Slave Society

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I. Introduction

About thirty years ago when I was studying in Japan I bought a Japanese translation of a book by the North Korean scholar Kim Sŏkhyŏng entitled The Class Composition of the Peasantry in Korea's Feudal Period. I was immediately struck by what I regarded as a strange anomaly in Kim's presentation of one of his arguments. As a Marxist historian following in the tradition established by Paek Nam'ŭn in his History of Feudal Society and Economy of Korea, Vol. I, published initially in Japan in 1937, Kim believed that Korea had passed from the period of primitive communism through the period of slavery to feudalism at least by the establishment of the Koryǒ dynasty in 918, if not in the so-called Unified Silla period from 668-935 (see my previous lecture on Development or Stasis in Korean History). In discussing the class structure of Korea in the Chosŏn period, particularly from the sixteenth century on, he, like many others, took cognizance of the large numbers of slaves in the Korean population, but it had no effect on his periodization of the various stages of development of Korean history because there was no shaking his belief that sixteenth-century Korea was right smack in the middle of feudalism, and the peasantry in that period had to be defined as serfs (nongmin). To him, slaves were an aberration that had to be acknowledged but was difficult to explain.

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1) This book was originally published in North Korea as Chosŏn ponggŏn sidae nongmin úi kyegup kusŏng (Pyongyang: Kwaḥagwŏn ch'ulp'ansa, 1957), and it has been reprinted in South Korea under the same title. (Seoul: Sinsawŏn, 1993).
Furthermore, he was also firmly convinced that since Korea was already on the universal track of development of world history as defined by Karl Marx, there had to be a period of slave society that antedated feudalism. He tried to find concrete evidence to demonstrate the existence of that society before the Koryŏ dynasty but was unable to do so, and he blamed it on the paucity of evidence left from that early period. He was not deterred from the hope, however, that some time in the future the crucial evidence would be unearthed, possibly in the form of a stone inscription.

The next interesting development in the discussion of slavery occurred when Shikata Hiroshi published his study of the household registers from about a half-dozen districts in the area around Taegu from the seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. He found that the percentage of slave households in these villages was around 30 percent from 1690 through 1732, but then dropped to below 5 percent after 1789. Subsequent studies agreed with this. Those statistics have been well noted, but few have taken the pains to remember that Shikata counted individuals as well as households, and that the percentage of individual slaves remained close to thirty percent of the total number of persons counted in the household registers right to the middle of the nineteenth century, casting doubt on the proposition that slavery died away by 1800. Shikata could only speculate that the population figures were not consistent with slave households because either the authorities had begun to include slaves living in other towns under the residence of the master, or an influx of divided families had been reduced to penury and slavery. But even if we follow the conventional wisdom right now that the slave population plummeted some time around 1780, we would still be faced with the problem of interpreting the meaning of a slave population that constituted 30% of the population in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Since that time, many other studies have confirmed that percentage even though no one has been able to study every district in the country. I would like to mention the important work done some years ago by Susan Shin and John Somerville in the United States on the question of population and status.

University found a household register from a northern suburb of Seoul in 1663 that indicated that 75 percent of that area was inhabited by slaves. Considering that Seoul was the capital of the country and an area that housed both official slaves in government employ and large numbers of private slaves owned by yangban officials and their relatives, 75% should not be alarming. Yet it should be known and advertised by everyone interested in the subject, and yet it has not been. It does not mean that the national average percentage of slaves in the whole country was 75 percent, but it makes 30 percent a more likely estimate than one might have thought for all three southern provinces, and maybe slightly less in the north where the population of local yangban was smaller.

Does Shikata’s study indicate that a figure of 30 percent for the slave population occurred suddenly in the seventeenth century? By no means, because he was limited to existing and available documents. We have no records that go back earlier that indicate percentages except perhaps for the records of a few villages in the late Silla period in the ninth century that are stored in Japan in the Shōsōin imperial repository around Kyōto. Even though information in the Samguk sagi, the History of the Three Kingdoms, compiled in the twelfth century suggests that some Silla aristocrats in Kyŏngju may have owned several thousand slaves, that figure can not be taken as representative of the population at large. The Shōsōin documents indicate that the average percentage of slaves was around 10 percent or less. Once again, it may be hazardous to draw general conclusions from a few villages in the ninth century about the country as a whole, but at the present time it is fair to say that the slave population probably remained at this low percentage in general. At least this material indicates that sometime between the ninth century and the seventeenth century, the percentage of slaves in Korean society rose from about 10 to about 30 percent of the population.

II. Koryŏ Dynasty Slave Population

What about the Koryŏ dynasty? Two studies were done on Koryŏ slavery that attracted my attention some years ago, a dissertation at Columbia University by Ellen Salem and a book by Hong Sŏnggi. Both laid out the legal definition of a slave and described slavery’s

major features, but neither of them raised the question of whether or not a slave society existed in Koryó times. Hong Sǒnggi, however, did discuss the issue of the percentage of slaves in the total population. He was not sure exactly what that percentage was, but he suspected that it might be close to 50 percent. For that matter, he implied that exceeding 50 percent was an important consideration, but unfortunately, he did not say why 50 percent made a major difference.

