Im Ggeokjeong (?–1562) was one of a trio of legendary bandits, along with Hong Gildong and Jang Gilsan, who were active in the mid-sixteenth century during the reign of Myeongjong (r. 1545–1567). Unlike typical criminals, they were righteous heroes who were beloved and supported by the common people. Embodying the hopes and desires of the people, they were larger-than-life figures whose feats became the stuff of legend well beyond their deaths. Known for his smarts and valor, Im was born in the Yangju region into the *baekjeong* class. Though they were not as low in status as the unfree people (*nobi*), they were often treated worse because of their occupations. They did the jobs that violated Buddhist principles such as slaughtering, tanning, leatherworking, and meat-selling. The *baekjeong* were subjected to such severe discrimination that during the Gabo Peasants’ War of 1894, one of the peasant army’s demands was to eliminate discrimination against them and allow them to get rid of their *paeraengi*, the distinctive hats that they wore. Im Ggeokjeong, who came from the lowest segment of society, was a revolutionary who completely rejected the legitimacy of feudal society. His resolute resistance against the ruling class inspired Hong Myeonghui (1888–1968) to serialize the novel *Im Ggeokjeong* in an effort to give readers hope during the colonial period. The novel enabled a rediscovery of Im Ggeokjeong as the figure who best captured the sentiments of people during the Joseon era.

**The Causes of Banditry**

Im Ggeokjeong began his raids in the late 1550s at a time when people turned to thievery as a protest against society and in response to economic crisis. One of the main causes of banditry was continual crop failures and famine. Natural disasters precipitated crop failures and famine, pushing starving households to turn to stealing. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the West, when rampant piracy and marauding plagued the Mediterranean region throughout the latter part of the sixteenth century. In Korea, raids on wealthy landowners and government properties reflected declining economic and social conditions. It is not an
exaggeration to say that the chronic crop failures and famines of the mid-sixteenth century were a direct cause of the looting and pillaging.

Another factor was the excessive taxes levied on the people. The combination of a heavy tax burden and poor harvests brought farmers to the brink of ruin. In Hwanghae province, where Im’s army was based, there were two severe problems with the tax system. The first was with the tribute tax. The amount of goods demanded by officials was in excess of what peasants could actually provide. Though Hwanghae province had far less land, population, and products than the three southern provinces, it was levied far more products, and the collection of tribute goods was much stricter. The second major problem concerned mandatory military service