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**Slaves and Owners; or Servants and Masters? A Preliminary Examination of Slavery in Traditional Korea**

BY MARK PETERSON

In Korean there are two words for slavery. One, *nobi chedo*, is used to describe traditional Korean slavery; the other, *noye chedo*, is used to describe slavery in all other countries.1 There is nothing romantic about *noye chedo*, but somehow the common perception of *nobi chedo* is somewhat romantic and is considered by many as an institution in which the slave was not treated badly. There are even those who prefer to translate *nobi* as servant, and *noye* as slave. English accommodates that distinction in terminology, but when one speaks of the institution *chedo*, both *nobi chedo* and *noye chedo* must be translated as “slavery.”

The popular concept of slavery in Korea in remarkably romantic. There is hardly a presentation of traditional times, be it in novels, or a drama on TV or in the movie theater, that does not portray a slave as one of the figures in the story. Look at what is probably the best-known story in Korea, the tale of Ch’unhyang. The hero, Yi To-ryong, is in the constant companionship of Pang-ja, his servant (or slave). He is portrayed as a “sidekick” and he provides some comic relief in the story. The suggestion that Yi To-ryong could sell Pang-ja strikes Koreans as shocking and unthinkable. Yet in traditional times, slaves were bought, sold, traded and inherited.

In recent years I have been studying the inheritance system of the Yi dynasty, that is to say I have been examining matters or inheritance from the perspective of the originators of the documents—the aristocracy. To them, property meant primarily land and slaves. Such documents show slaves were generally inherited from generation to generation, that they were given as special gifts and special allocations of property, and that they were bought, sold and traded. In this study I will re-examine these inheritance documents from the perspective of the slaves.

Studies published on slavery heretofore have been largely based on hojok, census registers. Among the more important are those by Edward Wagner (1974), Susan Shin (1974), John Somerville (1976/77), Kim Yong- sop (1963) and the classic Japanese period work by Shikata Hiroshi (1938).2[page 32] These articles, based on studies of hojok, show that a large proportion of the population was of slave status and that there were changes over time in the institution of slavery and status of slaves, but they do not show other important aspects of slavery such as the purchase, inheritance or barter of slaves. Each of these articles acknowledges the fact that the work on these documents has just begun and that much of what they conclude must be tentative. By adding the perspectives on slavery provided by the inheritance documents, documents that are just recently coming to light, we are able to see much more of the social situation of slaves and their owners, the aristocrats. Still we are in the pioneer stage and much of what we conclude is still tentative. However, with the added perspective of a completely different type of document, the inheritance document, we are getting much closer to understanding Korean slavery.

Another reason for examining Korean slavery in more detail at this time is the uniqueness of Korean slavery as described in Orlando Patterson’s important work, Slavery and Social Death. Therein, in two separate locations, he argues that Korea had the most highly developed system of slavery in Asia (1982: 126-143). In his book, he gives a cross cultural explanation of the institution of slavery wherever it was found throughout the world and throughout history. Korea stands out as an unusual case in several respects. Patterson repeatedly refers to the sophistication and breadth of the institution in Korea.

If Korean slavery is unique, in what ways is it? And what social conditions made it so? With the availability of inheritance documents and other personal papers in large numbers, we are able to move further along the way to answering these questions. Studies on Koryo period slavery have been conducted largely on the basis of the official court records. Yi dynasty slavery can now be examined from a variety of perspectives. In addition to the official court record, the Sillok, which gives considerable data about slaves but only in either a very general sense or in specific cases where a slave rebellion or an incident involving a slave reached the attention of the court, studies on the Yi dynasty have used the *hojok,* the census registers.

