7 The Discourse On Slavery in the Cosŏn Period

The reason why slavery or serfdom in Cosŏn, as in any other historical context, cannot be explained by socio-economic factors alone is stated by Evsey D. Domar as an "exogenous variable."[1] His basic assumption is that "without proper governmental action free land will give rise to free farmers rather than to serfs."[2] This means that we must understand "proper government action" with respect to land and slavery (or serfdom), and to do so we must understand how "proper government action" was debated and accomplished. This will be the subject of this part of my study, which reconstructs the discourse on slavery from various angles, introducing discursive statements made "in a logical, grammatical, locutory nexus," as Michel Foucault demands, whether they be recorded utterances in meetings or written down in religious, juridical, literary, or scientific texts.[3]

The actors of that time were well aware of the power of the written or spoken word. In 1527, after a series of frustrating meanderings in slave legislation, King Cungjong remarked:

> In our country, laws are often enacted on the basis of one man's words and abolished on the basis of another man's.[4]

Understanding how public discourse and decision-making on slavery unfolded in Cosŏn requires attention to the socio-political frameworks and ideological underpinnings of the time. While Cosŏn lacked a "public sphere" in the Habermasian sense of open arenas for articulating and negotiating meanings, proximity to the center was critical for influencing discourse. As in Tokugawa Japan, where rigid social hierarchies shaped public expression, Cosŏn's public sphere mediated between private and official domains, developing within spaces of political and cultural activism that bridged normative ideals and actual governance.[5]

Scholar-officials, who wielded disproportionate influence in this framework, often presented their voices as representative of society at large and were "close to matching those of civil society in general,"[6] although their access to the public arena was unevenly distributed.

Cosŏn was a "despotic bureaucracy."[7] Its deliberative and decision-making process was a negotiation between royal authority, bureaucratic institutions, and Confucian ide-

1 Domar 1970: 21.

2 Ibid.: 21.

3 Foucault 1972: 86, 220.

4 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 21:12:19 = January 21, 1527.

5 Jeffrey Newmark, *Introduction*, in Welter and Newmark 2017: 9.

6 J. Han 2013: 188.

7 Kim Hongshik 1974: 78.

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ology.[8] There was no separation of powers. At the apex of government stood the king, whose authority was exercised through a hierarchy of administrative organs. All legislation was prepared by the relevant offices, then proposed to the State Council, and finally decreed by the king.[9] Initially, the State Council dominated the public arena, acting as the highest deliberative body, reviewing important matters, and advising the king. Its senior councilors wielded considerable influence and often acted autonomously. Once the king made a decision, the State Council ensured its transmission throughout the bureaucracy. Over time, however, the importance of the council diminished as the day-to-day governance shifted more and more to the Six Ministries.

The Six Ministries handled the operational aspects of national government, each responsible for a specific area such as personnel, taxation, foreign relations, military affairs, justice, and public works. Their ministers enjoyed direct access to the king, ensuring the swift transmission of royal directives. The Royal Secretariat complemented this administrative framework by managing all documents exchanged between the king and other government bodies. The Royal Secretariat acted autonomously in certain cases, and its meticulous diary[10] formed the basis for the *Veritable Records*, a key historical source and also the battleground for fierce contests over legitimacy and cultural memory.

Under King Sŏngjong, the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn* ("Great Code of Administration") was finalized and published in 1485 as the first complete collection of state laws and regulations in Korean history. It was based on Chinese precedents and even specified that in cases left out in this code, the laws of the Ming Dynasty should apply. Slave legislation was, as in Koryŏ, introduced in the Penal Code.[11] Judicial decision-making resided primarily in the Ministry of Justice, although appeals and interventions by the censors played a critical role in maintaining justice. Judicial and administrative authority intersected in provincial and local governance, where governors and magistrates relied on intermediaries such as the local clerks to enforce tax collection and public order. Despite their inefficiency, these intermediaries, themselves evolved into hereditary groups, eased the administrative burden on the *yangban*, who focused on scholarly and cultural pursuits, thus reflecting their Confucian self-image as scholar-officials.

Oversight of the public arena then shifted to the officials of the Three Boards. These censorship organs, notably the Council of Censors and the Court of Remonstrances, served as moral watchdogs[12] and through their critical views "often had a fundamental impact on national governance."[13] They scrutinized the conduct of officials, investi-

8 For an overview, cf. Henthorn 1971: 158–61; Seth 2010: 131–34.

9 Kipyo Kim, *Overview*, in Korea Legislation Research Institute 2013: 4.

10 Today, 3,243 volumes of the *Sŭngjŏngwŏn Ilgi*, spanning the period from 1623 to 1910, remain: Sŏul Tähakkyo Kyujanggak 2015: 94.

11 Deuchler 2015: 68; *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 140–43.

12 Kracke 1976: 497.

13 Yi Yunbok 2020: 202.

gated their backgrounds, and criticized the king himself to ensure that governance adhered to Confucian ideals and livelihoods and addressed the sentiments of the people. These institutions, along with the Office of Special Advisors created in 1478, guided policy by providing advice grounded in history, law, and Confucian orthodoxy. In the late fifteenth century, the Office of Special Advisors became the only channel for transmitting public opinion from outside the court. Its members, the Censorship and Remonstration Officials (*tägan*), were recruited from among the graduates of the Royal Confucian Academy (Sŏnggyungwan). The small number of students admitted to the Royal Confucian Academy (originally 75, but often reaching between 100 and 200)[14] were particularly outspoken, and, at least in the early Cosŏn period, often resorted to collective action (walking out on strike or refusing to enter the academy's canteen) to express their opposition to royal authority[15]—though never in favor of slaves. The Royal Debates, a neo-Confucian lecture program, played a central role in legislative and administrative thought. Attended by kings, censors, historians, and secretaries, they linked Confucian theory to contemporary governance and guided the monarch in moral and political matters. Through this intellectual engagement, neo-Confucian principles permeated every aspect of Cosŏn's administration. Properly listening to "public sentiment" was considered essential to benevolent government.[16] A memorandum in 1501, written by the slave Ŏ Mujŏk, reminded the king of the importance of the censors' role in good governance:

> The Censorship and Remonstration Officials and aides are the ears and eyes of Your Highness. What Your Highness has not yet heard, the Censorship and Remonstration Officials and aides hear; what Your Highness has not yet seen, the Censorship and Remonstration Officials and aides see. Their candid discussions must be earnestly listened to and followed in every detail, and even then, one should fear that the sentiments of the lower classes may remain unspoken or virtuous words might remain hidden.[17]

In the sixteenth century, the public arena shifted further to the *sallim*, the intellectuals who lived in the countryside.[18] "Chiefly working behind the scenes,"[19] they were considered to be "the voice of the people."[20] How this was understood to work was brought up by Yi I, one of the leading neo-Confucian scholar-officials of the time:

> What is universally agreed upon by human hearts is called public discourse. The arena of public discourse is what we call the national policy. National policy is that which the entire nation agrees

14 Hiraki 1982: 111.
15 J. Han 2013: 189; cf. Cho 2010: 178.
16 Kwŏn Ŭnna 2024: 243.
17 CWS, Yŏnsangun, Y. 7:7:28.
18 Um 2005: 306.
19 Deuchler 2015: 242.
20 S.-J. Han 2019: 30.

> upon without prior deliberation.[21]
> I humbly reflect that public discourse is the vital energy of a nation. When the arena of public discourse is in the court, the nation is well-governed. When it resides in the streets and alleys, the nation falls into disorder. If public discourse is absent both above and below, the nation will surely perish.[22]

This reflects the idea that the discourse among scholars (*saron*) mediated between the court and the people, and it implies that good governance depended on the ability of scholars, as the "political public,"[23] to have their opinions heard in the public arena, i.e., the king's court. This discourse took place in the private Confucian academies (*sŏwŏn*) founded in the countryside by rival clans and factions, where circular letters between scholars and joint memorials were both produced.[24] Their presentation to the court took the form of collective action; for example, in 1565, about 300 scholars from the Yŏngnam area met, signed the memorial, and chose ten representatives who, after a lavish farewell banquet in full view of the public, went to the capital to negotiate with the court over the next few weeks.[25] Their march to the royal palace was designed to make a spectacular impression on the inhabitants, with slaves playing a major role: An errand boy from their guesthouse carried the box containing the memorial on his shoulders. Two other slaves assisted him by stabilizing the box from either side. Four slaves wielding wooden sticks were assigned to chase away those who might block their path.[26]

That kings and governments disliked and sometimes violently suppressed this discourse among scholars had to do with a common anti-establishment bias in this discourse, because the Confucian ideology's firm belief in the interdependence of the natural, moral, and social orders was so deeply embedded in their thinking

> that any Confucian scholar with an uncompromising spirit sees the existing state of politics as flawed and corrupt when evaluated through the lens of this normative criterion.[27]

This fundamental opposition (more often than not "opposition for opposition's sake"[28]) certainly had opportunistic features. While the *yangban* as neo-Confucian *scholars* had a "negative perception of the practice of mobilizing government authority" for their own profit, as *entrepreneurs* they paradoxically "did not perceive the use of government au-

21 *Yulgok Cŏnsŏ* 7, "Memorial Requesting to Resign as Chief Censor and Addressing the Purification of East and West."

22 *Yulgok Cŏnsŏ* 7, "Memorial Submitted on Behalf of Counselor Ingŏl." Cf. Deuchler 2015: 243.

23 Cho 2010: 184.

24 Ibid.: 202.

25 In this case, they demanded the execution of a Buddhist monk for proselytizing. The king refused at first, but finally agreed when the scholars threatened to boycott the upcoming state examinations: ibid.: 189–93.

26 Ibid.: 205.

27 S.-J. Han 2019: 30.

28 Ayukai 1973: 444.

thority to facilitate their economic activities in a negative light,"[29] thereby conveniently ignoring what Confucius himself had said about the interrelationship between governance, status, and economic success:

> When the state is governed by the [Confucian] Way, to be poor and lowly is shameful; when the state is not governed by the Way, to be rich and noble is shameful.[30]

Over time, the gap between officially approved, orthodox "government learning" and independent "true learning" widened, and the *sŏwŏn*, while still discussing and teaching what was thought within their faction's brand of philosophy, contributed to the privatization of knowledge and education rather than bringing them to the public sphere.[31]

On the level of the central government, the Board of Border Defense, established in 1517 to administer military affairs, emerged as the focus of public debate. After the Great East Asian War (1592–1599), its duties expanded to encompass many other areas of administration, including the provincial level. Its daily records, the *Pibyŏnsa Tŭngnok*, documented the debates and decisions in these matters. They were published annually and became a basic source for the compilation of the *Veritable Records* of the kings. The surviving 273 volumes cover the period from 1617 to 1892.[32]

It is also true for both Japan and Korea that "meaningful and valuable contributors to the public sphere often belonged to society's periphery."[33] Scholars who were neither successful in applying for official position, nor fortunate enough to be born into a wealthy clan, nor affiliated with the power factions that had dominated the national discourse since the late seventeenth century, often found themselves on the margins of *yangban* society, struggling for recognition.[34] These tendencies help to explain why Cosŏn scholars' statements on slavery often show empathy and compassion for the slaves, while their criticism of the prevailing legal and social causes of their misery is strong, although in many cases these are not coupled with feasible and helpful proposals for systemic reform. We must also take into account that, as Palais puts it, "the reformers themselves were also members of that same slaveholding class and were reluctant to adopt any radical policy that would severely damage those class interests."[35]

For those who were neither educated nor privileged, there was another, very physical way "to relieve grievances and communicate the concerns of the people,"[36] which

29 U. Lee 2007: 140.

30 邦有道、貧且賤焉、恥也。邦無道、富且貴焉、恥也。*Analects* 8:13.

31 Deuchler 2015: 401.

32 *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 269–72; Hwang 2004: 47; Sŏul Tähakkyo Kyujanggak 2015: 96.

33 *Introduction,* Welter and Newmark 2017: 9.

34 Deuchler 2015: 323.

35 Palais 1996: 232.

36 CWS, Yŏngjo, Y. 50:6:23 = July 20, 1774.

William Woodville Rockhill describes as "clamoring for justice":[37] In 1401, a petition drum was placed in front of the State Tribunal, allowing individuals to bypass the lower courts and seek the monarch's intervention directly if they felt justice had not been served.[38] Petitions could be oral or written. Written petitions required classical Chinese, the official legal language, and many illiterate individuals relied on scribes to compose their petitions. Nearly six hundred petition records, mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, show that women from all walks of life, including slaves, petitioned both local and central authorities.[39] Between 1776 and 1800, slaves sent 126 petitions to King Cŏngjo alone, accounting for 3 percent of all petitions during that period. But it was not only slaves who addressed slave-specific grievances, including the hunting slaves of slaves and coercion into servitude (almost ten percent of all 917 documented petitions), debt and tribute extortion by corrupt officials and tyrannical *yangban*, and the status of the offspring of marriages between commoners and slaves[40]—all touching on vexing problems of slavery in general, but each embedded in the realities of life and death that were absent from most of the learned discourse presented by the literati and officials. It is important to note that via petitioning, even slaves had a voice and were able to "exercise power over corrupt officials."[41] However, it would be dangerous to romanticize this opportunity for expression; in their everyday lives, slaves' freedom of speech and opinion was often not tolerated and even violently suppressed.[42]

Decision-making in Cosŏn was thus profoundly shaped by the interplay of Confucian ideology, bureaucratic structures, and social hierarchies. Discourse on slavery operated within this framework, with marginalized voices struggling for recognition amidst institutional barriers and elite dominance. The system's reliance on Confucian principles often prevented meaningful engagement with the realities of slavery. It should not be overlooked that the most important part of the discourse was hardly written down at all; namely the arguments and decisions in everyday life, with acts of consent and defi-

37 Rockhill 1891: 179.

38 Sun Joo Kim 2021: 139; Jisoo M. Kim 2015: 7; this was originally a Chinese device from the third or fourth century BC, designed to help "the ordinary man facing injustice" or "the individual with private frustrations and ill-use." Kracke 1976: 492, 496.

39 Jisoo M. Kim 2015: 18; "the petitioner, bearing his prayer, written on a large roll of the finest paper and bound round with red strips, goes to the palace gate, spreads his mat, and there takes his seat , the petition resting upright against the wall . In this position he remains until some one is sent out from the palace to take his petition and present it to the king. Another mode of petitioning is for a person to take an empty brass rice bowl and strike it as the king passes along in one of his progresses. Should the king choose to receive the petition the procession stops and it is presented to him then and there." Rockhill 1891: 179; petitioning at the site of a royal procession began in the fifteenth century: Jisoo M. Kim 2015: 144; from the sixteenth century, petitions written in the Korean script were, although reluctantly, also accepted: Jisoo M. Kim 2015: 55.

40 Han Sanggwŏn 1996: 221, 340.

41 Jisoo M. Kim 2015: 126–27.

42 Chö Kisuk 2023: 177.

ance, which can only be traced with great difficulty and very incompletely; because for the slaves themselves,

> their service was a life strategy chosen to adapt as best as possible to the conditions given to them.[43]

7.1 Burning the Ledgers

As Martina Deuchler has noted, legislative activity on social issues was "unusually high" in the first century after Cosŏn was founded in 1392.[44] This is also true for slave-related issues, as reflected in the frequency of the terms for male and female slaves in the *Veritable Records* of the first kings (see p. 241). At this time, the ruling elite selectively applied neo-Confucianism and other philosophies to manage state reforms, including administrative codes, military recruitment, and agricultural productivity. Ritualistic and ethical aspects of neo-Confucianism were prioritized over philosophical ones, shaping state ideology and governance models based on the "rule of propriety."[45] Part and parcel of these models was hereditary slavery.[46]

In 1392, the first year of the reign of King Thäjo, Kwŏn Cungwa, a senior politician and scholar who had already served the previous dynasty, called for a revision of the current slave intermarriage rules:

> The law of this dynasty regarding children born to slaves has long followed the principle of inheriting the status of the mother or father. Many violent and low-status men marry free women, and their offspring are classified as private slaves. As a result, the number of low-status men increases daily, while the number of free people decreases. This has led to a significant decrease in the number of people available to perform government duties. I humbly request that, from now on, low-status men be prohibited from having intercourse with free people. Furthermore, in cases where free women have already become the wives of low-status men, let them be forced to separate. If anyone violates this order, the punishment should extend to the slave owner.

The king's response, however, was not quite what the petitioner had requested. Instead of banning intermarriage, Thäjo created a new status category:

> Those born to low-status men who married free women belong to the Agency of Naval Supplies, as their personal status is considered free while their labor status is low.[47]

43 Yi Häjŏng 2015: 117.
44 Deuchler 1992: 3.
45 Y.-j. Koh 2003: 64–73.
46 Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 79.
47 CWS, Thäjo, Y. 1:7:27 = August 23, 1392.

Calling this—invention of a category of "free people with servile duties" that serves as an intermediary class between free people and slaves—an "improvement"[48] is discouraging. It seems more appropriate to note that the new dynasty showed a remarkable talent for making things more and more bureaucratic and complicated from the very beginning. Eventually, the category was expanded to include cases of unclear status ("neither free nor base") in 1395[49] and the former miscellaneous laborers in 1414. Their servile duties included menial tasks such as attendance, escort duties, and errands for central government offices or royal family members; clerical work, boarding and horse management, mail delivery, guarding, and agricultural tasks at relay stations (for details, see p. 566); service at beacon towers and watchtowers; patrol, police, and judicial assistance; and transportation of goods. Service in auxiliary military units, especially in the navy, was the most demanding and therefore the least popular.

But mixed unions were not the only problem the new regime attempted to solve. It was also observed that the repayment of debts often resulted in the enslavement of free people, which was considered unjust and therefore restricted:

> The laws of this dynasty regarding the distinction between free and servile status are extremely strict. However, allowing free individuals who have not repaid their debts to become permanent slaves is highly unreasonable. Henceforth, unpaid debts shall be resolved by calculating the amount owed in relation to the market value of slave labor. Once the debt is fully repaid, the individual shall be released. Interest shall be limited to the principal amount, and excessive use of labor in such cases is strictly prohibited as a standard rule. Violators shall be punished under laws against coercion into servitude.[50]

In 1394, further concerns were raised about the abuse of power and the illegal seizure of people and land, which contributed to the unlawful enslavement of free individuals. Councilor Cŏn Päkyŏng proposed the establishment of a supervisory agency to investigate and resolve disputes related to slavery—and to burn the old slave registers:

> Regarding the matter of slaves, disputes and litigation remain excessively burdensome. His Majesty should order the establishment of an agency to handle the issue. Fair and impartial officials are to be selected, strict rulings established, and all cases resolved within a set timeframe. After reviewing the original documents, an official certificate shall be issued for each case, while the original documents, following the precedent of land-related cases, shall all be burned to eliminate the possibility of future disputes.[51]

48 Yi Hongdu 1991: 194.

49 Yi Yunbok 2020: 190.

50 CWS, Thäjo, Y 1:11:17 = December 9, 1392. This was a ban on *permanent* debt enslavement, not a ban on debt slavery as such, contrary to what Kim claims: B.-R. Kim 2014: 167.

51 CWS, Thäjo 3:8:2 = September 5, 1394.

However, it took more than a year for this proposal to move forward. On January 17, 1396, Director of the Ministry of Justice Pak Shin and others submitted the following memorial to King Thäjo:[52]

> There remains only the matter of slaves, which still follows the old ways. Lawsuits have increased, and deceit and fraud grow daily. Even among close family members, disputes arise with harsh words, dividing households as though they were enemies. Moreover, how can we begin to describe the other acts of robbery and theft! Everyone is focused on winning, fabricating countless lies, and confusing truth with falsehood. This has led to delays in judgments and the stagnation of legal processes. Some engage in cunning deceit, uncovering hidden details, while others, driven by greed, alter dates and documents. The contracts become vague, and their words constantly change, leaving those who hear them confused and uncertain in making decisions. [...] By eliminating major flaws and rectifying the state's governance, now is the opportune time to set a lasting standard for the state.
>
> [...] An official from each department will be appointed to oversee the revision of the slave registers. Their responsibilities will include investigating the root causes of disputes and clearly establishing prohibitions against fraud and deception. The original documents will be collected and thoroughly examined. Regardless of the officials' rank or the number of slaves, all labor service records will be compiled in one document. Each person will receive an official certificate, and the old registers will be burned. The official documents issued today will serve as the basis for future records. [...] For those slaves who have served before, only their origins should be verified, and a new register of their status should be created, returning them to their rightful owners. This would not be difficult and would instead be seen as convenient. However, if the issue of confiscation persists, the powerful would act on their desires while the weak, deprived of their property, would have no way to appeal. Therefore, it is proposed to establish a separate agency, set deadlines, resolve all disputes, and finally burn the old registers to prevent future fraud and conflict. [...]...

The authors identified significant problems related to the system of slavery, which continued to follow outdated practices. Lawsuits involving slaves had increased, while deceit and fraud were rampant. Even within families, disputes over slaves created hostility between relatives. The legal system was overwhelmed, and disputes often resurfaced, prolonging the cycle of litigation.

In response, they called for the revision of the slave registers. The proposal suggested that all labor service records be compiled into a single document, with each slave owner receiving an official certificate to verify ownership. To prevent further manipulation, the old registers would be burned, and the newly issued documents would serve as the basis for all future records. They also proposed to allow a two-year period to settle all outstanding litigation related to slaves, after which new slave records would be created, and old ones would be destroyed.

The authors also expressed concerns about potential resistance. They feared that powerful individuals might exploit the system to their advantage, using their influence to manipulate outcomes, especially in cases involving the confiscation of slaves.

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52 CSW, Thäjo, Y. 4:11:28 = January 17, 1396.

The king, in turn, approved the plan, tasking the Ministry of Justice with its implementation (including the re-establishment of the Agency for the Rectification of Slave Status) and setting a course for resolving these long-standing issues.[53]

Nevertheless, most of the powerful families supporting the new dynasty passed over this attempt at reform "without losing any slaves."[54] With the collapse of the rank fields system, powerful landowners once again amassed large agricultural estates,[55] often using natural features such as rivers and mountains to define their boundaries. These sprawling estates posed significant challenges to the central government. First, they made it difficult to govern and administer the country. Second, they fueled intense competition among officials for land and the labor to work it. These lands were worked by slaves, who, as before, were granted to the king's men at an average rate of one slave per ten *kyŏl* of land. Since the size of a *kyŏl* of land depended on the quality of the land, it is very difficult to calculate the labor required to cultivate it. Assuming that a *kyŏl* of the best soil covered about 0.6 hectares (1.5 acres), then the labor requirement was a multiple of the number of slaves assigned. This makes it likely that the *yangban* also relied on tenant farmers.[56] It is consistent with this assumption that the "proverbial"[57] metaphor of slaves as the "hands and feet" of the *yangban* was repeatedly used during this time.[58]

A particularly pressing issue was the enslavement of commoners, because it disrupted the established social and economic order, which depended on free individuals fulfilling various state obligations. As a remedy, specific cases of coercion into servitude were reviewed by official bodies. By 1398, measures were taken to provide legal documents that prove the status of individuals and to prevent disputes from arising:

> Those who force free citizens into servitude, seize slaves unlawfully, forge and use false documents, continue to hold slaves after legal judgment, claim ownership over unassigned slaves, conceal and unlawfully claim unregistered slaves, misappropriate slaves under joint ownership, or permanently claim pledged slaves, whether officials or commoners, shall be permitted to resolve disputes amicably before formal litigation. However, those who refuse to acknowledge their wrongdoing, engage in deceitful arguments, disrupt the law, or mislead officials shall be subject to punishment according to the court's judgment.[59]

It soon became clear that burning the slave records, resetting the ownership structure, and supervising in this way could not provide a "permanent" solution to the slave issue.

53 Cf. Pak Cinhun 2018: 231–32.

54 Kye 2008: 67.

55 Duncan 2000: 147.

56 Ibid.: 148, 150.

57 Deuchler 2015: 5.

58 By Ha Yun in 1402 and Yang Sŏngji in 1468. Cf. Duncan 2000: 149.

59 CWS, Thäjo, Y. 6:7:25.

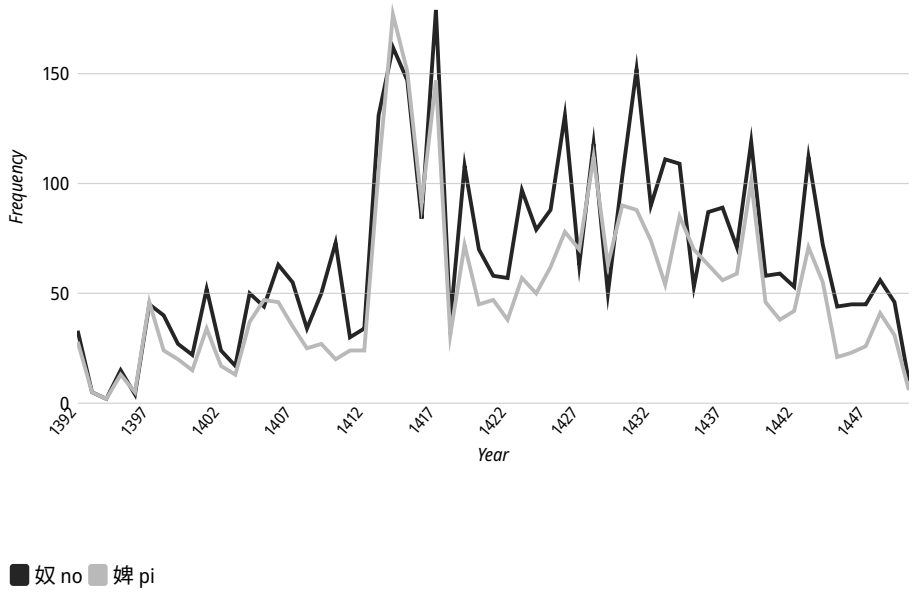

Fig. 9: Frequency of the terms 奴 (*no* , male slaves) and 婢 (*pi*, female slaves) in the Veritable Records of the first kings of Cosŏn (1392–1450).

The tax policy of the Cosŏn state was based on the differentiation of the object of taxation, as expressed by one of King Sejong's advisors in 1425:

> If there is land, there is taxation (*co*); if there is a body, there is labor duty (*yŏk*); if there is a household, there is tribute in kind (*kongmul*).[60]

In other words, the basic concept of a taxpayer was an economically independent, landowning, able-bodied individual with a household. Those who did not meet these criteria or those who were privileged were exempt.

Taxes on land were to be paid in grain, while tributes in kind in regional products. During the early years of Cosŏn, public labor obligations (*kugyŏk*) were imposed across all social strata.

Not surprisingly, households assigned labor duties were called "labor duty households" (*yŏkho*). These households could represent whole families, but they could also consist of several independent families. Regardless of their composition, they were

60 CWS, Sejong, Y. 8:4:28 = May 24, 1425. Cf. Kim Hongshik 1974: 79.

treated as self-sufficient economic units. Duties were levied according to the amount of land owned, the distance from the place of service, and the type of labor performed. By 1465, the tax base changed from households (*ho*) to adult individuals (*cŏng*), which made it possible to shift the calculation of taxation from land to able-bodied adults, since there were many commoner households that owned little or no land. The "active adults" on duty (*cŏngjŏng*) were now supported by "assistant adults" (*cojŏng*) or supporters (*pongjok*), and there were further reductions and exemptions for sons and other relatives classified as "subordinate adults" (*soljŏng*). Ultimately, only 30 percent of all households were registered as labor duty households, and of those, only 10 percent were on active duty.[61]

In addition, military service (*kunyŏk*) was compulsory for all adult males, excluding the *yangban* and slaves. Each soldier was supported by a group of three to five men, who provided financial support through taxation to sustain the soldier's family. However, instead of direct military service, many commoners opted to pay taxes in the form of goods, such as textiles or grain, to fund the military. The same was true for labor duties; they could be commuted into in-kind contributions (usually cloth), which was understood as a "labor substitution fee" (*yong*).

In terms of land ownership and in-kind production, the role of slaves was marginal; what mattered was their labor. There was a clear distinction between public and private slaves in this regard. Public slaves provided their labor unconditionally to the state. In contrast, private slaves, who primarily relied on their master's household to fulfill their basic needs, were generally exempt from state-imposed labor (*kugyŏk*) during the early Cosŏn period, but their owners could exploit them for private labor, effectively shifting state burdens onto commoners. This reinforced the stratification of society, as *yangban* elites could legally avoid conscription while imposing increasing economic dependency on their tenant farmers and household slaves.

However, to overcome the labor shortage, the state attempted to integrate slaves into the tax structure by classifying them as "half an assistant adult," which meant that their duties were only half as high as those of commoners.[62]

This seemed attractive enough that, in some cases, landless commoners sought to evade state labor obligations by voluntarily registering as slaves of powerful landowners (commendation), thereby changing their status from taxable commoners to dependents with reduced or no tax obligations. This dynamic not only reduced the number of available labor and military conscripts but also increased the economic influence of the *yangban* class, who could now absorb laborers beyond the reach of the state.[63] Commendation did not automatically lead to hereditary slavery, but many *yangban* eventually

61 Kim Hongshik 1974: 79–81.
62 Ibid.: 79–81.
63 Ibid.: 83.

registered their new dependents as returned runaway slaves or the offspring of slaves they owned.[64]

To fully understand the importance of slaves as agricultural laborers, it is necessary to look at the evolution of the agricultural land and population. Unfortunately, the figures from the Cosŏn government surveys are not easy to interpret.

In Cosŏn, the land was surveyed in six different quality categories. Good land at 1 *kyŏl* measured less area than 1 *kyŏl* of poor land. One *kyŏl* corresponded to 0.99 to 3.95 ha. Later Japanese calculations at the beginning of the twentieth century showed that one *kyŏl* corresponded to an average of 1.82 ha of land. However, the classification of quality changed over time, and in 1634 a new measurement with larger units was introduced. The total number of *kyŏl* changed accordingly. Furthermore, the survey did not distinguish between land that was actually in use and land that was fallow. The survey was also carried out inconsistently in terms of region and time.[65]

Taking all these factors into account, it is nevertheless possible to draw some conclusions about the evolution of land use in the Cosŏn period. In the fifteenth and especially in the sixteenth centuries, the area under cultivation expanded considerably. This was mainly due to the *yangban* settling in the countryside and intensifying their agricultural economy.[66] After the sixteenth century, growth rates were very slow, to the point of reaching "general stagnation."[67]

Development also varied greatly from region to region. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the south of the peninsula, the provinces of Chungchŏng, Kyŏngsang, and Cŏlla, was developed particularly rapidly, while the less fertile north was used much less intensively in comparison. This was also reflected in the uneven distribution of the slave population. It was highest where many *yangban* had their estates.

The most labor-intensive form of agriculture was wet rice farming. In the nineteenth century, it accounted for less than 30 percent of agricultural land; by 1913, they accounted for 52 percent. It is important to note that in the three southern provinces, the proportion of rice fields was already between 40 and 46 percent in the fifteenth century, rising to 64 to 75 percent by 1913.[68] Accordingly, the demand for agricultural labor was highest there.

Similar uncertainties exist for population trends. Again, there are no reliable totals; more importantly, up to half of the population was undercounted. It seems that population growth was low at the beginning and highest between the early seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries. It stagnated after 1810.[69]

64 Yi Hăjŏng 2009: 211.
65 Miyajima 1995: 94–100; Hochol Lee 1997: 107.
66 Miyajima 1995: 100–101.
67 Hochol Lee 1997: 109.
68 Ibid.: 110.
69 Ibid.: 111.

In any case, population density increased significantly in all parts of the country, but especially in the three southern provinces, from the seventeenth century onward. This caused land to become scarce in relation to the available labor force.[70]

Tab. 13: Trends in cultivated land area during the Cosŏn period (unit: M *kyŏl*) (Miyajima 1995: 95).

Year	Kyŏng-gi	Chung-chŏng	Kyŏng-sang	Cŏlla	Kwang-hä	Kang-wŏn	Phyŏng-an	Ham-gyŏng	∑
1404	0.149	0.223	0.225	0.174	0.091	0.060	0.007	0.003	0.932
1424	0.194	0.236	0.261	0.246	0.224	0.066	0.312	0.130	1.670
1501		0.232	0.295	0.368	0.102	0.035			1.032
1591[a]	0.147	0.253	0.315	0.442	0.107	0.348	0.153	0.064	1.829
1591[b]	0.150	0.260	0.430	0.440	0.110	0.028	0.170	0.120	1.708
1721	0.101	0.255	0.337	0.377	0.129	0.044	0.091	0.061	1.395

a 磻溪隨錄 *Pangye Surok*.
b 增補文獻備考 *Cŭngbo Munhŏn Pigo* v. 148.

Tab. 14: Land and population in Cosŏn, 1550–1875 (Hochol Lee 1997: 107).

Year	Land (M *kyŏl*)	Estimated Land (M ha)	Estimated Population (M)	Population per ha
1550	1.516	4.337	9.503	2.191
1650	1.378	3.783	9.020	2.384
1725	1.320	3.712	12.130	3.268
1775	1.445	4.259	14.093	3.309
1825	1.455	4.148	15.277	3.683
1875	1.487	4.325	15.884	3.673

7.2 The Patrifilial Rule

The core problem lay in the heritability of slave status, which perpetuated the problem with each new generation. The issue was not just about the dwindling number of free people (important to the state, as these were potential taxpayers and soldiers), but also about preserving the *yangban* class's ownership claims over their private slaves. Abolishing slavery outright would have addressed the former concern but would have

70 Hochol Lee 1997: 111–13.

undermined the interests of the *yangban*, who were deeply invested in maintaining their slaveholdings. Trying to reconcile these competing priorities—state interests and *yangban* privileges—was an impossible task, akin to squaring the circle. For the next four centuries, attempts were made to resolve this dilemma, but the outcome was predictable. The failure was inevitable because the problem could not be solved within the framework of the neo-Confucian social order. As long as society was structured around rigid status distinctions, and as long as the monarchy relied on the support of the neo-Confucian elite, there could be no sustainable solution to the problem.

On March 6, 1414, Left State Councilor Ha Yun—a veteran politician and key supporter of King Thäjong—submitted a memorial with several requests related to the treatment of base people. First, he proposed that only civil officers whose ancestors had held at least the sixth rank within the past four generations should be eligible for appointment. However, King Thäjong rejected this proposal, arguing that talented individuals, regardless of their lineage, should be allowed to attain high office—"as long as they are not of base origin."

Ha Yun then argued that the existing reclassification policy for those descended from female slaves or concubines was inconsistent, unfair, and practically impossible to administer. He underlined that the same rule was being applied unevenly, yielding contradictory results: some were promoted to good status, others remained base, even though they shared identical family backgrounds. He then further argued:

> Moreover, if those with a good father and base mother, as well as those with a base father and good mother, are all permitted to be classified as good, it would lead to a situation where the good outnumber the base.[71]

Was this really an appeal to return to the ambifilial rule of the last years of Koryŏ?[72] Or was it not rather an appeal to further reduce the options for claiming free status for *all* without exception in order to prevent a situation where "the good outnumber the base"?

Thäjong waited four months before deciding. Finally, his answer was the formal introduction of the *patrifilial rule*. It was officially implemented as follows:

> On the day of Mujin [July 22, 1414], it was first ordered that all public and private slave girls who marry men of good status will have their children follow the father's status and be recognized as good (free) people. Minister of Rites Hwang Hŭi advised, saying, "There are no particular objections to the law of liberating the offspring of low-born concubines from servitude; if the father is free, then the child should also be free, as it should follow the father's status." The king replied, "What you say is correct. If this is the case, even without a formal law of release from service, there will naturally be no servitude. It is indeed unsuitable that the descendants of ministers should be placed in servitude because of their mother's status."
> A royal order was issued, stating, "Heaven, in creating the people, did not intend for there to be any

71 CWS, Thäjong Y. 14:2.6 = March 6, 1414 .

72 Yi Yunbok 2020: 194.

> low-borns. In previous dynasties, under the laws regarding slaves, when people of good and low status intermarried, the offspring followed the mother's status, which led to a constant increase in the number of low-borns and a decline in the number of free people. Therefore, from the 28th day of the 6th month of the 12th year of Yongle [July 23, 1414] onward, the children of public and private slave girls who marry men of good status shall all follow the father's status as free people. This shall follow the example set by the previous dynasty's decision on the status of common people, and be implemented accordingly."[73]

As another reminder of how Cosŏn politicians and scholars "did not understand certain features" of Koryŏ law,[74] it should be noted that Thäjong here confuses two very different terms, i.e., *release from service* (*pangyŏk*) and *remission as commoner* (*pangyang*). Service and status "did not correspond one-to-one,"[75] but these concepts were often confused.

The real significance of this decree was the introduction of the *patrifilial rule*. According to this rule, if a female slave married a free man, her children would be born free.

However, the opposite was not true; it was even forbidden for male slaves to marry free women, and the offspring of such illegal marriages were to be made public slaves.[76] Although some scholars see this as an "improvement,"[77] it was, compared to the ambifilial rule introduced in Koryŏ in 1391, a step backwards. So when the royal decree claimed that the patrifilial rule was in accordance with the rules of the Koryŏ dynasty, it was obviously untrue. Koryŏ's family norms were not based on patrilinearity,[78] which is why such a debate would have been unthinkable in the previous dynasty.

Choosing the patrifilial rule was choosing a vision of society in which "the good outnumber the base" instead of letting the slave population grow without limit. There is some truth to the claim that "the patrilineal norms of Confucianism offered some resistance to this tendency to expand and enshrine slavery,"[79] but this rationale was only part of the true motivation here. In the discussion before the king, two arguments were made to support this reform: one involved the children of the concubines of high-ranking politicians and the other the decline in the free population. The first argument was confidential and intended for the king's ears only; the second argument was made public. The decline in the number of tax-paying freemen was a real concern because it hurt the state's finances. But discrimination against the "illegitimate" secondary sons of *yangban* with concubines of lower birth (often female slaves) was a hotly contested issue within the upper class. Previously, when elite men took commoner or slave women as

73 CWS, Thäjong 14:6.27 = July 22, 1414 . Cf. Sŏng 1992: 116.
74 Deuchler 1992: 31.
75 M. Yoshida 2018: 44.
76 Pak Cinhun 2006: 318.
77 Yi Hongdu 1991: 196.
78 Yi Yunbok 2020: 189.
79 Kye 2021: 302.

secondary wives, their offspring gained the same status as their mothers. A 1397 regulation, reaffirmed in 1405, allowed the sons of an elite man with his own slave concubine to be classified as commoners rather than slaves if they joined the navy as unranked sailors (i.e., as free people with servile duties), effectively barring them from advancing within the elite circle. In 1417, this was applied to more than 10,000 men of uncertain status; their commoner status became permanent only after they had fulfilled their military duties in the navy.[80]

The key question that lurked in the background of this problem for the next few centuries, without ever really being answered, was of course why free men, and especially the *yangban*, took concubines (it would be more accurate to call them "secondary wives") from the lower classes in the first place. A practical reason would have been that there were not enough marriageable daughters from families of equal rank; an ideological reason would have been that concubinage was not appropriate for daughters of higher classes because concubines were disadvantaged in many ways. In the case of female slaves, their legally unrestricted availability for sexual exploitation was a matter of fact. But perhaps there was another, unspoken reason: that here, and only here, it was permissible to cross the boundaries between social classes, that here a freedom in both directions of social mobility was allowed that was otherwise denied, because "the taking of a secondary wife was not limited by rules of class endogamy."[81]

Before going any further, it is necessary to define the exact meaning of "patrifilial" and "matrifilial" in the context of Korean slavery. This problem arose as a logical consequence of the inheritance of status in Korean society.

In the case of slave marriages, there was no uncertainty; the descendants of slaves became slaves. But what happened when a slave man married a free woman, or a free man married a slave woman? Addressing the status and obligations of the children born of such mixed unions became the "focal point" of all reform efforts.[82]

In Koryŏ and Cosŏn, a total of seven different rules of status inheritance were applied in practice,[83] and all of them were contested. Those who favored the patrifilial rule sought to increase the number of free subjects eligible for military service and taxation and to decrease the number of slaves, while those who favored the matrifilial rule sought to increase the number of slaves to maintain a constant supply of cheap labor for administrators and landowners. It was also easier to determine who the mother was, while the identity of the father was not always certain. On the other hand, the patrifilial rule favored the hereditary transmission of professions and would have prevented

80 Yi Hongdu 1991: 197; Deuchler 2015: 126–27.

81 Deuchler 1992: 269; for a discussion of secondary wives, see Deuchler 1992: 268–70.

82 Hiraki 1982: 129.

83 It is rather undercomplex to assert that the matridominial rule of the Koryŏ period was "applied without change" before 1731, but the assertion has been made, perhaps for the convenience of the busy reader: Yim Haksŏng 2013: 75; but of course Yim knows that there was more to the story than that: Yim Haksŏng 2013: 77–80.

siblings from having different statuses and owners.[84] Thus, debating and regulating intermarriage meant regulating the reproduction of the social structure itself.[85] In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the rules were unstable because political factions had different preferences and could not reach a consensus on the use of "humanizing exceptions"[86] that allowed more flexibility. It is questionable, however, whether all of the sometimes very rapid changes were duly observed by local administrators and slave owners.

These rules facilitated downward and upward mobility in the generation of the child. In the following table, 🧍↓ means a hypodescent (downward) effect, and 🧍↑ means a hyperdescent (upward) effect. Moreover, the matrifilial rule with patrifilial exception that applied for most of Cosŏn history was also effectively gender-biased because it was created with the secondary *sons* of qualifying elite fathers in mind; secondary *daughters* were never a political issue.

Tab. 15: Status regulation of mixed slave unions in the Cŏson period.

Rule	Father	Mother	Child	Effect	Adopted
Matridominial	Free	Slave	Slave	🧍↓	1039, 1300, 1678, 1690
	Slave	Free			
Ambifilial	Free	Slave	Free	🧍↑	1391
	Slave	Free			
Patrifilial	Free	Slave	Free	🧍↑	1414
	Slave	Free	Slave	🧍↓	
Matridominial with Patrifilial Exception	*Yangban* et al.	Slave	Free	🧍↑	1432, 1472
	Free	Slave	Slave	🧍↓	
	Slave	Free			
Matrifilial with Patrifilial Exception	*Yangban* et al.	Slave	Redeemable	🧍↑	1468
	Free	Slave	Slave	🧍↓	
	Slave	Free	Free	🧍↑	
Matrifilial	Free	Slave	Slave	🧍↓	1669, 1684, 1731
	Slave	Free	Free	🧍↑	

84 Hiraki 1982: 141.

85 Han Yŏngguk 1977: 177–78.

86 O. Patterson 2018: 143.

Rule	Father	Mother	Child	Effect	Adopted
Patrifilial-matrifilial Bifurcation	Free	Slave	Son: Free	↑	17th c. to after 1731 (relay station slaves only)
			Daughter: Slave	↓	
	Slave	Free	Son: Slave		
			Daughter: Free	↑	

7.2.1 Kil Cä and the Runaway Slaves

Kil Cä was a figure from the transitional period between the Koryŏ and Cosŏn dynasties. Trained by Yi Säk (Mogŭn) and Kwŏn Kŭn, among others, friends with Yi Pangwŏn since his youth, the fifth son of Yi Sŏnggye and future King Thäjong, he was destined for a brilliant career. However, out of loyalty to the defunct Koryŏ dynasty, he preferred to forego the government offices offered to him (he claimed that his familiar background [*munji*] was "cold," i.e., humble, and that he was a "lowly captive of a failed kingdom," i.e., Koryŏ[87]) and restrict himself to his activities as a neo-Confucian teacher and writer under the name Yaŭn. The *Yaŭn Sŏnsäng Ŏnhäng Sŭbyu* ("Supplementary Collection of Yaŭn's Words and Deeds"), published by his descendants in 1858, contains an episode that shows him as being rooted in neo-Confucian respect for familial inheritance and propriety:

> The Teacher [Kil Cä] [...] married the daughter of Shin Myŏn, a major general. The Teacher originally lived in modest poverty, whereas the Shin family was known for their wealth, with abundant slaves, money and grain resources. People referred to them as a rich household. [...] The Shin family had more than ten runaway slaves, both young and old, who had been in hiding for years. The Teacher's father-in-law made a firm promise that any descendant who managed to recapture the slaves could claim them. When the Teacher captured them all without exception, he returned the slaves to his father-in-law as agreed. However, when the father-in-law insisted that the slaves be given to him, the Teacher adamantly refused to accept them. Quietly, the father-in-law documented the transfer in official records without informing the Teacher.
>
> In the year Kichuk [1409], while reviewing documents, the teacher accidentally discovered the record of the transfer. Disturbed by this, he again refused to accept ownership. Angered, his father-in-law exclaimed, "You refuse official titles and stipends, and now you refuse slaves? Do you even belong to the human race?" The Teacher replied, "Descendants are the living representation of one's ancestors. How could I show favoritism among them? Furthermore, even though the patri-

87 *Yaŭn Sŏnsäng Ŏnhäng Sŭbyu* 1, Annex: Letter of Resignation, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/冶隱先生言行拾遺/卷上 [accessed 29.07.2025].

> arch of the family has passed, those who remain must be properly supported. Even if they are considered illegitimate descendants, they have the task of carrying on the ancestral line and must bear the responsibility of presiding over family rituals. This is a duty of great importance." He then distributed the majority of the slaves to the rightful heirs.[88]
>
> In the winter of Kyesa [1413], his brother-in-law, the monk Sŏldang, bequeathed a slave to the Teacher's son, Shisun, as the adopted grandson.[89] The Teacher said, "Since he is an adopted grandson, why should the slave be passed along as part of another family's lineage?"[90] He then ordered Shisun to decline the inheritance and return the slave.[91]

Kil Cä held strong views on lineage integrity and the management of property, including slaves, within family lineages. Despite marrying into the wealthy Shin family, known for their abundance of slaves and resources, he consistently refused to accept slaves as personal property. When he successfully recaptured runaway slaves, he returned them to his father-in-law but declined ownership to prevent alienating them from the Shin family's lineage estate. He emphasized that all descendants, including illegitimate ones, bore the responsibility of continuing the ancestral line and performing family rituals, viewing such duties as paramount.

Later, when his brother-in-law bequeathed a slave to his son, Shisun, as the adopted heir of the Shin family, Kil Cä rejected the inheritance, reasoning that as an adopted grandson, Shisun's role tied him to the Shin lineage, and accepting the slave prematurely would transfer it to the teacher's own family instead of preserving it as part of the Shin estate. Kil Cä's actions reflect his unwavering commitment to protecting lineage property and ensuring the proper fulfillment of familial and ancestral obligations. They also reveal the views he held, that slaves were inheritable property and that slave owners had every right to hunt down runaway slaves.

7.2.2 Benevolent Restraint

While slave owners, especially *yangban*, enjoyed complete discretion in the punishment of their slaves, neo-Confucian rules of conduct expected them to avoid outbursts of anger or violence when their slaves misbehaved. The *Tädong Yasŭng* gives an example of such benevolent restraint in the household of a scholar-official from the mid-fifteenth

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88 Kil Cä refuses the gift because it would alienate the slaves from the property of the Shin lineage. Apparently, his father-in-law had no legitimate sons by his principal wife.

89 法孫 *pŏpson*, which means that Shisun, as the adopted heir, would become the head of the Shin family after the death of his grandfather.

90 If Shisun accepted the slave before legally assuming his role as the new head of the Shin family, the slave would formally belong to his father's family.

91 *Yaŭn Sŏnsäng Ŏnhäng Sŭbyu* 1, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/冶隱先生言行拾遺/卷上 [accessed 29.07.2025]. For Kil Cä and his writings, see *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 59–60.

century. The text also constructs a sharp contrast between the behavior of the Confucian educated upper class and the uneducated lower class.

> Hwang Iksŏng [...] consistently sought leniency and fairness, maintaining a calm and composed demeanor in his private life. Even when surrounded by his children, grandchildren, and servants, who might cry, play, or laugh loudly, he never scolded or restrained them. Once, when a servant child pulled at his beard or slapped his cheek, he simply allowed it without reprimand. On another occasion, while drafting documents during a meeting with his subordinates, a young slave urinated on the paper he was writing. He showed no sign of anger and merely wiped it clean with his hand. Such was his virtue and tolerance.
> Hwang Iksŏng [...] served as Prime Minister during the reign of King Sejong for nearly thirty years, maintaining composure so steady that neither anger nor joy ever showed on his face. He treated servants with kindness and never punished them harshly. He was especially compassionate toward his serving maids and boy slaves, often joking with them. Observing this, he would remark with a smile, "Slaves, too, are children of Heaven. How could one mistreat them?" He even wrote instructions to this effect for his descendants.
> [...] On another occasion, the renowned scholar Yi Mungang, who had recently placed first in the state examination, came to visit Hwang. Hwang handed Yi a copy of the *Outline and Details of the Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Government* and asked him to write out its table of contents. As Yi began to work, a rude female slave approached, leaning over to serve snacks, and rudely said, "Bring wine!" Hwang gently replied, "Let her be." The maid stood idly for a long time before shouting angrily, "Why so slow?" Hwang, unfazed, smiled and said, "Bring it to her."
> As the snacks were served, several slave children, dressed in rags and barefoot, began tugging at Hwang's beard, stepping on his robes, and snatching the food to eat. Some even playfully pushed him. Hwang simply laughed and exclaimed, "Ouch! Ouch!" with no sign of reproach. These slave children, too, were the offspring of his slaves.[92]

As an aside, this short passage uses no less than nine different terms for slaves, some differentiated by gender or age, others generic. To outside observers, these variations may seem as indistinguishable as the proverbial forty shades of green in Ireland. To people of that time, each of them must have been distinct and meaningful.

7.3 (Not) Limiting the Number of Slaves

The reform-minded *sadäbu* also began advocating for limits on the number of slaves an individual could own. This debate gained significant momentum during the reign of King Thäjong. In 1414, the king formally instructed his officials to draft legislation regulating slave ownership. The resulting proposal, the Limitation Law, suggested implementing a tiered system of slave ownership limits based on social rank.

However, this version faced strong opposition from many officials who had vested interests in maintaining the existing system. Consequently, the first attempt to pass the

92 *Tädong Yasŭng*, Hädong Yawŏn 2, Sejonggi, https://www.krpia.co.kr/viewer?plctId=PLCT00008010&tabNodeId=NODE07373335&nodeId=NODE07373336 [accessed 29.07.2025].

law failed. Undeterred, King Thäjong revisited the issue the following year and commissioned a revised version of the legislation. This second version proposed more lenient limits on slave ownership compared to the original draft. Senior members of the royal family were to own only 150 slaves each, senior officials 130, and so on, while commoners were to be allowed 40 male slaves and an unlimited number of female slaves. These numbers would not have changed much, but the aristocrats and *yangban* were so opposed to this proposal that King Thäjong dropped the plan.[93]

During the following reign of King Sejong, the idea was put back on the table, only to be rejected again. One of the leading scholar-officials, Ha Üji, himself coming from a "humble local gentry background,"[94] claimed that slavery had been established "in order to fix the status between the high and low" and was therefore indipensable to uphold the "beauty of our customs and social relations."[95] He defended the slave system as a foundational component of social order and Confucian values and argued that natural and social hierarchies demand distinctions between noble and base roles, with slaves performing menial tasks to allow the ruling class to engage in more esteemed duties. This arrangement, he believed, mirrored the Confucian relationship between rulers and subjects, reinforcing loyalty and structure. Ha justified slavery as an established tradition rooted in historical customs, which connected the institution to punishment for crimes. He opposed the slave limitation law, citing the impracticality of enforcing equal slave ownership due to varying family sizes and inheritances. Ha argued that laws should not be changed unless they were perfect, referencing historical cases where similar limitations caused disorder. Additionally, he emphasized the influence and opposition of powerful families with large slave holdings as a practical barrier. As an alternative, Ha proposed distributing slaves within family lines and prohibiting slave sales to prevent the further consolidation of slave ownership. These ideas aimed to maintain stability within the ruling class without significantly disrupting the established hierarchy or economic privileges associated with slavery.[96] As such, Ha's attitude was a good reflection of the "lack of willingness to deal with even the grave inequality in the ownership of slaves" that prevailed in the *yangban* class.[97]

The patrifilial rule for mixed marriages introduced by Thäjong "soon became a dead law."[98] When the number of slaves dropped so much that the supply of new slaves seemed to be in jeopardy, thus threatening the productivity of the *yangban* estates, the Ministry of Military Affairs, on August 19, 1418, stated that

93 Chia-Horng Lin 2006: 220; Pak Cinhun 2018: 239; Duncan 2000: 149.
94 Pak Cinhun 2006: 340.
95 Quoted in Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 80.
96 Pak Cinhun 2006: 335–39.
97 Ibid.: 340.
98 Kye 2008: 67.

> among these people, some deceitful persons avoid labor duties. After their status is determined, they fail to report or, after a short period of service, they flee immediately.

It proposed that all people of uncertain status, redeemed slaves, and the descendants of concubines assigned to the auxiliary troops who evaded their service duties should be returned to their former owners, while miscellaneous laborers should be permanently classified as government slaves. The king immediately approved the proposal.[99] The next day, a man named Cŏng Tak protested against this decision by beating the petition drum, but King Sejong responded that the matter had already been resolved.[100] On April 22, 1419, he ordered the permanent re-enslavement of public and private slaves as well as free men with servile duties in the auxiliary troops who had shirked their duties.[101]

Half a year later, Left State Councilor Pak Ŭn remonstrated, emphasizing the importance of the auxiliary troops as a means of expanding "pathways to emancipation" in a population "where slaves are many and commoners are few." He argued that the system provided five key categories of eligibility for emancipation, each addressing different social circumstances.

Among these categories, individuals whose commoner or slave status was unclear were to be assigned to the naval forces. Pak described this solution as equitable and fair. However, he objected to classifying such individuals as slaves if they escaped before completing their term. He viewed this as an unjust reversal of their ambiguous yet relatively liberated status. Similarly, laborers with minor obligations, while not fully enslaved, were treated as servile if their daughters married slaves, perpetuating a system of hereditary servitude. Pak argued that classifying these laborers as slaves solely for fleeing their obligations was unreasonable.

As for the offspring of concubines, Pak highlighted their kinship ties to commoners and the inhumanity of assigning them to servile duties. Allowing such individuals to follow their father's status and become commoners, he asserted, was critical to preserving human ethics.

Pak further addressed cases of individuals whose appeals for commoner status were unresolved, noting that they had originally been recognized as commoners but assigned to the auxiliary troops to reduce the prevalence of servile people. Reclassifying such individuals as slaves without distinguishing their proper status, he argued, would undermine justice.

Finally, Pak criticized the reclassification of individuals who had successfully redeemed themselves from slavery. As these individuals had paid for their freedom, it was unreasonable to permit their reclassification as slaves based on subsequent accusations.

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99 CWS, Sejong, Y. 1:7:18.

100 CWS, Sejong, Y. 1:7:19.

101 CWS, Sejong, Y. 2:3:19 = April 22, 1419.

Pak concluded by stressing the importance of protecting the emancipated status of the auxiliary troops. He proposed measures to punish non-compliance with registration and labor obligations while preventing the indiscriminate reclassification of women and men as slaves, as this could disrupt the underlying principles of emancipation and exacerbate social instability.[102]

The policy was not rescinded, but it proved ineffective and was apparently not seriously enforced. In 1420, the Ministry of Justice reported that "for members of the auxiliary troops who evade their duties and are reassigned to various offices as slaves, lax supervision has occasionally allowed them to avoid work and live idly."[103]

Throughout 1429, a series of debates and legal decisions shaped the status of children born to slaves and commoners. In July, the Ministry of Justice sought to clarify the status of children born to various categories of enslaved individuals. While the children of male palace slaves with women who were either commoners or in military service were to remain within the palace slave status, those born to public or female private slaves who married military personnel were to be classified as commoners, following the precedent of the previous dynasty, i.e., the patrifilial rule. Marriages between female slaves and specific laboring groups, such as salt workers and relay station officials, were governed by existing statutes, while the offspring of relay station slaves who married their own female slaves were to inherit their father's status. The king approved these classifications, reinforcing a structured approach to hereditary status.[104]

However, by September, concerns arose regarding the growing number of status disputes. Right State Councilor Mŏng Sasŏng, a veteran politician and trusted advisor of King Sejong, warned that public and female private slaves were increasingly attempting to secure commoner status for their children by marrying free commoners or by falsely claiming that commoners fathered them, "creating a confusion of names and realities." He argued that if this continued unchecked, public slaves would soon disappear and lead to a labor shortage that would necessitate the forced conscription of commoners:

> Public slaves cannot be entirely abolished. If all of them were freed and became commoners, then it would be necessary to conscript free people into service in their place, which would create serious problems in the future.

To prevent such an outcome, he proposed barring commoner men from marrying female slaves.

Chief State Censor Kim Hyoson criticized that reintroducing the matrifilial rule would be a more effective solution. The king sided with Kim, stating that that imposing restrictions on marriage would contradict the laws of his ancestors, who had intended

102 CWS, Sejong, Y. 2:9:1 = September 29, 1419.
103 CWS, Sejong, Y. 3:7:27 = September 13, 1420.
104 CWS, Sejong, Y. 11:6:11 = July 21, 1429.

"to ensure a steady increase in the number of commoners." Still, he admitted that "it would be preferable to reinstate the matrifilial rule."[105]

Despite the king's decision, the Ministry of Justice reiterated on October 3, 1429, that the shift toward patrilineal inheritance had led to widespread manipulation. Public and female private slaves with enslaved husbands falsely claimed that their children were fathered by commoners, leading to an increase in fraudulent lawsuits. Their arguments resorted to slandering female slaves:

> Moreover, it is common for public and female private slaves to change partners multiple times within a single month, leading to frequent intermarriage between commoners and slaves. This creates confusion for judicial officials in their rulings. Not only does it blur the distinction between free and unfree status, but there are even cases where children do not acknowledge their actual fathers.
>
> From now on, since public and female private slaves do not have fixed husbands and often engage in secret liaisons with both commoners and slaves, any claims seeking commoner status for their children on such grounds should not be entertained.

In this way, they claimed that the alleged immorality of female slaves caused legal, social, and ethical problems. To curb these abuses, the ministry, avoiding an outright prohibition of mixed marriages, proposed rejecting all claims of commoner status based on disputed paternity. Having consulted the relevant ministries, which unanimously agreed, the king approved it.[106]

The issue resurfaced in 1431 when the Ministry of Justice addressed the status of children born to female entertainers assigned to government offices. These women, the ministry alleged, often cohabited with men without formal marriage, further complicating lineage determinations. To ensure consistency, the ministry proposed that all children born to public and female private slaves after June 1414 should inherit their mother's status, even if their fathers later became commoners. The king ordered further discussion.[107]

In May 1431, the court again debated the patrifilial rule regarding the offspring of mixed marriages between male commoners and female slaves. King Sejong's councilors recommended a fundamental change in the system:

> The matrifilial rule is a sound regulation established by an earlier era. This law was created not to increase the number of slaves, but rather because servile women frequently change husbands and behave like to animals.[108] As a result, their offspring recognize only their mother and not their

105 CWS, Sejong, Y. 11:7:25 = September 2, 1429.

106 CWS, Sejong, Y. 11:8:26 = October 3, 1429.

107 CWS, Sejong, Y. 12:12:18 = January 10, 1431.

108 The idiom "acting like birds and beasts" (行同禽獸 *hängdong kŭmsu*) appears across various historical and literary contexts in China and Korea, describing behaviors that are perceived as utterly inhuman, immoral, or savage, equating individuals to animals devoid of reason, morality, or social norms. In many cases, it is used to criticize actions that violate human relationships, such as incest, betrayal,

> father, which led to the establishment of the principle of following the mother. Now, the best course of action would be to abolish the law that allows children to inherit the status of their father and reinstate the matrifilial rule, which classifies them as slaves.[109]

If this was not what the king wanted, they suggested that the prior consent of the owners of female slaves be required before allowing such marriages, but Sejong remarked that in the case of private slaves, "their masters will probably refuse permission." The councilors then argued that the patrifilial rule should be extended to the children of male slaves married to commoner women in order to respect "the principle of honoring the father." This provoked the king, who replied,

> This cannot be. How can the laws of the nation permit slaves to marry commoner women? In my opinion, we should strictly forbid such marriages between commoners and slaves. If violations occur, the law should be applied and the violators punished. As for the children of such unlawful unions, they should all be classified as public slaves.

To which the coucilors objected:

> Many private slaves currently abandon their masters and seek refuge under public ownership, and such cases are widespread. If this law is implemented, female private slaves would prefer to marry commoner men, knowing that their children would become public slaves. Within a hundred years, the private slave population would be greatly reduced.[110]

The next day, the Special Deliberation Bureau presented a report stating that

> while there are prohibitions against male slaves marrying commoner women, there are no such prohibitions against female slaves marrying commoner men. This discrepancy in prohibitions between men and women is truly inappropriate and inconvenient. [...] According to the Great Ming Code, marriages between commoners and slaves are subject to legal penalties, and such unions are to be dissolved and corrected. We petition that, following the precedent of the Tang Code and the statutes of the Ming dynasty, beginning from the first day of the seventh month of the 7th year of Xuande (August 5, 1432), public and female private slaves should be strictly prohibited from marrying commoner men. If violations occur, offenders should be punished according to the law. Any offspring resulting from such illegal unions should not be allowed to follow the status of the father

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or severe violations of filial piety and loyalty that subvert established familial or social hierarchies. It is used to denounce behaviors that are seen as deeply immoral or sexually deviant, often connected with actions that degrade human dignity or the ethical fabric of society, such as the coercion of women, adultery, or corruption. The idiom is also frequently employed to depict individuals or groups engaging in brutal or violent acts, such as killing for pleasure or committing crimes without regard for human life. It highlights their departure from civilized norms, likening their actions to the instincts of untamed animals. The idiom sometimes refers to people in power or familial positions who exploit others or act with extreme cruelty, suggesting that their moral corruption has rendered them akin to animals.

109 CWS, Sejong, Y. 14:3:15 = May 5, 1431.

110 CWS, Sejong, Y. 14:3:25 = May 15, 1431.

> and become commoners. Instead, they should be returned to the ownership of their respective public or private masters.[111] The king agreed.

This decision "effectively curtailed the application of the patrifilial rule."[112] From then on, children of female slaves always became slaves and (as before) children of male slaves also became slaves. Without saying so, the matridominial rule of Koryŏ was thus reinstated for all but a few symptomatic exceptions: *Yangban* who held government office, those who had passed the state examinations, sons of persons granted royal privileges, and childless commoners over the age of forty. These exceptions effectively legalized the practice of *yangban* fathers freeing their secondary sons who had been born to them by their slave concubines.

However, the secondary sons continued to be an issue because it was felt inappropriate to let them off the hook in such a generous manner. In 1456, King Sejo accepted a new proposal by the Ministry of Justice, stating:

> A directive was previously issued specifying that children born by courtesans and concubines to government officials should, according to the father's will, be allowed to redeem themselves and achieve exemption from servitude, similar to the provisions for registered slaves. However, no formal regulations regarding their conscription into official duties have been established. Consequently, after being freed from servitude, many such individuals remain idle. It is recommended that they be included in the auxiliary troops under the same provisions as redeemed slaves and the descendants of concubines.[113]

Eight years later, in late 1464, the Ministry of Justice, responding to a report from the governor of Hamgil Province,[114] highlighted the problem of displaced individuals in the border region. Attempting to evade state obligations, many claimed to be the slaves of specific owners. However, compliance with official documentation for their return was inconsistent, and the verification processes were unreliable. The remote and isolated nature of the province, coupled with its relative ease of sustenance, had made it a refuge for runaway slaves and those seeking to escape labor duties. These individuals allegedly exploited the ambiguity of their status to avoid obligations, engage in unauthorized economic activities, and commit fraud.

The report warned that the current policy—assigning those with unclear commoner status to the auxiliary troops—risked integrating more and more displaced slaves into the military. Since these troops were entitled to free status upon completing their service, the policy inadvertently provided an escape route from servitude. To prevent further abuse of this loophole, the report recommended that displaced individuals without

111 CWS, Sejong, Y. 14:3:26 = May 16, 1431. Cf. Yi Hongdu 1991: 200.

112 Ibid.: 200.

113 CWS, Sejo, Year 2:7:5 = August 14, 1456.

114 This province in the northeast of the peninsula was first called Yŏngil between 1413 and 1416, then Hamgil until 1470, then Yŏngan and finally Hamgyŏng in 1509.

clear documentation of commoner status should be classified as slaves by default even after retirement from military service. Until their status could be properly verified, they were to be provisionally registered as slaves in local administrative records. This measure was adopted.[115]

A case from 1466 illustrates how rigid the system could be in practice. A resident of Sŏngju in Kyŏngsang Province claimed that his grandfather, a high-ranking official, had taken his own slave as a concubine, leading to the birth of the petitioner's father. After a thorough review of the status of children born to concubines, the petitioner's father was classified as a member of the auxiliary troops and was required to serve indefinitely due to a lack of formal discharge. Upon his death, his son, the petitioner, was obligated to continue the service for over forty years without being released.

Seeking discharge, he submitted a petition, but the Ministry of Military Affairs denied his request, arguing that his father's classification was not formally recorded in the Sŏngju register. The case was forwarded for review, and the Ministry reaffirmed that without official documentation, administrative procedures did not permit discharge. However, a royal directive followed, instructing that in future cases, discharge decisions should be based on the auxiliary troops' registry, granting remission to those who had served long terms despite bureaucratic inconsistencies.[116]

7.3.1 The Abolition of Temple Slaves

The abolition of Buddhist temple slaves—who had been prominent and numerous in the Koryŏ period—marks a major shift in the history of slavery. It came into full swing under King Thäjong, who began to reduce the number of temple slaves from the beginning of his reign in 1400.[117]

However, this did not go unchallenged. In 1406, some officials objected to the decision to nationalize the slaves of the Kuryŏng Temple in Kimhä, Kyŏngsang Province. They asserted that they, as the descendants of the monk Hyegyŏng, had been fighting in court since 1398 to be the rightful owners of these slaves. Hyegyŏng had once donated private slaves to this temple, "and over the generations their number grew to several thousand." They won their case in court, but the Censorate still wanted to nationalize the slaves. It persuaded the king to have the plaintiffs dismissed from their posts or exiled for opposing a government decision approved by the king.[118]

This shows that the main thrust of the debate over the abolition of temple slaves was not an ideological opposition to Buddhism, but the struggle over their labor. It fits

115 CWS, Sejo, Y. 10:11:20 = December 27, 1464.
116 CWS, Sejo, Y. 12:9:17 = November 3, 1466.
117 CWS, Thäjong, Y. 6:3:12 = April 9, 1406.
118 CWS, Thäjong, Y. 6:6:26 = July 20, 1406.

the picture that, in 1407, the Council of Censors suggested that the process be halted for the time being, fearing that enforcing their redistribution might lead to mass desertion:

> Previously, temple slaves beyond the fixed quota were reassigned to various government offices in both the capital and the provinces. However, since monks lack discipline and structure, the slaves they oversee are often idle and negligent in their duties. If these slaves are suddenly separated from their parents, spouses, and children and forcibly assigned to different government offices for labor, there is a risk that they will flee, leading to a continuous decline in registered households, which would ultimately be detrimental to the state.
> Therefore, aside from the 4,000 individuals already assigned to the Agency for Military Armory, no additional temple slaves should be redistributed among government offices. Instead, they should remain where they currently reside and continue their previous duties as before. Male and female slaves, young and old, should be categorized and assigned to state-run farms, and their body tributes should be assessed appropriately. Each local province and district should annually record and store their contributions, establishing separate registers to ensure preparedness for unforeseen needs and famine relief.[119]

There was no immediate response to this petition, but we learn from this that King Thäjong had previously transferred 4,000 temple slaves to the Agency for Military Armory. This was related to the build-up of a new fire lance force, a unit manned and supported entirely by slaves, which defied the principle that slaves should not serve as soldiers. The Council of Censors had already criticized this in 1404:

> Recently, when the Fire Lance Brigade was expanded, the assignment of duties was made solely based on land registers without considering the number of slaves or their age and physical condition. As a result, some who should have had their duties reduced were instead burdened with more, while others who should have had their duties increased were assigned less. If this system is not revised, the burden will become unbearable, leading to continued desertions. Therefore, it is requested that the governors of each province conduct a thorough review of the slave registers in all offices and agencies, recording the number and names of those aged fifteen to fifty and submitting a report.[120]

The problem was that these temple slaves were burdened with a considerably higher labor duty than before, leading to an imbalance between them and the other public slaves. When the State Council submitted a proposal to standardize the body tributes of public slaves in 1408, it stated:

> Previously, the contributions required from original government-owned slaves were too light, while those imposed on former monastery and temple slaves were excessively heavy, resulting in an imbalance in the obligations of all public lowborn. We request that the contributions for both categories of slaves be unified as follows: male slaves shall provide five bolts of coarse cloth, and female slaves shall provide four bolts of coarse cloth as the standard obligation.[121]

119 CSW, Thäjong 7:1:12 = February 28, 1407.
120 CWS, Thäjong, Y. 4:8:20 = October 3, 1404.
121 CWS, Thäjong, Y. 8:8:28 = September 26, 1408.

