

Royal Compassion and Disaster Relief in Chosŏn Korea*

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Among mountain fields and valley huts the water runs amok.
Rocks protrude like teeth, tails and scales, creating turmoil like that of a whale.
Only snails occupying the empty houses, the worst calamity is still to come.
All people cling to their horses and weep over their destroyed farmland.
Only the warm sun of spring can bring back smiles in all these villages,
And only a warm autumn can restore the prosperity of farming.
With the precious royal order in hand I arrive at this,
But how could this unworthy official be of assistance to the royal compassion?

– Chŏng Kŏnjo, *Ode on Travelling in Northern P'yŏngan as Comforting
and Admonishing Official*¹

Introduction

As the title of the above poem by Chŏng Kŏnjo 鄭健朝 (1823-?) informs us, it was composed as he travelled around the northern parts of P'yŏngan province as a Comforting and Admonishing Official (*wiyusa* 慰諭使). This he did in the summer of 1859, appointed by the central government to help disaster-stricken

*The research for this article was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of England.

1. Chŏng Kŏnjo, *Sajip* 私集 (Private Collection), Kawai collection, Kyoto University Library.

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people and secure social order in the area. Torrential rainfall had devastated several counties, with approximately one thousand five hundred families afflicted and more than thirty people killed.

Due to the demise of the Chosŏn dynasty and Korea's loss of independence in the early twentieth century, the nineteenth century is often depicted as a period of deteriorating state administration as royal in-laws and other influential *yangban* families abused their power and fought each other for power and wealth. The fact that Chŏng Kŏnjo travelled through these disaster-stricken counties with, as we will see, a large and expensive entourage, finding time and peace of mind to compose poetry, albeit using it to show his concern for the people in an ideological and abstract sense, seems to corroborate this picture of a ruling elite out of touch with the living conditions of the people.

However, Chŏng Kŏnjo did fulfil his duties faithfully, giving substantive aid to those afflicted. The aid he administered was a combination of tax-exemptions and measures partially covered in the "royal compassion" (*hyehyul* 惠恤) paragraphs of the rites section in the law code. As the latter were royal acts of benevolence there were no detailed rules regulating them, and orders would often be given in accordance with precedents. They were thus never thoroughly systemized through royal edicts and legislation. The system rather developed gradually over the centuries, to crystallize from the mid-eighteenth century into a comprehensive system of material compensations under the generic term *hyulchŏn* 恤典 (compassionate rulings). This term had been used since late Koryŏ, but it was only with the *Soktaejŏn* 續大典 (Supplemented Great Code) of 1746 that it was mentioned under "royal compassion" for the first time, although it still did not reflect the full scope of the system.² We have to go to the early nineteenth-century *Man'gi yoram* 萬機要覽 (Handbook of Government Affairs) to get a more detailed description of the system as it had developed by then.

By the late eighteenth century the Confucian Chosŏn state had developed an elaborate system of tax exemptions and relief aid to support the population in times of calamity and crop-failure.³ Whereas many studies have been devoted to

2. This law code only stipulates that in those cases where whole families had died in an epidemic and the bodies had not been collected and buried, the Ministry of Taxation, the Office for Famine Relief, or the provincial authorities should execute *hyulchŏn*. *Soktaejŏn*, reprint (Keijo: Chŏsen Sŏtokufu Chŭsŭin, 1938), 249.

3. For a discussion on the perceived link between the welfare of the population and the quality of state administration in East Asian Confucian statecraft, see Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea and the Hazards of World History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

the system of famine relief, the *hyulchŏn* system and the relief aid it provided to people affected by natural disasters has not been given much scholarly attention.⁴ This study will therefore initially provide a history of its development. This overview will focus on aspects of direct relevance for disaster relief, and will not deal with other parts of the system, such as orphan care or the help given to impoverished yangban. Thereafter it will present Chŏng Kŏnjo's mission as a case study to show how the system was used to provide disaster relief in mid-nineteenth century Chosŏn. This case study will be based on Chŏng's detailed records of this relief mission, the *Wiyusa tŭngnok* 慰諭使謄錄 (Records of a Comforting and Admonishing Official).⁵

A second aim of this paper is to try to look beyond moral evaluations of early nineteenth-century state administration, focusing instead on practical results and arguing that the long tradition of elaborate dynastic administration, heavily steeped in Confucian ideology, had gained its own momentum, to a certain extent ensuring that administrative practices and rules were followed, regardless of the moral qualities of those in positions of power. As Ku Wanhoe has pointed out, relief aid was an opportunity for magistrates and other officials to distinguish themselves morally.⁶

Development of the *hyulchŏn* system

Cases of bereavement

Hyulchŏn, as an institutional borrowing from China, originally meant measures to honour people in high official positions who died unnatural or accidental

4. The two scholars who have written most extensively on the famine relief system in Chosŏn are Mun Yongsik and Chŏng Hyŏngji. See, for example, Mun Yongsik, *Chosŏn hugi chinjŏng kwa hwan'gok unyŏng* (Late Chosŏn Famine Relief Administration and Grain-Loan Management) (Seoul: Kyŏngin Munhwasa, 2000); and Chŏng Hyŏngji, "Chosŏn hugi chin'gŭp unyŏng e taehayŏ" (On the Management of Relief Aid in Late Chosŏn), *Idae sawŏn* 26 (1992): 107-141. Yi Sangbae has written on natural catastrophes and state policies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the focus is mainly on measures to prevent catastrophes, and although there is a brief discussion on tax exemptions, the *hyulchŏn* system is not covered. Yi Sangbae, "18-19 segi chayŏn chaeae wa kŭ taech'aek e kwanhan yŏn'gu" (A Study on Natural Disasters in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries and Related Countermeasures), *Kuksagwan nonch'ong* 89 (2000).

5. These records are kept in the Kawai Collection in the library of Kyoto University.

6. Ku Wanhoe, "Chosŏn hugi ūi chinhae haengjŏng kwa kunhyŏn chibae: Suryŏng ūi yŏkhal ūl chungsim ūro" (Relief Administration of Late Chosŏn and County Control: Centring on the Role of Magistrates), *Chindan hakpo* 76 (1993): 69-106.

deaths.⁷ These measures included the closing of royal sessions, contributing to the funeral expenses, memorial services officiated by the king, the enshrinement of mortuary tablets in the royal shrine, the erection of shrines, or the endowment of posthumous ranks and titles. Later, however, the range of people upon whom *hyulchŏn* could be bestowed widened, the system no longer being limited to high officials, and it came to center on financial compensation. In 1443 King Sejong (r. 1418-1450) gave the following order to the Ministry of Rites:

It has already been legislated that financial aid for funeral expenses and tax-exempt status shall be given to [the families of] those who meet with an accident and die while defending our borders or performing corvée labour in the capital or the provinces, or those who are killed by the enemy or taken prisoner. But for those who meet with an accident and die as a result of their official duties, to them no funeral aid or tax-exempt status is given and this is an error. From now on the scope of *hyulchŏn* shall be widened, and following the example of soldiers who drown, two *sŏm*⁸ of rice and beans, and three years of tax-exempt status shall be given to all who meet with an accident and die as a result of their official duties. There is also a law saying that when a person dies while performing public duties a royally sponsored memorial ritual shall be held in their county. However, not all magistrates follow this, and from now on they must all do so, and then report it to the Ministry of Rites for later consultation.⁹

This order allowed for acts of royal compassion to be bestowed upon people other than soldiers who died accidental deaths, regardless of their social status. However, it is not until 1479 that we find the first record of *hyulchŏn* bestowed in this manner. In 1477 eight inhabitants of Cheju Island had embarked on a ship to transport mandarin oranges in tribute to the state. They met rough weather and were cast adrift. Five of them drowned and the rest were shipwrecked on the Ryukyu Islands. Subsequently, in 1479 the survivors were brought back to Chosŏn with a returning envoy and their story was reported to the throne. Upon hearing this, the king decided that *hyulchŏn* should be bestowed upon those who had drowned.¹⁰

These Cheju Island inhabitants died while transporting tribute, so in that sense they were performing an official duty. However, soon it would rather be the accidental death in itself, regardless of any official duty performed, that

7. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄 (Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty), 48 vols., reprint (Seoul: Kuksa P'yŏnch'an Wiwŏnhoe, 1955-1958), 4:469c.

