



Unanticipated Achievements: *The Diffusion of Finger Severing and Relevant Discourse at the Joseon Court in the 15th–16th Centuries*

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex historical narrative surrounding the practice of finger severing (danji 斷指) in early Joseon Korea, focusing on its unique origins and widespread dissemination, and the multifaceted discourse it generated among the ruling elite. By tracing finger severing from its emergence during the reign of King Taejong to its proliferation in the 16th century, this research illuminates the interplay between institutional factors, societal customs, and cultural perceptions that shaped its evolution. This study deviates from the conventional approach of explaining Joseon's cultural edification solely through the intentions and actions of the government and the royal court. Instead, it explores how folk customs were discovered and then intentionally spread by the government, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of Confucianization in Joseon Korea. The dissemination of finger severing highlights the success of the early Joseon ruling class's proactive policies aimed at cultivating and standardizing ethical practices. However, this study also explores the contradictions within the ruling elite's discourse surrounding finger severing, as well as the discrepancy between the ruling class's intentions and the actual motivations driving the civilian populace's engagement in the practice. The proliferation of finger severing in early Joseon Korea represents both the triumph of the state's cultural cultivation policies and the unexpected outcomes of the complex interplay of institutional efforts, societal customs, and divergent perceptions.

Keywords: finger severing, Joseon period, cultural cultivation, ethical practices, societal dissemination, religious customs

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Introduction

In 1408, the 8th year of King Taejong's reign, an intriguing report reached the king's ears from a local official in northwestern Pyeongan-do province. The narrative concerned a woman named Kim Chung-gae, who hailed from the Gaju area. In search of a cure for her ailing mother, Kim stumbled upon an unconventional remedy: feeding the patient pulverized bone from a living person. Determined to save her mother, she made a startling sacrifice by severing the fourth finger on her right hand.¹ The bone from the finger was crushed into powder and administered to her mother, with the remaining powder applied to the crown of the patient's head. Following this, the patient exhibited remarkable signs of improvement.

Upon receiving this account, the king honored Kim Chung-gae by having a memorial gate erected and presenting her with 20 sacks of rice and beans. The reason for her commendation remains unclear, yet her act of sacrifice in pursuit of her mother's well-being aligned with the prevalent elite promotion of filial ethics during that era.

Kim Chung-gae's narrative is the earliest recorded instance directly entwined with familial ethics involving the severing of a finger. This act of finger severing (*danji* 斷指)² transcended time, becoming ingrained over centuries and included in national ethical textbooks such as the *Samgang haengsildo* 三綱行實圖 (Illustrated Guide to the Three Relations)³ compiled during the reign of King Sejong. Approximately 30 percent of esteemed individuals chronicled in the *Dongguk sinsok samgang haengsildo* 東國新續三綱行實圖 (New Sequel to the Samgang haengsildo of the Eastern Kingdom) during King Gwanhaegun's era were those who practiced finger severing.

1. *Taejong sillok* 15.9a, 7th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1408.

2. The translation of *danji* 斷指 as "finger severing," follows Wang's previous research (Wang 2012). As Wang pointed out, in the Korean context, *danji* was not about consuming the body, but severing a finger. And although it lies outside the scope of this paper, finger severing was done to use the finger bone for medicinal purposes, but it was also a magical act for healing disease.

3. The translation of the concept related to *Samgang haengsildo* is referred to in Young Kyun Oh's previous study (Oh 2013).

Local records during the Joseon era, such as the *Yeoji doseo* 輿地圖書 (Illustrated Records of the Provinces) meticulously detailed exemplary filial children across regions, citing numerous cases of finger severing among nationally acclaimed filial children (J. Pak 2009).

The practice continued beyond the Joseon dynasty's fall. In 1925, the poignant tale of 18-year-old Jeong Hyo-sun emerged, who, in a bid to cure her 13-year-old husband's illness, resorted to cutting her fingers and feeding him her blood. Tragically, upon her husband's death, she chose to end her life by suicide.⁴ Japanese colonial bureaucrats acknowledged such acts of finger severing (S. Pak 2016), albeit with minimal commendation. Surprisingly, finger-severing instances persisted into the 1960s.⁵

The widespread prevalence of finger severing has been underscored in many studies as a part of efforts by Joseon elites to emphasize Confucian family ethics (Soon-gu Lee 1985; J. Pak 1990; H. Lee 1999; J. J. Lee 2007; Yun 2016). How could finger severing have thus expanded nationwide? Deuchler (1992) asserts that Korean society underwent a transformation driven by the ideology of elite-led Neo-Confucianism, highlighting the significant role played by family ethics, such as filial piety, in this process. Such Neo-Confucianization, as elucidated by Deuchler, offers a crucial framework for understanding finger severing. This suggests that Confucianization is a top-down policy led by the elite. According to Korean research, the Confucianization of Joseon can be explained based on the restructuring of educational systems targeting local societies (Hiraki 1976; Jeong 1989; Seong-Mu Lee 1997), changes in daily and religious customs (Han 1976; Soon-gu Lee 1985; Ko 1989), and the widespread distribution of books (J. Kim 1981; Ha 1983; Seon Hye Choi 1994). Finger severing has been described as spreading through a comparable process. In Wang Sixiang's comprehensive study, which extensively examines the phenomenon of finger severing, the encouragement by the Joseon government is highlighted as a

4. "13-dae nampyeon-eul wihayeo nyun sam-cha danji—Sangbuhuneun jagi do akdu" (Severing Fingers Three Times for Her 13-year-old Husband—Hanged Herself after He Died), *Sidae ilbo*, December 25, 1925; cited in Oh (2013, 263).

5. "Danjihhan hyoja, abeoji sallyeo" (Filial Son Severed His Finger, Saves His Father), *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 20, 1962, 3.

catalyst for cultural exchanges between the Ming and Joseon (Wang 2012).

However, as Deuchler and others have confirmed, the Confucianization process in Joseon was not based solely on the Chinese classics (Deuchler 1992). The expansion of finger severing cannot be simplified as stemming purely from its cultural origins, and scholarly critiques have persisted, as suggested by that of Se-woong Koo (2018). Finger severing embodies a dilemma and might have origins beyond Chinese tradition, as highlighted in research by Keith Knapp (2014). Why do we find widespread incidents of the practice in the Joseon period? It is necessary to delve deeper into these dynamics, the complexity of which cannot be reduced to mere government promotion or advances in Confucianism.

