

The Invention of *Pyeongmin*: A Critical Reevaluation of “Social Estate Theory” in Korean History

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A conventional theory of Korean social history asserts that the people of Joseon were divided into distinct social estates: *yangban*, *jungin*, *pyeongmin*, and *nobi*. *Pyeongmin* is described as a lower-middle or commoner estate, but its precise meaning warrants reevaluation in light of estate theory, which poses that an estate society must classify individuals into categories on the basis of law. This study examines the usage of the term *pyeongmin* from the late 18th to the early 20th century in official documents produced by the Joseon government and the Japanese colonial authorities, focusing on how *pyeongmin* functioned as a marker of personal status. The findings reveal that *pyeongmin* was used as a broad, catch-all term for those not belonging to a specific group, with its connotations shifting depending on the context. Also, while Joseon identified individuals through their duties to state or occupations, the Japanese colonial regime sought to distinguish the subjects based both on their occupations and their social estate. Contrary to some previous studies that treat *pyeongmin* as a definitive indicator of social estate, this study strongly suggests that the term offers little to no information about an individual's estate. The absence of *pyeongmin* as an independent and recognized social estate is significant because estate societies typically require all individuals to be legally classified into specific estate groups. Unlike medieval Europe, imperial Russia, or Edo Japan, there is scant evidence that traditional Korean society followed such a system. Rather, the notion of an estate-based social structure in Korea may be a product of Japanese rule.

Keywords: Social estate, social class, *pyeongmin*, *yangban*, Joseon, Korean social history

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