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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social status, chaste widowhood, and trends in marital age gaps in post-Imjin Korea, 1606–1630

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Abstract
This study investigates the impact of warfare on nuptial patterns, focusing on the trends and characteristics of age differences within marriage. Specifically, it explores the socio-demographic outcomes of the Imjin War (1592–1598) and post-war reconstruction in Korea, using the earliest extant Chosŏn household registers, compiled between 1606 and 1630. Individual-level microdata were derived involving 2,336 married couples based on 11,749 entries in these registers, covering four administrative districts located in the southeastern region of the Korean peninsula severely devastated by the war. Factors such as status, property, warfare, social practices, and legal regulations influenced spousal age differences. First, social rank and family wealth played pivotal roles, with age gaps widening as a husband's socio-economic status increased. Second, females born after 1580, whose first marriages were affected by the Imjin War and post-war circumstances, experienced an average marital age gap of about ten years. Third, this effect was further complicated by the imposition of socio-legal rules on remarriage; that is, the *yangban* entailed a pronounced age difference owing to the Neo-Confucian norm of chaste widowhood. This study enriches the understanding of historical marriage customs in Korea and offers insights for studies on age disparity in marriage.

Keywords: chaste widowhood; Chosŏn society; historical demography; household register; Imjin War; marital age gap

Introduction

The Imjin War of 1592–1598, also known as the Bunroku–Keichō campaign or the "First Great East Asian War" (Haboush 2016; Swope 2009), was an international conflict that profoundly affected Korea's Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910).[1] Previous studies have investigated the course and legacies of this monumental war from various perspectives (Andrade, Kang, and Cooper 2014; Craig 2020; Haboush 2009; Haboush and Robinson 2013; Han 2013; Hur 2013; Zhou 2022 [1962]). Scholars have also examined the characteristics of state-led restoration projects in post-Imjin Korea (Kim 2015b; Lee 2018).

However, research on the socio-demographic ramifications of the war through the lens of social history is still in its nascent stages, despite the burgeoning literature on global population migration,

[1]See Lewis (2014) and Swope (2009) for general discussions of the Imjin War, and Haboush (2016) for research on its impact. The term "Imjin" 壬辰 refers to one of sixty years in a sexagenary cycle. In this study, it specifically denotes the year 1592 when the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598) invaded Korea and swiftly occupied Seoul. In response to the desperate plea of the Chosŏn dynasty, Emperor Wanli (r. 1573–1620) of the Great Ming dynasty decided to send a rescue troop that same year. Such war mobilization subsequently induced population movement, including officials and merchants, along the Sino-Korean border (Hasegawa 2019).

notably involving Korean captives who were either repatriated from Japan or enslaved and traded within Japan's global slave trade (De Sousa 2019; Min 2008; Yonetani 2022). As for the societal changes brought about by the Imjin War in post-war Chosŏn, Deuchler (2015) illustrated that local elites actively engaged in efforts aimed at reconstructing social order and undertaking moral rehabilitation in the aftermath of the Imjin War. Similarly, Pettid (2015) elucidated the social customs and ethical standards concerning women through literature analysis. However, the extent to which Confucian moral ethics and post-Imjin literary discourses – such as that of the virtuous woman (*yŏllyŏ*) 烈女 (Pettid 2011) – effectively influenced individual behavior remains unclear and requires thorough substantiation. This knowledge gap between textual sources and demographic reality primarily stems from the severe devastation wrought by the war, which impeded the Chosŏn government from accurately documenting vital statistics such as births, deaths, and abductions. In this respect, the demographic consequences of the Imjin War have remained largely unexplored.[2]

This article scrutinizes the nuptial patterns in early seventeenth-century Chosŏn society to uncover the socio-demographic impacts of the Imjin War on marriage customs, aiming to reveal a notable yet understudied facet of post-war Korean society. It focuses on the broad marital age gap after the Imjin War when husbands were unusually older than their wives. Understanding this trend requires considering the protracted duration of the war, which led to a remarkable rise in the number of widows and widowers, thereby substantially influencing marriage and remarriage dynamics.

In addition to the Imjin War, another crucial factor conducive to the increase in the marital age gap was the socio-legal norms surrounding remarriage. Neo-Confucianism, the dominant ideology of the Chosŏn as well as China's Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1636/1644–1912) dynasties, not only emphasized fulfilling the duty of filial piety as a daughter (Wang 2012) but also advocated for the husband's family to be the only legitimate home for a married woman, underscoring her filial obligations to her husband's parents. The patrilineal ideals of Neo-Confucian reasoning, particularly expounded upon by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and his school of thought, emphasized the importance of maintaining a chaste widowhood (Birge 1995; Deuchler 1992; Mann 1987; Pettid 2015; Theiss 2004). According to this perspective, the death of a husband did not relieve a wife of her moral duties; instead, it highlighted their significance, making them even more essential (Birge 2002, 2003). These circumstances, wherein widow remarriage was deemed unacceptable, facilitated the prevalence of age-disparate marriages. As will be further explained, this trend was particularly conspicuous among *yangban* 兩班 elite families: widowers of high social standing married first-time brides, resulting in remarkable age discrepancies between remarried husbands and their first-married wives.[3] On the contrary, marital age gaps decreased as a husband's socio-economic status declined, confirming that non-elite women were less constrained by chastity ideology (Kim 2015a, p. 96).

To analyze the age differences among married couples, this article uses data extracted from household registers (*hojŏk*) 戶籍 compiled in 1606, 1609, and 1630.[4] These registers, despite their intrinsic limitations, stand as the sole reliable sources for comprehending the population, family structures, and individual lives of people in post-Imjin Chosŏn society. Furthermore, the household registers analyzed in this research pertain to the southeastern region of the Korean peninsula, which bore the brunt of the devastation caused by the Imjin War. They meticulously document various population movements, including the influx of new residents such as Japanese deserters, the repatriation of former

[2]Notable exceptions include studies on Korean abductees for whom fragmentary records are available (Han 2020a; Naitō 1976). The Imjin War also led to the desertion of soldiers from the Japanese army, known as *hangwae* 降倭, who eventually settled in post-war Chosŏn. In addition, numerous Chinese immigrated to Korea from the Imjin War period to the aftermath of the fall of the Great Ming dynasty. See Bohnet (2020) and Han (2021) for details.

[3]The term *yangban* literally signifies the two classes of civil and military elites. Originally, it referred to government officials during the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392). However, by the mid-Chosŏn era, its meaning expanded to include social elites, comprising not only former and incumbent officials but also their descendants. Wagner (1974a) and Palais (1996) extensively analyzed the formation of *yangban* families. Kawashima (1984) and Deuchler (1992) also derived valuable insights into their characteristics.

[4]For pioneering studies on Chosŏn household registers, see Wagner (1974b), Shin (1974), Ro (1983), and Kim (2005).

abductees from Japan, and the relocation of soldiers (*somogun*) 召募軍 through state-sponsored migration to depopulated areas (Han 2020a). These registers are invaluable for addressing gaps in social and demographic research regarding the repercussions of the Imjin War.

This study derives individual-level microdata involving conjugal couples, incorporating variables such as age, birth year, social status, household wealth, geographic location, and migration history, as recorded in the registers.[5] The objective is to discern the socio-demographic effects of the Imjin War on marriage norms and family formation in early seventeenth-century Chosŏn society through an examination of temporal changes and socio-economic variations in marital age disparities.

Socio-legal contexts and marriage customs during the Chosŏn dynasty

Status-based social structure

To delineate the features of marital age differences before and after the Imjin War, it is imperative to consider the social structure that influenced marriage during that period. Since the Chosŏn society was structured along status-based lines, a person's socio-familial background was pivotal for spousal selection. In this context, variations in marital age disparities would likely correlate with social standing.