To effectively understand the issues surrounding finger severing, two crucial aspects require clarification. First, understanding the institutional framework within which finger severing occurred is pivotal. Joseon actively attempted Confucianization among its populace. However, beyond the comprehensive explanations offered by such studies, how did information about finger severing spread among the people, at least until the late Joseon era? A comprehensive explanation is necessary regarding the process through which central bureaucrats obtained information about cases of finger severing, rewarded them, and how this fact was then disseminated to others.

Second, understanding the diverse perspectives of various factors involved in finger severing is essential. While the spread of finger severing has been explained in terms of the diffusion of Confucian family ethics in the Joseon period, there exists a substantial gap between the filial piety supported by central bureaucrats and scholars beneath the umbrella of Confucian tradition. The Confucian classic *Xiaojing* 孝經 (Classic of Filial Devotion) emphasizes, “Our bodies and hair originate from our parents,” stressing the preservation of one’s body. Based on this principle, many Korean and Chinese scholars have criticized bodily mutilation. This critique intensified among scholars especially in the late 16th century, when they emphasized ethical practices in daily life. Consequently, scholarship to date has presented contrasting explanations, some studies suggesting on the one hand that finger severing was marginalized as emphasis was increasingly

placed on Confucian virtues (H. Kim 1998), and on the other, that over time finger severing gained recognition as a Confucian practice and spread widely (Wang 2012; K. Lee 2019). These explanations present divergent images of the cultural origins of finger severing and the significance of its diffusion. For instance, the explanation that criticizes finger-severing expansion fails to sufficiently account for its continuous appearance and recognition through rewards after the 16th century.⁶ Conversely, emphasizing Confucian acknowledgment also fails to explicitly explain the continuous critical discourse surrounding finger severing after the 16th century. For example, the authoritative 16th-century scholar Toegye Yi Hwang argued that *halgo*, though commendable, was not the most virtuous act one could perform.⁷

Thus, this study aims to progress beyond traditional interpretations of finger severing, moving toward uncovering historical institutional facts while comprehensively elucidating the institutional, social, and cultural attributes of the practice. By illuminating the uniqueness of finger-severing cases and their multifaceted diffusion, insights into the characteristics of Joseon's Confucianization at the local level can be attained.

6. *Jungjong sillok* 100.58a, 4th day of the 5th lunar month, 1543.

7. “割股，先儒之論盡矣，至於迫切之極，既不可取之他人，則容有不得不權以處之者，蓋此外更無他道理，則寧毀體以救親命，亦人子至痛之情，然終不可以是訓人爲孝，故朱子止謂之庶幾，而不以爲至善也，凡事到無可奈何處，無恰好道理，則不得已擇其次者而從之，乃所謂權，亦此時所當止之處也。然尤當審處，不然，或至於乖僻亂道之罪也” (‘Dap Yi Sukheon’ 答李叔獻 [Reply to Yi Suk-heon], in *Toegye seonsaeng munjip* 退溪先生文集 [Complete Works of Toegye Yi Hwang], vol. 14). Similar claims are found in Yi Ik (‘Gyugwa’ 割勝 [Thigh Cutting], in *Seongho saseol* 星湖僿說 [Complete Works of Seongho Yi Ik], vol. 15) and Jeong Yak-yong (‘Gyominjibeop’ 教民之法 [Norms for Instructing the People], in *Gyeongse yupyoo* 經世遺表 [Proposals for Good Government], vol. 13). In that sense, the paper below, which implies the possibility of coexistence of “criticism and diffusion,” is worth referencing (Cho 2009).

The Dissemination of Finger Severing and Its Institutional Factors

Dissemination Process Across the Korean Peninsula

During the early Joseon era, sanctioned acts of bodily harm, including finger severing (*danji* 斷指) and thigh slicing (*halgo* 割股), were endorsed by the ruling class. Among these, a notable case is that of Kim Chung-gae⁸ from Gaju, Pyongan-do province, which was chronicled in 1408.⁹ This act of finger severing by Kim Chung-gae aimed at alleviating her mother's illness and epitomized the Confucian concept of devoted filial piety (Pak 2009). However, the origin of this method poses an intriguing conundrum regarding its transmission.

Finger severing was a practice predominantly observed within the civilian domain of Joseon. Its prevalence and propagation appear to be inherently linked to the societal confines of the Joseon era. Instances of finger severing were consistently reported and rewarded from the reign of King Taejong (r. 1400–1418) to that of King Jungjong (r. 1506–1544). Tabulating reported cases of finger severing to the Joseon court by region reveals intriguing trends (Table 1).

This representation, focused on the time of incidents of finger severing were reported to the Joseon court, does not encompass the entire spectrum of finger-severing practices, but it does shed light on discernible patterns noted during the court's investigations.

Records of finger severing throughout early Joseon are sparse. However, it is noteworthy that finger severing, which was initially concentrated in the northwest region of the Korean Peninsula, gradually spread to other regions, including Gyeongsang-do and Gyeonggi-do provinces. Of course, due to the limited cases in early Joseon, instances after King Munjong's reign (1450–1452) can be interpreted as a *delayed discovery* of a pre-existing phenomenon

8. The full name Kim Chung-gae is not recorded in the *Taejong sillok*, but it is found in the work *Samgang haengsil hyojado* 三綱行實孝子圖 (Conduct of the Three Bonds with Illustrations of Filial Sons).

9. *Taejong sillok* 15.9a, 7th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1408.

Table 1. Number of Finger-severing Cases by Province from the Reigns of King Taejong (1400–1418) to King Jungjong (1506–1544)

Categories	Pyeongang	Gyeong-sang	Hwanghae	Gyeonggi	Jeolla	Chung-cheong	Ham-geyeong	Gangwon	Hanseong
Taejong-Sejong	11	2	3	0	3	1	2	0	0
Munjong-Yejong	2	4	1	1	0	2	2	0	0
Seongjong-Yeonsan	3	7	1	4	2	0	1	0	0
Jungjong	9	7	0	3	2	3	0	2	1

Source: *Joseon wangjo sillok* (Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty), for the respective monarchs.

rather than the result of dissemination. However, considering various circumstances indicating that finger severing was not a widespread East Asian custom, it is still reasonable to place more weight on the possibility of dissemination.

