A Cultural Analysis of Slavery in Historical Korea

Joshua J. Snyder

Western New Mexico University

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Dr. Hernandez

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The history of the Korean Peninsula has been relatively obscure to the western world, due in large part, to the lack of available historical research written or translated into English. For Korean, Chinese, or Japanese speakers, however, there is a wealth of well-documented and descriptive journals and books dedicated entirely to uncovering the extensive historical narrative of the Korean story. Here lies the trouble for non-Asian language speakers who desire to learn and study about this often overlooked peninsula that is equivalent in size to the present states of Illinois and Wisconsin combined. Furthermore, since the cease-fire following the Korean War in the 1950s, half of the country's historical research has been closed off to the majority of the outside world, thus drawing the nation further and further into historical obscurity. Thankfully, as South Korea has opened its doors to the outside world and exposed its culture through large conglomerate companies like Samsung, LG, Hyundai, Kia, and Doosan, as well as through the 1988 Summer Olympics, 2002 World Cup, and the 2018 Winter Olympics, the west has taken notice and scholars and journalists alike have sought to unveil the previously untouched and unfamiliar history of the country. In view of the goal of previous scholars before me, this paper seeks to further reveal the historical narrative of the Korean Peninsula through examining the complex and drawn-out history of the Korean slaving society. Unbeknownst to many, Korea not only enslaved individuals for personal use in the homes and in the fields, they did so at such alarming levels as to be labeled a slaving society. Slaves were present throughout Korea long before the African slave trade took shape in the 16th and 17th centuries. Although comparisons can be made between both slaving cultures, in reality, the Korean slaving society in many ways, is unlike any previous civilization before or after its rise and fall. I intend to shine a light into the historical darkness surrounding the daily life and routines of generations of slaves. Furthermore, I will explain the various ways
individuals were brought into slavery, as well as, the various ways they were able to receive their emancipation or freedom from their low status within the cultural hierarchy. I will look at the relationships between slaves and masters, and the legal restraints, if any, which were available to both parties. Ultimately, I desire to provide a voice from the past to the present and let the stories and burdens that thousands upon thousands of individuals experienced throughout the Korean peninsula for generations finally be able to speak for themselves.

Part I – History of the Korean Peninsula

Before diving into the history of Korea’s slaving society, we must first review and understand the major historical information as it relates to Korea. The Korean peninsula has found itself consistently engulfed in warfare, whether it was a fight amongst the local tribes, or being under siege from an outside force, Korea has always been a promising launching point for excursions into Japan and China, and as such, is a country that is more familiar with warfare than it is with peace. For many outsiders who visit portions of South Korea, most notably, Seoul, they often find themselves left with the feeling that the local inhabitants are semi-cold towards foreigners and tourists. This ‘uncertainty’ that the locals feel towards outsiders, is due in large part, to the frequent conquests of outside militaries seeking to overthrow the local governments within Korea and establish the Korean peninsula as their own. Some do not excuse the ‘cold’ nature of the locals towards outsiders, others don’t simply care; however, for anyone who spends considerable time within the country and endeavors to understand local customs and cultures, they find a nation that is full of life, excitement, fun, and more importantly, a group of people who live for sharing their beliefs and traditions to those who are willing to stop and listen. One great place to start is examining Young Ick Lew’s “Brief History of Korea – A Bird’s Eye View.” In it, Mr. Young remarkably
illustrates the broad history of Korea. The country can be divided into four distinct and vastly effective dynasties that have ruled Korea throughout its written history as well as three well chronicled ‘kingdoms’ that co-shared authority throughout the peninsula during the first 1000 years of the common era. The first dynasty that dates back to 2,333 BCE is known as the ancient Joseon (조선) Dynasty. This dynasty is formally recognized as the “first Korean state,”¹ and survived for nearly 2200 years before being overthrown by the Han of ancient China in 108 BCE. Subsequently, the conquered region was divided into four territories that were equally ruled by four commanders. Over time, these commanders returned to China, leaving behind only one in command, until being overridden by another local authority known as the Koguryo in 313CE.² The Koguryo occupied what is present day North Korea, and divided the south portion of the peninsula amongst two other civilizations; the Paekche, and the Silla. Each kingdom was independent of the other and yet shared many similarities. For example, “all were agricultural economies based on rice cultivation. Trade was mostly through barter, with a limited use of shell money or Chinese coins, and transport was by horse, oxcart, and ship.”³ Another similarity that was present within each kingdom, and was passed down through generations and dynasties was a sort of caste system or societal ranking. “There were also numbered grades (called ‘head ranks) of lower aristocracy (6,5,4) and free citizens (3, 2, 1), as well as lower classes that included slaves and criminals. Movement between classes was strictly controlled. A hierarchical system was also used in the military organizations, led by the king.”⁴ This societal division played a significant role amongst the lower classes and slaves who were consistently looking for ways to