The proposal was approved, but problems continued with respect to the management of the growing number of former temple slaves relocated to the administration. In October 1415, the minister of justice made another request:

> With more than 80,000 former temple slaves reassigned to the Bureau of Rites and Agriculture, it will likely be difficult to fully assess their productivity. Therefore, we request that they be distributed among various government offices to facilitate more effective management and benefits.[122]

By this process, more than 80,000 former temple slaves (*sanobi*) were made into capital-bureau slaves (*shinobi*)—both written with exactly the same Chinese characters (寺奴婢), but with very different meanings[123]—and palace slaves.

This transition was finalized when the Ministry of Justice obtained the consent of the king with regard to their proposal concerning former temple slaves in 1417, which read as follows:

> These slaves were originally assigned exclusively to the Bureau of Rites and Agriculture, but since their status has not yet been fully assessed, we request that they be redistributed among this ministry, the Office of Palace Servants, the Agency of Royal Supplies, the Office of Palace Provisions, the Office of Palace Maintenance, and the Hospitality Office. They should be officially registered through verification of their records and status, and their body tributes should be assessed annually for collection and submission.[124]

There was also a relevant follow-up on the Fire Lance Brigade:

> Regarding the Fire Lance Brigade under the Agency for Military Armory, due to the previous reassignment of former temple slaves, their total number was set at 10,000. Each year, based on official registers, they were assigned as supporters to regular troops, prepared for inspections to determine leadership roles, and rotated annually. However, since it is inappropriate for lowborn individuals to serve as soldiers, the Fire Lance Brigade within the Agency for Military Armory shall be classified as assistant labor slaves (*coyŏngno*), while the naval forces under the Agency of Marine Products shall be registered as transport slaves (*cŏnunno*).[125]

This provision was extremely important, for it ended Thäjong's experiment of using slaves as regular soldiers. They were relegated to the status of auxiliary and transport slaves, eliminating any chance of them becoming officers and overcoming their subordinate status.

The abolition of temple slaves was driven by concerns over economic inefficiency, but also by profound Confucian hostility toward Buddhist institutions and accusations

122 CWS, Thäjong, Y. 15:8:29 = October 10, 1415.

123 It should be noted that even the pronunciation was originally probably the same. The character 寺, meaning both "temple" and "office," was transcribed as 亽 *sá*, with a vowel articulated centrally, between *a* and *ə*.

124 CWS, Thäjong, Y. 16:12:14 = January 10, 1417.

125 CWS, Thäjong, Y. 16:12:14 = January 10, 1417.

of monastic corruption, particularly allegations of sexual misconduct involving temple slaves. Under Thäjong's successor Sejong, these accusations became the official pretext for their final removal.

On January 3, 1419, the State Council presented the king with a memorial that referred to recent anecdotes of immorality among monks and slaves:

> [...] Monks like Kahyu and Cŏngho at Höam Temple and monks like Saik and Sŏngju at Cingwan Temple, along with dozens of others, have engaged in sexual misconduct with female temple slaves, defiling the Three Jewels [Buddha, his teachings, and the community of practitioners] and violating the laws of the state. If even prestigious temples are guilty of such behavior, how much worse must the situation be in other temples?
> The existence of temple slaves is a long-standing corruption that has not yet been abolished. However, its persistence ensnares monks in sin and crime, tarnishing not only the Buddhist path but also the nation's moral order.
> We humbly acknowledge that His Majesty, endowed with wisdom and insight, has ruled diligently since ascending the throne. It is fitting to eradicate long-standing corruption and implement reforms.
> Therefore, we earnestly request the complete abolition of male and female temple slaves, so that monks will no longer be tempted to engage in sinful acts and instead uphold the virtues of purity and restraint. Such a measure would be of great happiness.[126]

The Six Ministries followed with a stronger memorial on the same day, using almost the same language, but generalizing the argument even further and clarifying what should be done with the slaves:

> [...] Monks in every temple today command the service of slaves, live in luxury and indulgence, and openly engage in licentious behavior. How can this be in accordance with the teachings of their masters? The Höam and Cingwan temples are known for their purity, yet their monks have engaged in sexual misconduct with female temple slaves, sometimes with two or three women at a time. Since the attraction between *yin* and *yang* [female and male] is a natural principle, and since these monks are in constant proximity to the slaves day and night, how could they not transgress? If even the so-called pure temples behave like this, how much worse must the situation be in all the other temples? Therefore, we demand that all temple slaves be made public property and that monks be forced to dedicate themselves to austerity and spiritual cultivation so that they can properly uphold their religious path.[127]

Meanwhile, the Censorship and Remonstration Officials proposed a compromise:

> [...] It is necessary to abolish both male and female temple slaves so that monks can devote themselves fully to their spiritual practice. However, since this is an entrenched corruption that cannot be eradicated quickly, we propose the following gradual reforms:
> 1. Establish a fixed number of temple slaves.
> 2. Move them at least ten miles away from the temples.
> 3. Prohibit female slaves from serving within the temples.

126 CWS, Sejong, Y. 1:11:28 = January 3, 1419.
127 CWS, Sejong, Y. 1:11:28 = January 3, 1419.

> These measures are intended to prevent monks from engaging in sexual misconduct. [...] Moreover, since monks renounce family ties, they should not command the service of slaves, even those who once belonged to their own parents. Therefore, we petition for the complete abolition of male and female temple and monastic slaves, and demand that all monastic slaves return to the status of commoners, so that Buddhism can once again adhere to its principles of purity.[128]

Although this was the mildest suggestion, it was completely impractical. Housing slaves at a distance of five kilometers from their places of work and prohibiting female slaves from even entering the temples made them virtually useless to the temples.[129]

On the same day, King Sejong responded with the following decree:

> Male and female temple slaves outside the capital will be abolished. In addition, the slaves of Kägyŏng Temple,[130] Yŏngyŏng Temple[131] and Täja Hermitage[132] shall also be abolished. However, the Cŏngŏp Nunnery—a place where widows live together and where male slaves do not go frequently—is exempt from this policy.[133]

In conclusion, the more than 80,000 former temple slaves were transferred either to the royal palaces or to the public offices in the capital, significantly expanding the scale of public slavery compared to the Koryŏ period.[134] The fate of the monastic slaves that belonged to individual monks rather than to the temples remains uncertain. The censors had suggested that they be freed as commoners, but this seems unlikely to have happened. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1418, some temples and monks retained slaves, but in much smaller numbers, and they were classified as private slaves.

For the temples, the loss of their temple slaves was catastrophic. They were not only household servants and laborers, but also played a supporting role in agriculture and taxation, making their abolition economically disruptive for the temples.

In 1448, shortly before his death, Sejong again discussed the issue of temple slaves with the Royal Secretariat with respect to protecting the golden statues in the Buddhist Hall, which had been moved outside the palace, from theft. At first, Sejong suggested using the remaining slaves of the Cŏngŏp Nunnery to guard the statues and maintain the hall. But then he changed his mind:

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128 CWS, Sejong, Y. 1:11:28 = January 3, 1419.

129 Perhaps I am exaggerating the logic. As Peterson remarked: "There was no correlation between the locations of allocated lands and residences of allocated slaves. That situation is admittedly so unreasonable that it is hard to imagine how the society functioned." M. Peterson 1985: 40.

130 Located in Kyŏnggi Province, this temple was designated as the royal shrine for King Thäjo. It existed until the eighteenth century.

131 In Käsŏng.

132 Built in Koyang, Kyŏnggi Province, near the tomb of one of the sons of King Thäjong.

133 CWS, Sejong, Y. 1:11:28 = January 3, 1419. Cŏngŏbwŏn was a Buddhist nunnery established before 1164 in Kägyŏng and later moved to Hanyang (Seoul). It housed Buddhist nuns, often from aristocratic families, and was initially protected and funded by the Cosŏn kings. It was abolished in 1448, reinstated in 1457, and finally abolished in 1612.

134 So 2021: 198.

> Since they will continue to reproduce, it will be difficult to abolish the system in the future, and the burden of the temple hall slaves will become excessive.
> Previously, when the temple slaves were abolished, we assigned only a limited number to the two main Buddhist sects. Those assigned were called chamber boys (*pangja*).
> Following this precedent, I propose that we appoint six people as *corachi* and make them responsible for the Buddhist Hall. They will take turns in providing security.[135]

Little is known about the *corachi*, a group of low-status workers who were assigned to clean and maintain Buddhist shrines in the palace and later in temples. This role was typically filled by public slaves, which led to opposition from officials who saw it as a corrupt and obsolete institution. Over time, the number of *corachi* was reduced, but the system persisted for much of the Cosŏn period.

Sejong's remark about the continued reproduction of temple slaves reveals much about the distinction between slaves and other low-status workers. The main difference was not that or how both were dependent and restricted in their personal freedom. We can also assume that *corachi* had their own families and offspring. The crucial difference was that the offspring of slaves became the property of their owners and thus, in the eyes of the king, a *future burden*. This was not true for other workers, such as the *corachi*, who were not bound across generations. In other words, the peculiarity of slave status, its hereditary character, came at a price.

7.3.2 Drafted-Up Slaves

The system of drafted-up slaves (*sŏnsang nobi*) in Cosŏn was a structured way of managing state-assigned slaves, balancing labor needs, taxation, and military service.[136]

The term "drafted-up slaves" was reportedly used in the late Koryŏ period (though it does not appear in official histories), but it had a different meaning. In 1403, the Court of Remonstrances dealt with the phenomenon of officials summoning slaves from their home districts to work in Seoul:

> It is respectfully noted that former officials and ministers of the previous dynasty forcibly ordered their native prefectures and counties to select strong male government slaves and label them as drafted-up slaves, claiming a large number of households and privately exploiting their families for labor. Although the state had previously issued bans, lax enforcement in recent years has allowed these abuses to resurface. As a result, provinces and counties throughout the realm now lack government slaves for official duties, leading to continued decline and deterioration. It is requested that the Ministry of Justice conduct a thorough push-and-brush investigation of all those designated as drafted-up slaves, except those granted to meritorious subjects, and return them to

135 CWS, Sejong, Y. 30:12:9 = January 23, 1448.

136 Western-language research on this topic is non-existent. Astonishingly, the Korean term was mentioned as "slaves selected and sent up to the capital" in a 2024 call for papers for a study on "trade in humans," which is a completely unrelated topic. Roebuck, Ransmeier, and Abel 2024: 1.

> their original government duties. In addition, strict corrective measures should be taken for those who were not granted by the ruler, but were illegally exploited by officials and commoners.[137]

According to this source, high-ranking officials selected able-bodied public slaves from their home regions and exploited them for their own benefit. This resulted in a shortage of public slaves in the central and local governments.[138] To prevent future abuses, the Cosŏn administration took this process into its own hands, especially after King Thäjong abolished 80,000 temple slaves and integrated them into public slave management (see p. 258).

A certain number of these slaves were then routinely selected for service in the capital. They were called "drafted-up slaves" (*sŏnsang nobi*) as opposed to the slaves residing in the capital (*kyŏnggŏ nobi*). In general, they worked for a total of three years in a three-rotation system, going to Hanyang for six months until they were replaced and returning home for one year before their shift began again.[139]

Their duties included administrative or logistical tasks. While performing these duties, the drafted-up slaves were required to pay their own expenses, with limited support in the form of two, later three supporters (*pongjok*).[140] These supporters provided each slave with grain and cloth to offset some of the expenses incurred during their service.

Under King Sejo in the mid-fifteenth century, the rotation was extended to five years, and in Kyŏnggi province even to six years, resulting in an actual labor service of only once every five (or six) years. This meant that the number of slaves involved increased dramatically. Under King Sejong, there were about 12,000 active drafted-up slaves plus 24,000 support slaves; under Sejo, there were 44,000 plus 132,000. This reflects the enormous growth of the slave population during the fifteenth century. The total number of public slaves working for the central government is estimated at 200,000, while those working for the local branches of government amounted to 70,000–80,000. Thus, about twenty percent of all public slaves were on active duty as drafted-up slaves.[141]

The system was seriously flawed, as its administration was inconsistent at both the capital and local levels. The distribution and actual conditions varied from one government unit to another. In practice, many departments in the capital lacked enough resident slaves, forcing them to rely on rotating slaves or tribute replacements. When departments had too many slaves, they could be reassigned to areas in need of labor or given to privileged *yangban*. By the mid-1400s, the selection of slaves was delegated to low-ranking local officials, who were reportedly negligent or outright corrupt in their

137 CWS, Thäjong 3:11:20 = December 4, 1403.
138 So 2021: 198.
139 Ibid.: 200.
140 Ibid.: 198.
141 Ibid.: 205–7.

procedures.[142] Under King Sejo, substitution, which had already been practiced inofficially, was legalized. The Ministry of Justice reported that

> previously, drafted-up slaves from outside the capital, whether because of their parents' old age or illness or because of their wives and children's lack of means of livelihood, hired substitutes to perform their duties in their place. In the capital, those without assigned labor duties and those already engaged in the six-rotation labor system accepted payment to act as substitutes, allowing those with and without means to mutually support each other and continue their livelihoods. Now, due to the prohibition on lending and borrowing *hophä* [identification tags], outlying slaves are no longer able to hire substitutes, leading to an increase in those evading their labor obligations. We request that, from now on, all government slaves and personnel who seek substitutes be allowed to do so by mutual agreement.[143]

The request was granted. Slaves could now officially hire substitutes (*täripca*) to fulfill their work obligations. However, the cost was about 2.5 times the amount of the tax exemptions enjoyed during the period of service, which meant that slaves who decided to hire a substitute had to bear an additional burden equal to their regular body tribute.[144] Some government slaves turned providing substitute labor or exacting compensation fees into a business model for themselves.[145] Interestingly, the report also mentions the negative impact on slave mobility caused by the implementation of the *hophä* system: It prevented public slaves from taking unofficial secondary jobs through private arrangements, as they could be easily identified.[146]

For the state, this substitution scheme marked the beginning of the capitalization of slave labor, which was to become increasingly important for the financing of the state in the following period.[147]

However, Sejong's pioneering policy was not followed by his immediate successors. The number of slave rotations was also reduced, first to five and later to seven. Meanwhile, due to the increased demand, the market price for replacements continued to rise to such heights that the government decided to outlaw it completely in 1474, except for unavoidable cases.[148] Nevertheless, local officials tolerated it in exchange for bribes, and the unofficial prices climbed even higher.

The system began to crumble in the sixteenth century. In 1520, one inspector from Kangwŏn Province complained about the drastic negative effects of the policy:

> None of the drafted-up slaves [...] perform their assigned rotations themselves; instead, all employ substitutes from among the capital's residents. The fees for these substitutes are collected with

142 Ibid.: 201.
143 CWS, Sejo, Y. 4:11:4 = November 18, 1468. Cf. ibid.: 213.
144 Ibid.: 203.
145 Kim Hongshik 1974: 84.
146 So 2021: 213.
147 Kim Hongshik 1974: 83.
148 So 2021: 218.

> additional monthly interest, effectively doubling the standard rotation fee. As a result, those who are too poor to afford this are subjected to forced contributions from their relatives and neighbors. As entire households become destitute, families scatter and flee, leaving nine out of ten houses empty and the villages desolate.[149]

In response, the service period was reduced to three months in the 1540s, and the replacement price was lowered significantly.[150]

The disruptions caused by the Great East Asian War (1592–1599) led to the widespread displacement of slaves, many of whom escaped or dispersed. Illegal collection of labor compensation fees by officials remained a persistent problem, although laws attempted to curb it by requiring direct payment to government offices. Systemic corruption made enforcement difficult, and reformers such as Yu Hyŏngwŏn pushed for broader land redistribution as a solution.

By the seventeenth century, the system was completely abolished. Its disappearance reflects changes in labor management and the challenges of maintaining forced labor systems in the face of administrative inefficiency and social disruption.

7.3.3 Push and Brush: In Search of Slaves

To cope with the problem of runaway or otherwise disappearing public slaves, King Sŏngjong decided to establish the Agency for Slave Investigation in 1478. The regulations for the "push-and-brush" investigation of public slaves presented by the Agency in 1478 sought to ensure the accurate documentation of slaves within government and educational institutions while addressing instances of evasion and concealment.[151]

A key aspect of this policy was to enforce accountability among local district officials and headmen, who were often aware of the movements and disappearances of government-owned slaves but concealed this information through bribery. As a deterrent, officials recorded the names of the concerned clerks and headmen and threatened that if unregistered slaves were later discovered, those officials would be permanently relegated to menial roles as low-ranking relay station clerks or as slaves themselves. In addition, all government-owned slaves in various districts, including military slaves and those assigned to Confucian schools, were subject to systematic investigation and registration.

The measures also targeted those who sought to escape servitude by entering monastic life, ruling that all slaves who had illegally become Buddhist monks or nuns were to be forcibly returned to secular status. It also ordered that a survey be made of the office slaves scattered throughout the provinces every twenty years. Such surveys

149 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 7:5:14 = May 30, 1520.

150 So 2021: 222.

151 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 9:12:2 = December 25, 1478.

were to be conducted by dispatched court officials within a fixed time frame. Investigations within the palace and related offices were scheduled according to the rotation of duties rather than being conducted simultaneously, which would have caused delays.

The regulations also addressed cases of intermarriage between public and private slaves, requiring proper documentation from the relevant offices, such as the Board of the Royal Treasury and the Office of Royal Clan Affairs, to verify servile status. Officials of the State Council and Censorship and Remonstration Officials were required to submit status records from the slave registers for verification, while outside officials were required to undergo personal examinations.

The process also included the appointment of clerks and scribes from relevant institutions, such as the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Slave Affairs, to oversee the investigations. Provisions were also made for cases in which slaves disappeared during the investigation. If their disappearance was obvious but unreported, those responsible, except for high-ranking officials, meritorious subjects, hereditary privilege holders, and military personnel, would be subjected to criminal interrogation.

However, the intended twenty-year interval for push-and-brush investigations was never realized. The next kings to establish slave hunting agencies were Cungjong in 1514, Myŏngjong in 1556, and Hyojong in 1655.[152]

7.4 (Not) Introducing the Matrifilial Rule

In 1468, a literary licentiate named Song Hŭihŏn sent a petition to King Sejo, demanding the abolition of the patrifilial rule. He argued that systemic flaws in state legislation led to injustice and inefficiency regarding slaves and social hierarchy. The law allowing the children of slaves to claim descent through their fathers, ostensibly designed to promote social mobility and increase the number of free citizens, had instead encouraged manipulation by both slaves and their masters, leading to disputes over status and ownership. The author warned that the pursuit of freedom through the exploitation of legal loopholes undermined social norms and the intended harmony of the legal system.

> Thus, the slave owners dispute and argue in public offices, and officials are unable to discern right from wrong. Litigation inevitably increases, and the fundamental principles of order and morality are thereby compromised. Does this truly align with the intentions of heaven, earth, and the ancestors? Though the burdens of litigation and the disruption of social norms may not yet be deemed grave, human nature fundamentally seeks benefit and avoids harm, despises humiliation, and desires honor. Then among all the slaves, who would not wish to improve their status and that of their children? I fear that if this law is not revised, marriages between commoners and slaves will persist, and all slaves, public or private, will exploit countless methods to evade their status. The

152 CWS, Hyojong, Y. 6:2:9 = June 3, 1655.

> numbers of slaves, once abundant, will decline year by year and month by month, and the state's structural flaws will ultimately remain unrectified.[153]

King Sejo was so impressed that he ordered his government to deliberate and report on the actionable parts. Even the ministers opposed the patrifilial rule:

> "If the patrifilial rule is implemented now, public slaves who wish to elevate their children to commoner status will inevitably falsely claim that their child is the offspring of some local official or clerk. If this continues, in just a few years, the number of public slaves will significantly decrease. Currently, commoners cannot be mobilized for labor, and the number of slaves is steadily declining; the resulting harm is incalculable. Moreover, the matrifilial rule does not refer to taking her surname but rather to the labor assigned to her."[154]
> The king responded: "When this law was first established, the intent was to increase the number of commoners and thereby expand the military register. If we adhere to the matrifilial rule, there would ultimately be no way to elevate anyone to commoner status. What is to be done?"
> The ministers said: "In ancient times, there was the practice of redeeming one's status through payment; this is a path to becoming a commoner."
> The king immediately decreed that all slaves tied to labor based on their mother's status were permitted to have their fathers redeem their status. Offspring of monks were to be classified as public slaves.[155]

This meant that the default would be the matridominial rule with a patrifilial exception: if the free father chose it (and could afford it), the patrifilial rule could be applied, and the male offspring would be assigned to the auxiliary troops. However, in 1472, King Sŏngjong limited this privilege to the concubine-born children of high-ranking officials, while the children of commoners and concubines automatically became slaves.[156] (The conventional way of explaining this situation, in keeping with the deliberately opaque terminology of the Cosŏn politicians, is to define it as the matrifilial rule "with two exceptions,"[157] namely the application of the patrifilial rule to slaves married to free women and the possibility of redeeming the children of slave concubines if desired. Later critics such as Song Shiyŏl and Yu Hyŏngwŏn pointed out that this was based on a mistaken and misleading understanding of the matrifilial rule. Since there can be no doubt about the validity of this criticism today, there is no reason to engage in the verbal obfuscation tactics of the past.)

The exception that Sŏngjong legalized—that is, the emancipation of the sons of wealthy fathers—was literally called "following the good" (*congnyang*), and it required the payment of "body compensation" (*sokshin*), a self-explanatory term. It was limited

153 CWS, Sejo, Y. 14:6:14 = July 12, 1468.

154 This shows the difference in the interpretation of the matridominial rule of the Koryŏ period and the matrifilial rule in the Cosŏn period: The Cosŏn officials were more concerned with lineage (claiming a family name) than with duties.

155 CWS, Sejo, Y. 14:6:14 = July 12, 1468.

156 Yi Hongdu 1991: 204.

157 Jisoo M. Kim 2015: 138.

to the emancipated individuals only in their lifetime, while their descendants became the slaves of their masters.[158]

This policy, however, sparked significant social backlash. While some slaves did serve in the military, particularly during emergencies or within auxiliary units, mandatory military service was not generally imposed upon them. Many commoners sought to become slaves to avoid compulsory military service,[159] while the offspring of slave concubines cleverly exploited a loophole in the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn*, the "Great Code of Administration": If children born to high-ranking officials entitled to marry slave concubines did not undergo formal redemption before their sixteenth birthday, they remained in the category of slaves and should logically revert to the ownership of their mother's masters or the state. Thus, they would be omitted from the auxiliary troop registry and could reclaim their slave status, even the possibility of filing formal complaints for reassignment to servitude.[160]

This development puzzled the government. King Sŏngjong initiated a debate at the court, with two factions emerging: One group, representing the interests of officials and large-scale slave holders, suggested that they stick to the rule in order to ensure that the offspring of commoner concubines were classified as slaves. The other group wanted to strengthen the military and fiscal power of the king.

In 1481, King Sŏngjong issued a directive to the Department of Slave Affairs that was probably meant to prevent such strategies:

> Offspring born during the period when their parent was classified as a slave, prior to being assigned to the auxiliary troops, shall also be allowed to enter the auxiliary ranks. After completing their term of service and being discharged, they shall be reclassified as commoners.[161]

But intermarriage was not the only pressing problem to be solved. As early as 1468, King Sejo proclaimed another directive, highlighting the precarious living conditions of free hired laborers, an issue that was slowly gaining importance, especially in the border regions:

> Hired laborers are not slaves[162] but impoverished individuals who rely on others for sustenance. In reality, they are free commoners and, according to the law, should be registered for military service. […] Out of compassion, I permit those under the patronage of their households to be registered only by name without being subjected to labor. In times of peace, they may pursue their own desires; in times of need, their strength may be utilized. Is this not the grand principle for organizing military forces and governing the state? If not, those avoiding service will all flock to powerful households,

158 Pak Kyŏng 2013: 402.

159 Palais 1996: 226.

160 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 9:8:7 = September 12, 1478.

161 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 12:3:18 = April 25, 1481.

162 This does not seem to have been universally accepted. In the eighteenth century, Yi Ŭbong equated the term "hired laborer" (*kogong*) with "hired slave" (*kono*): Yi Ŭbong 1977: 727.

> willingly becoming slaves. This will lead to an imbalance in tax and service obligations, leaving the weaker citizens unable to bear the burden, and military strength will be depleted and sparse.[163]

Thus, he exempted hired laborers from military service in order to prevent them from becoming slaves. Although Sejo stated that they were free commoners, it is clear that they were dependent on their employers, wealthy landlords who employed them alongside their slaves and supported their living and provided food for them. In fact, the line between these hired laborer and slaves was blurred. The Censorship and Remonstration Officials warned in 1509:

> The current number of troops in our country is insufficient. If we continue to reduce their number, the number of military households will decrease even more. If, on the other hand, we rigidly adhere to the original quotas and forcibly enlist the husbands of female slaves, hired laborers, beggars, and those without dependents to meet the required numbers, this will not only result in an overly mixed and inefficient force but will also cause them to scatter and flee, leading to a nominal existence without practical substance. [...] There are many cases of wealthy households falsely claiming the husbands of female slaves or hired laborers as slaves, taking in free people and exploiting them for labor within their houses.[164]

They proposed that these people be exempted from fixed duties and that the number of hired workers be limited to a maximum of three per household. In 1469, under King Sŏngjong, a system of valued labor compensation was introduced. For a fixed price, payable in cloth (the labor compensation price, *kabo*), it was now possible to pay off labor obligations. This was another step towards the monetarization of state labor.[165]

Despite all efforts, the slave population continued to grow significantly. In 1478, Shim Wŏn, a great-grandson of King Thäjong, presented a detailed memorandum that served as a call for systemic reform to improve governance by addressing the root causes of social and administrative problems. In this regard, he lamented:

> Currently, among the common people, private slaves account for eight or nine out of ten, while genuine free folk make up merely one or two. Those who live in stability and wealth are invariably private slaves, while those in poverty and hardship are invariably public slaves or free folk.
> The reason for this lies in the following: Whenever governors and officials are appointed, whether knowingly or unknowingly, senior ministers and officials host farewell feasts with wine and meat, requesting protection for their slaves. This practice has become customary at all levels and is known as "commemoration." Since many governors and officials are appointed from within their ranks, they dare not refuse.
> For all public duties, public slaves and free folk are conscripted, while private slaves are exempted. Free folk and public slaves are unable to endure these burdens and often flee, becoming servants of the private slaves. Even their hereditary land and property cannot be preserved, as they ultimately fall into the hands of the powerful families.

163 CWS, Sejo, Y. 14:6:18 = July 16, 1468.
164 CWS, Cŏngjong, Y. 4:i9:18 = October 11, 1509.
165 Kim Hongshik 1974: 83.

> As a result, the private slaves increasingly grow secure and wealthy, benefiting from the misfortunes of their neighbors. When hardships arise, they compete to oppress and exploit others—how, then, could they possibly assist one another?
> As a result, free folk and public slaves are increasingly displaced, with fathers and sons unable to protect one another, and husbands and wives unable to care for each other. The hardships of the people have never been greater than today, and it can be said that the foundation of the state is no longer secure.[166]

Shim Wŏn warned that private slaves, protected by powerful families, enjoyed exemptions from public duties and grew wealthier, often at the expense of public slaves and free folk. Conversely, the burdens of public service and taxation fell disproportionately on public slaves and free folk, driving them into economic ruin and dependency on private slaves. This dynamic exacerbated societal divisions, weakened familial bonds, and destabilized the foundation of the state.

Perhaps the most alarming part of his argument, however, is his estimate that 80–90 percent of the common people (understood as a combination of the king's free and unfree subjects, excluding the *yangban*) were private slaves. "Eight or nine out of ten" was a fairly common figure of speech (I counted 38 instances in various contexts in the *Veritable Records*) and must not be taken at face value; it is "exaggerated."[167] Actual numbers that support such estimates are very rare. The Agency for Slave Investigation reported in 1484:

> The total number of [public] slaves in both the capital and the provinces amounts to 261,984 individuals; the total number of slaves belonging to various counties and relay stations amounts to 90,581 individuals.[168]

This gives a total of 352,565 public slaves. Including private slaves, the total slave population may have been as high as 1–1.5 million,[169] about one-third of the total population of 4–5 million. There were two main reasons for this development.

First, as explained by Shim Wŏn, many commoners voluntarily submitted themselves to slavery in order to escape the burdens of military service and labor obligations. In 1472, the administration reported that in connection with the introduction of *hophä* (identification tags), which were mandatory for commoners and public slaves but not for private slaves:

> There were commoners who were not properly registered in the commoner records. Some sought commendation under the households of military officials and asked to be recognized as slaves.

166 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 9:4:8 = May 18, 1478. Cf. ibid.: 83.

167 B.-R. Kim 2003: 156.

168 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 15:8:3 = September 1, 1484. Courant misunderstands this to be the number of private and public slaves: Courant 2007: 331; cf. S. Shin 1975: 52.

169 B.-R. Kim 2006: 50; Sudō 1939: 14.

> There were also cases where individuals colluded with others who had matching registration documents and falsely claimed slave status.[170]

The only administrative weapon to fight commendation was to accuse their new owners of coercion into servitude. An infamous case was discussed in 1473 and 1474, when the censors accused Song Ikson—a military official based in Cŏlla Province who had been made a meritorious subject for supporting the 1453 coup of King Sejo—of illegally accumulating land and slaves:

> Song Ikson [...] has extensively seized free citizens, turning them into his private dependents, and his unchecked arrogance knows no bounds. [...] Many people who evade taxes and labor flee to the homes of wealthy and powerful figures. If Song Ikson is not punished now, this corruption will never be resolved.[171]

King Sŏngjong was reluctant to deal with this case and demanded more evidence, so the censors continued pressing for his punishment:

> The local magnates of Cŏlla Province have long constructed widespread enclosures and barriers to conceal free citizens. [...] Song Ikson alone has amassed as many as 500 slaves in a single district. If he had not concealed free people and turned them into his dependents, how could he have reached such numbers?[172]

> Song Ikson has practiced coercion into servitude, with the recorded cases being exceptionally numerous. Upon examination of the official records and household registers by the State Tribunal, it was found that over 500 free people had been reduced to slavery through fraudulent registrations. Additionally, there are likely hundreds or even thousands of cases of women or vulnerable individuals who were coerced but remain unregistered.[173]

The king finally admitted the accusations and relieved Song Ikson from his offices but pardoned him immediately from further punishments.[174]

Second, slave owners increasingly claimed ownership of children born of commoner-slave unions and slave marriages, and they also *de facto* appropriated the free husbands of female slaves. For them, "the control of large contingents of slaves proved critical to economic success."[175] For commoners, these unions were profitable because when they married slaves, they could avoid labor duty and military service for their offspring.[176]

In 1485, a debate took place in the court that seemed to veer off in a completely different direction. King Sŏngjong learned that

170 CWS, Sŏngjong 3:3:1 = April 17, 1472.
171 CWS, Sŏngjong 5:3:19 = April 14, 1474.
172 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 5:3:19 = April 14, 1474.
173 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 5:3:25 = April 20, 1474.
174 S. Shin 1975: 51.
175 Deuchler 2015: 136.
176 S. Shin 1975: 52.

> "Yim Pok, a private slave residing in Cinchŏn, has contributed 2,000 *sŏk* of grain for famine relief. His intentions are commendable. At a time of widespread hunger, even those of higher status are unwilling to contribute, yet this lowly slave has done so. Would it not be fitting to reward him by granting freedom from his servile status?" [...] The court officials replied: "This individual likely intended to gain freedom and become a commoner. While his contribution is indeed a service to the nation, from the perspective of his master, he is seen as a rebellious and disobedient slave. Furthermore, granting freedom is a serious matter and cannot be permitted lightly."[177]

Four days later, a formal inquiry took place:

> A royal order was issued to the Royal Secretariat to summon Yim Pok and inquire about his request. Yim Pok asked for his four sons to be freed and become commoners. The king directed the matter to be discussed with senior officials, including those of the Office of Royal Genealogy and the State Council.
> Han Myŏnghŏ, Yi Kŭkpä, and Yun Ho proposed: "Yim Pok's contribution of 2,000 *sŏk* of grain is enough to save the lives of a hundred people. His request to free his sons is reasonable. We should grant his sons freedom while providing the equivalent number of slaves to compensate his master."
> Shim Hö and Hong Ŭng countered: "If we open the path for slaves to gain freedom through grain contributions, it will encourage widespread rebellion among slaves against their masters. This is no trivial matter."
> The king decided: "All four of Yim Pok's sons shall be freed and made commoners. To compensate the master, public slaves shall be provided."[178]

The next day, Chief Censor Yi Kyŏng submitted a sharp protest letter, stating:

> We humbly believe that addressing disasters and relieving the suffering of the people are urgent matters for the state. Currently, due to the drought, the common people face extreme hardship, struggling to find food and unable to secure their daily sustenance. This is undoubtedly a matter of deep concern for Your Majesty and one shared by all officials. At such a time, Yim Pok's contribution of 2,000 *sŏk* of grain deserves recognition and reward, and it would be appropriate to publicize his actions widely to encourage others to follow suit.
> However, the distinction between free and servile statuses is as fundamental as the separation of heaven and earth, and it must not be altered. In the past, during military campaigns, the policy of allowing slaves to gain freedom led to significant problems. Once the door was opened, slaves rebelled against their masters, and discord between social classes grew, fostering a spirit of arrogance and defiance that persists even now. This issue touches upon the fundamental principles of social order and must be treated with caution.
> Yim Pok took advantage of the circumstances to profit, accumulating tens of thousands of *sŏk* of grain—not a divine blessing, but the product of the people's labor. In ancient times, when states faced calamities like floods or droughts, the government collected grain from the wealthy through controlled distribution or encouraged contributions. This was done with the understanding that those who accumulated wealth from the people during ordinary times would release it in difficult years to aid the populace. Such practices ensured balanced use of resources and were overseen by government offices.
> Yim Pok, however, saw an opportunity to exploit the situation, offering a mere fraction of his wealth

177 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 16:7:24 = September 11, 1485. Cf. S. Shin 1975: 80; Hiraki 1982: 165.
178 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 16:7:28 = September 15, 1485.

> to present himself as a benefactor while seeking freedom as a reward. We believe this is unstable ground for policy. If the state allows unscrupulous individuals to give up only a tenth of their profits to gain freedom, and even extends this to four family members, it will be difficult to establish a consistent precedent, even if others attempt to follow suit.
> Furthermore, much of the grain collected by private slaves like Yim Pok likely originated from their masters' resources. If opportunistic slaves take advantage of their masters' weakened positions to claim ownership of such resources, offering them to the state to seek freedom, disputes between slaves and masters will surely arise. If such cases are universally permitted, wrongful claims and grievances will multiply. From beginning to end, this policy does not appear sustainable.
> We humbly request that rewards be carefully considered and bestowed within proper limits, while Your Majesty reflects further on the matter. Even if such grain is not voluntarily donated, it could still fall under the category of encouraged contributions. Additionally, it is unclear how much of the grain was verified and officially registered by the magistrate of Cinchŏn. If the grain was presented without formal registration or state verification, it constitutes an act of defiance against the state's laws and authority, and such fraudulent behavior should be dealt with according to the law. We humbly request an investigation into the matter and the proper enforcement of the law.[179]

The memorandum reflects the same biased sentiments that had guided mainstream arguments for discrimination against slaves for centuries and demonstrates a tendency to view the motives of lower-status individuals with suspicion. Yi described the rigid division between free people and slaves as fundamental and natural. He expressed suspicion of allowing slaves to gain freedom through contributions, portraying such actions as opportunistic and potentially destabilizing. He suggested that granting freedom to slaves could encourage widespread rebellion among other slaves and undermine the authority of their masters. Yi framed the grain contributed by Yim Pok as likely coming from his master's resources, implying that such contributions should be credited to the masters, not the slaves, and that Yim Pok's wealth had been built on theft from his master.

But the king, it is recorded, "would not listen." *Non olet,* as Emperor Vespasian might have commented.

While this case is the earliest example of buying freedom through grain contribution, it was still considered an isolated case (another donation by a private slave was rejected in the same month[180])—and the incredible amount of grain donated by this wealthy slave would not have encouraged many to follow suit. The number of private slaves continued to grow.

The increasing monetization of labor contributed to this trend. Any kind of labor, and even the substitution of labor, could now be turned into a payment. Local officials abused this to extort routine payments from commoners, charging interest that multiplied the official labor compensation price. The situation worsened over time. In 1630, the censors highlighted a case involving the supporters of the musicians of the Department of Music, complaining:

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179 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 16:7:29 = September 16, 1485. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 165.
180 Ibid.: 166.

> At the time of its founding, a fixed quota was set, but it is no longer observed. Now the number of musicians and support staff is arbitrarily increased every year, so that no county is exempt from this burden. Some are required to pay in cloth at market prices, while others are charged for shortages, with up-front charges and monthly interest. In some cases, individuals have been forced to pay over thirty bolts of cloth. How could anyone in the world afford to provide thirty bolts of cloth and still maintain their livelihood? Since the labor obligations were fixed, entire families fled to escape them. As a result, local magistrates, having no alternative, reported empty names to their superiors and levied the labor compensation price on the local community, turning this practice into a chronic abuse.[181]

7.4.1 The Japanese Pirates, East Asian Slave Trade, and Language Barriers

The kings of the fifteenth century had a good reason for recruiting more men into the military: Cosŏn was under attack.

The first mention of Japanese pirates in Korean sources dates from 1223, when the *Koryŏsa* reported a pirate raid in the south of the peninsula.[182] One of the goals of the invaders was to kidnap people and sell them as slaves.[183] Their main bases were the three Japanese islands of Tsushima, Iki, and Matsura—these pirates were collectively known as the Three Island Pirates—and the Hakata region (now Fukuoka) on the island of Kyūshū.[184] Between 1223 and 1418, a total of 570 raids were recorded on the Korean peninsula.[185] Not only did they plunder, they also seized thousands of people to sell them as slaves, particularly since cheap labor was in high demand. Abducted women were married off to Japanese men and probably also forced into prostitution. For fear of such raids, entire villages and islands near the coast on the peninsula were abandoned and became "dead silent and desolate."[186] Many Koreans were taken to the kingdom of the Ryūkyū islands by Japanese pirates or arrived there by drifting ashore. Some settled there permanently, intermarrying with the locals, while others worked as sailors in Ryūkyū's vast trading network.[187] Historical records show repeated instances where captives were later repatriated from the Ryūkyū kingdom, fostering closer ties between Koryŏ (and later Cosŏn) and Ryūkyū.[188]

The situation worsened after the fall of the Kamakura shogunate and the outbreak of civil war in Japan in 1333. The emerging local lords of western Japan encouraged

181 CWS, Injo, Y. 7:6:21 = August 28, 1630. Cf. Hyunjoon Park and Kuentae Kim 2019: 209.
182 Seoh 1969: 23.
183 Seoh 1969: 24; Takegoshi 1940: 43.
184 Seoh 1969: 32.
185 Ibid.: 35.
186 Watanabe 2014: 61–67; Zöllner 2017: 100.
187 Imamura 1928: 452–59.
188 Akiyama 1932: 834–35.

pirate activity to acquire food, money, and manpower for their own purposes.[189] Weakened by the Mongol and Red Turban invasions and internal strife, Koryŏ was unable to effectively counter this challenge. After 1392, the newly formed Cosŏn government responded by strengthening its coastal defences, upgrading its fleet, offering economic incentives to the pirates for peaceful trade, and negotiating with Japanese leaders. In 1394 and 1395, royal envoys succeeded in arranging for 1,400 Koreans who had been deported to Kyūshū to return to their homeland. Finally, in 1419, King Sejong ordered an army of 17,000 men to attack Tsushima, known as the Kihä Eastern Expedition, to sweep the pirates off the island.[190] In 1420, the king sent an envoy, Song Hŭigyŏng, to Japan to negotiate a piracy treaty with the Japanese *shōgun* Ashikaga Yoshimochi in Kyōto. On his way to Japan, Song came across a boat that looked suspicious. He noted:

> There was a Japanese man, and he was on a small boat catching fish. When he saw my ship, he approached and knelt down, trying to sell fish. When I looked inside the boat, I saw a monk who was crouching and begging for food. I gave him food and asked him some questions. The monk said, "I am a junior military officer from Taizhou in Jiangnan [modern-day Linhai, Zhejiang Province, China]. Two years ago, I was brought here as a prisoner, my head was shaved, and I was made a slave.[191] I cannot endure the suffering any longer, so I beg you to take me away from this place." As he said this, tears streamed down his face.
> The Japanese man [who was the monk's master] said, "If you give me rice, I will sell this monk right away. Will you buy him?" I asked the monk, "What is the name of the island where you are living?" The monk replied, "I have been sold and living with this Japanese man for two years. Since we are always floating on the sea like this, I do not know the name of the place."[192]

We know from this encounter that among themselves the pirates distributed captured soldiers as slaves, but that they also used them as merchandise. We also learn how seemingly naturally people of different origins and mother tongues—Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese—could communicate with each other back then. In fact, people who had been abducted and enslaved from their homeland often served as interpreters.

After arriving in Japan, Song Hŭigyŏng met Wei Tian, who is a case in point. Born in China, Wei was kidnapped by Japanese pirates as a child and brought to Japan. He later moved to Koryŏ, becoming a slave to the scholar and poet Yi Caan, a friend of Yi Säk particularly famous for his interest in Chinese literature, before returning to Japan with a courtesy envoy. After being discovered by a Chinese delegation and repatriated to China, the Hongwu Emperor eventually assigned him back to Japan as an interpreter. Over time, Wei Tian gained the trust of *shōgun* Ashikaga Yoshimitsu and even married

189 Seoh 1969: 36–38.

190 Zöllner 2017: 105, 109.

191 The short haircut may have been a mark of his slave status: Watanabe 2014: 63.

192 Quoted in Watanabe 2014: 63; cf. T. Nelson 2004: 470; the explanations in this travelogue are often "fragmentary," but the author covers "a wide variety of political, economic, cultural and social conditions in Japan" that cannot be found elsewhere. *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 100–104.

in Japan. Fluent in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, Wei Tian's unique background and language skills made him an invaluable interpreter for the Muromachi shogunate and a top intellectual in East Asia. His journey included meeting the Hongwu Emperor, absorbing Korean culture, and serving the Japanese government.[193] His fate was not singular; others included Qu Xiang, a Chinese kidnapped by Japanese pirates as a child and employed as a shogunate interpreter in the 1430s, and Lin Congjie, also abducted from China, who served as the interpreter of a Japanese embassy to China in 1468. Another young Chinese man, Zhu Hao, established a "close relationship" with a Japanese merchant, and when his uncle owed the merchant money, he paid for it with his nephew. The merchant took Zhu Hao with him to Japan, where he entered the service of *shōgun* Ashikaga Yoshizumi and Lord Hosokawa Masamoto and served twice as an interpreter on legations to China.[194] Although Zhu cannot be directly identified as a slave, this is still a testimony to the trade in human beings. Finally, in 1408, another Chinese named Yang Ji arrived in Korea as an envoy from Matsura. At the age of forty-two, he had been kidnapped from Ningbo by Japanese pirates and taken to Tsushima, where he served as a domestic slave for fourteen years before escaping. He asked to stay in Korea, but he was denied and sent to China instead.[195]

At the same time, there were Japanese traffickers who not only sold Korean captives but also purchased and sold fellow Japanese as slaves, sometimes to Korean buyers, and also engaged in selling Japanese women into prostitution.[196] In 1408, following a diplomatic incident, King Thäjong banned the trade in Japanese slaves:

> An order was issued to prohibit the purchase of Japanese slaves. The governor of Kyŏngsang Province reported: "A man from Kimhä, Pak Chŏn, had purchased a Japanese slave, but she escaped onto a ship belonging to an envoy of the Japanese king. The local magistrate said to the envoy: 'This slave was purchased at a high price, and now she is hiding and refuses to come out, which goes against the spirit of neighborly relations. It is only right to return her quickly.' The envoy responded: 'In our country, there are no private slaves.' In the end, the slave was not returned." Upon hearing this, the king issued the order.[197]

In its fight against piracy and enslavement, the Cosŏn court was not driven by humanitarian considerations. Its aim was to rid the country of disloyal foreigners, not to fight slavery as such. Shortly before the Kihä Expedition against Tsushima in 1419, the Cosŏn

193 *Bericht des Nosongdang über seine Reise nach Japan aus dem Jahre 1420 (Nosongdang-Ilbonhaengnok)* 1973: 98–99; Chŏng Hyewŏn 2016: 88–89; Oláh 2009: 82.

194 Oláh 2009: 82–84.

195 T. Nelson 2004: 471.

196 Akiyama 1932: 835–36.

197 CWS, Sejong, Y. 8, 10:21. Cf. T. Nelson 2004: 472; Zöllner 2017: 117; Akiyama 1932: 835–36; human trafficking was declared illegal in Japan in 1239, but it continued *de facto*, leading to the emergence of professional human traffickers who bought and sold private slaves (*genin*) throughout the country, and trafficking was "increasingly normalized," as slavery tended to be understood in contractual rather than status terms. Yi Yŏnghun 2004: 12–17.

government captured 591 Japanese from ports in Kyŏngsang Province, including both merchants and permanent residents, of whom 136 were killed. The permanent residents, who had been living illegally in Cosŏn, were treated as slaves and dispersed across Korea. The government's treatment of these Japanese differed from that of assimilated Japanese, who had adapted to Korean culture and spoke the language. Assimilated Japanese were seen as closer to Korean citizens due to their cultural integration, while those with poor language skills and low integration were seen as undesirable.[198]

After successful diplomatic negotiations in 1426, Japan and Korea formally settled their conflict, but numerous abducted Koreans were unable to return. One of Sejong's envoys to Japan, Pak Sŏsäng, reported on his return in 1429 that there were still many fellow countrymen being held there as slaves. He learned that more than fifty Koreans who had been sold by pirates in the Ryūkyū islands were "suffering increasingly due to the recent famine and long for their homeland." The king of Ryūkyū wanted to exchange them for rice. The Koreans arranged with the Japanese diplomats to transfer them to Cosŏn. Pak went on:

> The Japanese pirates once invaded our country, capturing our people and making them slaves. Some were sold to distant lands, never to return, causing their fathers, brothers, and sons to harbor deep resentment, but how many have had the chance to seek revenge? As we traveled, at every port where our boats docked, the captives eagerly sought to escape, but because their masters had locked them in chains and held them in strong confinement, they were unable to do so. Truly, this is lamentable. The Japanese often have little food and sell many slaves, or sometimes steal others' children to sell them. This has become widespread. On Iki Island, due to the ongoing chaos of war, their grain has run out and food is scarce. By next spring, the hunger will be even worse, and if they do not turn to theft, more will surely resort to selling people to survive. Due to the recent restrictions imposed by our country, those who used to sell along the borders have stopped. Reflecting on the principle of repaying harm with justice, which has been a common practice throughout history, since they have enslaved our people, we should respond by purchasing and demeaning them. I propose that, from now on, all males under ten years old and females under twenty years old should be permitted to be bought, and those traveling to Japan should be allowed to buy and bring them back, making them permanent slaves, to demonstrate the principle of avenging our people. If there is concern about them gathering along the border and becoming a future threat, it should be permitted to sell them further inland, ensuring they do not reside near the coast.[199]

Pak's suggestion that Korean envoys and merchants should be allowed to buy up young Japanese shows that the aim of the Court was not to free people from slavery. They simply wanted to retaliate and acquire able-bodied substitutes for the Korean slave economy. Moreover, Pak feared that the Japanese slaves might band together in Korea and become pirates themselves. Therefore, they should be removed from the coastal areas. This fear of slaves coincides with a discussion before the king that took place in 1427,

198 Chŏng Hyewŏn 2016: 65.

199 CWS, Sejong, Y. 11, 12:3 = January 6, 1430. Cf. T. Nelson 2004: 470; Imamura 1928: 423–25; Akiyama 1932: 835.

in which the Minister of War expressed his concern that “ill-disposed people and slaves who betray their masters” could defect to the pirates and reveal military secrets such as the production of gunpowder. As a result, the royal court declared remote islands such as Ullŭng a restricted area where no settlements were allowed.[200]

Much later, in 1497, the Ministry of Rites submitted a memorial:

> The Japanese monk Setsumyō testified: “I am a native of Hakata in Japan. When I was fourteen years old, a Japanese resident of Tsushima named Shirō[201] came and said to me: ‘If you go to Cosŏn, food and clothing will be provided, and you will also receive rank and status.’ Delighted by his words, I, along with six others, followed him to Cepho in the first month of the year of Kabo [1474]. There, Shirō sold us to resident Japanese people. Fearing enslavement, I shaved my head and became a monk, traveling across the great country’s mountains. However, due to the strict prohibition against monks under the national law, I grew my hair again and became a layman, taking refuge in the house of a resident Japanese named Jirōtarō.[202] I wish to return to my homeland.”
> Judging from his testimony, Setsumyō has traveled extensively through all eight provinces, thoroughly familiar with the mountains, rivers, and even the minutest details of the people’s affairs. Returning him to his homeland would be highly inappropriate. It is requested that he be settled in the capital according to the precedent for accepting naturalized individuals.[203]

This request was approved. Thus, the court did not permit him to return to Japan because he had extensive knowledge of Cosŏn’s geography, infrastructure, and internal affairs and could potentially provide strategic intelligence to Japan. We see in both cases, first, the continuity of the old idea that foreigners could in principle be enslaved or robbed of their freedom (except when it was inconvenient for diplomacy and reciprocity was not granted) and, second, the persistence of deep-seated doubts about the loyalty of all slaves to their masters and their country, since they were considered to be originally ethnically alien, even if they had lived in the country for generations. These concerns had already led to the exclusion of slaves from military service in the early days of slavery.

7.5 (Not) “Including Commoners”

At the end of the fifteenth century, the rural neo-Confucian literati, called *sarim*, advocated ethical reforms to eliminate corruption and instate moral governance. Under their leadership, they implemented village covenants as norms for rural life and private academies as ideological tools against the dominant meritorious elites, highlighting the division between scholarly ideals and elite politics. This period saw the literati purges

200 CWS, Sejong, Y. 8, 12:13 = January 19, 1427. Cf. Zöllner 2017: 108–9.
201 而羅時羅. “This is clearly ‘Shirō’ 四郎.” Tsuji 2012: 47.
202 而羅多羅. Cf. ibid.: 46.
203 CWS, Yŏnsangun, Y. 3:1:7 = February 17, 1497. Cf. Akiyama 1932: 836–37.

of 1498, 1504, and 1519, where *sarim* reformers faced backlash and intensifying factional strife.[204]

When the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn* was drafted in the late fifteenth century, the question was raised as to whether the privilege to redeem the children of secondary wives (concubines) of low origin should be extended to commoners. This was the so-called "Three Characters Debate," because the magic formula in classical Chinese consisted of the three characters 及良民 (*kŭp yangmin*, "including commoners"). At that time, the head of the Royal Secretariat successfully argued against this by declaring:

> If public slaves with some wealth are allowed to marry commoners or to purchase those of similar age to redeem themselves, they will no longer be true slaves. Both in government offices in the capital and in the prefectures, a certain dignity is maintained by the presence of slaves. Moreover, the tribute of cotton cloth from slaves is directly tied to state finances. If this law is enacted, I fear that the Bureau of Currency and Slave Taxation will see a decline in the amount of cotton cloth it collects. Furthermore, female entertainers in the counties, even if they marry government slaves, will have their children claimed as sons of their commoner husbands and allowed to enter commoner status. This is a serious problem that must not be permitted.[205]

The counter-argument was thus a mixture of concerns about the decline of slave labor and tax revenues from slaves, and the rise of the descendants of (*horrobile dictu*) prostitutes into the ranks of the commoners. But the debate was revived when in February 1515, during the reign of King Cungjong, some proposed to reintroduce the phrase "including commoners" into the slave inheritance rules for mixed marriages in order to broaden the "path to emancipation."[206] This caused a controversy in the court. The opponents claimed that "collective deliberation" at the time of King Sŏngjong had led to its removal, and that there was no need to revisit it. Minister of Military Affairs Shin Yonggä and others pointed out that the "path to emancipation" was very narrow, and the military quota was constantly shrinking;

> Moreover, how can it be justified to prohibit the offspring of free men who marry public or private slaves, or concubines of high or low rank, from attaining free status? While there are distinctions of rank and privilege, they are not so extreme as to deny them emancipation.

But the king chose not to reinstate the phrase.[207] However, this was not to be his last word. On January 9, 1517, Cungjong lamented during the royal morning lecture:

> There are few free people and many of servile status. Eventually, this will result in the complete absence of free people, which is no trivial matter.

204 Y.-j. Koh 2003: 70.
205 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 23:8:6 = September 9, 1491.
206 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 10:2:15 = March 10, 1515.
207 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 10:6:6 = July 26, 1515.

Shin Yonggä responded:

> Under the current system, servile status follows the mother, which has led to slaves marrying free women and slave women marrying free men. Consequently, the paths to servitude have multiplied, while the paths to freedom have diminished, resulting in a continual decline in military quotas. I previously raised this issue, but the ministers and court discussions all deemed it difficult to address. It is now necessary to establish a law prohibiting marriages between slaves and free citizens.

After some deliberation, the ministers, this time even those who had opposed one year earlier, recommended introducing the phrase "including commoners" into the provisions about the offspring of concubines and female slaves, and the king agreed.[208]

However, Cungjong's reign lasted for thirty-eight years, giving him ample opportunity to change his mind. Four years later, he told the Royal Secretariat that he would tolerate the phrase "including commoners" only for slaves who had originally been free men. When the Secretariat announced this to the Department of Slave Affairs, it turned out that the Bureau had always applied this phrase, albeit only to children born after 1500, which meant that the number of affected cases was very small anyway.[209] So, nothing was changed.

Until 1527, that is, when the king ordered that a new debate about "including commoners" be held because of a "steady depletion of public slaves."[210] The government then found out that "due to incomplete transmission of information by government clerks," the Ministry of Personnel and the Ministry of Military Affairs had never been properly consulted, making the whole regulation "inappropriate." To which the king replied that the phrase would no longer be applied beginning with the new year.[211]

But it did not take long to resurface, alongside the debate over the patrifilial and matrifilial rules. This time, the issue was the treatment of slaves in the counties of Wŏnju in Kangwŏn Province and Ŭiryŏng in Kyŏngsang Province.

In December 1534, the governor of Kangwŏn submitted a request to remove the magistrate and local clerks in Wŏnju and to classify the offspring of public and private slaves according to the patrifilial rule. The Royal Secretariat recommended an investigation, which the State Council agreed to.[212] This took some time, but in November 1535, the Council of Censors exposed systemic abuses by the local gentry in these districts, who exploited government dependents and turned them into private slaves through forced marriages with their own female slaves and enforced intergenerational subjugation under the matridominial rule:

208 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 11:12:8 = January 9, 1517.
209 CWS, Y. 15:1:28 = February 26, 1520.
210 CWS, Y. 21:12:19 = January 30, 1527.
211 CWS, Y. 21:12:24 = February 4, 1527.
212 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 29:11:8 = December 22, 1534 and 11:9.

> As a result, all government dependents, from local clerks to government slaves, have become subjugated to the families of these officials. The power of the local gentry has grown unchecked, while government authority has gradually diminished.
> Recently, an incident occurred at the residence of the former county magistrate Wŏn Kyehyŏn in which a local influential figure sent his slave to seize a government clerk. Witnessing this, Kyehyŏn merely punished the slave with a caning. This marked the end of any efforts to restrain the gentry's abuses.
> The gentry, angered by what they perceived as humiliation, took advantage of the timing of Kyehyŏn's removal from office to further escalate their actions. They captured the same clerk once more. When the clerk sought refuge within the district office, the gentry's slaves pursued him into the office, dragged him out, and seized him again.[213]

The king responded by ordering his ministers "to convene on a later date for collective discussion and resolution." The ministers decided at the end of 1535 that

> children born from the intermarriage of local clerks and government slaves and public and private slaves follow the patrifilial rule and receive allocations accordingly.[214]

In late January 1536, however, the king realized that creating a local exception would "break the unity" of the legislation. The three State Councilors defended their decision as a temporary, extraordinary measure meant to punish the "exceptionally aggressive, oppressive, and violent" gentry in the affected disctricts and to warn others to behave properly.[215]

Six and a half years later, the Royal Secretariat reopened the debate, and the State Councilors at the time criticized the previous decision as "inappropriate"—because "from the times of our ancestors, servitude has always followed the status of the mother" (apparently an untrue claim, as Thäjong had introduced the patrifilial rule in 1414)—and revoked it. The king, citing his earlier reservation, ordered a reconsideration of this discussion "to pave the way for increasing the population of free commoners."[216] After ten days, the ministers reported to the court:

> With this intention in mind, the matter was discussed among the officials, who said: If the patrifilial rule is adopted, it must then be applied throughout the entire nation. However, as this has never been implemented historically, enforcing it now is a matter of great significance and difficulty. Previously, the phrase "including commoners" was considered for adoption, but it was ultimately removed because it would encompass many who were originally free. Nevertheless, if the goal is to increase the number of free commoners, there is no other choice but to implement this policy.
> During lectures on the classics, those who speak on matters of national policy consistently argue

213 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 30:11:6 = December 10, 1535.
214 Quoted in CWS, Cungjong, Y. 38:7:8 = August 28, 1542.
215 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 31:1:7 = August 2, 1536.
216 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 38:7:8 = August 28, 1542.

> that this is an urgent issue. Now, could the phrase "including commoners" be implemented? Let this be deliberated and reported.[217]

Six days later, the government and the Ministry of Personnel jointly submitted a memorial, stating:

> To this day, discussions remain unsettled, making it difficult to decide lightly. However, the lack of pathways to free status is a significant matter and not a trivial issue. Since this is not a new regulation being established, it is appropriate to reintroduce the phrase "including commoners" while revising the legal provisions. [...] Regarding the patrifilial rule, this was not a practice of the ancestors. Creating a new rule based on temporary problems is indeed highly difficult."[218]

Accordingly, the king decreed:

> The phrase "including commoners" shall be reinstated [...] , but the patrifilial rule shall not be implemented.[219]

The issue persisted into the reign of King Myŏngjong, who in 1548, being told that "allowing individuals to escape servitude must not be overly indiscriminate," decided that the phrase did not extend to children born before their father achieved emancipation.[220]

Five years later, the debate was reopened when the chief of the Court of Remonstrances, Yun Chunnyŏn, proposed to the king:

> Recently, due to the continued decrease in the number of free men eligible for military service, a law was established prohibiting base individuals from marrying free women. When the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn* was initially established, it was decided that the offspring of slaves who married free women and the offspring of free men who married slave women would all be classified as slaves. This law was instituted by powerful ministers, benefiting private interests while harming public administration.
>
> The new law can be considered commendable; however, once a law is enacted, problems arise. Our nation is different from the Central Plains [China]. If all the slaves of the *sadäbu* were suddenly taken away, not only would it be inconvenient in practice, but the law would ultimately prove unenforceable.
>
> If free people were prohibited from marrying slave wives, the pool of eligible free men for military service would increase, and the scholar-officials would not lose their household slaves. I request that this matter be broadly deliberated in the royal court.[221]

However, Right State Councilor Yun Wŏnhyŏng replied:

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217 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 38:7:8 = August 28, 1542.

218 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 38:7:14 = September 3, 1542.

219 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 38:7:14 = September 3, 1542. Palais has the year wrong: Palais 1996: 225; cf. Hiraki 1982: 138–39.

220 CWS, Myŏngjong, Y. 3:12:30 = February 19, 1548.

221 CWS; Myŏngjong, Y. 8:i3:14 = May 6, 1553.

> The current law allowing public and private slaves to marry free women should remain unchanged. Furthermore, free men should only be allowed to marry free women. If the principal wife in every household is a free woman, the children of free men will all become eligible for military service. Additionally, if free people violate the prohibition and unlawfully marry slave women as their principal wives, the law should allow individuals to report them. These offenders should not benefit from prior pardons, and their entire families should be exiled to the borders.

Finally, Minister of Personnel An Hyŏn proposed:

> The *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn* says: "All slaves follow their mothers' status." The commentary says: "If a slave marries a common woman, the offspring follow the father's household status." It also says: "The children and descendants of officials of all ranks who took public or female private slaves as wives or concubines must have their status reported by their father to the Department of Slave Affairs, where they will be verified, documented, and assigned to supplementary military units."
> If we apply a blanket prohibition, the path for slaves to attain free status will be completely blocked. Offspring born to free men with concubine wives to gain freedom should be allowed to redeem themselves and become free according to the law. For those born to principal wives, as proposed by the Chief Censor, the marriages should be prohibited, and both families involved in arranging such marriages should be punished. It would also be appropriate for the relevant ministry to strictly establish regulations.
> Additionally, for offspring of commoners born to concubine wives who have already purchased their freedom and become free, clear procedures should be enforced. Expanding the pathways for slaves to attain commoner status is also worth considering.

And the king decided:

> The prohibition of free people marrying public slaves is a law of the Ming Dynasty Code. Although a certain law has been established now, it cannot be enforced. Yun Wŏnhyŏng's argument is detailed and does not violate human nature. An Hyŏn's argument is also appropriate. These two arguments should be considered together.

The driving force behind this initiative was the so-called "Small Yun" faction, representing the interests of the mighty Yun clan from Phaphyŏng in Kyŏngsang Province and led by Yun Wŏnhyŏng, with whom both Yun Chunnyŏn and An Hyŏn were affiliated. They never intended to better the situation of slaves in general. Their concern was to strengthen the privileges of secondary sons, i.e., the offspring of (mostly slave) concubines to *yangban* men who were, under the rules of the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn*, denied access to positions in the civil service.[222]

The Solomonic solution found was that the default rule would remain, that an individual's status would have to follow that of the mother. The decision allowed for an exception in the case of the offspring of free men (typically *yangban*) with secondary slave wives. If the freeborn father wished, these children could redeem their status and become free, benefiting from the patrifilial rule. This means that the patrifilial excep-

222 Deuchler 2015: 127.

tion was a tool for the *yangban* to manage their personal lineages and ensure their social standing, while the matrifilial default ensured the perpetuation of the slave system for the rest of society. Male slaves, in particular, saw no benefits from this arrangement, as their children would continue to inherit their father's status. Moreover, they were not allowed to take free wives.

The debate continued eight months later, when Im Gwŏn, the new Right State Councilor, strongly disavowed the patrifilial exception:[223]

> The granting of privileges of secondary sons is widely regarded as inappropriate. Regarding illegitimate offspring, if one wishes to distinguish their free or unfree status, those deemed free are often individuals who transitioned from public or private slave status to free status. How can one clearly determine whether these free individuals were born before or after the transition? Even their parents may not always be aware of such details. How much more so for others? Co Yunson and Yi Ŏnjŏk, both of whom held the rank of First-Rank Prime Minister, had children by concubines, and yet even their status could not be clearly distinguished. How, then, could the origins of children born to those of lower status be determined? If the argument is to value their talent, then among those who excel, even if they belong to the base class, they can be selected and employed. However, granting them eligibility for the examination system is likely not appropriate.

According to Im, while it was inappropriate to grant eligibility for state examinations to individuals born to base mothers in any case, he conceded that individuals from the base class who demonstrated exceptional talent could still be "selected and employed," though he did not say how this would work. To cast his concern about status privilege as a moral concern, Im referred to a recent criminal case:

> In the capital, there was a member of the *sajok* who killed his mother, and his father reported the incident, yet no punishment for his crime has been heard of. Such cases represent a great disruption of human ethics, and if they are not clearly addressed, I fear that the moral order will be destroyed from this point forward.

He was informed that the murder was committed by a member of the Palace Guard named Yi Wŏnbu and reported by his father, Yi Cing. One day later, Yun Chunnyŏn and others presented the case to the Court:[224]

> We have also heard of the unfilial conduct of Yi Wŏnbu. His father, Yi Cing, initially sent his slave to present a statement to our office, saying: "My son, Wŏnbu, beat and killed his own mother, plotted to kill his father, ate meat during his mother's mourning period, and while in mourning, wore black clothing and a black hat to marry a concubine."
> We immediately detained and interrogated the accused with the intent to transfer the case to the Office of the state tribunal. However, Yi Cing later submitted another statement, saying: "Wŏnbu once violently beat a slave girl. When his mother tried to intervene, Wŏnbu pushed her down and caused an injury out of anger. Furthermore, he appropriated the income from the fields, the tribute of slaves, and other property for personal use. As a result, I was left to starve, and he even attempted

223 CWS, Myŏngjong, Y. 9:1:19 = March 2, 1554.
224 CWS, Myŏngjong, Y. 9:1:20 = March 3, 1554.

> to sneak into my sleeping quarters at midnight with malicious intent."
> Afterward, Yi Cing sought to excuse Wŏnbu's actions, submitting statements twice to that effect. Members of his family claimed: "Yi Cing, distressed and ill, made false accusations against his son." Yi Cing himself, in grief and tears, refused to lodge a formal charge.
> Upon broader investigation, it is evident that Wŏnbu is guilty of unfilial behavior, but the allegation of killing his mother remains unclear. Recently, due to irregularities among officials, the matter was delayed in submission, leading to this deferment. This issue arose in the royal lecture hall. As our position has become untenable, we request to be dismissed from office.

The king declined this offer of resignation, and the case was never discussed again at court. No further details are known, but the fact that Im Gwŏn referred to it in his speech against the privileges of secondary sons suggests that Yi Wŏnbu was such a secondary son. None of the sources mention the status of his mother; we do not even know whether she was his father's primary or secondary wife. Perhaps she tried to help the slave girl because she was a slave herself? In any case, this tragic instance may serve as evidence of domestic violence perpetrated against slaves.