The practice of bodily filial acts has its roots in the aforementioned Chinese tradition of thigh slicing. As a result, previous research has posited an influence between the dissemination of finger severing in early Joseon and the pre-existing tradition of thigh slicing. (H. Lee 1999; K. Lee 2019) However, the first recorded instance of finger severing, associated with Kim Chung-gae, suggests that it was a unique folk tradition originating in the northwest region of the Korean Peninsula for two reasons. First, the initial instances of finger severing are found in the early records of the *Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty* (*Joseon wangjo sillok*), and Kim Chung-gae, the first documented practitioner, does not appear to have based his actions on any specific classical knowledge. Second, information on thigh slicing is found not only in Chinese classical texts advocating filial piety, but also in medical texts such as the Chinese work *Bencao shiyu* 本草拾遺 (Additions to Materia Medica). In contrast, no medical literature on finger severing existed in either China or Korea at the time. Taken together, these factors suggest that finger severing is likely a local medical practice indigenous to the Korean Peninsula with no documented foundation. Table 1 shows that

the practice was concentrated in Pyeongan-do province throughout the 15th and 16th centuries. This indicates that it spread in connection with institutional and societal factors during these centuries.

During the initial period spanning 1408 to 1447, finger severing was prevalent in Pyeongan-do province. In the first 20 years, among the seven reported cases, five emerged from Pyeongan-do. For instance, in Anju, Pyeongan-do, Cho Jon-bu treated his mother's epilepsy by severing his ring finger and using alcohol.¹⁰ Although different from Chung-gae's approach, the actions of finger severance and treatment for epilepsy are remarkable. Cho's ability to *treat with human bones* is also emphasized here. The geographic proximity of Anju and Gaju within Pyeongan-do province suggests successive similar remedies for akin ailments.

In 1439, consecutive instances of finger severing were reported in the same village: reports from Yejo 禮曹 indicated, "Gumeum Dochi from Jasan county, Pyeongan-do province, suffered from a severe ailment. His nine-year-old son, Geum Won-jin, severed his finger and used the blood as a remedy. Similarly, Kim Eul-song from the same county faced a grave ailment. His son, Kim Gwi-ssi, also nine years old, severed his finger and utilized the blood as a cure. They petitioned for the restoration of their household registrations." These requests were granted them.

Notably, Geum Won-jin and Kim Gwi-ssi, both nine-year-olds from Pyeongan-do, engaged in finger severing. Although the exact nature of the severe ailment is not specified, the occurrence of similar practices within the same county signifies the prevalence of such customs.¹¹

Following King Sejong's reign, finger severing persisted primarily in Pyeongan-do province. Although cases were initially reported beyond the northwest region, by 1408, reports from Pyeongan-do and Hwanghae-do provinces included such individuals as the aforementioned Kim Chung-gae from Pyeongan-do, Cho Jon-bu from Anju in Pyeongan-do,¹² Yang Gwi-jin

10. *Taejong sillok* 24.27b, 1st day of the 12th lunar month, 1412.

11. *Sejong sillok* 85.1b, 3rd day of the 4th lunar month, 1439.

12. *Taejong sillok* 24.27b, 1st day of the 12th lunar month, 1412.

from Ongjin in Hwanghae-do,¹³ Eun-si (the daughter of Eun-gwangu) from Pyeongan-do,¹⁴ and Kim Hyo-saeng's daughter from Seoheung in Pyeongan-do.¹⁵

However, during the middle of King Sejong's reign, reports of finger severing gradually surfaced in other regions. Records of finger severing were documented in 1420 in Jeolla-do province, in Gyeongsang-do in 1432, and in Chungcheong-do in 1434. After 1439, more cases were reported in Jeolla-do, Gyeongsang-do, and Chungcheong-do provinces. The occurrence of finger severing, previously centered on Pyeongan-do during King Taejong's reign (1400–1418), had expanded across various regions. Reports during Danjong's reign (1452–1455) were concentrated within a three-year span, with Pyeongan-do and Hwanghae-do provinces accounting for three of the ten cases. During Seongjong's reign (1469–1495), among the 16 reported cases, Pyeongan-do and Hwanghae-do provinces accounted for four, with five cases in Gyeongsang-do province and four in Gyeonggi-do province. During King Jungjong's reign (1506–1544), 3 of the 27 cases were reported, with new occurrences in Gangwon-do and the central region of Hanseong (the capital).

The practice of finger severing remained primarily among commoners, but gradually expanded to include aristocrats, scholars, and students. Structuring this information yields the following insights:

In previous scholarly investigations, it has been emphasized that during the early 15th century in Joseon, the acknowledgment of exemplary individuals primarily centered on local officials (J. Pak 1990). However, as we advance into the 16th century, a noticeable trend emerges, indicating gradual diversification across social strata. In this context, the practice of finger severing primarily revolved around commoners.¹⁶ Interestingly,

13. *Sejong sillok* 22.13b, 17th day of the 11th lunar month, 1423.

14. *Sejong sillok* 23.33b, 18th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1424.

15. *Sejong sillok* 43.23b, 14th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1429.

16. Regarding the cause of this phenomenon, Kim Ga-Ram (2012, 90) has argued, "The spread of the complex to the nobility was a result of 'increasing the difficulty of the nobleman's filial piety,' and the court after the King Seongjong era tolerated or encouraged it as an act of filial piety." In fact, finger cutting continuously expanded and was increasingly

Table 2. Number of Finger-severing Cases by Status between the Reigns of King Taejong (1400–1418) and King Jungjong (1506–1544)¹⁷

Categories	Taejong-Sejong	Sejong-Yejong	Seongjong-Yeonsan	Jungjong
Officials	5	1	6	9
Commoners	16	11	12	13
Lower classes	1	0	0	9

Source: J. Pak (1990).

during the reigns of King Seongjong and King Jungjong, although infrequent, instances involving students and lower-ranking officials were marginally more prevalent, deviating from the general pattern. For instance, in 1472, Choe So-ha ascended to the Seongkyungwan (National Confucian Academy), and in 1516, Kang Eung-tae attained the position of local magistrate. These accounts detail how practitioners of finger severing secured government positions, contributing to their widespread recognition during King Jungjong's era.