8. The volume of a *sŏm* varied between 90 and 120 liters.

9. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 4:502a-b.

10. *Ibid.*, 10:16b.

would be raised as one of the criteria for *hyulchŏn*. In 1515 we can see the first such case when the northwestern provinces of P'yŏngan and Hwanghae were flooded and more than one hundred people reportedly drowned. The provision of *hyulchŏn* was requested for all the people affected. However, in the end it was turned down.¹¹ The issue of aid to disaster-stricken people was again raised in the summer of 1519, when the country was once again struck by flooding; Kyŏnggi province being worst affected this time. On the seventh day of the eleventh month it was decided that royally sponsored memorial rituals (*ch'ije* 致祭) should be held for people buried in landslides in Yangju county.¹² However, two days later the king was advised to pay for funeral expenses instead.

Prime State Councillor Chŏng Kwangp'il said:

'As for royally sponsored memorial rituals, as this shows Your Highness' utmost sincerity in guarding against natural disasters and protecting the innocent people, there is nothing incorrect in this. But as this is not something we can find in the regulations for memorial rituals of this country, Your Highness is not obliged to sponsor these services, it is enough to provide funds for the funeral and look after the family. After all, this is not the same as cases of people who die in battle.'

Right State Councillor An Tang added:

'We already have the example of *yŏje* to provide memorial rituals for people with no one to look after them, so there is nothing wrong in having royally sponsored memorial rituals for those lost in landslides. But if the bodies of the deceased are recovered and we provide funds for their funerals and provide the families with *hyulchŏn* so that they can have their own ceremonies, then there is no need to hold royally sponsored rituals. However, if the body isn't found, or if it is a person without family, then it is possible to hold a memorial, despite the fact that this cannot be found in our regulations for memorial rituals.'¹³

Slowly the practice of bestowing *hyulchŏn* upon people afflicted by natural and other forms of disaster, regardless of official duty or social status, became standard. In 1525 the issue of *hyulchŏn* was raised in connection with, among other things, an epidemic in P'yŏngan province, a blizzard in Hamgyŏng province, and a fire in Yongsan.¹⁴ The system had thus changed from being a way of honouring dead officials to a method of helping families that had been deprived of members through calamity.

Central to Confucian ideology was the notion that natural disasters were sent by heaven to show dissatisfaction with unworthy kings, and this idea played an

11. Ibid., 15:94d-95a.

12. Ibid., 15:553a. All dates are in the lunar calendar.

13. Ibid., 15:553c.

14. Ibid., 16:371a, 476d.

important role in the above-described change in the *hyulchŏn* system. This can be seen in discussions held at court in 1547, the second year of King Myŏngjong (r. 1545-1567), a year when the country was afflicted by both drought and flooding, in addition to hail and landslides. Reportedly, by showing his compassion through the bestowal of *hyulchŏn* upon those who died in these disasters, King Myŏngjong wished to atone for his moral deficiencies that had caused them.¹⁵

This changed character of the system can furthermore be seen in discussions at court in 1673. That year saw a severe famine afflicting the country, a situation that was caused by the previous year's crop failure. Discussing the difficult tasks administrators faced at such times, the following thoughts were expressed at court:

Left Vice Royal Secretary Sim Chae said:

'To execute *hyulchŏn* is indeed a most beautiful act of an age of sages. But to report and ensure that all people killed by tigers, drowned while crossing waters, crushed to death, or killed in fire receive *hyulchŏn*, is that not a too cumbersome and distracting task?'

[Left State Councillor] Hŏ Chŏk added:

'In the past *hyulchŏn* was only given to people who died while performing meritorious services, but as the *hyulchŏn* of today is given without any distinction between public and private matters, and the death of a person is directly compensated with three *sŏm* of grain, we cannot but worry about the corrupt practices of local clerks.'¹⁶

We can see that *hyulchŏn* was provided in an increased range of cases, including individual cases of death not related to large-scale natural catastrophes, and that use of the system had increased in frequency to the extent that some statesmen worried that it distracted local officials from other duties. The bestowal of *hyulchŏn* in cases of major natural calamities continued as well, though, and sometimes *hyulchŏn* was given to as many as 600 people.¹⁷ Table 1 lists causes of death for which *hyulchŏn* is recorded in *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄 (Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty) and *Ilŏngnok* 日省錄 (Records of Daily Reflection).

The problem of people killed by tigers could at times be quite serious. In 1754 in central Kyŏnggi province more than 120 people were reportedly killed within one month. During the same year more than 100 people were killed in

15. Ibid., 19:519c-d.

16. Ibid., 38:53a.

17. Ibid., 39:268c-d.

Table 1. Accidental or unnatural deaths for which *hyulchŏn* is recorded

Drowning	Freezing to death in blizzard	Starvation
Suicide	Death by fire	Death while fighting rebels
Death in battle	Death in landslides	Killed by tigers or other beasts
Murder	Death in collapsed house	Avalanche
Epidemics	Death by falling cliffs	Trampled to death by crowd
Food poisoning	Unjust execution	

Source: *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* and *Ilŏngnok*

Kangwŏn province, with eighty-one new cases being reported just two months later.¹⁸ The families of all these victims were given compensation.

It is also interesting to note that during the reign of Hyŏnjong there were several cases where *hyulchŏn* was given when people had died from starvation.¹⁹ Furthermore, during the reign of Sukchong this form of relief was also bestowed on people who committed suicide because they could not endure hunger. It started in the second month of 1683 when a man of gentry background from Puan abandoned his wife and children and broke a hole in the ice and drowned himself. *Hyulchŏn* was bestowed on him and his family was given grain. In the eighth month of the following year, three families in Chŏlla province committed suicide when faced with a severe crop failure, and *hyulchŏn* was bestowed upon them with material compensation being given to their relatives.²⁰

Another interesting case of a different character is also reported during the reign of Sukchong. In 1686 the king proceeded to the Sŏnggyun'gwan Academy to pay his respects to the sages of old and officiate a ritual. After the ritual he returned to the procession tent to hold an examination at the Myŏngnyundang Hall. However, scholars from the capital and provinces had heard rumours of this and gathered in large numbers. Following the advice of the Royal Lecturers, the king had the west wall of the Myŏngnyundang torn down to open it up to the outer yard of the Pich'ŏndang Hall and then he ordered that any disorder or crowding must be stopped. However, at this the examinees started to fight with each other to get into the yard first. People fell over and eight were trampled to death, with many more seriously injured, and it was reported that the screaming would not cease. Hearing this, the king was greatly shocked and sent medical officers and medicine to look after those who were still alive. He bestowed *hyulchŏn* upon those who had died, and if they had come from the countryside

18. Ibid., 43:523d, 541a, 545a.

19. Ibid., 36:671d, 674b-c, 38:27c.

20. Ibid., 38:627c, 39:9a-b.

he had their bodies returned on funeral biers.²¹

As for the concept of *hyulchŏn*, rather than its practical application, by the late eighteenth century it had been broadened to also represent the state's ambition to support those afflicted by bereavement in a more long-term perspective. In the twelfth month of 1763, King Yŏngjo (r. 1724-1776) argued that "to look after and aid the 'four people' [widowers, widows, orphans and childless] is the most important task in kingly rule" and he ordered that *hyulchŏn* should be bestowed upon them.²² Furthermore, around the mid-eighteenth century decisions at court to bestow *hyulchŏn* began to be less concerned with specific cases, and rather seem to have been based on a list of cases presented by the provincial governors.²³ Whereas earlier entries in the chronicles often describe individual cases in detail, from that time on *hyulchŏn* was only recorded in the form of simple summaries. This seems to indicate that the frequency with which it was given by governors increased, and that a certain bureaucratic mechanism had been introduced.

