

Perceptions on disabilities and illnesses in late Joseon Korea

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Abstract: This paper seeks to delineate and explain changing public perceptions towards those who suffered from deafness, blindness, or intellectual disability in Joseon Korea. In the fifteenth century, the Great Code of State Administration (경국대전, 經國大典 Gyeongguk Daejeon) prohibited discrimination against the disabled. The deaf and blind in particular even enjoyed favorable attention. The state provided such economic benefits as exemption from taxes as a way to compensate them for their impaired abilities, thereby fostering a rather favorable social climate towards persons with disabilities. Some blind persons were even believed to have such special talent as fortune telling. In the eighteenth century, however, negative perceptions towards the disabled began to gain strength. Increasing frequency of documented references to disability as an object of mockery suggests that the state and the society alike viewed the disabled as ‘useless people’ (폐인). Mainly utilizing court histories, literary anthologies, army rosters (군적), and military division (군영) records, this paper argues

that overall change in the Joseon economy fueled discrimination against the disabled. In particular, changes in the military defense system and its associated military tax (군포) significantly contributed to the negative portrayal, as the new practice tended to divide the population into households collectively responsible for tax levies. By the nineteenth century, the state's harsher treatment of the disabled set the stage for outright discrimination against disabled in modern Korea, exacerbated by the introduction of the Western notion of eugenics.

Keywords: Disabilities; Postive Perception; Discrimination Economic Benefits; Collective Responsibility.

Percepcje niepełnosprawności i chorób w Korei okresu późnego Joseon

Abstrakt: Artykuł ma na celu naszkicowanie i wyjaśnienie zmian publicznego postrzegania osób cierpiących na głuchotę, ślepotę lub niepełnosprawność intelektualną w Korei okresu Joseon. W XV wieku *Wielki Kodeks Administracji Państwowej* (경국대전, 經國大典 Gyeongguk Daejeon) zakazał dyskryminacji osób z niepełnosprawnościami. Szczególnie ucieszyli się z tego ślepcy i głusi. Państwo w celu rekompensaty ograniczonych możliwości zapewniło im korzyści ekonomiczne, takie jak zwolnienie z podatków, tworząc tym samym raczej sprzyjające warunki społeczne dla osób z niepełnosprawnościami. Wierzoło wręcz, że niektórzy ślepcy posiadają zdolności wóźbiarskie. W XVIII wieku na sile zaczęło jednak przybierać negatywne postrzeganie osób z niepełnosprawnościami. Zwiększająca się częstotliwość dokumentowania odwołań do niepełnosprawności jako przedmiotu wyłudzeń sugeruje, że zarówno państwo jak i społeczeństwo postrzegało niepełnosprawnych jako 'osoby bezużyteczne' (폐인). Bazując na historiach sądowych, antologiach literackich, spisach wojskowych i dokumentacji oddziałów militarnych artykuł argumentuje, że całościowa zmiana w gospodarce Joseon przełożyła się na dyskryminację osób z niepełnosprawnościami. W szczególności do negatywnego wizerunku przyczyniły się zmiany w systemie obrony militarnej i powiązany z nimi podatek wojskowy (군포), które podzieliły społeczeństwo na gospodarstwa domowe współdzielące zobowiązania podatkowe. W XIX wieku ostrzejsze podejście państwa do osób z niepełnosprawnościami przygotowało podłoże do narastającej dyskryminacji tej grupy we współczesnej Korei, zaostrene przez wprowadzenie zachodniej koncepcji eugeniki.

Słowa-klucze: niepełnosprawności; pozytywny wizerunek; dyskryminacja; korzyści ekonomiczne; odpowiedzialność zbiorowa.

