



*Beyond Birth
Social Status in the Emergence
of Modern Korea*

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*Birth and Bureaucracy:
Social Stratification in the Chosŏn Era*

Korea's best-known folktale, the "Tale of Ch'unhyang," can readily be taken as a version of the Cinderella story. Set in the county seat of Namwŏn in the country's southwest region, the story recounts the travails and ultimate triumph of two young lovers, a beautiful girl of low social rank, Ch'unhyang, and the teenage heir to a powerful aristocratic family. The initial spark of physical attraction leads to a vow of devotion. The two must overcome a series of obstacles from both family and the larger society, but in the end Ch'unhyang's perseverance is rewarded with betrothal to her prince.

Fairy tale it is, but in a richly historical way for the student of Chosŏn dynasty society. Beyond its lessons of love conquering tribulations and evil, two striking impressions emerge. One is the tale's poignant depiction of the power of birth status in the social order. Nearly all the characters—their names, actions, thoughts—are defined by their hereditary status identity, and the overcoming of the enormous status difference between the two protagonists heightens both the satisfaction of the inevitable resolution and the degree to which this familiar story—which appeared first as *p'ansori*, a native Korean song form, in the eighteenth century—captured popular sentiment in late Chosŏn Korea. Indeed, to a certain extent the appeal of this fantasy might have corresponded to the inconceivability of such an ending in real life.¹ The other is the story's vivid portrayal of the strong government presence in the social realm and vice versa. Most of the major characters have a bureaucratic function. The evil antagonist, whose desire for Ch'unhyang threatens to thwart her

dreams, is the county magistrate of Namwŏn. The young hero, who several years later returns to the village as a royal secret inspector and rescues his beloved from the clutches of the corrupt magistrate, is the son of the previous county magistrate. The intermediaries between the heroine and the county magistrate's court are the hyangnu hereditary clerks of the local government. Ch'unhyang's mother is a *kisaeng*, a low-born courtesan assigned to the county seat, whose relationship with an earlier magistrate had produced Ch'unhyang. And even Ch'unhyang herself, although without formal ties to the government,² is victimized by the evil magistrate's expectation that she will perform the same "official duties" as her mother.

To the observer of Chosŏn society, the gem of the story lies in Ch'unhyang's (correct) protestations that she does not hold the same status as her mother. Indeed, it is the lead character's status identity that makes the "Tale of Ch'unhyang" such an effective representation of the complex nexus of birthright and bureaucracy in the Chosŏn social order, for Ch'unhyang is a member neither of the aristocracy like her father nor of the low-born like her mother nor yet of the commoner population. Rather, she is a member of a secondary status group, the *sŏl*. The presence of a spirited *sŏl* girl, as well as the hyangnu go-betweens mentioned above, in this fantasy highlights the indispensable role of secondary status groups in the social hierarchy of the Chosŏn dynasty. This hierarchy was imbued with a clear, long-standing principle of differentiation to determine status (*munbŏl*, *munji*, or the modern *sinbun*), the social identity that pervaded human interaction and determined one's occupational options, tax and public service responsibilities, marriage possibilities, clothing, and even one's mode of speech. This principle was birth. The basic ingredient in one's status, in other words, lay beyond one's control. But there were other ingredients as well. Over the course of the Chosŏn dynasty, many factors came to enhance the workings of heredity in determining social status in Korea, and among these none proved as consequential as the bureaucracy. The incorporation of Neo-Confucianism as the ruling ideology and the establishment of a state centralized to an unprecedented degree spurred the emergence of a bureaucratic order that corresponded to the ascriptive social hierarchy in a precise and systematic way. In this manner, Chosŏn Korea reached a remarkable integration of state and society, as the official and extra-governmental realms—even the realm of family—melded into a methodical whole.

Heredity, Marriage, and the State

Heredity differentiation of the population appears to have been institutionalized from the earliest recorded times of Korean civilization. In the Silla dynasty, which unified the Three Kingdoms (fourth- to seventh centuries) to rule over most of the peninsula from the seventh to tenth centuries, the "bone rank" (*kolp'um*) system designated set hereditary ranks for the population, from members of the royal family to commoners. Marriage relations did not cross the boundaries of the separate ranks. Three patterns emerged from this arrangement and guided Korean social hierarchy until the twentieth century: ascriptive social status; political sovereignty based on a hereditary kingship;³ and the dominance of an aristocratic elite, who complemented, and often dominated, the monarchy. This system continued during the subsequent Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392). Although invasions and threats of invasion threatened to undermine the system during the five centuries of Koryŏ rule, the model held true. The dynastic house, even under the rule of the Mongols or Korean military usurpers, remained intact, while two formidable aristocratic groups—those residing in the capital and others acting as semi-feudal lords scattered around the country—helped maintain the social order. This comprehensive system of birth-based status also extended to a substantial population of hereditary slaves (*nobi*) and other "mean" people such as butchers and tanners. These people, as well as the aristocracy and commoners, would continue into the Chosŏn dynasty, when they would be joined by a fourth major category, the secondary status groups.

The emergence of these secondary elites during the first three centuries of the Chosŏn era may suggest that the ruling order underwent significant change in the early Chosŏn. This is the view of many historians who reject the continuity of either the aristocratic principle or the aristocracy itself, the *saŏk*,⁴ over the Koryŏ-Chosŏn divide and instead argue for constant shifts in the ruling class. In this view, a new group of Neo-Confucian, mid-size landowner idealists took over in the Koryŏ-Chosŏn transition of the late fourteenth century; another new group, the *sarim*, took control in the early sixteenth century; and so on. In the 1980s and 1990s, some historians proposed an even more dramatic thesis, that in the early Chosŏn the only officially recognized status difference was that between a large mass of "commoners" (*yangin*) and a group of low-born people

