

TESTING THE LIMITS:  
KING CHŎNGJO AND ROYAL POWER IN LATE CHOSŎN

by

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# Abstract

The present work examines the attempt of Chǒngjo, King of Korea from 1776 to 1800, to shift the balance of power in late Chosŏn Korea in favor of the crown. It examines the official court records, the King's official writings, and the recent discovery of Chǒngjo's "secret" letters to high official and ostensible enemy Sim Hwan-ji, using them to illustrate how the King navigated the labyrinthine webs of power. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork of late Chosŏn history and examines Chǒngjo's legitimacy issues arising from the death of his father. Chapter 2 deals with political philosophy, as Chǒngjo struggled with the aristocracy over the proper interpretation of Neo-Confucian ideology. Chapter 3 addresses how Chǒngjo dealt with the various power groups at court. After looking at his early struggles with the machinations of Hong Kuk-gyŏng, it examines the intrigues against his half-brother Prince Ŭn-ŏn, his aunt Princess Hwawŏn, and his uncle Hong In-han, and reveals how the King sought to protect royal relatives to preserve the majesty of the royal clan and to dispel any pretensions his mother's family may have had of dominating the throne. The chapter then turns to Chǒngjo's handling of the major political factions and his subtle refinement of the Policy of Impartiality. Chapter 4 looks at Chǒngjo's efforts to institute a system to perpetuate royal power. After briefly examining his struggles with the bureaucracy over a key government position, the chapter investigates his creation of two new administrative organs to strengthen royal power: a system to train future administrators in his own particular throne-centered interpretation of Confucianism, the *ch'ogyŏ munsin*, and a locus of power outside the traditional bureaucratic ladder, the Royal Library. Chapter 5 addresses Chǒngjo's military reforms. After gutting the established military organizations, he set up a new army

under the command of his personally-selected governor in the city of Suwŏn, headquartered at the newly-constructed Illustrious Fortress. The sixth and final chapter concludes with an assessment of Chŏngjo's reforms: He was largely successful in creating space for royal autonomy during his lifetime but was largely unsuccessful in perpetuating that power beyond his reign.

# **Preface**

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, C. Lovins.

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Preface.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Dedication.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chǒngjo in Late Chosŏn Historiography.....	3
Argument and Structure of the Dissertation.....	8
Background and Methodology: Chosŏn Political History at a Glance.....	15
A Brief Note on Primary Sources.....	34
A Brief Note on Names and Titles.....	36
Chapter 2: The Politics of Confucianism.....	38
Education and the Classics.....	40
Discretion 權.....	48
Chapter 3: Power and Factions.....	66
Early Setbacks: Honggs and Princes.....	69
The Policy of Impartiality.....	78
Chapter 4: Building a System.....	97
Early Setbacks: The Struggle over Selection Secretaries.....	99
Kyujanggak and Ch’ogyae munsin: Education and Training.....	102
Expanding Recruitment: Northmen and Bastards.....	114
Personal Rule: Circumventing Ministers.....	125
Chapter 5: Military Matters.....	140
The Illustrious Fortress: A Monument to Sado?.....	141
The Robust and Brave Regiment: Whom Do They Serve?.....	156
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	164
Bibliography.....	176

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*To Dr. S.J. Barrett*

*Who first told me I could do it*

# Chapter 1: Introduction

況一天之下，一國之內，共尊一人，同事一君者乎？

All under a single Heaven and all within a single state, do they not together do homage to a single person and together as one serve a single ruler?<sup>1</sup>

For most of the twentieth century, the late Chosŏn 朝鮮 period in Korea (roughly 1700 to 1910) was regarded as a long, slow decline into factionalism and chaos, ending with the ignominy of Japanese colonialism. Locked into rigid Neo-Confucian ideology and riven by hereditary factions that argued over minutiae like proper mourning garments and classical writing styles, Chosŏn was trapped in a state of stagnation and was powerless when confronted with the modern world. However, in the past two decades, scholars have challenged this universally negative discourse of late Chosŏn political history. Perspectives of King Chŏngjo 正祖 (r. 1776-1800) are a case in point. For decades, Chŏngjo was a footnote in Chosŏn history, only mentioned in connection with Christian persecutions or with his copious writings. Only in the past ten years have Korean scholars seriously begun to reconsider the standard view of a corrupt, decaying, backward Chosŏn government (and, by extension, society),<sup>2</sup> and commensurate with this, a few Korean scholars have led the charge in re-examining Chŏngjo's policies and the strength of his kingship. These scholars argue that Chŏngjo was more than just an example of a filial son who protected Catholics from persecution. Building on their work, the present study contributes to the refutation of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.9.22.

<sup>2</sup> Yun Nae-hyŏn, Pak Sŏng-su, and Yi Hyŏn-hŭi. *Saeroun Han'guksa*. Paju: Chipmundang, 2005. Even this recent history—despite purporting to be a “new” history free from the domination of Japanese colonial historiography—simply gives standard nationalist responses to colonialist claims about Chosŏn. In short, with chapter titles like “Minjung Ŭisik ŭi Hwakdae [Expansion of Mass Consciousness],” the dynasty is given credit for what the authors claim it was *about to become* (a modern state) rather than for *what it was*.



“steady decline” model of late Chosŏn history, the legacy of scholarship promoted by the Japanese Empire in order to solidify its hold on its Korean colony. It is my contention that, through careful explication of Confucian ideology, constructing and garrisoning the Illustrious Fortress 華城 in Suwŏn 水原, and establishing and subsequently empowering the Royal Library 奎章閣, King Chŏngjo was in the process of systematically strengthening the Korean throne to an extent not seen since King Sejo 世祖 in the fifteenth century. It was only his untimely death that allowed aristocratic power to reassert itself and undo or co-opt his reforms, ushering in a century of declining political strength and unity until the arrival of a modernized Japan and the dynasty’s ignominious end in 1910.

