8 The Lines of Power

Legal and political thought in the Confucian period was overwhelmingly linear. Power over land and people was grounded on and sanctioned by the production and possession of documents that, through the sheer power of ink and brush, proved lines of tradition, ownership, and dependency. Status required proof, and proof was in the hands of those who could read, write, and pay for documents, registers, and certificates. The aim of this chapter is to present the most important types of written documents and charters and to use some exemplary cases to demonstrate how they can help to understand the social and mental world of slaves and the negotiation processes between private and public power.

In Cosŏn, lineage played a crucial role in determining status, and it was inherited through blood ties. There were two main categories of lineage based on status:[1]

1. For *yangmin*, lineage was primarily traced through the paternal line. In genealogies (*cokpo*), the paternal lineage could be traced back many generations to a common ancestor; in the case of the *yangban*, linked to a specific ancestral seat. Exogamy was practiced, meaning marriage within the same lineage was forbidden. In *household registers* (to be compiled every three years), the paternal line was typically recorded for three generations and the maternal line for two generations, reflecting the importance of paternal descent in administrative records as well.[2]
2. As in the Koryŏ period, "the system of hereditary slavery was the core mechanism for reproducing slaves."[3] This implies that patterns of slave inheritance had to be fixed and observed. For slaves, however, lineage was less formally recorded and was focused on the maternal line, with the paternal line often neglected or omitted. In *household registers*, often only one generation of both paternal and maternal lines was recorded, and the father was frequently not mentioned. Slaves did not have the same extensive genealogies as free people. However, by the nineteenth century, even slaves were sometimes incorporated into lineage structures.

In addition to the body of information on slavery in the Cosŏn state contained in the historical records of the royal court, official household registers (*hojŏk*), administrative and judgment documents, and a wealth of private documents help to create "a much more dynamic portrait" of the conditions of slavery and the interactions with and among slaves.[4] Until the late 1980s, these sources were "overlooked"[5]—there was simply "a lack

1 M. Yoshida 2018: 52–53.

2 Miyajima 2003: 290.

3 Kim Sujin 2013: 226.

4 M. Peterson 1985: 33.

5 Jangseogak International Society for the Book 2016: s.p. cf. Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 99.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112210079-012

of interest" in the world of slaves.[6] Today, research on these sources is still underway,[7] but it has already become clear that these documents were more than mere records of transactions. They embodied status on paper. They were as much reflections as adscriptions of status; as one Cosŏn bureaucrat noted, they were literally "schemes"[8] for social engineering. Today, they are "powerful tools for showcasing social conflicts,"[9] helping us to better understand the structure of society at the time.

Transactional documents involving slaves included purchase contracts, inheritance records, indenture contracts (which used slaves as collateral), and gift records (which transferred slaves within or outside the family). What we learn from these documents is that slaves were treated as inheritable property, similar to land and houses. Beginning in the sixteenth century, the concept of selling or pledging land and slaves increasingly shifted from a legal obligation to a contractual agreement. However, unlike land, slave transactions still required official notarization to prevent disputes.[10]

The main formats of transactional documents involving slaves can be summarized as follows:

Tab. 25: Formats of legal documents in the Cosŏn period (Im 2022).

Feature	*Sŏngmun* 成文 (Written Record)	*Myŏngmun* 明文 (Explicit Contract)	*Yiban* 立案 (Statement of Record)
Definition	Written record confirming a legal event	Explicit contract documenting a mutual agreement	State-verified legal document
Legal Nature	Unilateral legal acts (inheritance, wills, official grants)	Bilateral legal agreements (sales, loans, debt repayment)	Provides government-backed proof of ownership
Primary Use	Inheritance, wills, grants, state-registered ownership	Contracts for transactions requiring consent	Land sales, slave transactions, legal disputes, financial agreements
Historical Transition	Used for all legal documentation until the 16th century	Became dominant in contracts by the 16th century	Essential for land/slave sales until the 16th century, later only for slave sales

At the end of a contract, the testator or seller or applicant and the guarantors or witnesses had to affix their signature as a mark of their identity. Those who could not write (such as most slaves) used an imprint of their left hand (for male slaves) or right hand

6 Yi Hajŏng 2017: 84.

7 M. Peterson 1985: 33; Mun Hyŏnju 2011: 184.

8 See p. 321.

9 S. Yim 2007: 21.

10 For an overview of the development of contract formats, see Im 2022.

(for female slaves)—according to the *yin-yang* doctrine, the left was associated with the masculine and the right with the feminine. Either an outline of the hand was drawn on the document, or a black ink handprint was made.[11] The scribe, who also served as a witness, often used a paraph (*sŏap*), a unique mark that was difficult to forge.

In the following documents, I will use (s.) for a written signature, (m.s.) (*manu sinistra*) for a left hand signature, (m.d.) (*manu dextra*) for a right hand signature, and ⸎ (*signum*) for a paraph.

The ¶ mark stands for the character 印 which originally means "seal," but in such documents it marks the end of a line or paragraph to prevent unauthorized addition of characters.[12]

8.1 Inheritance and Equal Division of Slaves

In general, *yangban* families practiced equal division of property among their children. As laid out in the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn* (Great Code of Administration), the division of slaves followed the same principles. The inheritance process was structured to ensure that the main family retained primary control, with secondary claims allocated based on status and lineage.

Most division records of the Cosŏn period concern the division of slaves.[13] Legitimate children divided the slaves equally or "as near as was humanly possible",[14] while the children of free concubines received a smaller share, usually one-seventh, and the children of slave concubines received one-tenth. If no legitimate children existed, the children of free concubines each inherited an equal amount of slaves, with the ritual heir receiving an additional one-fifth, while children of slave concubines received one-fifth. When only legitimate daughters remained, the ritual heir among the children of a free concubine received additional portions. If a legitimate mother died without male heirs, the slaves were first distributed among concubine children, with the remainder reverting to the main family or, if no heirs existed, to the government. Adopted children might receive shares, typically one-fifth or one-seventh, with full inheritance granted if adoption occurred before three years of age. If legitimate children existed, adopted children received a smaller portion, while if none existed, they shared the inheritance with concubine children. After the mid-seventeenth century, there was a growing tendency to reduce the share for daughters and increase the share of the head of the family.[15] Moreover, qualitative rather than numerical equality was also aimed at by considering

11 J. An 2000: 172.
12 Yi Kwangu 2019: 100.
13 Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2006: 136.
14 M. Peterson 1985: 35.
15 Kim Yongman 2008: 122; Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2006: 158.

the age of the slaves, grouping them into seniors, adults, and young (*nojangyak*), even including unborn children.[16]

The state was always greedy, so it was advisable to make a will in time. Government laws enacted in 1397 and 1405 made it mandatory to create and certify deeds of inheritance for each slave, because without proper documentation and consensus about inheritance within the lineage, slave ownership was forfeited to the state.[17] In 1404, the widow of a former high official from the Song clan died without an heir, leaving behind many slaves. Ho Ki, a former medical official, took possession of the slaves under the pretense of caring for them. However, members of her extended family, including powerful officials such as Ha Yun, successfully claimed them through a ruling by the Agency for the Rectification of Slave Status. Ho Ki protested this decision by beating the petition drum to appeal directly to the king. King Thäjong reviewed the ownership certificates from both sides, but delegated the matter to the Censorship and Remonstration Officials, explaining that even high ministers did not handle such minor matters, much less the ruler himself. The censors eventually decided that Ho Ki had forged documents and that Ha Yun and the others were not close enough relatives to claim the slaves. As a result, all the slaves were declared the property of the state.[18]

In many cases, the division of property led to the separation of slave families.[19] The involuntary separation of slave family members caused by their masters' actions could occur through inheritance, sale, or marriage (such as when *yangban* brides brought their own slaves into their husbands' families as part of their dowries), which at times required the relocation of slave families to different places. This was more common in the case of living-in slaves, but became rather rare by the late eighteenth century.[20] One inheritance document from 1632 shows how one *yangban* divided his entire estate —lands and slaves—almost equally among his four sons and daughters without respect as to where the fields were located or where the slaves where living and working or to which families the slaves belonged; each child received a nearly equal share of the slaves.[21] In one case, the six children of a female slave were divided among three of the heirs. This seems "unreasonable"[22] from an economic point of view, but may make much more sense if we consider that in effect, "the siblings would be forced to interact and cooperate with each other" instead of splitting up;[23] the *yangban* siblings, that is. Slave siblings had no chance of avoiding separation. However, this did not necessar-

16 Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2006: 141–44.
17 Palais 1996: 218.
18 CWS, Thäjong, Y. 4:1:12 = March 2, 1404.
19 Sun Joo Kim 2020a: 103.
20 Kim Kŏnthä 2011: 102–5.
21 M. Peterson 1985: 34.
22 Ibid.: 39.
23 Ibid.: 36.

ily mean physical separation, and families with small children were often spared from this.[24]

8.1.1 Pongman's Explicit Contract of Inheritance (1540)

The provisions for the distribution of property also applied to slaves, for slaves were not prohibited from owning land and even their own slaves. They just had to be able to afford it. It is not correct to classify this property as *peculium*—that is, land that "always belongs ultimately to the master, who allows his slave to enjoy its usufruct as long as he remains a slave"[25]—as O. Patterson and M. Peterson thought.[26] It was their property, albeit in a somewhat limited way.[27]

The inheritance contract of the private slave Pongman is a rare and revealing case that illustrates the complexities of property ownership among slaves in Cosŏn. Dated to 1540, the document serves as both an inheritance record and a contractual agreement, highlighting the legal strategies employed by slaves to protect their assets.

Despite having two daughters, Pongman faced the challenge of being treated as a childless slave by his master, who sought to seize his estate. Under the prevailing legal framework, a slave without a recognized male heir had no legitimate claim to property, making Pongman's assets vulnerable to confiscation. In response, he took the unusual step of drafting a formal inheritance contract to safeguard his daughters' rights.

The document records the division of Pongman's estate, including farmland, cattle, and household goods, between his two daughters. At the same time, recognizing the power of his master, he deliberately allocated a portion of his property to his master under a formal contractual arrangement known as "contract of formal gift to a superior" (*kisang myŏngmun*). The legal term *kisang* was reserved for slaves, as their masters had the right to claim their property when they died without heirs, although in practice they also often claimed it if the slave's children belonged to other masters, or simply forced their slaves to "donate" it to them.[28] Pongman's move was then likely a strategic compromise, ensuring that his master had a legally recognized claim while preventing the total loss of his estate. By structuring his inheritance in this way, Pongman effectively preempted future disputes and strengthened his daughters' position as rightful heirs.[29] Other effective counterstrategies for slaves included selling their land without

24 Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2006: 148–49.
25 O. Patterson 2018: 210.
26 O. Patterson 2018: 183; M. Peterson 1985: 38.
27 Yi Häjŏng 2017: 83.
28 Yi Häjŏng 2017: 94; Lauer 2017: 102.
29 Im 2022: 97–99.

their masters' knowledge, deceiving their masters by hiding or underreporting their assets, or running away.[30]

Notably, the contract was classified as an explicit contract (*myŏngmun*) rather than an attested record (*sŏngmun*), a distinction that carries significant legal implications. Traditionally, *sŏngmun* was used for passive records of inheritance, reflecting the idea that property division followed established legal customs rather than requiring active negotiation. The use of *myŏngmun*, however, suggests that Pongman's case was treated as a contractual arrangement, emphasizing the need for explicit legal proof and mutual recognition of property rights. This classification aligns with broader legal trends in the sixteenth century, when transactions such as sales, debt repayments, and financial agreements increasingly relied on *myŏngmun* to ensure enforceability.[31]

> On the 22nd day of the first month of the nineteenth year of Jiajing [March 10, 1540], a Kyŏngja year, an explicit contract for the daughters.
> I made this explicit contract because I am already seventy-six years old, and I do not know whether I will live or die tomorrow, and I cannot comprehend the uncertainties of life. I have two daughters, each of whom belongs to a different master. So my master thinks of me as a childless person. Regardless of my age, he collects tribute from me every year and interferes in my affairs. So I have offered him this:
> 16 *pok* of paddy fields in Anhŭngwŏn; 3 *pok* of the dry fields in Pangŏgogwŏn; 1 stove; 1 brass basin; 2 large oxen. These were separately recorded as a gift to my master as if giving them to an only son. As for the rest of the houses, the fields, the paddies, and the daily household goods, they will be given to you, my daughters, and each of you will take possession of them accordingly.
> I give my eldest daughter, Okkŭm, 14 *pok* of the paddy fields in Kamawŏn; 6 of the 12 *majigi* of the paddy fields in Anhŭngwŏn; 8 *majigi* of the 1 *sŏmjigi* of the dry fields in Yulgogwŏn; 5 *pok* of residential land in Pangŏgogwŏn; 17 *pok* of dry fields in Somogwŏn; 1 tile-roofed house in the lower part; 1 cart; 1 cauldron; 1 cooking pot; 5 jars; 1 axe; 5 *sŏk* of grain; 2[5] *pok* of additional dry fields in Yulgogwŏn; 10 fruit trees on the east side. ¶
> My second daughter, Pokkŭm, will inherit 14 *pok* of paddy fields in Kamawŏn; 6 of 12 *majigi* of the paddy fields in Myojiwŏn; 6 of 12 *majigi* of the paddy fields in Anhŭngwŏn; 8 *majigi* of the 1 *sŏmjigi* of the dry fields in Yulgogwŏn; 3 *pok* of the dry fields in Pangŏgogwŏn at the house in the lower part; and 17 *pok* of in Somogwŏn. She will also inherit the house with roof tiles in the upper part, and because it is not large, also 1 large ox, 10 fruit trees on the west side, 1 pot, 1 cauldron, 5 jars, agricultural tools, and five *sŏk* of grain. ¶
> Owner: Father, private slave Pongman (S.)
> Guarantors:
> Younger brother, Poksan (S.)
> Brother-in-law, Private slave Näŭnsan (S.)
> Scribe: Cŏng Suon 🖋

In total, Pongman divided 44 *pok* and 18 *majigi* of paddy fields, 65 *pok* and 16 *majigi* of dry fields, and 5 *pok* of residential area. The fields were spread over six locations. It is

30 Yi Häjŏng 2017: 94.

31 Im 2022: 87–88; translated from the Chinese original, quoted from Jangseogak International Society for the Book 2016: s.p. Cf. Im 2022: 98.

impossible to know the exact metric area of these assets, but they range anywhere from 13 ha to 36 ha for paddy fields and from 15 ha to 42 ha for dry fields. The residential area would have been between 500 and 2,000 square meters. These dimensions were much more than one person could handle. Okkŭm, the elder daughter, received between 13 and 38 ha (46 percent), and Pokkŭm between 13 and 34 ha (47 percent). Each daughter also inherited a house. All in all, this was a fairly balanced division, with slight advantages for the first-born daughter. Pongnam's master was compensated with almost 7 percent of the total area.

Pongman's contract proves that slaves in Cosŏn were not entirely devoid of property rights. While official law regarded slaves as property rather than property holders, the reality was far more complex. Many slaves accumulated wealth, engaged in transactions, and sought ways to ensure that their belongings were passed down to their families. This case also illustrates the legal vulnerability of enslaved individuals, who had to carefully document their claims to property in order to resist confiscation.

At the same time, the contract sheds light on the shifting legal consciousness of the period. In the late sixteenth century, the role of inheritance documents began to change, moving away from simple records of succession toward legally binding agreements.[32] Pongman's decision to frame his inheritance in contractual terms reflects this transformation, as well as the growing reliance on explicit contracts to establish legal security in property transfers. His case stands as an example of how even those considered property under the law could engage in complex legal negotiations to protect their families and assert their agency within a restrictive social structure.

Pongman's contract survived because it became part of the documents of the prestigious Cinsŏng Yi clan of Andong. However, there is no evidence that Pongman ever belonged to this clan. The document was probably transferred to them when they later bought some of the land he had given to his daughters. This absorption of other people's records is another indication of the inequalities between families.[33]

8.1.2 Claiming Runaway Slaves (1602)

In 1602, Yi Ham of the Cäryŏng Yi clan submitted a petition to the prefect of the Yŏnghä magistrate in Kyŏngsang Province, seeking official recognition of ownership of a female slave and her children. The request was made by his head slave Yŏnbok, who acted as his representative in legal matters, as was customary for trusted slaves in the households of the *yangban*. The document, written in classical Chinese with elements of native *yidu*, is a single-sheet manuscript preserved in Chunghyodang, the main house of the Cäryŏng Yi

32 Im 2022: 100.

33 Mun Sukca 2021: 209.

clan in Yŏnghä. Yŏnbok signed this document with an imprint of his left hand, indicating that he could not write.

Yi Ham had hunted and captured a female slave named Yulŭmdŏk, who had previously belonged to his maternal uncle, Hwang Yungwan. She had served in Seoul but fled after the death of Yungwan and his only son, Hwang Bin, who died without heirs. According to legal precedent in the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn*, property—including slaves—that belonged to an heirless cousin was to be inherited by the next of kin, and ownership of runaway slaves was usually given to the person who recaptured them. Acting on these principles, Yi Ham sought official certification of his claim to Yulŭmdŏk and her two children, Yangbok and Congdŏk.

This document shows us that the family life of slaves was always precarious. The capture led to the destruction of Yulŭmdŏk's family—presumably the very thing she was trying to prevent by fleeing. We are not told how old her children were. But since they apparently had no children of their own, they were probably still minors. On their escape, the small family had traveled around 200 km before they were caught in Sangju. It is another 100 km to Yŏnghä. They probably had relatives in the area with whom they wanted to go into hiding. Obviously, their masters also knew this and hunted them down.

The petition, written on a single sheet of paper measuring 41 cm × 30 cm, describes how Yi Ham assigned Congdŏk to his sister's service while keeping Yulŭmdŏk and Yangbok in his own service. Anticipating potential disputes with other cousins over the legitimacy of his claim, Yi Ham requested a formal notarization to validate the legality of his ownership and the circumstances surrounding the recapture of the escaped slaves.

Typically, confirmations were issued as a statement of record (*yiban*) or decree (*yipci*). This document uses the term "formal confirmation" (*tajim*), indicating official recognition of Yi Ham's claim of ownership. After receiving the petition, the prefect of the Yŏnghä magistrate, on November 26, 1602, ordered the legal office to conduct an official investigation ("review and inspect," *chuyŏl*).[34]

> Former investigative official Yi Ham's head slave Yŏnbok (m.s.)
> Presents the following statement:
> Regarding a slave matter: My master's third-degree relative, former Naval Commander Hwang Yungwan, had inherited the female slave Yulŭmdŏk, who was serving in the capital. However, after the Naval Commander, Master Hwang, and his only son, Hwang Bin, both passed away without heirs, the said female slave, Yulŭmdŏk, escaped and wandered, eventually settling in Sangju, Kyŏngsang Province.
> According to the inheritance rights of a fourth-degree relative in the absence of heirs, my master is the rightful heir and has seized and brought back the slave woman Yulŭmdŏk and her children: her first-born son, slave Yangbok, and her second-born daughter, female slave Congdŏk.

34 Translated from the original text on Academy of Korean Studies, https://archive.aks.ac.kr/link.do?dataUCI=G002+AKS+KSM-XB.1551.4777-20101008.B021a_033_00015_XXX [accessed 16.3.2025].

My master has assigned the second child, female slave Congdŏk, to the service of Lady Yi, my master's sister, the wife of the late Yi Samin. The female slave Yulŭmdŏk and her son Yangbok remain in the direct service of my master.
As to whether or not the said female slave, Yulŭmdŏk, is the rightful property of a fourth-degree relative due to the lack of heirs, as well as the fundamental reason for her escape and subsequent recapture, this information is submitted for formal confirmation review, so that further instructions may be issued.
This matter has been submitted for review and approval for disposition.
30th Year of Wanli [1602], 10th Month, [Day], request for notarization
[Official Comment:]
Review ordered.
Judicial Office
23rd day [November 26, 1602]
Prefect's Seal 🖃

8.2 Remission of a Slave

The scholar-official Yi Hyŏngsang—who used the pen name Pyŏngwa—came from a prestigious clan in Cŏnju and served in various important positions after entering government service in 1680. An astute neo-Confucian, he left a large body of writings, and in 1735, two years after his death, he was enshrined in the Sŏngnam Academy that he himself had established in Yŏngchŏn (Kyŏngsang Province).

Yi Hyŏngsang left a description of a trip in May 1700 to Yibŏm, a scenic spot in Kyŏngsang Province, together with his friend An Kungyŏng and accompanied by a "strong slave" named Ilsŏn and the boy slave Ochŏn, who followed with the horse. When they had to cross a large river, Ilsŏn carried his master across on his back because the stone ridge was slippery underfoot.[35]

A long-time servant, this Ilsŏn or Sŏnil, as he is called in other documents, apparently had a close relationship with his master. Towards the end of Yi Hyŏngsang's life, he granted Sŏnil "eternal freedom":[36][37]

Forgetting oneself to offer loyalty is the duty of a slave; reciprocating loyalty and rewarding merit is the right of a master. I have a servant named Sŏnil, who is a child of Yong Wŏnnyang from Yesan County, and is currently 47 years old. For thirty-six years, he has diligently served, partaking in both celebrations and mourning without any hint of deceit in his heart, always displaying the utmost sincerity.

35 *Pyŏngwa Sŏnsäng Munjip* 甁窩先生文集, Yibŏm Yusannok 立巖遊山錄. UCI: G002\+AKS-AA25_55019_001_0485, http://yoksa.aks.ac.kr/jsp [accessed 04.03.2025].

36 甁窩全書甁窩先生文集 *Pyŏngwa Cŏnsŏ Pyŏngwa Sŏnsäng Munjip* (Collected Works of Pyŏngwa: Anthology of Master Pyŏngwa), UCI: G002\+AKS-AA25_55019_001_0486, http://yoksa.aks.ac.kr/jsp [accessed 4.11.2024]. See also Yi Hyŏngsang 2023.

37 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1987: 357.

> When I was ill, he worried over me as if I were his father; when there was food, he served me as if he were my son. Such dedication is rarely seen or heard of. During the upheavals in the Ŭlhä [1695] and Muin [1698] years,[38] he faced dire situations where life and death hung in the balance. Despite the risks, he did not spare his own life, only lamenting that he might not see me again. His prayers, like the buzzing of flies, moved those around him deeply.
> This story has spread, becoming well-known in the Lake and Mountain regions. Sŏnil's devotion comes from his inborn nature. He worked day and night, wholeheartedly fulfilling his duties, which I appreciate deeply.
> Beginning this year, I hereby grant him freedom. I also give him a horse as a means to start his own livelihood. This is documented according to the law to serve as proof for future reference. Dividing the estate among blood kin is something our family deeply abhors.
> Since past generations, we have freely employed him, without the need for formal contracts. Moreover, this document, bearing my personal seal, is as unbreakable as metal or stone. Thus, Sŏnil is granted eternal freedom. So be it.

In the manumission of slaves, it was essential to update the historical contract record for those slaves. For example, if a property division record existed in which these slaves had been entered (even if only in the abstract form of "future offspring"), it must be amended on its back with an official *päthal* note, as in the case of a 1699 document:[39]

> 7th year of Yongzheng [1729], 3rd month, [blank] day, Cŏngan District Magistrate ¶
> officially recorded as removed from prior ownership:
> The female slave Mäsŏn, her first-born son, male slave Sangi, and her second-born son, male slave Yŏni, etc., redeemed from slavery. ¶
> County Magistrate 之

Since the historical contract record was an important piece of evidence in slave ownership disputes, such backnotes were crucial. If former owners failed to record them correctly, it could be difficult for former slaves to prove their redemption.

8.3 Selling Slaves in the Cosŏn Period

During the Cosŏn period, the sale of slaves was perfectly legal, although there was no public slave market. Sales and purchases were based on case-by-case negotiations.[40]

In principle, bargaining was not possible, because, July 31, 1398, slave prices were officially fixed for the first time since 986 (see p. 68):

> The Slave Agency of the Ministry of Justice submitted a proposal stating: "The price of slaves is often no more than 150 bolts of five *sŭng* cloth, while a horse's price reaches 400–500 bolts. This overvalues livestock and undervalues humans, which is unreasonable. We propose setting a standard

38 Periods of severe famine in Cosŏn.

39 Translated from the Chinese original, quoted from Sun Joo Kim 2020a: 107.

40 An Sŭnjun 2014: 112; B.-R. Kim 2003: 158.

price for male and female slaves: 400 bolts for those aged 15 to 40, and 300 bolts for those younger or older. For runaway slaves, the labor substitution fee will be three bolts of cloth per month of absence, but not exceeding the total value." The king approved this proposal.[41]

Compared to the 986 prices, adult slaves were four times more expensive, and all other slaves were six times more expensive. However, the distinction between male and female slaves prices was now absent. More importantly, the compensation for runaways was set at 3 bolts per month of absence. With a net value of 400 bolts per adult slave, we can therefore assume that a slave was expected to work for $400/3 = 133$ months, or 11 years and 1 month, to amortize the cost of their purchase. Since 1 bolt equals 40 feet, 3 bolts equal 120 feet per month, or 4 feet per day. In 986, however, the net value was 100 bolts, or 4,000 feet, and the runaway penalty was 30 feet per day. Amortization was reached after $4000/30$, or 133 days—only four and a half months. In other words, in 1398, it took roughly thirty times longer to compensate for a runaway slave.

This extended amortization period suggests that by 1398, slaves had become a more longer-term investment, with their value requiring much more time to recover . This shift indicates significant economic changes over the centuries. The significantly longer period required to amortize the cost of a slave suggests that the value of a day's work had decreased, even though the overall price of slaves had increased. These price fixes were either pure bureaucratic fantasy, unrelated to the reality of the slave labor market, or implied that the productivity of slave labor had dropped dramatically compared to 500 years earlier. Alternatively, the high supply of slaves depressed the value of each slave.

This official price table remained unaltered throughout the Cosŏn period but was likely disregarded in practice.[42]

There is very little documentary evidence of slave sales until the early sixteenth century. Deuchler suggests that this fact "perhaps indicat[es] that trading in slaves was slack."[43] Arguments *ex silentio*—that is, based on the absence of evidence—should always be made with caution. For instance, the absence of household registers before 1600 does not imply that the Korean Peninsula was unpopulated; it simply means that documentation has not survived. Similarly, a lack of explicit records on slave trading does not conclusively prove inactivity but rather calls for cautious interpretation. For example, the records could have been intentionally destroyed.[44] Even in later periods, evidence of slave sales is not spectacularly abundant. However, slave trading certainly grew after 1690, when the money economy expanded.

41 CWS, Thäjo, Y. 7:6:18 = August 8, 1398. Cf. An Sŭnjun 2014: 116.

42 Ibid.: 117.

43 Deuchler 2015: 137.

44 Yi Cŏngsu and Kim 2008: 366; it has even been suggested that the decline in usable data points indicates a decline in slave transactions "by the late eighteenth century at the latest": Yi Uyŏn and Cha 2010: 107.

Recent studies by Heeho Kim provide detailed data on slave prices during the Cosŏn era. The dataset comprises 285 cases of private slave transactions recorded between 1689 and 1894, involving 634 individuals. 94 percent of these transactions occurred in the southern provinces of Cŏlla and Kyŏngsang, consistent with the observation that these were the regions with the highest number of slaves.[45] On average, two individuals were traded in each transaction.[46]

The frequency of transactions increased sharply in the eighteenth century but then declined steeply after 1860. The data also show a general decline in slave prices until 1820. Initially gradual, this decline accelerated rapidly in the nineteenth century.[47] At the turn of the eighteenth century (1689–1710), the average price was 20 *ryang* for male slaves and 24 *ryang* for female slaves, resulting in a weighted average of 22 *ryang*.[48] During this period, 35 males and 48 females were traded, with females comprising a clear majority. Over the subsequent decades, prices for both sexes declined significantly. Between 1710 and 1750, after the final implementation of the matrifial rule in 1731, the prices of male and female slaves fell to 12 and 15 *ryang*, respectively. The weighted average dropped to 14 *ryang*. Nonetheless, the number of transactions increased—69 for males and 90 for females—suggesting growing market activity despite falling prices.

The trend of decreasing prices continued through the remainder of the eighteenth century. Between 1750 and 1790, average prices fell further, reaching 9 *ryang* for males and 13 *ryang* for females, with a weighted average of 12 *ryang*. During this period, the number of transactions remained high—73 male and 92 female slaves were sold—indicating sustained demand, particularly for females, who accounted for over 55 percent of all trades.

Between 1790 and 1820, prices reached their lowest point. Male slaves were sold for an average of 7 *ryang*, and females for 11 *ryang*, yielding a weighted average of just 10 *ryang*. This was accompanied by a notable decline in transaction numbers—42 males and 59 females—possibly reflecting economic hardship and decreased purchasing capacity amid recurrent famines. Despite the contraction in absolute numbers, the gender imbalance persisted, with women consistently outnumbering men in slave sales.

In the nineteenth century, however, this pattern shifted dramatically. Between 1820 and 1860, the average price of male slaves rose modestly to 10 *ryang*, while the price of female slaves more than tripled to 34 *ryang*, raising the weighted average to 27 *ryang*. Notably, the number of male slaves sold declined to 28, while 65 female slaves were

45 Cha and Yi have extended their dataset to 789 transactions involving 1,763 individuals: Yi Uyŏn and Cha 2010: 106.

46 Ibid.: 108.

47 Brezis and Kim 2009: 8.

48 I calculated the weighted average based on the case numbers and average prices for male and female slaves provided by Kim and Yi. Yi Cŏngsu and Kim 2008: 368–70, 383; Cha and Yi criticize these averages as "likely overestimated" because the prices for children were calculated as three-fourths of the prices for adults: Yi Uyŏn and Cha 2010: 120.

traded, further reinforcing the feminization of the slave market. This trend peaked during the final decades of legal slavery. From 1860 to 1894, only 8 male and 25 female slaves were sold. However, prices soared to 13 *ryang* for males and an extraordinary 60 *ryang* for females, with a weighted average of 48 *ryang*. These figures indicate both a contraction of the slave market and a sharp rise in the economic valuation of women. The growing price disparity between the sexes and the predominance of female slaves in transactions point to a fundamental transformation in the function of slavery—one increasingly oriented toward domestic, reproductive, or other gender-specific roles. However, when accounting for galloping inflation during the final years of Cosŏn, the real prices approached nearly zero.[49] This indicates a decrease in the demand for slaves due to increased surveillance costs and a shift in the economy toward employing wage laborers instead of slaves. Holding slaves was no longer economically efficient due to the high cost of monitoring them. After the abolition of hereditary slavery, the market collapsed.[50]

Over time, women, children, and adolescents were traded most frequently. Until 1820, women accounted for approximately 60 percent of those sold; thereafter, the proportion rose to 76 percent.[51] The average age of those traded decreased steadily from 21 years (22 years for women) to 15 years (13 years for boys and 17 years for girls) until 1860. Between 1860 and 1894, however, the average age rose to 27 years for male slaves and dropped to 14 years for female slaves. These trends of increasing femininization and juvenilization suggest that the primary objective of these transactions was not the acquisition of agricultural labor.[52]

During the late Cosŏn period, when natural disasters, epidemics, and famines disrupted the economy, cases of self-sale into slavery (*camä*) increased markedly, particularly among young girls.[53] In the second half of the eighteenth century, self-sale accounted for only about 8 percent of all slave transactions. During the ensuing period of recurrent famines, however, the proportion rose sharply to 28 percent by 1820. The average age of self-sold slaves during this time was 15—nearly three years below the overall average—indicating that more children were sold during periods of crisis. Prices for self-sold slaves were significantly lower than for others and tended to converge.[54]

49 Yi Cŏngsu and Kim 2008: 391; Yi Uyŏn and Cha 2010: 120.

50 Brezis and Kim 2009: 14; Yi Uyŏn and Cha 2010: 125.

51 Brezis and Kim 2009: 7.

52 Yi Cŏngsu and Kim 2008: 368–73.

53 Pak Kyŏng 2008: 187–88.

54 Yi Cŏngsu and Kim 2008: 375–77, 386, 396.

Tab. 26: Slave transactions by period with average slave prices in *ryang* (Yi Cŏngsu and Kim 2008: 373, 383).

