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BORDERLANDS: THE INSTITUTIONAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN *SZLACHTA* AND THE KOREAN *YANGBAN* IN EARLY MODERNITY

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Abstract: In this paper, the administration and dynamic cultures resulting from the disputed past, high ideals and challenges faced by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's and Korea's nobilities, along with their "Sarmatic" and Confucian frameworks are analyzed, with the evolving identities of Joseon's and Rzeczpospolita's *Szlachta* and *Yangban* social

strata, their respective opponents, and the pragmatic realities that affected their status and activities, being within the center of inquiry.

Keywords: Korea, Sociology, Nobility, Confucianism, Sarmatism, Poland, Lithuania

국경지대: 초기 근대 폴란드-리투아니아 슬라흐타와 한국 양반의 제도적, 철학적 자의식

초록: 본 논문에서는 폴란드-리투아니아 연방과 한국의 귀족들이 직면한 논쟁적인 과거, 높은 이상과 도전, 그리고 그들의 "사르마틱"과 유교적 틀에 따라 변화하는 조선과 르제츠포스폴리타의 슐라흐타와 양반 사회층의 정체성, 그리고 그들의 지위와 활동에 영향을 미친 실용주의적 현실을 분석합니다.

키워드: 한국, 사회학, 귀족, 유교, 사르마티즘, 폴란드, 리투아니아

POGRANICZA: ŚWIADOMOŚĆ INSTYTUCJONALNA I FILOZOFICZNA POLSKO-LITEWSKIEJ SZLACHTY I KOREAŃSKICH YANGBANÓW WE WCZESNEJ NOWOŻYTNOŚCI

Abstrakt: W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano administrację i dynamiczne kultury wynikające ze spornej przeszłości, wysokich ideałów i wyzwań stojących przed szlachtą Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów i Korei, wraz z ich „sarmackimi" i konfucjańskimi ramami, z ewoluującymi tożsamościami społecznych warstw Szlachty Rzeczypospolitej oraz Yangbanów Joseon, ich przeciwnikami i pragmatyką realiów, które wpłynęły na ich status i działania.

Słowa-klucze: Korea, Socjologia, Szlachectwo, Konfucjanizm, Sarmatyzm, Polska, Litwa

1. Context Introduction

Among the most pertinent research questions concerning Central-Eastern European polities is the degree of "uncivilized" influences within their traditional cultures as opposed to the order of law, order and morality. "Barbarism" is a key concept within this discourse, embodying since Hellenistic times two distinct components: the otherness, and the threatening, alien presence, often associated with warlike attitudes. Ingrained in the collective doubts of Europeans since then, these ponderings have also often been varyingly scrutinized or embraced by the various cultures of the old world, in accordance with the stages of their socio-political development and the doctrines or philosophies holding sway over their populaces. Analogical doubts were visible among the inhabitants of North-East Asia, particularly in the region of Manchuria and Korean Peninsula, where the tensions between "barbarism" and Confucian heritage often ran high. The early (up to the early twentieth century) external observers-researchers of this area tended to frequently attribute multiple negative characteristics to the region's countries and aspects of their social order allegedly present throughout the ages. The "orientalist" (Gu 2013: 77-80) attitudes of Western scholars often embraced "slave state", "this-worldism" or "non-existence of capitalism" as factual phenomena, in their eyes negatively positioning East Asia, particularly the Sinophone areas, vis-à-vis the socio-political and economic achievements of Europe and America. The glocal socio-economic impact of this "Asiaticist" scholarly attitude could not help but be adapted by early-modern sociologists such as Karl Marx, who was strongly interested in the types of socio-economic organization ingrained in ancient Asian polities compared to pre-modern Europe, with the concept of "the Asiatic Mode of Production" (which, in essence, implied brutal domination of lower social strata and extraction of their life necessities by central administrative castes) being so often attributed to him—though this concept may have been subject to misinterpretation and undue

attention by commenters (Jorgensen 1995: 331).The particulars of these methodological disputes are of altogether secondary importance in the context of the present discussion. On the other hand, these perspectives indicate the tendency of scholars as well as the general populace to think in terms of regionalisms, placing a given territory and its inhabitants within a specific geo-political rationale to either denigrate them, or, conversely, to reinforce their perceived standing. As part of these processes, rationalization of a people's origin and chosen mode of life was more often than not predicated on exclusivist mythologizations or philosophies. Indeed, the terminological and pragmatic controversy pitting the tradition and legends against more traceable roots of a given country marks a field of inquiry bridging the interrelated disciplines of intellectual history and historical sociology. Consequently, the oft-limited concept of national consciousness comes into question, just as the fragmentation of historical narratives and ethnic alignments present a conundrum to scholars of early European societies, who frequently juxtapose the factual and assumed dynamics of state-building processes which occurred in geographic locales that did not possess cultural or genetic homogeneity, such as south-eastern Europe and the region of Caucasus (Tevzadze 1994: 437-438). Among the discussed issues are: Is ethnic cohesiveness real or merely an artificial, academic or social construct? Who were the "national ancestors"? Where did they come from? To what extent did tentative or imported national doctrines influence social stratification systems? In historiographic research on "national consciousness", the structure and ideological role of the upper echelons of a given society warrant attention, because in most cases, such elites have represented key societal segments capable of literary and artistic output, providing the (often understandably biased) record of their times, and of their own intellectual considerations.

This was certainly the case with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795) and the Joseon (朝鮮) state in the Korean Peninsula (1392–1910). These countries, placed on the opposite ends of the Euro-Asiatic continent, at the first glance could

not have been any more different from each other. One gradually embraced war and conflict as a legitimate and just means of protecting secular and religious interests of the state, the other denigrated military occupations to the legally and philosophically lower strata of society and political activity. The Commonwealth was culturally and ethnically highly diverse, while Joseon was largely homogenous, with heterodox belief systems and political positions gradually becoming marginalized over the course of the Yi (李) family's reign. And, perhaps most strikingly, the Commonwealth was largely open to diplomatic contact with a variety of states, while Joseon expressed at the very least reserved, and oftentimes isolationist attitudes towards its relationships with states other than orthodox, imperial China. A researcher with no prior background in the matter may thus naturally speculate about the viability of a comparative research encompassing these two countries, and the academic purpose thereof. For the present study, the rationale is, however, clear, and predicated on their surprisingly analogical rise and growth—driven and represented by Commonwealth's and Joseon's respective noble strata—and the downfall caused by external factors compounded by internal weakening of the state and its institutions. Two powers, priding themselves on their self-exalted status as bulwarks against (perceived) barbarism or paganism and the chaos of the surrounding world which were ultimately forced to make compromises and question their identity and state conduct. Noble strata of high cultural ecumene existed in Western Europe as well, and both China and Japan also embraced Neo-Confucianism as the key guiding philosophy for their societies and politics, yet in Commonwealth and Korea the conceptual tension between high idealism and impure reality was especially high, emphasized by the close and significant military threats to their respective borders. The relationships, on the one hand, between the idea of the *Rzeczpospolita*—the Republic—and the heroification of the nomadic Sarmatians, and on the other hand, between the Neo-Confucian virtues and the mixed Korean-Manchu heritage (embodied in popular Gojoseon /Dangun [古朝鮮/

檀君] foundational mythologies, the-dynamics of pre-Joseon Goryeo [高麗] and Balhae [渤海] states with Southern Manchurian tribes and, from the seventeenth century onward, the Joseon-Qing conflicts and tributary dependence) in modern Korea's nationalistic contexts (Yun 2016: 1-9) present different, yet conceptually—philosophically and ethically—similar dilemmas, both to their contemporary inhabitants and to researchers. The concept of a "borderland" or "frontier" strongly applied to both the Commonwealth and Joseon. The traditionally "barbaric", yet unmistakenly brave Sarmatians recorded in ancient Roman narratives (Zaroff 2017: 233-260) and the ritual propriety Koreans even prior to Joseon era according to Chinese records (Vermeersch 2016: 105) constituted a source of cultural paradoxes in both the Commonwealth and Joseon. The former strived to characterize itself as a protector of Christian faith and an ally of the Papacy (Tygielski 1999: 49-65), and the latter pursued its reframing as a "Little China" (kor. *Sojunghwa* 小中華) (Lee 2010: 305-318), resulting in a paradoxical reframing of its formerly fringe alignment to the Han Chinese cultural ecumene into a faithful adherence to ritual standards of the orthodox Neo-Confucianism. This tendency for a "messianistic" national identity, coincidentally culminating in the seventeenth century both for the Commonwealth and Joseon, alienated many inhabitants and allies—internal and external (Głowacki 2014: 29-48) whose beliefs or ethnicities did not align with the changing credo of the two states in question. This sharp conceptual division between the barbarian past and its "cultured" reconceptualizations, combined with the "exceptionalist" attitudes, had no direct, contemporary equivalent elsewhere in East Asia or in Western European polities, perhaps with the exception of Hungarian and Russian heritages. In the latter's case though, the ideological consistency of pan-Slavism and anti-Westernism is comparatively dubious (Duncan 2000: 42-44) and disconnected from any specific referential point (or external polity) of cultural subservience or adherence (except for the state's and Russian Orthodox Church own dogma). This division is especially clear given the fact that in the

