

**THE CIVIL EXAMINATION PROCESS AS SOCIAL LEAVEN:
The Case of the Northern Provinces in the Yi Dynasty**

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One of the most important institutions of the Yi Dynasty was its examination system. An integral part of Korea's political fabric from 1392 until abolished in 1894, its basic function was as the principal means of recruitment to the dynasty's political elite. But it served other functions as well, for it soon became a primary determinant of social status and also provided a major means whereby economic wealth might be accumulated. In a society that recognized government service as the chief glory to which man might properly aspire, the successful examination candidate during the Yi occupied a truly unique position.

Although there were three major categories of state-service examination, the civil examination degrees were far more highly prized than those awarded to military men or to specialists in statutes, medicine, languages and the like. Accordingly, we may safely say that there was a substantial degree of coincidence between those who took the civil degrees and those who were regarded as the cream of Yi Dynasty society. This privileged class, it is being increasingly noted, was neither so exclusive in its make-up nor so self-perpetuating in its composition as had been earlier believed. Yi Dynasty society, after all, was characterized by marked diversity, and the Yi governmental system offered opportunities to a large proportion of its citizens to lead satisfying lives. Otherwise there must have been serious social unrest and the dynasty, one of the longest and most stable administrative spans in human history, could not have survived so tranquilly for so long.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how one segment of Yi society, representing, more than twenty-five percent of the country's total population, was given an opportunity to satisfy its minimal social-political

aspirations through access to the civil examination process. I refer to those Koreans of the Yi Dynasty who lived in the three northern provinces of Hwanghae, P'yŏngan, and Hamgyŏng. Although it is popular wisdom that inhabitants of the northern half of the country were discriminated against in the examination process – and thus that there were no real *yangban* in the north, this paper will argue a contrary view. Admittedly there was substantial discrimination in giving northerners access to higher political office, but it can be demonstrated that by the end of the dynasty they had become proportionately more successful in passing the civil examinations than were their southern compatriots.

It has become possible only recently to attempt to analyze the local place of residence of successful candidates for the higher civil service examination (*munkwa*) degree in the Yi Dynasty. Owing to the tireless and innovative research of Professor Song June-ho of Chŏnbuk National University, we now know the county or city of residence of all but a few of the nearly 9,000 successful candidates from 1650 until the traditional examination system was abolished in 1894. Specifically, residence is available for over 96% of candidates between 1650 and 1673 and for all but four or five candidates among the more than 8,200 who received degrees from 1675, the first year of King Sukchong, until 1894.

Before 1650, unfortunately, the residence data remains incomplete and irregularly available, the more so the further back in time one goes. Ultimately much of the data now missing can be found or surmised, but some of it – particularly the for less than one out of ten among 2,000 passers from the Yi Dynasty's first examination in 1393 to 1510 can be routinely determined. From 1510 the availability of residence data rises sharply, to over half, at which level it generally remains until after the Japanese invasions of 1592-1598. (Hideyoshi's aggression, of course, is an important reason why many records are missing for the first two hundred years of the Yi Dynasty.)

From about 1600 to 1650, then the percentage of known residences is about 75%. The question of civil examination candidates from the three northern provinces must be set in this framework of data availability.

Among 1,913 successful higher civil service examination candidates from 1392-1499, the first century or so of the Yi Dynasty, only 7 are known to have resided in the north. Further investigation undoubtedly will reveal more, but almost certainly the number will remain small, less than 5% of the

total I should think. Between 1500-1599 only 36 among nearly 2,400 are indicated as northern residents, still only 3 or 4% of those whose residences are known. For the 17th century the number is 185 (7.5%), but in the 18th century almost 14% of successful candidates resided in the northern provinces and in the 19th century 15.40%. During Kojong's reign, in the last thirty years during which the examinations were held, the percentage is 22.8%, close to one of every four successful candidates.

Before proceeding to an analysis of this phenomenon of steady, even dramatic increase in the number of northern civil examination candidates, it would be well examine the growth of the population in general in that part of Korea during the five hundred years of the Yi Dynasty. Much of the northern border region, the land along the Yalu and Tumen rivers, had scarcely come under Korean control by 1392, and strong efforts were made in the first decades of the new dynasty to promote the settlement of these more remote areas. But surviving population records are too meager for indicating increases that would have occurred as a result of border settlement policies. Records in 1397 and 1423 both indicate that fully a third of the Korean people lived in the north, and yet two 17th century censuses (1640 and 1648) show only about 20%. The 1717 census has the figure back up to nearly 30% and thereafter, in three other 18th century censuses, it is a steady one-third. Population growth patterns in the 19th century, however, favored the southern provinces, and at dynasty's end it appears that the correct proportion of Koreans living in the three northern provinces was about one in four, 25%.