(*ch'ŏnim*), mostly slaves. There was, in other words, no hereditary elite in the early Chosŏn; instead, there was a level playing field out of which an aristocracy, through bureaucratic competition and other means, emerged by the sixteenth century.⁵ Not coincidentally, this thesis fits well with the view that Korean history underwent a series of steps, through material growth, to an ever-higher state of development. To be sure, we cannot overlook the periodic processes of aristocratic renewal through augmentation or partial displacement, including the incorporation of followers of the Chosŏn dynastic founder, Yi Sŏnggye, in the early fifteenth century. But as John Dun can has cogently shown, to a significant extent the establishment of the Chosŏn dynasty represented the culmination of a centuries-long process of central elite formation. The aristocracy's critical support for the new dynasty arose mostly from its desire to strengthen and institutionalize its hereditary socio-political privileges amid the dislocations of the late Koryŏ era.⁶

The argument, furthermore, for the supposed absence of legal designations for aristocratic status in the early Chosŏn contradicts strong evidence to the contrary. For example, the state-sponsored cataloging of noble families in the early fifteenth century, as well as the dynastic legal code of the late fifteenth century, did in fact recognize differences between the aristocracy and others.⁷ And given the clear continuity of a large group of people in hereditary bondage,⁸ to deny the existence of the very people who depended on this slave labor flies in the face of common sense. Finally, although determining the size of the Chosŏn aristocracy—and much more so that of the secondary status groups—depends on geography, period, manner of designation, and other factors, research suggests a conspicuously substantial presence, reaching perhaps over 10 percent of the population.⁹ The mystery of how such a large aristocratic group could perpetuate itself can be solved, however, when we consider how the hereditary principle worked in conjunction with marriage patterns and bureaucratic eligibility.

Marriage, Family, and Lineage

The family system, especially marriage and lineage, were instrumental in the development of the Chosŏn social hierarchy. In this study, "lineage" (*kŏgye*, *kamun*, sometimes *munjung*) refers to an individual's patrilineal descent group. Although people and lineages were commonly identified as belonging to a specific "clan" (*ssi*jok or *sŏng-*

ssi), there was an important distinction between lineage and clan. A clan—designating a common surname, a common "clan seat" (*pon'gwun*), and usually a common progenitor—could consist of one lineage to dozens of different lineages, each characterized by a shared *recent* descent line and thereby distinct from other lineages in the same clan.¹⁰ Lineage, or lineage consciousness, lay at the heart of status differentiation according to birth, for different lineages in the same clan could reflect differences not only in recent ancestors but also in social status. Some of the larger clans, such as the Yi of Chŏnju and the Kim of Kimhae, had not only aristocratic but also muban, northerner, chungin, sŏl, and even hyangni lineages. Only the more recent, secure blood ties—in a word, lineage—counted in determining one's social status. In fact, the separate lineages within a clan, in a reflection of lineage consciousness, used distinctive generational name-characters, or *hanguyl-chia* (often called *tolim-chia*), and, beginning in the later Chosŏn era, clustered in thousands of "same-lineage villages."¹¹

Such was the power of birth that status was accredited not through an individual but through his or her ancestral lineage over several generations. Likewise, for the social elite, a person's life was measured largely by his ability to sustain or increase the prestige of his lineage.¹² This system reflected a unique combination of Confucian ideal and native reality. Amid the fervor of reinventing the world according to Neo-Confucian principles, the Chosŏn founders insisted on ordering society in accordance with proper family ritual and family structure. Their models for this project were ancient Chinese customs and the regulations outlined in Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals* (*Zhuzi jiali*).¹³ This warranted the introduction of guidelines for ancestor worship, succession, inheritance, marriage, and funerary rites. The cornerstone of the family system was the notion of *chongpŏp*, or agnatic descent. Simply put, the paternal line became one's ancestry. Although this policy required perhaps two centuries to take root among all segments of the population,¹⁴ an ideology of kinship based on patrilineal descent remains in force today.

Preventing the complete implementation of the *chongpŏp* ideal, however, was the persistence—in both legislation and in practice—of determining an individual's status by those of both the father and the mother. Whereas descent, in other words, was patrilineal, status itself was *bilateral*. According to Martina Deuchler, bilateralism had long been a Koryŏ custom¹⁵ and, in turn, was likely based on ancient

Korean practice. Bilateralism proved almost as powerful as the *chongpōp* principle itself throughout the Chosŏn dynasty. Just as the Korean practice of allocating bureaucratic posts according to birth status diluted the meritocratic tendency of Confucian bureaucratic ideals, bilateralism, too, strengthened the power of heredity at the expense of social fluidity and hence led to the stratification of the population into endogamous status groups. In a social space dependent on the public recognition of birth identity to determine privileges and modes of social interaction, marriage patterns underscored both the dynamism and the stability of the Chosŏn social order. Lineages could not depend simply on the standing of their males to maintain their status; they had to seek marriage partnerships that provided a maternal line of equal or greater status. Marriage with a lineage of lesser status invariably lowered the status of all the descendants (and even of the ancestors); hence conjugal partners were sought exclusively from others in the same status group.

The bureaucracy served to refine and reinforce this social practice. Candidates for the state examinations, for example, had to pass a series of background checks on their eligibility to sit for the examination. Legally, only the famous dictum excluding the sons and grandsons of concubines and remarried widows should have applied, but soon—as was widely acknowledged¹⁶—censoring organs and other government institutions came to prohibit, with a few exceptions, those of lower status from taking the examinations. Verification of status identity began with the submission by every candidate of the names of his *sajo*, or “four ancestors”: father, paternal grandfather, paternal great-grandfather, and maternal grandfather. The *chongpōp* ideal should have directed attention only to members of a candidate’s paternal line, but the inclusion of the candidate’s maternal grandfather reiterated the critical contribution of *both* parental lines in determining status identity.¹⁷

