

Local Elites, Descent, and Status Consciousness
in Nineteenth-Century Korea:
Some Observations on the County Notable Listings
in the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam*

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1. Introduction

In the past several years while constructing a database of Chosŏn military examination (*mukwa*) graduates, I have become increasingly drawn to local history. As well known, historians have debated for some time on the nature of transition the local society underwent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Korea. Some scholars paint the picture of a wholesale destruction of the old local *yangban*-dominated social order amidst the local conflict known as *hyangjŏn*;¹⁾ others stress the continuity and even increased stability of the old order.²⁾

1) Some of the representative works presenting this interpretation are: Kim In-gŏl, "Chosŏn hugi hyangch'on sahoe kujo ūi pyŏndong," in Pyŏn T'ae-sŏp Paksa hwagap kinyŏm sahak nonch'ong kanhaeng wiwŏnhoe, ed. *Pyŏn T'ae-sŏp Paksa hwagap kinyŏm sahak nonch'ong* (Seoul: Samyŏngsa, 1985), pp.767-92; Pyŏng-uk An, "The Growth of Popular Consciousness and Popular Movement in the 19th Century: Focus on the Hyanghoe and Millan", *Korea Journal* 28 (April 1988), pp.4-19; and Kim Hyŏn-yŏng, "Chosŏn hugi Namwŏn chibang sajok ūi hyangch'on chibae e kwanhan yŏn'gu"(Ph.D. diss., Seŏul taehakkyo, 1993), pp.109-45.

Despite this disagreement, all sides have generally recognized that local *yangban* registers so commonly compiled and maintained in mid-Chosŏn Korea, the *hyangan*, came to be discontinued in most counties from the eighteenth century onward, when the previously excluded families somehow began to flood the pages of this document. Also generally acknowledged among scholars is that most older local *yangban* lineages were no longer producing examination degree holders and central officials after mid-Chosŏn. In sum, then, social historians have disagreed on how to interpret these poignant changes in late Chosŏn.

While working with various source materials on the military examination, I have become convinced that the military examination passers as a whole can tell us much about the late Chosŏn social history. During the period of its existence from 1402 to 1894, somewhere between 150,000 and 170,000 men earned a military examination degree a figure more than ten times that of the civil examination (*munkwa*) passers from the same era. Unlike the civil examination which came to be dominated by a smaller number of descent groups³⁾ in late Chosŏn, the social base for the military

2) For example, see: Fujiya Kawashima, "Study of the Hyangan: Kin Group and Aristocratic Localism in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Korean Countryside", *Journal of Korean Studies* 5 (1984), pp.20-24; Song Chun-ho, "Sinbŏnje rul t'onghaesŏ pon Chosŏn hugi sahoe ūi sŏngkyŏk ūi ilmyŏn," *Yŏksa hakpo* 133 (March 1992), pp.1-62; Chŏng Chin-yŏng, "Chosŏn hugi tongsŏng ch'ollak ūi hyŏngsŏng kwa paltal", *Yŏksa pip'yong* 28 (Spring 1995), pp.335-43; and Paek Sŏng-jong, *Han'guk sahoesa yŏn'gu: 15-19 segi Chŏlla-do T'aein-hyŏn Kohyŏllae-myŏn ūl chungsim ūro* (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1996), pp.195-205.

3) I use the term, descent group, to refer to a group of kinsmen sharing a common surname (sŏng) and an ancestral seat (pon'gwan), both of which, paired together, are transmitted patrilineally. In the late Chosŏn period, a descent group defined as such could range from a single lineage comprising the members sharing same social status, ancestry, residence locale, political factional affiliation, and intellectual lineage at one extreme, to, at the other extreme, a

