Yangban and the Common People in Korean Literature of the Eighteenth Century

Cho Dong-il*

I. Introduction

There were four hereditary classes in the Korean society of the Chosŏn Dynasty. Yangban (civil and military officers) was the ruling class that monopolized political power, wealth, and learning. Chungin (middle person) was the class of petty officials with various kinds of technical training, such as the interpretation of foreign languages, local administration, etc. Sangmin (common people) formed the majority of the population. Most of them were farmers or merchants, and some of them were artisans. Ch'ŏnin (low-born person) were slaves, shamans, female entertainers, actors, and butchers.

According to the legal system of the time, yangban, chungin, and sangmin were free citizens while ch'ŏnin were in the class of people subordinate to free citizens. Free citizens under the law were said to have equal civil rights. However, the ideal of equal civil rights for free citizens was quite different from the actual situation in the society. In fact, the yangbans were the rulers, and all others were the ruled. The overall name for the ruled classes was p'yŏngmin (common people) or minjung (mass people, the masses). I call them merely “the people” in this paper.

Yangban ruled the people with their hereditary claim to ideological dignity. However, in the late Chosŏn Dynasty, especially from the eighteenth century, the yangban's social position was noticeably threatened by the economic and cultural growth of the people. Some yangban families who were

* Associate Professor of Korean Literature, Seoul National University
not able to get a government post for many generations fell into a state of misery. At the same time, the members of the people, who were becoming wealthy due to the introduction of new agricultural methods, domestic and foreign trade, and money-lending, became a challenge to the yangban’s privileged position in society. The voices of the people began to express doubt in the status quo and criticize the ruling ideology even from the low estates of humble sangmins or ch’omins.

Such social changes were colorfully manifested in literary works of that period. I have selected three typical examples for discussion in this paper. The first is Pak Chi-won’s short story, “Yangbanchôn” (Story of a Yangban), the second work is an anonymous kasa (a genre of didactic verse) called “Ubuga” (Song of Stupid Men), and the third is a scene from mask drama entitled “Yanbankwachang” (the Yangbans’ Scene) contained in Pongsant’alch’um (Pongsan mask drama). “Yangbanchôn” was written in classical Chinese. It was authored by a well-known yangban writer. “Ubuga” was composed in Korean using the Korean alphabet, Hangeul. The anonymous poet who composed “Ubuga” might have been a literati from the people. “Yangbankwajang” was orally transmitted and recreated among the people of a commercial city. The above three examples represent the three main strata of Korean literature in the eighteenth century, and, using a satirical style, each of them depicts serious situations that illustrate the conflict between the yangban class and the people.

II. “Yangbanchôn” (Story of a Yangban)

Pak Chi-won (1737–1805), one of the leaders of Shilhak (the school of practical learning), wrote several short stories through which he examined a yangban’s life and thought critically. “Yangbanchôn” was one of his most important works. As a satire on a yangban’s life, it had an excellent plot and displayed deep insight. Pak says that “the word yangban is an honorific term for scholar-officials” in the first sentence of the story. However, the yangban in the story is unable to preserve his honor. Through the presentation of this unconventional event, Pak’s story expresses the prevailing mood of social change that characterized his time. The summary of the plot that was centered structurally on the satirical depiction of a yangban is as fol-

1 Pak No-ch’un explained the writer’s biography in his article entitled, “Pak Chi-won, Satsang of the Aristocratic Society,” Korea Journal 13, No 3 (March, 1974)

2 Peter Lee’s translation of this story is in his Anthology of Korean Literature from Early Times to the Nineteenth Century (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawai, 1981)
lows

A country *yangban* was poor. He lived on rice borrowed from the government. The loan increased to an amount beyond his ability to repay. The magistrate of the county (area; district) had sympathy for his misery, but the governor of the region, who was making an inspection tour discovered the fact of the unpaid loan, and he ordered the poor *yangban* to be imprisoned. The *yangban* wept day and night, but found no solution. Even his wife abused him, and derided him saying, "a *yangban* isn't worth a penny." About that time, a rich commoner in that village came forward and proposed to buy the *yangban*'s position on the condition that he would agree to repay the rice loan to the government for the miserable *yangban*. Hearing of this news, the magistrate was so pleased that he called both the buyer and the seller into his office. He then ordered an official deed of buying and selling to be drawn up in the presence of many witnesses.

