Beliefs, Social Structures, and Practices

The Choson Dynasty, also known as the Yi Dynasty, has long been celebrated for its artistic, scientific and intellectual achievements, including the 1443 invention of the Korean alphabet (han’gul) by the greatest of all Choson kings, King Sejong. The Choson Dynasty, which means the kingdom of morning serenity, is one of modern history’s longest dynastic rules, lasting over 500 years. This achievement is even more impressive in light of Korea’s strategic and, some might say, precarious geopolitical location at the center of the East Asian corridor.

How did Korea achieve such political stability? What social forces were at work? The Choson Dynasty adopted Confucianism as its state religion and developed concomitant social structures, ultimately establishing cultural values, which supported continuous dynastic rule.

These cultural values of the Choson Dynasty, centerpieces to the Ch’unhyang story, still resonant in contemporary Korean life. The idea of an interdependent, collective self rather than an independent, autonomous self, of role dedication rather than self-fulfillment, and the privileging of harmony and order rather over justice or progress are all typically Confucian cultural values that have carried over from the Choson era into the present.

Choson Dynasty officially began in 1392 when Yi Songgye, an army general, was declared king, following his successful coup against the Koryo government. With the support of Neo-Confucian scholar-officials, he and the twenty-six Yi kings that followed him adopted and enforced the principles of Confucianism, a belief system founded by the Chinese philosopher Confucius, as the for guide their actions as well as virtually every citizen of their dynasty.

Confucius taught that men of wisdom and virtue, chosen for their knowledge and moral quality, should lead the government. They were to rule, not by force or law, but by example. This theory of government was an ideal held for centuries by many countries of East Asia; the application of the theory, however, was less than ideal. Korean rulers during the Chosen reign established social structures and institutions to enforce Confucian ideology and practice.

King T’aejo (Yi Songgye) instituted the Chinese examination system to recruit wise and moral men into government. Men that could demonstrate through rigorous examination that they understood proper governance, classic literature, and morality, as it was taught in the sacred books of Confucian philosophy, were appointed to government positions. Once in place, they were expected to lead by moral example.
Yi Mongyong's experiences in taking the civil service examination.

In the Anthology of Korean Literature, Shin Chae-hyo gives a descriptive account of Yi Mongyong's experiences in taking the civil service examination. While highly romanticized, this account provides insight into the importance placed on the examination, based on very specialized knowledge of Confucian morality, during the Choson Dynasty. An excerpt of this account follows.

Yi Mongyong was in Seoul studying poetry and composition night and day. He made himself master of a hundred authors. Soon there was an extraordinary examination, and he took his writing materials to the examination ground.

Around him, he saw a great concourse of people, crowds of scholars bowing before the king. The royal orchestra was playing court music. The rector of the National Academy announced the theme appointed by the king: "Springtime in the examination ground is the same today as yesteryear."

Yi Mongyong found the subject to his liking. He spread out his paper and slowly ground the ink while he sought inspiration. Then dipping his golden weasel-hair writing brush into the ink, he began to write. He wrote in the style of Wan His-chih, and according to the model of Chao Meng-fu. His brush flew over the paper, and he was the first to finish.

The chief examiner saw that in Yi Mongyong's composition, every stroke was perfect and the couplets were like jewels on a thread. His calligraphy was strong, like the dragons flying through the heavens. The verses had the rhythm of a flock of wild geese descending on the sand flats.

After the list of successful candidates had been announced, and he had received three cups of wine from the king, Yi Mongyong was declared the top graduate of the examination. When he came out from the royal presence, he had the winner's spray of pink flowers fixed on his hat, and he was wearing a yellow silk robe of his new rank with cranes embroidered on the back and chest.

People accepted the authority exercised by scholar-officials who, by definition and expectation, were wise, generous rulers. The Confucian social order centered on five human relationships, those between:

- king and subject (Ch’ung- loyalty)
- father and son (Hyo, filial piety)
- husband and wife (Pyol, different realm of duty and obligation)
- older and younger brothers, (Precedence by age)
- friends – (Ch’in- faithfulness and mutual trust)

Models for all social interactions, these relationships emphasized reciprocity, that is, the duties and obligations of people to one another. In each case, the stronger person was expected to be kind and protective toward the weaker; in turn, the weaker person was expected to be loyal and obedient to the stronger. Social equality, as envisioned by the
founders of the United States, would have seemed unnatural to Confucian scholars, except perhaps among friends of the same age and rank.

Confucian teachings extolled the virtues of one's loyalty to the state and one's loyalty to kinship groups. In situations of competing loyalties, kinship considerations were more often placed above those of the state, because of the pivotal importance of the family in the Confucian social order. Kin relations served as the focus of political, social, and economic activities. Individuals had no social status apart from their families. One's social status rose and fell with the failures and successes of kin. In all cases, individuals recognized that their identities were forever enmeshed with those of their ancestors and progeny. Their identities were part of a social and historical continuum, influenced by the past, while simultaneously influencing the future.