examination candidates broadened with passage of time.⁴⁾

Although Korea was free from any foreign military threat from about 1650 to 1850, this was the period when the state was most intent on awarding a large number of military examination degrees, while the civil examination quota were maintained at a level appropriate for recruiting just enough men for the central officialdom's civil branch which offered less than 2,000 positions. As there was an oversupply of military examination degree holders when the military branch of central officialdom had under 5,000 slots available, the military examination's efficacy as a qualifying test for an aspiring military official really depended on the social status of the passer: whereas a young graduate from an elite military line of Seoul tended to receive, if not already have received before the examination, a royal messenger (*sŏnjŏn'gwan*) post from which his career could take him to a Five Military Divisions (Ogunyŏng) commander (*taejang, yŏngjang*) appointment some day, a provincial *yangban* or commoner often had to be content with the degree itself and being referred to by his villagers as *sŏndal*, which was an

group of segments consisting of members of varying shades of social status, unverifiable genealogical relationship among the segments, and residence locales scattered all over the country.

- 4) Studies on the late Chosŏn military examination include: Yi Hong-nyŏl, "Mankwa sŏlhaeng ũi chŏngch'aeksajok ch'ui: Chosŏnchunggi rul chungsim ũro", *Sahak yŏn'gu* 18 (1964): pp.207-46; Chŏng Hae-un, "Chosŏn hugi mukwa ipkyŏkcha ũi sinbun kwa sahoejŏk chiwi: Sukchong-Chŏngjo nyŏn'gan ũi 'mukwa pangmok' punsok ũl chungsim ũro", *Ch'ŏnggye sahak* 11 (1994): pp.187-243; Yi Hong-du, "Mukwa rŭl t'onghae pon Chosŏn hugi ch'ŏnin ũi sinbun pyŏndong", *Minjok munhwa* 19 (1996): pp.269-307; Chong Hae-un, "Pyŏngja Horan ki kun'gong myonch'onin ũi mukwa kupche wa sinbun pyŏnhwa: Chŏngch'uk chŏngsi mukwa pangmok' (1637 nyŏn) ũl chungsim uro", *Chosŏnsidae sahakpo* 9 (June 1999): pp.71-104; and eadem, "Chosŏn hugi mukwa kŭpcheja yŏn'gu" (Ph.D. diss., Han'guk chŏngsin munhwa yŏn'guwon, 2002).

honorary form of address for a military examination degree holder.

Accordingly, a study of military examination passers can help us better understand the nature of political participation and social mobility in late Chosŏn Korea. As a basic foundation for such inquiry, I have put together a military examination graduate database which currently comprises 32,327 records. Because all the surviving extant military examination rosters (*pangmok*) account for just some 23,000 passers out of the dynasty total between 150,000 and 170,000, I have been looking at other sources, including the *sillok* (the veritable records, that is the official history of the Chosŏndynasty), *mubo* (military genealogies recording the direct patrilineal ancestors of each military examination passer for eight generations, as well as his maternal grandfather and father-in-law), and local town gazetteers (*ŭpchi*) for more graduates.⁵⁾ Among them, local gazetteers are rich with information on thousands of additional military examination passers in particular and the local notables in general. From this research background so described, I prepared this paper to discuss some of my observations on the county local notable listings in a specific primary source, the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* (An all-around geographical survey of Korea).

5) This is an ongoing project. I expect that once I complete entering more data from additional local town gazetteers and the Mansŏng taedongbo which is a very reliable multi-descent group genealogy compiled in the early twentieth century to record the elite yangban families of traditional Korea, the total number of military examination graduates in the database will be more than 40,000. This figure would represent about a fourth of all Chosŏn military examination passers.