The late eighteenth century witnessed more systematisation. In 1778 the need for clearer rules on the granting of *hyulchŏn* was discussed at court. King Chŏngjo (r. 1776-1800) pointed out that the practice varied between the different provinces. The general principle was that it was given on royal decision after a request had been made by the governor.²⁴ But in some provinces it would be given after a special royal order even though the governor had not requested it. In other provinces it was bestowed directly, and only after this was it reported to the State Council and the king. In yet other provinces, it was neither done directly nor requested, but rather done on orders from the Ministry of Taxation. Finally, in some provinces it was not given even though hundreds of people had died due to one of the causes listed as criteria for *hyulchŏn*. The cause for this last situation was said to be the rule that *hyulchŏn* would be given only if more than three people in a county had died or were afflicted. As this created severe inequalities the king ordered that from that time on *hyulchŏn* should be provided without reference to the rule about three afflicted people in a county. Furthermore, from that time on the standard procedure for all provinces should be for the governor to report the names of all those to whom *hyulchŏn* should be given, and that the Ministry of Taxation should then be ordered to carry it out.²⁵

21. Ibid., 39:63a-b.

22. Ibid., 44:153a-b.

23. Ibid., 43:290d, 298d, 300d, 301b, 312d.

24. Ibid., 34:606a.

25. *Ilŏngnok*, 86 vols., facsimile (Seoul: Seoul Taehakkyo Tosŏgwan, 1982-1996), 4:40-43,

When the systemized compensations were later listed in the *Man'gi yoram* in the early nineteenth century they were simplified into four categories: death by fire (*sosa* 燒死), drowning (*ŏmsa* 淹死), people killed by tigers (*horamsa* 虎嘜死), and people crushed to death (*apsa* 壓死).²⁶

What was the content of aid in cases of bereavement? The original form of funeral aid given to a meritorious subject (*kongsin choae* 功臣助哀) in the early seventeenth century amounted to 5 *p'il* of cotton cloth, a coffin, 7 quire (20 sheets) of paper, and oiled paper, etc.²⁷ As for *hyulchŏn* in the larger sense, when King Sejong in 1443 broadened the scope of people who were entitled to such aid, he also ordered that it should amount to two *sŏm* of rice and beans and three years of tax-exempt status (*pokho* 復戶).²⁸

Aside from this, it is difficult to know exactly how much aid was given as the amount often “followed precedents” of cases that were not entered in the chronicles. It is not until we get the systemized version presented in the *Man'gi yoram* that we get a stipulated amount; one *sŏm* of unhulled rice for all four categories.²⁹ Furthermore, in cases of severe calamity the king could give special orders that extra aid be handed out. The *Man'gi yoram* stipulated this as one extra *sŏm* of rice, and cases in the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* show that this was the amount given in the late eighteenth century.³⁰

Local authority reports on *hyulchŏn* from the nineteenth century extant in the Kyujanggak also confirm that the amount of aid given was one *sŏm*, but not necessarily in rice if that wasn't the main crop of the area.³¹ In a seemingly

108-109.

26. *Man'gi yoram*, 2 vols., reprint and translation (Seoul: Minjok Munhwa Ch'ujinhoe, 1971), 1:194.

27. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 31:129a.

28. *Ibid.*, 4:502a-b.

29. *Man'gi yoram*, 194. In the capital the funds for *hyulchŏn* aid were to be given by the Ministry of Taxation or by the Office of Relief Works (Chinhyulch'ŏng). In the provinces it was executed by the provincial authorities and financed by Ministry of Taxation loan-grain. As this became scarce, in the late eighteenth century loan-grain belonging to the Office of Relief Work was also used, and from 1800 it was only to be financed by the latter. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 47:266c.

30. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 46:42b-d, 48c-d.

31. This can be seen, for example, in records of disaster relief in Hamgyŏng province and on Cheju Island. *Hamgyŏngdo Anbyŏn tŭng sa ŭp t'oeapho kŭp ŏmabin tŭng pyŏl hyulchŏn chegŭp sŏngch'aek* 咸鏡道安邊等四邑賴壓戶及揜壓人等別恤典題給成冊 (Report on Special *Hyulchŏn* Given to Families with Collapsed Houses and Families of People Crushed to Death in Four Counties of Hamgyŏng Province Including Anbyŏn), Kyujanggak 16956. *Hamgyŏngdo Kyŏngsŏngbu ŏmsain kŭp p'yot'oeho pyŏl hyulchŏn yŏ sinhwan tanggam sŏngch'aek* 咸鏡道鏡城府揜死人及漂賴戶別恤典與身還蕩減成冊 (Report on Special *Hyulchŏn* and Grain-Loan Repayment Exemptions Given to Families of People Drowned and Families with Houses Destroyed by Flooding in the Kyŏngsŏng

obvious measure, but one that contradicted many critical voices of the time, an exemption of taxes levied on individuals would also be granted for those who died.³²

Compensating loss of property

Above we have seen how *hyulchŏn* developed from being a way of honouring the death of high officials to a system to give material aid to those who lost family members in natural disasters or accidents. The system developed in other directions as well. As *hyulchŏn* in the sixteenth century started to be given in times of natural catastrophes, reports of human losses also mentioned material losses. But it is not clear whether any compensation was given for this at that early stage. However, from the mid-seventeenth century on, pleas for *hyulchŏn* that only or predominantly mentioned the loss of property, rather than the loss of life, started to emerge. In 1636, for example, *hyulchŏn* was explicitly given to families whose houses had been destroyed in flooding in the capital, and in 1660 King Hyŏnjong (r. 1659-1674) gave an order that *hyulchŏn* should be given in Kangwŏn province where several hundred houses had been destroyed in forest fires.³³

This form of aid seems to have become standard practice by the mid-eighteenth century. In 1744 and 1745, *hyulchŏn* was granted to licensed cotton merchants (*paengmokchŏn* 白木麿 and *mokhwajŏn* 木花麿) in the capital who had lost goods in fire.³⁴ In 1805, a similar case concerned Chinese silk merchants (*ipchŏn* 立麿). They were given 100 *tong*³⁵ of hemp and linen cloth belonging to the Ministry of Taxation in aid, to be paid back within ten years without interest. They were also exempted from 1000 *yang* of silver they had to pay the Ministry of Taxation, and if they were liable for corvée labour, they were

County of Hamgyŏng Province), Kyujanggak 16990. *Cheju mok ōmsain hyulchŏn chegŭp sŏngch'aek* 濟州牧揔死人恤典題給成冊 (Report on *Hyulchŏn* Given to Families of People Drowned on Cheju Island), Kyujanggak 16958.

32. In 1861, for example, the grain-loan interest was exempted for seventeen people who drowned in Chŏlla province. *Chŏllado Puan chibang Siktŏri ōmsain tŭng sinhwan t'anggam suhyo sŏngch'aek* 全羅道扶安地方食島里揔死人等身還薄減數爻成冊 (Report on Grain-Loan Repayment Exemptions for People in Sikto Village in the Puan Area of Chŏlla Province Drowned or Otherwise Killed by Calamity), Kyujanggak 17076. A practice criticised at the time was the continuous levying of the military cloth tax on dead people, called *paekkol chingp'o* 白骨徵布.

33. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 34:634a-b, 36:237a.

34. *Ibid.*, 43:152c; 43:169a.

35. A *tong* was a measurement unit for cloth amounting to 50 bolts (*p'il*), each bolt being approximately 24 metres.

exempted from this for one year.³⁶

In 1748, people who had lost property in a fire in Ŭnsan county were given 1 *sŏm* of millet each (reportedly according to a precedent of 1746).³⁷ As *hyulchŏn* was also bestowed upon those who had died in the fire, this indicates that the *hyulchŏn* aid now consisted of a package of relief measures. However, a family could only receive one form of *hyulchŏn*. If they actually qualified for two or more different forms of *hyulchŏn*, the officials choose the most appropriate type.³⁸

Just as with aid given in the case of bereavement, in the late eighteenth century the practice of compensating for the loss of property became more systemized, with continuously increasing numbers of people being granted aid. In 1763, aid was given when 270 houses were swept away and more than 300 hundred houses collapsed due to torrential rainfall in the capital. Later that year aid was also given in the Hosŏ region where more than 200 houses had been swept away and more than 400 collapsed.³⁹

As seen above, the principles for bestowing *hyulchŏn* for bereavement were discussed in late eighteenth century in the process of systemization. The same was the case for aid given to compensate for material losses. In 1787, the Mayor of Hansŏng, Yi Sungho told King Chŏngjo:

As for collapsed houses, following the example of fires, from early on only cases where five *k'an*⁴⁰ or more were destroyed have been reported. However, this summer, in accordance with the special benevolence, *hyulchŏn* has been given even if only one or even just a half *k'an* was destroyed. So, hoping to get lucky, people even report cases where maybe just a pillar has been damaged in a large tile-roofed house of several tens of *k'an*. There must be some rules to limit this, and in the future I would recommend that the standard procedure should be that only those cases should be reported where the whole house has been swept away by flooding or has completely collapsed, or where only a little is intact.⁴¹

The king's response to this was that the mayor shouldn't split hairs when it came

36. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 47:505b.