¹ Young, Pg. 6
² Ibid, Pg. 6
³ Korean History, Pg. 3
⁴ Korean History, Pg. 4
improve their status. Unlike the caste system within India, it was possible, but not common, for an individual to improve his or her social status throughout the duration of their life. This idea will be discussed in greater detail when viewing slavery as a whole.

Even though the Han were removed, their effects on the local culture and civilization were plentiful, such that “the strength of the Chinese influence is still felt in Korea’s Confucian-based laws, political norms, and bureaucratic institutions.” Over the next 1000 years, these four distinct kingdoms frequently sought to overthrow one another in an attempt to gain ultimate control of the region. The Silla who eventually conquered the Paekche and Koguryo gained control of the peninsula by 660 and set up, what is arguably, one of the most prosperous and influential kingdoms in Korean history. Each kingdom expanded the cultural influence of Korea, however, it is the Silla Dynasty that is most remembered for its influences on the country as a whole. “The Unified Silla era became a time of relative peace, prosperity, and cultural growth. Today, a great number of archaeological sites and artifacts from the period can be found in the former Silla capital of Kyongju in the east of the peninsula.” The Silla helped to establish Buddhism as the state religion at the time, thus transferring away from the Confucianism that was brought to Korea as a result of the Han invasion.

Over time, the Silla experienced intense civil war amongst the classes as the elites consistently remained in power, and the ‘lesser born’ citizens found themselves unable to significantly improve their social standing. As a result, the Silla Dynasty viewed as “the longest enduring in Korean history” found itself divided again amongst the ancestral Paekche, Koguryo, and Silla descendants. This war led to the eventual decimation of the Silla Dynasty and the rise of the Koryo (고려) Dynasty. “Eventually, a

5 Young, Pg. 7
6 Korean History, Pg. 5
7 Young, Pg. 13
rebel leader named Wang Kon became strong enough to challenge Silla. He and the last Silla king ended the war amicably by each marrying one of the other's daughters, with Wong taking control and allotting the former king a large holding of land. Thus the ‘three kingdom’ period was brought to an end, a timeframe that began around 37BCE and ended in 935AD.

Wang Kon, also referred to as King T’aejo, was the founder of the Koryo Dynasty, and it was from this time period that Korea eventually received its name. “Combining military prowess and nimble diplomacy, Wang Kon in 918 founded a new dynasty, named Koryo, from which the words ‘Korea’ in English and ‘Coree’ in French were originally derived.” Interestingly, it was during this time that Buddhism and Confucian politics established roots in Korea without any upheaval or turmoil. “Confucianism as a political ideology and Buddhism as a religion coexisted without any problem during the Koryo Dynasty. Moreover, at the time of the founding of the new dynasty, Buddhism was the most popular religion.” John Jorgensen furthers the assertion of Buddhism as the state religion of Korea during the Koryo Dynasty by stating: “Buddhism is frequently referred to as the state religion of the Koryo, a dynasty that ruled most of the Korean Peninsula from 918-1392.” The relation between Buddhism and class ranking played a significant role in the acceptance of the religion across the region and greatly shaped all those trapped within their specific social status. “One reason Buddhism was so quickly accepted in some areas may have to do with its reinforcement of social roles (decided by actions in past lives), and thus its use in maintaining the status quo.”