Commonwealth and Joseon Korea the cultural identity of their noble strata at the peak of their development (late sixteenth-early seventeenth century) typically did not translate into warlike activities against other nations - differentiating them from the Iberian Peninsula's Catholic states' Conquista/Reconquista - or into a rationale of an active, rather than defensive attitudes towards the "heterodoxies". An increased attention to these aspects of the highlighted states in global and pan-human contexts could hopefully be facilitated by this paper, especially as, philosophically, the self-perception of the Commonwealth's and Joseon's nobilities as "hallowed protectors" points towards the notion of socio-political exceptionalism, often discussed by analysts of the modern USA or the West in general (Moosa 2023: 1-7), though, once again, without explicit metaphysical undercurrents. Moreover, the notion of a "borderland" or a "barrier-state" warrants more of academic interest, particularly with regards to the process of identity-building among populaces of such areas. At any rate, the cultural force of the aforementioned tension was enacted or materialized in a multitude of ways. The Commonwealth's *szlachta* and Joseon's *yangban* (兩班) scholar-literati expressed their outlooks on their identity and attitudes towards the Other through private philosophical exchanges, petitions to the royal court, works of art, or educational schemes for their posterity. The textual body they left for posterity allows us to trace their beliefs, lifestyle and political acumen. It is therefore a surprise that no significant comparative analysis of the elites of these states has been published so far in Western academia, taking into account the above-described factors of the apparent nobility-barbarism dichotomies and exceptionalism motivated by ideological credo as well as their embodiments in the public and private engagements of *szlachta* and *yangban*. As such, certain methodological misconceptions are particularly notable, and must receive particular elucidation.

In any interdisciplinary research of pre-modern societies, including the present paper, the dichotomy between the historical and merely assumed origins of nations is a topic of prime importance.

Dichotomies themselves have often served as ideological mechanisms of controlling people and their narratives. Indeed, the unique and special characteristics which the upper echelons in Commonwealth and Joseon ascribed to themselves, to solidify their position as the highest and most exalted representatives of their respective nations, were based on various dichotomies, among them being "literacy-illiteracy", "conflict-civility" and "baseness-nobility". Similar ones are suggested in Ford's reading of Greco-Roman and Chinese histories concerning interactions with "barbarians". In his opinion, these oppositions may boil down conceptually to a sense of individual and group (including national) security, which necessitates a delineation of characteristics possessed by "Us", but not by the potentially threatening "Other" (Ford 2020: 106-108). Importantly, Ford refers to East Asian philosophical traditions regarding human nature, and their influence on early Chinese international politics, which equated the worst possible traits of otherwise "cultured us" as a collectively standard mentality and way of life of the non-Chinese "barbarian Other" (ibid.: 84-87). It must be remembered that, both in Western and East Asian contexts, "the Other" which is juxtaposed against the nobility has not always been an external invader; migrations and absorption of formerly "uncivilized" territories by new or expanding states subsumed the aforementioned "barbarians", in various capacities, by the "standard" populace. In this sense, it may be argued that even though civilizational progress occurs to stave off chaos and disorganization, "the Other" often associated with this chaos tend to be absorbed and reorganized under the newly-created (or adapted) administrative and intellectual frameworks. In short, the "high" and the "low" are inseparable in intellectual discourse, and the dialectic of socio-economic and philosophical development has necessitated some type of a response to potentially unsavory ancestors or foreign opponents by the state nobility.

In this study, the ways the described tensions were interpreted, integrated and intertwined by the Commonwealth's *szlachta* and the Korean *yangban* are elucidated as key components

of their respective consciousnesses. The roughly 300 years between the beginning of the sixteenth and the end of the eighteenth centuries are appropriate as the main time frame for this inquiry, as they marked a particular socio-political and cultural stage in the dynamics of the highest societal echelons of the Commonwealth and Joseon—countries which were oft considered, figuratively and literally, to be worlds apart. With their geopolitical alignments and national borders in flux, they were essentially positioned on the western and eastern fringes of the Eurasian steppe. Regardless of the geographic considerations, the aforementioned time frame was selected for this study for a number of reasons, and not without consideration of prior stages of Poland's and Korea's history.

The similar, and perhaps even culturally convergent developments coincidentally taking place in the Commonwealth and Joseon may be summed up in three key points. To begin with, the solidification of national institutions and the privileges of the *szlachta* and *yangban* scholar-literati reached their pinnacles in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Key events of this period included the death of the Polish monarch Jan I Olbracht (John I Albert r. 1492–1501), whose reign witnessed the initiation of the two-chamber parliament, as well as the disastrous expedition against the Moldovan associates of the Ottomans (1497). This period also saw the first purges of Confucian literati under Korea's infamously unhinged king Yeonsangun (燕山君; r. 1483–1495). These two occurrences, despite their disparate nature, eventually led to the reinforcement of the nobility's role in the economy, statecraft and wider society, as well as marking a stage in the development of the Commonwealth and Joseon in which privileged families became entrenched in their increasingly exclusive sphere of activity, ever more clearly separated from other social strata. These processes clearly, though not necessarily formally, constrained the formerly near-absolute power of kings, providing nobilities of Poland-Lithuania and Joseon with a framework in which they, and their beliefs, would largely determine the course of their respective monarchies, and not vice-verse, unlike the noble settings of Western

Europe. This was compounded by the end of the Jagiellonian dynasty in the Commonwealth and the institutionalization of the free election system, and by the Japanese and Manchu invasions of Korea from the end of the sixteenth century until the 1630s, with the Commonwealth's own conflicts with neighboring states (Sweden, Russia, Turkey) lasting more than 60 years in the seventeenth century.

The response of the two political entities to the foreignness of new ideas (such as the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, nascent Western empirical sciences and various modes of rationalism) coupled with the fear and sense of moral or military responsibility to protect against armed and political threats and their alien values, shaped the intellectual and religious environments in the Commonwealth and Korea, culminating in the buildup and strengthening of their national identities and reinforcing ideological isolation.

Last but not least, postulates for economic, social and technological reforms, inspired by the real and perceived weakening of state organization, gained traction both in Joseon and the Commonwealth in the eighteenth century. These postulates, or criticisms, were usually aimed at the nobility or more generally the social strata holding power, their political conduct and conservative outlooks being blamed for the their state's backwardness and unpreparedness for challenges. The main socio-political and economic difference at this point lies in the fact that, unlike Korea, the Commonwealth did not survive these reform attempts as a sovereign entity, which in its case took place against a backdrop of rising Russian, Prussian and Austrian dominance, and the partitioning and eventual disintegration of the state's territory, and with it, the dissolution of the independence and political influence of the *szlachta*. Meanwhile, the reigns of the enlightened monarchs Yeongjo (英祖; r. 1724–1776) and Jeongjo (正祖; r. 1776–1800) marked both the peak of late Joseon's culture and a downward socio-economic slope; subsequent monarchs could only rudimentarily attempt to stabilize the internal chaos of increasingly frequent

natural disasters, popular uprisings and the attempts by Western powers to invest in Korea on their own terms. All of these factors point towards surprisingly analogical circumstances of the Commonwealth and Joseon. The ideology of Sarmatism in the Commonwealth as well as the exclusivist nature of Korean Neo-Confucian orthodoxy after the Japanese and Manchu invasions, would be inherently tied to both the romanticized or denigrated remote national past as well as contemporary political borders and alignments. These sentiments would, similarly, undergo scrutiny within the following 200 years or so, in accordance with the rise of critical sciences in the West and the East and the subsequent increase of social diversity in the countries in question. At any rate, these wider philosophical or cultural trends and their noble purveyors found a natural haven and mode of expression in the institutions of national governance. Consequently, the key matter to discuss, which embodies in itself the spirit of this paper, is: What was the role of "borderland identity" in shaping of the topmost social strata in the Commonwealth and Korea, and how did the nobility frame and cement its traditional underpinnings as well as their dominant and numinous position in society vis-à-vis the various "Other"?

2. Origins and Basic Organizational Functions of the *Szlachta* and the *Yangban*

The Polish-Lithuanian *szlachta* and the Korean *yangban* were, in purely pragmatic or materialistic terms, quite similar. Specifically, an extended family having control over an economically significant and officially affirmed land, typically secured through a measure of private military power, would be seen both in Central-Eastern Europe and in Korea as representatives of a privileged status group. On this point, scholars such as Martina Deuchler have indicated that the actual roots of the *yangban* stratum are not to be exclusively

found in the dominant Confucian doctrine in Joseon era or even to graduates of official examinations in Goryeo (918–1392), but could be traced as far as the United Silla (新羅; 668–935) and its local powerholders originally delegated by the state to local areas for purposes such as coordination of farming activities, taxation or mustering of troops; above all, Deuchler's research conclusively proves that it was in the Silla period that Chinese-style surnames indicating particular lineages were formally adopted by the majority of people in the upper echelons of society (Deuchler 1992: 84-87). These power-holders eventually gained a degree of autonomy from the state, though their domains never truly approached actual independence or resembled medieval Europe's *feudum*. Moreover, scholars have established (Duggan 2000: 1-13) that the basic structures and methodologies of feudalism have their source in ancient Rome, though it remains an important question whether codifications of the socio-political order of this type over the ages possibly represent mere affirmations and enforcements of a developmental stage common to all of humanity throughout history, with complex regional variations, or if feudalism had its exclusive roots in European antiquity. In essence, this means that the framework of the "feudal state" proposed by Karl Marx as supposedly prevalent throughout the majority of pre-modern and early-modern East Asia has little substance to it, and many generalizations—social or political fragmentation coupled with top-down inter-class dependencies—may have been prevalent throughout history, but the actual particularities of socio-political interactions naturally varied.