2. Contents of the Source

The compilation of *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* was lead by Yi Pyŏng-yŏn (1894-1977), who was a Confucian scholar hailing from a Yonan Yi lineage based in Kongju, Ch'ungchŏng Province. The project is said to have involved over 100 persons from 1910 into the 1920's in ultimately covering 129 out of over 220 counties in Korea, which at the time was under the Japanese colonial rule. The work was first published in 1929 and reprinted in subsequent years up to 1958.⁶⁾ It is not clear why certain locales are covered in the *Chosŏn hwanyŏn sŭngnam* and other are not. All provinces of colonial Korea are represented except Cheju, although in the case of Kyŏnggi the only county included is Yangju located to the north and northeast from Seoul.⁷⁾ Because the capital, Seoul, is not covered at all and both Ch'ungch'ŏng provinces are underrepresented, the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* fails to account for a large segment of the late Chosŏn officialdom, of which roughly half of its members resided in western central Korea in the nineteenth century.⁸⁾

In describing a locale, the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* more or less

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- 6) For my own research, I used the reprinted 16-volume edition published in 1998 by the Han'guk Inmun Kwahagwŏn, after Yi Pyŏng-yŏn's descendant had made available to the National History Compilation Committee (Kuksa P'yŏnch'an Wiwŏnhoe) the manuscripts formerly not included in the original set.
- 7) During the question and answer session following my presentation of an earlier version of this paper at the conference, Professor Song Chun-ho (June-ho Song) pointed out that the original compiler of the work had solicited submissions from various counties. If true, then this also helps to explain such an uneven coverage of the country, as some locales responded and some did not.
- 8) Kenneth C. Quinones, "The Prerequisites for Power in Late Yi Korea: 1864-1894"(Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1975), pp.144-47. He fittingly dubs this region the "yangban crescent."

follows the traditional late Chosŏn gazetteer. For each county, up to forty-nine separate sections are devoted to presenting a brief history of its administrative borders and jurisdiction, significant topographical features, famous landmarks, and local notables of both genders and various social status groups, although *yangban* males form the vast majority.

The local notable sections in particular are characterized by the compiler's making distinctions among numerous categories of Confucian virtue, scholarly reputation, and political career. The result is a large number of separate sections for, among others, scholars (*hakhaeng*), Confucian scholars (*yuhak*), Confucian sages (*yuhyŏn*), and more recluse-type rural scholars (*yuil*). Likewise, those holding a central office are divided into famed officials (*myŏnghwan*), meritorious individuals formally enlisted as merit subjects (*hunsin*), and those of merit not so enlisted (*kongsin*). These sections are followed by the listings of those embodying cardinal Confucian virtues, and then by the listings of examination passers, "shadow privilege" protection appointees (*ŭmsa*), posthumous rank or office (*chŭngjik*) recipients, and elderly recipients of ranks and offices (*sujik*, *noinjik*).

3. Local Notable Listings

The *Chosŏn hwanyŏn sŭngnam* records roughly ten percent of all Chosŏn civil examination passers and less than one percent of the military examination graduates. This disparity may reflect at least two things: one, the Confucian *sungmun-kyŏngmu* culture of

elevating *mun* (literary virtue) over *mu* (martial virtue);⁹⁾ and two, the much greater social diversity of the military examination passers and hence the greater selectivity that was required on the part of the work's compiler in deciding whom to include and whom not to include. Accordingly, the compilation staff surely must have favored degree holders from more prominent local elite families.¹⁰⁾

Given such presumed underlying tendencies on the part of the work's compilation staff, it is to be expected that the military examination passer section should come after the civil examination listing in the work. Not only is this true, a county's military examination graduate listing is always preceded even by the licentiate examination (*saengwŏn-chinsasi*) listing, even though institutionally the civil and military examinations together constituted the highest-level state examinations, the *taekwa* ("great examinations"), elevated over the licentiate examinations dubbed the *sokwa* ("lesser examinations"). This listing order bias on the part of the source, then, seems to reflect the military examination's lower stature in the compiler's eyes, although throughout chosŏn, various kings and

9) The more researched Chinese case is illuminating in this regard. Since the adoption of Imperial Confucianism as the official state ideology during the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), an ideal ruler of a stable, lasting dynasty was not only to possess a certain virtue or "potency" (Ch. *de*, Ko. *tok*) but also to rule with morality, persuasion, or cultured civility (Ch. *wen*, Ko. *mun*). He was to turn to punishment, violence, or military force (Ch. *wu*, Ko. *mu*) only when the *wen* had proven ineffective. John K. Fairbank, "introduction: Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience," in *Chinese Ways in Warfare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), ed. Frank A. Kierman, Jr., and John K. Fairbank, pp.2-9, 25-26.