It is apparent, then, that by the end of the Yi Dynasty the percentage of northerners who were successful in the civil examinations came to essentially equal their proportion of the total population. And when allowance is made for the fact that residents of the capital city, Seoul, and its immediate environs accounted for perhaps half of the total number of successful candidates, it may be suggested that northern residents did better than any other part of the country. In that perspective, the total of 1,281 northern residents among 7,410 total passers after the year 1700 becomes not one in six but fully one in three, and the 20% figure for the 19th century is tantamount to two in five non-Seoul candidates. More significantly, the ongoing northern success in the civil examinations was a rising tide: P'yŏngan province's gain, for example, meant a corresponding loss in the southern provinces. The early Yi Dynasty's apparently discriminatory

preference for southern candidates had disappeared and, in a startling reversal, the northern candidates came to out-perform their southern countrymen.

What were the forces that produced this phenomenon and what is its meaning for the social and political history of the Yi Dynasty? And what is the legacy that this phenomenon has left for Korea today? Research in its present stage can only suggest the bare outlines of answers to these questions and perhaps point the way for future inquiry. But if this phenomenon is to be understood its anatomy must be further laid bare.

A closer look at the distribution of successful candidates among and within the northern provinces is instructive. Among the three provinces, first of all, Hwanghae (surprisingly, it seemed to me) had the worst passers-to-population ratio: it produced 11.5% of the north's 5 successful candidates from 22.2% of the population. (This and other population percentages given below are based on the 1789 census.) Hamgyŏng province had a somewhat better record, showing 19.3% of the passers with 27.2% of the population. P'yŏngan province, on the other hand, with just over half the north's population, boasted just under 70% of those who earned degrees.

Even more noticeable are the disproportionately heavy concentrations of candidates found within each of the three northern provinces. In Hwanghae, Haeju and P'yŏngsan supplied 43% of the passers although their populations comprised under 18% of the provincial total. In Hamgyŏng province Hamhŭng and Anbyŏn contributed nearly half of the successful candidates (47.6%), while their combined population was only 14.7% of the provincial total. In P'yŏngan province the aspect of concentration was in one sense less marked but in another way it was dramatically more pronounced. The two leading producers of successful candidates were Chŏngju and P'yŏngyang, with 38.4% of the province's total of 1,044, whereas their populations were only 12.2% of the province's total. It was not the city of P'yŏngyang however, but the town of Chŏngju just north of the Ch'ŏngch'ŏn river in North P'yŏngan province that supplied by far the largest number of successful civil examination candidates in all of the northern half of Korea. An incredible 282 of these envied men resided in Chŏngju, constituting 27% of the P'yŏngan total and 18.7% of the overall northern total. This was achieved, moreover, with less than 4% of the P'yŏngan population and, less than 2% of the total northern population. The second-place city of P'yŏngyang can claim credit for only 119 passers, hardly more than

Hamhŭng's 110. In rather sharp contrast, those two major northern cities held 7% of the northern population while supplying 15.2% of the overall northern total of successful candidates.

In a general sense one expects the concentrations of successful candidates in the north to be where they are actually found. In Hamgyŏng province they were concentrated in the major coastal cities and towns, while those in P'yŏngan are found most heavily in, the crescent-shaped area ringin⁵ the west Korea Bay and centered on the mouth of the Ch'ŏngch'ŏn river. In these areas a fruitful agriculture, a bountiful ocean and thriving commerce could support larger populations and the leisure class that gave leadership to northern Korean society. At the same time, however, our statistical profile has revealed striking anomalies in the distribution of successful examination candidates that cannot be accounted for by economic geography. It is clear that other forces also were at work.