To uphold the Confucian social order, Choson leaders stratified society into rigid status levels with specific duties and privileges. They created social institutions and practices that defined and maintained fairly impermeable class distinctions as a method of social control.

The central government assigned people to classes and, beginning in 1425, Choson leaders required all adult males counted in census reports to carry on their person a ho-p'ae, a form of identification that stated his name, birth year, class status by the level of civil examination passed and residential county. Violators of either census reporting or the ho-p'ae system were severely punished. The ho-p'ae was designed to enforce civic duties, shoring up systems for tax collection, labor practices, and military service, but it also served to rank everyone within a rigid social hierarchy.

At the top of the social hierarchy were members of the royal family. The royal family was exempt from the ho-p'ae system because they had, in theory, absolute power.

Much actual power was yielded by yangban, civil and military officials who directed the government, economy and culture of Choson society. So complete was this direction, many refer to Choson society as yangban society. Having risen through a state examination system designed to recruit officials of wisdom and moral merit, yangban were expected to continue devoting themselves to the study of Confucian doctrine and self-cultivation so that they could best serve others while in public office. By setting policies by their own example, their primary responsibility was the moral cultivation of Choson people.

Yangban were excused from paying taxes. The civil officials enjoyed greater prestige than their military counterparts. Similarly, yangban who ran the central government ranked higher than those who oversaw local municipalities. Yangban nobles of highest status wore the a-p'ae, or ivory tag, which allowed bearers to ignore nighttime curfews and other restrictions. Yangban of lower rank wore the kak-p'ae or horn tag.

Below the yangban were chung'in, who passed miscellaneous civil examination called chapkwa, and possessed specific professional skills. This group of technical specialists included interpreters and scribes, accountants. Members of the chung'in were referred to as "middle people." One theory suggests that this was because they largely lived in the central part of Seoul. While a small percentage of chung'in wore the kak-p'ae of lower ranking yangban, and enjoyed the attendant privileges, most wore the samok pang-pa'e, a small wooden tag that afforded its bearer fewer privileges.

Lower in social standing than then chung'in, but still socially acceptable, were the sangmin, or commoners. Included in this rank were peasant-farmers, fishermen, artisans
and merchants. Like most chung'in, they were identifiable by the samok pang-pa'e. These "ordinary" people, though poor, retained their dignity because they produced food and material goods from their labor. This was not true for merchants of the same sangmin class. They were seen as parasites, increasing their wealth through the exchange, rather than the production, of goods. Considered uncouth by others of similar and higher rank, merchants were heavily taxed to keep from gaining social mobility by ignoble measures.

The lowest rungs of society were occupied by ch'onmin ("lowborn"), estimated to comprise close to one-third of Choson society. Most were slaves, either publicly owned by the government or privately owned by individuals. Many public and private slaves formed independent households and, rather than provide labor, paid fixed fees to their owners.

While this relationship was similar to that between landowners and tenant farmers, by law, slave owners could sell their slaves at their whim. Also, ch'onmin was a hereditary class, much like yangban, which prevented social mobility. If either of a child's parent had slave status, that child would also be a slave. They carried large wooden tags called taemok pang-p'ae. Slavery was formally abolished in 1894.

Other outcasts who shared with slaves the misfortune of lowborn social status were butchers, tanners, actors, acrobats, shamans, and kisaengs. Kisaengs were female entertainers who were often taken by yangban men as concubines or secondary wives. People accepted social inequality based on birthright. Yangban could marry only yangban. Children of yangban fathers and kisaengs, however accomplished, were relegated to chung'in positions, which were attained by taking a miscellaneous civil service examination called the chapkwa. This practice was legalized with the introduction of sool kumgo pop in 1415, the law which prohibited children of ignoble birth, such as children of concubines and remarried women from taking the civil service examination. Before it was abolished in 1894, this law determined the fates of countless individuals and families.

Analyses of chung'in lineages reveal that members of this social group, like those of the yangban class, intermarried closely. Analyses of lineages of the two lower classes, sangmin and ch'onmin, show a greater number of out-marriages; the children of unions between these two classes were considered ch'onmin, whether their father or mother was a member of the higher ranking sangmin, or commoner class.

Other than birthright, people were also socially measured based upon their education, occupation, wealth, and place of residence. Educational achievement through the civil service examination system, or kwago, was considered the formal channel for advancing through society to the ruling class; however, much like birthright, education was neither universally available nor fair. Only male children of yangban marriages and ancestry were permitted to sit for the kwago. Since each kwago candidate had to submit a list of his four ancestors (sajo) on both paternal and maternal sides, sons and grandsons of concubines, remarried widows, immoral women, corrupt officials, etc. were barred from taking the civil service examination. It nears the miraculous that any commoners - though historians list a few - managed to take and pass these restricted exams, and thus begin climbing the social ladder.