10) Such selectivity on the part of a late Chosŏntown gazetteer is evident when its listing of native son military examination passers is compared against a list of all passers from the same locale as documented in extant examination rosters. The latter type of listing is almost always more comprehensive and includes the passers of lower social status as well.

officials emphasized the dual importance of *mun* and *mu* for the state while noting that *mu* cannot compare to *mun* as a superior human talent.¹¹⁾

Besides the listing order bias, also noteworthy is the work's uneven coverage of examination passers from various periods. Both the quality and quantity of information is inconsistent as far as various periods are concerned: for many counties the work covers, an examination graduate listing is adequate for the early and mid-Chosŏn periods up to about 1700, with the eighteenth century more thinly covered, and the nineteenth century given the best treatment. For example, about forty percent of all military examination passers recorded in the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam*, that is 565 out of 1,427 men (39.6 percent), are nineteenth-century graduates.

However, the reign-by-reign break down of the actual Chosŏn period examination passers shows that the state continued to award the degrees to a large number of candidates throughout late chosŏn, with the stretch from roughly 1650 to 1800 forming the overall peak for the military examinations in particular. Also, it was during this period when the most prominent capital military lines of late chosŏn, such as those of the P'yŏngsan Sin, the Nŭngsŏng Ku, the Tŏksu Yi, and the Chŏnŭi Yi descent groups, began to produce a large number of military examination graduates, while the local elites' civil examination success declined.¹²⁾ If we can assume that the early

11) This apparently contradictory coupling of attitudes was manifested almost as soon as the military examination system was instituted in 1402, and the *sillok* abounds with such comments by the monarchs and kings, especially in the fifteenth century. I discuss these points in my earlier work, "Military Officials in Chosŏn Korea, 1392-1863" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999), pp.100-109.

12) Idem, "Military Examinations in Late chosŏn: Elite Substratification and Non-Elite

twentieth century compilation staff of the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* must have had more information on the eighteenth-century degree holders than those of early or mid-Chosŏn periods, then the coverage pattern in question may be hinting at some important changes affecting the local elites during the eighteenth century. One way to test this possibility is to investigate the degree of political participation by the local elite examination graduates at the time.

4. Official Careers of Local Elites

Overall, the local elite individuals recorded in the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* are a far cry from "national luminaries," that is those whom we would find in a good Korean biographical reference book. The fact that ninety percent (1,281 out of 1,427, that is 89.8 percent) of even the military examination passers the source does record are known to have held a rank (*kwang'um*) or an office seems impressive enough, but this appearance is more deceiving than real: at least two thirds of such offices and ranks attained by the passers were nothing more than a border region district magistracy, a largely defunct (and honorary) Five Guards (Owi) system military post,¹³⁾ or a rank title

Accommodation", pp.8-25.

13) Such as the five guards commander (Owijang, senior third grade), third deputy commander (Hogun, senior fourth grade), fifth rank military officer (Sajik, senior fifth grade), sixth rank military officer (Sagwa, senior sixth grade), seventh rank military officer (Sajŏng, senior seventh grade), eighth rank military officer (Samaeng, senior eighth grade), and ninth grade military officer (Sayong, senior ninth grade) posts. In the late nineteenth century, the five guards commander posts in particular were being commonly granted to the grain donors aiding the government's famine relief effort, as well as elderly licentiate examination passers who essentially had no realistic prospect for an official appoint in any other way.

alone. This means that at most, just thirty percent of the military examination passers recorded in the source attained a more important post in the central government, the kind that would have enabled them a more meaningful participation in the court politics.