The Chosŏn government officially stratified its populace into two distinct legal categories. The first group comprised the *yangin* 良人, who were the king's subjects with various obligations, including taxation. Nevertheless, they were eligible to partake in civil service exams (*munkwa*) 文科 and hold government positions (Hwang 2004; Palais 1996). The second group consisted of the lowborn (*ch'ŏnmin*) 賤民 (Deuchler 1992, p. 13), most of whom were unfree laborers known as *nobi* 奴婢, who were either owned by the government or owned privately (Hwang 2004; Kim 2004).[6]

In contrast to Chosŏn society's two-tier stratification system, this study adopts a three-class system (Ch'oe 1974, 1987, pp. 103–4; Deuchler 1992, pp. 302–3; Kim 2004, p. 153) to account for the significant disparity between the ruling and ruled classes within the *yangin* sector of the population. *Yangin* thus require further subdivision into *yangban* elites and commoners, traditionally referred to as *sangmin* 常民.[7] The *yangban* constituted a group of people who held government posts or were bureaucratic candidates preparing for civil service exams. The Chosŏn government exempted them from military service. Hence, individuals with non-military responsibilities, such as bureaucrats and young students (*yuhak*) 幼學 (Ch'oe 1987, pp. 135–37; Duncan 2000, p. 195; Han 2021, note 15), should be classified as *yangban*. The commoner status largely consisted of peasants with diverse obligations to the monarch, including military service. Individuals below this status were categorized as lowborn, including *nobi*.

The three statuses – the *yangban*, commoners, and lowborn *nobi* – shaped the patterns and opportunities of marriage and remarriage in Chosŏn society. Gender also wielded considerable influence; for instance, societal tendencies regarding remarriage under the sway of the Neo-Confucian norm of chaste widowhood varied not only across social statuses but also along gender lines. In this context, examining spousal age gaps across different statuses can reveal the extent to which Neo-Confucian marital norms permeated society. This is particularly pertinent when discussing the period after the Imjin War when the deaths of spouses reached unusually high levels.

[5]This study adheres to the traditional age and year conventions according to the lunar calendar. According to traditional East Asian customs, individuals turn older not on their birthdays but in the Lunar New Year, where they are considered one year old at birth.

[6]While the generally accepted English translation of *nobi* is "slave" emphasizing servitude, this study does not equate *nobi* with the traditional notion of a slave. Instead, it regards them as unfree laborers specific to the Chosŏn dynasty. *Nobi*, as recorded in the Chosŏn household registers, had distinct characteristics from typical slaves in Western history, such as those in the Antebellum American South (Rhee and Yang 2010). *Nobi* subjects had the right to form their own families, paid taxes, and served in the military. In some cases, they even possessed other *nobi*. Thus, the current study opts to depict them as unfree laborers instead of slaves. For discussions in English-language secondary literature on whether *nobi* should be considered "slaves," see Palais (1995, 1998, pp. 23–47) and Rhee and Yang (2010).

[7]Some scholars, such as Palais (1996), translated *yangin* as commoner, encompassing both the *yangban* and non-elite subjects. However, in accordance with Deuchler's (1992, p. 13) terminology, this study employs "commoner" in a narrower sense, referring solely to *sangmin* within the *yangin* category.

Spousal age differences and marriage norms

Several studies have investigated age differences between spouses in traditional East Asian societies (Lee and Campbell 1997; Lundh and Kurosu 2014; Tsuya *et al.* 2010, pp. 82–87; Wolf and Huang 1980). However, due to a lack of data, the spousal age gaps specific to Chosŏn society around the time of the Imjin War have not been methodically explored. While some notable studies, such as the work of Kuen-tae [Kŏnt'ae] Kim (2004, 2005, 2006), have shed light on marriage age, customs, and marital age gaps, they focus on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rendering them unsuitable for understanding the Imjin War's impact on nuptiality. Furthermore, Yi (2001), who analyzed age differences between couples in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, considered a limited number of cases, making it infeasible to ascertain the overall trend with confidence.[8]

As shown in Table 1, an indirect method of exploring age difference patterns within marriages before and after the Imjin War is to observe the disparity in age at first marriage during the mid-Chosŏn period. Studies reconstructing age at first marriage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – drawing on data such as biographies recorded in personal anthologies and letters that mention marriage – reveal that couples from *yangban* families had an age difference of approximately 0.5 to 2.5 years (Pak 2006; Park 2008). This trend of age-similar marriage persisted into later periods; for instance, the average age at first marriage in the Tansŏng 丹城 region from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries was 18 years for men and 17.5 years for women (Kim 2005, pp. 196–98).[9] Taken together, these findings suggest that first marriages were typically with peers, with a maximum age difference of less than three years. Given that the age at first marriage for women belonging to *yangban* families was influenced by the onset of menarche and displayed no distinct fluctuations in the *longue durée* compared to men (Pak 2006), it is reasonable to infer that the cohort of women affected by the Imjin War at the time of their first marriage was born in the mid-1570s and later.

In addition to the normative customs regarding marriageable age, it is important to examine the socio-legal contexts of marriage during the Chosŏn dynasty to identify the factors affecting marital age differences (Kim 2004, 2006; Pak 2020; Park 2008). While Chosŏn society legally upheld strict monogamy, it held unfavorable views of extramarital affairs, but only toward women. Men were permitted to have secondary or minor wives (*ch'ŏp*) 妾 and faced relatively lenient consequences for extramarital affairs. Conversely, women encountered harsh judgment even in cases of forced relationships, let alone remarriage.

Although both late imperial China and the Chosŏn dynasty – where the Neo-Confucian social order was strict – emphasized the significance of chaste widowhood, the actual situations in each society differed. In China, women could remarry after a three-year mourning period following the death of their husbands, so remarriage was more frequent than lifelong abstinence (Brook 2010, pp. 140–41; Sommer 2000). However, the Chosŏn government maintained a stipulated statute prohibiting widow remarriage from the fifteenth century until the Kabo Reform in 1894 (Deuchler 1992, pp. 276–80). The rationale behind the enactment of legal prohibitions against widow remarriage can be analyzed from various angles, including demographic imbalances such as a surplus of women, political exigencies, and the consolidation of Neo-Confucian moral values. A recent study (Kim 2022) posited that the negative portrayal of remarriage found in *Elementary Learning* (*Xiaoxue*) 小學, a Confucian textbook authored by Zhu Xi and esteemed among Chosŏn scholars, may have influenced the proscription against women remarrying. Further, the consequences of breaching the law regarding chaste widowhood extended to the descendants of remarried women. They were barred from participating in the civil service exams, thereby preventing them from attaining

[8]Using family genealogy, Yi (2001) discussed only four cases of marriage before the Imjin War.

[9]Tansŏng is a narrow, sparsely populated mountainous area located beneath Mount Chiri 智異山, the largest mountain in the southern part of the Korean peninsula (see Figure 1). Tansŏng was incorporated into Sanŭm in 1914 and currently forms part of Sanch'ŏng-gun 山淸郡 in South Korea.

Table 1. Age of the first marriage in Chosŏn in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (unit: years)

Period	Men	Women	Spousal Age Gap	Source	Material
1500–1549	17.98	15.33	2.65	Park (2008)	Personal Chronological Records
1550–1599	18.03	15.50	2.53		
1600–1649	17.46	16.35	1.11		
1600–1699	17.31	17.75	−0.44	Pak (2006)	Marriage Letters

high-ranking positions (Ch'oe 1987; Deuchler 2003).[10] Under such circumstances, widows tended to eschew remarriage due to this discriminatory regulation.