Correspondence of Bureaucratic and Social Hierarchy

The process of institutionalizing and thereby sustaining aristocratic domination, then, rested on the elaboration of the hereditary principle by the state bureaucracy. For while the birth-based dominance of the Chosŏn aristocracy depended considerably on economic advantages (landed wealth and tax exemptions) and ritual privileges (Confucian lifestyle and learning),¹⁸ it was the political power bestowed by bureaucratic domination that proved indispensable in legalizing

and reinforcing aristocratic social supremacy. In organization and function, the Chosŏn bureaucracy presaged many elements of the modern state in twentieth-century Korea. Although it neither depended on nor administered a fully commercial economy, it achieved a high degree of rationalization and codification. Codification arrived via the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* of 1471, the dynastic legal code that drew from sources ranging from the *Great Ming Code* (*Da Ming li*) and Neo-Confucian doctrine to Koryŏ precedent and remained the template for rule until the end of the Chosŏn dynasty.¹⁹ The Code contained, in addition to the basic laws of the country, a highly systematic blueprint for government administration, detailing the tax system, the military order, diplomatic protocols, the penal process, and even noble titles for the royal family. The management of personnel took highest priority, as seen in the Code’s specification of hundreds of different official titles and salaries for all bureaucratic ranks. Perhaps most impressive in this respect were the intricate provisions for recruiting and promoting government officials. The state examinations, the starting point for ensuring a meritocratic process of selecting and placing worthy officials, lay at the heart of this elaborate system.

Given this degree of bureaucratic rationalization, what explains the persistence of a system of ascriptive distribution of privilege and access in government and society? Furthermore, what prevented the state administration from becoming a tool for monarchic despotism? The key to both queries appears to be the integration of aristocratic interests in both the bureaucratic and the social realm. In premodern Korea, the bureaucracy acted not as an instrument of domination divorced from the people it ruled but as the manifestation (and catalyst) of socio-political differentiation itself. In the Chosŏn dynasty—and to a degree, throughout Korean history—the aristocracy’s dominant social position expressed itself through administrative control. Indeed, the common term for the Chosŏn aristocracy, *yangban*, originated in the Koryŏ dynasty to refer to the “two branches” of officials, the civilian and the military, and testified to the importance of the bureaucracy in reinforcing aristocratic privilege. Although administrative rationalization and codification might have provided the monarch a legal basis for despotic control, in reality he had to contend with aristocrats who sustained their societal hegemony by acting as the arbiters of the ruling ideology and regulators of bureaucratic access.²⁰ This denied the monarchy a sustained source of

institutional power and perpetuated a tension between the conflicting tendencies of heredity and Confucian meritocracy in the formation of the bureaucratic elite.²¹ Such latent conflict erupted periodically throughout the dynasty, occasionally manifesting itself in bloody political battles between monarchs and aristocrats.²² A de facto settlement, however, regulated membership in the country's ruling elite through bureaucratic modification of the dominant criterion of birth.

This pattern applied to the rest of society as well, with people becoming differentiated into ascriptive status groups usually categorized in terms of their responsibilities to the state (*chigyŏk*), such as officeholding, taxes, and corvée labor. It was not so much bureaucratic achievement, however, as bureaucratic *eligibility* that was determined by birth status.²³ The distribution of bureaucratic eligibility in fact came to mirror the social hierarchy, as the four major status categories—the aristocracy, the secondary status groups, the commoners, and the low-born—corresponded to the qualification of their members for the bureaucracy. The low-born (slaves, butchers, entertainers, shamans, etc.) remained ineligible for positions, although notably the government slaves (*kong nobi*), *kisaeng* courtesans (like Chunhyang's mother), and shamans found themselves attached to state service.²⁴ Commoners (farmers, artisans, merchants, and fishermen), although legally eligible for all offices, were shut out of the bureaucracy except for the lowest, most menial posts. The members of the secondary status groups and the aristocracy filled almost all bureaucratic offices, and indeed the very existence of the secondary status groups rested on differences in bureaucratic eligibility.

The Parameters of Social Mobility

The important refinements provided by the bureaucracy to the ascriptive social hierarchy also sustained the important, albeit small, role for achievement in social mobility. One can find this dynamic at work, for example, in the status differences within the Chosŏn aristocracy, which may have been sufficiently pronounced to throw into question the usage of a single term, such as *yangban* or *saŭok*, to account for these hereditary elites. The work of Ch'a Chang-sŏp,²⁵ in particular, has illuminated the formation and duration of a relatively small group of super-aristocratic lineages, the *pŏllyŏl*, who, in the late Chosŏn era (seventeenth to nineteenth centuries), dominated the highest bureaucratic posts for generations. Ch'a cites a host of indi-

cations for this split within the aristocracy, including the preponderance of high officials who came from a small fixed group of capital-based lineages, the limited number of lineages—all belonging to the *pŏllyŏl*—who could provide royal consorts, and in particular many written records that differentiated the *pŏllyŏl* from lesser aristocratic lineages, especially those from outside the capital region.²⁶

Geography was a strong indicator of *saŭok* differentiation. The mountainous terrain in Korea fostered the atomization of local communities, as did history, demography, topography, and distance from Seoul—spatial, conceptual, and political. The county of Tongnae (encompassing present-day Pusan), for example, was an important military post as well as the primary staging area for the limited trade with Japan. This resulted in a larger and more influential presence of elite military officials there than in other districts.²⁷ The county of Iksan in northern Chŏlla province was known for its large population of local aristocracy. As Song Chun-ho has shown in a case study of this county, however, this resulted from lower criteria for recognition of aristocratic lineages in Iksan than in other areas.²⁸ Similar conditions applied in certain townships of Ulsan county, as John Somerville has demonstrated.²⁹ On the other hand, the Andong region of northern Kyŏngsang province boasted a strong aristocratic base. Its historical role in the development of the Korean aristocracy—dating back to the Silla dynasty—produced a stricter regulation of status groupings and more stringent control over local society by the aristocracy.³⁰ Local variations extended to the provincial level as well. Because of their proximity to the capital, Kyŏnggi and Ch'ungch'ŏng provinces—which one scholar has called the "yangban crescent"³¹—contained a much higher percentage of resident aristocrats with recent kinship ties to central government bureaucrats. On the other hand, since Koryŏ times local aristocrats from Chŏlla province³²—once the territory of the ancient kingdom of Paekche and then of Later Paekche (Hu Paekche), an early rival to the Koryŏ royal house—suffered bureaucratic discrimination, although not a few central officials from Chŏlla reached high posts. But in general, the most powerful and prestigious lineages were recognized nationwide as those of the group of (civilian) elites who consistently produced central government officials and passers of the state civil examinations and lived in or near the capital. The recognition accorded *local* aristocratic lineages, on the other hand, decreased with distance from their home region. A local aristocrat from

southern Kyōngsang province, for example, would have found it difficult to gain the same level of recognition in northern Chōlla province, and this problem would have proved more acute in the competitive environment of Seoul.

