

Chapter 11: The Civil Service Examinations

The Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) employed an elaborate civil service examination system for recruiting central government officials. For years, if not decades, an aspiring official had to study the Confucian Classics and statecraft diligently in order to pass the examination. In the United States today, someone desiring a successful career as a government official will have to consider many things. What kind of a government career will be good? Which particular examination will it require, if any? And what would be a desirable preparation for passing this examination?

In Joseon Korea, where the examination system was of central importance in the recruitment of government officials, ambitious young men considered the same questions. In 958, the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392) instituted the civil service examination system, but with the protection appointment system that allowed male relatives of an official of at least fifth rank to be appointed to office without taking the exam. It was not until the Joseon period when the examination system functioned as just about the only meaningful way for an individual to pursue a successful career as an official. In addition to the protection appointment system that still allowed close kin of an official of at least second rank to receive appointment to an office, various recommendation systems could allow Confucian scholars of nation-wide fame to attain an official position. However, the vast majority of those who occupied the highest and most meaningful offices in the central government were graduates of the civil service examination.

The civil service examination was highly competitive. Comprised of four fields, the civil service examination selected civil officials, military officials, government technical specialists, and State Confucian Academy (*Seonggyungwan*) students through the civil (*mungwa*), military (*mukwa*), technical (*japgwa*), and licentiate (*saengwon-jinsa*) examinations respectively. In Joseon society, where the elite upheld Confucian literary virtue, passing the civil examination conferred the greatest prestige upon aspiring officials. However, the candidate was first required to pass the preliminary examination held in his locale. Candidates who successfully passed the preliminary examination then had to pass the metropolitan examination, which was held in the capital. Candidates who passed the preliminary and metropolitan licentiate examinations were eligible to study at the State Confucian Academy. The final stage of the examination process was the palace examination which was held in the king's presence and used to rank the finalists. In comparison, both the military and technical examinations were less prestigious than the civil examination. Unlike the civil service examination, the military and technical examinations were taken by candidates from diverse social backgrounds and were monopolized by a non-*yangban* status group which contributed to their relatively low prestige.

Regardless of the type of examination, both the local and metropolitan stages were extremely competitive. Even the most highly educated *yangban* had a very low passing rate. The triennial examinations were held every three years and only produced 33 civil, 28 military, 48 technical, 100 classics licentiate, and 100 literary licentiate examination passers. In total, the Joseon dynasty produced some 14,000 civil; between 150,000 and 170,000 military; more than 12,000 technical; and over 47,000 licentiate examination passers. Although Joseon Korea's population increased from somewhere

between two to five million people in 1392 to about twenty million in 1910, it was clearly difficult for anyone to enter officialdom.

The Joseon civil service examination was not an entirely “fair,” meritocratic institution which valued an individual’s talent over his family background. First, the state administered irregular special examinations far more often than the regular triennial examination. Although the examination was originally held every three years, special examinations – administered on felicitous occasions for the state and royal family – became more frequent. Throughout the Joseon period, such special examinations were held four times more often than the triennial regulation examinations. Since the government often held irregular examinations that were announced less than ten days in advance, the irregular examinations generally favored those who lived in Seoul and the surrounding vicinity. Of course, special occasions such as the accession of a new king to the throne or the investiture of a crown prince signaled that a special examination would be held. However, provincial aspirants who lived far away from Seoul were often not even aware that special examinations were being administered. Unsurprisingly, Seoul residents dominated the civil examination during the Joseon period.

The examination system also favored the elite. Even when the grading was done fairly, candidates from powerful *yangban* families were more likely to have prior knowledge of what might be on the examination and prepare accordingly. Moreover, the highly competitive nature of the examination demanded years, if not decades, of intensive study from childhood. This process required economic security that allowed the candidate to focus on his studies rather than worrying about his livelihood. Although everyone was eligible except for slaves, sons of remarried mothers, and others that the state deemed unqualified, the ability to invest so much into examination preparation was beyond the means of most people except for the *yangban*. Unlike the military examination which tested actual weaponry skills, the civil, the technical, and the licentiate examinations hardly produced passers of commoner status during the entire Joseon period.

The Joseon examination system had two faces. In principle, it promoted individuals based on talent rather than status and thus laid the foundation for a modern society. In reality, the examinations were dominated by *yangban* and technical specialists, which allowed them to monopolize government positions and further maintain their status. Of course, fourteenth to nineteenth century Korea and China were almost exceptional cases in the world in terms of maintaining an institution to recruit new government officials from the population based on their talent. In this regard, both Korea and China were arguably ahead of early modern Europe. However, the subject matter tested by the civil and licentiate examinations—the most prestigious competitions—stressed knowledge of the Confucian classics and its application, which meant that the civil service examination system as a whole was hardly a “modern” institution geared toward recruiting capable officials well-versed in practical knowledge.

Let us consider an example of an actual essay question on policy from a Joseon civil service examination. Conducted in 1515 during the reign of King Jungjong (r. 1506–1544) at the State Confucian Academy, the examination prompted the candidates as follows:

Confucius¹ said, “If I were to be appointed by the government, then only several months would be enough to accomplish my goals [to restore the social order] through statecraft, and within three years at most I would be able to do so.” Could a sage like Confucius speak in this way without a realistic plan to back up his claims? Confucius must definitely have had his own ideas about the scale and method of the most ideal, practical statecraft. Can you point out the details of his plan one by one? The late Zhou period² was a time when its crumbling social order and laws had already fallen apart. Nevertheless, Confucius contended that he could present a good government and correct the problems within just three years. If Confucius had really been appointed, what would have been the result after three years? Could we have indeed witnessed a good outcome? I think that all of you who gathered in this hall of the State Confucian Academy are students who are very eager to learn and follow the teachings of Confucius, so all of you may have aspirations to accomplish the ideal statecraft of emperors Yao and Shun.³ Probably none of you want to be remembered [by posterity] as having been selfish and seeking personal success in life. In the time of difficulty that we are confronting, how and what must be implemented in order to overcome the national crisis and revive the idealistic governance of earlier sages? Discuss your own solutions to this in detail.

Now consider how an examinee should write a policy essay regarding the current economic crisis in the United States. Among the various policy essays presented by the examinees, the examination officials will have to choose those offering the most well organized, reasoned argument while still respecting appropriate conventions of English prose.

¹ Confucius (551-479 B.C.): the originator of Confucianism. He was a famous Chinese thinker and social philosopher, whose teachings and philosophy have deeply influenced East Asian life and thought.

² The Zhou was an ancient Chinese dynasty (11th-3rd B.C.) that laid the foundation of Chinese civilization.

³ Legendary kings honored by Confucius in early China. They are allegedly to have governed their people with moral virtues.

Chapter 12: Korean Slavery and Confucian Hypocrites

The Confucian elite in Joseon Korea employed self-serving interpretations of Confucian classics in justifying slavery. Until the mid-eighteenth century, a quarter of the Korean population was slaves. Ostensibly a Confucian social order maintained by the principles of benevolence and mutual propriety, late Joseon Korea nonetheless bound many to chattel slavery. Accordingly, Confucian understandings of slavery in Joseon Korea deserve consideration.

Even before the Joseon period, the slave population steadily increased. Until the eleventh century, it is believed that about ten percent of the population was slaves. With the demise of the early Goryeo sociopolitical order during the course of military rule (1170–1270) and Mongol domination (1258–1351), the slave population steadily increased to about thirty percent of the population. Arguably, the concurrent spread of Neo-Confucianism in Korea suggests that, at the very least, the late Goryeo Confucian elite did not have a serious issue with slavery. In fact, the most ardent advocates of scaling back slavery were King Gongmin (r. 1351–1374), who was an ardent Buddhist, and Sin Don (?–1371), a Buddhist monk mothered by a slave and promoted by Gongmin to be the *de facto* prime minister.

While spearheaded by reformist Confucian scholar-officials, the Goryeo-Joseon dynastic change left slavery intact. Instead of rationalizing the institution, the Joseon elite emphasized the long tradition of Korean slavery, the usefulness of slavery as punishment, and the inevitability of slavery in maintaining a social order based on the principle of *myeongbun* (“rectification of the name”). Among these grounds, the *myeongbun* justification is especially noteworthy since it is a core concept indispensable to the Confucian view of relationships among humans as well as states. Defined as the strict distinction—in both hierarchical and moral terms—between the high and the low, the upper and the lower, and the noble and the base, Joseon Confucians explained *myeongbun* as the indispensable principle governing both the world order and interpersonal relations.

The Joseon ruling elite relied on the concept of *myeongbun* to rationalize its privileges as well as discriminatory treatment of various groups such as slaves, secondary children, and women, among others. Most of the Confucian elite were slave owners and they compared a slave’s duties and obligations to the master with those of a subject to the ruler. As most of the powerful families in late Goryeo maintained political power, social status, and economic resources even after the dynastic change, the Joseon elite used the Three Bonds and Five Moral Rules of Confucianism to justify slavery.