As far as social, rather than political processes are, concerned other dynamics of territorial domination were discernible both in Europe and Asia, including lineages and clan identities tied to the inhabited land or a place of origin via a foundational narrative. Interconnectedness of interests on the basis of distinct family ties, coupled with the dissolution of large kindred groups was probably the actual norm developed in late pre-modern Europe, approximately from the twelfth until the fourteenth century (Bloch

2004: 138-140), and within roughly the same time frame in the Korean Peninsula. As such both the powerful landholders and the lowly tillers could over time display direct or obscure genetic links to the throne, though the actualization of that potential hinged upon the level of literacy, affective networks and economic standing. Oftentimes, the actual social freedoms and the degree of mobility were higher and more inclusive than popular narratives tend to imply. Norman Davies notes on this point that in medieval Poland, institutionalization of slavery was rather weak, discrediting the "slave state" stage within Marx's assumed universal methodology of progress (Davies 2005: 12). In purely institutional terms, *feudum* certainly played a key role in the formative stages of the *szlachta*. Service to the sovereign and the subsequent official acknowledgement by them was particularly important in the initial solidification of noble privileges, and the possession of land signified a stability of livelihood coupled with traits such as legal immunity. In Korea, from the Goryeo era onward, land or a geographic location came to signify not only a noble family's source of economic income (through its own value as well as the labor of the rural dependencies), but also, should a clan grow and become more widespread, a potential (often mythical or speculative if no clear historical records existed) place of origin—an ancestral seat (Deuchler 2015: 10). Although European nobility regularly marked their real or tentative place of origin—sometimes through particularly construed surnames—it was only in the gradually Confucianized Sinophone Asia, and especially Joseon, that the ancestral seat gained quasi-religious connotations, with multiple clan branches meeting together periodically at the designated place for ancestral and key seasonal rituals. This mode of delineated familism has survived in Korea into modernity despite the legal disappearance of the *yangban* status. The Western European nobility, in its formative stage, approximately in the seventh century AD, was already marked as a relatively closed super-stratum, placing great stress on non-base birth and exogamous, rather than endogamous marriages, though questions concerning coherency of its ethnic

origins, coherence of customary practices and the role of service to rulers and state institutions (as the possible determinants or signifiers of long-term noble status) remain (Fouracre 2000: 17-19). In many cases, construction of the notion of the "noble" accompanied its' differentiation from the "base", though not necessarily in a proactive manner. Once again, the anecdotal narrative accusing medieval Western European nobility of exploiting their dependent villagers (etc.) must be carefully reassessed; the non-nobles or even "ignobles" were by default predisposed towards less preferential treatment by the law and state functionaries precisely because their speech, clothes and dwellings were usually coarse and much less prominent than those of the well-fed and (at least externally) physically stronger nobles (Reuter 2000: 85-97), though this did not equal exploitation per se— it could have been merely a facilitating factor. These dynamics and differences in lifestyle may be compared with the Joseon-era culture of the *yangban* scholar-nobility, which, interestingly, prescribed extravagance and opulence in dressing code, practical appliances (including styles of porcelain vessels) and interpersonal conduct; these points were raised even at the royal court—where members of the *yangban* served—with such esteemed individuals as the first counselor Yi Jong-Song (李宗城; 1692–1759) correlating unnecessary expenditures on the part of the state with disturbances among the people and decrease in the "Great Unity" (kor. *Daedong* 大同), an important aspect of Confucian philosophy (*Yeongjo Sillok* 1734/8/15). The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's *szlachta*, on the other hand, valued personal freedom and, as we shall see further on, was characterized by its disdain towards servitude to the state, directly at the court and separated from the land. The *Szlachta* nobles, , through a narrative idealistically popularized in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for the convenience of the newly created union between Poland and Lithuania, approximating an overarching "foundational myth" for the partner states (Maciejewski 1974: 13-42), promoted themselves as direct descendants of the ancient Sarmatians, in spite of the latter's non-Slavic and non-Baltic

cultural identity, not to mention the apparent dichotomy between the highly esteemed Western Roman values and the "ends of earth" provenance of the ominous riders, who, in the first centuries CE, posed a direct threat to Rome (Cunliffe 2019: 57-58); furthermore, the presence of Sarmatians as integral components of historical Polish or wider Polish-Lithuanian-Russian societies of the Commonwealth has not, so far, been attested by archeological evidence, despite the key role of this dubious mythology in providing a collective identity to this vast state (Marcinek 2011). It must be noted that the anthropological data on the relationship between native Koreans and the Manchu tribes is far more conclusive than the possible ties between the Slavic states and ancient Sarmatia—nevertheless, in Korean traditional narratives, the tribes living beyond Mount Baekdu (백두산) were invariably considered to have little to no actual culture. On the other hand, the Balhae state that formed in the northernmost parts of Korean Peninsula as well as Manchuria in late seventh century following the downfall of Goguryeo and lasted until 926 has long had a contentious standing among Korean historians (both in Joseon era and modernity), as the prevalence of Korean cultural components vis-à-vis those of proto-Manchurian tribes and the Chinese is particularly wrought with uncertainties in this case (Kim 2016: 248-257). Thus, the origins of noble strata—ideological, material and —geographic - were indeed convergent on a collective sense of idiosyncratic honor, historical pedigree and outward wealth contrasted against poverty, simplicity and lack of ancestral history.

In Poland, through the gradually increasing perception of one's land being an intimate familial property, as opposed to being granted in the past to one's ancestors for their knightly services to the Crown, a *szlachta* noble considered himself as an impressive individual in all ways (regardless of his actual economic status) and tried to maintain it without pandering to the ever-weakening kings and their courts, unlike his Western European colleagues. When these French, German or Italian nobles referred to their potential origins in "barbarian" tribes, it was a sporadic occurrence, and

elevation of the cultural or military standing of the "uncivilized" Germanic or Celtic peoples was not exclusive to the upper echelons of Western European societies; over time, entire nations built awareness of their predecessors (real or assumed), priding themselves on this legacy. A Polish *szlachcic* noble, on the other hand, basked in this sense of cultural uniqueness. To him, only the *szlachta* nobles were fit, physically and ideologically, to represent the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The peasants and the city-dwellers were assumed to have little of the Sarmatic identity, if at all—in a sense, they were not actual citizens. This attitude, in Poland, had a direct antecedent in the behavior of dukes and their "knight" allies, from the late twelfth until the fourteenth century, when, often under pretense of law, they performed "service" for their lords through the application of force on other feudal domains and the insubordinate populace (Górecki 2000: 115-155). Knightly honor, perhaps, was a façade of this behavior, and armed excursions were justified as pious in nature, as was the case elsewhere in Europe whenever the defense of Christian communities against various "pagans" gained traction among local populaces, at the formative stages of the "antemurale" credos, but before Sarmatism's methodologies took hold in the Commonwealth. In this context, the conflict between Poland/Lithuania and the Teutonic Order for the moniker of the Defender of Christianity, coupled with the diplomatic efforts of the former towards the vilification of the latter is notable (Tazbir 2004: 10-13). In fact, the relative distance between Central-Eastern Europe and Rome made Poland's claims of its honorable struggles against the Turks or Muscovites dubious in the West and the South (ibid.: 20-22), perhaps reinforcing the internal and international perception of Poles and Lithuanians as not-quite-Christians, or quasi-barbarians. Overall, the conceptual role of barbarians and pagans in the shaping of Europe's institutional and socio-political environments is difficult to trace beyond the Commonwealth and its eastern and south-eastern neighbors, beyond the medieval era, and beyond certain aspects of the Counter-Reformation movement. The knights and the nobles of Poland and