While it remains uncertain if the geographical expansion of finger-severing cases reported to the central court correlates directly with the actual dissemination of the practice itself, various factors prompt consideration that it spread across the nation from the early Joseon period. Because of the relatively small number of reports on finger severing, determining definitively whether the practice extended nationwide during the early Joseon period or if it was an already existing widespread custom discovered and gradually reported with increasing frequency through the local Joseon administration, poses a challenge. If one assumes a nationwide spread of finger severing the circumstances that enabled this possibility demand scrutiny.

encouraged from the Sejong period up to the late Joseon era. However, it is also necessary to recognize that while finger severing was encouraged, the practice also became the subject of more serious criticism after the 16th century.

17. This table is divided into officials and their families (*sajok* 士族), commoners (*pyeongmin* 平民), and the lower classes (*cheonin* 賤人).

Institutional Factors Behind the Trend

Several circumstances illustrate the diffusion of specific information regarding Finger Severing practices during the early Joseon period to various regions. Notably, the cultural policies of the Joseon era, compared to those of the Goryeo era, played a pivotal role in disseminating regional practices to other areas (Pak 1995). Even during the Goryeo era, recognizing and rewarding exemplary conduct were common. However, records of such conduct during the Goryeo era often lacked formalized procedures and relied more on individual reports from those who had heard of the exemplary acts.¹⁸

Some instances illustrate the process of disseminating information regarding finger severing to other regions during the Joseon era. The case of Yu Seok-jin, a student in a local school in Jeolla-do province, demonstrates this well.¹⁹ The filial acts of Yu Seok-jin, were discovered by Seo Seong, a temporary resident, and documented in personal accounts. This specific case, recognized by the inspector and relayed to the central administration, stands out for its discovery by Seo Seong, made during his temporary residency in Gosa, and its subsequent documentation in the historical record. Scrutiny of the systematic procedures of Seo Seong's report to local authorities and its transmission to inspectors is warranted.²⁰

During the early Joseon era, local intellectuals played a mediating role in local administration. In 1395, a "kind and honest individual" was appointed as a magistrate.²¹ During King Taejong's reign, regulations were in place to report rule violators, who were subsequently exiled, manage the

18. "Hyoun" 孝友 (Filial Children and Loyal Friends), "Yeoljeon" (Biographies), *Goryeosa*, vol. 121.

19. "全羅道 高山縣鄉校生徒池活等告于縣曰, 縣吏石玠其父得風疾, 每日一發, 發則氣絕, 久而乃蘇. 石玠日夜呼泣哀禱, 廣求藥餌, 一日有僧踵門曰, 聞, 爾父有狂疾, 信乎? 石玠驚喜, 具告病證, 僧曰, 碎生人骨, 和血以飲則可愈. 石玠即折其無名指, 和血以進, 病小間, 乃再進遂愈. 小尹徐省適在縣見其事, 作傳以記之" (*Sejong sillok* 10.5b, 18th day of the 10th lunar month, 1420).

20. *Sejong sillok* 8.1b, 4th day of 4th lunar month, 1420.

21. "令守令各於四面村程途里數分辦, 分置賑濟所, 擇其閑良, 品官慈祥廉潔者, 定爲監考, 守令以時考察" (*Taejo sillok* 8.3b, 30th day of 7th lunar month, 1397).

local populace, and report new births to the government.²² This system involved influential local figures reporting to the authorities, enabling individuals such as Yu Seok-jin and his act of finger severing to become known to the inspector. The process from local inspectors to the central administration was facilitated by the reformed local administrative system of the period. The following case from King Danjong's reign exemplifies this idea.

Kim Mun-gi, the inspector of Hamgil reported, "From an early age, Bak Ja-chang practiced filial piety towards his parents. When his mother suddenly fell ill and fainted, Bak Ja-chang heard that consuming the finger bone could cure such an illness. He immediately cut off his right thumb, mixed it with medicine, and administered it to his mother, who recovered."²³

This case underscores how local figures such as Bak Ja-chang wielded significant influence in local administration and communicated their acts of finger severing to the central administration through the inspector. This process leading from the inspector to the central government was the result of an established local system. Inspectors reported these local trends to the king through official documents, which were subsequently reviewed by the Royal Secretariat and relayed to the Ministry of Rites. After a secondary review by the Secretariat, the report was resubmitted to the king, and upon approval, rewards were dispensed. For instance, Bak Ja-chang, who performed finger severing for his ailing mother in Hamgil, was honored by the establishment of a memorial gate and appointment to a local government position.²⁴

The reporting of virtuous conduct through the inspectorate system was intertwined with the reformed local administration. The political forces guiding the establishment of Joseon restructured the inspectorate positions

22. *Taejong sillok* 3.36a, 18th day of the 6th lunar month, 1402; 16.41b, 23rd day of the 11th lunar month, 1408.

23. "咸吉道觀察使金文起啓...朴滋昌, 自少孝養父母, 其母忽得惡疾氣絕, 滋昌聞生人骨可治, 卽斷右手長指, 和藥供母, 病愈" (*Danjong sillok* 7.7b, 16th day of the 7th lunar month, 1453).

24. *Taejong sillok* 8.30b, 5th day of the 12th lunar month, 1404.

to efficiently manage influential figures in local regions, granting them greater authority and deploying them to each province. These inspectors strengthened the centralization of power during this period (Seon Hye Choi 1994).

If news of activities of a specific region are relayed to the central administration and disseminated to other regions, what processes facilitate this dissemination? Initially, one may consider the existence of memorials or markers in regions where virtuous acts have occurred.

The role of the *Samgang haengsildo* in expanding virtuous conduct to other regions warrants further attention.²⁵ This publication, promulgated in 1434 and disseminated to various provinces multiple times,²⁶ related such things as Wang Wuzi's behavior from the Goryeo-era *Hyohaengrok* (Record of Filial Behavior), the virtues of King Gyeongdeok and King Seondeok of Silla, and historical cases from the Goryeo era.²⁷ Instances of finger severing, such as those of Kim Chung-gae, Yu Seok-jin, Yang Gwi-jin, Eun Si, and Kim Sa-wol are also featured.²⁸ Notably, Finger-severing cases were emphasized in half of the domestic cases out of the 11 recorded in the *Samgang haengsildo* during the Joseon era. This publication gained significant promotion after the Sejong era, leading to the discovery of finger-severing instances in areas beyond Pyeongan-do province.²⁹ Cases emerged from regions such as Chungcheong-do and Hwanghae-do provinces in 1454, signaling the widespread phenomenon of finger severing.³⁰ Essentially, the institutional backing during early Joseon facilitated the nationwide dissemination of the practice.