Hojok clearly show that society was divided into three classes: aristocrats (*yangban*), commoners (*sangmin*) and slaves (*ch’onmin*). Shin reports, “The distinction between the sangmin and the ch’onmin is occasionally ambiguous; the barrier between the yangban and sangmin, on the other hand, is unmistakable’’ (1974: 15). Most writers comment on the social mobility observed in the hojok, but two saw wholesale upward mobility (Shikata & Kim), and two saw an equally drastic downward mobility (Shin & Wagner).3

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Aside from questions of mobility, hojok generally give the impression that slaves had social status somewhat similar to free men (commoners) because of two factors often found in hojok: (1) a high frequency of intermarriage between slaves and commoners and (2) a high percentage of slaves who lived away from the household of the owner. Hojok, on the other hand, also indicate one area of discontent, the number of escaped slaves, by faithfully listing them years and years after their escape.

Other dynamics can be inferred from the hojok, but not confirmed. Wagner, in looking at the 1663 “Seoul pukpu hojok,” draws the conclusion that “buying and selling or other transfer of ownership had taken place” (1974: 53). At another point he states:

A further analysis of the slave component in such terms as continuity of ownership, sale or tranfer of slaves, patterns of bequeathing ownership, inheritance of slave status across generations, slave marriage and its relationship to an owner’s effort to maximize his slave assets—these and no doubt other vital questions can be answered with varying degrees of success on the basis of further intensive work on the document (1974: 52).

Wagner also notes that large-scale slave owners had slaves residing in numerous different locations throughout the peninsula:

The census document offers us no information on this point, but it seems not unreasonable to suppose that these slaves for the most most part lived and worked on agricultural lands held by their owner (1974: 44).

On these points, the inheritance documents provide some answers, fill in some gaps, and provide some surprises.

Inheritance documents and other private documents, many of which have come to light in recent years,4 reveal a much more dynamic portrait of the life of slaves and the interaction between slaves on the one hand and commoners or aristocrats on the other. Unlike the hojok which record all human beings, albeit according to status, the inheritance documents record slaves as property. Other kinds of documents at times found in private collections along with inheritance documents include those detailing the sale or barter of slaves, and occasionally there are those that reveal other details about the meaning of slave status and the relationship between owner and owned, such as one document in the Puan Kim collection which shows that an aristocrat was incarcerated over a slave’s death by beating.

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First, let us examine a typical set of inheritance documents in order to see what type of information in available therein. In my possession is an inheritance document kept by a branch of the Chonju lineage dated 1632. In the document the property of Yi Hyong-uk and his wife was divided between his four children who, listed in order, were a son, Yi Yom; a daughter who married Min Ung-hyop; another son, Yi Suk; and another daughter who married Pak An-hyo. Property (land and slaves) in the early seventeenth century was divided equally irrespective of the sex and the sequence of birth of the heirs.5 The Yi dynasty code as well as social custom stipulated that the property was to be divided equally, and indeed it was divided equally in every respect.

One of the more curious aspects of the inheritance process is the practice of dividing land and slaves without regard to location of the land and residence of the slaves. Each of the four siblings received land in three or four areas of Korea; all received part of the land in Paekch’on, two split the property in Namyang, and all received one or two smaller parcels in toto. The residences of the slaves were similarly spread over the whole peninsula, with each heir having slaves in six or eight areas, none of which coincided with the location of the inherited fields.

In dividing up the slaves, each sibling received, as near as was humanly possible it appears, an equal number of fold and young, male and female, strong and weak, and near and distant slaves. Each of the four siblings not only received the same total number of slaves (eighteen), but by subcategory, they each were given exactly four “new” slaves, thirteen “inherited” slaves and claim on one “escaped” slave. The average age of slaves inherited by each sibling was 27.8,24.7,24.0,and 25.8,respectively. If factored by age group, it appears even more clearly that the division was as equal as possible:

Table I: Number of slaves distributed to each sibling

according to age of the slave

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Sibling (heir) |
| Age grouping | #1 | #2 | #3 | #4 |
| 1-20 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 |
| 21-36 | 7 | 9 | 8 | 9 |
| 37-61 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Total | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 |

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The division of the slaves was also equal according to gender, although not as clearly so as was the division by age.