Lithuania were obviously the dominant political stratum within the rising Commonwealth,—and this state of affairs reinforced *szlachta*'s ego and derogatory treatment of "non-Sarmatians", even though, as noted above, the actual instances of exploiting non-elites should be analyzed case-by-case. Contrarily, the relative ethnic homogeneity of Koreans through the ages did not predispose the *yangban* or their predecessors to separating themselves (the Silla-era "bone rank system", despite its name, being a rather standard stratification system, dividing society on the basis of largely in-born rank and function) (Deuchler 2015: 19) from the larger populace or other nations on the basis of their perceived origin and blood ties. A doctrinal variant of international exclusivism eventually came to be practiced by the *yangban*, motivated by the downfall of what was seen as "Confucian Orthodoxy", and consequently of philosophical authority in China proper following the establishment of the new Manchu dynasty (Kalton 2019: 31). At any rate, the political, cultural or military power embodied by Polish-Lithuanian and Korean nobility predisposed these social strata towards playing a decisive role in the formation and day-to-day functioning of national institutions: the civil apparatus, the legislature, the national defense structures, but also the intellectual force emanating from the royal court. The main differentiating factor between the discussed types of nobility is that in the Commonwealth, the *szlachta* considered itself, by birthright, to be largely free from the majority of obligations towards state institutions, such as any new taxes enforced without government's (*sejm* or *sejmiki ziemskie*) explicit approval, though in particularly hard national circumstances such as those of the seventeenth century this rule would be periodically set aside (Kopczyński 2019: 74-75); while in contrast the *yangban* had a strong sense of responsibility for ethical education, passing civil (or more rarely, military and technical) examinations, and virtuously serving and advising the king, who was seen as the moral and ritual lynchpin of the nation; the royal court as well as the six ministries, official academies and various tribunals were considered among the most proper places where a noble scholar-literati aspiring to become

a "sage" should seek employment. Compared to the earlier "Renaissance" model of teaching, rote by-the-book learning gave way to "Baroque" upbringing, placing psychological and moral considerations in daily conduct at the forefront (Grzybowski 1996: 9-10). In the Commonwealth, and especially in the seventeenth century, the discussed father-led familial education amounted to training in basic Latin—the *lingua franca* akin to how classical Chinese was viewed in Korea—and an introduction to military know-how. Furthermore, the local schools in the Commonwealth, which were usually administered by the Church, constituted the second stage of education in Central-Eastern Europe; in Joseon Korea's provincial educational facilities (typically called *Hyanggyo* [鄕校] or *Seodang* [書堂]), the curriculum typically consisted of Confucian ethics and the recitation of ancient classics, in addition to rituals for sages and worthies of old (Kim 2010: 27-28). Despite these relative similarities, the actual values espoused by the *szlachta* and *yangban* differed significantly, especially in their public or administrative contexts. Additionally, the militaristic component of Sarmatism stood in stark contrast to the civil, high-minded and refined preferences of the Neo-Confucian scholar-literati. The details of these divergences form the next step of our discussion.

3. The Self-Perceived and Factual Socio-Political Roles and Privileges of the Nobility

Although in both the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Joseon Korea the noble strata of society formed comparatively early, the late fifteenth and the entire sixteenth century may be given special attention, as a possibly convergent stage of their evolution and the point of departure for dynamic and problematic developments the discussed polities underwent in the subsequent centuries. In both cases it was a golden age of history that essentially embodied a short

socio-political respite preceding a period of decline and conflict. It marked the development of humanistic sciences in Poland and Lithuania, and perhaps the formative peak of Confucian ritual ethics in Korea. Strict societal divisions started being enforced in both polities, and the formerly substantial autonomy of the commoner farmers, along with the role of women within the family and in wider society (Wyczański 1965: 269-271), witnessed a visible curtailing. Furthermore, the legal and political developments within this time frame established relatively thorough foundations for the dominance of the nobility in matters of the state. In Korea, the finalized version (Jung 2013: 182) of the dynastic code in 1485 (the so-called *Eulsa Daejeon* [乙巳大典]), and in Poland the *Nihil Novi* Constitution (which forbade kings from issuing new laws without consent and input of nobility) of 1505 simultaneously stabilized the state while also paving the way towards the virtual sanctification of the hold which the nobles had gained over their kings—in favor of the former's class- and status-based interests, including a wide scope of legal immunity (Sucheni-Grabowska 1988: 2). To clarify, unlike in the Commonwealth, significant power-stripping of kings was never presumed in Joseon as their privileges were significant despite the periodic tensions between particular kings and the *yangban*; moreover, the central government formally exerted fiscal and administrative influence on the countryside, becoming entangled in multi-factor relationships with the local populace (Karlsson 2006: 214-219).

At any rate, all costs of affirming oneself as the member of public society were steep both in the Commonwealth and Joseon. In the Korean Peninsula, the ethical aspects of social stratification exerted particularly strong influence on economic opportunities in daily life. In short—regardless of whether one was a nominal free farmer, or a public or private "slave"—a menial worker, foot soldier, or land tiller represented a basic unit of physical labor for which the *yangban* normally considered themselves ineligible, similar to their position on profit-centric mercantile activities. The scholar-nobility provided the state with philosophical expertise and moral

underpinnings; the actual sustenance and practical service was the duty of the "Other". The king's proclamations, his decisions and, conversely, the limitations placed upon his conduct were translated into the fruits of pragmatic administrative work by virtue of the monarch's relation with the multitude of institutions. In particular, the censorate, inspectorate and advisory bodies (*Saganwon* [司諫院], *Saheonbu* [司憲府] and *Hongmungwan* [弘文館]), collectively known as *Samsa* (三司; literally "three departments) and created after 1438, were meant to ensure that the country or its rulers do not fall into absolutism, moral negligence or barbarism. The fact that much of the internal, or background work of these bodies was done by non-elites or *jungin* (中人) "middlemen" specialists, and that the *yangban* readily dismissed any direct involvement in such "petty matters" was an obvious aspect of social stratification in the Joseon era. Likewise, other than the clergy, it was the *szlachta* that held within its grasp the majority of state offices in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The king of this nominally two-state country by himself constituted one of the parts of a single deliberative structure called *Sejm Walny*, having to cooperate with the Senate and Chamber of Representatives (*Izba Poselska*); each component of this structure had uniquely designated prerogatives and powers. Unlike Joseon, the Commonwealth was much more decentralized. Consequently, the status and the wider interests of *szlachta* (in this political sense interpreted as individuals of noble birth) not only dominated *Sejm Walny*, but also regional organs of deliberation called *Sejmiki Ziemskie*. The successive monarchs were viewed implicitly by the law, popular custom and explicitly by the *szlachta* as "the first among nobles" (Grzybowski 1996: 29-30), indicating the close connection between the aristocracy and the nobility; in theory, any member of the *szlachta* could be declared a king during a Free Election. *Artykuły Henrykowskie*, named for the agreement between the Commonwealth's nobility and the first freely-elected king, Henryk Walezy (Henry III r. 1573–1574) — a devout Catholic—delineated the limitations placed upon kings, who were expected to safeguard the interests of *szlachta* and not trespass upon

their "golden freedom". Among the key aspects of these Articles were the *szlachta*'s personal immunity in the face of law, the right to form political confederacies, the *liberum veto* (the right of noble individuals to protest and immediately bring an end to any legislative session) and the right to rise against the monarchy in case of its unlawful actions. Interestingly, and in line with aforementioned details on the religious freedom in the Commonwealth, was the right of the *szlachta* to choose their credo as per the Warsaw Confederation of 1573. Janusz Tazbir notes that the demands of the *szlachta* on Walezy, other than the affirmation of previously legislated privileges, also included the legal conceptualization of the future of the Commonwealth as a religiously neutral and/or tolerant political entity, which required much diplomatic maneuvering (Tazbir 2009: 88-95).

By the end of the sixteenth century, to secure their interests, both the *szlachta* and the *yangban* either entrenched themselves in political camps or retreated to their respective landed properties. The survival strategies of nobles varied depending on the perceived threats to their positions. The aforementioned importance of land (preferably, for *szlachta*, outside of city walls or centers of royal power) was reinforced by both the desire to virtually own villages and rural infrastructure as the means to familial sustainability and prestige—and to remain separate from the royal court and bourgeoisie. During hard times, the size of the property and its agricultural output clearly distinguished those well-to-do *możni* ("affluent ones"; major landowning and politically influential stratum from which the omni-influential and even less monarchy-dependent *magnateria* separated in the sixteenth century) who managed to secure their livelihoods through significant political power from the middle *szlachta*, not to mention the landless farmers or "plebs" (Wyczański 1965: 216-217). For the *yangban*, too, land quality, familial prestige and connections mattered deeply, as they were the primary signifiers of lasting noble status; nevertheless, while servitude towards the state and its ruler remained generally in vogue throughout much of the dynasty, the particulars of political or literary career were subject to much

corruption and amoral competition. As such, esteemed scholars in the vein of Yi Hwang (李滉; 1502–1571) cautioned their disciples, at times recommending spiritual seclusion in nature as a viable alternative to cynical "rat race" in politics and administration (Deuchler 2015: 177-181). As market opportunities and status fragmentation grew after the Japanese (1592-1598) and Manchu-Qing invasions of Korea (1627-1637), economic reality started to knock at *yangban*'s doors, a typical Confucian scholar-noble otherwise shunning personal engagement in money-making. Similarly, the snowballing economic impact of war against Russia (1609-1618), Cossack uprising (1648-1657), Swedish invasion (1655-1660) and Polish-Ottoman war (1672-1676) led to a wide-ranging pauperization of the entire Commonwealth. Thus, both the Polish-Lithuanian *szlachta* and Joseon *sadaebu* (士大夫; esteemed scholars; an alternative term for *yangban*) strived to balance their day-to-day essentials, while focusing on "higher" pursuits, at least conceptually. Their respective mindsets, in the former's case largely derived from the combination of Sarmatism and Catholicism and in the latter's case from increasingly nationalized reading of the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy, found public embodiments in the state institutions to which the nobles had legalized or implied predispositions, regardless of the actual relationship between the "center" and the "periphery".