8 Korean History, Pg. 7
9 Young, Pg. 13
10 Nam, Pg. 38
11 Jorgensen, Pg. 1
12 Korean History, Pg. 4
The Koryo Dynasty experienced multiple attempts against its sovereignty both abroad and from within. During the end of the 11th century, a successful coup de’ tat’ was initiated by various military officers which gained control of the nation for 60 years, however, their reign was cut short by an invasion from the Mongols. Instead of defeating the Koryo Dynasty, the Mongols sought and effectively created alliances between the two kingdoms. As such, the 100 years of Mongol authority within Korea was “a harsh and repressive one”\textsuperscript{13} which was eventually overthrown in 1392 when General Yi successfully defeated the Mongol/Koryo Dynasty and created the fourth, and final, Chosun (조선) Dynasty (also referred to as the Yi (이) Dynasty). The main features regarding the Chosun Dynasty that reigned from 1392 until the early parts of the 20th century is the switch away from Buddhist ideology and religion, and a shift towards Neo-Confucianism. Surprisingly, this change in state religion did not entirely end the need for or necessity upon Buddhism for although ‘the state ideology of the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910) was Confucianism, [many] Chosun kings who supported Confucian values as state ideology also followed Buddhism as a personal belief.’\textsuperscript{14} It was during this dynasty that King Sejong created the Korean alphabet in 1443; furthermore, the Chosun Dynasty placed a premium upon education and learning and would later be influenced through Catholic and Protestant missionaries during the 17th and 18th centuries.\textsuperscript{15} However, like all kingdoms and dynasties preceding it, the Chosun Dynasty experienced vast attacks from outsiders, most notably, the Japanese and Barbarians from Manchu.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Young, Pg. 15
\textsuperscript{14} Nam, Pg. 36
\textsuperscript{15} Young, Pg. 16
\textsuperscript{16} Young, Pg. 16
The purpose of the previous paragraphs stating a general overview of Korean history is simply to allow the reader to better understand and connect with the various dynasties and kingdoms that have conquered the Korean Peninsula, as well as, be able to understand how these ruling parties greatly shaped, altered, re-shaped, and solidified the societal role of the elites, citizens, lower classes, and more importantly, the slaves.

**Part II – Social Structure (Four Societal Ladders)**

Korean culture and society has always been shaped by social status. From the very onset of birth, an individual was placed within a hierarchical system and spent the majority of his or her life working against that social structure. Karl Moskowitz, in *Korean Development and Korean Studies – A Review Article*, defines the Korean system as being “a system of strict class distinctions and boundaries, a system to which interclass mobility was anathema.”17 Ki Chung Kim takes this one step further by stating, “Korea had been a slave society, not just a society with slaves.”18 Her statement is profound, for often times, in the global study of slavery; Korea is often overlooked, misunderstood, or misrepresented. How can it be that this country with such rich history and tradition can be referred to as being a *society* of slaves? Furthermore, this society was highly populated by slaves. Over the course of the major dynasties the numbers fluctuated dramatically based upon agricultural need, overall cost, and dependence upon bodies to join the military. Interestingly, “the proportion of slaves in the Korean population went from 43% in 1690 to 15% in 1789 and back to 31% in 1858.”19 This dramatic shift over the course of 200 years revolved around the introduction of coin currency within the country during the later end of the 17th century, as well as the ongoing battle between the social elites and their need for forced labor and the governments needs for

17 Moskowitz, Pg. 88
18 Kim Ki Chung, Pg. 108
19 Brezis, Pg. 6
individuals to tax. However, not all scholars viewed these numbers exactly the same, as individual responses from that day argued for even higher percentages of slaves within the dynasty and parts of pre-modern Korea. “Yi Sim Won [stated] in 1478 [that] “among people today, private slaves are eight or nine of every ten people, and people of good status are but one or two of every ten people.” Of course, these statistics are in relation to the ‘good status, bad status’ of individuals within the region, and are quite possibly being represented in a way that combines all individuals who were not of yangban (elite) status together with the nobi (slave). In either case, it can be expected that the social groups represented within Korea provided very polarizing results amongst the population. “[Korean] social groups provided spaces for people to live their lives and at the same time also bound them through the two settings of local area and blood ties...this period [Chosun Dynasty] carried statuses which were determined by birth (natural) and that were differentiated legally and socially (hierarchical), and that their positions in society were determined by their status.” For the individuals at the top, life was good and plentiful, whereas, for the individuals at the bottom, life proved very difficult and demanding. There was a consistent battle being waged, for those in command were unwilling to relinquish their hold on positions of authority, and those under authority were seeking ways to gain higher positions of power.