37. *Ibid.*, 43:287a.

38. Chŏng Yagyong 丁若鏞. *Mongmin simsŏ* 牧民心書 (Essays from the Heart on Governing the People), 6 vols., edited and translated by Tasan yŏn'guhoe (Seoul: Ch'angjak kwa Pip'yŏngsa, 1985), 2: 287.

39. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 44:139a, 44:141b.

40. A *k'an* was a measurement used for buildings, roughly equating to 180cm or the space between two pillars. At times it is also used more broadly for a "room."

41. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 45:661d.

to special royal orders. However, contrary to Yi Sungho's complaints, it seems that the rules stipulated that only houses completely destroyed were to be given aid, and in 1789 the king was rather disappointed that this was the practice followed.

Recent years haven't seen the kind of rain we have had this year. Furthermore, as the water level of the river has risen, this makes life even more difficult to endure for the people living by the river. There were originally rules for *hyulchŏn* stipulating that it should only be granted to houses in the capital and provinces that had been completely destroyed. Looking at the recent reports from the municipal authorities of the capital they have not divided the afflicted houses into classes, and have thus ignored those houses where little is intact and a lot has been destroyed. This year we shall not be hindered by such hair-splitting and I order that *hyulchŏn* shall be given to all afflicted poor houses, including those completely destroyed and those where more than half has been destroyed, and the aid shall be given according to such a classification.⁴²

As with cases of bereavement, it is difficult to get a picture from the chronicles of the size of the aid given to compensate for material losses. The few cases that do mention the quantity given indicate that it amounted to one *sŏm*, and that often tax exemptions were also given.⁴³ The compensations stipulated by the *Man'gi yoram* were as follows:

Table 2. Compensation for material losses⁴⁴

Type	Compensation
<i>In the capital</i>	
Collapsed house, completely	2 <i>yang</i>
Collapsed house, more than half	1 <i>p'il</i> of high quality hemp cloth
<i>In the provinces</i>	
Houses destroyed by fire, large households	9 <i>mal</i> of rice
Houses destroyed by fire, medium households	8 <i>mal</i> of rice
Houses destroyed by fire, small households	7 <i>mal</i> of rice
Houses destroyed by fire, minor households	6 <i>mal</i> of rice
Houses destroyed by fire, single households	5 <i>mal</i> of rice
Houses destroyed by flood, completely (<i>p'yosil</i> 漂失)	1 <i>sŏm</i> of unhulled rice
Houses destroyed by flood, (<i>p'yoap</i> 漂壓)	7 <i>mal</i> of unhulled rice
Houses destroyed by flood, (<i>p'yot'oe</i> 漂頽)	7 <i>mal</i> and 5 <i>toe</i> of unhulled rice

Source: *Man'gi yoram*, 194.

42. Ibid., 46:40d.

43. Ibid., 43:287a. and 44:247d-248a.

Special orders to hand out extra aid (*pyŏl hyulchŏn* 別恤典) could also be given in cases of material losses. According to the *Man'gi yoram*, in the case of houses destroyed by fire, large and medium houses should be given one extra *sŏm* of unhulled rice and small and minor houses 10 *mal*. All four categories should also be given 1 *p'il* of cloth.⁴⁵

The compensations stipulated by the *Man'gi yoram* were the backbone of a system that was modified when executed in the provinces. How this was done can be seen in a case from Ch'ŏngdo county in Kyŏngsang province in 1800. In the fifth month of that year, twenty-one houses were destroyed by heavy rain. The *Man'gi yoram* did not differentiate between houses of different size when giving compensation for flood damage, but the magistrate of Ch'ŏngdo felt a need to do this and seven houses that were completely destroyed were given compensation "according to the precedence for houses destroyed by fire" according to size: six *mal* of rice for houses of three or four *k'an*, and seven *mal* for houses of five *k'an*.⁴⁶

The owners of all twenty-one houses were furthermore also given materials for the repair or reconstruction of their houses as well as four *mal* of barley each. For houses only partially destroyed, empty straw sacks were given (*kongsŏm* 空石),⁴⁷ and houses completely destroyed were also given timber, rafter wood (*yŏnmok* 椽木), and straw for the roofs (*kaech'o* 盖草), all to be collected at the county office.⁴⁸

Later in the nineteenth century it seems that one *sŏm* became standard for houses destroyed by flood, regardless of the classification system detailed in the *Man'gi yoram*. In 1856, 165 families in Hamgyŏng province were given this

44. The length of a *p'il* was approximately 24 metres; the volume of a *mal* was approximately 6 liters; and the volume of a *toe* was approximately 0.6 liters.

45. *Man'gi yoram*, 195. In *Mongmin simsŏ* Chŏng Yagyong referred to a text called *Piguk yoram* according to which the aid given for destroyed houses would differ according to the scale of the disaster. If less than 100 houses had been destroyed the aid was seven *mal* of rice for a large house, six for medium size, and five for a small. If more than 100 houses had been destroyed, however, the aid was nine *mal* of rice for a large house, eight for medium size, and seven for a small. *Mongmin simsŏ*, 287.

46. One person also died in this case and his family was given one *sŏm* of unhulled rice, just as the *Man'gi yoram* stipulated. *Osallok* 鰲山錄 (Osan Records), Kawai Collection. Kyoto University Library, 144-148.

47. Empty straw sacks were often handed out to protect people from cold, see for instance *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 41:51a, 41:303c, and 45:268d (when this concern was shown to prisoners); or to construct contemporary shelters, see for example *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 47:624d.

48. *Osallok*, 148-153.

compensation (one *sŏm* of millet) even though the damage was classified as *p'yot'oe* (and they thus should have been given seven *mal* and five *toe*), and the same was the case for twelve families in 1865.⁴⁹ In 1841 in the same province, this compensation was given to forty-seven families whose houses had been destroyed, following a classification not listed in the *Man'gi yoram*, and to eighteen families whose houses had been crushed by snow (*sŏrap* 雪壓).⁵⁰ From the above we can see that the compensation for lost property that had become a common practice by mid-eighteenth century was continued and maintained into the nineteenth century.

Tax exemptions

Finally, tax exemptions were also given in the wake of calamities. As the concept of *hyulchŏn* had been broadened to encompass the general well-being of the populace, such tax exemptions were discussed in terms of “royal compassion,” even though they were not part of the actual system. Given the frequency of severe crop failures in Late Chosŏn, the state had developed an elaborate system for land-tax exemptions,⁵¹ and thus, it was taxes levied on individuals that were discussed in terms of *hyulchŏn*, as can be seen in discussions held during a severe drought in 1652, in which Vice Royal Advisor Min Ŭnghyŏng told the king: “The crop failure is more serious in the Honam region than anywhere else, and *hyulchŏn* must be bestowed so that the people can regain a stable life. The land tax might be difficult to revise, but at the least we should exempt them from the tribute tax. Only after that can the lives of the people be secured.”⁵²

Reductions in corvée labour, another individually levied tax, were also often granted in the name of “royal compassion.” In the fifth month of 1665 Chief Censor Yi Kyŏnggŏk told King Hyŏnjong:

The whole of Ch'ungch'ŏng province has been blessed with a reduction of corvée labour, even the counties up in the mountains that haven't been afflicted. Only Kyŏnggi province has received no *hyulchŏn*. I think that it would be proper that

49. *Hamgyŏngdo Kapsan; Hamgyŏngdo Kyŏngsŏngbu*.

50. *Hamgyŏngdo Anbyŏn*.

51. For studies on the system of land-tax exemptions, see Yi Ch'ŏlsŏng, *17, 18 segi chŏnjŏng unyŏngnon kwa chŏnse chedo yŏn'gu* (Studies in Theories on Land Administration and the System of Land Taxation in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries) (Seoul: Tosŏ ch'ulp'an sŏnin, 2003); and Anders Karlsson, “Famine, Finance and Political Power: Crop Failure and Land-Tax Exemption in Late Eighteenth-Century Chosŏn Korea,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, no. 4 (2005): 552-592.

52. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 35:548b.

the counties in Kyŏnggi should receive a reduction of corvée labour. If worries arise that the exemptions are too comprehensive and that there aren't enough funds to cover it, I suggest that some of the reduction from the mountain areas of Ch'ungch'ŏng should be transferred to Kyŏnggi.⁵³

As we will see in greater detail in the case of Chŏng Kŏnjo's mission, *hyulchŏn* was given as a package of relief measures, among which tax exemptions played an important role. In the seventh month of 1672, for example, tax reductions were given to peasants in Ch'ungch'ŏng province who were afflicted by flooding, together with *hyulchŏn* for those that had died.⁵⁴

Clearly showing how the concept of *hyulchŏn* had changed to encompass the general well-being of the people, tax exemptions were given in the name of "royal compassion" even in the absence of calamity, as a way to rectify unfair taxation. In the eighth month of 1673, for example, *hyulchŏn* was given in the form of tax reductions to the inhabitants of five counties in Kyŏnggi province as a reward for the hard corvée labour they had to endure.⁵⁵ The way in which dealing with unfair taxation was seen as a form of "royal compassion" can also be seen in the following discussion from 1664:

Inspector-General Chŏng Chihwa among others presented a memorial to the king.

[...] The enforcement of land surveys is a measure to ensure the people an equal burden of corvée labour, but complaints that the grading of land has been lowered while the taxes have increased are already more severe than when the grading of land was raised. [...] As even devastated land is being taxed, how could the impoverished peasants that have lost their means of livelihood fail to feel resentment? The efforts to search through all families and grab all able-bodied men were a result of the fact that wealthy families would hide and protect them within their fences. But the magistrates do not abide by the original intentions of the court and enlist all the brothers of poor families that live under one roof sharing one bowl of rice or by force enrol poor scholars on the military rosters even though they don't have any male slaves [upon whom it could be levied]. So both scholars and commoners feel this as a bitter insult. As we feel that the proper thing to do would be to bestow sufficient *hyulchŏn*, in this there must be flexibility.⁵⁶

53. Ibid., 37:447a.

54. Ibid., 38:121c.

55. Ibid., 38:156b.

56. Ibid., 36:431d-432a.

Nineteenth-century disaster relief

Whereas the late eighteenth century has been called a “renaissance” period for the Chosŏn dynasty, owing to the competent rule of the strong and able King Chŏngjo, the early nineteenth century has been depicted as the beginning of the decline that finally led to the demise of the kingdom in the early twentieth century. Since King Sunjo (r. 1800-1834) was underage when he was enthroned, Queen Dowager Chŏngsun administered state affairs from behind the scenes, and the young king’s father-in-law Kim Chosun (1765-1831) managed to gather almost all political power into the hands of his line of the Andong Kim descent group. Although the in-law family in power changed over time, this was a phenomenon that characterized political life throughout the nineteenth century, since all the kings enthroned in that century were either minors or relatively young.⁵⁷ These dominant in-law-families are said to have “lost the reform mindedness” of the previous century and allegedly displayed a “lack of understanding for the sufferings of rural communities.”⁵⁸ Hampered by “outdated notions,” they lacked a proper understanding of the social circumstances of the time and just “lived comfortably in their own closed world.”⁵⁹

However, in the case of disaster relief, as we shall see, many policies implemented by Chŏngjo were continued in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century admittedly saw a general decline in the relief administration, but this was not so much a result of moral decay as of strained state finances after the serious crop failure and famine problems in the periods 1809-1815 and 1832-1838, in turn due to the climatic circumstances of the early nineteenth

57. For a detailed treatment of nineteenth century politics and the centralization of political power, see Han’guk yŏksa yŏn’guhoe, *Chosŏn chŏngch’isa, 1800-1863* (Political History of Chosŏn, 1800-1863), 2 vols. (Seoul: Ch’ŏngnyŏnsa, 1990).

58. Han Yŏngu, *Tasi ch’annŭn uri yŏksa* (Our History Rediscovered) (Seoul: Kyŏngsewŏn, 1997), 394.

59. O Such’ang, “Sedo chŏngch’i ŭi sŏngnip kwa unyŏng kujo” (The Formation of In-Law Politics and its Operational Structure), in *Han’guksa* 32 (Kwach’ŏn: Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wiwŏnhoe, 1997), 224. In this text O Such’ang to a certain extent provides a reevaluation of the in-law politics of the early nineteenth century. He criticises earlier views for their understanding of the politics of the period as crippled due to the influence of the in-law families. To see the cause of the problems of the period in such a deviation from the ideal of absolute royal power is, according to him, to apply “medieval standards” (*chungsejŏgin kijun*) and instead, a structural understanding of these problems is needed, placing them in the long-term development of the Chosŏn dynasty.

century.⁶⁰ The *hyulchŏn* system, which required far fewer funds than the famine relief system, was maintained through much of the century, though.

Comforting and Admonishing Officials

As we have seen above, from the second half of the eighteenth century an elaborate system to deal with the effects of natural calamities had developed, including supporting those bereaved, compensating for material losses, and granting tax reductions. From around the same time, the state began to dispatch Comforting and Admonishing Officials from the capital to coordinate these relief measures. The duties of these officials are described in a royal edict from 1781, when such an official was sent to help disaster-struck people in Kyŏngsang province for the first time.

In that year the southeastern province had experienced a drought followed by severe flooding. According to the governor's report more than ten thousand households suffered collapsed property and several hundred boats had been destroyed. The king ordered *hyulchŏn* to be bestowed upon those who had drowned, material compensation to be given for collapsed property, and reduction and exemption given on different taxes levied on individuals.

He also ordered a Comforting and Admonishing Official to be sent. His duty was to investigate the situation and visit the most afflicted areas in person, evaluate the work performed by magistrates and report any misconduct, make plans for measures to restore people's livelihoods and for future famine relief, make estimations for future land-taxation, gather those afflicted by the calamity to relay the king's compassion by reading out his royal message (*yunŭm* 綸音) to the people of the province, and execute the relief measures. He was also supposed to investigate the general conditions of local administration and correct

60. Mun Yongsik, *Chosŏn hugi chinjŏng*, ch. 3. Yi Hoch'ŏl and Pak Kŭnp'il have shown how the grain reserves held by central government dropped fifty percent after the severe spell of crop failure 1809-1815. See Yi Hoch'ŏl and Pak Kŭnp'il, "19 segich'o Chosŏn ūi kiho pyŏndong kwa nongŏp wigi" (Climatic Change and Agricultural Crisis in Nineteenth-Century Chosŏn, 1799-1825), *Chosŏn sidaesa hakpo* 2 (1997): 123-192. Sŏ Han'gyo has also stressed the continuation of relief aid in the early nineteenth century. His work, however, is framed within the "breakdown of the feudal order," and he still considers the in-law politics to have brought ruin to the political order. Whereas he sees the famine relief as a way to prop up a failing system characterised by "structural contradictions," the position of this study is that the early nineteenth century rather must be seen as a continuation of the advancements in Confucian statecraft of the eighteenth century. See Sŏ Han'gyo, "19 segi chinyul chŏngch'aek kwa napsok chedo ūi ch'ui" (Trends in Nineteenth-Century Relief Aid Policies and the *Napsok* System), *Yŏksa kyoyuk nonchip* 25, no. 1 (2000): 611-644.