The noble strata in Europe and Asia alike have not only pursued ideological strategies of survival meant to simultaneously maintain the cultural cohesiveness and unity of its economically disparate members, but also made active efforts to safeguard themselves against status groups that could pose a distinct challenge to them. Although the cultural force carried by the bourgeoisie and the *jungin* middle-stratum specialists was discernible, neither they nor rich peasants could gain true clout in the public sphere comparable to actual nobles. As far as the topic of serfdom is concerned, the connections between inter-class dependencies and geographic divisions as well as the resulting discriminatory practices are clearly visible in both Polish and Korean history. To begin with,

the degree of legality and the range of these practices is a key matter to analyze. For example, it is very difficult to fully discern whether slavery existed in the Commonwealth – certainly, as Norman Davies believes, it was not institutionalized. The closest and most vilified approximation to slavery was *pańszczyzna* ("lord's work"), which was a burdensome, unpaid labor allotted to all tenant farmers living on a noble's land. Eventually it would cover all peasants living in a given area, with significant free hand given to the nobles in setting the rules of regulations. Notably though, while it was the king Jan Olbracht, who "tied" the peasants to the land (with *Piotrków Statutes* in 1496), and king Sigismundus the Old who increased the days of *pańszczyzna* from a few days per year into few days per week (in 1520), the reality was that the landlords could essentially force their associated peasant households to work even ten days per week, which typically was covered by peasants hiring paid replacements, whenever the family members could not bear the burden (Rauszer 2020: Chapter 1). Once again, though, it was more of an individual, rather than systematic burden. Regardless of this state of affairs, runaway peasants became a common phenomenon despite severe punishments, Ukraine (the name of which, interestingly, could be interpreted as "fringe land") was one of the most popular destinations given its vastness and, for most of its history, the relatively weaker influence of the Commonwealth's nobility. The desire to control Ukraine's populace, was, however, strong, and its resistance exacerbated by the predominantly Orthodox Christian credo of Ukrainian's peasants and Cossacks, who, especially after the disastrous (for the Commonwealth in the long term) uprising by Bohdan Chmielnicki in 1648, became closer to Russia. In Korea, the lowborn sub-stratum of *baekjeong* (白丁) even came to be associated with the northern migratory *orangkke* (오랑캐; barbarians) due to their lifestyle and unclean occupations: butchers, leather makers and base entertainers. Given the fact that by the fifteenth century any attempt at recovery or re-incorporation of former Goguryeo/Balhae land became an unrealistic affair and to reinforce taxation as well as other tools of social control, the

government of Joseon frequently postulated integrating such wandering segments of society into the commoner stratum or to recruit them as soldiers (*Seongjong Sillok* 1475/4/12). A "slave-proper" sub-group of *baekjeong* (often synonymized with *cheonmin* 賤民) called *nobi* (奴婢) was divided into two main categories – public (that is, attached to a particular office or organizational unit), and private (owned by another individual) ones. In practice, while their status was formally low, they were indistinguishable from commoners, and they could buy themselves out through grain donations to the state (the name of this practice being *napsok* 納贖) or by nominating a replacement (*Daejeon Hoetong, Hyeongjeon 刑典, Gongcheon 公賤*). As was with many other strata of Joseon society, the situation of both free peasants and *nobi* (or generally speaking, *nobi*-like individuals) was comparatively worse in the northern parts of the Peninsula, with the rebellion of Hong Gyongnae (洪景來) in 1811-1812 engaging substantial numbers of destitute individuals from that area. The disdain towards vagrancy and the preference towards a sedentary mode of existence in fact defined political establishments in both Europe and East Asia, at least partially due to economic reasons. Many of the *jungin* and *baekjeong* occupations were of key importance to the state and the *yangban*, as it was in the Commonwealth's *szlachta*'s intermingling with skilled members of bourgeoisie and lowborn artisans, peddlers, meat and skin processers and other providers of basic services.

The conceptual contrasts between economic standing and the birth-dependent status became ever more visible from the late Renaissance onto the Baroque era, even as the traditionalist top-down order of societal classes were highlighted, accepted or even enforced as part of the religious climate. Moreover, in the majority of Western Europe from the late sixteenth century onward, the position of the monarchy was strengthened, shaping it into the defining peak of social hierarchy (Maravall 1986: 27-29) that with the support of Catholic of Protestant Churches. , Concurrently to this, the perception of nobility grew rather fluid, characterized primarily by its land ownership or, in France, through the direct affiliation of

lineages to the royal court. As we can see, this was largely not the case in the Commonwealth as far as the relationship between the *szlachta* and successive kings was concerned. The legislation applying to the Commonwealth's bourgeoisie followed both the cultural trends of the time (namely, the interplay between the Counter-Reformation, the rapidly advancing arts and sciences, and the tensions between the *ancien regime* and *nouveau riche*) and the freedom- and authority-centric will of the *szlachta*. Specifically, the growth of the cities was promoted, but the rights and privileges of the citizens themselves, vis-à-vis the predominantly rural nobility, were until the eighteenth century curtailed with mixed results. As Wyczański writes in his book, while the situation of the city patricians (the highest echelons of bourgeoisie hierarchy, encompassing powerful merchants, bankers, or the richest artisans), on the one hand could act against the *szlachta* and purchase land, or become holders of the state's highest offices or Catholic Church's functionaries, on the other hand was precarious in its status, having to contend not only against the *szlachta*, but also with local guilds and the impoverished masses, who could at times violently voice their discontent (Wyczański 1965: 48-52) while, sporadically, some of the bourgeoisie's lower social strata found employment at *szlachta*'s major *folwark* or *latifundium* enterprises or, in the case of "new" cities (i.e. those established through the merging of multiple pre-existent villages), continued to cultivate their original farmland (ibid. 1965: 51). It should be noted that the merchant stratum, amidst the attempts to reinforce class and status divisions, acted as a lynchpin for all types of economic activities, by all social strata, at times providing credit even to the monarchs. In Joseon, the gradually rising demand for luxurious goods from China and Japan led to merchants - normally in the lower echelons of Confucian hierarchy – gaining significant effective societal standing, key role in the international trade, and a generally stable source of income, despite local markets being promoted from the sixteenth century onward and constituting threat to traditional merchant associations, such as those located in the old capital Kaesong (開城) (Park 2020: 143-

174). The general trend in Renaissance-Baroque Europe was that tenant farmers were too much of a useful resource by themselves to let them wander freely—consequently, the well-being of the land and its lords depended on the labor of such "tied-up" peasants (Lukowski 2003: 74-76). In Joseon, this dependency had varying dimensions, often in accordance with the political standing of the *yangban*, with regional considerations adding key background to the fragmentation of the scholar-nobility becoming explicit from the late sixteenth century onwards. Not only was the freedom of philosophical expression in Korea stifled by factionalism but the *yangban's* perceived or actual domination over the lower echelons of society did not follow class and status simultaneously. Nor was the situation of the commoner and lowborn people altogether painful or inescapable. For instance, decreasing of the tax burden by selling oneself into slavery oftentimes only brought minute problematic changes to the lifestyle of a commoner farmer, and only those unfree *nobi* who were attached as serfs to public state offices were distinguished in any way from standard "good men" (*yangmin* [良民]). The implementation of the "Uniform Tax Law" (*Daedongbeop* [大同法]) in the seventeenth century simplified tax burdens and procedures for non-elite tax-payers through systematizing rice as the primary medium; however, regardless of whether one was a member of the *yangmin* or the lowborn stratum, the practice of the upper social strata until the second half of the eighteenth century was to pressure destitute families to pay exorbitant military tax or have their men join the army (Kim 2014: 66). On the other hand, becoming part of the military, especially through passing an examination, often presented special developmental opportunities to lowborn individuals (Seo 2014: 208-210), though class- and status-advancement of non-elite individuals through military means from the late sixteenth century onward is not a very extensively researched topic, in either Korean or Polish-Lithuanian contexts. In the fifteenth-century Commonwealth a nominal change of status through economic prestige was understood as something plausible (Leszczyński 2020: 242-243), though

frowned upon—a rather far cry from the similar practices among slaves, commoners or middle tiers of society, which only started to become visible in the eighteenth century and were invariably ostracized or meticulously hidden by the "genuine" *yangban* establishment.