The key is the frequency of marriage connections across these boundaries, if any. Ch'a Chang-sōp shows that people from lower *sa-jok* backgrounds did occasionally gain the highest posts in the central bureaucracy and in many instances managed to establish marriage relations with the *pōllyōl*. Undeniably a powerful group of capital-based elites did emerge in the late Chosōn—something that other scholars have pointed out—but the question is the degree to which they excluded other aristocratic lineages from marriage ties or from access to the highest offices. As Ch'a has demonstrated, the records indicate more than a few exceptions to this exclusivity. Moreover, the socio-bureaucratic distance between these two aristocratic groups paled in comparison with that between them and those below, such as the secondary status groups. These facts justify the retention for our purposes of a general concept of a *sa-jok* aristocracy.³³

Furthermore, the state-led standardization of social norms, necessary for the maintenance of the overall Chosōn order, upheld the interests of local aristocrats. Like their capital-based counterparts with whom they had ancestral ties, they enjoyed exemption from both the military cloth tax and corvée labor duties. The government, for example, also chartered local Confucian academies, or *sōwōn*, and enacted other measures to ensure aristocratic prominence in local ritual life.³⁴ And to enforce these privileges, the Chosōn government dispatched a centrally appointed magistrate, or *suryōng*, to each of the more than 330 counties. Again, state assistance to the local aristocracy was most pronounced in the realm of bureaucracy. In particular, the *saengwōn* and *chinsa* (or *saengjin*) licentiate state examinations provided an opportunity for bureaucratic achievement without necessarily providing bureaucratic office. Although in the early Chosōn the *saengjin* exams often served as an unofficial preliminary stage in the path toward passage of the *munkwa* high civil service examination, *saengjin* passage also served as an end in itself, especially in the late Chosōn, in maintaining the prestige of one's lineage. Success demonstrated one's scholarly abilities, familiarity with ritual, and dedication to the Neo-Confucian canon—all signs of proper aristocratic behavior.³⁵

The role of the *saengjin* examinations in sustaining or increasing lineage prestige within the *sa-jok* aristocracy underscores the limited, albeit potentially powerful impact of non-ascriptive, achievement-oriented bureaucratic factors in the social hierarchy. To be sure, heredity remained the indispensable feature in determining status, but the bureaucracy increasingly served to refine birth-based status identity, particularly in the upper tiers of the social order, and enough at times to enable upward social mobility. The bureaucracy, in fact, was the institution in which achievement and merit could most affect the social hierarchy. Bureaucratic eligibility was determined by the status group into which one was born, but bureaucratic achievement, within the plane of eligibility determined by birth, allowed non-ascriptive accomplishments, such as examination success or job performance, to play a role. In turn, bureaucratic achievement could affect lineage status over the long term. The workings of merit and other attainable factors, in other words, took effect in the gap between bureaucratic eligibility and bureaucratic achievement, as Fig. 1.1 illustrates.

In contrast to the largely impenetrable differences among status groups, the differences in lineage prestige within status groups were more flexible and could hinge on non-ascriptive factors, most notably bureaucratic achievement. And when compounded especially with marriage connections but also with wealth and other factors over several generations, noticeable changes in the arrangement of the social hierarchy could emerge. In fact, depending on long-term marriage patterns, the boundaries between and within status groups could shift over time. Intra-status group differences could harden and result in a transformation of one group into two, for example—as scholars such as Ch'a Chang-sōp claim for the *sa-jok* aristocracy—or various lineages could, through intermarriage, coalesce into a distinct status group, as was the case for the chungin in the second half of the Chosōn. Both dynamics operated in forming the secondary status groups, who personified this limited dynamism in the overwhelmingly ascriptive social hierarchy.

What, then, of the role of wealth? This returns us to the debate, discussed above, about the development of the social hierarchy in the late Chosōn, for the perception of a breakdown in the status system is premised on a level of sustained economic growth, even a kind of proto-capitalism, sufficient to overturn the social order. As

discussed earlier, Korean historical scholarship in the post-Korean War period has been first and foremost a reaction against the Japanese historiography that justified colonial rule as a means of overcoming the stagnation and decay of the Chosŏn era. Korean historians have countered by arguing that Chosŏn society was undergoing major changes autonomously, because of its agricultural, commercial, and social vitality. Yi Ki-baek, in his well-known history of Korea, cites the phenomenon of gains in agricultural production among commoner peasants, who used the resulting surpluses to profit from the market and even to purchase bureaucratic titles, as evidence that the status system "was undergoing a significant change in character . . . based on *economic wealth*"³⁶ (*italics added*). This process fit the larger Korean historical pattern, as argued by Yi and others beginning in the 1960s, of "internal development" (*naejŏk palchŏnmon*), in which Korean history was propelled by the periodic emergence of a new socio-economic class that overtook the previous ruling elite.