This is not to say that the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* is entirely lacking in nationally famous individuals. Especially in the case of the Ch'ungch'ŏng provinces, well-known central officials can be found mixed among those from more purely localized lineages. For example, the famous Sin Hŏn (1810-84), who headed the Korean delegation at the signing of the 1876 Korea-Japan treaty, is recorded in the source with some other P'yŏngsan Sin military line kinsmen of his as the notables of Chinch'ŏn.¹⁴⁾ It seems that such central officials maintained an alternate residence outside the capital or at least had some ties to a rural locale that surely must have been all too eager to claim them as its native sons.

Beyond the margins of central "yangban cradle", by which I mean the Kyŏnggi, much of Ch'ungch'ŏng, western Kwangwŏn, and southern Hwanghae regions, very few locales in the nineteenth century, as covered by the *Chosŏn hwanyon sungnam*, could claim as their native sons or local notables a nationally famous, high-ranking central official, even though Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang provinces, for

14) Professor Sin Ho-ch'ol, who was one of the presenters at the conference and a member of the same P'yŏngsan Sin lineage, has told me that the descendants have lived in large number in the locale and other nearby places in Ch'ungch'ŏng-pukto. Whereas Sin Hŏn was descended from the famous general, Sin Ip who had committed suicide after failing to check the advancement of the Japanese invasion force at the outset of the Imjin War in 1592, Professor Sin is a descendant of the general's elder brother, Sin Chap (pen name: Toksong) who was a civil examination passer (1583) and attained a series of important top civil offices. Professor Sin himself is a native of the region where, according to him, there currently are many descendants still residing.

example, are given the most extensive treatment as they are covered by nine out of the work's sixteen volumes. In the case of the Kyōngsang region's local *yangban* lineages with which I am most familiar, interestingly the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* tends to put the representatives of older *hyangan*-certified local elite families on the various lists dedicated to scholarship and moral virtues. In other words, the examination graduate listings of late Chosŏn tend to include more individuals from families of somewhat lower prestige level—the kind that did not use to be represented in the *hyangan*.

At this point, I must note that the older local *yangban* families did not completely turn their backs on state-sanctioned status markers such as an examination degree, rank, or office. To the contrary, it is quite evident in the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* that some older local elite lineages of *hyangan*-documented status began producing the military examination passers in late Chosŏn after a period of no examination success or office holding. Some of the reasons cited in various biographies and anecdotes for turning to the military examination include a personal career preference or a growing perception that a military examination degree was something less politicized than the civil counterpart and yet prestigious enough to reaffirm a family's elite social status.¹⁵⁾

All the same, we must not forget that here we are dealing with extremely selective listings of local notables in the source. This means that the local elites as a whole, including the far greater number of those not appearing in the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam*, most likely had very little going for them by the nineteenth century,

15) I discuss such older local elite families in "Military Examinations in Late Chosŏn", pp.21-22.

as far as the examination success and official careers were concerned.

5. Newer Social Elements among the Examination Passers and Rank/Office Holders

At this point in the discussion, an important question to raise may be to ask: to what extent the military examinations were being utilized by the status-seeking newcomers, including those commonly labeled by the change-thesis proponents as the *sinhyang* (“new local families”), *hyangim* (“local duty personnel”), and *yoho pumin* (“wealthy households”).¹⁶⁾ While working with the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam*, I came to realize that this early twentieth-century source reflects *some* social mobility that had taken place in late chosŏn. Unfortunately, I cannot say to what precise extent, because those who had achieved upward social mobility generally cover up their humbler origins by resorting to the standard rhetoric stressing illustrious pedigree and Confucian virtues of all the forebears. Therefore, unless one is quite familiar with the various branches of the descent group label, that is the coupling of a surname and an ancestral seat, by which a late Chosŏn individual is listed in the source, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to verify whether particular genealogical claims are indeed true.

