9 School Slaves, Station Folk, and Female Entertainers in the Cosŏn Period

This chapter will take a closer look at some special groups of public slaves unique to the Cosŏn period, which are often missing from general discussions, but which made up a significant portion of public slavery in both numbers and substance.

9.1 Academy and School Slaves

The education system benefited from the great redistribution of former temple slaves under King Thäjong. In 1413, when quotas were set for the supply of public slaves to the local administrations, any slaves remaining after the administrative quorums were met were to be distributed to the schools that still lacked slaves.[1] The distribution of public slaves to the schools and academies was justified both as a demonstration of benevolence and as following established classical precedent, as explained in a Royal Lecture to King Cungjong in 1521:

> Impoverished students who enter a Confucian school often lack the means to prepare meals, making it impossible for them to stay and study for even a single day, despite their desire to do so. The presence of slaves in educational institutions is well documented in the classics [...] [2]

The thought that friendly slave women were preparing tasty meals for hard-working poor students while they pored over their books may have been appealing, but for the schools and academies it certainly did not tip the scales in favor of their desire to own as many slaves as possible. Like all public and private schools, the Royal Confucian Academy (Sŏnggyungwan) relied heavily on slave tributes as a major source of financial support,[3] along with income from rank fields and subsidies from the Ministry of Taxation. While these slaves were essential to the Academy's daily operations, they were also involved in cheating scandals during state examinations, violent behavior against royal guards and policemen, and extortion of commoners.[4] This was just the surface of a pressing structural problem.

The slaves had their own concerns, and they voiced them directly to King Cungjong when he tried to promote the use of paper money in the early sixteenth century. The Sŏnggyungwan slaves complained to the king because they had the privilege of operating butcher shops in the vicinity of the Academy for their livelihood, and in such small

1 CWS, Thäjong, Y. 13:11:11 = April 12, 1413.

2 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 16:1:12 = February 18, 1521.

3 Cang Cächŏn 2019: 109.

4 Ibid.: 106–8.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112210079-013

business, metallic currency was more practical than paper money. The king referred the issue to the Ministry of Taxation for discussion, and ultimately, the circulation of paper money declined by the end of Cungjong's reign. This petition clearly demonstrates the slaves' active role in addressing economic concerns that affected their ability to conduct business. However, King Sŏnjo banned the slaughter of cattle in the early seventeenth century because he considered it "unvirtuous." The ban was apparently not permanently enforced.

When excessive taxation on slave income led to financial hardship in the late seventeenth century, the Academy's headmaster petitioned King Sukcong for tax reductions, which were granted. Next, in the eighteenth century, King Yŏngjo granted temporary tax exemptions to Sŏnggyungwan slaves involved in state funerals and other state services. Finally, King Cŏngjo further reduced taxation in recognition of the burdens arising from forced labor and contributions to public duties, but he also repeated the ban on slave-run butcher shops.[5]

Despite these concessions, it became increasingly difficult to maintain a steady inflow of slave contributions. The *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn* explicitly ruled out exemption from servitude for Academy slaves, but this proved ineffective due to widespread slave escapes and fraudulent record keeping. By 1729, Sŏnggyungwan had already lost 2,500 of its 4,000 registered slaves. To mitigate this loss, "push-and-brush" campaigns were mandated every three years, or at least every six years. However, the enforcement of these inspections was problematic, because the officials sent by the Ministry of Taxation, usually low-ranking clerks, were susceptible to bribery and manipulation. Many slaves took advantage of this by falsifying records (for example, reporting the living as deceased or falsely reporting others as having escaped). By 1755, there were only 882 male and 516 female slaves left. Finally, official slave hunts ceased around 1764.[6] The schools tried to track down runaway slaves through their own push-and-brush campaigns, but without lasting success.

Although the official number of resident Confucian scholars was set at 75, it often grew to 100 or even 200 during peak academic seasons. This strained financial resources, making the academy even more dependent on slave tributes to meet its annual budget. As the number of tribute-paying slaves decreased, the Academy's budget was further strained. Academy scholars flooded the court with petitions for support while simultaneously using their slaves to squeeze out money from their tributors. In 1809, the Left State Councilor Kim Cächan reported to King Sunjo that these patterns of unexpected behavior were connected:

> Recently, the frequency of petitions from scholars both in the capital and the provinces has nearly surpassed that of the repeated memorials from the Three Boards. I do not know whether such was the case in antiquity as well. It is frequently said they have established offices to collect money

5 Cang Cächŏn 2019: 95–98, 104, 107.

6 Hiraki 1982: 111–12.

> separately from the provincial authorities, and that all four capitals and 360 counties have been assigned quotas. Local government clerks are apprehended and forced to make advance payments, and if there is even the slightest delay, they are subjected to corporal punishment, no different from debt collection by the judicial authorities.
> Moreover, the lower slaves of the *panhak*[7] are being allowed to carry out arbitrary collections, coercing and extorting with no place left untouched. These lower slaves also frequently abuse their position, even to the extent of seizing market shops and forcibly extorting in countless ways.
> In previous years, regarding this matter, the late sovereign issued an edict with the utmost strictness, even going so far as to punish officials who had lent out lower servants, holding their superiors accountable and enforcing severe prohibitions. However, the situation has now worsened compared to before, and the government clerks can no longer endure it. Orders were given to Sŏnggyungwan, the Four Schools, and the Capital County to impose a strict prohibition on such practices. Should this continue, the Grand Master of Confucian Studies and the high officials of the Capital County shall first be held accountable and subjected to severe investigation.[8]

The academies and schools, hit hard by the financial crisis, used their slaves in aggressive and unlawful tax collection, extracting funds from the provinces and coercing government clerks into advance payments under threat of corporal punishment. They leveraged their positions to engage in extortion, forcibly seizing goods and market spaces. Despite previous royal prohibitions, these abuses worsened, leading to renewed royal intervention to curb the slaves' actions and hold educational authorities accountable. The report made it clear that this was not a problem of the Sŏnggyungwan alone.

The royal Four Schools, established in the capital to provide Confucian education to the sons of officials and commoners aged fifteen or older, suffered from similar losses. Originally possessing over 1,000 affiliated slaves, this number fell to fewer than 100 by 1739, leaving the schools in a severe financial crisis. A subsequent 1755 census recorded 186 male and 128 female slaves remaining, but they were scattered across several provinces in so insignificant numbers that the administration gave up on the idea of hunting them down.[9]

Even in the countryside, school slaves were a crucial economic pillar of the local schools (*hyanggyo*), along with land, and ensured the operation of these state-sponsored educational institutions.[10] These local schools were created one per county for the purpose of educating *yangban* sons. The government allocated slaves to each *hyanggyo* based on the population of the local district. As stipulated in the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn*, they received between ten and thirty public slaves. These regulations remained in force until the nineteenth century. However, the actual number of school slaves varied widely depending on regional economic conditions and the status of each *hyanggyo*.

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7 The term *panhak* refers to government-established educational institutions. In the Cosŏn context, it typically indicates the Sŏnggyungwan, the Four Schools in Hanyang and other local Confucian academies affiliated with the state education system.

8 CWS, Sunjo 9:5:27 = June 27, 1809. Cf. Cang Cächŏn 2019: 108–9.

9 Hiraki 1982: 115.

10 Yi Kwangu 2019: 69; Na 2018: 80.

By the seventeenth century, the decline of both public and private slavery also affected schools, leading to operational difficulties. While some slaves gained legal freedom through official channels, many escaped using forged documents or other illegal methods.[11]

For example, in 1650, the Phunggi School in Kyŏngsang Province succeeded in having the provincial governor reclassify a soldier, who had been officially registered as a free man since 1642, as a school slave, even though the soldier claimed to be the son of a soldier and a free woman. Apparently, the school had "turned a blind eye" to this desertion for almost eight years before it took action.[12] The school's records showed that the woman had been a slave of the school; thus, her children legally belonged to the school. It turned out that her son-in-law, a freeman "who never liked the fact that his brothers were school slaves,"[13] was then in charge of the school's records and had arbitrarily changed the status of her children to "free." Now their sons had almost ten children of their own, to whom the school laid claim. The school won a legal victory, but the defendant refused to return the children to the school; after 1654, he disappeared without a trace. When the school went after his nephews, these tried in vain to petition for free status.[14] Almost forty years later, the school took action against two great-grandsons of the woman who this time claimed that their great-grandmother had been a private slave, at least at the time when she gave birth to their grandmother. This was potentially dangerous for the school, but the fact that at that time her son-in-law was the school's filekeeper and thus suspected of forging the records weighed in heavily. In the end, their appeal was rejected, and their status reverted to school slaves.[15]

As in this case, slave hunting could be an effective way to replenish the ranks, but it was time-consuming and the outcome was unpredictable. Support from the state authorities was also not a given for local schools. From the seventeenth century onwards, it repeatedly happened that the provision of public slaves was reclaimed or their number was restricted because the administration itself ran out of slaves. The schools tried to remonstrate against this, as in the case of the following petition on behalf of the local school of Yŏnghä, Kyŏngsang Province, drafted by the scholar-official and prominent Southerner Yi Hyŏnil around 1683:[16]

> [...] Recently, [...] twenty-three slaves belonging to the school were taken to fill the role of official servants because of the shortage of slaves in the local government office. The difficulty of maintaining the school and the cries of suffering from the servants cannot be overstated. How does this square with the principle that the king's property should not be diminished? [...] Although the

11 Yi Kwangu 2019: 68–69.

12 Ibid.: 77.

13 Ibid.: 54.

14 Ibid.: 54.

15 Ibid.: 66.

16 *Kalam Sŏnsäng Pyŏljip* 葛庵先生別集 2, Cŏngmul Kamsak Sŏngmun Nobi So 請勿減削聖門奴婢疏, https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/葛庵先生別集/卷二 [accessed 29.07.2025].