25. *Sejong sillok* 64.19a, 27th day of the 4th lunar month, 1434.

26. *Sejong sillok* 66.22a, 24th day of the 11th lunar month, 1434.

27. "Eubu halgo" 義婦割股; "Hyangdeok gyubi" 向德割髀; "Seonggak yangmo" 聖覺養母; and "Wicho halgo" 尉韶割股, in *Samgang haengsil hyojado* 三綱行實孝子圖 (Illustrated Guide to the Three Relations: Filial Sons).

28. "Chunggae danji" 蟲介斷指; "Seokjin danji" 石珍斷指; "Gwijin danji" 貴珍斷指; "Eunsi danji" 恩時斷指; and "Sawol danji" 四月斷指, in *Samgang haengsil hyojado* 三綱行實孝子圖 (Illustrated Guide to the Three Relations: Filial Sons).

29. *Sejong sillok* 64.17b, 26th day of the 4th lunar month, 1434; 84.38b, 24th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1439.

30. *Danjong sillok* 12.6b, 17th day of the 8th lunar month, 1454.

Divergent Perspectives on the Encouragement of and Compliance with Finger Severing

Tradition of Bodily Filial Acts Before the Joseon Era

When pondering the inclusion of bodily filial acts (*yuksin hyohaeng* 肉身孝行),³¹ such as finger severing and thigh slicing, which are encompassed within the ethical realm of Confucianism, profound inquiries arise. The publication of the historical work *Xintangshu* 新唐書 (New Tang History), which delves into the act of thigh slicing at its inception, presents an intriguing historical account.

During the Tang Dynasty, the medical text *Bencao shiyu* 本草拾遺 chronicled the consumption of human flesh for treating ailments. Subsequently in China, it became customary to slice thigh flesh as an offering to parents plagued by illness. The *guoshi* 國史 (Chinese dynastic histories) documented the commendation of remarkable figures for such practices. According to the eminent Tang scholar Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), “Preparing sustenance to heal parents in illness is an embodiment of filial piety. However, inflicting harm on one’s own body in this manner has no precedent. Even if not contrary to righteousness, such actions may inflict damage upon the body bestowed by the parents, disrupting the lineage. How can one raise a banner to single out such an individual?” Yet despite its crudeness, the act of self-sacrifice for parental care, even by those without extensive education, garnered recognition, such that it led to the creation of some 18 volumes in the *Xintangshu* dedicated to those who performed it.”³²

31. The conceptualization of finger severing (*danji* 斷指) and thigh slicing (*halgo* 割股) as bodily filial acts is referenced from Cho (2009). Meanwhile, the translation of *yuksin hyohaeng* 肉身孝行 as “bodily filial acts” draws upon Wang Sixiang’s work, where it is referred to as “filial acts of the body” (Wang 2012,13).

32. “唐時陳藏器著本草拾遺，謂人肉治羸疾，自是民間以父母疾，多到股肉而進，又有京兆張阿九，趙言，奉天趙正言，滑清泌，羽林飛騎啖榮祿，鄭縣吳孝友，華陰尹義華，潞州張光玘，解縣南鋸，河東李忠孝，韓放，鄢陵任客奴，絳縣張子英，平原楊仙朝，樂工段日升，河東將陳陟，襄陽馮子，城固雍孫八，虞鄉張抱玉，骨英秀，榆次馮秀誠，封丘楊高珪，劉浩，清池硃庭玉，弟庭金，繁昌硃心存，歙縣黃芮，左千牛薛鋒及河陽劉士約，或給帛，或旌表門閭，皆名在國史，善乎！韓愈之論也。曰父母疾，亨藥餌，以是為孝，未聞毀支體者也，苟不傷義，則聖賢先衆而為之，是不幸因

The status of bodily filial acts among other forms of self-inflicted harm within the Chinese tradition is intricate. While it could be seen as a virtuous act, hence a subject of praise, it could not be wholly endorsed due to the conflict with the Confucian adage, “Receiving one’s body and flesh from one’s parents.” Han Yu criticized those who inflicted self-harm and disrupted lineage in pursuit of virtue.³³

The narrative of Hyangdeok 向德 chronicled in the *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (Historical Record of the Three Kingdoms) is believed to have transpired during the reign of King Seondeok (r. 532–647). It depicts Hyangdeok’s filial acts of the body to provide sustenance to his ailing mother, a deed rewarded by the king with 300 *cho* of land. The publication of the *Bencao shiyu* during the Kaiyuan era (713–741) eliminates the possibility of King Gyeongdeok or King Seondeok’s direct reference to it concerning Hyangdeok’s actions. Furthermore, the instances of Sangdeok and Hyangdeok alone may not be conclusive evidence of the prevalence of bodily filial Acts in Silla.

Nevertheless, Kim Bu-sik (1075–1151), chief compiler of the *Samguk sagi*, indicated in that history that he had referenced the *Xintangshu*. Following the record of Hyangdeok’s tale, Kim Bu-sik added an annotation, “Speaking of this [record of Hyangdeok], Song Qi wrote in the *Xintangshu* as follows: ‘[It is] Excellent...thus, it is worth recording as a heroic tale.’ Thus, actions like Hyangdeok’s should also be recorded.”³⁴

Kim Bu-sik utilized these references to posit that while bodily filial acts might diverge from filial norms, their recognition was warranted because of the genuine intentions underpinning such acts. Kim asserted, “Thus, actions like Hyangdeok’s should also be recorded.” This illustrates Kim Bu-sik’s belief that the tradition of exemplary behavior, as depicted in the *Xintangshu*, mirrored its presence in Silla.

而且死，則毀傷滅絕之罪有歸矣，安可旌其門以表異之？雖然，委巷之陋，非有學術禮義之資，能忘身以及其親，出於誠心，亦足稱者。故列十七八焉” (‘Xiaoyou’ 孝友 [Filial Children and Loyal Friends], *Xintangshu*, vol. 195).