Nonetheless, there are some well-known cases of nineteenth-

16) Whereas the *sinhyang* mainly comprised those of *sŏl* (that is a secondary son) descent, the *hyangim* (or *hyangjok*, “Local families” included the less prominent local yangban previously excluded from the older elite yangban-dominated local institutions, as well as wealthy households (*yoho pumin*).

century local notables who clearly were from less-than-illustrious backgrounds. For example, the famous Yi Yong-ik (1854-1907) from Myŏngch'ŏn in Hamgyong region, who earned the trust of King Kojong (r. 1863-1907) and played an active role in assisting the latter's economic reforms during the Korean empire period (1897-1905), was a commoner, and yet the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* nonetheless records him as a local notable. According to the source, he was a Chŏnju Yi, the descent group from which the royal family had also hailed, and the son of an office-holder listed in the protection appointment section in this period essentially meaning that the father gained his office through means other than passing either the civil or military examination. Unlike most other local notables in the source who can be linked genealogically to other famous individuals of the given locale from earlier periods, I could find no further information on Yi Yong-ik's pedigree in the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* section devoted to his home county, Myŏngch'ŏn. This dead end seems to allude to Yi's commoner background which is well documented by other sources.

The same was true for many nineteenth-century military examination passers in particular: I could not connect 346 out of 1,427 military examination graduates, that is about a quarter of the total, to an antecedent in the pages devoted to their respective home counties. Moreover, there is at least a few known cases of military examination degree holders who appear to be commoners in the original examination rosters and yet the town gazetteer-type sources like the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* record a descent from famous scholar-officials. Since there must have been a far greater number of such military examination passers whose non-elite origins had

been successfully covered up over a few generations separating them from their non-*yangban* ancestors, it seems that the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* compilation staff failed to screen all the originally non-*yangban* degree holders. This is understandable in that, after all, it must have been impossible for anyone to be knowledgeable about all the traditionally prominent local families of every single county.¹⁷⁾ In this sense, then, it is fair to say that the source reflects some upward social mobility that had taken place in the late Chosŏn period.

6. The Elites' Varying Responses To the End-of-the-Dynasty Crises

Aside from their social origins, how the local elites responded to the crises with which Korea was faced in the nineteenth century can tell us something about the nature of the Chosŏn system. The majority of local notable listing entries record nothing more than the person's name and some government career achievements if any, but some entries also make note of an embodiment of cardinal Confucian moral virtues such as loyalty (*ch'ung*) and filial piety (*hyo*), as well

17) The prominent yangban families of national prominence were a different matter: usually based in Seoul or its surrounding areas within the confines of western central Korea, such families continued to produce examination passers and central officials till the end of the Chosŏn dynasty. Perhaps not too surprisingly, any bona fide yangban with a good knowledge of all the elite families and famous personalities must have known about such descent lines. In fact, it appears that there existed a good consensus among yangban on what families would be included in such a select group. The various multi-descent group genealogies published in the early twentieth century, such as the Mansŏng taedongbo and the Ch'ŏnggu ssibo tend to cover all such families. In the case of the Mansŏng taedongbo, approximately seventy percent of all Chosŏn period civil examination graduates are to be found in it.

as scholarly distinctions, martial prowess, devotion to educating others, and aiding the government with famine relief effort. As informative as these notices may be, though, they tend to repeat a handful of virtues and achievements over and over in a formulaic language with stock expressions, and the reader is left wondering if the descriptions are exaggerated.

Nonetheless, the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* does give us some indications of their varying reactions to all the traumatic events threatening the very survival of the dynasty toward its end. I have come across references to participating in a government military campaign against the Tonghak troops but never a case of someone joining the Tonghak. Also, I had to look in vain for any reference to an active resistance against the Japanese something which may seem puzzling, given that so many military examination passers, for example, are praised in the source for excellent weaponry skills, moral fortitude, and heroic temperament. In fact, the closest example of anti-Japanese resistance I came across in the source was a military examination passer who is said to have entered Manchuria to “uphold the righteousness” (*suŭi*) after the Japanese take-over of Korea.¹⁸⁾ Granted that the watchful eyes of the Japanese colonial state at the time of the source’s compilation could have found a more specific description of anti-Japanese activities seditious, one still wonders why the “uphold the righteous” formula could not have been used for more military examination passers, unless there really were very few applicable cases. If the supposedly martial, heroic native sons holding a military examination degree could not be expected to

18) I understand this note to mean that the individual in question moved to Manchuria and became involved in some form of a patriotic activity.

stand up against the Japanese, then it is not hard for us to imagine what the other local notables less martially oriented must have been like.