In the deed, the impractical and tedious norms of a *yangban*'s life were enumerated. After the deed ceremony was over, the rich commoner said, "I have heard that a *yangban* is like an immortal. Please amend the deed to make it more profitable for me." Therefore, the magistrate began to dictate a new deed. This new deed enumerated in graphic detail the *yangban*'s tyrannical privileges. The conclusion of the story is as follows:

> When the deed was half written, the rich man put out his tongue and said, "Stop, stop! How absurd! Are you trying to turn me into a robber?" Shaking his head, he went away. For the rest of his life he never mentioned the word *yangban*.

The main event in this story could not have been factually possible. However, this story was (and still is) convincing as a caricature of the social change of the period. Two aspects of a *yangban*'s life, the hypocritical virtues as well as the excessive oppression of the people are criticized in this work as being both unnatural and unreasonable. Notwithstanding the fact that *yangbans* devised two-fold defensive measures in order to keep their power, they began losing their prominent positions in the eighteenth century. As this occurred, the rich commoner became powerful even without taking the *yangban*'s title, because not only was he able to manage in the economy, he also had a more realistic way of thinking. Further examination of Pak Chi-won’s other stories reveals that he praises the virtues of diligence, credit, and contributions to commercial profit while criticizing the tyrannical vices of the corrupt *yangban* class.

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3 I quote Peter Lee's translation in *Anthology of Korean Literature*, p. 225.
III. "Ubuga" (Song of Stupid Men)

In "Ubuga," some persons who lost their yangban positions by their misconduct are presented with in a comic style. The narrator blames the chosen persons as if he were a moral teacher. However, the actions described are actually interesting, humorous, and vivid enough to attract the reader's attention. The fixed idea of Confucian morality is not changed, but the narrator reveals that the yangban in the song wants what is materially profitable instead of hollow prestige. This discrepancy in values, which reflected the uneven historical development between thought and action of the period, is expressed well in "Ubuga," as can be seen in the following translation:

He wastes money as if it were water
Tides over a crisis extemporarily
His guests are only money-lenders
About a yangban's virtues he does not care.
His most pressing need is to earn his living.
He decides for now only to make money
He disposes of his farms and slaves,
Even the trees beside his ancestors' tombs,
To get money with which he can begin
A business, and practice the art of
Money-lending.

This passage summarizes economic changes that were taking place in the eighteenth century. With a wide circulation of coin currency, commercial activities were expanded, and the production of commodities increased. The yangban who wasted money to get newly made commodities could not avoid becoming debtors. To pay off their debts, they had to dispose of their properties with which they had maintained their respectable social positions. On the verge of his bankruptcy, the hero of "Ubuga" decides to become a money-lender. It is paradox for him to abandon his yangban's prestige with the purpose of preserving it.

The practice of lending money at interest was prohibited by Confucian morality. The yangban who violated this prohibition had to lose his dignity. Ironically, commoners who became rich by money-lending obtained yangban's positions by illicit methods. As the influence of money increased, the traditional class structure of society became disrupted and confused.

"Ubuga" is an example of a kasa, a kind of didactic poetry concerned
primarily with moral instruction, travelogues, and descriptions of social customs. *Kasa* was originally a genre of *yangban* literature, but from the eighteenth century, its writers were occasionally anonymous commoners. Their works not only satirized the *yangban*’s dilemma, but also illustrated various aspects of the people’s lives. Farmers’ revolts against government officials were recurrent themes. One song explained how peaceful farmers had to leave their rural homes, wander aimlessly, and finally become robbers in order to survive the oppressiveness of the times.

IV. “*Yankankwachang*” (The *Yangbans’ Scene*)

There is a person who appears disguised as a *yangban* in one of the rural pageants performed with the accompaniment of *nongak* (farmer’s music), which we can see even now in many places in Korea. This character does not play any musical instrument, but only runs around the troupe making stupid blunders and making the spectators laugh. This scene is a primitive form of Korean mask drama. In the *Haohoe* mask drama, which has a history of over five hundred years, two characters called *yangban* and *sonbi* (scholar) make fools of themselves by unreasonable boasting about their family genealogies. As the two members of the ruling class argue against each’s “honorable” lineage, their valets with vulgar gestures show themselves to be more discerning of the real situation in their mimicry of their masters’ hubris and hypocrisy. Such a satire against the ruling class is a typical element in rural mask dramas.