33. “Hurendui” 鄢人對 (Response about a Man of Hu), *Quantangwen* 全唐文 (Complete Tang Prose), vol. 559.

34. “宋祁唐書云，‘善乎...亦足稱者。故列焉。’則若向德者，亦可書者乎” (‘Seunggak,’ *Samguk sagi*, vol. 48).

The narrative of bodily filial acts was not exclusively acknowledged by Kim Bu-sik, but circulated widely on the Korean Peninsula of the 12th century. According to the *Goryeosa* concerning King Myeongjong's reign (1170–1197), Wi Cho 尉紹, stationed as an executive captain, resorted to thigh slicing to prepare dumplings for his ailing father, Wi Yeong-seong.³⁵ Regarding this, subsequent discussions between King Myeongjong, Han Mun-jun, and Mun Guk-gyeom referenced Yi Heung's case documented in the *Xintangshu*. This tradition persisted in the *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (Additional Material on the Three Kingdoms), where Hyangdeok's tale from the *Samguk sagi* was included (though under the name Sangdeuk 向得).³⁶

However, sacrificing one's body for the sake of one's parents was deemed a praiseworthy virtue. The *Xintangshu* 新唐書, within its section "Xiaoyou" 孝友 (Filial Children and Loyal Friends), took a cautious stance in acknowledging this sacrifice. Han Yu's critique of finger severing necessitates re-examination, especially considering those lacking adequate learning and moral virtues. The essence of their act of finger severing lay in their heartfelt sacrifice for their parents.

The age-old practice of bodily filial acts in China was criticized during the subsequent Yuan³⁷ and Ming dynasties.³⁸ Edicts were issued to discourage the glorification of bodily filial acts, acknowledging their inevitable physical harm. Despite these criticisms, such bodily filial acts retained their status as a traditional virtue. In Joseon, the act continued to be glorified until the late Joseon era. Were these concerns expressed in China not evident in Joseon?

The perception of bodily filial acts as a facet of family ethics in Joseon varied. While not expressly promoted, as it surpassed the bounds of filial

35. "Hyou" 孝友 (Filial Children and Loyal Friends), in "Yeolcheon" (Biographies), *Goryeosa*, vol. 121.

36. "Hyangdeok," in "Yeolcheon" (Biographies), *Samguk sagi*, vol. 48.

37. "禮部講究得，割股行孝一節終是毀傷肢體，今後遇有割股之人，雖不在禁限，亦不須旌賞，省府准呈，仰照驗施行" (*Yuan dianzhang* 元典章 [Statutes of the Yuan Dynasty], vol. 33).

38. "禮部議曰...人子遇父母有疾，醫治弗愈無所控訴，不得已而割股臥水，亦聽其所爲，不在旌表之例詔" (*Ming taizu shilu* 明太祖實錄 [Veritable Records of Emperor Ming Taizu], 234.2b, 8th day of the 9th lunar month, 1394).

piety, finger severing posed a dilemma as it was also championed as a virtuous act. Joseon's ruling elite encouraged finger severing, aspiring for its proliferation as a virtuous practice. However, the expansion of finger severing itself posed challenges to bureaucratic officials. This quandary was prevalent among Joseon's ruling class.

Discourses on Finger Severing in Early Joseon: Principle and Utility

The practice of finger severing in early Joseon sparked a nuanced debate among the ruling elite, reflecting but also diverging from traditional discourse. This practice was not considered an *ethically perfect* expression of filial piety, leading to reluctance among bureaucrats to endorse it fully. However, the elite also recognized its potential benefits, finding it difficult to classify it as unfilial or to discourage it entirely. This issue arose from a conflict between determining whether finger severing aligned with the *principle* of filial piety and assessing its *utility* in practical terms

This dichotomy is evident during King Sejong's reign, when despite not explicitly endorsing finger severing, the ruling elite acknowledged its practitioners as virtuous. The assessment of Yu Seok-jin's finger severing in 1420 by Seo Seong illustrates this complexity.³⁹ Deputy mayor Seo Seong remarked that while Yu's actions did not align with a moderate path of filial piety, they reflected virtues such as refraining from indulgence, abstaining from local gatherings, obeying challenging parental demands, and maintaining humility. Seo's evaluation notably focused on Yu's daily conduct, portraying him as a virtuous son not solely for his act of finger severing, but for his consistent demeanor. Seo saw Yu's behavior as aligning with the *principle* of filial piety, emphasizing that it was not just the finger severing, but his overall consistent behavior that mattered.

Concerning the evaluation of finger severing, a different perspective

39. “全羅道 高山縣鄉校生徒池活等告于縣曰，縣吏石玠其父得風疾，每日一發，發則氣絕，久而乃蘇。石玠日夜呼泣哀禱，廣求藥餌，一日有僧踵門曰：‘聞，爾父有狂疾，信乎？’石玠驚喜，具告病證，僧曰，碎生人骨，和血以飲則可愈。石玠即折其無名指，和血以進，病小間，乃再進遂愈。小尹徐省適在縣見其事，作傳以記之” (*Sejong sillok* 10.5b, 18th day of the 10th lunar month, 1420).

emerged around 1432. Yu was acclaimed and acknowledged for his virtuous actions. In Ministry of Rites reports, Shin Sang asserted, “Even though finger severing might exceed the moderate path, it emanates from utmost sincerity. Please carry out this virtuous act.”⁴⁰ Shin emphasized that while finger severing might surpass the standard bounds, it stemmed from the deepest sincerity, aligning with the principle of filial piety. Shin believed that *sincerity* itself was in line with this principle. Within the ruling class, while the act of finger severing was acknowledged as virtuous, instead of excessively glorifying finger severing per se, they embraced the sincerity it manifested.

King Sejong concurred with Shin’s perspective. However, Sejong also recognized the utility of promoting finger severing as a means of disseminating filial piety throughout society. Consequently, Sejong particularly emphasized finger severing as an act primarily undertaken by individuals lacking scholarly knowledge. According to Sejong, finger severing belonged to a realm of conduct for parental care that was not equitable to being misled by Buddhism or shamans. Nevertheless, since they were all ordinary individuals sincerely devoted to their parents, their actions were considered permissible. Sejong advocated lenient punishment and opened pathways for redemption, empathizing with the ignorance of the common people. During a similar period, he advanced guidance to the uneducated through the *Sanggang haengsildo*. Therefore, for Sejong, permitting finger severing constituted an acceptable action grounded in the prevalent perception that utilized the uneducated populace as subjects for guidance to stabilize societal norms.