> rural Confucian schools are remote, they are still national schools. Their protection and preservation depend entirely on the decrees of the central government. [...] Recently [1683], after the division of Yŏngyang county, more than twenty slaves of the local government were assigned to the newly established county. As a result, the local government's land holdings and slaves were greatly reduced, leading to weakened operations and deep resentment. Some officials and scholars submitted a petition, but the wording was ill-considered and exaggerated the situation, leading to the court's decision to assign school slaves to official duties. After that, the scholars of the local government submitted another petition, but because they lived in that county, they did not clearly state the situation or speak firmly, and they failed to enlighten the king. The matter was delayed, and when it was sent to the local authorities for investigation, the actual situation was completely neglected, and the matter was never resolved. [...] During the previous petition by the local government officials and scholars, it was stated that after the slaves were taken away, only a small number of weak and exhausted individuals were left who were unable to perform their duties. This is the root of today's problem, where school slaves are used as official servants, causing us great distress. [...] We request that the relevant department conduct a thorough investigation and examine the records kept by the Department of Slave Affairs regarding the number of official slaves in Yŏnghä. Then those slaves who have been assigned to official duties should be quickly returned to their original schools. This is our greatest wish. [...]

The forced reassignment of school slaves to official duties due to local administrative shortages highlights the tensions between central and local governance, where bureaucratic inefficiencies and weak petitions failed to prevent the depletion of educational institutions' resources. Yi Hyŏnil was a member of the Cäryŏng Yi clan whose ancestral seat was in Yŏnghä, so it is obvious that he wrote this petition on behalf of his rural relatives. Local clans were strong supporters of these schools, which were often directly related to ancestor worship.

The particular problems of the school in Yŏnghä were closely related to the establishment of a new school in Yŏngyang, the new district that was formed in 1683 by splitting off from Yŏnghä. The people of Yŏngyang felt oppressed by their dominant neighbors, which is why they pushed for their independence. From 1687, the *yangban* and magistrate of Yŏngyang petitioned the provincial governor of Kyŏngsang to have slaves assigned to this school. They wrote in January 1687:

> As for land and slaves, there is no designated source. Dormitories have been built, but there are no slaves to run them. The kitchen exists, but there are no female slaves to cook meals. [...] Students staying at the academy have to rely on village households for food, which causes unavoidable inconveniences. [...] We request that ten slaves be allocated from the various public slave rosters of this county in accordance with legal provisions.[17]

The governor accepted the petition and four weeks later granted ten public slaves. The county was to select them from its own stock of capital-bureau slaves. These were slaves who lived in the county but were attached to departments of the central government in the capital, to which they paid tribute. Therefore, the county needed the approval of

17 1686:12:1 = January 4, 1687. Translated from the Chinese original, quoted from Na 2018: 81.

the Department of Slave Affairs in Seoul where they were registered.[18] This is why the county now compiled a slave register, which it completed on March 14, 1687 (12:2). The list contains eight female and two male slaves. The arithmetic mean age of the ten slaves was 20. The youngest among them was 12 years old, while the oldest was 36 years old. The median age was 18.[19] This means they were very young. The group included one family, the female slave Makpun (age 36) with her daughter Makson (age 15). Makson was initially mistaken for a boy, probably because of her name (*son* means "grandson"), and the list had to be corrected accordingly. Seven were previously associated with the Treasury Board, and one each with the Hospitality Office, the Bureau of Military Armory, and the Department of Slave Affairs,[20] to which the list was submitted to be checked and corrected before being submitted to the king for approval and sent back to the provincial governor, who confirmed the selection in a directive to the county magistrate on May 12, 1687. On June 26, 1687, the county magistrate informed the school that its application had been approved and that ten slaves had been assigned to the school. "This is a great honor for scholars both near and far."[21]

Thus, the entire process took nearly half a year from start to finish. For the selected slaves, this meant a significant change in their young lives: Instead of paying tribute to distant masters in Seoul, they now had to take care of boys and young men from the upper class.

9.1.1 The Slaves of the People's Relief Hall

In order to become independent of outside support, other institutions secured additional slaves through reproduction, which meant encouraging their female slaves to marry outside slaves or commoners, donations, or purchases.

A telling example of a reproductive strategy is the Ceminnu ("People's Relief Hall") in Yŏngju County, Kyŏngsang Province. It was founded in 1433 by local officials and the *yangban* as an academy-affiliated medical institution, and eventually served as a local school and a meeting place for the local elite.[22]

Its 3 surviving slave registers indicate a gradual increase in the number of slaves, from 45 in 1728 to 46 in 1774 and 59 in 1785. This reflected not necessarily real growth, but rather inconsistencies in maintaining registers, in particular with regard to deceased and absconded slaves. The slaves served for cultivating medical herbs, supplying firewood for heating, and for cooking.[23] The Ceminnu actively engaged in the sale and pur-

18 Na 2018: 85.
19 Ibid.: 87.
20 Ibid.: 88.
21 1687:6:1 = June 26, 1687. Cited in ibid.: 92.
22 Kim Yŏngna 2023: 193.
23 Ibid.: 201.

chase of slaves to meet operational demands. In the 1728 register, 1 female and 6 males at an age range of 6 to 53 years were listed as bought, while 1 female slave with 2 children were listed as sold. Selling usually occurred to repay debts.[24] The children and grandchildren of the newly acquired female slave appear in the 1774 and 1785 registers.[25] This confirms that slave family lives tended to be stable.

The 1728 register notably recorded no elderly slaves, indicating a selective focus on tribute-eligible individuals when the register was compiled.[26] Marriage patterns among these slaves followed two distinct forms: unions between female slaves and unspecified partners, which were predominant, and marriages between male slaves and free-born women, which were increasingly rare.[27] While the enforcement of the matrifilial rule simplified marriage structures, Ceminnu slaves continued to marry within these two patterns, regardless of legal changes. Their geographical distribution extended across northern Kyŏngsang Province and parts of Kangwŏn Province. Around half resided in Yŏngju, in direct vicinity of the Ceminnu.

The composition and status of Ceminnu slaves reflect a system in which state authorities, local officials, and the gentry contributed to the institution's operation, paralleling the provision of slaves in private academies (*sŏwŏn*). Their familial structures resembled those of public slaves, while their marketability as commodities aligned with the characteristics of private slaves. As a result, Ceminnu slaves embodied a hybrid status. This, again, is a shared feature with the *sŏwŏn* slaves.

These household data allow us to reconstruct the remarkable lineage of a single female slave, Makpun. She had no less than 125 descendants recorded over eight generations, 56 of whom were male. In most cases, however, the children of sons were not registered because they became the property of their mothers' owners if their mothers were slaves. The notable exception was Makpun's great-grandson Wŏnpil. He was married to a free commoner, which meant that his descendants were legally registered as slaves before 1731. Two things become very clear from this lineage: First, how potentially prolific slave ownership was; and second, that in sharp contrast to the inheritance patterns of slave owners themselves, slave lineage was overwhelmingly matrilineal.

The economic benefits of owning slaves were not limited to their labor. Slaves and their families could be sold when money was needed. Thus, the ownership of female slaves in particular could be seen as a long-term investment in living assets.