조선 후기 장애인에 대한 인식의 변화

초록: 본 고에서는 장애인에 대한 전근대 관념을 다양한 자료를 통해 추적해 보았다. 전근대 장애인에 대한 인식은 오늘날과 큰 차이가 있었다. 장애가 있더라도 다른 부분의 능력이 뛰어난 것으로 파악하고 그들을 보호해야 할 대상으로 인식하고 있었다. 그러나 조선후기에 접어들면서 장애인에 대한 인식은 당대의 기록을 통해 급속하게 부정적으로 바뀐 것을 확인하였고 이는 공개적인 장소에서 거리낌 없이 나타나고 있다. 이에 대한 원인을 경제적인 변화 즉 공동책임을 강조했던 조선후기의 세제의 변화에서 찾아보았다. 장애인의 노동력 결여가 다른 사람들에게 부담으로 전가되기 시작하면서 장애인을 온정적으로 보는 관점에서 벗어나 점차 공동체의 부담으로 간주했기 때문이다. 이러한 인식은 식민지기를 지나며 더욱 악화된 것을 확인할 수 있다. 장애인의 사회의 일원으로 받아들이고 사회의 일원으로 공동체 생활을 영위하기 위해 이러한 인식의 변화를 살피고 그 원인을 좀 더 면밀하게 향후 연구에서 검토할 필요가 있다.

핵심어: 장애; 긍정적 인식; 차별; 경제적 이득; 집단책임의식.

1. Introduction

A general definition of a disabled person is someone who “[has] a physical or mental condition that limits their movements, senses, or activities”¹. Because of their impairment, disabled people feel immense difficulty in performing tasks that are completed by others without thought, such as climbing a stair. The difficulties disabled people in Korea, however, go beyond the physical aspects; they must deal with another enormous obstacle, which is the perceptions held about them by others. In Korea, disabilities are often viewed not just as a difficulty but ‘something to be ashamed of or to be hidden’.

As of 2015, people with disabilities take up about approximately 5% of Korea’s population. This ratio is much lower than the global average, which is about 10%, and it is not too far-fetched to say that this is partially related to the Koreans’ perceptions

¹ Oxford Living Dictionaries. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>. (Accessed 15 June 2023).

of disabilities². It is easy to find present-day examples that point to the discriminative perception held about the disabled in Korean society, such as the neighborhood protests held against the construction of facilities for disabled people because such facilities are deemed disadvantageous for children's education or real estate value. Why is it that there is such a negative perception of people with disabilities in Korea? This is the question that this paper sets out to answer by examining the historical formation of Korea's perceptions of disabled people and its meaning.

There are barely any historical studies on disabled people in Korea so far conducted. The primary reason behind this insufficient research is the lack of records available on disabled people during the premodern era. The few records that do remain mostly provide descriptions of fragmentary facts. Thus, the very few studies that have been conducted on this topic have concentrated on reviewing the records on disabled people from the viewpoint of history and tracing how the definition of disabled people have changed over time. Another study put its focus on the perceptions of disabilities found in Buddhism and Confucianism, which were the main religions of premodern Korea, in the attempt to identify the period's cognitive framework on disabilities (안옥선 An Ok-sun 1999: 46-55; 정창권 Jung Chang kwon 2005).

The study extracts the viewpoints on the human body from the representative scriptures and sheds light on the religious definitions and meanings given to disabilities. Through this study, we were able to collect what few sources that exist on disabled people in Korea, which enabled us to carry out the basic research on how the perceptions towards disabled people and their transformation over time.

Recently, based on the above research, a few studies have been conducted on 'the point of change' in the perceptions towards people with disabilities. These studies utilized the genre of fiction as the basis for identifying the 18th to 19th century as the point in time where the perceptions underwent a change. Especially in the field of Korean literature, analyses of vernacular fiction and colonial novels have been used to argue that the negative perceptions towards people with disabilities significantly increased from the mid to late 18th

² In the census conducted after the Korean War, the ratio of disabled people among the national population was only 0.4%.

century and that, through the colonial period to the era of industrialization, this negative perception became more prevalent. Another study on this topic focusing on late Joseon Korea states that the spreading of the negative perception towards disabled people is connected with the dissolution of Korea's class order in the 18th to 19th century. Here, it is argued that the commoners of this period started using disabled people as symbols for ridiculing or criticizing the ruling class or as ways to censure others (이훈상 Yi Hun-sang 1990).

The interpretations of the few records that have been collected so far have made it possible to identify the large trend in how the perceptions towards disabled people in Korea have changed. However, additional sources beyond the records that have been discovered so far remain elusive, causing the research on this topic to stagnate. Therefore, in this paper, we revisit how the perceptions towards disabled people have changed historically based on previous studies with particular attention to the influence of economic circumstances since disabilities strongly tend to be defined based on external social, cultural, and economic factors (Turner 1984). Historically, poverty has often led to the magnification of the negative image held of the weak, at times leading to attacks in the form of “witch hunting” (Miguel 2005: 1153–1172) a representative example of how poverty molds the perceptions towards the socially vulnerable. The task of examining how the economic conditions of premodern Korea led to changes in the perceptions towards disabled people will help us to trace the origins of the perceptions held in today. We expect that this study will allow us to approach closer to understanding the transformation of the perceptions towards disabled people in Korea.

