“My Own Flesh and Blood: Stratified Parental Compassion and Law in Korean Slavery”

This presentation discusses the relationship between human emotions and slavery in Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910) by examining legislative processes as well as private practices concerning the status of the offspring of a yangban man and his slave-status concubine. The legislative discussions and decisions on the topic at the royal court often subscribed to the notion that these children were also the yangban’s “flesh and blood” and called for compassion, a Confucian emotional norm expected of parents. When yangban fathers manumitted their slave-status children, they recorded their feelings in the same affective language expressed in the legal discourses. Yet, because slaves were among the yangban’s most valuable possessions and yangban elites regarded the maintenance of social hierarchy as the key for social order, legal paths for manumission were narrowly defined and emotional norms did not always dictate parents’ actions. By investigating the larger legal framework related to slave-status children of yangban elites alongside specific cases, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the historical impact and practices of emotional politics in relation to slavery. It finds that the yangban fathers’ very primordial human emotion toward their own children was stratified by social and economic conditions and selectively applied.