The present work is part of a movement among scholars to rescue late Chosŏn history from colonial distortions without sliding to the opposite extreme of projecting “modernity” far into Korea’s past. Drawing on historical scholarship in Korea, Japan, and the West, this research avoids the ideological bias of previous work on late Chosŏn political history. This approach allows an understanding of King Chŏngjo that is free from Eurocentrism—both teleological and Orientalist—and serves as an example for future interdisciplinary research throughout the humanities and social sciences. The present work endeavors to view the late Chosŏn period on its own terms as far as possible, rather than using models designed to analyze modern nation-states or assessing Chosŏn’s degree of “modernity”. Thus, I hope to avoid evaluating various figures in modern terms like “conservative” and “progressive” or “future-oriented” and “past-oriented”.<sup>3</sup> I hope to offer a political history that is grounded in

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<sup>3</sup> JaHyun Kim Haboush discusses Jung Ok-ja’s use of the “progressive/conservative” dichotomy in her chapter of *Culture and State in Late Chosŏn Korea*, 48-49. Yi Han-wu criticizes Chŏngjo for being “oriented toward the past” because he fails to divest himself of Sado. The implication is that Chŏngjo failed to “modernize” Chosŏn. *Chŏngjo: Chosŏn ūi hon i chida*. Seoul: Haenaem. 2007, 125.

culture and historically situated. After all, the boundaries between politics and culture were not strongly policed in Chosŏn, so any analysis of one cannot afford to ignore the other.

## CHŎNGJO IN LATE CHOSŎN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Scholars in the 1950s hardly mention Chŏngjo at all, even when addressing topics to which he is directly relevant. In their article on Yi dynasty factionalism, Gregory Henderson and Key P. Yang describe both Yŏngjo 英祖 and Chŏngjo as “generous and forgiving monarchs.”<sup>4</sup> What made them good rulers? They were able to bring about conditions that approximated “the Confucian ideal of the best scholars in the highest positions.”<sup>5</sup> Henderson and Yang depict the effective Chosŏn monarch as nothing more than a vehicle for facilitating the rule of aristocratic scholar-officials. Eighteen months earlier Henderson wrote that Tasan Chŏng Yak-yong 茶山 丁若鏞 “was constantly consulted in secret council by the King, and his opinions were of great influence”<sup>6</sup> and that Chŏngjo “broke with the post-1694 Yi tradition proscribing the elevation to high position of Namin [南人 Southerner faction] adherents and gave official advancement to a Namin leader, Ch’ae Che-gong [蔡濟恭], a man so brilliant that, despite his faction, he succeeded in winning and retaining the king’s personal favor.”<sup>7</sup> The article does not mention Chŏngjo again until he dies, and Henderson only mentions his death in connection with the immediate reassertion of aristocratic

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory Henderson and Key P. Yang. “Outline History of Korean Confucianism, Part I: The Early Period and Yi Factionalism.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 18, No. 1. November 1958, 94.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Henderson, “Chŏng Ta-san: A Study in Korea’s Intellectual History.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 16, No. 3. May 1957, 379.

<sup>7</sup> Henderson, “Chŏng Ta-san,” 379.

dominance over the king's favorites, leading to a purge of Chǒngjo's supporters from the government and, hence, the exile of Tasan.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars mention Chǒngjo largely in connection with Catholicism, particularly when the suppression of Catholics was construed as evidence of the fossilization of Chosŏn society.<sup>9</sup>

Scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s, including such seminal works as Lee Ki-baik's *New History of Korea* and James Palais's *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*, occasionally addressed Chǒngjo's policies outside Catholicism, generally regarding his reign as largely a failure. Lee gives Yǒngjo and Chǒngjo credit for stability through putting "[a] lid on factionalism", and there is a brief mention of Chǒngjo's appointment of sons of secondary wives to the Royal Library, though that institution is not described as having any political role. However, Lee blames both monarchs for exacerbating factionalism by creating two new factions centered on the execution of Chǒngjo's father. He does not mention any institutional reforms, and attributes the appointment of secondary sons to "the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate lines of descent...breaking down" rather than to Chǒngjo's policies.<sup>10</sup>

For Palais, Chǒngjo failed to address substantive problems, such as the government's shrinking tax base. Commenting on the late Chosŏn period in general, Palais writes:

The record of Yi dynasty kings on these issues was relatively poor. None of them was able to exert leadership sufficient to reverse the trend toward private wealth, aristocratic power, central government impoverishment, and peasant suffering. The reform of the tribute tax system...was carried out in spite of royal Fabianism.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, Ki-baik. *A New History of Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1984, 239-240.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-250.

<sup>11</sup> James B. Palais. "Political Leadership in the Yi Dynasty". In *Political Leadership in Korea*. Edited by Dae-sook Suh and Chae-jin Lee. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1976, 11.