Period	Male Slaves	Female Slaves	Total	Male Average Price	Female Average Price	Weighted Average Price
1689–1710	35	48	83	20	24	22
1710–1750	69	90	159	12	15	14
1750–1790	73	92	165	9	13	12
1790–1820	42	59	101	7	11	10
1820–1860	28	65	93	10	34	27
1860–1894	8	25	33	13	60	48
Total	255	379	634	12	26	20

8.3.1 Bargaining for Slaves (1707)

In the absence of a public slave market, slaves were traded based on bargaining between slave owners. Slave sales involved both negotiation and verification procedures, where prospective buyers assessed not only the slave's physical condition but also their work attitude and willingness to serve. Before finalizing a purchase, sellers and buyers often exchanged correspondence, and the buyer might summon the slave for direct evaluation. Once the buyer confirmed the slave's suitability and consent, the sale was completed through payment, documentation, and official registration. For example, before Yi Mungŏn bought a slave offered to him by an acquaintance in 1557, he called the slave to his home and asked his opinion. After the slave agreed, he had the necessary papers prepared.[55] Evidence for these negotiations exists in the form of letters exchanged between sellers and buyers. An Sŭnjun has analyzed the interactions between two *yangban* families in Sangju, Kyŏngsang Province, that took place in 1707. The first letter dates from March 6, 1707 (2:3), and contains a sales offer made by the Kwŏn family to the Kim family.[56]

> *Front Side*
> Although the distance is great, I have waited to send a small gift, delivered by my household slave. I respectfully acknowledge your letter and have carefully examined its contents.
> I have awaited your response with great anticipation, and have found much comfort from afar. Now that my female household slave Muhwa and her child are about to be sold, I have received word of your intention to purchase them—how fortunate!

55 Yi Hăjŏng 2015: 114.

56 Quoted and translated from from An Sŭnjun 2014: 126.

Although the price of slaves here is different from that in Kyŏnggi Province, a price of thirty *ryang* for two slaves seems very reasonable. I sincerely hope you will consider the price conveyed by my household slave and proceed with the purchase. What do you think?
I sincerely wanted to meet you in person to discuss this matter, but after traveling a long distance, exhaustion and illness have overcome me, so I am writing to trouble you with this letter instead.
The authorization for the sale has also been revised according to your instructions and is being sent accordingly. Please review and accept it.
There is much more to say, but I cannot convey it all. I humbly ask for your consideration.
Respectfully submitting this letter of gratitude.
Cŏnghä year, 2nd month, 3rd day [March 6, 1701].
Kwŏn Hŭi.
Back Side
Delivered to the house of classics licentiate Kim [Kim Pildä],
A letter of appreciation from Kwŏn.

This letter was surely not the first on this matter. Since it says here that the authorization was "revised," there must have been a previous step. The revision probably concerned the purchase price, which had presumably been higher in the first offer to Kim. As in this case, trusted slaves, often the head slaves of a family, served as intermediaries, delivering messages and gifts and negotiating the details of the transaction.

The price offered was below the nationwide average (see p. 464). The reference to the higher slave price in the metropolitan region of Kyŏnggi suggests that there was a certain logic of supply and demand: slaves were always in short supply and high demand in the capital, while prices were certainly lower in a rural region like Kyŏngsang, where the supply of slaves was particularly high.

Selling a mother together with her young child was typical and not only humanly necessary, but also practical: who else would have taken care of the child?

Two days later, Kim Hŭi wrote again: another child from Muhwa had turned up; possibly through a slave hunt. Kim was now offering all three for the same price of 30 *ryang*.[57]

Front Side
The gloomy rain continues incessantly; at this moment, I wonder if your health and well-being are secure—how are you? I am thinking deeply about your kindness.
Now, in addition to the female slave Muhwa, another male slave born from her has appeared.
Now that the slaves have been presented, the price for a total of three slaves, even at a fair value, cannot be less than 30 *kwan*. So if you really want to buy them, please prepare this amount accordingly to complete the purchase. What do you think?
Since these slaves are neither old nor disabled, they are certainly useful. Therefore, this price is not excessive. I sincerely hope you will consider the price as reported by my household slave. Thirty *ryang* must be prepared. This would be a great favor.
I have nothing further to say.
I humbly submit this letter for your esteemed consideration.

57 Quoted and translated from ibid.: 127–28.

Cŏnghä Year, 2nd month, 5th day [June 8, 1707].
Kwŏn Hŭi
Back Side
Delivered to the house of classics licentiate Kim,
A letter submitted by Kwon.

8.3.2 Selling Slaves (1712)

In 1786, amid financial hardship caused by famine, Kim Cŏngha, a member of the Puan Kim clan in Cŏlla Province, authorized his slave Sŏksan to sell six household slaves. The individuals to be sold were a long-inherited female slave, her three daughters, and her two sons. To ensure the legitimacy of the sale and prevent future disputes, Kim instructed that the transaction be properly recorded in the historical contract record (*ponmungi*) with the notation "officially recorded as transferred and removed from prior ownership" (*päthal sachul*). A *ponmungi* was "a document that records the object of the transaction and serves as a reference" for the history of a transaction, usually given to the buyer along with a newly created contract. It served as a reference for verifying ownership, preventing double sales, and establishing legal continuity in property or slave transactions. While the term generally referred to past sales contracts, in a broader sense, it could include any previous document that recorded the transaction object, such as a property division record, a statement of record (*yiban*), or a request for notarization.[58] The historical contract record referenced in the authorization was originally drawn up in 1779 when Kim and his siblings divided their parental estate, and the sale was later documented in both the statement of record and the family property division document.

Following this authorization, Sŏksan secured a buyer, a Confucian scholar from Hamyŏl County. The next day, they agreed on a price of 80 *ryang* for the six slaves (a price higher than average at the time, see p. 464), and Sŏksan drew up the contract of sale in his own name, formally transferring the slaves. He then took the necessary legal steps by visiting the Puan magistrate with witnesses and officials to request the registration of the sale. Presenting the historical contract record to the magistrate, he ensured that the transaction was recorded on both the front and back of the document as "officially recorded as transferred and removed from prior ownership."[59]

This case illustrates the widespread practice in late Cosŏn of *yangban* delegating legal and financial matters to trusted household slaves and the bureaucratic safeguards in place to ensure legal compliance. But this practice itself and the documents attached to these transactions also reveal how status-based attributes were embedded in the ex-

58 Mun Sukca 2021: 201.
59 Cŏn Kyŏngmok 2012b: 234–35.

change of documents. When there was a significant social or status disparity between the contracting parties, records often accumulated in the hands of the higher standing parties.[60] This resulted in less legal protection for others when they lacked documentary evidence of contractual transactions.

All legally sanctioned slave transactions had to be documented in a standardized format. This required six distinct documents that collectively formed the transaction file. These documents were written in *yidu*, a bureaucratic language blending classical Chinese and Korean. The following example, illustrating the sale of a female slave and her child in 1712, is adapted with minor corrections from Jung Hee An, who has conducted a semantic analysis and translated them into German.[61]

The slave, referred to as Sanyŏ in the first document (perhaps by mistake) and Sarye in the others, was twenty-three years old at the time, with a two-year-old son, making it impractical to sell them separately. Her owner and master, a *yangban* named Yi, does not appear formally in the transaction, nor does the buyer, a *yangban* named Yun. Both relied on male house slaves as proxies: Yŏngman for Yi, and Sangun for Yun. These proxies handled the price negotiation (resulting in an average price for the time), arranged the formal procedures, secured two witnesses and a scribe, and requested notarization. This use of proxies was customary, as direct engagement in commercial activities was deemed inappropriate for *yangban*. Without their trusted house slaves, the *yangban* would have been unable to manage their estates.

This transaction was initiated in early April 1712. According to the final notarization, the owner and his older brothers had signed an agreement the previous week to allocate their inherited slaves. It is likely that their father had recently died without a formal will,[62] and the owner of Sarye had hurried to sell her, possibly for financial reasons. Yŏngman was able to find a buyer within ten days of being assigned the task.

It remains unclear from the records whether the proxies Yŏngman and Sangun could read and write. It is plausible that the negotiations were conducted orally, with the scribe handling all writing duties. As can be seen from Pak Ciwŏn's *The Yangban Story* (see p. 396), transaction documents were read aloud to the participants before they were signed or sealed. The sales procedure began with the drafting of an explicit contract, which was established through mutual agreement between the buyer and seller. Once the terms were set, the buyer or their proxy—often a slave—submitted a petition to the local authorities, formally requesting official recognition of the purchase. Following this, the magistrate's office initiated an inquiry into the transaction, in which officials verified the sale by directly questioning the seller. The credibility of the transaction was assessed through the oath of confirmation, during which witnesses and the scribe responsible for drafting the contract were examined. After these verifications

60 Mun Sukca 2021: 209.
61 J. An 2000: 172–80.
62 Ibid.: 180.

were completed, the final step involved the issuance of an *yiban* (statement of record). This document, granted by the magistrate's office after a thorough review, served as legal confirmation of the buyer's ownership over the purchased slave.

The six documents required in a slave trade were:

1. the authorization of the proxy seller (*phäji*) (also called *phäja*),
2. the explicit contract between seller and buyer (*myŏngmun*),
3. the request for notarization (*sŏji*),
4. the confirmation from the witnesses (*chosa*),
5. the confirmation from the seller (*chosa*), and
6. the statement of record (*yiban*).

8.3.2.1 Authorization of Sale

To the Slave Yŏngman
Subject: Not for any other reason, but because it is necessary:
To agree upon a price with a willing buyer and to receive the money for the inheritance of Sanyŏ, the fourth child of the female slave Mägä from Chungju, one person, and Sanyŏ's first child, the slave Yŏnggŭm, together.
And following this necessity, I hereby grant permission, through this letter, to prepare an explicit contract.
[In the year] Imjin, 3rd month, 3rd day [April 8, 1712]
Master Yi

8.3.2.2 Sales Contract

Sales Contract [to] Sangun, slave of the classics licentiate Yun, in the Kangxi year 51, Imjin, 3rd month, 13th day [April 18, 1712],
Regarding the aforementioned sales contract,
Due to the necessity for my master ["On this occasion"]:
The inherited slave Sarye, the fourth child of the slave Mägä, born in the Kisa year [1689], and the slave Yŏnggŭm, child of Sarye, born in the Kyŏngin year [1710]—together two persons—along with their descendants, have been transferred upon setting the price, thus exchanged for an amount of 45 *ryang*, and the money has been received. By the authority of [my] master, they, together with their descendants, have been sold in perpetuity.
Because the historical contract record is bound together with others, it cannot be handed over. If later there are objections among children, grandchildren, and relatives, this document serves as a submission to the office for correction.
House slave of the slave owner, classics licentiate Yi: Yŏngman (m.s.)
Witness: No Ŭise (s.)
Witness: Yŏm Üsŏng (s.)
Scribe: Co Chasŏk 曺

8.3.2.3 Request for Notarization

Sangun, slave of the classics licentiate Yun.
The aforementioned respectfully submits the following letter.

I request an examination of the document through which my master has purchased two slaves from Yŏngman, slave of the classics licentiate Yi, at a fixed price, and subsequently request instructions on how to authenticate the document [and issue a certificate] as in previous cases. To the office head, with a request for action.
[In the year] Imjin, 3rd month, day

8.3.2.4 Confirmation from the Witnesses

On the same day
Witnesses: No Ŭise, Yŏm Üsŏng
Scribe: Co Chasŏk
We testify as follows:
You have requested us to report truthfully on the sale of two *yangban* slaves by Yŏngman, the private slave of the slave owner. The above-named Yŏngman, private slave of the slave owner, has, by the authority of his master, appraised his master's slave, Sarye, the fourth child of the slave Mägä, born in the Kisa year [1689], and her first child, the slave Yŏnggŭm, born in the Kyŏngin year [1710]—together two persons—at a price of 45 *ryang*, and received the money accordingly.
The two slaves, along with their descendants, were sold permanently to Sangun, the slave of the classics licentiate Yun, and a sales contract was drawn up.
We, as witnesses and the scribe, have participated and signed; this corresponds to the facts.
We request the document's review and certification, as in previous cases.
Official (s.)
As above (s.)
As above (s.)
As above (s.)

8.3.2.5 Confirmation from the Seller

Imjin, 3rd month, day, Yŏngman, slave of the slave owner, the classics licentiate Yi
I testify, as you request, "Truthfully attest to the fact of your sale of the *yangban* slave Sarye and the same slave's first child, the slave Yŏnggŭm."
Since my master, the slave's [i.e., my] owner, deemed it necessary, I have set the price for the slave Sarye, inherited from the ancestors, the fourth child of the slave Mägä, born in the Kisa year [1689], as well as the slave Yŏnggŭm, the first child of the same slave [i.e., Sarye], born in the Kyŏngin year [1710]—together two persons—and received the amount of 45 *ryang* accordingly.
It corresponds to the facts that I, by the authority of my master, have sold the said slaves along with their descendants in perpetuity and have drawn up a bill of sale.
I request that the documents be examined and certified as in previous cases.
Official 𝔖
same day
(m.s.)

8.3.2.6 Statement of Record

In the year Kangxi 51, 3rd month, day, *yiban* of the Cecŏn Office.
Subject: Creation of an excerpt from the above-mentioned statement of record.
The compiled written statements of the witnesses, the scribe, and the owner of the goods were presented.

> The historical contract record was requested and reviewed; it was a document negotiated between the brothers on the 25th of the 2nd month in the year Kyŏngin [March 31, 1712].
> The first son Yi Yunchu, the second son Yunsŏk and the scribe Yunyŏp, the younger brother of the illegitimate cousin with the same family name, ¶ have signed [it], and this is accurate.
> Yŏngman, private slave of the aforementioned owner, [for] his master's inherited slave Sarye, fourth child of the slave Mägä, born in the year Kisa, and her descendant, the slave Yŏnggŭm, born in the year Kyŏngin, set the price for these two and received the sum of 45 *ryang*.
> These slaves, along with all their descendants, were sold in perpetuity to the slave Sangun from the household of the classics licentiate Yun, and this is accurate. Accordingly, following the model, the sale was authenticated on the reverse side of the historical contract record,[63] and a statement of record was issued.
> Official representative 𝕾

8.3.3 Buying Two Daughters (1575)

The scholar-official Yu Hŭichun had four daughters with his slave concubine Kujildŏk, who belonged to a *yangban* named Yi Ku. In 1568, he bought the first two daughters—the elder already a concubine in Seoul—for one horse each. He submitted the sales documents and a petition, which the authorities approved.[64] The redemption of the second daughter was delayed until 1570, because Yi Ku demanded an official post for his son-in-law Yi Chŏng, which Yu initially refused.[65] From 1573, Yu supported this son-in-law, probably to facilitate the redemption of the remaining two daughters. On December 29, 1575, Hŭichun stated in his diary *Miam Ilgi* that the redemption of his four daughters had finally been achieved:

> Late in the afternoon, a domestic slave from Yi Ŭnjin [= Yi Ku]'s residence in the capital brought a letter from Yi Chŏng. The documents for the release and manumission of Hämyŏng and Häbok, drawn up at the time of their sale, were also sealed and delivered. I was very happy to see them. The four slave girls born in Congsŏng all obtained cleansing of their status and became commoners —how fortunate![66]

Congsŏng, Hamgyŏng Province, was where Hŭichun had been exiled between 1547 and 1565, and where his relationship with Kujildŏk had begun.[67] Afterwards, Kujildŏk lived in Hŭichun's hometown Hänam in Cŏlla Province.

The text of the explicit contract for the redemption of his younger daughters was also recorded in Hŭimun's diary. There is a chronological inconsistency in the document: the stated ages (19 and 15 years) imply a four-year difference, but the stated birth

63 This refers to the *päthal* statement, i.e., "officially recorded as transferred and removed from prior ownership."
64 Sun Joo Kim 2019: 16.
65 Ibid.: 17.
66 Yu Hŭichun 1938: 82.
67 Sun Joo Kim 2019: 15.

years (1558 and 1561) reflect only a three-year difference. Also, the youngest daughter's name is Häbok in the the diary, but Hägü in the contract.

> The purpose of this explicit contract is as follows:
> For urgent reasons, the female slaves Hämyŏng, the third child of Kujildŏk, belonging to the undergraduate Yi Chŏng who lives in the capital, nineteen years old, born in the Muo year [1558], and Hägü, fifteen years old, born in the year of Shinyu [1561], were purchased with the approval of the assistant magistrate Yu N.N.
> Because my daughters had been separated from me, I was overcome by the emotions of flesh and blood and redeemed their bodies so that they might become commoners, and earnestly petitioned for this.
> The two, Hämyŏng, nineteen years old, born in the Muo year, and Hägü, fifteen years old, born in the Shinyu year, are now to be treated as commoners. Their price was set at six hundred sheets of paper money.[68]

The combined value of two young slave girls was merely 600 sheets, despite acknowledging elsewhere that a single daughter had previously cost one horse, which makes this an "extremely low transaction cost."[69] But Hŭichun did not pay himself. Under the date of April 9, 1576, there is a note in Yu Hŭichun's diary that the draft treaty was sent to Posŏng "because Yi Cŏng sold [Hämyŏng and Häbok/Hägü] to Cang Ichang."[70] Hämyŏng had become Cang Ichang's secondary wife in 1574, which was the reason why Ichang, who lived in Posŏng, Cŏlla Province, paid for the girls' redemption. The papers were delivered to Ichang two days later by a slave named Oksŏk for official registration.[71] Oksŏk returned four days later with copies of the official documents, but for some reason, they had to be redrafted.[72] On April 19, 1576, a petition for the manumission for Hämyŏng and Hägü, along with copies of the certificates issued in Posŏng, was finally submitted to the Department of Slave Affairs and then forwarded to the district office.[73]

8.3.4 Declaration of Self-Sale (1799)

In the late Cosŏn period, self-sale into slavery became a frequent phenomenon. The contract, dated to May 6, 1799, records the self-sale of an eight-year-old girl named Yongdan into slavery under Cŏngsam, the head slave of a *yangban* named Pak. The document explicitly attributes the motivation for self-sale to extreme poverty and the immediate

68 Yu Hŭichun 1938: 270.
69 Sun Joo Kim 2019: 18.
70 1576:3:11: Yu Hŭichun 1938: 159.
71 1576:3:13 = April 11, 1576: ibid.: 161.
72 1576:3:17 = April 15, 1576: ibid.: 164.
73 1576:3:21: ibid.: 167.

threat of starvation following a major famine, echoing the socioeconomic distress of the day:[74]

> Explicit contract to Cŏngsam, head slave of classics licentiate Pak, on the 2nd day of the 4th month in the 4th year of Jiaqing, Shinsa[75] year [May 6, 1799]
> The purpose of writing this explicit contract is as follows:
> My parents were originally poor and had nothing to rely on, so they wandered east and west, begging and barely managing to maintain their lives. With the recent great famine, survival became even more difficult, and starvation seemed inevitable. For three years now, we have been wandering in distant places, unable to return to our hometown. I am only eight years old, too young to beg for food. Abandoned on the road, I suffered from hunger and cold, crying day and night, on the verge of starving to death. Then the household above took pity on my life, took me in and raised me, allowing me to survive until now. The grace of saving my life is as deep as the sea, so it is hard to repay. Although I am an ignorant person, I want to repay this favor, but I have no way to repay it.
> Recently, an ordinance was issued allowing those who raise abandoned children to own them, and it has reached this county. Therefore, I am writing this document, offering my body and future offspring in perpetual self-sale for servitude, and receiving 10 *ryang* of money to save my parents from starvation.
> If anyone questions this in the future, let this document distinguish right from wrong.
> Self-selling female slave: Yongdan (m.d.)
> Witness: Father, Han Myŏngdol (m.s.)
> Witness: Maternal Uncle, Chŏ Yongjä (s.)

The stated circumstances—prolonged wandering, abandonment, and the impossibility of survival through begging—mirror the demographic shift toward younger, increasingly feminized slave populations in times of crisis. Between 1790 and 1820, the weighted average slave price fell to its lowest point, while the proportion of slaves sold through self-sale into slavery rose to 28 percent (see p. 464). The average age of self-sold individuals during this period was fifteen, but this case—an eight-year-old girl, sold by her natal kin—illustrates the extremity of need that could push even very young children into bondage. The contractual language further reinforces the commodification of girls as assets, as it formalizes the transference not only of Yongdan herself but of her "future offspring," highlighting the heritability of slave status and the value projected onto the reproductive capacity of female slaves—a central feature of the late Cosŏn slave economy.

Moreover, the mention of King Cŏngno's Self-Relief Ordinance of 1783 allowing caretakers of begging or abandoned children to claim ownership introduces a legal framework that institutionalized and legitimized such transfers. It reveals the state's complicity in codifying vulnerability into servitude and possibly reflects attempts to stabilize

74 Quoted and translated from Pak Kyŏng 2008: 188–89.

75 This is not correct. 1799 was a *Kimi* year. The last *Shinsa* year would have been 1761.

or regulate the increasingly informal slave market during periods of crisis and dislocation.[76]

However, the fact that Yongdan's father and maternal uncle signed the contract, as well as the stipulation that ten *ryang* was paid to her parents, makes it clear that she was not abandoned.

Although the contract is styled in the first person, ostensibly voiced by the self-selling child, the actual author of the document was certainly not Yongdan herself, who, at eight years old, would have been legally and practically incapable of producing such a formal and literate text. The real authors were almost certainly the buyers, the Pak family and their intermediate, the head slave Cŏngsam. Her adult guardians—specifically her father, Han Myŏngdol, and her maternal uncle, Chŏ Yongjä—appear as witnesses.

This authorship reflects a common legal and rhetorical convention in slave contracts of the period: the use of the first-person voice of the prospective slave to simulate voluntary consent, even when the document was drafted, negotiated, and executed by adults on behalf of the minor. The performative function of this rhetorical strategy was to legitimize the transaction and preempt future challenges by presenting the sale as an act of deliberate gratitude and filial duty. In reality, the child's voice served as a legal fiction; the true agency of the contract lay with the adult relatives who benefited from the sale and with the buyer, represented here by the head slave Cŏngsam acting on behalf of his master, the classics licentiate Pak. While Pak Kyŏng speculates that her family may have felt "compelled" to sign this document,[77] we cannot rule out the possibility that for them this transaction of selling an otherwise useless girl was nothing out of the ordinary, mirroring "different expectations for sons and daughters."[78]

8.4 Analyzing Household Registers: How Many Slaves?

The idea of organizing and governing the population through household registers originated in ancient China and was implemented with many variations and varying degrees of success in various regions of East Asia. In the case of Korea, the surviving household registers are an invaluable source of information for "analyzing changes over time"[79] in Cosŏn society, including slavery. Contrary to the assumptions of previous research, there is now a consensus that they were not created as a demographic device to count the population (census), but, as is said about the Koryŏ period,

76 Pak Kyŏng 2008: 190.

77 Ibid.: 191.

78 Ibid.: 198.

79 Kim Sŏkhŭi 1975: 290; Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 2.

> labor duties were assigned based on the household registers.[80]

In other words: Household registers were never intended to record *status* (*shinbun*), and it is "almost impossible"[81] to use them to measure the status or class structure of their time. They were used to record *duties* (*yŏk*).[82] In the late seventeenth century, Yu Hyŏngwŏn vehemently disagreed with this view, stating: "The household register is used to record the number of people." However, Yu did not mean this in a purely statistical or bureaucratic sense. Rather, he saw registration as a moral and political act —an expression of sovereign virtue, social coherence, and historical accountability:

> If the number of the people is not thoroughly known, affairs cannot be made uniform. If affairs are not uniform, then even if one wishes to bring about good governance, it cannot be attained.[83]

However, there was no consensus on this issue and no uniform practice during the Cosŏn period. In the early nineteenth century, Cŏng Yagyong, while also pointing out that household registration was the base of all taxation and duties, distinguished between two methods of conducting it: One was "rigorous investigation and strict enforcement," and the other was "generosity and flexibility."[84] Cŏng recommended the use of the latter method, because it

> does not stress strict investigation nor advocate accuracy in registering the people. [...] A local government that adopts this system of law collects only general information on the number of households, trying to make the law fair and equitable to all of them.[85]

In any case, in compiling the actual household registers, it was necessary to classify households according to their economic size and capabilities. This policy was called "forming households by differentiating and grouping" (*pundŭng yipho*). Households and individuals that fell through the cracks of the criterion of economic performance were simply ignored and marginalized. This explains why in many cases up to 50 percent of the slave and other base populations were not registered, and why the imbalance in age

80 KS 79, Shikhwa 2, Hogu. Mysteriously, Kim Hongshik refers to this as a quotation from the Cosŏn period, CWS, Thäjong 4:5:23 = July 9, 1404. However, this is not correct. The phrase is not documented outside of the *Koryŏsa*. This does not mean that the fiscal policy of the Cosŏn period deviated from it, as it was closely based on the Koryŏ model. Kim Hongshik 1974: 79.

81 Y.-M. Kim 1986: 747.

82 M. Yoshida 2018: 42.

83 *Pangye Surok*, B. 3.

84 Y.-Y. Chŏng 2010: 343; cf. Takeda 1991: 25.

85 Y.-Y. Chŏng 2010: 344; Cŏng described this generous method in great detail. He assumed that local officials were corrupt and the local population forgetful and easily manipulated. The magistrate should therefore not allow the number of households and residents to be changed once it had been determined, except in times of great need. Y.-Y. Chŏng 2010: 343–60.

and sex ratios is so pronounced in the surviving registers,[86] which, for the period after 1600,[87] show an increasing susceptibility to such biases over time and therefore cannot be interpreted with the straightforwardness that earlier research thought possible. There is currently no consensus on the reliability of these sources.[88] Given the very limited comparability of the available data, any consideration regarding diachronic interpretation is methodologically problematic. In addition, there were also differences between the regions, and even worse, even within the same region, different bodies, such as the local military administration and relay stations, could make competing records, which led not only to some groups being registered twice, but also to some individuals being recorded differently: someone who was considered a clerk in his relay station could at the same time be recorded as a slave in the military register.[89] Thus, even if, by some miracle, all the household registers ever kept had survived, reconstructing the entire social space would be virtually impossible. The best approach to the social reality of the Cosŏn period today is therefore only possible through case studies.[90] Generalizations are extremely difficult. But rather than bemoaning the inadequacy of household registers as data sources, they should be seen as testimony to a

> compromise between the households' economic power and social standing, as well as the competing interests of the administration, which sought to impose higher taxes, and the people, who aimed to minimize their tax burden.[91]

During the Cosŏn period, household registers were theoretically compiled every three years; these years were called "register years" (*shingnyŏn*). The residents themselves recorded the information in documents called household rosters (*hogu tanja*), single-sheet documents that were submitted in two copies. The administration compared them with the previous household registers, corrected them, prepared updated household registers and created three copies of the registers, of which one copy was returned to the households with corrections. If necessary, authorized copies of the household rosters could be requested. These copies were called supplementary household registers (*cunhogu*). They were used, for example, as supporting documents in slave hunts (*chuno*), lawsuits, or applications for civil service examinations.[92]

86 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 47–48.

87 There are none for the period before 1600: Kim Sŏkhŭi 1975: 290; this implies that there are no data from the period when the patrifilial inheritance of slaves was enforced: Han Yŏngguk 1977: 180.

88 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 50; for example, given the enormous variety of reasons for underreporting and overreporting, it is simply undercomplex to claim that "the possible range of error […] was plus or minus 30–35 percent." B.-R. Kim 2018: 402.

89 Son 2004: 68.

90 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 50.

91 Ibid.: 75.

92 Mun Hyŏnju 2011: 157; Kim Sŏkhŭi 1975: 281–82; for a basic introduction in English, see M. Peterson and Phillips 2004: 1–3.

8.4.1 The Household Roster of Yun Cachŏl (1855)

The *Household Roster of Ŭmnä Village, Kyochonni, Ŭlmyo Year* is a single sheet of Korean paper measuring 94 cm × 94 cm, folded into multiple rectangular sections for storage and handling. The document shows visible creases from folding, as well as minor stains and ink smudges and traces of bookworm damage, consistent with handling and storage over time. The edges of the paper remain relatively intact, suggesting careful preservation. The text is written in vertical columns in Classical Chinese using a clear and formal script.[93]

In the upper right section, there is a block of text listing names and familial relationships of the *yangban* core family, consisting of the head of the household, Yun Cachŏl, his wife, a daughter of the Pannam Pak clan from Naju, Cŏlla Province, his son Yun Sangŭl, and his daughter-in-law, a daughter of the Koryŏng Pak clan from Koryŏng, Kyŏngsang Province. The ages and years of birth for each of these four persons are given. For Cachŏl and his wife, who were living in Kyochonni, Chungchŏng Province, the document mentions their paternal fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers and their maternal grandfather with their ranks and titles. Their female ancestors are not recorded, nor the names of wife and daughter. Since Cachŏl's son Sangŭl was only eleven years younger than his wife, Lady Pak, she was certainly his second wife and Sangŭl's stepmother.