The problem with his estimate is that there was no concrete evidence in the form of local household registers from the Koryó period to allow a twentieth-century historian to guess the percentage of slaves in the total population, but in my view his feeling that the percentage of slaves must have been very large was justified by the little qualitative evidence that exists about the importance of slavery in Koryó society. He even noted the existence of a few wealthy slaves mentioned in the history of the Koryó dynasty, one of whom even bailed his wife’s master out of bankruptcy. He noted the existence of some slaves who had power because of the high positions of their masters or because they had been able to join the capital guards and worked their way up to the top when the guard commanders seized political power after 1170. He also took note of the minor slave rebellions that took place at the beginning of the thirteenth century but failed to succeed in liberating slaves from captivity.

It also is common knowledge that at the very beginning of the Koryó dynasty, the dynastic founder, Wang Kón, later known as King T’aejo, allowed his allies among the local warlords (changgyo, sóngjiu) and magnates (hojok) to enslave prisoners of war they had captured during the long rivalry with the Later Paekche state from the beginning of the tenth century to the final capitulation of the last Silla King in 935. He did not dare order his main supporters to release them after the war was over because he was dependent on their continued support for his own position as king. Thirty years later King Kwangjong made an attempt to reduce the slave population because it had prevented him from collecting taxes and controlling manpower for civil and military purposes, but he only wanted to conduct a survey of men who had been illegally reduced to slavery by force and return them to commoner status, a rather limited goal of reform less radical than total emancipation of

"Koryó sidae kongnobi ú sónggyókk" [The nature of official slaves in the Kory period], Yóksa hakpo 80 (December 1978):27-57; idem, Koryó sidae nobi yǒn’gu [Slavery in the Koryó period]. (Seoul: Han’guk yǒn’guwón, 1981); idem, Koryó kwijok sahoe wa nobi [The aristocratic society of Koryó and slavery]. (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1983).
slaves. Yet, it was another important indication of the power of the early Koryó slave-owning aristocracy.

In 982, the famous Confucian scholar-official Ch'oe Sŏngno rose to the defense of King T'aejo for his slave policy and attacked King Kwangjong for undermining the position of the slave owners by attempting to manumit them. He was angered because many slaves had testified against their masters during the purges that Kwangjong carried out against a number of aristocratic officials, and he claimed that Kwangjong had only undermined the propriety of the hierarchical social order by encouraging slaves to look forward to manumission and to weaken the intensity of the respect they owed their masters.

There was good reason for a Confucian official to defend slavery in 982, even though one might ask whether it was condoned in Confucian thought, because slave status had been made hereditary some time before 1039. We can not be sure exactly when this took place because the edict declaring the inheritance of slave status does not exist in the available records, but the matrilifial (or matrilineal) succession law of 1039 (chongmobop) does exist, and it decreed that in mixed slave/commoner marriages the slaves would inherit the status of the mother. This law is more important for what it implies than for what it says for two reasons. The number of persons that would have gained commoner status according to this rule would have been miniscule, but the law was ignored totally as masters took over all the offspring of mixed marriages even if the mother was a commoner. What is more important is that the law shows that if both parents were slaves, the children automatically became slaves. If there is any doubt about this, all doubt is removed by King Ch'ungnyŏl's response to the Mongol authorities in 1300 when they asked him to change the Koryó slave inheritance law to conform to the Mongol Yüan dynasty practice by which the offspring of mixed slave/commoner marriages was determined by a set of five regulations that were different from Koryó's matrilifial rule.

King Ch'ungnyŏl protested the Mongol demand to adopt their law on slave inheritance on the grounds that the Korean practice of permitting the inheritance of children from mixed slave/commoner marriages had become such an entrenched custom for almost three hundred years, even though it was in contravention to the matrilifial rule of 1039. That it was impossible to expect the people of Korea to abandon it to conform to current Yüan dynasty law. The Mongols relented and allowed hereditary slavery to continue without interruption in Koryó.

Yu Hyŏngwŏn, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, acknowledged and deplored the
existence of hereditary slavery in his own time in the Chosón dynasty. and he believed it had to have been instituted by King Taejo of Koryó at the beginning of the tenth century. But did hereditary slavery necessarily mean that the slave population would increase to a significant proportion of the entire population? Logic dictates that slaves would not increase to a larger percentage than what they were at the beginning of the tenth century unless one were to assume that the birth rate among slaves was higher than among the rest of the population.

Recently Yi Yonghun, a professor at Seoul National University, has argued that the percentage of the slaves of Koryó remained small despite the existence of inherited slavery—which he called an epoch-making law—for a number of reasons, some based on extant evidence, others based on conjecture. One argument was that the slave family was very weak because in 1262 the king granted palace slaves to a merit subject including two illegitimate children, and in 1391 a household register listing 21 slave families showed that only 2 of the families consisted of a married couple with children, and 14 others just a husband and wife; the remaining 5 families consisted of single persons. In addition, the Koryó law banned the marriage of a male slave to a commoner woman, which presumably prevented the slave population from expanding, but the conclusion that weak marriage ties among slaves prevented the expansion of the birth of slaves is based on the erroneous assumption that marriage was more important than informal cohabitation and that everyone was obeying the law, which they were not. And who knows why a fragment of a document listed 25 slave families of which only 2 had children? Maybe the children were sold off or given away?