Upon introducing Chǒngjo in the article “Political Leadership in the Yi Dynasty,” Palais had this to say:

King Chǒngjo, who has earned a reputation for evenhandedness in his treatment of bureaucrats and factions, was hardly more able or vigorous than Yǒngjo in his approach to substantive problems. His investigation of land and land tax problems in the 1790s produced no major reforms.<sup>12</sup>

Palais does not seem to think it relevant that Chǒngjo died only a few years after he called for this investigation, hampering his ability to produce major reforms based on it. After all, as Palais notes, it took most of the eighteenth century to get a few local *yangban* 兩班 families to voluntarily pay a tax imposed by the Equal Service Law,<sup>13</sup> so Chǒngjo could hardly be expected to overturn landlord privilege in a mere three or four years. In his monumental *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*, Palais claims “Chǒngjo and his officials [emphasis added] reject[ed] land limitation as ‘impractical’” and also rejected equal tenancy holdings.<sup>14</sup> Later Palais notes that Chǒngjo did succeed in restricting the ubiquitous private academies 書院.<sup>15</sup> These two pages represent the entirety of Chǒngjo’s influence on the titular politics and policy in traditional Korea. This falls in line with Palais’s general view of kingship in Chosŏn, which “had its greatest monarchs at its beginning.”<sup>16</sup> But late Chosŏn was quite different from early Chosŏn, and consequently a “great monarch” had to operate differently in late Chosŏn. Strong kings like T’aejong 太宗 and Sejo ruled as they did

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> James B. Palais. *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1996, 567-568.

<sup>14</sup> James B. Palais. *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1991, 69.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-117.

<sup>16</sup> Palais, “Political Leadership in the Yi Dynasty,” 13.

before men like Yōnsan 燕山君 and Kwanghae 光海君 were toppled from the throne by their own officials at the head of troops supposedly under royal control. It is my contention that Chōngjo was a strong king, perhaps a great one, even though his strength reveals itself in ways quite different from the rougher and more direct approaches of the early Chosŏn kings. It would be a foolhardy ruler who behaves as a despot while operating in Palais's "limited monarchy" that was "incapable of allowing a major shift in the balance of power toward a strong and centralized monarchical leadership"<sup>17</sup>, and Chōngjo was a far too astute politician to behave like Sejo in a changed political landscape.

Indeed, there are a number of similarities in both the recognition of problems and the attempted solutions between Chōngjo and the man Palais considered the strongest ruler of late Chosŏn, the Hŭngsŏn Taewŏn'gun 興宣大院君. Both men recognized the problem of the private academies and acted against them, with Chōngjo's early success in restricting them making possible the Taewŏn'gun's later elimination of them as a major political force. Both attempted to expand official recruitment to widen the pool of talent from which the throne could draw, initiated building projects to add to the grandeur of the royal house, and proved either unwilling (the Taewŏn'gun) or unable (Chōngjo) to ensure that their sons would continue their policies, allowing many of their reforms to be reversed following their exits from the political scene.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, scholars began to reappraise late Chosŏn politics. Yi Kŭnsun's seminal *Chosŏn hugi tangjaengsa yŏn'gu* [*A Study of the History of Late Chosŏn Factional Struggle*], along with the work of Mark Setton, showed that factional struggle was not mere umbrage over minor matters or personal animosity but represented real

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<sup>17</sup> Palais, *Politics and Policy*, 272.

disagreements over actual policy. Earlier views of factionalism as a cover for power struggles gave way to more nuanced views that saw power struggles as inextricably tied up with philosophical positions.<sup>18</sup> Acknowledging the work of scholars who had given attention to the seriousness of factional disputes, JaHyun Kim Haboush, Martina Deuchler, and Donald Baker noted that the participants in these disputes all accepted Neo-Confucianism and its emphasis on right behavior.<sup>19</sup> Thus, while opposition to Catholicism, for example, was caught up in real political concerns, it also had an ideological dimension. Condemnation of Catholicism as threatening to social order was not merely a cover to attack political enemies but reflected genuine concern with the danger a strange ideology might represent. In Korea, scholars such as Kim Moon-sik and Yu Ponghak argued<sup>20</sup> that Chǒngjo's concern with culture, such as writing style and "right learning" 正學, were part of how he dealt with substantive issues, and the 2000s have only seen further refinement of this view. Yu Pong-hak also called attention to the unsophisticated use of dichotomies like Practical Learning 實學 (*sirhak*) versus Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism 性理學 (*sǒngnihak*) and progressivism versus conservatism that oversimplified analysis of the Chosŏn period, while Suzuki Nobuaki argued that the Catholic persecutions could not be separated from the political conditions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and Chǒngjo's policies.<sup>21</sup> All of this lent support

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<sup>18</sup> Compare James Palais's realist view of Song Si-yŏl's position on the Ritual Controversies (1659/1674) in his chapter of *Political Leadership in Korea* (1976) with JaHyun Kim Haboush's realist/ideological view of the same in her chapter of *Culture and State in Late Chosŏn Korea* (1999).

<sup>19</sup> This is a theme in each of these authors' chapters in *Culture and State in Late Chosŏn Korea*.

<sup>20</sup> Kim Moon-sik. *Chǒngjo ūi kyŏnghak kwa chujahak*. Seoul: Munhŏn kwa Haesŏk, 2000; Yu Pong-hak. *Chǒngjo Taewang ūi kkum: Kaehyŏk kwa kaltŭng ūi sidae*. Seoul: Singu munhwasa, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Suzuki Nobuaki. "Richō Seiso no bunka seisaku kara mita tenshukyō taisaku ni tsuite." *Toyo Daigaku Bungakubu Kiyo*. 1988, 53-84. Yu Pong-hak *Kaehyŏk kwa kaltŭng ūi sidae: Chǒngjo wa 19-segi*. Sŏngnam: Sin'gu Munhwasa. 2009, 13-19.

to the notion that Chǒngjo's erudition and prolific scholarship were pursued not in lieu of policy objectives but to further them.