24 Ibid.: 203–4.
25 Ibid.: 202.
26 Ibid.: 204–6.
27 Ibid.: 208.

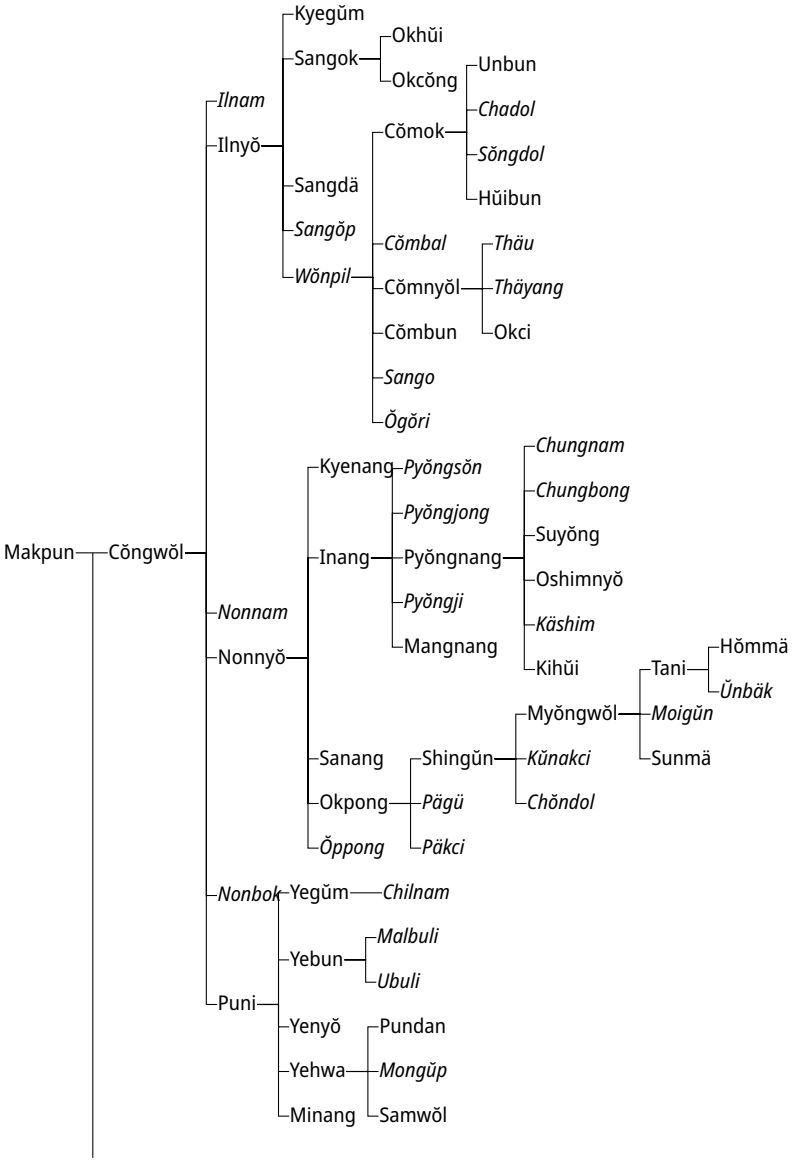

Fig. 32: Makpun's descendants. *Italics* = male (Kim Yŏngna 2023: 212–13).

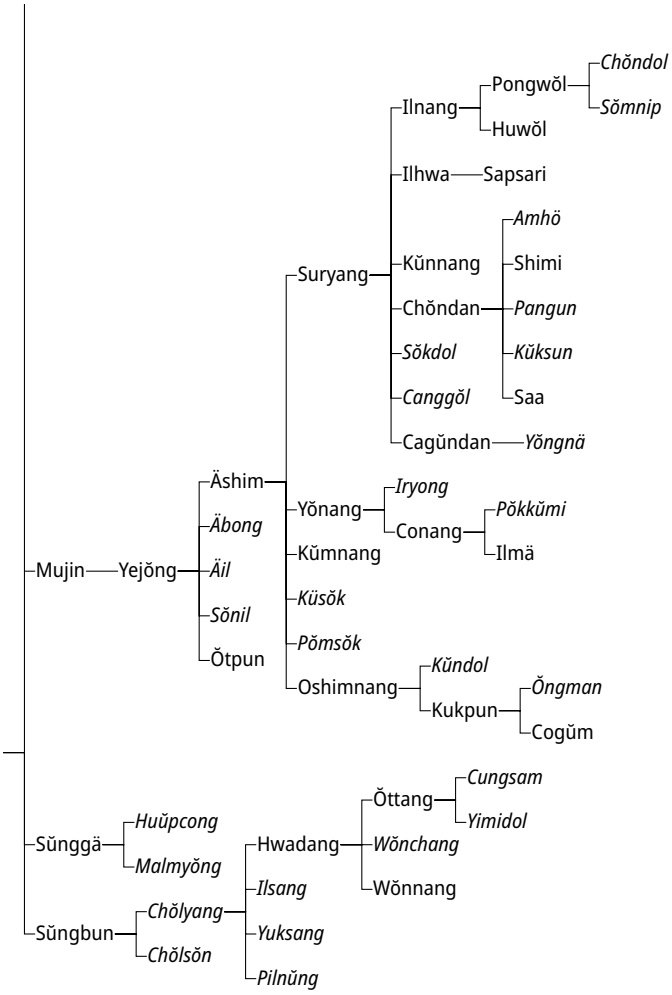

Fig. 33: Makpun's descendants (continued). *Italics* = male (ibid.: 212–13).

Just how useful and devoted as laborers the school slaves were is questionable. One of the Ceminnu's representatives claimed in 1650:

> The *hyanggyo* has originally few slaves and relies completely on these individuals, who sometimes serve as guards or storehouse attendants, and at other times as wet nurses or tea servers. After

> their enlistment, they live near the *hyanggyo*, treating their duties as if they were someone else's business, and not knowing their roles, which makes many scholars deeply pained.[28]

This apparent lack of enthusiasm was another reason why, by the seventeenth century, commoners began to replace slaves as both hired laborers and tribute payers.[29] This trend also made it easier to sell slaves when it was economically profitable.

A 1755 document in the National Museum of Korea provides a comprehensive record of the sale of eight female slaves belonging to the Nampo County School in Chungchŏng province.[30] Initiated by an authorization issued on August 22, 1755 (7:15), by academy officials managing the academy's affairs, the document authorized a slave named Wŏnjä to sell the academy's slaves. The subsequent explicit contract, dated September 6, 1755 (7:30), records the actual sale to Hong Sangsŏn of Poryŏng, with the proceeds to be used to rebuild the academy's Myŏngnyundang (lecture hall). After the sale, Hong Sangson submitted a request for notarization to the magistrate of Pinin County in the eleventh month of 1755. The document also includes confirmations from the seller Wŏnjä, confirming the sale, and from witnesses Hwang Kŭm, Ca Kŭmgŭm, and Chö Talchŏn, who also signed the explicit contract. This resulted in the issuance of an *yiban* (statement of record), which formally confirmed the transaction by the county magistrate. This six-part format is entirely consistent with the established procedures for slave sales (see p. 466).

9.1.2 Sosu Sŏwŏn

Sosu Academy, founded in 1543 by Cu Sebung, the governor of Phunggi in Kyŏngsang Province, was the first private Confucian academy, receiving a royal charter in 1550.[31] Located in Sunhŭng, it became an influential center for Confucian learning in the northern region of Kyŏngsang. Initially modest in scale, the academy grew significantly, housing up to 380 slaves by the eighteenth century. While previous studies focused on headmasters and students, Kim Yŏngna recently analyzed Sosu Academy's slaves, utilizing sources such as the *Sosu Sŏwŏn Nobian* (Sosu Academy Slave Records), which include genealogical records from 1677, 1762, and 1783. These records, originally formatted as slave rosters, provide insights into slave family relationships and show the academy's emphasis on updating slave records.[32] However, while the 1667 record was just a list of the currently active slaves, the 1762 and 1783 records included not only the current

28 Quoted from Yi Kwangu 2019: 70.
29 Ibid.: 71.
30 *Nobi yiban* 奴婢立案. National Museum of Korea, No. 購 311. 49 cm × 304 cm.
31 Kim Yŏngna 2020: 61.
32 Ibid.: 62.

slaves but also their ancestors; even many of those actually already deceased. This indicates a shift in attention towards the lineage of the slaves.[33]

Sosu Academy started out with just 3 male slaves and 15 female slaves, who were official slaves granted by Governor Cu Sebung. Most of these first slaves were children. In addition, the wives and children of executed criminals were transferred to the academy. Not all of them lived inside or near the academy; some were living elsewhere in Kyŏngsang Province.[34]

The total number of actual slaves rose to 134 in 1677, 382 in 1762, and 375 in 1783. But the rosters included many more individuals: former slaves as well as runaways, who were listed in the hope of somehow regaining them. At all times, female slaves vastly outnumbered male slaves.

Between 1677 and 1783, the academy bought only five slaves. One was the adult son of an academy slave (which probably means that his father had married an external slave); the motivation for this purchase was apparently to keep his father's lineage inside the academy. In three other cases, male academy slaves married newly bought female slaves; together, they had twelve children who all became the property of the academy. This strategy of buying the female mates contributed to the sharp rise in the number of slaves between 1677 and 1762.[35]

Although needed to manage these considerable numbers of slaves, the slave records were not regularly updated. A document from 1762 explains:

> This slave record is of utmost importance to the academy. The old slave records have become worn and faded, and due to the prolonged lack of updates, there is no reliable basis for verifying births and deaths among the slaves. Therefore, the slave record was revised and corrected, with priority given to recording the origins of the slave generations in this new document. Additionally, the number of offspring among the slaves is documented, with an actual addition of 96 individuals, excluding deaths and runaways. From now on, each year's census will carefully examine this new record. It will be bound and stamped to prevent any risk of loss. Year of Imo, early spring. Headmaster Kwon, Administrative Officer Pä, Senior Officer Kim.[36]

Sometimes, additional records were created. In 1794, a female slave, daughter of an inherited academy slave, and her son were recorded to have been found hiding together with the son of another academy slave (presumably the father of the boy) during the compilation of the 1785 slave record. They were discovered and documented in 1794.[37]

33 Ibid.: 68.
34 Ibid.: 63–64.
35 Ibid.: 65.
36 Quoted in ibid.: 66.
37 Ibid.: 67.

Tab. 35: Age structure of Sosu academy slaves (Kim Yŏngna 2020: 69).