Ironically, the work of Shikata Hiroshi, a Japanese scholar from the colonial period, inspired much of this postwar historiographical rush to declare the traditional Chosŏn status system dead by the nineteenth century. In undertaking a statistical analysis of household registers (*hojŏk*) of the Taegu area from the late seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, Shikata found that by the 1850s the commoner population had declined slightly from the totals found in the 1690s, but the "yangban" population had grown by a staggering 500 percent and constituted almost half the total population of Taegu.³⁷ On the surface, this was proof of important—indeed, revolutionary—transformations in the social structure. As Shikata himself took pains to remind the reader repeatedly, however, numerous factors could skew the data in the household registers, such as changes in the meaning of the titles and the many motivations for purchasing higher household titles, not the least of which was tax exemption. Shikata's statistical analysis, then, merely confirmed a tremendous increase in elite *titles*. To be sure, as Shikata also noted, the proliferation of elite titles suggests that developments in the economic sphere were weakening the boundaries immediately above and below the commoner status.³⁸ When it came to the ruling stratum, however, there is no evidence of trends, or even individual cases, of upward mobility from lower strata.³⁹ Those commoners, and even slaves, who possessed the economic means to purchase titles were no dif-

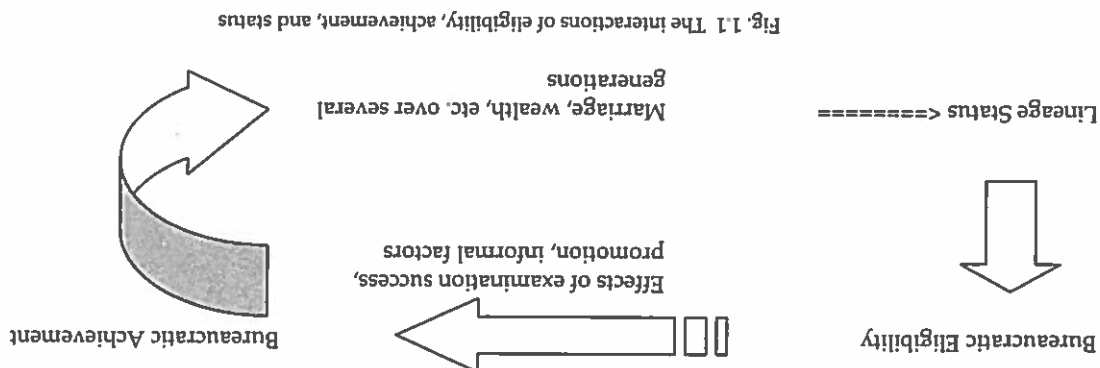


Fig. 1.1 The interactions of eligibility, achievement, and status



Fig. 1.2 Kim Tŏksin, *Nosang alhyŏn* (Paying respects on the road), early eighteenth century (SOURCE: Academy of Korean Studies).

ferent from the tens of thousands of seventeenth-century passers of the military exams who managed to use their newfound titles to escape the tax rolls themselves but could not bequeath this privilege to their descendants.

Perhaps most convincing are the non-statistical factors that cast doubt on pronouncements of upward mobility into the ruling stratum. First, nowhere in the writings of officials or other members of the ruling elite is there a recognition of a wealthy commoner, a member of a secondary status group, or anyone else not a hereditary descendant of *sajok*, as *sajok*.⁴⁰ To the contrary, the sheer number of mentions of abuses in the purchase of titles reflects the strong consciousness of social status differentiation.⁴¹ Second, outside observers who visited Korea in the nineteenth century, whether missionaries or officials, universally pointed to a lack of vigorous commerce. This may have been due partly to the limitations on travel and observation imposed on these people, but one would assume that a flourishing market economy sufficiently strong to overturn the social structure would have been noticeable. The increases in agricultural production and market activity from the seventeenth century on, then, appear not to have transformed the workings of the agrarian economy significantly.

This explains why, unlike bureaucratic eligibility, economic standing did not necessarily correspond to social status, as scholars have



Fig. 1.3 *Hop'ae* identification tag (SOURCE: Academy of Korean Studies).

demonstrated. Household and land registers show that in many areas, while the aristocracy enjoyed a collective economic advantage, there were also commoner and even low-born families who owned more land than some aristocratic households.⁴² But wealthy commoners, although they could purchase formal titles, could not attain the marriage connections and bureaucratic offices that were the preserve of the aristocracy. Aristocrats could tolerate people of lower birth equaling or even surpassing them in economic standing, but they could never allow lower groups access to influential positions in the bureaucracy, much less marriage partnerships. This is not to deny the significance of wealth in the social hierarchy but to accentuate the limits of wealth as an independent variable in upward social mobility. For the aristocracy and secondary status groups—the two major groups who could attain office—lineage wealth did play a powerful role in intra-status group prestige over the long term, particularly since it might fund the education and contacts necessary for attaining office. The inverse of this principle also proved important: bureaucratic posts supplied not only salaries but also opportunities for more informal income as well, which, especially for *sajok* restricted (openly, at least) from engaging in trade, greatly enhanced

their financial standing.⁴³ Recent studies have demonstrated the enormous profit potential of even mid-level positions; the county magistrate controlled the distribution of government grain, for example, and could use this power to enrich himself.⁴⁴

Wealth, then, was closely connected to bureaucratic achievement, but the influence of this connection was circumscribed by hereditary status. Interestingly, wealth—or more accurately, a lack thereof—had a far greater potential for inducing *downward* mobility, which occurred with far greater frequency than upward mobility. Combined with a drought in bureaucratic fortunes over several generations, poor financial resources could curtail the marriage prospects of a lineage precipitously, enough at times to push it into a lower status group. The ability of wealth to upgrade the status of a lineage, however, had definite limits. In fact, the secondary status groups, which included some of the wealthiest people in the late Chosŏn, supply numerous examples of this limitation.

The Secondary Status Groups

What distinguished the secondary status groups—and what made them so distinctly a product of Chosŏn—was not merely their hereditary identity but also their lower bureaucratic eligibility. In issuing a directive in 1882 to eradicate this discrimination, King Kojong clarified the connection while specifying the victims:

In our country we have always venerated lineage (*munji*), but this in reality does not amount to heavenly justice. In recruiting men for office, how can we place restrictions based on higher and lower [birth status]? Now that we are beginning anew, we must accordingly enlarge the paths toward office. This means that candidates from the northern provinces (*sŏbuk*) and Kae-sŏng (Songdo),⁴⁵ and those from sŏl, chungin (*ŭiyŏk*), hyangni (*isŏ*), and lower-ranking military (*kuno*)⁴⁶ backgrounds must all be allowed to accede to the higher positions (*hyŏnjik*).⁴⁷

The secondary status groups' ineligibility for higher office represents only a part of the story, however, for this separation from the aristocracy above proved no wider than that from the commoners below. The secondary status groups were, in other words, a (subordinated) group of elites—thoroughly integral to the socio-political order and incorporating the entire matrix of institutional, ideological, and cultural factors behind the social hierarchy.