Still, Lee Song-Mu in his chapter on factionalism in late Chosŏn places the blame for its evils squarely on weak kingship in a conclusion completely in line with the “declining Chosŏn” model, despite being published in 1994.<sup>22</sup> In 2000, Sohn Pokee argued that the monarch was merely the arbiter who helped the *yangban* achieve a consensus or, at best, selected from among several alternatives proposed by the *yangban*.<sup>23</sup> This is far from uncommon in Chosŏn political histories; as Park Hyunmo has observed, the king's role in politics have often been overlooked in the historical literature.<sup>24</sup> Among scholars working primarily in English, it seems JaHyun Kim Haboush was a voice crying in the wilderness when she called Chǒngjo's reign “a glorious chapter in the Yi Confucian monarchy, deserving of the epithet ‘restoration’”.<sup>25</sup>

## ARGUMENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

Scholars in Korea have taken quite a different look at Chǒngjo's policy achievements throughout the 2000s. Indeed, there is something of a cottage industry of work on Chǒngjo in Korean. From Yi Tae-Jin, who views Chǒngjo as having pretensions to absolute monarchy, to Park Hyunmo and Yu Pong-hak, who sees him as a shrewd politician with no firm agenda

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<sup>22</sup> Lee Song-Mu. “On the Causes of Factional Strife in Late Choson.” In Dae-Sook Suh, ed. *Korean Studies: New Pacific Currents*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Sohn, Pokee. *Social History of the Early Chosŏn Dynasty: The Functional Aspects of Governmental Structure*. Seoul: Jisik-sanup. 2000. Especially chapter II.

<sup>24</sup> Park Hyunmo. *Chǒngch'i ka Chǒngjo*. Seoul: P'urŭn Yŏksa. 2001, 8. Yi Tae-Jin makes a similar point in “Chosŏn wangjo yugyo chǒngch'i wa wanggwŏn”. *Han'guk saron* vol. 23, 216.

<sup>25</sup> JaHyun Kim Haboush. *The Confucian Kingship in Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2001, 233.

responding to the vicissitudes of the times, to Yi Han-wu, who argues he had a vision rather than a plan and learned the game of politics through his early mistakes, to Jung Jae-hoon, who put forward that he sought to roll back the clock to early Chosŏn—there are a number of ways Chŏngjo’s reign can be interpreted.<sup>26</sup> As yet, no monograph-length treatment of his reign has been undertaken in English, and this is what I set out to do here. In the course of my research, I have come to fall somewhere between Yi Tae-Jin and Park Hyunmo. While it is a stretch to call Chŏngjo an absolute monarch on par with Louis XIV’s “absolutism”, I do believe he had a general intention, if not an exacting and specific plan, to reform the government so as to strengthen not only himself but the very position of king. It has become clear to me in the course of my research that Chŏngjo was a masterful politician who fully understood the system in which he had to operate, what he could accomplish and what he could not, how to accomplish what he could, and importantly, how long such accomplishment would take, which he probably measured in years or even decades. I have identified four areas in which Chŏngjo carried out or was in the process of carrying out major reforms, each of which is discussed in a chapter:

Chapter 2 deals with political philosophy, as Chŏngjo struggled with the *yangban* over the proper interpretation of Neo-Confucian ideology. With his mastery of the Confucian canon, the King was in a position to engage in intellectual combat with the *yangban* over his role in government. Though prominent scholars such as Yi Tae-Jin, Yi Tŏk-il, and Park Hyunmo have scratched the surface of the importance of Chŏngjo’s reforms, there is as yet no in-depth study of the relationship between the king’s intentions as revealed in his writings

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<sup>26</sup> Chŏng Ch’ae-hun, “18segi kukka unyŏng ūi chaechŏngbi”. In *Chŏngjo wa Chŏngjo sidae*. Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2011; Park Hyunmo, *Chŏngch’i ka Chŏngjo*; Yi Tae-Jin, “Chŏngjo: Yugyojŏk kyemong chŏldaekunju”. *Hanguksa simin kangjwa* 13; Yi Han-wu. *Chŏngjo: Chosŏn ūi hon i chida*; Yu Pong-hak *Kaehyŏk kwa kaltŭng ūi sidae*. Park focuses on Chŏngjo’s response to political changes, while Yu emphasizes social and economic change.



and the reforms he was able to implement. The present work aims to accomplish this. We are fortunate that Chǒngjo left a substantial corpus of writings. In the attempt to understand what Chǒngjo was trying to do and why, these writings are an invaluable source for the inner workings of his mind. The King brought his formidable intellect to bear on re-interpreting the classics to permit a greater degree of royal latitude. By positioning himself as a scholar-king who instructed his ministers from a superior position, looking back to the more monarch-centered commentaries on the classics that predated those of the Song Dynasty, and expanding the concept of “discretion” 權 (*kwǒn*)—the accepted departure from ritual and precedent at appropriate times—Chǒngjo sought to build an ideological justification for a strengthened kingship.

Chapter 3 addresses how Chǒngjo dealt with the various power groups at court. After looking at his early struggles with the machinations of Hong Kuk-gyǒng, it examines the intrigues against his half-brother Prince Ŭn-ǒn, his aunt Princess Hwawǒn, and his uncle Hong In-han, and reveals how the King sought to protect royal relatives in order to preserve the majesty of the royal clan and to dispel any pretensions his mother’s family may have had of dominating the throne. The chapter then turns to Chǒngjo’s handling of the major political factions and his subtle refinement of the Policy of Impartiality. It takes advantage of the recent discovery of Chǒngjo’s “secret” letters to high official and ostensible enemy Sim Hwan-ji 沈煥之, using them to illustrate how the King navigated the labyrinthine webs of power in late Chosǒn. This chapter reveals that Chǒngjo was willing both to sacrifice close supporters and to work with opponents in pursuit of his policies.