2. The Positive Perception Held of Disabled People

The perceptions towards disabled people have varied historically depending on the period, place, and sociocultural background. What can be found from the historical records of premodern Korea include both positive and negative perceptions, albeit at slightly different levels. Over time, however, one began to overwhelm the other, especially in the 18th century, and the negative stance became

mainstream in Korea. What is interesting is that the records on people with disabilities before the 18th and 19th centuries mainly contain positive perceptions. The shifts in perceptions cannot be solely attributed to a simple change in people's perceptions; rather, they must occur from various historical backgrounds.

As historical records before the 14th century are virtually unavailable, it is not easy to trace what is said about disabled people in ancient and medieval times. Most of the records that remain were those that were made under the direction of the government. There are some records dealing with disabled people, albeit very few. A key example is the 'Ondal seolhwa' (온달설화) a biography included in the *Samguk sagi* (삼국사기, 三國史記, *History of the Three Kingdoms*) which records the history of the ancient Korean state in the latter half of the 6th century. The disabled people in this biography are Ondal and his mother. Ondal's mother is blind and, being unable to work, can only barely sustain her life. Her only family is her son Ondal who, according to the records, is intellectually disabled and teased as being an idiot. Due to his disability, Ondal is unable to make an independent living, so he goes around the neighborhood to beg for food so that he can survive. According to the story, Ondal becomes a successful figure in the end after overcoming many difficulties, ultimately marrying the king's daughter and distinguishing himself in battles against other countries. Against historical records of the late Joseon and the colonial periods that describe people with disabilities as either having no ability at all or having some abilities only to give up everything in the end in the face of obstacles, the story of Ondal and its depiction of disabled people produce a striking contrast.

Although Ondal made his living through begging, in ancient Korea, the government operated a relief system for the 'weak' who required protection called 'the four kinds of poor people' (鰥寡孤獨, 환과고독). The 'four kinds' refer to widowers, widows, orphans, and elders without children. The disabled people are not specifically included in the 'four kinds', as they would have faced harsher lives than even the four kinds that are listed (as can be seen from the story of Ondal), it is possible to imagine that they would have received government protection as well. Quite a few articles from the Joseon era discuss the government's efforts to provide relief to people with disabilities and those who are unable to make an independent living. The following record is a petition made to the King on February 4,

1423, by the Board of Revenue (戶曹, 호조), requesting the implementation of a special relief for disabled people:

“It is now a very busy time for farming, so all healthy people who work in the fields should be given grain (grain distributed in the spring to be returned in the autumn harvest season with 10% interest), and for the four kinds of poor people (鰥寡孤獨) and *Janjil* (殘疾, 잔질), *Pyejil* (廢疾, 폐질), grain should be given free of charge.” (세종실록 *Sejong sillok* 1423.2.4.).

The *janjil-ja* 殘疾者 and *pyejil-ja* 廢疾者³ mentioned in this article as beneficiaries of the special relief are categorized under people with disabilities today, and the government actively sought to distribute grains to them, free of strings, to provide relief. In other words, the Joseon government gave more special treatment to disabled people among the weak under their protection.

Moreover, the government during this period did not simply view disabled people as beneficiaries of its relief system. The government’s recruitment of disabled people for job positions that can be performed regardless of their disabilities shows indirectly is that disabled people were seen as more than just objects of protection. In the 15th century, blind people were employed at the Directorate of Astronomy (觀象監, 관상감), which was responsible for weather forecasting and observations. Suggestions were made within the government on the hiring of blind people for specific jobs, pointing to how open the government during this period actively sought to employ disabled people. Such was possible because the contemporaries had the understanding that the visually impaired have more acute senses due to their blindness. Thus, blind people were able to work as fortune tellers, astronomers, musicians, etc. and were also employed in the related government positions. Of course, more preparation may be required for blind people to play musical instruments compared to the non-disabled, but the general perception was that they could produce the same or better achievements than the non-disabled. This perception became the basis for the active employment of disabled people.