In addition to using Confucianism to suit its needs, the Joseon elite did not hesitate in finding other means of promoting slaveholding. Confucian notions of patriarchy and patrilineal kinship would have arguably provided an ideological basis for a law that the offspring of a female slave should inherit its father’s status, which was usually equal to or higher than the mother’s. However, the slave-owning Confucian elite had two practical reasons for not honoring the patrilineal status inheritance rule when a female slave was involved. First, it was not always possible to determine the status of the father. Second, the patrilineal inheritance rule would eventually reduce the slave population over time since the social status of the father was usually the same or higher than that of the slave mother.

Certainly meant to defend the interests of *yangban* slaveholders, the inclusion of this formulation in the State Administrative Code in 1471 contributed to a rapid increase in the slave population. Slaveholders tried to have their slaves marry or have sexual relations with commoners in order to claim the slave offspring. Also, the heads of impoverished commoner households married off their daughters to male slaves so that the slave grandchildren would be raised by the legal owners of the father. Reported cases show that powerful slaveholders took advantage of such practices by even forcing female commoners to marry their male slaves. Not surprisingly, not only did poor males choose to marry female slaves, some desperate commoners in debt or unable to pay the crushing taxes even offered themselves as slaves.

As someone's property, a slave owed no tax or military obligations to the state. By the early sixteenth century, the Joseon government found its tax base greatly reduced. In fact, the devastating wars against the Japanese (1592–1598) and the Manchus (1627, 1636–37) not only forced the desperate state to recognize the problem of inadequate military manpower but also to begin allowing some slaves to perform military services by offering incentives to them or their owners. Despite their class interests, more public-minded *yangban* statesmen began to propose increasing the commoner population—not necessarily out of Confucian benevolence but in recognition of the dire needs of the state. Finally in 1731, after four decades of debate, the government adopted the rule of matrilineal inheritance of slave status. In reality however, it was not common for a male slave to father a child with a woman of higher social status, but the new policy certainly was a positive step toward controlling the continuous increase in the slave population.

Indeed, in the mid-seventeenth century, the percentage of slaves in the Korean population began to decrease until the abolition of slavery in 1894. In addition to the 1731 legislation, other factors contributing to the decrease were slaves running away, the weakening of government control over its own slaves, social change resulting from the improvement of agricultural productivity and the growth of commerce and handicraft, and the blurring distinction between commoners and slaves as more slaves paid taxes and performed military service like the commoners. In fact, the state manumitted all slaves owned by various government offices in the capital in 1801, and the government declared in 1886 that no child born to a current slave would inherit the parent's slave status. Finally in 1894, the government abolished slavery altogether. The timing of the abolition is suggestive in that it coincided with the abolition of the civil service examination system which had been recruiting government officials well-versed in the Confucian classics for centuries. In other words, Korean slavery shared its lifetime with that of Confucianism as the state ideology.

The conservatism of even the more reform-minded Confucian scholars in late Joseon shows that Joseon Confucianism per se had little room for the abolition of slavery. On social reform, renowned Confucian social critics such as Yu Hyeongweon (1622–73), Yi Ik (1681–1763), and Yu Suweon (1697–1755) only went as far as the prohibition of inherited slave status and slave trade. One late Joseon reform Confucian intellectuals who is well-regarded today, Jeong Yagyeong (1762–1836), was actually a harsh critic of the 1801 manumission of government slaves. In fact, he warned that without slavery, national discipline would be abandoned and the distinction between high and low would disappear. This conservative attitude of Confucian reformists concerning slavery is closely related to the fact that none of them argued for the total abolition of the status system. Even Bak Jiwon (1737–1805), an ardent critic of the

culture of his fellow *yangban*, merely argued for reforming the institution of slavery rather than pursuing its abolition.

Overall, Joseon Korean Confucians, whether conservatives or reformists, regarded *myeongbun* as a law of nature. While recognizing that every person was born a child of Heaven and Earth, they emphasized that Heaven endowed each person with a specific role according to his or her position on the universal moral hierarchy. The lord should act like a lord, a subject like a subject, a father like a father, and a son like a son. Applying the concept of *myeongbun* to the social realities of Joseon Korea, the Confucian elite felt no guilt about possessing slaves. Certainly, some Confucian intellectuals expressed greater compassion toward slaves, but they nonetheless used the notion of *myeongbun* to defend slavery as an institution crucial for maintaining a stable social order in Korea. In so doing, they did not shy away from blatantly self-serving interpretations of seemingly humanistic Confucian ideas.

While historically rare, slaves in Korea sometimes did what they could to improve their lot rather than relying on any sympathetic members of the ruling elite. The following speech by a slave in the Goryeo capital, Manjeok (?–1198), is telling. According to historical accounts, most of the private slaves in the city were involved in his plot to emancipate slaves and seize power. The plot came to light before the uprising took place, and the government executed about 200 slaves. Manjeok's speech was recorded as follows:

“Listen! My comrades! Since the event of 1170 many high officials have arisen from among the slave class. Are generals and ministers born into these glorious positions? No! For when the time is right, anyone at all can hold these offices. Why then should we only work ourselves to the bone and suffer under the whip? If you kill your master and burn the record of your slave status, thus bringing slavery to an end in our country, then each of us will be able to become a minister or general.”

Chapter 13: The Rise of Confucian Literati

In sixteenth century Joseon Korea, a group of Confucian scholar-officials rose to power in the central government. Usually called *sarim* (literally, “rusticated literati”), they were scholar-officials well-versed in Confucian classics and advocated applying Confucian teachings to achieving individual moral cultivation, harmonious communities of mutually-helping members, and responsible governance under a diligent ruler. The *sarim* are important for understanding Korean history, because their moral rhetoric, if not themselves, dominated society for about four hundred years, from the early sixteen century to the early nineteenth century. In fact, many so-called Korean traditions took shape in this period. They include, among others, a more strictly patrilineal kinship organization, a preference for sons, primogeniture, ostracizing remarried women, the relegation of women to the “inner sphere,” and a taboo against a marriage between individuals with the same surname and ancestral seat.

As a political force, the *sarim* presence in officialdom became noticeable during the reign of King Seongjong (r. 1469–1494) who wanted to control powerful “meritorious subjects” (*gongsin*) that had enthroned him as a minor. Seongjong appointed many *sarim*, who had passed the civil service examination, to various positions in the Censorate (*Daegan*) that comprised the Office of the Inspector-General (*Saheonbu*), the Office of the Censor-General (*Saganwon*), and the Office of Special Counselors (*Hongmungwan*). In the Joseon government, the Censorate had three important functions. Above all, new appointments and legislation required the endorsement of the Censorate, without which even the king’s approval was ineffectual. Also, Censorial officials could even criticize the king for any action or conduct that they judged counter to Confucian values, and it was understood that the monarch could not punish them for such criticism. Thirdly, the Censorate exercised powers of surveillance and impeachment of any officials for immoral behavior or corruption. As Seongjong expected, the young censorial officials, who had just passed the civil service examination, never hesitated to criticize powerful high officials for the slightest wrongdoing.

The *sarim* suffered a major setback under King Yeonsangun (r. 1494–1506) who desired to establish autocratic rule over scholar-officials. Amidst the ensuing tension between the throne and censorial officials, he purged any officials protesting and remonstrating autocratic royal decisions. Yeonsangun especially targeted a number of censorial officials and their supporters, even executing some. Infuriated at the Confucian scholars in general, Yeonsangun even closed the State Confucian Academy as well as abolishing the censorial and other offices that he deemed to be infringing on royal authority. Moreover, he even purged the entrenched, opportunistic senior officials who had supported his earlier purge of the *sarim*. Now isolated, Yeonsangun’s tyranny ended when the disgruntled victims of the second purge and their supporters dethroned him, and he died soon afterwards while in confinement.

Elevated by the officials who engineered the coup, Yeonsangun’s half brother and the new king, Jungjong (r. 1505–1544), struggled to enhance royal authority which was at a low point. Effectively a nominal ruler who was surrounded by powerful officials rewarded as meritorious subjects for the coup, Jungjong took advantage of a temporary power vacuum when three key leaders of the coup died within six years after

seizing power. He began to appoint more reform-minded Confucian literati to censorial offices to check the power of meritorious subjects. Under the aegis of Jungjong, Jo Gwangjo (1482–1519) and his reformer colleagues rapidly expanded their power.

Using the censorial offices as his powerbase, Jo put forth a series of reform proposals, but only some of them were ultimately put into action due to stiff opposition from the meritorious subjects. The most striking reform was the establishment of the recommendation examination system. Jo proposed the system to recruit morally upright Confucian scholar-officials through recommendations rather than the standard civil service examination. Despite objections from Jo's critics, Jungjong approved the new system, which was then used to select twenty-eight men. Since most of them were recommended by Jo, the outcome invited even further criticism and opposition.

Unsurprisingly, when Jo proposed to nullify the titles of merit subjects and to confiscate their reward land, the conservatives launched a counter-attack which became the Purge of 1519. Although the reformist Confucian *sarim* perspective viewed a monarch's moral qualities as crucial for effective governance, Jungjong himself had become tired of ceaseless remonstrances and scrutiny over his conduct from the censorial officials. Moreover, Jungjong saw in the censorate a new base of challenge to royal authority. With his approval, the meritorious subjects and other powerful officials who had been biding their time arrested and purged Jo and his *sarim* party, executing the top leaders and banishing the rest.