In Chosŏn society, the loss of chastity was referred to as *sirhaeng* (失行) or *shilchŏl* (失節).[11] The Imjin War triggered a surge in female victims who experienced *sirhaeng* involuntarily as well as cases where husbands sought divorce because their wives had suffered *sirhaeng*. For instance, King Sŏnjo (r. 1567–1608) received a request from a man in the royal family to grant a divorce to his wife who had been captured by the Japanese army during the Imjin War and subsequently returned.[12] Despite King Sŏnjo's opposition to abandoning returned wives, he was unable to alter the prevailing societal atmosphere. Following the Second Manchu Invasion in the twelfth lunar month of 1636, the Chosŏn government allowed the divorce of such returned wives to placate public opinion, particularly among social leaders (Pak 2020). Accordingly, women who experienced *sirhaeng* during the Imjin War or returned after being captured by the Japanese army faced significant disadvantages in their marriages. This situation was especially precarious for women in the *yangban*, who were expected to adhere strictly to Neo-Confucian norms regarding female chastity.

It is therefore worthwhile to investigate the extent to which the Imjin War impacted marriage and remarriage patterns in Chosŏn society. Since the marital age difference in Chosŏn society typically fell below three years, the present study examines whether the war and post-war periods showed a different trend by considering key factors influencing mate selection, such as status, wealth, and region. Identifying patterns in marital age difference in this manner aids the analysis of marked changes in spousal bereavement and remarriage resulting from the prolonged war. This study pays special attention to a specific group – women born in the last quarter of the sixteenth century – whose age gap with their husbands may have diverged from that of previous generations due to their first marriages being directly affected by the Imjin War. As will be discussed later in the analysis of the Chosŏn household registers, these women were more likely to marry considerably older husbands, partially because of the war's impact on the sudden increase in the number of widowers.

Recorded information on married couples in Chosŏn household registers, 1606–1630

Advantages and disadvantages of household registers

This study uses extant early seventeenth-century Chosŏn household registers to assess the effect of the Imjin War on changes in nuptial patterns. Since its inception, the Chosŏn government compiled

[10]As stipulated in the National Code (*Kyŏngguk Taejŏn*) 經國大典, Yejŏn 禮典, Chekwa 諸科, "The descendants of women who have remarried and lost their chastity … are disqualified from participating in the higher and lower civil service exams" 再嫁失行婦女之子孫 … 勿許赴文科生員進士試.

[11]Prior to the Imjin War, the term *sirhaeng* was used to refer to women who remarried (see note 10). By the mid-seventeenth century, after the Imjin War and the Second Manchu Invasion, this term changed to denote women who lost their virginity by force or went through captivity. See the fifteenth, the seventh lunar month, the eighth year of King Hyŏnjong's reign (1667), The Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty.

[12]Eleventh, the third lunar month, the sixteenth year of King Injo's reign (1638), The Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty.

national household registers triennially.[13] The primary objective of crafting household registers was to identify individuals and households subject to taxation and corvée service.

Household registers contained vital details concerning subjects' obligations to the state, which were contingent upon their occupation or social status. While the occupational classifications appeared in household registers may not always align perfectly with individuals' actual professions, they nonetheless represent their official status and provide valuable insights. Household registers from the Chosŏn dynasty meticulously documented various social statuses, ranging from royal family members and high-ranking government officials to socially marginalized subjects like monks, butchers, and *nobi* at the lowermost tier.

One notable advantage of household registers lies in their ability to unveil ancestral and individual identities. Given the status system in Chosŏn society, ancestral records were indispensable for determining the status of male household heads and their wives. Hence, the names and occupations of the "four fathers" (*sajo*) 四祖 – the father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and maternal grandfather – were documented. Furthermore, household registers comprehensively recorded various personal particulars, such as a person's surname, ancestral origin, age, place of residence, and relationship to the household head. They also contained migration details; for example, instances of absence owing to escape or registration in a different household from three years prior were noted with a brief explanation (Dong *et al.* 2015a).

However, the Chosŏn household registers have certain drawbacks. First, their triennial compilation hampers the ability to ascertain the precise timing of vital events such as births, deaths, and marriages that took place between two consecutive surveys (Park and Lee 2008). Particularly pertinent to the present study is the inability to determine the spousal age difference in first and subsequent marriages as these were not recorded separately. Second, since the primary purpose of Chosŏn household registers was to identify individuals or households liable for taxation, only specific households were documented based on the requisite tax threshold.[14]

Despite these limitations, household registers remain the sole source for understanding the overall population and family structure of premodern Korea. For elite individuals who could compile their family records into genealogies, their personal lives, and family details can be corroborated via these biographical records. However, genealogical records (*chokpo*) 族譜 of the Chosŏn dynasty were prone to inaccuracies because of retrospective interpretations rather than real-time recording.[15] Moreover, given that the vast majority of the population did not compile genealogies until the nineteenth century, information about these segments is limited. As discussed, research on marriageable age and marital age differences is confined to the *yangban* who left behind chronological records and marital correspondences (Pak 2006; Park 2008); thus, generalizations about broader societal trends are restricted. In this context, a dataset reconstructed from household register information serves as the most robust source for portraying family formations of all social strata (Park and Kim 2010, p. 110).

Five household registers in post-Imjin Korea

All the extant Chosŏn household registers were compiled following the Imjin War.[16] Because of the catastrophic war, the Chosŏn government suspended the compilation of household registers until

[13]Residents were surveyed at the village (*ri*) 里 level, which served as the basic unit for tax collection. Records were collated at the sub-county (*myŏn*) 面 level and compiled into volumes at the county (*gun*) 郡 or (*hyŏn*) 縣 level. Household registers were retained by the central government and local authorities and used as needed.

[14]As Son (2004) estimated, the household register covered about 40 to 60 percent of the total population in the respective areas. Meanwhile, minors, who were exempt from tax payment, were often unregistered. Comparable characteristics of these Chosŏn household registers are evident in records from the Ming and Qing Chinese dynasties (Ho 1959).

[15]See Campbell and Lee (2002) for a comparison between genealogical records and household registers. The significance of historical demographic data, including genealogies and household registers, is explained in the work of Song and Campbell (2017). Also, see Han (2020b) and Robinson (2008) for discussions on the characteristics of premodern Korean genealogy. Wagner (1972) conducted pioneering research in this field, and recent monographs, such as those of Bohnet (2020), Deuchler (2015), and Park (2014, 2019), have provided in-depth analyses of genealogical sources.

[16]All the registers compiled before the Imjin War were lost. The household register from 1528 in the Andong 安東 region, which is the only exception, has survived with just one page remaining.

before 1606 when post-war restoration efforts began to show progress. Surviving household registers from the first half of the seventeenth century are scarce, with only six types from five administrative districts known to exist. The present study utilizes all but one of these registers, covering five household registers assembled in one prefecture and three counties.[17]

This study focuses on the five oldest Chosŏn household registers – the 1606 Sanŭm 山陰, Tansŏng, and Chinhae 鎭海 registers, the 1609 Ulsan 蔚山 register, and the 1630 Sanŭm register. These four administrative districts were located in the southeastern part of the Korean peninsula, specifically in Kyŏngsang Province 慶尙道 (Fig. 1). Kyŏngsang Province faces the Japanese archipelago across the Korea Strait; its southern coastal areas were major battlegrounds and suffered cataclysmic damage during the Imjin War due to their geographic proximity to Japan.

First, Ulsan, situated along the seashore, served as a major military base, hosting the headquarters of the provincial military commander of Left Kyŏngsang Province 慶尙左兵營. Its military significance was further emphasized after the Imjin War. In 1599, immediately after the war, it was elevated to a strategic prefecture (Tohobu) 都護府.