We can begin with the muban, whose existence testified to the long-standing struggle between the civilian and military elites in Korea. The millennium between the Three Kingdoms period of early state formation and the stabilization of the Chosŏn system in the fifteenth century witnessed a gradual shift in the character of the dominant group in Korea from one primarily military in orientation to one commanding civilian. By the last century of the Koryŏ dynasty, civilian ruling elites had solidified their position while turning increasingly to Confucian teachings for models of organizing state and society. Political and military circumstances in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, furthermore, downgraded the military examination, or *munwa*. The primary culprit was the precipitous increase in the number of military examination passers during times of crisis or special need. A flood of men from lower status backgrounds gained entrance through this means.⁴⁸ The resulting taint of baseness forever demoted the military lineages, and by the latter half of the Chosŏn dynasty, simply taking the military examination or assuming military office led to a decline in status for civilian aristocrats, who shunned the military. Although in the early Chosŏn civilian and military *yangban* lineages intermarried, and there were families with officials in both orders, by the early seventeenth century the central military officials began to develop into a separate hereditary status group, the muban.⁴⁹ Significantly, however, the muban, who maintained exclusive marriage ties and monopolized the top military posts, also formed in order to prevent further erosion in their social status from the encroachment of lower social elements. These lower groups took advantage of the increasing accessibility of the *munwa* military exam and military posts to gain a measure of upward mobility.

Another secondary status group residing in the capital, the chungin, counts as one of the most distinctive features of the pre-modern Korean social hierarchy. Not even in China, where statecraft originated from the same Confucian sources, did a hereditary status group of technical specialists—interpreters, medical officials, legal specialists, astrologers and astronomers, accountants, painters, and copyists—develop in the central government.⁵⁰ Their existence resulted in part from the phenomenon that also helped relegate the muban to a subordinate standing: a governing ideology that elevated mastery of Confucian ethics and philosophy over military or technical skills. This bias reared its head at the very beginning of the

dynasty, when separate educational programs and examinations, the *chapkwu*, were designated for the technical officials.⁵¹ Thereafter, the mutually reinforcing forces of marriageability and bureaucratic eligibility consigned these officials to a permanently secondary social status by the latter half of the Chosŏn. Although they were on the whole subscribers to the state orthodoxy, they were also its victims: the indispensability of the chungin to the proper functioning of the state lay in stark contrast to their subordinate standing in the hierarchies of both the bureaucracy and the society.

The sŏl not only were victims of the ruling ideology but were very much its products. The story of the sŏl encompasses the entire Chosŏn dynasty. In contrast to their predecessors in the Koryŏ era, when polygamy was a common occurrence among the elite, the early Chosŏn rulers imposed a distinction between primary and secondary wives in accordance with Neo-Confucian teachings on the family. The resulting demotion in social rank for secondary wives to the level of concubines rendered their children "illegitimate." When coupled with the Korean insistence on using bilateral descent to determine hereditary status, this resulted in the sŏl. Henceforth not just the children but all descendants of concubines carried a social stigma, which drastically curtailed their marriageability, bureaucratic eligibility, and social standing. The growth of the sŏl population and their discontent became truly forceful and consequential elements of the Chosŏn social order, with implications that, over the centuries, came to challenge even this order's core principles and to tear at the very social fabric that the Confucian ideologues had worked so hard to weave. The very public sŏl campaigns to escape their legal and social stigmata included mass petitions to the throne signed by thousands, and the growing challenge to their exclusion from communal and familial life led to increasing tension between the sŏl and the local aristocracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These activities also stimulated similar attempts by other secondary social status groups to gain greater recognition as members of the ruling elite.

The hyangni were among these other groups. Like the sŏl, the hyangni were ubiquitous. As hereditary clerks who ran the day-to-day operations of the provincial and county government offices and, most important, assessed and collected taxes, the hyangni were essential cogs in the wheels of local administration. Many of the hyangni lineages descended from those of the Koryŏ era, when they

performed similar functions but enjoyed greater autonomy and status; the founders of other hyangni lineages were fallen aristocrats forced to perform these duties. From the very beginning of the dynasty, the ruling order viewed the hyangni with contempt as practitioners of a necessary evil of government administration and convenient scapegoats in times of trouble. Like the chungin, the hyangni stemmed from a bureaucratic ethos that valued generalists over specialists even while depending on them, and like the chungin, they proved indispensable to the functioning of the Chosŏn state. They were, in fact, fixtures in the countryside, extending the state's presence in local society and taking over where the direct reach of the central government stopped.

The final secondary status group, the local elites of the northern provinces, also illustrate the gap between the capital and the countryside. The northern regions' pre-Chosŏn standing as a frontier and as the home of Jurchen tribesmen, coupled with the influx of tens of thousands of immigrants from the southern provinces at the beginning of the dynasty, produced a very different mix of status groups as well as a distinctive social stratification system. While, for example, the presence of the state—in the form of local and provincial officials dispatched from the capital—and the northern regions' incorporation into the examination system eventually transmitted standardizing guidelines into northern society, without the *sajok* aristocracy that ruled over the southern provinces and capital region, two factors beyond birth and bureaucracy contributed significantly to elite status in the north: military office and commercial activity. Over time, a northern literati elite, increasingly hereditary, also emerged. Like the *sajok* aristocracy of the south, the northern literati lineages solidified their position at the apex of local society through landed wealth, endogamous marriage practices, and bureaucratic achievement. Indeed, the northern elites were more successful in the civil service examinations during the final two centuries than the southern aristocracy. It was just a matter of time, then, before the northern elites, like the other secondary status groups, clamored publicly for greater recognition and privileges. But because of their lack of lineage connections to the ruling aristocrats and to the continuing perception of the north as a backwater, the northern elites, despite their strong foothold in the examination system, found themselves shut out of high bureaucratic posts.