On the more personal and less institutional aspects of belief typically espoused by the *szlachta*, it suffices to say that the role of religion within the Sarmatic mindset suggested a moral dissonance, symptomatic of the wider trends of the European Baroque era; attachment of the Polish *szlachta* to (especially after the sixteenth century) Catholic faith usually took external forms of expression, rather than internal, pure faith. As Tazbir says in another one of his works (Tazbir 1979: 109-120), there were active attempts on the part of society and the establishment to equate political roles and positions (king, *hetman* army commanders, etc) with the saints and angels of Catholicism, both to make the faith more understandable to the illiterate social strata, and to provide "palatability" towards the bloody activities of the war-filled seventeenth century. Indeed, while we cannot say anything certain about the direct, historical relationship between the religion of the ancient Sarmatians and the metaphysical inclinations of the Commonwealth's nobility, a trend of using Catholicism and "cultured" Sarmatism to justify the freedom and violence associated with the *szlachta* as activities meant to protect the Christian world is discernible. It should be reiterated that while in economic, regional and political sense *szlachta* was horizontally as well as well as vertically divided, in terms of religion and custom, by late eighteenth century, the collective identity of this otherwise eclectic stratum shifted firmly towards Catholicism, with Eastern Orthodoxy and other religions or sects becoming sidelined. One of the major reasons for this tendency could lie in the number of foreign incursions, including the Swedish "Deluge" of 1655. The saber, horse and traditional *żupan* clothing—informal emblems of a *szlachcic*—thus pointed towards an image of a "civilized warrior" (contrasting with a notably austere clothing style preferred by the *yangban*), even if the mental horizons of a

typical noble in the seventeenth century Commonwealth were not very extensive. Benedykt Chmielowski (1700–1763), representing a typical noble of king Augustus III's reign (r. 1733–1763) —himself caught between the tail-end of the Central-Eastern European baroque and the forerunners of the Enlightenment—remains one of the chief portrayers of the era and of Sarmatic mentality. His monumental work, *Nowe Ateny* (*New Athens*) thus combines superstitions and national mythologies, with a strong interest in empirical sciences and finding the rational underpinnings of religious belief. On the topic of the Sarmatians' origins, he traces them to the second descendant (Magog) of Noah's son Japhet, squarely including the assumed ancestors of Poles among the "northern nations" (Chmielowski 1745); in Polish nobility's popular consciousness, *chłopi* peasants have since the medieval period been commonly perceived as descendants of Noah's cursed son Cham. Up until the mid-seventeenth century—when the entirety of the Commonwealth's populace became impoverished due to incessant wars—peasants, or at the very least families classified as such, could display significant affluency and learning, sometimes comparable to city-dwellers and lower-class *szlachta*. This could be considered an accomplishment in itself, given that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the approximate levels of illiteracy among middle-class *szlachta* and bourgeoisie are estimated at 44%, and among the lowest echelons of the nobility could reach 92% (Wyczański 1965: 409); Wyczański additionally suggests, that literacy could be higher in northern and western regions of Poland, further solidifying geographic discrepancies between members of the *szlachta*. To compare, the literacy rate recorded among Koreans in 1930, twenty years after the fall of Joseon dynasty, was approximately 22% (Becker 2021: 9). The gradual decline in economic prosperity of the Commonwealth was thus correlated with increasing levels of strenuous *pańszczyzna* allotted to peasant households, contributing towards the later, somewhat mistaken belief in complete exploitation and subjugation of *chłopi* by *szlachta*. Peasants could marry and remarry freely (Lukowski 2010: 113-114),

except when one of the partners lived in a different village. Marriages between members of the nobility and bourgeoisie or even peasantry were a far more common and largely legal occurrence (Wyczański 1965: 148), in contrast with Joseon's *yangban* pursuit of genealogical and status purity.

The Grand Ming Code (大明律), a major point of reference in pre-modern and early-modern Korea's law, stipulates severe flogging as a punishment for arranged marriages between "slaves" (in Korea, this category could technically encompass not only servants per se, but also the majority of *cheonmin* lowborn service-providers) and members of the nobility, or conversely for registration of "honorable persons" as slaves (Jiang 2005: 87-88). At any rate, children of *yangban* men and non-elite concubines could not inherit their fathers' noble status. Furthermore, the state desired to maintain a stable tax base, and so a rising number of commoner-slave marriages presented a problem to it (*Jungjong Sillok 97:1a [1541/12/2]*), since the tributary duties of the *cheonmin* were comparatively low. Commoners and the lowborn people constituted the bulk of Joseon's soldiers, and in fact could raise their societal standing through participation in military examinations. Overall, the military lineages of the *yangban*, combined with the non-elite soldiers, contributed towards a stratum of a secondary status in Confucian ecumene. In the Commonwealth, the martial spirit of *szlachta* was, perhaps quite ironically, embodied not in the regular fighting force, culturally glorified by such formations as the *husaria* winged cavalry, but in the motley *pospolite ruszenie* (popular charge), formally raised by king himself, with often mixed results stemming from unclear or weak commandership by monarchs, from arrogance of *szlachta* as well as its lack of serious preparedness, and, perhaps most importantly, due to frequent idealization of this formation, interpreted through the lens of Sarmatic courage (Wierzbicki 2008: 43-48). This image stands juxtaposed against a *yangban* noble, who likewise considered himself a protector of his nation's philosophical orthodoxy from the Japanese or Manchu, but in a decidedly literary fashion (unless he was a member of a military

muban [武班] lineage), rather than through the arts of war. The factual identity and societal position of the *yangban* title were extensively examined by members of the seventeenth and eighteenth century "practical learning" trend, among them Yu Hyeongwon (柳馨遠; 1622–1673). In his collected works, he remarks that, in the past, any discrimination between nobles and commoners was on the basis of ethical conduct rather than familial origin, with the later times eventually witnessing increased status-based scrutiny combined with mutual disdain between the legitimate *yangban* and the illegitimate *seoja* (Yu Hyeongwon 1770). This opinion is just one of the many expressed by *silhak* (實學; literally "practical learning" or "real learning") scholars, who generally supported the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy but condemned multiple societal aberrations, among them the hereditary nature of *yangban* status; for them, *yangban* or *sadaebu* originally signified merely a passer of the civil service examination who came to be employed at state institutions, and not a noble by default. A relative of Yu Hyeongwon, Yi Ik (李瀷; 1681–1763), additionally advocated for societal divisions based on age (Yi Ik 1920), though it must be remembered that the *silhak* scholars were neither revolutionaries and rebels against the status quo, nor direct equivalents of European enlightenment's scientists, despite their wide-ranging interest in the natural world. Consequently, both the Commonwealth's *szlachta* and Joseon's *yangban* acknowledged their functional role, and a wide scope of independence vis-à-vis their individual monarchies, but detested any kind of institutional chaos, and unlike many other European and Asian states of their period, were strictly against the deposition of kings through violent means.

Overall, neither the Commonwealth's nor Joseon's political domains had aspects of absolute monarchy—however, in the former's case, the king was practically impotent as far as his powers vis-a-vis the *szlachta* were concerned. Thus, they were recognized as the topmost tier in the state's order and administration. However, internal divisions continued to foment. In Korea, the *Hungu* (勳舊派; Meritorious Subjects) paved the way for the more

ideologically and educationally-inclined *Sarim* (士林), partially through the multiple "purges" and factional upheavals roughly in the time frame of 1498–1546 (Lee 1993: 475-476); the latter group subsequently, from the seventeenth century onward, experienced further factional divisions based on their philosophical and political attitudes. In the Commonwealth, the regional *szlachta*, from the early sixteenth century onward, weakened in favor of the state-wide *magnateria* (Litwin 1983: 467-468). As stated above, it would be highly disputable to assume that the pre-modern Korea represented a decentralized feudal state. Nevertheless, clear spheres of influence by the *yangban* became visible from the sixteenth century onward. The local registers (*yuhyangso* [留鄕所]) —established primarily for the purpose of delineating *yangban* men living within local societies, and for the purpose of ethical management of these societies—were one of the forms these spheres of influence took, and were eventually merged with the system of local elite shrine-academies (*seowon*[書院]), which were, in turn, eventually perceived as a distinct political threat by the central government in the nineteenth century. Baek Seung-A, however, indicates that the actual antagonism on the part of the local *yangban* was typically directed at the social strata that posed an actual danger to noble interests in specific areas or fields of expertise—such as the unsalaried, "wicked" *hyangni* (鄕吏) clerks (Baek 2021: 48-49). This was compounded by the fact that following the death of the last Jagiellonian king, Sigismundus Augustus in 1572, the process of electing each subsequent king took the form of a mass nobility congregation. The key formational path to a group identity which was to shape the next two centuries of Polish "public" (if in practice highly limited) society stood wide open, with philosophy, rituals and politics determining the fates of *szlachta* to nearly the same degree that economy and land possessions did—similarly to the Korean *yangban* after Japanese and Manchu invasions.