Another notice in the History of the Koryó Dynasty (Koryósa) dated 1319 mentioned the investigation of the households under the control of a very important personage called a Sasimgwan, a person usually granted a rural region in the provinces with population attached to derive tax revenues as a prebend without either direct or feudal ownership. The investigation revealed that the population in the region was 2,360 households and 137 slaves. Yi Songhun estimated that if the households had an average of 10 persons each, then the percentage of slaves in that group was only 0.6 percent. Even though Yi Songhun conceded that famous scholar-officials like Yi Kyubo and Yi Saek each had 10 to 20 slaves and others had as many as several hundred, he concluded that these men had to be capital officials, and that only the capital officials were large landowners. The percentage of slaves in the population under the Sasimgwan had to represent the general situation in the provinces, which meant that the local slave population was miniscule, hardly higher than the Unified Silla
period.  

A second point in Yi’s argument was that Koryó kings limited the master’s right to dispose of his slaves any way he wanted, preventing the master from purchasing more slaves. King Kongyang of Koryó in 1391 banned sales of slaves except in emergency, but this occurred just before the dynasty fell in 1392. King Ch’ungnyǒl in 1278 took back slaves he had granted as gifts to some one, indicating that the slave master could not be sure of the strength of his tenure. From this Yi concluded that the master or slave owner only had possession over the slave and the right to the usufruct of his labor, something less than outright ownership.

Another piece of evidence Yi cited to show a low percentage of slaves in the population was a fragment of a household register dated 1391 showing two groups of families, one a set of 21 slave families living in the capital at Kaesóng, the other a group of 25 commoner families, 4 of which had a total of 7 household slaves.

Nevertheless, logic is an unreliable guide in a case like this. One has to assume a certain degree of greed and ambition in the behavior of the Koryó aristocrats, and also the likely consequences of an era of land acquisition that seems to have taken place along with the breakdown of the chǒnsikwa system of the 10th through 12th centuries in Koryó. a prebendal system of land tax allotments to yangban with civil and military official rank. By the twelfth century small-holding commoner peasants were not only going bankrupt and losing their land to mortgage holders, but many were commending their lands to aristocrats and becoming slaves to evade labor and military service and the oppressive tax collectors of the state. If one doubts that a large increase had taken place in the tenth century, it becomes far more likely in the late eleventh, and certainly in the twelfth centuries.

Yi Yonghun also made the point that the Koryó slave population could not have been large because the yangban ruling class had not been in charge of society as they were when the Chosón dynasty began in 1392. Yi believed that there was only a rapid increase in slavery in the fifteenth century because slaves were connected to yangban: yangban were eager to get more slaves to support themselves, and they fueled the increase.

Finally, he argued that slave laws were far more lax and lenient in Koryó than in Chosón.

In Koryó slaves might be able to attain high office, but they were totally prohibited from doing so in Chosón. Slaves could report their masters to the authorities if they violated the laws in Koryó, but they were prohibited from doing that in Chosón. And slaves might get away with exile instead of execution as punishment in Koryó if they killed their master under mitigating circumstances.

It is true that slave laws and punishments against disrespectful slaves were much looser in Koryó than Chosón, but that only mitigated the power of slave ownership; it did not remove it. It was also a feature of other slave societies for slaves to hold high positions, as in Imperial Rome, so that feature does not indicate that a slave system did not exist.

With respect to the role of the yangban in expanding the slave population, the yangban were not created in the Chosón dynasty. They made their appearance as a distinct social class in the early fourteenth century in an age when Koryó society was dominated by aristocratic so-called great families (hojok) with their feet in both the capital and the countryside. They were slave owners as well as land owners, and they carried their land and slaves with them into the next dynasty. The only ones that lost land and slaves were those who refused to betray the last Koryó king and support the usurper who founded the Chosón dynasty.

These men came from a dynasty that was for all purposes defunct. The Koryó kings were weak and unable to raise enough taxes to pay their officials; two thirds of the districts were run by local magnates; and the aristocrats and Buddhist monasteries ran things without too much interference from the king and the central government. These were the people who were the chief beneficiaries of hereditary slavery, and it boggles the mind to imagine that they were not able to increase their slaves in this situation, or had to wait for the next dynasty to do so! I don't think it matters that Koryó law was lenient in its punishments, or banned slave/commoner marriages because I am sure many slaves either married, cohabitated, and had children with other slaves or commoners no matter what the law said. It is impossible to believe that the slave population did not grow under those circumstances, and the flimsy evidence about the Sasingwan is not enough, at least at present, to convince me otherwise.

Besides, there are a number of other factors that have to be taken into account. After the military commanders in the capital seized power in Chóng Chungbu's coup d'état in 1170 and continued to maintain their power under Ch'oe Ch'unghón and his family to 1259, it seems more than likely that the military men in power and their civil-official lackeys
probably increased their slaves despite the minor slave revolts that occurred during this period.