The stance adopted by Shin Sang and Sejong mirrored an inclination to praise the act of finger severing. For them, causing harm to one’s body for the sake of one’s parents was not directly encouraged. However, as it was an expression of the sincerity of those lacking a comprehensive education, it was chronicled and rewarded as a form of virtuous conduct. Thus, as finger severing represented an extreme form of virtuous conduct exhibited by the uneducated, even if the practitioners were not moderate, they were regularly

40. “若割指等事, 雖過中制, 出於至情, 乞依上等施行” (*Sejong sillok* 58.19b, 28th day of the 11th lunar month, 1432).

rewarded and found ample mention in the *Samgang haengsildo*.

But the ruling class exercised caution about overemphasizing finger severing. Extreme and immediate actions such as finger severing had the potential to overshadow other acts of filial piety in representation. In 1441, the Council of State (Yeonguijeong 議政府) pointed out that while finger-severing incidents were promptly reported and rewarded due to their overt nature, genuinely significant daily acts of virtue went unnoticed. According to the Council of State, those who sincerely demonstrate filial piety, dutifully obey their parents, and are exemplary individuals should receive genuine recognition.⁴¹ However, conveniently focusing solely on easily recognizable cases posed a challenge.

Another issue arising from the undue representation of finger-severing cases was the challenge of reporting them to Seoul, as it was an extreme action performed by the uneducated commoners of the provinces, making it difficult to witness in the capital. In the 18th year of Seongjong's reign (1487), Kim Su-son questioned if the reporting of finger-severing actions solely in local areas stemmed from investigative negligence in the capital.⁴² Hence, during the early Joseon era, finger severing was to a certain extent encouraged for practical reasons but was not explicitly promoted as a virtuous act.

The expansion of finger severing raised significant concerns among the ruling class of the mid-Joseon era. In 1517, the Office of Special Advisers (Hongmungwan 弘文館) noted that the actions recorded in the *Samgang haengsildo* were specific instances occurring at times of disaster or crisis, and not indicative of everyday moral conduct.⁴³ The Office of Special Advisers argued that unlike everyday acts of virtue, such as described in the *Xiaoxue* 小學 (Lesser Learning), finger severing was confined to particular situations.

Similar contentions emerged with the official Yi Won-sik in 1518. Yi Won-sik contended that finger severing should be concealed, deeming it an

41. “然斷指則過常之事，不必如是而後以爲孝也，至如孝心純至，順悅親意，人無間言，特異於人者，則尤宜褒獎” (*Sejong sillok* 94.8b, 22nd day of the 10th lunar month, 1441).

42. *Seongjong sillok* 202.3a, 7th day of the 4th lunar month, 1487.

43. *Jungjong sillok* 28.21b, 27th day of the 6th lunar month, 1517.

action of one unable to control their rage due to a cruel nature.⁴⁴ Yi Won-sik's argument suggests that during this period there was a view that finger severing did not genuinely stem from the heart but was impulsive, or at the very least was perceived with concern. Throughout King Jungjong's reign (1506–1544), finger severing persisted as a revered virtuous deed. Reflecting on Sejong's initiative in composing *Samgang haengsildo*, King Jungjong was compelled to endorse it.⁴⁵

Prior to the Joseon period, finger severing was not only an unusual custom seldom witnessed in the historical narratives of the Korean Peninsula, but it was also absent from the classical traditions of China and their medical practices. Whether the propagation of finger severing led to the anticipated moral transformation by the intellectual class of Joseon through moral guidance and standards remains unverified. Furthermore, it remains unclear if individuals practicing finger severing among the civilian populace acted according to the intentions of ruling-class guidance.

In reality, the reported cases of finger severing across the nation were intrinsically linked to its perceived efficacy in treating madness. Instances include actions taken by officials, such as Choe Jon-bu of Pyeongan-do province in the early Taejong era, who cured his father's epilepsy by having him consume the bones of a living person.⁴⁶ Similarly, Yu Seok-jin, previously reviewed in 1432, dealt with prescriptions for illnesses, such as wind illnesses and madness.⁴⁷ In 1422, Kim Sa-wol from Pyeongan-do acted upon hearing a prescription claiming that consuming the bones of a living person would cure his parents' madness.⁴⁸ Kim Hyo-saeng from Hwanghae-do fed her parents a finger, believing it would cure their madness.⁴⁹ In 1432, Kim Hyo-rang of Changwon, Gyeongsang-do province, was also told that the bones of a living person were the best remedy when his father suffered from madness (*gwangjil* 狂疾), and so he severed his fingers and fried them

44. *Jungjong sillok* 33.28b, 22nd day of the 5th lunar month, 1518.

45. *Jungjong sillok* 62.55a, 21st day of the 8th lunar month, 1528.

46. *Taejong sillok* 24.27b, 1st day of the 12th lunar month, 1412.

47. *Sejong sillok* 10.5b, 18th day of the 10th lunar month, 1420.

48. *Sejong sillok* 16.18a, 27th day of the 6th lunar month, 1422.

