In accordance with Confucian principles, the Joseon government emphasized agriculture and regarded commerce and industry with disdain. Confucianism disapproved of profit-seeking activities and put merchants at the bottom of the social hierarchy. However, Joseon's policies were not intended to suppress the development of commerce completely. People needed to buy goods that they could not produce themselves, and merchants sold them products such as salt, fish, and handicraft goods. In addition to government policy, there were other factors that stimulated commercial development, including handicraft production by the peasantry, improvement in their purchasing power, and the development of a market infrastructure. These developments led to the emergence of rural markets called *jangsi*.

There were three main types of merchants who worked at these markets: *gaekju* (brokers), *yeogaek* (commission agents), and *jangdolbaengi* (itinerant peddlers). They were particularly active during the late Joseon period when the country underwent commercial development. *Gaekju* and *yeogaek* owned inns where they also operated businesses that sold goods on consignment, acted as middlemen, and provided financial services. Koreans commonly think that all itinerant merchants in the period were what were called *bobusang*. The *bobusang* were an organization of peddlers that received monopoly rights from local government offices or from the Border Defense Command (Bibyeonsa). Some of them were well connected with high-ranking officials. However, not all itinerant peddlers were *bobusang*, and most of them did not enjoy the same privileges. In fact, most of the people working in markets were merchants and peasants who were exploited by the government or by merchants with monopoly rights. They fought against such exploitation as they worked to make a living. Koreans today are familiar with the exploits of Joseon-era merchants through popular historical novels.¹ These stories portrayed merchants from Gaeseong who travelled to markets all over the country, the itinerant

¹ Such as *Jang Gilsan* by Hwang Seogyeong, *Gaekju* by Gim Juyeong, and *Sangdo* by Choe Inho.
performers who followed them, and the gangs who defended their turf. These characters were not simply products of a writer’s imagination; they were based on people who actually existed in the late Joseon period. The rural markets were both places where business was conducted and the site of their joys and sorrows. This chapter examines the emergence of rural markets with a focus on one of the most common types, the so-called ‘five-day market.’ It also discusses the lives of the itinerant merchants whose livelihoods were dependent on these markets.

The Predecessors of the Itinerant Peddlers

Since the Joseon government allowed merchant associations called sijeon to operate stores in Seoul, people living in cities could obtain goods easily. There were also stores in cities such as Gaeseong, Naju, Gyeongju, and Jeonju. By contrast, most rural villages did not have permanent stores; in fact, at the time of Joseon’s founding, there were no rural markets that opened at regular intervals in a fixed location – the markets that were the basis for the existence of itinerant merchants.

In the early Joseon era, people in rural areas bought goods from peddlers known as haengsang, a term that meant ‘traveling merchants selling goods.’ They were the forerunners of the merchants called jangdolbaengi or jangdollim. Since there were no rural markets yet, it would not be accurate to call them jangdolbaengi. The haengsang existed from the time that people began to trade for goods that they could not produce, going back to at least the Three Kingdoms Period (first to seventh centuries CE). For instance, a Baekje song entitled ‘Jeongeupsa’ contains a line expressing the wishes of a woman: “O Moon, climb high and cast your light on the road on which my beloved is traveling to sell his goods.” They played a greater role in the economy as the amount of surplus goods and the social division of labor increased. In the early Joseon period, traveling peddlers were sometimes considered to be a bad influence on rural society. They travelled to rural villages to sell handicraft goods such as combs, brass-ware, woodwork, clothing, and farming implements and local products such as salt and fish. The government thought that they were selling unnecessary luxury goods in order to buy up rice and other important staple grains. The wares they handled suggest, however, that they were providing tools for farming and other necessities of daily life.

There were two main types of haengsang peddlers. The yuksang traveled over land, and the susang or seonsang traveled by water routes.