Rural mask dramas were performed once in a year under the *yangban*’s connivance. From the mid-eighteenth century, there appeared another type of mask drama in the growing cities where petty officials and merchants had formed a social group as powerful as the *yangban*s. These city dramas demonstrated more effective satire than was seen in the rural mask dramas. One of the best examples of this type is *Pongsant’alch’um* (*Pongsan* mask drama), which was handed down in the *Pongsan*, district of *Hwanghaedo* Province. The sixth scene of that drama is “*Yankankwachang*”, or the *yangban*’s scene, in which three *yangban* brothers are mocked by their valet whose name is *Maltugi*.

Upon close examination, the masks worn in this scene reveal that the faces of all three *yangban* brothers are deformed. The first brother has two

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4 The social history of the mask drama was explained in my article “Oral Literature and the Growth of Popular Consciousness,” in *Folk Culture in Korea* (Seoul: International Cultural Foundation, 1974)
lines indicating a double harelip, and the second brother has one harelip line. The third has a twisted nose and misshaped mouth. These distorted facial features symbolize two characteristics of the yangban simultaneously: they are abnormal and they think too highly of their social hierarchy. Therefore, their abnormalities are figured with rigorous grades that symbolize their distorted, twisted views of society.

The valet, Maltugi, introduces three yangban to the spectators and warns them to show respect to his honourable masters. But the word "yangban" in the way he speaks it has a derogative meaning in that context. The word had in reality undergone a vast change in meaning in the society. As a result, the valet can easily make fools of his lords by making fun and witticisms, as they lack the ability to recognize the insulting situations with which they are confronted. But the spectators understand well the implied dramatic irony, and are very entertained by this spectacle.

Throughout the scene, the yangban have nothing to do but scold at their valet in vain and compose meaningless verses to kill the tedious time. The privilege to live without any productive work is painful. On the other hand, the valet Maltugi is one of the people. It is he who is vigorous and active in all things, able to control the social situation, and challenges the absurdity of inequality represented by his foolish masters. Maltugi has a collaborator in Ch'wibari, an energetic man who is also a rich merchant. In that same scene, the rich merchant is accused by the yangban of being an embezzler of state funds. But the yangban fail utterly in their attempts to punish Ch'wibari. Thus, Maltugi and Ch'wibari are portrayed as successful fighters for an egalitarian society that does not give special privileges to an elite class such as the yangban.

V. Comparison of Literary Works to the Images in the Fine Arts

It is interesting to compare the images of the yangban and the people expressed in the literary works just analyzed with images that appear in the fine arts of the same period. However, such an approach presents a problem to the researcher because the story "Yangbanch'on" has no direct equivalent in the fine arts of the eighteenth century. Yangban artists painted only landscapes. Some persons appear as figures in the landscape paintings of the period, they are looking at mountains or waterfalls, keeping aloof from the

5 Yoh Suk-kee analyzed the scene in "Laughter in Korean Traditional Drama," in Humour in Korean Literature (Seoul International Cultural Foundation, 1977)
world of social conflicts. The literary works depicting the relation between the yangban class and the people can be compared with the genre paintings of the same age, with more success.

These two modes of artistic expression, both the products of the social changes in the eighteenth century, reveal for the first time in Korean cultural history a sincere people-centered interest in the dynamics of social change. Nevertheless, there were some differences between verbal and visual expressions. The satire against the yangban was more clearly presented in literary works, while the productive activities of the people were expressed more vividly in genre paintings by artists such as Kim Hong-do and Sin Yun-bok.

The mask drama of the period bears further examination because it is a visual as well as literary art. This is true because in mask drama, the character of each performer is expressed in his/her mask before acting or speaking begins. The colors and shapes of each mask have symbolic meanings. The light and the dark, the small and the large, the normal and the deformed face are all definite features that denote differences in character at a glance. These differences, as stated above, can be seen clearly in the masks worn in “Yangbankwajang.” The masks in the Yangban Scene of Pongsan mask drama express the yangban characters with faces that are light, small, and deformed. In contrast to this, their valet, Malttugi, has a mask that is dark, large, and a normal shape. This deliberate contrast in mask design offers a more distinct way of expressing the social conflicts than the vehicle of dramatic dialogue. The mask drama of the eighteenth century can be appreciated for its effective visual and literary satire of the serious social problem of inequity between the yangban and the people. We can appreciate the abnormalities visually presented in the yangban masks in this context.
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