We also know something about the position of slaves in the transition that took place between the Koryo and the Choson dynasties in 1392. During the Red Turban invasions of Korea in 1361, slaves in the capital took advantage of the turmoil to burn the slave registers. While a number of slaves may have been able to escape their masters and remain free, the major consequence of the loss of government records was not a large drop in the slave population, but a plethora of lawsuits between slave owners claiming ownership of the same slave. These suits were not settled and could not be settled for as long as sixty years because the defeated parties would defy the decisions of the authorities and continue to hold on to the slaves they had. These cases had piled up by the thousands until King Taejong rendered a Solomonic decision in 1417 not to hear anymore appeals on cases that had already been decided. At the time there were 13,000 cases pending over disputed ownership of slaves, an astronomical figure for lawsuits given the population at the time and a good indication that there were a lot of slaves around.

At the beginning of the Choson dynasty there was also intensive discussion bearing on slave ownership, including a limitation on the number of slaves that an individual could own. Legislation was proposed in 1415 that would have allowed the highest ranking official 150 slaves and a commoner 40 male slaves, which probably meant he could own about one hundred if his female slaves had been counted. If you add up all the members of a family, the limit might have been three or four times that figure. One might think that even a 150-slave limit would have satisfied even the most acquisitive of slave owners, but opposition to it was so fierce that King Taejong, who numbers among the most powerful and decisive of all kings of the dynasty, failed to adopt it. He remarked at court that he expected that the custom of divided inheritance (punjae) among children upon the decease of the head of household would operate automatically to reduce individual ownership even if the deceased slave owner owned a thousand slaves. A thousand slaves is a lot of slaves, to say the least, and it is hard to believe they just materialized in the two decades after the dynasty was founded. And Taejong was more interested in reducing per capita slave ownership levels than in reducing the slave population.

Another important development took place when King Taejong made a decision about disposing of the slaves of Buddhist temples he had shut down as part of the anti-Buddhist program of his Neo-Confucian ideological supporters. If he had ever thought about
manumitting these temple slaves as an act of humane benevolence, and I doubt that he did. He ended up by converting all of them to official slaves—slaves owned and employed by the state. At the time there were about 80,000 of them so converted, and the numbers of official slaves grew gradually until reaching the high point of about 350,000 by 1500.8

This kind of evidence is circumstantial, fragmented, and limited. But in the absence of quantitative evidence (which is also open to question even when it is available), it seems to reinforce the opinion that slavery loomed very large in the Koryó dynasty. It is totally unrealistic to think that the Korean slave population suddenly appeared at the 30-per cent level when the oldest existing household registers were compiled in the seventeenth century.

III. Definition of Slave Society, the 30 Percent Factor

So what if 30 percent of the population is slave? It certainly has not made much of a difference to Korean historians, at least until recently, because most were heir to the notion of Paek Nam'um and others that both Koryó and Chosón were feudal societies in which most of the peasant cultivators were either serfs or like serfs. Orlando Patterson, in his Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study, published in 1882 included Korea among the world's slave societies.9 This treatment has raised controversy in South Korean scholarly circles, but if you consider that most of the famous slave societies in world history had a slave population of about 30 percent, then it appears that Patterson's inclusion of Korea is justified. 30 percent is the figure for ancient Greece, Republican Rome, Imperial Rome, and the antebellum South in the United States prior to the civil war.

Of course, one can turn this figure upside down, and some have done so. If the percentage of slaves was only 30 percent, then the free population had to be 70 percent, so calling such a society slave would constitute a grave violation of justice. But any Marxist scholar should certainly not blink at calling a society with 30 percent a slave society, for

8) Yi Sugón estimated over 100,000 official slaves in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, over 200,000 slaves in the second quarter, and over 350,000 in the last quarter. Idem. Yongnam sarimp'a ǔi hyöngsông [The formation of the sarim group in the Kyöngsang area] (Taegu: Yongnam taehakkyo minjok munhwa yón'guso, 1979), p. 174. Yi Yonghun cites an estimate of 450,000. op. cit.
without it, Marx's whole scheme of historical progression from primitive communism, to slave, to feudal, to capitalistic society would suffer an enormous gap because it is based on acceptance of Greece and Roman as slave societies.

Furthermore, most of the scholarly community is willing to accept the 30 percent figure as an acceptable dividing line. Some may regard it as too arbitrary, but it has the importance of riveting attention on those societies because it stigmatizes them as special societies who had to keep a large percentage of their population in a particularly onerous and demeaning state of enthrallment. In the twentieth century, particularly in the United States, acknowledgement of the existence of slave society in the past may produce a certain sense of shame for being part of a society that would enslave others, or a sense of responsibility for providing for the welfare of the descendants of slaves.

In the United States today, there are hardly any scholars of U.S. history who would deny the existence of slave society in the antebellum South. But there are plenty of scholars and large numbers of ordinary people who forget that the American South was part of American society and that some of America's most famous presidents, particularly those from Virginia and other parts of the South like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, were themselves slave owners. Those who are currently reacting against affirmative action laws designed to give a special lift to the descendants of slaves by setting aside preferential treatment for them in some instances have come under attack by those who think that Americans in the 21st century should no longer be held liable to provide something extra to slave-descendants. They think that affirmative action violates constitutional rights of equal opportunity, but they conveniently ignore the fact that constitutional guarantees for slaves was set aside until 1861. Yet alone the two hundred years before the American revolution.