Year		1677			1762			1783	∑
Age	Male	Female	Male	Female	N. a.	Male	Female	N. a.	
1–15	20	31	12	10		14	17		104
16–60	22	42	47	38		41	31		221
> 60	5	6	23	47		30	63		174
Added	1	2	15	11		3	2		34
N. a.	2	3	67	101	11	68	96	10	358
∑	50	84	164	207	11	156	209	10	891

9.1.3 Tosan Sŏwŏn

The Tosan Academy, built in 1574 in Andong to honor the learning and virtues of Thögye (Yi Hwang), had a very large slave population. In accordance with general trends, the number of *sŏwŏn* slaves began to gradually increase in the seventeenth century, peaked in the eighteenth century, and then declined in the nineteenth century. However, even then more than 1,000 slaves were recorded. While it is uncertain whether this number reflects the actual reality, it is clear that Tosan Academy had significantly more slaves than other *sŏwŏn*.[38]

In the beginning, *sŏwŏn* slaves mostly lived in areas close to the academy. In the early nineteenth century, they began to reside in various regions, as far away as Tägu, but when managing slaves in distant regions proved difficult, they concentrated back around the *sŏwŏn*. Residential patterns varied; most lived in regular villages, others in government offices, warehouses, schools, and relay stations, *sŏwŏn* villages of other *sŏwŏn*, temples, or the estates of *yangban* families.[39]

Sŏwŏn generally followed government decisions regarding military conscription. Tosan Academy kept military records for their slaves until the early eighteenth century. Exemption from military service required official approval, and even with identical evidence, results could vary. Moreover, when local officials changed, previous military exemptions could be overturned. In such cases, *sŏwŏn* would resort to legal action to have their slaves exempted from military service. Legal documents detail conscription lawsuits in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[40]

38 Kim Yŏngna 2019: 300.
39 Ibid.: 296.
40 Ibid.: 297.

At Tosan Academy, it was possible to obtain exemption from tribute by paying in money, cattle, or land. The most common reason for exemption was old age or illness. The academy would even document the specific illness in order to understand the reason for the exemption. Initially, exemption was granted to a family member if the family had many active members, but this was not strictly followed and disappeared over time. It was also allowed to replace a tax payer with a relative, mostly brothers, uncles or nephews.[41]

Sŏwŏn slaves enjoyed a greater degree of familial stability than private slaves. These slaves were not subject to individual inheritance, which made it unlikely that they would be moved to other regions or separated from their families when ownership changed. In the eighteenth century, most slaves were first-generation families. Later, there were cases where families lasted up to the ninth generation, indicating that *sŏwŏn* slave families lasted longer than private slave families. In the early eighteenth century, Tosan Academy actively promoted marriages between its male slaves and female private slaves of other owners. This required negotiations with *yangban* owners; children born of these marriages and appearing on the academy's slave list were the result of purchase agreements. Marriages with public slaves were much less common.[42]

9.1.4 Philam Sŏwŏn

Philam Academy was located in Cangsŏng, Cŏlla Province. The peak of its slave ownership was the sixteenth century, but from the late seventeenth century onward, it saw a decline in the number of slaves.[43]

The *Nobibo*, or Slave Genealogy, of Philam Academy is a unique, thirty-eight-page document from the mid-eighteenth century that records slave lineages in a genealogical format, reflecting an innovative approach to slave management. It was created "to understand the lineages of the slaves attached to the academy and to manage them efficiently."[44] Conventional slave registers typically listed individual details such as name, age, and status. The *Nobibo* goes a step further; it organizes slaves into family units and traces their lineages over up to six generations, focusing on the female slaves who were most important in determining the line of succession.[45] This layout reveals the

41 Ibid.: 298.

42 Ibid.: 299–300.

43 Mun Sukca 2009: 143.

44 Mun Sukca 2009: 136; the *Nobibo* came to public attention in 1984 when Chonnam National University Museum published it as part of a series of reports. A later facsimile corrected the errors and restored missing pages. Cross-referenced with other materials from the academy, the document's annotations reveal its origins in the mid-eighteenth century. Mun Sukca 2009: 137.

45 Mun Sukca 2009: 139.

Academy's intention to manage slaves as continuous family lineages rather than isolated individuals, ensuring long-term ownership stability.

Organized in six columns per page, the *Nobibo* contains detailed entries for 272 slaves, 230 of whom were inherited. The records are almost evenly divided between 133 male and 138 female slaves (one individual is unspecified), but it is evident that lineage continuity depended predominantly on female slaves, with their rate of succession being 2.5 times higher than that of male slaves.[46]

For 83 slaves (31 percent), their spouses are recorded (see table p. 565). Male and female slaves could either marry a slave from within the academy, a slave from elsewhere, or a free mate.[47] The number of marriages within the academy slave population was only 4, which is less than 10 percent for both sexes. While a slight majority (53 percent) of male slaves married free women, the reverse was apparently not true; only 1 in 47 women married a free man. However, in 33 of these cases (70 percent), the status of the husband is not indicated at all, while in the case of male slaves, this information is never missing. The reason for this is apparently that according to the matridominial rule the children of female slaves usually belonged to the academy regardless of the status of their spouse, while the children of male slaves lost their academy status in almost all recorded cases if they were married to a female slave from outside the academy. At first glance, it seems "unclear" why the academy would have consented to these invidious unions,[48] but if the academy had prohibited such marriages outside the academy altogether, the other slave owners would likely have reacted similarly, which would have meant that their own slave women would no longer have found spouses outside the academy. In the end, it came down to reciprocity.

In contrast, 14 of the 19 academy male slaves married to commoner women have descendants listed in the *Nobibo*, meaning that their descendants were slaves owned by the Philam Academy.[49] This means that the old hypodescent ("one drop") rule was applied in practice, even though it was legally abolished in 1731.

Notes within the *Nobibo* further detail escapes ("reportedly fled to ..."), manumission or sales, while the frequent listing of offspring under the mother (regardless of the father's status) reflects a matrilineal focus that helped ensure lineage continuity.[50] The *Nobibo* thus functions as both a register of individual slaves and a strategic family record, demonstrating the academy's response to declining slave populations by institutionalizing family-based slave management.[51] This approach allowed the Philam

46 Mun Sukca 2009: 150–56.
47 Ibid.: 145.
48 Ibid.: 152.
49 Ibid.: 152.
50 Ibid.: 157–58.
51 Ibid.: 152–53.

Academy to adapt to the social and demographic changes of the time, with female slaves playing a crucial role in maintaining the longevity of the slave system.[52]

Only 7 out of the 272 slaves at Philam were government slaves. One of their recorded lineages spans three generations, two are father and son, while the remainder are listed as single individuals with no lineage structure.[53] This underscores the overwhelming importance of private slave ownership and inheritance to the academies which, though recognized by the state, were privately run institutions.

Furthermore, only 38 academy slaves have their residences recorded. Most of them lived either near Cangsŏng or in other places in the province of Cŏlla. It is likely that most of the slaves lived independently, cultivating land owned by the academy as well as land owned by local landlords. Their main task was to provide goods for the Academy's biennial ancestral rites.[54]

Through the *Nobibo*, Philam Academy is also known to have emancipated slaves in the mid-eighteenth century for reasons such as renovation (such as the reconstruction of gates, decorative painting, or the construction of the library), paying off the academy's debt, and performing ancestral rites. Typically, slaves could gain their freedom by paying the sum of 60 *ryang*.[55] That is, slaves were released when it seemed economically opportune.

This is also true of the trade of slaves. In one case, a mother and her daughter were sold to pay for new ritual vessels.[56] As documented in the *Nobibo*, 35 of the 272 slaves were purchased. Sometimes the academy purchased offspring to maintain continuity within slave families. For example, it purchased the sons of a male academy slave who had married a female private slave, reintegrating them into the academy's slave line.[57]

Tab. 36: Spouses of slaves of Philam Academy (Mun Sukca 2009: 145).

Type	Academy Slaves	Private Slaves	Commoners	Unknown Status	∑
Male Academy Slaves	4	13	19	0	36
Female Academy Slaves	4	9	1	33	47
∑	8	22	20	33	83

52 Ibid.: 158.
53 Ibid.: 144.
54 Mun Sukca 2009: 143; An Canghŏn and Yi Sanghä 1998: 94.
55 Mun Sukca 2009: 142.
56 Ibid.: 142.
57 Ibid.: 153.