Certainly an important part of the explanation for the unbalanced geographical patterns of civil examination success may be found in the, familiar fact of the predominance of a relatively few clans or lineages in the statistics of the degree holders. In summary, 32 clans produced 10 or more passers each, making up 865 out of the north's known total of 1,509, 57.3%. Another 27 clans each earned 6 to 9 degrees, totaling 194 or another 12.8%. At the other end of the scale, 37 clans produced just two northern passers each, while a rather startling 145 clans are credited with only a single successful candidate residing, in the north. In other words, among the 300-plus clan designations that identify northern candidates in the examination rosters, fully 60% apply to one or two candidates only. These clans provided 14.5% of the degree holders, while the 19% that were the most successful clans provided over 70%.

Once again the county-town of Chŏngju offers the best illustration of the imbalance just described. Of Chŏngju's 282 successful candidates 51 are from the single clan of the Yŏnan Kim, while the Paekch'ŏn Cho supplied 29, the Chŏnju Yi 27, the Suwon Paek²⁵, the Namyang Hong 20 and the Haeju No 18. Six clans, then, contributed 170 or 60% of the total, while 45 other clans are represented by one or more passers. To a lesser degree the other northern cities and counties that have the largest numbers of degree holders also have large representations by one or more clans. Hamhŭng had 30 Cho'ŏngju Han, 17 Chŏnju Chu, and 11 Changhŭng Wi; Kasan had 9 P'ap'yŏng Yun and 8 Sunch'ŏn Kim; Kaech'on had 13 Kwangju Yi and Anju

had 25 Sunhŭng An. Ten of Ch'ölsan's 20 successful candidates were Hadong Chong, 8 of Sukch'ön's 36 were Yönan, Ch 'a, 6 of Unsan's 15 were Suan Yi, 5 of Hoeryöng's 11 were Haeju Oh.,

It will have been noted that most of the clans mentioned above for illustrative purposes are those with distinguished records of producing degree holders and government officials also from main lineages residing in the southern provinces. P'ap'yöng Yun, Namyang Hong, and Ch'öngju Han are prime examples. There are a number of exceptions, however, and some of these are of particular interest. All 20 Chonju Kim degree holders resided in the north, mostly in P'yöngan but a number also in Hamgyöng. All 18 Haeju No lived in the north and, indeed, all of them in Chöngju. 13 of 16 Tanyang Yi were northern residents, 23 of 25 Suan Yi, 11 of 12 Changhōng Wi, 21 of 23 Chonju Chu.

One wonders, of course, how it came about that descendants of men whose original clan domiciles were in such Chölla towns as Chonju and Changhŭng, or in Tanyang in Ch'ungch'öng province, or in Kyöngsang province, came to reside and flourish in the north. There can be no single answer to a phenomenon that preliminary research shows to be a complex problem. A number of distinct patterns, however, are discernible.

In the case of those clans with significant numbers of degree holders from both southern and northern lineages, it is clear that the forbears of the northerners were in residence there from a very early date, generally before the beginning of the Yi Dynasty. Recently a genealogy of the northern Yönan Kim lines was published in Seoul, and it identified nearly all of the 70 Yönan Yim northern residents as the descendants of a pre-Yi Magistrate of Kaesong who remained in the north. The Paekch'ön Cno and P'yöngsan Sin are other examples of clans that have their seats in Hwanghae province and established important lineage groups in the north as well as in the south. In contrast the Munhwa Yu, although it had substantial clan populations in the north, could produce only two very late dynasty degree holders.

A second pattern to be noted is that of an originally southern clan that established a major branch in the north. The Chonju Kim, Chonju Chu and Tanyang Yi already have been mentioned; in terms of political stature the southern branches of these clans were of little or no importance. On the other hand, the Sunhŭng An, Ch'öngju Han, Hadong Chong, Namyang Hong, and Suwon Paek are examples of originally southern clans that remained

much more powerfully established in the south and yet had major northern lineages.

The most interesting pattern, if one may use so orderly a term to describe so amorphous a situation, concerns that large number of clan designations that apply to one or two, or a small handful, of successful northern candidates. The first thing to note about this group is that, with relatively few exceptions, the clan seat is located in the south, usually Kyōngsang or Chōlla province. And the first question to ask about this phenomenon is whether it is genuine: that is, does the clan, seat claimed really represent earlier origins in and migration from southern domicile location? The conclusion is inescapable, I think, that the phenomenon is genuine, but this conviction is one that can only be argued, not proven.