Yet, if forgetting is a disturbing syndrome in the United States, it strikes me as a far more serious problem in Korea. As far as I know, there has been no serious feeling of guilt about slavery in Korean history, no attempt to make up for the indignities suffered by the slaves, or their descendants. Of course, one reason for this is that slaves were racially indistinguishable from the general population, and they themselves did their best not only to run away from their masters but to disguise their heritage so they could blend into Korean society without notice. To this day I can say I have never met anyone who told me he was descended from a slave even though I have met a large number of people from yangban lineages who know that their ancestors owned slaves. Yet even among these, I have really never detected any sense of shame or guilt among the descendants of the slave owners, even
though Yu Hyôngwon in the seventeenth century did express a strong sense of shame and
guilt, not for slavery itself, which he felt was condoned by the ancient Chinese sages as a
proper method of punishing criminals, but for hereditary slavery which condemned innocent
children and descendants for hundreds of years to demeaned status, indignities, and cruel
treatment. He condemned it as a violation of Confucian norms, not as a violation of any
modern or Western values outside the Korean experience.

IV. Does Slave Society Deny Progress or Change the Marxian MOP (Mode of Production)?

To turn to a more properly scholarly subject, however, what about the effect on Korean
historians about the news of a slave population of 30 percent? As argued at the outset, the
news was ignored because it did not fit into Marx’s scheme; it occurred at the wrong time,
after the onset of feudal society and not before it. Hence, it could not be allowed to be
treated as a separate phase or distinct period of history even though all scholars
acknowledged that the 30 percent level had not been achieved in Silla or early Koryó and
was reduced possible to 10 percent by 1800.

I would think that the time has come to acknowledge the existence of slave society and
consider what it means for historical evolution, let alone development. Those scholars who
are only willing to abide by statistical evidence may insist that the 30 percent figure lasted
only from 1600 to 1800, but even they could not deny that it existed for those two hundred
years. And there are many more who would be willing to push the date much further back
into the Koryó dynasty. If so, does the existence of slave society from anywhere from four
to seven hundred years 1100 or 1200 to 1800 mean that Korean society retrogressed, slip
backward from something more advanced to something less advanced?

Why isn’t that a possibility? After all, feudalism might be regarded as progress by Marxist
historians who think that the operation of the dialectic in the material world results in a
never-ending upward spiral of progress from less to more developed systems, but for a long
period of time most Western historians regarded the age of medieval feudalism as a period
of darkness and barbarism following the sorry decline and fall of the sometimes glorious
Roman Empire. Medieval times meant the loss of order as well as culture, the rise of
military lords and knights who had to maintain order by the sword because there was no
civilized central authority. It was only saved by the Renaissance of the fifteenth century and the Reformation of the sixteenth when the tide of civilization began to sweep over Western Europe once again. That bleak view of medieval times has been relieved considerably by recent scholarship on Western Europe, but for a long period of time Western scholars had to live with the unhappy memory of close to a thousand years of barbarism. In other words if the West can live with the notion of an age of barbarism and the U.S. has to face the sorry fact of its slave past, why can't Koreans likewise face the music and take serious thought of what it means.

V. Labor and the Mode of Production

To return to the previous question, does the existence of slave society defined as having a 30 percent slave population mean that Korean society regressed to an earlier stage of development as long as that slave society existed? I would answer that it depends on how you define slave society and how you define progress. Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst in a recent study of precapitalist modes of production from a Marxist standpoint noted that Marx himself did not explore the question of slavery as a mode of production adequately. They concluded that in fact slavery did not constitute a distinct mode of production and was found in a number of different political forms, let alone one that necessarily follows the ancient mode of production and precedes the feudal. 10) That statement certainly fits slavery in the United States which coexisted with capitalism and was devoted to the production of cotton to supply British textile mills.

From the standpoint of the mode of production that involves the methods of production and the social relations of production, Korean slavery was part of a system of primarily agricultural production based on private ownership of land in which both small holding peasant owners lived alongside large landlords who either rented their land to tenants or hired seasonal or daily laborers, or both. I would throw out the notion of feudalism and feudal society altogether from Korean history (something that Yi Yonghun agrees with). Peasants could be either a landowner, or part owner/tenant, or even a combination of landlord, self-cultivator, and tenant at the same time, or simply a landless tenant, or a landless

seasonal or daily farm laborer who was either paid a wage or provided room and board.

VI. Yi Yonghun: The nobi as both Slave (noye) and Serf (nongno)

What about the slave? Did it make a difference what kind of work he performed and the way he did it? I have believed that it did not, but recently Yi Yonghun has raised a serious objection to that point of view. Almost all scholars have agreed that slavery exists when one human being owns another and treats him as chattel property, as if he were an object. All slave systems have this common feature, and the slave owner has the right to buy or sell their slaves, give them away as gifts, bequeath them to his heirs, or donate them as gifts to Buddhist temples or Confucian private academies. Yi Yonghun, however, has objected that this definition of slavery is too legalistic, and that if you regard the life style of the slave closely, you would have observe that the Korean slave had too much freedom and independence, more than what a slave should be allowed. For this reason he decided that the word conventionally used throughout East Asia to mean slave (nobi) does not necessarily have to mean a true slave (noye), and that nobi may in fact refer to people who may be either true slaves or serfs (nongno) or people like serfs (nongnojok). Yi was willing to admit that the private domestic slaves were truly slaves (noye) because they lived in the master’s house and performed a variety of tasks as domestic servants, but only that type.

