

Culture Notes

The Red Palace

by June Hur

Feiwei & Friends, 2022

Fiction, set in Korea

2022 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

June Hur's *Red Palace* is a richly detailed murder mystery set in mid-1700s Joseon Korea (1392–1910). Hur's exquisite attention to detail brings the Joseon period to life for the reader. To better understand the context of the novel, here is a brief overview of the Joseon period.

The Joseon Dynasty: Confucianism, the Uinyeo system, and Prince Sado

Confucianism as State Ideology

The Joseon dynasty lasted over 500 years, from 1392 to 1910. It started when the military leader Yi Seonggye overthrew the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392) and set up his new capital at Hanyang (modern-day Seoul). The new dynasty embraced Neo-Confucianism as its guiding philosophy. This was not just a political choice.

It completely reshaped how Korea was governed, how people were educated, and how they lived their daily lives.

Power in Joseon Korea belonged to the *yangban*, the scholar-official class. They had to prove themselves by mastering the Confucian classics and passing difficult civil service examinations based on the Chinese imperial system. As model Confucians, their days were filled with studying, running the government bureaucracy, performing ancestral rituals, and setting an example for everyone else in society.

Neo-Confucianism brought a system of rules for how people should behave—both at home and in society. At the heart of this system were the Five Relationships: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and friend and friend. These relationships defined how Koreans interacted with each other in daily life. Rituals, ancestor worship, and filial piety became the essential fabric of everyday life. Through these efforts, Joseon Korea was deliberately shaping itself into a model Confucian society.





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Stratified Society and Social Rigidity

Joseon society had a rigid hereditary class system that made social mobility nearly impossible.

At the top were the *yangban* aristocrats, who controlled political power and land. They monopolized education and the civil service exams, keeping their privileged status across generations. The *yangban* class accounted for about 10 percent of the population.

Below them were the *jungin*, or “middle people.” They were educated professionals, including doctors, interpreters, and astronomers, for example, who were essential to the government but could not advance beyond their rank.

The *sangmin* commoners made up the majority. They were farmers, artisans, and merchants. Farmers were theoretically respected as producers but faced heavy taxes and forced labor. Merchants, though economically important, ranked lowest among “honorable” occupations because Confucians were taught to see them as parasites, profiting from the work of others.

At the bottom were the *cheonmin*, or “base people.” They included slaves (*nobi*), butchers, entertainers, and outcasts.

Women in Joseon Society

Confucian ideology created a deeply patriarchal society that severely restricted women's autonomy. The principle of male superiority shaped everything from family structure to legal rights. The ideal woman was chaste, obedient, and self-sacrificing. Strict gender segregation was the social and legal norm.

***Uinyeo* System**

Uinyeo were highly educated and trained female physician assistants who, despite their expertise, were paradoxically still considered members of the *cheonmin*. The *uinyeo* system was established in 1406 by King Taejong to address the Confucian taboo against male physicians treating female patients.



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Uinyeo acted as nurses, midwives, and physicians; their duties included acupuncture, pulse diagnosis, and dispensing medicine to female patients. They served either within the Royal Infirmary or at the Hyeminseo, the Joseon public health facility for commoners (1392–1882).

The Royal Family

Old Doctrine and New Doctrine

The late Joseon (1592–1910) saw intense factional strife amongst the *yangban* class during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. King Geyongyo (d. 1724) favored the *Soron* or “Young Doctrine” which was a branch of the Reformist school or *Sirhak*. In general, this faction promoted the spread of useful knowledge and political, social and economic reforms that increased the well-being of the commoners. His son, King Yeongjyo (r. 1724-1776) was a staunch supporter of the *Noron* or the “Old Doctrine” that favored a strict adherence to Neo-Confucianism. He is generally considered one of the greatest Joseon kings.

The Tragedy of Crown Prince Yi Seon

King Yeongjo’s only son, Crown Prince Yi Seon, is a tragic figure. Believed to have suffered from mental illness, he had a deeply fraught relationship with his father, and was responsible for the murder and rape of numerous people both inside and outside the palace. His wife, Crown Princess Hyegyong, mother of the Grand Heir, documented her husband's secret wanderings and his deteriorating mental health in her work, *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyong: The Autobiographical Writings of a Crown Princess of Eighteenth-Century Korea*. Fearing dynastic decline, King Yeongjo was persuaded by the Crown Prince’s mother to take action. Accordingly, he ordered his son sealed inside a rice chest, where the prince remained until he died approximately a week later. Upon his death on July 12th, 1762, he was posthumously renamed Sado, meaning “to think of with great sorrow.” King Yeongjo was ultimately succeeded by his grandson, who ascended the throne as King Sunjo in 1800 at just ten years of age.



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Legacy

The Joseon dynasty, which lasted from 1392 to 1910, was deeply influenced by Neo-Confucian philosophy, which governed everything from political structure to daily life. Society was rigidly stratified, with the *yangban* scholar-official class at the top and the *cheonmin* at the bottom, leaving little room for social mobility. Women faced severe restrictions under Confucian patriarchal norms, though innovations like the *Uinyeo* system reflected attempts to navigate these constraints. The late Joseon was marked by factional conflict between reformist and orthodox Confucian factions, and by personal tragedies within the royal Yi family. Though it ended with Japanese annexation, the Joseon period profoundly shaped Korea in ways that endure to the present day.

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2026

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