Jungjong soon regretted his course of action, and within two decades, the Confucian literati supporters of Jo returned to officialdom through the civil service examination. As before, they filled the censorial offices, resuming both auditing and remonstrance functions. In the late sixteenth century, the court rehabilitated Jo by posthumously promoting him to the post of Chief State Councillor. By then, the majority of *yangban* elite had come to support the *sarim* and took it for granted that Jo and his partisans were righteous. In fact, throughout the rest of the Joseon period, the ruling elite revered Jo as a paragon of Confucian virtue.

The rise of Confucian literati to power in the sixteenth century was a by-product of the Confucianization of Korea, a process that had begun in the late Goryeo period. Already at the beginning of the Joseon period, the official ideology was Confucianism and this meant, in more practical terms at least, that kings and their officials could not openly ignore any remonstrance based on Confucian moral values. About a century into the Joseon period, passing the civil service examination – which was heavily focused on Confucian curriculum – had become just about the only way for an ambitious, talented man to succeed in Joseon society.

Of course, the political reality was a different matter. Before the reign of Seongjong, who promoted Confucian scholar-officials, early Joseon politics had undergone a series of often violent conflict, including coups and usurpations. Increasingly, *yangban* intellectuals actively employed Confucian rhetoric to criticize the reality of the times. In more practical terms though, these moral stances essentially amounted to criticism of political opponents. In attacking the enemy, a statesman had to present convincing and justifiable reasons that the majority of the *yangban* elite could accept. Accordingly, Confucian values became the only viable rhetorical weapons in political debates and struggles.

In the long run, these factors pushed the Joseon Confucian elite toward fundamentalism. In fact, one of the major slogans of Jo and his *sarim* partisans was

“Return to the original Confucian morals in order to revive our society!” To more idealistic intellectuals deeply disturbed by the often cruel reality of early Joseon court politics, this rallying cry was appealing.

Indeed, an increasingly larger segment of the elite rallied under this slogan regardless of family affiliations. In fact, officials supporting the *sarim* positions also made their sons learn from prominent *sarim* figures. For example, when he was a teenager, Jo Gwangjo accompanied his father who had been appointed as magistrate of a northwestern frontier locale. A *sarim* leader, Kim Goengpil (1454–1504), had been banished by the court to this area and Jo often visited Kim and deepened his understanding of Confucianism under him. What is striking about this arrangement is that Jo’s father was essentially allowing his son to learn from a criminal. Regardless of the punishment meted out to *sarim* figures in the course of political turmoil, some high officials did their best to protect *sarim* as much as possible from purges. Whether Korean society should be dubbed “Confucian” even at the end of the Joseon Dynasty in 1910 is open to debate, but the triumph of *sarim* rhetoric in politics and *yangban* society by the late sixteenth century facilitated the deep penetration of Confucian values into Korean society.

Chapter 14: The Korean-Japanese War and Its Aftermath

Conflicts with two external forces shook Joseon Korean society to its very foundation: the Korean-Japanese War (1592–1598) and the Korean-Manchu wars (1627, 1636–1637). Whereas the Japanese devastated the physical resources of Korea, the Manchus undermined Korea's ideological reference points. These conflicts compelled the Joseon dynasty to take more drastic measures geared toward reorganization and reconstruction. This chapter examines the effects of the Korean-Japanese War on Joseon society.

Joseon Korea was poorly prepared for war when Japan launched a massive invasion. During a long period of relative peace that began during the mid-fifteenth century, Korea's military organization had disintegrated. One reason was that a part of the *yangban* elite had been highly successful in avoiding military duty since the late fifteenth century. More importantly, the state allowed those who were still required to fulfill their military obligation to avoid active-duty service by simply submitting a so-called military cloth tax. In the sixteenth century, the increasing frequency of Jurchen raids and Japanese traders' riots prompted the Joseon government to search for new ways of strengthening military organization. However, the state was unable to find an effective remedy besides creating the Border Defense Command to better coordinate deliberations and decisions on national security. Even this measure was no more than one of many ad hoc measures taken by a Joseon state and elite that had become too accustomed to the ways of peace.

On the eve of the war, Japan and Ming China, both participants in the upcoming conflict, differed sharply in terms of their state of military preparedness. In Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598), a military strongman, had completed unification of the country after more than a century of incessant warfare. Driven by his ambitions to overturn the China-centered East Asian world order in both China and Korea – which restricted Japanese traders' access to expanding markets – he sought to channel the warlike energy of Japanese society outward by invading the continent. In contrast, Ming China's military organization had been in decline since the early sixteenth century due to chronic fiscal problems. The troop strength of the Ming standing army as of 1592 was much less than half a million, most of them stationed in the northwest and southwest to quell internal rebellions.

The war began with Japanese dominance in land battles. In the spring of 1592, a massive army of 150,000 Japanese troops landed at Busan at the southeastern tip of the Korean Peninsula. Flush with musketeers and expert swordsmen, the Japanese forces generally terrified and overpowered the ill-prepared Korean defenders. In just three weeks, they had captured Seoul and the other major towns of Joseon. Approaching the northern frontiers of Korea however, the Japanese advance slowed as their overextended supply lines became vulnerable to attacks from increasingly effective Korean militias – the “righteous armies” (*uibyeong*) comprised of the landed elite, commoners, and Buddhist monks among others.

In contrast to the initial setbacks on land suffered by the Korean forces, the well-prepared and highly disciplined Korean navy commanded by Admiral Yi Sunsin (1545–1598) defeated the Japanese in one engagement after another at sea. Appointed to his post the year before, Admiral Yi had energetically set about strengthening the

country's naval forces, building warships and training their crews. In particular, he built the famed "turtle ships" (*geobukseon*) by improving upon war vessels built during the fifteenth century when Korea had last undertaken major naval operations against the Japanese. He protected each turtle ship from enemy arrows and shells by providing an iron-plated covering, as well as implanting spikes on the covering to make it difficult for enemy soldiers to board the ship. Yi also placed cannons around the entire circumference of the ship to fire at the enemy from all angles. These turtle ships were relatively few in number and functioned more as attack vessels than mainstays of the fleet, but the Korean navy under Yi's command still enjoyed great success, including the destruction of over 400 Japanese warships in the summer of 1592 alone. Yi's naval victories not only helped to protect the southwest's Jeolla province, the grain basket of the country, but they also prevented the Japanese from using the sea lanes as supply routes for their advance units further north in the peninsula.

In this situation, the Ming Chinese army of 50,000 troops entered the conflict to aid Joseon Korea. As the suzerain power, Ming China had a moral obligation to protect its vassal, but more pragmatic geopolitical considerations dictated that it was better to confront the Japanese before they could set foot on Chinese soil. The joint Ming-Joseon forces retook Pyeongyang in the northwest from the Japanese and continued to advance southward toward Seoul. In the vicinity of the capital however, a Japanese ambush delivered a crushing defeat on the overconfident Ming army, which then fell back on Pyeongyang. When the Japanese launched a major northward offensive, the Korean defenders successfully defended Haengju Fortress just outside Seoul on their own. After the defeat, the retreating Japanese abandoned Seoul and entrenched themselves in the southeast. Thus, the Koreans were able to recover their capital a year after its capture by the enemies.

At this point in 1593, the war entered a stalemate during which intrigues and negotiations failed to produce a settlement. As the suzerain of Joseon Korea, Ming China exercised tight control over the Koreans during the war. At the same time, Ming China negotiated bilaterally with Japan while often ignoring the wishes of the Korean government. Among his demands, Hideyoshi asked for a marriage between the Japanese emperor and a Ming imperial princess, the resumption of the tally trade between China and Japan, and control over Korea's four southern provinces. On the other hand, the Ming court offered to recognize Japan as a new tributary by investing Hideyoshi as the "King of Japan." Though largely sidelined during the negotiations, the Joseon court insisted that no negotiations begin before the complete withdrawal of Japanese troops from Korea.

Due to such irreconcilable differences, the talks ended and hostilities were resumed in 1597. Dispatching more troops to the peninsula, Hideyoshi launched an all-out amphibious offensive. About three months before the resumption of the war, factional strife at the Joseon court and royal suspicion toward Yi Sunsin's growing fame led to his dismissal and imprisonment. His successor, Won Gyun, however went on to lose the entire fleet at the naval battle of Chilcheon, and the Japanese fleet began to advance westward along the southern coast. In desperation, the Joseon court restored command of the naval forces to Yi Sunsin. Although only twelve battleships were available, Yi and his crews crushed the Japanese fleet at the naval battle of Myeongnyang, destroying over half of the approximately 300 Japanese vessels.

On land too, the Japanese found the defenders much better prepared this time.

The Ming-Joseon forces defeated the Japanese in a series of battles. Shortly before his death in 1598, Hideyoshi acknowledged the bleak prospects faced by the Japanese troops by ordering them to withdraw from Korea. The Korean-Japanese war finally came to an end but not without the loss of Korea's foremost military commander. During the final battle of the war at Noryang off the south coast, Yi Sunsin was killed while commanding the battle against the retreating Japanese fleet.