Although some scholars have argued for multiple societal divisions, others such as Han Young-Woo have stated the social division within the Chosun Dynasty of Korea consisted of only lowborn and freeborn individuals. However, the commonly accepted position amongst the vast majority of Korean scholars has been four. Incidentally, the

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20 Mitsuo, Pg. 44
21 Ibid, Pg. 35
22 Chung, Ku Bok, Pg. 1
lowest class, which was commonly reserved for slaves or criminals, is not always counted within this structure.

“In pre-modern Korea, there were four hereditary classes: the yangban, or scholar-aristocrat class, which dominated political and military power and wealth; the chungin (middle people), or relatively petty officials, the yangmin or common people, mostly farmers; and finally the chonmin or low born. Most chonmin were nobis (hereditary slaves), but also included in the chonmin class were actors, mudangs (female shamans), kisaengs (female entertainers) and butchers.”23

The delineation of social statuses within Korea was not present, or at least is not found in any remaining public records, within ancient Korea, most notably the ancient Chosun Dynasty through the Silla Dynasty. As was mentioned earlier, a major factor in the universal acceptance of Buddhism throughout the population was its adherence to a social structure. Prior to this acceptance of a 4-leveled structure, the general idea was based solely off of good and bad status. “There are but two distinctions for people in our country: people are of base status if they are not of good status.”24 The need for stricter guidelines only came about when the government required greater numbers of individuals to serve within the military and to pay taxes. For the sake of clarity, this paper will refer primarily to the accepted 4 division social structure that was present throughout the Chosun Dynasty with roots tracing back to the Koryo Dynasty as well.

Part III – Divisions of the Nobi (노비)

The Nobi system has been a part of Korean culture and society since even before the Ancient Chosun Dynasty was in power. As far as recorded history has shown, the slaving structure has been a consistent, recurring aspect throughout all of Korea’s history. “Slavery dated as far back as the Three Kingdoms period (57BCE-668CE).”25 Unfortunately, much of the information known about the Nobi, which is the ancient

23 Kim, Bok Rae, Pg. 48
24 Mitsuo, Pg. 36
25 Brezis, Pg. 3
Korean word used for slave (present day - Noyae 노예), is unrecorded because the majority of the population, excluding the Yangban, were illiterate. The information that has been recorded has been written and interpreted through the eyes of the slaveholders or from public records of court cases and census papers. It is from these papers that the conclusions about the Korean slaving society have been drawn.

To put it bluntly, the Nobi system was arguably unlike any slaving society in the world. Within the system can be seen remarkable variations and experiences of the slaves. In some instances, slaves were almost autonomous from their masters, and in others, they were far more familiar to the antebellum slaving structure of the American South. The system can be broken down into two distinct groupings or categories of slaves; publicly owned and privately owned slaves. "Broadly speaking, there were two categories of nobi: the kongnobi (or kwannobi), that is, state-owned nobi, and the sanobi, privately owned nobi."26 Whether an individual was a privately owned or publicly owned slave made little difference in how the nobi viewed their circumstances, for in both cases, the individuals generally respected and adhered to their social standing. This respect, quite possibly, grew from the lack of negative public perception of the nobi as well as their ability to be included in various aspects of society. "There may not have been a perception of slaves as lower-class, and even if there was such a perception, it seems to have been extremely weak. Slaves could attend meetings with [the elites], and they could be appointed, as staff working in the community compact group, which was a countywide organization that promoted ethical behavior."27 Furthermore, slaves were required to contribute to society in two ways, either through providing personal service to their master or yangban, or by annually giving money to the government authorities.