4. Precarity of the Noble Status and the Brink of Change

Turning our focus to the material means of status reinforcement, s in Joseon, officially, all land belonged to the monarchy. Even in the event of it being provided for the needs of a recognized nobleman and his family (and in exchange for special service—though that was more common early in the dynasty), it was still assumed to belong to the crown. Here we coincidentally arrive at the main points of division between the *szlachta* and the *yangban* as far as their status was concerned. Firstly, land could be held by a *yangban* and his genealogical descendants only if they were of so-called "primary" standing; that is, if they were born of a legitimate male *yangban* and his non-commoner or non-lowborn wife. Confusion between what was considered legitimate and illegitimate, both in societal and ritual terms, indeed constituted much of discourse among the literati in sixteenth to eighteenth century Joseon. The aforementioned giant of *silhak* thought, Yi Ik, stipulates on this point that

"The [crimes in] Community Compact regulations are as follows: … ones who evict their legal wives, one who does not distinguish female and male status, one who confuses status of his wife and concubine, one who treats his secondary descendant as a legitimate one, one who being a legitimate son does not care for his secondary sibling properly, one who being a secondary son disrespects his legitimate brother (Yi Ik 1920; my own translation)" .

To formally keep their privileges, descendants of a *yangban* lineage would still have to consistently, generation-by-generation pass at least the initial stages of the *Gwageo* (科擧) — the all-encompassing examination system for civilian, military and technical expertise, with the *Mungwa* (文科; civil), and more uncommonly *Mugwa* (武科; military) examinations carrying enough prestige as to reinforce the social standing of a hereditary scholar-official, and, rarely, the participating individuals of lowborn (even "slave") or secondary status (Park 2001: 23). While, in theory,

all members of the "good" *yangmin* stratum could sit for any and all exams, the actual customary practice, and the inter-related economic reality, prevented most from active participation, and the initially nominal possibility of attendance granted to farmers virtually dissipated by the seventeenth century (Ch'oe 1974: 624); the "dark" practitioners of shamanism, who were interpreted by Confucians as conflicting with their own "virtuous" communication with spirits (Han 2020: 74), were prohibited explicitly. In contrast, there were no certificates signifying noble status with the respectively associated educational or institutional achievement of the *szlachta*, who, as described above, oftentimes educated their children informally in their homes—more advanced, secular educational institutions that would garner the support of the nobility coming only with the Counter-Reformation movement, and later in the wake of the European Enlightenment. At any rate, both the *szlachta* and the *yangban* generally abhorred hard physical work and mercantile activities, and so land-tilling became the domain of dependent serfs. The perceived threat to the prestige, wealth, and power within the state, held by the Commonwealth's and Joseon's noble strata, came not from the impoverished, angry and constrained lowborn or peasant people (with the exception of Bohdan Chmielnicki's uprising in 1648), but from elsewhere. Specifically, the middle strata, in both cases represented primarily by technical specialists, merchants, city-dwellers and "secondary" offshoots of noble lineages that could not be directly classified as either *szlachta* or *yangban*. Among the pre-Joseon "strongmen" mentioned earlier in this article figured the *hyangni*, to whom the *silhak* trend ascribed the majority—though by no means all—of the negative societal traits that in the eyes of these "empirical" scholar-literati besmirched their times. The newly-established Confucian government of Korea feared their encroachment and the potential diluting of clear social delineations, and so by the reign of the third king, Taejong 太宗 (r. 1400–1418), the dissolution of the majority of former privileges of the *hyangni* was complete, transforming them into a non-salaried stratum of local functionaries in provincial areas, whose duties were

to be aiding the centrally-delegated magistrates in their administrative work, consequently disassociating them from their former ancestral lands and power bases (Duncan 2014: 218-220). On the other hand, it may be argued that the focus on this occupational stratum by Joseon's early kings was not singular, and that the *hyangni* essentially constituted an "irregular" social domain, not unlike the *baekjeong* and the other "quasi-commoner" groups, that had to be reorganized following the establishment of the new, Neo-Confucian socio-political order (Choi 2009: 240-241). In this way, the attire of the *hyangni* marked them as members of the lowborn; coarse cloth and wide-brimmed hats marked their presence to all. At the same time, their role in local government was indispensable, much like the case of the *jungin* specialists who mainly lived in larger towns and cities. They carved out their occupational niches, remaining skilled in fields the *yangban* would shun, oftentimes also developing their own distinct genealogical identity—something that was otherwise rare beyond the scholar-literati in the Joseon era. Among occupations hereditarily taken up by the *jungin* were translators, legal technicians and aides to the *yangban*, accountants, skilled physicians and astronomers (Hwang 2004: 108). The astronomers and translators, or interpreters, served the most important functions as far as the maintenance of the Confucian order was concerned; the former prepared and corrected calendars, dealt with time-keeping and geomancy, while the latter were the main points of contacts with various "barbarians" in the northern border regions as well as during diplomatic missions to China and Japan (ibid.: 108-110). Due to the lack of career opportunities in the civil branch of the government, compared to legitimate *yangban* descendants, the "secondary sons"—who were also deprived of equal inheritance through the acts of the early Joseon kings—frequently gained competences and economic stability through their association with this eclectic middle stratum, and by passing the technical—or "miscellaneous"— *Japgwa* (雜科) examinations. Moreover, as Hwang observes, the most dominant lineages among the *jungin* specialized in multiple disciplines and

some among them gained wealth comparable to the richest merchants—leading to them act as lenders to the highest echelons of society (ibid.: 112, 118), similar to the Commonwealth's merchants. Analogically, the Commonwealth's nobility had only one real rival class in terms of literacy, level of culture, economic power and political influence: the aforementioned city-dwellers in Poland and Lithuania, whose influence eventually became paramount in shaping the Partitions' economies after the downfall of independence in 1795 and the subsequent reshaping of the *szlachta*'s social standing and national identity.

As one may surmise at this point, the philosophical aspect of the *szlachta* identity, as opposed to the *yangban*'s, is essentially a composite construct of multiple contrasting elements. Aside from the aforementioned notion of Sarmatism—which, once again, by the sixteenth and seventeenth century had only rudimentary vestiges of historicity—only the concept of "golden freedom" (*libertas aurea*; a term for collective privileges and powers of the *szlachta*) acted as an overarching system of socio-political belief, casting its shadow upon the majority of religious phenomena in the Commonwealth. As stated above, the preference of nobles towards Roman Catholicism became especially strong during the Baroque. Denigration of Buddhism was coupled with the unfortunate time frame of the introduction of the "idealist" Lu-Wang school of Neo-Confucianism into Korea, along with highly critical commentaries by its Ming scholars. Consequently, the "realist" Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy dominated the socio-political landscape of the upper echelons of society, and one would be hard-pressed to pinpoint any *yangban* clans openly espousing philosophical outlooks different from the officially-accepted ideology; only rather eccentric, reclusive scholars expressed any degree of interest in the intuitive, Taoism-, or Buddhism-like (in the eyes of the Cheng-Zhu conservatives) teachings of Wang Yangming (王陽明; 1472–1529) and Lu Xiangshan (陸象山; 1139–1192) (Deuchler 2015: 180-181). Notably, due to the Japanese and Manchu invasions and the downfall of the Ming dynasty, Korea's Confucian elites developed

a shared perception of being the singular bastion of culture in the world, maintaining the high standards associated with the "legitimate" dynasties of China, while being surrounded by "barbarian" countries. The ritual forms of expression of these attitudes were severely regulated by law and Chinese canon, and by themselves signified a noble upbringing. Thus, especially from the second half of the eighteenth century, they came to be imitated even by commoners and lowborn people. One may argue that, just as with the often highly emotional displays of piety by *szlachta* during momentous political and military events (e.g. the Swedish "Deluge" invasion of 1655), the Neo-Confucian ritualism of Joseon served to maintain cohesiveness, and a sense of belonging to a common cultural ecumene, among the *yangban* scholar-nobility. At the same time, certain cracks in this cohesiveness were becoming obvious, if not necessarily formalized. Even though both the Commonwealth and Joseon had only the rudimentary characteristics of feudal states, lines of division between their noble identities and certain interests could be traced, particularly those of a geographic, economic, and political nature. Regional discrimination, with the exception of the one directed at the *yangban* from the northern provinces, was seldom based on legal principles; popular custom and intra-regional competition for the (notoriously limited in number) official positions in central government were the prime motivators. Some of these rivalries translated to political toxicity stretching into the modern era—for example, the enmity between Gyeongsang (慶尙) and Jeolla (全羅) provinces (Haberman 1987). From the late eighteenth century onward, as the fragmentation of the stratum progressed and accessibility of well-paid positions dwindled, the quality of farming land became a key factor in defining social standing and economic prosperity of the *yangban*, their associates and offshoots (such the *seoja* [庶子] illegitimate offspring). This was partially reflected by the decreased prominence of the mountainous Gangwon (江原) and northern provinces, as the quality of soil there was inferior to that in the south (Choe 2019: 52-53). In a similar vein, parts of the infertile Mazowsze (Masovia) region of