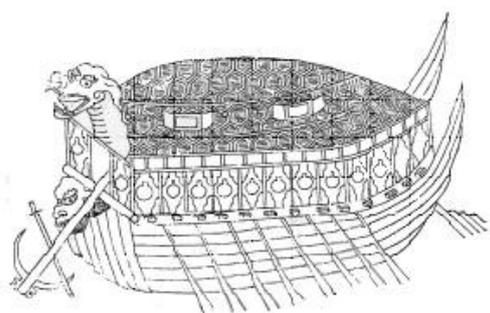
The war took a heavy toll on the Joseon state. During the early phase of the war, the Japanese occupied or overran every major town in addition to Seoul. In the process, a preponderance of materials crucial for governance and social order suffered destruction, including household, slave, and land registers. As a result, the post-war government found its revenue base decreased to less than half the antebellum level. Revenues did not achieve a full recovery until almost a century after the end of the conflict. In addition to the records, Korea suffered in real terms with the drastic reduction of the overall population, particularly the males. The loss of one million out of eight to ten million in population amounted to a critical reduction in human resources for the state, at the least in terms of tax, military, and corvee obligations.

In contrast, the landed provincial *yangban* assumed a stronger economic position. Having lost so many land registers during the war, the central government attempted to take a nation-wide land survey immediately after the war but found itself in a difficult position. Not only did the state lack sufficient funds for such surveys, it also faced uncooperative provincial landlords. As a result, a considerable amount of farming land remained unrecorded, thus escaping taxation. At the village level, postwar private control over land was stronger than before the war.

The Korean-Japanese War also changed the nature of the Joseon-Ming relationship. In accordance with the traditional tribute system of East Asia, Ming China had hardly intervened in domestic affairs of Joseon before the war. However, Ming entry into the war inevitably brought about subsequent and frequent Ming interventions in the military affairs of Joseon, such as troop deployment and the provision of supplies. Furthermore, the Ming sometimes intervened in non-military domestic affairs, including matters of royal succession. Even after the war, the Ming attempted to exercise tight control over Joseon. Surprisingly, the Joseon king and his officials not only acquiesced to the Ming intervention, they even praised the Ming emperor as the savior and father figure who had protected Korea from the Japanese aggressors. Understanding Joseon Korea's submissive attitude toward the Ming – and praise of the Ming emperor as the father – requires an examination of the Korean-Japanese War and its aftermath from the standpoint of the king and high officials.

Even before the war, both the royal and governmental authorities had been in decline. The crushing tax burden had made peasants hostile to the *yangban* ruling class. When the court fled Seoul before its capture by the Japanese forces, the residents were so infuriated at the government's incompetence and irresponsibility that they blocked the departing royal procession of the king and his entourage, hurling insults and even stones. Once the court had evacuated Seoul, slaves set the slave rosters ablaze. Throughout Korea, many even welcomed the Japanese as liberators. It was not until some Japanese began to plunder Korean peasant grain supplies that the angry peasants stood against the occupiers. Even local scholars and students, otherwise indoctrinated in the cardinal Confucian virtue of loyalty to the ruler, blamed the king and high officials for their misadministration and poor preparation before the Japanese invasion.

In this milieu, the court intentionally elevated the importance of military aid from Ming China. If the Ming were recognized as the saviors of Joseon Korea, then those Koreans who had asked the Ming for help – namely, the king and high officials – should receive credit for their actions. On the other hand, if the righteous armies and Yi Sunsin were recognized as the true heroes, then that recognition would mean that the king and his officials had somehow failed to protect the country. On these grounds, the Joseon court had to recognize the Ming emperor as the savior and the father of the Korean people. In some ways, the South Korean government acted in the same way centuries later by honoring the United States both during and after the Korean War (1950–1953).



전라 좌수영 거북선

통제영 거북선과 함께 (이충무공전서 (1795년)에 수록된 거북선이다.



Interior of the *geobukseon*

Chapter 15: The Manchu Invasion and Its Aftermath

The Korean-Manchu wars (1627, 1637) influenced the subsequent evolution of Joseon society, especially in terms of the ideological and cultural orientations of its ruling elite. Attacking Joseon Korea just twenty-nine years after the Japanese retreated from the peninsula, the Manchus were comprised of the Jurchen people – who originally inhabited central and eastern Manchuria when founding the Later Jin (1616–1636) – as well as Mongol and Han Chinese defectors. Since the Later Jin soon changed its name to the Qing dynasty (1636–1911), in effect the Manchus were descendants of the Jurchens.

For the most part, early Joseon Korea managed to contain the sporadic Jurchen military threat. The Joseon government offered incentives such as court ranks, appointments, and salaries, to those Jurchen tribal leaders willing to accept the ritual overlordship of the Joseon king. For example, the ancestors of Nurhaci, the founder of the Later Jin, received such trappings in the fifteenth century. In the late sixteenth century however, Nurhaci was powerful enough to bring all Jurchen tribes under his control before announcing the inauguration of the Later Jin dynasty in 1636. Two years later, he launched a major offensive against the declining Ming dynasty and had occupied the entire Liaodong Peninsula by 1621.

Rapid expansion of Later Jin power forced Joseon into a delicate position. From both dire need and capitalizing on Joseon's indebtedness for Chinese help during the Korean-Japanese War, the Ming requested Korean troops. The Jurchens (hereafter Manchus) however sternly warned Joseon against aiding the Ming. Rather than immediately dispatching troops, King Gwanghaegun (r. 1608–1623) chose a wait-and-see policy of monitoring the expanding conflict between the Ming and the Manchus. In contrast, the court officials strongly opposed the king and advocated a pro-Ming and anti-Manchu stance. After a heated debate, the Joseon government finally dispatched some 13,000 troops, but the Manchus annihilated the joint Ming-Joseon forces in a battle where half the Joseon forces were killed and the rest surrendered to the Manchus. After this disaster, Gwanghaegun leaned even more toward siding with the Manchus, but his officials continued to advocate a pro-Ming policy. They argued that Joseon had a moral obligation to the Ming for helping Joseon against Japanese attack. Moreover, the pro-Ming officials even thought that the Ming would eventually defeat the Manchus. In the course of the continuing standoff with his officials, Gwanghaegun lost his throne in 1623 when some hardline anti-Manchu officials and scholars engineered a coup. His successor, King Injo (r. 1623–49), and those who elevated him now openly pursued a pro-Ming, anti-Manchu policy.

This shift consequently led to the First Korean-Manchu War (1627). The Manchu forces advanced to the vicinity of Seoul. Encountering pockets of resistance, the Manchus made overtures of peace with the condition that Joseon sever its ties to the Ming. Surprised at the speed with which the Manchus penetrated its territory, the Joseon government accepted their conditions and pledged not to associate with the Ming any longer. At that time, the Manchu goal was to invade China Proper, as the previous non-Chinese powers such as the Khitans, Jurchens, and Mongols had accomplished. Satisfied with the Joseon government's reassurance, the Manchus withdrew from the peninsula. Afterward, tension between the Manchus and the Joseon did not dissipate, as

the Joseon continued to maintain contact with the Ming by sea.

The Manchus were able to subjugate the Joseon only after another invasion. In the mid-1630s, the Manchus changed their dynastic name from Later Jin to Qing, and their ruler proclaimed himself the new Son of Heaven. When Joseon rejected the Qing demand to transfer their allegiance from the Ming, the Qing retaliated decisively and started the Second Korean-Manchu War (1637). Bypassing mountain fortresses, a Qing invasion force even larger than the previous one headed directly for Seoul. The invaders swept down the peninsula so quickly that Injo was unable to escape to an island as originally planned. Instead, he and his forces hastily dug themselves in at a mountain fortress near the capital. For weeks, a sea of Manchu troops laid siege to the fortress and repelled a series of Joseon troops that arrived from the provinces to rescue the court. With their provisions nearly exhausted, Injo and his officials capitulated. The Joseon acquiesced to all of the Manchu demands, including Joseon Korea's transfer of its allegiance as a vassal from the Ming to the Qing. Also, Injo was forced to send two of his sons to the Qing capital as hostages. Seven years later in 1644, the Manchus broke through the Great Wall and captured Beijing, the Ming capital, though it would take them over a decade to wrest control of the remainder of China Proper from Ming loyalists.

While not comparable to the earlier Korean-Japanese War in terms of duration and destructiveness, the Korea-Manchu wars shook the ideological foundations of the Joseon. Since the Joseon court had made certain decisions and taken steps that ultimately invited the Manchu attacks, it makes sense to ask whether the conflict was avoidable on the part of Joseon. Why was the Joseon elite so fixated on a pro-Ming, anti-Manchu stance?

