

**EXCERPTS FROM THE PANGYE SUROK: YU HYŎNGWŎN ON
ABOLISHING SLAVERY**

Introduction

The institution of Korean slavery was passed on from Koryŏ to Chosŏn and showed little sign of weakening by the seventeenth century. Indeed, though the “80 or 90 percent” that this text suggests as the proportion of slaves among the total population was probably an exaggeration, slaves were numerous and economically central in Korea in a way they were not in other East Asian countries, and despite significant differences from, for example, American slavery, pre-modern Korea has been considered a “slave society” along with ancient Greece and Rome, the antebellum U.S. South, the Caribbean during European colonization, and a few other historic instances. The scholar Yu Hyŏngwŏn (1622-1673) argued for reform of several Chosŏn economic institutions, including slavery.

Selected Document Excerpt with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from the Pangye surok:
Yu Hyŏngwŏn on Abolishing Slavery

...

... But if the government of a true moral king is put into practice, and he rectifies the various institutions of government and washes away all partiality and vulgarity, then it is clear that the law governing slavery would definitely have to be abolished.

....

(Note: What I mean by abolishing it, indeed, does not mean a sudden and total abolition of presently existing slaves. Just order that slavery stop with the slaves that exit at the present time. ...)

[Translated by James B. Palais]

Question:

1. Is Yu completely opposed to slavery? What, exactly, does he wish to change? Do you think he compromises his principles, and why?

Longer Selection

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I have found that the name “slave” first appeared when criminals were confiscated and enrolled as slaves for a crime they had committed. There was never a law in ancient times where someone innocent of a crime was forced to become a slave. In addition, the ancients never extended the penalty of those who had been enslaved for their crimes to their descendants; how much less so if they were innocent of any crime. ...

According to the law in our country, no one ever asks whether a person is guilty of a crime or not. We only investigate his line of descent through previous generations and make people slaves for a hundred generations. That is why even ignorant and low people can control the life or death of others. Suppose that a man of worth and talent appears among the slaves. He too is fettered and made the slave of another person. How could this be reasonable?

I do not know when this law was first devised, but I believe that it must have gradually become more widespread in the early Koryö period. ... By the time of our Chosön dynasty, when our laws were formulated, they forced people into slavery, and once people were enslaved, there was no way for them to get out of slavery. It was for this reason that the size of the slave population has gradually increased to the point where 80 or 90 percent of the population are slaves while barely 10 or 20 percent are commoners.

(Note: Under the present law, the children of mixed slave/commoner marriages are supposed to adopt the status of their mother, but if the father is a slave and the mother a commoner, then the children adopt the father's status and become slaves. This means that once someone has become a slave, there is no way out for him or his descendants. In addition, because military service is even more onerous than slavery, many people marry their sons and daughters to private slaves, with the result that the commoner population is gradually getting smaller. Under this law, before a few hundred years pass the country definitely will have no commoners left at all. Even the 10 or 20 percent of the population that barely exist as commoners are only slaves who have run off to a distant place and gone into hiding or are the destitute offspring of *yangban* and their concubines.)

It would be all right if we could continue the matrilineal succession law and apply it equally and uniformly. (Note: This means that if a child is born to a commoner woman, then that child becomes a commoner.) But if the government of a true moral king is put into practice, and he rectifies the various institutions of government and washes away all partiality and vulgarity, then it is clear that the law governing slavery would definitely have to be abolished.

Nevertheless, in ancient times under feudalism, because the ruler granted fiefs to his vassals, the high officials had no concern about being left without support. In China at the present time there are also hired servants and workers, so that the families of the scholar-officials also have people working for them.

(Note: Even though there are slaves in China, all of them hire themselves out as laborers. The Chinese do not have a system that requires inspection of a person's lineage to see if he is a slave or not. Generally speaking, it is said that when they use someone to do work for them, they only hire slaves or use hired commoner laborers for a limited period of time.)

But in our country this slave law has been in existence for a very long time, and having slaves has become a long-established custom. All the scholar-officials rely on them, so much so that it would be difficult for their families if slavery were suddenly abolished. Any changes in this custom must come about gradually, with relations between the higher and lower orders of society gradually becoming warmer and the practice of hiring workers gradually increasing. Only after that takes place can you then abolish slavery.

(Note: What I mean by abolishing it, indeed, does not mean a sudden and total abolition of presently existing slaves. Just order that slavery stop with the slaves that exist at the present time. Those who are currently recognized as slaves will continue to be recognized as slaves until they die, but the law providing for the inheritance of slavery will be abolished. ... If we were to enact this law, then we ought to establish a time limit on the law and allow the current masters to make a report to the magistrate of the slaves born to them before the enactment of this law, and the magistrate will make a file of their names and keep it in his office. After this time, no further petitions to recognize existing slaves will be allowed.) ...

(Note: Between heaven and earth there are naturally both noble and base people. The nobles employ others, and the base are employed by others. This is both an unchanging principle and an unchanging situation. After the slave law is abolished, the situation of the families of the high officials will be no different from today. What will change is that once the system of using hired labor is adopted, then the worthy and the ignorant and the noble and the base will each get his proper share of things, and people will be encouraged to be virtuous and righteous. But under the system of hereditary slave service, whether one is rich or poor has nothing to do with whether one is noble or base, and being noble or base has nothing to do with whether one is worthy or ignorant, so that people in that situation are encouraged to fight and steal things. And this is what makes the two systems different. ...)

At the present time our country regards slaves as chattel, but they are human beings the same as we are. Under what principle can you treat a human being like chattel? In ancient times when someone asked how wealthy a country was, the reply was always in the number of horses that country had. What this means is that even though the Son of Heaven and the feudal lords had the responsibility for managing people, they never said that people were their private property.

But in our country at the present time the custom is that when you ask a man how wealthy he is, he always answers by telling you how many slaves and how much land he owns. Therefore, you can also see how mistaken and sick our laws and customs are.

It is basically not hard to understand that the slave law in our country is wrong in principle, but people in general are all blinded by their immediate private interests, and all of them think that it is too hard to abolish the slave law. The ruler is the person who governs the people in the name of Heaven. The country is our country. The people are our people. How could things have changed so much over time that a special group of our own people were made into slaves and made to suffer harm? That harm has been extended to neighbors and relatives, and the poison flows among the masses of the common people until it causes disease to the country. You do not have to wait for me to tell you this before you realize what is right and wrong. That is why I want to abolish that law, something that will not be that hard to do.

[Translated by James B. Palais]

Questions:

1. Is Yu completely opposed to slavery? What, exactly, does he wish to change? Do you think he compromises his principles, and why?
2. What is the philosophical background to Yu's opposition? How does this compare with the reasons that slavery has been opposed (partially or entirely) in other historical contexts?
3. Why does Yu suggest that slavery has grown so prevalent? What social dynamics are at work?
4. Do you think Yu is right that changing the law governing slavery "will not be that hard to do"? What does his text suggest?