But there were three types of slaves that looked more to him like serfs than slaves. These included domestic slaves who were sent out into the fields to cultivate land. In the beginning of the dynasty there was a system just recently discovered called chakkae (by Kim Kon’ae of Songkunkwan University), which consisted of assigning two pieces of land to the slave. On the chakkae piece of land, the slave was to cultivate the land and turn all the product over to the master; but the second piece was granted for his own private cultivation, presumably with an ownership right, to cultivate for his own support. This arrangement seems hardly different from sharecropping tenancy in which the cultivator pays a certain percentage of his crop to the landlord.

Then there were the outside-resident slaves (oegó nobi) who were sent to live in their own cottage some distance away from the master’s residence. Some think that one type of land the outside-resident slave cultivated was his property, either given to him or purchased by him. In that case, the slave owed the master a fee called personal tribute (sin’gong) paid in
woven cloth at a rate of one or two p’il of cloth set by the government, somewhat similar to the rate the commoner peasant paid to the government for the military support cloth tax. In the second case, the outside-resident slave cultivated land owned by the master as a sharecropper, dividing the crop in half with the master. In Yi’s view, these three modes of cultivation or relations of production made the agricultural slave look more like serfs than slaves. Serfs, because these slaves were still the legal property of the master, but their distance from his home and the degree of independence lessened the degree of servitude to the point where the nobi resembled the serfs of Russia more than the slaves of the antebellum South in the United States. Although the nobi was not the same as a commoner tenant, he had the same economic relationship to the master that the commoner tenant had to the landlord, but because he still remained the property of the master, he had to be something besides a tenant -- a serf or someone like a serf.

Another point Yi raised was that the nobi as serf or serf-like cultivator or owner also cultivated a small plot, making him one of the “small peasants (sonong)” or “small-scale land managers” (sogyóngyŏng) that represented a significant new stage in class formation—the successors to the cultivators or tenants of large estates of an earlier era. The nobi were becoming small-holding (sonong) owners or cultivators (or tenants) just like the rest of the commoner population, a new wave that was to overwhelm the Chosŏn countryside and set the pattern for the period when the nobi system (either slave or serf depending on your point of view) would dissolve (as it did in the late eighteenth century) and all cultivators would become small-holders, tenants, or hired laborers.

In Yi Yonghun’s account, real slavery extended back to the Silla and Koryŏ dynasties, but the numbers of real slaves was too small to call Korea a slave society. Then the number of real slaves increased to the 30 or 40 percent mark between the late fourteenth century until some time in the sixteenth century when an increasing number of real slaves were replaced by outside-resident serf-like cultivators who abandoned the chakkæ mode of cultivation and became sharecropping serfs. Slaves or serf-like peasants had always done their best to run away—the runaway rate was over 20 percent even at the beginning of the dynasty—but in the eighteenth century it became endemic until the masters were left only with their true-slave domestic servants but in small numbers, six at most, usually a couple.\(^\text{11}\)

In short, Yi rejected the idea of chattel property as something sufficient by itself to define

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slavery, and beseeched his readers to consider the circumstances of labor and production as
the key factors in determining whether a person owned by someone else is really a slave or
not. I don't know whether Yi had a hidden objective behind his thesis, but his argument
conveniently kills two big birds with one stone. It rejects the hypothesis that Korea was a
slave society for more than two hundred years at the maximum, and it sets Korea back on
the road to progress.

VII. Problems with the Yi's Argument

Yi's argument is well worked out, based on a honest interpretation of available fact, and
certainly feasible, but there are several problems with the argument. The most serious one is
his attempt to avoid the implications of the slave as chattel property. In my view that fact
cannot be eliminated by any kind of reasoning no matter how complex. But what about the
fact that the working style of some slaves may look like serfs, or commoner tenants, or
sharecroppers? To answer that question I would return to the point made by Hindess and
Hurst that slavery did not constitute a separate mode of production and could live or coexist
with other modes of production.

In my view, the Korean mode of production was based on landownership, private property,
and landlord/tenant relations, even back to the Koryo dynasty. That the slaves who
sometimes rented land or cultivated land under the chakkae system-only a shade away from a
rental contract-or acted as sharecroppers, or even owned land, means that they were living
and working according to the rules of the Korean mode of production. It does not cancel the
fact that they were the property of the master. They were not free to leave the land or their
master's control and go elsewhere without his permission. That they often ran away and got
away with it only means that system maintenance broke down, not that slavery as a system
had been abandoned.