The roster is only dated as stemming from an "Ŭlmyo Year." From the list of the successful examination candidates of the Sojŏnggong branch of the Phaphyŏng Yun clan, we know that Yun Sangŭl, the son of Yun Cachŏl, passed the classics licentiate examination in 1855, an Ŭlmyo year.[94] This allows us to date the roster to exactly the same year, 1855. In the roster, the son has no academic title, which indicates that it was written before his passing the examination.

In the left corner, there is a stamp with black ink, "Main Office (blank) Number." This would have been the space where the magistrate's staff inserted the internal household registration number.[95]

In the lower left section, there is another block of text, more densely written, listing the slaves of the families. This section contains an official seal, which is faint but still visible, with remnants of ink smudging and a rectangular stamp impression in red ink, signifying revision by local authorities. The stamp reads "Certain characters modified under review and amendment" (周挾改幾字 *cuhyŏpkä kija*). This is a very important detail, because the presence of this red "revision seal" stamp confirms that this docu-

尹滋晶　戸口單子

93 *Ŭlmyo-nyŏn Yun Cacŏl Hogu Tanja* 을묘년윤자철호구단자, https://archive.aks.ac.kr/link.do?dataUCI=G002+AKS+KSM-XD.0000.0000-20101008.B004a_004_00342_XXX [accessed 25.6.2025].

94 *Phaphyŏn-sshi (Täjonghwa) Sojŏnggong-pha Sängwŏnshi* 파평윤씨 (대종회) 소정공파 생원시https://cafe.daum.net/ppyd/HDTk/213 [accessed 08.03.2025].

95 Mun Hyŏnju 2011: 183.

ment was not only a household roster (*hogu tanja*); it was also used as a supplementary household register (*cunhogu*).[96]

Prior to the seventeenth century, household rosters were submitted to the magistrate's office, which checked and corrected them, prepared the household registers on the basis of the rosters, and issued supplementary household registers on request. From the late seventeenth century on, the heads of the households themselves submitted both rosters and, after the magistrate had corrected them, the supplementary registers. After 1738, even this procedure was simplified, and the roster was returned with the revision stamp.[97] The document, now turned into a supplementary household register, was then ready to be used for identifying status—such as applications for state examinations,[98] and this may very well have been the case here as we know that Cachŏl's son was about to take his exam.

Yun Cachŏl, undergraduate, 55 years, born in the Shinyu year [1801], ancestral seat: Phaphyŏng
Father: Student [Yun] Changjin
Grandfather: Deputy of the Royal Successor's Guard, [Yun] Cŏnggi
Great-grandfather: Honorable Senior Gentleman, former Mannyŏngjŏn[99] Councilor, [Yun] Kwangjŭp
Maternal grandfather: Honorable Senior Gentleman Yi Cipha, ancestral seat: Kyŏngju
Wife: Lady Pak, 38 years, born in the Muin year [1818], registered in the Pannam [Pak] clan[100]
Father: Undergraduate [Pak] Täsu
Grandfather: Student [Pak] Congŏn
Great-grandfather: Honorable Senior Gentleman [Pak] Sŏngwŏn
Maternal grandfather: Honorable Senior Gentleman Hong Kyumyŏng, ancestral seat: Namyang
Eldest son: [Yun] Sangŭl, 27 years, born in the Kichuk year [1829]
Daughter-in-law: Lady Pak, 28 years old, registered in Koryŏng

(Main Office No. (blank))

Living-in Slaves:
Male slave: Sungŭm, born in the Kyŏngshin year [1800]
Male slave: Sundŭk, born in the Kamja year [1804]
Female slave: Chŏmä, born in the Kyeyu year [1813]
Father: In-house slave Sŏngchä
Mother: Female in-house slave Sŏmi
Living-around Slaves:
Male slave: Cŏlbyŏk, born in the Ŭlsa year [1785]
Father: In-house slave Ilgŭm

96 Ibid.: 177.
97 Ibid.: 170–76, 184.
98 Ibid.: 170.
99 萬寧殿: A hall on Kanghwa Island, built in 1713 to store the chairs and palanquins of the royal palace Hall on the island: Courant 2007: 121.
100 The Pannam Pak clan from Naju, Cŏlla Province, flourished since the Koryŏ period.

Mother: Female in-house slave Chŏnmä
Female slave: Cokkangnyŏn, born in the Cŏngsa year [1797]
Father: In-house slave Toli
Mother: Female in-house slave Poktŏk
Child:
Female slave: Ögŭm, born in the Kyemi year [1823]
Female slave: Talgŭm, born in the Imjin year [1812]
Father: Private slave Ŏdungŭm
Mother: Female in-house slave Pongnyŏn
Male slave: Phandong, born in the Kapshin year [1824]
Same parents as above.
Male slave: Yŏngguk, born in the Cŏngchuk year [1817]
Father: Commoner Yu Oktong
Mother: Female in-house slave Cokkä
Female slave: Yusŏm, born in the Shinsa year [1821]

Certain characters modified under review and amendment.

Tab. 27: The slaves of Yun Cachŏl (Yun Cachŏl 1855).

Type	Name	Sex	Age	Father		Mother	
				Name	Type	Name	Type
Living-in	Sungŭm	m	55	Sŏngchä	In-house slave	Sŏmi	In-house slave
	Sundŭk	m	51				
	Chomä	f	42				
Living-around	Cŏlbyŏk	m	70	Ilgŭm		Chŏnmä	
	Cokkangnyŏn	f	58	Tŏli		Poktŏk	
	Ögŭm	f	32	Cŏlbyŏk		Cokkangnyŏn	
	Talgŭm	f	43	Ŏdungŭm	Private slave	Pongnyŏn	
	Phandong	m	31				
	Yŏngguk	m	38	Yu Oktong	Commoner	Cokkä	
	Yusŏm	f	34	n.a.			

The roster records ten slaves, consisting of five men and five women, with ages ranging between 31 and 70 years. A striking feature is the absence of younger individuals, despite at least two of the enslaved women being within their childbearing years. This suggests either the possibility that younger individuals were omitted from this document, or a low birth rate among the enslaved population. Often, slave families were not fully recorded in the household roster of the main household register, but some of their

members were either counted as independent households or omitted. Thus, being listed without relatives is therefore not conclusive evidence of the absence of slave families.[101]

Among the ten slaves, five are siblings, proving the hereditary nature of servitude within the household. The only recorded child-parent relationship in the document is that of Ögŭm, the daughter of Cŏlbyŏk and Cokkangnyŏn. Notably, one female slave has no relatives listed, making her the only enslaved person without a documented relationship within the register. All other slaves are recorded as having mothers who are classified as in-house slaves, indicating that their status as Yun family property was inherited. When slaves were registered as the children of in-house slaves, then they were inherited.

The term "in-house slave" (*panno* for men and *panbi* for women) was commonly used for slaves who belonged to the same master or household.[102] It was derived from the synonymous terms for an "in-house slave crew," *panjung* (as it was used by Yi Mungŏn and by O Hŭimun in their sixteenth century diaries[103]), *ilban*, and *panha*, which all meant "a collective of slaves who were linked by familial ties or residential proximity."[104] In his 1789 forty-volume lexicographic study, *Kogŭm Sŏngnim*, the scholar-official Yi Ŭbong gave a definition of *panha*:

> In our dynasty, the Eastern [= Korean] colloquial term for a group of slaves is *panha*.[105]

The paternal lineage among the enslaved individuals is more varied. One father is recorded as a private slave, meaning he was owned by another family, while another is listed as a free commoner. These paternal classifications underscore that slave status was determined through the matrifilial rule, ensuring that children of enslaved women remained property of their owners, regardless of the father's legal standing.

In terms of residence, only three individuals—Sungŭm, Sundŭk, and Chomä—are recorded as living-in slaves (*solgŏ nobi*), meaning they resided directly on the Yun family estate. The remaining seven slaves are classified as living-around slaves (*yiha nobi*), meaning that they lived near the household without forming independent households themselves. This reflects a spatial model that emerged in the late Cosŏn period (see p. 340).

101 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 65.

102 An Sŭnjun 2014: 141; Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 64.

103 *Mukcä Ilgi*, 1553:12:29: "Two bolts of cloth … were taken by a slave from his crew," and 1558:2:24: "The female slave Okchun […] went around cursing within the slave crew." Yi Mungŏn 2025; *Swämirok*: "The people of the in-house slave crew and the neighboring village, understanding the situation and united in intent, each acted accordingly." O Hŭimun 1971a: 495.

104 An Sŭnjun 2007: 86; see *Mukcä Ilgi*, 1551:1:10: "The slave crew resents me, and so they made this baseless accusation." Yi Mungŏn 2025.

105 本朝口東俗奴婢謂同隊曰班下 Yi Ŭbong 1977: 727; cf. An Sŭnjun 2007: 87; these terms were interchangeable with 同 *tong* ("in-house slave crew"), 同奴 *tongno* ("in-house slave"), and 同婢 *tongbi* ("female in-house slave"): An Sŭnjun 2007: 86.

A final observation is that the register does not list any runaway slaves, a detail that raises two possible explanations. Either there were no recorded fugitive slaves at the time of compilation, or there was a documentary practice in this region of omitting fugitives from supplementary household registers while still recording them in the official household register. If the latter practice was in place, it may indicate a deliberate administrative strategy—perhaps reflecting local variations in how slave mobility was monitored and documented.[106]

Overall, this supplementary household register provides a detailed snapshot of enslaved individuals in the Yun household in 1855, revealing patterns of hereditary slavery, kinship structure, residential arrangements, and administrative practices. The absence of younger individuals, the classification of fathers, and the omission of fugitives highlight the nuanced realities of servitude in this period, where household registers functioned as both legal instruments and tools of social control.

The listing of slaves by name should not be confused with proof of their actual existence. There are known cases in which not a single slave named in the rosters could be verified in other contemporary documents such as diaries and vice versa. The reasons for this may be an intentional and unintentional confusion of individuals or their status, insufficient knowledge of the personal circumstances of the slaves, exaggeration and understatement, negligence, and ambiguity, caused by inheritance, transactions, war, epidemics, and other external influences. The state administration was completely indifferent to the fates of individuals. It only cared that the reported numbers were reasonably realistic. Thus, these rosters apparently represent only one "degree of reality."[107]

8.4.2 The Slaves of the Puan Kim Clan

The slave-related documents preserved by the Puan Kim clan in Ubandong, a remote coastal village in Cŏlla Province, span almost continuously from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, making it a valuable source for illustrating the socioeconomic changes of this *yangban* family which exerted considerable political and economic influence in this region during these 150 years.[108] Of particular interest are the 22 household rosters and 17 supplementary household registers prepared for Sunchŏn and Puan Counties between 1672 and 1825, compiled by eight generations of Kim. They were published in 1983 and analyzed by Cŏn Hyŏngtäk in 1989. The statistics for the Ciphyŏnggong branch of the clan show that the extent of their slaveholding peaked in the early eighteenth century and then began to decline. After 1825, the family had only

106 Mun Hyŏnju 2011: 173.
107 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 70.
108 M. Peterson 1985: 37.

two or three slaves, most of whom had run away. The family archives contain seventeen purchase contracts and thirty-five slave inheritance documents.[109] Over time, the family inherited a total of 1,061 slaves and purchased 33 (of which 29 were out-residing and one was a runaway from the moment he was first registered); the origins of 55 more slaves were unclear. Thus, 92 percent of all slaves were hereditary. This is strong evidence that hereditary slavery was the dominant type of slavery in the Cosŏn period.[110] Fluctuations in slave numbers were not only caused by general demographic trends; they often reflected the effects of property division between *yangban* parents and children, and were much greater for out-residing slaves.[111] It is also clear from the rosters that the classification of living-in and out-residing slaves was fluid; the same slaves could be registered in different categories in the same year.[112]

Before the final implementation of the matrifilial rule in 1731, intermarriage between slaves and commoners was common, as it contributed to the reproduction of the slave population. Of the inherited slaves, 299, or 28 percent, were children of a slave father and a free (commoner) mother. After 1731, when this advantage was abolished, intermarriage was much less frequent. In the Kim family rosters, slaves were generally first recorded when they were around 20 years old, which implies that slave children who died or escaped before that age were not recorded.[113]

Slaves played a crucial role in managing the fishing operations of the Puan Kim clan. Many out-residing slaves were involved in fishing and transportation, using boats to transport goods for fees or catch fish. Instead of the usual body tribute, they paid annual tributes in money or seafood, particularly rockfish and herring, which indicates seasonal tribute collection, with some also providing additional gifts of fish or salted eggs. The clan received a significant surplus of seafood, storing some and converting some into money through intermediaries.[114]

Additionally, the Puan Kim clan owned ships, which allowed them to maintain ties with officials and relatives in Seoul through trade and transportation. Their slaves operated these ships, thus facilitating the movement of goods, such as grains and daily necessities, and even assisting in wartime evacuations. Documents reveal that some slaves petitioned for tax exemptions on damaged ships, which further indicates the economic role of these vessels in the clan's fishing business.[115]

The clan also employed household slaves with specialized skills who produced goods for the master's household and, at times, for external clients in exchange for payment. Additionally, some servants appear to have specialized in making paper, fans,

109 Ibid.: 38.
110 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1989: 48.
111 Cŏn Kyŏngmok 2012b: 221.
112 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1989: 51.
113 Ibid.: 52.
114 Cŏn Kyŏngmok 2012b: 249.
115 Ibid.: 250–51.

fine-tooth combs, and traditional hats (*kat*). Their gift lists frequently included these items, alongside seafood, which suggests that his household servants produced them rather than purchasing them from the market. This division of labor, where certain slaves engaged in fishing while others focused on artisanal crafts, further supports the idea that the Kim household maintained a structured specialization among their servants.[116]

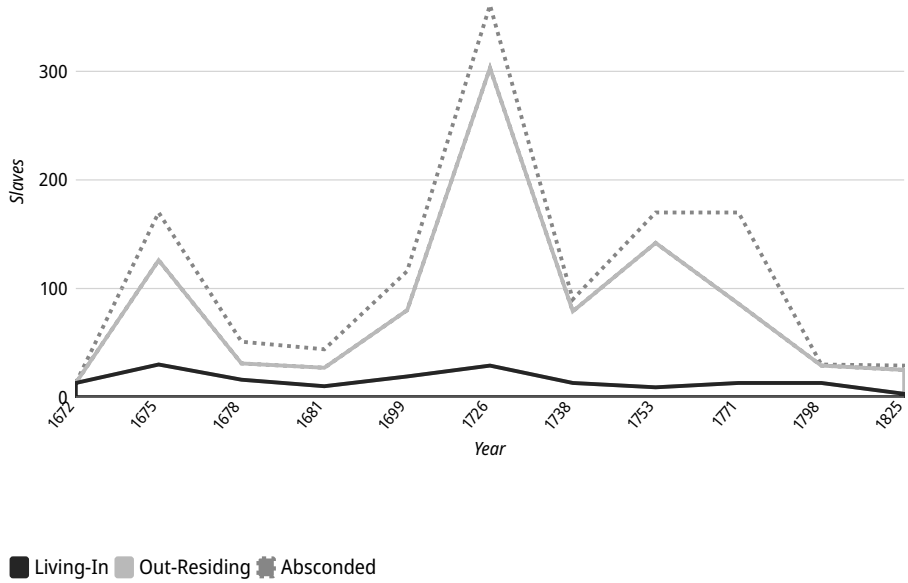

Fig. 21: Slaves of the Puan Kim Clan in Ubandong, Cŏlla Province. Vertically stacked values (Cŏn Kyŏngmok 2012b: 220).

8.4.3 The Slaves of the Kyŏngju Sajonggong Chŏ Family

There is no general pattern that could be used to describe the quantitative development of slavery in Cosŏn. The case of the Sajonggong branch of the Chŏ clan of Kyŏngju, as

116 Cŏn Kyŏngmok 2012b: 245–46.

reconstructed from their household rosters, differs significantly from that of the Puan Kim clan. In their case, the number of dependents (slaves including their family members) peaked in 1687, halved by 1813, and then declined dramatically. This may also be due to underreporting[117] and to the fact that from the 1820s onwards, fewer and fewer out-residing and fugitive slaves were recorded.[118] However, the main reason was that the remaining slaves were hardly producing any recorded offspring.[119] We also see from the data of runaway slaves between 1723 and 1822 that nearly half of all female slaves absconded, but only 32 percent of male slaves (see p. 380).

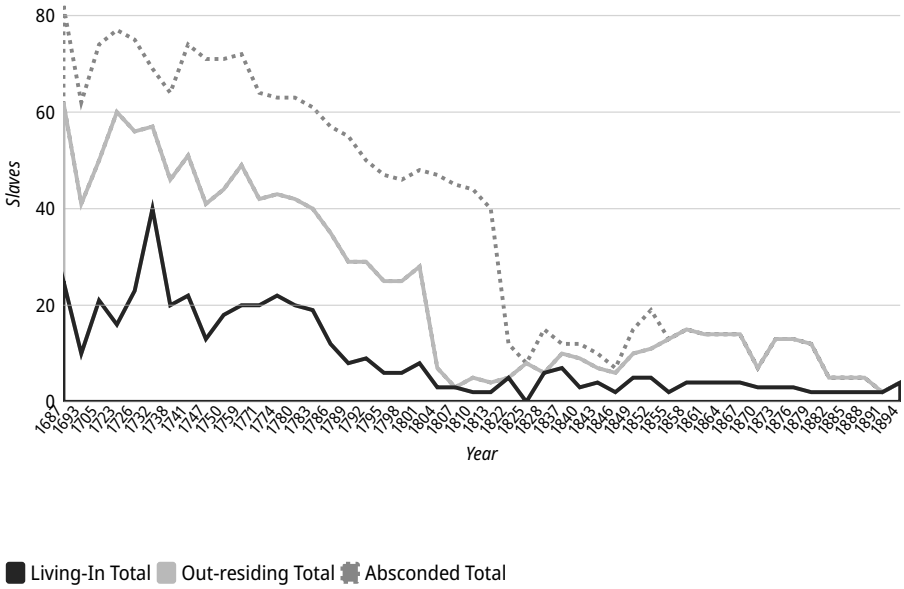

Fig. 22: Slaves of the Kyŏngju Sajonggong Chŏ family, 1687–1894. Vertically stacked values (Kwŏn Kijung 2023: 244–45).

117 Kwŏn Kijung 2023: 238.
118 Ibid.: 246.
119 Ibid.: 250.

8.4.4 Slave Ancestors in Komunsŏ 8

In 1992, the *Kyujanggak* (the former Royal Archive) published a volume containing 492 documents from its holdings related to household registers and supplementary household registers from the period between 1678 and 1908. By my count, these documents refer to a total of 2,421 biological parent pairs (father and mother) of the ancestors of the slaves listed in these registers. Among these, a striking 93 percent of all mothers were in-house slaves—that is, they belonged to the same household as their descendants. This suggests that, on the maternal side, reproduction largely took place within the slave household, ensuring that the slave population was replenished primarily by women who were already integrated into the household structure. Another four percent were private slaves owned by different households (the remainder are marked "as above," which would require a case-by-case study).

As for father figures, only 32 percent were in-house slaves, 36 percent were private slaves, 20 percent were commoners, and 12 percent were unknown. This diversity suggests that while female household slaves were the backbone of household reproduction, the ancestry of male slaves involved a broader pool, possibly reflecting:

– A lack of adult male slaves within the same household.
– The practice of bringing in partners from outside the household to maintain or increase the slave population.
– Social, legal, or economic factors affecting the choice or availability of slave mates.

The predominance of in-house slave mothers suggests an intentional or systemic strategy of reproduction within households because it ensured a stable, controlled, and self-sustaining labor force. The variation among father figures, however, suggests that the reproductive network was not entirely closed and that external contributions—whether from private slaves or commoners—played a role in shaping the genetic and social structure of the slave population.

The observed pattern indicates that slave owners structured slave households in a way that emphasized internal reproduction to secure a steady, hereditary labor force. By relying on in-house slave mothers to reproduce within the household, owners ensured that the property (in this case, the slaves) would remain within a controlled and predictable lineage, thus sustaining the economic and social systems built upon slave labor.

Caution should be exercised in generalizing these findings. The registers, while extensive, may not capture regional differences or other contextual factors that affected slave reproduction. Some records may be duplicated. Nevertheless, the large sample size over a 230-year span suggests that the overall pattern is robust, although the exact percentages may shift slightly after deduplication. The pattern significantly bolsters the hypothesis that the heredity of slave status was the dominant factor in slave ownership.

Tab. 28: Slave Ancestors in *Komunsŏ* 8 (Sŏul Tähakkyo Kyujanggak 1992).

Father					Mother	Total	Percent
	In-house Slave	Private Slave	Government Slave	Unknown	n.a.		
In-house slave	735	18	0	3	8	764	32
Private slave	794	50	0	0	31	875	36
Government slave	2	0	0	0	0	2	0
Capital-bureau slave	4	0	0	0	0	4	0
Commoner	443	8	11	0	25	487	20
Unknown	276	13	0	0	0	289	12
Total	2,254	89	11	3	64	2,421	100
Percent	93	4	0	0	3	100	

8.4.5 The Tägu Household Registers and Shikata Hiroshi

In 1937 and 1938, Shikata Hiroshi published the results of his statistical survey of Cosŏn period household registers. He used the 187 registers kept at the *Kyujanggak* (Royal Archive) covering Tägu County in Kyŏngsang Province.[120] Shikata himself called his results "extremely limited" and "not definite."[121] His results "remained forgotten" for some time after World War II but got new attention in the Korean academia during the 1960s, inspiring new insights into the social dynamics of the Cosŏn period as "the most important" study on the slave population of Cosŏn.[122]

As Miyajima Hiroshi points out, Shikata approached Cosŏn society from a Japanese perspective, assuming that, because Edo-period Japan was a status-based society, Cosŏn must also have been organized along similar lines. This hypothesis influenced his anal-

120 The Kyujanggak became part of Keijō Imperial University, known today as Seoul National University, in 1924. For Shikata's introduction to the material, see Shikata 1937: 3–11; for a recent analysis of the 187 extant registers, cf. Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 14–15; according to the Kyujanggak, they only have 186 registers from Tägu in their possession: Sŏul Tähakkyo Kyujanggak 2015: 142; in total, the Kyujanggak holds 257 household record ledgers. For an overview, see Takeda 1991: 19–20.

121 Shikata 1937: 3; however, the Tägu-related registers comprise 187 out of the 250 registers, i.e., the vast majority of what was available. Shikata 1937: 4.

122 Kim 2022: 3; Cang Kyŏngjun 2017: 108; Hwang 2004: 29; his family name is sometimes misspelled as "Yomo": B.-R. Kim 2003: 167.

ysis of household registers and the interpretation of occupational roles and social hierarchies recorded in them.[123]

Shikata faced significant challenges in his work. The registers are ambiguous in terms of status assignment; in particular, there is no simple entry like "*yangban*." Shikata acknowledged that "the status relationships of these *yangban* were subject to extremely diverse and disruptive factors."[124] To define *yangban* households, he decided to include any household whose head was "listed as an undergraduate, student, or classics licentiate, or literary licentiate."[125] However, this approach is problematic because, after the seventeenth century, the term "undergraduate" (*yuhak*), which was not associated with any government position, came into use among the descendants of secondary sons of *yangban*, who did not belong to the *yangban* class proper, and of commoners who sought to escape the burden of military conscription or military service tax,[126] thereby intentionally "blurring status lines." This issue was exacerbated as more and more commoners and slaves used grain contributions to buy the undergraduate title and pretend to be of higher status.[127] Eventually, *yuhak* formed an "amorphous group of unregistered students (and military service tax evaders?)."[128] It is a fact that people living in late Cosŏn actually perceived the inflation of the *yuhak* as an indication of a sudden increase in *yangban*,[129] but today's academic consensus is that "there is no simple formula that equates *yuhak* with *yangban*."[130]

Although this fact was not lost on Shikata ("some may have falsified their lineage in this regard"[131]), he underestimated the scale of the problem. Yet, as of today, there is no convincing alternative to his approach. However, since (among other things) we do not know exactly how many people falsely claimed *yangban* status, it is dangerous to draw conclusions from this data alone about the temporal dynamics of the distribution of different status groups and thus about social mobility, as Shikata hoped to do. According to Cang Kyŏngjun, any observable shift in the household data "simply indicates changes

123 Miyajima 2003: 295.

124 Shikata 1938: 115.

125 Shikata 1938: 115; Wagner remarks: "Since the census document is not expected to label the social classes explicitly, considerations of format and language provide important clues to class affiliation. Shikata apparently was the first to notice and make use of this." Wagner 1974: 40.

126 M. Yoshida 2018: 42.

127 Deuchler 2015: 377, 389–90, 506; Hwang 2004: 29.

128 Palais 1996: 158.

129 M. Yoshida 2018: 41–42; in the early nineteenth century, Cŏng Yagyong claimed: "If this situation is allowed to continue, all the people in this country will be Confucian students, and no confusion will be more serious than that." Y.-Y. Chŏng 2010: 355.

130 Päk 2011: 17; similarly, Kim concludes: "It is doubtful whether there was any change in social stratification as shown in the study of family registries." Y.-M. Kim 1986: 745.

131 Shikata 1938: 115.

in the proportion of households by status in the household registers."[132] In other words, the data "merely confirmed a tremendous increase in elite *titles*."[133]

Another major weakness of Shikata's study is the notorious underreporting. It is estimated that the average household register covered only 60 percent of the actual population to be surveyed.[134] The reported numbers of children, especially female children, often appear to be "incredibly low" across all status groups.[135] While daughters and daughters-in-law were frequently simply ignored, even the legitimate sons of *yangban* were often not recorded before they reached adulthood.[136] In the case of slaves, it was often local officials who failed to register them so that they could exploit them for their own benefit and avoid higher tribute and conscription duties when the population officially increased. These hidden people were called "shadow households" (*yangho*).[137] But even private slave owners felt little need to carefully update their records. No one expected them to.[138]

Overreporting was also possible. Many slave owners did not relinquish their legal claims to runaway slaves for a very long time, if ever. As a result, slave records could include slaves who, by human standards, were long dead. They were called "white bones." For example, a slave in the registers of a *yangban* family in Cŏlla Province was continuously listed with his son from 1759 to 1897, reaching the ages of 184 and 151, respectively. Both had fled long before but were never erased from the roster.[139] In another case from Hadong, Kyŏngsang Province, a female slave born in 1784 was officially listed until 1894, when she would have been 110 years old. But the extreme case on record for the Cosŏn period was a female slave named Käsŏn, owned by the Cäryŏng Yi clan in Hwanghä Province, with an alleged age of 227.[140]

Finally, Tägu was certainly not a representative case. Kyŏngsang Province had an unusually high percentage of slaves because it was a center of agriculture. Nevertheless, the Tägu registers form "the most extensive, and most detailed collection" for the Cosŏn period.[141]

Notwithstanding these limitations, Shikata's data are "useful materials."[142] By acknowledging the challenges of defining social status in late Cosŏn and addressing them carefully, scholars can build on Shikata's foundational work to further refine our under-

132 Cang Kyŏngjun 2017: 106.
133 Hwang 2004: 29.
134 Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 8.
135 Wagner 1974: 43, 47, 50.
136 Kwŏn Kijung 2023: 238–39.
137 Päk 2011: 27.
138 Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 101.
139 Pak Kŏnho 2023: s.p.
140 Pak Kŏnho 2022b: s.p.
141 Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 14.
142 Cang Kyŏngjun 2017: 107.

standing of this period. Modern Korean historiography still uses the household registers of Kyŏngsang in very similar ways.[143] At the very least, they reflect social consciousness and its dynamics, if not social reality.

Slave records varied in depth of documentation. Basically, they were "subject to the customs of the slave-owning family and personal discretion."[144] Privately owned slaves could be identified as *sano* ("private male slave") or *sabi* ("female private slave"), while government-owned slaves carried designations tied to their place of work. The slave's name, usually recorded without a surname, and age were listed, followed by the owner's identification in the case of private slaves. A slave's lineage was recorded only if he or she formed an independent household. In the 1663 Seoul household register, a slave's father and mother's status and name were recorded, but not his or her paternal lineage. In addition, the wife of a household head, if she was a slave, had her owner's name recorded if it was different from her husband's owner.[145] In 1666, the Seoul magistrate complained to Hyŏnjong about the unsatisfactory standards of recordkeeping:

> Both public and private slaves are recorded up to the fourth ancestral generation, yet the names of their mothers and their official owners are omitted. Without distinguishing between paternal and maternal lineage or whether an individual belongs to public or private servitude, disputes and lawsuits will inevitably multiply. The names of the mother and the official owner should therefore be recorded together and made mandatory.[146]

The genealogical information of slaves recorded in their masters' households was abbreviated. It included only their names, the names and birth years of their children, and the names of the children's fathers. Wagner notes that the method of recording slaves was "too often haphazard, at times quite unintelligible," which made it difficult to understand whether they were living-in, out-residing, or runaway slaves.[147]

In contrast, the Tägu registers contain complete lineage data for slave wives as well. Children and other dependents living in the household were also listed. The following two sample records, one from a *yangban* household and one from a slave household, from 1811, are quoted from Shikata.[148] These records included the standard four generations of paternal lineage and additional information about the name and status of the mother and maternal grandfather. This reflects laws that determined the ownership and status of offspring based on the mother's classification as a slave.

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143 After the Tansŏng household registers from 1606, the digitization of the 187 Tägu household registers between 1681 and 1876 was completed in 2019; and the 1609 Ulsan register will be next: Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 2.

144 Han Hyojŏng 2013: 27.

145 Wagner 1974: 41.

146 CWS, Hyŏnjong, Y. 7:3:6 = March 30, 1666.

147 Wagner 1974: 42.

148 Shikata 1937: 10–11.

First Household

Head of Household: undergraduate Yun Shihyŏng, age 49, born in the year of Imo [1762], from Phaphyŏng.

Father: Former Tomb Guardian Cang.

Grandfather: student Yŏngpil.

Great-grandfather: Shield and Strike General and Vice Councillor of the Central Secretariat Kyŏngno.

Maternal Grandfather: student Cŏn Ubyŏk, from Hänam.

Wife: Lady Yi, age 39, born in the year of Imjin [1772], registered in Sŏngsan.

Father: literary licentiate of the Royal Confucian Academy Yujin.

Grandfather: Junior Servant Official and Resident Kyŏngsang Instructor Horyong.

Great-grandfather: Grand Master of Governance Kwangu.

Maternal Grandfather: Military Training Administration copyist Kim Kyŏngnip, from Sŏngju.

Children:

Daughter: age 10, deceased in the year of Kisa [1809].