Table 6. Comforting and Admonishing Officials dispatched 1800-1863⁶¹

Year	Official	Province	Disaster
1804 (Sunjo)	Junior Secretary Hong Sökchu	Kangwŏn	fire
1804	Yi Sanghwan	P'yŏngan	fire
1809	Royal Secretary Pak Chonghun	P'yŏngan/Hamgyŏng	fire
1814	Royal Secretary Sŏ Ch'unbu	Kyŏngsang	flooding
1819	Chŏng Wŏnyong	Ch'ungch'ŏng	flooding
1821	Chŏng Wŏnyong	P'yŏngan	flooding/epidemics
1827	Sŏngch'ŏn Magistrate Cho Kiyŏng	P'yŏngan	flooding
1829	Kim Yŏngsun	Hamgyŏng	flooding
1832	Sŏ Yŏmsun	P'yŏngan	???
1834	Yŏngbyŏn Magistrate Yi Kŭngu	P'yŏngan	flooding
1845 (Hŏnjong)	Kim Konghyŏn	P'yŏngan	flooding
1851 (Ch'ŏlchong)	Sŏngch'ŏn Magistrate Cho Yŏnhŭng	P'yŏngan	flooding
1851	Koksan Magistrate Hong Sunmok	Hwanghae	flooding
1852	Yŏnghŭng Magistrate Pak Sŭnghŭi	Hamgyŏng	fire
1854	Sunch'ŏn Magistrate Sin Sŏkhŭi	Chŏlla	flooding
1856	Yangju Magistrate Kim Yŏngjak	Kyŏnggi	fire
1856	Royal Secretary Sin Sŏkhŭi	Kyŏngsang	flooding
1856	Chilgok Magistrate Chŏng Sŏkcho	Hwanghae	flooding
1857	Sunch'ŏn Magistrate Yi Sŭngik	Chŏlla	flooding
1857	Kyŏngju Magistrate Yun Haengmo	Kyŏngsang	flooding

61. Records of Chŏng Wŏnyong's 鄭元容 two missions can be found in his collected works. Chŏng Wŏnyong. *Kyŏngsanjip* 經山集 (Collected Works of Kyŏngsan), Han'guk yŏkdae munjip ch'ongsŏ (Seoul: Kyŏngin Munhwasa, 1999), 280-312.

Table 6. Continued

Year	Official	Province	Disaster
1859	Sŏngch'ŏn Magistrate Chŏng Kŏnjo	P'yŏngan	flooding
1860	Ich'ŏn Magistrate Nam Chongsun	Kangwŏn	fire
1861	Officer Cho Ch'ae	Hamgyŏng	flooding
1862	Sŏngch'ŏn Magistrate Sŏ Sŭngbo	P'yŏngan	flooding
1863	Koksan Magistrate Yun T'aegyŏng	Hwanghae	flooding

Source: *Ilsŏngnok* and *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*.

any malpractices in legal enforcement, taxation, and granary management.⁶²

In the nineteenth century it was common practice to send Comforting and Admonishing Officials when a region was struck by a large-scale disaster. Table 6 lists officials sent during the reigns of Sunjo, Hŏnjong and Ch'ŏlchong.

The predominant cause was flooding, but sometimes officials were also sent when an area was struck by fire. It is interesting to note that despite the alleged administrative deterioration of the period we see no decline in this system. Rather, the reign of Ch'ŏlchong (r. 1849-1863) saw its most frequent use. We can see that magistrates already in the province were used, rather than sending someone from the capital. This seems to have been institutionalized in the use of magistrates from certain counties, for example, Sunch'ŏn in Chŏlla and Sŏngch'ŏng in P'yŏngan. The following case of Chŏng Kŏnjo's mission in P'yŏngan province in 1859 is thus undoubtedly representative of how disaster relief was performed in the nineteenth century.

The summer of 1859

Given the trying natural conditions of nineteenth-century Korea, the summer of 1859 was by no means extraordinarily wet or affected by harsh weather. Still, all through the summer months, reports kept coming in from the provinces reporting that houses had been destroyed and people killed. At the beginning of the seventh month, six people drowned and 399 houses were destroyed due to heavy rainfall in Hamgyŏng province, and ten people drowned in stormy weather in P'yŏngan and Hamgyŏng provinces. In Ch'ungh'ŏng province

62. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, 45:263a.

seventeen houses were destroyed because of continuous heavy rainfall. At the beginning of the eighth month rain destroyed eighteen houses in Ch'ŏlla province. The same month, and due to the same causes, eight people drowned or were crushed in Kyŏngsang province, thirty-one houses were destroyed in Kangwŏn province, and thirteen people drowned and twenty-seven houses were destroyed in Hamgyŏng province.⁶³ The most severe flooding, however, occurred in P'yŏngan province, starting late in the sixth month. The first report from the governor of the province, Sŏ Chaesun, reached the capital on the ninth day of the seventh month, detailing that 273 houses had been destroyed in Sŏngch'ŏn county.⁶⁴

Government response

When reports of calamities and requests for *hyulchŏn* reached the central government, these issues were discussed at royal audiences, as it was the king who had the final say in the matter. On the twenty-second day of the seventh month the Border Defence Command sent the following memorial to the king.

As for the special relief to be given to the families in Sŏngch'ŏn and other counties discussed at yesterday's audience, we humbly accept the royal order for relief aid to be given. The concern Your Highness shows for the people is highly moving. We do not know what the governor and magistrates have been doing so far, but seeing how autumn approaches, every day is now valuable. The reason for not sending a Comforting and Admonishing Official is to avoid the corruption this would evoke. Instead we have now given magistrates orders to visit all villages in person and to spread the content of Your instructions. Following the examples of Comforting and Admonishing Officials they should divide afflicted households into heavily, moderately and lightly affected, and support them with official money. After that the governor's office should add more help in reconstructing their houses, so that they can continue to live a settled life. Only after this is done can morals be corrected. This should be done before the autumn harvest. The governor should discuss with the magistrates how to alleviate corvée labour.⁶⁵

63. *Ilŏngnok* 62:824, 837, 850, 858-859, 861, 872, 875, 880, 894, 895, 897.

64. *Ibid.*, 62:800. This was not the first time that summer Sŏ Chaesun had to plea for the inhabitants of Sŏngch'ŏn. Ironically, just a week earlier the court had received a report from him relating that sixteen houses had been destroyed by fire. *Ilŏngnok*, 62:758. On the seventeenth day of the seventh month the court received a second report stating that due to heavy rain 694 houses had been destroyed in the counties of Sŏngch'ŏn, Kangdong and P'yŏngyang. *Ilŏngnok*, 62:813-814. Furthermore, on the first day of the eighth month the governor once again reported that the counties of Yangdŏk and Pyŏktong 174 houses had been destroyed and thirty-four people killed. *Ilŏngnok*, 62:835.

65. *Pibyŏnſa tŭngnok* 備邊司謄錄 (Records of the Border Defense Command), 27 vols., reprint

As we have seen above, when giving relief aid in the form of *hyulchŏn*, the central government often sent Comforting and Admonishing Officials. However, as this not only disrupted provincial administration, but was also very costly, in this case central government initially suggested the use of existing administrative channels, ordering magistrates and the governor to investigate the situation and provide relief aid. After the report of the first day of the eighth month however, with reportedly more than 1,500 families affected and such a great loss in human lives, King Ch'ŏlchong felt that more firm action was needed.

I have listened attentively to all the reports of natural disasters so far coming from the counties of P'yŏngan province. Now, in these two counties [Yangdŏk and Pyŏktong] a large number of people have drowned or been crushed by collapsing houses. I pity the poor people in these counties with their ragged clothes and hollow faces, and I can vividly imagine the uneasy sight and wailing of those deprived of their houses. I am greatly shocked and feel immense pity. If extraordinary measures are not taken to help them, on whom can the people rely in the future to care for their lives? Thinking about this I can find no peace and stay awake at night. Chŏng, the magistrate of Sŏngch'ŏn, is to be notified by spoken orders that he has been designated Comforting and Admonishing Official. First of all he shall travel to each part of the afflicted counties. As for the method of giving people somewhere to live and providing them with relief, he should discuss this with the governor and they should come to a conclusion. If every man and woman is able to get somewhere to live, that embodies the benevolence of the state.⁶⁶

Chŏng Kŏnjo, who had been dispatched to Sŏngch'ŏn the previous year, was thus given the duty of travelling around the area, both to estimate the severity of the situation and to hand out aid to those in need in consultation with the governor of the province.

Hyulchŏn in action:

Chŏng Kŏnjo's activities as Comforting and Admonishing Official

Chŏng Kŏnjo would travel for slightly more than a month, from the middle of the eighth month to the middle of the ninth month, passing through thirteen counties and estimating the extent of the damage in the five counties mentioned in the reports: Yangdŏk, Pyŏktong, P'yŏngyang, Kangdong, and Sŏngch'ŏn.

(Seoul: Kuksa P'yŏnch'an Wiwŏnhoe, 1959-1960), 25: 393b.

66. *Wiyusa tŭngnok*, 1.