26 Kim, Ki Chung, Pg. 111
27 Mitsuo, Pg. 39
“The ibyok nobi were those who were in service in person (whether to a public agency or private master), while the napgong nobi were those who were obligated to make an annual tribute payment in lieu of their personal service.”

Over time, when the need for more payments of tribute rose, the number of privately owned nobi greatly decreased; conversely, when the yangban created an uproar from their lack of service persons, those disputes would alter the entire system and the number of personal slaves once again increased. Aside from dividing the slaving system between public and private or service and tribute, nobi were also further divided by their means of birth. Relying upon the means that an individual became a slave further raised or lowered his social standing. If an individual was born free but became a slave through being captured during war, the term ‘freeborn’ slave would be applied to his or her name. Conversely, if an individual was born into slavery, he or she received the term of ‘non-freeborn’ slave.

“Since the late Koryo Dynasty the government [has] tried to distinguish slaves having the freeborn origin from [the non-freeborn] slave group.”

In stark contrast to public opinion and perception regarding slavery, the Korean slaves received a greater level of freedom and personal liberty. It is well known that nobi slaves often times owned slaves of their own, for the nobi that resided outside of their masters home, marriage was a common part of life. “More of the (outside-resident nobi), both male and female, were married and lived as a family unit, whereas more of the (service nobi) were unmarried single men and women, who lived as dependents of the owner.”

Likewise, they were allowed to increase their monetary status apart from their owner, and often times fought together with other slaves and free persons against outside invaders and military threats. Furthermore, they were exempt from paying

28 Kim, Ki Chung, Pg. 111
29 Chung, Ku Bok, Pg. 3
30 Kim, Ki Chung, Pg. 111
taxes to the government as well as being required to serve in the military. A caveat to paying taxes, however, was their requirement to pay tribute to their masters or owners in place of taxes. Prior to the creation of the slave market; individuals were either born into slavery, forced into slavery through military capture, or accepted a life of slavery to avoid extreme poverty by seeking dependence upon the yangban.\(^{31}\)

**Part IV: Nobi Enslavement Policies**

Throughout all of documented Korean history, a typical slaving market or slave trade was not present until the onset of the 18\(^{th}\) century. For the better part of 2000+ years of history, the situations that led to an individual being enslaved revolved only around a few factors. We know that the social status of individuals contributed heavily to increasing numbers in the slave population, for instance, “the fact that over one third among the population occupied the slave status resulted from the freeborn-lowborn status system.”\(^{32}\) In addition, it can be concluded that the social ladder that separated elites from peasants, and freeborn from slaves, also contributed to the heightened ideology amongst the yangban and their feeling of authority over the ones they enslaved. For the yangban, “their nobi were property as much as human beings: human beings whose services were indispensable to maintaining their privileged way of life, but also property that could be bought and sold, inherited, given as gifts, and punished at will.”\(^{33}\) Essentially, individuals who became slaves did so as a result of being captured enemies, criminals, traded away by their parents, or born into their position as a result of the social order within Korean society. During the Three Kingdoms era between 57BCE and 668CE “Koreans were made slaves of other Koreans during the war between the Three Kingdoms, beginning with prisoners of wars between the states. Over time, slaves

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\(^{31}\) Brezis, Pg. 4  
\(^{32}\) Chung, Ku Bok, Pg. 6  
\(^{33}\) Kim, Ki Chung, Pg. 110
became part of the Korean caste-status system, wherein slaves had a clear economic place.”

Beginning with the Three Kingdoms period, slavery as a result of criminal behavior became increasingly common. It also solved a valuable question of how a criminal should be handled while still contributing in some fashion back to society. Dating back to the 1st century CE on, “slaves were either former prisoners of wars between tribes or nations, criminals... [Children of parents who] were forced by circumstances to sell their children into slavery, or commoners [who fell] into slavery due to private debts.”