Daughter: age 5, deceased in the year of Pyŏngo [1786].

Son: born 3 years ago in the year of Cŏngmyo [1807].

Daughter, age 1, registered this year of Kyŏngo [1810].

Slaves:

Female slave: Yegogo, gave birth to female slave Myŏngdä, age 14, born in the year of Cŏngsa [1797], fathered by private slave Makson.

Female slave: Küchunil, gave birth to male slave Künam, an Ivory Patrol Soldier, age 38, born in the year of Kyŏnsa [1773], fathered by Son Yongnam.

Female slave: Kuwŏli, gave birth to male slave Canam, sent to the household of Pä Po of Kamulchŏnbang.

The same slave: gave birth to male slave Kyenam, age 4, born in the year of Cŏngmyo [1807], registered this year, fathered by private slave Kim Yunnam.

Verification seal for the household register: Year of Cŏngmyo [1807].[149]

Second Household

Head of Household: private slave Myŏngnap, Squad Unit Force soldier, age 57, born in the year of Kapsul [1754], from Sŏngju.

Master: Yun Philhyŏng, residing in the main household.

Father: commoner soldier Hŭinam.

Mother: female private slave Nonnä.

Grandfather: commoner soldier Sani.

Great-grandfather: commoner soldier Sanbok.

Maternal Grandfather: private slave Kang Kŭm, from Kimhä.

Wife: female private slave Mangŭm, age 49, born in the year of Kyemi [1763], from Milyang.

Master: Yi Ton, residing in the main household.

Father: private slave Sunhong.

Mother: freewoman Ŭmchun.

Grandfather: private slave Sunsäng.

Great-grandfather: private slave Puji.

Maternal Grandfather: Private slave Cŏmdong, from Sunchŏn.

Children:

149 Ibid.: 10.

Son: private slave Cinbal.
Daughter: Private female slave Igŭm, transferred to the master's household.
Daughter: Myŏngwol, died in the year of Kyŏngo [1810].
Daughter: Ähwan, age 14, born in the year of Muo [1798].
Verification seal for the household register, Year of Cŏngmyo [1807].

The head of the first household is Yun Shihyŏng, a 49-year-old undergraduate from Phaphyŏng. His wife, Lady Yi, is 39 years old and registered in Sŏngsan. Together, they have two young children: a son born in 1807 and a daughter born in 1810. However, she was certainly not Shihyŏng's first wife; Shihyŏng's eldest daughter died already in 1786 at the age of five, when Lady Yi herself was only fourteen years old. Their household includes six slaves: Yegogo and her 14-year-old daughter, Myŏngdä; Küchunil and her 38-year-old son, Künam, a soldier; and Kuwŏli and her 4-year-old son, Kyenam.

The head of the second household is Myŏngnap, a 57-year-old man who resides with his wife, Mangŭm, a 49-year-old female private slave. Myŏngnap is from Sŏngju, and Mangum is from Milyang. Their household includes two living children: a son, Cinbal, and a 14-year-old daughter, Ähwan. The household functions as a cohesive unit with four living members who contribute to its upkeep and responsibilities.

In both households, some slave children are reported as living elsewhere, reflecting the practice of transferring slaves to other households or locations for labor or other purposes. In the first household, Canam, the son of the female slave Kuwŏli, was sent to a *yangban* household in Kamulchŏnbang—probably the household that owned his father, Kim Yunnam—while his younger brother stayed with their mother.

In the second household, Igŭm, the daughter of Myŏngnap and Mangŭm, was transferred to her father's master's household. This transfer aligns with the common practice of reallocating slaves within a master's extended household or property for labor or household management.

However, there is one irregularity that is difficult to explain. Why was Myŏngnap's wife Mangŭm a slave? Her mother was a free woman, so when Mangŭm was born in 1763, the matrifilial rule should have applied, meaning she was free. In practice, however, this rule was often ignored.[150] The quantitative development of slavery in the Tägu household registers between 1690 and 1858 reflects a long-term decline in the institutional presence and demographic visibility of slaves. During this period, free status was consolidated among commoners and *yangban*. Shikata's statistics from 1690, the earliest data available, show a proportion of approximately 7 percent *yangban*, 46 percent commoners, and 47 percent slaves in Tägu. This matches well with the data for Tansŏng, another county in Kyŏngsang with an excellent corpus of available data, where the distribution in 1678 was 5 percent *yangban*, 47 percent commoners, and 48 percent slaves (or base people).[151] In Tägu, 6,597 slaves were recorded, 1,005 of whom were runaways.

150 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1989: 54.
151 M. Yoshida 2018: 45.

This number excludes 1,824 cases of movement across jurisdictions, and a relatively small number of emancipations or deaths.

By 1729–1732, the number of present and runaway slaves had increased to 8,543, but the proportion relative to the total population had already begun to fall, reaching 37 percent. Notably, this period saw a sharp rise in the number of slaves moved (2,509), as well as an increase in recorded deaths (458). These figures suggest a more dynamic—perhaps volatile—management of slave labor, possibly connected to the administrative disruptions or reclassifications following the introduction of the matrifilial rule in 1731. The high mobility could also reflect efforts to reassign or redistribute slaves in response to shifting household strategies or state interventions.

In the 1783–1789 registers, the number of present and runaway slaves had declined significantly to 3,083 individuals—now comprising only 23 percent of the population. Simultaneously, 1,232 slaves were recorded as having moved, and 256 as having died, indicating the continuation of high attrition and redistribution rates. The drop in total slave numbers likely reflects not only demographic aging and low reproduction as well as the effects of underreporting following the 1740 general tallying system, which discouraged the enumeration of unproductive or dependent individuals, particularly children. Furthermore, this decline coincided with the increasing invisibility of slaves in household registers, as the institution became more flexible, informal—and perhaps deliberately obfuscated.

By 1858, the number of registered slaves had increased to 4,372—accounting for 33 percent of the population. The continued reduction in deaths (79) and transfers (85), alongside relatively few cases of manumission (86), suggests that slavery as a formal category had become residual. At the same time, the number of absconded slaves fell sharply to only 246.

In summary, the Tägu registers do not support the conclusion that the slave population simply disappeared. The number of slaves decreased considerably during the eighteenth century, both in absolute and relative terms, but recovered in the nineteenth century. Some have proposed that this increase was fictitious, resulting from the practice of tax payment under a slave's name (*nomyŏn chulpo*).[152] However, the final increase did not occur everywhere, making it difficult to find a general explanation.

From 1690–1858, the distribution of slaves across households in the Tägu household registers illustrates a significant reorganization of slaveholding practices and a gradual normalization of the presence of slaves within free households, especially among the elite. In 1690, around 79 percent were not recorded within slaveholding households. This reflects a slave regime in which many individuals were registered as independent entities or attached to institutions and communal holdings rather than directly embedded in domestic settings. Over time, the proportion of slaves residing within households began to increase markedly, reaching 37 percent by 1729–1732, 74 percent by 1783–1789,

152 Kwŏn Kijung 2023: 228.

and ultimately 92 percent in 1858. This progressive incorporation of slaves into private households suggests a long-term reconfiguration of slavery from a dispersed and perhaps semi-public institution into a domestic one closely tied to the free household economy.

Tab. 29: Slaves in the Tägu Household Registers (Shikata 1938: 141, 212–24).

Period	Free						Slaves		
	Yangban	Commoners	Present	Absconded	Total	Total Percent	Moved	Freed	Deceased
1690	1,027	6,894	5,992	1,005	6,997	47	1,824	14	96
1729–1732	2,260	8,066	4,940	1,094	8,543	37	2,509	51	458
1783–1789	3,928	6,415	1,957	1,126	3,083	23	1,232	33	256
1858	6,410	2,659	4,126	246	4,372	33	86	7	79

This trend becomes clearer when viewed alongside the composition of slave-owning households among *yangban* and commoners. In 1690, 75 percent of *yangban* households held slaves, averaging six slaves per household. This indicates a concentrated form of elite slaveholding. Among commoners, only 12 percent of households possessed slaves, and in far smaller numbers. By the early eighteenth century, the proportion of slaveholding *yangban* households remained high, though the average number of slaves per household decreased to four. This suggests a diversification or redistribution of slaves across a broader segment of the elite class. Among commoners, the number of slave-owning households slightly increased in absolute terms, but remained marginal in scale and scope.

By the late eighteenth century, this pattern became more pronounced. While the percentage of *yangban* households holding slaves dropped to 68 percent, and the average number of slaves per household declined to two, nearly all of the slaves recorded in the registers were now living within households. This indicates a shift away from institutional or independent slave registration and a move toward a more individualized, domestic model of servitude. Among commoners, slave-owning continued to decline slowly, with only 7 percent of households holding slaves, typically just one each.

By 1858, this transformation had culminated in a model where slaveholding was fully domestic and narrowly distributed. Although 90 percent of *yangban* households still owned slaves, the average had dropped to just two per household. Among commoners, only 1 percent maintained slave ownership, with minimal numbers per household. Slavery had become an increasingly residual and domestic phenomenon, largely confined to elite households and reduced in scale to reflect changing economic conditions and legal ambiguities surrounding the status of former government slaves.

Together, these data reveal a system undergoing gradual internal dissolution, in which slaves were increasingly folded into the private household economy and removed from the public eye of registers and institutional oversight. This domestic concentration accompanied the broader decline in slave numbers and visibility, contributing to the institution's fading by the end of the nineteenth century.

Tab. 30: Slaves in households in the Tägu household registers (ibid.).

Period	Slaves	In Households		Not in Households
		Number	Percent	
1690	5,992	1,256	21	4,736
1729–1732	4,940	1,807	37	3,133
1783–1789	1,957	1,448	74	509
1858	4,180	3,825	92	355

Tab. 31: Households and slaves in the Tägu household registers (ibid.: 146, 212–13).

Period	Yangban					Commoners				
	Households	Households with Slaves				Households	Households with Slaves			
		Number	Percent	Slaves	Slaves per Household		Number	Percent	Slaves	Slaves per Household
1690	290	218	75	1,256	6	1,694	198	12	409	2
1729–1732	579	406	70	1,807	4	1,689	241	14	368	2
1783–1789	1,055	718	68	1,448	2	1,616	107	7	134	1
1858	2,099	1,880	90	3,825	2	842	189	22	263	1

The Tägu household registers also provide information on how many slaves had slaves of their own; more specifically, they show how many slave households listed slaves as household property. In 1690, this applied to 25 of 1,172—or 2 percent—of all slave households who reported owning 40 slaves, or an average of slightly less than 2 slaves each. In the small sample from 1729–1732, a total of 87 out of 824 households, or 11 percent, had 101 slaves registered, for an average of just over 1 slave per household. After that, these numbers decreased so much that we can assume that this phenomenon was an absolute exception. One example is a female slave owned by a male slave in Sanŭm

County in 1606.[153] Another example is the private slave Subong and his cousin, who in 1717 owned three they had slaves possibly inherited from their maternal grandfather.[154] Overall, only a small minority of slaves owned a very small number of slaves

Tab. 32: Slave-owning slave households in the Tägu household registers (Shikata 1938: 146, 212–13).

Period				Slaves	
	Households	Households with Slaves			
		Number	Percent	Slaves	Slaves per Household
1690	1,172	25	2	40	2
1729–1732	824	87	11	101	1
1783–1789	140	2	1	2	1
1858	44	0	0	0	0

However, the Tägu household registers reveal a deep transformation in the demographic composition of the slave population, shaped by legal reforms, administrative restructuring, and social developments across the late Cosŏn period.

In 1690, the slave population was still relatively balanced in both age and gender. The largest group was children under the age of fifteen, with 876 boys and 1,043 girls, making up nearly 20 percent of the total. This suggests a vital reproductive base within the slave population and a reliance on natural increase. The cohorts aged 15–44 were also strongly represented and relatively balanced in gender, indicating an internally reproducing and labor-active servile population. However, the famine of the Kyŏngshin years in 1670–1671 left a visible demographic scar: the cohort aged 15–29—born during or just after the crisis—was significantly smaller than expected. This underrepresentation, combined with still sizable older cohorts, reflects both mortality and reduced birth rates during a period of scarcity.

By the time of the 1729–1732 registers, significant changes begin to emerge. The number of children remained high, especially girls (840 as compared to 480 boys), but the gender imbalance across age cohorts began to widen. This development coincided with the legal introduction of the matrifilial rule in 1731, which stipulated that only the children of female slaves would inherit slave status. This fundamentally shifted the reproductive burden and economic value of slaves onto women. Female slaves became indispensable not only as workers but also as reproducers of slave status. The growing numerical dominance of women, particularly in the reproductive age groups, reflects the system's increasing reliance on matrilineal transmission and the internal reproduction of slave labor.

153 Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 22.

154 Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2014: 87.

This trend intensified in the 1783–1789 registers. The proportion of children, especially boys, decreased markedly, while adult women came to dominate the population. The 1740 introduction of general tallying—whereby local communities were assessed on fixed tax quotas rather than on precise household headcounts—meant there was little incentive to report all slaves, especially children who were not yet tax-relevant. As a result, underreporting became widespread, and the visible decline in the child population reflects administrative suppression rather than an actual demographic collapse. Adult women, by contrast, remained visible and central to the labor economy, reinforcing the feminization of servile labor.

By 1858, this demographic development reached an extreme. Children were now a minimal presence—only 52 boys and 184 girls—while women aged 30–44 numbered over 1,000. In this register, the slave population had become overwhelmingly female and adult. The abolition of palace and capital-bureau slaves in 1801 likely contributed to this pattern. Former state slaves, many of them women, may have entered private households in ambiguous legal conditions and were either partially registered or kept off the books. Male slaves, by contrast, increasingly disappeared from the records—either through manumission, transfer to non-household labor roles, or deliberate underreporting.

In sum, the Tägu registers document a slave society undergoing structural transformation. From a relatively balanced and self-reproducing population in 1690, slavery evolved into a system centered around the labor and reproductive capacities of women, shaped by legal rules, administrative incentives, and social adaptation. Children became demographically invisible, and men were gradually marginalized in the statistical record. These changes reflect not only the internal dynamics of slave households but also the broader recalibration of slavery's function within late Cosŏn Korea.

All statistical data reveal the imbalance between registered male and female slaves. Women were favored, and not only by slave owners, who benefited from the fact that their children automatically became their property. Slaves were taxed by both their owners and the state, and if debts were not paid, daughters could be used as human collateral. For many, their daughters were their only remaining asset. In earlier times, both male and female slaves were sold, but as male slaves increasingly resisted and fled, their market value declined. Especially in the northern regions of Korea, daughters were preferred at birth because sons were conscripted for military service at the border and were unable to contribute to the household. When daughters grew up, they could be sold to southern merchants. When a southern merchant arrived in a village, families would congratulate those who could sell their daughters, reflecting how girls were treated as commodities.[155]

155 Yi Kyu-Tae 1985: 60.

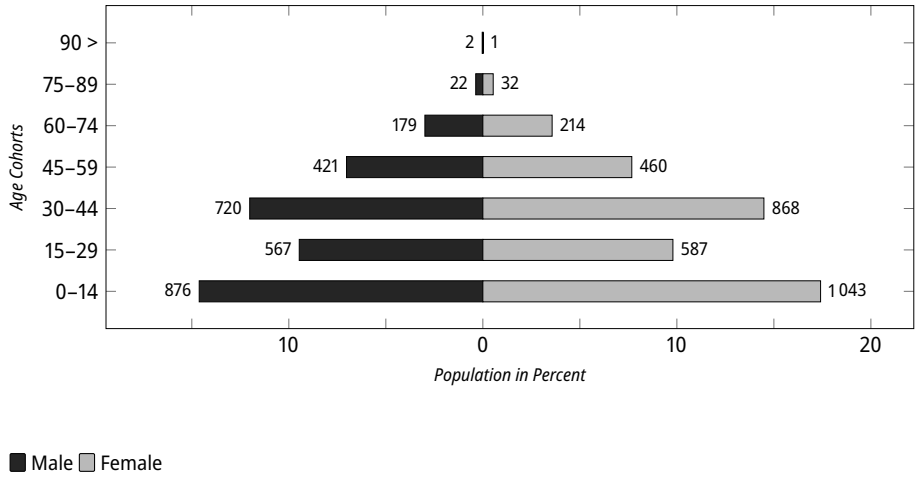

Fig. 23: Male and female slave populations in the 1690 Tägu household registers (Shikata 1938: 212).

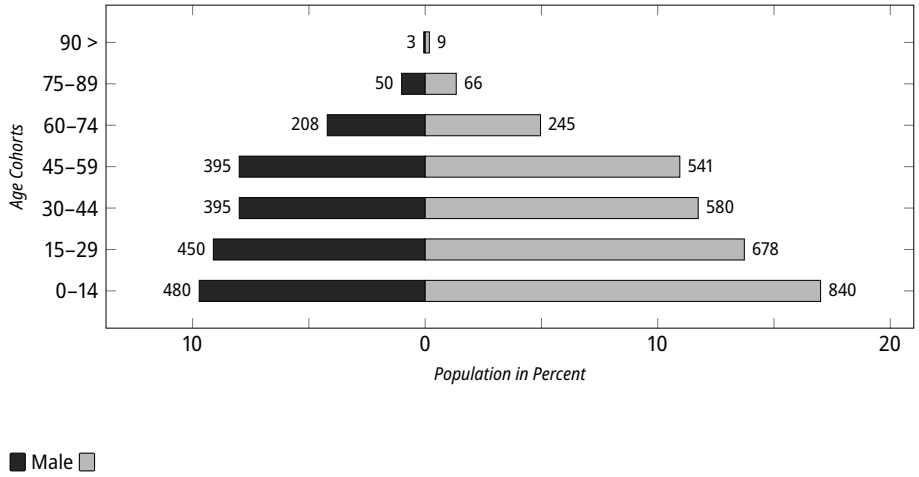

Fig. 24: Male and female slave populations in the 1729–1732 Tägu household registers (ibid.: 216).

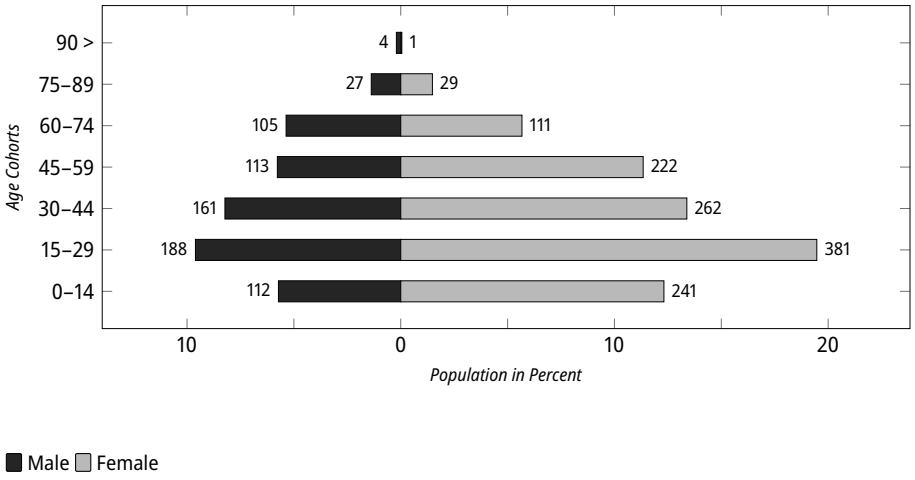

Fig. 25: Male and female slave populations in the 1783–1789 Tägu household registers (ibid.: 229).

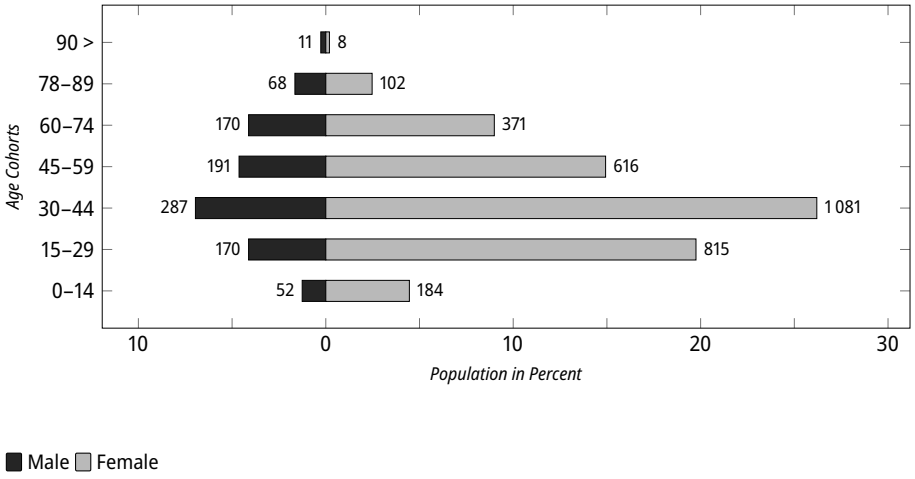

Fig. 26: Male and female slave populations in the 1858 Tägu household registers (ibid.: 221).

Tab. 33: Marriage patterns of slave households in the Tägu household registers (Shikata 1938: 119).

Period	Status of Husband									Households		
	Private Slave			Public Slave			Commoner			Slaves	All	Slave Percentage
Status of Wife	Private Slave	Public Slave	Commoner	Private Slave	Public Slave	Commoner	Private Slave	Public Slave	Unknown			
1690	935	27	131	28	41	10	138	10	61	1,381	3,156	44
1729–1732	706	3	93	3	15	5	88	7	49	969	3,092	31
1783–1789	107	0	32	2	0	0	16	0	23	180	2,811	6
1858	22	0	17	1	0	4	0	0	8	52	2,985	2

The marriage patterns recorded in the Tägu household registers offer key insights into the social integration and evolving boundaries of the slave population from 1690–1858. In 1690, nearly half of all households—44 percent—were identified as slave households. The majority of these marriages involved unions between two private slaves (935 cases), with significantly fewer involving public slaves or cross-status pairings. Nonetheless, mixed-status marriages—especially between slaves and commoners (269 cases)—were not insignificant. Such pairings reveal a degree of permeability in the boundaries of legal status, even in the late seventeenth century, although they remained numerically marginal.

As time progressed, the number and visibility of slave marriages declined precipitously. In the early eighteenth century (1729–1732), slave households accounted for only 31 percent of all households. Most servile marriages still occurred between private slaves, though the absolute number of such unions diminished. Marriages between slaves and commoners became increasingly rare, reflecting the introduction of the matrifilial rule in 1731. This rule fixed hereditary status more rigidly through the female line and may have discouraged interstatus unions by increasing the legal and social cost of such arrangements, particularly for free men.

By the late eighteenth century, only 6 percent of households were slave households. The numbers reveal a near-total disappearance of interstatus marriages and a sharp contraction in overall slave marital activity. The institution of slavery had by this time become not only numerically diminished but also socially isolated. Slaves were no longer forming new, visible households at scale, and the social space for legal and socially sanctioned slave marriage had narrowed substantially.

By 1858, slave marriage was almost extinguished from the official registers. Only 58 slave households were recorded—just 2 percent of all households—and among these, a mere 22 involved marriages between private slaves, and 17 between male slaves and commoner women. This final stage reflects the institutional collapse of slavery as a socially reproductive system.

The decline of slave marriage in the Tägu registers thus mirrors the broader erosion of slavery itself. As servile households lost visibility and legitimacy within the formal order of society, the social reproduction of slave status through marriage dissolved in parallel. By the mid-nineteenth century, the disappearance of slave marriage signals not only the end of institutional slavery's demographic growth but also its social marginalization, rendering the slave household a relic within an increasingly free and restructured social landscape.

8.4.6 The Tansŏng Household Registers

The Tansŏng Household Register Ledgers are an official compilation of household data for Tansŏng County in Kyŏngsang Province, consisting of seven volumes. They were preserved in the old local school, where they were discovered by Korean researchers in 1975. Thirteen volumes were found, but one had no cover page, making it impossible to determine its date, and six volumes were no longer usable due to natural decay.[156] The data exhibit a high degree of continuity, recording, with no major omissions, the population of all military and civilian households within the county, organized by village, for 13 register years from 1678 to 1789. In addition, 25 volumes with partial datasets covering the years 1825–1888 were discovered in the Library of Gakushūin University, Japan.[157]

They have since been thoroughly studied. Between 1999 and 2006, the registers were digitalized, and their data are now published online at the Daedong Institute for Korean Studies at Sungkyunkwan University in the form of Excel data files.[158]

Over the course of nearly two centuries, data from Tansŏng County show a marked decline in the proportion of the enslaved population, accompanied by persistently high rates of slave desertion, especially in the eighteenth century. In 1678, slaves (including deserted and moved individuals) made up more than 60 percent of the registered population,[159] but this proportion declined steadily over time, falling below 50 percent in the early eighteenth century and to about 24 percent in the late eighteenth century. Despite this decline, the rate of slave desertion increased, peaking at over 35 percent in the 1780s, indicating growing instability within the slave system. Even as the overall slave population declined, a significant proportion of the remaining slaves attempted to

156 Kim Sŏkhŭi 1975: 279.

157 Takeda 1991: 3–12.

158 Hogu DB, https://skb.skku.edu/ddmh/db/intro.do [accessed 17.3.2025]. For a short introduction in English, see Paek, J. Park, and Sangkuk Lee 2022: 374–77; see also M. Peterson and Phillips 2004: 4; Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 2.

159 Peterson and Phillips identify only 2,147 or 51.7 percent male slaves and 2,304 or 55.6 percent female slaves = 4,451, or 54 percent, in total, but they exclude runaways and move-outs: M. Peterson and Phillips 2004: 22.

escape, suggesting worsening conditions or increased opportunities for escape. By the eighteenth century, both the slave population and desertion rates had declined, indicating the progressive erosion of the slave system and the declining centrality of slavery in local society after the abolition of most public slavery in 1801.

The rate of slave desertion in Tansŏng County in the period from 1678 to 1861 reveals the deepening instability and eventual erosion of the institution of slavery over the long eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Initially, in the late seventeenth century, the slave population constituted a substantial proportion of the local population, peaking at over 50 percent in 1678 and remaining above 40 percent through the early decades of the eighteenth century. Even in this early period, however, the rate of desertion was significant and rising. By 1717, nearly one-third of the slave population was recorded as having deserted, suggesting widespread resistance and growing disengagement from servile obligations.

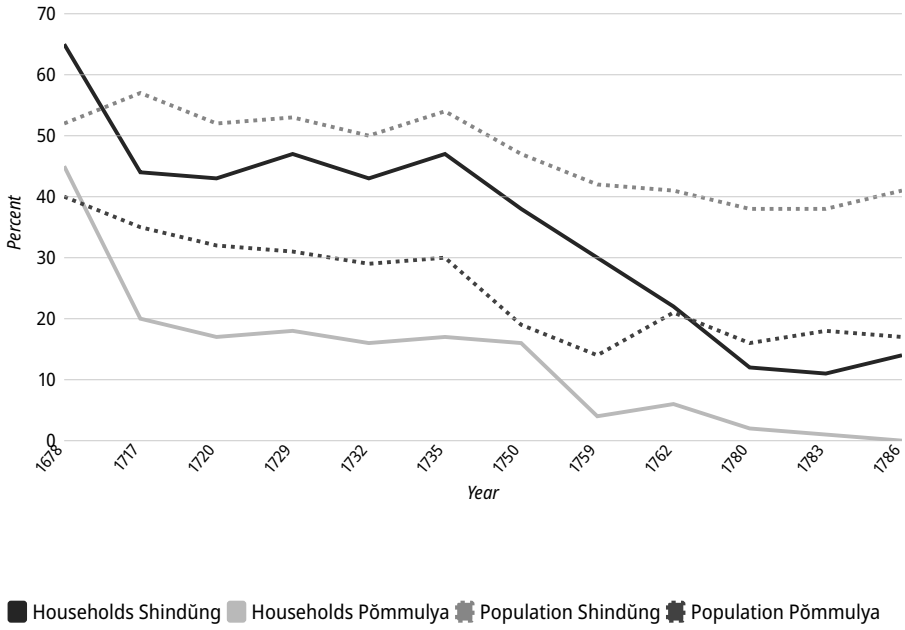

Fig. 27: Proportion of slave individuals and slave households in 18th-century Shindŭng and Pŏmmulya villages, Tansŏng County (Cang Kyŏngjun 2017: 111).

This dual pattern—persistently high slave ratios combined with a rising trend in desertions—continued into the 1730s, with slave desertion rates regularly reaching or exceeding 30 percent. Such figures point to a structural crisis within the slave system: while the institution remained demographically significant, it was increasingly undermined by the refusal of slaves to remain within its confines. This erosion was not immediately reflected in a steep decline in the slave population, which declined only gradually, suggesting that despite growing resistance, administrative inertia and reproductive replacement maintained the outward form of servitude.

From the mid-eighteenth century, however, the crisis became more pronounced. While the proportion of slaves in the population declined, the rate of desertion began to approach the 40 percent mark, indicating a dual contraction in both the size and internal coherence of the slave population. As desertion became endemic, the ability of slaveholders and local authorities to maintain servile labor relations weakened. Data from the early nineteenth century underscore this unraveling: by the 1830s and 1840s, both the slave population and desertion had fallen to around 20 percent, probably due to the emancipation of public slaves in 1801.

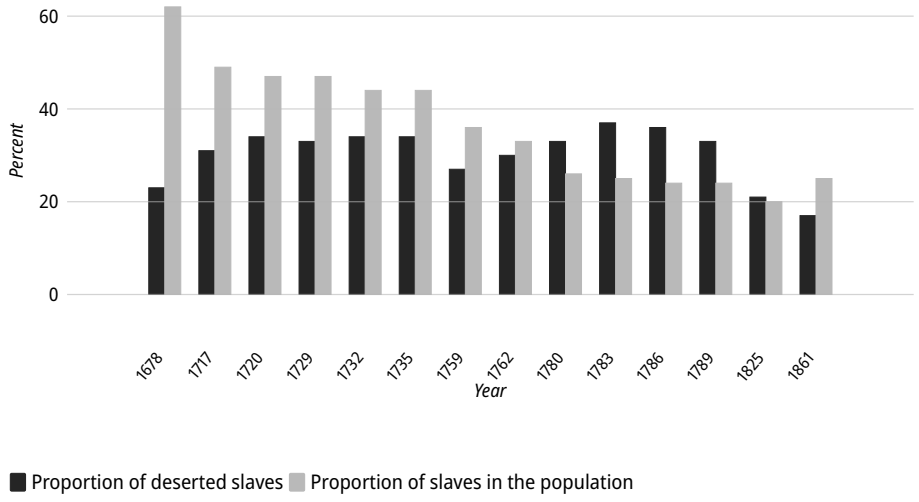

Fig. 28: Proportion of slaves in the population and deserted slaves in Tansŏng County (Kim 2022: 6).