Chapter 4 looks at Chǒngjo’s efforts to institute a system that would perpetuate royal power. After briefly examining his struggles with the bureaucracy over the key government

position of selection secretary 銓郎 (*chöllang*), the chapter examines his creation of two new administrative organs to centralize royal power: a system to train future administrators in his own particular throne-centered interpretation of Confucianism (the *ch'ogye munsin* 抄啓文臣) and a locus of power outside the traditional bureaucratic ladder, the Royal Library (*Kyujanggak*). The *ch'ogye munsin* system took relatively young officials and trained them under the king's direction. The king personally selected promising scholars under age thirty-seven to be reeducated in his own philosophy of government, sometimes receiving lessons from the king himself. Due to his mastery of advanced Confucian texts, Chǒngjo was able to design the program he wanted these officials to learn, "sage-king learning" (聖王學 *sǒngwanghak*), ignoring the demands of the older officials around him that he teach their preferred "study of the sages" (聖學 *sǒnghak*). Men reeducated under the *ch'ogye munsin* system were the pool of talent from which Chǒngjo drew his support; virtually all appointments to the Royal Library were graduates of the system, and they slowly began to take over other parts of the government as well. By the closing years of Chǒngjo's reign, half of all officials to serve in the government came through the *ch'ogye munsin* system. It is telling that, as soon as Chǒngjo died, his opponents successfully managed to exclude these men from power.

The Royal Library, while on the surface simply a place to store texts deemed important by the king, was given extensive powers by Chǒngjo in exchange for support for his reforms. Established the very day after he ascended the throne, the Royal Library once again served a dual purpose. It brought prestige to the monarchy and, more pertinently, to Chǒngjo himself, and it also quickly assumed an important role in the politics of his reign. In his fifth year, he directed that Royal Library officials take on the duties of the *Yemun'gwan*

(Office of Royal Decrees), *Hongmun'gwan* (Office of Special Advisors), and *Sŭngjŏngwŏn* (Office of Royal Secretariat). Strikingly, the officials of the Royal Library had the power to impeach officials in the existing government organs but were not subject to impeachment in turn by the censorial organs of the regular bureaucracy. This vesting of importance in the Royal Library weakened the traditional aristocratic strongholds of power. It is little wonder that Yi T'aek-ching 李澤徵 wrote in a memorial to the king in 1782 that “The Royal Library is Your Majesty’s private institution, not a public institution, and its officials are your private officials with no connection to the court [是閣卽殿下之私閣。而非國中共公之閣也。 是臣卽殿下之私臣。而非朝廷隣哉之臣也。].”<sup>27</sup>

The chapter then moves on to address Chŏngjo’s efforts to expand the pool of men from which he could draw officials. Throughout his reign, he sought to select men as he saw fit, including those who had long been excluded from positions at court: Southerners, men from the northern provinces, and sons of *yangban* by concubines, known as secondary sons 庶孽, allowing him to make use of talented men who had no independent power base in the bureaucracy. The rapid removal of these men from power after the king’s death is testament to their dependence on him for their positions. Though the major factions by no means disappeared, they were no longer the dominant political force after Chŏngjo’s death. His strengthening of royal power and the pervasive influence in the government of men loyal to the king alone rather than to the traditional factions was a significant factor in the emergence of in-law politics 勢道政治 (*sedo chŏngch'i*) at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Catholic Persecution of 1801, carried out almost immediately on Chŏngjo’s death, was not a reassertion by the Patriarchs faction of its supremacy by purging the Southerners but a

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<sup>27</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1782.5.26

reassertion of *yangban* aristocratic power by a purge of men loyal to Chǒngjo, not all of whom were Southerners. Many of those persecuted as Catholics were in fact men brought into the government at least indirectly—and often directly—as a result of Chǒngjo’s policies. The chapter concludes with an examination of the King’s attempts to increase direct royal influence by expanding the use of commoner petitions to the throne and the elimination of slavery.

Chapter 5 addresses Chǒngjo’s military reforms, both to increase direct royal power over the military and to improve military readiness. After gutting the established military organizations—a stronghold of aristocratic authority—the king set up a new army under command of his personally-selected governor in the city of Suwǒn, perhaps with an eye toward transferring the capital there from aristocrat-infested Seoul; this force eventually became the central army unit. Central to his reform was the construction of the Illustrious Fortress in Suwǒn. Scholarship on Chǒngjo’s reign has long held that the Illustrious Fortress was primarily a project to rehabilitate the reputation of the king’s deceased father and that the project was not largely military, as a fortress in Suwǒn is not strategically placed to defend the capital. However, as Palais notes, the Chosǒn military was deployed “more by political considerations than by the logic of national defense.”<sup>28</sup> In line with this, it is my contention that the Fortress was to be a center of royal power against domestic military threats such as the fate that befell King Kwanghae: deposition at the hands of officials leading what was ostensibly the king’s own army. While Chǒngjo was intensely concerned with his father’s memory, Sado’s tomb also provided a convenient excuse for building a fortress to “protect” it, an excuse that would prove difficult for opponents to challenge on ideological grounds. Thus, the Illustrious Fortress is an excellent illustration of Chǒngjo’s understanding of

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<sup>28</sup> Palais. *Confucian Statecraft*, 1008.

kingship: Everything is political and can be used for political ends. To this end, Chǒngjo stationed royal guards at the fortress and designated it as an administrative center. These guards, the Robust and Brave Regiment 壯勇營 (*chang'yong'yǒng*), began as a token tomb guard that the King slowly and patiently built up into a formidable military force outside the regular bureaucratic structure of the military.

