

# Final Essay – ATS3947

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**Question:** To what extent did social stratification in mid-to-late Choson Korea provide political stability while simultaneously producing social stagnation and inequality?

## Essay

### **Introduction: Modern hook and historical question**

When Parasite won the Academy Award for best picture, audiences everywhere recognised its brutal portrait of inequality in contemporary Seoul. The flooded semi basement, the glass walled hilltop house, the invisible labour that oils elite comfort, all of it felt modern yet strangely familiar. That familiarity is not accidental. The moral logic that sorts winners from losers in the film echoes a far older grammar of status drawn from the Choson social order. Scholars such as Martina Deuchler have shown that lineage and kinship structures long predated Neo Confucianism in Korea, and that Neo Confucian statecraft later deepened those lineage based hierarchies. James Palais, writing on Korean uniqueness, likewise argues that this hierarchy supplied coherence and stability, even as it narrowed the space for reform.

This essay investigates the roots of that hierarchy in the mid to late Choson period and asks a simple question with complex implications. Did social stratification help Korea to function better, or did it push society toward stagnation. The approach is historical and text based. I draw on the Week three materials and core scholarship to examine the institutional power of the yangban, the constrained roles of chungin, peasants, nobi, and the gendered position of kisaeng, alongside the examination system that claimed merit while reproducing birth privilege. I set clear limits by staying within Choson rather than roaming into later centuries, using modern references only as a frame for relevance. My thesis is that the status system delivered political order and administrative continuity, but it did so by entrenching inequality, suppressing mobility, and misallocating talent. By the nineteenth century those costs outweighed the benefits, leaving a society that was stable yet brittle, orderly yet unable to adapt.

## How hierarchy was made “normal”

If the yangban supplied the ideal of order, everyday life for nonelite Koreans revealed how costly that order could be. Choson was founded in the late fourteenth century as a self consciously Neo Confucian state with its capital at Hanyang. The court set out to reorder society around family ritual, agrarian stability, and textual learning. The Great Code of Administration did more than list crimes and penalties. It mapped a graded society into law. At the top stood the yangban, below them the chungin or middle people, then the large body of commoners known as yangin or sangmin, and at the bottom a cluster of despised statuses labelled chonmin that included baekjeong, entertainers, and hereditary servants. The code linked each rank to specific rights and obligations. Eligibility for the highest civil examinations was restricted to those of good birth. Sumptuary rules regulated dress, housing materials, and the conduct of weddings and funerals. Testimony and punishment were not truly equal before the law. A blow struck upward across status lines carried a heavier penalty than one struck downward. Marriage across ranks was discouraged and often blocked by custom, which ensured that status reproduced itself through family strategy.

## Chungin, peasants, and nobi

Within this frame, the chungin worked as the technical class that kept bureaucracy and ritual life moving. Interpreters managed diplomacy, clerks handled records, physicians and astronomers served the court. They could sit for certain professional examinations and enjoyed modest privileges, yet they were largely barred from the great civil ladder that led to high office. Their careful endogamy and guarded guild like culture show how a partially privileged group survived inside a system that did not intend to let them rise far. Below them, the yangin bore the fiscal core of the realm. They paid the taxes in grain and cloth, provided labor on roads and fortifications, and absorbed the shocks of weather and price. Village compacts and elders mediated between state and field, but the mediation often tilted toward local notables who were kin to district officials.

The most revealing moral paradox concerned the nobi. In law and custom they were both persons and property. Many were hereditary through the mother and could be bought, sold, or transferred along with land. Some served inside households as domestic attendants, others worked fields or were placed on out service arrangements that allowed them small plots or wages. A few could purchase freedom, and the state occasionally manumitted its own servants, but the default assumed lifelong service that passed to children. Owners were urged to treat nobi humanely and to avoid lethal cruelty, yet the daily reality of command, discipline, and sale sat alongside Confucian claims about benevolence. In disputes a nobi could sometimes petition officials, but

the weight of testimony and the severity of corporal punishment reflected the asymmetry of status. The system's virtue language prized harmony, filial duty, and humane rule, while the status code normalised the possession of human beings as a means to secure lineage and estate.