This study concentrates on the earliest surviving records of the Ulsan household registers, specifically the 1609 register, which provides a vivid depiction of the post-war landscape.[18] Ulsan underwent profound demographic shifts during the Imjin War, emerging as one of the most affected regions. This was attributed to the presence of Japanese commander Katō Kiyomasa, who established a Japanese castle (*waesŏng*) in Ulsan and held out until the end of the Imjin War, retreating to Japan in late 1598 (Swope 2006). Hence, the 1609 Ulsan household register, compiled a mere eleven years after the ceasefire, offers insight into local conditions at that time, marked by the devastation wrought by the Siege of Ulsan in 1598 and the Japanese military stationing. It shows, for instance, state-led immigration initiatives aimed at repopulating the Ulsan area as part of post-war revitalization efforts. In Nongsŏ-ri 農所里, Ulsan, 166 out of a total of 237 households consisted of relocated soldiers (*somogun*) recruited from other regions. The 1609 Ulsan household register also portrays the migration of various individuals from diverse backgrounds to the area due to the Imjin War. This included individuals abducted by the Japanese army and taken to Japan, some of whom managed to escape and return, as well as those who arrived on the Korean peninsula with the Japanese army but defected during the war (Lee and Han 2020).[19]

Second, Sanŭm and Tansŏng, situated adjacent to each other (see Fig. 1), have extant household registers dating back to the seventeenth century. Unlike Ulsan, which was valued for its military importance and mainly inhabited by non-elite populations, Tansŏng was strongly influenced by the *yangban*. The *yangban* in Tansŏng, in contrast to neighboring regions, produced more officials and civil service exam candidates, and exerted strong control over the local community until the late nineteenth century (Hojŏktaejang yŏn'gut'im 2003).

While Sanŭm and Tansŏng did not experience a prolonged Japanese military presence, their proximity to Chinju 晋州, one of the major battlefields, exposed them to several attacks and substantial damage. Tansŏng lost its function as a county due to depopulation resulting from the war, leading to its annexation by neighboring Sanŭm in 1599. Only in 1613 did Tansŏng regain its status as a separate county. Owing to these circumstances, the 1606 Tansŏng household register was compiled as part of the Sanŭm register, confirming the lasting impact of the Imjin War in this region. The 1606 household register of Sanŭm and Tansŏng reveal records of individuals currently absent who

[17]The remaining one was the 1639 Haenam 海南 register. While all the other registers belonged to Kyŏngsang Province, Haenam was part of Chŏlla Province and was therefore excluded from the current study. Inter-provincial comparative studies will be considered in future research.

[18]The extant Ulsan household registers, currently housed at Seoul National University, contain records spanning two centuries, from 1609 to the late nineteenth century. Recently, the University of Ulsan, with support from the South Korean government, digitized and transcribed these registers; they are now available to the public on the website of the Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies at Seoul National University. https://kyudb.snu.ac.kr/book/text.do?book_cd=GK14986_00.

[19]Social historians (Han 2020a; Im 2008) have actively employed the seventeenth-century Ulsan household registers, including those beyond the 1609 register, owing to their documentation of various populations, such as surrendered Japanese soldiers and Jurchens.

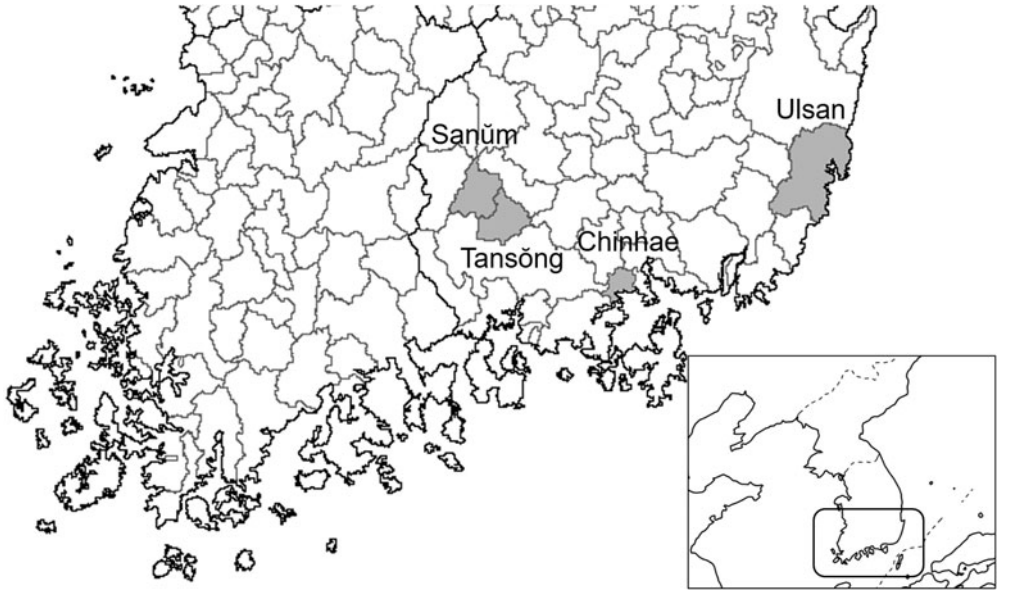

Figure 1. Locations of the four studied administrative districts in Korea.
Note: This map was adapted from resources provided by the Chosun Culture Electronic Atlas, a project of the Research Institute of Korean Studies at Korea University.

were taken captive during the Imjin War (Han 2020a). Furthermore, the surviving household registers of Tansŏng have garnered scholarly attention. This is because, unlike the Sanŭm registers, the Tansŏng registers were kept in a state of preservation from 1678 until the late nineteenth century.[20]

This study analyzes two surviving Sanŭm household registers from 1606 and 1630. Despite being among the oldest surviving Chosŏn household registers, these Sanŭm household registers have received limited attention in related research, with only a few exceptions (Han 2020a; Ro 1983). This is because, unlike the Ulsan and Tansŏng registers, the Sanŭm registers did not survive beyond the mid-seventeenth century, making it impossible to conduct long-term investigations. Therefore, this study holds significance as it conducts a comprehensive re-examination of two early seventeenth-century Sanŭm household registers.

Third, albeit in small quantities, the records of the 1606 Chinhae household register are available. Chinhae, a small county on the southern coast where major naval battles occurred during the Imjin War, suffered significant damage from the conflict. While Chinhae compiled its household register in 1606, most of the records have disappeared, with only a few remaining in private possession. Hence, no research has been conducted on the 1606 Chinhae household register to date. Despite its limited volume, it holds importance as one of the earliest surviving household registers. This study therefore includes the 1606 Chinhae household register to identify the impact of the Imjin War on the trend of marital age gaps.

Information on social stratification in the five household registers

The occupational records and genealogical information in household registers are important as they represent an individual's state-recognized social status. During the Chosŏn dynasty, individuals

[20]In the early 2000s, researchers digitized the Tansŏng registers, covering a span of two centuries, and subsequently made the results publicly accessible. The Tansŏng dataset has drawn widespread recognition for its scholarly value and is being employed in various research projects, most notably in the study of East Asian comparative historical demography (Dong et al. 2015b; Kim 2004; Kwŏn 2008; Son and Lee 2010).

inherited the socio-legal status of their parents. As mentioned, the household register established a person's social standing by documenting the names and occupations of four male ancestors across three generations: the father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and maternal grandfather.[21]

This study improves the precision of social status information by cross-verifying individuals' occupational records with genealogical data recorded in household registers. When it was difficult to determine social status, the family details of the household head (*chuho*) 主戶 were consulted to establish the person's social status. For household members other than the head, except for *nobi*, their occupation records were employed to ascertain their social status. In cases where occupational information was lacking, the same social status as the household head was assumed.

The Chosŏn government did not mandate labor service obligations for women of *yangin* status; hence, their occupational records are absent in the household registers. Women with occupational records belonged to the *ch'ŏnmin* group, except for *yangban* women, whose honorific titles corresponded to their bureaucrat husbands. In this study, the primary criterion for differentiating women's social strata consisted of official appellations indicating their positions, adopting established research methods such as those developed by Yi (1997, pp. 233–41). Both *yangban* and commoner women typically identified themselves in official documents using their surnames and appellations, reflecting their social status, rather than their given names. In household registers, *yangban* women designated themselves as "lady" (*ssi*) 氏, while commoner women used either "wife" (*sŏng*) 姓 or "woman" (*choi*) 召史 (Han 2021, note 76, 77; Lee and Han 2020, note 26; see also Wagner 1983). Given that women listed in the household registers as either the household head or the wife of the household head had their ancestors' information recorded, they could not arbitrarily use appellations indicating a social position higher than their own.