By 1861, at the end of the period covered, the slave population ratio had risen slightly, as already seen in the case of Tägu, while the desertion rate had fallen below 20 percent to its lowest level ever. What the data capture is not a sudden rupture, but a long process of attrition, resistance, and administrative disengagement. Over the course of two cen-

turies, slavery in Tansŏng County gradually eroded from within as the enslaved increasingly removed themselves from the system—physically, socially, and demographically—and it shrank considerably, but it did not collapse. The institution retained formal traces in the records, but its material foundation was steadily eroded by continued desertion.

8.4.6.1 Becoming Kim Hŭngbal: Subong and His Descendants

Kwŏn Nähyŏn used the Tansŏng registers to reconstruct how one slave family worked their way up to the margins of *yangban* status over the course of two hundred years. The private slave Subong appears in the 1678 register of Tosan Hamlet, alongside his wife and young son, all listed as slaves.[160] Subong was thirty-two years old and the son of the private slaves Katpok and Sukhyang. His paternal grandfather was unknown and his maternal grandfather a private slave. Accordingly, Subong came from a family of slaves.

However, by 1717, Subong and his sons were all recorded as commoners, and he was given an honorary bureaucratic title, bestowed on him for making a grain contribution.[161] This elevation coincides with the two major national famines, 1670–1671 and 1695–1696, which devastated state finances and spurred the state to accept grain contributions in exchange for privileges, making it probable that Subong purchased his freedom and his rank by donating grain to the state during the crisis.[162]

Subong first appears in the 1678 register with the ancestral seat (*pongwan*) of Kimhä but without a surname—typical for many slaves of the time.[163] Data from his village show that among those who possessed only an ancestral seat in 1678, Kimhä was the second most common choice. By 1717, it had become the most common, indicating it was a strategically selected identity by many former slaves.[164] At the same time, Subong is registered with the surname Kim, fully establishing himself as a member of the Kimhä Kim clan. This pattern, beginning with only a *pongwan* and later acquiring a surname, was common among manumitted slaves.[165] Significantly, the Kimhä Kim lineage in this region had no registered *yangban* members; the majority were either commoners or freed slaves, making it an accessible identity for status ascenders like Subong.[166] However, Subong also changed his personal name: he now officially called himself Kim Hŭngbal.

160 Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2014: 22.
161 Ibid.: 82.
162 Ibid.: 85.
163 Ibid.: 88.
164 Ibid.: 91.
165 Ibid.: 89.
166 Ibid.: 94.

Crucially, the 1717 register reveals that Subong/Hŭngbal left behind at least two slaves to his son. One slave is shown to have had children, indicating the continuity of property within Subong's household.[167] This confirms Subong not only exited slavery himself but became a slave owner, a significant indicator of upward mobility in the late Cosŏn social hierarchy.

Other evidence of economic independence includes Subong and his cousin's possession of separate households, despite being registered as slaves, and the early manumission of his cousin's son, which suggests strategic intergenerational planning. Additionally, household registers from the surrounding county indicate that approximately 10 percent of land was owned by slaves by 1720. This statistical information supports the possibility that Subong owned land.[168]

After Subong's death, his sons remained mostly in Tosan, though one son relocated twice. The movement away from the residence of their former owners to locations with no established *yangban* presence was likely a calculated strategy to escape lingering servile associations and to cultivate social space for growth. This is borne out by the fact that the descendants of this son who relocated appear most frequently in the registers and show the most consistent upward mobility.[169]

Beginning with Subong's grandchildren, we see widespread and repeated name changes in the registers. The renaming was not merely cosmetic but often aligned with efforts to erase markers of servility. Names common for slaves were replaced with formal Sino-Korean names. Inconsistent multiple names and self-acclaimed occupations in the military or as students are recorded for individuals. Through the "conscious effort to erase one's own past,"[170] "the person's very existence becomes confused,"[171] indicating a deliberate attempt to obscure servile origins by symbolically burning the ledger.

Subong and his descendants transitioned from slavery to commoner status through a combination of strategic economic accumulation, exploitation of state crises, and gradual social adaptation—all of which are traceable through detailed examination of the household registers. The entries reveal not only changes in legal status but also indirect evidence of property ownership, naming practices, migration, and occupation, offering insight into how former slave lineages navigated the rigid status system over multiple generations.

167 Ibid.: 86–87.
168 Ibid.: 87.
169 Ibid.: 104.
170 Ibid.: 108.
171 Ibid.: 109.

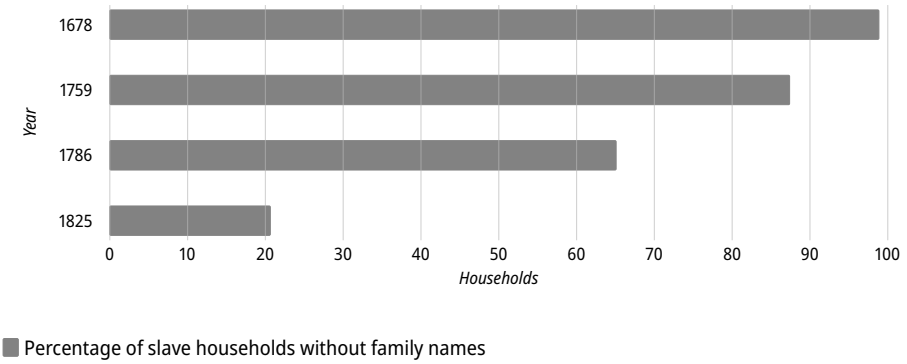

Fig. 29: Use of family names in Tansŏng County, Kyŏngsang Province, 1678–1825 (Kyungran Kim 2016: 230).

8.4.7 The Ulsan Household Register

The 1609 Household Register Ledger of Ulsan is the oldest surviving population register from the Ulsan region of Kyŏngsang Province and one of the most comprehensive sources for the study of slave society and demographic patterns in early seventeenth-century Korea, just after the devastating Great East Asian War. Preserved in the Seoul National University Library, it is bound as a large-format volume measuring approximately 55 cm × 65 cm and comprising 43 leaves. Although there is some damage—particularly at the beginning and end—the register remains nearly complete, covering seven townships within Ulsan Prefecture and one affiliated county. Each township in the register typically includes one to three villages. A summary clause appears at the end of each township section, providing statistics on the number of households, population size, and composition. Many sections are illegible due to environmental influences or deliberate excisions, probably made by descendants seeking to remove references to ancestors of servile or disreputable status.

The population recorded in the 1609 register includes 4,109 individuals in 1,245 households. A total of 905 households (72.7 percent) were of commoner status, while 320 households (25.7 percent) were of servile status. The relatively high proportion of free commoner households reflects the wartime phenomenon of mass flight by slave populations, leaving fewer slave-headed households to be recorded.

The register includes the names and occupations of the slaves and their parents living in the household. However, it omits information on the legal status of the parents of slaves, making it difficult to trace inheritance status or reconstruct intergenerational

kinship. In addition, the frequent recurrence of common names leads to ambiguities in identifying individuals.[172]

Allowing for typical underreporting, the total slave population may have been about 40 percent.[173] There were 155 free-status household heads married to slaves. In addition, 592 living-in slaves were recorded in 136 households.[174] Most of them lived in the households of large *yangban* clans, which owned an average of eight slaves each, while other households owned less than three slaves on average.[175]

Of all living-in slaves, 70 percent were married to free people, probably due to pressure or demands from their masters. But this did not directly threaten the reproduction of the free population, as only 10 percent of all free women were married to slaves. Put another way, 90 percent of all married male slaves were married to free women, but most male slaves were not married at all.[176]

In contrast, most out-residing slaves were married. Their marriage opportunities were much greater, although only 55 percent of male slaves were married to free women.[177] There is a chance, however, that some of their partners had gained freedom through special privileges during the war chaos, and thus were originally slaves.[178]

Household data for the Ulsan local government after the 1609 household register ledger continue through 1904, making it one of the most useful datasets in the country. However, not all districts are covered. The following table juxtaposing status affiliations in 1684 and 1885 is quoted from Yŏng-Mo Kim 1986 to illustrate the somewhat simplistic approach of earlier research, which constructed categories such as "semi-*yangban*" or "middle class" in a positivistic manner. As a result, the almost total disappearance of slaves—from 46 to near 0 percent in two hundred years—seems quite impressive, but certainly cannot be taken at face value if "slave" is understood as anything other than a nomenclature. What appears statistically as emancipation may often be a reclassification or obfuscation, not an actual transformation in social reality.

172 See https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0029262 [accessed 29.07.2025]; https://kjg.snu.ac.kr/home/ul/ulview_bib_years.jsp?yy=1609 [accessed 29.07.2025]; Han Yŏngguk 1977: 180–83; John N. Somerville was one of the first Western researchers who thoroughly used the Ulsan registers for his 1974 dissertation, which has unfortunately not been accessible to me: Somerville 1974; on his cautious approach to the study of household registers, cf. his warning: "Any attempt to reconstruct history on the basis of the analysis of one census register, no matter how carefully executed, is extremely precarious." Somerville 1976: 3.

173 Han Yŏngguk 1977: 186.

174 Ibid.: 185.

175 Ibid.: 188.

176 Ibid.: 191–92.

177 Ibid.: 196.

178 Ibid.: 197.

Tab. 34: Status Structure of Ulsan (Y.-M. Kim 1986: 744).

Status	1684	1885
Yangban	3.0	1.0
Semi-*Yangban*	2.2	37.4
Middle class	0.4	32.1
Commoners	34.4	12.2
Low commoners	1.3	0.0
Lowborns	1.3	0.2
Slaves	46.0	0.1
Widows	7.9	16.6
Others	3.4	0.2
$\sum$	99.9	99.8

8.5 The Diaries

In the absence of extensive autobiographical sources, much of the lives of slaves remains "invisible and inaccessible" to us.[179] The diaries of slave owners have therefore emerged as critical primary sources for understanding the complexities of early modern slavery, offering unparalleled insights into agricultural management, interpersonal dynamics, and the psychological frameworks of enslavers. While inherently biased, these records provide researchers with granular details about daily operations, resistance strategies among the enslaved, and the moral contradictions of slaveholding societies. The entries were not created with a specific purpose in mind, making them a less operational type of source than official documents. This suggests that intentional distortion was comparatively unlikely.[180] However, the information is often fragmentary, and piecing it together can be challenging.[181]

Slave owners' journals often functioned as ledgers, recording crop yields, labor allocations, and market transactions. The financial anxieties of enslavers also surface in these texts. They frequently oscillate between moral guilt—when they felt unable to nourish their slaves—and economic pragmatism.

While slave owners sought to document control, their journals inadvertently also preserved acts of resistance. Entries about runaway slaves, slave hunting, and the punishment of escaped slaves reveal the persistence of efforts of self-liberation. They also reveal strategies by which slaves protected their kinship ties and family life and

179 Kichung Kim 2003: 113.
180 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 61.
181 Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 100.

achieved self-management through various tactics of agency, the most important of which were middleman embezzlement, fraudulent use of their masters' authority, usury, and commercial activities.[182]

The slaves frequently mentioned in diaries tended to be efficient workers who performed important household or commercial tasks. This led to more attention being paid to able-bodied young or middle-aged slaves, with female slaves receiving more attention than in official documents.[183] Most importantly, what we understand from these sources is that, as Yi Häjŏng states,

> the mode of service for slaves was, in principle, determined by the master's will, but the personal circumstances and individual will of the slaves were also reflected to a certain degree.[184]

8.5.1 Yi Mungŏn: The Mukcä Ilgi (1535–1567)

The *Mukcä Ilgi* ("Diary of Mukcä"), written by Yi Mungŏn under the pen name Mukcä and covering the years 1535 to 1567, is the diary of a *yangban* scholar-official who, after being exiled from a position in the Royal Secretariat during the Literati Purge of 1545, spent the rest of his life in his native Sŏngju, Kyŏngsang Province.[185] The diary has been widely utilized for research on the society, culture, and institutions of mid-Cosŏn before the Great East Asian War.

Yi Mungŏn supervised his slaves through a highly involved, hierarchical, and hands-on system that combined direct inspection, delegation of oversight duties, document control, and mobilization of state or local authority.

Yi Mungŏn emphasized formal documentation. He often required *kisang* deeds (formal "gifts" of land by slaves to their masters, allowing the masters to claim their inheritance; see p. 455) to be properly registered and relied on scribes to prepare legally valid contracts. He took the extra step of submitting such documents to government offices to prevent future disputes.[186] Also, he did not hesitate to initiate lawsuits to reclaim *kisang* land or punish those who resisted his authority. He utilized local officials to arrest obstructive slaves or field tenants.[187] He frequently conducted site visits to verify the reports submitted by his slaves. For instance, in March 1551, he personally accompanied a scribe to measure the land claimed by the female slave Näjŏlgŭm and found that she had attempted to reduce the share of land to be allocated to another slave. He had the

182 Yi Häjŏng 2017: 87.
183 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 63.
184 Yi Häjŏng 2015: 114.
185 Yi Häjŏng 2015: 109; for the online edition of the diary with a translation into modern Korean, see Yi Mungŏn 2025.
186 Yi Häjŏng 2017: 93–94.
187 Ibid.: 101–2.

misleading boundary stakes removed and ordered the land to be divided precisely in half.[188]

The case of Näjŏlgŭm illustrates both the vulnerability and assertiveness of slaves claiming property rights in sixteenth-century Cosŏn. She belonged to the Yi family's Yŏnan household in Chimgok, Sŏngju County. In 1554, Näjŏlgŭm was accused by a fellow slave of trying to sell land without permission. Yi Mungŏn responded by summoning another slave and instructing him to investigate the situation and inform the buyer that the land in question had long been "gifted" and therefore could not be legally transferred. Näjŏlgŭm became furious and confronted the other slaves, demanding to know why they had reported her to Yi Mungŏn. She insisted on her right to dispose of the land, which she claimed to have inherited from her father Oksŏn. The following year, her husband succeeded in selling the land, prompting Yi Mungŏn to petition the Sŏngju magistrate to stop the unauthorized transaction. By the end of the year, however, several potential buyers—slaves and free people alike—approached Yi Mungŏn to inquire about purchasing her land, some even claiming that Mungŏn himself had sanctioned the sale.[189] In 1563, Mungŏn initiated a lawsuit in which Näjŏlgŭm claimed that the land had belonged to her father. Eventually, the magistrate issued an *yiban* (statement of record) confirming Mungŏn's claim, and the land was reclassified as part of the holdings of the Yŏnan household.[190]

However, Näjŏlgŭm and the other slaves who had tried to secure shares of land from her property did not accept this outcome passively. In the months that followed, they engaged in direct resistance. In the fall of 1563, when the head slave Mansu was sent to oversee the harvest and collection of taxes from Chimgok, they again disrupted the harvest by causing disorder in the fields and preventing threshing. These actions were serious enough to prompt Yi Mungŏn to seek legal recourse once again, this time requesting Näjŏlgŭm's arrest along with her co-conspirators.[191]

Among the slaves of the Yi Mungŏn household, Mansu occupied a particularly prominent position, functioning not merely as a laborer but as a crucial intermediary in the administration, legal affairs, and economic management of the estate. Mansu was repeatedly dispatched to carry out errands requiring considerable autonomy and judgment. He was regularly entrusted with the delivery and receipt of legal and bureaucratic documents. In 1556, for example, Mungŏn sent him to Yŏsan in Cŏlla Province to recover land formerly "gifted" (*kisang*) by the out-residing slave Maksan. Upon his return, Mansu delivered the reply of the local magistrate, which confirmed the claim that Maksan's descendants had already sold the *kisang* land. Subsequently, he brought back a formal adjudication document authored by the Yŏsan county magistrate, effec-

188 Yi Häjŏng 2017: 96.
189 Ibid.: 98–99.
190 Ibid.: 100–101.
191 Ibid.: 101–2.

tively re-establishing Yi Mungŏn's legal claim over the property.[192] In 1563, Mansu was sent to oversee the threshing of rice in the fields of Chimgok. His report—detailing how Näjŏlgŭm had disrupted the harvest by inciting disorder—prompted Yi Mungŏn to initiate legal action, which led to the arrest of the involved parties and the eventual resumption of the harvest.[193] Mansu's responsibilities also extended to coordinating with tenant farmers and field managers, particularly in contentious areas, where disputes over land ownership and resistance to estate control were frequent.[194] Despite his close involvement in his master's business, Mansu still had a private life beyond his duties as a slave. Early in 1553, his mother, who lived in Kwangju, Cŏlla Province, died, and her family postponed the funeral while waiting for Mansu to arrive. Mansu left for his hometown about two weeks later, conducted the funeral, and returned. Yi Mungŏn had expected him to rush to the funeral, as was customary among the *yangban*, but apparently Mansu's family used a method called grass-burial, which allowed the body to decompose before ritual burial, giving the slaves time to return (or be returned if they died themselves) to their hometowns without haste. In 1558, Mansu was ordered to care for an out-residing slave suffering from typhoid fever; when the slave died, Mansu performed a grass-burial for him, and Yi Mungŏn later arranged for his remains to be moved to Sŏngju. Such relocations were costly, so the masters preferred local burials, providing for the wooden coffin, sacrificial items, shamanistic rites, and the necessary funeral assistance.[195]

The fate of the slave woman Tolgŭm as recorded in the *Mukcä Ilgi* provides valuable insights into the role of household slaves in *yangban* education. Tolgŭm was the daughter of the female slave Samwŏl and married Yachal, a slave of Yi Mungŏn. They had two sons. Yachal moved with Mungŏn to Sŏngju in 1545, but Tolgŭm stayed in Poŭn, Chungchŏng Province. As Yachal repeatedly made detours while on errands to see his family which delayed his travels and for which he was punished several times with beatings, Mungŏn assigned Tolgŭm to household service in his Sŏngju household, but she returned to Pŏun without permission.[196] In 1548, while his wife was pregnant, Mungŏn reported that Yachal "ran away for fear of his wife's words," but returned after only one day; apparently, the couple had planned to escape and abandoned this plan because it was unrealistic.[197]

Finally, around 1551, Tolgŭm moved to Sŏngju and became the wet nurse of Mungŏn's grandchildren. This was a demanding task. As a slave wet nurse, Tolgŭm not only had to breastfeed the children, but also to take care for them when they were sick, and she was under constant supervision by her master. On the other hand, a lasting emotional

192 Ibid.: 94–95.
193 Ibid.: 101–2.
194 Ibid.: 102–3.
195 Yi Häjŏng 2016: 207–9.
196 Yi Häjŏng 2015: 113.
197 Ibid.: 113.

bond could develop between the children and their wet nurses, protecting Tolgŭm more than once from punishment for negligence or other transgressions while also instilling jealousy in the mother, Mungŏn's wife.[198]

After the death of Yachal in 1552, Tolgŭm entered into a relationship with the slave Congnyŏn, a widower whose wife had been a household slave of Yi Mungŏn. Although their union was technically a remarriage, Yi Mungŏn did not tolerate it because he applied stricter ethical standards (with neo-Confucianism disapproving of remarriage of women) to Tolgŭm in the role of a wet nurse than to other slaves. As a result, he banished both Congnyŏn and his son, and when they secretly returned, expelled them again. A female slave gave Tolgŭm and Congnyŏn her room for a secret meeting. When the head slave Mansu and his wife found out about this, they got into a heated argument. Mansu beat his wife. Her screams were heard by Yi Mungŏn, who found out about the secret meeting. In the end, he punished everyone involved: the slave girl for letting them use her room; Mansu for beating his wife, and Tolgŭm, whom he left to be punished by his jealous wife. She then forced Tolgŭm to apologize to her own son for her misstep.[199]

The slave Congnyŏn was not owned by Yi Mungŏn, but as the husband of a household slave (*pibu*), he had a similar status. These husbands often paid body tribute, worked for free, and sometimes lived in the households of their wives' masters. In return, the masters protected them from public labor duty, slave hunting or extortion by others, and often supported them by writing petitions to local officials on their behalf.[200] If the marriage was terminated by the wife's death or abandonment, they were free to leave their service, which Mungŏn tried to prevent by offering them another wife from among his female slaves.[201] For the same reason, *pibu* could not be punished in the same way as one's own slaves. In the fourth month of 1561, when it was discovered that Congnyŏn had been stealing and eating eggs for a long time, Yi Mungŏn first intended to report him to the authorities for caning, but eventually gave up the idea.[202] Congnyŏn and his companions seem to have been aware that he enjoyed a higher degree of tolerance. When it was discovered in 1558 that Congnyŏn had long been secretly feeding his private horse with fodder from the Yi household, Tolgŭm (his second wife) and another female slave did not report it. When Yi Mungŏn's wife found this out and rebuked them, they cursed her and were eventually beaten.[203]

According to his diary, Yi Mungŏn actually only bought two slaves while in Sŏngju. He was economically struggling and instead gladly accepting both free villagers and outside slaves applying for commendation, but also children who were abandoned or adopted by commoners and offered as new dependents. He would then notify the local

198 Yi Hăjŏng 2015: 118–23.
199 Ibid.: 128.
200 Yi Hăjŏng 2009: 200–204.
201 Ibid.: 206.
202 Ibid.: 208.
203 Ibid.: 210.

magistrate and register them as recently acquired slaves.[204] In contrast to the actual, hereditary slaves, however, it was unproblematic for these new dependents to give up their service if they considered it appropriate. Their marriages and families also appear to have been much less stable.[205] In *Mukcä Ilgi*, Yi Mungŏn used corporal punishment as a central method of education. Behind this approach was an educational philosophy rooted in Confucian ethics that emphasized moral cultivation through external discipline. Corporal punishment functioned as both corrective and formative, designed to shape not only external behavior but also internal moral orientation. The intent was to build character through physical and emotional impact, consistent with the period's belief in the educational power of physical correction.[206] Yi Mungŏn's practice reflects the broader Cosŏn-era belief that moral and emotional development required disciplined guidance, beginning in the family.[207]

He applied these rules even to his children and grandchildren, especially his son and grandson. His punishments were not arbitrary: they were usually accompanied by written justifications, revealing a didactic intent.[208] The punishments were aimed not only at correcting behavior, but also at instilling values such as diligence, obedience, respect, and moral conduct. Punishments were administered personally and frequently, and targeted specific behaviors such as laziness, dishonesty, evasion of study, disobedience, rudeness, drunkenness, or actions that dishonored the family.[209] Girls were spared corporal punishment, but boys were not.[210] His son, for example, was punished not only with beatings, but also with emotionally humiliating punishments such as being made to sleep without a blanket, or being made to lick dirt if he masturbated (which was thought to be detrimental to his studies).[211] Methods of punishment included slapping, beating with rods or whips, pulling hair, cutting hair, and taking away symbolic clothing such as the *kat* (the wide-brimmed hat that was the status symbol of male *yangban*) or mourning clothes. Targeted body parts included the back, buttocks, thighs, shins, and cheeks.[212]

Yi Mungŏn expressed some remorse, especially when punishing his grandson, but did not show similar restraint toward slaves.[213] Slaves were sometimes punished as proxies for others, especially when a family member was indirectly targeted. They were

204 Ibid.: 213–15.
205 Ibid.: 219.
206 Chö Kisuk 2023: 162.
207 Ibid.: 161–62.
208 Ibid.: 166.
209 Ibid.: 164.
210 Ibid.: 165.
211 Ibid.: 164.
212 Ibid.: 163.
213 Ibid.: 165.

also used as emotional outlets—receiving punishment meant to shame or signal disapproval to someone else, such as a daughter-in-law.[214]

Slaves were beaten for disobeying orders, working dishonestly, or performing tasks with carelessness or poor quality. Mistakes or negligence, such as dropping clothing, forgetting ingredients, or sleeping in a neighbor's house, resulted in corporal punishment.[215] If slaves lost or damaged the master's property—such as clothing, musical instruments, or household items—they were punished, often regardless of intent. For example, one female slave was beaten for breaking the frets of a *kŏmungo* (Korean zither), and another for losing a knife.[216] Slaves were also punished for unsanitary cooking practices (e.g., failing to remove mouse droppings from rice) or for creating fire hazards (e.g., bringing embers into the room).[217]

Corporal punishment was used to correct what were perceived as bad attitudes, such as laziness, rudeness, arrogance, disobedience, or lying. Slaves were punished for insolent speech, loud behavior, and quarreling among themselves.[218] They were also punished for violating spatial or ritual etiquette, such as crossing the front yard early in the morning or behaving noisily in ceremonial contexts.[219]

Yi Mungŏn also intervened in the sexual behavior of slaves, punishing them for adultery, harassment, rape, jealousy, or gossip. Such punishments extended to speech and emotion, and sometimes involved direct interrogation and enforcement by the master's family.[220] None of this was out of the ordinary in the Cosŏn era. It was part of the slaves' training in learned helplessness.

8.5.2 O Hŭimun: The Child Wandering with a Broken Tail (1591–1601)

The *yangban* O Hŭimun was a member of the Häju O clan. He was known for his literary skills, although he never succeeded in the civil service examinations. His later years were marked by political connections, especially through his eldest son, O Kärang, who served as a diplomatic envoy to Japan and later became Chief State Councillor.[221]

At the outbreak of the Great East Asian War (1592–1599), O Hŭimun was fifty-three years old and resided in Seoul. His household included his seventy-five-year-old mother, his wife, four sons, and three daughters. His first three sons lived separately with their

214 Chö Kisuk 2023: 178.
215 Ibid.: 167–69.
216 Ibid.: 169.
217 Ibid.: 169–70.
218 Ibid.: 170–74.
219 Ibid.: 177.
220 Ibid.: 175–76.
221 This was based on the editorial notes in O Hŭimun 1971b: 1–14; cf. Kichung Kim 2003: 112.

families, while the youngest son and his three sisters lived with his parents. O Hŭimun owned large estates in several provinces, where he received tribute from his slaves.

In late 1591, O Hŭimun embarked on a journey south to settle family affairs and to collect tribute. During this journey, the Japanese invasion began. Unable to return home, he sought refuge in the mountains of Cŏlla Province, where he remained for several months. He made several attempts to reunite with his family and finally rejoined them in late 1592 at an estate near Phyŏnggang in Kangwŏn Province, where he farmed. In 1601, he finally moved to in Seoul.

He left a personal diary, the *Swämirok* ("Record of a Child Wandering with a Broken Tail"), which is now recognized as a national treasure. The manuscript has been preserved by his descendants. It consists of seven volumes arranged chronologically, beginning with his journey south in 1591 and ending with his resettlement in the capital in 1601. Each entry contains daily records of events, observations on battles, famine, and social disruption, as well as details about his personal struggles and interactions with local officials, scholars, and displaced elites.[222]

The *Swämirok* makes frequent mention of slaves and their activities. The exact number of slaves owned by the family is not specified, but it is believed to have been approximately thirty.[223] The following will focus on the central events and observations concerning slave management.

One objective of O Hŭimun's trip to the South in 1591–1592 was to visit family, while another was to manage slave affairs, such as collecting taxes and settling inheritance issues. The author's interactions with Insu, one of his out-residing slaves living in Muju, Cŏlla Province, reflect his efforts to settle inheritance matters.

His first visit to Insu took place in January 1592 when the author stayed at Insu's house in Muju. This visit prompted discussions about Insu's status in the family inheritance. Shortly thereafter, the writer visited his maternal uncle in Yŏngdong, who was gravely ill, and met with cousins. During his visit, he learned that "due to an oversight in the division of the maternal family's inheritance, certain slaves were left out."[224]

After negotiating with his maternal relatives, O Hŭimun immediately returned to Insu's house to inform him of the situation.

> Early the next morning, I returned to the home of my slave Insu and explained the reasoning behind the inheritance distribution. Insu and his niece (a fifth degree maternal relative) have been apportioned to our family as part of the inheritance. Previously, all of the slaves had been overlooked

222 *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 273–77; the manuscript, along with a transcription, has been published online by the Korea Heritage Service. O Hŭimun 2000; the first book was partially translated into English in 2019 by Michael C.E. Finch. H. O 2019: 371–94; see also Kichung Kim 2003: 27.

223 Kichung Kim 2003: 112.

224 O Hŭimun 1971a: 2; Finch omits this important statement. H. O 2019: 374.

> and appropriated by a fourth degree cousin from Yŏngdong. Upon hearing the unusual details of the division and its resolution, he was greatly pleased.[225]

In the spring, O Hŭimun continued his journey and arrived at Hänam County. There, he encountered a situation involving runaway slaves.

> I issued an order to catch and bring forward a male and a female slave, who were living in [Canghŭng] town. He had been sentenced to deliver body tribute, but due to poverty, he could not comply. When questioned [about his whereabouts], the female slave, his mother, refused to provide any information. She was beaten but still refused to confess truthfully. If all possible severe punishments were used, I feared that it might lead to her death, so I released her immediately. How laughable my awkwardness must seem! But the hiding slave, Tŏksu, revealed himself. Upon further questioning, I discovered that he was now under the jurisdiction of the military camp, having been assigned to serve under a temporary officer. His duty there was extremely grueling, and he wanted me to remove his name [from the military roster].[226]

At the time, escaping into military service was a common phenomenon. Apparently, the conditions in the military did not satisfy all runaways, and this slave was one of those who eventually preferred to return to his master. Shortly after that, the first Japanese invasion began. O Hŭimun sent two of his slaves back to Hanyang to help his mother, wife, and children. Frustrated by the incompetence and cowardice of the military, he retreated to the north of the peninsula.

For the next few years, his diary reflected the hardships of war, while he struggled to maintain the family business. One recurring issue was that slaves would suddenly leave and disappear without notice, either for extended periods of time or forever.

In the second lunar month of 1593, he reported:

> The slave Maljilson was sent to the military camp, carrying a military permit, along with supplies [...] However, after departing, he did not return by the expected date, raising deep suspicion. Then, on the 20th day of the second month, at dawn, Anson and Myŏngbok fled at the same time. The previous day, they had made a pact with two other slaves, taking a horse and running away with stolen goods. I was overcome with illness and resentment. At the Kyedang Hall, Anson stole one bronze brazier, one knife, and three sickles [...] The pain and hatred from this betrayal were unbearable. Not only that, but the only horse belonging to the master was also stolen during the chaos of war. This horse was our sole means of transportation, and Sonbyŏng took it and fled. The pain of this loss is beyond words. If they are caught in the future, they should be put to death without mercy, for their crime is beyond pardon.[227]

Eventually, Anson and Myŏngbok returned, without being executed. However, both remained troublemakers. Myŏngbok was disrespectful and lazy:

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225 O Hŭimun 1971a: 3; Finch misunderstood the situation: H. O 2019: 374.