With the creation of coin currency, the individual sale and purchase of slaves began, however, the privilege of owning slaves during the late 17th century rested solely in the hands of the government and the elite yangban. This proved to be yet another reason for consistent dissention and frustration between government officials and the yangban who greatly enjoyed their ability of being the only private individuals within society who were eligible to own slaves. This tension came to a head in the early part of the 19th century when the “state claimed to defend the interest of private nobi owners on the grounds that the yangban class formed the basis of the traditional hierarchical Chosun society, [however] it increasingly sought to undermine the private nobi system in order to expand the population base for taxation purposes (in kind, labor, and money).”

Part V: Nobi Resistance & Emancipation

Even with all of the ‘positive’ aspects of their lives and their existence, nobi were still slaves, and still attempted to rebel against the authority figures above them. When given the opportunity, slaves would simply run and seek a new life within a different

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34 Brezis, Pg. 3
35 Ibid, Pg. 4
36 Kim, Bok Rae, Pg. 60
region of Korea. “Some runaway nobi formed permanent maroon communities, some surrendered for continued service to the state or to an influential yangban household, but most became independent peasant farmers.”37 Unlike the American South where the slaves were physically different from their masters, within Korea, the singularity of their physical features provided some level of obscurity that enabled nobi to blend in with their surroundings and build a more promising life. “One result of [paying tribute] was flight: In 1484, for example, 10,000 of the 45,000 public nobis were on the run, while total nobi (public and private) fugitives possibly numbered a million. Nobi marronage continued to rise, peaking in the late eighteenth century.”38 Of course, the desire to flee was not enough, nor was being similar in appearance, for many nobi who attempted to run would simply be captured and either put to death or be returned to their previous state of being a slave. Due to Korea’s long history of warfare, from both international and domestic forces, opportunities to run were surprisingly plentiful and over time, the numbers of escaped slaves gradually increased as a result. “Many things caused the increased rate of nobi flight during the war, including destruction of the nobi registers, death or disappearance of the nobi masters, and separation of the nobi from their masters in the confusion and turmoil of war. Added to these were also the drastically diminished resources of the nobi masters, which not only reduced their control over the nobi but also their capacity to pursue their runaway nobi.”39

Another example of nobi resistance was much harsher and extreme when compared to flight; murder. Due to the lack of a strong social infrastructure, it became increasingly common for enslaved nobi to simply murder their master and subsequently flee. Furthermore, it was not unheard of for the nobi, upon murdering his or her master,

37 Kim, Bok Rae, Pg. 51
38 Ibid, Pg. 50
39 Kim, Ki Chung, Pg. 119
to receive no form of punishment for fear of shaming the name of their recently murdered owner.

“Yangban violence against nobi was considered legal, but rarely made public. Ironically, the same was true of much violent nobi resistance, which ranged from physically assaulting or murdering masters, to raping their wives or daughters, to participation in coup d’états and outright rebellion...An assault on a social superior in principle carried severe punishment – generally the death penalty. However, there exist few officially recorded cases of nobi assault on a master, as the ruling yangban class considered that such acts, if made public, would stain their honor.”

Of course, it would seem logical to assume that murders grew rapidly throughout the region when it became publicly aware that an individual nobi viciously murder their owner and received no form of punishment. Then again, the entire system and relationship between the yangban and the nobi didn’t entirely make sense either. As such, the number of murders throughout the Chosun Dynasty period (pre-modern era) fluctuated dramatically, some periods saw increased acts of violent crimes committed by nobi, and other periods saw strong declines in violent crimes. “The murder of their master by nobis, [was] rare in the early Chosun era, and more common from the reign of King Sonjong (1469-1494), [and] declined markedly following the reign of King Yongjo (1724-1776).”

The reasons behind this uncertainty are most likely plentiful, and difficult to define, however, it is my general assumption that these numbers fluctuated likely as a result of the increased level of international attacks on the region during the 15th century, which subsequently allowed greater opportunities for both public and private nobi to achieve their freedom through non-violent acts against their masters.