³ ‘폐질자 (廢疾者)’, ‘잔질자 (殘疾者)’, ‘篤질자 (篤疾者)’ are terms used in premodern Korea to refer to disabled people. The terms are left in Chinese characters in the manuscript due to the difficulty in translating their exact meaning.

Thus, in the Joseon era, the consensus was that disabled people might be impaired in certain bodily functions but can be outstanding in certain fields, and the government officially recognized this view as a fact. This view held strong until the late Joseon period, and examples that reflect this consensus can be found in the chronicles as well as the periodical works of the time such as vernacular fiction. The following excerpt is from a work by Yi Ok (李鈺, 1760–1815), a novelist of the time who introduced a new style of fiction in the late Joseon period, which depicts a scene with a blind fortune-teller:

“The blind person whose surname is Chang is from Seoul. . . . I tell fortunes using food, and it is much more accurate than fortune-telling with a turtle shell. . . . The world thinks of you as a person knows only to eat, but I see that there is deep thought behind your actions. Ah, if you tell fortunes based on such principles, who would dare question its authority?” (이옥 Yi Ok 2001: 54).

Sin Hoechae (신희재), who also appears in Yi Ok’s novel, is speech impaired but has an extraordinary ability as a blacksmith. Moreover, Shin is respected not only for his talent in making knives but also for his extensive knowledge of things. The description of Shin presents him in a positive light: he is exceptionally competent in many areas, and his unimpaired abilities are perceived to be functioning well, unaffected by his disability. Objectively speaking, such perception of disabled people should be considered as a given, as something that is apparently true. However, the reality today is that people with disabilities are seen as being challenged in other areas as well, beyond their actual disabilities. In comparison, the perceptions towards disabilities found here differ significantly from today’s perceptions of disabilities in Korea.

3. The Increase of Negative Perceptions

Then, when did the favorable perceptions towards disabled people move in a negative direction? More precisely, when did the negative perceptions become more prevalent? According to previous research, this trend appeared from various backgrounds in the late Joseon

period, more precisely from the mid to late 18th century. However, as the excerpts from Yi Ok and the chronicles of Joseon show, the positive perceptions held of disabled people continued to coexist with the negative perceptions even into the 19th century. Gradually over time, the negative perceptions spread and gained dominance, and it is possible to find traces of the negative perceptions formed then in today's language and culture. A representative example is common proverbs, which well-reflect the perceptions of the period as they are used by both the commoners and the ruling class.

Proverbs that include the mention of blind people, such as 'Sleep matters little to the blind' (소경 잠자나마나) or 'A mirror in a blind man's house' (소경집에 거울), are illustrative examples. These proverbs stop at simply making a mockery of blindness, but there are other proverbs that go further. The proverb 'A blind with his eyes open' (눈뜬 장님) uses blindness to express how someone is good for nothing, which is clearly distinguished in its tone from the positive perception of blind people and their exceptional abilities. Proverbs such as 'To kill a blind and pay for murder' (소경 죽이고 살인 빚 갚는다)⁴ or 'Killing a blind taken as murder' (소경 죽이고 살인한다) go even further to denying the visually impaired of their human dignity by implying that the killing of a blind person does not amount to killing a person. In other words, the proverbs bring to surface the subconscious dismissal of blind people's human dignity.

These proverbs are not used frequently but have been passed down to this day, unlike proverbs that give positive meaning to disabilities which have mostly disappeared over time. It is not clear when these proverbs first appeared. However, they seem to have been in usage continuously up to recent times since their original meanings have been preserved. That is, there is a very high possibility that, at one point in time in the late Joseon era, the records on disabled people started to reflect more of the negative perceptions, and through the colonial period and the Korean War, the negative emotions held about disabled people became amplified further to be transmitted by word of mouth.

Especially in the 1930s when Japan started in full-fledge to extract war supplies from Korea, worsening Korea's economic

⁴ The meaning of this proverb is 'to become responsible for something very big after doing something very small or insignificant' and implies that the life of a blime person is not equal to a person without disabilities.

situation severely, the spread of negative perceptions towards disabled people became more pronounced. Short novels written during this era portray the lives of disabled people, and those written during the colonial period mostly depict disabled people in a negative way with barely any positive light. The novel *Blindness* by Eum Heung-seop, which was published in 1937, is a typical example.