226 O Hŭimun 1971a: 4; Finch's translation of this passage is untenable. H. O 2019: 377.

227 1593:2:20: O Hŭimun 1971a: 149.

> At the beginning of the month, the slave Myŏngbok was ordered to cut grass, but not only did he fail to obey immediately, he also spoke many words of defiance. Because of this, he was beaten on the soles of his feet.[228]

Anson fled again in early 1594, taking his mother with him.[229] While he eventually returned, Myŏngbok disappeared five months later, never to be heard from again:

> The slave Myŏng is inherently lazy and stubborn. Even while staying at home, he refused to obey even the smallest tasks. Only when forced would he comply, yet even then, he put in little effort. [...] Last month, he left home to conduct trade on his own, using a permit. At the beginning of this month, he returned, but brought nothing back, which raised my suspicions. A few days ago, he secretly took something and fled, which left him feeling uneasy. Yesterday [...] , the slave was given a written order but did not return. Even yesterday, at the marketplace, he was still in the area but ran away upon seeing Maljilbok. It is certain that he has now escaped permanently. Painful regret.[230]

We can draw several conclusions from these events. First, running away was not necessarily meant to be permanent. Often the runaways would return and be welcomed by their former owners like the prodigal son. Second, slaves could engage in trade outside their estates on their own, thereby increasing their income.

Third, slave owners were free to call their slaves by different names. Was this man officially called Myŏngbok, or just Myŏng? Was his fellow slave called Maljilson ("grandson of Maljil"), or rather Maljilbok? The point here is that 卜 *pok* sounds the same as 僕 *pok*, which means "slave." There were other slaves in the family with names ending in *pok*, such as Päbok 派卜 or Hanbok 漢卜, and there were also, quite prominently, slaves whose names ended with 奴 *no* ("slave"), leaving no doubt as to their status, such as Tŏngno 德奴 ("Tŏk slave"), Songno 宋奴 ("Song slave," whose original name seems to have been Songi 宋伊), and Hanno 漢奴 ("Han slave"). It is likely that Han*bok* and Han*no* are the same person.

Hanno/Hanbok was a living-in slave (*solgŏ nobi*) of Hŭimun's nearby relative Hŏ Chan.[231] He assisted with agricultural work alongside Hŭimun's own slaves,[232] occasionally traveled to the county magistrate to deliver tribute, and also accompanied a newly purchased slave on her way to another estate of the family.[233]

The name of this female slave was originally Samjakcilgä (三作叱介); but before she was sent away, she was renamed as Tŏkkä (德介). Apparently, "Samjakcilgä" was a play on words. A *samjak norigä* (三作 노리개) is a traditional Korean ornament consisting of three pendants combined into a single decorative piece, often worn by women

228 1593:6:23: ibid.: 185.
229 1594:2:24: ibid.: 289.
230 1594:7:7: ibid.: 338.
231 1595:12:18: ibid.: 518.
232 1595:2:29: ibid.: 438–39.
233 1594:10:23: ibid.: 370.

as part of their *hanbok* attire. The name can be understood as a pun because *samjak* refers to the three-piece composition of the ornament, while *cilgä* is similar to *shilgä* (실개), which could mean "a small string" or a small attachment. It seems that O Hŭimun was not fond of such playfulness. The meaning of her new name "Tokkä" was more dignified: "virtuous woman." Together with Samjakcilgä, her sister, Ajakkä, was renamed Nulŭngä, a name that may sound similar to "yellow dog" (*noranggä*); but it is not obvious that this was meant to be derogatory. In later entries, Hŭimun referred to her simply as Nulŭn.[234] Three days later, Hŭimun went to the provincial capital to obtain an authorized *yiban* (statement of record) for the new names of the sisters.[235] This enabled him to register them under their new names in the future household registers. Incidentally, researchers today find almost no overlap between the names in official slave rosters and slaveholders' diaries; the inconsistent naming and renaming of slaves may explain this, at least in part. (For more on slave names, see p. 528.)

For accompanying this woman, Hanno had his private reasons: he wanted to see his father. His father may have been a free commoner, and Hanno went several times to search for him. His mother was the slave Ŏdun, so there can be no doubt about Hanno's servile status.[236] Ŏdun herself disappeared repeatedly without permission. O Hŭimun described Hanno as

> dull-witted and shameless, always hiding and stealing household items, sometimes even taking from the neighbors. He frequently fought and quarreled with other slaves, and despite many severe reprimands, he never changed. His nature is truly problematic. I had long considered expelling him, but since he was not originally a long-serving slave and had only been recently tracked down and brought back, his circumstances were pitiful. So, I held back my anger and decided to tolerate him for now.[237]

At some point, Hanno/Hanbok married another slave of Hŭimun's, Kangbi.[238] In 1597, they decided to run away:

> Yesterday at noon, Hanbok unexpectedly arrived, took his sickle and brazier, and immediately left, saying he would go to Käsŏng with military provisions, cattle, and two bolts of cloth to be delivered tomorrow. I believed this to be true. At dawn today, after the third crowing of the rooster, Kangbi fled. At that moment, I became aware of it and ordered Tŏngno, Chungŭmi, Kŭmdam, and the neighboring villagers Kim Ŏksu and Kim Phung to follow their tracks on horseback and pursue them. After half a *sok*'s distance, they found them hiding in the forest, captured them, and brought them back. My rage was immeasurable.
>
> Not only did my female slave flee, but they also stole Hŏ Chan's horse, which made the situation even more unbearable. I had him struck with a large rod seventy to eighty times on the soles of his feet, and Kangbi was also beaten over fifty times. Hanbok was bound, and I ordered Tŏngno,

234 1595:6:6: O Hŭimun 1971a: 471; 1595:7:16: O Hŭimun 1971a: 472.

235 O Hŭimun 1971a: 507.

236 1594:12:21: O Hŭimun 1971a: 386; Kim seems to have overlooked this fact: Kichung Kim 2003: 123–24.

237 1594:12:21: O Hŭimun 1971a: 386–87.

238 His association with Ŏ's household may have come from this marriage: Samimi 2019: s.p.

> Chungŭmi, and the others to escort him to the authorities so that he could be properly prosecuted according to the law. The matter was then handed over.
> Moreover, Hŏ Chan had originally intended to sell this horse, buy a slave, and use it for trade with Hanbok. However, I had long known that Hanbok was unreliable and repeatedly told them he could not be trusted. I had warned that he would certainly steal the horse and flee, but no one listened to me. And indeed, it happened as I predicted. When he was captured, he showed no remorse at all. He uttered many threatening words against the other slaves who captured him, saying, "If you do not release me, I will take great revenge for this someday." If he is not eliminated, I fear there will be future troubles.
> Because of the time spent pursuing Hanbok, the wheat fields have yet to be fully plowed and sown. This is truly infuriating.[239]

This was not the first time that O Hŭimun rhetorically wished for the death of a runaway slave; but this time, it became a cruel reality.

> In the evening, the slave Chungŭmi returned from the county magistrate and brought a letter from [the magistrate in] Phyŏnggang. According to the letter, Hanbok had, in the past few days, suddenly fallen gravely ill, to the extent that all officials, both high and low, despised him. As a result, he was ordered to be sent far away and never to be kept here again.
> Later, he deceived Hŏ Chan, saying he would go to Nammyŏn to exchange the horse for a good ox. Chan, fearing that he would be deceived, refused to allow it. Then, at dawn, Hanbok secretly took the horse and left. Chan, unaware of his escape, continued to wait for his return. Only the next day, when he did not return, did he realize what had happened. Although he wanted to pursue him, after a night had passed, it was already impossible to catch up.
> As they were regretting and lamenting this situation, news arrived that Hanbok had been caught, bringing them immense relief. Fearing that he might escape again, they beat him severely on the soles of his feet and bound him tightly. In general, this man's nature was extremely defiant. Ever since arriving here, he had conflicts with all the household members, high and low, and constantly hurled insults. Everyone resented him bitterly.
> Thus, last night, he was securely confined, bound with heavy wooden stocks, and eventually died from the ordeal. His death is not something to mourn, but considering that he had been in my household for four years and was originally not guilty of a crime deserving death, his sudden demise leaves a sense of unease in my heart, as though I had swallowed filth. I could not sleep all night.[240]

It appears that the punishment meted out to this slave was misguided, and Hŭimun experienced a sense of remorse. Hanbok may not have been the most popular or loyal of his slaves. However, during the ten-year period documented in the diary, nearly all of Hŭimun's slaves, including those he trusted most, betrayed him at some point.

In the early years, the two slaves Makcŏng and Songno were the pillars of Hŭimun's business. Makcŏng in particular was his master's right-hand man. In retrospect, Hŭimun wrote about Makcŏng:

239 1597:6:26: O Hŭimun 1971b: 187.

240 1597:6:27: O Hŭimun 1971b: 188; cf. Sun Joo Kim 2023: 328.

> Makcŏng was originally from Phyŏngyang. At fourteen years old, he was taken and exchanged for service. Now at thirty-seven, he had managed all tribute collection from slaves, cotton trade, and marriage arrangements for the younger ones. He never delayed his duties. During the chaos of my wife and children fleeing, he was relied upon.[241]

Makcŏng was married to Pungä, a female domestic slave of Hŭimun.[242] Songno, on the other hand, who performed very similar tasks, was notoriously unreliable, and Hŭimun did not trust him. But he tolerated his irregular absences with gritted teeth:

> Songno insisted on seeing his mother and pleaded persistently. Having no choice, I sent him to her, instructing him to come back tomorrow.[243]

In January 1593, these two slaves accompanied him on a journey, when an accident occurred that did little to increase his confidence in Songno:

> After breakfast we resumed our journey, but had barely traveled more than ten *ri* when we accidentally took a detour. There was a small bridge, and when my horse stepped on it, his foot slipped and I was thrown to the ground. Makcŏng was behind and had not yet caught up, while Songno, who was in front, saw me fall and ran back to help me up. Meanwhile, my packhorse, now without anyone to hold its reins, lost its footing on the narrow path and fell into the mud. The ropes that held the pack to its back broke first, and only then was the horse recovered. But my sleeping bundle was completely soaked. With no other choice, I sought shelter in a nearby house to dry my clothes, bedding, and other belongings, making it impossible to continue our journey that day.[244]

In the fall of that year, Songno disappeared again and returned in December with an excuse tailored to elicit his master's sympathy.

> In the evening Songno arrived and reported that he could not deliver the provisions because his father was ill. He said he had carried them on his back and left, but when he reached Kŏjang he returned. He had received permission to leave in the ninth month [October], but he exceeded the allowed time by several months. Because of his long absence, the household affairs fell into disorder. At first I wanted to punish him severely for his wrongdoing, but although his words were not entirely true, his concern for his father is natural, as is the duty of a son. Therefore, I will pardon him and not pursue the matter further.[245]

What had happened to the supplies Songno had been entrusted with (he probably used them for himself) was not even discussed. Songno continued his duties as before. In early 1594, Songno escaped again, only to return more than six months later. O Hŭimun noted with growing frustration:

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241 1595:12:18: O Hŭimun 1971b: 518.

242 1592:10:30 = December 3, 1592. Here, Hŭimun calls her Puni. O Hŭimun 1971a: 109.

243 1592:11:11 = December 4, 1592. ibid.: 112.

244 1592:12:22 = January 24, 1593. ibid.: 253.

245 1593:11:26 = December 18, 1593. ibid.: 238–39.

> Songno left in the third month after receiving a permit but had not returned until now, leading me to suspect that he had died from illness. However, unexpectedly, he has now returned. Although I resent him greatly, the household has no other servants to command, so in a way, his return is a relief. When questioned about why he had not returned earlier, he claimed that his father had died, and that he himself had fallen ill, which prevented him from coming back immediately. He further stated that he had returned only after burying his father this autumn. This is certainly a lie, yet he has calculated well and made it seem believable. Since he did not initially escape on his own, I decided not to punish him severely for his disobedience and instead treated him with leniency.[246]

Only two months later,

> Songno received a permit [...] , with instructions to return before the tenth day of the first month. In the past, he had twice received a permit, but both times he exceeded the return date, causing constant resentment. Initially, I did not wish to send him, but he pleaded earnestly, saying he wished to perform rites at his father's grave. Surely, this is not a false pretense. The sentiments of a son toward his father are the same for all—so I allowed him to go but strictly ordered him to return promptly.[247]

In July 1595, Songno escaped again:

> At dawn, Songno ran away. Recently, he had refused to work properly in the fields, frequently claiming illness and lying in bed. I had long harbored frustration and anger, wishing to discipline him for his laziness, yet I had endured it for too long. Now, in the midst of the farming season, with weeding unfinished, he abandoned his duty and fled—an intolerable offense, truly unbearable! If he is caught in the future, he must be punished severely for his wrongdoing.[248]

A month later, he turned himself in and accepted his punishment. In the meantime, his mother and two relatives had been taken into custody, which was probably the reason for his return. This incident proves that fugitive slaves often maintained contact with their families, which is why pressure was exerted on these family members in the sense of kin punishment.

> The fugitive slave Songi and his younger brother Kaŭngigŭm appeared. [...] His mother and his uncle, Pak Suryŏn, as well as his fourth-degree cousin Suŭn, had been imprisoned. Therefore, he immediately appeared, which was a relief. Songno was punished with seventy strokes as a warning. Kaŭngigŭm received a response and was sent back.[249]

A few days later, however, the drama unfolded:

> On the seventh day of the month, I sent Songno to Hamyŏl. By evening, I heard rumors that he had not returned but was hiding at [the female slave] Okchun's house. I personally went to investigate and found him concealed beneath a wicker basket. When I raised my torch, he bolted and fled into

246 1594:10:14 = November 25, 1595. ibid.: 367.
247 1594:12:21 = January 30, 1595. ibid.: 386–87.
248 1595:6:9 = July 15, 1595. ibid.: 472.
249 1597:7:16 = August 21, 1595. ibid.: 482–82.

> the rain—an unbearable outrage. Since last spring, he had a secret affair with Pungä, though I did not take it seriously at the time. Now, following Makcŏng's recent departure, they had planned to run away that very night, but we discovered their intentions in advance. Upon searching Pungä's room, we found that her clothing and belongings had already been secretly given to Songno and moved elsewhere—deeply infuriating.
> I captured Pungä and locked her inside the women's quarters, sealing all outer doors. I also ordered the maid Kang to sleep in the same room as Pungä, fearing that she might wait until we were all asleep and then escape. On the eighth night, Songno secretly approached the women's quarters, where Pungä was staying, and attempted to dig a hole under the wall to pull her out. Failing to create an opening, he then dug into the stable floor, attempting to pull her through. After managing to partially extract her, he abandoned Pungä's clothing in her quarters and fled—an act of extreme outrage. From now on, she must be kept under strict confinement to prevent any further escape attempts.[250]

> The government slave arrived with a horse [...] I then ordered the government slave to take Pungä away, as keeping her here would risk Songno luring her into an escape attempt. In the evening, Makcŏng arrived [...] Upon hearing about Pungä's actions, Makcŏng was so furious that he refused to eat the evening meal and went to bed hungry.[251]

A week later, Hŭimun allowed Makcŏng to bring his wife back from the county jail.

> Makcŏng returned with Pungä from Hamyŏl. [...] Makcŏng was visibly joyful upon seeing Pungä, which was quite amusing.[252]

Five days later, Hŭimun visited the county prefect to "discuss matters concerning Songno,"[253] which could only mean that he wanted to apply for a slave hunt. But Songo surprised him again:

> Upon returning home from the station crossing, the night had already grown late. Upon arrival, I heard that the female slave Pungä had escaped the night before. It was Songno who secretly returned, took advantage of an opening, and led her away. I was overcome with anger and frustration, yet there was nothing to be done. If they are caught in the future, they will be executed without mercy.
> Meanwhile, Makcŏng fell ill with malaria on the journey, suffering from severe pain. Upon hearing that his wife had also run away, he refused to eat and spent the night hungry—how foolish! Yet, it was not solely his wife's doing; rather, it was the fault of those in the in-house slave crew and among the neighboring villagers, who conspired together and facilitated her escape. Their continuous disturbances and commotion were utterly detestable![254]

Songno and Pungä had developed considerable criminal energy to escape together. Hŭimun was convinced that fellow slaves and neighbors had helped them. Makcŏng,

250 1595:8:7 = September 10, 1595. O Hŭimun 1971b: 488; cf. Sun Joo Kim 2023: 332.
251 1595:8:7 = September 10, 1595. O Hŭimun 1971b: 489.
252 1595:8:15 = September 18, 1595. O Hŭimun 1971a: 490.
253 1595:8:20 = September 23, 1595. ibid.: 491–92.
254 1595:9:3 = October 7, 1592. ibid.: 495.

the deceived husband, was inconsolable and spent the next few days alone in his room, "claiming illness and refusing to come out," heartbroken, refusing to eat.[255] Three months later, on January 14, 1596, he passed away.[256] Hŭimun arranged for his lavish burial—"He was buried with a coffin, with wine and fruit offerings"—and commented on Makcŏng's last days:

> Since last year, he became less obedient, and when he was dissatisfied, he planned to escape—this year, even more so. After Pungä fled, he resented authority, ignored household chores, and disobeyed orders. He hardly tended the cattle. He packed food and clothing at his side, always preparing to flee. However, he became ill and unable to walk. He was left unattended as everyone assumed he would not last long. After ten days, his illness became critical, and he died—unfortunate, unfortunate. In the light of recent events, I do not regret his death, but he had worked hard before.[257]

He had nothing but contempt for Makcŏng's unfaithful wife Pungä:

> Pungä, a source of disorder, secretly enticed Songno and fled. Makcŏng took it to heart, fell ill, and died. One female slave caused disorder. One slave fled. One slave died. The household was left without workers. I feel the deepest pain in my bones because of Pungä.[258]

His grief for Makcŏng was genuine. Five years later, he held a commerative service for him on his death anniversary, with a ritual sacrifice.[259]

The conclusion of this drama was somewhat unexpected: more than four years later, Songno made a sudden reappearance.

> Songno had been captured in Mungyŏng County [in Kyŏngsang Province] and was immediately ordered to be sent back, which is why he has now appeared here. This slave had escaped in the autumn of the Year of Pyŏngshin [1596] [...] and afterward hid at the household of his mistress Pungä [...] Now, due to the letter ordering his imprisonment, he has come forward voluntarily. He presented one bolt of wood, eight strings of dried persimmons, and five *sŭng* of glutinous rice as tribute. For six years, he had been absent and had not fulfilled his tribute obligations, and now he brings only such meager offerings—truly painful. Nevertheless, I chose to tolerate and pardon him, as his return coincided with a time when there was no one available to send to the capital, which was at least a fortunate matter.
>
> I also heard that both daughters of the deceased Makcŏng had passed away, while Songno had married and fathered two children.[260]

255 1595:9:6: ibid.: 495.

256 1595:12:16 = January 15, 1596. O Hŭimun 1971a: 518; Kim's article contains several inaccuracies in the timeline. Here, she erroneously dated Makcŏng's death to "September" and "ten days" after Pungä's escape, which gives a significant twist to the story. Kichung Kim 2003: 131.

257 1595:12:18 = January 17, 1596. O Hŭimun 1971b: 518–19.

258 Ibid.: 518–19.

259 1600:12:15 = January 18, 1601. ibid.: 535.

260 1601:2:16 = March 20, 1601. ibid.: 550.

One of the slaves ordered to bury Makcŏng was Tŏngno. After the death of Makcŏng and the escape of Songno, he became a pivotal figure in the household. His duties ranged from manual labor and agricultural work to significant trade activities, particularly in fish, salt, and hemp. He frequently traveled to different regions to conduct business on behalf of his master, sometimes encountering substantial difficulties and losses. Tŏngno played a crucial role in trade, often traveling to exchange goods. His ventures included trading salt for raw hemp to prepare winter necessities,[261] purchasing fish,[262] and engaging in transactions involving fish, high-grade wood, and charcoal in county markets and even the capital.[263] However, his efforts frequently ended in failure. In 1598, his trade in fish was highly unsatisfactory, due to poor market conditions.[264] In 1600, an attempt at business left him returning with the same amount of trade wood he had initially taken, resulting in a wasted journey.[265]

O Hŭimun's relationship with Tŏngno was therefore marked by both dependency and dissatisfaction. While he relied heavily on Tŏngno for business and household management, he frequently expressed frustration over his inefficiencies, delays, and perceived dishonesty. In 1599, when Tŏngno reported that his horse had been stolen by Chinese soldiers, O Hŭimun initially believed this was an excuse to cover up negligence. Upon further investigation, however, he found that Tŏngno had indeed been badly beaten and had nearly died trying to retrieve the horse.[266] Despite acknowledging his suffering, O Hŭimun lamented the financial losses incurred and the disarray caused in the household.

At times, O Hŭimun considered punishing him but refrained due to necessity. In 1600, after his failed trade mission, he was ready to severely beat him but decided against it, knowing that Tŏngno was still needed for household affairs.[267] Despite repeated disappointments, O Hŭimun had no other servant capable of fulfilling these responsibilities.

Tŏngno's wife was also a household slave. She was involved in textile production but caused damage due to carelessness. In 1600, she accidentally set fire to the earthen house while weaving, resulting in the loss of woven cloth and posing a significant risk to the household.[268] In early 1601, both Tŏngno and his wife fell severely ill, leaving household affairs in disorder. O Hŭimun was deeply distressed, as their sickness dis-

261 O Hŭimun 1971b: 181.
262 Ibid.: 186.
263 Ibid.: 305, 351, 451.
264 Ibid.: 351.
265 Ibid.: 464.
266 Ibid.: 380, 382.
267 Ibid.: 523.
268 Ibid.: 535.

rupted travel plans and preparations for New Year's rituals.[269] This was the reason why Songno's unexpected reappearance was a relief for Hŭimun.

The fact that Hŭimun blamed Makcŏng's wife Pungä for the disaster of 1595 does not mean that he was fundamentally misogynistic. He also had little sympathy for another female slave who had died in early 1595 after many years of service because of her quarrelsome character, but he at least expressed understanding for her circumstances:

> The old female slave Yŏlgŭm passed away last night [January 23, 1595]. Her illness was extremely severe and beyond recovery. However, she had long lived in a cold place and was never able to eat her fill. Even when there was food she wished to eat, she had no means to obtain it. Unable to eat, she died—a pitiable, pitiable fate.
> By nature, she was wicked and ill-tempered. Whenever things did not go her way, she would burst into anger and hurl insults. Even in front of the master, she often spoke disrespectfully, and people despised her. Thus, her death is not regrettable.
> However, she was captured and put to work when she was young. Now, having lived past seventy years, she never once fled. She was also skilled in spinning and weaving, diligent in household matters, and never engaged in theft. These are qualities to be acknowledged. That she has died far from home, unable to be buried properly, is truly lamentable, lamentable.[270]

The mistreatment of slaves by their masters was a frequent topic of discussion when Hŭimun received visitors. On one occasion, the nephew of a slave residing in a cousin's household sought assistance:

> In the evening, the female slave Pokshi from Anak sent her nephew, the monk Ipsŏngho, to visit. He reported that she had suffered mistreatment at Ubong's family, leaving her unable to survive. She was on the verge of being scattered and lost, so he had come personally to rescue her. However, being far away, there was little I could do—what could be done given the circumstances? [...] Tomorrow, the slave Makcŏng will be sent [...] and deliver my letter along with a letter from my mother. The purpose of this is to ensure that there will be no further intrusion. However, the Ubong family is notoriously arrogant, and even among their own siblings, they often turn against each other. Surely, they will not listen.[271]

But Hŭimun also showed great severity towards female slaves when they failed to fulfill their duties. In early 1597, a recently acquired female slave refused to pay the tribute and fled. Hŭimun obtained a slave hunting license from the magistrate and sent Hŏ Chan to hunt her down.[272] He was successful.

> In the evening, Hŏ Chan returned from Hansan, having captured the female slave and brought her in. I ordered him to beat the female slave. She was immediately bound and thrown down, receiving between fifty and sixty blows on the soles of her feet. As a punishment for slaves, her long jacket and

269 Ibid.: 543, 544.

270 1594:12:15 = January 24, 1595. O Hŭimun 1971a: 385; cf. Kichung Kim 2003: 113; to die away from home, even in the house of one's relatives, was considered a tragic death: Yi Häjŏng 2016: 197.

271 1595:1:17 = February 25, 1595. O Hŭimun 1971a: 425–26.

272 O Hŭimun 1971b: 120–21.

> skirt were removed. The other day, when Chan personally visited her, he was completely refused reception and she did not fulfill the tribute obligation. She then fled and did not appear. Severe pain.[273]

At the time, escapes were frequent, which led to several slave hunts:

> Yina arrived, bringing the slave Toljong, who had escaped at dawn. Deeply detestable. Upon arrival, his clothes were taken off and replaced with a single-layer skirt to ensure he remained. However, after staying in the county jail for only a few days, he fled—an even greater cause for distress. On the way, two female slaves escaped, and one male slave also fled again. In the end, only one female slave remained. [...] Furthermore, today during the hour of the Dragon [7 to 9 AM], the slave Hyangchun gave birth to a daughter. Since yesterday, she had suffered abdominal pain and endured extreme agony throughout the night but had not yet given birth. Fearing that the room was too cold and the presence of people was causing distress, she was moved outside to an earthen house near the gate, where warm gruel was provided. There, she finally gave birth.[274]

Even when working in the fields, slaves often showed little motivation. So much so that their collective refusal to work in the middle of the harvest season resembled a modern-day strike. They eventually forced their master to hire additional laborers:

> I instructed eight people to resume weeding the fields that had not been completed the previous day, which had been plowed on the sixth day. Following the meal, I rode out on horseback with Tŏngno, inspecting various fields before heading to the weeding site of the household and female slaves. By mid-morning, the weeding was nearly finished, with only five or six acres remaining. However, the workers were not completing the task; they were resting under the shade of trees by the river.
>
> Upon observing the weeding site, I saw that the task could have been completed yesterday, yet the workers repeatedly complained about the abundance of weeds, saying they lacked the strength to finish. Today, they said the same. If all hands did not work together, the task would once again remain incomplete. To address this, I enlisted eight additional laborers, but they also idled and did not weed. This occurred repeatedly, and I was taken aback by this lack of productivity.
>
> Upon arriving, I observed that the workers were still lingering in idleness, exhibiting signs of laziness and arrogance, which was deeply frustrating. I was compelled to act when I could no longer contain my frustration. I ordered two female slaves to be dragged by the hair, and using the whip I had in hand, I struck their calves over forty times. Following this, I directed them to move to the soybean fields of the classics licentiate [Hŭimun's son] for weeding. The task was assigned to twenty-nine individuals, requiring six to seven *tu* of grain. However, the workers frequently lodged complaints about insufficient food, and when sent into the fields, they often wandered aimlessly. This behavior is deeply unacceptable.[275]

These were slaves who were simply used as agricultural laborers. At the other end of the social spectrum were out-residing slaves who had accumulated wealth and indepen-

273 1596:12:15 = February 1, 1597. O Hŭimun 1971b: 122.

274 1597:3:8 = April 23, 1597. ibid.: 154.

275 1598:7:13 = August 14, 1598. ibid.: 320.

dence through their own efforts. This is particularly evident in the case of the wealthy private slave Yŏnsu who was treated as a respected visitor:

> Yŏnsu, a private slave residing in Anhyŏp [in Kangwŏn Province], came to visit and presented a large fish [...] Yŏnsu, now 80 years old, was wealthy and among the most prosperous in the neighboring districts. He lived five *li* from here. I offered him *soju* (a distilled liquor), but as he did not drink, he declined and only had a small cup before returning home.[276]

These exceptionally successful individuals probably served as role models for aspiring out-residing slaves who sought to escape their enslavement through business acumen, such as Songno, Tŏngno, or Kwangno, who ran his own household in Seoul where O Hŭimun occasionally stayed.[277] Their interaction was mostly transactional, as seen when O Hŭimun sent rice to Kwangno's place for trade purposes,[278] had him exchange a tiger skin for wood[279] and had him handle the procurement and transportation of goods purchased in the capital, such as millet, aged soy paste, and beef.[280] However, occasional missteps, such as the delivery of a sick horse, exposed possible lapses in judgement or management on Kwangno's part, prompting O Hŭimun to take corrective action.[281] Kwangno even owned his own slave,[282] possibly the person in his household whom O Hŭimun's female slave Hyang had married without permission. In this case, O Hŭimun intervened directly and ordered Kwangno to dismiss her immediately. Hyang then complained to Hŭimun, "filled with jealousy and resentment, cursing without end," which led to a break in contact with her.[283]

O Hŭimun's diary reveals that while he fundamentally viewed his slaves as property and economic agents, he also perceived them through a prism of ethical expectations and practical concerns. On one hand, he demanded absolute obedience and productivity, meting out severe punishments when these standards were not met. Yet, his accounts occasionally convey a sense of remorse and ethical self-reflection regarding his own actions. For instance, after the punishment of Hanbok, he articulated a profound sense of "immeasurable rage" alongside a deep, unsettling regret that left him sleepless—a rare moment where he seems to acknowledge the moral implications of his actions.[284]

> Yŏnsu [...] also came to visit and offered one *sŏk* of rice tax, ten *tu* of beans, one tanned animal hide, and four preserved fish. Each was received with liquor and food. Yŏnsu and Tŏksun were

276 1597:5:29 = July 13, 1597 . ibid.: 181.
277 1599:11:15: ibid.: 514.
278 1596:8:21: ibid.: 47.
279 1599:3:11. ibid.: 382.
280 Ibid.: 493, 47.
281 1599:6:16: ibid.: 414.
282 1600:5:22: ibid.: 493.
283 1598, undated. ibid.: 360.
284 1597:6:27: ibid.: 188.

> both private slaves who had become wealthy. Yŏnsu was originally a slave of Judge Yu Hŭju, while Tŏksun was a slave descendant of Judge Cŏng Changyŏn. Following the recent disturbances, most of their fortunes had collapsed, yet Yŏnsu's household remained as prosperous as before.[285]

The reason for these repeated friendly visits with generous gifts was revealed two months later:

> The son of the wealthy private slave Yŏnsu, who had been referenced earlier, met with me. He had made a grain contribution and gained emancipation. I offered him a cup of distilled liquor and sent him off.[286]

Hŭimun had apparently put in a good word for Yŏnsu with the magistrate, which presumably accelerated the emancipation of his son. As was so often the case, financial resources played a significant role in facilitating the outcome.