The sixth and final chapter concludes with an assessment of Chǒngjo's reforms. A testament to the power Chǒngjo centered in himself is that, after his death, his chosen ministers were quickly ousted from their posts and his reforms were rolled back or co-opted by those who had opposed them. Chǒngjo's son Sunjo 純祖 was only ten years old when his father died, and so the country was nominally under the control of the still-living second queen of Yǒngjo, Chǒngsun 貞純王后. Chǒngjo's plan to free all slaves in Chosŏn was reduced to the mere emancipation of the by-then unnecessary palace slaves. Since this supposedly represented a loss of central government revenue, the "shortfall" was made up by the disbanding of Chǒngjo's Robust and Brave Guards. The king's major reforms—such as the abolition of slavery and the removal of discrimination against the sons of concubines—were only partially carried out by the succeeding regime—or perhaps we should say they were partially blocked. To Chǒngjo belongs whatever credit may be given for these limited reforms.

As noted before, late Chosŏn kings have been blamed for their weakness in handling the problems facing the dynasty in its final years. Perhaps the worst we can say of Chǒngjo is that he spent twenty-five years building a system that strengthened the king and then died before producing someone strong enough to hold his system together. The resulting power vacuum was filled by aristocratic factionalism of a different sort, but it amounted to a

fracturing of the central government nonetheless, paralyzing its ability to respond to the rapid changes that were soon to engulf it.

JaHyun Kim Haboush lamented in 2001 that, thirteen years after the publication of her monograph on King Yǒngjo, English-language scholarship on Korean kingship remained virtually nonexistent.<sup>29</sup> The present work is intended as a belated first step in filling this void. It will be of note not only to scholars of late Chosŏn political history but also to anyone who is interested in the dynamics of royal power, the influence of rhetoric on the accomplishment of policy objectives, and one person's struggle against an overpowering system. While this work of necessity deals with Neo-Confucianism and the particulars of Chosŏn society, the problems King Chǒngjo faced and his ingenious efforts to solve them reflect concerns that reformers have always had across societies.

## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY: CHOSŎN POLITICAL HISTORY AT A GLANCE

Having surveyed the existing literature on Chǒngjo and provided an overview of my own position and the main arguments in support of it, I will now establish the background and framework out of which the present work proceeds. Its primary framework will be that of James Palais, as articulated most forcefully in the article "Confucianism and the Aristocratic/Bureaucratic Balance in Korea" and the monograph *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*. I will sketch out that framework below; those interested in a more thorough treatment are encouraged to peruse those two works.

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<sup>29</sup> Page x of the preface to the paperback edition of *The Confucian Kingship in Korea*.

## Aristocratic-bureaucratic balance

Politics in Chosŏn Korea could be described as, if not a tug-of-war between the king and his ministers, a tug-of-war between the throne and the aristocratic-bureaucratic hybrid that constituted the elite *yangban* class. The throne and the *yangban* needed each other, even as they struggled against one another with no clear “winner” over the course of five hundred years. The reasons for this may be broken down into four broad categories: structural factors from the preceding Koryŏ 高麗 society that constrained the direction Chosŏn could take, the political weapons of the king in his struggle with the aristocracy, the political weapons of the aristocrats in their struggle with the throne, and the contradictory tendencies inherent in the dynastic ideology of Neo-Confucianism.

*Structural factors.* Let us begin by looking at how the structure of Korean society set the parameters under which the new Chosŏn state could operate. According to Palais, Chosŏn was at its founding a monarchical, centralized, bureaucratic government on top of an aristocratic, hierarchical social system, and “[a]bhorrence of excessive power was probably the main feature of the Yi dynasty polity.”<sup>30</sup> The central government was in competition with the *yangban* aristocrats over access to resources: land, slaves, and labor. Power, wealth, and prestige were not the province of the throne alone. Private land ownership—consistently condemned but never genuinely threatened throughout the whole of the dynasty—and inherited status based on lineage put the *yangban* on equal footing with the Chosŏn kings.

Further, Korea had a long tradition of local independence from excessive central authority. Provincial administrators were dependent on elite local families for support in governing their areas, and the bureaucratic system discouraged vigorous leadership; most

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<sup>30</sup> Palais, “Political Leadership in the Yi Dynasty,” 4.

provincial governors wanted nothing more than to leave office without a scandal.<sup>31</sup> Provincial governors were also rotated frequently and were not permitted to serve in their home areas, creating space between them and the local *yangban* on whom they depended for assistance in administering their districts. The government clerks 鄉吏 (*hyangni*) who were supposed to support the governor, having lost their official salaries in the transition from Koryŏ to Chosŏn, also turned to corruption. Korea also had a long tradition of consensus-based decision-making. Rarely would a king make a major decision that was opposed by a sufficient number of important officials. Most major issues were decided by the *tangsanggwan* 堂上官, encompassing thirty to fifty officials of the top three bureaucratic ranks who had the right to request a royal audience, and various sinecured elder statesmen. This consensus-based policy-making was a significant hindrance to the king's ability to impose his own will on the bureaucracy.

Finally, Korea was relatively isolated from political shocks, such as invasions, and economic shocks (such as extensive foreign trade) on any major scale. Indeed, in nearly five centuries of the dynasty up to 1876, Chosŏn experienced only two periods of major invasion: Japanese from 1592-1598 and Manchu from 1627-1637. As devastating as these periods of invasion were, it remains that they made up less than twenty years out of almost five hundred. It is this relative stability that allowed Chosŏn to remain an aristocratic agricultural society, in sharp contrast to China. There, the Tang 唐 Dynasty aristocratic-bureaucratic hybrid class was slowly transformed into the Song 宋 bureaucratic gentry class as invasions from the north forced the landed aristocrats to abandon their power bases there and flee south, increasing their dependence on service in the imperial government under an autocratic

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<sup>31</sup> Palais. "Political Leadership", 15.



emperor by the Ming 明 period. Extensive foreign trade in Song led to the development of widespread commercialization and urbanization, two trends notably absent from Chosŏn until the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest. Even then, their scale did not approach the comparable trends in Song.<sup>32</sup>

*Weapons of the throne.* Still, despite these formidable structural barriers to centralization and royal despotism, the Chosŏn monarch was never reduced to a figurehead as were the Japanese emperors or even some kings of Koryŏ. Chosŏn kings had significant resources at their command, and as long as they were adults of sound mind and body, they were the central figures on the political scene, even in periods of bureaucratic dominance.