A few days later, the Council of Censors launched the next attack on the privileges of secondary sons, calling it "shocking" to see that the offspring of free (!) and, in some cases, even slave concubines were admitted to government schools, and demanded their immediate expulsion; to which the king agreed. The interesting point is that when the *Veritable Records* of King Myŏngjong were compiled, the editors added a telling comment:

> How exceedingly narrow-minded this memorial of the Censorate is! When the state first permitted privileges for illegitimate offspring, they accepted this, yet now they find it shocking that these individuals enter schools, claiming it tarnishes the prestige of the students. Then, would not the inclusion of the offspring of prostitutes and base-born individuals in the official ranks, violating the social hierarchy and the dignity of the elite, be even more shocking?[225]

Six months later, the king decreed, at the request of the Council of Censors, that secondary sons who had been barred from government schools should not be referred to as "undergraduates," and those who earned a state degree "must not be confused with the *sajok*."[226]

The rationale behind the censors' apparent conservatism is revealed in a memorial they submitted that November:

> We humbly observe that, although our nation is distant and differs in land and customs from China, the [Confucian] Three Bonds and Five Relationships are not fundamentally different. Yet, in matters of institutions and regulations, there are instances where we cannot but differ from China.
> Thus, the system of the *sajok*, which does not exist in China, exists in our country; and the laws

225 CWS, Myŏngjong, Y. 9:2:1 = March 14, 1554.
226 CWS, Myŏngjong, Y. 9:8:25 = October 1, 1554.

> concerning slaves, which are absent in China, are established here.
> In that case, can the gentry be abolished, or can the institution of slaves be eliminated?[227]

Of course, this was a purely rhetorical question. The answer was always: No.

Despite their absolute authority and the Confucian ideal of a well-ordered, hierarchical society, Cosŏn kings seemed to find the remedy to the problem of balancing emancipation, servile labor, and social stability as elusive as a slippery eel on a scholar’s inkstone—it always wriggled out of reach, no matter how many decrees were issued or councils convened. The basic reason for this was that slavery did not serve the state of the kings as much as it did the estates of the *yangban*.

7.5.1 Earning Freedom, Earning Death: Ŏ Sukkwŏn

A few singular exceptions stand out, demonstrating that excellence in culturally valued fields could occasionally transcend societal barriers. Ŏ Sukkwŏn was a scholar-official active in the first half of the sixteenth century. One of his literary works was the *Phägwan Capki* (“The Storyteller’s Miscellany”), a collection of essays and anecdotes that conveys a vivid portrait of early Cosŏn society.[228] Some of these jottings are related to slaves. One example is about the amazing career of a remarkable Korean artist:

> Yi Sangjwa was a slave belonging to a certain scholar-official. From a young age, he demonstrated exceptional talent in painting landscapes and portraits, becoming unrivaled in his era. King Cungjong issued a special decree to redeem his freedom and appointed him to the Bureau of Painting.
> When King Cungjong passed away, [Yi Sangjwa] painted the royal portrait. In the Pyŏngo year of the Jiajing era [1546], he also painted the portraits of meritorious subjects, and as a result, he was included in the upper ranks of the meritorious subjects. Truly, Yi Sangjwa’s rise can be called an extraordinary turn of fate.[229]

This story underscores the extraordinary rarity of social mobility for slaves in Cosŏn, where the rigid social hierarchy generally prevented upward mobility. This rare opportunity, however, depended entirely on external intervention, such as the patronage of King Cungjong, rather than systemic mechanisms. Nevertheless, these cases were symbolic anomalies that served to underscore the broader rigidity of hereditary slavery and the extreme rarity of such redemptions.

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227 CWS, Myŏngjong, Y. 9:9:27 = November 2, 1554.

228 Translated into English in 1989 by Peter H. Lee: Ŏ 1989.

229 *Phägwan Capki* 2:57, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/稗官雜記/卷二 [accessed 29.07.2025]; my own translation. Cf. ibid.: 162.

Freedom could also be bought. At least, this is what Ŏ Sukkwŏn claims to have been the case with a slave who had a family name and whose family was therefore apparently originally free:

> In the early Jiajing era, there was a private slave named Yi Yangdong, who was known in his village for his filial piety. He bribed the overseer of his region, Kil Nambu, and also bribed officials in the Ministry of Rites to petition for official recognition of his filial piety. At first, the ministry officials disapproved and rejected his request. After several years, however, his petition was successful, and his household was granted the honor of a memorial gate[230] and its family registry status restored [to freedom]. Overjoyed, Yangdong eagerly retrieved the official papers from his home to speed up the process. His true motivation, however, was not a love for the reputation of being a filial son, but the tangible benefit of his household's restored status.
> He later worked as a scribe for the same department, using his position to abuse power, embezzle funds, and bring harm to the community. He eventually died under punishment by beating. Sadly, even the recognition of filial piety could be bought with bribes, proving once again that the saying "Money is the true god of the world" is not without merit.[231]

The story of Yi Yangdong illustrates the fragile and morally fraught pathways for low-born individuals to achieve upward mobility in a rigidly hierarchical society. While Yi's eventual restoration of his household registry and recognition for filial piety could be seen as a form of emancipation from his lowly status, it was achieved not through virtue but through pretended virtue, bribery, and manipulation of the bureaucratic system. Ultimately, Yi's downfall—punished for abuses of power—serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of exploiting such pathways, illustrating that while social mobility was possible, it often came at significant moral and societal costs.

Sometimes the desire to be free led to betrayal and treason, and sometimes it led to death:

> During the reign of King Yŏnsangun, there was a slave of a scholar who took refuge in the house of White-Eye, a palace concubine, and plotted to get rid of his master. After proper order was restored, his master dug a deep pit, bound the slave, and placed him in it. As the pit was filled with soil from the bottom up, the slave wailed and begged for mercy, but when the soil reached his waist, he realized he wouldn't be spared and began to hurl insults. His master continued to fill the pit until the servant was completely buried.
> Sŏngŏn, the slave of Yi Hanphyŏng, who worked as a craftsman in the palace, once tried to denounce his master to a court eunuch. But the court eunuch stopped him, saying, "How can you bear to falsely accuse your master of such a serious crime?" Secretly, he sent the accusation to Yi Hanphyŏng. When Yŏnsan was deposed, Yi Hanphyŏng cried, saying, "When a ruler loses his way, the relationship between superiors and inferiors is in disarray, and the faults of the slave cannot be blamed. But the great bond of loyalty between us has been broken, and he can no longer serve

230 In another chapter, Ŏ Sukkwŏn gives an explanation of 旌門 *cŏngmun* ("memorial gate"). The practice of honoring filial sons and virtuous women by erecting a gate (or arch) and inscribing the names of those honored can be traced back to China: Ŏ 1989: 142–43.

231 *Phägwan Capki* 2:36, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/稗官雜記/卷二 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Cf. ibid.: 144.

> me." He then gave the servant to his wife's brother.
> Thus, although a servant who betrays his master deserves to die, the way each person deals with such betrayal varies greatly.[232][233]

The first reaction described here is brutal and deadly, in line with the severity of the law against traitorous slaves. The second reaction is milder because Yi Hapyŏng sees his slave's actions in the context of political events. According to Confucian ideas, there is a relationship of reciprocity between those above and those below. If those above—the king and the *yangban*—behave inappropriately, then one cannot blame those below—the slaves—for behaving in the same way.

7.5.2 Moral Governance and the Life of a Slave: Ŏ Mujŏk

It has been claimed that "no narrative of *nobi* life written by a *nobi* has yet been unearthed."[234] There is, however, at least one exception. Though very brief and arguably falling short of modern standards of autobiography, it unquestionably qualifies as a "narrative." It was written by the poet Ŏ Mujŏk, whose father was a scholar-official, but because his mother was a government slave, he himself was born a government slave. He was likely a relative of Ŏ Sukkwŏn, as their families shared the same ancestral seat.

The dates of his life are unknown, but in 1501, he wrote a long memorandum for King Yŏnsangun, who was feared for his ruthless and brutal suppression of opposition, admonishing him to follow the examples of the wise Chinese emperors Yao and Shun; to heed the censors' advice; to purify his mind; to rid court and military of female entertainers (courtesans), as "they have never been suitable instruments for ruling a nation"; to ban alcohol; to suppress Buddhism; and to refrain from constructing a defensive wall on the northern border, because

> when the people are already groaning in suffering, even a lofty wall reaching the heavens, with iron gates and stone doors, would provide no more protection than a simple willow hedge in a field.[235]

Predictably, this bleeding flew in the face of his career. Perhaps fleeing persecution for his criticism, his life "ended in obscurity."[236] But what concerns us here is the way he introduces himself in the opening paragraph of the 1501 memorandum.

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232 *Phăgwan Capki* 2:58, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/稗官雜記/卷二 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Cf. ibid.: 162–63.

233 for Ŏ Sukkwŏn and his writings, see *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 321–24.

234 Kichung Kim 2003: 109.

235 CWS, Yŏnsangun, Y. 7:7:28.

236 https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0035962 [accessed 29.07.2025].

> As a lowly and humble servant, born and raised at the edge of the sea,[237] I have encountered a prosperous era and been bathed in pure governance. Though my status is that of a slave, I have lived in abundance and without hardship, often having the opportunity to apply myself to the study of the classics and histories.
> As the years of my life have passed, my foolishness, like bookworms and moths that consume books, has only deepened. I have never read books that are not sacred nor spoken words that are not righteous. Because of my lowly position, I have had no aspirations for fame or achievements, yet my loyalty to the ruler and love for the nation, and my longing to restore the spirit of the Three Dynasties, have not been diminished by poverty, misfortune, or hardship in the slightest.[238]

From Ŏ Mujŏk's words, we may infer that, as a secondary son, he was privileged enough to bear a family name and enjoyed some "abundance" in his youth. He was given a thorough Confucian education, but not the chance to be appointed to an official position. He alleges that the subsequent "poverty, misfortune, or hardship" he lived through did not diminish his allegiance to the political system. He therefore did not openly question his slave status, acknowledging his marginality while still asserting his worth through scholarly excellence.

Ŏ Mujŏk's posture—simultaneously deferential and morally assertive—thus lends itself to interpretation through the concept of "learned helplessness," as a lens for understanding how systemic unfreedom could shape self-perception, moral expression, and the boundaries of agency.

7.6 Yulgok and Thögye: Emotions for Slaves?

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Korea faced significant external threats and internal rebellions, such as the rebellion in Hwanghä Province led by Yim Kkŏkcŏng, a *päkcŏng* who rose to arms in the late 1550s in response to famine and excessive taxation, leading a band of 200 impoverished peasants, escaped slaves, and fellow *päkcŏng*. Aided by public slaves as informants, they attacked local magistrates and looted their offices, even sneaking into Hanyang and fighting government troops. By 1560, Hwanghä Province was largely out of government control. In early 1562, after a series of fierce standoffs, Yim was finally captured and executed. The rebellion sent shock waves through the ranks of the *yangban*, who feared it might escalate into a full-scale attack on their society, but fortunately for them, Yim "lacked an objective understanding of the contradictions of his time" and ended his life as a bandit.[239]

These incidents increased the demand for military personnel. In the mid-1500s, slaves were mobilized to fight incursions from both the northern and southern borders. In some cases, these slaves were granted remission as a reward for their bravery.

237 In Hamjong, Phyŏngan Province, facing the Korea Bay of the Yellow Sea.

238 CWS, Yŏnsangun, Y. 7:7:28.

239 San Kwon Han 2014: 188.

However, this practice was strongly opposed by slave owners who feared losing their property. As a result, the government restricted remission to slaves who had directly participated in battle.

Still, the military was in desperate need of new recruits, which led to a new debate about hereditary slavery. At a court debate in 1573, Yi I remarked:

> The state's legislation on private slaves is inconsistent. It follows both the matrifilial and the patrifilial rule, leading to the problem that commoners are increasingly absorbed into private households while the number of military conscripts continues to decline.

King Sŏnjo admitted that "modification seems necessary."

> The king then asked, "Should the status follow the father or the mother?" Most officials answered, "Following the mother is more practical."[240]

But a minority objected, and the topic was dropped.

In the sixteenth century, scholars like Yi Hwang, who used the pen name Thögye, and Yi I, the pen name Yulgok, debated interpretations of neo-Confucian principles, especially focusing on the "Four Beginnings" and "Seven Emotions," which represented divergent views on morality, self-cultivation, and governance. Factional alignment intensified around these philosophical interpretations, leading to the establishment of philosophical schools that later aligned with political factions.[241] Their debates focused on the question of the human condition, placing humanity at the center of the universe. While they can be called humanistic in general, it is "difficult to say"[242] whether their humanism also extended to slaves.

There is evidence, however, that these debates helped to re-emphasize emotion and compassion. For example, the scholar-official Yu Hŭichun demonstrated "a particular emotional standard shared by social elites at the time"[243] when, between 1568 and 1575, he bought the freedom of his four daughters born to a slave concubine because he was "overcome by the emotions of flesh and blood"[244] (see p. 470). In another emotional act in 1578, King Sŏnjo observed a child soldier during a royal procession. "Deeply moved with compassion," he ordered the underage soldiers to be dismissed and sent home.

> However, many of these young soldiers, fearing that local governors would assign them to even harsher duties upon their return, were reluctant to leave, with the result that only a small number chose to return home.[245]

240 CWS, Sŏnjo, Y. 6:11:12 = September 1, 1573.
241 Y.-j. Koh 2003: 72.
242 Cŏn Seyŏng 2018: 7.
243 Sun Joo Kim 2019: 23.
244 Yu Hŭichun 1938: 270.
245 CSW, Sŏnjo, Y. 11:8:11 = September 22, 1578.

This observation provoked a rather alarming comment in the *Veritable Records*, outlining the fundamentals of the military system of Cosŏn and its connection with slavery:

> The state modeled its system after the Tang dynasty, assigning soldiers to agricultural duties. Those sent to the capital for service were tasked only with providing security. Their supplies were funded by three guarantors, and military assignments were determined based on accumulated service and rank, ensuring that soldiers were well provided for.
> However, since the matrifilial rule was enacted, commoners have gradually been classified as slaves, leading to a significant reduction in the military ranks. With the rise of peacetime inefficiencies, idle individuals avoided military duties, and officials were unable to register them. Consequently, military duties were shifted to scholar-officials' stipend households.
> Additionally, due to the escape and evasion of government slaves from various offices, soldiers assigned to capital service were often reassigned to duties in those offices. There, they suffered daily abuse at the hands of officials and clerks, lacked the support of their guarantors, and were unable to sustain themselves. As a result, many fled, and the burdens on their families and neighbors grew worse. Local governors were unable to fill the resulting vacancies, leading to the recruitment of children to meet quotas.
> Furthermore, certain roles, such as naval forces, palace guards, and menial workers, were even more arduous than standard military duties. To escape these assignments, regular soldiers would falsely report their young sons as being of age, increasing their age to make them eligible for service.
> By this time, the corruption and inefficiency of the military system had reached its peak.[246]

In summary, slavery was both a cause and a consequence of the manpower shortages in the military and government. The matridominial system drained the commoner population into the slave status, while the diversion of military personnel and the harsh conditions of service exacerbated recruitment problems. Efforts to address these issues —such as allowing slaves to earn freedom through merit—faced significant resistance from the elite, further entrenching the systemic inefficiencies.

In his work entitled *Cinshisaso* ("Memoir on Current Affairs"), Yi I (Yulgok) addressed these critical issues the nation was facing at a time of increasing internal and external threats. He proposed a range of solutions, from fairer tax and tribute systems to military reform, including the recruitment of skilled slaves and low-status individuals with military potential. Yulgok called for a fairer and more accurate system of land assessment and tribute collection to reduce the burden on the people and ensure that tax obligations reflected actual land productivity. He urged that the current tribute registers be revised even before the land surveys were completed to address immediate inequities. He advocated local administrative reform, emphasizing long-term tenure for officials to promote loyalty and stability. On defense, Yulgok called for stockpiling resources, training troops, and organizing local forces to effectively deal with border threats. He believed these measures were essential to restoring the state's strength, securing peace, and addressing the deep-seated problems of governance that left the

246 CSW, Sŏnjo, Y. 11:8:11 = September 22, 1578.

country vulnerable to decay and disorder. The final paragraphs addressed the issue of slaves:

> My humble proposal, previously presented and then halted, remains without alternative even now. If my words are heeded, we could recruit secondary sons of concubines and both public and private slaves with military skills, requiring them to provide their own provisions and stationing them in the northern and southern provinces. For the northern region, a term of one year would be set, and for the southern region, a term of twenty months. With many volunteers, the Ministry of Military Affairs could then test their abilities and assign them accordingly. Secondary sons of concubines would be allowed to pursue official careers, while slaves would gain freedom. For private slaves, their masters must submit a certificate to the Ministry of Military Affairs, allowing only those with permission to serve, thereby preventing the enlistment of slaves who would abandon their masters. Those without military skills would instead make grain contributions to the northern and southern provinces, with the amount determined by their proximity, and in return be granted freedom, similar to soldiers. In this way, provisions and military forces could be gradually strengthened.
> In the past, during Yi Shiä's rebellion,[247] base people who transported military supplies were all granted freedom, and lesser sons of concubines who joined the military were allowed to take the civil service examination. These were measures implemented temporarily by King Sejo as a precedent.[248]

Although Yulgok's proposals were initially rejected, they eventually paved the way for the practice of "grain contribution" (*napsok*), a turning point in status politics.[249]

However, Yulgok's view of slaves was ambivalent. In his 1569 *Tongho Mundap* ("Tongho Questions and Answers"), Yulgok discussed the need to correct inaccurate slave registers, cautioned the ruler against relying too much on slaves, and warned that "dishonest servants and cunning officials secretly stockpiled all kinds of goods, deceiving their superiors and obstructing the commoners."[250]

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247 Yi Shiä's Rebellion in 1467 was an armed uprising in Hamgil Province, led by the military commander Yi Shiä, opposing King Sejo's centralization policies. The rebellion arose from local resentment toward the king's imposition of southern officials, the burdensome defense against Jurchen raids, and the enforcement of the *hophä* system, which restricted movement. Initially successful, the rebels attacked and overpowered government officials, spreading influence across northern provinces. King Sejo responded by deploying reinforcements and advanced weaponry, ultimately defeating Yi's forces. Yi Shiä was captured and executed.

248 *Yulgok Sŏngsäng Chŏnsŏ* (The Complete Works of Master Yulgok) 7. https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/栗谷先生全書/卷七 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Yulgok passed the literary examination at an early age, became a Buddhist monk for a number of years, and entered the state service, occupying "a series of brilliant official positions." Famous for his originality, he was trusted by King Sŏnjo. He made proposals and petitions to the king, but they were never accepted because the factional scholars opposed them. *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 216–18; Chung claims that Yulgok called for "the liberation of talented slaves, and the recruitment of skilled people from the commoners and servants" in his *Yukcogye* ("Six-article Memorial for Current Affairs"). In fact, Yulgok did not even mention slaves or servants there. Chung 2022: 154–55.

249 Deuchler 2015: 374.

250 https://zh.m.wikisource.org/wiki/東湖問答 [accessed 29.07.2025].

In a conversation between Yulgok (here called by his courtesy name, Sukhŏn), and Yi Ciham, another scholar leaning towards Practical Learning, whose pen name was Tojŏng,

> Sukhŏn mentioned his elder brother's eldest son, lamenting the difficulty of finding good slaves. Tojŏng responded, "It is already hard enough to find good people among scholars, so how much harder it must be for slaves? For a household to acquire a good slave is a rare stroke of fortune. If one seeks to find an ideal slave, one merely exhausts oneself to no avail. Rather, one should seek the best way to manage and guide them, not to find a perfect slave. Make a slave into a good slave of a worthy master. Why insist on finding only a naturally good slave?" These words are insightful, containing the essence of self-reflection and leniency toward others.[251]

In his *Kyŏngmong Yogyŏl* ("The Key to Repelling Ignorance"), a primer for Confucian learning written in 1577, Yulgok emphasized compassion and the moral responsibility of slave owners for the everyday lives of their slaves:

> Slaves work for us, so you must first show kindness and then use authority to win their hearts. The relationship between a ruler and his subjects, and between a master and his slaves, follows the same principle. If the ruler does not care for the people, the people will scatter; if the people scatter, the state will perish. If the master does not take care of the slaves, the slaves will scatter; if the slaves scatter, the household will fall. Therefore, regarding the slaves, one must feel compassion for their hunger and cold, provide them with clothing and food, so that they may find their proper place.
>
> If they do wrong or evil, one must first earnestly instruct and admonish them so that they may reform. If they still do not reform, then only after that can the punishment be administered so that they know in their hearts that the master's punishment comes from instruction and is not a matter of hatred toward the slave. Only then can their hearts be changed and their behavior transformed. In the management of a household, the inner and outer quarters must be distinguished according to the rules of propriety. Even male and female slaves must not be allowed to mingle freely. Male slaves, unless they have a special assignment, must not enter the inner quarters without permission. Female slaves must all be made to have steady husbands, and they must not be allowed to become licentious. If they do not cease to be licentious, they must be removed from service and made to live separately so as not to defile the customs of the household. Slave men and women must be made to live in harmony. If any engage in quarrels or noisy disputes, they must be strictly forbidden and punished.[252]

The attitude toward slaves in this text is paternalistic and regulatory. Slaves are seen as indispensable workers whose loyalty and proper behavior must be ensured through a combination of benevolence and discipline. Masters are expected to provide for the slaves' basic needs and to give them moral instruction and admonition before resorting

251 *Yulgok Sŏngsäng Chŏnsŏ* 32, quoted from Sŏng Hon's *Ugyejip* 牛溪集. Sŏng Hon, pen name Ugye, was "one of the most prominent literati" of his time. He was one of Yulgok's main contrahents in the debate over emotions. *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 235–37.

252 *Kyŏngmong Yogyŏl*, b. 8. Translated from the Chinese original, https://ygc.skku.edu/ygc/sub.do#key=I_ncf_GMY_0090 [accessed 09.04.2025]. Yi's English translation is problematic: Yi I 2012: 29–30.

to punishment. At the same time, Yulgok emphasizes the importance of strict hierarchical order and segregation—especially along gender lines—and mandates control over slaves' behavior, relationships, and movements in order to maintain household decorum and social stability. Although the text clearly articulates an expectation of compassion toward slaves, this compassion is instrumental—it serves the purpose of maintaining loyalty, harmony, and stability. Thus, compassion is real but conditional, embedded in a hierarchical worldview in which care is given from above, not as a right but as a function of governance. Accordingly, Palais finds "no humanitarian appeal to alleviate the suffering of slaves" in Yulgok's thought.[253]

His rival Yi Hwang (Thögye) owned about 150 slaves in his middle years, and no fewer than 367 by the time he died.[254] He certainly showed empathy and concern in a letter to his grandson when he heard that a slave wet nurse, who was about to be sent to Seoul, intended to leave her own three- or four-month-old baby behind. He likened this abandonment to killing her child and therefore intolerable to a benevolent person. Consequently, he suggested that if she had to go, it would be more compassionate for her to take her child with her and raise both children together. On the other hand, when Thögye learned that his nephew's house had been attacked by robbers, he expressed relief that no one was killed, paradoxically adding, "How many slaves and cattle were killed or injured?"[255] Apparently, for him, "no one" did not include slaves, and slaves existed on the same level as cattle.

7.7 The Great East Asian War and the Crisis of Slavery

The Japanese invasions of Korea, also known as the Great East Asian War (1592–1598), initiated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, devastated Cosŏn society and "triggered social changes,"[256] with long-term cultural and demographic consequences that shaped regional history.

The invasions were marked by extreme violence. The Japanese Buddhist priest Keinen, who accompanied a Japanese lord on this campaign, witnessed his countrymen hunting for slaves and recorded this in his diary:

> The fields and mountains, and even the castles, were all burned without exception. People were struck down, their necks bound with chains or bamboo tubes. Parents lamented for their children, and children searched for their parents. It was a pitiful sight, the likes of which I had never witnessed before. [...] They took the children of Korean people by force, struck down the parents, and

253 Palais 1996: 229.
254 U. Lee 2007: 130.
255 Cŏn Seyŏng 2018: 4.
256 Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 2.

> ensured they could never meet again. Their mutual lamentations were like the torment of ultimate punishment.[257]

> Various merchants from Japan also arrived, and among them were those who traded in people. They followed behind the main camp, buying men and women, young and old, binding their necks with ropes and gathering them together. They drove them forward, and if they could not walk, they struck them from behind with sticks, forcing them onward. The sight of them being beaten and driven was truly reminiscent of the punishment inflicted on condemned criminals in hell.[258]

Accompanying the Japanese, Europeans also appeared at the scene. Jesuit priests like Gregorio de Céspedes and Francisco Laguna were present in Korea during the war, witnessing atrocities and facilitating conversions to Christianity.[259] The Portuguese Jesuit chronicler Luis Fróis provides vivid, pro-Japanese accounts of the invasions, detailing events such as the capture of Pusan and other fortresses, where Korean noble men and women were taken captive despite attempts to disguise their status. Slaves, including women and children, were brought to Japan, with Christian *daimyō* such as Konishi Yukinaga and Itō Sukekatsu assigning captives to Jesuits or providing temporary shelter until they could integrate into Japanese society. For instance, according to Fróis, when Itō Sukekatsu returned to Japan, he

> also brought with him many Koreans that he had captured in war, men and women, he also ordered all men to give them [sic] to the Priests to do according to their will; and the women were delivered to his wife not as captives but to have them in her home, until they knew how to communicate and talk, and could have means of living in Japan and then she would give them freedom; but not let them go too soon, because as foreign people who could not speak, they would be soon lost and [held] captive.[260]

In this way, tens of thousands of Koreans—estimates ranging from 20,000 to more than 100,000—were captured and transported to Japan and beyond.[261] This mass displacement created acute labor shortages in Korea while simultaneously fueling a demand for captives in Japan. These experiences mark the transformative impact of Korean slavery on Japanese society, economy, and culture.

Some Japanese researchers argue that Hideyoshi practically abolished slavery, as free peasants replaced the role of *genin* (private slaves), while others contend that *genin* persisted much later, living under slave-like conditions.[262] The inclusion of huge numbers of Korean slaves may have been a retarding element in the transition from

257 *Chōsen Nichinichi Ki*, Keichō 2:8:6 = September 17, 1597, and 8:8 = September 19, 1597. Chōsen Nichinichi ki Kenkyūkai 2000: 15; Hur 2021: 76.

258 *Chōsen Nichinichi Ki*, Keichō 2:11:19 = December 27, 1597. Chōsen Nichinichi ki Kenkyūkai 2000: 49; cf. Broomhall 2023: 50; Hur 2021: 77.

259 Sousa 2019: 94–102.

260 *Historia de Japam*. Quoted in ibid.: 99.

261 Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 5; Hur 2021: 68.

262 Yi Yŏnghun 2004: 4.

a slavery-based to a peasant-based economy. In any case, the sudden influx of Korean slaves—including men, women, and children— reportedly caused a decline in their market value in Japanese slave markets.[263]

Korean slaves in Japan experienced diverse fates, reflecting their forced integration into Japanese society without consideration for their former status.[264] While historical records do not extensively document the lives of these captives, some assimilated into Japanese society. For most, however, adapting to life in Japan was fraught with challenges due to language and cultural barriers. The majority endured hardships as they struggled to integrate into their new environment.[265] Many were employed in agriculture to address labor shortages, while others served as laborers or artisans in construction and fortification, technicians, or household servants. Some well-educated captives were eventually recognized as *samurai*, interpreters, or monks; a few became scholars, vassals, or even high-ranking retainers in some Japanese domains. Skilled Korean potters significantly influenced Japanese ceramics, producing renowned styles like Arita and Hagi ware.[266]

Despite some captives finding pathways to freedom or marriage within Japan, many were sold to other regions, including Macao. In Nagasaki, which became a hub for the Korean slave trade, many Korean women entered brothels. For women in particular, returning to Cosŏn was not an easy option. As one kidnapped *yangban* daughter wrote in a letter brought back from Japan in 1596:

> Even if I were allowed to return to my country, I know well that society would never accept me again.[267]

7.7.1 Naeshirogawa

The village of Naeshirogawa, established in the Satsuma domain on Kyūshū Island in the late sixteenth century, became a settlement for Korean captives brought to Japan during the Great East Asian War. Initially treated as a distinct ethnic group, these captives contributed significantly to the development of Satsuma ceramics, such as the renowned Satsuma ware. Although not considered slaves, their movements and identities were tightly controlled, with restrictions on intermarriage and policies to preserve the distinct Korean cultural identity of the potters.[268] Over time, Naeshirogawa evolved into

263 Sousa 2019: 90–94; S. Kang 2009: 59.

264 Hur 2021: 81–82.

265 Sousa 2019: 103–13; Kurushima 2014: 5–10; Hur 2021: 80–81.

266 Hur 2021: 79.

267 Shin Kyŏng: *Cäjo Pŏnbangji* 再造藩邦志, v. 3, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/再造藩邦志/卷三 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Quoted from a letter handed over to the diplomat Hwang Shin when he visited Japan in 1596. Cf. Broomhall 2023: 55.

268 Ogawara 2014.

a hub for ceramics production. From the eighteenth century onward, Naeshirogawa's Korean language interpreters provided crucial services, including interrogations, translation, and detailed reporting to domain officials. The Satsuma domain institutionalized this role, fostering Korean language education in Naeshirogawa and dispatching interpreters to handle maritime incidents which involved Koreans.[269] Despite their contributions, efforts to achieve *samurai* status in the Meiji era were rejected, prompting many residents to adopt Japanese identities. One family purchased *samurai* registration in 1886, adopting the Tōgō family name and achieving samurai status. Their son, Tōgō Shigenori, later studied German literature at Tōkyō Imperial University and eventually became a diplomat, serving as Japan's foreign minister during World War II.[270]

7.7.2 The European Involvement in the Korean Slave Trade

After arriving in East Asia in the first half of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese quickly expanded their slave trading networks into the region. Prior to the 1570s, China was the primary supplier of slaves in East Asia, with Japan taking over in the 1580s, followed by Korea in the 1590s. As local resistance to the trade intensified, the focus shifted to India and Southeast Asia.

Early on, Jesuits, who traveled with Portuguese merchants as missionaries, began to face ethical questions regarding the legality of the East Asian slave trade. Moreover, the Japanese began to see it as an insult to Japanese sovereignty and social order.[271] In 1587, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the *de facto* ruler of Japan, banned the trade of Japanese people both domestically and internationally:

> Selling Japanese to China, the Southern Barbarians or Korea is a wrong. Furthermore, the trade of people in Japan must stop.[272]

As early as 1408, Japan had intervened at the Korean court, opposing the sale of Japanese into slavery because "there are no private slaves in our country," which led to a royal ban on the trade of Japanese slaves in Korea.[273] This makes it probable that Hideyoshi's ban was already in place long before Hideyoshi. Japanese historians disagree on this point, and we should also note that at the very beginning of the Jesuit presence in Japan, Francis Xavier had been informed that "honored and rich people had slaves to serve them."[274] In any case, after restoring peace and a stable agrarian order in Japan,

269 Kurushima 2014: 30–36.
270 Ogawara 2014: 286–87.
271 Hirayama 2021: 165.
272 Tenshō 15:6:18 = July 23, 1587, quoted in Watanabe 2014: 147–48.
273 *Cosŏn Wangjo Shillok*, Thäjong Shillok, Y. 8, 10:21. Cf. T. Nelson 2004: 472; Zöllner 2017: 117.
274 Silva 2022: 177.

Hideyoshi was not tolerating the enslavement of Japanese any more. While it is uncertain whether Hideyoshi strictly enforced the ban, slavery in Japan gradually decreased over the following century.[275]

Unimpressed, the Portuguese slave traders continued their business as before, and the Jesuits protected them because they were financially dependent on the traders. Hideyoshi himself saved the Jesuits for the time being when he ordered the invasion of Korea in 1592. There was no prohibition on buying or selling *non*-Japanese, so the Portuguese were free to participate in the resulting human trafficking. They preferred to buy female slaves, which makes it likely that these Korean women were sold into sexual slavery.[276]

Following the doctrine of the Catholic church, enslavement was only acceptable if these slaves had been taken as prisoners in a just war. The nature of the Japanese aggression against Korea was dubious at best. In 1593, Jesuit scholastic thinker Luis de Molinas, in his *De iustitia et iure* ("About Justice and Law"), raised his concern:

> I am not entirely sure whether the Portuguese merchants who buy men and women as slaves take care to investigate whether these have been captured in a just war and if they have been legitimately reduced to servitude or not.[277]

On the other hand, Luis Fróis expressed delight with the opportunities offered by the war in his newsletter from the end of 1596:

> This year we have initiated many slaves of both sexes from the kingdom of Corai [= Koryŏ = Cosŏn], and they now reside in Nagasaki. They say that there are more than [1]300, and the majority of them received baptism two years earlier, but this year they took part in the confession. Experience teaches that the nation is suited to our holy faith, they are human and courteous; they receive great pleasure when baptized. […]
> This nation prevails in judgment, having united to its simplicity, and has hitherto made clear enough that they did not yield to the Japanese. It has been pleasing to God, on the occasion of the Coraian war, to supply us with the first-fruits of new crops to the forest of their souls; and it is the common opinion of all that if the preaching of the Gospels, which finds it easy to pass through Japan, penetrates to Korea, it is easy to enter into the ears of the people, and spread far and wide through those regions.[278]

In Nagasaki, a growing community of Korean Christians, many of them slaves, was established; they even built their own church. The Nagasaki slave market also flourished, as the Florentine merchant Francesco Carletti pointed out:

275 Hur 2021: 82; Botsman 2011: 1327.

276 Sousa 2019: 542, 180–81; there are no surviving lists of East Asian slaves traded by the Portuguese: Sousa 2019: 543.

277 Quoted in McManus 2021: 73.

278 Hay 1605: 443–44; see Sousa 2019: 117–18.

> Out of these provinces [sc. of Korea]—that is, of the more maritime ones—they [sc. the Japanese] brought an infinite number of men and women, boys and girls, of every age, and they all were sold as slaves at the very lowest prices. I bought five of them for little more than twelve *scudos*. Having had them baptized, I took them with me to Goa in India, and there set them free. I brought one of them with me to Florence, and I think that today he is to be found in Rome, where he is known as Antonio.[279]

On his voyage back to Europe, Carletti's ship was sunk in a fight with Dutch ships. When the sailors and passengers aboard abandoned ship, the Dutch would only save those who offered them valuables. Carletti reports how Antonio was able to survive:

> One of my servants, of the Korean nation, played a trick on them despite the fact that he did not know how to swim and was aware that they were not accepting servants or slaves like himself. Around his neck he hung two of my little pictures, one on which was painted a crucified Christ, whereas the other was an *Ecce homo*, and both of them on copper. I still have them, and value them highly because they were made by good artists in Japan, as well as because of the trick carried out by that servant of mine. Wearing them, he plunged into the sea and was quickly picked up by those sailors, who thought that he had something of great value to them. And when they saw what these things were, they gave them back to him, and as he already was in their boat, let him remain there, and thus took him to their ship, where he saved those pictures for me with very little difficulty because they, being mostly heretical Calvinists, did not wish to see paintings either of the saints or even of God Himself crucified.[280]

Antonio was taken to Florence and later to Rome, where he was freed around 1600. It was long believed that he had been portrayed by Peter Paul Rubens in a painting supposedly showing a "man in Korean dress." However, this seems rather implausible: Although Antonio was certainly one of the few East Asians at the time who "filled a space in the Netherlandish imagination," "Rubens' depiction of an East Asian was foremost a work of fantasy."[281]

After the death of Hideyoshi in 1598, the Japanese troops were withdrawn, and the market for Korean slaves collapsed completely. In the same year, the Jesuits held a council in Nagasaki where they decided to finally distance themselves from the slave trade.[282]

Nevertheless, over the next two decades, a reign of terror against local and foreign Christians led to the near-complete extinction of Christianity in Japan. The culmination of this persecution was the Great Martyrdom of Nagasaki on September 10, 1622, when fifty-five Christians were publicly beheaded or burned alive. The last to die that day was Japan's first indigenous Jesuit priest, Sebastian Kimura. Along with the other missionaries remaining in Japan, he had gone underground after 1613, finding refuge in the household of Antonio de Corea, a Korean who had been enslaved during the Great

279 Carletti 1964: 115.

280 Ibid.: 239.

281 Weststeijn and Gesterkamp 2016: 161.

282 McManus 2018: 100.

East Asian War. Baptized, freed, and married to a Japanese slave of his former owner, Antonio settled in Nagasaki, where the couple adopted one boy and had another.[283]

Antonio had also taken in a young Korean female slave, possibly as a concubine or *de facto* family member, and she, too, was baptized. In 1621, she betrayed Antonio and Sebastian Kimura, leading to their arrest and execution along with Antonio's entire family. Sources differ on her motivations: some claim she sought the bounty offered for revealing a priest's whereabouts, hoping it would grant her freedom,[284] while others suggest she had suffered long in slavery and renounced her faith "after many years of vexatious service."[285]

Ironically, the Jesuits, who had long struggled with the moral implications of Christian slave ownership, were ultimately undone by the very institution they had tolerated. The betrayal of Japan's first indigenous priest by a Korean slave taken during Hideyoshi's invasion adds a final bitter twist to the story, highlighting how slavery shaped not only individual fates but also the broader history of Christianity in Japan.

7.7.3 The Invasion as a Slave Rebellion

Leading Korean intellectuals and politicians interpreted the failure to prevent the Japanese invasions and to protect the country without the help of the Chinese as a "self-inflicted 'national disgrace'"[286] that invited disorder and unrest. In particular, King Sŏnjo's hasty flight from the capital triggered chaos, during which slaves and refugees destroyed slavery records in an attempt to erase their enslaved status:

> As the royal procession prepared to leave the city, treacherous subjects entered the Board of the Royal Treasury, fighting over its riches. After the king departed, the chaos escalated, and riots broke out. The rioters first set fire to the Department of Slave Affairs and the Ministry of Justice, targeting the public and private slave registers stored in those two offices. The rioters then looted the royal palaces, government offices, and granaries, setting them on fire to cover their tracks. The three palaces—Kyŏngbok, Changdŏk, and Changgyŏng—were all completely destroyed.[287]

This eruption of "suffering and resentment felt by the slave class"[288] was not the only internal unrest. Between 1589 and 1602, several large-scale rebellions broke out, fueled by the mobilization of military forces beyond state oversight. Unlike earlier uprisings,

283 Sousa 2019: 122, 158–59.

284 Cieslik 1956: 8.

285 Mathias Tanner: *Die Gesellschafft Jesu: biß zur Vergiessung ihres Blutes wider den Götzendienst, Unglauben und Laster für Gott, den wahren Glauben und Tugenden in allen 4 Theilen der Welt streitend.* Prag: Universitäts-Buchdruckerei, 1683, p. 387.

286 S. Kang 2009: 66.

287 CWS, Sŏnjo, Y. 25:4:14 = May 14, 1592.

288 Hiraki 1982: 153.

which were usually quelled in the planning stages, these wartime rebellions saw the actual formation of armed groups, sometimes leading to direct confrontations with government troops.

The destabilization and famine caused by the war, combined with the experience of raising private armies and the breakdown of public security, created conditions conducive to rebellion. In some cases, rebel leaders seized official seals from local districts to conscript soldiers under false pretenses, often under the banner of recruitment for righteous armies (*ŭibyŏng*). Many commoners and slaves were drawn into these uprisings, sometimes without fully realizing the implications.[289]

To quell the unrest and prevent uprisings from recurring in the same regions, the court adopted a strategy that combined repression with political pragmatism. While harsh punishments were imposed on the main perpetrators, leniency was shown to those who had been coerced into participating. Executing all involved would have severely weakened the regional labor force and military capacity. As a result, those with lesser involvement were often spared. Official proclamations reassured the population, emphasizing that only the ringleaders would be punished. In some cases, the government offered former rebels a path to redemption through merit-based rewards.[290]

Slaves were implicated in these rebellions, both as participants and as targets of collective punishment. In some cases, they were among those mobilized by rebel leaders, either through coercion or voluntary enlistment.[291] But the court was well aware that the excessive burden of labor duties and taxation after the war were the main causes of people's resorting to flight, plunder, rebellion, and collaboration with the Japanese invaders.[292] According to one report:

> At that time, many arrogant and violent slaves murdered their masters and ran rampant. Some wielded weapons, while others committed acts of sexual violence.[293]

The Honam region in Cŏlla Province was spared from Japanese invasion, but marauding Korean soldiers proved to be no better:

> They seized other men's wives, concubines, and younger sisters, with ten men ravaging a single woman until she perished, one after another. They slaughtered fathers and elder brothers, boiled and sacrificed children, burned and destroyed homes, plundered wealth, drove away people's cattle

289 Kwŏn Ŭnna 2024: 225–33, 244.

290 Ibid.: 237–38, 243.

291 Ibid.: 223, 240.

292 Ibid.: 236, 240–43.

293 Co Kyŏngnam 2025: b. 1; *Namjung Camnok* ("Miscellaneous Records from the Chaos") was written by Co Kyŏngnam, an obscure literary licentiate, covering the years between 1592 and 1638. It is based on personal experiences and reports submitted to the court. See *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 325–26.

> and horses, enslaved men and servants, seized fertile fields, and uprooted ancestral graves. Their cruelty and savagery knew no bounds.[294]

However, it should not be overlooked that the forced conscription of slaves for military service (*kunyŏk*) was what made this violence possible in the first place. Before the war, private slaves were exempt from military service. But new *ad hoc* measures to strengthen the military in the fight against the invaders eventually led to the recruitment of both public and private slaves, as well as commoners and Buddhist monks, into private and royal troops. Beginning in 1593, slaves were even allowed to take military examinations, and if they passed, they could potentially gain freedom and even entry into elite archery and firearms units. In 1594, the Squad Unit Forces (*sogogun*) were established as local troops stationed at strategic locations, and conscripts were required to either actively serve or pay a compensation fee in rice.

The government promised generous compensation to slave owners for allowing their slaves to serve in the military, such as promotion in rank or government positions. If the owner was a public slave, he was granted freedom. The government also offered freedom to slaves in exchange for acts of bravery.[295] At first, anyone, including slaves, who presented a severed head of a Japanese enemy would receive a blank privilege certificate for passing the military examination. However, this system was prone to corruption, with some killing civilians or prisoners of war and falsely claiming enemy kills to gain freedom, and others selling forged manumission certificates.[296] To prevent this, the requirements for rewards were tightened in 1593 and 1594.[297] Thus, while the war did not spark a broad movement for social reform, it did inspire individuals to seek personal advancement through military service, escape, or administrative loopholes.[298]

The war caused widespread devastation, and many slaves died from disease, starvation, or attack. Slave women were particularly vulnerable. O Hŭimun reported some tragic cases among his family's slaves:

> I heard that the female slave Pokci, who belonged to my in-laws, had initially fled the capital [Seoul] together with her mother. However, her husband, who was a stonemason, saw that their son Ŭngil had been captured and taken away. Desiring to rescue him, he followed in pursuit but never returned. It is certain that he was killed. Pokci, along with her three children and her mother, struggled greatly to find food. Having no other choice, they reentered the city and returned to their old home. However, when the fire raged through the city, they fled again and sought refuge at Cunghŭng Tempel, where they all starved to death. Although Pokci's mother did not die at the hands of the enemy, she must have perished from starvation. What an unfortunate fate.[299]

294 Co Kyŏngnam 2025: b. 1.
295 Hiraki 1982: 155, 160; Lovins 2021: 181.
296 Hiraki 1982: 164.
297 Ibid.: 156.
298 Ibid.: 164.
299 1592:5: O Hŭimun 1971a: 169.

> The female slave Hŭnbi of my in-laws is said to have died of starvation. She was the one who carried me in her arms when I was still an infant. Knowing that she has perished from hunger makes her loss all the more heartbreaking. […]
> Another female slave, Okkŭm of my in-laws, also fled early in the chaos, and her whereabouts remain unknown. At first, I had planned to track her down and capture her, but now I hear she has already perished. Though she did not die of starvation, her fate is now beyond recovery. What a pity.[300]

As a result of the turmoil, fields were left abandoned, and there were not enough slaves to maintain graves and perform ancestral rites.[301] In Kyŏngsang Province, tribute collection was severely hampered by the invasions. Male capital-bureau slaves were assigned to naval forces, while female slaves were responsible for tribute collection and transportation. This led to increased hardships and a significant surge in runaways. The province's governor proposed measures such as adjusting tribute records and accounting for displaced persons to mitigate the burden. Similarly, in Hwanghä and Phyŏngan Provinces, longstanding customs of substituting grain for fine cloth were overturned following the wartime disruptions.[302]

Cosŏn intellectuals rationalized the Japanese invasion that had struck them out of the blue as a kind of slave rebellion. Their consistent use of the term "Japanese slaves" (*wäno*) to describe the invaders further reinforced this interpretation. This view was clearly expressed in a comment in the *Namjung Camnok*:

> [In Japan,] in previous generations, the position of imperial regent was always held by members of the four great clans—Fujiwara, Tachibana, Taira, and Minamoto. Nobles inherited noble status, while the lowborn remained lowborn. Therefore, even those in power among the Japanese still valued reputation and propriety, not daring to act with complete lawlessness. However, when [Oda] Nobunaga was killed by his own vassal, Hideyoshi, who had risen from slavery, seized power by attacking and murdering the high ministers, plunging the country into disorder and ruling with unchecked tyranny.[303]

This was factually inaccurate—Hideyoshi was of lowly origin, but he was no slave, nor was he responsible for Nobunaga's death. However, from this perspective, Cosŏn sources portrayed Tokugawa Ieyasu's rise to power after Hideyoshi's death as a restoration of order in Japan, emphasizing his descent from a noble *samurai* lineage.

This framing contributed to the eventual repair of Japanese–Korean relations. For Cosŏn, the repatriation of the kidnapped to Japan was a matter of national pride and royal authority, leading to the dispatch of envoys to Japan until 1624. These envoys made it clear that the repatriation was a prerequisite for resuming diplomatic relations. They

300 1592:12:07: O Hŭimun 1971a: 248–49.
301 Kim Yongman 2008: 120.
302 Hiraki 1982: 22.
303 Co Kyŏngnam 2025: b. 4.

successfully orchestrated the return of 7,500 captives.[304] The first repatriation mission, led by the Buddhist monk Yujŏng, brought back 1,300 captives in 1605. However, for many, this did not guarantee a happy welcome:

> Naval Commander Yi Kyŏngjun led the [Korean] naval forces to Pusan. However, due to unfavorable winds, they were delayed and ultimately missed the scheduled deployment. [Ambassador] Yujŏng entrusted the repatriated people to Yi Kyŏngjun, instructing him to arrange their distribution as appropriate. Yi Kyŏngjun assigned them to various ships, allowing them to be taken wherever deemed fit. The ship captains, upon receiving the men and women, competed fiercely, binding and restraining them in a manner worse than plundering. When asked about their affiliations and origins, many could not answer. Those who had been captured at a young age often knew only that they were from Cosŏn but did not remember their place of origin or the names of their parents. As a result, many were simply registered as personal slaves. Beautiful women were bound, while their husbands were thrown into the sea, making them the personal property of their captors. Such incidents were not isolated cases.
>
> Though Heaven is high, it hears the cries of the lowly, and thus the matter came to light. Yi Kyŏngjun was immediately dismissed and replaced by Yi Unnyŏng. Orders were issued to the naval commanders of each province to investigate and expose the border officers responsible for these atrocities. However, the naval commanders treated the orders as mere formalities and ultimately failed to carry out the investigation or report the offenses.[305]

When faced with a lack of status documentation, Cosŏn officials were clearly overwhelmed, and some even exploited this to enrich themselves by enslaving those without proper documents. This situation was not limited to returning abductees. During the war, the uncertainty surrounding the survival and reproductive status of slaves complicated household records to the point where recording even one parent of a slave in property registers was difficult, and verifying details such as slave classification, age, gender, residence, name, and childbirth became highly challenging.[306] Thus, for some, the war became "a catalyst that quickly made incremental opportunities for social advancement more concrete,"[307] while for others, it led to new or renewed enslavement.

The surviving family documents and diaries of the time show that the war caused great disruption in the *yangban* household management and led to a neglect of their control over land and people.

For example, there was Kim Hongwŏn of the Puan Kim clan in Ubandong, Cŏlla Province. After passing the first state examination in 1591 at the age of twenty, Hongwŏn received a pair of slaves and a farm in Yongdam County from his father. His father

304 Toby 1991: 27–30, 34; Kurushima 2014: 5.

305 Co Kyŏngnam 2025: b. 4; Broomhall, based on secondary citation, misinterprets this as a "sympathetic" report about Japanese abusing Koreans and misunderstands the phrase 稱己奴 as "they simply called themselves slaves." Broomhall 2023: 50, 59; in fact, this grammatical construction suggests an external imposition of status, not voluntary self-identification. Accordingly, Japanese research reads this unanimously as "claimed them as their own slaves" ("自分の奴とした"). See Yonetani 2008: 118.

306 Kim Yongman 2008: 119.

307 Hiraki 1982: 155.

hoped that Hongwŏn would reclaim the farm, which had almost become a wasteland.[308] In 1592, following the outbreak of the war, Hongwŏn returned to the ancestral seat in Puan, leaving the management to his head slave, Kunsŏk. The land was farmed by tenants, and Kunsŏk was responsible for collecting their taxes and delivering military supplies to the authorities. However, the tenants claimed that in 1593, Kunsŏk collected their taxes, fled to his master's residence in Puan, and hid there without ever delivering them to the authorities. In 1594, the Yongdam magistrate asked the Puan magistrate to arrest Kunsŏk, but a month later, Kunsŏk finally delivered the taxes to the Yongdam magistrate, and the case was settled.[309] A document written by Kunsŏk in the name of Hongwŏn to the Yongdam magistrate in 1613 indicates that during the war, the Kim slaves left the farm, and the tenants were left to fend for themselves. Eventually, the magistrate registered these lands in the names of the tenants. Since Hongwŏn had distinguished himself on the battlefield, presumably with the help of his slaves who accompanied him into battle, he gained a good reputation, which may have helped him reclaim his property.[310]

7.7.3.1 Of Concubines, Loyalty, and Chastity: Yi Sugwang

For the neo-Confucian scholar Yi Sugwang, the turmoil following the Japanese invasions brought about profound social changes that he saw as troubling and threatening to social stability. He explains this with reference to two highly controversial issues—discrimination against the sons of non-*yangban* concubines and the inclusion of slaves in the ranks of commoners:

> The policy of allowing secondary sons to be eligible (for government service) began in the reign of King Thäjong, following the advice of Right Remonstrator Sŏ Sŏn. This was established as a fixed law, though it was not a traditional or universal system. In the 23rd year of the Wanli reign [1583], Yulgok, in charge of military affairs, suggested allowing concubine-born individuals to pay grain to gain eligibility for the civil service examinations as a temporary measure to address border crises. However, some argued that this was inappropriate. When it came to discussions of the law, they believed that it was as challenging as granting full eligibility. Nevertheless, since the Imjin War [i.e., Great East Asian War], many secondary sons have taken civil service exams and attained official positions without waiting for permission to do so.
>
> In our East [i.e., Korea], names and titles have always been held in high regard. During the upheaval of the Imjin Rebellion, the entire nation fell apart, and the great families of the aristocracy rose in righteous opposition to suppress the rebels, ultimately restoring order—this was the result of their efforts. The institutionalization of slavery began in the Shilla period, but after the turmoil, some were permitted to escape servitude through military achievements or by paying grain, leading to a great increase in those pretending to be commoners. As a result, even those who reached high ranks or held prestigious titles often showed contempt for the aristocracy and challenged their masters,

308 Cŏn Kyŏngmok 2012b: 223.
309 Ibid.: 228.
310 Ibid.: 238.

> sometimes even committing acts of rebellion and murder. There is concern that in the future, this will lead to unspeakable troubles.[311]

In 1614, Yi Sugwang published the first encyclopedic work in Korean history, the twenty-volume *Cibong Yusŏl* ("Topical Discourses of Cibong"). This comprehensive collection spans a wide range of subjects, including astronomy, geography, administration, literature, peoples, language, arts, food, and biology. While deeply rooted in neo-Confucianism and written "without scientific consideration," the essays reflect the notable influence of Western learning. Yi's biographical chapters, however, focus on "famous anecdotes whose purpose is to arouse a sense of morality among the people."[312] When addressing the topic of slavery, Yi frequently draws from classical Chinese authors, adhering to conventional stereotypes and generalizations. For instance, he judges household slaves as follows:

> Song dynasty scholar Wang Qunyu said: "Eating dry rice without care, falling asleep hastily, adjusting the lamp to burn long, and placing objects haphazardly in the way—these are characteristic behaviors of slaves."[313] I would add: "Filling the lamp with oil to the brim, arranging the mat askew,[314] enjoying naps during the day, and lying down immediately after eating." [...] Li Yishan's *Miscellaneous Notes* states: "A scholar who is overly interested in sound and music will neglect their studies; a woman who understands poetry risks transgressing propriety; and an inferior slave who learns to read and write is likely to cause trouble. It is better for them not to understand such things at all." This statement is accurate and reflects common views of the time.[315]

However, Yi's work is not limited to conventional reflections; it also includes vivid observations informed by his historical knowledge and personal experiences during the Great East Asian War. Among these is the biography of Phung, a relay station slave who served Yi faithfully at the onset of the first Japanese invasion in 1592. Phung's bravery and endurance are contrasted with the cowardice of many, including *yangban* officials who abandoned their posts during this time of national crisis. Yi's account of Phung

311 Cibong Yusŏl 3: Yi Sugwang 1915a: 78.

312 *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 309–15.

313 This is a partial quote from the *Physiognomy of Slaves*, published in volume 134 of the Chinese *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*. The whole catalog reads: "They are typically handling tables too high, filling containers with water to the brim, adjusting lamps excessively long, and adjusting the lamp to burn long. They eat dry rice without care, fall asleep hastily, place objects obstructively in pathways, and wear their clothes inside out." See https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/古今說海_(四庫全書本)/卷134 [accessed 29.07.2025].

314 The "mat" refers to a traditional woven mat used in East Asian households as a seating or sleeping surface. These mats were commonly made of materials such as straw, bamboo, or rush. A neatly arranged mat in traditional Chinese etiquette reflects discipline, orderliness, and respect for one's surroundings or guests. A mat placed crookedly implies negligence or laziness, traits attributed to servants or people of lower status in this critique.

315 Cibong Yusŏl 16: Yi Sugwang 1915b: 169.

offers a rare glimpse of individual valor amidst collective failure, highlighting his dedication against overwhelming odds:[316]

> Nyŏn Phung was a servant of Kimchŏn Station. During the Imjin Japanese invasion [1592], when I was a former official in the Ministry of Personnel and was dispatched as an officer to Kyŏngsang Province, the area was overrun by enemies. Almost all the officials and soldiers who were supposed to accompany me fled, but only Phung stayed by my side without a moment's hesitation. One day, we had to sleep exposed in a field, very close to the enemy encampment. In the middle of the night, there was a sudden commotion in the army camp, and men and horses were in disarray. Phung urgently got me on my horse, allowing us to escape unscathed. Later, at the village of Kŭmsan, when I was still lying down, I was unaware that the enemy had suddenly come within ten paces of us. Phung hastily led the horse into the back valley as numerous enemies chased us with swords drawn. This happened not only once or twice.
>
> When we heard at Unbong that the capital had fallen, I, along with other officials, faced west and wept bitterly. Phung also cried in deep sorrow. When we later borrowed troops from the Three Provinces Army and were in the Thousand Waters Plain, we were pursued closely by the enemy. Thanks to Phung's skill in urging the horse through the mud, we narrowly escaped.
>
> Upon reaching Üju, the government ordered me to head to Hamgyŏng Province as a commissioner. I told Phung, "You have suffered greatly and should not enter this barren land again." I wanted him to stay behind and await my return, but Phung insisted, saying he could not remain alone and firmly requested to accompany me. In the following year, in the year of Kyesa [1593], the invaders retreated from the capital, and Phung finally returned home. When he arrived, he found that his mother was gone, and his wife was in mourning, believing him to have died long ago. When they met again, they thought they were seeing a ghost.
>
> The next year [1594], Phung visited me again in the capital, but shortly afterward, he passed away. From Kyŏngsang Province to Üju and then up to Hamgyŏng, we traversed thousands of miles together, and he protected me through many perilous situations. When enemies were close, Phung would keep watch day and night, sometimes until dawn without sleeping, always holding the horse in readiness. In dangerous terrain, Phung would use his right hand to hold the horse and his left to support me, constantly ensuring my safety. His dedication and loyalty were unwavering.
>
> Even when we were near his hometown, only a few miles away, he did not ask to see his mother or wife, nor did he ever show any inclination to leave. At times, we were surrounded by enemies on all sides, with no hope of survival by nightfall, yet he never left my side. We often went without food, and there were days when we had nothing to eat, leaving him exhausted, yet he never complained. When asked why he didn't leave, Phung would reply, "It is not that I cannot go; it is simply that I cannot bear to leave."
>
> I was not someone Phung knew beforehand, nor did I have any power or influence over him, yet he stayed by my side from the first encounter. Phung was not of noble birth, nor was he a man seeking fame or rank. His loyalty was pure and sincere, a true testament to his character. At that time, it was common for slaves to abandon their masters, and even officials would sometimes abandon their posts, clinging to their families and forgetting their duty to the state. Though they wore official robes, such individuals were untrustworthy compared to a man like Phung.
>
> Phung was only twenty years old, quiet, reserved, and of honest character.

Thus, Phung displayed exceptional loyalty and bravery, remaining steadfastly by his master's side while others fled in fear of the enemy. He accompanied his master across

316 Cibong Yusŏl 15: Yi Sugwang 1915b: 141–41.

thousands of miles, through countless life-threatening situations, and often went without food, always ready to defend him and even sacrificing sleep to keep watch. Phung's character thus exemplifies loyalty and sacrifice and the virtues of subordination within a hierarchical structure.

Aside from this virtuous exception, Yi Sugwang observed significant changes in the slave system after the Great East Asian War. While many gained freedom through military service or payment of taxes, widespread fraud and social disruption followed. The war also saw an increase in social mobility for slaves, including remission from slavery, the ability to take state examinations regardless of status, and the mass passage of unqualified individuals from servile backgrounds in military examinations. The military was now filled with people of low status and mixed backgrounds who gained entry through military merit or the payment of taxes, a development that Yi criticized as arbitrary and indicative of a collapsing status system that concerned him more than the inherent injustice of the slave system itself.[317] Yi Sugwang also recounted the much shorter episode of a slave girl who went to her death out of loyalty to her mistress:

> In the Wanli era, during the Imjin Incident with the Japanese [1592], *yangban* women fleeing the chaos gathered at Tŭmba Crossing,[318] competing desperately for boats—a scene of utter despair. Among them was a lady accompanied by her female slave. They were unable to board a boat. A boatman tried to pull the woman aboard by her hand, but she cried bitterly, saying, "My hand has been defiled by your touch; how can I continue to live?" She then threw herself into the water and drowned. Her slave, weeping, said, "My mistress is gone; how can I bear to live alone?" and followed her into the water, dying as well.
>
> Alas, what fierce loyalty and honor! In the chaos of those times, such incidents must have been countless, yet few were recorded in history. Even when such tales were heard, the identities of the individuals often remained unknown—a true pity.[319]

The slave girl's determination to follow her mistress to her death is reminiscent of the sacrifice of the slave Hapcŏl in the Shilla period. However, this was not a heroic death on the battlefield, but the defense of female chastity. Despite their tragic endings, Yi Sugwang saw these episodes as evidence that society as a whole was changing for the better as a result of the war. He notes:

> During the Imjin War, there were countless women who chose to protect their chastity, willingly facing slaughter rather than being defiled by ruthless invaders. Even among ignorant lowborn women, many cursed their captors and chose death. Is this not the result of a deeply ingrained sense of moral transformation?[320]

317 Hiraki 1982: 209–10.

318 A famous crossing of the Yimjin river to the north of Seoul.

319 Cibong Yusŏl 15: Yi Sugwang 1915b: 142.

320 Cibong Yusŏl 3: Yi Sugwang 1915a: 78.

The novelty lies in the emphasis on female chastity and resistance to sexual assault. This standard was now being applied to the actions of female slaves, although Yi Sugwang was aware that women were in the role of victims in relation to men. This is reflected in another episode in which the ruthlessness of an older scholar in the sexual exploitation of a female slave is contrasted with the moral awareness of his younger nephew:

> A scholar had an illicit relationship with his slave's wife. His nephew knew about it but dared not speak openly. Instead, he asked his uncle, "Among human desires, which is greater: the desire for food or for sexual pleasure?" The uncle replied, "The desire for food is greater." The nephew disagreed, saying, "No, the desire for sexual pleasure is greater." The uncle asked, "How do you know this?" The nephew responded, "You did not consider it defiling to sleep with the slave's wife, yet if it were the slave's leftover food, you would refuse to eat it. From this, I know the desire for sexual pleasure is greater." Those who heard the exchange burst into loud laughter.[321]

In contrast, Yi Sugwang cites another example of female slave loyalty that occurred before the Great East Asian War:

> Minister Yu Kwŏn was accused of crimes during the Ŭlsa year [1545] and implicated by Cŏng Sunbung in a conspiracy of rebellion, which involved falsified records of achievements. Yu's family members and possessions were confiscated, with his household being enslaved. Among them was a female slave named Kap, just fourteen or fifteen years old, who was extraordinarily intelligent. Cŏng treated her with great favor, providing her with clothing and food comparable to that of his own daughters. Kap, in turn, anticipated his wishes and acted with utmost sincerity in all matters. Whenever she encountered her former masters, however, she would berate and insult them, saying, "They once treated me with little kindness, and I repay them in kind." Cŏng, trusting her completely, harbored no suspicions.
>
> One day, Kap hid a valuable item, prompting Cŏng to interrogate her. Kap wept and said, "Since coming here, I have worn the clothes and eaten the food of my master. Your favor has been boundless—why would I stoop to such petty theft?" Cŏng, moved, dismissed his suspicions.
>
> However, Kap had been secretly involved with a young male slave. She told him, "If the master accuses me, I cannot endure the punishment and will implicate you as well." Terrified, the slave asked her what to do. Kap replied, "I need to ward off suspicion. You must find me the body part of someone recently deceased." The slave complied, cutting off the arm of a victim of plague and giving it to Kap. Kap secretly placed it in Cŏng Sunbung's pillowcase.
>
> Not long after, [Cŏng] Sunbung fell ill and died. When the household discovered the truth, they interrogated Kap. She responded fiercely, "You killed my master, and thus became my enemy. I have long wished to avenge him. Now I have succeeded and face death with no regrets. What more could you ask?" She then took her own life.
>
> Ah, she was a woman and lowborn. Though she was a lowborn woman, she possessed the heart of a courageous and resolute man. It is truly worthy of respect. It is truly unforgettable![322]

321 Cibong Yusŏl 16: Yi Sugwang 1915b: 186.

322 Cibong Yusŏl 15: ibid.: 142–43.

In this case, Yi also praises the young slave for her loyalty and agency. But chastity was obviously not yet one of her virtues, even if her relationship with a young slave can be interpreted as a strategic ploy.

The fight against the Japanese invaders sparked a moral turnaround, which Yi Sugwang did not see as limited to the upper class. Female slaves had a dignity to defend as women, which represented an expansion of the previous view of slaves. The price for this recognition was submission to the moral concepts of neo-Confucian doctrine. Women who surrendered to the enemy or survived abduction to Japan were considered "irretrievably lost to their homeland."[323]

7.8 The Post-War Struggles

In a discussion with King Sŏnjo in 1601, Co Suik, a young scholar-official who had served in various capacities at the court during the war, demanded the abolition of private slaves, knowing that this was a bold proposal:

> In my humble opinion, the practice of private slavery is unique to our country. Heaven creates all men and endows them with equality. To distinguish between the noble and the base from the moment of birth is utterly unreasonable. According to the rules of our country, even the most mediocre people can enjoy the luxuries of lords and princes just because their ancestors owned a few slaves. How can this be justified? In the past, scholars have said that the well-field system could only be implemented after great turmoil in the realm. Now that the country is in dire straits, even those who own slaves dare not speak out. We must adopt the system of the Central Plains [i.e., China], assign a limited number of private slaves proportionately to officials from the prime minister on down, and abolish private slaves forever so that they can be used as soldiers. In the past, at the time of the establishment of the Eastern Expedition Province in Koryŏ, a Tang official inquired about the law of private servitude and wanted to abolish it. At that time the ruler and his ministers stopped them and said that this was not allowed. These were all the views of mediocre rulers and mediocre ministers, so how can they be worth discussing? Now the fortunes of our nation are turning toward prosperity. [At this] time of comprehensive renewal, it is unacceptable to cling stubbornly to the wrong rules of the past. How can the matter of restoration be done by treating it as something to be discussed with smiles and polite concessions?[324]

Co was not alone in calling for change. The Board of Border Defense proposed the restoration of the *hophä* system, hoping it would help to recruit soldiers and stabilize financial support for the military. This system supplemented the household registers and required adult males to wear an identification token (*hophä*). It was originally imported by Koryŏ from the Yüan dynasty in 1391 (but never enacted) and was introduced

323 Broomhall 2023: 52.

324 CWS, Sŏnjo, Y. 34:10:25 = November 19, 1601. Hiraki mistakenly attributes this speech to Yun Sŭnggun: Hiraki 1982: 221.

and withdrawn several times in the early Cosŏn period. However, King Sŏnjo rejected the proposal.[325]

After the war, Cosŏn's population grew rapidly, arable land expanded, and the economy began to recover, providing an opportunity to improve taxation and military recruitment. The monetization of labor since the late fifteenth century had largely replaced physical labor with payments. This allowed wealthy landowners to shift their burdens onto tenant farmers, either by paying them for labor or by renting them land. Small farmers became increasingly indebted to and dependent on these landlords.[326] Two competing approaches were discussed to counter this development:

1. The Uniform Land Tax: Farmers had to pay three types of taxes—land tax, labor compensation fee, and a tribute in kind (local specialties such as rice, silk, paper, or ginseng). Since many farmers could not produce these specialties themselves, they had to buy them from merchants, who often raised prices unfairly, while corrupt local officials could demand excessive amounts and surcharges for transporting the products to the capital. This led to financial hardship for the farmers and merchants and reduced government revenue.[327] To remedy this, officials proposed a simpler system in which farmers would pay a fixed amount of rice based on the calculated value of their tribute goods, eliminating the in-kind tribute system. This system was called Rice Collecting System (*sumibŏp*) and was temporarily applied in 1594. In mountainous areas where rice was scarce, alternative payments in cloth or money were allowed. It was limited only to the conversion of in-kind taxes and was not very effective. In contrast, the Uniform Land Tax, which bundled all kinds of obligations, including the land tax, into a single tax and was first implemented in Kyŏnggi Province in 1608, proved beneficial, although some officials questioned its fiscal sustainability. The revenue from this tax was then used to pay the wages of the workers. This completed the transformation of personal labor duties into rent collection, and it also legalized and accelerated the transformation of small independent farmers into tenant farmers. This also made slave labor increasingly obsolete, and it also reduced the problem of evading taxation by running away, since land had no legs. Only the military service tax had to be paid separately.[328]
2. The *hophä* system: In contrast, King Kwanghä favored a different approach, reinstating the *hophhä* system in 1609. The goal was twofold: to enforce military recruitment and to improve taxation by tracking individuals more effectively.[329] The system was controversial, as it restricted mobility and closed loopholes in taxation and the status system. Critics warned that it would lead to increased tax evasion, fal-

325 Sŏl 2021: 6, 2024: 168.
326 Kim Hongshik 1974: 85; W. Lee 2015: 30–33.
327 J.-C. Lee 2004: 165–66; Lovins 2021: 179; M. Shin 2014: 65.
328 Kim Hongshik 1974: 85; Sung Woo Kim 2014: 63.
329 Sŏl 2021: 7–9.