Moreover, his concern is evident in his careful management of inheritance matters and his calculated negotiations with slaves like Insu. He applied consistent, if harsh, standards of behavior, expecting loyalty and service while also expressing frustration when these are betrayed. This suggests that he held both his slaves and himself accountable within the confines of a rigid, hierarchical system. Thus, despite the transactional nature of their relationship, there are clear indications that O Hŭimun reflected on the ethical dimensions of his actions, even if his framework did not fully extend moral equality to his slaves.[287]

The diary portrays the slaves as agents engaged in a continuous struggle to safeguard their family lives and personal ties amid the harsh burdens of their labor. Despite the stringent controls and severe punishments imposed upon them, many slaves actively maintained contact with their relatives and made calculated escape attempts aimed at reuniting with family members. These actions expose the vital importance of familial bonds even under oppressive conditions. Moreover, the recurring phenomenon of runaway slaves who later returned indicates that their departures were not solely acts of disobedience but also efforts to preserve or reclaim personal and familial identity. This assertion is further substantiated by the practice of kin punishment, which O Hŭimun employed to coerce familial groups into ensuring the slave's return, thereby highlighting the centrality of family ties in the lives of the enslaved individuals. In sum, the diary reflects that, while the slaves were subjected to the severe demands of slave labor and strict disciplinary measures, they nevertheless endeavored to protect and nurture their personal and family relationships as a form of resistance and survival.

285 1597:7:20 = August 20, 1597. O Hŭimun 1971b: 193.

286 1597:9:14 = October 24, 1597. ibid.: 230.

287 O Hŭimun 1971a: 3–4, 1971b: 187–88.

8.5.3 Chö Hŭngwŏn: Daily Records (1735–1770)

The *Yŏkcung Ilgi* ("Daily Records") is the private diary of Chö Hŭngwŏn, recording his daily life from 1735 to 1770.[288] It is another example of copious information on daily routines from the perspective of a *yangban*. His family, the Kyŏngju Chö clan, was based in Tägu. This is especially interesting because the household registers of this this region are exceptionally well preserved and can thus easily be compared to the diary. Chö Hŭngwŏn mentioned about 264 different slaves, the household registers about 300 actual individuals in the period covered by the diary.[289] The results of this comparison are sobering: there is "almost no consistency" between these two sources.[290] This pertains to basic data such as personal names, place of residence (entirely unrelated to place of household registration), family relations (siblings, spouses), status (living-in, out-residing, escaped), and, most incredibly, ownership. In some cases, slaves were recorded under owners who had no factual connection with them or with the Chö clan.[291] It may be that the official authorization of slave sales lagged considerably behind real life.

Names were seemingly recorded at random, especially for female slaves. The Chö clan listed twenty slaves under the stereotypical name Coshi. Siblings, and in extreme cases, three consecutive generations of grandmother, mother, and daughter, all received the same name on official documents, making it the equivalent of the English name "Mary." In other cases, different names were entered for the same individuals.[292] The household registers were never intended as family registers in the modern sense, so it did not really matter which name was registered. Nevertheless, the nonchalant "whatsoever" attitude of handling slave individuals in documentation is highly revealing.

According to the household registers, two-thirds of the 300 slaves were never recruited for actual labor but were tribute-paying slaves. For all practical purposes, this group was identical to the out-residing slaves, because with growing distance from the main estates of the slave owners, it became more and more impractical to call them to work. Thus, only 100 slaves were direct-labor slaves (*angyŏk nobi*), a term that came into use in the seventeenth century after the monetization of slave labor became overwhelmingly popular; eventually, this was almost a synonym for living-in slaves.[293]

Once again, the discrepancy between the registers and the *Yŏkcung Ilgi* is striking. Only 124 or less than half of the slaves mentioned in the diary can be found in the registers.[294] This tendency may have become even stronger in the nineteenth century.

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288 Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 99.

289 Ibid.: 100.

290 Ibid.: 102.

291 Ibid.: 102–3.

292 Ibid.: 103.

293 Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 106; however, there were exceptions. The Kyŏngju Chö clan recruited their direct laborers from among their out-residing slaves: Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 43.

294 Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 107.

In the *Yŏkcung Ilgi*, one case stands out as demonstrating an exceptionally intimate master–slave relationship. Between 1737 and his death in 1754, the interactions between slave Adang and his master exhibited consistent patterns and notable extraordinary situations.[295] Adang predominantly fulfilled roles associated with procurement and logistical errands, serving primarily as an intermediary agent for his master in a variety of tasks, ranging from acquiring goods such as salt, silk, medicinal decoctions, and fish, to delivering tributes and handling administrative errands including tax payments. Much of his tasks were courier work. These repeated assignments indicate a role that largely involved movement, negotiation, and interaction beyond his master's household, suggesting a degree of trust and responsibility delegated to Adang.

Extraordinary circumstances include the year 1740, when he was arrested by the authorities for having violated a ban on cutting down trees (which he committed because he was ordered to collect wood). Another remarkable situation occurred one month later when he assisted in a slave hunt, illustrating his active participation in controlling and maintaining servile structures.

The relationship between Adang and his master was characterized by a certain flexibility permitted by necessity and practicality, reflecting a complex combination of agency and subjugation. Adang interacted frequently with his master, often through reporting, yet he also exhibited limited but meaningful agency when fulfilling tasks in distant locales. His role appears to be that of an indispensable agent, required to manage external duties and sensitive transactions on behalf of his master.

Adang's role was fundamentally that of a trusted intermediary, consistently bridging the master's interests and the external economic and administrative spheres. His trusted responsibilities suggest respect for his capabilities within constraints, but his repeated illnesses and the manner of his death after protracted illness also underline vulnerability and dependency inherent in his social status. His illness and eventual death in 1754 appear prominently in the records, emphasizing his importance and valued service to the master.

8.5.4 Slave Names and their Implications

Written records from the Cosŏn period—household registers, slave rosters, contracts, annals, and diaries—often mention the names of slaves. However, the correct reading and interpretation of these names is not always certain, as naming practices were fluid, inconsistent, and easily altered.[296] This instability reflects the marginalization of this social class.

295 Based on Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 109.

296 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 61; Yi Hăjŏng 2015: 111 fn. 5.

Slave names in Cosŏn were linguistically diverse and shaped by the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the period. Nevertheless, scholarly engagement with this topic remains scarce. Chŏ Yŏnhwa has examined the names of slaves in the household household registers of Tongsang, Kyŏngsang Province, spanning the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Unlike the names of *yangban* and commoners, which typically employed formal Sino-Korean vocabulary conveying Confucian ideals or social aspirations,[297] slave names tended to be utilitarian, crude, or dehumanizing. They frequently referred to occupational roles, spatial assignments, physical features, or hierarchical subordination, stripping individuals of familial or personal identity.

These names were typically written with Chinese characters that conveyed Korean phonetics rather than meanings. Common suffixes for slave names included 伊 (-i), 里 (-ri/-ni), and 之 (-ci). Names such as Kangaji (江牙之) were direct phonetic transcriptions. However, due to a phenomenon known as phonetic substitution, names were sometimes pronounced differently. For instance, Kwangjari (光自里, meaning "Shining-from-within") was pronounced as Pitchari in certain dialects. Similarly, 大阿只, which appears as Täaji in Sinokorean reading, was actually pronounced as Kŭnagi. Another name written in ostensibly pure Chinese characters is 單文 ("red pattern," i.e., "The Reddish One"), which may not have been read in the Sinokorean style as Tanmun, but rather according to the vernacular: Pulgŭri.[298]

Though "extremely unflattering"[299] or derogatory names were not the norm, they existed. Examples include Kettong (舡同 or 介屎) ("Dog Feces"), Shinomi (時老未) or Shidŭk (是得) ("Dung," derived from 屎 *shi*), and Malbu (馬夫 or 馬不) or Malbuli (馬乙夫伊 or 馬夫里) ("Horse Testicles").[300] Some names bordered on profanity, such as Käjoji (介助之), which combined the word for "dog" (*kä*) with a vulgar expression for the female genitals (*coji*).[301] Yet such openly insulting names were relatively rare and should not be overstated. They were certainly "not names easily borne for a lifetime" and could be changed.[302]

More commonly, names denoted functions: Puŏgi (夫於己, derived from 부엌 *puŏk*, "kitchen") for kitchen staff, or Madangsö (麻堂金, derived from 마당 *madang*, "yard") for a male yard worker. Others referenced physical or behavioral traits—for example, Cŏmsam (點三, "Dotted Number Three"), Cagŭn (小斤, "Small Axe"), or Cakci (作之, "Walking Stick"). Some reflected temperament: Norang (老郎, "Narrow-minded-and-extremely-miserly"), Toli (乭伊 or 石伊, "Tough-as-stone"), or Chadol (次乭, "Hard-as-stone"). Others evoked animals or plants, especially young animals: Songaji (松牙之)

297 Chŏ Yŏnhwa 2010: 33.
298 Chŏ Yŏnhwa 2010: 30; Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2014: 70–72.
299 Lauer 2017: 107.
300 Chŏ Yŏnhwa 2010: 50.
301 Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2014: 72.
302 Ibid.: 72.

or Sosŏkci (小石只, "Calf"),[303] Kangaji (江牙之, "Puppy"), Mangaji (馬牙之, "Foal"), or Toyaji (道也之, "Piglet"), as well as Tali (達伊, "Moon") and Koni (坤伊, "Earth").[304]

Some names reflected birth chronology or timing: Kyenang (癸娘, "*Kye*-Year Daughter"), Mujin (戊眞, "*Mu*-Year True Girl"), Cŏngwŏl (正月, "First Month"), Samwŏl (三月, "Third Month"), Ilnam (一男, "First Son"), Ilnyo (一女, "First Girl"), Inang (二娘, "Second Daughter"), Sanang (四娘, "Fourth Daughter"), and Chilnam (七男, "Seventh Son").

Despite their marginal status, many slave households used *tollimja*, the recurrence of a shared syllable in given names across generations, to express family lineage.[305] In an 1811 Tägu case, the female slave Küchunil (貴春壹) had a son called Künam (貴男), both sharing the character 貴 (*kü*), while Myŏngnap (命立) shared 命 (*myŏng*) with his daughter Myŏngwŏl (命月). Another slave woman, Mangŭm (万今), and her daughter Igŭm (二今) shared 今 (*kŭm*) (see p. 488). Similarly, Makpun's great-granddaughter Sangok (尚玉) named her daughters Okhŭi (玉希) and Okcŏng (玉貞) (see p. 557).

Although not prohibited by law,[306] the use of family names for slaves was very rare and was reserved for cases where slaves could claim freeborn ancestry. The household registers of Tansŏng County in Kyŏngsang Province show that among slave households, 99 percent had no family names in 1678, and about two-thirds still had none a century later. The situation changed rapidly in the late eighteenth century. By 1825, only 20 percent had none, even though the number of slave households had greatly diminished. This means that the use of surnames had become the norm by then, but lagged far behind the rest of the population. In order to adopt a surname, reference to an existing lineage was required, and the family's history of enslavement was obscured. It was common to retroactively change the occupational titles and social identities of immediate and extended family members in updated household records. Records of enslaved mothers were either removed or altered to reflect a status of freedom.[307] This meant that the vast majority of Korean slaves succeeded in concealing their social backgrounds by the end of the Cosŏn period—at least on record.

One such example is a female slave whose name was Coshi in the 1708 census, but who was recorded as the freed slave Kwak Coshi in 1717. She received her surname from her father. To legitimize this, the status of her ancestors had to be rewritten in key places. The following diagrams show her old and new lineages; positions 5, 7, 9, and 17 (Coshi's grandmothers, paternal great-grandmother, and paternal great-great-grandmother) were not included in the records, but can be logically inferred under the conditions of matrifilial rule. In order to legitimize her newly acquired status, Coshi had to change her family tree in six out of ten relevant places. Three of these changes had to be entered in the register.

303 Pak Kŏnho 2022a: s.p.

304 Chŏ Yŏnhwa 2010: 34–48.

305 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 66.

306 It is not true that slaves were "officially denied a family name," as Kim claims: B.-R. Kim 2003: 159.

307 Kyungran Kim 2016: 243.

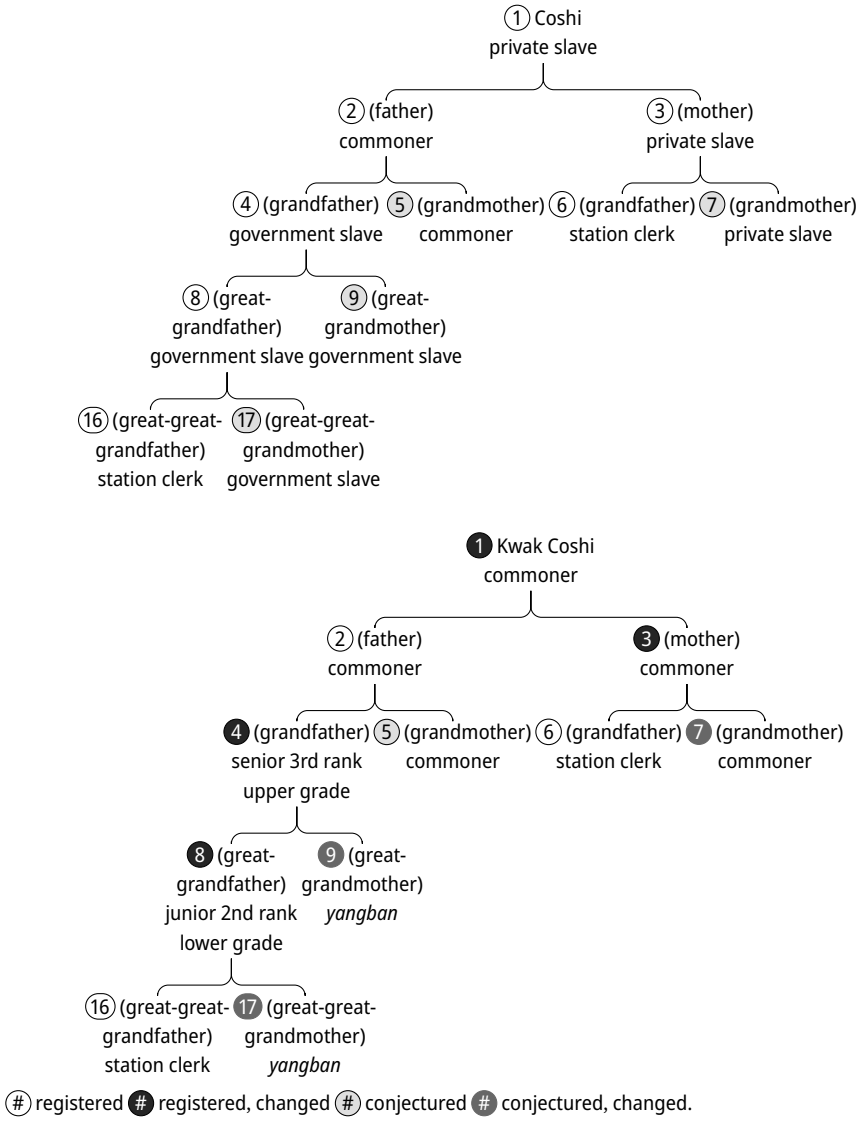

Fig. 30: Coshi's lineage in 1708 (above) and 1717 (below). Adapted from Kyungran Kim 2016, p. 237.

8.6 Slave Biographies and Slave Tales

Biographies of lower-class people began to appear in the sixteenth century. Co Hanŭl has analyzed about 200 of them, including 31 that focus on slaves.[308] Overall, her study shows that the literary representation of slaves in the late Cosŏn period was not static, but evolved in dialogue with changing social realities, authorial identities, and literary norms. From moral paragon to figure of critique and resistance, the slave emerged as a contested but central figure in cultural imagination. One type of slave biography (*nobijŏn*) was written to praise the loyalty of slaves who saved their masters from danger, sacrificed themselves for their masters, or remained loyal even after their master's household fell into ruin. The other type praised the slave's human virtues other than loyalty, including righteousness, filial piety, and chastity. While these virtues are no different from those praised for non-slaves, specific narrative problems could arise if the master sexually abused the female slave or attempted to force her to remarry.[309]

Eulogies and lamentations occupy a distinctive place in both the Chinese and Korean literary traditions. Often inscribed on monuments or displayed in shrines, these texts serve as both memorial inscriptions and rhetorical expressions of moral values, lineage prestige, and political legitimacy. In order to "render social memory to the departed,"[310] they often blend elements of official historiography, ethical discourse, and personal remembrance, making them complex sources that straddle literature and documentation, offering glimpses into lives that would otherwise "fall into social oblivion without a trace."[311]

Kim Sujin has identified and analyzed a corpus of around 40 texts from the late sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. She distinguishes between two genres: lamentations for funeral services for slaves (*ăsa*) and life stories of slaves, as they are handed down in inscriptions and historical records.[312]

Notably, there are almost no texts from before the Great East Asian War. A second observation is that the increase in runaway slaves after the sixteenth century led to the portrayal of both conflicts between masters and slaves and loyal slaves with the aim of reaffirming master–slave relationship.[313] Kim concludes that "the increase in writings for slaves is not unrelated to the improvement in their social status" prompted by the war.[314] Finally, she states "a shift in the attitude toward slaves" towards the human instead of the conventional material aspects of slavery.[315]

308 Co Hanŭl 2023: 16.
309 Ibid.: 17.
310 Kim Haboush 2009: 11.
311 Ibid.: 11.
312 Kim Sujin 2013: 227.
313 Ibid.: 231.
314 Ibid.: 230.
315 Ibid.: 231.

Kim Sujin categorizes these biographical texts into four types, namely "Archetype of Loyalty," "Small and Fragile Being," "Independent Personal Subject," and "Sacrificing Subordinate." Adding two independent variables, "Degree of Agency Assigned to the Slave" and "Emphasis on Social Hierarchy," I propose to arrange these four perspectives on slaves as follows:

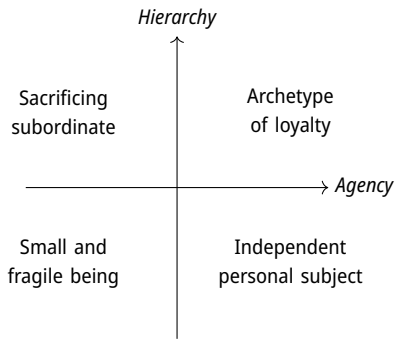

Fig. 31: Perspectives on slaves in *yangban* texts. Adapted from Kim Sujin 2013.

8.6.1 Kwŏn Shi: Libation for the Maidservant Kyejŏng (1649)

Kwŏn Shi from Andong was a scholar-official praised for his moral conduct. In 1649, he wrote one of the very few eulogies of a deceased female household slave, whose name was Kyejŏng:

> On the first day of the fifth lunar month in the Kichuk year [June 10, 1649], your master, the idle Lay Buddhist Kwŏn [Shi] instructed the female slave Imhyang to prepare rice and vegetables as offerings for your spirit, Kyejŏng. It has now been ten days since your passing, yet your soul has found no place to return. Thus, your master, mistress, and your master's daughter have come together to honor you as a senior member of the family, holding this ritual to console your spirit.
>
> If your soul lingers, come to this place, receive these offerings, and find peace, so that you may eternally have a place of belonging. Ah! Though you were born into a lowly station, your character and behavior were truly more virtuous than others. When you first entered our household to work, you were thirteen, and now, at sixteen, you had already surpassed what even the most capable adult male slaves could achieve.
>
> Since you joined us, you never once complained of hunger even when starving, nor did you lament the cold or express fatigue despite hardship. You regarded your masters as though they were your parents, showing remarkable loyalty and foresight. How could such qualities be easily found among servants of humble origin, let alone a child of your tender age?
>
> Because of this, your master and mistress cherished and trusted you as dearly as their own eyes or their teeth. Who could have imagined that after a brief illness lasting only a few days, you would suddenly pass away? As a grown man, to shed tears over the death of a mere maidservant may seem excessive, yet I cannot help but grieve for you. Ah! How tragic and heartbreaking this is.

The eulogy for Kyejŏng praises her remarkable character and exceptional devotion despite her lowly status as a maid. It is remarkable that Kwŏn Shi and his family seem to have developed a deep affection for their slave girl, even though she only stayed with them for about four years. For Kim Sujin, this has to do with her vulnerability as a female slave, as a lowborn, and as a youth. This triple vulnerability makes her "a profoundly small and fragile being," for whom the author feels deep "paternalistic compassion."[316]

8.6.2 Yadam: The Slave Girl From Cirye

Beginning in the seventeenth century, literary biographies of lower-class individuals intersected with folktales and the emerging genre of *yadam*. *Yadam*, literally "noncommittal talk," was an anonymous narrative based on observation and everyday life that in many ways foretold and exposed the ultimate collapse of the old status and class order in an easily accessible literary form.[317]

This interaction allowed writers to experiment with fictionality and to more forcefully express the agency of marginal figures such as slaves. Through these hybrid forms, narratives of slave resistance—such as standing up to their masters—became more prominent, demonstrating a shift toward representing slaves not only as moral exemplars or victims, but as active subjects. Their stories are based on realistic causal relationships, typically in urban settings, and deal with actual social developments of the late Cosŏn period.[318]

The *yadam* "The Story of a Slave Girl from Cirye" was narrated by the "literary raconteur" and impoverished *yangban* No Myŏnghŭm around 1770.[319] It tells the fictional story of an orphaned slave girl who becomes the legal wife of a *yangban* through cleverness, willpower, and cunning. In doing so, she secures wealth and an academic education for her sons who eventually join the ranks of the Cosŏn elite. However, she resorts to deception, forgery, and murder to achieve her goal. The narrative does not condemn these actions; instead, it presents her story as a "true account inflected by the social atmosphere and mechanisms" characteristic of her time.[320] The plot is as follows:[321]

In Cirye County, Kyŏngsang Province, an eleven-year-old slave girl serving in the Kim household memorizes an auspicious burial site chosen by a monk for her deceased master, but withholds it so that the burial would take place elsewhere. She later reburies

316 Kim Sujin 2013: 237.

317 S. Park 2020: 7; Co Hanŭl 2023: 257.

318 Co Hanŭl 2023: 257.

319 S. Park 2020: 73.

320 Ibid.: 75.

321 The story is included in No Myŏnghŭm's *yadam* compilation *Tongpä Naksong*. For the Chinese original and its English translation, see S. Park 2020: 229–35; for another summary, see S. Park 2020: 99–101.

her own father's remains there with earnings saved from years of labor, believing that the site's good fortune would only benefit her if she were free.

She flees to Kangnŭng in Kangwŏn Province, enters the service of a poor scholar, and through intelligence and charm eventually becomes his concubine and later legal wife. Together, they fabricate a noble lineage by forging documents, move to Seoul, and build a respectable life, hiding her origins by excluding anyone who knows her past.

Her sons rise to prominence, but her secret is threatened when a thief overhears her revealing her origins to her sons. The thief informs Kim's son, who comes to confront her. Recognizing her power and influence, he remains silent. She welcomes him as a "brother," helps advance his career, and eliminates the treacherous thief.

As Si Nae Park observes, this story offers "no clear moral paradigm" for reconciling career ambition with piety and virtue.[322] The fortunes of both the protagonist and her former master's son are built on fraud and deceit. Indeed, all the major characters engage in morally questionable or even outright criminal behavior, suggesting that the society depicted in the story is, at its core, a web of deception. The fact that an eleven-year-old slave girl can already discern and manipulate the mechanisms of this world reveals a "social intelligence"[323] untethered from the limitations of inherited status.

In Kim Sujin's terms, this *yadam* falls into the category of an "independent personal subject" with a high degree of agency whose actions openly challenge established social hierarchies.

However, the story contains a surprising contradiction: why does the protagonist, at the height of her success, choose to reveal her secret to her unsuspecting sons? Is this an attempt to be honest with her children, despite having built her life on deception? Does she hope to make them complicit in her fraudulent past, binding them closer to her through shared knowledge? Is it an act of vanity, seeking their admiration for her achievements against impossible odds? Or is she issuing a warning that the dark truth of their family's origins could one day threaten their carefully constructed careers?

History has shown that promising careers can be destroyed when a family's origins fail to align with the rigid expectations of a status-based society. The thief's behavior exemplifies the predatory nature of this world. Upon overhearing the woman's secret, he immediately relinquishes his own personal freedom, becoming the slave of her former master's son in exchange for the opportunity to exploit her secret for material gain. The protagonist's response to this threat is as swift as it is brutal. She eliminates the thief without hesitation, ensuring the survival of the identity she has painstakingly constructed—a reaction that can be seen as a thinly veiled reference to the oft-quoted cliché that slaves and those with "slave faces" are incapable of truly virtuous action; or as an act of self-defense in an immoral and merciless world.

322 S. Park 2020: 102.
323 Ibid.: 99.

8.6.3 Folktales

In 1979, In-Hak Choi published a collection of almost 800 Korean folktales (*mindam*). As is often the case in this genre, the episodes are not datable. However, it can be safely assumed that they date back at least to the late Cosŏn period and that they reflect popular narratives of the time. Slaves appear in eighteen of these stories. Many emphasize loyalty as the defining characteristic of a good servant, often presenting servants who act to protect, save, or elevate their masters' standing. This loyalty frequently reinforces social hierarchy, where servants willingly sacrifice or act for the benefit of their masters, even at great personal cost. Such "stories of loyal slaves"[324] (*chungnodam*) reflect the Confucian ideal of unwavering loyalty to one's superior, portraying an idealized, harmonious master-servant relationship where servants are rewarded for their faithfulness, and the hierarchy remains intact. Accordingly, in the following examples, servants show a high degree of both agency and observation of social hierarchy, thus becoming "archetypes of loyalty":

Buying a Story with One Hundred Ryang: A servant is sent by his wealthy master to buy a story for one hundred *ryang*. He meets a farmer and pays him for a story about a stork. When he retells this story to his master, it inadvertently serves as a warning that deters a burglar from robbing the house. The servant's dutiful fulfillment of his task, though strange, fortuitously protects his master's wealth and shows the value of unquestioning service.[325]

The Story-Spirit: A servant overhears the "story-spirits" scheming to kill his master on the way to his wedding. Determined to protect him, the servant preemptively removes each obstacle. He prevents his master from drinking poisoned water, stops him from eating deadly strawberries, and ultimately kills a venomous snake in the bridal chamber. By faithfully protecting his master, the servant embodies loyalty and courage, with his actions underscoring the importance of stories being shared rather than hoarded.[326]

8.7 Punishment and Litigation

Slave abuse was widespread in Cosŏn. In his 1668 account of Korea, the Dutchman Hendrick Hamel claims:

> A master may take the life of his slave for a minor reason.[327]

324 Co Hanŭl 2023: 256.
325 No. 253 I.-H. Choi 1979: 91–92.
326 No. 763 ibid.: 331–32.
327 Hamel 1920: 38.

Anecdotal evidence has it that Yi Sŏgu, a scholar-official of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, ordered his household slaves to beat to death a male slave who had insulted him while drunk the day before. When an official from the Ministry of Justice later visited his home to inquire why his slave had been found dead, Yi Sŏgu replied that it would have been proper to report the slave to the authorities and have him punished for violating the moral order, but doing so would have brought shame on his household. Therefore, he had no choice but to kill him privately. Sŏgu allegedly got away with this answer.[328]

The killing of private slaves had been prohibited since 1444. In practice, however, it occurred, though mostly unintentionally, for example as collateral damage in corporal punishment and other forms of "arbitrary and abusive violence."[329] Slaves were only rudimentarily protected by law and justice from excessive cruelty by their masters. In 1597, a *yangban* felt "very uneasy" after the "unexpected death" of a male slave who had received caning on his order.[330] In 1760, another man was accused of illegally killing his slave. His mother appealed to the magistrate claiming that this was an accident because her son only intended to punish the slave with acceptable five lashes, and quoting the Korean proverb 烏飛梨落 *obi irak*, literally "a crow flies, a pear falls," in the meaning of "in the wrong place at the wrong time." Her intervention was successful.[331]

Penal law demanded the execution of slaves in cases of treason, violent aggression, insult or accusation, as the populace was told in the *Kyŏngminphyŏn* ("Book of Warning") written by the high ranking government official Kim Cŏngguk in 1519:

> Slave and master must be distinguished according to the hierarchical positions of lord and vassal. To serve one's master requires utmost sincerity, and one must never act in defiance. [...]
> Striking the head of the household results in decapitation; insulting them leads to execution by strangulation.
> Bringing accusations against them results in 100 strokes of the cane and penal servitude.[332]

Lawsuits of slaves against their masters were made illegal and punishable by death in 1422, except when slaves reported them for treason against the king.[333] However, this rule could be circumvented by using free relatives as proxies. In 1487, the court was informed that a secondary son had cruelly and repeatedly punished a female slave, named Hyoyang, for running away. She survived this ordeal, but her paternal uncle Malmi

328 Kim Congsŏn 2013: 165–67.

329 Sun Joo Kim 2021: 138.

330 Rhee and D. Yang 2010: 11.

331 M. Peterson 1985: 38.

332 *Cunggan Kyŏngminphyŏn* 14, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/重刊警民編 [accessed 29.07.2025]. This work, consisting of fourteen chapters and published in both Chinese and Korean to make it accessible to non-elite readers, was "of considerable importance for admonishing the people of that time": *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 173–76.