First, as much as it was a restriction on the king's authority, the need for consensus also limited what the aristocracy could accomplish when it was not united, which was most of the time. Because the high officials 大臣 (*taesin*) were consulted and gave their assent to policy decisions, they were the king's ally when it came to implementing them in the face of opposition from lower-ranking ministers. Over the course of the dynasty, the critical voice of the Censorate became more and more sacrosanct. Younger ministers, having been appointed to the one of the three censorial offices 三司 (*samsa*), were expected to be free to criticize the government. In practice, to avoid accusations of *lèse majesté*, they usually attacked the high officials. Thus, the censorial voice acted both to restrict the king and to push the high ministers into defending him and his policies.

Second, the path to political leadership, according to Palais, involved success in the examinations, obtaining royal favor, and the consequent promotion to high office. Palais notes that the second of these was the most critical. No official, no matter his position or

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<sup>32</sup> James Palais. "Confucianism and the Aristocratic/Bureaucratic Balance in Korea." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* vol. 44, no. 2. 1984, 448-455.

power base, could remain in power after losing the favor of the king. Cho Kwang-jo 趙光祖 was put to death when he lost the trust of King Chungjong 中宗, despite there being only a few calls for his execution and a great deal of official support for him. Song Si-yöl 宋時烈, for a time the most powerful official in the country, was executed for opposing King Sukchong's 肅宗 choice of heir. Hong Kuk-yöng 洪國榮, decried for running the country in place of King Chöngjo, was exiled when his scheme to put his adopted nephew in the line of succession incensed the king. All these men reached the apex of political power when they had the favor of the king and tumbled into death or exile when they lost it.

Third, the king, though with the advice and consent of his ministers, retained the right to appoint and dismiss officials at will. Though it was difficult to do either in the face of strong opposition, this power remained firmly with the throne. Even the most illustrious of *yangban* families had to legitimate their power through holding office in the central government or risk losing recognition as a leading clan. Failure to produce a high-ranking government official for enough generations risked relegating a family to Kim Yong-söp's second-tier *yangban* or rural elite (sometimes referred to as *hyangban* 鄉班), who "still retained a vestige of prestige from inherited social status" but "whose life style hardly differed from that of commoners".<sup>33</sup> This kind of downward social mobility, though by no means common, was a regular occurrence throughout the dynasty. Thus, the king's bureaucracy was an important source of *yangban* status, one they could not afford to ignore.

Finally, though the *yangban* as a class were wealthy, the royal family remained the wealthiest individual family, and the aristocrats were never able to significantly restrain the king's use of the Royal Treasury. Short of insisting that the king ought to be frugal, there was

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<sup>33</sup> Palais. *Politics and Policy*, 8.

nothing the *yangban* could do to halt the king's spending. Nor were they able, at least in the first half of the dynasty, to prevent the king's creation of merit subjects (*hun'gu*). These were men who had supported the king's accession and, as a result, were given titles and land from the state. Even reformers like Yu Hyŏng-wŏn 柳馨遠 did not advocate abolishing the practice of elevating merit subjects, merely limiting the number of them and the grants provided to them.

*Weapons of the yangban.* Despite his formidable might, the king was nevertheless locked in a dependent embrace with the *yangban* scholar-aristocrats. These men, bolstered by prestigious lineage—some boasted illustrious ancestors in Silla and Koryŏ who outshone the royal ancestors—and extensive landholdings, collectively refused to allow the throne to erode their privileges. No matter how serious factional disputes became, the aristocrats would close ranks to defend against any attempt to add their lands to the tax rolls or to eliminate their tax exemptions, their immunity to military and corvée labor service, or their monopoly on office-holding. Indeed, as the dynasty went on, they further restricted access to the highest levels of power, even as the military examinations and sale of degrees permitted the lowest ranks of *yangban* to swell, prompting Eugene Park to remark that late Chosŏn social status was “rigid at its extremes but fluid in the middle”.<sup>34</sup> The most powerful *yangban* families continued to marry each other and block lesser *yangban* from the corridors of power, whatever degrees they bought.

As only *yangban* were effectively able to take the examinations, kings had no alternative but to staff their bureaucracies with them, all the more so because he was usually expected to select from a list of candidates submitted by other officials. In a society in which

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<sup>34</sup> Eugene Park. *Between Dreams and Reality: The Military Examination in Late Chosŏn Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2007, 179.

family descent was so important, no king could make political use of eunuchs, who lacked opportunities for education and any semblance of prestige. Adoption was practiced, but only among collateral family lines; adopting a son from a completely unrelated family was unacceptable among *yangban* families. Commoners were effectively banned from taking the examinations, and kings struggled even to bring lesser *yangban* into the government. King Chǒngjo and the Taewǒn'gun had some success in bringing in *yangban* from the northern provinces—traditionally regarded as not even true *yangban* by the illustrious families in the capital—but these attempts were strongly resisted and did not continue when the reins of power passed to a new ruler. Indeed, a key *yangban* advantage was simply their ability to perpetuate themselves as a class. The throne's power waxed with strong monarchs but waned again with weak ones; as kings came and went, the *yangban* class remained, weathering the storm of strong rulers until one came along that they could dominate.