Since an important aspect of his duties was to represent royal power and maintain social order, he needed to travel with a large entourage befitting his social position and displaying royal authority. The road document (*nomun* 路文) for the first leg of his journey entitled him to an entourage of thirty-three men, including palanquin bearers, a parasol holder, and a person to lead the ceremonial horse. This document also detailed what county should pay for the expenses for food and accommodation at each stage of his journey.⁶⁷

By reading Chŏng Kŏnjo's records we can see that upon arriving in these five counties he would first gather the calamity-stricken people in the yard in front of the county office and admonish them, informing "the stupid men and women" of how much the king pitied them. One of the biggest concerns for central government in times of natural disaster was peasants leaving their villages, which resulted not only in a volatile group of vagrants, but also made it more difficult for the area to return normal agriculture and a restored in-flow of taxes. So for an official like Chŏng Kŏnjo, admonishing peasants to stay in their villages was just as important as comforting them with aid.

Chŏng Kŏnjo then received detailed reports on the situation in the counties, on the basis of which he later suggested relief aid in consultation with the governor. When he later reported his findings to the governor, he confirmed to the throne the number from the initial report of thirty-four people dead. As for houses completely destroyed, he reported 1,144 (the initial reports had mentioned 1,141), to which he added 397 houses that had been partially destroyed.⁶⁸

As seen above, the central government could give aid either directly in the form of material compensation or in the form of tax reductions. The direct aid given in northern P'yŏngan in 1859 reportedly amounted to two *yang* and five *chŏn* per household.⁶⁹ With roughly 1,500 affected households and a reported cost for this aid amounting to 3,171 *yang*,⁷⁰ the figures more or less add up. Whereas the *Man'gi yoram* stipulated that aid in the countryside should be given in grain, this aid was given in cash, and it also slightly exceeded the amount in cash stipulated for the capital.

Furthermore, additional aid was given in Yangdŏk and Pyŏktong, the two most severely hit counties, and the only counties where people had reportedly died. This additional aid was given on a scale shown in Table 7.

67. Ibid., 6-7.

68. Ibid., 61.

69. Ibid., 38.

70. Ibid., 60.

Table 7. Additional financial compensation given in Yangdŏk and Pyŏktong

Damage	Compensation/case	Yangdŏk cases	Pyŏktong cases
Flood damage, large	4 <i>yang</i>	2 (families)	
Flood damage, medium	3 <i>yang</i>	1	
Flood damage, small	2,5 <i>yang</i>	37	
Collapsed property, large	4 <i>yang</i>	7	
Collapsed property, medium	3 <i>yang</i>	5	
Collapsed property, small	2,5 <i>yang</i>	59	66
Death by drowning	3 <i>yang</i>	6 (people)	
Crushed to death	3 <i>yang</i>	16	12

Source: *Wiyusa tŭngnok*.

The king approved of this scheme of financial compensation,⁷¹ and in Yangdŏk, with 22 deaths and 111 families with damaged property, 360 *yang* in cash was thus handed out. In Pyŏktong, 201 *yang* was handed out with twelve people crushed to death and 66 families with minor damages caused by collapsed property. So, in all, 561 extra *yang* was handed out in these two counties. The total amount given out in financial compensation thus amounted to 3,732 *yang*, and central government rice belonging to the Ever-Normal Office (*sangpy'ŏnggok* 常平穀) was sold to raise the funds needed for this mission.⁷²

What, then, was the practical value of this compensation? It is extremely difficult to estimate the general value of the currency of the time, but according to one study the approximate value of one *yang* in the nineteenth century was three *mal* of rice, approximately eighteen liters.⁷³ Accordingly, the general compensation given to all affected households in the area would equal forty-five liters of rice, and the additional aid given in Yangdŏk and Pyŏktong between forty-five and seventy-two liters.⁷⁴ If we treat this in terms of survival, as these were times of natural disaster for the people in these counties, according to the early nineteenth century administrative handbook on relief aid, *Hwangjŏng*

71. *Pibyŏnsa tŭngnok*, 25:416c-d.

72. *Wiyusa tŭngnok*, 65.

73. It is difficult to evaluate the value of a *yang* as it varied over time and between areas. But a rough estimation for the nineteenth century is that it was worth approximately three *mal* (eighteen liters) of rice. Paek Sŭngjong, *Han'guk sahoesa yŏn'gu* (Studies in the Social History of Korea) (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1996).

74. The fact that rice prices increased in times of crop failure must be considered when dealing with financial compensation in times of calamity, but 1859 was not a year of large-scale crop failure, the year is not even listed among the years characterised by natural calamities. Yi Sangbae, "18-19 segi chayŏn chaehae."

taegae 荒政大概 (An Outline of Famine Relief), when handing out relief food, grown men should be given 0.3 liters per day.⁷⁵ Compensation amounting to two and a half *yang* would thus provide this minimum food ration for approximately five months and four *yang* for approximately eight months.

However, it is doubtful whether the figure of 0.3 liters in *Hwangjǒng taegae* really was sufficient, and Chǒng Yagyong as well as a local account from the eighteenth-century recommended instead 0.6 liters.⁷⁶ Calculated on the basis of this daily ration, the compensation should have provided food for an adult for between two and a half and four months.⁷⁷

These calculations are of course crippled by the fact that rice wasn't the staple grain in P'yŏngan province, but has been chosen here since that is the grain for which we have the most accurate price information, and this exercise has just been an attempt to show the approximate value of the compensation given. The larger quantity of other grains needed to feed an adult would be compensated for by the fact that they had a lower price.

Although private charity doesn't seem to have been as developed in Chosŏn as in Qing China,⁷⁸ private individuals would often contribute to relief aid efforts. In northern P'yŏngan province in the summer of 1859, Cho Ilbyŏn, the magistrate of Pyŏktong, privately handed out eighty-seven *sŏm* of rice and 720 *yang* to families stricken by disaster. An inhabitant of Sŏngch'ŏn, Yi Kisang, voluntarily contributed 2,500 *yang* to the central government's aid efforts, and another named Hong Chunju contributed 2,000 *yang*.⁷⁹ Unless this money went into the wrong pockets, disaster-stricken people were thus given private help that exceeded the help provided by central government. But it must be remembered that even though this was "private" help, it was either given by a magistrate, the representative of central government, or channelled through the bureaucracy, thus still creating goodwill for central government and helping to maintain social order.

75. "Hwangjǒng taegae," in *Sajǒnggo* 四政考 (A Survey of the Four Administrations), Kawai Collection copy, Kyoto University Library, 2.

76. Ku Wanhoe, "Chosŏn hugi ūi chinhyul," 86; Kim Kyŏngt'ae, "Tasan ūi chinhyul yanggok sugŭmnon" (Tasan's Theories on Supply and Demand of Relief Grain), In *Tasan ūi chŏngch'i kyŏngje sasang* (Seoul: Changjak kwa Pip'ŏngsa, 1990), 259.

77. Based on daily provisions for soldiers and other government directives, Mun Yongsik has also come to the conclusion that at least 0.6 liters would have been needed for an adult. Mun Yongsik, *Chosŏn hugi chinjŏng*, 114-115.

78. William T. Rowe, *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796-1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 91-134.

79. *Wiyusa tŭngnok*, 66.

Table 8. Calamity land (*chaegyŏl*)

County	Swept-away fields (<i>p'orakchhŏn</i>)	Silt-covered fields (<i>poksajhŏn</i>)	Total
P'yŏngyang	0	0	0
Kangdong	10,64,7	244,70,7	255,35,4
Shŏngch'hŏn	66,93,4	21,88,6	88,82
Yangdhŏk	169,23	47,67	216,90
Pyhŏktong	2,88,8	0	2,88,8
Total	249,69,9	314,26,3	563,96,2

Units: *kyŏl*, *pu*, *sok*.

Source: *Wiyusa thŭngnok*.

The reason why the two private individuals gave their help in the form of contributions to central government efforts rather than giving it directly to the people would of course be to distinguish themselves, and they were also later praised by the king.⁸⁰ In relation to this, it doesn't seem to have been a coincidence that both private individuals who voluntarily contributed money came from Sŏngch'ŏn, Chŏng Kŏnjo's county.