In promoting Confucian virtues, the Joseon elite had been indoctrinating their people with the principles of loyalty to the ruler (*chung*) and filial piety to the parents (*hyo*). In this context, the Joseon officials and scholars had to honor the Ming emperor as the ritual father who had given Joseon a new lease on life by saving it from Japanese aggressors. Submission to the Qing thus amounted to a betrayal of the father, the Ming, by serving the father's foe, the Qing. Accordingly, offering to serve the Qing emperor as their new suzerain meant that the Joseon king and his *yangban* officials had violated the cardinal Confucian virtues of loyalty and filial piety. Injo and the officials who elevated him in 1623 by deposing Gwanghaeun, who had merely sought to stay out of the Ming-Manchu conflict, found themselves in a morally weaker position.

Capitulation to the Manchus, therefore, was not merely a matter of national humiliation but also an ideological crisis for the Confucian ruling elite of Joseon. Having violated the cardinal virtues of loyalty and filial piety by shifting allegiance from the Ming to the Qing, the Confucian elite of Joseon could easily appear to be hypocrites to the ordinary people. In the long run, the Korean-Manchu wars would have strong repercussions on the existing Confucian social hierarchy that the state and the elite had been justifying in terms of loyalty and moral obligations.

In dealing with such internal problems, the Joseon king and the elite had two options. One approach was to adapt to the new reality of accepting the Qing as the new suzerain of the Joseon. Ideologically, this stance was problematic because it was tantamount to admitting that one was changing his father or ruler. Another option was to emphasize Confucian values even more strongly, while denying the reality of Qing dominance as much as possible. Though this stance carried the obvious risk of angering the Qing, it was possible to limit gestures of loyalty to the Qing strictly within the

confines of diplomatic protocols.

Among the two options, the Joseon elite was able to settle on the second, as the Qing stopped meddling in the details of domestic affairs of Joseon after 1660. The Joseon court certainly had no choice other than to duly perform tributary obligation to the Qing court and pay lip service to the notion. Now that China was under barbarian Manchu rule and since the rest of the world had always been barbaric, the anti-Manchu, isolationist Joseon elite began emphasizing Confucian morality more strongly than ever before. In order to offset their forced violation of the two cardinal Confucian virtues, the Joseon elite pursued more radical Confucian dogmatism. This meant bolstering their weakened moral authority through sincere performances of worship rituals to the vanquished Ming as the deceased ruler and father.

In such a climate, the mainstream Joseon elite put greater emphasis on Neo-Confucian orthodoxy as synthesized by Zhu Xi, while deeming other interpretations to be heterodox and even denouncing them. While the intellectual landscape in China at the time was more colorful and varied, the Joseon elite allowed relatively little room for discussions or debates on alternate interpretations of Confucian texts, not to mention other systems of thought. In fact, the decades immediately following the Second Korean-Manchu War witnessed intense court factionalism where political parties advanced their arguments based on their respective interpretations of proper Confucian rituals. Ultimately however, the struggles were about power.

For the following two centuries or so, such a dogmatic, past-oriented Confucianism shaped a conservative worldview among the majority of Joseon Korean political and intellectual leaders. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, significant social and economic changes took place and some intellectuals offered alternative interpretations of the Confucian texts in an effort to address them. However, the government and its generally conservative officials continued to work within the bounds of tradition. While the West had entered its “Age of Discovery” and was busily exploring and exerting control over the rest of the world with continuing technological advances, Joseon Korea isolated itself even further as the “Little China,” or the only true bastion of civilization now that China was under barbarian Manchu rule. Thanks to European geographical knowledge of the world that was introduced through China, eighteenth-century world maps produced in Joseon Korea look much more like world maps today than those of fifteenth-century Korea. However, the underlying Joseon attitude toward the rest of the world was that of overall superiority.

The late Joseon elite’s cultural orientation had two faces. On the one hand, it ushered in an age of cultural flowering when towering intellectuals examined various aspects of human society, both past and present, but through the lens of Confucian classics. At the same time, late Joseon complacency, if not arrogance, toward understanding the world would prove detrimental to a more decisive and effective response to the events of the nineteenth century when imperialism arrived on the shores of Korea.

Chapter 16: Confucian Transformation and Women

By the end of the seventeenth century, the Confucian transformation of Korean elite society was more or less complete. Confucian practices regulated every aspect of life for the *yangban* and *chungin*, although commoners and slaves had a much lower degree of adherence to them. Differences between pre-Confucian Goryeo and Confucian Joseon societies in terms of their kinship system and the status of women are striking.

Among the elite, one of the most fundamental shifts affected the nature of marriage and assignation of status to children. The Goryeo aristocracy practiced polygamy, which meant that a man could legally have up to four wives. In contrast, the Joseon elite from the fifteenth century increasingly subscribed to monogamy which allowed each husband to have just one legal wife although he was still free to maintain concubines (*cheop*). Enacted in the early fifteenth century, a new law distinguished illegitimate children (*seoeol*) mothered by a concubine from the children birthed to a legal wife. A series of new laws followed, culminating in 1471 with the *State Administrative Code* that formally banned illegitimate sons from the civil service examination.

A distinct feature of the kinship system as interpreted through Korean Confucianism, harsh discrimination against illegitimate children was a byproduct of imposing the monogamy law on the hereditary status system. Under the new law, the *yangban* elite naturally did not want to marry off their daughters as concubines. Consequently, men had to find concubines among commoners and slaves, as well as the illegitimate daughters of *yangban* men. Accordingly, it was the “blemished” pedigree on the maternal side that was a critical factor in preventing an illegitimate child from inheriting his or her father’s *yangban* status.

Also, the Korean elite interpreted Confucianism in a way that increasingly restricted consanguineous or near-kin marriages. In the Goryeo period, the practice was especially pronounced among royals who did not shun even half-sibling marriages. For example, Wang Geon (King Taejo, r. 918–943), the founder of the Goryeo dynasty, married his daughters to their half-brothers. We can even find cases of marriage between an aunt or an uncle and a nephew or a niece, even though it was legally banned. In late Goryeo, marrying someone with the same family name and ancestral seat, as well as a matrilineal cousin, was prohibited only on paper. At the same time, aristocratic marriages – other than those involving the royal family – increasingly shunned such unions. By the mid-Joseon period, the elite culture strictly prohibited any type of marriage between two individuals with the same family name and ancestral seat, even if they could not demonstrate genealogically how they were descended from a distant common ancestor, let alone marriage between siblings and close cousins.

An emphasis on a patrilineal descent group as a discrete entity increasingly entailed primogeniture, a system endowing the eldest son with the exclusive rights of inheritance. Earlier in Goryeo, all children—as well as sons-in-laws—exercised the rights of status succession and inheritance. Though not always observed in reality, primogeniture had become the general practice by late Joseon. One of the main reasons for this change was the Korean elite’s interpretation of Confucianism in a way that emphasized patrilineal rules and preference for the eldest son.

Those most significantly affected by the patrilineal orientation of the Korean elite were women (see table). Though Goryeo maintained a polygamous society wherein women had no role in political institutions, their position was still stronger than in late Joseon. Above all, no legal or social restrictions held Goryeo women back from divorce or remarrying. Also, a Goryeo woman could travel freely about in public at any time and without a head covering, whereas in late Joseon, an elite woman had to refrain from doing so—in addition to covering her head when outside the house. In fact, a visiting Chinese official in the eleventh century observed how in public Goryeo women interacted freely with men.

[Table] The evolving position of women from Confucian families

	Goryeo (10th–14th)	Early Joseon (15th–16th)	Late Joseon (17th–18th)
Marriage	Polygamy	Monogamy	Monogamy
Place of wedding	Uxorilocal	Uxorilocal	Virilocal
Place of couple's residence	Uxorilocal	Uxorilocal	Virilocal
Women's divorce	Common	Allowed but considered shameful	Almost impossible
Women's remarriage	Common	Allowed but considered shameful	Almost impossible
Women's head cover in public	Not used	Not required but recommended	Required
Children's residence	Matrilocal	Matrilocal	Patrilocal
Inheritance	Paritable	Almost paritable	Almost primogeniture
Household head succession	Any son. In absence of son, son-in-law. Little interested in lineal succession	Preference in the order of eldest legitimate son, younger legitimate sons, <i>seoel</i> , sons-in-law, and adopted son (brother or cousin's legitimate son)	Legitimate son or adopted son (brother or cousin's legitimate son)
Adoption	No	Uncommon	Widespread
Ancestor worship participation	No ancestor worship	All descendants and their spouses	All except female descendants, sons-in-laws, and <i>seoel</i> (including their descendants)

Simultaneously, the ancient Korean custom of matrilocal (or uxoriocal) residence of newlywed couples gave way to patrilocal (or virilocal) residence.

Traditionally, the Korean bridegroom traveled to the bride's natal home for the wedding ceremony. The couple stayed there as long as they wanted, usually until the children were grown. Thus in Goryeo society, a groom literally did *jangga gada* ("to go to the wife's family"), an expression still used by contemporary Koreans to refer to a man getting married. In late Joseon however, the couple took up residence with the groom's family soon after the wedding at the bride's natal home. Still used by contemporary Koreans in the sense of a woman getting married, *sijip gada* ("to go to the husband's family") had become the norm, certainly among the elite, but was also widely practiced among the ordinary people. All the same, it is interesting that the ancient custom of holding the wedding ceremony at the bride's family residence somehow survived the Confucian purists' drive to make Korea a patrilineal society. Even today in South Korea, a couple just returning from the honeymoon visits the wife's parents' residence first and sleep at least one night before proceeding to their new home on the next day.