Table 2. Number of slaves distributed to each sibling

according to gender of the slave

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Sibling (heir) |
| Slave Gender | #1 | #2 | #3 | #4 |
| Male | 11 | 12 | 11 | 7 |
| Female | 7 | 6 | 7 | 11 |
| Total | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 |

Sibiling number four, the daughter who married Pak An-hyo, received more female than male slaves, but given all the variables not only of age and gender but also of physical strength and fertility which certainly bear on the economic value of the slave and the proximity of the slave’s residence to that of owner’s, it can still be argued that they divided the slaves as equally as they possibly could.

Land was also divided equally to such an extent, in fact, that each parcel large enough to be divided was divided so that each sibling could have part of each parcel, and this was done in spite of the fact that landholdings were scattered all up and down the peninsula. The division of the property, both land and slaves, shows a total concern with the principle of equality.

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How did the apportionment of slaves bear on the unity of the slave family? More often than not, each member of a slave family was inherited by a different sibling. For example, in a slave household of four—father, mother, and two children—each of the owner siblings would receive one of the slaves. This does not mean, however, that the slave families were broken up. The system was sophisticated enough to allow separate ownership without moving individual slaves to places geographically more convenient. For example, the slave family residing in Yongp’yong was comprised of a mother and her six children. The mother was owned by the third sibling; the eldest child, the third and the fifth were inherited by the second sibling; the second and the last child were owned by the fourth sibling; and the fourth slave child was owned by the first-born of the aristocratic siblings.

[page 36] Table 3. Inheritance of one slave family distributed among four sibling owners

|  |
| --- |
| Yonhap (mother)b. 1585inherited by #3 |
| Wonsaengb. 1607#2 | Kumsaengb. 1611#4 | Kusaengb. 1614#2 | Yonsaengb. 1622#1 | Paksaengb. 1623 #2 | Husaengb. 1628#4 |

Whereas it would seem more reasonable to give all the slaves resident in one place to one sibling and all the slaves in another to the next sibling, the middle Yi dynasty Koreans gave all the siblings an equal share in all the property in all of its locations, at least as far as it was possible to do so. Although it appears unnecessarily complicated at first, there must have been good reasons for doing so. One that comes to mind is that the siblings would be forced to interact and cooperate with each other since they all owned property adjoining each other in the case of land and related to each other in the case of slaves. The interaction in such a fractionated situation must have been intense, and the siblings must have found ways to cooperate. If they did not, the fighting and lack of cooperation would have rendered management of the estates impossible. In this way the method of disbursing the inheritance provided a cement made up of the networks necessary to control and exploit the property—a kind of lineage glue.

One document from the Kyongsang area shows siblings enacting a trade for the sake of convenience. The document stated that since both

owners had slaves in each of two locations, an exchange of ownership would enable both siblings to more easily manage the property. Although only one such document has been uncovered so far, this sort of practical readjustment after the allocation of the property probably occurred often.

The set of documents held by the Puan Kim lineage is large and varied. In addition to the inheritance documents which show much the same concern for equal division of the property as did the Chonju Yi document, the Puan documents cover a long period and eventually show the change in the inheritance pattern from the equilateral system of the early Yi period to the primogeniture pattern of the late period. One document was even written to declare that the change was going to be made and [page 37] provided the rationale for disinheriting those who had had, up to then (1669), equal access to family property (Puan p. 224,#33).

In addition to the inheritance documents which provided a record of the division of property between the siblings, there were several documents of special inheritance which were gifts given at the perogative of the owner usually for a special occasion such as a wedding, birth or the passing of an exam. On such an occasion, a son or other close relative would be given a “special allocation”(pyolgup); in the text of the document the reason for the gift was usually explained.