Wŏnch'il, the main character of Eum Heung-seop's *Blindness*, goes to a school for the visually impaired due to his blindness while preparing to find his place in society. Although he receives education at the school, the curriculum is geared towards training the students for the occupations that have been traditionally held by blind people, for instance, to become a massage or acupuncture therapist. In the excerpt from the novel below, it is possible to see that the perception held about the special abilities of blind people remains the same. However, the positive impression of disabled people that seem to emerge at first sight fades away quickly to project negative images:

“You shouldn't dismiss someone because they are mute or blind. A physiologist once said that a person who is defective in his physical structure or senses, although he has that defect, all of the energy that is not used because of the defect is sent to his other senses or organs. To give examples, the eyesight of a person who has one blind eye is much stronger than that one eye of a person who has two working eyes; a person who cannot move his legs has strong arms, and a person who cannot use his arms has strong legs... But, to be honest, blind people are the most pitiful.” (엄홍섭 Eum Heung-seop 1937: 645–746).

In the first excerpt, the main character Wŏnch'il mentions his hidden physical abilities despite his impaired vision. He comforts himself that although his eyes do not function well, his other abilities do not fall behind and even exceeds those of others. The second excerpt is a conversation held by a teacher at the school for the visually impaired on his views on disabilities. Both excerpts share the idea that a disabled body is physically inferior to a non-disabled body, but to compensate for the disability, other senses or functions become superior to the non-disabled in disabled people. On the surface, the contents of these excerpts seem to draw a positive image of the visually impaired. However, in the novel, one is merely the personal thoughts of Wŏnch'il, and the other is the teacher's private comments

to a parent of a student while the students are asleep late at night. In other words, the positive outcomes of disabilities are only recognized passively, not publicly. On the other hand, the images held of blind people expressed in public conversations throughout the novel are full of negative views about their incompetence and dishonesty:

“Oh, what’s up with him! You think we’ll be scared if you raise your voice? Such an annoyance, go on your way! Should’ve known when I woke up on the wrong side of the bed!” (엄홍섭 Eum Heung-seop 1937: 774).

Unlike the positive perceptions in the previous excerpts, negative comments about disabled people are openly thrown about without hesitation in the presence of Wŏnch’il. Even considering the limitations of fiction, it seems safe to say that the perceptions towards disabled people described here do not significantly differ from the reality of the period.

4. The Reversal of Perceptions

When did the negative perceptions towards disabled people become dominant and why? Recent studies on the perceptions towards disabled people found in Korean literature suggest the possibility that the negative perceptions spread in the mid to late 18th century through the commoner’s borrowing of the disabled people’s negative images to mock the incompetent ruling class since they provided a good tool for attacking the aristocracy. However, while the negativity placed upon disabled people may have been effective means of resistance against the ruling class, it was social violence exerted upon the weak.

Various negative images were projected on disabled people and utilized in the late Joseon period. In particular, the socially underprivileged used these images as tools of satire, which would have been only possible because a consensus had formed that the behaviors of disabled people can be sources of laughter. A representative example can be found in masked dances that were performed at the local markets in the late Joseon period. Among them, the ‘Performance of Five Players’ (오광대놀이) performed at the markets in South Gyeongsang Province in the late Joseon period

provided emotional catharsis to its audience by having a leper who is a member of the ruling class as its main character:

“Leper: His face is deformed and ugly. One arm and leg are broken.

Stage

When the curtain rises, music plays loudly. The leper (mask) enters the stage from the left, dancing to the music. He has a horrible, deformed face and dances in a strange form, waving his afflicted arm and leg. (Music stops)

Leper: I am disabled, but I am aristocracy. The lowly commoners have to follow whatever I say. (Dances to the music wearing the leper mask and circles the stage.)

Leper: Being an aristocracy is great. So great. Aristocracy is great. (The music climaxes. He dances to the music around the stage, then exits the stage to the left.)” (전경옥 Jeon Kyung Wook 1993: 72–73).

As can be seen, the aristocracy is portrayed as being pompous despite having disabilities. At the same time, the speaker attracted audiences at the market by mocking and scorning the authority of the aristocracy. Most of the audience watching this performance were commoners. Considering the proximity of disabled people and commoners in terms of social vulnerability, the way disabilities were used to demean the aristocracy and provide entertainment gave way to larger violence against disabled people.