Yi Yonghun also objected that the reality of Korean slave life was better, freer, maybe
easier than what the slave laws said. He suggested that Korean outside-resident slaves lived
better than what slaves had to suffer in other societies, particular the black slaves of the
American antebellum South. He pointed out that there were fewer symbols of ignominy than

in other societies. While most Korean slaves were not allowed surnames, many commoners also lacked surnames, and they were usually not marked or scarred. Even though they were exempted from military service, they were later assigned military service in from the seventeenth century. And he also argued that the outside-resident slave should be understood as an independent (or semi-independent) small-holding peasant owner or cultivator.

I would object on the grounds that none of these considerations eliminate the fact of ownership and the right of disposal even though they may modify that right. The way that agriculture was conducted, the rules for ownership and rental, and the way labor was compensated even as they affected Korean slaves constituted a different kind of system from what existed in other societies, but it does not rule out slavery. It is true that a few lucky slaves could even buy a piece of land for themselves or another slave to serve their needs. In the Koryó dynasty some reached important and powerful positions. Maybe Sin Ton, a monk who was the son of a slave women, is the best case, because he served as prime minister under King Kongmin in the mid-fourteenth century. But so too did a number of slaves in Rome attain power and influence because their masters were important enough to protect them. Even some black slaves in the U.S. were sent to factories in cities to work for wages, were treated nicely by their masters, sometimes educated and given responsibilities. A certain amount of variety has to be allowed as long as the Korean slave remained a piece of chattel property who could be bought and sold.

Even though there was no racial markers for Korean slaves, even though there was not much of an active slave market like in the United States, and even though they were not forced to live in slave quarters on a plantation like the American South, they still had to suffer plenty of disabilities and indignities. One of the reasons for the absence of an active public slave market was the feeling that slaves, like land, had to be retained in the patrimony so as not to weaken it when it was transmitted to the next generation. But when times got hard, slaves were sold, and in some cases slave families were broken up, not just by sale, but also in the process of dividing the patrimony among the siblings.

Even though most of the outside resident slaves looked just like commoner tenants (let alone serfs) on the master’s estate or landholding. “estates” in Korea in the Chosón dynasty and earlier did not indicate anything like a manorial estate in medieval Europe or the plantations of the southern United States where the land held by the feudal lord or titled aristocrat or American plantation owner consisted of a single unit of land of large expanse controlled or owned completely by the owner. In Korea, plots of land were small in size and
ringed by dikes or elevated ridges to keep the water intact on small paddies, and the process of purchase and sale meant that an estate accumulated by a large landlord consisted of an agglomeration of scattered small parcels. There was no way that this system of scattered and ridged parcels could be cultivated by plantation organization or a feudal manorial system without knocking down the ridges and dikes and consolidating land into large units—something not done until the 1960s and after. Small-scale management was a necessary attribute of the way agriculture was conducted in Korea, and not necessarily an aspect of progressive or modern development.

VIII. Serfs in Theory

Besides, was the serf that Yi describes really a serf? Recently many Western historians have begun to challenge the whole concept of feudalism and serfdom in Europe, so it may not be soon before both have to be discarded from the historical vocabulary in Western history. But according to the traditional theoretical model for feudalism, the serf was described as a peasant cultivator who has no ownership rights over the land he cultivated, but he was not owned as an individual by any one else. Since the demesne of the feudal lord or the monastic estate he worked was not owned by anyone, but granted as a fief from the feudal lord to one of his vassals or to the church, the vassal who controlled him did not own the land either. He only had a temporary right to manage the estate, earn income from it, administer laws on it, and collect dues and fees from the peasants, but he did not own the serfs. Theoretically they stayed on the land even though the vassal assigned the fief might be changed by the feudal lord.

Given the system of land tenure and cultivation in Korea, the anomalies are obvious. The Korean common peasant could be a proprietor. If he were a tenant, he entered into a contract and paid either a fixed rent or a certain percentage of the crop. If he were the standard sharecropper, he either split the crop 50/50 with the landlord who owned the land, but the landlord did not own him. If he was an outside-resident slave, he could cultivate the chakkae for his master, or pay a tribute fee to his master on land that he owned, or split the crop and pay sharecropping rent on land that the master owned, but he was still owned by his master and could be moved to another parcel or sold, given, or bequeathed to someone else.
Now, Yi Yonghun is not a believer in feudalism for this period -- he even wrote a long book refuting its very existence -- which makes his point of view somewhat hard to understand. But Korean historians influenced by Marxism who believe that this was a feudal period have recognized most of these facts I have stated above about rural life during the Choson dynasty, but they still insist conditions were feudal or like feudalism. Their explanation for this is that what made the ordinary Korean peasant tenant look more like a serf than an ordinary tenant was because his landlord “exploited” him by collecting more than what the sharecropping rental agreement or even a fixed-rental agreement called for: the landlord also demanded the performance of labor on his land, the delivery of small goods and gifts, and the transportation of goods, so that the extra use of tenant labor makes the landlord look more like a feudal vassal and the tenant more like a subjugated serf bound to the land.

I do not happen to agree with this picture because not enough concrete evidence has been presented to convince me that demands for extra services existed, or were a major form of exploitation, while there is plenty of evidence that tenants were either dismissed or chose to leave on their own an almost an annual basis. But Yi is not making the standard argument made by Korean Marxists. Instead of trying to make common peasant tenants look like serfs, he is trying to making slaves look like serfs! But that is all one can say about the nobi: they look like serfs (nongnojok), but they are not real serfs because they are not attached to the land and they are disposable property (which the serfs are not).