I would suggest first of all that there could have been no reason to disguise the fact of northern origins, if indeed an examination candidate belonged to a lineage descent group that could not remember or trace its origins to a southern area. Although in a distinct minority, there were a number of successful candidates who admitted to clan locations in one of the three northern provinces. Moreover, there never was any discrimination against such important southern lineages with clan seat in the north as the P'yōngyang Cho and the Hamjong O. (It is a curious fact, in passing, that not a single P'yōngyang Cho among 26 successful candidates and only one of 24 Hamjong O resided in the north.) Secondly, one does not find the reverse phenomenon, the isolated degree candidate residing in the south who claims a northern clan seat. And yet, in addition to the two P'yōngan clans just mentioned, many of the country's most prominent lineages originated in Hwanghae province. Finally, in many instances where a northern passer appears to be the only member of his clan, or one of just two or three, to achieve prominence, evidence can be found to indicate that his clan did have a wider base and recognition. This evidence may appear in the rosters of the lower civil service (*sama*) examinations or in those of military examinations, or in local gazetteers. In some cases the clan population appears to be confined to the north, but often southern lineages of some prominence are revealed to have existed as well.

Accordingly, if the claim to a clan of southern origin may be regarded as genuine, then it must be concluded that migration from south to north took place at some earlier time. Just how early this might have been is extremely difficult to determine, and most likely there were several periods

when such movement was pronounced. One is tempted to see evidence of an early and large-scale Chōlla to Hamgyōng migration in the fact of the emergence from Hamgyōng of the Yi royal family, the Chonju Yi, and the presence in the same area of a number of other Chōlla clans, some of which have been referred to about. It is equally inviting to attempt to trace migration routes from eastern parts of Kyōngsang and Kangwōn provinces along the coast northward into Hamgyōng. Or to imagine similar movements through the Choryōng Pass from Nakteng River areas along the edge of Korea' s. mountain spine and eventually into P'yōngan province.

But it seems most likely to me that these northern examination candidates may be traced to the organized transfers of 'people from the southern three provinces into the northern areas that took place in the 15th century. This would help account for the slow development of northern examination success in the first two centuries of the dynasty. At the same time, the arrival of these people in the north would not have been so early as to have made them forget their places of origin.

What I am suggesting, then, is that many of the southern clan designations that identify northern degree holders must represent the localities in the south where a candidate's forbears lived before migrating to the north in fairly recent times, for the most part shortly after the founding of the Yi Dynasty. This in turn suggests that in few cases would these settlers have been members of southern lineage groups with acknowledged privileged status. Instead, they must have been ordinary people, of ordinary social status – commoners in other words.

In recent years we have been getting' accustomed to the notion that access even to' the higher civil service examination in the Yi Dynasty was not, after all, restricted to a single class, the so-called *yangban*. There were no such legal stipulations and in actual practice a significant number of cases have been identified where men of definitely inferior social status were able to take and pass these examinations. Surely the record of examination success by northerners that has been set forth here is further proof of the vital degree of openness that the examination system continued to display. As the centuries of the new dynasty passed, many ambitious lineage groups in the north were striving to acquire the education and emulate the life-style of the acknowledged elite of traditional Korean society, the southern *yangban*. Many of them succeeded in establishing themselves as genuine members of that elite, as northern *yangban* with their status anchored to a

degree of examination success that may well have been the envy of their southern compatriots.

The significance of this conclusion has many facets. To begin with, it means that the northern component must be taken into account in formulating hypotheses concerning the formation and stratification of Yi social classes. Secondly, a fresh look must be taken at the discrimination that did exist, in the pattern of office-holding, so that we may better understand the dynamics of Yi politics. Thirdly, the importance of this phenomenon for determining the course Korea took in the period of transition from traditional to modern society must not be overlooked. In the light of the role of Chǒngju residents in late traditional Korea, the fact that the famed Osan Chunghakkyo was established there takes on new meaning. We are all aware of the great contributions being made to contemporary society in the Republic of Korea by those born in the north. Surely many of these must be descended from the northerners who won the higher civil examination degrees in the later years of the Yi Dynasty. It is even imaginable that the Premier of North Korea, who is identified as a Chǒngju Kim in the latest hagiography, was thrust up by the forces I have been describing here.

Finally I would argue the view that the longevity of the Yi Dynasty is substantially owed to its ability to ensure physical and psychological contentment in the lives of all major components of its population, not merely to a favored few.

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