An explanation is needed as to why the commoners of the time shut their eyes from the suffering they were inflicting on disabled people to attack the aristocracy. From the viewpoint of analogy or mockery, disabilities were used to attack the aristocracy because body images can be easy and effective tools. However, if there is a disabled person among colleagues, neighbors, or family members, it would have been difficult to use disabilities for satire just because it is an effective way to attack others. For a person use disabled people as a tool of ridicule, it would have been necessary to sever all links connecting him/her to disabled people. If a person empathizes with a family whose member has disabilities, so that their unhappiness becomes that person’s unhappiness, such mockery would feel as though it is directed to his/her own family. It is only when society feels an emotional connection with disabled people and empathize

with their suffering that it becomes possible for them to perceive disabilities in a positive way.

In the premodern era, the emotional connection with disabled people went beyond sympathizing with their disabilities. People who were close to those with disabilities felt a responsibility for the disability or disease, and this responsibility was shared by the whole community to become a sense of duty about the diseases afflicting others and their healing process. The disease or physical difficulties experienced by an individual was not seen as pertaining solely to the individual; an understanding existed in the background that such physical affliction can only be cured within the context of society and culture.

We can learn the contemporaries' perception of diseases in the premodern era from the ritual performed for treating skin diseases in Chungcheong Province, which is located in the central part of Korea. This healing ritual, which continues to exist today, embodies a completely different cognitive framework from that for modern medicine (이필영 Lee Pil-Young 2000). The skin disease that spurred the performance of this ritual in Chungcheong Province was called 'tan (丹)'. Tan causes the patient's temperature to rise and their body to become red and itchy. In modern medicine, dan is referred to as herpes zoster⁵, a viral disease that surfaces when the immune system becomes weak. In other words, tan is a disease that is caught on a strictly individual basis. Yet, in Chungcheong Province, regardless of the fact that tan requires individual treatment by nature, all treatment for tan was attempted as a community, from uncovering the cause and finding a cure. It was thought that the disease was caused by a ghost and that all members of the community were responsible for bringing this ghost to give rise to the disease in the village. So, people who became sick or impaired from the disease while receiving treatment in the designated communal space were considered a community responsibility. That is, in the central region of premodern Korea, even a personal skin disease was considered a community responsibility and its treatment was believed to be possible through a community effort.

Could it have been possible for the Performance of Five Players in the Tongyeong region and the ritual for treating skin

⁵ In the *Exemplar of Korean Medicine* (東醫寶鑑), 'tan' is written as 'tandok (丹毒)'. The common name for this disease is 'jeongnyu' (赤瘤).

diseases in Chungcheong province to take place in the same spatial background? My answer to this question is ‘no’. If the community was held accountable for a person’s disease or disability, it is doubtful that disabilities or illnesses will be treated as someone else’s business and used as a tool to condemn others. Then, from when and why did the people of late Joseon period begin to portray and use disabled people negatively in their everyday lives? In particular, the question why, unlike in early Joseon, disabled people came to be seen as useless beings, making it difficult for them to coexist in society requires examination.

We intend to explore this question from an economic perspective. Around the world in the premodern era, women or disabled people were targeted and attacked to reduce food consumption during economic difficulties. For example, even up to recently in Tanzania, witch hunting of women was conducted during famines (Miguel 2005: 1153). The situation in East Asia during the premodern era was not very different. Especially in Korea, where a vast number of people engaged in rice farming during farming seasons, any loss in the labor force could deeply affect the survival of the community. Thus, preserving the labor force was the most pertinent issue during famines as this directly connected to the farming and harvesting in the following year. For the commoners who barely survived the year on a meager harvest could not but feel burdened by disabled people who were unable to contribute to the labor power. However, since relief was provided by the government for the protection of the weak including disabled people on a community basis and as disabled people participated in other productive activities instead of contributing directly to the farming labor, their efforts were recognized by the community. There were some disabled people whose physical disabilities were so severe that they could not work at all, but there was no open criticism or mockery of them because the government established various systems to provide relief to those who were unable to make an independent living. Thus, the non-disabled did not bear the full burden arising from the disabled people’s lack of labor power.