People were also ranked by occupation. According to Confucian ideology, work that relied on one's intellectual capacity rather than physical strength was held in greater esteem. The value of work was also correlated with the extent to which people were
served by one's occupation. A yangban civil officer, who was responsible for national policy decisions, was placed at the top of the social hierarchy, while a farmer, who labored for his family, was placed much farther down.

In the beginning of the Choson dynasty, one's wealth was easily estimated by one's occupation. Without the burden of taxes, many of the yangban class were able to maintain their wealth by holding on to their land and slaves, both of which were inherited or acquired as emoluments from the government. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, when some members of the ruling class began selling their yangban titles to well-to-do merchant families, wealth increasingly became an independent basis for social stratification.

The location of one's residence was also used as a social marker. Generally, it was more prestigious to live in Seoul, the capitol, than anywhere else. This was the case even for members of the yangban class, who were called hyangban if they lived in rural areas to differentiate them from their superiors who resided in Seoul. Within city or village limits, the chung'in lived near the center of town while outcast groups were segregated in ghettos outside of the gates.

After the royal family, members of the yangban class enjoyed the highest standards of living and exercised the greatest amount of power. After all, their demonstration of knowledge of statecraft and moral cultivation by successfully passing the kwago examinations on Confucian classics proved that they earned such privileges. Unfortunately, while this may have been true among the original test takers, many children of yangban marriages rode on the coat tails of their male predecessors. Many of these descendants abused their power, exploiting lower classes, to maintain their lives of luxury.

To stem corruption, Choson rulers instituted the amhaeng osa system (literally "the King's secret mission"). Amhaeng osa were royal appointees whose primary duties were to investigate wrongful acts of local government officials and military commanders. These appointees were also directed by the King to relieve the sufferings of the people in times of famine, droughts, floods, and epidemics, and to protect national borders and coastlines from encroaching enemies. The use of amhaeng osa, first recorded in 1509, grew prevalent during the latter part of the Choson Dynasty, flourishing during the reigns of King Yongjo and King Chongjo.

The king’s appointment process (paech’o) of amhaeng osa was as secret as their subsequent missions. The three highest-ranking ministers recommended a short list of candidates to the king. The king, in turn, conferred this rank upon the appointee in secret, issuing essential materials for the amhaeng osa to conduct his work: a pongso (a letter of appointment, conferring the amhaeng osa status to the bearer); a samok (letter of assignment, detailing his investigation); a bronze scale (to measure the size of punishment instruments - whips, canes, and fetters, etc.); and a ma-p’ae (bronze-made horse badges).

With the royal warrant, royal seal, and date of appointment engraved on one side, the ma-p’ae established the amhaeng osa’s official position, authorizing the use of government transportation and funds, among many other privileges. The number of horses (one to five) on the reverse side, for instance, indicated the number of horses the amhaeng osa could requisition at any of the many government post stations along the main roads of Korea.
During their journeys, the amhaeng osa traveled incognito, disguised in plain clothes to keep their missions clandestine. Upon reaching their destination, they spoke with commoners about village living conditions, taxation, and the local officials' conduct. They also surveyed the fields, marketplaces, and government buildings to determine whether local officials had appropriately employed well-educated, filial sons.

Once his assessment was complete, the amhaeng osa appeared in the county hall, revealed his identity, and, in cases where the local officials committed wrongdoings, seized the office of the county administration. When this happened, the amhaeng osa became a hero of the local province, saving commoners from the injustice of evil magistrates. The amhaeng osa's mission ended with the delivery of a summary report to the king.

There are many stories in Korean literature about amhaeng osa of which perhaps the most well known is the story of Ch'unhyang. As in this telling, the stories climax to the dramatic moment when the amhaeng osa suddenly produces his map'ae, revealing his true identity as a secret inspector, and saving commoners from abusive officials. The wrongdoer is taken away in chains to face the king's justice.

The amhaeng osa story gives insight into the social controls set up by the Choson Dynasty to regulate the ideals and structure of a Confucian society. Above all, these social controls, as in the construction and deployment of amhaeng osa, provided a release for the frustration of the disenfranchised lower classes. In popularizing a story about a kisaeng's daughter (a low-born) whose faithfulness and goodness are rewarded with a yangban marriage and recognition by the king, the Choson Dynasty asserted models for emulation for its people. No matter how unrealistic - that a kisaeng's daughter would experience such upward social mobility - these fairytales relaxed the rigidity of the Choson Dynasty. They allowed the majority to enjoy, if only in the collective aspiration, the social privileges - such as even sitting for the civil service examination - to which only a tiny portion of the population was born entitled. They instilled a persistent sense of hope for justice among commoners, keeping their motivations for revolution at bay and promoting national stability for centuries.