

Yangban is an honorific term used when addressing the educated gentry.¹²² In the county of Jeongseon there lived a certain Yangban scholar. He was a sagacious man who loved to read books. Whenever a new county magistrate arrived in the county, in accordance with Confucian propriety he would be sure to go the Yangban scholar's cottage in person to pay his respects most humbly.

But this Yangban scholar was impoverished. His yearly allotment of rice depended on loans from the magistrate's office. After many years, that debt added up to a thousand stones worth of grain. When the governor¹²³ arrived for an official inspection of the county, he audited the records for expenditures and income. When he discovered the financial dealings of the Yangban scholar, he was enraged. He exclaimed,

“Who is this Yangban scholar? He is depleting our funds for military preparedness.”

Thereupon he ordered the Yangban scholar imprisoned. The county magistrate felt great pity for the Yangban scholar. He knew the scholar was just scraping by and could not conceivably pay back the debt he owed. The magistrate could not in conscience lock the man up. But ultimately, there was nothing he could do to help in this

¹²² The Yangban were a hereditary class of scholar officials who made up the ruling class of Joseon Korea. Although in theory Yangban became administrators by passing the civil service exams, in fact those exams were closed to all but a small number of people by the eighteenth century. Most Yangban families had been excluded from power for decades by Park's time, and many lived in dire poverty.

¹²³ The governor carried out the routine evaluation of local officials and inspection of local conditions for the central government.

case.

The Yangban scholar cried night and day. He had no idea where he could come up with the funds required.

His wife excoriated him: "All your life you have loved reading books. Such reading has not helped to pay back our debt to the county magistrate."

She then spat out this curse, "Yangban, Yangban! A Yangban is not worth a single penny."

A wealthy member of the community sat down with his family members to discuss the Yangban scholar's situation.

He remarked, "Although the Yangban is poor, he consistently receives the most glorious indications of respect. Although I have amassed some wealth, I am considered lowly and uncouth. I don't dare ride a horse. When I see the Yangban scholar, I find myself stopping dead in my tracks, unable to move in fright. When I meet him, I end up stooping over and bowing respectfully in his presence as I would before a high official. There I am, with my head hanging down, crawling on my knees before him. These experiences have been countless, and deeply humiliating."

"But now it seems that the Yangban scholar is penniless and cannot pay off his debts. What a terrible fix he finds himself in now. It will be nigh impossible for him to maintain his Yangban status under such circumstances. Why don't I just go buy this Yangban status from him and keep it for myself?"¹²⁴

Thereupon, the rich man wandered down to the gate of the Yangban scholar's home and offered to pay back the debt he owed to the county magistrate.

The Yangban scholar was delighted and readily consented to the plan. The rich man promptly paid off in full the debt at the magistrate's office.

The magistrate was startled when he heard about this event. Thinking the matter odd, he set off to inquire as to the Yangban scholar's situation. He asked the scholar about the circumstances

¹²⁴ A humorous tall tale commences: Yangban status could not be sold in reality.

surrounding the repayment of the debt to the magistrate's office. The Yangban scholar was dressed in a wool jacket and wore short pants and a shirt. He bowed down right there in the road before the magistrate and humbly declared,

"Lowly man that I am, I do not dare gaze upon your honor."

The magistrate was astonished. He bent over and pulled the Yangban scholar up from the ground, "Why does your honor denigrate and humiliate yourself in this manner?" he inquired.

But the Yangban scholar grew all the more timorous and frightened. He prostrated himself before the magistrate and, banging his head on the ground, he pleaded,

"For the love of God, how could a lowly man like me dare to dishonor himself before you? I have sold my Yangban status to pay off my public debt. Now it is the rich man of our village who serves as the Yangban. How could a lowly man like me dare to assume that old title and put on airs?"

The magistrate sighed. "Who is the true gentleman? It must be the rich man." He said. "Who is the true Yangban? It is now the rich man. To be wealthy, but never parsimonious, is righteousness. To aid others when they are in need is benevolence. To detest base behavior and seek nobility is sagacity. Such behavior defines the true Yangban.