Representations of Chosŏn Social Structure

The subordination of the northerners, which amounted to the displacement of the dual workings of birth and bureaucracy to the dimension of regionalism, revealed the scope and versatility of status in delineating the people of Chosŏn. The secondary status groups, in fact, exhaustively embodied this mechanism. Whether the fusion of the Neo-Confucian family system to ascriptive social hierarchy, which created the *sŏlli*; priorities in administrative functions, which subordinated the chungin in the capital and the *hyangni* in the countryside; the military as an outlet for social mobility, which the emergence of the *muban* exemplified; or the restricted power of economic wealth, which the northerners as well as chungin felt so keenly, all the elements that constituted Chosŏn Korea's method of differentiating the population come into play in the story of the secondary status groups. Their ubiquity, both physically and conceptually, in late Chosŏn society renders them a valuable tool for exploring the premodern social hierarchy.

It was the aristocracy, however, that enforced this system. Here Michael Mann's theory of social differentiation is helpful. Mann sees stratification emerging through the networking of ruling groups who controlled one or more of four sources of social power: ideological, economic, military, and political.⁵² The Chosŏn ruling aristocracy, in its formation, eventually deployed all four sources,⁵³ but it exercised its stranglehold on privilege mostly through ideological and political resources, which approximated, respectively, the customary and legal bases for the hierarchical differentiation of the Chosŏn population according to status.⁵⁴ Following General Yi Sŏng-gye's overthrow of the Koryŏ court, the aristocracy, which had already secured its firm standing atop the social order by the late Koryŏ, simply acceded to Yi's takeover of the throne, absorbed Yi and his followers, and thereafter found little need to resort to brute force. Force, furthermore, would have run contrary to the Confucian ethos, which, by frowning upon accumulation and commercial activity, also tempered economic power, as we have seen. This did not mean that the aristocracy did not enjoy economic privilege—it was a slave-owning, landed nobility from the beginning, after all; rather, the scale of the aristocracy's economic advantage did not correspond to the extent of its domination. This fits the general observation offered by Max Weber that status-based domination usually stands “in

sharp opposition to the mere pretensions of property” and more often forms the basis of economic gain rather than vice versa.⁵⁵ In the Chosŏn, wealth was accessible to those of lower social standing, but in spite of their material resources, upstarts found it nearly impossible to access the much more valued commodity, the sustained social and political power provided by bureaucratic achievement. As a comprehensive political resource, the Chosŏn state administration secured what Mann would call the aristocracy's *collective power* over other actors, but, and just as important, it manifested and enforced the ruling group's *distributive power* of determining the relative standing of the entire populace. Finally, aristocratic domination relied on a panoply of ideological or, perhaps more accurately, ritualized resources. This ruling ethic, in turn, can be parsed into two elements: Confucianism, imported from China and Koreanized continuously thereafter, and the native practice of assigning human value in accordance with birth.

Ancestry as Symbolic Capital

Status, as defined and analyzed in this study, comes close to Weber's definition of it as a “claim to social esteem” based often on birth.⁵⁶ On a larger level, status in the premodern Korean context approximates Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of “symbolic capital,” those resources and attributes (material, cultural, or other forms) converted into categories of value.⁵⁷ This categorization of value usually reflects power relations in a given social space, for it controls the “production of common sense” and “legitimate naming.” In this sense, the theory of convertible capital offers a viable way of understanding the Chosŏn stratification system. Hereditary privilege worked as a form of cultural capital that came to constitute the dominant form of symbolic capital, and hence the primary element of status itself.⁵⁸ As this chapter has argued, birth, and by extension one's ancestral lineage, accounted overwhelmingly for the status, or more specifically, the status group identity, that determined an individual's range of life possibilities. Marriage patterns, especially group endogamy, remained essential to the upkeep of this system, for the standing of one's lineage—which after all determined one's birth—depended on both the male and the female members.⁵⁹

By emphasizing the historicity of social differentiation and behavior, Bourdieu also provides one possible way of comprehending how the premodern Korean social hierarchy arose and endured. The evi-

dence points toward a long history of delineation through birth. Reaching a pinnacle during the Chosŏn, this mode of regulating relative access to privileges was acknowledged, internalized, naturalized—that is, made self-evident and “rational”—not only through institutionalization and coercion, to be sure, but also through the force of habit. Most Koreans likely came to accept this structuring of the collectivity, and they refrained from chronic rebellion against the system because they lacked the consciousness, as much as because, as Mann posits, they lacked the organization. As reflected in their cultural output, such as popular entertainments, literature, and other expressions, those below the ruling aristocracy—and especially, as the rest of this book demonstrates, the secondary status groups—were infused with what Korean scholars call the “desire to be yangban” (*yangban chihyang ūisik*). One’s place in this hierarchy refined this outlook more narrowly, but in general the validity of the principle of ascriptive status, developed over many centuries, was widely acknowledged. This collective consciousness, comprising an array of ideological, cultural, ritualistic, economic, and administrative forces, corresponded to the “system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings” that Bourdieu conceives as *habitus*.⁶⁰ The notion of a Chosŏn *habitus* also accounts for the important variations, in accordance with status group identity, in the prevailing perception of social ordering as well as for the limitations of such departures from the historically grounded “norm.” Later chapters of this book elaborate on how both themes present keys for understanding the place of the secondary status groups in the modern transformation of Korean social structure.

