

To Build a Centralizing Regime: *Yangban* Aristocracy and Medieval Patrimonialism*

Javier Cha

This article examines the ambiguous roles of birth and merit in Korea from around 900 to 1500 CE. Medieval Korea's *yangban* aristocracy valued pedigree but did not guarantee heredity. Many illustrious houses failed to retain their status, and the void created opportunities for provincials to try establishing themselves as new and lasting capital-based *yangban* courtiers. The mesh of patron/client ties and conjugal bonds generated in this social process explain the centralization of authority and the consolidation of the peninsular society after the collapse of first-generation states in the Korea-Manchuria region.

Keywords: Koryŏ, medieval Korea, centralization, sociopolitical history, patrimonialism, patron/client ties, marriage alliance

As scholars of humble origin, we cannot rise to prominence on our own. We need to have like-minded benefactors in high places and be recommended [into office] through that tie. Only then can we straighten that which is bent and put into motion that which is dormant.¹

Yi Kok 李穀 (1298-1351)

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1. 寒門窮巷之士，固不能自達，必有青雲知己爲之援引，乃可以申其屈動其蟄。Yi Kok, “Yŏ tongnyŏn Cho Chungso, Ch’oe Hŏnnap so,” *Kajŏng chip* (Han’guk munjip ch’onggan ed.) 3.148a.

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