No longer identified with her family of birth after marriage, a wife in late Joseon became a member of her husband's family. The cardinal Confucian virtues of wife's fidelity to her husband (*yeol*) and filial piety (*hyo*) expected a married woman to be an obedient, dutiful wife serving the parents-in-law while being a wise, nurturing mother. As such, women no longer enjoyed economic independence, as they had lost their rights of inheritance from their natal families. No longer possessing her own inheritance and the power to protect it as her own even after the wedding, a late Joseon woman brought a one-time dowry to her husband's family from her own family.

All these long-term changes show that the customs which many contemporary Koreans regard as tradition are relatively recent phenomena in Korean history. Not only were they different from more ancient practices, "tradition," – if there is such a thing – continues to evolve even to this day. This is only natural in a human society that is both dynamic and organic.

Chapter 17: Reactions to Confucian Dogmatism

Reacting against the Confucian dogmatism that followed Joseon Korea's capitulation to the Manchus, some intellectuals articulated what they called *silhak* ("practical learning"). Finding Neo-Confucian orthodoxy as systematized by Zhu Xi an empty discourse, *silhak* scholars sought real solutions to the real problems of late Joseon society. It is interesting that while the Age of Enlightenment intellectuals in the West were inspired by classical Greece and Rome in critiquing medieval institutions and ideas, contemporaneous *silhak* figures of Korea advocated going back to the original Confucian classics wherein they sought descriptions of an ideal society and its governance.

Far from it, late Joseon politics underwent a series of factional disputes, and many members of losing factions turned to *silhak*. In the course of ensuing strife, one faction after another faded from the political scene: the Northerners after the 1623 coup, the Southerners in the last decade of the seventeenth century, and the Disciple's Faction in the early part of the eighteenth century. As a result, more and more *yangban* intellectuals found themselves excluded from political opportunities. Not surprisingly, many among such marginalized *yangban* began to criticize the power structure dominated by a single faction and its Confucian dogmatism.

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, *silhak* scholars' criticism of Zhu Xi orthodoxy continued throughout the eighteenth century. In so doing, they advocated going back to the original teachings of Confucius. Some even questioned: "Zhu Xi was merely a Confucian scholar, like me. Why do I have to blindly follow his interpretation?" Such a criticism of Zhu Xi was a dangerous position for anyone to take. Accused of desecration, some were even executed. In the end however, the *silhak* intellectuals were unable to overcome the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy so deeply entrenched in the late Joseon power structure.

Among the *silhak* scholars, some turned to Roman Catholicism. It was first introduced to Korea in the early seventeenth century by Joseon envoys to Ming China where they interacted with European Jesuit missionaries in Beijing. Catholicism initially attracted the attention of some Korean scholars as an intellectual curiosity. They approached it as a part of overall Western Learning (*seohak*) encompassing all aspects and products of Western culture, including compasses, pocket watches, navigation charts, and world maps (especially Matteo Ricci's).

In the eighteenth century, some *silhak* scholars began to show interest in Catholicism for spiritual reasons. They were especially drawn to the notion of equality of all human beings as God's creations. Some began converting to Catholicism, even though they had never been contacted by foreign missionaries. Indeed in the history of Christianity, the Korean case is unique in that Catholicism took root and grew as an indigenous phenomenon rather than through European missionaries or conquerors. In addition to attracting the politically marginalized Southerner *yangban* intellectuals who did not live too far from Seoul, Catholicism increasingly appealed to the capital's technical specialists, commoners, and women, to whom Catholic teachings of salvation were powerful and compelling. Although replacing the Confucian concept of Heaven with the anthropomorphic Christian notion of God was not all that difficult, rejecting ancestor worship remained a difficult, painful decision for many. Ultimately, this aspect

of Christianity invited state persecution of the religion as an evil heterodoxy.

In the nineteenth century, Catholicism won more converts among commoners and women, especially those living in more urban areas. By the mid-nineteenth century, Korean Catholics numbered roughly no more than twenty thousand out of a total population of about fifteen million. However, the state found that their beliefs posed a threat to Confucian values and the existing social order. Besides the rejection of ancestor worship which violated the cardinal Confucian notion of filial piety, the Christian tenets of egalitarianism and God's impartiality were incompatible with the Joseon Confucian emphasis on *myeongbun* (status distinctions) by which both the state and the elite regarded hereditary social hierarchy as a natural law.

In addition to addressing religious and philosophical issues, *silhak* figures maintained a strong interest in social reform. As the self-proclaimed advocates of "practical learning," they presented a variety of reform proposals. The most significant were redistribution of the farming land, abolition of hereditary slavery, establishment of more public schools, equal opportunity for political participation, increasing agricultural productivity, and promoting commercial activities.

Among the *silhak* intellectuals in the eighteenth century, some expressed a particularly strong interest in commerce, manufacturing, and even international trade. Making up the so-called Northern Learning, most advocates hailed from capital families and had an opportunity to visit Beijing where they were impressed by the prosperity of eighteenth-century Qing empire—commonly referred to as the "Northern country." Departing from the earlier *silhak* intellectuals who were more focused on revitalizing rural communities based on agriculture, the Northern Learning scholars realized that their country had much to learn from "barbarian" Qing China. Accordingly, they began to criticize the reality of isolating Joseon Korea and published a slogan that demanded, "Look at the reality! Joseon is now reduced to an obsolete country. Learn from the Manchus if you really want to surpass them!"

The Northern Learning scholars argued that in addition to agriculture, commerce was crucial for enriching the country. They suggested that the government construct the necessary infrastructure for the transportation of goods, such as paved roads and more efficient maritime transportation. Some even argued that in order to promote production, consumption was more important than the Confucian emphasis on frugality. In making these arguments, the Northern Learning scholars stressed that rather than blindly privileging the *yangban* elite, which included too many idle Confucian scholars, the government must support those who are productive and thus most useful to the society, such as farmers, artisans, and merchants.

Characterized as rationalist Confucian reformers, *silhak* scholars transcended certain limitations. Many *silhak* figures increasingly recognized the necessity of commerce and the relationship between production and consumption. From this vantage point, they advocated enriching Joseon society. All the same, *silhak* intellectuals were unable to develop their ideas into more concrete, realistic proposals, as they had little power or influence to apply their ideas to the reality of the time. As the majority of the *yangban* elite continued to adhere strongly to Zhu Xi orthodoxy, the *silhak* reform proposals had little chance of winning acceptance by the throne and the court officials content with status quo. Some of the proposals that were accepted did little to change the main course of historical development in Joseon Korea.

Satirical narrative fiction and paintings made up one cultural dimension of the

silhak movement. While enjoying popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth century among the marginalized *yangban*, ordinary people, and women, works of narrative fiction featured scores of titles, each with many variant editions, written in either literary Chinese or vernacular Korean. These works, which included the famous *Story of Chunhyang*, were usually didactic. For example, *The Story of a Yangban*, which was one of the most popular works of satirical fiction at the time, poked fun at the highly ritualized and even hypocritical *yangban* culture. Others works of fine art moved away from imaginary landscapes to depicting scenes of people's daily lives in a humorous way (paintings 1, 2, 3). Similar to rationalist *silhak* thought, satirical narrative fiction and paintings failed to win the hearts and minds of the majority of the Joseon elite.



"A Place of Washing" by Sin Yunbok (18th century). A yangban man is stealing a glance at a woman's naked breasts.



Clandestine Meeting under the Moonlight by Sin Yunbok (18th century)

Chapter 18: Economic Growth and Korean Merchants

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the late Joseon economy experienced a significant change. Though remaining a fundamentally agrarian economy controlled by the state and its conservative Confucian officials, increased agricultural productivity and surplus facilitated the growth of the handicraft industry and the expansion of markets. The late Joseon economy lagged behind those of neighboring Qing China and Tokugawa Japan in terms of the overall extent of commercialization, but the new economic developments were similar to that experienced by many early modern societies of Eurasia.

During this period, agricultural production steadily increased, thanks to the successful employment of new farming techniques that had been available since the fourteenth century. Fallowing virtually disappeared, as various natural fertilizers such as night soil and animal dung allowed farmers to use the land continuously. Especially in the south, improved irrigation ditches and canals allowed more cultivators to convert dry fields in lowlands to wet paddy fields. In addition to a more reliable supply of water, the spread of better transplantation techniques boosted rice production. Most farmers used to sow seeds directly in the field, but they began to raise sprouts in seedbeds before transplanting them into another field. First employed in the southwest, the transplantation method gradually spread to the rest of Korea. However, the wide employment of the transplantation carried certain risk. Since it required a huge amount of water, rice farming relying on the transplantation technique was vulnerable to a long drought.

In spite of various technological advances, highly commercialized agriculture was unpopular and not widespread. Available quantitative data suggests that productivity in Korea was roughly 80 percent of the average productivity of China or Japan at the time. The factors contributing to the difference include climate, land fertility, grain varieties (especially rice), and farming techniques.