Finally, let us consider whether Yi’s argument is a more significant argument of progress in Choson dynasty history than mine. Yi argues that most slaves became serfs or serf-like by the sixteenth or seventeenth century before they escaped serfdom to become small-holding commoner peasants. My contention is that in Korea most nobi escaped from slavery in the late eighteenth century to become commoners differentiated into landlords, smallholders, tenants, sharecroppers, and hired laborers. The result is the same. I would argue that breaking free from slavery may be a bit more spectacular, but was the result of that liberation really glorious when shortly after liberation, the lot of the commoner peasant became so difficult that Korea was plunged into a century marked by the largest popular rebellions in Korean history?
IX. Treatment of Slaves

My argument is that Korean nobi were real slaves because they were chattel property, but Yi Yonghun has countered that this interpretation is too legalistic, which means it does not reflect reality. The situation of Korean slaves was not defined only by the laws, however. There was also the matter of the treatment of slaves by the masters and by other members of society. Yu Hyongwon of the seventeenth century wrote most eloquently about the plight of the slave, and he did not confine his remarks only to the legal and commercial aspects of slaves. He thought that slavery had a dehumanizing effect in Korea not just on the slave, but on the masters, and on society at large as well. Slavery, he said, brutalized the slave owners who were only able to manage their slaves by whipping them. Whipping demoralized the slaves, drove them to despair, and caused them to lose all sense of loyalty and all taste for diligent toil. They had no choice but to take to the road, to escape bondage, at the first opportunity. Pangye surok 26:7a.

Yu Hyongwon was providing eye-witness testimony that went beyond the emotionless language of the law codes, and it tells us that slavery in Korea was indeed a demeaning and degrading experience stemming from the complete control masters could exercise over slaves if they wished! They did not always have to be cruel and tormenting, but there was nothing to stop them from being so if they wanted, and that was characteristic of all slave societies.

Slavery in Korea also tells us something about the ruling class that we otherwise would not know if slavery did not exist. In other words, it tells us something extra about the yangban of the Choson and Koryo dynasties, and even the aristocrats of Silla who were also large slave owners even though slaves were only a minor proportion of the population in most villages outside the capital at Kyongju. We do not know for sure why slavery lasted so long in Korea. It could have been a Korean solution to a labor shortage, or the legacy of King Taewo of Koryo's enslavement of prisoners-of-war, or the propensity of the Koreans to create a powerful hierarchical social order with a strong emphasis on status inheritance. Whatever the reasons, the time has arrived to recognize its importance in understanding a major aspect of Korea's past. And this involves pushing it way back into the Koryo dynasty, or at least until the time that we can find better evidence about numbers than exists at present.
한국 역사에서의 노비

제임스 B. 팔레

<국문초록>
17. 18세기까지 한국사회에서 전체 인구 대비 노비(노예)의 비중이 30퍼센트 이상이 되었다는 사실이 여러 연구를 통해 밝혀졌음에도 불구하고, 한국 학계에서는 이 문제에 대해서 그다지 주목하지 않고 있다. 그렇지만 고도로 발달된 문명사회 가운데 한 지역인 한국의 전근대 사회에서 이 정도로 노비 인구가 많이 존재했다는 점은 주목해야만 할 사실이라고 생각한다.

세계적으로 가장 대표적인 노예제 국가 혹은 사회라 할 수 있는 고대 그리스 로마나, 남북전쟁 이전 시기 미국 남부 사회에 있어서도, 노예 인구가 30% 이상을 차지했다는 점에서 이들 국가 혹은 사회를 노예제 국가·사회에 부르는 사실은 상식에 속하는 일이다. 전근대 한국사회에서의 노비들도 그들이 무엇이라 불리던 간에 주인의 재산으로 간주되고 따라서 상속, 증여, 매매되었다는 점에서 노예로 간주할 수 있다. 그리고 인구 비중에서 18세기 후반 이전까지 30퍼센트 이상의 향상적인 수치를 기록하고 있었던 점에서 18세기 이전 한국사회를 세계사적 차원에서 가장 대표적인 노예제 국가 가운데 하나로 바칠 수 있을 것이다.

그러면 이들 노예들은 대체로 고려 왕조의 전국을 전후하여 대량으로 발생했으며, 18세기 후반 이후 인구 구성에서 현격하게 그 비중이 높아졌다는 점에서, 한국의 노예제 사회는 약 9세기에 이르는 매우 장기 지속적인 특성을 지녔다고 판단된다.

한국 역사의 독특성은 바로 여기에 있으며, 이를 통해서 왕조의 장기적 지속성, 양반 귀족층의 장고하고도 안정된 지위 등과 같은 한국 전근대 사회의 특징들에 대한 해명이 가능해질 수 있게 된다. 그런 점에서 한국 역사에서 노비제 연구는 매우 중요한 과제 가운데 하나라고 할 수 있다.

핵심주제어: 노비(노예), 노예 연구, 노예제 국가, 한국의 노예제 사회.
전근대 사회의 특질