However, in the late Joseon period, the problems of the government’s relief system for the weak slowly emerged and led to its collapse, making the lives of the commoners even more difficult. The original purpose of the famine relief system, which was implemented and in operation since ancient Korea as well as the grain

loan system (through which grains were distributed in spring to be repaid with interest in the autumn) became distorted to such a degree that, by the late Joseon period, the government viewed the systems as a tax imposed on its people (양진석 Yang Jin-Suk 1989: 45–48). The reason behind such distortion is that the government was unable to secure enough tax revenue to cover its huge operation costs. As the government began to put its hands on this social security system to secure more tax revenue, the government systems the people depended fell apart.

Facing financial crisis, the government implemented a provincial quota system (pichongbeop, 비총법) in the mid-18th century to secure its annual budget, regardless of the will of the people. The government's intention was to secure a stable revenue regardless of the situation faced by the commoners, e.g., whether they were experiencing famine or a decrease in yield. A fixed amount of taxes was imposed every year on each region, and the county magistrate was put in charge of imposing and collecting the taxes. A certain amount of harvest had to be cultivated and gained every year to pay the designated amount of taxes, however, the reality is that this was impossible for most regions. Among the types of taxes, the military cloth (gunpo, 군포) tax, in particular, was levied on any male who can be enlisted as a soldier, but as more men among the aristocracy evaded going to the army using their ties to power, this tax became concentrated on the commoners. At that time, the government was imposing military-related taxes even on young children and the dead to secure the necessary amount of military taxes every year. Therefore, in most regions, the military cloth tax was imposed on disabled people as well, and the burden of this tax was passed onto the shoulders of the non-disabled, especially the commoners.

In 19th century Korea, the government did not have any system protecting the disabled people, and with the gradual disappearance of government protection, the disabled people became a burden to the non-disabled people in the community. As a result, it was inevitable that the image of disabled people changed to the negative. There exist many historical examples where, in the face of economic pressures and poverty, the first target of blame became the socially weak in the community rather than those that caused the problem such as the government or the people in power. Moreover, under the colonial rule of Japan, the policies that were put in place

veered further away from protecting the socially vulnerable. We believe that this context led to an interruption from the perceptions towards disabled people of the past, giving way to negative expressions. As a result, novels portrayed the socially vulnerable in a negative light, and disabled people, especially the women, whose physical labor efficiency was inferior, had to succumb to an even harder life. There would have been no barrier protecting them from being perceived as burdensome or as imposters among the non-disabled.

5. Conclusion

Even until recently, the socially vulnerable in Korea, especially disabled people were perceived as an unnecessary or unreasonable burden in the maintenance of the community. In this paper, we investigated when such perceptions had formed and why from a historical perspective. To answer the question of whether people with disabilities have been negatively viewed from the beginning, we reviewed existing records to find clues to the premodern perceptions towards disabled people. What we found is that there were both negative and positive perceptions held of people with disabilities, but the negative views gradually began to overrule other perceptions during the 18th to 19th century. Concerning the positive perceptions towards disabled people, we presented the example of a ritual held to treat diseases and discussed how diseases or disabilities were understood traditionally in the regional areas. In Chungcheong Province, located in the central part of the Korean peninsula, even personal diseases were treated as a community responsibility, and the community as a whole cared for the ill and the weak. At the background of such consensus was the idea that people with disabilities, despite their impairment, are members of the community. The government also recognized disabled people as members who should receive special support. At the least, the negative perceptions did not dominate over the positive. However, as the systems that maintained Joseon society failed to respond to changes, the perceptions towards disabled people began to change as well.

First, in the 18th century, Korea was no longer able to secure sufficient funds to run the country based on its existing system. As a result, the relief systems that were in place gradually lost their function to be used for the benefit of the government, while the unit for tax collection was slowly shifted in a way that made the whole community accountable its payment to guarantee a stable tax revenue. By imposing set tax quotas on a community basis rather than on an individual basis, the government attempted to secure the total amount of tax revenue they required. As a result, disabled people with smaller income and labor power compared to the non-disabled became a burden to the community. Especially after the late Joseon period and during the colonial period when economic difficulties exacerbated, extreme poverty robbed the people of the ease of mind that was needed to view disabled people as positive members of the community. Disabled people were no longer perceived as welcomed neighbors, and this perception continued to spread. Ultimately, the changing economic environment spurred the negative perceptions towards disabled people to grow and dominate until today.

Conflict of interest statement:

The author states that there is no conflict of interest to disclose.

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