

Society in Chosŏn Korea

Sept. 9, 2014

Questions to keep in mind

- 1) What was the most significant thing you learned in the previous lecture?
- 2) What was the most surprising thing you learned in the previous lecture?
- 3) What question was raised but unanswered in the previous lecture?

The Political Structure

- A king on top (the Yi family), though sometimes a queen dowager or, in one case, a Taewŏn'gun governed.
- Beneath the king, there was a bureaucracy staffed by men who had two qualifications for public office:
 - a) they had passed the Confucian civil service exam, and
 - b) they had the right family background

The structure of the government

- State Council (later much of its work was done by the Border Defence Council)
- Six ministries (Personnel, Taxation, Rites, Military Affairs, Punishments, Public Works)
- Three censoring organs, plus secret inspectors
- provincial governors and county magistrates.
- A military under central government control.

weak king and strong bureaucracy

- the ruling elite (yangban) and the king depended on each other
- Confucian rhetoric dominated political discussion
- Officials were generalists, not specialists
- there was no separation of powers into separate executive, judicial, and administrative organs.

The Social structure

- The Yangban 兩班 were at the top: they were an hereditary class of land-owning, exam-passing Confucian scholars. Civilians ranked above the military
- Below them were their sons by non-yangban mothers (“secondary sons”), and the sons of remarried yangban widows.

Below the yangban

- Chungin 中人, the technical specialists. Another hereditary class. Mathematicians, painters, translators, physicians, etc.
- peasants and fisherfolk
- artisans, including licensed artisans in Seoul
- merchants, including licensed merchants in Seoul and pedlars

The lower-classes

- the low status people, including slaves, kisaeng 妓生 (women entertainers, sometimes called “courtesans”), shamans, and monks.
- Slaves may have been 30% of the population until 1700, though the slave population declined after 1750 or so.
- Below them were the Paekchǒng 白丁: an hereditary group of butchers, etc.
- Women, like men, inherited their status from their fathers and mothers. The lower status took precedence.

Chapter 24: Social issues

- What were community compacts?
- Did they represent village democracy or were they a tool for yangban domination?
- What sort of behavior did a community compact encourage? What sort of behavior did it punish?

Slavery

- How important was slavery before 1800?
- Why was Yu Hyŏngwŏn opposed to slavery?
- Would you like to live in the sort of society Yi Chunghwan describes?

Secondary Sons

- What arguments were brought forward to support discrimination against secondary sons?
- What were Yu Suwŏn's argument against such discrimination?
- What reasons did Yi Sudŭk give for abolishing discrimination against secondary sons?

Inheritance Practices

- What was the rationale for denying daughters the right to the same inheritance share their brothers received?
- Is there any evidence that fathers loved their daughters less than they loved their sons?
- Why didn't daughters protest the discrimination against them?

Popular Unrest

- Why do peasants rebel?
- What role does religion play in popular rebellions?
- Why did the northwest erupt in violent protest in the first part of the 19th century? (The Hong Kyōngnae rebellion of 1811-12)