

THE STORY OF A YANGBAN

[*Yangban chôn*]

The word *yangban* is an honorific term for scholar-officials. In Chôngsôn county there was a yangban who was wise and who loved reading books. A new magistrate was wont to visit him to pay his respects.

The yangban was very poor; every year he borrowed grain from the county office. Over the years he had come to owe a thousand bags.

One day the governor made a tour of inspection. When he reached Chôngsôn county and examined the lending of government grain, he grew very angry and said, "What kind of yangban is he who borrows so much from military supplies?" He then ordered his imprisonment.

The magistrate pitied the yangban, for he knew that he had no means to restore the grain. He could not beat to jail the yangban but had no choice.

The yangban wept day and night but could find no solution.

His wife abused him. "You always love to study, but you're no good at returning government grain. A yangban you say, but your kind isn't worth a penny."

A rich man in the village heard of this and discussed the matter with his family. "The yangban may be poor but his standing is always high and prestigious. We may be rich, but we are always considered mean and low. We dare not ride horses, and when we see a yangban we lose heart and tremble. We scrape and bow before him in the courtyard, dragging our noses and walking on our knees. We have always been disgraced like this. Now, because he is poor that yangban cannot pay back the grain. Being in great distress, he will not be able, despite his prestige, to keep his rick. I want to buy his position for myself."

He then visited the yangban and proposed to settle the account for him. The yangban was very pleased and consented. Thereupon the rich man sent the grain to the county office.

Astonished, the magistrate went to the yangban to find out how he had managed to repay the grain. Wearing a coarse felt cap and a hemp jacket, the yangban prostrated himself in the mud, referred to himself as a "small man," and dared not look up. Greatly astonished, the magistrate got down, raised him up, and asked, "Sir, why do you humiliate yourself like this?"

The yangban became even more afraid, bowed his head, and prostrated himself once more. He said, "I am terror stricken. Not that I dare to humiliate myself, but I have sold my title to repay the loan. The rich man is now yangban. How can I use my former status to honor myself?"

The magistrate sighed and said, "How superior the rich man is! How yangbanlike the rich man is! To be rich without being stingy is righteousness. To be anxious about another's difficulties is goodness. To despise the mean and desire the honorable is wisdom. That man is truly a yangban. However, a private sale without a contract may lead to litigation. You and I will call together the people of the county as witnesses and draw up a deed. I will sign it as magistrate."

Thereupon the magistrate went to his office and summoned the gentry, farmers, artisans, and merchants to his courtyard. The rich man was seated to the right of the deputy magistrate, and the yangban stood below the clerks. He then began to draw up a deed:

"On a certain day of the ninth month of the tenth year of Ch'ien-lung [1745], the following deed is executed because I have sold the title of yangban to pay back the official grain I borrowed. Its value is one thousand bags.

"Now the term yangban has many implications. He who studies only is called a scholar; when he holds court rank, he is called a great official; when he has moral authority, he is called a superior man. The military corps stands to the west, the civil corps to the east; hence there are two corps. You may follow either of these courses, but from now on you must give up mean and base thoughts and imitate the ancients, with a lofty aim. You must always arise at the fifth watch, light the oil lamp, focus on the tip of your nose and sit with your buttocks on your heels, and recite from the *Critical Writings of Tung-lai* as smoothly as a gourd rolling on ice. You must bear hunger and cold and never say you are poor. You must tap your teeth and snap the back of your head,¹ swallow your spittle when you cough, brush your plush cap with your sleeves, and wipe away the dust that rises like waves. But you must not rub your hands too much when you wash or rinse to excess. You should summon your slave girls with a drawn-out voice, and walk in a leisurely manner, dragging your shoes. You should copy the *True Treasure of Classic Literature* and the *Anthology of Tung Poetry* with characters like sesame seeds, one hundred to

1 To help circulation and invigorate oneself.

a lie. Your hands should not hold cash or your mouth ask the price of rice. However hot it is, you must not take off your stockings or loosen your topknot at the dining table. You should not eat the soup first or slurp when sipping. Your chopsticks should not mash the food. You must not eat raw scallions or lap your mustache when drinking coarse wine or suck in both cheeks when smoking. You must not strike your wife in anger or kick utensils in irritation. You must not strike your children with your fists or swear at your servants or curse and kill your slaves. When scolding your oxen and horses, you must not insult their former owners. When ill, do not call a shaman; when sacrificing, do not invite monks. Do not warm your hands over a brazier; when talking, never splutter; and don't slaughter oxen or gamble. Should you act contrary to any of these precepts, the yangban can take this document and initiate legal action to rectify the wrongs.

"The magistrate of Chongsŏn county signs and the deputy magistrate and steward sign, as witnesses hereof."

Thereupon the attendant boy affixed the seals. The sound of stamping the seals clashed with the drum beats announcing the hour; the paper looked like a sky strewn horizontally with the seven stars of the Big Dipper and vertically with the three stars of Orion's Belt. Then the clerk read it.

The rich man stood in disappointment for some time but finally spoke: "Is this all there is to being a yangban? I heard that a yangban was like an immortal. If it means nothing more than this, I have been cheated. Please change it to read more profitably."

Thereupon the magistrate executed another deed which read: "When Heaven gave birth to people, it divided them into four classes, and among these the most honorable is that of scholar-officials, also called yangban. There is no profit greater than this. They do not till the soil or engage in trade. With a smattering of classics and histories, the better ones will pass the final examination, lesser ones will become doctors. The red diploma of the final examination is no more than two feet long, but it provides everything one needs—indeed it is like a purse. Even if a doctor gets his first appointment at thirty, he can still become famous on account of his father's name and fame. If he wins the favor of a man of the Southern faction,² his ears will become white from sitting under a sunshade,

2. A powerful political faction during the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

and his stomach full with the "yes" of servants. In his rooms he can tease female entertainers with an ear pick, and his grains piled in the courtyard are for the cranes to peck. Even a poor scholar in the country can decide matters as he wishes. He can have his neighbor's oxen plow his fields first, or use villagers for weeding. Who will dare behave rudely to him? Even if he fills your nostrils with ashes, catches you by the topknot, or pulls your hair at the temples, you cannot show resentment . . ."

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. And for the rest of his life he never mentioned the word *yangban*.

Chông Yag-yong (1762-1836)

ON DISMISSING A SERVANT

[*Ch'ultong man*]

Once upon a time, Wang Pao [first century B.C.] drafted a labor contract for his slave. It was so severe and exacting that the slave could not sleep at night or rest during the day. Moreover, the rules were as numerous as the hairs on a cow, and Wang's nagging was as irritating as the droning of a mosquito. The slave toiled until his joints creaked and his bones ached. Tears and snivel flowed down his face, wetting his chin and chest. But to revile him because of momentary anger is not a gentleman's way.

Now in my servant's contract I made the terms generous. Its contents follow:

"Get up at dawn, sweep the yard, and dredge the mud from the drain. Quietly cook rice—only wash the chaff off and cook it well; you don't have to make it sweet and soft. After breakfast, hoe the garden. Cut down the dead trees, clear the plot of tangled vines, and plant peach or plum trees. Your work includes transplanting persimmon trees, grafting crab apple trees, separating the eggplants, thinning out scallions, picking mallows, plucking leeks, manuring the taro patches, heaping soil around the potato stalks, leveling the