One new development that pushed Korea toward more commercialized agriculture in the eighteenth century was greater liberalization of the economy. Earlier in the Joseon period, the state had strictly regulated all commercial activities. For example, a merchant wanting to run a commercial business in Seoul had to obtain a license. Despite this government regulation however, the number of private—that is unlicensed or illegal—merchants in the seventeenth century began to increase rapidly and compete with licensed merchants. The government sometimes cracked down on the unlicensed private merchants, but their numbers steadily increased during the eighteenth century. By the end of the century, they were actually handling nearly half of all commercial transactions. Finding it more sensible to just approve private commercial activities and tax them, the government's Joint Sales Action in 1791 finally legalized private merchants, abolished preexisting licensed monopolies except in some key industries, and began collecting a new merchant tax.

The growth of commerce in the capital city area subsequently stimulated local markets as well, although the scale of the late Joseon market economy was more limited than those of Qing China and Tokugawa Japan. In the mid-eighteenth century, there were approximately one thousand local markets throughout Korea, each of which was open every five days. Since Korea at the time comprised about 200 counties with a total

population of roughly 12 million, we can estimate that the average population per county was about 60,000. Considering that each county had five markets on the average, we can conclude that there was approximately one market per 12,000 residents. This figure suggests a much lower degree of market access than in China and Japan where there was one market per 4,500 to 8,000 residents.

Facilitating the growth of markets were various new developments toward a monetary economy. Early Joseon Korea maintained a more self-sufficient agrarian economy wherein the limited amount of coin and paper money that the government minted did not enjoy nation-wide circulation. Instead, rice and cloth functioned as de facto currency. However, a considerable amount of silver produced in the New World began flowing into East Asia in the sixteenth century through the Spanish and the Portuguese. The Joseon economy began to use more silver as currency than ever before. During the Korean-Japanese War (1592–1598), not only did the Ming government pay its officials (including military commanders) and soldiers in silver, the Joseon government also paid its soldiers in silver as well as purchasing provisions with silver. Nonetheless, silver remained a subsidiary currency in relation to rice and cloth.

Some new developments in the seventeenth century put the Joseon economy on the threshold of a monetary economy. In the late seventeenth century, the government minted new coin money which soon circulated throughout the country thanks to the development of commerce and handcraft industry. Although it may seem that a fully functioning monetary economy was in place, the new coin was actually penny cash. It was not until the late nineteenth century when multiple denominations of cash were in circulation. Even then, rice and cloth still functioned as the main means of transaction, and the same media made up a large portion of the state tax revenue. Moreover, court officials' relatively limited knowledge of currency and its circulation often produced both inflation and deflation throughout the eighteenth century.

During the same period, the handicraft industry achieved noticeable growth. While an increasing number of merchants conducted business without a government license, more and more artisans sold their products to private clients even though the state traditionally imposed an obligation on them to supply the government with their goods. In the late seventeenth century however, the government began to purchase necessary items from merchants. Furthermore, the government eventually discarded the official rosters of artisans in 1790 and converted licensed artisans into free artisans who could sell their goods to anyone they wished as long as they were paying the taxes in kind or cash. While now liberated from government control, many artisans lacked sufficient capital and marketing skills. Accordingly, they tended to be financially dependent on big merchants. A typical arrangement was for the merchant to first provide raw materials and advance payment before an artisan would deliver the goods. Nonetheless, a variety of handcraft productions in the eighteenth century, financed by big merchants, were able to expand, these including farming tools, kitchenware, pottery, processed food, wine, ginseng, paper, and shipbuilding.

Despite these developments, the merchants were not powerful enough to challenge the entrenched position of the *yangban* elite. In fact, merchants as a whole were unable to make their presence in court politics felt until the final years of the Joseon dynasty. For sure, the merchants' social position in the eighteenth century was stronger than it had ever been, but it did not enhance their social status as far as the *yangban* elite were concerned. Abolished only in 1894, the civil service examination

system remained off limits to merchants.

In addition to denying political power to merchants, the government and the wealthy *yangban* controlled the circulation of goods and the supply of commodities to the capital. Of course, some great merchants were wealthy enough to issue checks or money drafts, give loans, and accept deposits, but both the state and the elite remained the biggest financiers as well as consumers. While paying lip service to the Confucian warning against extravagance and profit making, many wealthy *yangban* pursued commercial activities by using the names of their trusted stewards. Financed by the wealthy *yangban*, even the most successful merchants could not challenge their power or influence. Indeed, merchants did not present any reform proposal to the court on issues such as status discrimination and political participation.

Under these circumstances, Joseon merchants could not be satisfied with their status and many sought to acquire the outward trappings of *yangban* status, such as court ranks and offices, through donations of grain. Struggling with a revenue shortage, the government's sale of certain court ranks and offices began during the period of warfare with the Japanese and the Manchus. Although the existing *yangban* elite did not allow any newcomers, purchased ranks and offices were essentially state-sanctioned status symbols for those who could afford them.

Chapter 19: Taxation and Military Service in Traditional Korea

In the late Joseon period, the state's effort to rectify the centuries-old unfairness of the existing tax system amounted to a stopgap measure to prevent the commoner peasantry from going bankrupt. Previously, the nonelite strata had been largely responsible for a variety of taxes as well as labor and military duties, from which the *yangban* elite had enjoyed exemption. The government's new Uniform Land Tax Law and Equal Service Law alleviated the disproportionately heavy tax burden on poor nonelites, albeit to a limited extent.

Before the enactment of new tax laws, an annual tribute tax overburdened the poor peasants. Government procurement of most of its necessities relied on the tribute tax which the peasants had to pay in kind, such as cloth or local products. For example, taxpayers living in a county famous for high-quality paper had to present a predetermined amount of paper to the county magistrate each year. Artisans and merchants were no exception. They too had to provide certain items to the government on a yearly basis. In contrast, *yangban* elite and wealthy nonelite households generally escaped the levy.

To fix this problem, the government employed the Uniform Land Tax Law which converted each household's tribute obligation to a land tax based on its land-holding. The new law fixed the tax rate to twelve *du* of rice per *gyeol* of land. Actually, one *gyeol* ranged from about 2.2 to 9.0 acres depending on the fertility of land, and the government used various criteria in measuring the size of a cultivated plot according to the grade of its fertility. Twelve *du* amounted to about one percent of the crop yield during a year of average harvest, which meant that the new rate was low. This welcome relief did not immediately help all taxpayers. The changes were first put into effect during the early seventeenth century in Gyeonggi Province near the capital. However, resistance by *yangban* landowners caused a delay in the full implementation of the new law throughout all eight provinces for about a century.

The Uniform Land Tax Law is significant for many reasons. Above all, it levied the tax based on the assessed productivity of a household's landholding. Landless peasants were exempted from paying any tribute tax, while landowners now had to pay a land tax, for which they had previously been exempt. Also, the government had to purchase all their necessary items from merchants with rice, silver, or cash. This in turn stimulated commerce and manufacturing in the eighteenth century. The tribute merchants (or tribute contractors) who sold various products to the government not only had to obtain the products in the first place through purchase or self-maintained handcraft workshops, but they also had to maintain warehouses to store them.

Besides the tribute tax burden on the landless peasants that the Uniform Land Tax Law alleviated, nonelites in general almost solely bore the responsibility of military service. In principle, every male from the Korean age of sixteen to fifty-nine *se* (a person at birth is deemed a year old, and the age changes on every lunar new year's day) had to perform military service to the state. Performed on a rotating basis for a span ranging from two months to one year, the government assigned each conscript to the capital city, provincial headquarters, or frontier garrison armies. When not on active duty, a male of eligible age had to provision his squad with military equipment, food, and cloth.

In Joseon Korea, the system based on the principle of universal military service functioned at its best during the early Joseon period. At its peak during the mid-fifteenth century, the standing army was comprised of about 200,000 troops, and roughly one million off-duty reservists provisioned them with supplies. During the long period of peace from the late fifteenth century though, this system disintegrated. First, active-duty military service was burdensome to the commoners since most of their livelihoods depended on labor-intensive farming. However, even military provisioning as reservists was a difficult financial obligation to many poor peasants. In the late fifteenth century, *yangban* males – who had ostensibly performed their duties in less onerous elite or ceremonial guard units – began to shun their military obligations by bribing corrupt draft officials and clerks, usually with bolts of cloth. Seeing no obvious security threat to the country, the state legally sanctioned the trend in the early sixteenth century by gradually converting peasant conscripts and reservists to military cloth taxpayers. For an average household, two bolts of cloth – which amounted to roughly two months of living expenses – was the required payment every year.