Notwithstanding Bourdieu’s reminder about the historical specificity of each *habitus*, one is compelled to find meaningful comparisons in order to locate the Korean social hierarchy in human history and thereby specify its distinctive characteristics. In considering the premodern Korean social hierarchy, for example, we come face to face with the question, Was premodern Korean civilization a *caste* society? At first glance, this classification seems not to apply, since neither the Korean aristocracy nor the Korean ascriptive hierarchy was based on notions of ritual or religious purity, and unlike Indian castes, Korean status groups, except for a very small minority of outcastes, occupied the same geographical spaces. Furthermore, a strong contrast appears in the close integration of the state bureaucracy into the social hierarchy in Korea, something that the expansive, extremely variegated jux-

tapositions of castes in India did not produce.⁶¹ If, however, for a moment we can give in to the temptations of simplifying the Indian case and employ a broad concept of “caste system” as a complex social order that rigidly delineates a population ascriptively, the similarities appear striking. Koreans from the Unified Silla to the end of the Chosŏn era were segmented into hierarchically arranged, endogamous populations in accordance with birth, with the ruling hereditary group, like the Brahmans, propagating an ideology that justified its domination while supporting its standing through political and economic privileges. However, as Weber hinted, and as other scholars have claimed, such an elaborate caste system usually emerged as a systematization of discrimination based on “race” or ethnicity in historical settings such as the United States.⁶²

That such a phenomenon arose in Chosŏn Korea, among a population lacking discernible physical differences, suggests nothing less than an astounding degree of Korean exceptionalism. But Chosŏn Korea did not stand alone. Indeed the stratification of neighboring Tokugawa Japan presents a valuable example. Notwithstanding scholarly uncertainty about the extent of hereditation in the middle ranks of the social hierarchy,⁶³ as in Korea the general principle of ascriptive differentiation based on a selective adoption of Neof Confucianism maintained the Tokugawa social order. In fact, for the ruling elite—the Tokugawa and affiliate houses, the *daimyo*, and upper *samurai*—the degree of hereditation may have exceeded that of the Chosŏn *sjok*. Furthermore, if we broaden our focus and look for hereditary ruling groups whose socio-economic and political-institutional privileges reinforced each other, we can find many historical parallels.⁶⁴ In late imperial China, especially in the southeast, lineage background persisted as perhaps the most valuable of the various resources employed to gain and maintain elite status, despite the greater possibilities for social mobility than in Korea.⁶⁵ That premodern Korea fit patterns found in neighboring civilizations certainly does not render less important the exploration of Korea’s specific historical circumstances—quite the contrary. But it does suggest that, in the larger scheme of things, the *sjok* aristocracy and the long-standing practice of assigning status ascriptively—even the tradition of hereditary slavery⁶⁶—do not provide a complete picture of what was distinctive about social stratification in premodern Korea.

Consideration of secondary status groups, however, greatly furthers our understanding of this picture. Not only did the secondary

status groups constitute a substantial portion of the population in the latter half of the dynasty, but as contemporary portrayals of society such as the "Tale of Ch'unhyang" suggest, they made their presence felt everywhere: working and living among the central government offices and aristocratic households of Seoul; mingling in the local government organs and village communities of the countryside; and even occupying the northern half of the peninsula, where one found neither the *sjok* aristocracy nor, for the most part, private slaves. As with people in the other planes of the social hierarchy, the secondary status groups' identities hinged on the fundamental criterion of birth, and their adherence to the practices of group endogamy and their efforts to improve their lineage status reflect the degree to which they had absorbed the ruling social ethos.

Bureaucracy as Symbolic Capital

Hereditary privilege would have encountered definite limitations in implementation without the critical amendments offered by a second form of symbolic capital, the bureaucracy. In the Chosŏn era, a centralized state bureaucracy exercised great influence over the social hierarchy for the same reason that the aristocracy relied on its bureaucratic monopoly to enforce its domination: The bureaucracy actualized the state itself. As Bourdieu has found, the state normally plays an indispensable role in the delineation of social hierarchy, for it retains the "power of constitution" over social relations—that is, the state, through its grip on coercive authority, can sanction and legalize the workings of symbolic power, such as hereditary privilege or bureaucratic office. This authority over the imposition, composition, and certification of social divisions renders the state, in fact, the exponent of political power *par excellence*.⁶⁷ Bourdieu seems to be reminding us that "state" and "status" have a common etymology for good reason, but premodern Korean society appears to have internalized this connection quite thoroughly on its own, perhaps even before the documented influence of Confucian statecraft in ancient Korean history.⁶⁸ Indeed in the Chosŏn, the Korean ruling order went beyond using the state to legalize and enforce the dominant symbolic capital of hereditary privilege—the state embodied this relationship itself, through the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy was not merely the instrument of state power; it very much *was* the state. Hence bureaucracy—what Bourdieu might have called "administrative capital"—was transformed into a form of symbolic capital that,

in influence, stood second only to birth. Little wonder, then, that the restrictions placed on bureaucratic eligibility buttressed social discrimination based on birth—something that the secondary status groups knew quite well, since their very existence demonstrated it.

The secondary status groups also demonstrated the obverse of this principle: bureaucracy could act not only as the framework for stability but also as a catalyst for change. Bureaucratic achievement, in fact, was behind the formation of the Chosŏn aristocracy, in the mid- to late Koryŏ era. Bureaucracy served as the prime instigator of the formation of the secondary status groups as well. For the muban, chungin, and hyangni, their hereditary segregation from the aristocracy was cemented when their bureaucratic eligibility was restricted to lower positions. Northerners and the *sŏl* for their part found that the ruling order could readily suppress them through the manipulation of bureaucratic eligibility, denying northerners who had passed the *munkwa* examination access to higher positions, and the *sŏl* even the chance to sit for the examination during most of the Chosŏn era. The bureaucracy thus reinforced the aristocracy's hereditary privileges, but the aristocracy as well as the groups below it always understood that the bureaucracy also contained a powerful latent capacity to induce change. As the rest of this book demonstrates, when the secondary status groups began to seek inclusion in the ruling order in the late Chosŏn, they focused on eligibility for office. Their efforts and those of their supporters were behind much of the opening of bureaucratic eligibility that did occur.

For most of the Chosŏn era, the secondary status groups were not particularly successful in generating fundamental change, but the late nineteenth-century exposure to imperialism revived the bureaucracy's long-dormant potential to induce large-scale transformations in the social order. Hence, in pursuing the problem of how status in Korea (or, if one prefers, the aggregation of symbolic capital) changed from being predominantly a hereditary phenomenon to something based on a variety of factors, we must focus on the turn of the twentieth century and on bureaucratic change, for two reasons. First, as this chapter has argued, the bureaucracy was a barometer of social hierarchy in the Chosŏn dynasty. Second, as the following chapters demonstrate, the bureaucracy preceded the family system, marriage patterns, economic relations, and most other social or institutional indicators in departing systematically and fundamentally from long-standing norms.