Instead of more specific references to a patriotic activity, the reader finds that quite a common response to the end-of-the-dynasty crises noted in the source is simply quitting one's official post in disillusionment, returning home in the countryside, and spending the remaining years of his life studying and educating others. And not a few also enjoyed writing poems and drinking wine in their twilight years. Interestingly, this ethos of self-retirement after a short office tenure in Seoul is especially more commonly noted for the local notables from the south,¹⁹⁾ whereas receiving an office as a reward for contributing and transporting grains during a famine tends to be portrayed as the life's crowning moment for many northerners.²⁰⁾

7. Some Final Considerations

I would like to conclude my discussion with some observations and suggestions that may seem to go beyond what the evidence at hand warrants. The *Chosŏn hwanyon sungnam*, which was compiled in the

19) From Kojong's reign (1863-1907), many local yangban and formerly undistinguished families of the provinces produced individuals holding a central office, rather briefly in most cases. This phenomenon became especially pronounced after the 1894 Kabo Reform.

20) For a recent discussion on the northwestern residents' enhanced economic stature and cultural sophistication in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the central government's varying responses, see O Su-ch'ang, *Chosŏn hugi P'yŏngan-do sahoe palchŏn yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Ilchogak, 2002), pp.127-232.

early twentieth century, provides much useful information on the political participation and social mobility of late Chosŏn local elites, and my overall impression is that the local elites of late Chosŏn had a relatively weak sense of commitment to the notion of defending the central state. In the foregoing discussion, I focused on two types of local elites that were visible by the nineteenth century: one, the descendants of older local *yangban* who used to be recorded in *hyangan*; and two, the non-*hyangan* families that had achieved some status through obtaining state-sanctioned status markers and achieving cultural competence as exemplified by literacy and rituals. The late Chosŏn period witnessed some readjustments by the older *yangban* elite which, alienated from central politics, began to stress its claim to elite social status through both ascription and maintenance of certain cultural values. Thus in a source such as the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam*, one is more likely to find the representatives of older local *yangban* families with a reference to their descent from a notable scholar or official in listings dedicated to scholarship and moral virtues, rather than any listings of examination passers and rank or office holders.

Claims of cultural competence was not unique to the traditional local elite. I use the term, "cultural competence", here in the sense related to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital.²¹⁾ The tendency among many local *yangban* to invest so much effort into, for example, a licentiate examination degree that was not directly linked to an official appointment can be explained in terms of accumulating cultural capital, which has three dimensions, according

21) The following discussion is based on Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital", in *The Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), ed. John G. Richardson, pp.243-48.

to Bourdieu: one, the embodied state; two, the objectified state; and three, the institutional state. Regardless of their social status, the licentiate examination candidates seeking the degree had to attain the proper embodied state, that is to achieve familiarity with the Confucian classics to the extent that they could prepare for and pass either the classics licentiate (*saengwon*) examination stressing more memorized knowledge of the classics or the literary licentiate (*chinsa*) examination emphasizing an ability to compose an essay demonstrating the knowledge of the classics. Personal cultivation of required skills, then, prepared the individual for an objectified state, as he could use a specific, concrete object both to facilitate and manifest his cultivation. For a licentiate examination candidate, the possession and reading of various books, as well as performing proper Confucian rituals, could serve as an object expression of the proper objectified state, but of course neither a book nor a ritual had no intrinsic value to someone not knowing how to use them. Granted that both the objectified and embodied states had been attained, an examination candidate could strive to attain the institutional state by earning the licentiate degree. The degree itself demonstrated to all that the state was recognizing his cultural competence and thus some rise in his social status as an accomplished literatus status perfectly befitting an elite so heavily defined in Confucian moral terms in late Chosŏn Korea.²²⁾