333 Rhee and D. Yang 2010: 12.

filed a complaint with the Three Boards, and the censors, pointing out the excesses of this cruel, though not legally prohibited, punishment, suggested that Hyoyang and her entire family be confiscated as public slaves "as a warning to others." The Royal Secretariat agreed. Finally, King Sŏngjong issued an order to the Ministry of Justice detailing the degree of violence that Hyoyang endured and confirming punishment as "a warning to countless others":

> Recently, an investigation into an abandoned corpse led to the discovery of a case involving a private slave. Malmi reported that his niece, Hyoyang, had suffered extreme and illicit punishment at the hands of her master, Yu Hyoson, and he did not know whether she had died. When Hyoson was summoned and interrogated, he fully confessed. His testimony reads: "In my anger over Hyoyang's repeated escapes, I heated an iron rod and burned her tendons, pierced her ankle, and threaded a hemp rope through the wound."
> Hyoson is merely a secondary son[334] and probably did not command many household slaves. Yet, despite this, he treated her with such cruelty. If this is how he behaved, how much worse must the actions of powerful aristocratic families be? Such cases are difficult to uncover because those who suffer abuse rarely dare to report their masters. Now that this case has come to light, if we fail to enforce the law severely, violent individuals will remain unchecked, and such brutality may escalate to arbitrary killings.
> To serve as a warning to countless others, punishment must begin with Hyoson. In addition to sentencing him according to the law, his slaves—including Hyoyang, her mother Chilgŭm, her full sibling Maldong, her husband Habi, and her kin Yakcung and Chŏlgŭn—shall all be confiscated by the state.[335]

In many high-profile criminal cases involving slaves, they were in fact instrumentalized by *yangban*, who made them their accomplices. Some of these cases provide spectacular insights into the moral underbelly of society at the time. In 1488, during the reign of King Sŏngjong, a *yangban* and his slaves, including his slave wife, were condemned to death for killing the *yangban*'s mother:

> At the Royal Lecture, the Chief State Councillor Song Yŏng reported: "The prisoner of the State Tribunal Pak Sŏnggŭn committed matricide against his mother, Lady Cŏng, with the involvement of the female slave Yŏktŏk and the male slaves Nääunsan and Nääundong, who conspired to murder Lady Cŏng. According to the law, all should be subjected to slow slicing execution." The king said: "Sŏnggŭn and his accomplices have committed the grievous crime of matricide, leaving no path for survival. There is no need to review the case further—just administer the punishment according to the law and notify the Grand Council of State and above." Yŏng reported again: "Sŏnggŭn's wife did not obey him. When he was under interrogation, she stood beside him and cursed, saying, 'You should die quickly.' She also said, 'You always wanted to abandon me, but you hesitated only because I am from a *sajok* family.' Although her words were not directly related to Sŏnggŭn's crime, the high officials of the State Tribunal, in their strong resentment, suggested sentencing her as well." The King said: "Sŏnggŭn's entire family is inhuman. Investigate his wife as well and determine an

334 His father was the late meritorious subject Yu Ha, who had supported the 1453 coup in which Sejo seized the throne.

335 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 19:5:28 = June 28, 1487.

> appropriate punishment." Sŏnggŭn was the son of the former county magistrate Pak Yunchang. He committed fornication with the woman Ŏ Udong[336] and resided in Ŭmjuk County. His mother, Lady Cŏng, also engaged in excessive debauchery. When Sŏnggŭn was young, he once said to someone, "I saw four feet in my mother's bed." From then on, Cŏng despised him, confining him in a chest at night and treating his clothing and food no differently from those of slaves. As he grew up, she treated him even worse than tenant farmers. Sŏnggŭn resented this. He conspired with his elder cousin's household slaves, Näŭnsan and Näŭndong. Knowing that Cŏng was staying at the house of her nephew, Cŏng So, they plotted together with Lady Cŏng's slave Wŏnsŏk, making it appear as if they were bandits and murdering her. Since Sŏnggŭn confessed that he had conspired with So, he was beaten to death in prison.[337]

Of course, the vast majority of legal disputes between slaves and non-slaves did not involve murder and manslaughter, but often issues that could determine the existence of an entire slave family. The case of Tamulsari, brought before the district court of Naju, Cŏlla province, in 1585, centers on a dispute over the status of a woman who claimed to be a public slave.[338] Tamulsari was the widow of Yunphil, a wealthy private slave belonging to the plaintiff Yi Cido's father. Yi Cido argued, in accordance with the matridominial rule of the time, that Tamulsari's children should be considered the property of his family, as they followed the status of their father. In response, Tamulsari claimed that her own mother, Kildŏk, had been a public slave, making her children public slaves instead.[339]

However, Tamulsari's claims were later found to be false. She had falsely claimed to be Kildŏk's daughter in order to avoid having her children relegated to the status of private slaves. This scheme was devised with the help of her son-in-law, Kuji, a public slave who was trying to use his wealth and power to secure public slave status for his children. Together with another public slave from the Yŏngam county office, Kuji forged the documents that linked Talmusari to Kildŏk and enrolled her and her grandchildren as public slaves. In reality, Tamulsari was a free commoner.

The court case also involved a series of confrontations between the Yi family and Tamulsari's family. In 1584, Tamulsari had begun refusing to pay tribute and labor to Yi Cido's family, an action that led to further escalation. Her son-in-law, Kuji, physically assaulted an old private slave sent by Yi Cido to collect overdue tribute, prompting Yi Cido to file a lawsuit. Despite the clear irregularities, Yi Cido's legal recourse was hampered by the influence of local government officials involved in the conspiracy.

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336 Ŏ Udong was a *yangban* daughter who became a *kisäng* after being divorced by a member of the royal family. She became famous for her poetry and art. Afterwards, she had relationships with many "noble and base" men. When this was discovered in 1480, it became a major scandal and led to her execution after a controversial debate at court. CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 11:9:2.

337 CWS, Sŏngjong, Y. 19:8:22 = September 27, 1488.

338 The judgment document of this case was translated, analyzed, and discussed by S. Yim 2007; presented and discussed in English in B.-R. Kim 2018: 396–401; cf. Lauer 2017: 102–3.

339 S. Yim 2007: 12–13.

The case was finally transferred to Naju, where Governor Kim Sŏngil, known for his ability to detect forged documents, took charge. The investigation revealed the fraudulent nature of Tamulsari's claim, noting contradictions in her testimony and discrepancies in the records. In 1586, Kim Sŏngil issued a verdict stating that Tamulsari had falsely claimed to be Kildŏk's daughter and that her public slave record had been forged. While Tamulsari was spared physical punishment because of her age, her daughter and six grandchildren were given to Yi Cido's family.

To some extent, the legal protection of slaves became stronger in late Cosŏn, as evidenced by the case of Myŏngäk, an allegedly wealthy slave living in Tundŏk, Chungchŏng Province.[340] The case revolves around a brutal assault perpetrated by Kim Nogyong, a former military official who had once been romantically involved with a female slave named Chŏnmä. After Chŏnmä became Myŏngäk's wife in 1732, Kim reacted with jealousy and violence, culminating in a vicious attack in which he, accompanied by his slaves, tied Myŏngäk's feet to his horse and dragged him through town. The immediate pretext for this attack was a failed attempt by Myŏngäk and his family to transfer legal ownership of Chŏnmä using a forged certificate of authorization. This document falsely stated that Myŏngäk was acting on behalf of his master Yi to purchase Chŏnmä from its original owner, the *yangban* Yang Sŏngha. When the forgery was discovered, Kim attacked and abused Myŏngäk.

In the wake of this violence, Myŏngäk's relatives petitioned the provincial authorities in Cŏnju, Cŏlla Province, prompting the involvement of the Namwŏn magistrate. The magistrate's handling of the case is characterized by a dual rhetorical stance. On the surface, he consistently expressed sympathy for the slave victim and portrayed himself as an advocate for Myŏngäk and his family. He annulled Kim's claim to ownership of Chŏnmä, demanded the destruction of Kim's supporting documents, and insisted that Kim be severely punished. These gestures might suggest a principled defense of slave rights and legal dignity.[341]

A more critical reading, however, reveals that the magistrate's outward displays of empathy were part of a calculated legal strategy rather than a principled commitment to justice.[342] His ultimate goal was to discipline a troublesome local official who had a history of defying the state, including a previous prison escape and repeated insubordination. By publicly humiliating Kim and forcing a confession, the magistrate sought to reassert bureaucratic control rather than secure redress for the slave family. Indeed, the final punishment meted out to Kim—an indeterminate corporal punishment followed by release—falls far short of the gravity of the crime. No restitution was offered

340 Based on the *Namwŏn-hyŏn Chŏppo Imun Sŏngchäk* 南原県牒報移文成册 ("Collected Volume of Administrative Reports and Inter-agency Communications of Namwŏn County"), a collection of correspondence and other documents of the county magistrate of Namwŏn, the case is presented and discussed in Lauer 2017: 82–112.

341 Ibid.: 89.

342 Ibid.: 98.

to Myŏngäk's family, and Yi, as Myŏngäk's legal owner, received no compensation for the violation of his human property. The magistrate also implied that Chŏnmä was partly to blaim, claiming that "among promiscuous female slaves, sleeping in the east house [the place of the *yangban*] and eating in the west house [the place of the slaves] is by no means unusual."[343] The magistrate's rhetorical strategy also included the systematic "erasure" of the agency of the slaves who had participated in the attack on Myŏngäk at Kim's behest.[344] Although these slaves formed the core of the attacking force, the magistrate chose not to investigate their motives or hold them accountable. Whether they acted under duress, out of loyalty, or for promised rewards remains unexplored. This selective representation reveals the persistent ambivalence in Cosŏn's legal discourse regarding the humanity of slaves: they could be treated as persons when convenient, and as chattels when expedient.

The following case, reported from Yesan County to the provincial military authorities in 1762, highlights the uncertainties of manumitted slaves who remained vulnerable to re-enslavement through extortion and fabricated claims by former masters:[345]

> On the 9th day of this month [March 22, 1762], a petition was submitted by Shin Sŭngchŏn, a resident of this county, regarding a case of privilege certificate issuance.
> According to the petition, his mother, originally a slave of classics licentiate Kim, had redeemed herself under Kim. However, classics licentiate Kim later sold her to classics licentiate Cŏng, so his father was also redeemed under Cŏng.
> Meanwhile, the third cousin of classics licentiate Kim falsely claimed to be the former master and frequently visited [Shin Sŭngchŏn], demanding payments. Whenever his demands were not met, he would falsely accuse Shin Sŭngchŏn of disrespect and submit fabricated reports, resulting in repeated punishments and extortion.
> Feeling like a bird wounded by an arrow, Shin Sŭngchŏn had no choice but to appease him. He paid more than ten *ryang* on some occasions, and five to six *ryang* on others—so many times that he lost count.
> In the year of Cŏngchuk [1757], he was once again accused of disrespect and was told that if he paid 25 *ryang*, the matter would be settled. He complied without protest.
> In the year of Kyŏngjin [1760], another demand was made: if he paid 40 *ryang*, he would no longer be harassed. Again, he submitted the payment.
> On the 6th day of this month [March 19, 1762], the former master brought his slaves and demanded: "If you hand over 300 gold coins, you can redeem yourself and your six children and cousins, and I will never bother you again."
> Shin Sŭngchŏn lamented:
> "How dare I, with all my reason and morality, hold a grudge against my former master? This must be the misfortune written in my fate.[346] My life has come to this point—what regrets could there be?"

343 Ibid.: 90.

344 Ibid.: 95.

345 Translated from the Chinese original, quoted from Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1987: 354.

346 The phrase 口銀八字之奇險 (*kugin phalja-ji kihŏm*) refers to fortune-telling. *Kugin*, literally "silver mouth," meaning destiny as determined by one's birth. *Phalja*, "eight characters," is a reference to the

He wanted to buy back his freedom, but since his mother had already been freed and all his siblings were born after her release, this forced buyback seemed illegal.
The authorities ruled:

1. Since Shin Sŭngchŏn was born after his mother's redemption, Kim's claim as a former master was completely unjustified and outrageous.
2. Forcing him to buy back his freedom constituted the crime of coercing a commoner into servitude.
3. It must be punished according to the law.
4. Kim, who illegally took Shin Sŭngchŏn prisoner, must be arrested and severely interrogated.
5. All the money previously extorted from him must be accounted for and returned.
6. Any further claims regarding [Sungchŏn's] privilege certificates shall be invalidated.

Shin Sŭngchŏn's case reveals systemic corruption, as powerful elites exploited legal loopholes and coercion to reclaim freed individuals. The ruling against his former master reflects efforts to curb slave hunting abuses but also shows the difficulty of enforcing protections for manumitted slaves.

A case from Cinju, Kyŏngsang Province, in 1777 illustrates the still fragile status of slave families. Sŏng Yongsŏk owned a female slave married to a commoner, Hŏ Chä. He tried to extort the enormous sum of 10,000 *ryang* from Hŏ Chä for his remission from slavery (suggesting that Hŏ Chä had recently be released), and when Hŏ reported this to the magistrate, Sŏng Yongsŏk and his brother killed him. Chä's son petitioned the king, prompting a royal investigation into the case. While the investigators recognized the illegality of Yongsŏk's actions, conflicting testimonies and counter-petitions from Yongsŏk's wife—she struck the petition drum two times—introduced delays and complications. King Cŏngjo's handling of the case reveals the tension between justice and the influence of powerful landowners. Although he initially sentenced Yongsŏk to death, he later reduced the punishment to banishment following appeals and a reinvestigation. Nevertheless, the king acknowledged the broader social issue, noting that both the oppression of commoners by landowners and the betrayal of masters by slaves were harmful customs that needed regulation.[347]

Of the 1,112 cases of capital punishment crimes listed between 1776 and 1800 in the *Shimnirok* ("Record of Hearings"), the legal casebook of King Cŏngjo, 964 involved murder.[348] In her analysis of the 43 trials against slaves in the *Shimnirok*, Ham Bokhee concludes that the most common cases resulted from everyday quarrels, verbal disputes, and impulsive acts of violence, which often escalated into fatal outcomes. Cases involving theft and deception also appeared frequently, revealing tensions over property and trust. Domestic conflicts—particularly those between wives and concubines, or involving suspicions of adultery—led to several tragic incidents. Some cases were marked

Four Pillars of Destiny, a traditional Chinese astrological system that calculates a person's fate based on their birth year, month, day, and hour. *Kihŏm* means "strange and dangerous."

347 Jisoo M. Kim 2015: 142–44.

348 Kang Myŏnggwan 2019: 174.

by coercion or violence rooted in hierarchical relations, where power dynamics among slaves or between owners and slaves played a central role. False accusations, slander, and suspicion also triggered disputes, reflecting a climate of mistrust and vulnerability. Disputes over benefits such as shared business profits or resources led to violent confrontations, while some cases were driven by motives of revenge. There were also instances involving accidental fires or arson, as well as deaths under suspicious circumstances. Together, these cases reflect the volatile and often precarious conditions under which slaves lived.[349]

King Cŏngjo's rulings reveal the neo-Confucian intent to use the law not merely to punish but to educate and morally guide his subjects, especially those at the lowest levels of society, in several cases emphasizing their reform and reintegration over their elimination.[350] Cŏngjo often rejected hasty rulings issued by lower magistrates, especially when he sensed inconsistencies, bias, or insufficient evidence.[351] In cases where slaves had killed out of impulse, misunderstanding, or emotional turmoil, he carefully examined the broader circumstances—such as the social position of the accused, relationships involved, and underlying grievances—before reaching a decision.[352] When the cause of death was ambiguous or the conflict stemmed from domestic disputes or hierarchical coercion, he favored leniency and reform over harsh punishment. He often commuted death sentences to exile or corporal punishment when he judged the act to be the result of neglect, social pressure, or ignorance rather than deliberate malice.[353]

8.7.1 Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence

Cases of sexual abuse occurred in many very different constellations. Young female slaves were defenselessly at the mercy of their masters. Violence could also come from male slaves. However, it was a common stereotype to place the blame one-sidedly on the women, and to denounce female slaves as licentious or promiscuous.

In the *Mukcä Ilgi*, Yi Mungŏn reports the case of his male living-in slave Küsŏn, who in 1551 was accused of illicit relations with a female slave. Küsŏn denied the charge and deflected blame onto other slaves, but the following year, he was involved in harassing the water-fetching maid Ŭigŭm.

> In the evening, [...] I heard that there had been shouting and great disorder in the lower quarters. Upon inquiry, I learned that Küsŏn had harassed Ŭigŭm in such a manner, and falsely claimed that

349 Ham 2023: 258–60.
350 Ibid.: 139, 144.
351 Ibid.: 42, 77.
352 Ibid.: 93, 104.
353 Ibid.: 117, 123.

> the young master had ordered him to do it. Angered by this, I punished Küsŏn with fifty strikes to the buttocks and Ŭigŭm with twenty strikes to the legs as a warning.[354]

Thus, Yi Mungŏn treated the disturbance as a matter of household discipline rather than addressing it as sexual misconduct, reflecting how such abuse was normalized and insufficiently redressed within the slaveholding order, whereas Küsŏn threatened to run away for having been beaten without guilt.[355]

There could be fatal consequences to sexual violence. Of the 1,112 cases dealt with in the *Shimnirok*, 148 involved sexual issues, including 58 cases concerning the loss of life due to adultery or illicit intercourse. Of these, 30 cases pertained to the murder of a concubine, an adulterer, or an intermediary in the adulterous act, with the vast majority of the defendants being men.[356]

In the long history of sexual violence and assault, some incidents stand out in particular. In 1404, two out-residing private slaves and their brother-in-law were executed for raping a young *yangban* woman after luring her into their house by threatening to run away if she did not go with them:

> Executed the private slaves Shilguji, his younger brother, and Pak Cil.
> In Hanyang, Judge Yi Caji had three children. The eldest, Näŭni, was sixteen years old and unmarried; the others were still young. After Yi Caji and his wife died one after the other, Näŭni and her two younger brothers, along with the female slave Yŏnji and a young male slave, wanted to observe the three-year mourning period. Their house slaves Shilguji and his younger brother lived in Kwaju [in Kyŏnggi Province]. One day they came to request that the family move to Kwaju. Näŭni replied, "A woman's duty is not to go beyond the inner chambers. Besides, now that my parents have died, how can I go and live with you?"
> The slaves said, "The masters' clothing and food depend on the two of us. If you do not follow our plan, we will leave you and flee." Näŭni, having no other choice, went to their house, where the slaves happily provided food and supplies.
> Late at night, Shilguji hid his wife's younger brother, Pak Cil, in a room, stripped Näŭni naked and handed her over to Cil. Näŭni cried out loudly, as did her two younger brothers and Yŏnji. Shilguji and his brother held the two younger brothers and did not let them go. Näŭni struggled fiercely, but by the fifth watch of the night [around 8 p.m.], she was exhausted. Pak Cil tied her hands and feet and raped her.
> Näŭni escaped and lodged a complaint with the Hansŏng Magistrate. Shilguji, his brother, and Pak Cil were arrested and interrogated. They confessed to the crime. The case was reported to the State Council, but the verdict was postponed in accordance with the law.[357]

This was an unusual situation. After the death of their parents, young Näŭni and her little brothers were completely dependent on their slaves. Their escape would have meant their economic ruin. Shilguji appears to have owned his own house in Kwaju

354 *Mukcä Ilgi*, 1552:2:11 = March 5, 1552. Yi Mungŏn 2025; cf. Yi Häjŏng 2015: 115.
355 Yi Häjŏng 2015: 115.
356 Kang Myŏnggwan 2019: 175.
357 CWS, Thäjong, Y. 4:2:27 = April 15, 1404.

where he lived with his family. The status of his brother-in-law Pak Cil is not mentioned; he had a family name indicating that he was a free man, so it is possible that Shilguji was married to a free commoner woman. Why Shilguji committed this betrayal of his masters is not explained. Perhaps his original intention was not malicious at all, but the move to Kwaju was based on the sober assessment that the family's situation in the expensive capital was no longer tenable. However, the young woman's weakness was then ruthlessly exploited.

In 1436, a sex scandal caused a major stir in the royal palace. Crown Princess Pong, the daughter-in-law of King Sejong, was accused of multiple improprieties, including "spying on outsiders through cracks in the walls of the maidservants' lavatory near the Royal Academy," frequently instructing palace maids to sing romantic "songs designed to please men," and engaging in a coercive sexual relationship with a palace maid named Sossang. Sossang, who was already romantically involved with another maid, felt "greatly uneasy" about Pong's actions. When questioned by the king and queen, Sossang testified:

> Last winter solstice, the Lady called me into her quarters at night while the other maids were waiting outside. She requested that I stay with her for the night. I declined, but the Lady insisted. Reluctantly, I partially removed my clothes and entered behind the screen. The Lady then took the rest of my clothes, forcing me to lie down with her and engage in playful interactions, mimicking the acts of a man and a woman.[358]

King Sejong admitted that he had "long been aware of female attendants and maids in the palace having private intimate relationships and even sharing beds," and that he had tried to deter this behavior with punishments of up to one hundred beatings. However, given the severity of Pong's misconduct and her failure to fulfill her duties as Crown Princess, he ordered her divorce from the Crown Prince and her demotion to the status of a commoner.

Kim Cŏngjik—whose pen name was Cŏmphiljä—was an influential scholar-official of the fifteenth century and served as an official under King Sŏngjong. Among his writings is an anecdote describing the fate of a slave who was apparently an intersex case. The case illustrates how the intersection of slavery, gender, and sexuality in the Cosŏn era made slaves particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, where the bodies and identities of slaves were easily reduced to tools for their owners' desires or the subjects of scandalous curiosity:

> Sabangji was a private slave. From a young age, his mother dressed him in girls' clothes, made him up, and taught him how to sew and cut cloth. As he grew older, he frequently went in and out of the houses of court officials and had numerous affairs with female servants. The wife of the scholar Kim Kusŏk, Lady Yi, the daughter of the former Director Yi Sunji, was widowed. She took Sabangji into her home on the pretext of having him sew clothes. They lived together day and night for more

358 CWS, Sejong 18:10:26 = December 13, 1436.

> than a decade.
> In the spring of the seventh year of the Tianshun era [1463], the Council of Censors learned of this and conducted an investigation. They arrested and interrogated a nun he had been associated with. The nun said, "His male organ is remarkably large." A female physician named Pandŏk was summoned to examine him, and she confirmed the claim. The king ordered the Royal Secretariat, Prince Yŏngsun ([Yi] Pu), and Hasŏng Grand Prince Consort Cŏng Hyŏnjo, among others, to investigate further.
> The sister of Cŏng Hyŏnjo, who married into Lady Yi's family, also exclaimed, "How remarkable it is!" The king laughed at this and ordered that the matter not be pursued further, saying, "I am afraid this will bring disgrace to the family of Yi Sunji." Sabangji and Lady Yi were separated, and [Sabangji] was punished with about ten beatings before being sent to a slave household near the capital.
> Later, Lady Yi secretly recalled Sabangji. After Yi Sunji's death [1465], their relationship became even more unrestrained. In the spring of this year, a high-ranking official mentioned this to the king during a casual conversation. As a result, Sabangji was caned and banished to Shinchang County.[359]

As a slave, Sabangji's social status made him particularly vulnerable to exploitation. He had little to no agency to resist Lady Yi's demands. Sabangji's ambiguous gender and intersex traits further complicated his position. The fascination with his anatomy not only dehumanized him but also made him an object of rumor, curiosity, and increased vulnerability to exploitation. While the scandal caused public uproar and led to Sabangji's temporary banishment, the focus of societal condemnation was less on the abuse of Sabangji as a slave and more on the moral impropriety of the relationship. Lady Yi's actions, as a widow, were seen as a violation of Confucian norms of chastity, which required widows to remain faithful to their deceased husbands. However, this criticism focused on her failure to uphold societal expectations rather than her abuse of power over her slave. Sabangji's eventual return to Lady Yi's household, where the relationship resumed with increased brazenness, demonstrates the lack of enforcement or concern for the welfare of enslaved individuals. Conversely, as an enslaved individual, Sabangji was not condemned for violating chastity but was instead made into a spectacle because of his anatomy, reflecting a gendered and class-based double standard. The ultimate punishment of Sabangji (caning and exile) rather than Lady Yi demonstrates the systemic bias in favor of the ruling class and the ease with which slaves could be discarded or penalized, regardless of their victimization. It is highly significant that a scholar such as Ŏ Sukkwŏn concluded his commentary on this case by comparing Sabangji to a hermaphrodite horse, "but Sabangji may be said to have been worse than the mare since he committed a crime as well."[360]

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359 *Cŏmphiljäjip* 佔畢齋集 3, Sabangji, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/佔畢齋集/卷三 [accessed 29.07.2025]. This was quoted and commented on by Ŏ Sukkwŏn, who added that Sabangji's "testicles were covered by a flap": Ŏ 1989: 109.

360 Ibid.: 110.

8.7.2 Jealousy, Murder, and Public Opinion

Women were very rarely accused of homicide. Only 4 percent of the defendants in the *Shimnirok* murder cases were women.[361]

The *Veritable Records* report ten cases between 1397 and 1533 where *yangban* women were implicated in murder for jealousy. Since upper-class men could easily have any number of sexual relations with female slaves in addition to their already legal concubines and could also consort with *kisäng*, they often gave their spouses ample cause for jealousy. Jealousy was considered a divorceable female vice, and there is much evidence of women being beaten by their husbands for being jealous.[362] Thus, when wives resorted to retaliatory violence against the female slaves favored by their husbands, it can be interpreted as "acts of resistance" against their oppression. Killing or injuring their husbands would have been a serious crime, so they turned their revenge on the dependent women who were easy to hurt, by abusing, beating, torturing, and in some cases killing them in quite cruel ways.[363]

The case of Yi Mänggyun and his wife, Lady Yi, in 1440 revolved around Lady Yi's fatal jealousy, her husband's failure to manage his household, and the state's response to the transgression. On July 17, 1440, Yi Mänggyun, then serving as Left Second Counselor, reported to the king that a female slave in his household had committed a crime and was being punished by his wife, who ordered a male servant to beat her and cut off her hair. The slave died, however, and the household slaves were ordered to bury her body. However, the body was instead dumped on the roadside near Hongjewŏn (a relay station on the road to the north just outside Seoul's Western Gate), leading to an official investigation by the Three Boards. When confronted with the investigation, Yi Mänggyun conveniently implicated his slaves.[364] The king ordered further investigation, and it soon became clear that Lady Yi herself was the culprit, subjecting the slave to extreme cruelty: "Out of jealousy, she cut off the slave's hair and beat her to death. There is no doubt about the facts and evidence."[365]

The public reacted angrily to this crime, perhaps because Yi had tried to shift the blame to his slaves:

> When the news spread that Lady Yi had killed the household slave out of jealousy, men and women alike rushed to Yi Mänggyun's residence and gathered in large numbers at his gate. They shouted insults at her with unrestrained fury, and in no time the whole neighborhood was filled with the sound of their indignation.[366]

361 Kang Myŏnggwan 2019: 174.
362 Ibid.: 182.
363 Ibid.: 186–87.
364 CWS, Sejong, Y22:6:10
365 CWS, Sejong, Y. 22:6:12. Cf. Deuchler 1992: 274–75; Kang Myŏnggwan 2019: 192–93.
366 CWS, Sejong, Y. 22:6:10.

The Council of Censors formally reported:

> Lady Yi, the wife of Yi Mong-yun, unjustly killed her female slave out of jealousy. Yi Mänggyun tried to hide his wife's crime. The circumstances of the murder, driven by jealousy, were deliberately concealed, and he falsely reported, saying, "She was beaten for committing a crime." [...] Lady Yi unjustly killed a concubine of her husband.[367]

Yi Mänggyun's failure to report the crime truthfully and his attempt to shield his wife were seen as violations of both state law and Confucian moral principles. The censors therefore recommended that he and his wife be punished according to the law, including their separation and Lady Yi's exile. From this statement, we learn that the slain slave was indeed a secondary wife (concubine).

However, King Sejong took a more lenient attitude. He acknowledged the gravity of Lady Yi's actions, but emphasized her advanced age (nearly 70 years) and Yi Mänggyun's responsibility as head of the household:

> Lady Yi's immoral actions were solely the result of her husband's failure to properly manage his household. Therefore, Yi Mänggyun has been relieved of his duties. Lady Yi is already old, and her royal status has been revoked—what further punishment is necessary?

Sejong went on to cite historical precedent, saying, "During the Han Dynasty, Emperor Guangwu deposed his empress out of jealousy, but later scholars criticized this, saying, 'Jealousy is the natural disposition of women.'"[368] As a result, Yi Mänggyun was dismissed and later exiled.

The decision, however, met with persistent resistance from court officials. The Court of Remonstrances warned that leniency would undermine the moral order:

> If this case is not properly punished, wrongdoers will have no fear, and the Three Bonds[369] will never be upheld.[370]

Several officials repeatedly petitioned the king to enforce Lady Yi's exile, but Sejong refused, stating:

> It is not proper to send both husband and wife to the same place of exile, nor is it proper to separate them to different places. The wife of a high minister cannot be subjected to additional punishment —that is enough.[371]

367 CWS, Sejong, Y. 22:6:17.

368 CWS, Sejong, Y22:6:19.

369 The bond between ruler and vassal, father and son, and husband and wife, as the basis of social relations in Confucian societies: *Korea: A Historical and Cultural Dictionary* 2013: 469.

370 CWS, Sejong, Y. 22:6:19.

371 CWS, Sejong, Y. 22:6:20.

While in exile, Yi Mänggyun fell ill, and Sejong, despite previous censorship, granted him medicine and allowed his nephew to care for him.[372] Shortly thereafter, Sejong ordered his release and return to the capital.[373] On the way to the capital, however, Yi Mänggyun died at the age of seventy. The event was met with public sympathy as people lamented that "Yi Mänggyun lived under the domination of his wife and could not find peace even in his old age."[374] He died without heirs—neither his principal nor his secondary wife had borne him sons.

In the early Cosŏn period, female offenders were only mildly punished. Since the sixteenth century, however, they were frequently subjected to corporal punishment.[375] In early 1543, an "extremely shocking"[376] incident was reported to King Cungjong, who instructed the Royal Secretariat:

> It has been reported by the Hwanghä provincial governor as follows: "The concubine, her daughter, and two female slaves of the magistrate of Cangyŏn County, Hong Cŏn, died suddenly and mysteriously within a day or two. His wife, known for her malicious temperament and unable to overcome her jealousy and anger, secretly used poison to kill them all at once. At present, the wife has been imprisoned in the Songhwa jail along with those involved in the the household incident, and an investigation is underway."
> This situation arose from Hong Cŏn's inability to maintain order within his household, resulting in an extraordinary and alarming incident. His removal from office, followed by thorough investigation, is considered appropriate.[377]

Some voices in the government pleaded for leniency for the woman because "jealousy among women has existed since ancient times. In the past, when a nobleman's wife killed a concubine out of jealousy, there was no precedent for taking her life in return."[378] But the government council insisted that she must be interrogated and judged severely, and the king agreed. The ensuing interrogations revealed that two female slaves "acted on the orders of their mistress to conspire in the murder of Hong Cŏn's concubine. After three rounds of investigation, they were sentenced according to the law,"[379] which means they were executed.

The number of such incidents recorded was small, but they were significant because they highlighted the potentially fatal dilemma faced by slave women:

372 CWS, Sejong, Y22:8:6.
373 CWS, Sejong, Y22:8:21.
374 CWS, Sejong, Y. 22:8:30.
375 Kang Myŏnggwan 2019: 197.
376 CWS, Cungjong, Y 38:1:20.
377 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 38:1:17. Cf. Kang Myŏnggwan 2019: 198.
378 CWS, Cungjong, Y 38:4:7.
379 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 38:1:17. Cf. Kang Myŏnggwan 2019: 198.

Female slaves were both sexually exploited by male scholar-officials and lost their lives at the hands of female members of the same households.[380]

380 Kang Myŏnggwan 2019: 201.