9.2 Station Folk

The structure and management of relay stations during the Cosŏn dynasty were characterized by their sophisticated frameworks, designed to facilitate efficient communication and transportation across the kingdom.[58] Through the stations, all regions were connected to the capital.[59] The tasks of the the station staff included delivering royal orders and official documents, hosting envoys, providing relay horses, and supporting the transport of public goods.[60] Stations operated under a hierarchy of personnel, resources, and responsibilities, with their infrastructure and operations reflecting both local and central priorities.[61]

Nationwide, more than 500 relay stations existed.[62] Their layout typically included administrative buildings, warehouses, and accommodations for personnel and travelers as the operational core of the station. In addition, stables and feeding facilities for horses underscored the importance of maintaining a robust horse network for transportation and communication.[63] Economic management at relay stations involved collecting tributes, which were used to cover expenses like horse procurement and station maintenance. These funds often came from tributes and were managed to minimize corruption and ensure timely disbursement.[64]

The station folk lived in several villages around the station's official buildings. They were hierarchically organized and included clerks with various functions, soldiers, and support staff. In terms of legal status, they were divided into clerks and their wives, who belonged to the category of "free people with servile duties," and male and female public slaves. Membership in both groups was hereditary and was documented by the household diaries, which listed the household head's name, age, affiliation, four generations of ancestors, his wife's name, age, and ancestors, and the household's tribute quota; they were revised every three years. In these records, the members of each household were categorized according to their functions. For slaves, they documented their names, ages, four generations of ancestors, residences, siblings, cohabiting family members, children, and disruptions such as exemptions for the elderly, deaths, and escapes.[65]

Station slaves were tasked with manual labor, including maintaining station facilities, caring for horses (*yimayŏk*), farming, food preparation, military duties, and assisting with the logistics of accommodating travelers. Some were used as urgent runners for the delivery of official documents. Due to excessive obligations, many slaves fled or

58 Takekoshi 1991: 24.
59 Yi Yujin 2021: 45.
60 Co Pyŏngno 2015: 173.
61 Co Pyŏngno 2011: 316.
62 Takekoshi 1991: 24.
63 Co Pyŏngno 2011: 302, 316.
64 Ibid.: 303–4.
65 Co Pyŏngno 2015: 236–37.

migrated.[66] To ease their economic burden, they were given land to farm themselves or through tenants. For a time, households could also pay tributes in lieu of physical labor. But as the number of slaves continued to decline in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and more money was needed to buy horses, slaves had to perform both physical and monetary duties at the same time.[67]

Relay stations were divided into three grades, and the allocation of official slaves theoretically varied accordingly: for the high grade, 50; medium grade, 40; and low grade, 30. But these numbers, set in the fifteenth century *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn*, were greatly exceeded in the course of time. For example, in 1737, the nine stations of the Kŭmchŏn Route in Chungchŏng Province hat a total of 1,627 registered station clerks and 1,015 station slaves,[68] which meant that the proportion of slaves among all station folk was 38 percent.

In the eighteenth century, Sŏnghyŏng Station in Kyŏngsang Province had 1,310 associated station households (meaning that the station was registered as their ancestral seat[69]) and was staffed by 472 station clerks, 323 male relay station slaves, and 211 female station slaves;[70] slaves accounted for 53 percent of all station folk. Sŏnghyŏng Station governed twelve subordinate stations along the Sŏnghyŏng Route, which together provided 132 relay horses. (The system was greatly reduced for economic reasons in the nineteenth century.)[71]

Household data from four stations along the Songna Route in Kyŏngsang Province taken in 1765 lead to a very similar result. Although the proportion of slaves varied widely among individual stations, ranging from 22 to 78 percent, of the total number of 5,512 station folk, 3,009 or 55 percent were slaves.[72] Overall, the marriage rules and patterns of station slaves reveal a dual dynamic: the reinforcement of servile lineage through same-status unions and the potential for status change through intermarriage with non-servile groups. Only 14 percent of male station slaves were married to commoner women. The vast majority of mothers of female station slaves were slaves.[73] However, most of the slave households had no children.[74] To replenish their numbers, large numbers of temple slaves were assigned after the abolition of many Buddhist temples at the beginning of the Cosŏn period; later, captured fugitive slaves or convicted criminals or, if needed, *päkcŏng* of the surrounding villages were allocated.[75]

66 Takekoshi 1991: 24.
67 Co Pyŏngno 1991: 67, 2011: 316.
68 Takekoshi 1991: 35.
69 Co Pyŏngno 2015: 174.
70 Co Pyŏngno 2011: 314.
71 Ibid.: 315.
72 Co Pyŏngno 2015: 238.
73 Ibid.: 245–46.
74 Ibid.: 240.
75 Co Pyŏngno 1991: 67, 2011: 286, 316.

Another route was the Sagŭn Route, which had a total of 15 relay stations, all classified as minor. The 98-page *Sagŭndo Hyŏngjian* ("Sagŭn Route Personnel Roster") of 1747 provides a detailed statistical account of the personnel composition at all stations, with 506 households of station clerks, 274 households of male station slaves, 73 households of female station slaves, and 59 households of guardians.[76] The total number of station clerks registered at the stations was 3,460, of which 203 were reported as runaways, 709 as deceased, 107 as retired, and several hundred as sick, blind, or otherwise incapacitated, leaving 2,378 in actual service. As for station slaves, 1,170 male and 489 female slaves were registered, of which 302 males and 109 females, or 25 percent, were runaways, leaving only 671 males and 321 females in actual service. Together with guardians and guarantors, the total population amounted to 5,175 persons, of whom 3,411 were present. This means that the percentage of slaves was nominally 32 percent and actually 29 percent, while the percentage of clerks was 67 percent nominally and actually 70 percent.[77] In many cases, the position of station clerk was filled by young adults, reflecting the endemic scarcity of labor. However, even a significant number of the comparatively privileged station clerks (6 percent) were reported as runaways, suggesting that their working and living conditions must have been harsh—even more so for the station slaves.[78] Runaway slaves continued to be registered as heads of household, in three cases even though their ages were listed as 100 or older: the infamous "white bones" (*päkkol*) phenomenon, which demonstrates that the main purpose of the register was not to produce reliable census data, but to serve the "administrative convenience of identifying station people."[79]

If we extrapolate from these three cases with a total of around 14,000 people in 29 out of 500 stations, there could easily have been as many as 240,000 station hands in all of Korea, of whom about one-third or about 80,000 were slaves.

Social patterns at stations showed some peculiarities not seen in other public offices. Since the station clerks were the remnants of the Koryŏ period's miscellaneous laborers and were granted the status of "free people with servile duties" only in 1414, they were an "intermediary status group that formed the boundary between free and servile people,"[80] and the rules governing their marriage and inheritance patterns were restrictive and complicated. At first, if male clerks married slave women, all male offspring became station clerks. In the seventeenth century, sons became station clerks and daughters became female station slaves. This was the patrifilial-matrifilial bifurcation rule, the most complicated status inheritance rule, which was also proposed as

76 Co Pyŏngno 2017: 20.
77 Ibid.: 21–23.
78 Yi Yujin 2021: 51.
79 Yu Insu 2017: 39.
80 Takekoshi 1991: 24.

a general rule in the seventeenth century, but in vain; it was only applied to specific groups to provide for occupational inheritance.[81]

Tab. 37: Composition of relay station workers in Kŭmchŏndo, Sagŭndo, Songnado, and Cayado (Yim Haksŏng 2017: 8).

District	Year	Clerks	Slaves		Guards	Total
			Male	Female		
Kŭmchŏndo	1738	1,627	455	205	102	2,389
	Percent	68	19	9	4	100
Sagŭndo	1747	2,377	715	321	45	3,458
	Percent	69	21	9	1	100
Songnado	1765	2,233	1,805	876		4,914
	Percent	45	37	18		100
Cayŏdo	1804	3,415	103	63	38	3,619
	Percent	94	3	2	1	100
Total		9,652	3,078	1,465	185	14,380
Percent		67	21	10	1	100

In terms of family background and parentage, the data from Sagŭn Station in 1747 show that the majority of station slaves were born from unions between base-status women and men of either base or commoner status. Specifically, 88 percent were offspring of station women and male commoners. Mixed-status marriages between commoners and base-status individuals were a major source of the station slave population, as 108 individuals—more than half of the sample—were born from such unions. Maternal lineage shows a nearly equal distribution between commoner and base mothers, with 77 being children of female station slaves and 79 of commoner women. However, base status was more dominant on the paternal side. These findings confirm that inter-status unions played a central role in the reproduction of the station slave class.[82] But this was soon to change. After 1731, both sons and daughters were designated as slaves.[83] Thus, the chances of upward mobility through intermarriage diminished over time, and mixed unions became rare. But the fewer slaves there were, the fewer equal-status marriages there could be—which meant that the number of slaves would continue to decline.

There were more effective legal means to gain personal freedom, however: After the Great East Asian War (1592–1598), slaves could be reempted as a reward for wartime military service or other significant contributions to the state. Later, when the econ-

81 Hiraki 1982: 138–40, 147–48.

82 Yu Insu 2017: 57.

83 Hiraki 1982: 146; Co Pyŏngno 1991: 51, 2015: 245.

omy was hit hard by a series of famines in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, grain contributions for famine relief or military supplies were rewarded with the legal purchase of status and official positions.[84] Slaves could buy station clerk status, thereby "slightly elevating their status compared to the typical designation of slaves" in the words of the 1707 *Kyŏlsong Yuchübo*. The administration was at times so desperate for cash that it even offered bargains, as evidenced by a 1696 directive from the Board of Border Defense:

> As for the male station slaves and local clerks in the records of the bureau's submissions, it is indeed appropriate to question why local clerks were later made into station folk. During this calamitous year, demanding 30 *sŏk* of rice as payment—what reason is there for imposing station labor? It seems reasonable to reduce this to 20 *sŏk*, which would be preferable.
> As for the female station slaves, there are cases where individuals wish to replace their status and escape servitude. By acquiring replacement workers in the market, using them for service, and supplementing with grain to aid starving citizens, there would be no harm and significant benefit.[85]

Faced with such offers, the number of station slaves decreased to the point where the operation of the stations was threatened. The administration tried to prevent this. By the mid-seventeenth century, many station inspectors were accepting bribes to register station slaves as "relay station workers" (*yŏkcŏl*). When this was discovered in 1684, it was decreed that the status of all "relay station workers" would be downgraded to station slaves in the next round of registration.[86] In the 1747 *Sagŭndo Hyŏngjian*, they were identified as "station workers demoted to slaves."