22) This line of interpretation of the efficacy of a licentiate degree is somewhat different from that of Song Chun-ho. He tends to emphasize that even though passing a licentiate examination did not lead to an appointment, the examination retained its special appeal among yangban, and that many struggled for decades of their lives to earn a licentiate degree to demonstrate their credentials as literati. See "Chosŏn hugi ūi kwagŏ chedo", *Kuksagwan nonch'ong* 63 (1995), p.89. Ch'oe Chin-ok's emphasis is similar to that of Song: in her detailed analysis of the recently completed database of licentiates

In this sense, an individual's moral virtues, scholarly talents, and martial prowess boosted the potency of whatever degrees, ranks, and offices his kinsmen achieved, especially for those lineages that used to be excluded from the *hyangan* and yet were important enough to see their members included in the local notable listings of *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam*. Primarily because the older local *yangban* could rationalize their status based on birth as well as demonstrated cultural competence, the neither of which depended on a recognition or sanctioning from the center, the newer families that were more lacking in the birth category could not ignore culture category.

While striving to share a common elite Confucian culture with the descendants of older local elite families, the newer elite families still had to make up for their relative inferiority in pedigree by seeking a state sanction of their status. In this context, the military examination in particular was the most accessible and useful venue among the various state examinations, and the military examination graduate listings for various counties in the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* seem to hint at this inclination.

In understanding such a tendency, Bourdieu's discussion of the possible end result of hysteresis effect and an autonom deserve some attention. In what he describes as a hysteresis effect, status conscious and upwardly mobile social elements can seek out diplomas or certificates that had already become devalued as true markers of

from all extant rosters, Ch'oe explains that an officeless individual with a licentiate degree alone would still be deemed a bona fide yangban in local society, because passing the examination proved that he possessed the basic Confucian cultivation befitting yangban. See *Chosŏnsidae saengwŏn-chinsa yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Chimmundang, 1998), p.265. I cannot agree with them more on such potency of a licentiate examination degree, but they do not seem to draw a distinction between the type of yangban candidates who were so lured by the examination and those who were less so.

social standing among the representatives of the old elite. Such hysteresis effect is said to be greater for those more remote from the educational system and hence more likely to be attracted to devalued diplomas. In a society, a world may exist, that is an *autonom*, where such devalued diplomas continue to enjoy high prestige. In this *autonom*, the social newcomers who attain the diplomas may deliberately choose unemployment rather than settling for jobs they can realistically obtain and yet deemed unbecoming their degrees. According to Bourdieu, this phenomenon of deliberate unemployment is a transition phase that can lead to the next the widespread disillusionment among the social newcomers to the whole educational system and ultimately their rejection of the entire system.²³⁾

In light of Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital, hysteresis, and *autonom*, all the factors considered through my reading of the *Chosŏn Hwanyŏ Sŭngnam* seem to suggest that neither the older nor newer local elites could identify fully with the interests of the center which by the early nineteenth century had begun to show tendencies to exploit local resources without allowing the resource owners a more meaningful participation in the political process. Whereas the older local elite could still maintain and assert its superior social status more or less without the help of the center, the newer local elite sought out the state only as long as it could aid in status enhancement. There was not much the ultimately disillusioned local elites old and new could do were willing to do to reverse the verdict thrust upon Chosŏn Korea, that is its colonization by Japan. After all, local notables were not in a position of power or influence, the

23) Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), trans. Richard Nice, pp.142-44.

kind that was accessible primarily to the capital-based *yangban* lineages of civil officials belonging to certain factions. And we all know that even they were ultimately ineffective.