In addition to social status, household assets wielded significant influence in the spousal selection process. Since family estates in Chosŏn society primarily comprised land and *nobi* (Kim 2004, p. 153), the information on *nobi* in household registers serves as a valuable gauge of a household's prosperity. Despite many *nobi* fleeing from their owners in pursuit of freedom amid the chaos of the Imjin War, owners persisted in registering these runaways in household registers (this is particularly evident in the 1606 register of Sanŭm and Tansŏng) to maintain ownership claims (Han 2020a, p. 181). In light of such complexities, the present study considers whether the household head had ever owned *nobi* as an indication of property wealth, rather than simply tallying the number of *nobi* in the household at the time of registration.

Age differences in marriage and gender disparities in remarriage

Social statuses and spatial compositions

The total sample size included in this study was 11,749 individuals, with the breakdown by household register and social status presented in Table 2. The *yangban* accounted for only 7.54 percent, while the lowborn constituted over half (54.77 percent) of the sample. This suggests that no large-scale emancipation of *nobi* took place, despite the turmoil caused by the Imjin War – such as mass refugees and individuals abducted by the Japanese – and the practice of expunging them from records of lowborn (*myŏnch'ŏn*) 免賤 by presenting a Japanese head.[22]

The distribution of social statuses varied by region. In Tansŏng, the *yangban* and lowborn were prominent, while commoners accounted for only around 10 percent. This implies the dominance of influential local families who owned *nobi* and the overwhelming *yangban* culture in this area,

[21]Likewise, candidates for the civil service exam during the Chosŏn dynasty had to present the records of these four ancestors to qualify for the exam. See, for instance, twenty-ninth, the fifth lunar month, the sixteenth year of King Sŏngjong's reign (1485), The Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty.

[22]The heads noted in this manner were not exclusively Japanese soldiers. When instances arose where Korean heads were attributed to the Japanese, the Chosŏn government ordered investigations to ascertain whether the heads were truly Japanese soldiers and then provided a reward accordingly. See twenty-third, the third lunar month, the twenty-seventh year of King Sŏnjo's reign (1594), The Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty.

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Table 2. Composition of social status by household register

	1606 Sanŭm		1606 Tansŏng		1609 Ulsan		1606 Chinhae		1630 Sanŭm		Total	
Status	*N*	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent
Yangban	215	9.42	186	11.65	123	3.09	15	12.82	347	9.21	886	7.54
Commoner	878	38.46	172	10.78	2,027	50.84	19	16.24	1,332	35.37	4,428	37.69
Lowborn	1,190	52.12	1,238	77.57	1,837	46.07	83	70.94	2,087	55.42	6,435	54.77
Sum	2,283	100	1,596	100	3,987	100	117	100	3,766	100	11,749	100

confirming the abovementioned discussion. In contrast, Sanŭm had a relatively smaller population of *yangban* and lowborn individuals but a significant proportion of commoners at around 40 percent. Ulsan had a minimal share of *yangban* individuals at 3 percent, with half of the population being commoners (50.84 percent). In sum, Tansŏng and Chinhae exhibited greater social inequality while Ulsan demonstrated less inequality, with Sanŭm in the middle. These results indicate the possibility of regional variations in marriage-related norms and practices, which will be empirically validated by analyzing spousal age differences.

To accurately calculate marital age gaps, this study minimizes errors by excluding individuals who were deceased or secondary wives at the time of household registration, in addition to instances where information on social status was missing. Since the household registers were updated every three years, events occurring within that period were recorded in the subsequent census. For example, if someone died during the three-year interval, the household register would indicate "deceased" (*ko*) 故 before the name. Based on this notation, the present study excludes spouses who were deceased at the time of household registration. Furthermore, while it was common in Chosŏn society for *yangban* men to have secondary wives, these relationships were not considered legitimate and thus were not suitable for the analysis of marital age differences.

After applying exclusions, the analytic sample consisted of 2,336 married couples. Table 3 displays the results of classifying them according to the household register dataset and the husband's social status.[23] The proportions of *yangban* husbands follow a similar pattern to Table 2, with Tansŏng exhibiting the highest ratio. A distinctive feature of Ulsan is a significant number of lowborn husbands, along with the lowest share of *yangban* husbands. This phenomenon correlates with the demographic makeup of the region, characterized by a higher influx of migrants compared to other areas. Most of the lowborn husbands in Ulsan were immigrants who were privately-owned *nobi* (*sano*) 私奴 fleeing from their residences to become household heads. As examples of inter-status marriages, some of them were married to commoner women.[24]

The pattern of age gaps between spouses

The age difference between spouses varied markedly across regions (Table 4).[25] Sanŭm and Tansŏng show distinct patterns despite their proximity. Conversely, Ulsan exhibits the lowest average age difference at 5.02 years. As explained earlier, Ulsan experienced a colossal outflow of its population to Japan due to the Japanese military presence and subsequent withdrawal during the Imjin War, leading to a significant influx afterward. Such demographic changes likely affected the chances of finding spouses of similar ages in Ulsan. Moreover, the proportion of *yangban*, constrained by norms prohibiting widows from remarrying, was the smallest in Ulsan compared to other regions (Table 3). This characteristic was conducive to the narrower marital age difference in this region.

Furthermore, the spousal age difference differed remarkably according to the husband's social status. On average, *yangban* husbands were over 10 years older than their wives, whereas lowborn husbands were only 3.51 years older, with commoner husbands falling in between at 7.08 years older. The reason for the age difference by social status can be interpreted through the prism of marriage customs

[23]Regarding the husband's relationship to the household head, the heads themselves accounted for the majority (91.6 percent), with 2,140 men, followed by 107 sons, sons-in-law, and brothers, 87 *nobi*, and 2 others.

[24]In Chosŏn society, the principle dictated that if even one parent was lowborn, their children would also be classified as such. Consequently, *nobi* owners actively promoted unions between *nobi* and commoners to bolster their *nobi* population. This trend contributed to a decline in the commoner population by the sixteenth century, emerging as a significant social concern. Meanwhile, the Chosŏn government generally did not prohibit marriages across social statuses. The data analyzed in this study revealed numerous examples where commoner women wed lowborn men or vice versa. However, there remains an absence of notable research introducing these instances of status heterogamy to the international academic community, highlighting a forthcoming avenue of investigation.

[25]This table presents both the mean and the quartiles. The mean value can be skewed by outliers, such as extreme age differences; nevertheless, the quartiles are not affected by these values.

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Table 3. Composition of husband's social status by household register

	1606 Sanŭm		1606 Tansŏng		1609 Ulsan		1606 Chinhae		1630 Sanŭm		Total	
Status	*N*	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent
Yangban	80	16.88	53	32.12	55	5.01	4	25	110	18.84	302	12.93
Commoner	307	64.77	52	31.52	733	66.82	6	37.5	369	63.18	1,467	62.80
Lowborn	87	18.35	60	36.36	309	28.17	6	37.5	105	17.98	567	24.27
Sum	474	100	165	100	1,097	100	16	100	584	100	2,336	100

Table 4. Basic statistics: Spousal age difference by household register and husband's social status (based on wife's age)

		Mean	SD	Q1	Median	Q3	IQR	Min.	Max.
Dataset	1606 Sanŭm	8.05	9.20	1	7	14	13	−16	45
	1606 Tansŏng	5.34	7.47	0	4	9	9	−8	30
	1609 Ulsan	5.02	8.06	0	4	10	10	−26	37
	1606 Chinhae	8.63	8.62	1.5	3.5	17	15.5	0	26
	1630 Sanŭm	8.70	8.92	2	7	14	12	−24	42
Status	*Yangban*	10.12	9.50	3	8	15	12	−11	45
	Commoner	7.08	8.42	1	6	12	11	−24	41
	Lowborn	3.51	7.76	−1	2	8	9	−26	32
Total		6.61	8.65	1	5	11	10	−26	45

Notes: SD (Standard Deviation), Q2 (Median), IQR (interquartile range: Q3 – Q1).

and laws discussed earlier. Especially in the context of chaste widowhood, remarriages of *yangban* widowers typically involved younger first-time married women. Such remarriages became more pronounced as the men rose in social status, leading to an increase in the marital age gap. In contrast, for lowborn men, for whom the Neo-Confucian norm of chaste widowhood was not strictly implemented, the median age difference with their wives was only two years, with the bottom 25 percent (Q1) value at −1, indicating that over a quarter of the cases featured husbands younger than their wives.