> sification of household registers, runaway slaves, and commendations.[330] Kwanghä delayed full implementation until 1612 and modified it to exempt *yangban* undergraduates (who held no offices), commoners, and private slaves.[331] However, when a rebellion involving a man attempting to avoid his military duties under the *hophä* system was discovered, censors warned of further unrest, and Kwanghä repealed the system only a month after its enactment.[332]

Factionalism influenced many policy reversals in late Cosŏn. By the seventeenth century, the monarchy was in a state of constant crisis, while *yangban* lineages and political factions reached their peak influence.[333] The neo-Confucian Easterners had split into the Northerners and Southerners in 1589. After the Great East Asian War, the Northerners held power and favored the nationwide expansion of the Uniform Land Tax, while the Westerners opposed it, arguing that it disrupted the established social hierarchy and undermined local control over tax collection.[334]

The next king, Injo, was closely allied with the Westerners. By 1625, the political situation at the northwestern border had deteriorated and new recruits were urgently needed. Despite the objections and concerns of his councilors, Injo decided to implement the *hophä* system to address the recruitment shortages and enforce population registration. He proclaimed:

> For more than thirty years after the turmoil [of the Great East Asian War], the people of the eight provinces have remained unsettled, their residences shifting and dispersing to different lands, making it impossible to unify and reorganize them. Therefore, all males over the age of fifteen, regardless of their status or whether they are subject to state duties, must submit a registration form in the prescribed format, be registered in the household register, and receive a *hophä*. From the highest ranks, including the Senior First Rank, members of the royal family, and all government officials, down to both public and private slaves, everyone must comply. Among them, even commoners who are subject to state duties, though not yet fifteen years of age, are also required to submit a registration form.[335]

Hophä tokens varied in size and material. Officials—the "bureaucratic reserve" exempted from actual military service—had smaller *hophä* made of ivory, horn, or wood according to their rank, while commoners and slaves received larger wooden plaques (*mokphä*) on which not only their names and birth years but also their physical characteristics were inscribed. This made it easy to distinguish between status groups, but led

330 Ibid.: 11.
331 Ibid.: 12.
332 Ibid.: 13.
333 Deuchler 1997: 302; J.-C. Lee 2004: 161.
334 J.-C. Lee 2004: 168–70.
335 Quoted in: Sŏl 2021: 24.

to strong opposition from wealthy commoners.[336] In addition, private slaves had their owners' names written on their *hophä*.[337]

The *hophä* system created considerable resistance, resulting in missed registration deadlines, falsified records, fraudulent status claims, and academic enrollment fraud to obtain military exemptions. Special examinations were introduced to verify student status, leading to fierce opposition from the *yangban*.[338] The system finally collapsed following the Manchu invasion of 1627, when King Injo ordered all *hophä* to be burned at the Han River to appease popular discontent.[339] Despite its official abolition, its legacy persisted in household and military registration practices.

After Injo suffered a humiliating defeat by the Manchu, the victors added insult to injury by demanding *yangban* daughters to be sent to their court as attendants. Injo deceived them by sending slave girls, aged 16 to 22, rewarding their parents (or, in two cases, their brothers) with emancipation.[340]

These frustrating developments motivated a group of "brigands" in Hwanghä and Kangwŏn Provinces, led by the *yangban* Yi Chunggyŏng, to form a conspiracy, with the intention of entering the capital and staging an uprising in early 1629. The group was arrested in Phyŏngyang and interrogated. Among the twenty-one men interrogated as culprits, six were private slaves and one was a public slave owned by the Board of the Royal Treasury. This means that slaves accounted for one-third of the conspirators.[341] It appears that Yi Chunggyŏng and some of his co-conspirators had been operating as professional slave hunters, an emerging new business model at that time, catching three runaway slaves and making them his own slaves and accomplices in treason.[342] The conspiracy's plot was baffling. They had compiled a list of new government ministers and a twenty-point social reform agenda. Its most striking feature was the attempt to alter the legal and social status of various slave groups, both government and private, while simultaneously maintaining and reinforcing servitude in other contexts.[343] One of their most ambitious proposals was the elevation of the entire lowborn class to commoner status. This would have dismantled hereditary servitude for many, disrupting the rigid social stratification that defined Cosŏn society. However, this promise of liberation was immediately undercut by the continued militarization of slaves. The agenda explicitly mandated that the slaves owned by the Board of the Royal Treasury, as well as relay sta-

336 Sŏl 2021: 30.

337 Sŏl 2021: 32; naturalized foreigners (*hyanghwain*) were also marked differently. Sŏl 2021: 32.

338 The compromise was that if *yangban* candidates failed in the exam, they had to pay a cloth tax and undergo three years of additional academic training. If they then failed again, they would be conscripted: Sŏl 2021: 20–21.

339 Sŏl 2024: 169, 2021: 22.

340 Hiraki 1982: 175.

341 W.-C. Kim 2010: 67–68.

342 Ibid.: 74–75.

343 Ibid.: 79–82.

tion slaves, must now serve in the military. Private slaves, instead of gaining freedom, were reassigned to relay stations, ensuring their continued servitude under a different structure. This suggests an effort to repurpose slavery rather than abolish it outright, altering its function such that it supported state infrastructure and military logistics rather than private wealth. Further complicating the agenda was the classification of Buddhist monks' children as either government slaves or relay station slaves.

Another provision introduced a ranked system that dictated the number of slaves an individual might own, with even commoners being permitted up to five servants. The explicit allocation of human property according to social rank suggests a desire to regulate and standardize servitude rather than eradicate it.

Finally, while the agenda contained broad promises of reform—such as the abolition of exploitative politics and unjust taxation—the persistence of slavery in various forms reveals a fundamental contradiction in its vision. Rather than establishing true equality, the agenda proposed a redistribution of power and servitude, replacing elite monopolization with a more regulated but still deeply ingrained system of forced labor.

As confused as these demands may seem, they certainly "reveal some of the criticism and passion" of their day,[344] reflecting a revolutionary ambition to restructure the power dynamics while keeping them anchored in the fundamental assumption that coerced labor remained essential to the social and economic order. While there was not the slightest real chance of the conspiracy succeeding, the Royal Secretariat took it as one of the many warnings from Heaven and urged the king to introduce reforms.[345]

Injo's successor, King Hyojong, would not repeat Injo's mistakes. Instead, he promoted hunting slaves, not so much with the aim of returning them to their owners but to enlist them in military service. However, this had only little success. Others still recommended the *hophä* system, which had at least resulted in improved registers. A third approach was advocated by Song Shiyŏl and others, who proposed the extension of another Chinese model of social organization, the Five-House Registration System, which had already been introduced in the capital and border regions.[346]

In 1662, Yi Yuthä, a member of the *Soron* faction, submitted a 20,000-character memorial, which was initially rejected by the administration for being too wordy, although it was appreciated that Yi had "pondered over it for many years and gained deep insights." In fact, he drafted it with the assistance of Song Shiyŏl and others, and he intended to send it to King Hyojong, but since Hyojong had already died in 1659, he addressed it to his successor, King Hyŏnjong. Yi proposed that slave tax rates be brought in line with those of commoners, and that public and private slaves be granted freedom after serving in the military. He also claimed that slave labor was no longer necessary for the *yangban* to maintain a reasonable, if frugal, standard of living. Instead, he rec-

344 Ibid.: 79.

345 *Tädong Yasŭng* 大東野乘, Injo 7:2:15 = September 3, 1629. The source is a Cosŏn period anthology of unofficial histories, anecdotes, and essays by various authors.

346 Sŏl 2024: 175.

ommended the implementation of the Five-House Registration System and to "nurture the people" with the help of village covenants.[347] King Hyŏnjong was very fond of these ideas and adopted them.

These measures were intended to strengthen control of the population in order to stabilize the collection of taxes. Economic considerations influenced the migratory behavior of the slaves. For instance, almost 10,000 slaves migrated to Ceju Island, where they had to pay less tribute; in some places on the island, the percentage of slaves rose to 45 percent.[348] Islands in general had become popular havens for runaway slaves, which had a healthy effect on the living conditions on these islands, except when slave hunters arrived and plundered them.[349] Moreover, by this time, many public slaves had already escaped or had bought remission from slavery, so the number of those remaining had dropped from 350,000 to 190,000.[350]

However, the high costs associated with taxes and labor meant that only the wealthiest of the newly freed could maintain their free status, suggesting that many likely fell back into enslavement. Kim Shiyang, a prominent official and accomplished scholar of the first half of the seventeenth century, is quoted as estimating the number of private slaves at "more than 400,000"; however, the sources Kim Shiyang consulted are unknown.[351] Surviving household registers confirm an increase in slave households (which is not the same as an increase in the slave population): in Tansŏng, their proportion rose from 12.2 percent in 1606 to 39.2 percent in 1678, and in Hänam, 64.1 percent were slave households in 1639.[352]

In the western part of the capital, the proportion of slaves in 1663 was 55.7 percent of all households and 76.8 percent of all registered residents.[353] A breakdown of the Seoul data shows that *yangban* households owned an average of 26 slaves (of which only 7 were living-in slaves), while commoner households owned 2. But it also shows that a significant number of these slaves, about 19 percent, were fugitives.

In the case of wealthy families, the number of slaves could be quite large. In 1663, two households—that of Shin Tucing, with 201 recorded slaves, and that of Yi Ci, with

347 CWS, Hyŏnjong, Y. 3:9:23 = November 3, 1662. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 211; U. Lee 2007: 139; Sŏl 2024: 177.

348 Hiraki 1982: 23; Yim Haksŏng 2013: 90.

349 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1987: 359, 365.

350 Palais 1996: 230.

351 The quote comes from the 東國文獻備考 *Tongguk Munhŏn Pigo*, a comprehensive compilation of historical references published by the Office of Special Advisors in 1770, which includes a section on slavery. In the expanded version available in the Naikaku Bunko, 增補文獻備考 *Cŭngbo Munhŏn Pigo*, ca. 1908, the quotation is in v. 33, b. 126, folio 15, left, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/NAJDA-294-0019_增補文献備考_巻BB162-166.pdf [accessed 29.07.2025]). See also Ayukai 1973: 439.

352 Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 21–22.

353 The "Census Registers of the Northern Borough" (*Pukpu Canghojŏk*), kept today at the *Kyujanggak*, lists 641 households in the "northern part" (北部 *pukpu*) of Seoul: Sŏul Tähakkyo Kyujanggak 2015: 141; the geographical locations actually correspond to the west of the ancient city. Wagner 1974: 39; this sam-

147—stood out, even though both household heads were not holding positions in government or administration at the time.[354]

Tab. 16: Slaves in the 1663 Seoul household register (Wagner 1974: 43–53).

Status	House-holds	Members	Slaves				
			Living-In	Out-Residing	Absconded	Total	Per Household
Yangban	113	220	846	1,526	600	2,946	26
Commoners	205	425	175	165	51	391	2
Slaves	363	698	10			10	0
Total	651	1,343	1,031	1,691	651	3,373	5

Tab. 17: Examples of slave-owning households in Seoul 1663 (Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 12).

Head of Household	Slaves			
	Living-In	Out-Residing	Absconded	Total
Shin Tucing	15	166	20	201
Yi Ca	59	73	15	147

7.8.1 Hunting Slaves

The increase in slave desertions posed a problem for both private slave owners and public administrators. It meant a shortage of cheap labor, but also a decrease in tax revenue. Therefore, slave hunting, literally called "push-and-brush" (推刷 *chuswä*), became an official policy under King Hyojong, with unforeseen and unwelcome side effects. He was the last king to establish an Agency for Slave Investigation, as several of his predecessors had temporarily done in 1478, 1514, and 1556.[355] On February 22, 1655, the king discussed a recent report from the Department of Slave Affairs stating that the number of palace slaves and their families in the capital region had decreased to 300. As the Minister of Taxation reported:

ple represented less than 3 percent of all households in the capital: Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 8.

354 Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 12.

355 CWS, Hyojong, Y. 6:2:9 = June 3, 1655. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 93.

> The number of registered capital-bureau slaves is 190,000, yet we collect tribute from only 27,000 of them.

In response, King Hyojong suggested that a new "push-and-brush" campaign be initiated, and the Chief Censor proposed the creation of a new slave hunting agency "to carry out the task swiftly and decisively, without any leniency." Hyojong replied that "people will surely mock and criticize you for these words," but gladly accepted the proposal.[356] Two days later, the king issued an order to strictly limit the number of cases of slave self-redemption and appointed the directors of the Agency for Slave Investigation. He also reviewed and tightened the regulations for the agency, commenting that "the present regulations seem far too lenient." Slaves who had claimed free status since their grandfather's generation and whose descendants had attained official status through civil service examinations were granted a special pardon to retain their freedom. If a slave's father was the first to pass the exams and claim good status, his children—if they had also asserted free status—or grandchildren who newly passed the exams could similarly retain their good status. For those with three or more generations of civil exam passers, voluntary surrender would result in special leniency. However, if discovered through denunciation or investigation, they were to be reinstated in the slave register, regardless of their generational status.

Certain public slaves—the sons and descendants of King Thäjo, as well as *sajok*—were now allowed to buy their freedom through proxy emancipation, which means that they could substitute another slave for themselves. Although redemption from slavery had long since been happening *de facto*, this was the first time in history that the redemption of private slaves was explicitly legalized[357]—a true milestone. But the conditions were complex and controversial, and the effects were limited.[358] Freedom was only valid if granted by royal decree; otherwise, individuals were to be reclassified as slaves. In cases where a male office slave claimed a child of private slave origin, the child's status followed that of the father and was recorded accordingly.

Additionally, the heads of various government departments were responsible for conducting the census of their respective office slaves within the capital. The king was particularly concerned that local, provincial, and military officials might "show negligence or favoritism."[359]

The enthusiasm for this announcement was limited. The head of the Royal Genealogy Bureau, Kim Yuk, a reform-minded veteran scholar-official and an ardent supporter of the Uniform Land Tax, expressed his displeasure very clearly:

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356 CWS, Hyojong, Y. 6:1:27 = February 22, 1655.

357 Pak Kyŏng 2013: 404.

358 Pak Kyŏng 2013: 405; Hiraki 1982: 178.

359 CWS, Hyojong, Y. 6:1:29 = February 24, 1655. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 96–97.

> Recently, I heard about the establishment of the Agency for Slave Investigation and the subsequent issuance of decrees imposing punishment for violations. When I heard this, I could not help but sigh in sorrow. [...] What is now called push-and-brush— I do not know what new circumstances have arisen to justify such measures again. [...] A system that has been abandoned for a hundred years is now being reinstated within a few months, enforced with severe punishments and coercion. Under such conditions, it is impossible to know how many people will be unjustly executed, regardless of guilt or innocence.[360]

Yi was proven right. In the course of the campaign, a number of officials, including provincial governors and county magistrates, were dismissed and stripped of their ranks for negligence.[361] It was also reported that the use of excessive caning during the "inspection" of the children born to slaves caused several deaths,[362] revealing the violence of the procedure. Public slaves who denounced runaway public slaves were promised emancipation; however, the required number of slaves to be denounced was first raised to 50 slaves in 1657, and then to 100 in 1678.[363]

However, even if the king had high hopes for the outcome of the push-and-brush policy, this was unrealistic from the start. His understanding of the matter (the difference between tax-tributing public slaves and the registered total of public slaves) was apparently insufficient. The number of 190,000 included children and seniors who were not subject to taxation, as well as holders of tax exemption certificates and a large number of public slaves serving in administrative offices, schools, and the military who were not under the management of the Ministry of Taxation.[364] The exact results of the campaign, which presumably ended in late 1655, are unknown, but it seems to have produced no more than a few hundred additional taxpayers.[365]

As disappointing as that was, the king's precedent contributed to the rise of private slave hunting, which became a welcome business opportunity for professional traffickers. In response to the growing instability of the slave system, exacerbated by increasing numbers of runaway slaves, legal ambiguities surrounding redemption, and weaknesses in slave owners' ability to maintain control over their human property, slave hunters emerged.[366] They functioned both as enforcers of the slave system and as independent actors who exploited legal and administrative loopholes for personal gain. Their actions demonstrated that the late Cosŏn society "could no longer be understood solely through a simple dichotomy of rulers and the ruled."[367] Although perceived in previous research as agents acting on behalf of slave owners to recover runaway slaves,

360 CWS, Hyojong, Y. 6:2:9 = March 6, 1655.
361 Hiraki 1982: 107.
362 Ibid.: 102.
363 Ibid.: 181.
364 Ibid.: 94.
365 Ibid.: 104.
366 Han Hyojŏng 2013: 389.
367 Ibid.: 391.

historical records indicate that their activities extended far beyond this role, often involving the abduction and illegal sale of both legally freed individuals and commoners.[368]

Slave hunters primarily targeted individuals whose legal status was precarious. Runaway slaves, borderland slaves, and those who had undergone remission but lacked the social or institutional support to secure their freedom were particularly vulnerable.[369] The hunting operations were often disguised as legitimate slave recovery efforts, but in reality, the hunters engaged in outright abduction, forced servitude, and human trafficking. Many of their victims were either forced into labor or sold, while others were coerced into paying ransoms to secure their freedom.[370] In some cases, slave hunters used legal processes to legitimize their actions. They often submitted forged or manipulated household registers and affidavits to authorities, thus securing official cooperation under the pretense of lawful push-and-brush regulations.[371] In this way, they not only gained the ability to operate with impunity but also access to state institutions that unwittingly legitimized their activities.

The private practice of hunting slaves to recapture them or levying taxes on their descendants was known as *chuno*. Successfully conducting a *chuno* required the assistance of local authorities in the region where the escaped slaves had settled.[372] If direct contact with officials in these areas was not possible, it was customary to bring a letter of recommendation from influential figures in the central administration to secure the cooperation of the local authorities. Upon arriving at the target location, the slave hunters would then collaborate with the local officials to meticulously examine tax registers stored in the archives in order to identify the names, number, and residences of fugitive slave families. The historical contract records regarding the slaves that were carried by the hunters were carefully compared against these findings.[373] For female slaves, the hunting process included an examination of their offspring and pregnancy status, which were the determinants of their market value.[374]

Legal inconsistencies and gaps in status documentation allowed slave hunters to operate with considerable flexibility. They were legally required to provide verifiable documentary evidence of their claims, but household registers, which served as the primary legal evidence in status disputes, were highly unreliable due to self-reported inconsistencies and omissions, particularly regarding maternal lineage.[375] These shortcomings meant that judicial decisions in status lawsuits were often arbitrary, resulting

368 Han Hyojŏng 2013: 379.
369 Ibid.: 389.
370 Han Hyojŏng 2013: 389; Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 33–35; Sun Joo Kim 2021: 145–46.
371 Han Hyojŏng 2013: 389.
372 Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 30.
373 Päk 2011: 10; Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 31.
374 An Sŭnjun 2014: 141.
375 Han Hyojŏng 2013: 384.

in either erroneous decisions or passive rulings that failed to provide justice for victims.[376] Slave hunters exploited these uncertainties by selectively using official records that supported their claims while dismissing contradictory evidence. In doing so, they exposed the fundamental weaknesses of the legal system, which, despite its hierarchical structure, was unable to consistently enforce protections for commoners and legally freed individuals.[377]

The slave hunters' dual role reflected the paradoxes of the slave system. On the one hand, they functioned within the established order by capturing fugitive slaves and returning them to their legal owners. On the other hand, they actively destabilized the system by undermining the legal distinctions between slave and commoner, selling individuals outside the jurisdiction of their original masters, and profiting from institutional weaknesses.[378]

The scholar-official Yi Yugan, who during and after the Great East Asian War held various positions as army commander and governor, and who was known as compassionate but also firm in suppressing corruption, had to deal with a case of apparent fraudulent slave hunting in 1610:[379]

> Printing Supervisor Yi Pangsuk sent a letter regarding the matter of hunting slaves. His slave went back and forth at the guesthouse, loudly calling for another slave to deliver the letter, but nobody noticed. Yesterday, when senior compiler Mok was returning to the office, the slave called out again but still did not hand over the letter. After entering the office, [Mok] summoned the slave and accepted the letter. It turned out to be from [Yi] Pangsuk.
>
> The matter concerned a certain slave who was registered as a slave, but another man falsely claimed to have bought him and took him away by force. Upon examining the historical contract record, the issue of ownership transfer was raised, and an urgent petition for resolution was made. At the end of the letter, it was written: "If no action is taken, regret will remain until the matter is resolved." This seemed utterly ridiculous.
>
> His female slave was arrested and imprisoned yesterday. Today, the alleged buyer was summoned and questioned. After reviewing the sales contract, he was released. I ordered him to collect tribute from [Yi's slave] and report back on the matter of [the slave sale]. Shortly after, the alleged buyer came and reported that the alleged slave of Printing Supervisor Yi was actually not his slave, but in reality a slave of [Yŏ] Kyesŏn.[380]
>
> After giving it some thought, the phrase about "regret remaining until the matter is resolved" seemed to be part of a scheme for an illegitimate slave hunt. When summoned and questioned, [the female slave] swore on her life that the slave belonged to Yi. The imprisoned female slave then

376 Ibid.: 384.

377 Han Hyojŏng 2013: 389; Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 32.

378 Han Hyojŏng 2013: 389; Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 38.

379 *Ugok Ilgi*, v. 2, 1610:i3:10 = May 26, 1610, https://db.history.go.kr/diachronic/level.do?levelId=sa_082_0010_0010_0020 [accessed 05.03.2025]. Yi Yugan, whose pen name was Ugok (愚谷), wrote the *Ugok Ilgi* as a private diary between 1609 and 1618. It is a valuable source of knowledge about Cosŏn period administrative practices.

380 The character 呂 is illegible here, but the existence of Yŏ Kyesŏn is testified in an entry in the *Tongsayak* 東史約, 丙戌十九年.

> admitted that he was actually a government slave. When Tŏk Wŏnson was asked about this, he confirmed that the slave indeed belonged to the Yŏ family. When questioned, it was revealed that he was indeed a slave of the Yŏ family. When asked how he knew this, he replied that his wife had been a former female slave of the Yŏ family. Moreover, the one claimed to be Yi's slave was in fact the husband of the daughter of Wŏnson's wife, meaning he was Wŏnson's son-in-law, etc.
> Although wanting to detain her further, it was too excessive, so the matter was set aside. I wanted to retreat, but the offering of wine prevented this, and I could not speak plainly due to constraints. In hindsight, it was fortunate not to have fallen into this intricate scheme.

There are some details in this story that do not add up, but apparently, a letter written in the name of Yi Pangsuk claimed ownership of an unnamed slave who had allegedly been stolen from him and asked the magistrate for help in recovering him. Upon reading the strangely worded letter, Yi Yugan seemed to suspect it was a forgery. The magistrate, suspicious, arrested and interrogated Yi's female slave, who was trying to extort a ransom from the slave. He also summoned the buyer, Tŏk Wŏnson, and checked his papers against the evidence Yi had provided. Tŏk Wŏnson explained that the slave was his son-in-law, who had belonged to his own wife's former master, Yŏ Kyesŏn; and the imprisoned slave also admitted that the slave had never belonged to Yi.

The story of Tŏk Wŏnson appears plausible. He was probably a commoner who married a slave and purchased the freedom of his wife, her daughter, and her daughter's husband from Yŏ Kyesŏn. This suggests that Yi Pangsuk's slaves used his authority to orchestrate an unjustified slave hunt, possibly with or without his knowledge. However, Yi Yugan prevented their plan from succeeding. This was not an isolated incident. Another example is the dispute over the descendants of Anshim between 1651 and 1660. Initially recognized as a commoner, Anshim had lived with her first husband, Mallyong, a runaway slave, and their five children in a region far from his original master's household. She later married another slave, Sŏnggil, and had two more children. Their relative anonymity allowed them to raise a family, but the precarious nature of their legal status left them vulnerable to outside claims. The situation took a dramatic turn when Cŏng Pongnyang, a notorious slave hunter, broke into their home one night in 1648, claiming that Anshim was his slave. He seized four of her children with Mallyong and a grandchild, arguing that they were legally his property by virtue of their paternal lineage.[381]

The first lawsuit was filed by Sŏnggil and focused on proving Anshim's commoner status. Cŏng Pongnyang argued that Anshim's father was his hereditary slave, which would mean that both Anshim and her children were also legally enslaved. Anshim countered this claim with household registers that documented her father as a commoner. Cŏng claimed to have legal documents proving otherwise, but failed to present any—he simply left the courtroom and never returned, resulting in the suspension of

381 Han Hyojŏng 2013: 374.

the case.[382] However, the trial did not restore Anshim's children to her custody, as the issue of their ownership remained unresolved. The court determined that Anshim's father was a commoner but did not investigate whether Anshim's mother or Mallyong, the children's father, had slave ancestry, leaving the children's legal status unclear. The plaintiffs probably did not pursue the case further because if Mallyong was identified as a runaway slave, his children would have been forfeited anyway.[383]

In 1660, almost a decade after the first case, the Hänam Yun clan, the legal owners of Mallyong, initiated a second case after discovering that the descendants of their former slave Mallyong had been seized by slave hunters. The case now focused on punishing the perpetrators for their role in the coercion into servitude of Anshim rather than merely proving her status.[384] Yun Sŏndo, a leading member of the Yun clan, veteran politician, scholar and famous writer, identified his maternal cousin Ku Sŏngwŏn (now deceased) and his son Ku Cŏng as the key figures behind the crime, arguing that they had orchestrated the abduction and sale of Anshim's children. All three defendants had previously been convicted of illegal coercion into slavery. Ku Sŏngwŏn may have used his inside knowledge of the Yun clan to find out that Mallyong was a runaway slave, making his children easy prey. At the trial, Ku Cŏng claimed that his mother had mistakenly identified Anshim as the daughter of one of the family's own slaves "because their names were similar." They then sold three of Anshim's children to a merchant in Seoul "because we needed money."[385]

Though three of the abducted children were eventually returned, the fate of the other two slaves remained unresolved.[386] As conflicting testimony emerged, Yun Sŏndo attempted to obtain further evidence through the interrogation of Cŏng Pongnyang, but in the end, no severe punishment was meted out to the perpetrators.[387]

The case illustrates the difficulties of securing justice for enslaved or formerly enslaved people in a legal system that relied heavily on faulty documentation and was susceptible to manipulation by those with greater resources. In this way, slave hunters emerged as a "new class of opportunists who exploited the changing dynamics of the late Cosŏn slave system for profit."[388] Despite evidence of wrongdoing, legal ambiguities and procedural barriers often prevented meaningful redress. Slave hunters used forged documents, sometimes even basing their claims on accidental similarities of names without proper proof.[389]

382 Ibid.: 374.
383 Ibid.: 376.
384 Ibid.: 380.
385 Ibid.: 385.
386 Ibid.: 387.
387 Ibid.: 388.
388 Ibid.: 391.
389 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1987: 361–63.

One local official, in a 1736 report, expressed his disgust at this collusion and extended the argument to include the eternal timeline of inheritance in accordance with the linear logic of his age:

> Through long-standing slave registers, individuals have been falsely classified as descendants of certain ancestors based merely on vague resemblances and approximations. Through the influence of the *yangban* and manipulating government authority, these claims have turned them into hereditary property.
> At the time, the misclassification of only three or five individuals may not seem significant. However, after several hundred years and five to six generations, their countless descendants will have been gradually absorbed into servitude, completely reduced to the status of someone else's slaves. Is this not an intolerable injustice and the deepest suffering?[390]

The presence of a slave hunter could disrupt local governance by increasing the amount of requests for access to tax records and interfering with regular administrative duties. For the management of the out-residing slaves who lived far from their masters, it was essential to maintain good relations with the local administration. This was all the more true when it came to hunting down runaway slaves. Slave owners who lacked wealth and influential patrons often faced resistance from local officials, who might even expel them from the region. This situation was further exacerbated when the increasing rivalry and hostility between the factions of scholars led to the decline of cross-regional networks. In many cases, owners knew exactly where their slaves had escaped to, but they could not get them back because *yangban* belonging to a rival network simply no longer received official assistance, making it easier for slaves to stay hidden.[391]

There were two basic forms of resistance by slaves to slave hunting. If they had enough economic power, they could use it as leverage, for example, by offering bribes to officials.[392] In some cases, runaway families who had already established themselves as military officers or government officials in their new homes were able to threaten slave hunters. This suggests that they had relatives or allies among the local officials. There were also instances of secret agreements between fugitive slave families and local authorities to thwart *chuno* efforts.

Slaves could also respond by tempting their masters with open violence. An early example is documented in Cŏlla Province in 1437. When a *yangban* captured a fugitive slave, local officials rounded up the *yangban*, tied him upside down, and subjected him to prolonged abuse for several days until he died. The county magistrate knew about this but did not intervene.[393]

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390 *Namwŏnhyŏn Kongsa* 南原縣公事, Pyŏngshin year, undated. The source is a collection of various official reports from Namwŏn County in Cŏlla Province from 1735 to 1738. Translated from the Chinese original, quoted from Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1987: 363.

391 Cŏn Kyŏngmok 2012a: 124.

392 Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 38.

393 CWS, Sejong 29:11:3 = December 9, 1437. Cf. Päk 2011: 11.

Such incidents, sometimes involving the murder of masters, continued into the late Cosŏn period.[394] Narratives from the emerging genre of "slave hunt literature" (*chuno munhak*) also recount impoverished former slave owners encountering various strategies and traps set by fugitive slaves.[395] Such stories may have eventually shifted the general perception of slave hunting toward a more critical and humanitarian viewpoint.[396] Yun Sŏndo may be a case in point. He reported the case of a distant relative who had

> personally gone to catch a runaway slave boy. However, a group of several dozen people armed with clubs ambushed him along the mountain trail, injured his party, and took the boy back by force.[397]

This incident as well as Yun Sŏndo's frustrating experiences in trying to recover Anshim's children may have influenced his political stance on the slave hunt. In 1665, he submitted a memorandum to King Hyŏnjong, urging him to curtail the policy of "push-and-brush":[398]

> The number of government slaves who have gone into hiding is unknown, and yet the act of push-and-brush is an unshakable precedent of the ancestral court—how could it not be carried out? However, is there not also a proper way to implement it according to the times?
> In rectifying things that have been neglected for a long time, it is necessary to adapt to the urgency and circumstances, to distinguish between what requires thoroughness and what can be simplified, and to act according to reason. But if this is done suddenly and hastily, without gradual implementation, and if everyone is taken without exception, then the hearts of the people will be alienated and the nation will be thrown into turmoil—this is no trivial matter.
> Is it not better to lose slaves and win the hearts of the people than to win slaves and lose the hearts of the people? There are things in the world that are right in principle, but bring misfortune in practice. Thus, the *Book of Changes* teaches that even righteousness can bring disaster—this reasoning cannot be ignored.
> Moreover, as for the slaves and servants of the subjects and commoners, if they are entrusted to one place, they will be lost by another, so the masters' households are distressed and insist on reclaiming them. However, the slaves of the government, even if they are entrusted to another place, remain members of the national population. If they are hidden here, they appear there; if they are lost in one place, they increase in another. Although there may be gains and losses, appearances and disappearances between different households, there is no real loss to the state itself in the end.
> Moreover, those who are scholars, members of official families, or who have literary and military careers serve the nation in a way that is quite different from that of ignorant slaves. Their service to the country is a special gain rather than a loss. So why should they be degraded and serve the state as slaves in order to be considered a gain or a benefit?
> Moreover, these people certainly do not know their ancestral lineage, yet they have entered into marriages, had children and grandchildren, and made plans for future generations. If they are

394 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1987: 366–67; Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 40.
395 Päk 2011: 11.
396 Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 41.
397 KYG 3, Tap Yun Ŏsa Hyŏngŏn Sŏ.
398 KYG 2, Kaksa Nobi Chuswä.

seized and forced into servitude in a single day, how unbearable must be the shame, grief, and despair for their entire household, extended family, and local community!

If one carefully considers the nature of human emotions, is this not something that a wise and enlightened ruler should pity and pardon?

If one believes that the distinction between noble and base status is fixed and unchangeable, then are the old sayings—that the son of a minister may become a commoner, and the son of a commoner may rise to high office[399]—just meaningless words?

Among all the things between heaven and earth, there is no principle that is eternally fixed and unchangeable. Therefore, the sages composed the *Book of Changes* to elucidate this truth—how could it be that only slaves must remain slaves for all generations?

Those who have intermarried with scholars and officials and produced children and grandchildren—are they not people whose lineage has been obscured for many generations? If over time they have gone unnoticed by others and have finally been accepted into the ranks of the *yangban*, is this not the will of Heaven?

Laws cannot be changed arbitrarily, but can Heaven itself be defied?

In my youth, I heard stories passed down by the elders: In the past, a government slave woman from the northern region named Okpi fled to the southern lands, where her descendants all became *yangban*, numbering up to two hundred. During the reign of Sŏnjo, this was discovered, but Sŏnjo did not allow them to be returned to their servile status; he only ordered a full inspection and reclamation.[400] At that time, more than two hundred people wept as they crossed the mountain ridges, and those who witnessed it were deeply disturbed, seeing it as an ominous sign. Not long after that, the Great East Asian War broke out.[401] Could this not be what the *Book of Changes* refers to as "righteousness leading to disaster"?

Today, the number of people who will be returned to bondage exceeds two hundred, so the warning about "righteousness leading to disaster" cannot be taken lightly. Moreover, the longer something persists, the harder it is to clarify; the longer it remains unchanged, the harder it is to change.

Therefore, the laws of this dynasty state that if a case involves an event that occurred sixty years ago and there are no living witnesses, it should not be tried. Should it not be permissible to dismiss the cases of the families of scholars and officials, those registered in the local census, and their descendants if their ancestors have not been registered for sixty years?

If, on the other hand, a final decision were to be made by Your Majesty's own judgment, and the statute of sixty years without record were to be reduced to thirty years, it would be an act of truly wise government, one that would enable the state to win the hearts of the people and secure the favor of Heaven. [...]

As for those who serve in military garrisons or other government-assigned duties, the same principle should be applied to them. As for those who are not in this category, there is indeed no reason not to carry out the inspections and reclamations. However, based on reports from some counties about the number of newly identified people, if we estimate the numbers proportionately, the total number of people who will be affected nationwide could reach over one hundred thousand.

Among them are many fathers, sons, and brothers—whole families who will simultaneously be forced to pay tribute or enter into servitude. Their financial resources and physical strength will

399 This is a quote from Liu Yong, an eleventh-century Chinese poet: "If studying, the son of a commoner becomes a minister, and if not studying, the son of a minister becomes a commoner. 學，則庶人之子爲公卿；不學，則公卿之子爲庶人。"

400 Cf. CWS, Sŏnjo, Y. 27:11:16 = December 17, 1594, Y. 34:8:20 = September 6, 1601.

401 This is apparently not true; the war had already begun in 1592.

> be stretched to the breaking point. Therefore, there must be some means of relief, some additional act of mercy.
> What should this means of relief and act of clemency be? For all newly registered and previously registered slaves—whether old or new—reduce their tribute obligations by one-third. Furthermore, for families where three generations (father, son, and grandson) are all subject to the tribute, exempt one person from the tribute.
> In this way, we can reduce their burden, alleviate their suffering, and prevent families from dispersing. This will not only demonstrate Your Highness's deep benevolence and virtue, but also bring practical benefits.
> Even with these tribute reductions, the amount of tribute collected will still be nearly double what it was before the inspections began. [...]
> As for those who have not yet been identified, there is no need to conduct a sudden and aggressive search to reclaim them all at once. Instead, it would be better to investigate gradually over the next few years. In this way, we can avoid the dangers of unrest, resentment, and rebellion.
> Would it not be better to reclaim fewer people without losing them, rather than to reclaim many only to lose them again? [...]

Yun Sŏndo's memorial argued against the indiscriminate enforcement of the push-and-brush policy, warning that forcibly reclaiming hidden government slaves would destabilize the nation and alienate the people. While acknowledging precedent, he pointed out that policy must adapt to contemporary realities.

He emphasized the humanitarian consequences of re-enslaving people who have long integrated into society, formed families, and contributed to the state. By citing cases of former slaves' descendants rising to *yangban* status and invoking the *Book of Changes* to argue that no social status is eternally fixed, Yun implicitly questioned the idea that hereditary servitude was an absolute, unchangeable condition.

However, Yun Sŏndo stopped short of demanding the abolition of hereditary slavery. Instead, he proposed a statute of limitations exempting those unregistered as slaves for sixty (or thirty) years, and recommended tribute reductions to ease the burden on newly classified slaves. He urged gradual enforcement to prevent social unrest, warning that excessive rigidity has historically led to disaster. Ultimately, his argument prioritized stability, humane governance, and the long-term legitimacy of state policy.

The government ignored his advice,[402] and the slave hunting went on.

7.8.2 Yun Sŏndo: Generosity Without Expense

Yun Sŏndo left a remarkable body of writings under his pen name Kosan ("Lonely Mountain"), the *Kosan Yugo* ("Literary Remains of Kosan"), which reflects his Confucian worldview, his concerns about estate management, and his engagement with

402 KYG 6, Shijang.

broader social issues, including slavery.[403] Having spent his youth in the capital, his early visits to his family in the south gave him a glimpse of Arcadian life, as he reveals in a 1611 poem:

> The horses are fed with grain, the cattle are penned, and the rice of the slaves is white.[404]

The fact that the slaves had white rice suggests that they were relatively well nourished, an issue that Yun Sŏndo occasionally touched upon in his writings. When he visited his late uncle's former home in the very rural Namyang region of Kyŏnggi Province, he noticed:

> The kitchen still holds the covered wine jars,
> The walls still bear the writings instructing the slaves.[405]

The presence of written instructions on the kitchen walls is significant. It suggests that some members of the kitchen staff may have been literate, or that literacy was present within the household's management structure. Furthermore, it indicates that at least in some *yangban* households, written instructions were used to regulate the daily activities of slaves, possibly as a more systematic alternative to *ad hoc* verbal commands.

In another poem from 1611, Yun stated his socio-political credo:

> If there is form, then there is fate—nobility and baseness are not decided by human will.[406]

For him, this meant that those whose destiny it was to be in a noble position were obligated to practice benevolence. He tried to make this a principle in his handling of his personal slave affairs. In 1612, when his father was on his deathbed, Sŏndo "asked if he had any last wishes, but by this time, his father was too weak to speak. He then asked, 'My secondary stepmother has served you for many years—should she not receive something?' His father nodded in agreement, and so she was granted the ownership certificates of the household slaves."[407]

In 1634, Sŏndo's family became embroiled in a bitter inheritance dispute over the division of household slaves. The conflict arose when Hong, Sŏndo's brother-in-law, claimed the descendants of an unnamed woman who had been the wife of a house-

403 The first publication of his "Literary Remains" in 1796 was ordered by King Cŏngjo. Most of the works included are Chinese and Korean poems. As a poet, Sŏndo was particularly fascinated by the "beauty of nature" and the life of fishermen. *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 345–47.

404 KYG 1, Namkü Kihäng, quoted and translated from https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/孤山遺稿 [accessed 29.07.2025].

405 KYG 1, Ŭlmyo Abwŏl.

406 KYG 1, Mannam Kahö.

407 KYG, Nyŏnbo 1. When his stepmother died, Sŏndo wrote a letter to his younger half-brother, revealing his deep affection for this woman of humble origins: "I, orphaned at an early age, had only our step-

hold slave, Tähyŏn, during the time of Sŏndo's grandfather. According to Hong, this woman was a hereditary slave of his family. As proof, he referred to a recent slave list in his possession. If this were true, her descendants would have become the property of Hong's family. Sŏndo, however, denied this claim. According to him, the property certificates and household registers in the Yun family's possession proved that the woman was indeed recognized as a free commoner, which meant that, according to the distorted version of the matrifilial rule in effect at the time, her children and grandchildren inherited their father's slave status and became the property of his owners—the Yun clan. Therefore, they were divided among the various branches of the Yun clan. By attempting to retroactively declare the woman a slave, Hong was challenging not only property ownership, but also the legal identity of an entire lineage—individuals who had been recognized as members of the Yun family for generations. This made the case deeply controversial, as it involved not just a few household slaves, but an entire branch of dependents whose status Hong was attempting to redefine for his own benefit.

Nevertheless, Hong persisted in trying to claim ownership of these individuals. At first, Yun Sŏndo tried to maintain family harmony by handing over the slaves in question from his household to Hong, hoping to avoid a prolonged dispute. However, his half-brothers refused to back down and filed legal claims against Hong. Hong then attempted to pressure Sŏndo into dropping the lawsuit, citing family obligations and the dishonor that could result from an internal lawsuit. As the lawsuit progressed, Hong's tactics intensified, resulting in a violent crackdown on Sŏndo's family. Hong's aggressive pursuit of ownership forced Sŏndo's brother and his wife, as well as Sŏndo's own son and daughter-in-law, into hiding. Initially believing his concession to Hong was an act of wisdom and peacekeeping, Sŏndo came to deeply regret his decision as the situation worsened:

> I thought I was doing a good deed by handing over the slaves, but it has led to disaster.[408]

In essence, this was a case of retroactive status reclassification, in which a powerful *yangban* attempted to alter a settled historical status in order to enrich himself with additional slaves, despite both legal precedent and family records contradicting his claim. For Yun Sŏndo, this was not only a personal betrayal by his brother-in-law, but also a distortion of moral and legal principles that threatened the very foundation of the Confucian ethics of family and justice.

As a politician, Yun Sŏndo was a member of the Southerners' faction and expressed perspectives on economic necessity, social responsibility, legal disputes, moral obligations, and political criticism regarding the status of slaves. From the time of his youth, he

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mother as a parental figure. I had hoped that in the days to come, when I would return to our hometown, I would see her again and consider her a substitute for our father—this was my earnest hope, day and night." KYG 3, Ü Sŏje Sŏnyang Sŏ.

408 KYG 4, Kitap Sŏje Sŏnha Kapsul.

was exiled several times and for several years because of his views. Much of his literary work was written in exile. He experienced exile as a time of loneliness and hunger:

> No son, no wife, and no slave—A lonely old body drifting a thousand miles.
> Who among the well-fed pities the hungry?[409]

Served by "hired slaves" while in exile,[410] he was not literally alone, but he apparently missed his family, including his trusted slaves.

When he resigned from his court posts in 1652 and moved to Kosan in Kyŏnggi Province, he found his new home in a miserable state:

> The wind seeps through the gaps in the slaves' quarters, swelling my face,
> The meager meals from the village kitchen leave my legs and waist exhausted.[411]

After some time, Sŏndo rejoined the government, but in 1659, following the death of King Hyojong, a conflict arose over the proper mourning period for Hyojong. The Westerners' faction, led by Song Shiyŏl, argued that since Hyojong was a second son, his mourning should follow the customary one-year period for non–first sons. Yun Sŏndo, on the other hand, argued that since Hyojong was a legitimate king, he should be treated as if he were the eldest son and be granted a three-year mourning period. He accused Song Shiyŏl of undermining Hyojong's legitimacy. This dispute became a major political confrontation. In 1660, Sŏndo was forced to resign and was exiled to Samsu in Hamgyŏng, a miserable region near the Chinese border.

While in exile, Yun Sŏndo instructed his eldest son to manage the family estate and to treat the slaves with fairness and discipline. To prevent hardship, he urged the reduction of household luxuries to be able to provide adequate food and clothing for the slaves, while regulating their workload "so that they are not driven to exhaustion." He established fixed tribute rates, with adjustments based on individual circumstances:[412]

> For male slaves, it shall be two pieces of finely woven plain cloth, each measuring thirty-five feet. For female slaves, it shall be one and a half pieces. For the poor or those with many working slaves, the amount should be reduced accordingly, but for the wealthy, it should not be increased.

Punishments had to be mild and follow strict standards.

> Even when slaves make mistakes, minor mistakes should be corrected through instruction, while major mistakes may warrant mild beating. However, this should always be done in such a way as to foster a sense of being cared for rather than resentment of cruelty.

409 KYG 1, Cŭng Cŏng Cubu Ciyŏng Shinhä.
410 KYG 1, Sobinghwa.
411 KYG 1, Chodo Kosan Uum.
412 KYG 5, Kü Täa Sŏ.

Sŏndo also pointed out the special role of the head slave (*hono*). He was to concentrate only on the management of the main household:

> Except for those tasks which require great effort, all minor miscellaneous tasks and ordinary errands should be assigned only to the household slaves, and the head slave should not be made to perform them. He should be allowed to live at ease and naturally enjoy life. Village people, in particular, must not be allowed to use him for trivial tasks. Such matters must be carefully considered, and enduring them patiently will suffice.[413]

For large-scale labor, such as shipbuilding, wages had to be fairly structured. Throughout, he emphasized a balance of discipline and humane treatment to maintain stability on the estate.

Soon after, famine struck his region of exile, and Sŏndo's supporters at court pleaded in vain for his pardon or at least his resettlement. By 1662, Sŏndo's situation was so desperate that he wrote to a friend in the capital:

> At this point, if there is no government grain distribution, then there is no other way to survive. Therefore, I humbly request permission to present a petition on behalf of the slaves at this place, granting them their freedom as they wish, in exchange for food. Would it not be appropriate to allocate provisions accordingly?
> Although I am recorded as a criminal, the benevolent rule of this dynasty does not lack the will to preserve life. How much more so for the sons, younger relatives, and household slaves, who are all subjects of the state? Should these officials, entrusted with the care of the people, really be indifferent to their starvation and misery? Moreover, for local-born slaves, this is in keeping with their long-held desire, ensuring that there is no risk of default on the fall harvest levies.
> To grieve for the impoverished scholars is righteousness; to save the lives of the displaced is governance; to allow the household slaves to fulfill their lifelong wish and settle their descendants in safe places is benevolence. Although this may seem like a single thing, doing good does not take just one form—is this not what the ancient teachings refer to as "generosity without expense"? If there is to be no reconsideration, then this request may be granted in full.[414]

Sŏndo's letter presents several arguments that appeal to moral, political, and practical considerations. He implied that the suffering of the slaves was an urgent crisis that required immediate relief. His slaves were not merely his private property, but part of the broader social order as subjects of the state. He framed their liberation as an act of good governance. He pointed out that these slaves were already settled in their present location, which meant that they were unlikely to flee or default on their obligations. By emphasizing that their integration was natural and beneficial, he argued that granting them freedom would not cause economic instability. On the contrary, it would be a virtuous act consistent with the Confucian ideal of "generosity without expense," suggesting that freeing the slaves would cost the government little but yield great moral and practical rewards.

413 Cf. Cŏn Kyŏngmok 2012b: 230.

414 KYG 5, Yŏ Kapsan Päk Co Äsŏ, Imin Owŏl.

By structuring his argument in this way, Yun Sŏndo positioned the liberation of his slaves not only as a humanitarian necessity, but also as a politically and economically advantageous decision.

It is reported that he eventually provided the necessary funds to free the descendants of an ancestor of his wife's family who had been enslaved and whom he had met in Samsu. In a similar case, a younger cousin had taken one of his female slaves as a concubine and had many children with her. He demanded to pay a redemption price so as to grant her free status, and Yun Sŏndo agreed to her emancipation but refused to accept the payment.[415]

Yun saw his role as both a landowner and a moral leader responsible for his dependents, including his slaves. While he showed concern for the welfare of his household slaves, advocating for their fair treatment, adequate provision, and measured discipline, his perspective remained firmly rooted in a hierarchical worldview that saw slavery as a natural and functional part of the social order. His letters emphasize benevolence, but this concern was primarily paternalistic rather than grounded in a critique of the institution itself. Although he recognized the suffering of slaves and advocated for their humane treatment, his approach ultimately sought to reconcile Confucian ideals of moral responsibility with the economic and social realities of a system dependent on unfree labor. But this also reveals the economic pressures on elite families that forced even noble households to rethink traditional labor arrangements.

In 1662, Sŏndo was permitted to return home. This allowed him to concentrate on the clan's main seat, the Nogudang ("Green Rain Manor") in Hänam, for the rest of his life. Reflecting on his past experiences, he prepared a letter of admonition to his descendants, saying:

> You must never neglect self-cultivation, prudent conduct, accumulating virtue, and practicing benevolence—these must be your primary duties.
> Looking at our family history, the revered founder of our family worked diligently in agriculture but was lenient in his treatment of slaves. As a result, my grandfather and his brothers prospered, and our household prospered. Heaven's answer is clear for all to see. [...] As for the treatment of household slaves, they must not be neglected. One must reduce the excesses in the master's household and increase the provisions for the subordinates. The master's personal expenses should be cut back, while the slaves' food and clothing should be generously provided so that those who depend on me for their survival do not suffer hardship and resentment.
> Those who work daily must not be driven to exhaustion. If they make small mistakes, they should be taught; if the mistake is big, a light punishment may be given. One must see to it that they feel nurtured, not abused. The principle of leadership is to rule with leniency as the foundation.[416]

After Sŏndo's death in 1671, his children agreed on a property division contract that was signed in 1673 after a three-year mourning period. The family's land—more than 700

415 KYG 6, Shisang.
416 KYG, Nyŏnbo 2.

turak, between 35 and 70 hectares—was divided equally among the heirs, while the allocation of the more than 500 slaves gave priority to those who had provided services to the family. Slaves living near the main household were given to sons, while those located in other provinces were given to sons-in-law.[417]

How the spatial structure of private slavery was managed in the case of Yun Sŏndo and his family will be explored in the next section.

7.8.2.1 The Slaves of the Green Rain Manor

Due to inheritance divisions, *yangban* families' property could become scattered across several regions over time, resulting in an increase in the number of out-residing slaves. These slaves lived in their own homes and enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy. They were often given a plot of land for their own use—though they were not allowed to sell it—which made it easier for them to support their own families, paid a fixed rent called body tribute (*shingong*), and were charged with some extra duties. However, until the sixteenth century, the vast majority (up to eighty-five percent) of all private slaves were living-in slaves under the direct control of their masters. Many of these slaves worked on their owners' fields and were responsible for six to seven *majigi* of land. They could also rent additional land from other estates.[418] Their living situation depended on the possibilities and ideas of their owners.

The *Nogudang* ("Green Rain Manor") is the residential complex of the head family of the Hänam Yun clan in the Honam region, Cŏlla Province. As mentioned in an earlier chapter (see p. 166 sqq), the attached clan museum houses a wealth of historical documents, including the oldest existing slave deed. The residence itself, dating from the late fifteenth century, is an exceptionally well-documented example of a *yangban* estate in the southern agricultural regions of the Korean peninsula.[419] After King Hyojong lifted the banisment of Yun Sŏndo, who had been his tutor, he honored him for his service by allowing him to rebuild the men's quarters at the Green Rain Manor in 1667, which greatly changed the layout of the estate.

The *Nogudang* compound is surrounded by a wall and accessible through several gates. It is divided into three sections: The women's quarters (*anchä*), the men's quarters (*sarangchä*), and the slaves' quarters (*hängnangchä*). The women's quarters, which are spatially enclosed and include an inner garden, the main kitchen, and the *ondol* (underfloor heating) stoves, form the central part of the complex. The men's quarters effectively control access to the women's quarters and the slave quarters adjacent to

417 The National Digitization Service (국가유산디지탈서비스) has made its *Detailed Survey Report on the Hänam Nogudang Complex* from 2019 available online as a Hangul Word Processor document (a proprietary standard popular in South Korea) without pagination. It contains detailed scientific information about the *Nogudang* and clan assets: "Hänam Nogudang Ilwŏn: Cŏngmil silchŭk sosa pogosŏ" 2019: n.p.

418 Deuchler 2015: 136–37.

419 Cŏng Yunsŏp 2015: 87–88.

the main gate. An interior wall between the slave quarters and the women's quarters further separates them. There are also ancestral shrines in the southeast area of the compound, one inside the walls and two outside.[420]

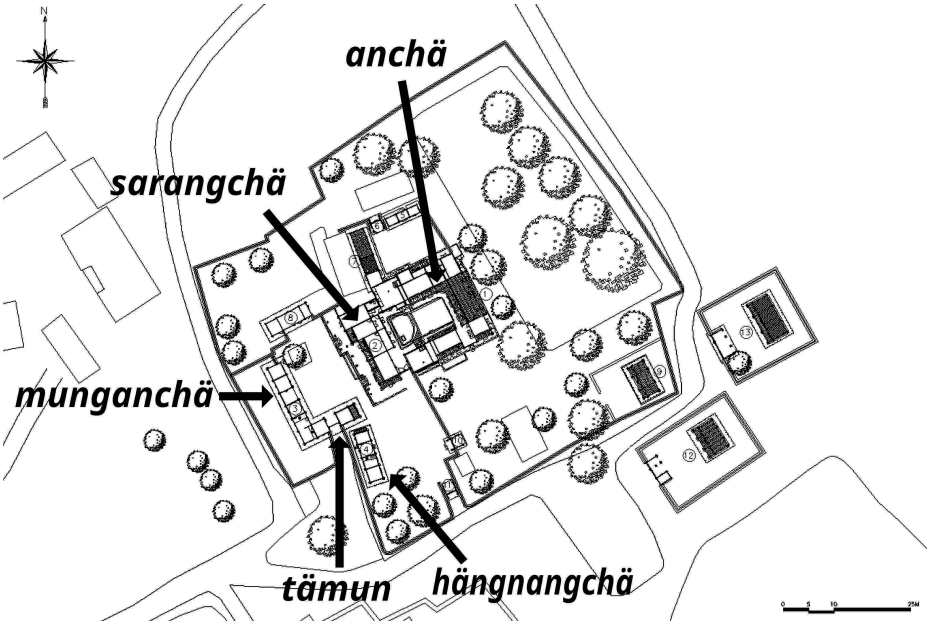

Fig. 10: Site plan of the Nogudang with the positions of the main gate (*tämun*), slave quarters (*hängnangchä* and *munganchä*), men's quarters (*sarangchä*), and women's quarters (*anchä*). Courtesy of Korea Heritage Service.

The design reflects Sŏndo's worldview:

> He placed great emphasis on the distinction between men and women, as well as the clear separation of the inner and outer quarters. Women were responsible only for clothing and food, and they were not allowed to participate in household governance.[421]

The residential and work areas for household slaves included the slave quarters, which consisted of the *hängnangchä*, located beyond the main gate (*tämun*), and the

420 Cŏng Yunsŏp 2015: 105.

421 KYG, Punok, Shijang. It is revealing that Hendrick Hamel, who came to Korea through a shipwreck in 1653 and stayed there until he could escape to Japan in 1666, wrote in his account of Korea in 1668: "This nation regards its women as nothing more than slaves and dismisses them for the smallest offenses." Hamel 1920: 43; cf. Broomhall 2023: 137.

munganchä, which flanked the main gate. These structures acted as a boundary between the household and the outer world. Here, slaves managed external affairs, such as security, errands, and interactions with visitors (*cŏppingäk*). Various storage and utility rooms, as well as the main kitchen, were integrated into the men's and women's quarters and served as workspaces for the servants.[422]

The architectural design and construction of the slave quarters at the *Nogudang* provide insight into the living conditions of domestic slaves who lived on the premises. Designed with practicality rather than comfort in mind, these quarters were used for storage, food preparation, and housing workers as part of the broader, hierarchical spatial organization of the estate.

Yun Sŏndo was already familiar with the concept of direct-labor slaves, which had recently begun to replace the traditional idea of living-in slaves.[423] Not all the direct-labor slaves on his estate may have lived in the *hängnangchä*. Among those who did, many were probably conscripted from more distant places and thus needed a place to stay in their master's household.[424]

The term *hängnang* literally means "rooms on both sides of the front gate, corridor."[425] The *hängnangchä* served a variety of functions, including those of toilets and storage rooms. However, its primary function was to house domestic slaves,[426] who were therefore also known as *hängnangsok*, "[people] belonging to the outhouses."[427]

Accordingly, the *hängnangchä* slave quarters at the Nogudang consist of a modest structure—a building adjacent to the compound wall and positioned to the right of the main gate structure.[428]

The foundation of the *hängnangchä* measures 11.77 m × 4.40 m and consists of a single layer of natural stone compacted with lime mortar, and a uniform height of 20 cm. The building follows a linear plan, four aisles wide and one aisle deep, covered by a hipped roof. The total width of the building is 9.87 m, with individual bay widths ranging from 2.10 to 2.70 m, and the side depth is 2.70 m. It has two rooms, a kitchen, and a storage room. The size of these rooms, which were likely shared by several people, indicates cramped living conditions.

422 Cŏng Yunsŏp 2015: 105–6.

423 KYG 5.

424 Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 112.

425 Chōsen Sōtokufu 1919: 928; Gale defines it as "servants' quarters; outhouses." Gale 1897: 128.

426 Itami 1983: 163; interestingly, the *Hanguk Minjok Munhwa Täbäkkwa Sajŏn* mentions their use for slaves only in passing: *Hanguk Minjok Munhwa Täbäkkwa Sajŏn* n.d.: 행랑채.

427 Gale: "Servants; slaves; menials." Gale 1897: 128.

428 The following description is based on "Hänam Nogudang Ilwŏn: Cŏngmil silchŭk sosa pogosŏ" 2019: s.p.

Fig. 11: Nogudang, *hängnangchä* (slave quarters, *left*) and *munganchä* (main gate slave quarters, *right*). Photo by the author.

Overall, the structural materials reflect the standard construction techniques used for secondary buildings in wealthy households. The framework consists of wooden columns supporting interconnected main beams and purlins. The roof has a central ridge and corner ridges and is made up of five layers of roof tiles, which are topped with ridge tiles. Ornamental tiles adorn the ridge ends. The medium-sized roof tiles ensure durability and proper drainage. The outer walls consist of infill panels between columns. The interior walls are made of a bamboo lattice framework covered with earthen plaster, while the exterior is finished with whitewashed plaster. While the roof provides adequate protection from rain and wind, and the whitewashed exterior provides some weather resistance, the internal insulation only moderately protects against seasonal temperature extremes.

The rooms have either single- or double-hinged doors, while the storage room and kitchen have double-plank doors, reflecting the building's practical and utilitarian nature. A single lattice window in the storage room provides ventilation and may improve airflow, but it probably provides only limited lighting and temperature control.

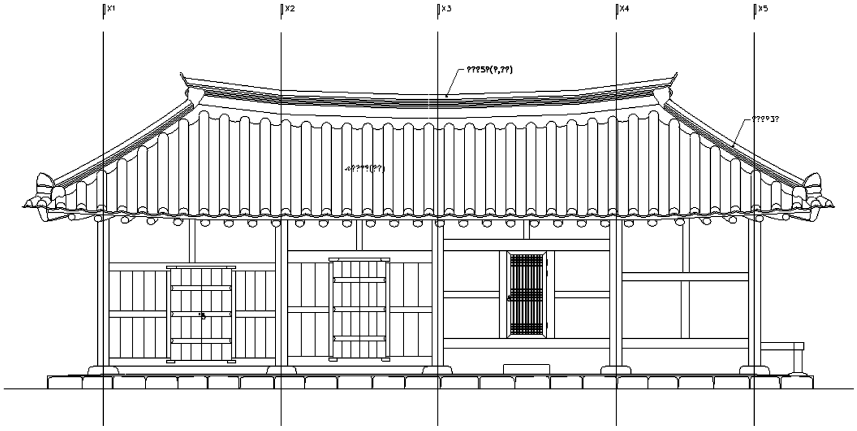

Fig. 12: Nogudang, *hängnangchä* (slave quarters), front view. Courtesy of Korea Heritage Service.

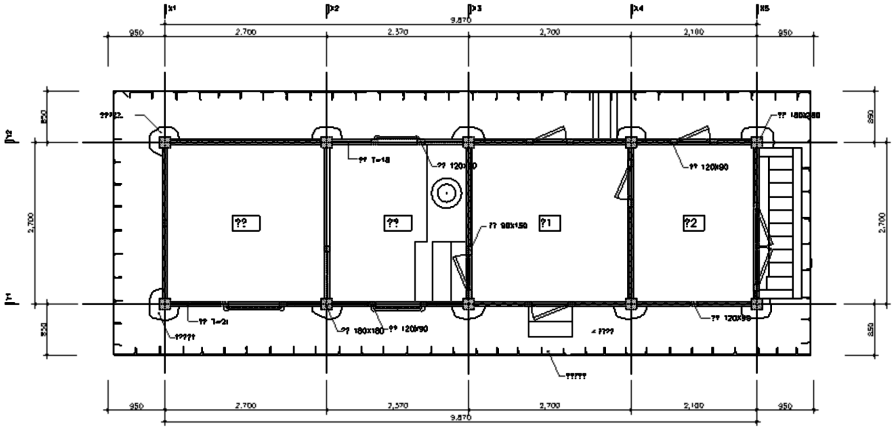

Fig. 13: Nogudang, *hängnangchä* (slave quarters), floor plan. *Left to right:* room, kitchen, room, storage area. Courtesy of Korea Heritage Service.

The *munganchä* slave quarters at *Nogudang* are an outbuilding adjacent to the main gate. They served as auxiliary spaces for household workers, estate management, and storage. The main gate slave quarters complement the *hängnangchä* while functioning as a transitional space between the the interior residential area and the exterior world.[429]

The building consists of two wings arranged in an L-shaped plan. The left wing section, which includes the main gate, a storage room, and a horse stable, has a total frontal width of 12.10 m, while the right wing extends 16.35 meters and contains five lodging rooms, a kitchen, and two storage rooms. Notably, the central storage room has a lofted ceiling that divides it into upper and lower compartments to maximize storage efficiency. The bay widths range from 2.60 to 2.80 m, making the rooms nearly square.

The foundation is a single-layer platform made of natural stone that measures 14.45 m × 18.65 m and has a uniform height of 20 cm. Its surface is compacted with lime mortar. The framing follows a three-beam system, with square wooden columns that support the main beams and purlins. Additional posts in the upper structure support the ridge purlin, creating a stable roof system. The building has a hipped roof. The main ridge consists of five layers of medium-sized tiles topped with ridge tiles. Decorative tiles are installed at the ends of the ridge.

The interior walls are made of a bamboo lattice framework covered with earthen plaster, and the exterior is finished with whitewashed plaster. Wooden panel walls are installed in the storage and kitchen areas. The interior walls and ceilings are finished with traditional Korean paper. The rooms have traditional Korean wooden floors. The kitchen, storage room, and stable have compacted lime mortar floors for durability and moisture resistance.

The building has ten doors and four windows. The doors in the rooms are single-leaf, wooden lattice doors that open with a hinge. The doors in the kitchen and storage rooms are single- or double-leaf plank doors. The windows are sash windows designed for ventilation.

While these living conditions were certainly not luxurious, they were reasonably stable. The slave and master quarters were clearly separated. From the men's quarters, it was easy to observe what was going on. However, it is important to note that the slaves and their living quarters literally served as the gatekeepers of the estate. Though separated from the outside world by a wall, the gate provided ample opportunity for communication. The slaves lived under the watchful eye of their masters, but they were not strictly isolated. The boundary with the outside world was permeable. This also explains why desertion was relatively easy.

429 The description in this section follows "Hänam Nogudang Ilwŏn: Cŏngmil silchŭk sosa pogosŏ" 2019: s.p.

Fig. 14: Nogudang, *munganchä* (main gate slave quarters), left wing with stable and main gate. Photo by the author.

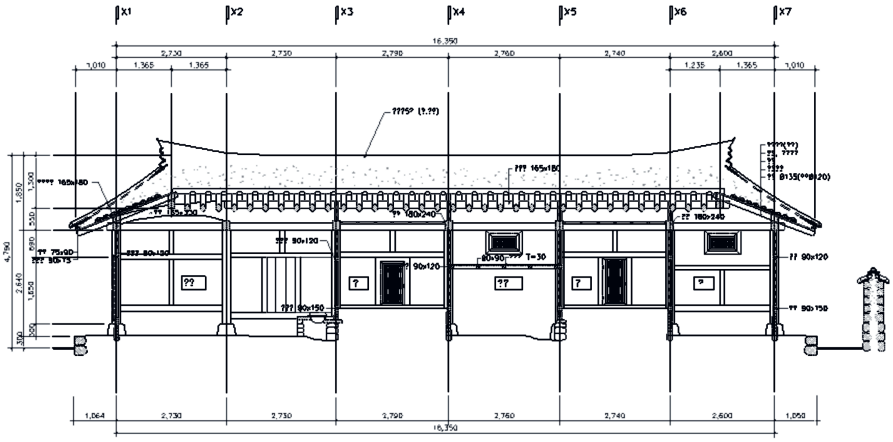

Fig. 15: Nogudang, *munganchä* (main gate slave quarters), right wing, side view. Courtesy of Korea Heritage Service.

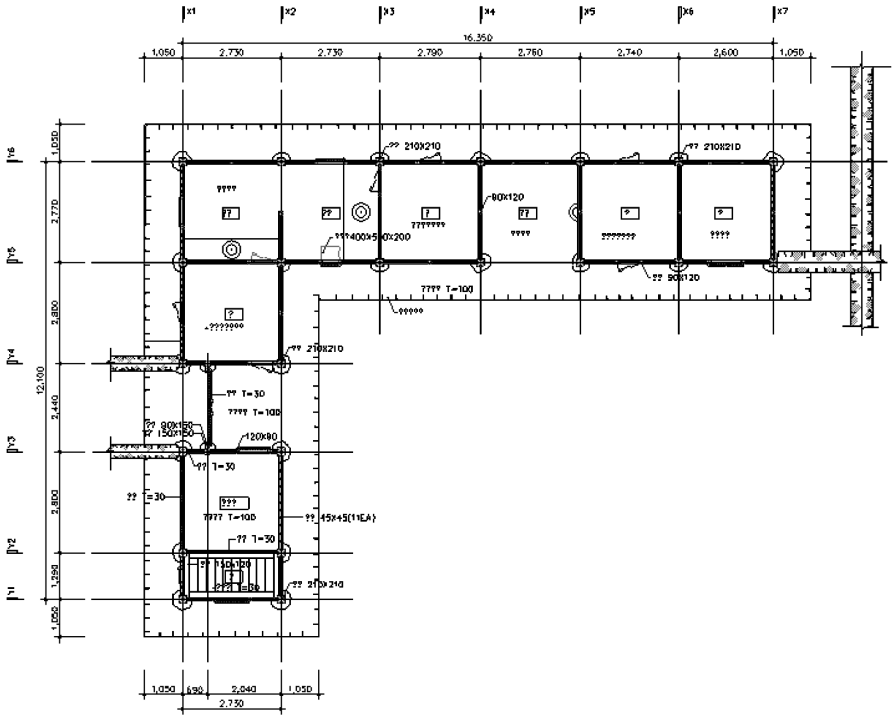

Fig. 16: Nogudang, *munganchä* (main gate slave quarters), floor plan. Courtesy of Korea Heritage Service.

The *Nogudang* model was certainly representative, but there were alternatives.

The *Hwagyŏngdang* ("Hall of Piety and Loyalty") estate, built by the Phungsan Yu clan in Hahö Village, Andong, Kyŏngsang Province, shows a distinctly different strategy of slave management. The estate was developed over time, with its current form established in the nineteenth century. Unlike the *Nogudang*, where slaves lived within the compound gates, the *Hwagyŏngdang* housed its enslaved workers outside the main compound, in a distinctly separate area located downhill near the riverbank. These slaves were called "living-around slaves" (*yihano*, literally "under the hedge"), because they lived on the perimeter of their headquarters.