In addition to the inheritance documents, the Puan collection also has a large number of hojok documents. These are not the type mentioned above (as the basis for many of the studies done up to now) which were large bound copies that recorded everyone in the county but are single sheets of paper which were the copies retained by the householder at the time of each triennial registration.

There are also isolated sales documents, many of which involved the purchase or sales of slaves, and other miscellaneous documents, many of which touched on the life and role of the slaves and their relationship to the owners. In fact few of the documents did not mention slaves in one way or another.

One case of an interesting gift is found in two documents dated 1735 wherein a man gave property to his son (Puan p. 206,#19) and to his new daughter-in-law (p. 206,#20) on the occasion of their moving to his patrilineal home after an initial postmarital stay at the bride’s natal home. He gave his son sixteen slaves and his daughter-in-law nine slaves. A smilar document in my possession from a segment of the Chonju Yi lineage records a mother-in-law addressing her daughter-in-law. In it she stated that she had only one son but had always wanted a daughter. She wrote, “You have entered the household and have been the daughter to me that I never had.” She went on to say that she would give her daughter-in-law five slaves to wait on her and help her. She closed by saying, “Do not reject this gift but use these slaves to make your life comfortable.”

In one property purchase document, a casual statement about slaves raises an interesting point—the peculium. In the document, a large piece of property is acquired by the Puan Kim group from the a man named Yu Song-min (p. 177,#16). The document states that all the property bounded by some small hills on two sides, the ocean on the third, and a stream on the fourth side were to be sold, with the exception of two small parcels that had already been sold to two slaves. Property owned by[page 38] slaves is called the peculium and is always considered to be of minimal value, usually being small personal items.

Land owned by slaves was another of the unique aspects of Korean slavery according to Patterson (1982: 183-4). Korean and Russian slaves were the only ones he could find who could own land, although he argues that the Korean case was not really an exception to the rule if one considers that slave landholding was temporary and that a slave’s land was easily taken over by the master (1982: 425). His argument is that landholding commoners who sold themselves into slavery to avoid debt or taxes would bring property with them, but that situation would not prevail long and the slave owner would eventually get control of the slave’s land.

In the Puan case, there were slaves who were not just trying to maintain property but had actually acquired property. This may be evidence that refutes Patterson’s attempt to downplay the uniqueness of Korean slavery; on the other hand, it is not very solid evidence because this may be viewed as an isolated case, or the slaves may have not been acting for themselves but as surrogates for their owners. Because of Confucian biases against commercial transactions, many pious aristocrats would not handle money directly but worked though agents—their slaves. The case at hand may have been such.

The most unusual of the Puan documents (Puan p. 116,#68,1760) was one written by the widowed mother of Kim Tung-mun (1732-1767). Her son was in jail and she addressed her petition to the magistrate pleading the innocence of her only child.6 The charge was the killing of a slave. The plea for innocence was based on the concept that proper punishment of a slave, up to five lashings, was acceptable and her son had acted within the provisions of the law. She also argued that her son was frail (and not strong enough to kill anyone). The fact that the slave died was coincidental, she argued, and quoted a Chinese four-character expression, “crow flies, pear falls,” a saying used to illustrate a case of simultaneous events that are mistakenly assumed to be in a cause-and- effect relationship. The document recorded the magistrate as saying that Tung-mun need not be held over for trial.

The most common documents, however, are probably the most telling. These are (1) inheritance documents, similar to the ones discussed above, which show that slaves were passed on from generation to generation, and (2) purchase and barter documents which show that slaves were sold and traded. In the Puan collection there are seventeen slave-purchase documents (Puan pp. 157-169) and thirty-five inheritance documents in[page 39] which slaves were the primary forms of property listed (Puan pp. 201-226). The Kyongbuk collection contains 212 inheritance documents and twenty-two slave-purchase documents. Both collections, the Puan collection and the Kyongbuk collection, contain several other categories of documents, such as letters, land sale agreements, etc., many of which discuss slaves. Many of these documents have yet to be studied fully; but when they are studied they will reveal a great deal about Korean slavery and social stratification. More of these types of documents are becoming available, and with them the possibilities for the study and analysis of slavery increase.