the Commonwealth came to be associated with impoverished *szlachta* (Uniwersytet w Białymstoku 2021), while the rich Wielkopolska region abounded with fertile fields, with many *magnateria* clans having their roots or landholdings there. The *szlachta* from Greater Poland, Lesser Poland, Masovia, Lithuania, Ruthenia and the "Wild Fields" often treated each other with disdain. An equivalent to this situation in the Joseon era was the rivalry between the *yangban* of Gyeonggi, Chungcheong, Jeolla and Gyeongsang provinces, each of which had the claim to fame of having produced a particularly large number of civil service examination graduates. And, the "Wild Fields"—encompassing mostly the traditional territory of Ukraine and parts of Belarus—had a counterpart in the northern provinces of Pyeongan (平安), Hamgyeong (咸鏡) and Hwanghae (黃海), in that the popular perception by other regions and stratifying regulations of the central establishment—meant to preserve the status and cohesiveness of the "legitimate" *yangban* lineages—led to the shunning of their nobles and their wider populace alike as people of a second category (Kim 2008: 135-136). Consequently there is an important distinction to note between the social composition of Joseon's and the Commonwealth's fringe regions, in that in the northern regions of the Korean Peninsula a distinct status group akin to the Ukrainian Cossacks apparently did not form. Adding to the complexity and diversity of interests among the Commonwealth's *szlachta*, there was also a degree of "national" tension between the noble clans of Poland and Lithuania, primarily driven by the former's historically longer ancestry, though it must also be noted that the regions historically associated with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (most importantly, Belarus and parts of Ukraine) were on their own highly varied in terms of their *szlachta*'s ethnic and socio-economic standing. "*Szlachta szaraczkowa*" ("grey nobility") or "*gołota*" ("naked *szlachta*") were just two of the multitude of *szlachta*'s impoverished sub-groups, and one's noble standing in the face of the law could additionally be decreased or practically abolished, contingent on acts bringing infamy upon oneself – this could apply

even to magnates from significant lineages (Pasek 2011). Likewise in Joseon, exile or execution remained a distinct possibility for any *yangban* in public office Głowacki remarks, that despite the gradually increasing Catholic profile of the Commonwealth, the popular disdain of *szlachta* towards Protestants had a nationalistic (typically anti-German or anti-French) component, and should not be characterized as an active religious intolerance (Głowacki 2014: 29-48) despite—or perhaps due to—the tendency of the law to limit or bar land ownership by non-Catholics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Disdain and hostility were much more readily expressed towards Muslims, given the long history of conflicts between the Commonwealth and the Ottoman Empire. Regardless, as implied by Głowacki's paper, the long-term habitation of the Commonwealth's territories by non-Catholic or non-Christian nominal "Poles" or "Lithuanians" appeared to make these peoples more palatable to *szlachta* and the law, though conflicts with the often orthodox Ukrainian Cossacks occasionally flared (Davies 2005: 336-338), exacerbated by Cossacks' sympathies towards Russia. Contrasted by this interplay of politics and religion, up until the early 1700s, the philosophical disputes on the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy and the degree of adherence to its heritage by specific individuals (like Pak Sedang [朴世堂]or Yun Hyu [尹鑴]) also formed a backbone of factional conflicts at the royal court, and a *yangban*'s social standing and legal fate was contingent on his carefulness during debates and exchange of letters (Deuchler 1999: 128-130), with execution, exile or infamy (through such titles as "Despoiler of the Way"; kor. *Samun nanjeok* [斯文亂賊]) as possible outcomes; thus, the ideological profile of Joseon may be said to strongly imply, or even be directly connected with, intolerance. This intolerance and the perceived imperative to maintain ritual propriety at all levels of public discourse, reaching its peak in the second half of the seventeenth century, was likely spurred on not only by internal political circumstances (such king Gwanghae's diplomatic balancing of diplomatic relations between the Han Chinese and the Manchu, which caused his deposition by

Joseon's orthodox establishment in 1623), but also due to the still-fresh memory of the Ming dynasty's downfall (1644) and king Injo's (仁祖; reign 1623-1649) kowtow (1636) before the leader of the invading Qing forces. As the relations with the Qing eventually stabilized, the country has simultaneously maintained its "hermit" status and remained open to innovations of purely practical, and mostly agricultural value. At any rate, the dangers to the noble strata of both the Commonwealth and Joseon were of both internal and external nature. To reiterate, the main threats to the stability of noble strata in Poland-Lithuania and Korea were simultaneously internal and external. The former ones included weakness and chaos of national institutions (both central and local) in which the particularist interests of nobles played a key their role, and the latter being the regional encroachment of rapidly developing foreign powers (with Russia, Prussia and Japan being the main actors). Other significant and long-term threats to nobilities of the Commonwealth and Joseon included the shift in the intellectual base and technical competences (in the face of increased international interference combined with the progress associated with European Enlightenment and missionary activities in Asia) from the landed gentry to the bourgeoisie, and in Korea, from the *yangban* to the *jungin*, "secondary sons" and *cheonmin* sub-strata. Nevertheless, Despite these dynamics and the downward trajectory of national cultures dominated by the noble status groups, the relative homogeneity of Korean society has been largely maintained until the present day, while the remarkable ethnic and cultural divergences (that is, taking the role of Tatars, Jews and others into account, and aside of the factor of the *szlachta*'s own fragmentation) in Polish and Lithuanian societies were additionally exacerbated by the Russian, Prussian and Austrian tripartition of the Commonwealth, and only the Second World War brought an end to this diversity. In the meantime, the Polish-Lithuanian *szlachta* collapsed culturally and economically just like their Korean counterparts did, leaving behind a complex heritage – both positive and negative within the scope of national histories – the impact of which is still being assessed today.

5. Conclusions

Despite the seemingly vast geographic and cultural differences, multiple instances of socio-political and ideological convergence may be traced in comparative research of the nobility in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and in Joseon Korea. To start, despite the different perspectives on the role of education in defining pathways of personal careers and the long-term stability of livelihood, a sense of philosophical or historical uniqueness pervaded the mindsets of the *szlachta* and the *yangban*, acting as a separating line between them and the other status groups in their respective states. Indeed, it was extraordinarily difficult to become a true noble other than being born as one. Political connections cultivated through multiple generations, or the resources and know-how for passing *Gwageo* examinations at their highest level (before the king himself) could not be easily attained by non-elites. Furthermore, while a particularly affluent individual of any stratum could potentially acquire an area of land equaling the territories owned by "magnates" or the ultra-powerful *polyol* lineages, a sense of ancestral belonging or the various mythologies associated with a place of origin typically could not be convincingly construed or substituted, though, as noted above, specific legal injunctions against the bourgeoisie existed in the Commonwealth, and in Joseon, to an extent, the commoners were also protected by law against excesses of the elites. Nevertheless, a key dimension to noble identity in the Commonwealth and Korea—one that is not always given attention by historians—is the pragmatic and essentially fluid border between the inborn status, ideologies underpinning it, and the socio-economic or military reality necessitating preservation of one's livelihood through acts normally unsavory to the *szlachta* and the *yangban*. Borders and borderlands, and not exclusively the ones between the noble Christianity and Sarmatic freedom in the Commonwealth, or between adherence to the reality of the regional geopolitics and maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy in Joseon,

characterized both internal and external images of the two discussed states. The encroachment upon family farmland by enterprising individuals—not necessarily of noble upbringing—the inability to carve a niche into educational and political environments due to their limited size and levels of saturation, and the resulting inability to maintain stable income, weighed heavily upon members of the *szlachta* and *yangban* alike. The new social, philosophical and technological trends from the "barbarian" Manchu Qing and the rapidly "enlightening" Western Europe were applied only selectively by the end of the eighteenth century due to the various real and theoretical tensions described above, leading to the *szlachta* and the *yangban*'s gradual intellectual isolation vis-à-vis the other social strata and the neighboring countries. In the Commonwealth's case, successive uprisings, and conflicts with foreign states in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries badly affected not just the state coffers and infrastructure, but also devastated arable lands, driving multiple nobles into the landless stratum of *golota* (non-possessive *szlachta* earning their living through various services to the crown or magnates). In Korea, despite a relatively peaceful period after the foreign invasions, the reconstruction period and the finalization of ritual controversies under king Sukjong's (肅宗) reign (r. 1674–1720) in the beginning of the eighteenth century, the society experienced high levels of fragmentation, and cases of extreme poverty and dramatic opulence were common both among the elites and non-elites. Consequently, only the absolutely topmost, truly royal echelons of society could enjoy a semblance of stability—highly important after the death of king Jeongjo, followed by that of Hong Gyongnae and the Donghak (東學) religious and socio-political disturbances (around 1850 and 1894), along with frequent famine and low crop yields. As part of these processes, the popular image of nobility – itself, as we have seen, based both in the Commonwealth and Korea on tensions between the ideal "lofty" and denigrated "beastly" - gradually fluctuated between the quasi-sacred "Other", through the merely privileged "Otherness", to the decaying "Other". In this sense, a basic conclusion comes to mind:

no matter what kind of exalted identity one may profess, it is invariably contingent on contentious narratives, material necessities and the often "lowly" and "dirty" prose of reality, rather than the poetry – even through though the poetry of foundational myths can bring meaning and identity to the people struggling to survive in the "borderlands".

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