As long as the borders were secure with no external military threat, the increased tax revenue at the cost of troop strength made sense. In the long run however, the new military cloth tax system invited disaster. Most government officials believed that under the protection of the suzerain Ming empire, the country did not need a large standing army against occasionally troublesome neighbors like the Jurchens and the Japanese. In fact, on the eve of the Korean-Japanese War (1592–1598), the Joseon army actually had no more than 30,000 active-duty soldiers, among whom the battle-worthy could have been as few as 8,000. Despite their unpreparedness for war, as well as the subsequent attacks by the Manchus, stable relations with the Manchu Qing dynasty after the capitulation in 1637 left the Joseon state without any motivation to strengthen the army. Also, the continuing refusal by *yangban* to pay any tax precluded any serious effort toward that end. Thus, the military cloth tax remained a heavy burden on the peasantry even with the Uniform Land Tax Law in effect.

To address this problem, the government in the mid-eighteenth century enacted the Equal Service Law which ultimately offered modest relief to peasants while decreasing the state's revenue. The original proposal aimed at reducing the amount of the military cloth tax from two bolts to one a year and made up for the loss by forcing the *yangban* to pay as well. In particular, the notion of expanding the tax base to include *yangban* was so controversial that the debate lasted two decades. While some public-minded officials proposed that the government collect the military cloth tax from the entire *yangban* class, the great majority of court officials in particular and the *yangban* elite in general vigorously opposed this proposal. In the end, the Equal Service Law that went into effect reduced the military cloth tax from two bolts and still left *yangban* households exempt—only partially making up for the loss by imposing the tax on the wealthy commoner households that used to evade it.

In sum, both the Uniform Land Tax Law and the Equal Service Law did not amount to anything more than a marginal adjustment by the state and its *yangban* agents to prevent the peasantry from going bankrupt. Without hurting their own interests, the ruling elite took stopgap measures to insure that eighty percent of the population could continue paying their taxes. Ultimately, there was no significant improvement in the livelihood of the still overburdened commoner taxpayers. Though no new social force emerged to challenge the *yangban* class in a meaningful sense, in the nineteenth century

the Joseon social order increasingly showed signs of instability as more non-elites began to resist the disproportionately heavy burden that was imposed on them.

Chapter 20: The Daewon'gun Regency, 1863–73

On the eve of Korea's opening its ports to Japan and other nations, the Daewon'gun (1820–1898) carried out a reform that that the Joseon dynasty badly needed. Since 1800, one king after another had ascended the throne as a minor and the queen dowagers and their natal families had dominated the court. Under the sway of a handful of the royal in-law families, the vast majority of *yangban* families were excluded from the political process, not to mention the non-*yangban*. The limited positive effect of the Uniform Land Tax Law and the Equal Service Law on lightening the tax burden on peasants was dissipated amidst rampant corruption. The venality was partly fueled by rapacious men who bribed powerful officials for magistracies and filled their own pockets, not only inflicting further suffering on the population but also reducing the revenue base of the state. Also, centuries of over-cultivation, denuded mountains, flooding, crop failures, starvation, and epidemics drove many peasants into desperate uprisings against corrupt agents of the government.

Commonly known by the abbreviated form of his title, the Heungseon Daewon'gun, in January 1864 (twelfth lunar month of 1863) Yi Ha'eung (1820–1898) assumed power under unusual circumstances. When King Cheoljong (r. 1849–1864) died without a son, the queen dowager and the most powerful officials reached a settlement that elevated Cheoljong's second cousin's son, the twelve-year old King Gojong (r. 1864–1907). Previously, the Joseon dynasty had opted for an uncle-to-nephew succession whenever a father-to-son royal succession was not feasible. In such a situation, the nephew (or someone of the nephew's generation) who ascended the throne also honored his father as the "Daewon'gun" if the father was not in the line of succession. The case of Gojong's father was unprecedented because there had never before been a Daewon'gun alive at the time of his son's succession to the throne.

As the lone survivor of the royal in-law families' persecutions of the previous monarchs' closest kinsmen, the Daewon'gun took measures to curb the power of royal in-law families. Although he was not officially the regent until the death of the queen dowager in 1866, the Daewon'gun immediately took action to appoint and promote capable individuals from more diverse backgrounds. Also, he chose a girl from a politically undistinguished scion of an aristocratic family to be wife to his son the king. Before long however, this family proved to be no different from the other powerful royal in-law families that tried to wield paramount power.

The Daewon'gun also sought to expand the revenue base for the state. Above all, he launched a nation-wide land survey. Despite uncooperative landowners, the survey was a limited success and registered much of the cultivated plots that had evaded taxation. As the next step, he cancelled all the debts that the peasants owed to the government after corrupt functionaries had forced grain loans upon them at exorbitantly high interest rates for decades. Moreover, the Daewon'gun enforced the military tax levy on obviously resentful adult *yangban* males, many of whom were so ashamed of the obligation that they paid in their slaves' names. While the state used the military tax revenue to support the standing army in principle, troop strength was insufficient for adequate national defense—despite the fact that the army was a far cry from the universal conscription system that the industrialized nation-states of Europe were maintaining at the time.

Another drastic measure that the Daewon'gun undertook was the closure of most private Confucian academies, which was intended to control — but further alienated — the *yangban*. For over two centuries, the academies had been bastions of dogmatic Confucianism and hereditary court factionalism, as well as an economic burden on local population. Despite being endowed with landholdings and slaves, they had enjoyed tax-exempt status. While the Confucian literati in general and the private academy students in particular were in an uproar, the Daewon'gun shut down about ninety percent of the academies, destroying their buildings, and confiscating their land.

While improving the finances of the state and the living conditions of the peasants at the expense of the ruling elite, the Daewon'gun tried to enhance the dignity of the royal house by reconstructing Gyeongbok palace. It was the main royal palace until it was evacuated by the court and destroyed by angry slaves during the Korean-Japanese War. Gyeongbok Palace was in ruins for over 250 years since the government lacked adequate funds to reconstruct it. To finance the project, the Daewon'gun collected various extra taxes, including land surtaxes, gate taxes, and tomb taxes. In addition, he minted a new set of coins in multiple denominations, but this led to inflation. The construction itself required a vast amount of manpower, and its mobilization antagonized the peasant class that had earlier appreciated the Daewon'gun for forgiving their debts to the government.

Besides internal reform and consolidation, the Daewon'gun sought to bolster national defense through an isolationist policy very much mindful of Qing China's humiliations by the West. Defeating the Chinese in the (First) Opium War (1839–1842), so named for the Qing government's crackdown on British opium smugglers, the British, as well as other Western powers, forced the Qing government to open five ports. Later, China's defeat by the British and the French in the Arrow War (also known as the Second Opium War, 1856–1858) led to the opening of additional ports—as well as the payment of indemnities—to Western powers. As shocked as they were at the news of China's submission to the “Western barbarians,” most Joseon officials and scholars strongly advocated fighting them if they were to attack Korea. Determined to defend the nation against any future Western attack, the Daewon'gun manifested his resolve by erecting steles throughout Korea with an inscription that read: “Western barbarians invade our land. If we do not fight, we must appease them. Appeasing them is betraying the nation.” In addition, the Daewon'gun executed several French priests and thousands of Korean Catholics because he regarded Catholics as agents of Western aggression.

In this milieu, the Daewon'gun dealt with the relatively small-scale Western incursions in a resolute manner. The fact that that none of these small incursions succeeded in getting anything out of Korea gave him a false sense of security. Retaliating against the anti-Catholic persecution and demanding trade, France dispatched a fleet of seven warships in 1866 commanded by Admiral Roze, at the time the commander of the French Asiatic Squadron. Seizing the administrative center of Ganghwa Island, located at the mouth of the Han River which flows through Seoul, the French pillaged it and carried away the weapons and documents in the storage. When a French force attempted to advance to Seoul however, the Korean troops defeated them at a fortress on the mainland just across from the island and also at southern fortifications on the island itself. After the embarrassed French squadron withdrew without any gains, an American trading ship, *The General Sherman*, sailed upstream in the same year along the Daedong River after the Joseon government had rejected a

demand for trade. In the end, local Korean garrison troops and the population burnt down the ship, killing all crewmen. In 1871, the U.S. Asiatic Squadron dispatched a detachment of five warships to Ganghwa Island and demanded trade as well as compensation for *The General Sherman*. When the Joseon government rejected these demands, the warships entered the strait between the island and the mainland shore and the Korean shore batteries opened fire. Although the Americans succeeded in capturing the forts in the southern part of Ganghwa Island after overcoming a fierce final resistance by the Korean defenders, they withdrew with no further gains.

In the course of the Daewon'gun's reform, three distinct groups critical of his policies emerged: the conservative Confucian *yangban*, progressive advocates of the opening of ports, and the peasantry. The conservatives harbored animosity toward the Daewon'gun for the imposition of military cloth tax on *yangban* and closure of most private academies, although they supported his isolationist foreign policy. In contrast, the progressive advocates generally supported his domestic reform and believed it was inevitable that Korea should open its ports and enter into diplomatic and commercial relations with the Western nations and Japan. The peasants were grateful about their debts to the government being forgiven and with the general reduction in corruption in local administration, but they resented the nation-wide labor mobilization and the inflation caused by the circulation of bad money. In this situation, the Daewon'gun had no pretext for continuing his regency when his son King Gojong turned twenty. With petitions from all quarter urging for Gojong's personal rule, the Daewon'gun had no choice but to relinquish power in 1873.