### **Kisaeng and yangban women**

Gender cut through these ranks and fixed many boundaries. Yangban women might learn letters and poetry, and some families cultivated refined accomplishment, yet the public world of office, law, and ritual leadership remained closed. Patrilineal genealogies recorded agnatic lines and reduced women to nodes through which male descent continued. The celebrated cult of the chaste widow shows how ethics and control overlapped. Fidelity won moral honors from the state, while remarriage could stain a family's prospects and restrict the chances of sons. At the other end of respectability stood the kisaeng. They were registered entertainers trained in government schools known as kyobang and attached to local magistracies or the court. Their curriculum covered music, dance, poetry, conversation, and etiquette for official banquets. They performed for embassies, entertained visiting officials, and contributed substantially to the cultural life of towns. A few gained literary fame and maintained relationships with scholar officials that left traces in poetry and painting. Yet the law placed them within the despised ranks. They were subject to mobility limits, could not freely marry out without redemption of their registration, and lived under strict regulation of dress and movement. Their artistry was publicly valued and privately constrained, a pattern that mirrors the broader logic of separate but unequal coexistence in Choson.

Taken together, these strata demonstrate how Choson integrated very different populations into one moral polity while reserving full dignity and mobility for a narrow slice of society. The code promised harmony and order. It delivered stability for the households that sat nearest the temples of learning and the chambers of office, while commoners, servants, and performers lived within carefully drawn boundaries that affirmed their usefulness yet denied them equal claim to voice or advancement.

### **Stagnation, corruption, and reform resistance**

The same hierarchy that promised order gradually produced sclerosis. By privileging ritual mastery and the composition of set pieces for the examinations, the state rewarded fluency in the classical canon over practical competence in finance, logistics, or technology. Offices clustered within lineages, not because no one else could serve,

but because only families with land, tutors, and leisure could reliably produce examination ready sons. Once in office, many officials defended status prerogatives rather than public interest. Local notables mediated taxation and labor obligations in ways that protected their kin and shifted burdens downward. Overtime, the gap between the ideal of benevolent rule and the reality of extraction widened. Factional habits embedded within elite culture magnified the problem, since winning or losing court favor often mattered more than solving concrete provincial grievances.

### **19th century weakness and the scholarly debate**

This rigidity had predictable consequences. Reform proposals that touched status were resisted because they threatened the symbolic economy of honour. Efforts to regulate slavery, to open more channels for technical talent, or to tax the privileged met procedural delays or moralising rebuttals about preserving harmony. By the nineteenth century the fiscal base of the court was thin, the countryside saw recurrent distress, and the capacity to respond flexibly to new diplomatic and economic pressures was weak. Rural unrest grew in places where peasants felt squeezed by levies and brokerage fees. When storms, blights, or price shocks struck, households already close to subsistence had little cushion. In such a setting the examination ladder no longer looked like a path for widely distributed talent but a narrow staircase reserved for the sons of houses that could already afford to climb.

The secondary literature helps to clarify why this outcome made sense inside the moral logic of Choson. Martina Deuchler (2015) emphasises that kinship and lineage were not superficial ornaments erected by the state for convenience. They were deep structures that knit villages to the center and gave ordinary people a meaningful map of obligation and respect. In that sense, the system did provide stability and a language for adjudicating disputes. James Palais (1996), however, stresses the cost side of that bargain. The very mechanisms that created coherence also narrowed political imagination and made it difficult to conceive of civic equality before the law. What looked like moral order in calm times turned into institutional brittleness when circumstances changed. The dynasty entered the nineteenth century with impressive ritual clarity and a long memory of continuity, yet with a shallow bench of administrative innovation and a social base frayed by inequality. Stability had been achieved, but at the price of a society that found reform hard to initiate and harder to sustain.

### **Conclusion**

Parasite engaged audiences because it staged a truth that Korean history already knew well. A society can be orderly and unequal at the same time. The Choson status system achieved remarkable political continuity by rooting authority in family ethics, ritual propriety, and a selective version of merit. Yet the same system narrowed the field of talent, fixed people in place, and treated birth as a stronger claim than ability. The result was an administration rich in classical fluency and ritual clarity but thin in adaptive capacity. By the nineteenth century, the costs of rigidity and accumulated inequality outweighed the benefits of stability.

This essay has argued that Choson stratification delivered order while constraining progress. The yangban's moral authority and the exam ladder lent legitimacy to rule, but everyday life for chungin, peasants, nobi, and women showed how that legitimacy was purchased. It meant limited mobility, a paradoxical acceptance of servitude within a virtue ethic, and a social fabric that could not easily absorb change. Scholars diverge on emphasis. Deuchler (2015) highlights the stabilising force of lineage as a deep cultural structure. Palais presses the point that those very structures restricted reform. Taken together, these insights explain why the system endured and why it struggled when the world pressed in.

The closing reflection returns to the filmic image of stairs and basements. Class lines drawn by ancestry do not disappear simply because laws change. Breaking lineage based thinking remains essential to any project of equality. The lesson from Choson is not only how hierarchy works, but how hard it is to unlearn.

## Reference List

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