The age distribution of the station slave population also reflects patterns aligned with institutional priorities. Among the 201 living slaves at Sagŭn Station in 1747, 69 percent were adults aged between 15 and 60, forming the main workforce. The younger cohort under 15 years accounted for 16 percent, while the elderly aged 61 and above, who were exempt from labor, represented 12 percent of the group. This demographic structure highlights a predominance of working-age individuals within the population, consistent with the station's labor demands.[87]

The shortage of labor worsened after the tax reliefs for slaves in 1755. In several provinces, the own revenues of the relay stations were no longer sufficient to ensure their operation.[88] One obvious effect of the manpower shortage was that more and more children were drawn into active service.[89] Eventually, shifts in labor dynamics, the erosion of hereditary servitude, and financial pressures on the state led to adaptations that included exploiting younger members of station workers' families. The number of fe-

84 Takekoshi 1991: 25.
85 *Pibyŏnsa Tŭngnok* 備邊司謄錄, Sukcong 21:2:9 = January 13, 1696, quoted in ibid.: 26.
86 Yim Haksŏng 2017: 11.
87 Yu Insu 2017: 57.
88 Hiraki 1982: 75.
89 Takekoshi 1991: 43.

male station slaves who were registered as household heads is also striking; moreover, multiple generations of women within the same household could be recorded as station slaves, implying matrilineal heredity of their occupation.[90]

Tab. 38: Relay station people and intermarriage. According to the *Kyŏngguk Tajŏn*.

Station Parent	Spouse	Son	Daughter
clerk	free	follows father	follows father
	slave	follows mother	follows mother
woman	free	follows mother	not attached
	slave		
male slave	free	station official	station woman
	slave	follows father	follows mother
	palace slave	follows mother	
female slave	free		
	slave		

While each station was a separate administrative unit and its inhabitants were therefore recorded in the station registers, they were also considered part of the community in which the station was located. Ideally, therefore, information about station personnel should be reflected in town or village records. However, recent research has shown that this was not the case. In the case of the two stations of the Sagŭn Route whose data can be directly compared with the surviving Tansŏng household register of 1750, Pyŏkkye and Shinan, the overlap was only 30 to 40 percent, and much less for female slaves (12 percent for Pyŏkkye, 0 percent for Shinan).[91] At the same time, the proportion of women recorded in the village registers was much higher than at the station. One explanation may be that after the introduction of the general tallying (*pichong*) in 1740, women were registered to fill the required "mouth quota" (*kuchong*) per community, while men were held back as a "reserve force for other duties."[92]

For some, the incoherent double-entry of stationers in both station and township registers offered an intriguing loophole for choosing between slave and non-slave status: if the father was a station clerk and the mother a slave unrelated to the station, the son had the patrifilial option of becoming a station clerk. When the mother was a free commoner, he could claim her status. Which path was viable depended on what was entered into the registers. It was even possible for someone to be listed as a station

90 Yi Yujin 2021: 51.
91 Yi Yujin 2017: 104.
92 Ibid.: 103.

slave in the station roster, but as a station clerk in the village register, or as a station servant in the roster and as a private slave in the village register.[93]

Horse Grooms

As part of the transportation labor force, the duties of public slaves required physical labor and technical skills, including feeding, grooming, and maintaining the health of relay station horses, as well as participating in the procurement and replacement of horses. They were directly supervised by overseers and station administrators, who monitored their performance and ensured the proper care of the horses. Cases of negligence, such as failing to manage horses effectively or unauthorized activities, such as selling retired horses, could result in severe punishment.[94]

But not all horse grooms (*mabu*) were allocated to the relay stations. The *sabok mabu*,[95] associated with the Bureau of Royal Stables (*sabokshi*), were assigned to specific tasks at the court, such as managing horses used for transportation, supporting envoys during official journeys, or working in the royal household and military supply systems.

The behavior of public *mabu* was often criticized, and administrative records document a variety of problems ranging from negligence to outright misconduct. During state missions or while transporting provisions to royal supply warehouses, *mabu* were often accused of theft, especially theft of horse fodder, and other forms of corruption.[96] Negligence was another recurring problem. During royal processions, *mabu* were criticized for failing to properly handle horses, leading to incidents such as unstable litters[97] and accidents involving royal or military personnel.[98] Such lapses resulted in punitive measures, including corporal punishment. An anonymous Cosŏn period painting shows two adult grooms, probably in royal service, with a horse. They wear formal and ornate yellow robes. The presence of *pärängi* (official hats) atop the topknots further emphasizes their servile rank in a formal or ceremonial context. The horse's equipment is luxurious, featuring a highly decorated saddle with intricate embroidery and ornamental tassels. The reins and harness are adorned with embellishments, underscoring the

93 Yi Yujin 2021: 68.

94 Co Pyŏngno 2011: 302–4.

95 Gale 1897: 544.

96 For example, SWI, Injo 3:3:27 = May 3, 1625: Theft during transport missions.

97 SWI, Hyŏnjong 9:8:18 = September 6, 1667: "During the movements, the litter bearers and grooms who handled the horses were negligent, causing the litter to shake and become unstable. The deputy director of the Bureau of Royal Stables, who followed as part of the escort, failed to diligently supervise and discipline the situation. This neglect is deeply disturbing. As a result, the punishment of fifteen strokes of the cane is to be administered."

98 For example, SWI, Kojong 9:3:5: "During the return procession yesterday, three grooms assigned to receive officials […] died of illness and one horse died. In addition, a horse belonging to the Office of Military Command […] disappeared."

ceremonial nature of the scene. These grooms were the successors of the Koryŏ period runners and footboys, both defined by T. Hatada as "slaves who accompanied their masters when they rode on horseback."[99]

Fig. 34: Anonymous: Horse with two grooms. Cosŏn Period. Courtesy of Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Köln, A 77,79. Photo by the author.

Despite their necessity, *mabu* were considered expendable labor. Their work was physically demanding and often involved significant risks, as evidenced by reports of their deaths from overwork or illness during state missions.[100] The logistical demands placed on the *mabu* often intersected with broader systemic issues, such as the overburdening of certain labor forces, which forced them to neglect their agricultural work.[101] In partic-

99 T. Hatada 1969: 155, 160.

100 Such as during Pak Ciwŏn's mission to Beijing in 1780, when the chief interpreter and his groom both suffered from "severe shivering and pain": *Yŏlha Ilgi* (*Jehol Diary*), Record of the Journey to the Northern Desert, https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/熱河日記/全覽 [accessed 29.07.2025]. On the *Yŏlha Ilgi*, see *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 412–16.

101 Co Pyŏngno 1991: 58.

ular, sources indicate that *mabu* were often drawn from already depleted or marginalized labor pools, such as the beaconfire guards. This let to tensions, especially when local administrators imposed additional duties on these workers, such as storing ice or transporting tribute items, on these workers.[102] Internal government reports often emphasized the need to distribute the workload of the *mabu* more equitably to prevent exhaustion and ensure the smooth running of operations.

Eventually, the shortage of slave labor led to an increase in child slave labor. However, the use of boys for the demanding work of grooms was controversial. On August 4, 1741, the Board of Border Defense "completely and strictly declined" a petition made by the governor of Hamgyŏng Province "to assign young boys as horse grooms."[103] This demand, although denied, was a clear symptom of the crisis of slavery. Of all the slaves in the Cosŏn period, horse grooms were perhaps the most visible and prototypical, symbiotically intertwined with the *yangban* economy and culture. Yi Tŏngmu, a *Shilhak* scholar of the second half of the eighteenth century, quotes a proverb of his time:

> As soon as you mount a horse, you want a slave to follow you,

and explains it as follows:

> This means that men's desires are constantly growing. They cannot act according to their proper position in society. If they do not have a horse, they want one. When they have a horse, they want a slave.[104]

This reflects the idea that human desires are insatiable—once one attains something, they immediately seek something more. But the saying also shows the close relationship that existed between *yangban*, horses (or rather donkeys), and their horse grooms. Where there is talk of riding *yangban*, the grooms are not far away. This is reflected in the popular idiom of the "six legs" (*yukcok*) needed to travel: the four legs of the animal and the two legs of the slave.[105]

For this, *yangban* needed their men. In November 1768, when he was twenty-seven, Yi Tŏngmu himself went on a twenty-four-day journey on horseback from Hanyang to Hwanghä Province, accompanied by one slave whose name he never mentioned in his travelogue. He simply stated:

> My horse was red and half-blind, my servant was stout and dull-witted.

102 For example, SWI, Hyŏnjong 14:12:15 = January 21, 1674.

103 *Pibyŏnsa Tŭngnok* 108, Yŏngjo Y. 17:06:23 = August 4, 1741, quoted in Takekoshi 1991: 43.

104 *Chŏngjanggwan Cŏnsŏ*, b. 62, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/青莊館全書/卷六十二 [accessed 29.07.2025].

105 Kim Hyŏnsuk 2015: 74.

Even so, after a week of traveling, exhaustion set in:

> South of the Broad Ford, there was an inn. I considered staying, but the sun still hung at the length of two horsewhips from the horizon, and I could travel another twenty *ri* before dark. I worried for my servant—by morning, he would have to wade through the icy waters, and the cold might seep into his bones. I also felt pity for my horse, fearing that the frigid river would cause it harm. Would it not be better to find lodging in Ajŏng Village instead? My servant replied, "As you wish." He tied his robe and adjusted his socks, guiding the horse from behind. The horse flicked its ears and flared its nostrils, stepping cautiously as if ascending a staircase. I wrapped the reins around my wrist, gathered my robe in front, gripped the saddle firmly, and placed my feet lightly in the stirrups.