After estimating the damage to farmland in the five counties, Chŏng Kŏnjo and the governor requested that calamity land status be granted, which exempted this land from tax, as shown in Table 8. As fields swept away by the flood had literally disappeared, it was requested that they be removed from the tax registers permanently, and as for silt-covered land it was asked that it be treated as calamity land until it had been cleared for cultivation. In the end, the central government decided that silt-covered lands should be given calamity-land status and would be returned to the taxable category next year, while swept-away fields were, of course, also given calamity land status, but the decision on whether they would be removed permanently from the tax registers was postponed until spring next year, after it had been seen whether they could be restored to agricultural use.⁸¹

Given that these tax exemptions constituted less than ten percent of the total *kyŏl* in each county (nine percent for Kangdong and eight percent for Yangdhŏk, the two counties with largest tax exemptions⁸²) it might not seem that much, but

80. *Pibyŏnsa tŭngnok*, 25:416c-d.

81. *Ibid.*

82. These figures are based on the total *kyŏl* given for these two counties in *Kwansŏ ūpchi* 關西邑誌 (Local Gazetteer of P'yŏngan Province), facsimile, in *Han'guk chiriji ch'ongsŏ ūpchi* 15 P'yŏngandop'yŏn (3) (Seoul: Asea Munhwasa, 1986), 360, 437.

Table 9. Grain-loan interest reductions

County	Rice	Millet	Sorghum	Soybeans	Total
P'yŏngyang	0, 6, 6, 9, 0	5, 10, 2, 2, 0	1, 13, 1, 5, 0	0, 2, 5, 5, 0	8, 2, 6, 1, 0
Kangdong		14, 6, 2, 0, 0	2, 6, 8, 0, 0	12, 2, 1, 6, 0	29, 0, 1, 6, 0
Sŏngch'ŏn		127, 3, 3, 4, 0			127, 3, 3, 4, 0
Yangdŏk		23, 6, 0, 0, 0			23, 6, 0, 0, 0
Pyŏktong		7, 8, 1, 2, 4			7, 8, 1, 2, 4
Total	0, 6, 6, 9, 0	178, 3, 8, 8, 4	4, 4, 9, 5, 0	12, 4, 7, 1, 0	195, 5, 2, 3, 4

Units: *sŏm*, *mal*, *toe*, *hop*, *chak*.

Source: *Wiyusa tŭngnok*.

compared with what was usually given, even in the allegedly benevolent late eighteenth century, it is a respectable amount.⁸³ Two entries in *Hyejŏng yoram* 惠政要覽 (Survey of Benevolent Administration) give the amount of *kyŏl* exempted in P'yŏngan province in the late 18th century as 313 *kyŏl* for 1786 and 418 *kyŏl* for 1794.⁸⁴ Furthermore, if we look at annual total tax exemptions and not individual instances of relief aid, in the last decade of the eighteenth century tax exemption was given in seven of the ten years, and the average for those years was 1,542 *kyŏl*,⁸⁵ which means that 563 *kyŏl* given on one occasion to only four counties in 1859 is a considerable amount.

Finally, Chŏng Kŏnjo and the governor also suggested that interest on grain-loans (*hwanmo* 還耗) should be reduced in the five afflicted counties, as detailed in Table 9, and the king also gave his consent to this form of aid.⁸⁶

The total sum of 195 *sŏm* equals approximately 17,550 liters, and as we can see, rice played a minor role in this part of the country where agriculture was dominated by millet. It is conspicuous that sixty-five percent of these reductions were requested for Sŏngch'ŏn, Chŏng Kŏnjo's own county. Could it be that he tried to ease the situation in his own county with the loan-grain system, one of the most problematic aspects of Late Chosŏn provincial administration? These reductions could, of course, be used to cover up the all too common deficits in this system.⁸⁷

83. *Kyŏl* was the unit of land taxation in Chosŏn. It was a fixed yield-value and the area that made up one *kyŏl* would vary according to the quality of the land.

84. *Hyejŏng yoram*, facsimile (Seoul: Pŏpchech'ŏ, 1980), 412, 459.

85. This calculation is based on figures given in *T'akchi chŏnbugo* 度支田賦考 (Survey of Taxes and Tributes), 2 vols., facsimile (Seoul: Yŏgang Ch'ulp'ansa, 1986), 2:21-45.

86. *Pibyŏnsa tŭngnok*, 25:416c-d.

87. By the mid-nineteenth century many granaries in this system were more or less empty. In

Concluding remarks

This study has detailed the development of the *hyulchŏn* system, from being a measure designed to honour the death of high officials to encompassing a variety of measures to help people struck by natural disaster, including material compensation and tax reductions. It was systemized in the late eighteenth century and clearly defined for the first time with the *Man'gi yoram* of 1808. Despite the alleged administrative decay of the nineteenth century, this system continued to help people stricken by disaster, and in times of major catastrophes the government dispatched Comforting and Admonishing Officials to supervise the aid.

If we look at the *Yukchŏn chorye* 六典條例 (Regulations of the Six Codes), the administrative handbook completed in 1866, the system was more or less intact in the late nineteenth century. The only change was that the aid given for collapsed houses in the capital had been increased to three *yang* for completely destroyed houses and was given in money (two *yang*) instead of cloth for partially destroyed houses (this was now also bestowed on houses where less than half had been destroyed).⁸⁸

This indicates that the picture of nineteenth century administrative decay needs to be modified. Regardless of the moral quality of those in positions of power, the bureaucracy seems to have fulfilled its duties, as can be seen in the case of Chŏng Kŏnjo's mission to northern P'yŏngan province in 1859. The inhabitants in the counties he visited were given substantive aid in the form of tax exemptions, reductions in grain-loan interest and direct aid in the form of money. Even though this wasn't enough to fully compensate for their losses, it might have been sufficient to show the goodwill of royal power and the central government, and to make it easier for the disaster-stricken people to stay in their villages and resume agriculture when conditions so allowed, thus fulfilling the most urgent task for central power: the maintenance of social order and securing of tax income.

Kyŏnggi and Ch'ungch'ŏng provinces more than ninety percent of the grain in the records were in fact missing. In P'yŏngan province this figure was sixty-four percent. This was mainly due to low-level corruption by the clerks in charge of the system, but also to the extensive relief aid programs of the early nineteenth century. Mun Yongsik, *Chosŏn hugi chinjŏng*, 251; Chang Tongp'yo, *Chosŏn hugi chibang chaejŏng yŏn'gu* (Studies in the Provincial Financial Administration of Late Chosŏn) (Seoul: Kukhak Charyowŏn, 1999).

88. *Yukchŏn chorye*, Kyujanggak charyo ch'ongsŏ pŏpchŏnp'yŏn (Seoul: Seoul Taehakkyo Kyujanggak 1999), 1: 502-504.

Doubts might be raised as to whether this aid really ultimately reached the people for whom it was intended. There is no way of knowing this, but if we disregard the perfunctory accusations of nineteenth-century moral decay, and bear in mind the suggestion made by Ku Wanhoe that relief aid in the nineteenth century in fact might have helped to ease social tension,⁸⁹ there is no reason why we should assume that it didn't, unless sources or research results would indicate otherwise.

This study hopes to constitute a small part in a less judgemental revaluation of nineteenth-century Chosŏn dynasty administration, and argues that the reason for the general decline in relief aid in this century was not so much a result of moral decay as of strained state finances. On the contrary, the moral climate of the Chosŏn dynasty rather ensured that some form of relief aid continued to be provided. In a society where it was crucial for both kings and bureaucrats to establish their moral credentials, relief aid provided a good opportunity for them to distinguish themselves. We must not underestimate the power of ideology in Late Chosŏn and the importance of moral acts. Even though the yangban class as such was powerful enough to be arrogant and act arbitrarily, when it came to individual members or smaller groups of the class, they were to a certain extent trapped by their own ideology and the momentum of administrative practices. Magistrates were evaluated, secret inspectors dispatched, and the severe competition within this class meant that any apparent lack of moral qualities could be criticized by rival groups or individuals.

We can thus imagine that Chŏng Kŏnjo was delighted to be able to distinguish himself in helping the suffering people, especially as it wasn't he or his county that would have to bear the cost. Hence the elated spirit of his poetry composition and the use of the noble art of self-praise through self-disparagement: "how could this unworthy official be of assistance to the royal compassion?"

89. Ku Wanhoe, "Chosŏn hugi ūi chinhyul," 70.