The *hängnangchä* consisted of a series of thatched houses, some with as many as nine bays. These houses were primarily constructed of wood and earthen materials and featured simple structural forms. This allowed the slaves to live in separate dwellings, returning to the main household for work each day before retiring to their own homes at night. Residents were not allowed to cook in their own quarters, but instead received meals from the main household. This system reflected a shift toward a semi-

autonomous model in which enslaved workers maintained personal households under the supervision of the estate.[430]

Overall, the *Nogudang* and *Hwagyŏngdang* estates represent different approaches to the spatial management of slavery in Cosŏn. The *Nogudang* model emphasized direct control and the immediate availability of enslaved labor, while the *Hwagyŏngdang* introduced a degree of autonomy, albeit within the constraints of servitude.

One useful example of how external dwellings for slaves were built can be found in the diary of No Sangchu.[431]

On August 27, 1778, No Sangchu went outside his residence at Mundong and selected a site in Pansongbang to build new slave quarters.[432] Groundbreaking began in October. On October 6, the old corridor quarters at the Mundong residence were demolished. On October 9, slaves Ilsam and Tŏktŏl were sent to lay the foundation. On the 11th, timber work began with the felling of the wood for the corridor columns. Despite light rain falling from evening into the night, work proceeded. Two days later, on October 13, the foundation site was measured, and the base stones were laid in place. On October 15, the first bay of the corridor structure was erected.[433]

By November, roofing began. On the 8th, the rafters were set in place.[434] Construction continued into December. On December 2, No Sangchu's nephew arrived with the slave Manŭi to repair the newly added roof.[435]

Thus, over the course of three months, the slave quarters progressed steadily from site selection to structural completion, involving both careful coordination and the labor of household slaves.

Six years later, in March 1784, the slave quarters underwent an energy-efficient refurbishment. Fire bricks were laid on three bays, and the eaves of the corridor quarters were hung and thatched with straw.[436] In this case, "fire bricks" (*hwajŏn*) likely indicates that the *ondol* system was being built or reinforced in the slave quarters, since *ondol* requires heat-resistant bricks to channel and retain the warmth from the flue beneath the floor. At a time when Korea was suffering from the effects of the Little Ice Age, this was a popular and understandable upgrade.[437]

430 Kim Yongman 2008: 140–44; on the distribution of soybeans among the outlying *hängnangchä* of the Kim family in Kalsan, Kyŏngsang Province, in the nineteenth century, see Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 67.

431 No Sangchu was a *yangban* from Kyŏngju Province who wrote about his life as a military official and head of his family in a concise, matter-of-fact style between 1773 and 1829. For details, see the introduction by Mun Sukca 文叔子: Kuksa Phyŏnchan Üwŏnhŏ 2005: v–xv.

432 1778:7:6: ibid.: 463.

433 1778:8:16, 19, 21, 23, 25: ibid.: 468.

434 1778:9:20: ibid.: 471.

435 Ibid.: 473.

436 1784:2:19, 20: ibid.: 646.

437 W. Lee 2015: 27.

7.8.3 Yu Hyŏngwŏn: Making Slavery Redundant

At the same time when Yun Sŏndo argued against excessive slave hunting, Yu Hyŏngwŏn—whose pen name was Pangye— wrote his own reform concept, *Pangye Surok*. The book was presented to the court after his death in 1673, but was "neither welcomed nor accepted."[438] It was printed a century later, in 1770, under King Yŏngjo, and it is now considered one of the most brilliant attempts at reform. Yu accused the current system of Cosŏn of being misguided. One key aspect he criticized was hereditary slavery, which was based on "a principle of human equality nowhere to be found in the previous literature."[439]

As a Confucian intellectual, Yu Hyŏngwŏn passed a damning judgment on slavery: "Though upheld by prevailing societal norms, slavery lacks all fundamental moral and rational legitimacy."[440] Nevertheless, in Book 26 of the *Pangye Surok*, Yu advocated for reform rather than its immediate abolition. He emphasized the need for fair and equitable wages and duties for slaves, including military conscription, tribute, and service. He was particularly critical of the cruel practice of transferring slaves from remote areas to the capital region, forcing them to flee or bribe officials in order to avoid family separation.

Yu argued that slavery should not be hereditary and estimated that it had engulfed 80 to 90 percent of the population (excluding the *yangban*), driven by commoners fleeing military service and the presence of runaway slaves and secondary sons. Although this estimate of the slave population is probably exaggerated and possibly based on his observations in the slave-heavy capital, it highlights the severity of the situation and strengthens his case for reform. He also pointed out the inherent problems with determining legitimate inheritance claims when slaves were treated as chattel and their ancestry was often unknown. This often led to the unjust collective punishment of entire families of runaway slaves. He believed that the only solution was the consistent and universal application of the matrifilial rule, which ensured that the children of free mothers became commoners. This would gradually reduce the slave population and encourage the use of hired laborers, similar to the system in China. He acknowledged the inhumane treatment of slaves and argued that treating hired laborers similarly would discourage recruitment. He posited that a gradual reduction in the slave population would naturally lead to the more humane treatment of slaves as well as hired laborers, since benevolence and mutual respect are crucial to a well-ordered society.

He saw slavery as a major cause of the poverty and weakness of Cosŏn. He believed that abolishing slavery while maintaining the distinction between noble and base classes would create a well-run state in which each status would receive its due share.

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438 *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 349; cf. Palais 1996: 7.

439 Palais 1996: 235.

440 奴婢以世之法。本非正當道理。*Pangye Surok*, B. 3, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/磻溪隨錄/卷三 [accessed 29.07.2025].

He condemned the view of slaves as mere chattel and called the practice of measuring wealth by the number of slaves owned "sick." He criticized rulers for failing to overcome private interests and enact necessary reforms, which was a key responsibility of their divine mandate. He questioned how one person could treat another as property and highlighted that the interchangeable use of "slaves" and "land" to describe wealth was a symptom of a flawed system.

Yu traced the origins of slavery back to the enslavement of criminals. He argued that there was no justification for enslaving innocent people, let alone extending the punishment to their descendants. He denounced the hereditary nature of slavery, in which individuals were enslaved for generations regardless of guilt. This included talented individuals, which he considered irrational. He criticized the flaws of the matrifilial rule, particularly the uncertainty of patrilineal descent, as well as the rule that children of commoner mothers and slave fathers were to inherit the servile status. He called this "illegality within illegality," a device designed to perpetuate the slave class. Although he advocated for the full implementation of the matrifilial rule, he did not endorse slavery itself. He believed that transitioning all slaves to matrifilial succession would gradually reduce their numbers, and he considered this a practical compromise.

This pragmatic approach is also evident in his views on the Squad Unit Force. Ideally, the military would consist of free citizens, but he acknowledged that the existing system required slave-based units. He proposed to eventually integrate all troops into a single regular army, but only after reforming the slave system to avoid social disorder. He believed that gradual reform based on practical realities was the only way to bring about change. Finally, Yu addressed the status of freed slaves and their descendants. He criticized the discriminatory application of the law that granted freed status only to the descendants of private slaves, not public ones. He argued that all descendants of freed officials or freed slaves, regardless of whether they came from public or private slavery, should follow the status of the mother.[441]

> One might then ask: Is it impossible to reform the system of slavery? The answer is: Unfortunately, this matter cannot be hastily discussed.
> If those who have been enslaved due to a crime should not have their punishment extend to their descendants, how much more so for those who are innocent? All are equally subjects under Heaven, yet some ignorant, lowly men have the power to determine life and death over others. Suppose a person of talent and virtue emerges among them—yet he, too, cannot escape a fate of servitude. Such is the law concerning slaves in this country. Is this truly the path of absolute justice under Heaven and Earth?
> However, fostering gentlemen while distinguishing them from petty people is something that cannot be abandoned in either ancient or modern times. In antiquity, the feudal system provided fiefs, so the gentry did not worry about lacking sustenance. In present-day China, there is the custom of hiring laborers, so even the households of scholars and officials have people to perform tasks on their behalf. In this country, this law [of slavery] has long been in effect and has already become an

441 Hiraki 1982: 212–14.

established custom. The sadäbus all depend on it, and each household inevitably considers how to maintain its own stability. Only then can reforms be carried out. If, instead, the system were to be abruptly abolished in a single day, the consequences would be difficult to contain, and there would be many casualties. This is why the matter cannot be hastily discussed.

One might then ask: What would be the appropriate course of action? The answer is that governance must follow the circumstances of the time. Given the current conditions, it is advisable to continue following the matrifilial rule while applying it equally to commoner women. (That is, to the commoner wives of slaves.) If there were uniform regulations, and if there were also established systems for rewards and promotions without abolishing functionality—(such as cases where military achievements or repeated success in archery examinations lead to official emancipation for public slaves, while private slaves could be granted substitution or redemption for their servitude)—then the severity of the current issues would not have reached this extent. As the number of slaves gradually decreases, the system of hired laborers would naturally rise, social relations would become more harmonious, and customs would slowly change.[442]

The rule that all slaves follow the status of their mother should be unified and consistently applied. (Currently, the law dictates that both public and private slaves follow their mother's status. However, if a slave marries a commoner woman, their children are classified according to the father's status instead. This rule is inconsistent and only applies the principle of base status. The law should be clearly defined and made uniform so that it has a singular standard: children born of a slave and a common woman should also follow the mother's status.)

Regarding the base class (in this country's customs, both public and private slaves are referred to as base people), the matrifilial rule originated during the reign of King Cŏngjong of Koryŏ. Knowing the mother but not the father is the way of beasts. Treating humans as if they were beasts—can this truly be called law? However, if we trace the origins of this unlawful practice, it stems from national customs that force slaves into harsh servitude without any dignity, treating them no differently than cattle, horses, chickens, or dogs. Given this treatment, if inheritance were determined by the father, there would have been an overwhelmingly high number of disputes and accusations of illicit behavior. Thus, the matrifilial rule was adopted out of necessity.

However, the fault lies not in the matrifilial rule itself but in the laws governing slavery, namely the hereditary laws for slaves. In later generations, the matrifilial rule was maintained, but if the mother were a common woman, the child would instead follow the father's status and be classified as a slave. This is not a true law—it merely serves to drag people into base status. It is illegality within illegality. [...]

If true royal governance were fully implemented, rectifying all aspects and eliminating partiality and backward practices, then the abolition of the slave system would become inevitable. This is clearly evident. [...]

Currently, the treatment of slaves is devoid of basic human principles. (According to the customs of the country, there is absolutely no sense of compassion or resposibility toward slaves. Hunger, cold, hardship, and suffering are considered their natural lot, and no one shows them any sympathy. They are governed solely by punishment and law, driven by caning and beating with a rod, and their lives and deaths are treated no differently than those of cattle or horses.)

442 *Pangye Surok*, B. 21, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/磻溪隨錄/卷二十一 [accessed 29.07.2025]. See also James Palais' unpublished translation, https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/items/3c19c2f1-69b3-4a27-9d3c-c80de7c9aaf2 [accessed 29.07.2025].

> Meanwhile, those who are not slaves do not labor for others, nor are they subjected to the labor of others. Given such customs, who would willingly become a hired laborer?[443]

7.8.4 Fighting Against Climate Change

The increase in runaway slaves was linked to new military recruitment policies. Over time, the Korean military's reliance on slave soldiers grew. By the late 1500s and early 1600s, the open recruitment of slaves into the military had become commonplace. Slaves often served in special units organized called Squad Unit Forces (*sogogun*), which were organized at the local level. Some even joined newly formed military agencies, serving alongside commoners and members of the elite.[444] This integration brought new challenges, however. Runaway slaves began using these agencies as sanctuaries, leading to restrictions on the enlistment of privately owned slaves. Conversely, private slaves conscripted into the *sogogun* were not only trained for combat but were also mobilized for various public works. These tasks, including civil engineering projects, imposed severe economic and physical hardships. The financial desperation of the conscripts forced them to sell their weapons and clothing and even beg for food due to repeated rotations and a lack of support.[445]

In the late seventeenth century, cases of slaves emancipated by paying a compensation to become free (*songnyang*) began to increase.[446] The fact that private slaves could redeem themselves offered new opportunities for the wealthy and ambitious among them. Although it was a private transaction between slaves and masters, the process was still very bureaucratic. The party seeking redemption had to submit a petition to the local magistrate, who would then hear testimony from the owner and witnesses. After determining whether the seller was indeed the rightful owner, the magistrate, or if directly involved, the Department of Slave Affairs in Seoul, would issue an official statement of record, completing the emancipation process that made the former slave a free citizen, effective immediately.[447] From the slaves' point of view, it was essential that their status as commoners after emancipation be universally and unquestionably accepted, including that of their present and future descendants. Therefore, the emancipation contracts had titles such as "explicit contract granting freedom" (*hoyang myŏngmun*) or "explicit remission contract" (*pangnyang myŏngmun*).[448] It was common for the

443 *Pangye Surok*, B. 26, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/磻溪隨錄/卷二十六 [accessed 29.07.2025]. See also the unpublished translation by James Palais at the University Libraries, University of Washington, https://digital.lib.washington.edu/handle/1773/23883 [accessed 29.07.2025].

444 Palais 1996: 227–28.

445 Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 9–10.

446 Kim Yŏngna 2019: 148–50.

447 Pak Kyŏng 2013: 411.

448 Ibid.: 414.

previous owners to justify their sales with general phrases such as "due to poverty" or "due to urgent needs," but this became less common by the end of the Cosŏn period.[449]

Former slaves could not always rely on justice and the fairness of their masters. In 1692, the slave Kichŏn paid a large sum of money and gave five slaves to the *yangban* Pak Wŏnji to redeem himself and gain freeborn status. The original *sokshin* document guaranteed permanent freedom for him and his descendants. However, in 1693, Pak secretly altered the document, adding a clause that included ten *turak* of land, and then obtained a new official *yiban* without Kichŏn's knowledge. This allowed Pak Wŏnji, and later his younger brother, to claim ownership of the land. In 1718, they attacked and tortured Kichŏn ("tied him up and suspended him upside down, beating him countless times with a rod") to force him to transfer parts of the land. Kichŏn finally became ill and died in 1720. In 1725, Kichŏn's son, Kwansang, sued, claiming that the *yiban* had been forged. Pak Wŏnji's son defended the document as a revision. However, the court found inconsistencies in Pak's claims and ruled in favor of Kwansang, restoring the ten *turak* of land to him.[450]

Another way for slaves to gain freedom was through grain contributions (*napsok*). This policy allowed individuals to donate grain or other resources to the state in exchange for rewards, such as official positions, exemptions from labor obligations, or improved social status. To be emancipated from slave status, the stunning amount of 700 *sŏk* of grain was required.[451] Donations became a key mechanism for the government to secure much-needed resources during emergencies such as famines, wars, and natural disasters. During these crises, the government relied on *napsok* to accumulate grain, including rice, millet, and barley, as well as other items such as cloth, ginseng, livestock, and iron for military use and relief efforts. This system often involved selling blank privilege certificates to individuals who donated grain. These certificates, which could be filled out with the buyer's name, granted the donor (mostly honorary) official positions or exempted them from labor duties or servitude in exchange for military service or grain contributions. During the Great East Asian War, the government expanded its use of such certificates to quickly collect resources and offer immediate rewards to contributors.[452] These honors were not inheritable, however, and were therefore of limited use.

The rewards for contributors varied based on the amount donated, allowing wealth to serve as a pathway to higher social status. This led to the "blurring of status-group demarcations":[453] slaves could gain their freedom and become commoners, secondary sons of concubines could remove their social restrictions,[454] and commoners could re-

449 Kim Yongman 2008: 137; Im 2022: 87.

450 http://www.ugyo.net/, 입안 0010 [accessed 29.07.2025]. See Pak Kyŏng 2013: 416–19.

451 Hiraki 1982: 168.

452 Deuchler 2015: 343; Hiraki 1982: 170.

453 Deuchler 2015: 343.

454 Ibid.: 389.

ceive exemptions from communal labor obligations. In sum, the wealthy could now climb the social ladder by forging their social identity in three stages: "grain contributions, change of residence, and falsification of household registers."[455] However, the price was considerably high. During the Great East Asian War, full remission cost approximately 500 *sŏm*, while exemption from military service could be obtained for 100 *sŏm*. Critically, during this period, the government ceased compensating slave owners for their loss of property, generating significant resentment among the slave-owning class.[456]

To appease the disgruntled slave holders, the government began offering compensation in the form of official ranks or by substituting public slaves for redeemed private slaves.[457] Over time, the value of these ranks diminished as they were distributed more widely. The sale of titles even to commoners and slaves, which began as an additional source of income for the central government after the Japanese invasions, led to a confusing inflation of social prestige and was particularly controversial.[458] By 1670, the price of freedom was lowered to 50 *sŏm*, which was still too expensive for most slaves. However, the rigid social boundaries separating slaves from commoners at least began to weaken during this period, allowing some slaves to escape their bondage through this method.[459]

Ultimately, none of these efforts stopped the accumulation of land and wealth by an increasingly small group of wealthy *yangban*, commoners, and even some slaves.[460] Arguably, they even exacerbated this trend. The Uniform Land Tax made farmers (both commoners and *yangban*) pay higher taxes on their land at a time when farmland was becoming scarce, as most of the peninsula's arable land had been reclaimed.[461] The result was that many commoners abandoned their farms and became tenants of wealthy *yangban* families, sinking into "slave-like dependence."[462] Domestic slave labor thus became unprofitable.[463]

In 1653, the Dutchman Hendrick Hamel suffered a shipwreck and was captured in Korea. He escaped to Japan in 1666 and published an account of his stay in Cosŏn in 1668. In it, he mentioned the slave system several times. Remarkably, his description of the matridominial rule, which was effective at that time, was accurate:

455 Ibid.: 390.
456 Palais 1996: 228–29.
457 Hiraki 1982: 171.
458 Deuchler 1997: 304.
459 Palais 1996: 228–29.
460 Deuchler 1997: 306.
461 Totman 2004: 143.
462 Deuchler 2015: 349.
463 Ibid.: 408.

> When a free man has children with a female slave, or a free woman with a male slave, all their offspring are considered slaves. When slaves have children with each other, their master retains possession of them.[464]

However, only one year later, this information became outdated. For the next sixty years, slave legislation would meander so much that it was as if the politicians and officials themselves were entangled in the very web of contradictions they wove, unable to reconcile power with pragmatism or control with concession.

Referring to the proposals made earlier by Yi I, Councilor Song Shiyŏl, leader of the Westerners faction at the court, convinced King Hyŏnjong in 1669 to implement the uniform matrifilial rule, which meant that all "children born to public or private slaves and free women, regardless of sex, would follow the status of the mother," effective immediately. However, this decision was not unanimous, as the rival Southerners faction would not easily support the Westerners' proposals; the prime minister "found the proposal impractical and abstained from the discussion due to illness."[465]

From the late seventeenth century to the early eighteenth century, and again in the early nineteenth century, the Korean Peninsula suffered from recurring droughts related to the global Little Ice Age, which severely impacted agricultural production. Some periods—particularly between the late seventeenth century and 1722—received as few as only twenty to thirty days of rain. Similar dry spells occurred in the 1770s, from 1809 to 1827, and again from 1857 to 1860. Alongside these fluctuations in precipitation, cold summers were especially notable from 1676 to 1693 and in the first half of the nineteenth century, specifically in the years 1838 and 1847. Hotter summers occurred from 1793 to 1803 and from 1851 to 1895. These climate fluctuations profoundly influenced agricultural cycles, with droughts and cold summers predominating from the late seventeenth century into the early eighteenth century and again through the first half of the nineteenth century. By contrast, much of the eighteenth century, as well as the latter half of the nineteenth century, experienced warmer conditions and more rainfall—around 1,200 millimeters annually. This allowed for more robust harvests and eased some of the challenges posed by earlier droughts, but in extreme cases caused devastating flooding. These "period catastrophes" forced the government to respond with tax remissions.[466]

In the Kyŏngshin years, 1670–1671, and in the Ŭlpyŏng years, 1695–1696, these unusual climate events directly caused two severe famines in Cosŏn, resulting in the loss of one-fifth to one-third of Korea's population.[467] In 1671, the crisis began in the provinces,

464 Hamel 1920: 35.

465 CWS, Hyŏnjong, Y 10:1:10 = February 10, 1669. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 130–31; Ayukai calls this "a partisan issue, intended to attack opposing factions" and "a politically motivated and insincere argument": Ayukai 1973: 446; Jisoo M. Kim 2015: 140.

466 Hochol Lee 1997: 105; the connection between the ecological crisis and deforestation is discussed in W. Lee 2015: 26–29; for floods, see W. Lee 2015: 47–48.

467 Mccormick 2023: 65.

where crop failures due to adverse weather led to famine and death.[468] In late April, reports from Cŏlla Province detailed continuous heavy rains starting in March, which damaged barley and wheat crops. Concurrently, a plague claimed over seventy lives, signaling the outbreak of disease as the famine worsened. In the capital, famine victims crowded porridge distribution sites, where poor sanitary conditions and overpopulation caused infectious diseases to spread rapidly, leaving streets filled with the dead. Entire families were wiped out, and the fear of contagion drove the inhabitants to flee their homes.

On April 19 (3:21), a horrifying report from Chungchŏng province reached the court:

> Chungchŏng Surveillance Commissioner Yi Hongyŏn urgently reported: "In Yŏnsan, a female private slave named Sunye, residing deep in a valley, killed and ate her five-year-old daughter and three-year-old son. Villagers, hearing rumors, went to question her about the truth, and she responded, 'The children died of illness. In the midst of severe hunger and sickness, I cooked and ate them, but I did not kill them.' Sunye's appearance is horrendous and inhuman, her face and body like that of a frenzied ghost—clearly a person who has lost her senses. Though one might call it madness, this is an event unprecedented in history. Her crimes are extremely heinous, and she has been detained strictly. I request instructions from the relevant department."
> The Royal Secretariat reported: "This case in Yŏnsan, where a woman cooked and ate her children, is deeply shocking and horrific. Parental love is a natural instinct endowed to all, and though she may be a hardened criminal, how could she lack awareness? Driven to such evil by the fire of starvation, this tragedy reflects not only the collapse of moral order but also the shortcomings in famine relief efforts. Provincial officials should first hold the magistrates accountable for their negligence, but punishing only those directly involved in the crime falls short, as the situation is alarming. We request that the surveillance commissioner and local magistrate be subjected to strict investigation. Furthermore, considering the famine policies of the court, which exhaust all resources and efforts from the treasury and officials, yet still leave citizens starving, we are faced with the looming destruction of society. With the drought signs this spring, the barley and wheat are withering, and a disaster of collapse is imminent. Relief measures should be strengthened. We suggest establishing a relief center in the capital, issuing further directives to provincial commissioners, and ensuring no gaps in famine relief measures."[469]

In April of 1671, a directive was issued to collect and care for abandoned children. These children were to be adopted or enslaved. This policy was formalized in June and extended beyond the capital to the provinces because "famine-stricken people, driven by despair, could not take care for their children and abandoned them by the roadsides and in ditches." A regulation was enacted, stipulating that abandoned children adopted in the first half of 1671 would be permanently classified as slaves, along with their descendants, regardless of wheter their original status was free or enslaved. This applied to children adopted before the age of fifteen. Those adopted at sixteen or older were limited to serving as hired laborers during their lifetime, while their descendants were allowed to return to their original social status and responsibilities.

468 This description is based on CWS, Hyŏnjong, Y. 12.

469 CWS, Hyŏnjong, Y. 12:3:21 = April 19, 1671. Cf. B.-R. Kim 2006: 51.

In May, additional reports emphasized the dire conditions in the capital, where famine relief centers struggled to meet the demand. Despite the distribution of porridge, more than 500 people died in these centers in a single month, while countless others perished on the roads. Similarly grim statistics were revealed in provincial reports, with tens of thousands dying from hunger and disease across Kyŏngsang and Cŏlla provinces. The sheer scale of the crisis hampered relief efforts, as officials were unable to bury the dead quickly due to resource constraints.

The plight of slaves was particularly notable during this period. They were among those hardest hit by the famine and disease because their labor obligations often went unrelieved. To ease the burden on the people, officials now proposed significant reductions in military cloth levies, slave taxes, and other fiscal obligations. In June, 26,500 *sŏk* of rice were distributed to starving households in the capital and the surrounding regions, while measures to prevent child abandonment were reiterated. Additional efforts that targeted the systemic causes of the famine were undertaken, such as expanding grain procurement channels and encouraging merchants to make grain contributions in exchange for official positions. In December, a decree abolished unpaid tribute obligations for slaves. These measures demonstrated the government's willingness to adjust policies and provide aid. However, the sheer scale of the disaster revealed the limits of its administrative capacity and the continued vulnerability of its most marginalized populations, including slaves and the urban poor.

7.8.4.1 The Stolen Hophä

All this took place against the backdrop of power struggles among the various political and scholarly factions at the court, which had intensified since the 1660s. King Sukcong, who reigned from 1674 to 1720, is known for his skillful manipulation of factional politics to enhance his own authority. He strategically employed the policy of *change of state*, which involved the abrupt removal of a ruling faction from power when it became too influential or destabilizing. Only in this light can the otherwise seemingly arbitrary shifts in policy on the slave issue over the following decades be explained.

In 1674, Sukcong approved a proposal to allow children born to private slaves and former female slaves, who had already been redeemed, to attain free status. The issue arose when the children of capital-bureau slaves and private slaves, despite having been redeemed, were reassigned to servile status due to their father's status. The king acknowledged the injustice of this practice, noting that families had already made significant efforts to secure their freedom, and reassigning them to public servitude was deeply unfair. He emphasized that public and private slaves should be treated equally, because "there is no essential difference between public and private slaves, and they should all uniformly be granted free status."[470]

470 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 1:5:25 = June 28, 1674.

In 1675, Yun Hyu, a non-orthodox Confucian scholar at the Royal Confucian Academy who was aligned with the Southerners, proposed the revival of the *hophä* and the Five-House Registration System, both of which included slaves.[471] In the fifteenth century, the Five-House Registration System was established, at least in theory, to control military and fiscal duties, as well as to suppress crime and population mobility. In this system, five households were grouped into one unit, and the unit was held collectively responsible for fulfilling its duties and obeying the law. The policy aimed to address the longstanding issue of inaccurate population records, which had led to inefficiencies in taxation and corvée labor obligations. However, Yu's proposal faced both ideological and practical opposition, triggering a six-year debate at the court.

Opponents warned against "unrest among the people"[472] and that "the ignorant masses feel uneasy and discontented."[473] As a compromise, instead of *hophä*, paper identification tags (*ciphä*) were issued. According to the *Veritable Records*, this policy was highly unpopular:

> Paper identification tags (*ciphä*) were placed inside small pouches and worn. At the time, people coined a phrase about this practice:
> "Wearing a small pouch brings great distress."
> [...] The people, already suffering from famine, were further burdened by excessive taxation and strict enforcement. Complaints and grievances filled the streets, yet Yun Hyu's faction described the situation as one of "joy and celebration."[474]

Yun Hyu defended his idea, saying that

> if the paper identification tag system is properly established and implemented, it will ensure fair taxation and encourage agriculture and sericulture. This would eliminate the exploitative practice of collecting tribute from white bones [i.e., dead people], allowing the people to regain their will to live.[475]

At this point, Chief State Councilor Hŏ Cŏk, who also belonged to the Southerners, intervened. In his view, paper identification tags were not acceptable because they grouped scholars and officials with commoners under the same classification. The tags listed a commoner household head and number above the names of officials and scholars, causing them distress and disrupting the social hierarchy.

> When scholars and officials see this classification, they are deeply shocked. Moreover, this practice disrupts the hierarchical structure of society.

471 CWS, Sukcong, Y1:1:24 = March 1, 1674.
472 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 2:1:13 = February 16, 1675.
473 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 3:1:22 = February 13, 1677.
474 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 1:9:26 = November 3, 1675.
475 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 3:2:15 = February 25, 1678.

He proposed supplementing the paper tags with *hophä* for government officials and down to examination passers.[476] In contrast to paper, the material used for the *hophä* could reflect status considerations. While *hophä* for commoners had to be wooden (*mokphä*), government officials had to wear *hophä* made of ivory or horn. Other officials seconded his view by pointing out that resistance was mainly coming from private slaves, who in recent times had taken clerical positions instead of commoners:

> Now that they are required to wear *hophä*, the distinction between social classes will become clear, which is precisely what they fear. Thus, they have taken the lead in spreading rumors and attempting to obstruct the policy.[477]

Sukcong then decided to introduce the *hophä* from April 1677 on, but only for those holding official positions.[478] This decision was again controversial. Yun Hyu warned the king in a confidential memorandum:

> I have discreetly listened to the voices in the streets and alleyways, and recently, there has been great unrest among the people. Rumors are spreading rapidly, and the public sentiment is becoming increasingly agitated. This anxiety arises from the impending implementation of the *hophä* system [...] I have heard that during the reign of Kwanghä, the *hophä* system was briefly implemented for scholars and officials but was abolished within a few months. Again, in the Pyŏngin [1626] and Cŏngmyo [1627] years of King Injo's reign, the *hophä* system was enforced universally across all social classes. However, in Cŏngmyo [1627], when the Manchu invasion occurred and enemy forces reached Anju, Governor Yun Hwŏn devised a plan to defend the city. One day, the soldiers gathered their *hophä* and piled them atop the city walls, shouting: "Can *hophä* defend against the enemy? How can we fight under such restrictions?" The troops then collapsed in disarray, and Yun Hwŏn fled, leading to the fall of the western front. Seeing the extent of public dissatisfaction, the court abolished the *hophä* system once the enemy had retreated.
>
> Given this historical precedent, the proper course of action today is to issue strict orders to the Hansŏng magistrate and provincial governors to conduct thorough inspections of identity certificates, ensuring they are properly held and strictly prohibiting unauthorized migration. Nothing further should be enforced.
>
> If it is absolutely necessary to record people through the *hophä* system, it will expose illegitimate children and slaves to public scrutiny, as if they were stripped naked before the eyes of all. This is something deeply distressing to human sentiment. Restraining a young colt while attempting to drive a wild ox will inevitably lead to rearing, kicking, and biting—how likely is it that the cart will not overturn, and its load will not be ruined?[479]

He also warned that the substitution of military service with grain and cloth levies destroyed the opportunity for upward mobility for the lower classes and was a "severe breach of trust." The subsequent relentless collection of these levies led to "public humiliation and punishment" and forced commoners "into the ranks of permanent slaves."

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476 CWS, Sukjong, Y. 3:3:1 = March 23, 1677.

477 CWS, Sukjong, Y. 2:5:25 = June 25, 1676.

478 CWS, Sukjong, Y. 3:1:7 = January 29, 1677.

479 CWS, Sukjong, Y. 4:5:11 = June 19, 1678.

In response, the king ordered the suspension of the *hophä* system, citing the extreme drought and widespread suffering as reasons for reconsidering its enforcement. However, the suspension was short-lived, as Hŏ Cŏk and others continued to lobby for its retention.[480] Finally, in 1685, *hophä* became mandatory, and the *ciphä* were discontinued.

While the systemic effects of the *hophä* system were limited (there was no noticeable increase in the number of registered households), it certainly facilitated individual identification, e.g., of examination candidates, crime victims, or returning castaways.[481] The fact that many *yangban* insisted on wearing smaller *hophä* in visibly different material qualities and sizes than those worn by the lower classes indicates that they viewed it as a device that allowed "immediate verification of an individual's social status by the *hophä* worn on his body and assignment to a corresponding occupational role"[482]—a function that could not be achieved by paper IDs. It is also noteworthy that a non–office holder had to produce his *hophä* at his own expense. After the death of an office holder, his *hophä* was given to the government office and burned.[483]

Tab. 18: Material and size of *hophä* (Sŏl 2024: 27–29).

Rank	Material	Size (cm)
2 and above	Ivory	6 × 2.1
3 and below	Horn	6 × 2.1
Graduates, students, non-commissioned officials, grantholders, guardsmen, soldiers, clerks, local officials, craftsmen	Wood	6 × 3
Commoners, displaced persons, private slaves, naturalized foreigners	Wood	7.5 × 4.5

Today, upper-class *hophä* are easy to find in museum collections, but slave tags are very rare. In fact, one South Korean private collector has only been able to find only one in thirty years of collecting and commented that "ironically, this makes the slave *hophä* a noble among *hophä*." He describes it as "something to be discarded quickly," a rectangular piece of rough and poorly finished wood, measuring 3.5 cm × 10.5 cm. Its inscription reads:[484]

> Sunchŏl, slave of Yi, 2nd house, 1st district, Yŏnghŭn Hamlet.

480 Sŏl 2024: 179.
481 Ibid.: 180.
482 Ibid.: 183.
483 Ibid.: 185–86.
484 Pak Kŏnho 2022a: s.p.

This was a location in Yŏngam County, Cŏlla Province. The tag was sealed in the lower left corner and had holes at the top and bottom, with a string attached for carrying.

Meanwhile, in 1678, a new debate arose over the matrifilial rule. The Ministry of Justice criticized the rule for encouraging fraud, as private slaves often took free women as wives, falsely claiming that they were of mixed status. This practice led to increased litigation between slaves and owners. After deliberation, the government decided "that children born to free women shall henceforth follow the status of the father," effectively cancelling the matrifilial rule. The king approved the change.[485]

In 1681, however, the Westerners returned to power and petitioned to reverse this decision. King Sukcong waited until 1684 to reintroduce the matrifilial rule:

> Regardless of whether they registered or not, let the household census records determine their status. If they are born to free women, they should be permitted to remain free.[486]

During this time, the atmosphere at the court was tense. In 1688, Sukcong took a new concubine, the beautiful Cang Okcŏng, daughter of a *cungin* family, which meant that her status was considered equal to that of the secondary sons of *yangban*. When she gave birth to Sukcong's first son in 1689, the king wanted to proclaim him his heir, prompting a protest from Sukcong's principal wife, Queen Min, and their supporters, including Song Shiyŏl. The king subsequently exiled Queen Min, executed Song Shiyŏl, and elevated Cang Okcŏng's status. Power in the court shifted to the Southerners. The new Left State Councilor Mok Näsŏn did not waste this momentum and initiated the next *turn of state* in slave policy. He pleaded for the abolition of the matrifilial rule as far as free mothers were concerned. The ministers agreed, although one of them commented that "within the past ten years, government orders have repeatedly changed, and I fear that this will lead to confusion." The king then ordered the abolition, which meant that from then on, the matridominial rule was in place again.[487]

Three years later, the king fell in love with a palace maid who was eleven years younger than Cang Okcŏng. The maid gave birth to a son in 1693, who died shortly thereafter, and to another son in 1694, the future King Yŏngjo. The personal name of this concubine is unknown; she is usually called Lady Chö, but her lineage is obscure, her father being a military officer and her mother a slave. Cang Okcŏng eventually fell out of favor, but her son remained as crown prince.

The political upheaval of 1694, known as the Kapsul Turn, exemplifies the intense factional strife that characterized the period. This event centered on the power struggle between the Southern and the two Western (Soron and Noron) factions, and on King

485 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 4:4:2 = May 22, 1678. Palais gave a wrong date, 1675: Palais 1996: 231; this goes back to a claim in the Supplement to the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn*, but there is no corroborating evidence that there was a rollback before 1678: Hiraki 1982: 132.

486 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 10:10:23 = November 19, 1684. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 134.

487 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 15:12:13: = January 8, 1590. Cf. ibid.: 135–36.

Sukcong's wavering decisions regarding Queen Min. After the Southerners successfully ousted Queen Min, Sukcong's subsequent remorse fueled a complex series of political maneuvers. Members of the Westerners lobbied for her reinstatement, while the Southerners attempted to preempt that move. Ultimately, the king's distrust of the Southerners led to their complete removal from the government, the reinstatement of Queen Min, and the execution or exile of key Southerner figures, including General Yi Ŭijing and Cang Hŭijä, the elder brother of Cang Okcŏng. Cang Okcŏng was deposed as queen. This marked the irreversible decline of the Southerners.

In an attempt to take revenge and provoke a new *change of state*, the son of Yi Ŭijing conspired with a nephew of Cang Hŭijä's wife and some of his house slaves. They desecrated the grave of Cang Hŭijä's and Cang Okcŏng's father and buried objects that would implicate the Westerners in the use of dark magic against Cang Okcŏng's son, the crown prince.

The theft of a slave *hophä* was central to the plot. One of the conspirators lured a house slave of General Shin Yŏchŏl, one of the leaders of the Westerners, to a tavern, where he was made heavily intoxicated. While he was unconscious, they forcibly removed his *hophä* and later placed it in the grave as a false clue.

A house slave of Cang Hŭijä was then ordered to "discover" these objects and bring them to the capital as evidence of a Westerner conspiracy against the crown prince. However, his suspicious behavior led to his interrogation and torture, and after the interrogation of the other accomplices, the truth was revealed. Of the eight men involved, four were slaves. One testified that he had previously borrowed money from the Yi family and had not yet repaid it. They then forced him, his wife, and his children into slavery. As a result, he moved to the Yi household's western ice storage corridor. When he hesitated to go to the grave, another Yi house slave threatened to kill him, leaving him no choice but to obey. After the interrogations, the conspirators were quickly and brutally executed.

Shortly after, in 1695, another disaster struck after an extremely poor harvest that resulted from a series of calamities, including a unique disaster in coastal regions where small crabs swarmed the fields, damaging seedlings and halting their growth. This unprecedented event added to the devastation caused by famine. Officials recognized the urgency of the situation and acted swiftly.[488] Comprehensive measures to alleviate the crisis were proposed and implemented by September. Stored grain, silver, and other provisions were mobilized, while disruptive public works and debt collection projects were suspended. Slave hunting and forced labor activities, including significant construction efforts, were halted.[489] Famine-stricken areas were classified into three levels of severity. In the most affected regions, personal service obligations and slave tributes were reduced by two-thirds, with similar reductions in grain quotas. In moderately af-

488 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 21:7:1 = July 31, 1693.

489 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 21:8:3 = August 31, 1693.

fected regions, obligations were halved. Military rations were uniformly cut by half across all regions, and the grain was retained locally for relief distribution.[490]

In November, Lieutenant General Co Hyŏnggi warned against the replication of failed policies from the famine years of 1670 and 1671, when "nearly a million perished across the nation." He cautioned against these mistakes, saying they "would only push the elderly and weak into the ditches and valleys to perish," and advocated for expanded charity using both palace and military treasures and voluntary contributions from private reserves. He emphasized the importance of avoiding strict enforcement methods, which had proven ineffective, and urged the adoption of more humane relief strategies. He also demanded that government slaves and other state personnel be allowed to pay their tributes in grain instead of cloth.[491]

Four weeks later, Secretary of the North Min Cinhu proposed that,

> following the examples of 1670 and 1671, permission be granted to redeem slaves of the royal household, government slaves, and slaves of various offices by paying rice, thereby freeing them from servitude, and allowing relay station slaves to be promoted to station clerks. He further suggested that the amount of rice required should be adjusted to a lesser amount compared to 1670 and 1671. Additionally, for privately owned slaves in the province, he proposed that the government set a fixed redemption price, allowing owners to be compensated in rice through the local officials. Regarding the adoption of abandoned children as slaves, he requested that it follow the measures already implemented during the Kyŏngshin years [1670–1671] and that relevant directives be urgently issued.[492]

It is not surprising that, in this situation, the grain contributions were once again most welcome, although "some observers expressed concern over the devaluation of official titles and honors."[493]

In January 1696, the government finalized, with the king's approval, policies for the adoption of abandoned children. These regulations set an age limit of under twelve years and a timeframe from February to June of 1696. Children of unknown origin required formal documentation (*yiban*) from local officials.[494] As in 1670, this system aimed to provide systematic care for abandoned children, integrating them into households while ensuring accountability on the part of adopters. Adoptions allowed children to be raised as family members or slaves, with formalized procedures ensuring proper care. Negligent adopters faced penalties, and biological parents reclaiming children had to compensate adopters for their expenses.

490 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 21:9:14 = October 11, 1695.
491 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 21:10:8 = November 4, 1693.
492 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 21:11:2 = November 27, 1693.
493 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 22:02:20 = March 12, 1696.
494 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 21:12:23 = January 17, 1696.

This policy of "protection or servitude" (or rather, protection *in* servitude), which blurs the line between care and exploitation, may date back to Shilla times.[495] It developed in response to crises such as war and famine, which increased the number of displaced children. Orphans and abandoned children were recognized as being in dire need, leading to legal frameworks and royal intervention. During the Koryŏ period, local authorities were required to provide food and shelter to orphans until they reached the age of ten, after which they could choose their own paths. Care solutions often relied on private, community-based systems. Children could be taken in as foster children, adopted children, or slaves. Adoption was, however, not primarily aimed at caring for displaced children, but was integrated into broader social support for vulnerable groups, including orphans, widows, and the childless.[496]

After the famine was over, the court itself fell into a deep crisis caused by the king's personal affairs. In 1701, the once-exiled Queen Min wasted away from what she described as a strange and unnatural illness. Before her death, she accused Cang Okcŏng, the concubine who was the cause of the queen's fall from royal grace, of cursing her with dark magic, allegedly with the help of her palace maids. This accusation gained traction when Lady Chö, the younger concubine, viciously spread the rumor to the king. In response, Sukcong ordered the execution of Cang Okcŏng (by suicide) and the palace maids. When his senior advisors urged for a proper investigation, the king summoned the accused maids for interrogation, during which they denied the charges. Convinced of their guilt, Sukcong took severe measures over the next few weeks, torturing the accused, removing from office court officials who questioned his decisions, and reiterating his determination to uncover the truth at any cost.[497]

Advisors warned the king in vain that the crown prince's mental health might be affected by his mother's harsh punishment, and it appears that this was true; when he ascended the throne as King Kyŏngjong in 1720, he suffered from severe physical and mental health problems. These chronic conditions worsened over time and contributed to his death after only four years on the throne.[498]

In stark contrast, his younger half-brother and successor, King Yŏngjo, the son of Lady Chö, maintained exceptional health throughout his life. He practiced strict self-discipline and followed a rigid diet, avoiding fatty foods, alcohol, and cold environments, which enabled him to actively govern until the day of his sudden death at the age of 83, after 52 years on the throne.[499] But the one thing he shared with his half-brother that shaped his political consciousness was their obscure backgrounds as a secondary sons. Despite his political success, "he was an unhappy king who lived his entire life with

495 C. Kim 2004: 78.

496 J.-W. Kim and Henderson 2008: 15; T. Hatada 1969: 87.

497 CWS, Sukcong, Y. 27:9:23, 27:9:24, 27:9:25, 27:9:26, 27:9:27, 27:9:28, 27:9:29.

498 Cŏng Sŭngho and Kim Sujin 2022: 66–68.

499 Ibid.: 68–70.

the stigma of being the child of a lowly palace maid."[500] This undoubtedly "tormented" him as much as it did all others who suffered this fate, "but it is somehow fitting that this identity [...] pervaded not only the masses but the royal family as well."[501] Against this background, it is probably no coincidence that Yŏngjo was more committed than any other king to improving the living conditions of slaves.

7.8.4.2 Chä Pängyun: A Lesson for My Servant

Chä Pängyun, whose pen name was Hŭiam ("Hopeful Hermitage"), was a prominent figure in the late Cosŏn period, known for his intellectual pursuits and connections to significant families. He came from a notable lineage, passed the state examination at an early age, and became a leading figure of the Southener faction. His poetic and scholarly works often reflected on both his life and the cultural heritage of Korea, such as his detailed descriptions of historical sites.

Volume 28 of the *Hŭiam Sŏnsängjip*, a collection of his major works, contains an essay called *A Lesson for My Servant* (僮喩 *Tongyu*). The text revolves around contentment and the rejection of societal expectations of success. The master, despite being seen as unfortunate by others, teaches his servant that true peace comes from accepting one's situation and finding satisfaction in a simple, unambitious life. While others may chase after wealth, power, and recognition, often at great personal cost, the master finds virtue in living modestly and avoiding unnecessary hardships. He demonstrates that external judgments and societal standards are irrelevant when one embraces contentment and inner fulfillment. The moral lesson is that true happiness and virtue lie not in outward success, but in a life lived according to one's own values, free from the pressures of status and material gain.

> A boy servant returned from the market with a troubled expression. The master asked, "Are you ill?" The servant replied, "It's not my body that's ill, but my heart. When I went to the market earlier, a crowd gathered, pointing at me and saying, 'Isn't this the servant of so-and-so? In this world, no one is as unfortunate as this master. I heard that those who excel in the examinations receive honors and are appointed to high positions, but he alone is left in difficulty, struggling with lowly tasks. Those who dwell in the academies either hold important posts or serve in government offices, but he alone remains in obscurity, rejected or overlooked. Despite his efforts in governance and study, he is excluded from the recommended lists, and though he strives to produce literary works, his name is absent from the grand compilations. He is both unskilled and unrewarded for his labor. If he cannot even secure his own future, what virtue does he possess to care for you? Why don't you serve in the household of a high official where you could have fine food and clothing, instead of toiling in hardship?' This is what troubled my heart."
>
> The master smiled and explained, "Indeed, my misfortune might have caused you distress. But there is also a virtue in this. Do you know it? Those who live by the river and sea engage in maritime trade. The servants in such households know how to cook and manage the fire or handle the

500 Cŏng Sŭngho and Kim Sujin 2022: 69.

501 Hwang 2019: 62.

oars. They journey far and wide, covering thousands of miles in a moment. But when they encounter storms and waves, losing sight of their return, facing treacherous winds and thunder, the boat breaks apart, the mast collapses, and they are left stranded in despair. Do you have to endure such trials?

Those who live in the mountains and fields toil in the fields. Their servants labor in the spring to plow and weed, and in the summer, they dig and hoe. They work under the scorching sun, drenched in sweat and rain, with mud up to their knees and dust covering their heads. Their backs are bent from work, their fingers calloused, and they have no rest even at night. When they cannot pay their taxes, they are taken as prisoners by the government, beaten and tortured by harsh officials. Do you have to suffer such hardships?

Have you not seen those high officials and nobles who, despite their power and rank, are bound and shackled, exiled to remote regions, wandering in isolation? They are imprisoned in mountains or held captive at sea, unable to see the sun and stars, their bodies plagued by disease and filth. They are attacked by wild animals or poisoned by venomous creatures, suffering from sickness, vomiting, and collapsing in agony. At such times, even if they have fine food and clothing, would you wish to serve them?

The fact that I am left in difficulty is because I am out of favor with the world. The world has abandoned me, so why should I worry about the hardships of my subordinates or the shame of being overlooked for appointments? The scholars of today serve the emperor, attending the imperial court, and are celebrated for their talents. They gather in the halls of the academy, bowing to each other, while others compete for fame and fortune. However, my learning is scattered and shallow, lacking the depth of accumulated knowledge. My writings are narrow and coarse, lacking in brilliance and appeal. As a result, I am marginalized and kept out of sight. This is how things are, so why should you be troubled?

I cannot provide you with fine food and clothing, but because I am unskilled in making a living, I do not venture into the sea without a boat or retreat to the mountains without land. Therefore, you do not have to worry about either of these things. Because I am not ambitious in seeking advancement, I remain content between talent and mediocrity, and I stay in a place of safety. This is why you do not have to suffer or fall in remote and desolate places. Is this not enough as a virtue from your master?

Moreover, I plant melons in two furrows and taro in ten plots, I extend the trellis for lychee and hang gourds from the eaves. I live contentedly, and when I am not occupied with writing, I carry a jar under the stars, working with a hoe in the rain. This is my way of finding satisfaction. Humiliation cannot diminish me, nor can honor enhance me. So why should I be concerned with the judgments of others? In finding contentment in this, I observe that even among my peers who passed the examinations, there may be some who envy my lack of ambition. In the past, the household of Kong Cheng was one where reciting poetry and grinding grain went hand in hand, and perhaps that spirit has been transferred to your master. Can you not also share in this contentment?

Thus, I wrote this as a lesson for my servant."

This story can be interpreted as a subtle exercise in maintaining control through the emotional management of the servant, which reinforces a dynamic that resembles learned helplessness. Disturbed by the public mockery of his master's failure, the servant implicitly expresses a desire for a better life. Rather than acknowledging this desire or offering any suggestions for improvement, the master responds with a lengthy philosophical justification of his own stagnation, presenting it as virtuous moderation and wise withdrawal. This speech does more than just soothe; it neutralizes the ser-

vant's unrest by redefining misfortune as safety, obscurity as protection, and poverty as moral clarity.

This strategy works not through coercion but through moral persuasion, which reshapes how the servant understands his own suffering. By comparing their modest life to the exaggerated dangers faced by other servants—those lost at sea, broken by labor, or caught in political downfall—the master cultivates gratitude for their deprivation. He replaces the servant's hope for improvement with a fear of worse alternatives. This rhetorical move closes off the imagination of change and casts resignation as wisdom.

Crucially, the master's storytelling shifts the source of the servant's hardship from structural injustice to the outcome of conscious, principled restraint. In doing so, the master deflects responsibility, portraying their shared condition as a chosen good rather than a failure or injustice. This strategy fosters a psychological environment in which the servant is less likely to question his position or seek an escape—not because he is convinced of its justice, but because he has internalized the futility of protest. Thus, the story functions as a soft form of domination, using narrative and philosophy to transform structural subordination into moral acceptance and induce a state in the servant that closely resembles helplessness masked as contentment.

7.8.4.3 Cŏng Cedu: Abolish Private Slaves—and Beat Them

Cŏng Cedu was a Confucian scholar of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.[502] His vision of society was deeply rooted in his philosophical commitment to human dignity and equality, which he sought to apply to the structural inequalities of Cosŏn society. A prominent proponent of Wang Yangming's Theory of the Equality of the Four Classes, Cŏng believed that all humans are inherently equal and that distinctions based on status or occupation are merely functional and do not reflect intrinsic worth. He opposed the hereditary and rigid social stratification of Cosŏn, particularly the divide between the *yangban* elite and the oppressed "base people," which he saw as an entrenched injustice detrimental to societal harmony and governance.[503]

Cŏng's critique of slavery reflected this commitment to equality. He proposed gradual reforms to dismantle the institution of hereditary slavery. He wanted to incorporate both the "base people" and the *yangban* into the commoner class. By exempting individuals under ten years old and those born thereafter from slave status, and by freeing enslaved individuals upon reaching sixty years of age, he envisioned a phased elimination of the slave class over fifty years. This approach, unique in his time for its consistent rejection of hereditary slavery, underscores his belief in systematic, non-disruptive reform to achieve social change.[504]

502 For his biography, see C. Chŏng 2020: 6–11.
503 Yi Ŭnyong 2016: 171.
504 Ibid.: 169–70.

In his broader political vision, Cŏng linked these social reforms to his philosophical principles. His model of governance emphasized the cultivation of virtue by rulers and the integration of moral sincerity with practical governance. He argued that rulers should embody and promote moral values while actively working for the welfare of the people. His economic policies, such as land redistribution and equitable taxation, aimed to reduce inequality and alleviate poverty, consistent with his belief in governance that prioritized the welfare of the people and the stabilization of society.[505]

Cŏng's insistence on equality extended to gender relations. He championed the right of widows to remarry, challenging the prevailing norms of male supremacy and advocating for the dismantling of gendered hierarchies. This stance reflected his broader effort to create a society in which moral and social values were consistent with the fundamental dignity of all individuals.[506]

Ultimately, Cŏng's political philosophy sought to create a harmonious society in which moral and social reforms were integrated. By addressing systemic inequalities and aligning governance with ethical principles, he envisioned a unified and flourishing society, consistent with the principle of "different professions, one path," where all individuals contribute to a shared moral and social order.[507]

The *Hagokcip* ("Hagok Anthology") is a collection of writings by Cŏng Cedu. It was compiled by his great-grandson in 1856.

> Completely abolish private ownership of slaves born into servitude. Children under the age of ten and those born after [...] shall be allowed to redeem themselves as free persons, and the buying and selling of slaves shall be strictly prohibited. Village chiefs and slave owners must keep a register of slaves and mark their bodies for identification. Records must be kept of those over ten years of age, and their servitude must be limited to sixty years. At the end of their term, they will be free to serve in the government as they wish. [...]
>
> Slaves who are orphaned or isolated shall be treated as beneficiaries of state aid, similar to poor commoners. Children under ten and those not currently registered as slaves will no longer be considered such. In fifty years there will be no servile class left. [...]
>
> Government officials without slaves will be given slaves according to their rank, from one to nine. However, these slaves will only serve during the official's lifetime and will not be inherited by successors. [...]
>
> The division between high and low classes has existed for nearly nine hundred years. Over generations, the descendants of the once free commoners have all gradually fallen into bondage. Today, for every free person in the nation, there are two in bondage. The *yangban*, who share the power of the state and the people, act as if the monarch is one entity and the people are another. How can such a principle exist in the world? How can a nation function when half the people serve the other half and the monarch relies on only a quarter of his subjects to maintain the country? Such a system cannot sustain a nation.
>
> Moreover, the suffering of one half while the other half enjoys comfort is contrary to the intention of Heaven and Earth in creating living beings. Such inequality is more harmful than floods or wild

505 Ibid.: 173.
506 Ibid.: 172.
507 Ibid.: 171.

> animals. When things reach their limit, change becomes inevitable. Now the system has reached its limit and must change. The abolition of the *yangban* factions and the military slave registry is the solution to this problem. Therefore, it is inevitable to carry out land reform and revise the marriage law.[508]

Cŏng Cedu's call for the abolition of private slavery is similar to that of Yu Hyŏngwŏn (although Cŏng Cedu could not have known this). In his assessment of the social situation, he was somewhat less dramatic than Yu; while the latter estimated the proportion of slaves in the population to be at 80 to 90 percent, Cŏng's estimate was "only" two-thirds. According to all we know today, this is also too high an estimate.

However, since Wang Yangmin's doctrine had been declared anathema by the neo-Confucian orthodoxy, Cŏng's opinions did not matter very much. Nor was he as brave as Ōshio Heihachirō, a Japanese disciple of Wang Yangmin, who led an armed rebellion against social injustice in the streets of Ōsaka in 1837. This was surely doomed from the beginning, but at least Ōshio followed Wang Yangmin's teaching that doing the right thing is better than just talking about it, styling himself as "a provocateur for the oppressed" and "the personification of individuality in the public sphere."[509]

This kind of heroic thinking and behavior was apparently alien to Cŏng Cedu. In 1682, when he was thirty-four, he fell suddenly and seriously ill. Anticipating his death, he left an educational testament and a "House Law" (*Kabŏp*) as "guidelines for safeguarding the family" to his younger brother and to his son, who was only eleven years old. In contrast to this radical political criticism of Cosŏn's society, the provisions on slaves included in this private "House Law" seem to have come from a completely different world of thought.[510]

> Female slaves and concubines are to be treated as inferior and are not to be used as concubines. […]
> When members of the *yangban* class form a faction and agree on something, even if the female slaves and concubines are close to them, they must not be allowed to intervene with a single word. […]
> Respect the master and suppress the slaves. In the state, the noble principle of respecting the ruler and subduing the vassal often leads to the worthy not being promoted and to a lack of propriety in treatment, as well as insufficient communication of subordinate sentiments. However, this is not so in the household. There are no unresolved feelings, and those who sweep and serve in menial tasks have no opportunity to demonstrate conduct or express opinions. Therefore, strict prevention and adherence to stern family principles are required. […]
> Even if a child is young and a slave is old, the child must wield authority to punish the slave with a rod or command them. This ensures that authority rests in the child's hands from a young age. If not, conflicts will inevitably arise later. Furthermore, if slaves are insolent or disrespectful toward the children, they must be severely punished. However, elderly slaves who have served faithfully

508 *Hagokcip*, b. 22. Quoted from Yi Ŭnyong 2016: 169.
509 Newmark 2017: 142, 143.
510 Cin 2016: 123–24.

> may be released if desired, but if they remain, they must still obey and serve the children without exception. [...]
> A daughter-in-law must also be granted the authority to punish and discipline slaves. Without this, slander and division will infiltrate, and acts of insubordination will increase. Furthermore, among the children, there must not be any division regarding the slaves; the slaves must be managed and disciplined uniformly. If this is not done, slaves will lean toward one side and disparage the other, or they will rely on one side and mock the other. [...]
> Although slaves are said to be under the service of their masters, it is improper for every member of the household to arbitrarily punish them. Still, all members of the *yangban* household, regardless of age or seniority, must function as a unified body. Additionally, if older slaves rely on their age to mock or insult the children or women of the household, they will ultimately cease to fulfill their role as slaves. Thus, from the very beginning, authority over them must be strictly established by the household's senior members. [...]
> Even if the miscellaneous visitors under the household gate are amicable, they should be treated with courtesy but must not be allowed to interfere in the affairs of the family. Moreover, they must not be given more importance than relatives or friends. The same applies to those of lower standing. Slaves and concubines must be strictly suppressed and must not be trusted or relied upon in ways that could disrupt the unity of the family.[511]

The discrepancy between Cŏng Cedu's political calls for the abolition of status and gender inequality and his private beliefs in tight control over slaves and gender discrimination is indeed puzzling, as Cin Sŏngsu remarks:

> The strict emphasis on maintaining hierarchical social order in the *Kabŏp* seems to conflict with his theories of social reform, which advocate the abolition of class distinctions and the promotion of equality.[512]

Ultimately, when it came to real-world issues, Cŏng Cedu's reasoning was just as "reflective of the limitations of the age"[513] as that of those mainstream philosophers he criticized.

7.8.4.4 The Emergence of Marginalized Occupational Groups

The efforts to introduce structural changes since the mid-seventeenth century—such as the Five-House Registration System and the Uniform Land Tax—had significant consequences for the administration of tax payments and, consequently, for the definition of status groups. Because they were implemented experimentally in different regions at different times, they also resulted in regional differences in the formats of household registers and other administrative documents, further complicating the reconstruction of social and economic dynamics during that time. However, it is clear that the state

511 Quoted from ibid.: 131–32.
512 Ibid.: 134.
513 Ibid.: 134.

stepped up its efforts to govern its population more effectively, including by reorganizing and integrating those marginalized groups that had traditionally escaped attention.

Focusing on monks and *päkcŏng*, Yamauchi Tamihiro has shown that these groups emerged during this period as unique and distinct types of marginalized social groups (Japanese: *shūen-teki shakai shūdan*) in a way that was incompatible with the traditional order of good and base people. Monks in particular interacted with other marginalized groups, such as shamans and itinerant entertainers (*sadang*). Along with butchers and basket makers, these groups had been integrated into the *päkcŏng* category established by King Sejong in 1432.[514] These peripheral social groups represented free people among the lowborn people; their crucial difference from slaves was that their status was not hereditary at first.[515] But this changed quickly. The state fueled racist prejudice against the *päkcŏng*. As early as the mid-fifteenth century, it was claimed before King Sejo that they were the descendants of foreign ethnic groups who had not been assimilated into Korean society even after centuries:

> They remain fundamentally different from the native population, retaining their ancestral customs, living in clustered communities, and intermarrying among themselves.

They were also accused of robbery, theft, and litigiousness, and of cooperating with Japanese pirates. The king found these slanders edifying.[516]

Over time, the original *päkcŏng* population was joined by runaway slaves and landless peasants, who chose butchery and other stigmatized trades to make a living. The development of artisan workshops and private enterprises created conditions that allowed runaway slaves to work under new identities.[517]

In the surviving household registers, monks are first recorded in the second half of the seventeenth century. Until the first half of the eighteenth century, monks did not lose their inherited status after entering a temple. In the temple, this did not matter. A person born a slave could become the head of a temple and command other monks of much higher birth. However, in household records, these distinctions became visible again. If the head of a monastic household was a slave, his master would also be recorded.

However, examples from the Tägu region show that slaves were only a small group within the temple communities, accounting for less than one-tenth of their population. The 1681 Tonghwa Temple household register lists a total of 62 household members, three of whom were temple slaves while two were private slaves.[518] In 1711, Namjijang Temple reported 63 people, including four male slaves and one female slave.[519] In 1720,

514 K.-J. Kwon 2014: 173; Yamauchi 2021.
515 H. Koh 1959: 103.
516 CWS, Sejo, Y. 2:3:28 = May 2, 1456.
517 Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 26.
518 Yamauchi 2009: 17.
519 Ibid.: 18.

Imsu Temple had 24 people, including one lay Buddhist private slave and one female slave.[520]

After this time, data on the individual status of monks becomes increasingly scarce. In the early eighteenth century, however, monks were sometimes listed separately from the usual good and base status categories. By the end of the century, the distinction between free and slave monks had completely disappeared from the household registers, and monks were increasingly treated as a social group that was distinct from the general household population.[521]

In the new registers that emerged in the nineteenth century, the individual status of monks and *päkcŏng* no longer mattered. Regardless of their ancestry, they were recorded as monks, craftsmen, etc. This distinguished them from both the *yangban* and slaves. However, this did not signify social advancement. On the contrary, these groups were increasingly despised by the local communities and "often treated worse [than slaves] because of their occupations."[522] Outcaste villages were formed where only *päkcŏng* lived. These villages were often called "hide-producing villages" (*pichon*) because leather workers represented the *päkcŏng*,[523] along with butchers,[524] gravediggers, basket and sandal makers, dog catchers, and other occupations considered to be impure. *Päkcŏng* were also used as executioners. They had to wear lower-class clothing, such as the *pärängi* hat instead of the *kat* worn by the *yangban* and commoners.[525] In 1894, when they were emancipated by law, there were about 50,000 of them.[526]

7.8.4.4.1 Symbolic Servants: Buddhist Boy Attendants

Because Buddhism played only a marginal role in the official world of the *yangban*, there is little evidence of non-Confucian ideas about slavery during the Cosŏn period. Yi Yŏnghun even claims that "the image of the Buddha reflected in the faces of slaves disappeared during the Cosŏn period."[527] However, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, slaves were involved as patrons in the ritual burial of Buddha figures (*mäbul*), especially the Buddha Amitābha, in caves on religiously charged mountains such as the Inner Kŭmgang. This may have been linked to end-time expectations during a period of social insecurity and political uncertainty.[528] A surprising parallel can be found in another development undoubtedly related to the ancient idea of the "Buddha slave" and arising from a spiritual need for popular piety.

520 Ibid.: 20.
521 Ibid.: 24.
522 San Kwon Han 2014: 181.
523 Ayukai 1973: 184–85.
524 "*Päkcŏng* means butcher in the Eastern [Korean] idiom of our dynasty." Yi Ŭbong 1977: 724.
525 K.-J. Kwon 2014: 176–77.
526 Passin 1957: 198.
527 Yi Yŏnghun 2004: 32.
528 Stiller 2019: 280.

The Great East Asian War resulted in many casualties throughout the peninsula, including a large number of children. It seems that this situation brought about a remarkable change in the religious beliefs of the Koreans. Many Buddhist temples had also been damaged or destroyed during the war; when they were rebuilt, Judgment Halls were erected in many places, which had not previously existed in this form or with this particular decoration either in Korea or in the rest of East Asia. Its most salient feature was the appearance of statues of children, the "Boy Attendants of Good and Evil," in the role of Buddhist servants to the Ten Kings of the Underworld.[529]

The term "Boy Attendant" (*tongja*) refers to children, typically between the ages of four and twenty, who aspire to become monks. After the Great East Asian War, *tongja* paintings and figures became prominent in the new Judgment Halls. They were "young scribe boys"[530] whose primary duty was to record and report people's good and evil actions in the *Book of Deeds*, which determined the karmic fate of souls in the afterlife.[531] They are portrayed as holding record books, scrolls, inkstones, staffs, or sacred beasts related to the judgment process.[532] Over time, their role expanded: by the eighteenth century, offerings such as fruit and flowers replaced the *Book of Deeds* in many depictions, suggesting a shift from record-keeping to facilitating rituals on behalf of the faithful.[533] Throughout the nineteenth century, *tongja* became increasingly prominent, appearing in more elaborate garb that reflected their elevated status within the spiritual hierarchy.[534]

However, when contrasted with household servants, the role of these Boy Attendants as prototypes of servile virtue becomes apparent. Household servants, often also called boys or boy attendants, performed practical yet symbolically significant roles in the funeral rituals that were central to Confucian society. Funerals were expressions of filial piety, the most revered virtue in Confucian ethics, and servants were essential to

529 The concept of the Ten Kings of the Underworld developed gradually in China during the ninth century, influenced by indigenous beliefs and Buddhism, and reached Koryŏ in the tenth century. Initially, Chinese views of the afterlife were vague and centered on the Yellow Springs, a cold and dark realm. Over time, Buddhism introduced ideas of *karma*, moral accountability, and a bureaucratic underworld led by King Yama (Yŏnma in Korean) and his *alter ego*, the bodhisattva Kshitigarbha (Korean: Cijang). This evolved into the Ten Kings, judges of the dead who systematically evaluate a soul's *karma* over specific intervals before determining its reincarnation. Finally, the underworld is highly systematized, with numerous officials, magistrates, and demon kings, illustrating a detailed moral universe shaped by both Buddhism and Korean cultural interpretations. C. Kwon 2019: 3, 35–43.

530 Ibid.: 23.

531 C. Chö 2021: 48; C. Kwon 2019: 53.

532 C. Chö 2021: 55–59.

533 Ibid.: 61.

534 C. Chö 2021: 66–67; incidentally, from the perspective of contemporary popular Korean culture, the symbolic clarity, visual appeal, narrative richness, and adaptability of Boy Attendants make them ideal for contemporary digital content creation, which aims to "simplify the complex Buddhist culture into cultural prototypes that can be easily used." Yi Yŏngsuk and Shin Sŭngyun 2012: 173.

the proper observance of these rites. Their duties, summarized as "conducting ancestral rites" (*pongjesa*), which were critical for any *yangban* family,[535] included preparing the ceremonial spaces, carrying the funeral bier, arranging the offerings, and tending the gravesites after burial.[536] Similar to the Boy Attendants of Good and Evil in the spiritual realm, servants acted as facilitators of rituals, enabling families to fulfill their obligations to the deceased and to society. In addition, slaves often participated in large funeral processions as symbolic mourners, reflecting the collective grief of the household and reinforcing the moral and social order, and they were also used as grave keepers.[537] The parallel roles of Boy Attendants of Good and Evil and household servants are particularly evident in their shared function as record-keepers and intermediaries who convey the prayers and devotion of the living to the divine. In both cases, these figures also represent accountability, subordination, and loyalty within their respective systems, as well as the maintainance of cosmic or social harmony. It is in this way that the images of the slaves were actually reflected in the face of the Buddha.

17.1: Buddhist boy attendant with lotus buds.

17.2: Buddhist boy attendant with lotus flower.

17.3: Buddhist boy attendant with inkstone.

Fig. 17: Wooden statues of Buddhist boy attendants. Cosŏn period. Height 65.5–75.5 cm. Häinsa Temple Museum. Photos by the author

535 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 74.
536 Deuchler 2015: 204, 211, 267–68.
537 Deuchler 1992: 230.