The overall trend of age differences within marriages evident in the early seventeenth-century Chosŏn household registers yielded a mean of 6.61 years and a median of 5 years. The top 25 percent (Q3) value of eleven years suggests that in one-quarter of the couples in this analytic sample, the age difference was eleven years or more. Such a large age difference between spouses may be closely linked to the unique environment of a long-term war (to be discussed later).

Figure 2 visualizes the detailed marital age differences by the husband's social status. Among the *yangban*, only 7.62 percent of husbands were younger than their wives. Meanwhile, marital age gaps of 11–15, 16–20, and 21 years or more constituted 16.23 percent, 11.59 percent, and 12.91 percent, respectively. Hence, for couples where the husband was eleven years or more older than the wife, the rate exceeded 40 percent. These findings imply that couples featuring a remarried husband and first-married wife, in which the husband was notably older, were prevalent among the *yangban*.

In contrast, about half of commoner husbands were 1–10 years older than their wives, with 15.68 percent of wives being older. For couples where the husband belonged to the lowborn, the share of older wives reached 29.10 percent, and when couples of the same age were added, it approached nearly 40 percent. However, less than 20 percent of husbands were more than eleven years older than their wives.

In addition, nuptial patterns in premodern societies, whether in the East or the West, were closely tied to family wealth (Lundh and Kurosu 2014; Wolf and Huang 1980). As discussed above, this study considers *nobi* ownership to assess the economic status of the husband's family. In the household register records, 501 married couples were identified whose household ever owned at least one *nobi* (Table 5 and Fig. 3).[26] A comparison of Tables 4 and 5 indicates that the age difference for commoner husbands who had ever owned a *nobi* was greater than for those who had not. Consequently, the remarkable age difference observed between *yangban* and commoner couples in Table 4 is no longer relevant.[27]

[26]Since the dataset for this study did not include *nobi* who owned other *nobi*, the results pertaining to lowborn men were excluded.

[27]There was no statistically significant difference between the mean values of the two groups ($t = 1.2488$, two-tailed p-value ($\Pr > |t|$) = 0.2123).

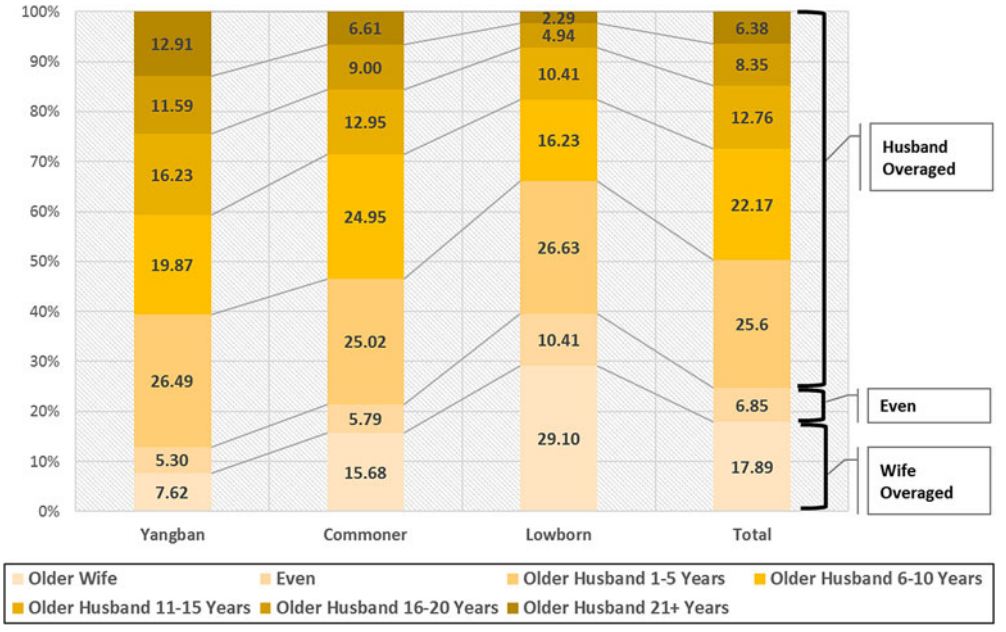

Figure 2. Distribution of spousal age difference by husband's social status.

Table 5. Basic statistics: Spousal age difference by husband's social status in a sample of households that ever owned *nobi*

Status	*N*	Mean	SD	Q1	Median	Q3	IQR	Min.	Max.
Yangban	236	10.09	9.77	3	8	15	12	−11	45
Commoner	265	9.06	8.73	3	8	14	11	−14	41
Sum	501	9.54	9.24	3	8	15	12	−14	45

According to Figure 3, the percentage of commoner husbands whose wives were older (9.43 percent) is substantially lower than those in Figure 2 (15.68 percent). In contrast, the proportion of commoner husbands whose households had ever owned a *nobi* and who were at least 16 years older than their wives (20.76 percent) is 5.15 percentage points higher than for all commoner husbands (15.61 percent). These results demonstrate that the mechanism for selecting a spouse's age was largely influenced by family property within the commoner status.

The Imjin War and the widening of marital age gaps

This analysis involved 2,336 couples, predominantly born in the late sixteenth century, who wedded their current spouses around the time of the Imjin War. It is inferred that the notable prevalence of age-discrepant marriages was closely correlated with shifts in the local marriage market, prompted by demographic changes in mortality and migration during the war. This study therefore investigates the existence of a temporal trend in age disparity, with a focus on a potential period effect of the Imjin War.

To accurately measure the period effect, having information about the timing of marriage to the current spouse is crucial; however, the datasets lack such details. As an alternative, birth cohort information was utilized. The decision of whether to set the birth cohort of wives or husbands as the reference point was pivotal for the analysis. As such, it was necessary to examine the trends in the

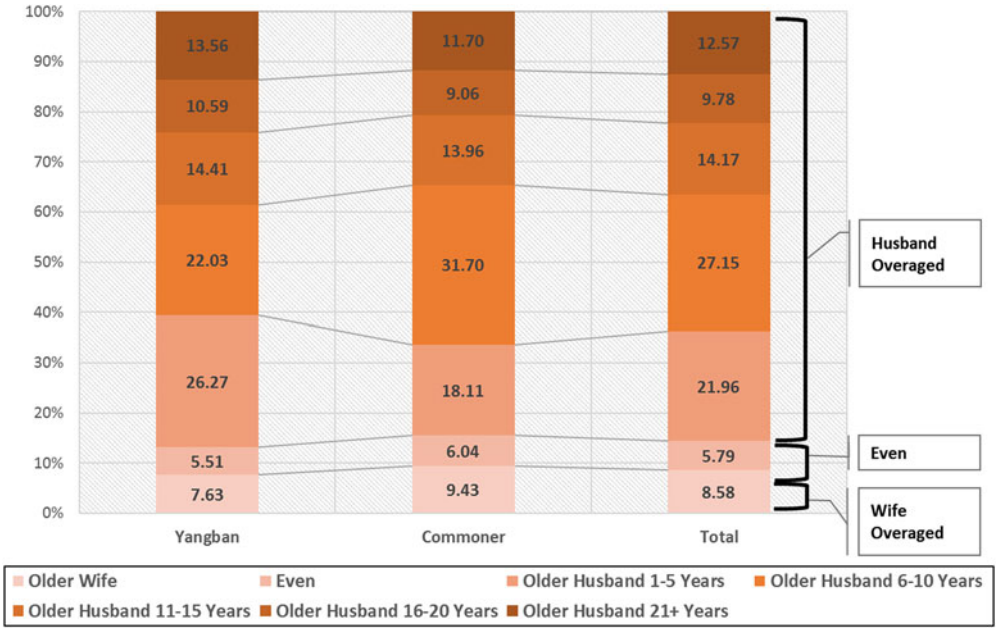

Figure 3. Distribution of spousal age difference by husband's social status: A sample of households that ever owned *nobi*.

marriage ages of men and women during the Chosŏn dynasty. As previously noted, men's age at marriage varied owing to social status and mortality, while women's age at marriage remained relatively stable (Pak 2006). Accordingly, the wife's birth cohort was chosen as the reference category, aligning with the research of Wolf and Huang (1980, pp. 138–39) on marital age differences in China.