49. *Sejong sillok* 43.23b, 14th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1429.

to make powder to mix and drink.⁵⁰ Similarly, in 1436, Kim Sang-taek from Pyeongan-do fed a ground-up finger bone to treat his parents' madness.⁵¹

In 1439, simultaneous instances of finger severing were reported in Samdeung-hyeon, Pyeongan-do. The individuals involved, the newly classified commoner (*sinbaekjeong* 新白丁) Han Seol and Yeongdeok from Hwanghae-do, severed their fingers, believing that consuming the flesh of a living person would cure their parents' madness.⁵² In 1439 in Jinju, Gyeongsang-do province, Sejong heard of Jin Ja-wan's son, Jin Gyeom, cutting his finger to cure his father's madness, as reported by Governor Yun Eun-bo.⁵³ Widespread cases in 1440 continued in this pattern.⁵⁴

The majority of finger-severing cases appeared chronically linked to madness, signifying that the act was perceived as a remedy for curing that malady. Despite the aspirations of the post-Sejong intellectual class that finger severing would emphasize the sincerity motivating the act over the act itself, it spread nationwide without diverging from the motive of treating madness. The fact that finger-severing cases were not reported in Hanyang (Seoul) during Seongjong's reign and his remark, "There are medicines within Seoul," suggests that when medical knowledge or medications such as were used in the Seoul region existed elsewhere, such incidents of finger severing would not arise.⁵⁵

Moving into the mid-Joseon era, some individuals learned to mimic the accounts of the *Samgang haengsildo*. According to a report from Gangwon-do by Inspector Hwang Hyo-heon in 1526, the wife of Shin Myeong-hwa from Gangwon-do always recited the *Samgang haengsildo*, and when her husband became mad, she cut her finger and fed it to him, claiming it cured

50. *Sejong sillok* 57.32a, 13th day of the 9th lunar month, 1432.

51. *Sejong sillok* 57.32a, 12th day of the leap 6th lunar month, 1436.

52. *Sejong sillok* 57.32a, 4th day of the 10th lunar month, 1439.

53. *Sejong sillok* 87.2a, 15th day of the 9th lunar month, 1439.

54. *Sejong sillok* 88.27a, 10th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1440; 105.30a, 14th day of the 8th lunar month, 1444.

55. "上曰, 或斷指療親之病, 或搏虎捍親之禍者, 多出於鄉村. 京中則有藥物, 無豺虎而然乎?" (*Seongjong sillok* 202.3a, 7th day of the 4th lunar month, 1487).

him.⁵⁶ Similarly, a report by Pyeongan-do province's Inspector Yun Eun-bo during the same period related how Yu In-seok of Hamgyeong-do province, upon his father's madness, induced finger severing after learning the story of its effectiveness in the *Samgang haengsildo*.⁵⁷

Separate from the complex discourse surrounding finger severing among the Joseon elite, practitioners perceived it as a medically efficacious act. Consequently, while the ongoing proliferation of finger severing symbolized the triumph of state-endorsed policies aimed at fostering *virtuous acts*, it equally emerged as an act arising from societal customs misaligned with the government's intents from the Taejong to Jungjong periods. In situations where an afflicted parent faced dire circumstances, children who wished to alleviate their parents' illnesses sought information on the spread of finger severing through guidance policies and resorted to the act. Records from the early 15th century provide evidence of the prevalence of finger severing, primarily centered on Pyeongan-do, a region relatively proximal to the border with China. There is a lack of reported cases from Hanseong (Seoul) during the approximate century of time when the practice of finger severing was rewarded. Moreover, based on statements from the practitioners, the nationwide instances of finger severing consistently cases of seeking a remedy for a singular condition known as madness (*gwangjil* 狂症). The spread of finger severing was an *unanticipated achievement* resulting from institutional efforts by the Joseon elite, despite being at odds with their objectives.

Conclusion

In terms of the dissemination of finger severing (*danji* 斷指) during the early Joseon period, its proliferation signifies both the triumph of the nation's early policies aimed at fostering moral values and the internal quandaries it encapsulated. In conclusion, the proliferation of finger severing was a result

56. *Jungjong sillok* 57.22b, 15th day of the 7th lunar month, 1526.

57. *Jungjong sillok* 57.28a, 25th day of the 7th lunar month, 1526.

of efforts by the Joseon government, albeit not necessarily in accordance with the intentions of that government. This study explored the complex historical narrative surrounding finger severing, delving into its widespread dissemination in early to mid-Joseon and shedding light on the multifaceted discourse on finger severing that emerged among the ruling elite, as well as between the ruling elite and subordinate classes.

By tracing the trajectory of finger severing from its emergence during the reign of King Taejong to its proliferation in the 16th century, this research illuminates the interplay between institutional factors, societal customs, and cultural perceptions that shaped its evolution. The initial concentration of finger-severing cases in Pyeongan-do province gradually expanded to other regions, transcending social strata to include nobility and scholars. This dissemination process highlights the success of the early Joseon ruling class's proactive policies aimed at cultivating and standardizing ethical practices, which profoundly influenced the sentiments and actions of the subordinate classes.

However, inherent complexities and contradictions within the ruling elite's discourse surrounding finger severing were also uncovered. While the act was not explicitly endorsed as an ideal manifestation of filial piety, its practitioners were often acknowledged as virtuous due to their sincere intentions. The ruling class grappled with the tension between the *principle* of filial piety and the *utility* of promoting finger severing as a means of moral transformation. This tension resulted in a cautious approach, with the elite refraining from excessive glorification of the practice while still rewarding its practitioners. The manifestations of cultural cultivation did not align perfectly with the aspirations of the ruling class. The spread of finger severing posed a dilemma for the ruling class attempting to implement cultural cultivation. On Confucian ground they opposed bodily harm, while they also hesitated to endorse provocative behavior by promoting finger severing.

Furthermore, a discrepancy between the ruling class's intentions and the actual motivations driving the civilian populace's engagement with finger severing was revealed. The majority of reported cases were consistently linked to the belief in its efficacy in treating madness, suggesting

that practitioners perceived it primarily as a medical act rather than an embodiment of the government's moral guidance. In reality, even within the civilian sphere, the ruling class's endorsement of finger severing contributed to its proliferation as a remedy for madness (*gwangjil*). Yet, in their pursuit of refining familial ethics through rural cultural cultivation, the Joseon court found themselves compelled to continue its encouragement, believing it aided in ethical refinement.

In conclusion, the examined cases surrounding finger severing provide glimpses into the contours of rural cultural cultivation spearheaded by the early Joseon ruling class. The dissemination of this practice involved civilian actions absorbed and documented by the state administration. However, it also shows the constraints of pre-modern state administration and the blend of reactions from subordinate classes that conflict with the intentions of the ruling class, who were unable to enforce these practices entirely. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of Confucianization in Joseon Korea, highlighting the challenges and contradictions inherent in the process of disseminating and regulating ethical practices. The dissemination of finger severing in 15th- and 16th-century Joseon Korea stands as an *unanticipated achievement* of top-down cultural policies, situated within the multifaceted nature of moral discourse in its historical context.

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