"Nevertheless, you have carried out this transaction in private without a legal writ of sale. Such an action invites future litigation. I will write up an agreement for you. The citizens of the county will bear witness, and we will issue a legal writ of sale to legitimize this action. I, in the office of county magistrate, will sign the writ of sale myself."

The magistrate promptly returned to his office. He summoned all the Yangban families of the county, as well as farmers, artisans, merchants, and traders. They gathered in front of the magistrate's bureau. The rich man took the seat of honor at the right hand of the magistrate. The Yangban scholar stood just below the seat of the chief administrative assistant.¹²⁵ The magistrate wrote

¹²⁵ *Gonghyeong* (公兪).

up a writ of sale that went as follows:

“Today, the ninth day of the ninth month of the tenth year of the reign of the Qianlong Emperor.¹²⁶ The following writ certifies that the status of Yangban has been sold in order to pay off a debt to the government equating the amount of one thousand stone-weights of rice.”

“As for the term ‘Yangban,’ its meanings are varied. One who devotes himself to reading the classics is known as a scholar. One who devotes himself to public service in government is known as an official. A person who possesses great integrity is known as a gentleman. The Yangban class is divided into two sections. When they stand before the king,¹²⁷ the military branch of the Yangban class lines up on the west side, and the civilian branch of the Yangban class takes its place on the east side.¹²⁸ These two branches are the source of the term ‘Yangban.’¹²⁹ Each Yangban carries out his assigned duties. He disdains base behavior and refuses to engage in it. He treasures the teachings of the ancients, and holds himself to the highest ethical standards. He normally awakes early in the morning at the fifth watch. He will strike a match and light the oil lamp to start reading. His eyes are fixed on the text just below his nose as he supports his rear with his ankles. He can recite *A Broad Consideration of the Zuozhuan by Master*

126 The year 1745. Qianlong was the name of the Manchu (Qing) emperor on the throne at the time. Most Korean intellectuals continued to use the last reign name of the defunct Ming dynasty. Some reformers such as Park chose to use the contemporary Qing reign name.

127 The King of Korea.

128 The Yangban class had military (*mu* 武) and civilian (*mun* 文) branches.

129 “Two” in Korean is pronounced as “yang” and “branch” is “ban.” The combination is the source of the term “Yangban.”

*Donglai*¹³⁰ with icy smoothness.”

“The Yangban endures hunger and cold; he never speaks of his poverty to others. He knashes his teeth and jolts his neck from time to time to maintain his focus.¹³¹ He carefully rinses his mouth with saliva and swallows it to keep healthy.¹³² He gently preens his wool cap with his sleeves to keep it clean. He brushes off the dust he sees around him until it permeates the air with waves. When washing at the sink, he does not rub his hands together excessively. He does not swish water in his mouth too long when gargling. The Yangban always uses a deep and smooth voice when giving orders to his servants. He walks with a relaxed gait, and does not lift his shoes far from the ground.”

“The copies he makes of the *True Treasures of Classic Literature* and the *Annotated Anthology of Tang Dynasty Poetry*¹³³ are written in a script as minute as sesame seeds; a single line contains one hundred characters. He does not handle money. He does not inquire as to the price of rice. Although the weather is sweltering, he never takes off his socks. The Yangban never exposes his topknot at the dinner table. He never starts with the porridge when eating and never

130 The *Donglai Zuo shi boyi* (東來左氏博議, *Broad Explanations on the Zuozhuan* by *Master Donglai*) is a commentary on the classical history *Zuozhuan* (左傳) compiled by the Song historian Li Zuqian (呂祖謙). This collection of commentaries became a stylistic model for composition after the Song dynasty.

131 These are two Daoist practices for maintaining good health and concentration. In the first practice one sits quietly with one’s eyes closed and presses one’s teeth together repeatedly. In the second practice one passes each arm behind the neck and taps lightly on the back of the head.

132 Another Daoist practice for maintaining health. One arises early in the morning, rinses the inside of one’s mouth with saliva and then swallows it slowly in drags.