The use of inheritance documents and the other private documents take us one step closer to answering the basic questions posed at the outset of this paper. Let us re-examine the statements quoted from Wagner above. First, he inferred from the hojok that there was buying and selling going on; and we have seen that numerous slave transactions took place and were recorded in documents that are coming to light today. Second, such “vital questions” as

...continuity of ownership, sale or transfer of slaves, patterns of bequeathing ownership, inheritance of slave status across generations, slave marriage and its relationship to an owner’s effort to maximize his slave assets...

we are told, “can be answered with varying degrees of success on the basis of further intensive” study of hojok. But now we have the very documents that deal directly with these “vital questions” and we are just beginning to make progress in understanding these vital processes in traditional Korea.

The third point drawn from Wagner’s article was that “it seems not unreasonable to suppose that these slaves for the most part lived and worked on agricultural land held by their owner.” The Chonju Yi inheritance document cited above shows that this reasonable alternative did not pertain. There was no correlation between the locations of allocated lands and residences of allocated slaves. That situation is admittedly so unreasonable that it is hard to imagine how the society functioned. Yet that appears to be the situation, which implies that Orlando Patterson was right in his assertion that Korean slavery was indeed sophisticated. We are viewing an economic system that enabled an aristocrat to own slaves in certain sections of the country, some far removed from his residence, and at the same time own land scattered around the country in areas other than where his slaves were resident.

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Finally, what of the position of Korean slavery in the world as outlined in Patterson’s book? Slavery is slavery and the ethnocentricity displayed in the terminological difference in describing domestic slavery versus other-nation slavery is nothing more than that, a display of ethnocentricity. “Slave” is the more accurate term, not “servant”; and “owner” is more accurate than “master” because Korean slavery, like slavery elsewhere, was at root a system in which people owned other people.

Yet there were unique aspects of Korean slavery. It was one of the longest held systems, one of the broadest in scale, and one of the most sophisticated in the pre-modern world. The ramifications long overlooked in Korean studies must have some relationship to the vital questions of modern Korea. Such questions include those that are part of Korea’s travail: the failure to enter the twentieth century as an independent state, the rise of a Communist regime in half of the territory, and perhaps others. The fact that it is a sensitive subject is one reason the study has long been overlooked. Now, with the aid of newly available and pertinent documents, the study can begin in earnest.

**NOTES**

1.The latter would also be found in South Korea if the North Koreans ever conquered South Korea—at least that is what government slogans pasted on walls and billboards all over South Korea say.

2. These sources are concerned, as is this paper, with the Yi dynasty, but there have been important works on the Koryo period. Among them is the dissertation by Ellen Salem Unruh, “Slavery in Medieval Korea”(Columbia University, 1978).

3. Somerville sees the mobility as terminological, that is to say, commoners obtained yangban titles but then, as a sort of nouveaux riche, were excluded from the old elite circles. He did not address the problem of slavery to any extent.

4. One of the first was Kyongbuk chibang komunso chipsong (A collection of old docu-ments from the North Kyongsang Province) published by Yongnam University, Kyongsang, 1981. Also several collections belonging to private households or lineage groups have been published by the Academy of Korean Studies (Chongsin munhwa yon’guwon) including Puan Kim-ssi uban komunso (Old documents of the Uban segment of the Puan Kim lineage), Kojon charyo ch’ongso 83-3 (Classic resources collection #83-3).

5. In the subsequent century the inheritance system changed from this type of equilateral system to one of primogeniture wherein the eldest son received the largest share, other sons received minimal shares and daughters were disinherited, although they did receive a dowry.

6. Other documents in the Puan collection reveal that he was an adopted son (p. 99 #15; see also the chart on p. 7).

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