After three weeks of hard travel, Yi Tŏngmu jokingly remarked:

> "In the morning I am overcome by wine;
> At noon I am overcome by meat;
> At night I am overcome by fish."
> Everyone stared at me in confusion and asked, "What do you mean?"
> I explained:
> "When the sun rises in the morning, my servant drinks *makkŏlli* until his stomach is full, and then he stops out of sheer laziness. Leading my horse, he exhales like steam, blowing it directly into my face.
> By noon, when the frost finally begins to melt, the horse's back is raw and chafed. The stench of rotting flesh and clotted blood fills the air. The underside of the saddle, hardened like brick, emits a stench so pungent it makes my nose twitch as if to sneeze.
> In the evening, as we sit down to a forced meal at the inn, the blue mud walls flicker with the flames of fish oil lamps. The wicks swell as thick as a thumb, and the rising fishy stench stings my nose.
> All manner of foul odors assault me, proving that my sense of smell has not yet failed me.
> But all of you—drinking wine, feasting on meat and fish, indulging your mouths and gnashing your teeth—you are only filling your bodies with accumulated filth!"

It is likely that this "stout" nameless slave was not a professional groom, but simply a domestic slave who had to perform the duties of a groom. However, his habit of drinking *makkŏlli* in the morning proves that he was an adult.

However, the image of the *mabu* underwent a dramatic change in the nineteenth century. This is indicated by regulations that barred them from wearing fine clothing. In 1874, the government stated that "for low-ranking individuals such as grooms and footboys, even fine ramie [garment][106] is prohibited."[107]

In his *History of Corea, Ancient and Modern*, published in 1879, John Ross included an illustration entitled "Pony & Groom," a contemporary, folk-art style imagination of a horse groom at the end of the Cosŏn period.

106 細苧 *sejo* referred to a silk-like, woven fabric produced from ramie. It was highly valued for its lightweight and breathable qualities, making it ideal for clothing in Korea's humid summers.
107 SWI, Kojong 11:6:13.

Fig. 35: Anonymous: Pony and Groom. Cosŏn period (Ross 1879: 312).

The groom appears cheerful and approachable, with a casual and relaxed demeanor. He wears a simple and practical green and blue outfit, reflecting his lower social status. His hair is tied back in a simple braid. This hairstyle is associated with youth and practicality and is often seen on commoners or younger servants engaged in manual labor or everyday activities, and worn by unmarried youth. This groom is clearly a boy, not a man. Many nineteenth-century depictions of grooms show boys: adult grooms became the exception.

In his early nineteenth-century genre painting *Traveling by Boat*, Kim Hongdo places a *yangban* on the bow of the boat. Behind him are the two donkeys of his traveling party. Both are tended by grooms who are undoubtedly boys. Between them stands an adult slave, recognizable by his *pärängi* hat.

To be sure, boys had been used as grooms before—such as Ochŏn, who followed with the horse when Yi Hyŏngsang went on a journey in May 1700 (see p. 459). But after the eighteenth century, "stout" adult grooms who could carry their masters on their shoulders or wade through icy waters became increasingly rare.

Fig. 36: Kim Hongdo: Traveling by boat—detail. Courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

9.3 Female Entertainers

The history of female entertainers (*yogi* or *kinyo*) in the service of the state goes back to the Koryŏ period where they were mainly used as musicians and dancers. In the Cosŏn period, they were classified as public slaves and were integrated into the *kugyŏk* (state-imposed labor) system. They were now commonly known as *kisäng*, and their labor duty was called *kiyŏk*. Besides singing and dancing, they were also employed as female physicians (*yŏŭi* or *ŭinyŏ*) and needlework maids (*chimsŏnbi*).[108] The entertainers serving in Seoul were known as capital entertainers (*kyŏnggi*), and when their numbers were considered too small, *kisäng* were drafted-up from the local governments and sent to serve in Seoul (see p. 263). According to the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn*, every three years, 150 *yogi* and 70 female physicians were to be selected for service in the palace,[109] where they were "thrown into indeterminate social positions."[110] Eventually the number rose to about 300, which was sharply criticized by neo-Confucian scholars. In 1430, it was argued that Chinese envoys visiting the court were offended by the licentious performances, and that they should be replaced by boys. This was tried between 1433 and 1443, but King Sejong put an end to it. He also ordered that female entertainers be sent to the northern border regions to serve the soldiers stationed there.[111] In 1501, Ŏ Mujŏk (himself born a slave) complained in a fiery letter to King Yŏnsangun, blaming the entertainers for financial disaster, corruption, and disorder and advocating their exclusion from society:

108 Yi Kyuri 2005: 154–55; Ayukai 1973: 493–502.
109 Hyun Suk Park 2021: 207.
110 Ibid.: 212.
111 Ibid.: 213–18.

> Female musicians [...] were never suitable instruments for governing a nation under a virtuous ruler. [...] Alas! They have existed for so long, and their admirers are many. [...] Today, there are court entertainers in the capital and rural entertainers in the provinces.
> Upon examining the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn*, it is written: "For soldiers without wives." Alas! Was this truly made for the soldiers? [...] From what I have observed, this practice only serves as a means for the officials' leisure and enjoyment, facilitating their feasting, singing, and dancing. The harm caused by female entertainers is ten times greater than that caused by Buddhism and Daoism. [...] What kind of people are these entertainers? They know nothing about the work of silkworms, yet they are dressed in fine silk, gauze, brocade, and satin, and adorned with gold, jade, pearls, and emeralds. Is this in keeping with the distinction between high and low, noble and base, or with the cultivation of compassion, reverence, and frugality? [...] The number of courtesans in the provinces and counties is no less than several thousand. Their extravagant clothes and adornments are not the result of farming or weaving, nor are they bestowed by Heaven or delivered by spirits. Rather, they are the result of their association with officials, who, relying on their authority, secretly drain the lifeblood of the people. [...] Courtesans usually use their charms to mislead others, deceiving men like fox spirits. Even those who pride themselves on being virtuous and upright are rarely immune to their hidden lure. Those seeking office or involved in disputes often bribe or ask for their help, turning black into white and creating chaos. Ignorant commoners, captivated by their seductive behavior, imitate them. The concubines of nobles emulate them, as do the wives of commoners, competing in beauty and jealousy. Taking their cue from courtesans, they disrupt households.[112]

After the fall of King Yŏnsan in 1506, it was proposed to King Cungjong in 1510 to reduce the number of female entertainers at the court to the absolute minimum of 70 and to employ boys instead. However, in 1519, a new debate began and the king decided to reduce the number of courtesans at the court and to abolish them completely in the provinces. One year later, however, he complained about the lack of skilled performers, and the State Council recommended reinstating *kwanbi* in the provinces, including the reintroduction of female musicians for the troops stationed in remote border regions. This provoked opposition, but even "without discursive legitimization," Cungjong decided to reinstate courtesans at the court and in the provinces as proposed.[113] The main argument in favor of courtesans was made by Yi Yuchŏng:

> Since they exist among the inhabitants of the capital, how could they not be supplemented in the provinces? In my opinion, the Two Frontiers[114] are of utmost importance. The officers and soldiers are stationed far from home for long periods of time—if there were no female musicians, how could they find comfort (慰安 *üan*)?[115]

What is striking about this argument in retrospect is that it was literally identical to the justification of the recruitment of Korean women to "comfort" Japanese soldiers in World War II.

112 CWS, Yŏnsan, Y. 7:7:28 = August 11, 1501.

113 Hyun Suk Park 2021: 204; Yi Kyuri 2005: 156.

114 The northern provinces of Phyŏngan and Hamgyŏng, which formed special military zones.

115 CWS, Cungjong, Y. 15:9:3 = October 23, 1520.

In 1623, King Injo decided to abolish all capital entertainers and to call local government courtesans (*kwangi*) only temporarily for state banquets. From then on, *kwangi* were the most prominent among the female entertainers, forming part of the local government slaves (*kwanbi*).[116] It was in the countryside that the *kisäng* culture flourished in the second half of the Cosŏn period. Often, their functions were not limited to entertainment, but also included menial work, as evidenced by the synonyms by which *kwangi* were known, such as water-fetching maidservants (*kŭpsubi*, or simply *kŭpsu*[117]) and wine-serving bathhouse maids (*cutang*).[118]

The total number of state *kisäng* has been estimated at 20,000, but this is difficult to validate, and their number dropped sharply at the end of the nineteenth century.[119] However, the available data confirm that government *kisäng* were most numerous in the northern provinces of Phyŏngan and Hamgyŏng, and also Cŏlla, reflecting not only the continued frontier status of the north, but also the fact that these were the provinces crossed by official routes for the Chinese and Japanese delegations, which required special care (including cooking, washing, and sewing) for the foreign diplomats and their Korean escorts along the way.[120] The only region where no evidence of *kwangi* has been found is the metropolitan area of Seoul and Kyŏnggi Province.[121]

In some areas, there was a separate category of *kisäng* reserved for the military, called *yŏnggi* ("military courtesans").[122] For example, in 1730, the provincial government of Phyŏngan in Phyŏngyang listed 39 local and 45 military courtesans, and from 1829 to 1831, Kangwŏn Province in Wŏnju listed 20 local *kisäng* (*mokki*) and 19 *yŏnggi*.[123]

The entertainers were selected from among government slaves "with exceptional talent and appearance." While it is uncertain whether "talent and and appearance" can be inherited, the relevant point is that in order to become a *kwangi*, the women had to be slaves, and their children inherited their slave status.[124]

They were trained at the education offices (*kyobang*), government offices where instrumental music, singing, and dancing were taught. In Wŏnju, where the number of military *kisäng* was particularly high, the *kyobang* was located next to the military slave quarters.