According to the *Shilhak* scholar Sŏng Täjung, there were also critical assessments of the proximity between such Buddhist and secular ideas of servitude. Around 1801, when most public slavery had just been abolished, he recounted an anecdote in which the slaves expressed their frustration with the face of the Buddha:

> Outside the Hyehwa Gate [in Seoul], on the eastern bank of the stream, there is a stone cliff covered with a stone canopy supported by two stone pillars. On the face of the cliff, a Buddha figure is carved, referred to as the "Slave Buddha," and the stream is named "Buddha Stream."
> The woodcutting slaves of the city's eastern district would gather daily beneath this carving and, looking up, curse it, saying: "The one who makes us slaves to others is this Buddha! If the Buddha has eyes, why does he look upon us like this?" They raised their sickles and struck at the carving, gouging out both of its eyes.
> The resentment born from their oppressive treatment was thus transferred onto the Buddha. Is this not something to fear? Moreover, there is a proverb that says: "When this Buddha disappears, there will be no slaves." It might be possible to do away with slaves, but how could one eliminate a stone Buddha?[538]

7.8.5 Yi Hyŏngsang: Giving Away Slaves

Apparently, Yi Hyŏngsang, an active official since 1680, had read the signs when he decided to free a large group of inherited slaves who had run away from his family more than sixty years earlier. They had come out of hiding in Cŏlla Province two years before and offered to pay compensation for their freedom. But Hyŏngsang refused the money and set them free for life. He wrote this statement:[539]

> The slaves of Honam, including Chŏnik and others, have been passed down through eight or nine generations. They no longer wish to remain in hiding, and last year, they voluntarily submitted a list of their names. In the past two years, they have appeared three times, staying for several months each time and earnestly asking for full redemption.
> Now, the number of these people is not small, and according to their own reports, the total number of the old and weak, men and women[540] exceeds several hundred. They are pleading earnestly with blood and sincerity.
> If I grant their request, I will be freed from poverty, and my household will prosper. However, I must consider the legal precedent, which states:
> "Cases exceeding sixty years shall not be heard."[541]
> Furthermore, according to the principles of celestial cycles, every thirty years brings a small change, and every sixty years brings a great transformation. How much more so for people and property?

538 Sŏng Täjung: *Chŏngsŏng Capki*. Translated from the Chinese original, quoted from Co Hanŭl 2023: 153.

539 Pyŏngwa *Sŏnsäng Munjip* 甁窩先生文集 v. 23, http://yoksa.aks.ac.kr/jsp/aa/VolView.jsp?aa10no=kh2_je_a_vsu_55019_001&aa15no=001&aa20no=55019_001_0487. Cf. Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 357.

540 老弱男女 *noyak namnyŏ*. This Chinese phrase is a standard four-character compound used to indicate "everyone without distinction of age, strength, or gender."

541 This limitation period originates from the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn*.

> In court rulings across nine counties, I have always placed great weight on the time limit, because I know it to be just and proper.
> These people understand that their case has been passed down for generations, and although they have voluntarily come forward to seek redemption, their status has not been questioned for sixty years.
> If I were to enslave them again, it would create an irreconcilable conflict between public and private interests, between sentiment and law. If I were to abandon the principles I have upheld all my life and change my position for personal gain, I would be ashamed even in death.
> What is the value of thousands of chariots and vast wealth? Moreover, some of them are scholars and military officers, which makes their enslavement even more unbearable.
> Last year, I granted special remission to five slaves for the same reason. If I think of it, manumitting only five people while keeping the rest enslaved would be a half-measure that is neither just nor rational.
> Since it is already unjust to claim them as property, poverty is preferable to wealth.
> Therefore, I have I discussed this with my children, and we have decided to remit them completely, and in accordance with this document, I will grant them formal manumission papers to protect them from any future claims of enslavement. This is the right thing to do.

Thus, Yi Hyŏngsang chose an ethical stance over economic gain, following the Confucian principles of justice and propriety and rejecting personal gain from an unjust claim. His decision, influenced by legal limitations and moral reasoning, contrasts with many who exploited loopholes in slave hunting to reclaim fugitives.

From an economic point of view, however, freeing these slaves may have been the right thing to do anyway. Available household registry data from Kyŏngsang Province suggest that the percentage of slaves decreased steadily after the late seventeenth century.

Tab. 19: Trends in the percentage of the slave population in Kyŏngsang Province, 17th–19th c. (Based on analyses of household registers published between 1938 and 1985. Use with caution due to possible methodological obsolescence.) (Yim Haksŏng 2013: 89).

Year	Cinhä	Sanŭm	Tägu	Tansŏng	Ulsan	Year	Cinhä	Sanŭm	Tägu	Tansŏng	Ulsan
1606		41.7		64.4		1759				30.2	
1609					40.5	1765			17.1		
1630		34.5				1786				25.9	
1678				55.6		1804					22.5
1690			45.9			1825				10.5	
1717				45.3		1867					14.7
1729					31.0	1876	5.3				

7.9 From Profit to Burden: The Shifting Economics of Labor

The persistence of slavery in the first three centuries of the Cosŏn period aligns with Domar's hypothesis, which states that labor scarcity and land abundance favor systems of forced labor.[542] Hereditary slavery offered the *yangban* several clear benefits. It provided a guaranteed and inexpensive labor supply, economic flexibility, and tighter control over their workforce. Moreover, slaves generated additional revenue through taxes and tribute, thereby reinforcing the *yangban*'s economic position. These advantages ensured a stable foundation for the *yangban* economy, allowing them to maintain their social status while fulfilling Confucian obligations. Slaves provided a reliable labor force that supported the elite class in its administrative and ritual duties—a service that free peasants, who were often viewed as less dependable, could not provide.

Over time, however, the factors that made slavery so profitable began to diminish. Population growth and changing economic conditions reduced labor scarcity, paving the way for a transition to alternative labor arrangements, such as tenant farming and the hiring of workers. One important factor was the spread of the practice of transplanting rice seedlings to wet paddies, which had greatly increased labor productivity beginning in the eighteenth century. Weeding frequency could now be reduced, from four times to twice per season. In dry fields, the cultivation of a second crop expanded, with the main produce being barley, soybeans, and green peas, which were easy to market. Other cash crops included tobacco, cotton, and *kimchi* vegetables. This meant that small landowners could make greater profits by selling their surplus production in the markets and hiring additional farm workers as needed.[543] As these shifts occurred, the profitability of slavery declined. To minimize production costs, slave owners reduced the number of slaves by freeing or selling them, or by simply letting them run away. Slaves were finally faced with "unprecedented competition"[544] as a labor force and thus began to actively seek other forms of existence.[545]

Beginning in 1694, six memorials and petitions were submitted to the king to reinstate the uniform matrifilial rule, which had already been in place from 1669 to 1678. However, King Sukcong always postponed a decision.[546] Under the new circumstances, the issue was not as divisive as before. In October 1730, Right State Councilor Co Munmyŏn made the following proposition to King Yŏngjo:

542 Domar 1970.

543 Hochol Lee 1997: 115–17; Totman 2004: 150.

544 Totman 2004: 151.

545 One indication of this was the increasing number of shipwrecked people from Kyŏngsang Province and Cŏlla Province found on the shores of Japan, many of whom were slaves accompanied by their wives and children. They were supposedly trying to escape from Korea. Lee Hoon 2008: 40–42, 75–77; Lee 2006: 87.

546 Hiraki 1982: 137.

> "The system of hereditary slavery does not exist in China. In our nation, however, it has a long history and cannot be abolished abruptly. The rule that the offspring of slaves who marry commoners follow the father's status, however, is particularly unjust. Because of this, many commoners have been reclassified as slaves. During the reign of King Hyŏnjong, the late Minister Song Shiyŏl submitted a proposal to abolish this rule, but it was not enforced thereafter.
> If this rule were permanently abolished, how many idle commoners could be recovered for the state? It would also help to alleviate resentment among the people."
> [...] The king replied: "If this pathway is opened, it will inevitably lead to abuses, such as slaves rebelling against their masters. This is nothing more than empty talk at the table."[547]

But it did not take long for the talk at the table to turn into national legislation. A major reason was the overburdening of the remaining commoners with taxes and services. They were even exempted from service in the Squad Unit Forces, which by the early eighteenth century had become an unreliable and ineffective force composed almost entirely of (mostly out-residing) slaves. Their main purpose became collecting taxes from the conscripts. This effectively made the slaves "double taxpayers" as they were obliged to pay their usual body tribute plus the military service tax. At least the military service tax was only half of what commoners paid. To offset this, beginning in 1654, each conscript on active duty was assigned one commoner or two slave guarantors, usually chosen from among his relatives. These guarantors were responsible for paying the conscript's service tax while he was on duty. In practice, one-third of the conscripts served, while the rest paid taxes.[548]

Again, it was felt that more commoners were needed. In January 1731, royal inspector Kim Sangsŏng reported to the king on his recent inspection tour of Kyŏnggi Province. In this context, he

> also spoke passionately about the issues with military service and the abuses within clans. He proposed that, starting this year, all children born to slaves who married commoners—whether public or private slaves—should follow their mother's status, thus increasing the pool of eligible commoners. The king sought the advice of his ministers. The Right State Councillor, Co Munmyŏn, strongly supported the proposal.
> The king decreed: "According to the inspector's report, the shrinking population of commoners stems from this issue. It would be wrong to neglect such a significant matter due to minor concerns. From this year onward, all individuals born under such circumstances shall be officially classified as commoners, regardless of whether they are born of public or private slaves, and their status will follow that of their mother."[549]

While this decision is often seen as the final breakthrough in fully establishing the matrifilial rule with respect to all slaves, the matter is not as clear as it seems. On February 16, 1731, there was a discussion before King Yŏngjo about the potential problems caused by the new law. Song Chinmyŏng suggested adopting "the recent relay

547 CWS, Yŏngjo, Y. 6:9:20 = October 20, 1730. Cf. ibid.: 144.

548 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1987: 344–50.

549 CWS, Yŏngjo, Y. 6:12:26 = January 22, 1731. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 145.

station rule, according to which sons follow the father's status and daughters follow the mother's status" (the patrifilial-matrifilial bifurcation rule). The purpose of this rule was to avoid depleting the pool of able-bodied slaves. The king acknowledged that implementing the matrifilial rule might cause slave men to marry only free women. Other ministers expressed concern that changing the law and implementing the bifurcation rule would create confusion, weaken state revenues, and reduce the commoner population within ten years. They argued that this would only affect the number of public slaves because "private households can force their male slaves [to marry] their so-called female in-house slaves, and thus suffer no losses." The king acknowledged that all laws have flaws. Despite some suggestions to modify the decree or adjust its implementation date, he insisted on adhering to the law as it was written. Ultimately, the ministers were instructed to discuss the proposal.[550]

On April 21, 1731, Song Chinmyŏng reported that his memorial had been shelved by the government, so the Department of Slave Affairs could not proceed with implementing the new legislation. Left State Councilor Hong Chijung answered that the government had prepared a reply draft, but warned that creating a new law—under which siblings born of the same mother could have different masters—would disrupt established distinctions and lead to endless legal disputes. The king acknowledged the tension between established principles and practical accomodations, yet he criticized the government's indecision by vacillating between old and new policies:

> I have heard that the reply draft allows the implementation [of Song Chinmyŏng's proposal]. Yet, they find the matrifilial rule convenient in the morning and the patrifilial rule preferable in the evening. [...] We should simply follow the earlier decree and make adjustments if any problems arise.

Thus, King Yŏngjo decided to uphold the original decree, insisting on careful implementation and adjustments if necessary, rather than major legal changes.[551]

However, this account of the debate and the king's decision is not reflected in the *Veritable Records*, which report the following under the same date:

> The king ordered that sons should follow the status of their fathers and daughters the status of their mothers. Thus, he established the law that distinguishes between public and private slaves.[552]

This would have meant introducing the patrifilial-matrifilial bifurcation rule for public slaves only. However, there is no evidence that this bifurcation was actually implemented. Perhaps the annalists misunderstood the crux of the court debate. What is clear, however, is that King Yŏngjo did not consider the new legislation to be above future scrutiny.

550 SWI, Yŏngjo 7:1:10 = February 16, 1731.
551 SWI, Yŏngjo 7:3:25 = April 21, 1731.
552 CSW, Yŏngjo, Y. 7:3:25 = April 21, 1731.

Official reports and census data from that time suggest that local officials and landowners often disregarded the policy, perpetuating disputes over slave status.[553] Nevertheless, the law played a crucial role in reducing the number of slaves throughout the eighteenth century. However, legal or moral arguments were obviously not the real reason why kings and *yangban* let this happen. Cosŏn society and its economy had reached a point where, as Domar puts it,

> the ownership of human beings becomes pointless due to the large increase of slaves, who become free provided they stay poor.[554]

Moreover, the introduction of the full matrifilial rule in 1731 allowed slaves to secure free status for their children if they married free women. However, this also meant that they had to take on the obligations of commoners, prompting many to try to escape.[555] Interest in buying commoner status also increased significantly. By paying a one-time "compensation to become free" (*songnyang*), many slaves now had the means to buy their exemption from servitude.[556] This only made sense because a significant number of slaves had accumulated enough wealth by now to afford these payments. According to a 1778 court report, it was not long before corrupt officials and greedy slave owners tried to rip off wealthy slaves:

> After being granted a token of privilege from various palace departments, palace slaves were sometimes forced to repurchase their freedom at exorbitant prices. Those who had already redeemed themselves were labeled "hidden fugitives" if they were found to be wealthy. They were then subjected to slave hunts, persecution, and severe mistreatment, which led to extreme disorder.[557]

Therefore, it seems that at least some *yangban* had "seller's remorse"—not because they lost a labor force, but because the freed slaves did not remain poor as Domar had stipulated. At the same time, even the slave fathers of free children began identifying themselves as the "fathers of commoners" and started adopting family names, a practice that signified their changing social identity.[558]

Until the late seventeenth century, most slave households did not have family names. In Tansŏng County, Kyŏngsang Province, in 1678, half of all registered households had no family names, more than 90 percent of which were slave households. Over the next forty years, the proportion of households without a family name dropped to one-quarter, more than 85 percent of which were slave households. Seventy years

553 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1987: 359.
554 Domar 1970: 23.
555 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1987: 359.
556 Sun Joo Kim 2021: 150.
557 SWI, Cŏngjo, Y. 2:1:10 = January 26, 1778. Cf. Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1987: 353.
558 To 2023: 491.

later, only 6 percent had no surname. By the early nineteenth century, virtually all inhabitants had a surname.[559]

Tab. 20: Households without family name in Tangsŏng Prefecture, Kyŏngsang Province (Kyungran Kim 2016: 228).

Year	Total Households	Nameless Households	Nameless Household Share	Nameless Slave Households	Slave Household Share among Nameless Households
1678	2,118	1,057	50	957	91
1717[a]	2,514	665	26	581	87
1759	2,713	450	17	381	85
1786	3,045	182	6	151	83
1825	3,083	24	1	13	54

a In table no. 3 of Kim's work, she confuses the 1717 data with the 1732 data. This is corrected here.

In August of 1732, the Board of Border Defense prepared new details for grain contributions, with different rewards according to the amount donated. Exemption from forced labor for three years was available for 10 *sŏk*, exemption for ten years for 50 *sŏk*, etc.[560] The next day, an official protested this policy in a memorandum to King Yŏngjo:

> Obtaining rewards through grain contributions has become a source of shame for the respectable members of rural communities. The practice of government officials forcibly taking grain from the people is also highly unjustifiable.[561]

By the late seventeenth century, these grain contributions had become a double-edged sword. Officials often put unfair pressure on the farmers to contribute grain or used the system for personal gain. While blank privilege certificates were effective in replenishing state coffers and providing resources during emergencies, they also led to systemic corruption. Officials distributed them arbitrarily, leading to widespread forgery and abuse. Records were often incomplete, making it difficult to verify who had legitimately received a certificate. The sale of positions based on wealth undermined merit-based governance and weakened the state's administrative structure. Nevertheless, Yŏngjo continued to accept grain donations, and he also continued to issue blank privilege certificates. In 1739, he approved 1,000 blank certificates for famine relief in Songdo and the surrounding regions; in 1745, he approved 1,000 more for repairing military equip-

559 Kyungran Kim 2016: 228.

560 CWS, Yŏngjo, Y. 8:7:5 = August 13, 1732.

561 CWS, Yŏngjo, Y. 8:7:6 = August 14, 1732.

ment in Kangwŏn province; and in 1749, and again in 1760, he approved 800 for famine relief in the northern regions and Kangwŏn.[562] This practice obviously deepened the imbalance between rich and poor because only the wealthy could afford to participate in the system, leaving the majority of the population disenfranchised.

From the late seventeenth century onward, the state increasingly imposed public labor obligations and military service on slaves. By the late eighteenth century, nearly half of private slaves bore both public and private obligations (*kyŏmyŏk*), particularly those who lived in separate households or were out-residing slaves.

This made it possible to extend cloth taxes to private slaves. However, collecting cloth taxes proved to be significantly more complex than the established land tax system because it required accurate household counts to determine quotas. Slave owners facilitated this transition by recording their slaves' obligations in household rosters, which in turn bolstered their social standing within the rural community by contributing to collective village responsibilities.[563] This administrative necessity created avenues for manipulation. Wealthy landowners and government officials often manipulated household records to shield their unfree laborers and slaves from taxation,[564] while smallholding cultivators sought the protection of influential patrons to evade the levy. Consequently, the burden of cloth taxation disproportionately fell on impoverished peasants and slaves who lacked the means to circumvent the assessment. The hope of escaping these burdens became a major incentive for a growing number of slaves to abscond, although the advantages of flight were often uncertain and minimal.

In response, many *yangban* sought to prevent desertion and maintain their workforce by providing small but consistent economic incentives. For instance, they began purchasing the free offspring of their slaves and provided monthly grain distributions to offer indirect support and protection from state labor obligations.[565] More significantly, they implemented slave compacts (*nobi kye*) as a crucial mechanism for both social control and economic cooperation.

Initially, such compacts served as mutual aid societies that offered material support to their members. They were broad-based initiatives aimed at unifying the *yangban* and lower classes. These compacts enabled both sides to pool resources and manage costs collectively. However, they gradually evolved into exclusive gentry-only organizations by the late eighteenth century.[566] Nevertheless, grassroots compacts also emerged, particularly in villages. These compacts functioned as autonomous cooperatives that managed shared resources such as land and labor.[567]

562 CWS, Yŏngjo, Y. 15:10:5, 20:12:19, 25:11:5; 39:10:19.

563 To 2023: 500.

564 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 75.

565 To 2023: 492, 2023: 485.

566 To 2023: 483; Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 4.

567 To 2023: 484; Shikata surveyed and categorized 60 compacts, but he did not examine slave compacts: Shikata 1944; Suzuki defines the *kye* as "a rational method of cooperation based on financial resources"

Slave compacts became particularly relevant in the latter half of the eighteenth century.[568] They varied in structure. While some involved entire groups, others were formed as two-person agreements between a master and an individual slave to jointly purchase and cultivate land. One example is the Caryŏng Yi clan of Majin Village (Cinju), which owned 43 slaves in 1710. This number fluctuated over time, peaking at 102 in 1762, then declining to 20–30 in later years. The clan established a slave–master compact in 1756, which remained active until 1825. Most members of this compact were their own slaves.[569]

The compact's membership roster, written in Hangŭl, listed all members, including their family names, which did not appear in household registers or inheritance documents. This is another indication of the manipulation of official records. Most male adult slaves signed with inked handprints, while some wrote their names in Chinese characters. Rosters were updated irregularly and often included the sons of previous members, some of whom may have been born free.[570]

Compact members, who were usually household heads, participated in collective activities, including meetings, mourning rituals, agricultural labor, and the maintenance of communal facilities such as grain storage buildings and their masters' main houses. Those who failed to carry out their obligations faced fines.[571] Beyond these duties, slaves continued to fulfill private obligations, such as cultivating land, perfoming household labor, and guarding graves, as well as public obligations, such as military service.[572] The governance and operation of these compacts were documented in compact records, which also contained detailed regulations (*cŏlmok*). The compacts were generally managed by an executive body that oversaw communication, record-keeping, and financial matters. Membership in this body rotated annually, and in some cases, additional representatives and service personnel were designated.[573]

The financial sustainability of slave compacts relied primarily on the interest from grain loans extended to both members and non-members alike, with repayment due after the autumn harvest. Interest rates were notably high, often reaching 20 percent per month. Another significant revenue stream came from the rent of compact-owned farmland, which was usually provided by *yangban* patrons. Many tenants were not compact members.[574]

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but his research is also limited to non-slave compacts, stressing the ideas of self-government and equality among members: Suzuki 1963: 556.

568 To 2023: 482; B.-R. Kim 2018: 407.

569 To 2023: 495.

570 Ibid.: 496.

571 Ibid.: 514.

572 Ibid.: 503.

573 Ibid.: 504.

574 Ibid.: 510.

A substantial portion of compact funds was allocated for social welfare, particularly in the form of funeral and mourning support. Funeral costs were high, which was why both the slaves and their masters were interested in a communal solution.[575] Assistance typically included rice, hemp cloth, and yeast, with most members receiving aid once or twice in their lifetime. Additionally, compact assets were sometimes used as intermediaries for tax payments.[576]

The increasing fluctuation and mobility of slaves also became a matter of great concern to the royal administration. On January 12, 1740, Right State Councilor Song Inmyŏng approached King Yŏngjo with the case of suspected runaway slaves who had allegedly murdered their master's family. He introduced the case by remarking on the importance of upholding slave laws:

> The laws on slaves in our country have existed since the Eight Prohibitions of Kija. King Thäjo of Koryŏ placed great importance on them. During the late Koryŏ period, knowledgeable individuals considered the collapse of the laws on slaves as a sign of the kingdom's impending downfall. Recently, impoverished *yangban*, in what is called "hunting slaves," have committed many unjust and unreasonable acts. Therefore, hunting slaves is always prohibited in times of famine, which is truly intended to facilitate the people's livelihood and stability. However, the laws on slavery have gradually deteriorated to the point that slaves kill their masters and people in other regions remain indifferent because they do not understand the ethical relationships and principles involved. This is also a cause for concern.[577]

Five years later, after a controversial debate, it was decided that tribute income would no longer be measured based on the actual number of slaves. Instead, fixed values would be introduced based on the figures from 1740. This method, called general tallying (*pichong*), was intended to prevent arbitrary increases and annual fluctuations by ensuring that the number of registered slaves remained stable on paper.[578] It was supposed to eliminate the need for further costly push-and-brush campaigns and to prevent administrative manipulation by officials who might otherwise inflate or deflate the numbers to suit their own interests. However, its legitimacy was questioned because it introduced a rigid system that some feared would not reflect the natural demographic changes and could lead to new bureaucratic problems.[579] Implementation began in Kyŏngsang Province, where most of the public slaves lived, and was applied nationwide around 1765. From time to time, corrections were made to the assumed number of slaves. The trend was always downward.[580]

575 Yi Häjŏng 2016: 213.
576 To 2023: 513.
577 SWI, Yŏngjo, Y. 14:12:25 = January 12, 1740.
578 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 71.
579 SWI, Yŏngjo, Y. 21:6:5 = June 23, 1745.
580 Cf. Hiraki 1982: 116–22.

The inequitable impact of taxation on the lower classes, as well as its role in fostering fraudulent reporting among the elite, fueled widespread resentment. These administrative inefficiencies and mounting public grievances eventually prompted internal governmental debates on reform. This explains why King Yŏngjo was also a major advocate of the Equal-Service Law enacted in 1750 despite opposition from some *yangban* factions.

The Equal-Service Law cut in half the annual textile tax levied on commoners in compensation for their military service duties (*kunpho*).[581] To offset the resulting decrease in government revenue, new taxes on rice fields, fishing, ships, and salt production were introduced. This marked a further shift from a system of forced labor and individual-based taxes to a system based on land and commodity taxation. Thus, the financial burden was distributed more equitably throughout society.[582] In 1753, the household-based assessment system was officially abandoned, and the cloth tax was restructured so as to be assessed based on land ownership rather than precise household counts.[583] However, these reforms did not abolish pre-existing tax obligations such as repaying loans for grain. These loans originated from temporary relief policies during famines, but they developed into regular payments on the provincial level. This effectively added additional financial demands to the populace. Thus, the tax system branched into land taxation (*cŏnjŏng*), military taxation (*kunjŏng*), and grain loan taxation (*hwanjŏng*), collectively known as the "Three Taxations" (*samjŏng*).[584]

Discussions about slave relief began in 1754. There was considerable disagreement within the government about who should compensate for the loss of tribute revenue. The government took a "very passive attitude" toward reform.[585] King Yŏngjo therefore seized the initiative before these important details could be clarified. In a 1755 decree, the king made it very clear that his interest in reform was related to his self-image as a benevolent ruler:

> Alas! Having passed a full sixty-year cycle [i.e., being 60 years old], I have now reigned for thirty years, yet I have bestowed no significant grace upon the people. My heart is constantly filled with shame. As my hair turns white and I approach the twilight of life, what shall I accomplish?
> Do the 咸 and 恒 hexagrams[586] not state that there must first be man and woman, and then husband and wife, and that only then do father and child follow? Alas! Who understands the joy of husband and wife better than capital-bureau slaves? Some remain virgins even at the age of fifty. Others go

581 Deuchler 2015: 348.

582 Deuchler 1997: 310; Sung Woo Kim 2014: 64.

583 T. Hatada 1969: 82–83; Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 71.

584 Sung Woo Kim 2014: 67–68.

585 Hiraki 1982: 34, 77.

586 *I Ching* hexagrams no. 31 ䷞ ("influence"; "the universal mutual attraction between the sexes") and no. 32 ䷟ ("duration": "In the sphere of social relationships, the hexagram represents the institution of marriage as the enduring union of the sexes"). Yŏngjo referred to these hexagrams because he was in the 31st year of his reign. Wilhelm 1950: 131, 135.

> so far as to call someone else their husband. How can I eat without feeling troubled when I think of this?
> Instruct [...] the senior officials of the State Council to deliberate and propose measures for reducing the cloth tribute imposed on all slaves, whether public or private. Consult the ministers in the capital and present the results during an audience.[587]

A few days later, Yŏngjo was told that for male slaves, tribute reductions were linked to the concept of relieved households, which provided exemptions for field labor. These exemptions, granted for various reasons, such as being part of the royal family, old age, military service, outstanding filial piety or virtue, or when facing natural disasters, allowed some male slaves to reduce their obligations. However, personal labor-related tributes, such as cloth payments, were still required. Officials argued that these labor-related tributes could not be reduced further, particularly in regions where relieved households were abundant. The inconsistency between field labor exemptions and continued tribute obligations created administrative tension, especially as the number of eligible commoners dwindled and more responsibilities fell on slaves.

Further administrative challenges stemmed from the Ministry of Military Affairs' handling of tribute allocations. Tribute obligations for military training and duties were structured on a rotational basis. However, disputes arose during leap years when additional intercalary months disrupted the allocation system. The ministry often cited these disruptions to justify claims for unpaid tributes, creating constant administrative conflicts. The government proposed adjusting the rotation system to account for leap years, which would redistribute contributions more evenly and prevent disputes. The king approved these adjustments as part of broader efforts to ensure fairness in tribute collection.

The situation was more burdensome for female slaves. Unlike male slaves, female slaves were not eligible for relieved household status and were thus fully obligated to provide tributes. Unequal taxation was not the only factor, although it was a major one, in the increase of female runaway slaves. This trend is well reflected in the case of the Kyŏngju Sajonggong Chŏ family. Their household records from 1723 to 1822 show that both the absolute and relative numbers of escaped female slaves were significantly higher than those of males. During those 100 years, nearly 50 percent of all recorded female slaves absconded, as opposed to only 32 percent of males.[588]

587 CWS, Yŏngjo 31:2:4 = March 5, 1755. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 33.
588 Compiled from the data in Kwŏn Kijung 2023: 244–45.

Tab. 21: Absconded slaves of the Kyŏngju Sajonggong Chŏ family, 1723–1822 (Kwŏn Kijung 2023: 244–45).

Sex	Total		Absconded	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Male	579	44	186	32
Female	746	56	370	50
Total	1,325	100	556	42

7.9.1 Inequalities in Slave Burdens

In fact, female slave escapes had become so common that in some cases, the slave sale contracts contained a rescue clause such as:

> If within three years, the individual escapes or goes into hiding, the original price shall be refunded.[589]

King Yŏngjo questioned the apparent gender inequality in the system, but the administration justified it by citing the entrenched practice of collecting personal labor tributes, which were essential to maintaining administrative operations. Nevertheless, in March 1755, the king proposed the reduction of non-essential tribute items for female slaves.[590]

A week later, Yŏngjo was informed that a reduction in the tribute of capital-bureau slaves was not feasible "in the foreseeable future" for fiscal reasons.[591] Apparently, this did not sit well with the king. Two weeks later, he ordered the State Council to finalize measures that would halve the tribute obligations of capital-bureau slaves and issued the following proclamation:

> Alas! Two great afflictions weigh heavily upon the nation: one is the burden of commoner labor duties, and the other is the plight of slaves. The abuses of the commoner labor system have extended beyond mere grievances between neighbors to the point of collecting tribute from white bones.[592] The hardships of the slaves are even more severe and cruel—men are unable to marry, and women are unable to wed. Is this not contrary to the principle expressed in the 咸 hexagram, which states, "First, there must be man and woman, then husband and wife, and then father and child"?
> Such conditions are not only intolerable under just governance but also harm the harmony of society. Although the burden of commoner labor has already been reduced, if we do not reform the

589 Taken from a contract for the sale of a thirty-year-old woman named Sunjŏl and a six-year-old girl named Yŏnwŏl, presumably her daughter, for the price of 65 *ryang* in 1884. Quoted from Pak Kŏnho 2022b: s.p.

590 CWS, Yŏngjo 31:2:7 = March 8, 1755.

591 CWS, Yŏngjo 31:2:12 = March 13, 1755.

592 A metaphor for "persons who had already died." T. Hatada 1969: 83.

> tribute obligations of slaves now, when will we act? Despite my advanced age, I am issuing a decree to immediately reduce slave tribute: one piece of cloth for male slaves, and half a piece of cloth for female slaves. This will be formally codified by the senior council.
> Although recent disruptions delayed this reform, I am confident it will now be completed. On the eighth day, after the royal audience at the Hall of Accounts, despite my fatigue, I personally reviewed the matter. Alas! From this day forward, may the lives of slaves be somewhat improved. Let this decree be printed with moveable type and distributed according to established regulations. It is to be observed permanently to ensure that my earnest intention in these twilight years is not neglected.[593]

To assess the fiscal impact of this reform policy, various calculations were carried out on behalf of the king. These calculations show the number of public slaves affected and their highly uneven regional distribution across the peninsula. Data from the mid-eighteenth century show a total of 27,000 to 28,000 tribute-paying capital-bureau slaves.[594]

More than two-thirds of the slaves lived in Kyŏngsang Province in the southeast of the peninsula, while one-quarter lived in Phyŏngan Province in the northwest. Only about 2 percent lived in Cŏlla, the province adjacent to Kyŏngsang in the southwest. The distribution of palace slaves was quite different. In 1755, a total of 5.574 slaves were counted, of whom 1,595 lived in Hamgyŏng, 1,220 in Hwanghä, and 1,199 in Phyŏngan Province. This means that nearly three-quarters of all palace slaves lived in the three northern provinces.[595]

Apart from the capital-bureau and palace slaves, there were approximately 28,000 relay station slaves—in total, 50,000 tribute-contributing public slaves. The total tax revenue from all these groups was equivalent to 50,000 *ryang* in cash and kind.[596]

593 CWS, Yŏngjo 31:2:27 = March 28, 1755. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 34.

594 Hiraki expresses irritation about numerical differences in the main sources, claiming they are "not the result of a miscalculation." However, an obvious miscalculation is present in the data table he quoted from the *Thakciji* ("Records of the Ministry of Taxation"), where the total number of male slaves was 11,987 instead of 11,687. This does not explain the problems he raises, but it is a reminder that calculations should always be made *cum grano salis*. Hiraki 1982: 85–86; the *Thakciji* were compiled in 1788 and contain statistical data that are absent from chronological records: Sŏul Tähakkyo Kyujanggak 2015: 161.

595 Hiraki 1982: 35–38.

596 Ibid.: 84.

Tab. 22: Tribute-paying capital-bureau slaves in Cosŏn in 1748 and 1750. 1748: *Paldo Nobi Shilgongsu*. 1750: *Thakciji*.

Province	1748			1750		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Chungchŏng	200	108	308	693	383	1,076
Cŏlla	209	236	445	735	492	1,227
Hamgyŏng	41	1,171	1,212	43	939	982
Hwanghä	1	1	2	23	11	34
Kangwŏn	24	21	45	170	121	291
Kyŏnggi	5	3	8	108	707	815
Kyŏngsang	5,368	13,237	18,605	7,883	10,327	18,210
Pyŏngan	2,621	3,179	6,340	2,032	3,072	5,104
∑	8,469	17,956	26,965	11,687	16,052	27,739

Tab. 23: Palace slaves in 1755. *Näshi Nobi Kamgong Samok* (Hong Ponghan 1800: 16–17).

Department	Slaves		
	Male	Female	Total
Treasury	1,977	1,707	3,684
Palaces	1,299	591	1,890
∑	3,276	2,298	5,574

The reduction of taxes enacted by Yŏngjo was certainly "a major overhaul" of slave taxation,[597] but it was a costly move for the administration. Moreover, it did not provide the anticipated relief for the slaves. The perceived improvements in taxation were largely illusory because they entailed an accumulation rather than a replacement of fiscal burdens. In 1774, the Sub-Director of the Ministry of Taxation, Kim Ŭngsun,

> submitted a proposal addressing the chronic issues regarding capital-bureau slaves. The king expressed his desire to completely abolish the system of "female tribute," including the tributes from female capital-bureau and relay station slaves as well as female shamans, and to prohibit female private slaves from being required to pay tribute.
> The king instructed the State Council to deliberate on the matter and draft detailed regulations. However, the council found it difficult to propose alternatives to replace the tribute system, so the decision was delayed for an extended period.[598]

597 Hiraki 1982: 43.

598 CWS, Yŏngjo, Y. 50:2:14 = March 14, 1774.

One month later, Yŏngjo finally decreed the reduction in tributes for female capital-bureau and relay station slaves and shamans.[599]

It turned out that the instructions from 1755 had not been strictly observed, as the king learned from a memorial submitted by a member of the Office of the Inspector-General:

> I have heard that among the slave registries, there are individuals recorded as being over a hundred years old, and their number is beyond calculation. These cases represent the extreme injustice of collecting tribute from white bones.[600] Now that the reform of female slave tributes is underway, the slave registries should also be thoroughly reviewed and rectified to ensure that the 1755 Regulations do not remain mere words on paper.
> In Honam and Hosŏ,[601] the total number of registered slaves does not exceed three thousand, while in Yŏngnam,[602] the number of surplus slaves and tribute obligations is significant during the review process, although there may be concerns about reduced numbers in some areas. However, the surplus in Yŏngnam could be redistributed to make up for the shortfall in Honam and Hosŏ, ensuring an overall stable count.[603]

The king agreed and ordered an investigation. Whatever the outcome, this information about the unequal distribution of slaves and the resulting fiscal problems are evidence that the development of slavery still showed considerable regional variation.

One week later, Censor Pak Cunwŏn submitted another petition containing interesting details about the situation of different kinds of public slaves, which is worth quoting:

> The so-called capital-bureau slaves are subjected to demands whenever the levy is enforced and are burdened with additional exactions. They are squeezed to the marrow and flayed to the skin, with no limits to the extortions they endure. When a single family cannot bear the burden, their relatives must shoulder it; when their relatives cannot either, they scatter in all directions. When one family flees, their entire clan must take on the burden in their stead. This continues year after year, leaving few survivors. Commoners who witness this fear any association, dreading recognition. Among the children of office slaves, some remain unable to marry even past the age of thirty. Their dwellings, whether humble huts or makeshift shelters, are as distant from prosperity as heaven is from earth. How could the light of justice ever shine on the homes of the fugitives? The distress and grievances they endure are truly enough to disrupt harmony.
> I humbly beg Your Highness to take pity on the wretched plight of the capital-bureau slaves and to urgently order the provincial officials to resettle them and regulate their livelihood. They should no longer be sent to corvée labor under the push-and-brush system. Instead, the local authorities should assess the amount of tribute paid over the past few years and collect it gradually. If officials are assigned to manage the office's finances, there will be no risk of deficits, and the slaves will have a means of survival.
> The system of hereditary servitude imposed on these slaves contradicts the principles of the Eight

599 CWS, Yŏngjo, Y. 50:3:13 = April 14, 1774.
600 See. p. 487.
601 Regions in Cŏlla Province.
602 Region in Kyŏngsang Province.
603 CWS, Yŏngjo 50:6:23 = July 20, 1774.

> Prohibitions of the sage Kija and does not align with the just governance of a sagely ruler. As someone who embodies the vast virtues of Heaven and earth and radiates the brilliance of the sun and moon, Your Highness should consider ways to rectify this system. Beginning with the abolition of the tribute from slaves as the first step, and having already decreed its permanent cessation, this will truly follow the intentions of Yao and Shun, exemplifying the benevolent governance of the Three Dynasties. [...]
> Furthermore, I reflect on the situation of the relay station slaves: their labor contributions are appropriated entirely for the personal use of the inspectors, beyond what is required for the official cotton tribute. Although the tribute from female slaves has been abolished, the tribute from male slaves remains unchanged to ensure that the cotton tribute amount is met. Thus, the replacement of female slave tribute is of no real consequence.[604]

Pak Cunwŏn described the situation of public slaves as one of extreme hardship and systemic exploitation. He portrayed them as victims of relentless levies and exactions, subjected to demands that exceeded their capabilities. Their burdens were so severe that when one family could no longer endure them, their obligations were taken on by their relatives. When even they could not sustain them, entire families scattered in all directions. This cycle of oppression left only a few survivors.

Pak's plea highlighted the broader moral and political implications of mistreating slaves, prompting the introduction of reforms aligned with benevolent rule. He emphasized that commoners feared to be associated with the slaves and avoided interaction with them for fear of being implicated. Pak also pointed out the severe social consequences: slave children often remained unmarried even in their thirties, and their living conditions were drastically inferior to those of free people. Pak argued that this oppressive system generated widespread suffering, disrupted social harmony, and contradicted the principles of just governance. Pak appealed to the ruler to intervene, proposing that public slaves be provided regulated livelihoods and be freed from arbitrary taxation. In 1764, Yŏngjo decided to dissolve the Department of Slave Affairs, which had existed since 1467 and was responsible for maintaining slave records and adjudicating legal disputes involving slaves. Legal disputes had already been transferred to the Ministry of Justice in 1746, and the overall reduction in the slave population and the decrease in disputes requiring state intervention made the office, which was notorious for widespread corruption, obsolete.[605] This was another step in the abolition of the established system of slave control.

7.9.2 Yi Ik: Challenging Perpetual Servitude

As Cosŏn transitioned toward a commerce-oriented society, neo-Confucianism struggled to address resulting economic issues. During King Cŏngjo's reign (1776–1800), conserva-

604 CWS, Yŏngjo 50:7:01 = July 27, 1774. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 79.
605 SWI, Yŏngjo 40:10:26 = November 8, 1764. Cf. ibid.: 126–27.

tive factions continued to resist aspects of both the Uniform Land Tax and Equal-Service Law reforms. This led to the rise of the Practical Learning (*Shilhak*) movement, which questioned traditional neo-Confucian ideals and advocated for policies addressing socioeconomic disparities, marking a shift away from rigid factional ideologies.[606]

Yi Ik—whose pen name was Sŏngho—was a *Shilhak* scholar of the early seventeenth century who was forced out of politics because his family sided with the Southerners. Yi Ik's collection of essays, *Sŏngho Säsŏl Yusŏn* ("Selections from Miscellaneous Discussions of Sŏngho"), edited by An Cŏngbok, profoundly influenced the later generations of *Shilhak* intellectuals.[607] He was an outspoken critic of Cosŏn's slave system, condemning its "unprecedented" harshness and the constant suffering it inflicted on slaves and their descendants. He particularly opposed the matrifilial rule, which maintained hereditary servitude, arguing that it condemned slaves to hard labor under conditions worse than those of the world's poorest. Yi noted that private slaves, while generally less burdened, often suffered in slave-based Squad Unit Forces. Paradoxically, some private slaves preferred the predictability of public slavery. Yi also observed a growing number of relay station slaves, whose obligations were comparatively lighter.[608]

Tracing the roots of the system, Yi Ik claimed that while slavery existed in Kija's time, hereditary enslavement emerged later, under King Thäjo of Koryŏ. Thäjo's attempts to free prisoners were overridden by his retainers, leading to the establishment of perpetual servitude. Originally intended to follow the father's status, the matrifilial rule was fully implemented during the reign of King Cŏngjong, solidifying a system that caused profound social harm. Yi lamented the continued misery of private slaves and called for reforms, including shifting labor demands from private to public slaves. He argued that easing the burden on private slaves would allow the population to recover and prevent irreversible suffering.[609]

While acknowledging the difficulty of total abolition, Yi Ik proposed several measures: banning the sale of slaves to limit their treatment as chattel; adopting the Chinese model of fixed-term servitude; and limiting the size of slave holdings with more than a hundred slaves by freeing excess slaves. He proposed measures to increase the number of commoners and to limit fraudulent enslavement through forged documents. By moderating the system, Yi believed that the general population would stabilize, slaves' conditions would improve, and commoners would have a fairer chance of survival.[610]

> The laws regarding slaves in our country are unparalleled in the world, both in ancient and modern times. To be reduced to servitude for life, suffering for generations upon generations, is already a cause for lament. How much more grievous is it that the law mandates servitude based on the

606 Deuchler 1997: 312–14.
607 *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 369–74.
608 Hiraki 1982: 215; Palais 1996: 252.
609 Hiraki 1982: 216.
610 Hiraki 1982: 217–18; Palais 1996: 253.

> matrifilial rule? The mother's mother, and her mother before her, traced back ten or even a hundred generations, have long since been forgotten—who knows which ancestors they were? Yet, their distant descendants are condemned to endure boundless suffering, as if trapped at the ends of heaven and earth, with no hope of escape. [...]
>
> Furthermore, for those who serve within a household, the cruelty and toil imposed upon them are such that they are barely able to sustain their existence. Among all the impoverished people under heaven, none suffer as they do. I once stayed behind the walls of a house in the alleyways and overheard a group of female slaves gathering together to lament their grievances. I listened carefully, and every word they spoke was reasonable. People only hear the words of their masters and label them as stubborn slaves or obstinate maids—but this is unjust. In any legal dispute, both parties must be heard before determining right and wrong. Why, then, should the voices of slaves never be heard?
>
> Tao Yuanming once said, "They too are the children of men; they should be treated kindly."[611] If one employs others as one would employ oneself, then they can fully realize their humanity. In the past, a certain Wŏn once instructed his children, saying: "It is natural for people to work hard for their own affairs and to be lazy when serving others. From youth to old age, slaves work daily in the service of others. How can they possibly perform every task with complete dedication? You should therefore be lenient with them and not become angry." How true are these words!
>
> The ancients observed the conduct of slaves, saying: "they are typically handling tables too high, filling containers with water to the brim, placing objects obstructively in pathways."[612] These things happen because they belong to others, not to the slaves themselves. Moreover, persons who only eat dry rice are often hungry, and thus their stomach never feels bloated. Persons who quickly fall asleep are those who have labored greatly. Persons who wear their clothes in disorder have simply not had the leisure to groom themselves. If one examines these matters closely, all of them evoke pity.[613]

Yi Ik's text serves both as a moral critique of the cruelty of slavery and as a pragmatic argument for its humane administration. The text sympathizes with the plight of slaves and positions itself as an ethical and humanitarian critique. It draws heavily on Confucian and neo-Confucian thought, presenting morality in a hierarchical yet paternalistic framework—not arguing for abolition, but for just and humane treatment. The reference to Tao Yuanming, and implicitly to Zhu Xi, demonstrates an attempt to align the argument with respected intellectual and political traditions, making it a strong moral appeal to the ruling class within a Confucian socio-political framework. Thus, in his

611 The Chinese poet Tao Yuanming was known for his pastoral poetry, naturalism, and humanistic compassion. The quote is one of his most famous phrases, also popular in Cosŏn because it was quoted in the *Sohak*, the neo-Confucian textbook for elementary studies written under the guidance of Zhu Xi. It was cited three times in the *Veritable Records,* and King Yŏngjo in particular referred to it several times. Yi Hyŏnu 2015: 172, 178.

612 This is a quote from Wang Qunyu, *Physiognomy of Slaves*, published in volume 134 of the Chinese *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*. See p. 307 sq.

613 Yi Ik: *Sŏngho Säsŏl Yusŏn* 星湖僿說類選, v. 4 b: *Insapyŏn* 人事篇 ("Human Business") 3, *Chinsongmun* 親屬門 ("Relatives and Dependents"). The Compilation Center for Korean Confucian Classics: *Hanguk Yugyŏng* 한국유경 (儒經) DB, https://ygc.skku.edu/ygc/sub.do#key=I_rsc_SHC_0040_0030_0010_0010 [accessed 29.07.2025].

writings, Yi Ik unfolded a "bitter criticism as a scholar in opposition, but his solutions were never attempted."[614]

7.9.3 Yu Suwŏn: The Roundabout Treatise

Yu Suwŏn, an eighteenth-century scholar and official from the Southerners faction, is best known for his work *Usŏ* ("The Roundabout Treatise"), written in the 1730s. It was written as a didactic dialogue (問答 *mundap*). This style, featuring questions and responses in dialogical format, was frequently used in Confucian discourse, didactic writing, and reform tracts. Yu Suwŏn adopted the *mundap* form to present bold reforms that would address systemic issues plaguing Cosŏn society while simulating debate and addressing potential objections, thereby enhancing both the clarity and persuasive force of his arguments. Yu's groundbreaking ideas included bureaucratic reforms, commercial and agricultural innovations, and a reorganization of social hierarchies, which influenced later reformist thought.[615] A key focus of *Usŏ* was a critique of the prevailing social order, particularly the institution of slavery and the rigid class distinctions of the time.

> Someone said, "Cŏng Inji[616] edited the *Koryŏsa* and stated that the presence of slaves in the Eastern Kingdom [Korea] greatly contributes to the cultivation of customs and moral teachings, and that the practice of propriety and righteousness stems from this. What do you think of this statement?" The reply was: "How could he understand propriety and righteousness? Previous scholars have already established definitive judgments on the matter of slaves. How can we abandon those and believe Cŏng Inji's words? In the Koryŏ system, when slaves who were made free over time insulted or despised their original masters, if they cursed their masters or opposed their masters' relatives, they were returned to servile status. When those who had been returned to servitude complained about their grievances, they would have their faces branded and be returned to their masters. This is indeed a cruel and baseless policy, yet Cŏng Inji praised it as something worth adopting. His ignorance is truly profound.
>
> Moreover, during the Koryŏ dynasty, when selecting officials, they examined the family records up to the eighth generation to ensure that none were of servile origin.[617] If either parent was of servile status, even if their master freed them and permitted them to become commoners, their descendants would still revert to servile status. If the original master's family line died out, they would be assigned to the same clan. How can there be such a cruel and poisonous law in this world? Although slaves are of low status, they are still human beings. How could there be a rule that after redemption, they would revert to being slaves again? And how could there be a law requiring that for eight generations, one's ancestors must be free from servile status before being allowed to hold office?

614 *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 373.

615 Palais 1996: 35.

616 Cŏng Inji was a neo-Confucian scholar involved in the invention of the Hangŭl script and the editing of the *Koryŏsa* in the middle of the fifteenth century.

617 This goes back to King Chungnyŏl's statement from 1300. See p. 144 sqq.

Although the Koryŏ dynasty did not strictly prohibit the illegitimate offspring of aristocrats, the reason for the restrictions on them stems from this. How can one not feel sympathy for this?"
Someone asked, "What do you mean by saying it stems from Koryŏ?"
The reply was: "Among the illegitimate offspring, is there any who do not have servile relatives in the eight generations?"
Someone asked, "The law regarding slaves in the East came from Kija, who strictly emphasized the distinctions in status. What is wrong with that?"
The reply was: "The *Book of Han* says that Kija established the Eight Prohibitions. One of them was that those who stole from others would become slaves, and though they might be redeemed, people would still feel ashamed. But where is there a law that, after redemption, the person and their descendants would be returned to servitude and permanently restricted?
Generally, among the laws of Koryŏ, the most numerous are those that restricted descendants. For example, during the land administration reviews, if more than ten units of land were not reported, the descendants of those responsible would also be restricted. What kind of governance is this? [...] Koryŏ applied permanent restrictions even to the descendants of innocent merchants and artisans. As for slaves, they were treated with even more cruel policies, preventing them from ever being freed. The consequences of this have only worsened over time. It is truly lamentable."
Someone said: "Currently, slaves are not being returned to servile status, nor are there rules barring those with slave ancestry within eight generations from holding office. Why do you say the abuses have become worse?"
The reply was: "The *Sokjŏn* section on slaves states: 'The offspring of concubines or slaves from one's grandfather's household are of the same bloodline and cannot be treated solely as slaves.' However, during the reign of King Myŏngjong, some argued that while relatives within the fourth degree of kinship should not be used as slaves, those of the fifth or sixth degree were more distant and could justifiably be used as laborers. Thus, it was decreed that from the fifth degree onward, they could be treated as servants. This decree was codified.
Alas! Even the fifth and sixth degrees of kinship are relatives who share the same great-grandparents. To classify them as slaves and force them into servitude is to disregard familial bonds. Imagine if their great-grandfather were alive to witness this—what would he feel? Because of this, instances of relatives harming one another have proliferated, damaging societal customs and eroding human ethics to the point of extinction. Yet, ordinary people observe this calmly without finding it strange, which is profoundly disheartening.
Moreover, although slaves belong to their masters, in reality, they are subjects of the state. Yet the state regards them as if they were outsiders beyond its governance, failing even to impose a standard levy of a single coin per labor obligation. Instead, it leaves everything to the discretion of the overseers, with no one daring to intervene. The current abuses in the treatment of common laborers stem precisely from this. What kind of governance is this?"
Someone said: "Then, is it possible to levy labor obligations on private slaves in the present day?"
The reply was: "The state should treat all its people equally and with love. How can there be a principle where private slaves are exempt from levies, while free commoners are burdened instead? However, according to current regulations, not even a single coin may be levied on private slaves."
Someone asked: "Why is it that they cannot be levied upon?"
The reply was: "The Koryŏ dynasty prohibited members of the *sajok* from engaging in commerce or industry, confining their descendants to this prohibition. Because the *sajok* had no other means of livelihood, the state allocated them lands to serve as their hereditary estates. However, over time, this system led to endless abuses. The *sajok* seized public lands and forcibly took the property of commoners. By the end of the Koryŏ dynasty, this practice had become so rampant that lands in the entire Kyŏnggi region were redistributed to officials to prevent further exploitation. Yet the habit of the scholar-gentry occupying land only intensified. Great clans like those of Yim, Yŏm, Ci, and Ki

were entirely executed, and their land registers burned, temporarily relieving the suffering of the people. However, these abuses contributed to the downfall of the Koryŏ dynasty.
Similarly, hereditary slaves were allowed to remain private property and private dependents. This was because, without such measures, the *sajok*, having no other means of livelihood, would not have been able to sustain themselves. In our dynasty, the *sajok* were not allocated lands as in Koryŏ, but the emphasis on lineage and status surpassed that of Koryŏ. Even facing starvation, they would not engage in commerce or industry. How, then, could the *sajok* maintain their status and livelihood? For this reason, the system of hereditary slaves continued unchanged from the Koryŏ model, allowing the scholar-gentry to use them for labor and to collect contributions from them, with the state turning a blind eye and no longer interfering.
Yet, as time goes on, the livelihoods of the *yangban* have become increasingly strained. Thus, the practice of assigning contributions to the highest class has worsened day by day. Poor and struggling members of the scholar-gentry even lament that they cannot extract enough from their slaves. How, then, could the state impose additional labor levies on private slaves?"[618]

Yu challenged the justification of slavery as a cultivator of moral customs and propriety. He condemned the Koryŏ dynasty's harsh laws, which reinforced generational servitude and inflexible social hierarchies, deeming them cruel and unjust. He argued that these laws, rather than being based on universal principles of justice and public welfare, were a haphazard collection of imitated Tang laws and local customs, lacking coherence and depth. He rejected the notion that Koryŏ's problems were simply the result of decaying laws, asserting that these were systemic issues stemming from the very conception of the laws themselves, thus hindering effective governance and social harmony.

Yu exposed the dehumanizing policies that perpetuated servitude, including the re-enslavement of freed slaves, restrictions on descendants of servile ancestry, and systemic discrimination. He observed the widening gap between the ruling *yangban* class and commoners by the seventeenth century, criticizing the *yangban*'s treatment of commoners as akin to the treatment of slaves. He further criticized the hypocrisy of the *yangban*, who, despite professing disdain for commerce and industry, engaged in morally bankrupt practices like exploiting slaves, practicing usury, and abusing government positions for personal gain. Yu challenged the cultural stigma against commerce, arguing that productive labor is inherently neither base nor dishonorable.

In the following section, Yu Suwŏn deals with slave labor and slave redemption.

Someone said: "According to your argument, all forms of labor should be treated equally. However, in our country's laws, the labor of the lowly is the heaviest. If it is not reduced and regulated, it cannot be made equal. If one wants to alleviate it, the public finances will shrink greatly. How, then, can this be acceptable?"
The reply was: "The labor imposed on slaves is not only heavy in our country. Even in China, compared to ordinary people, it is also relatively heavier. Since they are lowly people, they naturally cannot be treated the same as good people in the same system. However, slaves are still human beings. How can one bear to cruelly and excessively extract labor from them, as is the mistaken practice today? Even when considering public slaves, in the past, the slaves of the Sŏnggyungwan

618 Yu Suwŏn 2018: B. 1.

> [Royal Confucian Academy] were only required to pay two coins for their labor obligations. Now, if both public and private slaves are equally regulated and their labor obligations are fairly determined, what harm is there?"
> Someone said: "If this is done, then public finances will surely dwindle."
> The reply was: "Public slaves are very numerous. If there are no issues of hidden evasion, then even if reduced obligations are permitted, public finances will not shrink. But being accustomed to mistaken regulations, rushing for immediate profits, cruel extractions, and oppressive levies, there are no limits to these abuses. Public slaves employ every possible means to evade, resulting in reductions rather than increases. Is this truly the behavior of someone deeply knowledgeable about the fundamentals of managing finances?
> During the Western Han dynasty, officials freed slaves and made them commoners. The ancients, when dealing with the lowly, pitied them for their loss of status and thus applied broad and lenient measures. Even if such measures cannot be adopted today, how can one still impose cruel extractions and levies without considering their urgent grievances and extreme suffering? Moreover, even now, the personal contributions required of public slaves vary greatly. This is also an extreme case of inequality."
> Someone said: "The levies on public slaves can still be reduced, but as for private slaves, nothing can be done about them."
> The reply was: "If we do not begrudge the reduction of levies on public slaves and establish a most equitable system to be applied universally, both domestically and abroad, then even those who are unscrupulous would not dare to stubbornly resist or refuse compliance. In the past, our King Sejong, in his deep compassion for the plight of the enslaved, issued a royal decree stating: 'If the original masters of slaves exercise life-and-death authority arbitrarily, employ excessive punishment, or impose unregulated levies, then such enslaved individuals should be transferred to public ownership and treated according to the law.'[619] This was truly the governance of a sage king. However, later court officials, disliking the inconvenience to themselves, introduced the policy of avoiding the transfer of slaves to public ownership. What a sorrowful development this is!
> Moreover, the redemption price for strong slaves was often no more than six taels of silver, yet due to the lack of governance and people's failure to adhere to regulations, the system was not followed. Now, if we adhere to King Sejong's royal decree and strictly enforce the rules of public ownership, then ignorant individuals would naturally not dare to commit irrational and oppressive extractions as they did before. Furthermore, the issue of repeated redemption, where slaves are redeemed and then forced to redeem themselves again, is a particularly severe chronic abuse today. For all redeemed individuals who have obtained freedom, official documentation should serve as proof. If someone reclaims a redeemed individual, they should be punished according to the laws against oppressing freemen. Moreover, children born to freed women should not be subjected to their father's servitude, and this should suffice."[620]

While not advocating for the complete abolition of slavery, Yu Suwŏn acknowledged the higher tribute burden placed on slaves due to their base status. He criticized the excessive levies imposed on public slaves, which drove many to flee, consequently reducing their numbers. Yu condemned the recurring re-enslavement of freed slaves and advocated for official documentation of manumission to prevent this. He also opposed the enslavement of children born to freewomen and slaves. He even studied hired laborers

619 This quote cannot be verified in the CWS.

620 Yu Suwŏn 2018: B. 7.

and compared them to both slaves and free workers, recognizing the efficiency of wage labor while also noting its similarities to slavery in certain contexts.[621]

In sum, Yu Suwŏn emerges as the most intellectually persuasive among the Cosŏn-period reformers considered in this study. He articulates a sustained critique of hereditary privilege, servile institutions, and the moral contradictions of the ruling elite, framed in a forceful and coherent rhetorical dialogue. Yu combines ethical clarity with institutional insight. He diagnoses the systemic roots of injustice and proposes reforms based on practical governance. His thought thus represents a singular moment of critical lucidity in late Cosŏn Confucian discourse.

7.9.4 An Cŏngbok: Unbearable Laws

During the reign of King Yŏngjo, the scholar An Cŏngbok, influenced by Practical Learning, composed the *Tongsa Kangmok*—a history of Korea from antiquity to the downfall of Koryŏ, which was based on a broad range and critical use of historical sources.[622] In his chapter about King Hyŏnjong of Koryŏ, An inserted a personal comment on the history of slavery in Korea and on the necessity to overcome it:

> The laws governing the heredity of slaves are, in truth, unbearable under a humane governance. How could it be that once entered into the slave register, one remains bound to it for a hundred generations? In ancient times, slaves were typically those who had committed theft and robbery and were consequently confiscated, or those captured from foreign raiders. Punishments extended only to the individual offender, never to their descendants. When has there ever been a law like ours in antiquity? [...]
> Those in poverty and without support sometimes sold themselves into servitude in order to rely on the protection of powerful households. Their descendants, in turn, became dependent on these arrangements, serving the same masters. Furthermore, prisoners of war taken in battle were enslaved without the possibility of redemption, their children and grandchildren remaining in servitude. The result of these entrenched practices was an unending cycle of inherited servitude.
> When the founder of Koryŏ unified the kingdom, he rewarded his military allies by granting them captives as slaves and distributed others to various government offices. Hence arose the distinction between private and public slaves. As a result, nearly the entire population came to be classified as belonging to the servile class. Few laws have ever been as unjust as this. Any ruler committed to reform would see it as a priority to rectify this system.
> How, then, can this system be reformed? Some say the answer is to follow ancient principles and avoid punishing the innocent. Labor should be organized along the lines of contract work and hired labor, as was done in Chinese practice. [...]
> But the great families of the realm would hardly comply willingly. Thus, eliminating this systemic flaw would require a significant transformation, one in which distinctions between high and low status would no longer exist. Only then could a sovereign emerge to regulate the system.
> If such foundational changes are not made and only minor adjustments—such as inspections and

621 Palais 1996: 253–57; Hiraki 1982: 219.

622 *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 394–97.

> verifications—are pursued, the fundamental problem will remain. The state's institutions will be deeply compromised, and disorder will spread unchecked, just as the historical records warn.[623]

But while An echoed here what others (including Yu Hyŏngwŏn) had previously proposed, he was skeptical that there was a political chance to reform the system and abolish slavery before society as a whole had changed. His skepticism may have stemmed from his observation that greed and avarice were so prevalent among the *yangban* elite that they would never voluntarily give up slavery. He pointed this out by citing the case of slave hunting:

> Observing the households of slave hunters, even if they amass hundreds of thousands in wealth, they ultimately find no secure legacy. Some die without heirs; others perish impoverished and begging. This clearly illustrates that such wealth is undeniably tainted. Wealth is calamity; riches are disaster. To obtain wealth unjustly—how can one hope to preserve any lasting blessings? Those who come after me should look to this example and take righteousness as their guiding principle. They should refrain from enforcing the unjust policies of slave hunting. This is truly the way to enjoy long-lasting prosperity and ensure abundant blessings for future generations.[624]

7.9.5 Cŏng Chobu: Begging for Grain

Cŏng Chobu was the pen name of a slave poet active in the second half of the eighteenth century. The name literally means "Cŏng the Woodcutter." He was the property of the *yangban* scholar Yŏ Chunyŏng, who came to regard him—through their shared devotion to poetry—not merely as a servant, but as both teacher and friend. Eventually, Yŏ manumitted him. Several of Cŏng's poems circulated among literary circles and were later included in anthologies of late Cosŏn verse.[625]

Yet, his life as a free man remained overshadowed by poverty. His most well-known poem, *Kŏljoshi* ("Begging for Grain"), casts a stark and bitter gaze on his marginal existence in a society structured by rigid hierarchies and institutional neglect:

> None came to reward my talent—seventy-six years of hunger.
> The mountain birds have long known the mountain man's face,
> Yet the district register no longer bears the name of the old man of the wilds.
> Not even a grain is shared from the granary full of rice.
> Alone in the riverside pavilion, I watch the smoke of evening rice rise.

623 *Tongsa Kangmok*, B. 6, Ch. 1, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/東史綱目/第六 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Cf. Palais 1996: 262–63.

624 *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].

625 Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2014: 7.

I ascend the tower, not to enjoy the moonlight—
Three mornings without grain—no, not to become a transcendent being.[626]

This poem reads as both a personal lament and a structural indictment. The opening line, "None came to reward my talent," suggests a sense of bitter alienation from a society that, while celebrating literary skill, withholds material support from those outside the registers of power. The poet's "seventy-six years of hunger" are not metaphorical: this was an age marked by repeated harvest failures and inadequate famine relief policies, particularly in the provinces.

The reference to the "district register" (*kunjŏk*) not bearing his name is especially poignant. Under Cosŏn law, household registration was not merely administrative, but also a prerequisite for receiving official grain relief and for participating in legal society. Although Cŏng was manumitted, he may not have been fully reinstated into the official registers of free commoners. This exclusion meant that relief granaries remained closed to him.

Natural imagery—mountain birds, evening smoke, riverside solitude—underscores his social isolation. The final lines subvert the trope of the solitary scholar in transcendental retreat: his three days without grain are not an act of spiritual discipline, but rather an instance of involuntary starvation. The line "not to become a transcendent being" dismisses the Confucian and Taoist ideal of noble poverty with biting irony.

In sum, the poem encapsulates the contradictions of late Cosŏn social policy—established by a state that idealized moral cultivation yet failed to protect its most talented and vulnerable people. Cŏng's elegant and furious verse documents this moral failure in the idiom of high classical poetry.

7.9.6 Pak Ilwŏn: Record of the Ministry of Justice

Pak Ilwŏn was a late Cosŏn official who held positions as governor and official in the Ministry of Taxation during the reigns of King Yŏngjo and King Cŏngjo. In 1781, at the request of the Minister of Justice, he compiled the *Chugwanji*, a comprehensive record of legal and judicial practices. His introductory remarks on slaves show that he was less than satisfied with the current state of things. He presents the history of Korean slavery as a longstanding, deeply rooted problem originating thousands of years ago. Initially, slavery was a punitive measure meant to deter theft, but over time it became entrenched. Despite attempts at reform—such as King Thäjo's order to burn the slave registers—these measures were never fully enacted. As a result, laws and official reg-

626 Translated from the Chinese original quoted in Yi Carok: *Nobi shiin Cŏng Chobu-ŭi shi*, https://blog.naver.com/leeih4441/222079033581, published 03.09.2020 [accessed 31.05.2025], and Yŏyŏbŏptang: *Hanshi Tongho*, https://www.facebook.com/groups/439252152781613/posts/2702584101036269 9/, published 12.09.2024 [accessed 31.05.2025]. Also quoted in part in ibid.: 100.

ulations continued to uphold the institution, relegating generations of people to a state no different from that of livestock.

However, Pak Ilwŏn acknowledges more recent legislative efforts that provided paths for slaves to become commoners, thereby challenging long-held norms and bringing moral order closer into alignment with Heaven's mandate. In his view, these reforms represent a crucial departure from the regressive legacy of slavery laws, offering hope for a more just and civilized social order.

> Respectfully noting: The laws regarding slaves are precisely the chronic malady of our Eastern land [i.e., Korea] for three thousand years. Among the Eight Prohibitions taught by the sage Kija, to confiscate thieves and turn them into slaves was no more than a temporary intention to punish evil; but afterwards it gradually took root, lingering between the Three Kingdoms, continuing without change until the upheaval of the Three Patrols in Koryŏ, when it reached an extreme. Only at the beginning of the founding of our Great Ancestor's [Thäjo] reign did he, with a sigh of lament, order the burning of public and private slave documents. Alas, at that time the various ministers did not cry out like dragons, did not accept the virtuous intention and serve it, so it was not put into effect for the slaves.
>
> Palaces slaves, inner palace slaves, government slaves, relay station slaves, temple slaves, and slaves of the schools—these various names remained exactly as before.
>
> The mandate of Heaven to the people never distinguished between raising high and low people! When one attains success, there are bells and tripods; when one is destitute, there is a thatched hut. From the start, there was no fixed limit. Yet in our Eastern land, this is not so. There is one class of commoners, one class of middle commoners, and beneath them there are slaves. Once one becomes a slave, then generation after generation they remain in servitude; the father passes it on to his son, the son to his grandson, and they are treated as property, the same as oxen, horses, chickens, and dogs.
>
> How can this accord with the principle of Heaven? The slaves in the world are so numerous. Among hundreds, thousands, and even countless numbers, can there truly be none with the governance ability of Cŏng Tojŏn, the literary talents of Sŏ Ki and Song Ikphil, the poetic and literary gifts of Päk Täbung and Hong Sethä? Yet they regard themselves as utterly lowly, do not cherish letters, do not cultivate their conduct, and it is customary for them to be driven, scolded, whipped, and caned. Is this not a great injustice?
>
> Only during the era of our revered Sukcong was special compassion shown, clarifying the law of following the father or following the mother. Only our late great king [Yŏngjo], setting a limit in the first month of the year Shinhä [1731],[627] did not permit arbitrary encroachment, hoping that many slaves might become good citizens. A grand transformation of the base customs of the Three Han, it will be a splendid code passed down through the ages. Ah, how excellent indeed![628]

Pak Ilwŏn criticizes the institution of slavery in Korea, identifying it as a long-standing societal "malady" that persisted for millennia. The text unfolds in several key arguments: The author explains how slavery began as a temporary punishment but became institutionalized, citing failed reforms under King Thäjo. He criticizes the inherited na-

627 King Yŏngjo decreed that from the first day of the first month of the Shinhä year (January 27, 1731), all children would follow the status of their mothers.

628 Pak Ilwŏn 1939: 68–69.

ture of slavery, invoking Heaven's principle to argue for natural equality and lamenting the injustice of dehumanizing treatment. He challenges the assumption that slaves lack talent or ability, citing the possibility that among them could be figures of the caliber of great scholars and officials, and condemns the systemic mistreatment of slaves —whipping, caning, and verbal abuse—as a grave injustice. He concludes by praising the reforms of Sukcong and Yŏngjo as significant progress, expressing hope for a transformation of societal customs. This structure moves from historical analysis to moral condemnation and ends with optimism for reform.

The text is imbued with moral outrage and sorrow rooted in Confucian moral philosophy. Pak Ilwŏn acknowledges the systemic nature of slavery and the failures of past reforms while simultaneously upholding Confucian ideals of virtue and just governance. His elitist perspective is evident in the examples of exceptional talent he envisions among slaves, suggesting that reform is desirable not necessarily out of compassion but because talent and virtue should not be wasted. His praise for Yŏngjo and Sukcong reflects a conservative optimism that change must come from enlightened rulers rather than systemic upheaval.

7.9.7 Pak Ciwŏn: The Yangban Story and the Story of Kwangmun

Pak Ciwŏn belonged to the minority of *yangban* who advocated economic reform and Practical Learning (*Shilhak*).[629] He was deeply frustrated with the life of the *yangban* due to his personal experience, repeatedly refused to submit to the constraints of the examination system, and even developed a prolonged mental depression.