133 *Ganwen Zhenbao* (古文真寶, *Veritable Treasures of Ancient Writing*) is a famous anthology of literary masterpieces compiled by the Song dynasty poet Huang Tingjian (黃庭堅). This collection was considered an essential reference book for a literary stylist. *Tongsshi pinhui* (諸詩品彙, *Annotated Anthology of Tang Dynasty Poetry*) is a collection compiled by the Ming scholar Gao Bing (高棅).

slurps when drinking. He never smashes his food with chopsticks. He never eats raw scallions. If he drinks unfiltered wine, he never slugs it or wets his whiskers. If he smokes, he never sucks in both cheeks when taking a puff.”

“The Yangban never slaps his wife, no matter how great his anger, and he never kicks crockery no matter how terrible his frustration. He never punches his children. He never curses his servants and slaves excessively. Although he may shoo a cow out of the way, he will never insult the person trying to sell it. If a Yangban scholar falls ill, he never calls for shamans to conduct an exorcism. When making offerings to his ancestors, he never brings in Buddhist monks.¹³⁴ Although he uses a brazier to keep warm, he does not rub his hands over it to warm them. When he speaks, he never spatters his saliva. He does not slaughter cattle and he never gambles.”

“If the holder of this contract violates any of these restrictions of the Yangban position, anyone can take this writ to the magistrate’s office and demand legal rectification.”

The lord and the magistrate of Jeongseon County stamped the contract with official seals. The county elder¹³⁵ and the magistrate’s deputy¹³⁶ also added their stamps and signatures as witnesses. Thereupon a functionary of the magistrate’s office put a final stamp on the document. The seals were stamped down one after another in such a quick succession it created a terrible din like the beating of drums. The official marks were scattered all over the contract like overlapping constellations of stars. An attaché from the central

134 Observing Confucian rites for the dead without Buddhist prayers. Many strict Confucians frowned upon the mixing of Confucian rites with Buddhist religious practices.

135 *Jwasu* (庶弟).

136 *Dyeolgam* (掛監).

government¹³⁷ read the document aloud, and the ceremony came to an end.

The rich man was despondent. After a few moments of silence, he remarked,

“It that all that a Yangban is? I had heard that a Yangban was like an immortal. But if it is really just that, I have lost all interest. Please give me something a bit more profitable than what you just described.”

The magistrate wrote out another record which stated,

“Heaven gives birth to and nourishes the people. The people in turn are divided into four classes.¹³⁸ Among those four classes, the most revered is the scholar. He is called the Yangban. His standing is the most favored in society. The Yangban does not plow the earth, nor does he engage in commerce. With just a cursory knowledge of literature and history, a Yangban can pass the higher exams and succeed in the civil service.¹³⁹ Even those who are not particularly distinguished pass the exams and become a licentiate.”¹⁴⁰

“Although the red tablets awarded in the civil service exam are only a foot long, they provide everything you need for life. Those tablets will serve as your constant money bag. A licentiate who takes office at the age of thirty can still rely upon the status bestowed by his family line. The influence of the Southerner party¹⁴¹ is always helpful in getting an appointment. The Yangban’s ears glow a delicate white as he enjoys the cool breeze, lounging under a parasol.

137 *Huijang* (戶長).

138 Scholar, farmer, artisan, and merchant.

139 The civil service exams were open only to those of the Yangban class.

140 *Jinsa* (進士), someone who has passed the lowest level of the civil service examinations.

141 The Southerner party was the most powerful of the political powers active in Korea during the late eighteenth century.

His belly grows round sitting there ringing a bell for his obedient servants. Retiring to his office, he enjoys the jeweled visage of a seductive courtesan. Then he feeds grain to the cranes that gather at his residence."

"Even an impoverished Yangban scholar residing in the countryside can pretty much do as he pleases. He can demand that the neighbor take his cow and plow the Yangban's fields first. Or he can enlist the commoners of the town if he needs his fields weeded or planted. Who would dare to slight him? He can blow the ashes from his pipe in your face, or splash water from his wash bowl on you, if he feels like it. And although your topknot will be speckled with ashes and your sideburns soaked, you will not dare take offense."

The rich man proofread the contract through. He struck out his tongue in astonishment, declaring, "Forget it! forget it! Buying Yangban status was just impertinent and imprudent. What are you trying to do to me here? Make me into some sort of a bandit?"

He swung his head with determination and marched away. The merchant never again spoke about becoming a Yangban for the rest of his days.

The Tale of the Daoist Immortal Mr. Kim

金神仙傳