For their work, which included performing music, dance, and sexual services for civil and military officials and foreign guests of the state,[125] *kisäng* received wages in

116 Yi Kyuri 2005: 158.
117 Yi Ŭbong 1977: 727.
118 Yi Kyuri 2005: 159.
119 Ibid.: 169.
120 Ibid.: 164–66.
121 Ibid.: 172.
122 Ibid.: 168.
123 Ibid.: 168.
124 Hyun Suk Park 2021: 205.
125 Ibid.: 205.

money and/or rice, which was grown on public fields designated as "*kisäng* wet fields" (*kidap*).[126] They lived in the local quarters for government slaves and performed in public banquet halls and special *kisäng* rooms (*kisängbang*), which were sometimes also used to house the entertainers.[127] Their benefits were equal to those of the other female government slaves but lower than those of male slaves.[128] However, as Hyun Suk Park argues, their situation was more "unpredictable and precarious" than that of other public slaves because they were exposed to the contact with men of higher status who could sexually exploit them at will without any chance of gaining their true respect.[129]

The irony of setting up "education offices" with the task of producing prostitutes was not lost on critics such as the *Shilhak* scholar Sŏng Häŭng who, in the late nineteenth century, ended one of his *kisäng* biographies with the lines:[130]

> The sages established the offices of instruction,
> Always placing ethics above all else—
> Why, then, do they not forbid official courtesans,
> Allowing custom to grow defiled with the winds of autumn?

The *kisäng* whose life story was told here was Cŏn Pulgwan, a state courtesan who remained faithful to the previous district magistrate, but was later forced into sexual service by the new magistrate, who dragged her off "like a goat or a pig." Refusing this treatment, she committed suicide.[131]

It may well have been this dehumanizing reality of *kisäng* life that compelled Chunhyang, the fictional heroine of the late Cosŏn period *pansori* play *Chunhyangjŏn*, to resolutely refuse to follow in the footsteps of her mother, a retired *kisäng*. At the age of sixteen, Chunhyang secretly and informally becomes the concubine of the magistrate's son, who is her age. However, when his father is appointed to a new position in Seoul, he leaves her behind. The new magistrate attempts to claim Chunhyang as his own concubine. After a roll call of the *kwangi* at his office, he asks disappointedly why Chunhyang, famous for her beauty, is absent. His chief administrator explains:

> Chunhyang was originally born of *yangban* lineage. She freed herself from duty by replacing herself with a female substitute slave and retired from *kisäng* service, devoting herself to the virtues of women's crafts. Then she made a lifelong vow to the former magistrate's son, Yi Mongnyong, before he left. Since then, she has remained faithful and chaste, which is why she was not presented today.[132]

126 Yi Kyuri 2005: 176.
127 Ibid.: 178.
128 Ibid.: 183.
129 Hyun Suk Park 2021: 225.
130 Sŏng Häŭng: *Cŏn Pulgwan häng* 田不關行. Translated from the Chinese original, quoted from Co Hanŭl 2023: 142.
131 Ibid.: 142.
132 *Manjŏngban Chunhyangga* 2025: l. 348.

This explanation refers to the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn*, which allowed the children of high-ranking officials and their concubines to redeem themselves by offering a female substitute slave—a legal loophole that seems to have applied to Chunhyang. Claiming to be a faithful secondary wife to the son of a high official was, therefore, a strategic assertion of status: not just romantic, but legal.

The new magistrate refuses to accept this defense and orders her to be summoned and enlisted as a *kwangi*. Chunhyang responds in anguish:

> What a miserable fate is mine! Some women are born fortunate and marry great lords of high rank [...] Others are born fortunate and become the wives of ordinary men, bear sons and daughters, and live their lives in peace, coming and going without worry. But what destiny was I born into? Born into the body of a *kisäng*, only to hear, "Bring her here!" "Drag her out!"—this shame is unbearable! How can I go on living?[133]

To which the magistrate scoffs:

> Well, just look at this absurdity! A *kisäng*'s daughter claiming chastity—who wouldn't laugh themselves to death at such nonsense? [...] When a woman refuses an order, it is usually because she has a secret lover, pleading desperately to remain faithful. But you—your crime is one of defiance beyond reason [...] What do loyalty and filial piety mean to a *kisäng*? What is chastity to someone like you?[134]

Ironically, the end of the story proves him right: Yi Mongnyong, her secret lover, returns as a secret royal Inspector, exposes the magistrate's abuse, and vindicates Chunhyang by affirming her claim to loyalty and chastity.

The core conflict of *The Tale of Chunhyang*, then, is Chunhyang's struggle to escape the legal and social trappings of her inherited *kisäng* status and instead live as a faithful secondary wife—which, given her background, is the highest social aspiration available to her. The magistrate's refusal to recognize her self-redefinition underscores the harsh rigidity of hereditary status boundaries in late Cosŏn society. The story is thus not merely a romance, but a profound commentary on social status, gender roles, and limited personal agency within a highly stratified legal order.

While Sŏng Häŭng was adamantly opposed to the *kwangi* system, he also recognized the humanity of the women:

> There is no one more lowly in status than a courtesan. Many courtesans, fully aware of their lowliness, behave like animals without the slightest shame. But there are also those who are steadfast and passionate, and even some who harbor a quiet longing.[135]

133 Ibid.: l. 401.

134 Ibid.: l. 417.

135 Quoted from Co Hanŭl 2023: 141.

For Sŏng Häŭng, the cruel treatment of all women—including *kisäng*—and even "taking pleasure in beating them" violated humanity and was "more savage than the deeds of wolves."[136] However, his "exposure of institutional violence based on the voices of victims"[137] was an outsider position among Cosŏn intellectuals.

The *kwangi* system survived the abolition of slavery until 1908, when the Japanese colonial government ended it.[138] But the Japanese did not leave it there. The "comfort women" system of the Japanese military during World War II built on structural similarities with the *kwangi* system, particularly its military *kisäng*. Both were state-organized systems of sexual labor designed to maintain the morale of soldiers stationed far from home. In both cases, the state explicitly justified the use of women for military comfort. However, the two systems differed significantly in their structure, recruitment, and function. *Kwangi* were public slaves registered as state courtesans within the Cosŏn bureaucracy, with duties that extended beyond sexual service to include music, dance, and diplomatic functions. Their status was hereditary, meaning that their daughters were also destined to become *kwanbi*, ensuring a continuous system of state-managed slavery. In contrast, the "comfort women" system was a wartime mechanism in which women—mostly from Korea, China, and Southeast Asia—were conscripted, trafficked, or deceived into sexual service for Japanese soldiers.[139] Unlike *kwangi*, they had no formal bureaucratic status and were subjected to coercion, violence, and physical confinement. Furthermore, while *kwangi* were an established part of the *kugyŏk* (state-imposed labor) system, their placement and functions were overseen by government officials, whereas the "comfort women" system operated largely outside the civilian legal framework. Moreover, *kwangi* were seen as a necessary element of state administration, embedded in the broader structure of court culture, diplomacy, and governance, while the "comfort women" system was a militarized system of exploitation designed to prevent rape in occupied territories, control venereal disease, and ensure the mental stability of soldiers. These distinctions suggest that the "comfort women" system was not a continuation of the *kwangi* system but rather an escalation of state-controlled sexual labor into a militarized form of systematic enslavement.

136 Co Hanŭl 2023: 146.

137 Ibid.: 146.

138 Yi Kyuri 2005: 184; Hyun Suk Park 2021: 204.

139 Zöllner 2021.

Tab. 39: Types of female entertainers in the Cosŏn period.

Type	Definition
Kisäng 妓生, *kinyŏ* 妓女, *yŏgi* 女妓, *changnyo* 娼女	Female entertainer, courtesan
Kwangi 官妓	*Kisäng* affiliated with the local governments who performed courtesan duties, including entertainment and sexual service
Kibi 妓婢	"*Kisäng*-maid" = *kwangi*
Cutang 酒湯	Wine-serving bathhouse maid = *kwangi*
Sugi 首妓	Head *kisäng*, the highest-ranking entertainer within a region or institution
Hängsugi 行首妓	Senior *kisäng* responsible for overseeing and training other *kisäng*
Chimsŏnbi 針線婢	Needlework maid selected from among *kisäng*, responsible for sewing and textiles
Sugŭppi 水汲婢 or *kŭpsubi* 汲水婢	Water-fetching maid who sometimes acted as a *kisäng*, receiving similar provisions and stipends
Ŭibi 醫婢	Medical maids trained to treat female patients, sometimes classified as capital *kisäng*
Yŏnggi 營妓	Military *kisäng* stationed in army camps, providing entertainment and comfort to soldiers
Yŏak 女樂	Woman trained in music and dance, often performing at envoy receptions and military garrisons