His satirical short story *Yangbanjŏn* ("Yangban Story"),[630] fictionally set in 1745, tells of an impoverished *yangban* who lives as a parasite at the expense of the rest of society and whose behavior, prescribed by the code of conduct for *yangban*, seems so ridiculous to the rest of the people that they prefer not to become *yangban* themselves. With this story, Pak Ciwŏn, now described as "a pioneer armed with a keen insight extending to the new era beyond" his time,[631] "unmasked the corruption and incompetence of the ruling class"[632] and summed up the contradiction between the aspirations and reality of the *yangban*.

629 K. Noh 2023: 293–96; Palais 1996: 991–94; Eikemeier 1970; Vos 1963: 183–88.

630 First published in 1900 in an anthology of his writings. K. Noh 2023: 293; for an English translation, see Vos 1963: 175–80; for an annotated French translation, see Pak Ciwŏn 2020; in his writings, Pak Ciwŏn "describes human nature in an illuminating way and reveals various inhuman aspects of Korean feudalistic society": *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 419–20.

631 K. Noh 2023: 295.

632 Vos 1963: 180.

The story ridicules some typical *yangban* behavior toward their slaves (such as shouting at their maidservants, cursing their dead slaves) and their "parasitic life,"[633] but there is another important connection to the issue of slavery: Pak Ciwŏn apparently drew the inspiration for this story from a much older Chinese story, *Contract for a Youth* by Wang Bao[634] (see p. 122). The satirical catalogue of slave duties in this ancient story was the model for the duties of a *yangban* as listed by Pak Ciwŏn. Pak Ciwŏn saw the duties of slaves and *yangban* as almost mirror images of each other, as two sides of the same coin.

Conversely, this story can be interpreted as a cautionary tale about the "*yangban* mimicry of lowborn families,"[635] a widespread phenomenon in the late eighteenth century. According to Pak Ciwŏn, elevating such a troubled class to a role model for all was not a promising approach to solving social problems.

> The term *yangban* refers to an honorable title for the *sajok*. In the county of Cŏngsŏn, there was a *yangban*, a virtuous man who loved to read. Whenever a new county governor arrived, he would always personally visit this man's humble abode and show him great respect. However, the *yangban*'s family was poor, and he had depended on government grain distributions for many years, accumulating up to a thousand *sŏk*.
>
> One day the provincial governor, who was making a tour of the district to inspect the distribution of grain, was furious and said, "What kind of a *yangban* is this, using up the military funds?" He ordered the *yangban* to be arrested. The county magistrate, sympathetic to the poverty and inability of the *yangban* to repay the debt, could not bear to imprison him, but he had no choice. The *yangban* cried day and night, not knowing what to do. His wife scolded him, saying, "You've loved reading all your life, but it hasn't helped the county's grain supply. Bah! A *yangban* isn't even worth a coin!"
>
> The wealthy man in the village discussed this in private and said, "Although the *yangban* is poor, he is always held in high esteem, while we, though rich, remain lowly and humble. We dare not ride horses, and when we see the *yangban*, we shrink back and scurry away, crawling into the courtyard to bow, kneeling, and scraping our noses on the ground. This has always been our humiliating position. Now that the *yangban* is so poor that he cannot repay the grain debt and is in great distress, he surely cannot maintain his status as a *yangban*. Why don't I buy his debt and get his status?"
>
> So the rich men went to the house of the *yangban* and offered to pay his grain debt. The *yangban* was overjoyed and agreed. The rich man immediately paid off the debt to the magistrate, and the magistrate, astonished by this turn of events, went personally to pay his respects to the *yangban* and inquire about the repayment of the grain debt.
>
> Wearing a felt hat and short clothes, the *yangban* prostrated himself in the dirt, humbly referring to himself and not daring to raise his eyes. The magistrate, greatly shocked, bent down to help him up and said, "Why are you humiliating yourself like this?"
>
> The *yangban*, even more frightened, bowed down and said, "Your humble servant is afraid and trembling. I dare not humiliate myself, but I have already sold my status as a *yangban* to pay off the grain debt. The rich man of the village is now the *yangban*. How could I dare to take back my former title and elevate myself again?"

633 B.-R. Kim 2006: 61.

634 Pak Ciwŏn 2020; English translation in Wilbur 1943: 383–88.

635 Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2014: 10.

The magistrate sighed and said, “What a gentleman this wealthy man is! A true *yangban* indeed! To be wealthy and not miserly—that is righteousness. To help others in times of need—that is benevolence. To despise lowliness and admire honor—that is wisdom. This man is a true *yangban*. But doing business privately without a written contract is the beginning of trouble. Let me and you gather the people of the county as witnesses, and we will draw up a contract to guarantee it. The magistrate will personally sign it.”

With that, the magistrate returned to the office and summoned the gentry, peasants, craftsmen, and merchants of the entire county. They all gathered in the courtyard. The wealthy man sat to the right of the head of the county council, while the *yangban* stood below the public officials. Then, a contract was drawn up that said:

“On this day in the ninth month of the tenth year of the Qianlong era [1745], the following terms are agreed upon:

Sold the *yangban* title to repay the official grain. Its value is 1,000 *kok*. As for the *yangban*, this name has many aspects. Reading books, they are called scholars. Engaging in government, they are called officials. Having virtue, they are called gentlemen. The military ranks are listed in the West, and the civil ranks are listed in the East. This is why they are called *yangban*. Follow your own path. But you must abandon all base things and aspire to the ideals of the ancients. You shall wake up frequently at the fifth watch (early morning). Light sulphur to burn the oil. Your eyes look at the tip of your nose. Balance on your heels and support your hips. Make a cold reading of the *Discussions from Donglai*.[636] Endure hunger and cold, never speak of poverty. Grind your teeth and flick your brains. Swallow spittle with a soft cough. Let your sleeves brush your fur hats, wave away dust, and make ripples. When washing, do not rub your fists. When rinsing your mouth, do not overdo it. Call loudly for your female slaves. Walk slowly and drag your shoes. Copy the *True Treasures of Ancient Prose*[637] and the *Anthologies of Tang Poetry*[638] in delicate script, a single line of one hundred characters. Do not touch money with your hands. Do not ask the price of rice. Do not walk barefoot with socks in the heat. When eating rice, do not let your hair down. When eating, do not start with the soup. When drinking, do not slurp loudly. When placing chopsticks, do not bang them. Do not eat raw onions. When drinking wine, do not slurp your moustache. When smoking, do not puff lazily. When angry, do not strike your wife. When furious, do not kick objects. Do not use your fists to chase away your children. Do not curse your dead slaves. When shouting at cows and horses, do not insult the seller. When sick, do not call shamans. During sacrifices, do not fast monks. Do not warm your hands in the oven. When speaking, do not let spittle touch your teeth. Do not slaughter cows. Do not gamble with money. All of these one hundred behaviors, if violated by the *yangban*, are to be judged by the officials. This document is held as a record. Corrected by the town master. Signed by the district magistrate of Cŏngsŏn and certified by the head and deputy of the district council.”

The cleric then placed the seals on the document with the sound of solemn drumming until it resembled the morning starry sky. Once the council head finished reading it aloud, the wealthy man sat in deep thought for a long time and then said, “Is this all there is to being a *yangban*? I have always heard that the *yangban* are like celestial beings. If this is indeed what it is, then it seems too dry and uninspiring. I wish to change it into something more advantageous.”

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636 東萊博議 *Donglai Boyi*, a collection of essays and scholarly discussions on various topics, mainly on philosophy, ethics, history, and governance, written by Lü Zuqian (呂祖謙, 1137–1181), a prominent neo-Confucian scholar during the Southern Song Dynasty.

637 The 古文眞寶 *Guwen Zhenbao* is an anthology of classical Chinese prose that is considered a key resource for students and scholars of classical Chinese literature.

638 The 唐詩品彙 *Tangshi Pinhui* is an anthology of Tang Dynasty poetry compiled in 1386.

> Thus, they proceeded to revise the contract, stating:
> "Heaven gave birth to mankind, and mankind is divided into four classes. Among them, the most esteemed are the scholars, known as *yangban*, whose advantages are incomparable. They do not engage in agriculture or trade, and they only superficially touch upon literature and history. With great success, they pass the literary exams, and even with little success, they still become a literary licentiate. The highest honor, the Red Plaque of the Civil Service Examination, is only two feet long, but it brings all the benefits and wealth. At thirty, the literary licentiate celebrates his first posting, then becomes a famous shadow-favored official[639] and serves the powerful southgoers,[640] with his white ears protected from the wind by a parasol, his belly full, his servants responding immediately to the ringing of his bell. His rooms are adorned with seductive courtesans, and cranes call out in his courtyards. Even a poor scholar, living in the countryside, can still act with authority—seizing his neighbor's ox before it plows the field or borrowing laborers from the village. Who would dare to disrespect him? He would throw ashes in your face, twist your hair, or mess up your sideburns, so that no one would dare to complain or resist."
> When the rich man heard the revised contract, he stuck out his tongue in amazement and said, "Enough, enough! How reckless this is! Are you trying to turn me into a thief?" Shaking his head, he walked away and never spoke of becoming a *yangban* again for the rest of his life.

The Story of Kwangmun

In another story, Pak Ciwŏn recounts the amazing career of a young beggar, Kwangmun, who became the trusted servant of an apothecary and merchant and gained fame as a loyal servant. According to a postscript to this story, Pak Ciwŏn learned of Kwangmun in his youth through his own slave:

> When I was eighteen, I was once very ill. During the nights, I often summoned an old servant and asked him about strange stories from the neighborhood. He frequently spoke about Kwangmun. Even in my youth, I had seen him, and he was extremely ugly. At that time, I was working hard on my writing and decided to compose this biography of him. I showed the manuscript to various scholars and elders. One day, it gained much praise, as it was written in the style of classical prose. By then, Kwangmun had already traveled to the southern regions of the Hu and Ling districts, where he became widely known, and he had not returned to the capital for decades.

This postscript is essential for understanding that Kwangmun was indeed a slave: The expression that Pak Ciwŏn uses for his servant (傭 *yong*) is the same as for Kwangmun. He also adds that "Kwangmun did not know his own surname," another indication of his lowborn status. Of himself, Kwangmun says: "I have no parents, siblings, wife, or children." While Kwangmun may not have been officially registered as a slave, it is clear from this that his living conditions were similar to those of an urban domestic slave.

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639 An official who has not passed the state examinations. Vos 1963: 194.

640 The 南行 *namhäng* were officials who did not pass the state examinations and therefore could not become part of the western (military) or eastern (civil) group of *yangban* officials at the king's court. Instead, they were placed to the south of the royal throne. Vos 1963: 194; Pak Ciwŏn 2020.

Kwangmun was a beggar. He once begged in the market streets near the Bell Tower.[641] A group of young beggars appointed Kwangmun as their leader and made him guard their base. One day, as the weather turned cold with rain and snow, the group of children went out to beg. One child, who was sick, did not go with them. Later, the child, cold and wrapped in rags, sobbed pitifully. Kwangmun felt deep sympathy for the child. He went out to beg for food and brought it back to the sick child, but by then, the child had already died. When the other children returned, they suspected Kwangmun of killing the child and began to chase and beat him.

Kwangmun crawled into a house in the village during the night, startling the dogs there. The homeowner captured him, but Kwangmun cried out, "I am fleeing from my pursuers, not stealing. If you don't believe me, you can take me to the market in the morning to clarify things." His words were simple and sincere. The homeowner, recognizing that Kwangmun was not a thief, released him at dawn. Kwangmun thanked him and requested a worn-out mat before leaving. Still suspicious, the homeowner followed Kwangmun and saw the group of young beggars dragging a corpse to Suphyo Bridge,[642] where they threw the body into the water. Kwangmun hid under the bridge, wrapped the body in the mat, and secretly carried it away.

He buried the body in a grave between the tombs in the western suburbs, weeping and speaking to it as he did. At that moment, the homeowner caught up with him and questioned him further. Kwangmun confessed everything he had done and explained what had happened the previous night. Moved by Kwangmun's honesty and righteousness, the homeowner took him home, gave him clothes, and treated him kindly. Eventually, he recommended Kwangmun to a wealthy pharmacist to work as a servant. The pharmacist kept Kwangmun employed for a long time.

One day, as the wealthy man was about to leave his home, he frequently looked back, re-entering the house to check the lock before finally departing. His behavior was strange, and when he returned home, he stared at Kwangmun with suspicion. He seemed to want to say something but, with a change of expression, held his tongue. Kwangmun was unaware of what had happened and, feeling uneasy, remained silent, not daring to leave.

After several days, the nephew of the wealthy man's wife came with money and said, "Earlier, I needed to borrow some money from my uncle, but since he wasn't home, I took it from the house myself. I was worried that my uncle might not know about it." Upon hearing this, the wealthy man felt deeply ashamed of how he had suspected Kwangmun. He apologized profusely, saying, "I am a small-minded person and have hurt the feelings of a noble man. How can I face you now?"

The wealthy man then spread praise for Kwangmun to everyone he knew, including other wealthy people, merchants, and officials. He exaggerated Kwangmun's qualities to such an extent that he even praised him to members of noble families and high-ranking officials. The nobles and officials began sharing stories about Kwangmun, discussing his integrity for months. Soon, everyone in Hanyang spoke of Kwangmun as though he were an ancient sage.

At that time, it became well-known in Hanyang that the man who had previously been generous to Kwangmun was not only a man of wisdom but also someone who could recognize virtuous people. This increased the wealthy man's reputation. And the wealthy, elder pharmacist grew richer. At that time, he accumulated wealth by pawning jewelry, jade, emeralds, clothing, utensils, household goods, estates, fields, and records of slaves.[643]

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641 The bell tower of Hanyang was a pavilion at the central marketplace. The bell announced the opening and closing of the city gates in the morning and evening.

642 A famous stone bridge over the Chŏnggye River in Hanyang (Seoul). It was first built in 1410 and is now a tourist attraction in Seoul.

643 It is extremely revealing to learn that slave records—the evidence of ownership of slaves—could be pawned.

> He mixed currencies according to the appropriate values, ensuring fair exchanges. However, when Kwangmun vouched for someone's debt, he never questioned it, upholding his promise as if it were worth a thousand gold pieces. Kwangmun was remarkably unattractive, with a large mouth that could fit two fists, and his speech failed to move people. He was skilled at performing the "iron crutch dance," a humorous act, and children in the Three Han would mock him, calling him "Uncle Talmun," which was another name he was known by.
>
> When Kwangmun encountered people fighting, he would remove his clothing and join in, laughing loudly and drawing lines on the ground as if to settle disputes over right and wrong. The entire marketplace would laugh, and even the fighters would stop, laughing and leaving peacefully. Despite being over forty years old, Kwangmun still wore his hair in braids. When people advised him to marry, he replied, "Beautiful looks are something everyone desires. But beauty is not exclusive to men. Women, too, are the same. That's why, being ugly, I cannot bring myself to care about appearances."
>
> When people encouraged Kwangmun to establish a household, he declined, saying, "I have no parents, siblings, wife, or children. Why would I need a home? In the morning, I sing and shout in the marketplace, and by evening, I sleep at the gates of wealthy families. There are 80,000 households in Hanyang; each day I move to a different one. I won't even live long enough to visit them all."
>
> The renowned courtesans of Hanyang, beautiful and elegant as they were, would not be worth a penny without Kwangmun's fame. Once, young noblemen, guards of the imperial stables, and various officials gathered in a hall where Unshim, a famous courtesan, was to perform a dance. However, she delayed and refused to dance. That night, Kwangmun wandered around outside the hall and eventually walked in, seating himself boldly among the nobles, despite wearing ragged clothes and appearing completely unkempt. His demeanor was carefree, and though his eyes were inflamed, and he feigned drunkenness, no one dared to stop him. He clapped to the rhythm and hummed along. Moved by his actions, Unshim finally rose, changed her clothes, and performed a knife dance for him. The entire hall rejoiced, and they all became friends before leaving together.

Pak Ciwŏn's story of Kwangmun presents a sharp critique of social hierarchies and superficial values in eighteenth-century Cosŏn, while celebrating moral integrity and human resilience. The story situates Kwangmun within the vibrant urban life of Hanyang, where rigid class divisions coexist with fluid social interactions. Kwangmun, a beggar who begins at the margins of society, rises to unexpected fame through his compassion, honesty, and ability to navigate societal tensions with humor and wisdom. His actions, such as caring for a sick child and resolving disputes in the marketplace, reveal a deep moral character that contrasts sharply with his ragged appearance and low status. The story paints Kwangmun with striking details, emphasizing his ragged appearance and eccentric demeanor. Kwangmun's unkempt appearance and unconventional behavior starkly contrast with his moral integrity and wisdom, an irony that underscores the theme of inner virtue over outward appearances.

Despite being misunderstood and suspected of wrongdoing, Kwangmun's integrity earns him recognition from influential figures, including a wealthy pharmacist who initially doubts him but later praises him publicly. This ironic elevation of Kwangmun highlights both his genuine virtue and society's tendency to exploit such qualities for personal or reputational gain. Kwangmun's rejection of societal norms—refusing marriage, family, or property—further underscores his philosophical detachment. The text

elevates inner integrity and moral action over superficial markers of status or appearance, reflecting pragmatic and humanistic ideals. Kwangmun, though a beggar, embodies true virtue, while those of higher status (wealthy merchants, noble families) are portrayed as narrow-minded, suspicious, or rigid.

Kwangmun's popularity across diverse social groups, from courtesans to nobles, challenges Confucian orthodoxies that exclude the marginalized from moral recognition. By centering the narrative on an unconventional hero, Pak Ciwŏn criticizes societal hypocrisy while affirming the values of Practical Learning, which prioritize practical ethics, human compassion, and moral action over status or ritual. Ultimately, Kwangmun's journey reveals that true virtue transcends appearances and societal constraints, making him both a cultural hero and a symbol of Pak's progressive ideals.

7.9.8 Freeing Public Slaves

With the introduction of general tallying in 1740, the need for push-and-brush inspections among public slaves was significantly reduced. In 1778, the Board of Border Defense submitted a decree for their abolition, citing "the disruptions caused by the push-and-brush inspections." The decree declared that the government would now strictly adhere to the "principle of preferring slight losses over uncertainties" and ensure that the recorded number of slaves remained fixed to prevent arbitrary increases or removals ("not a single individual shall be added or removed"). The former push-and-brush inspectors were dismissed, as their role had become obsolete. Under the new system, local magistrates were solely responsible for public slave management, while provincial governors could adjust the number of slaves within their jurisdictions to compensate for any regional shortfalls.

> Matters such as escaped, aged, or deceased slaves requiring replacement, as well as newly recorded births, are to be handled annually at the discretion of each district magistrate, in the same manner as military registers. These revisions shall not be reported to the palace office but only to the provincial military command during the decennial revision of the registers.[644]

While public slave hunting was now abolished, this did not protect private slaves, as evidenced by the case of a commoner named Co Sŏnggi in 1783. He was the descendant of the female slave Tŏngmä, who, together with her sister Yŏngmä and Tŏngmä's daughter Cini, was sold in 1696 by Yi Chungyŏng from the estate of the late undergraduate Yi Sejŏn. The three were sold in Hongju, Chungchŏng Province, to the commoner Yi Yŏng, whose widowed son Yi Sŏkcä took Tŏngmä as his concubine. Her sister Yŏngmä married a slave from the household of Yim Ponghwa, and they had a daughter named Kädŏk. When the

644 CWS, Cŏngjo 2:6:2 = June 14, 1778. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 124.

son of Tongmä and Sŏkcä, Sundong, became the head of the Yi household, he took his cousin Kädŏk as a concubine but later freed her. Their son was Co Sŏnggi.

In 1780, Yim Ponghwa died. In 1783, a *yangban* from Tŏksan named Yun forcibly entered the Yi household with his slaves, claiming that he had purchased Kädŏk from Yim Ponghwa in 1782. Co Sŏnggi denied this claim and, as a result, was severely beaten. He later petitioned the king, who ruled in his favor. Yun was subsequently arrested and punished for unlawful intrusion into a village and oppression of commoners.[645]

In 1782, the Board of Border Defense considered the situation of public slaves in blunt terms. Abolition, they argued, would only cause new unrest and flight among the free commoners:

> The first matter the adjustment of slave regulations. The government's treatment of slaves has reached its full extent: the office responsible for the ten-year inspections has been abolished, allowing them to escape abuse and exploitation. Compared to several years of tribute payments, the system was now firmly stabilized. Female slaves saw a reduction of one cloth bolt from their levy, and male slaves were freed from a lifetime labor obligation. This generosity, extending deeply into their lives, nevertheless failed to prevent financial exploitation and the suffering of neighboring communities.
>
> This hardship had clear origins: slaves were universally disdained by commoners and ostracized within their own villages. While official slaves could sometimes escape labor obligations, these particular individuals could not. The relay station slaves had a path to promotion, but that path was closed to them.[646] Over generations, their status remained lowly, causing them to devise countless ways to evade obligations. They concealed their resources, repeatedly blocked attempts at forced marriage, viewed denunciations as mortal threats, and faced severe punishment if caught. Some fled and registered elsewhere, while others hid and paid off their dues. From this, it is clear that their main aim was not just to escape tribute but to shed the stigma associated with their servile status.
>
> The proposal to replace capital-bureau slaves with free commoners in tribute roles, while seemingly reasonable, is not without its problems. Recently, even free commoners have been insufficient in number, and any reallocation strains local resources. Although lighter obligations were introduced, filling these roles remains challenging. Substituting capital-bureau slaves with free commoners risks upsetting the population, causing widespread distress and mass flight, likely far more than when slaves were initially removed from service. Upgrading an capital-bureau slave to a free commoner is like a significant promotion, whereas replacing free commoners with capital-bureau slaves is akin to exploitation. The two situations cannot easily be compared or equated. For now, it seems best to let this matter rest.
>
> Instead, consider a policy of simply apportioning tribute obligations across all without fully abolishing capital-bureau slaves. Explaining the government's benevolent intent and issuing strong local directives could stabilize production and ensure that aging or disabled slaves receive appro-

645 Han Sanggwŏn 1996: 277.

646 Before 1731, their status followed the patrifilial-matrifilial bifurcation rule, meaning the sons of female slaves were considered free if their father was free.

> priate support. With these measures, disruptions can be minimized, and the risk of falling short in obligations can be avoided. Such instructions could be left to local officials to implement.[647]

The Council argued that the government improved conditions for capital-bureau slaves by eliminating abusive inspections, reducing levies, and freeing them from lifetime labor obligations. Despite these reforms, many sought to escape the stigma and hardships of their status. Replacing capital-bureau slaves with free commoners was deemed problematic due to resource shortages and the social upheaval it could cause. Instead, the statement suggests maintaining a balanced tribute system, improving management, and ensuring adequate support for aging or disabled slaves, rather than making disruptive changes.

In November 1784, King Cŏngjo ordered a new investigation into the problems of capital-bureau slaves, and the Council had another lenghty and controversial debate. The discussants acknowledged that the problems with these slaves were well-documented, yet the measures to address these problems remained unsettled.

> Looking at the reports from the provinces, Kyŏnggi governor Shim I stated: "When the shortage of slaves is filled by substitutions, the resulting oppression and suffering are indescribable. Once the investigation begins, neighbors refuse to cooperate, relatives are ashamed to discuss family ties, and people flee deep into hiding with their wives and children, changing their fathers and altering their ancestors. Deceptive schemes emerge one after another. If one person resorts to such actions, many others will follow suit. If this occurs in one village, it will be the same in others. How could the overall numbers not dwindle? How could any new contributions be expected to arise? The root of the problem does not lie in the difficulty of fulfilling the service requirements, but rather in the inescapable stigma of servile status. Now, if each town across the eight provinces examines their current records and removes the designation of slave, replacing it with another status similar to the artisan-retainers of other bureaus, and if descendants of slaves are allowed to redeem themselves by paying a fee, receiving proper documentation, and becoming free citizens subject to regular taxation, just like military retainers, then the tendency of people to evade their status would be reduced. Moreover, the total number of taxpayers in the state would not diminish."
> This may be one partial solution, as Hamgyŏng's former governor Yi Myŏngshik believed. Once a slave was recorded on the registry, there was no way for them to escape their status. They tried countless methods to free themselves, leading to displacement and wandering. The decline in the number of slaves was largely due to these circumstances.

Suggestions made during the discussion varied, but they primarily aimed at two outcomes: either removing the "slave" label and converting these individuals to regular taxpayers, or maintaining a managed system to ensure that their contributions to the state were reliably collected. The conclusion of the meeting was frustratingly vague:

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647 Pibyŏnsa Tŭngnok 164, Cŏngjo, Y. 6:2:3 = March 5, 1782, https://db.history.go.kr/joseon/search/searchResultList.do#bb_164_001_02_0070 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Partially quoted in Hiraki 1982: 192–93.

> The distinction between free and slave status, with their starkly different classifications, has been part of the state's fundamental laws for four centuries, making it difficult to alter or abandon them.[648]

In 1790, Chö Hyŏnjung, royal inspector for the county of Hamyang in Kyŏngsang Province, made another effort to break the deadlock. He presented a petition to the Board of Border Defense:

> First, the problem with capital-bureau slaves lies in the unfair burden caused by escaped or unaccounted-for individuals. With many slaves having vanished—only one or two in ten remaining—one person might be forced to shoulder the tribute obligation for seven or eight others. What holds true for the county of Hamyang can reasonably be assumed to apply to other provinces as well. If we now abolish the designation of "slaves" and instead refer to them as "capital-bureau retainers," and then follow the annual census process used for free workers, any shortages can be filled with replacements.

But once again, the proposal was off the table and inertia was the order of the day:

> The Left State Councilor observed that the proposal to rename capital-bureau slaves as administration retainers was, according to the petition, an expedient request made out of urgency to correct an existing problem. However, even if the name were changed to administration retainers, the underlying issue would remain: slaves would still not easily fill the required quotas. Instead, they might be reclassified as free retainers, which could lead to new abuses. Although the matter is urgent and calls for careful consideration, the suggested measures fail to address the core problem. He concluded that apart from maintaining the current system, there might be no other solution.[649]

One year later, the same Left State Councilor, Chä Cegong, a very close ally of King Cŏngjo,[650] was still undecided:

> The matter concerns the suffering of the people, and while there may be one or another means of alleviating countless difficulties, the distress of slaves is something local officials dare not address and the court deems unsuitable to mention. How can such reasoning exist in this world? Upon closer examination of its origins, it arises from the distaste for the label and the accompanying shame. This, combined with improper arrangements for marriage, obstructs the proper course of human relationships. The only way to eliminate the longstanding accumulated ills lies in removing the name. However, the two characters for "slaves" (奴婢 *nobi*) have been in use for over a thousand years since the time of Kija, and a significant distinction of social status rests upon them. If the name is removed, private slaves will follow suit and imitate the change, ultimately erasing the boundaries of status entirely. Removing the name is not a matter that can be easily discussed, and that is why it presents such difficulty.[651]

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648 Pibyŏnsa Tŭngnok 167, Cŏngjo, Y. 8:29:10 = November 30, 1784, https://db.history.go.kr/joseon/search/searchResultList.do#bb_167_001_04_0870 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 193.

649 Pibyŏnsa Tŭngnok 167, Cŏngjo, Y. 14:04:14 = May 16, 1790, https://db.history.go.kr/joseon/search/searchResultList.do#bb_167_001_04_0870 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Cf. ibid.: 193.

650 Lovins 2019: 62.

651 CWS, Cŏngjo, Y. 15:03:29 = April 6, 1791. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 193.

Alltogether, these and other proposals to abolish slavery were made no fewer than eight times between 1784 and 1796, with no final agreement.[652]

However, in 1798, King Cŏngjo agreed to a proposal to end the distinction between free and slave soldiers in the troops of Phyŏngan Province. The distinction, he was told, caused private slaves to evade their duties because they faced discrimination.[653] This "groundbreaking" decision implied that slave soldiers would become free the moment they joined the military.[654]

King Cŏngjo was now willing to abolish government slavery. However, he died in 1800. It was therefore up to his son, King Sunjo, to proclaim the abolition. Sunjo was ten years old at the time, so it was evident that he only enacted what his father had prepared and his mother, the queen dowager, had accepted.[655] Emancipation was limited to the 66,067 tax-paying capital-bureau slaves in service of the royal palaces (the number is given in the proclamation), the central government, and the state academies and schools. They all gained commoner status. Their slave registers were burnt.[656]

But not all public slaves were emancipated. Those attached to the Ministry of Military Affairs and the Ministry of Public Works, but also the relay station slaves and the slaves of the provincial and local administrations, remained enslaved.[657] In other words, freedom was only granted to those "who had become useless."[658]

The royal declaration announcing the abolition of public slavery was composed by the scholar Yun Hängim on behalf of the king. It framed this act not as a radical innovation, but as a restoration of proper principles and the fulfillment of the late King Cŏngjo's unfulfilled aspirations. The declaration argued that slavery was a perversion of ancient wisdom, falsely attributed to the sage Kija, and cited the *Doctrine of the Mean* and its principle of treating the people as children, contrasting this ideal with the harsh realities of slavery:[659]

> 1. I am reading the *Doctrine of the Mean*. In governing the world and the state, there are nine guiding principles, the sixth of which is: "The people are like one's own children." Master Zhu [Xi] explains this by saying: "Treat the common people as if they were my own children." I have never failed to put down my book and sigh in contemplation. A child serves his father with sorrow and hardship, but he always rushes to his father's aid. A father nurtures his child so that when the child falls ill, the father spares no effort to save him. The relationship between a ruler and his people, the deep concern and longing for their welfare, is like that between a father and a child.

652 Palais 1996: 265.

653 Pibyŏnsa Tŭngnok 167, Cŏngjo, Y. 22:03:16 = April 20, 1798. Cf. Hiraki 1982: 194–95.

654 Hiraki mistakenly dates this to 1797: Hiraki 1982: 195; Palais Palais 1996: 266; Lovins follows him: Lovins 2019: 103.

655 H. Yun 1801: s.p.

656 Hiraki 1982: 197.

657 Ibid.: 199.

658 Han Yŏngguk 1977: 178.

659 Translated from the Chinese original, quoted from H. Yun 1801: s.p.

2. In my country, it is often said that the existence of slaves in government offices and various departments is due to Kija. But I say that this is not the case. When Kija came to the eastern land, he established the *Eight Prohibitions*. The purpose of the *Eight Prohibitions* was none other than the *Eight Governmental Functions* of the *Great Plan*.[660] Among them, food and commodities were placed first to ensure the sustenance of life, while the Office of the Minister of Justice was tasked with enforcing the prohibitions to suppress disorder. By means of these *Eight Governmental Functions*, Kija educated the people of the East. But the people, being ignorant and simple, knew only the *Eight Prohibitions* and not the broader *Eight Governmental Functions*. One of these prohibitions was to confiscate thieves as slaves, which was one of the *Eight Prohibitions*. Thus, this practice is ultimately derived from the laws of the Minister of Justice, and is inherently related to the *Nine Classics* in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, forming an interrelated whole.
3. If the slavery system of recent times is as it is said to be—where the government's enforcement is excessively harsh, where people treat slaves with the utmost contempt, where their lineage and kinship are segregated, and where their residences are distinctly separated, preventing them from marrying throughout their lives until they die—then such a government is nothing more than the failed policy of a declining age. Could it really be said that the wise Kija would have established such a system? Instead, I have heard Kija say: "Gather the *Five Blessings* and bestow them in due time, so that they may be widely granted to the common people." He also said: "Do not oppress or isolate the weak and disadvantaged." And further: "Act as the father and mother of the people and rule the world as their king."
4. From this, I further understand that the system of slavery did not originate with Kija. I respectfully recall how our great King Sukcong, out of his concern for the plight of the people, investigated the matter at court and reduced the tribute for male slaves by half and for female slaves by one-third. Our great King Yŏngjo, following the will of the people, abolished the tribute for female slaves and reduced the tribute for male slaves by another half. However, despite these reforms, the corrupt practices of the Board of the Royal Treasury's Agency for Slave Investigation remained unchanged. They pierced the skin to extract and verify the truth, rubbed the breasts to examine the branding marks, and caused a commotion in the villages where even chickens and dogs could not find peace.
5. As a result, countless lives were thrown into turmoil, unable to settle in their homes. Husbands were separated from their wives, mothers from their children. Beating their chests and wiping away bloody tears, they looked at each other in shock and despair, unable to bear the agony of separation. Many, in utter hopelessness, sought refuge in Buddhist monasteries, cutting themselves off from basic human relationships. Women, their hair turned white and braided in disorder, wandered the markets as beggars. Meanwhile, government officials came daily

660 The *Great Plan* (洪範 *hongbŏm*) is a foundational text of Chinese political philosophy, attributed to Kija and presented to King Wu of Zhou. It outlines a divinely sanctioned order for governance based on nine principles: the Five Elements (water, fire, wood, metal, earth), Five Personal Virtues (demeanor, speech, vision, hearing, thought), Eight Governmental Functions (food, economy, rites, infrastructure, education, justice, diplomacy, military), Five Time Divisions (year, month, day, celestial bodies, calendar), royal perfection as a moral standard, Three Governing Virtues (uprightness, strictness, leniency), methods for resolving doubts (consultation, divination), natural omens as political indicators, and the Five Blessings (longevity, wealth, health, virtue, a natural death) contrasted with the Six Calamities (early death, illness, sorrow, poverty, vice, weakness). It establishes a cosmic and moral framework for rulership, linking Heaven's mandate with human order. See https://ctext.org/shang-shu/great-plan [accessed 29.07.2025].

to demand money at their doorsteps. They whipped and beat the people, their cries as fierce as those of tigers. When officials falsely register someone [as a slave], the cost [of rectifying this] is as much as the price of a cow; when they encroach upon neighbors [to make them compensate for runaways], they plunder the property of a hundred households. Travelers on the road shuddered at the sight and even shed tears at the misery they witnessed.

6. Alas! What crime had these helpless and abandoned people committed to deserve such suffering? During the reign of my late predecessor [Cŏngjo], a benevolent decree was issued abolishing the system of hunting slaves. On the day the decree was promulgated, old and young alike rejoiced with drumming and dancing. The great grace of this decree spread far and wide, reaching even the distant seas. But fourteen years later, the governor of Yŏngnam reported: "A slave of the Board of the Royal Treasury carried the bones of a body and made a petition to Hamyang County." The ruler's heart was shaken with grief and anxiety. He immediately ordered the burning of the slave records and sent inquiries to the provincial governors. His words of compassion were multiplied tenfold, and the system was revised seven times. His sincerity and devotion were so profound that they could penetrate metal and stone and touch even the most insignificant creatures.
7. Memorials and petitions from the provinces and the Board of Border Defense piled up on all sides, while the sovereign's anxieties grew more and more pressing. Day and night he was consumed with worry and anxiety. At mealtimes, he put down his chopsticks, unable to eat; when it was time to rest, he paced his bedchamber, unable to sleep. In court sessions and official proclamations, he repeatedly and earnestly expressed his intentions. But the officials in charge failed to carry out his benevolent decree as intended. Although they made some minor reductions in numbers, this was far from reflecting the profound generosity and far-reaching grace of my late predecessor's policy.
8. I recall the teaching of my late predecessor, who said: "When the people rejoice even without the sound of pipes and flutes, and when they feel at peace even without the presence of splendid robes and carriages [at court banquets], it is because the harmony of *yin* and *yang* governs their vital energy, and benevolence and justice govern their affairs. Thus, the ruler tempers his mind with balanced food, calms his mind by listening to harmonious music, corrects his government by accepting harmonious words, and cultivates his virtue by practicing harmonious conduct. Now, however, people are suffering under the label of slavery, and their grievances are rising up to disrupt the natural harmony of Heaven. The winds and rains no longer follow their seasons, and the crops of grain and wheat do not ripen. Because of this, I am deeply troubled, and my heart cannot find peace. If my heart is to be at peace, must it not be through the reform of the slave system?"
9. This is what the court officials have received and praised. Now that I have ascended the throne and performed the rites of succession, I am filled with longing and reverence as I contemplate the immense duty of upholding the great legacy of my ancestors and strengthening the enduring foundation of the realm. I can only say that in order to inherit their aspirations and continue their deeds, nothing is more important than reforming the system of slavery. Moreover, when a king rules his people, there should be no distinction between the noble and the lowly, no division between those inside and those outside. To classify some as slaves and others as commoners, to separate and differentiate them, how can this be consistent with the principle of considering all as one's kinsmen?
10. The total of 36,974 palace slaves and 29,093 capital-bureau slaves will all be given the status of commoners. I also order the Royal Secretariat to collect the slave records and burn them

in front of the Tonhwa Gate.[661] As for the tributes required for government expenses, I order the Strong and Brave Guard to take care of them.[662] Alas! How could I dare to call this my own act of benevolence? I am merely fulfilling the unfulfilled wish of my late predecessor and restoring and clarifying what he had set forth.

11. From this day forward, for a thousand and ten thousand years, may the people dwell securely in their fields and homes, guard their ancestral graves, marry at the proper time, see their offspring multiply with each passing day, cultivate their crops without hardship, and live in joy, singing and celebrating. May this fulfill my heartfelt desire to carry on the compassionate intention of my late predecessor, who regarded the people as his own children.

The declaration detailed the abuses inherent in the slave system: harsh duties imposed on slaves, the contempt with which they were treated, their segregation into separate ancestral communities, the denial of marriage (a false claim already made by King Yŏngjo), and the emotional trauma of families being torn apart. The king also criticized the economic exploitation of slaves, particularly the demands for payments to officials, which often led to the ruin of entire families and communities. He also referred to a story of a slave carrying a corpse to appeal for justice, illustrating the desperation of their situation.

The king emphasized the efforts of his predecessor, King Cŏngjo, to address the issue. He noted the initial joy that greeted the decree banning the hunting of slaves, followed by the frustration when these reforms were not fully implemented. He described Cŏngjo's deep concern and repeated attempts to rectify the problems, which were ultimately thwarted by resistant officials.

King Sunjo positioned himself as one carrying on this unfinished work. He criticized the hypocrisy of officials who paid lip service to Confucian ideals while perpetuating the injustices of slavery. He stressed the importance of treating all people equally as "children" of the king, regardless of social status.

After ordering the public burning of slave registers, the declaration ended with an utopian vision of a future where formerly enslaved people would have their own land, marry freely, raise families, and live prosperous lives, praising the king's benevolent act.[663]

Economically, the abolition put considerable strain on the government. The capital-bureau slaves had contributed about 80,000 *ryang* of annual body tributes to the fiscus, which had to be substituted.[664]

But what was probably more important was that the measure was popular, as the king was assured by his Assistant Academic Official:

661 The main gate of Cangdŏk Palace.

662 King Cŏngjo established this guard in 1785 as an elite unit to protect the monarch. Following this edict, it was dismantled in 1802.

663 H. Yun 1801; cf. Palais 1996: 266–68.

664 Hiraki 1982: 201; Palais 1996: 268.

> I humbly heard that Your Highness has specially abolished the palace and capital-bureau slaves, burned their official registers, and made them free citizens forever. People far and wide are cheering and rejoicing like thunder.[665]

However, it would be unrealistic to expect the attitude of the slave owners—the *yangban*, in particular—to change overnight. There were still those among them who advocated slavery; but now there were also more and more who rejected it. Nevertheless, as a legal system, private slavery persisted as before, and there were still voices who defended it.

7.9.9 Shin Kwangha: The Kunlun Slave

Shin Kwangha, whose pen name was Muncho and who was born in 1729, came from a family of scholars and successfully passed the higher literary state examination in 1792. In his time, he was recognized as a "remarkable scholar." His poem *The Kunlun Slave* is a sharp and satirical portrayal of a foreign slave, blending humor, grotesque imagery, and social critique. It is uncertain, however, whether the slave described here was actually imported and ethnically non-Korean. The slave, though portrayed as incompetent and frustrating, becomes a mirror for the author's own powerlessness in the face of societal and natural challenges. While rooted in elite prejudice and hierarchical ideology, the author completely ignores the fact that his distorted image of a slave is the result of the "learned helplessness" provoked by a lifetime of abuse.

> Moved my home to farm by the sea, obtained a Kunlun slave.
> In nature extremely childish and stubborn, and physically a dwarf.
> At fifty-six years old, he doesn't understand differences in grains.
> Confused and dull, what harm is there in that? His fierceness remains excessive.
> Knows hunger but not satiety, follows the drinkers' lead.
> Eats hastily like a dog, looks sideways fiercely like a pig.
> In deep winter, facing cold food, before eating, his heart feels empty.
> Lifts a spoon to start eating, rough sweat already showing on his skin.
> First it gathers at the tip of his nose, then drips all over his face like pearls.
> Yellow mucus follows, swallowing and spitting, all mixed with water.
> People spit and avoid him, shamelessly he lacks any sense of shame.
> Who could endure being your wife? In old age, alone in male solitude.
> I am poor with no means to employ him, asking about his hired labor.
> He says he is experienced in farming, knowledgeable in agriculture without match.
> Spring arrives in the western fields, farm tasks entrusted to him.
> In youth he was useless, much more so in this old and frail body.
> Plowing together, unable to finish an acre, panting and sweating, hard to stay upright.
> Stumbling and falling, unable to handle wine, claiming to be sick in an instant.
> His face looks grim, but still capable of driving off malaria.
> In the morning he stops plowing and returns, hiring him is a wasted expense.

665 *Ilsŏngnok*, Sunjo, Y. 25:04:05. Quoted in Hiraki 1982: 199.

Late to bed, still not yet night, early to rise, almost midday.
Snoring, shaking the shared bed, avoiding sleep, we do not share a room.
When the maid disturbs his sleep, he puffs his cheeks, indulging in anger.
Speaking rashly, demanding to leave, relying on age to deceive me.
Both ears are also deaf, speech to him sounds nonexistent.
Watching people move their mouths, he thinks they laugh at his foolishness.
Sudden anger and loud curses, choking and braying like a sick donkey.
Children are startled, about to cry, the knowledgeable just sigh and leave.
My field faces the sea's fury, during high tide, prepared for the unexpected.
When the tide comes, the water buckets break, neighbors rush to help.
Sullenly he shows no emotion, hands behind his back, walking slowly.
Standing on the long dike, he curses the water as if it were guilty.
Old and lazy, he doesn't exert any effort, falsely claiming he works hard.
Unless he's Tao Kan's barbarian slave,[666]
how can he deceive like a pond keeper entrusted with an estate's fish?
The sea is truly strange, why does it trouble me so?
Onlookers cover their mouths, laughing secretly to themselves.
When he returns home, he faces my anger, standing with his back turned, drumming his throat.

The text reflects a deeply hierarchical worldview that dehumanizes the nameless slave and reinforces elite cultural biases. The author employs graphic descriptions of the slave's physical habits to evoke disgust and emphasize his coarse nature. Frequent metaphors liken the slave to dogs, pigs, and donkeys, dehumanizing him while underscoring his perceived inferiority and incompetence. The derogatory descriptions of the Kunlun slave reflect prejudices against foreign slaves, who were often seen as inferior and uncultured. The reference to Tao Kan's barbarian slave adds a layer of classical literary wit, contrasting the mythical loyalty of the past with the present-day reality of the author's unreliable servant. The slave is depicted as "childish and stubborn," physically small, and mentally incompetent in understanding even basic agricultural tasks. His eating habits are described with grotesque imagery. The depiction of his bodily functions further emphasizes his uncouth and animalistic nature. His laziness is described with sarcasm.

The slave's temperamental nature is highlighted through his anger, curses, and inability to communicate. His emotional outbursts frighten children and annoy others. In sum, the slave is portrayed as antisocial and oblivious to shame. His perceived laziness, lack of shame, and crude behavior are moralized, portraying him as inherently flawed. His anger, deafness, and antisocial behavior exacerbate the author's frustra-

666 胡奴. This is an allusion to a poem written by the famous Chinese poet Du Fu (712–770) to thank his Lao slave Aduan for the courage he showed when he had to repair broken water pipes at night. Du Fu claims that he was "once amazed by the marvelousness of Tao Kan's barbarian slave." The exact meaning of this line has been debated for centuries. In the fifth-century work "The Garden of Miracles," Liu Jingshu reports that when Tao Kan 陶侃 (259–334) went out one day with a foreign slave, they met a Buddhist monk who claimed that this slave was a divine messenger. Later that day, the strange slave miraculously disappeared. G. Patterson 2015: 36–37.

tions. In short, the slave exhibits the full spectrum of cognitive, motivational, and emotional deficits that Seligman defines as the characteristics of learned helplessness.

The author contrasts his struggle with the slave against the unpredictable forces of the sea, furthering the theme of helplessness and absurdity. At the same time, the text offers a subtle commentary on the absurdity of the system itself. The slave's exaggerated incompetence and the author's inability to control him highlight the tension between expectation and reality within Cosŏn's agricultural labor system. Shin Kwangha uses the slave's absurd failures as a vehicle for expressing his own frustrations with the challenges of managing labor and rural life. Shin Kwangha's frustrations stem from his unfulfilled expectation of obedience and productivity, something clearly beyond the responsibility of any single slave.

Read against the backdrop of late Cosŏn society, this poem reveals the deepening alienation between masters and slaves at a time when short-term hiring was increasingly replacing lifetime household servitude. The poet, himself too impoverished to own hereditary slaves, had to rely on a hired slave, whom he tried to regulate through meticulous rules and moral admonitions. However, knowing he was a mere contractual laborer, the servant flouted these restraints, behaving less like a loyal dependent and more like a cunning free agent.

This situation exemplifies the dual processes of reification (*Versachlichung*) and objectification (*Verdinglichung*): the slave is reduced to a disposable tool, and the master's authority is reduced to the writing of bureaucratic contracts rather than genuine household discipline. Both parties stand alienated from the Confucian ideal of an integrated family order. The master's self-mocking tone, lamenting his inability to enforce order, underscores how both the slave and the master become entangled in an impersonal economic relationship, stripped of the older moral bond.

Thus, the poem quietly reveals how the commodification of servitude in late Cosŏn society deepened social fragmentation, transforming both labor and authority into marketable, alienated commodities.

7.9.10 Tasan and His Slaves

In 1799, the scholar-official Cŏng Yagyong visited a former slave named Chö and stayed with him overnight. On that occasion, he composed a sentimental poem under his pen name, Tasan.[667]

> Slave Chö, you and I parted ten years ago,
> Tonight I come to rest at your home.

667 Cŏng Yagyong (Tasan): Suk Phyŏnggu. In: *Yŏyudang Chŏnsŏ* 1:3. For this collection of the works of "one of the most celebrated scholars" of the reform-oriented school of Practical Learning, among them almost 2,500 poems, see *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 450–54; translated

> Now, you've built a house that's grand and spacious,
> Your shelves and tables are adorned with elegant jars and pots.
> You grow vegetables in the sand fields, rice in the water,
> You taught your concubine to run the tavern, your son rides the boat.
> Above, there's no scolding; below, no debts—
> A life lived freely by the rivers and lakes.
> Though I wear the cap and seal of office, what does it bring?
> At forty, my life remains full of worries.
> I've read a thousand scrolls, but they haven't filled my hunger,
> Worn the token [of an official] for three years, but not gained an inch of land.
> With disdaining eyes, I gaze upon the world,
> Withered features, always closed indoors.
> I weigh and measure, and with you I compete—
> In truth, I lose a hundred times to your hundred wins.
> In the autumn breeze, I long for watershield soup and perch from home,[668]
> To clear my shame and quench my anger, side by side with you.

In the first line, Tasan mentions that he and his slave Chö "parted ten years ago," which can be interpreted to mean that Chö had been remitted from slavery.[669] Tasan reflects on the contrasts between his own burdensome life as a *yangban* official and the seemingly contented, liberated life of his friend, the former slave. This comparison underscores his disappointment with the material and spiritual shortcomings of his official duties, which have not provided him with tangible rewards or inner satisfaction. However, this contrast should not be taken at face value. There is no reason to assume from the poem that his friend's family was actually better off than Tasan's own; rather, this contrast serves a rhetorical purpose. By highlighting his lack of material gain despite years of official service, Tasan emphasizes the scholar-official's humility and the sacrifices involved in upholding duty over personal benefit. Such humility was a valued trait for a Confucian scholar, reinforcing his identity as someone dedicated to principles over wealth. Secondly, Tasan's longing for a simpler, more rustic life reflects Daoist ideals of returning to nature and rejecting worldly ambitions. This yearning is more rhetorical than literal. His expression of nostalgia for an idyllic countryside life reflects an idealized freedom rather than a serious desire to abandon his post. It is a poetic exercise in imagining liberation from his burdens, not a genuine intention to retreat. In essence, the poem balances the Confucian ethos of duty with the Daoist appeal for simplicity, using this imagined return to nature as a means to critique his own unfulfilling official life while subtly reinforcing his loyalty to his role. This imagined comparison therefore

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in: *A Confucian Autobiography of Tasan Chŏng Yagyong: Selected Poems, 1776–1836* 2024: 98–99; for a biography, see Setton 1997.

668 This line alludes to the story of the fourth-century Chinese official Zhang Han, who, according to the *Book of Jin*, "remembers these dishes of his hometown, quits his post and goes back home": *A Confucian Autobiography of Tasan Chŏng Yagyong: Selected Poems, 1776–1836* 2024: 99.

669 Ibid.: 99.

highlights not the literal success of the former slave's life, but Tasan's own sense of dissatisfaction with his official role and his yearning for a simpler existence. It must be admitted, however, that Tasan "observed the hardships of the peasantry through daily contact with them and analyzed and critized the corrupted feudal social system."[670] This does not mean that he rejected slavery.

In one of his short stories, *Chultongmun* ("Dismissing a Slave"), Tasan adapts Wang Bao's classic *Contract for a Youth* (see p. 122) to his time, ironically twisting it into *dismissing* a slave. It is hard to imagine that, as in this case, slaves were actually required to make refunds to their masters, but the idea shows how much slave labor was seen as a commercial service in the late Cosŏn period: if slaves failed to perform, they lost their right to remuneration, just like contract laborers. Incidentally, Tasan's text once again describes the wealth of tasks that were assigned to house slaves:[671]

> Long ago, Wang Bao's bonded slave was subjected to relentless demands, deprived of sleep at night and rest during the day. The rules imposed on him were as numerous as ox hairs and as minuscule as mosquito wings. His muscles ached, his bones suffered, and he was expected to accomplish great feats with limited strength, which led to him shedding tears that would stream down his cheeks and chest, suffering under a constant barrage of anger and scolding—certainly not the behavior of a gentleman.
>
> Now, a new agreement with a boy servant was established, easing the regulations.
>
> "Each morning, you are to sweep the courtyard, clear the muddy areas, prepare breakfast slowly, and attend to basic provisions. Only proper cooking is required, with no demand for fine flavors. After eating, you should tend the garden, removing weeds and clearing the underbrush, planting peaches and apricots, transplanting persimmons and grafting apple trees, separating eggplants and scallions, and picking and pruning various plants. Fertilize the taro, press down the sweet potatoes, water the cabbage and dry the mustard, tend to the melons without harming their stems. You may water the lotus with a bamboo tube, shelter the bananas with mats, and care for gardenias and pomegranates, watering them as needed. Clear the pathways by cutting grass and mending bridges, keep young servants in check, and prevent unauthorized cutting or gathering.
>
> Do not fear; these tasks are spread across the seasons and are not all required in a single day. If you need to transport supplies to mountain temples, sell herbs at riverside markets, procure medicine from the county or borrow ginger and dates from neighbors within five to ten *li*, these are not long journeys. Eat modestly along the way and refrain from drunkenness. Any remaining strength should be used to gather wood to store for times of flooding.
>
> I have given you land to grow beans and rice. When the season arrives, let me know so that you can weed and cultivate your crops. This is your personal responsibility, and I shall not inspect your work. However, if you do not heed my instructions, you will not retain your position."
>
> After reading this admonition, the boy servant clapped his hands and bowed his head in gratitude to his master, with a joyful expression and sincere words, saying,
>
> "Even if I were as small and frail as a pygmy, I would fulfill this work. Should I fail to keep our agreement, let me be punished by being bound and lashed."

670 *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 451.

671 *Chultongmun* 黜僮文. In: *Yŏyudang Chŏnsŏ* 1:3, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/與猶堂全書/第一集/第二十二卷 [accessed 29.07.2025].

> Yet he failed to live up to his promises, became complacent in his duties, and neglected the fields, leaving the weeds untended, thorn bushes overgrown, and dangerous creatures lurking, frightening the young children. The vegetables and melons withered, and the flowers no longer bloomed. Secretly, he made deals with woodcutters, slipping away right after meals, wandering about until evening. He drank wine in the markets, and upon sobering up, would return to sleep under a tree. He wore fine linen and ate rich dishes, not only failing in his duties but also growing arrogant. Despite gentle persuasion, he did not change his ways.
> Eventually, his master, Mr. Yun, summoned him and, with a stern voice, reproached him:
> "In a country, no rank is held higher than that of ministers, yet even ministers who hold office and draw salaries without fulfilling their responsibilities are dismissed to restore the people's trust. Likewise, officials charged with leading the people, if weak, cowardly, and unable to root out corruption, or if greedy and lacking dignity, are removed to prevent the exploitation of the people's resources. How much more so for you, a mere household servant—do you think you can escape your duties? Return the provisions allotted to you, and do not cling to undeserved privileges."
> The boy servant, hearing this, bit his fingers and beat his chest, with snot streaming down three feet, and tears falling from his eyes like the drizzling autumn rain.

According to this job description, the servant was responsible for a range of daily tasks essential to maintaining the household and its surroundings. Each morning, he was to clean the courtyard, clear away muddy areas, and prepare breakfast. After meals, he tended the garden, weeding and clearing undergrowth and cultivating various plants, including peaches, apricots, persimmons, eggplants, and melons, all while taking care not to damage the produce. He also watered and protected more delicate plants, such as bananas and gardenias, and maintained paths and bridges, preventing unauthorized cutting or gathering of resources. As additional tasks, he occasionally transported supplies to nearby temples, sold herbs at riverside markets, and procured medicine or provisions from nearby communities. He was expected to collect firewood and store it for emergencies, and to grow beans and rice for his own use on a plot of land provided to him, with regular updates on his crops. The tasks were deliberately spread across the seasons, requiring him to take on steady and attentive work rather than an overwhelming daily load, to ensure the smooth functioning of the household and land. In essence, this was no different from the times of Yi Kyubo or Yi Säk.

That Wang Bao's *Contract for a Youth* still served as a blueprint for defining slave labor is evident in another (untitled) poem by Tasan:

> In the midst of the rain, the young maid is hurriedly assigned to cover the scallions and separate the eggplants. Being young, she doesn't know the *Contract for a Youth*, but she still dutifully places the impatiens flowers on the upper terrace first.[672]

Among the intellectuals of the late Cosŏn period, Shin Kwangha and Cŏng Yagyong, with their positive endorsement of slavery, were an "anomaly."[673] However, it is undeniable

672 *Yŏyudang Chŏnsŏ* 1:7, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/與猶堂全書/第一集/第七卷 [accessed 29.07.2025].
673 H. Yun 1801.

that Cŏng Yagyong was a direct and favorite dialog partner of King Cŏngjo[674] while the king was deliberating on the future of the public slave system. It was only after the emancipation of the palace and office slaves that Cŏng Yagyong set about writing the *Mongmin Shimsŏ* ("Admonitions on Governing the People"), a comprehensive guide for local officials that detailed the principles and practices essential to effective governance and "an attempt to rectify the social ills of his time and the future."[675] He completed the manuscript in 1821.

The treatment of slavery in the *Mongmin Shimsŏ* is part of Cŏng's broader discourse on governance. While he acknowledged and affirmed the presence of slaves as an important aspect of social structure, his treatment lacks extensive theoretical exploration. Instead, his remarks are embedded in quotations from ancient classics and end with practical instructions for maintaining order and stability. He emphasized the need to regulate the behavior of slaves, especially those associated with powerful households, to prevent harm to the general population. He pointed out the responsibility of their masters and officials to curb their excesses and portrays slaves as potential sources of disorder if left unchecked.[676]

Cŏng Yagyong described the role of slaves in local government, one of the last areas where public slaves were still employed after 1801 (the other being relay stations), beginning his discussion with the admission that "among all the subfunctionaries, the job of government slaves is the hardest one."[677] These slaves, he explained, performed various arduous tasks such as attending to officials, managing supplies, working as artisans, caring for horses, heating rooms, and maintaining hygiene. Despite their hard work, only kitchen slaves and granary slaves received any form of payment, which consisted of leftover rice. Granary slaves also had to work as gardeners and were often financially burdened. However, this description is in the context of a section about "the scheming of government slaves," specifically their corruption, mistreatment of commoners, exploitation of merchants, insolence, and misbehavior, such as shouting and complaining. These attitudes and actions "provoke resentment in the people and damage the dignity of the magistrate."[678] His reputation would also suffer if he spent too much money on *kisäng*, who, although coming from poor families, usually had rich patrons to support them, while "the ones who most deserve his sympathy are female government slaves with ugly faces" who were busy day and night fetching water and preparing meals for the magistrate. They deserved kind words and small favors, such as their husbands' exemption from military service. Love and benevolence toward his slaves would earn

674 Y.-Y. Chŏng 2010: xxi.

675 Ibid.: xvi.

676 *Mongmin Shinsŏ*, B. 9:5, Kŭmbok, http://www.davincimap.co.kr/davBase/Source/davSource.jsp?Job=Body&SourID=SOUR001284&Page=9 [accessed 29.07.2025].

677 Y.-Y. Chŏng 2010: 232.

678 Ibid.: 233.

a magistrate their loyalty and prevent them from spreading dirty rumors about him.[679] Thus, Cŏng Yagyong framed benevolence as a means of governance that ensures both efficiency and protection from slander. As a whole, the section reflects the instrumental nature of the author's concern for slaves, where their treatment was primarily a means of maintaining order, loyalty, and the dignity of the magistrate, rather than a reflection of genuine humanitarian sentiment. How a magistrate treated his slaves mirrored his administrative competence and moral character.

While Cŏng Yagyong acknowledged the suffering of the slaves, he did not criticize the institution of slavery itself. In his remarks on "Distinguishing Ranks," he expressed his displeasure with the introduction of the uniform matrifilial rule in 1731:

> Since the laws concerning slaves were changed, the manners of the people have greatly deteriorated, which is not beneficial to the state.[680]

He called this a "change for the worse" and claimed that the *yangban* class had been weakened and that the "sense of community" of the people had deteriorated since then.[681] He also defended the hereditary nature of the slave status by referring to Chinese classics.

He then touched on the integration of abandoned or orphaned children into households as slaves or dependents, especially in times of famine or hardship, "when infants are discarded like fallen leaves."[682] As a solution, he suggested that "people should be allowed to gather abandoned children to make them their children or slaves."[683] While this reflects a practical solution to a social crisis, it is again framed as an administrative measure rather than as an expression of deep ethical concern for the individuals involved.

Aside from some etymological studies of slave terminology,[684] Cŏng Yagyong's discussion of slavery remained apologetic, pragmatic, and focused on immediate administrative needs.

679 Y.-Y. Chŏng 2010: 234.

680 *Mongmin Shinsŏ*, B. 7:5, Pyŏndŭng. http://www.davincimap.co.kr/davBase/Source/davSource.jsp?Job=Body&SourID=SOUR001284&Page=7 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Cf. ibid.: 538.

681 Ibid.: 538–39.

682 *Mongmin Shinsŏ*, B. 4:2, Cayu, http://www.davincimap.co.kr/davBase/Source/davSource.jsp?Job=Body&SourID=SOUR001284&Page=4, and B. 11:4, Sŏlshi, http://www.davincimap.co.kr/davBase/Source/davSource.jsp?Job=Body&SourID=SOUR001284&Page=11 [accessed 29.07.2025].

683 Y.-Y. Chŏng 2010: 198.

684 Hiraki 1982: 220.

7.9.11 Sŏng Hăŭng and the Righteous Slaves

The prolific *Shilhak* scholar Sŏng Hăŭng, himself a secondary son, had a very critical view of slavery. His *Ŭibokcŏn* ("Biographies of Righteous Slaves"), where he discusses the lives of seven slaves, is the only known example of the slave biography genre that goes beyond praising the moral character of its subject to take a critical stance toward the slave system.[685] In the preface, Sŏng writes:

> The labor of slaves being inherited through generations is not of ancient origin. People today frequently invoke the teachings of Kija, saying that among those who stole from one another, the men were made family slaves and the women were made maidservants. But in Kija's era, the Eastern [= Korean] customs favored theft and robbery, and Kija sought to reform these customs by degrading the thieves. Could he truly have intended to bind their sons and grandsons as slaves forever? And could he have envisioned anything like today's practice of pricing and reselling people like cattle?
> The present system of slavery comes from Mongol practices. When the Mongols invaded China, they took captives daily and kept them permanently, controlling their lives. [...]
> Koryŏ submitted to the Mongols and adopted their system, which then became customary in the nation. According to penal law, if someone slaughtered a cow, he was punished with 100 strokes; if someone privately killed a slave, he was likewise punished with 100 strokes. Thus, people and animals were treated no differently. Could this truly reflect the heart of the sages?
> The sages established the five human relationships. But now, slave and master constitute a sixth: the slave is driven harshly, treated as a lowly creature, yet expected to be more loyal to his master than to his own father, and to revere the master as though he were a sovereign. What sort of law is this?[686]

Rejecting the common Confucian justification that traced slavery to Kija, Sŏng Hăŭng reframes it as a foreign institution inherited from Mongol rule, thereby stripping it of moral legitimacy. He exposes the ethical contradiction of a system that treats slaves as subhumans while demanding greater loyalty from them than from sons or officials. By invoking Confucian ideals such as the Five Relationships only to reveal how slavery violates their spirit, Sŏng inverts orthodox rhetoric to condemn structural injustice. Unlike earlier thinkers who questioned aspects of the system, Sŏng combines historical revision, ethical protest, and a victim-centered perspective to offer a radical, humanist critique grounded in both scholarship and moral clarity.

685 Co Hanŭl 2023: 137, 148.

686 Sŏng Hăŭng: *Ŭibokcŏn*, Preface. Translated from the Chinese original, quoted from ibid.: 147.

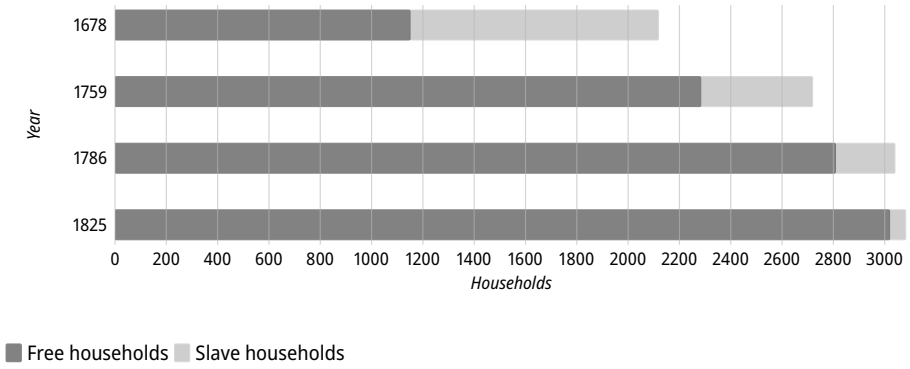

Fig. 18: Free and slave households in Tansŏng Prefecture, Kyŏngsang Province, 1678–1825 (Kyungran Kim 2016: 230).

7.9.12 The Breakdown of the Old Order and the Evolution of Hired Labor

Legal changes, like the enforcement of the matrifilial rule, not only altered inheritance practices but also undermined the institutional stability of slavery by codifying a structure that incentivized desertion and complicated ownership claims. While the policies of Kings Yŏngjo and Cŏngjo did not abolish slavery as a legal system, they did make it less economically viable by increasing the cost of managing slaves and decreasing the rate of return on slaves.[687] This was felt most acutely by the lower ranks of the *yangban* class.

From the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, the number of impoverished *yangban* in society increased rapidly. By the mid-eighteenth century, many *yangban* were living in poverty and could not pay their taxes or debts on time. As their economic situation worsened, so did their ability to control their slaves and recapture runaways. As poverty worsened, even the few remaining slaves often fled to avoid starvation.[688]

Ki Cŏngjin was a neo-Confucian scholar from Cŏlla Province. In an undated letter to a friend from the middle of the nineteenth century, Ki complained:

> When my family recently moved to a new residence where we did not know the neighbors, a plague broke out, and no one in the household escaped its effects. As our worries escalated, another calamity struck—the servants fled. Those who remained had to carry heavy burdens: one slave

687 Yi Uyŏn and Cha 2010: 124.
688 Päk 2011: 10.

> carrying firewood and another female slave fetching water. Tasks such as grinding grain, cooking rice, and preparing meals became impossible without our direct participation. After two months of this hardship, my hair really began to turn white. Still, I am thankful that no one died. Was this just fate playing with us?[689]

Obviously, slave desertion was an economic problem for the poor and middle-class *yangban* households that owned only a few slaves. There was, of course, a correlation here: if the masters had nothing to offer their slaves, the slaves would simply leave.

In an attempt to look at this fact from an economic perspective, Heeho Kim concludes that desertion was the cause of the collapse of slavery in Cosŏn. He argues that slavery in Korea did not end through violent uprisings or legislative abolition but rather through a "Pareto optimal shift from slavery to the wage labour contract system,"[690] where slave desertions led to a change in equilibrium that benefited society without harming any major group. According to his study, the change to the "pure" matrifilial rule of inheritance in 1731 led to an increase in slave desertions. By analyzing household registers and slave transactions, he convincingly shows that as more slaves escaped, the cost of policing them increased, ultimately making slaveholding less economically viable. The argument that desertions contributed to a decline in slave prices and a shift toward wage labor is well supported by data on the declining share of slaves (if the register data can be trusted) and rising real wages.

However, the claim that this process represents a Pareto optimal shift is problematic. A Pareto improvement implies "a reallocation that increases some household's utility [...] while reducing no household's utility."[691] In this case, the study itself acknowledges that slaveholders faced rising costs and a loss of labor,[692] which contradicts the idea of a frictionless transition. Moreover, the claim that desertions alone drove the end of slavery overlooks broader sociopolitical and economic factors, including state policies, changing elite interests, and agrarian transformations. The hypothesis acknowledges the role of King Yŏngjo in changing the legal status of slaves in 1731 but does not fully integrate this political dimension into its economic framework.

Moreover, the reliance on falling slave prices as evidence of inefficiency is somewhat reductionist. Prices reflect many variables beyond desertions, including broader economic conditions, shifts in agricultural productivity, and fluctuations in land ownership patterns.

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689 Nosa Sŏnsäng Munjip 蘆沙先生文集, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/蘆沙先生文集/卷四 [accessed 29.07.2025]. For the writings of Ki Cŏngjin, whose pen name was Nosa, see *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 474–75.

690 Kim 2022: 10.

691 Starr 1997: 143.

692 Kim 2022: 8.

Most importantly, as we can infer from Ki Cŏngjin's letter, the economic impact of slave desertions was more severe for small slave-owning households than for large owners. The concept of economies of scale is indeed relevant here:

1. A *yangban* household with 200 slaves that lost 20 percent to desertion would still retain 160 slaves, allowing it to continue functioning. However, a household with only three slaves that lost one-third of its labor force would face an immediate productivity crisis.
2. Larger estates could redistribute labor among the remaining slaves or gradually shift to alternative sources of labor, such as tenant farmers or hired workers. Small slaveholders lacked these buffers, making desertion an existential threat to their economic stability.
3. As Kim notes, the cost of policing increased with desertion. Large landowners could potentially afford to invest more in slave surveillance, enlist the help of local officials for hunting slaves, or impose collective punishment to deter desertion. Small owners had neither the resources nor the political clout to effectively prevent desertion.
4. Large landowners had more flexibility in switching to wage labor because they controlled large tracts of land and could attract free laborers. Small owners, however, often lacked the land or capital to support a wage labor force, making their increased dependence on slavery their primary economic structure.

