The Korean peninsula has been known for its mines since at least the Three Kingdoms period, but the exact origins of mining are unclear. As a very mountainous region, minerals can be found all over the country, but the best mines are concentrated in the north. Geography and climate dictated that the southern regions would be the center of agriculture with its fertile land and plentiful rainfall. The mountainous northern regions did not have much arable land, and rainfall was not sufficient to enable proper irrigation of paddy fields. However, the north was active in commerce and mining with mountains rich in copper, gold, and iron. In the late nineteenth century, foreign powers sought to extract mining concessions from the government. The Unsan mine in North Pyeongan province was granted to an American concern in 1895, later developing into one of the world’s leading producers of gold. Mining continues to be a major industry in North Korea today, producing important minerals such as magnesite, tungsten, and zinc. This chapter provides a brief overview of the development of mining in the Joseon period and also examines the lives of the various people who worked in the mines. Initially tightly regulated by the government, the mining industry gradually became dominated by investors who provided capital and hired workers who received wages for their labor. During the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, it transformed into an industry based on capitalist principles.

A Brief History of Mining

In the early Joseon period, the government's policy was to discourage gold and silver mining. The peasantry was also opposed to mining since they would be forced to do difficult labor without receiving any benefits. They bribed government officials and technical experts to submit false reports that their regions had no gold. Magistrates and local officials were also reluctant to develop mines because of the added obligations they would entail and the stiff resistance of the peasantry. The Great Code of 1469 (Gyeongguk daejeon) prohibited digging for gold and established regulations for its mining. In the fifteenth century, mining focused on iron ore.
rather than gold and silver; iron was used to produce daily necessities, weapons, and other metal goods. Mine workers did not work there by choice; the peasants residing near the mine were conscripted for compulsory labor. They had to extract ore, transport it, prepare firewood, and smelt the iron. Private mining production did exist, but it was strictly controlled and taxed.

Mining underwent gradual development over the succeeding centuries as the government loosened restrictions on it. When trade with China expanded in the sixteenth century, silver was needed to pay for the increased imports of silk. In addition to the official government mines, people engaged in illegal private mining of silver. In silver mining regions such as Dancheon in Hamgyeong province and nearby areas, independent miners emerged, having learned techniques when they worked as forced or paid labor in government mines. However, silver mining was still not a lucrative profession. Even in the reign of Jungjong in the sixteenth century, the residents of Dancheon did not have any fixed assets and were much poorer than other people in the province. In the seventeenth century, the government stopped direct management of mining operations, shifting to a system of indirect regulation through the collection of taxes. After the Manchu invasions in the seventeenth century, King Hyojong