Table 6 presents the age differences between wives and husbands, delineated by the wife's birth cohort, as observed in the datasets of the five household registers. Except for the 1630 Sanŭm household register, the remaining four registers exhibit a notable trend toward marriages with significant age disparities over time. During the recorded period in either 1606 or 1609, those born in the 1560s (581 individuals) and the 1570s (507 individuals) constituted over half of the data. The former cohort displayed an average age difference of about five years, while the latter exhibited a substantial increase to 8.22 years. These findings are attributed to the influence of the Imjin War on women born in the 1570s as they were of marriageable age during the war. The prolonged conflict affected societal norms and practices regarding the age of the groom, leading families with marriageable-age daughters to accept older husbands.

The 1630 Sanŭm household register reveals a trend spanning three decades following the end of the Imjin War in 1598. Age disparities with husbands continued to rise for women born up to the 1580s, aligning with previous findings from other registers. Beginning with the 1590s birth cohort, the age gap diminished somewhat. Nonetheless, wives born in the 1600s still had an average age difference of around nine years, which is meaningfully higher than for couples married before the war, especially wives born prior to 1570.

These findings underscore the significant impact of the Imjin War on nuptial trends and social customs. Considering that the marriages of women born in the 1570s and 1580s closely overlapped with the Imjin War, it notably influenced norms surrounding marriage ages. This impact persisted in subsequent generations born after the war.

This study further examines whether the observed period effect remained consistent across all social statuses or exhibited variations. Figure 4 illustrates the variation in age differences between spouses while controlling for the husband's social status. The results indicate that women who

Table 6. Age difference with husband by wife's birth cohort

	1606 Sanŭm, 1606 Tansŏng, 1606 Chinhae, 1609 Ulsan				1630 Sanŭm		
Year of Birth	*N*	Mean	Median	Year of Birth	*N*	Mean	Median
Until 1549	124	0.49	1				
1550s	303	2.75	2	Until 1559	35	1.74	1
1560s	581	4.97	4	1560s	85	5.89	5
1570s	507	8.22	7	1570s	104	7.40	7
1580s	225	10.00	9	1580s	92	12.93	13.5
Since 1590	12	12.50	12.5	1590s	91	10.55	9
				1600–1604	103	9.01	6
				Since 1605	74	9.09	7
Sum	1,752	5.91	5	Sum	584	8.70	7

Notes: The couple's birth cohort was constructed based on age and animal birth year information recorded in household registers.

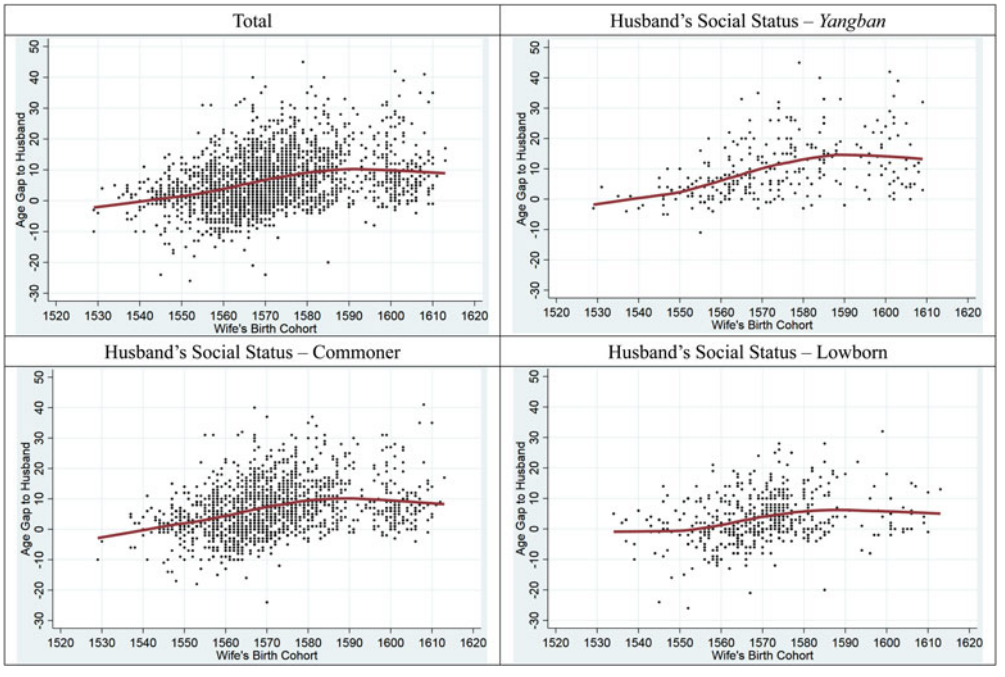

Figure 4. The temporal trends in spousal age difference by wife's birth cohort and husband's social status.
Notes: Lowess (local weighted regression analysis), one of the smoothing techniques, has been applied to the trend line.

faced the hardships of the Imjin War during marriageable age had the largest age differences with their husbands. This trend was pronounced for women who were children during the war and reached marriageable age afterward (born around 1580 or later). On average, they had an age difference of nearly ten years with their husbands. Their remarkably high age difference can be attributed to changes in the local marriage market resulting from the war, where an increase in young men's mortality and a rise in

widowers led to a surge in remarriages between widowed men and first-married women. Furthermore, the post-Imjin rise in age gaps varied depending on the husband's social status, with the lowborn showing a smaller increase vis-à-vis other groups because they had more flexibility regarding strict Neo-Confucian marriage norms, including chaste widowhood.

Marriage, remarriage, and widows

When investigating spousal age disparities in post-Imjin Korea, it is vital to acknowledge an inherent limitation of the household registers: the challenge of distinguishing whether a recorded marriage represented a first-time marriage or a remarriage. These registers only contained personal details about the current spouse, with occasional exceptions (as mentioned earlier) where information about the deceased spouse was included.

To tackle this issue, some prior studies, like those by Kim (2004, 2006), categorized couples under the age of thirty as first-time marriages and restricted the analysis to this age bracket.[28] However, this approach fails to resolve the fundamental limitations of the Chosŏn household register data. In traditional Korean society, the average age for men's first marriage was around eighteen years (Pak 2006; Park 2008), indicating that instances of remarriage in their twenties due to spousal death cannot be disregarded. This may be particularly relevant during the Imjin War when occurrences of deaths, disappearances, or abductions of young men and women were more frequent compared to other periods. Hence, considering individuals under thirty as first-married when calculating the age gap between spouses may cause misleading conclusions.