Considering the differential impact on small and large slaveholders, the collapse of slavery cannot be explained solely by rising surveillance costs or rational adaptation. Desertion was a disproportionate economic shock for small slaveholders. The decline of slavery was not a smooth, optimal transition but a disruptive, uneven process that drove many marginal households into financial distress and social decline. Whereas Heeho Kim interprets the end of slavery as a rational market correction, this study emphasizes its stratified social costs and destabilizing effects on debt-ridden commoners and minor *yangban*.

While desertion primarily affected slaveholders, the commodification of children reflects how these pressures extended beyond elite households into the lower classes. Free peasants had to pay taxes to their landlords and the state. If they were in debt, selling their children was often their only option. In some parts of the North, families treated their children, especially girls, as commodities.[693]

Moreover, toward the end of the Cosŏn period, the number of people in dependent relationships due to their occupation rather than their hereditary status increased considerably. Although hired labor had served as an alternative to slave labor since the early Cosŏn period, it only became structurally significant in the mid-eighteenth cen-

693 Yi Kyu-Tae 1985: 60.

tury. A remarkable shift occurred then in the composition of hired laborers and their employers, fundamentally changing their meaning and conditions.[694]

The disintegration of agrarian stability, the rise of the commodity-money economy, and the state's inability to provide social security created a large class of mobile workers who sought work in emerging sectors. Many of these displaced people were runaway slaves, and their ability to blend into the mobile labor force significantly undermined the effectiveness of the slave system.[695]

As agricultural productivity increased through methods such as transplanting rice seedlings and as land ownership became more concentrated, many small farmers lost their land and became itinerant laborers. These vagrants (*yumin*) migrated to urban centers like Seoul in search of work, forming an underclass of wage laborers that included former slaves. The mining industry also attracted a large number of *yumin*. This disrupted the labor market elsewhere, enabling slaves to escape their masters and the state's surveillance.[696] Similarly, the development of artisan workshops and private enterprises created opportunities for slaves to work under new identities. When registering in new places, they tried to prevent the detection of their slave status by omitting the names of their mothers or original masters.[697] Now nominally free men, they were employed as hired laborers in mining or transportation,[698] as porters, foremen in fieldwork, tomb guards, or even as mourning attendants. These men became visible in the records of the time because they were recorded as having these specific job titles, as opposed to begin actual slaves. Unlike the latter, they were also no longer referred to as "things" (*kŏt*).[699]

In rural areas, these developments fundamentally changed the conditions of hired labor. While adult males suitable for agricultural work dominated the ranks of hired laborers in the early Cosŏn period, younger females increasingly dominated by the mid-eighteenth century. Less suited to heavy fieldwork, they were more likely to be employed in domestic and subsistence labor. This trend reflects broader changes in rural household economies and the growing number of landless poor.

In 1672, nearly 90 percent of *kogong* employers were commoners and slaves, indicating that hired labor was primarily used by lower-status groups who lacked the means to own slaves. However, by 1753, the proportion of *yangban* and *cungin* employers had increased significantly to 22.5 and 11.6 percent, respectively. Meanwhile, slaves accounted for only 10.9 percent. This trend intensified by 1774, when *cungin* represented the largest share of employers (36.8 percent), and the combined share of commoners and slaves dropped to 35.8 percent. These developments suggest that upper-class households

694 For more on this shift, see the analysis of the Ulsan household registers in Yi Cŏngsu 2018: 181–83.
695 Yu Sŭnghŭi 2016: 24–25.
696 Ibid.: 26.
697 Ibid.: 28.
698 Ibid.: 25–26.
699 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 58.

were increasingly involved in hiring labor, while lower-class groups were becoming less dependent on *kogong*. On the other hand, the ecological crisis of that time negatively impacted agricultural productivity. This resulted in declining prices for wetlands and lower wages for hired laborers and slaves.[700]

Thus, before the mid-eighteenth century, *kogong* functioned primarily as a substitute for slave labor among households that could not own slaves. Hired adult males filled roles in agricultural production. However, as wealthier and higher-status households became the primary employers of *kogong*, and as younger women became more prevalent among those hired, the nature of hired labor shifted toward long-term, domestic servitude. Legal reforms in 1783 reinforced this process by requiring a minimum five-year contract for *kogong* registered in household registers. This formalized their status and deepened their subordination to their employers.[701] The growing prevalence of long-term female *kogong* thus signaled the convergence of hired labor and slavery, reflecting broader transformations in late Cosŏn society and economy. After the mid-eighteenth century, the character of hired laborers increasingly resembled that of slaves, albeit their employment was based on contractual arrangements rather than their hereditary status. The feminization and juvenilization of the labor force, as well as its deepening subordination to elite households, marked a transformation toward servile dependency. This transformation institutionalized *kogong* as a form of bonded labor that was structurally analogous to slavery but formally maintained through legal contracts and household registration rather than ownership.

The semantic ambiguity of late Cosŏn dependent labor, where contractually free individuals occupied roles functionally similar to domestic slaves, is exemplified by the informal term *sangno* ("commoner-slave"). In the late nineteenth century, Homer B. Hulbert noted:

> There is a certain kind of service that is rendered by boys that does not properly come under the term slavery. Such boys are called, to be sure, *sang-no* or "common slave" but they are not slaves. They run errands and do odd jobs about gentlemen's houses and receive in payment their food and clothing. They give no deeds, there is no compact and they can leave at any time. They are lower than the regularly salaried servant but vastly higher than the slave.[702]

In Western sources from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they appear as "boys" and "coolies."

700 W. Lee 2015: 49.

701 *Thäjŏn Thongbyŏn* 大典通編: "Persons hired as laborers outside the capital who receive a wage of ten *ryang* or more, and for whom a written contract with a term of five years or more is drawn up, may be entered in the household register and treated as hired laborers. Those who do not receive wages, do not have a written contract, or are not registered, but are employed intermittently for one or two years, shall be treated as ordinary persons." Translated from the original Chinese, quoted from Yi Cŏngsu 2018: 154.

702 Hulbert 1902: 150–52.

Ultimately, the end of slavery in Cosŏn was not a smooth transition driven by market forces, but a fragmented and stratified disintegration shaped by political reform, social inequality, and structural transformation in the rural economy.

7.10 The Abolition of Slavery

Although the nineteenth century was largely characterized by economic depression, substantial efforts to reform the system were lacking, and private slavery persisted as ever. However, the looming dissolution of the old status boundaries increased tensions within the population, with those *yangban* who faced economic and social decline resorting to violent demonstrations of power.

The tragic death of the young female slave Cŏmi from Andong, in Kyŏngsang Province, in 1842 illustrates what this meant for slaves in extreme cases. A *yangban* named Yi Cangyu suspected her of inciting one of his female slaves to run away and so had her brutally interrogated by one of his slaves in the courtyard of his estate and then arrested by the magistrate. Meanwhile, the escaped slave was persuaded to return by her brother. Yi Cangyu withdrew the charges against Cŏmi, but she died shortly thereafter, and her husband had her hastily buried before fleeing quickly, probably fearing a judicial investigation. The case was brought to court by Cŏmi's owner, who was himself a public slave and wanted to be financially compensated for his loss. The investigation revealed many contradictions in the testimony of those involved. Whether Cŏmi died from the abuse or from an illness could not be determined with certainty. Nevertheless, Yi Cangyu was sentenced to several strokes of the cane for excessive cruelty.[703]

In another incident the following year, Yi Pongdol, a forty-four or forty-five-year-old private slave, lived independently with his wife, who was a slave owned by the *yangban* Shin Philho; his slave-status sister; and his eldest brother, who held a *yangban* title probably acquired through a grain contribution to the state. The family, which included at least two cousins, shared a village in Kyŏngsang Province and worked together. Pongdol owned a fishing pond, and his brother owned a bean field. Conflict arose when Shin Philho entered Pongdol's home and smashed his cherished sauce jars in his rage after being hindered by Pongdol from fishing in his pond. Pongdol committed suicide in deep frustration. Despite the clear cause of death, his sister reported the case, prompting an official investigation. Although Philho was not found guilty of a crime, he was sentenced to a beating for his violent behavior.[704]

In 1863, the eleven-year-old King Kojong ascended the throne, but the real power in the government was wielded by his father, Yi Haŭng, who bore the title Hŭngsŏn

703 Sun Joo Kim 2021: 146–53.

704 "Case 3. A Defiant Slave Challenges His Master with Death: Yi Pong-dol (Anŭi, Kyŏngsang Province, 1842)" 2014; Sun Joo Kim 2023: 327–27.

Täwŏngun. He implemented a series of important reforms aimed at strengthening the monarchy. To this end, he did not shy away from imposing military taxes on the *yangban* in 1870. However, they were not taxed directly, but under the names of the slaves they owned. In Kojong's *Veritable Records*, this was celebrated as an act of tax justice:

> Since last year [1870], under the instructions of the Täwŏngun, *yangban* households have been paying tax under a slave's name, while commoners have been personally performing military service. Now there is no resentment among the white bones [dead people] and yellow mouths [infants] [who were conscripted to fill tax quotas]. This is a matter that brings about auspicious harmony. If it is implemented from the Royal Court and applied in all the provinces, it can serve as a standard law for ten thousand years.[705]

With this regulation, the Täwŏngun drew a line under a long-simmering debate about extending the military cloth tax to the *yangban*. Pointing to their class privileges, they had successfully resisted this move until then. The inflationary access of citizens and even slaves to the undergraduate title, which was considered the entry level for *yangban* status (and tax privileges), further reduced the number of taxpayers and made a solution increasingly urgent. The compromise reached by the Täwŏngun was that it was not the *yangban* or undergraduates themselves who had to pay the tax, but their slaves who took it on in their name. This system was called "tax payment under a slave's name" (*nomyŏn chulpo*). Those who were too poor to own slaves now registered fictitious slaves to keep up appearances. However, this only partially explains the increase in the number of slaves observed in household registers in the second half of the nineteenth century.[706]

Finally, redemption was near. By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan began to gain the upper hand in competing with Russia and China for influence in Korea. Inspired by Japanese enlightenment thought, Korean intellectuals tried to seize power in 1884. Following the example of Meiji Japan, they demanded "equality of all citizens."[707] Their coup was short-lived, lasting only for three days, and their demands were not met.

However, they had important effects. On January 24, 1886, King Kojong declared the end of hereditary slavery for all:

> Continuing the will of King Sunjo, who abolished the palace and capital-bureau slaves and burned their records, I now abolish hereditary slavery. Once a private slave is branded as such, he will remain so for life, passing his servitude on to his descendants. This perpetuation of servitude clouds benevolent governance and disturbs harmony. While it is important to maintain clear social distinctions, enslavement should end with one's lifetime, and no one should be forced to serve from generation to generation.[708]

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705 CWS, Kojong, Y. 8:3:25 = May 14, 1871. See Takeda 2000: 223; Kwŏn Kijung 2023: 228.

706 Kwŏn Kijung 2023: 228.

707 Kim Okkyun: Kapshin Illok, p. 30. Hand-written copy, Meiji period. Keiō University Libraries, https://dcollections.lib.keio.ac.jp/sites/all/libraries/uv/uv.php?archive=KAN&id=60-86-1&page=30 [accessed 04.01.2025].

708 *Ilsŏngnok*, Kojong 23:1:2 = January 24, 1886. Quoted from Hiraki 1982: 205.

Two months later, the Ministry of Justice issued the Private Slave Ordinance, which legally prohibited the sale of slave descendants and ensured their automatic transition to commoner status:[709]

1. Regarding rescue slaves and self-sold slaves: Their servitude is limited to a single lifetime and cannot be passed down to future generations.
2. Regarding the offspring of rescue slaves and self-sold slaves: Their sale is strictly forbidden.
3. Regarding hereditary slaves: Their servitude lasts only for their lifetimes. However, if they have offspring who have no one to depend on and voluntarily choose servitude, they will be compensated according to the new purchase rules.
4. Regarding self-sold slaves: Even if they have served for only one day, their status is permanently fixed, and they cannot be released without their master's permission.
5. Regarding the limitation of servitude to a single lifetime: Since servitude cannot be inherited, any money originally paid to purchase them is considered forfeited. After their death, no claim can be made against their descendants to recover the purchase price.
6. Regarding debts: No individual may be forced into servitude because of longstanding debts of money or grain, and such practices are strictly forbidden.
7. Regarding the descendants of slaves: If they falsely claim to have escaped servitude without proper authorization, they will be severely punished according to legal procedures.
8. Regarding enforcement: Once these regulations have been established, no individual, regardless of social rank, shall be allowed to return to the previous system. Anyone who violates this royal decree will be immediately exposed and punished according to the law.

Thus, the ordinance established that all forms of hereditary slavery would end, but it did it not free those currently enslaved, nor did it prohibit the sale of new slaves.

Eight years later, in early 1894, the Tonghak rebellion, loosely associated with and named after a nativist religion that had emerged in the 1860s, swept the southwestern part of the Korean peninsula. Although slaves, day laborers, and peasants joined the rebellion, it did not develop into a class-based movement.[710] It has long been claimed that the rebels demanded the emancipation of the base people and destroyed slave registers,[711] but this is without authentic evidence; the Tonghak leadership never advocated for the slaves and adhered to a staunchly conservative worldview, "idealizing the Confucian hierarchical social order."[712]

Inadvertently, the rebellion sparked Japanese intervention. Even before Japanese troops seized the royal palace in Seoul on July 23, 1894, the Japanese minister, Ōtori Keisuke, pressured the Korean king to implement reforms aimed at modernizing the country. These efforts were supported by pro-reform factions influenced by Japan.

King Kojong then issued a royal directive that was both an outright rejection of the old status-oriented political system and the frank recognition that this old system was the sole—not just the main—cause of stagnation and decay:

709 *Ilsŏngnok*, Kojong 23:3:11 = April 2, 1886. Quoted from ibid.: 206.
710 A. Park 2016: 69.
711 Atkins 2016: 130–31.
712 Lew 1990: 169.

> Our nation, situated at the pivotal center of East Asia, has become weak and stagnant, solely due to the decay and disorder of its politics, which fails to embrace change and adaptation.
> The foundation of national governance lies in the selection of capable individuals. Thus, all partisan biases and factional disputes must be entirely eradicated. There shall be no discrimination based on family background—only virtue and talent shall determine appointments.[713]

Under Ōtori's urging, the king convened an assembly that enacted "revolutionary"[714] reforms between July 18 and December 17, 1894, collectively known as the Kabo Reforms. These measures introduced administrative changes and reshaped Korea's traditional social structure and ethical systems. Although their impact was not immediate, they laid the groundwork for Korea's transformation into a modern state.[715]

One of the first decisions of the assembly was "the abolition of hierarchical distinctions of lineage and status, and the selection of talented individuals regardless of social status."[716]

In this context, it took only one short sentence to end slavery as a legal institution in Korea. On July 18, 1894, King Kojong proclaimed:

> The legal framework governing public and private slaves is entirely abolished, and the buying and selling of people is prohibited.[717]

In reality, this was not quite the end. Three days later, on July 21, 1894 (Kojong 31:7:2), as a reminder that slaves were not the only servile groups to be emancipated, it was proclaimed that

> relay station workers, entertainers, and leather workers are all permitted to escape their lowly status.[718]

While official sanctions against these groups thus ended in 1894, social discrimination continued. "Even a century later traces of prejudice against *paekchŏng* ancestry still remain."[719]

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713 1894:6:22 = July 12, 1894. Song Pyŏnggi, Pak Yongok, and Pak Hansŏl 1970: 1.

714 Deuchler 2015: 396.

715 Passin 1957: 225–26; Seth 2010: 246–47; Hwang 2019: 72–74, 2004: 59–67.

716 1894:6:28 = July 18, 1894. Song Pyŏnggi, Pak Yongok, and Pak Hansŏl 1970: 14.

717 1894:6:28 = July 18, 1894. Song Pyŏnggi, Pak Yongok, and Pak Hansŏl 1970: 16; cf. Hwang 2019: 25, 2004: 61.

718 Song Pyŏnggi, Pak Yongok, and Pak Hansŏl 1970: 20; cf. Passin 1957: 226.

719 *Korea: A Historical and Cultural Dictionary* 2013: 330; cf. Passin 1957: 198; H. Koh 1959: 103–6; K.-J. Kwon 2014: 179.

The abolition of 1894 was "largely a symbolic gesture"[720] and "a reform in name only,"[721] because the "legal framework" to be abolished was quite different from the social reality of the time. On March 23, 1895 (2:27), Yun Chiho wrote in his English diary:

> My father disapproves the abolition of slavery and of caste distinctions before other social ties have been devised to hold different clases [sic] in order.[722]

With this opinion, Chiho's father, Yun Ungnyŏl, a wealthy *yangban* and leading military and political figure, certainly did not represent the official position of the Korean government regarding the modernization of the nation. But it may well have reflected the popular view.

However, there was no going back because "equality meant modernization."[723] The gradual decline of slavery reflected a society in transition, caught between entrenched traditions and the aspirations for a modernizing state. The state had ceased to be the necessary mediator and guarantor of a status-based society and a state-organized division of labor. In short, state and society had separated.[724] In modern Korea, as in any modern society, there is no room for intermediate status groups between rulers and subjects. Therefore, Yun Ungnyŏl was wrong: state-sanctioned "social ties" (a term that must be taken very literally in the case of slavery) are incompatible with the modern state.[725] The new government, with many leading bureaucrats coming from the families of secondary sons, made this very clear when it declared in early 1895 that "background" was no longer a criterion for appointment to high-ranking positions.[726] However, for quite a while, the government itself practiced "favoritism based on blood relation."[727]

720 Hwang 2019: 25.
721 K.-T. Yi 1970: 40.
722 http://db.history.go.kr/id/sa_027_0010_0020_0110 [accessed 29.07.2025].
723 Y.-M. Kim 1986: 743.
724 Miyajima 2003: 294.
725 Hiraki 1982: 12.
726 Hwang 2004: 67.
727 Y.-M. Kim 1986: 738.

Tab. 24: Four categories of slaves in 1895 (Vinton 1895).

Category	Gender	Hereditary	Ownership	Features
Kwanbi	Female	No	Public	Punishment-based, for government offices, children often free
Näin				Given to the palace as an honor, assigned tasks at palace, free to leave but cannot return
Camä			Private	Temporary slavery for financial relief, redeemable, children free
Cong	Male and Female	Yes		Lifelong servitude, salable, loanable

Slavery did not disappear overnight. There are numerous household records from rural communities that show the presence of slaves in the early twentieth century. As late as 1904, some *yangban* continued to submit old-style household rosters that listed their slaves instead of their modern replacements. Parents continued to sell their daughters into private slavery.[728]

This persistence of slavery explains some of the culture shock felt by many Western and Japanese observers who came to Korea in the late nineteenth century. To them, the legal and historical ramifications of the system were confusing and its concepts opaque. Even among the Koreans, it was questionable who could still be called a slave after the various stages of reform. The colloquial term *cong*, still in use today,[729] is an example of this: it is not a precisely definable term, any more than the English word "drudge" is. In 1891, Maurice Courant pointed out this ambiguity:

> Current usage confuses station clerks, slaves, and those in certain professions with the same contempt.[730]

In the same year, an American observer, William Woodville Rockhill, noted:

> Slavery, in one form or other, has existed in Korea, as in China, from the remote periods of its history. Criminals and female children sold by their parents form at present the bulk of this class. Cases occur where husbands sell their wives to acquit a debt, but the law forbids this practice [...] A man marrying a slave owns the children she bears him, but the males become free on reaching their majority. The rights of owners over their slaves are limited by law. Thus one may not be put to death by his owner before the latter has obtained the permission of the Board of punishments if he resides within Söul, or of the high provincial authorities if living elsewhere. Slaves, moreover,

728 Yim Haksŏng 2013: 92.

729 Kichung Kim 2003: 108.

730 "L'usage actuel confond à peu près dans le même mépris les Clercs des postes, les esclaves et ceux qui exercent certaines professions." Courant 2007: 329.

> enjoy certain civil rights. Thus one slave may bring an action against another to obtain damages or recover debts.[731]

He saw slavery in Korea as a legally regulated institution, mainly involving criminals and the trade in girls and wives. Owners' authority was limited, and slaves retained limited civil rights, including legal recourse. It is revealing that he assumed that a distinction was made between sons and daughters in inheritance law. In fact, this bifurcation was only common for relay station slaves. However, it was precisely this group of slaves that was most accessible to many foreigners because they used the services of enslaved grooms on their travels.

One of the earliest Japanese discussions of contemporary Korean society was written by Kikuchi Kenjō, a journalist and adventurer who went to Korea around 1894 and stayed there until 1946. For his involvement in the brutal assassination of Queen Min in October 1895, he was charged and temporarily arrested for trial in Hiroshima, and while in prison he wrote his book on "The Kingdom of Korea" (*Chōsen Ōkoku*).[732] In his chapter about slavery, Kikuchi remarked:

> Slavery is a remnant of barbarism, and even today, in uncivilized regions of Africa, it is said that slaves are bought and sold. Considering that the buying and selling of slaves persists on the Korean peninsula despite numerous efforts by emancipation advocates throughout history, who could help but be astonished?[733]

It is also significant that Kikuchi thought—although as a journalist he could have known better—that slavery and the slave trade were still legal at the time of this publication:

> The prohibition of slavery has been advocated, yet emancipation has still not been regulated by national law. Consequently, the practice of treating slaves as commodities in the marketplace persists to this day.[734]

The American physicist Cadwallader Curry Vinton was more accurate in his October 1895 essay, one of the first Western texts on Korean slavery:

> In preparing for this assimilation of the social classes, for this welding of the people into an independent nation, the Korean authorities early took the step perforce of declaring the abolition of slavery. […] At present the law stands inert, stillborn. Slavery still exists, law and law giver notwithstanding.[735]

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731 Rockhill 1891: 180.

732 Yi Manyŏl 2019: 237; Orbach 2018: 114; the assassination was approved by the queen's father-in-law, the Hŭngsŏn Täwŏngun, who even demanded that his son, King Kojong, degrade the dead queen to the status of a commoner. This would have disqualified her son, the future Emperor Sunjong, as heir to the throne. However, King Kojong refused. Orbach 2018: 119.

733 Kikuchi 1896: 203.

734 Ibid.: 209.

735 Vinton 1895: 366; on Vinton's role in Korea and Korean studies, see Kendall 2016.

Vinton's image of slavery in Korea encompassed various categories. The most severe were the male *cong* slaves, who were considered property for life. These private slaves could be sold, loaned, or given away and were unable to control their fate or that of their descendants. In contrast, *kwanbi*, or female government slaves, were enslaved as punishment for crimes, but they were not bound permanently. Their male children were born free; however, their female children could face servitude as well. Obviously, Vinton was referring to the typical bifurcation pattern for relay station slaves, probably because foreigners traveling in Korea frequently interacted with the enslaved grooms in the public relay stations and were thus relatively well acquainted with their situation. *Camä* were mostly women who temporarily sold themselves into servitude due to financial hardship and retained the right to redeem themselves. Their children were not enslaved, though they might temporarily serve the master to support their mother. Palace slaves, or *näin*, were young girls in royal service. They were assigned tasks such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, and serving as concubines. They could often advance in status but were unable to leave.[736] Vinton characterized slavery in Korea as lenient compared to the brutal systems seen in other parts of the world across these categories. Slaves were rarely overworked ("to overwork them would be foreign to the Korean nature"), underfed, or harshly punished. They were treated "very mild[ly]," and public slave sales were uncommon. Many slaves developed family attachments and chose to remain with their masters despite opportunities to escape.[737]

However, these observations cannot be generalized. For instance, a 1903 newspaper advertisement offered a reward for the tracking down of a 14-year-old slave girl who had run away. She was described as having no smallpox scars on her face, but she always wore powdered makeup and holey shoes.[738]

Fortunately, this was not the only way in which this new print medium opened up a new page of public discourse on slavery in Korea. One of the first local journalists was Sŏ Cäphil, better known to foreigners as Philip Jaisohn. He was the son of a *yangban* family from Tägu, and he studied in Japan in 1883, supported the failed Kapshin coup of 1884, and later emigrated to the United States where he studied medicine, converted to Christianity, married an American, and became a U.S. citizen. He returned to Korea in 1895 and, together with Yun Chiho, founded the Independence Club in 1896 to promote political and social reform. In April 1896, Sŏ began publishing the first private Korean newspaper, *Tongnip Shinmun*, which also had an English edition, *The Independent*. A number of the local news stories reported during the first year provide valuable insight into the persistence of slavery and human trafficking.[739]

736 Vinton 1895: 372.

737 Ibid.: 372.

738 B.-R. Kim 2014: 171.

739 There may have been a difference in coverage or language between the English and the vernacular versions concerning these issues: Kim and Jung claim that only 14 issues of the Korean edition between 1896 and 1899 contained the word "slave": Jae Kyun Kim and M.-K. Jung 2021: 153–54.

The discursive role of this journalism in shaping international perceptions of Korea can hardly be overstated. The English edition informed the growing international community about slavery in Korea, confirming the view that despite the formal abolition of the social restrictions and privileges of the past, the new Korean empire still contained "many despotic, regressive, and debilitating elements and tendencies."[740] For the international public, the persistence of domestic slavery became a popular symbol of Korean backwardness. Sŏ Cäphil was not afraid of this effect because he pushed for far-reaching Westernization. For him, the root of Korea's backwardness was still alive: Sinocentric Confucianism. As he wrote:

> Chinese education is mental slavery.[741]

This was the premise of his newspaper's coverage of the social problems of the day. One concern was the cruel treatment of house slaves:

> Son Sok Ka of Myo Dong drove out from his house the sick child of his servant fearing that the child had a contagious disease. The child died on the street. The police arrested him for his cruel action. This forthly demonstrates the necessity of establishing a public hospital for the needy and homeless ones in Seoul.[742]

> A female servant of An Choug Myen of Jun-Dong tried to commit suicide by jumping into a well. She was rescued by Policeman Choi Sung Chin. The cause of the attempted suicide is said to be due to the cruel treatment of her employer.[743]

Yangban were criticized for continuing to behave with arrogance and pride toward subordinates and slaves (called "retainers" in the story):

> The new chief of police Yi Chong Keun uses a low form of language to his sub-ordinate officers when they are not of *yangban* class. This custom was abolished in 1894, but the new Chief institutes this obnoxious custom again. Go slow, Mr. Yi Chong Keun.[744]

> The Korean *Yangbans* commenced again the old custom of having their retainers loudly proclaim their approach in the street, and demand every body to get out of their way. The funny part is that they demand that man on horse back to dismount, and when they walk, the retainers hold their masters up by arms and keep their coat tails out of the dirt. The whole sight is disgusting or rather amusing in the extreme.[745]

740 Hwang 2019: 76.
741 *The Independent* 1:54, August 8, 1896. *The Independent* 1976: 54.
742 *The Independent* 1:40, July 7, 1896. ibid.: 40.
743 *The Independent* 1:68, September 10, 1896. ibid.: 68.
744 *The Independent* 1:32, June 18, 1896. ibid.: 32.
745 *The Independent* 1:65, September 3, 1896. ibid.: 65.

Finally, a story about a water-fetching maidservant informed readers that this type of domestic servitude still existed and that these women were vulnerable in the unsafe working environment of Seoul:

> A female servant of a man named Ko, in the southern part of the city, went to a well to draw water. While raising the vessel from the ground to put it on her head the cushion which rests on the head fell to the ground. She requested a by-stander to replace it on her head, but when doing so he snatched her silver hairpin and ran away. She screamed after him and a policeman being near secured the thief, restored the pin to its owner and march the culprit off to the police station. Moral: leave your hair pins at home.[746]

A particularly appalling issue was the pressing of young women into sexual slavery:

> On the complaint of one, Mun Shim Pak, a countryman, the police yesterday arrested Yi Kwan Ho of Seoul, charged with purchasing the wife of the complainant. We wonder what section of the criminal code this will come under. We hope a place can be found for it and a severe punishment, for such events as this are extremely common.[747]

> There is a gang of men whose business is to entice the innocent female children of poor and ignorant classes and carry them away for immoral purposes. The *Independent* received a number of letters from the parents of those unfortunate children complaining of the horrible business of those immoral characters. "We have no other power to stop it than bringing the matter before the police in hope the authorities will take steps to prevent them from ruining those ignorant helpless creatures."[748]

> The wife of Pak Won Sun of Chemulpo enticed a young girl from Song-Do and kept her in a house of ill fame in Chemulpo. The girl was shocked when she found out the purpose of her betrayer, and made complaint to the Police Dep't. The Police arrested Pak's wife.[749]

> A female servant of Paik Yung Du of Nam-Song-Hen was arrested on the charge of enticing young females for immoral purposes.[750]

Much later, Yi Kyuthä (Yi Kyu-tae), a leading South Korean journalist who wrote for the influential daily *Chosun Ilbo* from 1959 until his death in 2006 and who exerted a major influence on the historical consciousness of his conservative readership, investigated such incidents. While pursuing a nationalist agenda and believing in the superiority of "Koreanness" over the West and China, Yi's "provocative questions"[751] were also a fierce critique of pre-modern elitist arrogance. In his book *Modern Transformation of Korea*, his portrayal of cruelties committed by *yangban* against the lower people was so blunt

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746 *The Independent* 1:8, April 23, 1896. *The Independent* 1976: 8.
747 *The Independent* 1:7, April 21, 1896. ibid.: 7.
748 *The Independent* 1:8, April 23, 1896. ibid.: 8.
749 *The Independent* 1:65, September 3, 1896. ibid.: 65.
750 *The Independent* 1:60, August 22, 1896. ibid.: 60.
751 Kim Thäho 2024: 160.

that he was accused of distorting and fabricating facts.[752] In his 1985 book on *Sex and Love of the Korean People*, he exposed the connection between the decline of slavery and the transition to the modern human trafficking of women, an issue inextricably linked to the "hegemonic masculinity"[753] that dominated both pre-modern and modern Korea. The episodes of abused and kidnapped women cited by the *The Independent* are perfectly consistent with what Yi Kyuthä told his South Korean readers almost a century later; not surprisingly, because he relied heavily on the newspaper archives to which he had access.

According to Yi Kyuthä, while legal reforms declared emancipation, social and economic realities remained unchanged.[754] Slave owners freed their slaves under social pressure rather than voluntarily, offering no economic support and thus leaving most former slaves in dire poverty. Many slave women initially resisted emancipation as they feared the loss of social and economic security.

With the liberation of slaves, impoverished parents sought new ways to survive. The trafficking of young women persisted into the 1900s. A fifteen-year-old girl of notable beauty could be sold for 100 *wŏn*, while a twenty-year-old woman was valued at 50 *wŏn*, at a time when an ox was worth around 100 *wŏn* and a cow about 80 *wŏn*. Women deemed unattractive or past their prime were sold at half that amount. As modernization advanced and human rights awareness grew, the number of women sold decreased, but their price increased—at times doubling.

This was not limited to the countryside. The trade of girls to Seoul's Japanese business and entertainment district, Cingogä, or Honmachi in Japanese (modern-day Chungmuro), flourished. Young girls were often used as collateral in pawn transactions with Japanese merchants who had begun settling in Korea around that time. Many parents effectively sold their daughters under the guise of pawning them, contributing to a troubling trend that even the Japanese authorities warned about. These women were sold for 80–150 *wŏn* and were bound to contracts requiring them to send their parents monthly payments of 3–10 *wŏn*. Once the agreed-upon amount was paid, the buyer could resell the women to a new Japanese owner. Women sold to or employed in Japanese households were commonly referred to as *ŏmŏni* ("mothers"). This is confirmed by Tamura Kazuko, who grew up with her Japanese family in Seoul:

> In those days, when Korea had only upper and lower classes, most lower-class people were employed by the Japanese. Men did heavy labor and women worked as maids in Japanese households. In any case, many worked for the Japanese. I heard that even then, the wages were terribly low. Even in a mere teacher's household like ours, a woman named Kim-san came to work. She was around twenty-seven or twenty-eight and had a child. My mother called her "Kim-san" or "Ŏmŏni,"

752 Anon.: *Yi Kyuthä*, https://namu.wiki/w/이규태 [accessed 04.02.2025].

753 Moon 2002: 79.

754 For more on this, see Yi Kyu-Tae 1985: 60–63.

> so my sister and I did too. *Ŏmŏni* means "mother" in Korean. At that time, it seems there was a custom of calling all Korean women who worked in Japanese households by this term.[755]

A *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper report from January 17, 1929, noted that 1,300 *ŏmŏni* employment cases had been registered in Cingogä, for which more than 3,000 young women had applied. Most of the applicants were poor and illiterate. Without an education or professional skills, Korean women needed these poorly paid jobs because working as domestic servants was the only way for them to make a living for themselves and their children. The report explicitly drew a comparison between their working conditions and those of female slaves.[756]

Though officially employed as maids, wet nurses, attendants, and cleaners, many were subjected to sexual exploitation, fulfilling "a dual role as domestic laborers and sex slaves."[757] The *ŏmŏni* issue became a widespread social concern, to the extent that when a young girl went missing, people would first search Cingogä.

However, the trafficking of Korean women extended to China. In the 1920s and 1930s, Japanese and Chinese traffickers played a key role in maintaining transnational networks of sexual slavery. Newspaper articles on Korean girls being sold to Chinese buyers or kidnapped and resold by Chinese traffickers appeared approximately once every three days. Therefore, Yi Kyuthä argues that, despite its formal abolition, slavery and the sale of slave children persisted, with young girls valued as commodities within a gendered economy. Rather than eradicating these practices, colonial modernization and capitalist restructuring reconfigured them within a broader imperial economy. Under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), the commodification of women intensified within an expanding system of labor and sexual exploitation. In the market for female servants, concubines, and prostitutes, Korean women were increasingly trafficked into servitude under new legal and economic frameworks.[758] This trade laid the groundwork for the wartime "comfort women" system, in which Korean women were systematically coerced or deceived into sexual slavery for the Japanese military.[759]

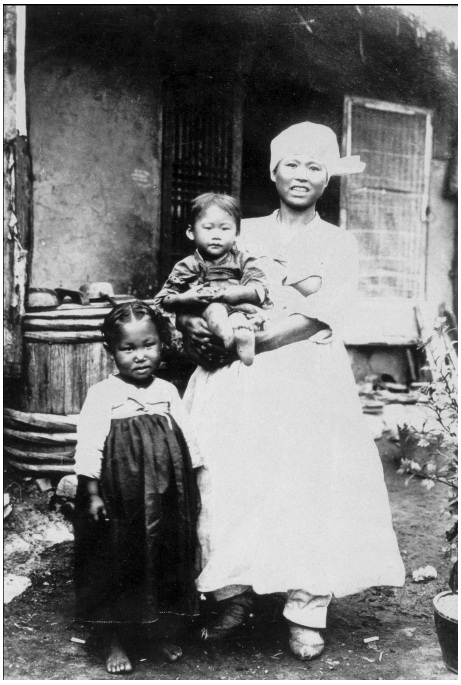
755 Tamura 1985: 67.

756 Interestingly, the report refers to these women as *omŏni*, a common dialectal variation of *ŏmŏni* in Kyŏngsang Province. This suggests that many of these girls and women may have originated from an area of the peninsula where slaves were once plentiful. "Cingogä »omŏni«-ro 1,200 myŏng chuŏp: Cimangja-nŭn 3,000 myŏng tolpa: Yŏbi kathŭl kurŭl-ŭi shinse" 1929: 2.

757 Yi Kyu-Tae 1985: 99.

758 For a closer look, cf. Yoshimi 2019.

759 One of the first feminist activists to address this issue and use the term "sexual slavery" was the Japanese Matsui Yayori: Matsui 1977; for my discussion of the "comfort women," see Zöllner 2021.



19.1: Slave woman with children (KOGL Collection Minjok 028661).

19.2: Servants at a meal (detail) (KOGL Collection Minjok 028674).

Fig. 19: Photographs of slaves taken by or for Hermann Sander in 1906–1907. Courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea

Thanks to photography, real-life images of Korean slaves from the turn of the twentieth century exist. During his visit to Korea from 1906 to 1907, German officer Hermann Sander (1868–1945) and an accompanying Japanese photographer took several photographs of slaves. One photograph shows a young woman in traditional Korean attire standing in front of a thatched-roof house. She is smiling and holding a child while standing next to another young girl. The caption identifies her as a slave woman ("Sklavin!" in German) with children. Another photograph shows "servants at a meal."

7.10.1 Slavery and Stagnation

In the age of imperialism, Korea quickly lost its sovereignty in foreign affairs at the end of the nineteenth century and finally became a Japanese colony in 1910. The Japanese justified the annexation of Korea by claiming that Korea had a lower level of civilization and was more backward than Japan and therefore could not maintain its independence

on its own. One of the arguments used to support this claim was the existence of slavery. However, what was meant was not slavery as a historical system as it had developed in Korea, but rather the "product of Western colonial models"[760] projected onto colonized societies and their cultures.

In 1902, the Japanese Fukuda Tokuzō, who had just finished his studies of economic history in Germany, made a journey "through the famine-stricken regions of eastern Korea,"[761] which inspired him to develop the theory that Korea's economic development was stagnant, lagging about a thousand years behind Japan and Europe. For Fukuda, there was a normal course of historical stages that progressed from a tribal society to feudalism to absolutism to the modern nation-state. However, Korea did not follow this course; thus, its development came to a standstill.

> The fundamental cause of this, as I understand it, lies in the absence of a "feudal system."[762]

This was supposedly caused by the lack of the idea of land ownership. Fukuda writes:

> In Korea, the concept of land ownership does not exist. There are no landowners in Korea. If one were to insist on identifying an owner, it would be the royal family, but this is only a nominal claim. Land in Korea is not something that can really be owned.
> On the other hand, slaves do exist, but no value has yet been recognized in using them as the basis for individual rights. The noble and wealthy *yangban* class owns a large number of slaves, who are treated as property and used like cattle. Among them, however, there is not a single retainer of hereditary loyalty who would risk his life to serve his master with unyielding devotion.[763]

Thus, the absence of feudalism, as evidenced by the existence of slavery, prevented Korea from developing into a modern nation:

> The modern state and its national economic organization have their origins in authoritarian police states. However, the emergence of an authoritarian police state requires the prior existence of a long period of rigorous feudal education, which Korea has never experienced. Without this feudal educational stage, how could an authoritarian state emerge?[764]

While Fukuda's equation of the Korean *nobi* he observed with slaves went without major opposition within Korean historiography until the late 1950s,[765] his conclusion that Korean society was stagnant is much more controversial. As such, a stagnation theory is not yet an ideological or political judgement;[766] but in Fukuda's reasoning, denouncing Korea's past became a tool for denying Korea's future as an independent and modern

760 Sousa 2021: 4.
761 Fukuda 1928: 112.
762 Ibid.: 119.
763 Ibid.: 144.
764 Ibid.: 119.
765 Yi Yŏnghun 2004: 4; B.-R. Kim 2003: 156.
766 Miller 2010: 9.

nation-state in the modern world of nation-states. The next logical step was to turn Korea into a Japanese colony.[767]

In 1925, the Japanese historian Inaba Gunsan was appointed by the Government General to write a history of Korea from the viewpoint of the Japanese colonial regime. In his "Cultural History of Korea," he states several reasons for Korea's stagnation, one of which was slavery:

> When considering the characteristics of the class system, the case of slaves also involved significant stagnation. [...] Considering the origin of the Korean slave system, its fixed and unchanging nature must be understood as arising from the calm, unaltered atmosphere of the peninsula.[768]

Shikata Hiroshi presented a markedly different version of the stagnation theory. In 1951, he wrote:

> Past scholars have often rushed to emphasize the non-progressive nature of the Yi Dynasty economy, resorting to abstract speculation or merely comparing numerical data found in documents from the Yi Dynasty with figures published at the end of the dynasty, extracting conclusions about economic change during this period. The lack of academic rigor in the former approach is self-evident, but even the latter method, due to its apparent plausibility, requires great caution. This is because it often starts with an incorrect evaluation of the figures.[769]

Shikata's concept of stagnation aimed at a different level of observation:

> Throughout the 500 years of the Yi Dynasty, regardless of the era examined, the same lifestyle persisted, the same modes of thinking dominated, there was no advancement in production methods, no significant change in consumption patterns, and the same arguments and criticisms were repeated without reflection or reform. The *yangban* class always ruled, the commoners were perpetually subjugated, Zhu Xi's neo-Confucianism remained a sacred standard, primitive agriculture was continuously practiced, and the populace was always made to be content with a minimum standard of living. The passage of such dreamlike, uneventful time is what is symbolically and comprehensively referred to as "stagnation."[770]

Stagnation, Shikata argued, had "both material and mental aspects"; the lack of sufficient capital accumulation was the material aspect, but it was caused by "first, the organizational structure of Yi Dynasty society, and second, the guiding spirit that governed this society."[771] It was the "political and social hierarchical relationships" shaped by the *yangban* elite that formed the social and economic orders, which implied the enslavement of a large part of the population.[772] Shikata goes into great detail to explain the

767 Yi Manyŏl 2019: 250.
768 Inaba 1925: 61.
769 Shikata 1951: 149.
770 Ibid.: 150.
771 Ibid.: 151.
772 Ibid.: 160.

situation of slaves in pre-modern Korea, but he, as might be expected given his meticulous analysis of the socio-economic data he derived from the household registers, rather accurately shows that their situation was not static. To pretend that there was no development in pre-modern Korea was not his intention; his point was that this development showed a "cyclical tendency." In Wittfogel's words, development did not, or did only very slowly, lead to "primary social changes" that fundamentally transformed society.[773]

While the stagnation theory is mainly associated with the justification of Japanese colonialism, it was originally also much in favor with Korean Marxist thinkers like Cŏn Sŏktam, who in 1947 argued that the abnormalities of Korean history causing social stagnation were a result of the *absence* of a slave mode of production.[774]

Today, the theory of stagnation is used by representatives of the New Right against the theory of internal development promoted by the anti-colonial Left.[775] In this context, the answer to the question of whether slavery was an essential part of the pre-modern economy or whether slavery had already *de facto* abolished itself before it was legally abolished under Japanese pressure in 1894 can also be a political statement.

Torii Ryūzō, a pioneering Japanese anthropologist, ethnologist, and archaeologist, was commissioned by the Japanese colonial administration of Korea to conduct the first anthropological and archaeological survey of the Korean peninsula.[776] During his first expedition to Korea in 1911, he and his photographic assistant Sawa Shun-ichi took a considerable number of photographs of members of the marginalized *päkcŏng* group, as well as three photographs of slaves.

They served as a "spectacular display of the barbaric Asian Other by way of photography,"[777] but there is more to it. One photograph depicts two couples of government slaves (*kwannobi*) in Yŏnghŭng, South Hamgyŏng Province, the site of an important royal ancestral shrine. The image is carefully composed with a symmetrical structure: the left half features a middle-aged couple, while the right half shows an older couple, possibly the parents of the younger man. All four adults are wearing traditional white garments. The women are seated, while the men are standing behind them. Torii Ryūzō, dressed in a dark modern Japanese uniform, stands in the center between the two men, forming a diagonal visual axis with the boy, who is also dressed in dark clothing, sitting on his mother's lap in the front left of the photograph. The subliminal message of the photograph is that the four adult slaves embody Korea's past, while the boy—under the paternalistic gaze of the modern Japanese colonial official—represents its future.

773 Wittfogel 1967: 420.

774 Miller 2010: 7–8; Patterson seems to subscribe to this view, calling Korea a case of "the passive articulation of slavery": O. Patterson 2025: 81.

775 Miller 2010: 10.

776 Pai 2009: 281.

777 Helen J. S. Lee 2019: 236.

Fig. 20: Sawa Shun-ichi: Two couples of government slaves (*kwannobi*). Yŏnghŭng, South Hamgyŏng Province. Courtesy of National Museum of Korea.

7.10.2 Colonial Slavery

As Japan gradually colonized Korea between 1894 and 1910, the idea that Korea was on its way to being enslaved by Japan emerged and gained prominence among the advocates of Korean independence. For some, this was the logical outcome of Korea's failed history, as Yun Chiho saw it:

> Under the galling slavery of Japan, Koreans will learn that the despotism of their own rulers has been the stepping stone to the despotism of alien masters. If Koreans survive the fire of the Japanese tyranny, they will prove their fitness to exist. But if they succumb they are no better than the Hawaiians and do not deserve to exist.[778]

778 *Yun Chiho Ilgi* 6, October 16, 1905, https://db.history.go.kr/modern/level.do?levelId=sa_029_0030_0100_0060 [accessed 29.07.2025].

The term "fitness" echoes a social Darwinist concept of the survival of nations. Yun uses Hawaii, which was annexed by the United States in 1898 under dubious circumstances after being declared a "failed state," as a benchmark for comparison. In addition, Yun wrote his diary in English, which is why he used the word "slavery" literally to refer to his own nation. This would have been more complicated in Korean. Public discourse in Korea had only recently begun to distinguish between the traditional servitude of the *nobi*, which was taken for granted, and slavery "in all other countries,"[779] to which another Sinokorean term for slaves, *noye*, was applied; the latter was mainly associated with Black Africans and Americans who were identified as inferior, savage, and uncivilized. Never to become the "slaves of others" in the latter sense became a key slogan of modern Korean nationalism—"yet slavery was always a metaphor, not a synonym, for colonialism."[780] Ironically, it was also common to refer to the colonizing Other, the Japanese, as "Japanese slaves" (*wäno*).[781] However, as Mark A. Peterson notes:

> Slavery is slavery and the ethnocentricity displayed in the terminological difference in describing domestic slavery versus other-nation slavery is nothing more than that, a display of ethnocentricity.[782]

In this way, the ethnocentric idea of Korean supremacy was as much based on racial prejudice as was the idea of *yangban* supremacy, and slavery was the common link between them.

The *Declaration of Independence*, proclaimed in Seoul on March 1, 1919, as a symbol of resistance to Japanese domination, certainly testifies to the spirit of national consciousness that grew out of the colonial situation, which was rhetorically denounced as slavery. At the Second Congress of the Communist International in Petrograd, a Korean delegate told his audience on July 28, 1920:

> Japan keeps Korea in colonial slavery.[783]

After the outbreak of World War II, Japan, until then politely accepted into the ranks of Western colonial empires, faced growing international condemnation, with its handling of Korea becoming a focal point of criticism. In the 1943 Cairo Declaration, U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill, and the

779 M. Peterson 1985: 31.

780 Jae Kyun Kim and M.-K. Jung 2021: 161.

781 D.-y. Ku 1985: 77.

782 M. Peterson 1985: 41.

783 *The 2nd Congress of the Communist International as Reported and Interpreted by the Official Newspapers of Soviet Russia. Petrograd–Moscow, July 19–August 7, 1920* 1920: 42.

Chinese Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek drew the world's attention to the "enslavement of the people of Korea."[784]

The phrase struck a chord with diaspora Koreans. James S. Shin of the Korean-American Council in Washington wrote President Roosevelt a letter, in which he invoked the slavery metaphor to criticize the inconsistency and hypocrisy of U.S. politics toward Korea. The same nation that had freed its own enslaved population in 1865 failed, in 1905, to extend similar protection to Koreans made "slaves of the Japs." He regarded the 1943 Cairo Declaration as an opportunity for the U.S. to redeem itself and uphold the very principles of freedom upon which it was founded.[785]

Echoing this anti-colonial discourse, Douglas MacArthur, Commander-in-Chief of the Allied occupation forces, in Proclamation No. 1 "To the People of Korea," dated September 7, 1945, also referred to the "long enslavement of the people of Korea."[786] It is in this way that Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, became "Liberation Day," the day on which Koreans were collectively emancipated from colonial slavery. The elimination of its legacy was then proclaimed as the common and supreme goal of all ethnic Koreans. However, this focus has long suppressed the no less problematic pre-colonial heritage of slavery.

7.11 The Hidden Background

A closer look at the history of slavery in Korea "raises many questions and doubts at the same time"[787] and does not allow for simple, optimistic answers. For example, if it were true that "slavery was only able to persist due to poverty,"[788] then we would not be able to adequately explain the considerable "emotional"[789] weight that its legacy still carries in a wealthy country such as South Korea today. Hidden discrimination is not yet a matter of the past.[790]

In December 2008, an article in a local South Korean newspaper highlighted a dispute within the Hänam Yun clan, a prestigious clan with eight branches from the Honam region, counting more than 66,000 members in 2015. As shown on p. 166, the clan has a series of documents dating back to 1342 that deal with the inheritance of slaves within

784 Cairo Declaration, https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/shiryo/01/002_46/002_46tx.html [accessed 29.07.2025].

785 Caprio 2022: 161–62.

786 *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers*, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East, Volume VI 740.00119 Control (Korea)/ 9–745, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v06/d776 [accessed 02.02.2025].

787 Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 99.

788 B.-R. Kim 2014: 172.

789 Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 67.

790 K.-J. Kwon 2014: 179.

the family. These documents are among the oldest sources of their kind in Korea and have attracted considerable scholarly and media attention. The newspaper article discusses alleged distortions of facts about the clan that have been widely disseminated through various media channels, which have led to "a sense of alienation among different branches" of the clan. Specific points of contention include the status of the main house, the legitimate heir, and the true progenitor of the clan.

One significant issue is the misidentification of Yun Tanhak as the legitimate eldest son of Yun Kwangjŏn, instead of Yun Tanbong, the progenitor of the Lord-Colonel (*tähogun-gong*) branch. Demanding a "sincere apology" and "quick correction" from those members of the clan responsible for spreading "false facts," the author posed the following questions:

> Yun Tanbong is the legitimate eldest son, so why is Yun Tanhak referred to as such? Is it because of the slave document passed down to Yun Tanhak? In a feudal society that prioritized the eldest son, more property and documents, including those of slaves, would have been left to the eldest son. Unfortunately, the descendants of the Lord-Colonel branch have faced economic difficulties, and no slave documents from their ancestors have survived.[791]

This article appears to have been written from the perspective of the Lord-Colonel branch, whose seniority is asserted. While internal disputes of such clans might not attract widespread interest, the issue raises a critical question about contemporary South Korean society: why does the historical ownership or non-ownership of slaves still determine familial precedence?

It seems more socially acceptable to be descended from slave owners rather than former slaves. This reflects a distortion of social and cultural memory, exposing the enduring impact of servile societies that shaped Korean history and continue to influence social norms today.

The abolition of the slave status in 1801 for government slaves and in 1894 for all slaves might have been expected to erase the socioeconomic disadvantages associated with slave ancestry, especially given the homogeneity in ethnicity and culture, the residential integration of slaves and commoners, and the relative ease with which many slaves had acquired family names.[792] Yet historical evidence shows that, far from disappearing, these inherited disadvantages persisted across multiple generations. The deeply institutionalized nature of the social status system, as "the most direct and pivotal mechanism of stratifying individuals,"[793] created a context in which the formal end

791 Namchon 남촌: "Wägoktön Hänam Yun-sshi Kamun-e sashil myŏt kaji" (왜곡된 해남윤씨 가문의 사실 몇 가지 "Distorted Facts About the Hänam Yun clan"). *Kangjin Shinmun*, December 5, 2008, 20:28:26. http://www.gjon.com/bbs/view.html?idxno=9609 [accessed 24.06.2025].

792 Hyunjoon Park and Kuentae Kim 2019: 684.

793 Ibid.: 682.

of *nobi* status did not necessarily translate into true equality, and the victims of centuries of discrimination could "not easily escape" from the shadows of the past.[794]

Household records from 1864 to 1894 for 945 male individuals from Ceju Island—where most slaves were government slaves and thus were emancipated in 1801—reveal a persistent legacy of disadvantage for male descendants of *nobi* great-grandfathers, more than six decades after the system's demise. The multigenerational data show that adult men whose great-grandfathers belonged to the high-status group had a 93 percent chance of achieving high status themselves, while those whose great-grandfathers were slaves had only a 21 percent chance.[795] None of the former slave families rose to high status immediately after emancipation.[796] These patterns held true even after controlling for the status of fathers and grandfathers.[797]

The broader implication is that while policy changes should have smoothed the path to social parity, adult males whose great-grandfathers were slaves remained relatively disadvantaged.[798] Thus, what began as a legally defined status in one era became a source of deep and enduring discrimination for later descendants, persisting long after slavery itself was formally abolished. One possible avenue of escape was migration, since those who moved could avoid the stigma attached to *nobi* ancestry by escaping to environments where their origins were unknown.[799] But for those families who stayed put, the institutional memory of slavery continued to embrace their descendants. Possible mechanisms include lingering social prejudice against *nobi* descendants and limited access to resources.

Subsequent sociological fieldwork, conducted nearly seventy years after final abolition in 1894, further corroborated these patterns of persistent disadvantage. In 1960, Yi Mangap published the results of a sociological survey conducted among all households in six rural villages of Kyŏnggi Province near Seoul. The purpose of this research was to find out the framework of human relations in the rural areas of modern South Korea. The research indicated that the situation of lowborn individuals, mostly including former slaves, was characterized by significant social isolation and economic disadvantage, even in the years after Korea's independence. Despite the formal abolition of the old status system, class distinctions persisted and continued to shape the lives of these individuals. Most former slaves had left their original places of residence, where their low status was widely recognized, and the number of those who remained in villages was small. Consequently, their role within the rural social structure was minimal.[800]

794 Hwang 2019: 25.
795 Hyunjoon Park and Kuentae Kim 2019: 690.
796 Ibid.: 685.
797 Ibid.: 692.
798 Ibid.: 694.
799 Ibid.: 695.
800 Yi Mangap 1960: 88.

The lowborn who remained generally lived at a lower socioeconomic level than others and were socially marginalized. Lacking family ties, they often experienced isolation within their communities. Although they continued to face social scorn, this appeared to be a matter of custom rather than a reflection of strong class consciousness among those of higher status. For example, in one case, teenagers from a *yangban* village mocked a lowborn individual, illustrating the persistence of class-based contempt. Moreover, the research suggests that the descendants of lowborn individuals did not display significant resentment or resistance to this continued discrimination. "It seems that even those of lowborn descent have no feelings of rebellion against those who treat them with contempt."[801]

Despite the fading of visual and behavioral markers of class in rural areas, the social status of lowborn individuals remained a barrier to their integration into broader social networks. This was evident in marriage patterns, where individuals of lowborn descent rarely married outside their class. Both *yangban* and commoners were reported to avoid intermarriage with lowborn individuals, reinforcing their exclusion.[802]

Attitudes towards class discrimination, particularly against the lowborn, remained complex. The research found that 6.2 percent of respondents believed that class discrimination would never disappear, while 26.8 percent thought it would take a considerable amount of time for it to be completely eradicated. In addition, 50.3 percent of respondents believed that such discrimination would disappear soon, while 15.5 percent expressed uncertainty about its future. Interestingly, attitudes toward the necessity of class discrimination varied by education and age: less educated individuals were more likely to support the continuation of discrimination, while younger and more educated individuals were more likely to support its abolition.[803]

Overall, the lowborn population remained economically disadvantaged and socially excluded. Discrimination against them persisted, not only through continued social isolation but also through ingrained attitudes that favored the maintenance of class divisions.[804]

Another important finding of the study was that people who could not claim *yangban* ancestry were hesitant to admit it.

> When individuals known as commoners are asked about class differences, many appear uncomfortable, showing a reluctance to reveal that they themselves are commoners.[805]

801 Yi Mangap 1960: 88.
802 Ibid.: 97.
803 Ibid.: 94–95.
804 Yi Mangap 1960: 89, 94–97; Cang Kyŏngjun 2017: 106.
805 Yi Mangap 1960: 88.

If this is true for the commoners, it would seem that those descended from slaves would be much more likely to hide their ancestry. As of today, "no one in Korea claims to be a *nobi* descendant."[806]

Almost no one, that is. The poet Sŏ Cŏngju was brave enough to do it. In his 1941 collection of poems *Hwasajip* ("Flower Snake Collection"), his lyrical *Self-Portrait* (*Cahwasang*) begins with the confession:

> Father was a slave;
> he never came home, even late at night.[807]

There were not many who followed Sŏ's example. The reason is, as Jung-Woo Kim and Terry Henderson have noted,

> that in spite of the fact that almost all features of traditional society (social stratification, slavery) disappeared after the impact of modernization and colonialism [...] , many of the social values from the Chosun [Cosŏn] Dynasty survived and served as the ideological background for many modern phenomena.[808]

This was confirmed by Yi Kyuthä, who wrote in 1970:

> We call our modern society egalitarian and democratic, but many relics of our socially stratified past still remain.[809]

He believed that the "after-effects of the old class consciousness" were still at work.[810] There is ample empirical evidence to support this claim. In 1998, when Denise Potrzeba Lett asked members of the current middle class about their family background, they "invariably claimed *yangban* ancestry."[811] She concluded:

> The "game of distinction" played by the *yangban* of yesterday has become the "game" of contemporary middle-class Koreans.[812]

Slavery continues to be an unpleasant legacy. In 1995, James Bernard Palais, one of the leading representatives of Korean studies in the West, published a fiery indictment of his East Asian colleagues:

806 Yi Yŏnghun 2010: 349.
807 Quoted from Sŏ 1989: 3; see also Hae Ri Kim 1999: 174.
808 J.-W. Kim and Henderson 2008: 17.
809 K.-T. Yi 1970: 39.
810 Ibid.: 44.
811 Lett 1998: 227.
812 Ibid.: 227.

> Korean and Japanese scholars have known about slavery in Korean history, and yet none of them have called Korea a slave society in any period. Why not? Because it is an embarrassment.[813]

Since then, public and academic awareness has changed considerably—as shown earlier in this work, at least North Korea has adopted the terminology of "slave state" in its state-sanctioned historiography, and in the South, slavery has become a topic in history education and history textbooks as well as in popular culture. But these developments may not be enough to completely refute the main thrust of Palais's critique.

As if in response to Palais, Thak Yanghyŏn explicitly called his 2020 book "The Slave State Cosŏn." In it, he states:

> In the twenty-first century, the majority of South Korean citizens are descendants of such slaves. [...] Most people reading this text may not know whether they are descendants of slaves. When it comes to the history of the slaves issue in the Cosŏn Dynasty, silence and avoidance are common. This is because it is considered an "unpleasant truth."[814]

Another Korean scholar, Kichung Kim, confessed in 2003:

> Until several years ago, I had no knowledge of the extent of slavery in pre-modern Korea. In fact, it was in shock and dismay that I learned Korea had been a slave society, not just a society with slaves. How can I account for my ignorance? Was it simply a personal failing or part of the collective ignorance of my generation?[815]

A tentative answer to this question is probably: Collective ignorance, induced by educational, media, and political systems that would prefer to avoid the subject as much as possible.

This may have begun to change in the last twenty years, at least in South Korea, where the development of civil society has raised awareness of discrimination and injustice. An indication of this change is the critical acclaim received by several Korean television series addressing the subject of slavery. While entertainment remains their primary purpose, these dramas also serve an educational function by offering viewers a glimpse into aspects of Korean history that might otherwise remain obscure to national and international audiences.

The 24-episode drama "The Slave Hunters" (Korean: *Chuno*, directed by Kwak Cunghwan) aired on KBS2 in 2010. The drama is set in the late seventeenth century. The story begins with a tragic incident: the son of a *yangban* family loses everything when a slave owned by his family sets their house on fire while running away with his sister, whom the son loves. Years later, after having accumulated enough wealth to purchase the status of a *yangban* family, the slave is able to change his and his sister's identities. Meanwhile, the *yangban* has become a slave hunter, tracking down a general-turned-

813 Palais 1995: 416.
814 Thak 2020: 19.
815 Kichung Kim 2003: 108.

runaway slave while also searching for the woman he loves. The series was a ratings success, topping charts for seven consecutive weeks and winning several awards.[816]

The drama "The Tale of Lady Ok" (*Ok-sshi Puinjŏn*, directed by Cin Hyŏk), which premiered on JTBC and Netflix in November 2024, deals with the topic of escaped slaves from a female perspective. After rejecting a demand for sexual service and burdened by the memory of being ordered to bury her sick mother alive, a young slave woman flees her *yangban* owners. During her escape, she encounters another *yangban* family being attacked and murdered by bandits. Before their daughter dies, she asks the slave to live in her place. Mistaken for the daughter, she is taken in by the girl's wealthy grandmother. Although she initially reveals the truth, she is persuaded to remain under the false identity. Her intelligence and composure impress her new household, and she eventually settles into the role of a *yangban* woman. The drama foregrounds her transformation from slave to noblewoman, not through legal emancipation or purchase, but through impersonation. While she gains formal recognition as a wife, she fights for exploited children, slaves, and women, becoming a "superhero" for the oppressed, "incorporat[ing] modern ideas about what truly matters."[817]

The third remarkable series also takes up the motif of escape. "Mr. Sunshine" (*Misŭthŏ Shŏnshain*, Netflix, 2018, directed by Yi Ŭngbok) follows a fictional slave boy who, after witnessing the brutal deaths of his parents at the hands of their *yangban* masters, escapes to the United States in the early 1870s. Decades later, he returns as a U.S. Marine Corps officer stationed in Seoul. His journey is juxtaposed with that of a *yangban* woman who is secretly fighting for Korean independence. Their romance is fraught with tension because her noble status and his enslaved past embody the rigid class divisions that persisted even as Cosŏn crumbled under foreign influence. The series explicitly confronts the hypocrisy of a resistance movement that fights for national freedom while upholding a system that enslaves people. The former slave is still bound by the trauma of his past and the prejudice of a society that continues to view him through the lens of his birth status. The series also contrasts his experience with that of a *päkcŏng* man who flees to Japan and returns as a pro-Japanese *yakuza* enforcer. The two characters' stories illustrate how marginalized individuals navigated—or rebelled against—the collapsing social order. Incidentally, the storyline also echoes the centuries-old fear of the elites that a slave rebellion would come from the outside, revealing that the fall of Cosŏn was due not only to foreign aggression, but also the rot within its own hierarchical structures.

Nevertheless, the ending of "Mr. Sunshine" is disappointingly predictable. Despite his thoroughly negative childhood experiences, the returned hero finds an "inner

816 Chung Ah-young: "Fact vs. Fiction in Slave Hunters." In: *Korea Times*, March 9, 2010, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/entertainment/shows-dramas/20100309/fact-vs-fiction-in-slave hunters [accessed 03.06.2025].

817 Park Jin-hai: "The Tale of Lady Ok' captivates viewers with strong female lead in Joseon Dynasty." In: *Korea Times*, January 19, 2025, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/entertainment/shows-dramas/

healing,"[818] which transforms the plot into a story of a successful homecoming, even if it means sacrificing his own life. The narrative arcs toward reconciliation and national belonging, echoing elements of a prodigal return. Overcoming the demons of the past becomes less important than fighting the evil Japanese enemy. Furthermore, it is scandalous when, as in this series, one minority—slaves—is pitted against another —*päkcŏng*—and the cliché of the *päkcŏng* being unpatriotic collaborators, as they are known to have received support from Japanese groups that were similarly discriminated against,[819] is subtly perpetuated. Unfortunately, Korean pop culture in general all too often endorses the hypocrisy of such obfuscation strategies by portraying slavery as "remarkably romantic."[820]

In reality, prejudice against "low-borns" remains an issue both north and south the 38th parallel. For example, in 2014, North Korea referred to U.S. President Barack Obama as "a crossbreed with unclear blood."[821] The traces of modern anti-Blackness evident in such racist statements in both Koreas are grounded in the fact that "race was crucial to Koreans' precolonial, as well as colonial and postcolonial, history."[822]

Historians bear part of the responsibility for this disturbing continuity. The traumatic experience of the colonial period drove the Korean independence movement and historians in independent Korea to vehemently deny the claim of Korean backwardness and its connection with slavery on the Korean peninsula. In the understandable attempt to separate the inter-Korean debate on slavery from the dispute over the colonial era, Joy Sunghee Kim asks a rhetorical question and answers it herself:

> Does the presence of slavery explain Korea's failure to modernize and maintain sovereignty at the beginning of the twentieth century? Absolutely not.[823]

In this absolute form, however, this answer is not correct. The continued existence of slavery was certainly not the only reason why Cosŏn failed to modernize in time. Rather, slavery was a structural feature of the world that Cosŏn's elite had created for themselves—a world incompatible with the profound changes unfolding by the late nineteenth century. Slavery was not the direct cause of this world's collapse, but it was a revealing symptom of its obsolescence.

Yet more important than the question of modernization is the question of the emotional and psychological legacy of slavery. One of the most enduring and intergenerational consequences of learned helplessness—as it was induced in Korean slaves—was

20250119/the-tale-of-lady-ok-captivates-viewers-with-strong-female-lead-in-joseon-dynasty [accessed 03.06.2025].

818 J. Chang 2024: 146.

819 Passin 1957: 233–34.

820 M. Peterson 1985: 31.

821 Quoted in Jae Kyun Kim and M.-K. Jung 2021: 144.

822 Ibid.: 148.

823 Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 5.

shame: the shame of coming from a group that had been marginalized through no fault of its own. In the case of Korean hereditary slavery, shame was not only a response to suffering but a disciplinary emotion cultivated by social structure and ritual degradation. It functioned as an internalized form of control—and continues to do so today, albeit under new institutional forms. Modern South Korean society, though formally egalitarian, still carries the structural and psychological residues of its hierarchical past. Deep-seated anxieties about social rank, family background, and respectability are often expressed through shame-based dynamics, especially in the face of perceived failure or inadequacy.

The stigma historically attached to slave ancestry has not fully disappeared and continues to inform unspoken hierarchies. This helps to explain why slavery is still perceived as a sore spot or a particularly "sensitive"[824] topic in the historical narrative. Efforts have been made to whitewash this legacy with counterfactual claims that Korean slavery was "more humane" than elsewhere, or that the Cosŏn period, when up to fifty percent of the population was enslaved, was actually the era of "slave liberation."[825] These attempts only confirm Miyajima's claim that slavery is part of the "hidden background" of contemporary Korea, "not just a matter of the past":

> In other words, knowledge about social status in the Cosŏn dynasty still exists, and many people still think it is meaningful—or believe it holds meaning—to know what social status a particular family held.[826]

Today, few in North or South Korea would choose to give their child a name once common among their ancestors, lest it betray a non-*yangban* lineage. Names such as Kŭnagi and Sŏnil have no place in the public imagination of present-day Korea; in truth, they never did. The people who bore them, and the histories they carry, have been pushed into silence. Yet their descendants—though rendered invisible—still "represent the majority of ordinary Koreans living everyday lives today."[827]

More than any other aspect, the continuing actuality of hereditary patterns represents the true uniqueness of slavery on the Korean peninsula, with some Koreans still misconstruing their inherited privileges as the fruit of a natural order.[828] The acknowledgment of this legacy and the inclusion of those who suffered from it are ongoing processes.[829] In view of the long history of slavery on the Korean peninsula, Ki-Jung Kwon's conclusion is not to be understood as a value judgment, but as a realistic assessment that could be made in a similar way of many other societies and cultures:

824 M. Peterson 1985: 41; Hwang 2004: 358.
825 Han Yŏngu in 1997, quoted in Hwang 2004: 358.
826 Miyajima 2003: 291.
827 Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2014: 10.
828 Hwang 2019: 26.
829 M. Yoshida 2018: 57.

It seems that a great deal of time and effort is needed for a class to become fully liberated from all forms of social discrimination.[830]

830 K.-J. Kwon 2014: 179.