Other examples of resistance included sexual assault and rebellion. The first, which even when consensual was still viewed as assault, and the later, involving secret

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40 Kim, Bok Rae, Pg. 49
41 Kim, Bok Rae, Pg. 53
meetings and detailed plans unfortunately never gained meaningful success. In the event a child was born through the sexual relationship between a slave and a ‘good status’ person, the original law relegated the child to the status of slave regardless of the gender or status of the other parent. However, the law regarding the social status of children born of a slave parent fluctuated like the rate of murder. “Children were slaves if one of their parents was a slave, regardless of the status of the other parent...

[However, by 1397] the Jongyang law stated that children were common if their mother was common, regardless of the status of the father...[this change greatly disturbed the elite individuals and as such] In 1430, the slavery policy reverted to the previous system in order to secure more slaves for the agricultural sector.” As can be expected, the legal status of children born of slaves changed a few more times before the eventual abolishment of slavery in 1894. The cause behind such drastic legal changes was connected to the ever-changing relationship between the yangban and the government. The yangban took great pride in their ownership of slaves and connected their societal value and worth to the number of nobi that were under their authority. The government, on the other hand, desired larger numbers of free individuals of whom they could impose taxes upon, for private slaves were required only to pay tribute to their masters and not to their government.

Emancipation was rare amongst the nobis, at least at the hands of the yangban. When the population of slaves decreased, the rate of emancipating slaves equally declined. There was little incentive for a yangban individual to emancipate his slaves, at least not economically. As previously mentioned, a slave’s greatest chance for freedom lied solely through flight from their masters, or in times of war, service in the military. When slaves did receive their freedom, it was typically achieved through the

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42 Brezis, Pg 5
intervention of the government during times of war. “By bringing in a required number of enemy heads, a nobi could gain manumission…[In addition] to increase its grain supply [during low periods of food] the government offered manumission to any nobi who could contribute a stipulated amount of grain to the government.”\textsuperscript{43} Of course, for the nobi who were personal slaves, the opportunity of contributing large amounts of grain was not possible, let alone feasible. Although studies have not been conducted, it would seem highly likely that, in the event a nobi did murder or flee from his master, it was most likely done so by a slave who resided with and depended almost exclusively upon their master for support. Although emancipation had been discussed as early as the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, it wasn’t put into effect, at least not amongst the state owned slaves, until the early parts of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. “It was not until 1801…that the state finally substituted [paying tribute] a tax on fishing and commerce, and emancipated all 66,000 state-owned nobis.”\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, as the below outline explains, Korea represented one of the latest countries to completely emancipate all slaves from their bondage. In fact, one of the major contributing factors that led to the emancipation of the slaves, was the destruction of the Korean caste system. In essence, these two factors were greatly connected, and slavery and social status could not exist without the benefit of the other.

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<th>Table 1. A Chronology of Emancipation in the World, 1772-1900</th>
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\textsuperscript{43} Kim, Ki Chung, Pgs. 119-120
\textsuperscript{44} Kim, Bok Rae, Pg. 59
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</table>

Source: Fogel and Engerman (1974), Table 1.\(^{45}\)

The life of the *nobi* was very peculiar in relation to many of the other slaving societies in the world. Unlike the American South, or even amongst ancient Rome, Koreans had little difficulty enslaving individuals from their own societies as they saw them as being inferior to themselves. Korea relied heavily upon the traditions and rules found within the Buddhist and Confucianist beliefs that called for societal separation between those of good status and those of bad status. Enslaved individuals were acquired through dowry, sold into slavery in order to pay off debts, were captives of war, or towards the end of the 17th century were sold in the markets. Once marked as an individual of low status, it was difficult, but not impossible, to move up the social ladder. The most common ways to receive their freedom or improve their status was through flight, bribery, or by murdering their master. Emancipation was rare throughout the peninsula, and due to the constant disagreements between the government officials and the *yangban*, laws and rules were constantly in flux, which only further alienated the *nobi*. The history of the slave trade throughout Korea is deep, and can still be felt today in the way Koreans perceive themselves and their neighbors across the border and from within the country. In essence, traditions die hard, and the pain and suffering has not yet finished for this prosperous, and divided nation.

\(^{45}\) Brezis, Pg. 19
Works Cited


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