The current study addresses these limitations by examining genealogical records from *yangban* families to verify cases where a significant marital age difference was recorded in the household register, indicating male remarriage. One such example is found in the 1606 Sanŭm household register, where Min Hyochong (閔孝宗, born in 1534) married Lady Yun (尹氏, born in 1579) of the P'ap'yŏng 坡平 Yun descent group; Lady Yun was a staggering forty-five years younger. According to the Genealogy of the Yŏhŭng 驪興 Min descent group compiled in 1923, Lady Yun was the second wife (*huch'ŏ*) 後妻 of Min Hyochong, who had previously been married to Lady Yi 李氏 of the Kangnŭng 江陵 Yi descent group. Another example in the 1606 Sanŭm household register is the case of O Yi (吳儞, born in 1534), who was recorded as being married to Lady Yi (李氏, born in 1569) of the Kŭmgu 金溝 Yi descent group; she was thirty-five years younger. In the Genealogy of the Hamyang 咸陽 O descent group compiled in 1909, however, O Yi's wife was listed as Lady Min 閔氏, instead of Lady Yi. This difference is likely because O Yi married Lady Yi after the death of his first wife, Lady Min, who was not recorded in the 1606 Sanŭm register.

These intriguing cases imply that the majority of couples in which the husband was twenty years older than the wife comprised those of remarried men and first-married women.[29] The age difference at the time of remarriage was particularly pronounced among the *yangban*. The effective imposition of the socio-legal norm of chaste widowhood can explain this societal trend. Since the *yangban* placed a high value on prohibiting women from remarrying, widowers belonging to the *yangban* had to seek out virgins instead of widows. In contrast, this tendency was less conspicuous among commoners and lowborn individuals, where women's remarriage was not a significant social or normative concern.

Finally, this study tests the validity of its argument by examining cases where widows maintained chaste widowhood throughout their lives. Table 7 presents the number of female-headed households recorded in the household registers. Most of these household heads were widows, except for a few

[28]In the present study's datasets of household registers, when calculating the age difference between couples for men under the age of thirty, it appears to be half a year.

[29]While remarriage was not separately recorded in the household register, instances of remarriage due to the death of a previous wife within three years occasionally led to documentation of both the deceased and the new spouse together. Among the fifteen cases of second wives (*huch'ŏ*) in this study's dataset, the average age difference with the fourteen husbands, whose ages were confirmed, was 14.9 years. In nineteenth-century Tansŏng, the age gap between remarried men and their spouses was 9.5 years (Kim 2006).

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Table 7. Share of female household heads of by household register and woman's social status

	1606 Sanŭm			1606 Tansŏng			1606 Chinhae			1609 Ulsan			1630 Sanŭm			Total		
Status	Pop.	Heads	percent	Pop.	Heads	percent	Pop.	Heads	percent	Pop.	Heads	percent	Pop.	Heads	percent	Pop.	Heads	percent
Yangban	85	8	9.4	80	18	22.5	6	1	16.7	44	8	18.2	169	28	16.6	384	63	16.4
Commoner	390	10	2.6	94	5	5.3	11	0	0	985	18	1.8	543	65	12.0	2,023	98	4.8
Lowborn	620	16	2.6	605	5	0.8	47	0	0	971	11	1.1	1,027	27	2.6	3,270	59	1.8
Sum	1,095	34	3.1	779	28	3.6	64	1	1.6	2,000	37	1.9	1,739	120	6.9	5,677	220	3.9

lowborn women (government- or school-owned *nobi*) who were unmarried and lived separately from their owners. Some of these households headed by widows had adult sons capable of assuming the role of household head after their fathers passed away (Kim 2018). Examining the ratio of female household heads to the general female population across different social statuses indicates that a significant number of *yangban* women did not remarry and remained widows. This was particularly pronounced in Tansŏng where the *yangban* culture was strong. More than one-fifth of *yangban* women endured hard times following the Imjin War as widows.[30] Hence, it is possible to deduce that the social culture of Chosŏn – where women were strongly discouraged from remarrying, combined with men's desire to remarry and the demographic aftermath of the Imjin War – served as the main driver of the unusual marital age differences.

Conclusion

The analysis of early seventeenth-century Chosŏn household registers unveils the demographic consequences of the seven-year East Asian international war, particularly in the southeast of the Korean peninsula. By analyzing the microdata of 2,336 couples living in this region, collected from the household registers, this study summarizes the results into two main points.

First, the higher a husband's socio-economic status, measured by his social status and *nobi* ownership, the larger the age difference with his wife. In other words, this study demonstrates that social status and family wealth were important determinants of age-dissimilar marriages.

Second, the Imjin War had a significant impact on the age difference between spouses. For women born around 1580 or later, the average age difference with their husbands was about ten years. These results suggest that women who experienced the war during childhood and became of marriageable age after the war had different age preferences when selecting husbands compared to the previous generation of women. However, the changes in the local marriage market owing to the Imjin War – such as the increase in remarriages between male widowers and first-married women – varied depending on social status. The age difference between spouses with wives born around 1580 or later was the greatest among the *yangban*, who strongly enforced the strict Neo-Confucian norm prohibiting widows from remarrying. By comparison, the age difference was less pronounced among the lowborn, who flexibly applied this norm.

These findings indicate that the Imjin War broadened marital age disparities in the stratified Chosŏn society and sheds light on the post-war persistence of Neo-Confucian norms, particularly among the *yangban*. One of this study's most significant results is the phenomenon of widows who chose not to remarry and became household heads. Particularly among *yangban* women, the share of widows taking on household head roles was strikingly high at 16.4 percent, compared to female commoners (4.8 percent) and lowborn women (1.8 percent). Conversely, the age difference among lowborn couples was significantly lower than the other groups, with 40 percent of cases consisting of husbands of the same age or younger. These results imply that lowborn couples were comparatively free from the constraints of the norms surrounding chaste widowhood and had relatively weaker patriarchal authority within their families. Along with these social status characteristics, marital age differences varied considerably by region, providing useful implications for research on the social history of local marriage customs.

The Chosŏn government, confronted with a surge in the number of widows caused by the Imjin War, strove to uphold Neo-Confucian family norms. For instance, the New and Expanded Korean Conduct of the Three Bonds with Illustrations (*Tongguk shinsok samgang haengshil-to*) 東國新續三綱行實圖, completed in 1615, revived and celebrated the stories of virtuous women who sacrificed their lives to remain chaste during the war. According to the present research, however, the purpose

[30]Through an analysis of the Tansŏng County household registers, Kim (2018) found that it was common for widows to be recorded as heads of the household (*chuho*), and the number of female heads of households surged from the seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century.

behind such efforts and the use of visual aids was to edify commoners and lowborn widows, particularly those who were illiterate and readily remarried, rather than to laud *yangban* widows who remained celibate.

In conclusion, this research has several implications for filling gaps in prior studies. It scrutinizes marriage patterns in a premodern, status-based society and assesses the repercussions of a prolonged war within the framework of socio-demographic history. By employing seventeenth-century Chosŏn household registers, particularly the previously unexplored Sanŭm registers of 1606 and 1630, the present study sheds light on societal practices following the Imjin War. Furthermore, it empirically demonstrates that despite tumultuous circumstances such as death, abduction, and violence, Neo-Confucian marriage norms, including the observance of chaste widowhood, persevered predominantly among the *yangban*. These points constitute the research contributions of the current study.

However, this study has some limitations due to the constraints of existing household register data, leading to partially fulfilled results. The Chosŏn registers neither recorded whether couples were in their first or second marriages nor the exact year of marriage. In addition, while the study could identify some widows who chose chastity and became household heads, they represented only a fraction of all widowhood cases, leaving the broader picture incomplete. The accurate identification of remarried widows is impractical; therefore, the possibility of remarriage among *yangban* women cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, some portions of the household registers have been lost over time, rendering certain information inaccessible. These omissions impose constraints on the findings of this study.

Despite such limitations, however, this study expands the scope of research on the Imjin War beyond its political, military, and diplomatic dimensions to encompass social aspects, illustrating the societal constraints and perceptions surrounding marriage in the premodern era. The influence of the Imjin War on marriage patterns likely extended beyond Chosŏn to impact regions such as China and Japan, where numerous commanders and soldiers perished. Hence, further research on this topic is warranted.

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