In addition to their lineage prestige, landholding, education, and monopoly of the bureaucracy, the higher officials controlled the careers of lower officials through the processes of review of current performance and recommendation to higher office. Through these twin pillars, high officials could ensure that lower officials would be careful of who and how they criticized from their otherwise inviolate censorial offices. Thus, any maverick official who made a strong challenge to *yangban* privilege in the name of reform for the sake of better government risked not only his own career but those of his brothers, sons, nephews, and even cousins.

*Neo-Confucianism.* The ruling ideology of Neo-Confucianism likewise was a two-edged sword. Palais argues that the contradictory tendencies of this belief system contributed to the balance of royal/bureaucratic and aristocratic forces in Korea.

For the monarch, Neo-Confucianism is powerful because it is predicated on there being a king. The educated elite ostensibly serve him, offering advice while he does the actual ruling. Through emphasis on the Confucian virtue *ch'ung* 忠 (loyalty), he dispatches his officials to carry out his instructions. The Confucian bureaucracy gives him sole right of appointment over key offices, both in the capital government and in the provinces (though, as we will see, the king was restricted to a small pool of men considered appropriate for such appointments). While reformers like Chŏng Tojŏn 鄭道傳 envisioned a figurehead monarch with actual power in the hands of a prime minister, the Confucian stigma against ministers usurping the monarch's power had roots both wide (appearing many times in many Confucian texts and dynastic histories) and deep (extending back even to the *Analects of Confucius* 論語). As long as the king was an adult of sound mind, he could not be replaced as the locus of power.

For the *yangban*, the Neo-Confucian virtue *hyo* 孝 (filial piety) represents a source of loyalty outside the state, and it helped to perpetuate factional loyalties down through the generations. The emphasis on bureaucracy and the right to remonstrate restrict the ruler's ability to curtail *yangban* privilege, and the notion of a ruling class made up of virtuous men justified inequalities of status and wealth. Further, the Korean king in the Neo-Confucian worldview was subservient to the Son of Heaven, the emperor of China. That is, the Korean monarch was not the final arbiter in his country, for the Chinese emperor always remained as the true master of All-under-Heaven. Though in practice the emperor did not intervene in domestic Chosŏn affairs—even to the point of not intervening in succession struggles—it nevertheless weakened the ideological basis for absolute monarchy in Chosŏn.

## The Prince Sado Affair and Legitimacy

承慰。此中今始還內，憊甚之外，此朔此享，孺慕尤難抑耳。

I am pleased to have received your letter. I have just returned to the palace. Not only am I exhausted, but today I made a sacrifice, and it is all the more difficult now to stay focused due to my longing for my father.<sup>35</sup>

Chǒngjo was the son of Crown Prince Sado 思悼世子, the son of King Yǒngjo, and Lady Hyegyǒng 惠慶宮 洪氏 of the P'ungsan 風散 Hong 洪 clan, Sado's legitimate wife. As the grandson of the king and the son of a legitimate wife, Chǒngjo's own legitimacy ordinarily would have been unquestionable. Unfortunately, the tragedy of Prince Sado's death made the issue much more complicated. Chǒngjo's relationship with his father's memory and his mother's clan are thus complex and contradictory, illustrating the intricate labyrinth of Chosŏn politics in which the public and the private are fused—for no one more so than the king—and the slightest misstep could prove fatal.

While neither Yǒngjo nor Chǒngjo ever faced a plot that came close to overthrowing him—due in no small part to the lack of a rival with a credible claim—both kings struggled with legitimacy. Yǒngjo was the son of a palace servant and ascended the throne after the brief reign of his brother. While the rules for royal sons of concubines were less strict than those for *yangban*—the son of a *yangban* by a concubine was, in many ways, not even considered *yangban* at all—it was still a touchy subject, for the son of a concubine would take the throne only if there were no legitimate sons available. Yǒngjo also had to deal with rumors that he had poisoned his own brother to become king himself. The rebellion he faced early in his reign was quickly put down and he himself was never in serious danger, but the rebellion profoundly affected the way he conducted himself as king.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Chǒngjo. *Chǒngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 630, 1800.5.5.

In 1762, Yǒngjo ordered Sado to enter a rice chest, which was then sealed, and Sado died eight days later. The reasons for this are not clear, with contradictory accounts claiming that Sado was provoked to treasonous conduct by an extremist faction<sup>37</sup> or that Sado's own mental illness meant that he had to be eliminated to secure the dynasty.<sup>38</sup> While it is impossible to make a definitive statement on the matter, the latter account seems better supported by reason and the available historical evidence. First, it is buttressed by a first-hand eyewitness who was not herself directly involved in court intrigue and had no direct connection to any of the factions—Sado's wife, Lady Hyegyǒng.<sup>39</sup> The account also fills in gaps where the official *Annals* records are conspicuously elusive. It is not merely that the record is silent but that it elides and obscures the events, not least because Chǒngjo requested and received Yǒngjo's permission to excise parts of the official record that he (Chǒngjo) deemed injurious to his father's memory.<sup>40</sup> Lady Hyegyǒng's account is, moreover, supported by its damning portrayal of Sado, particularly the final memoir that exposes the symptoms of his madness. It is impossible to know, but it is tempting to speculate that these are exactly the sorts of things that Chǒngjo expunged from the official record. In any case, that Lady Hyegyǒng includes them lends significant credibility to her account, since Sado's madness is no better than—and in fact could be judged *worse* than—his intriguing with an extremist faction. It is hard to see any benefit to Lady Hyegyǒng

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<sup>36</sup> See Haboush. *Confucian Kingship*, 102, 136-142.

<sup>37</sup> Sǒng Nakhun. *Han'guk tangjaengsa*. In *Han'guk munhwasa taegye* vol. 2. 378-380; Yi Sǒng-mu. *Chosǒn sidae tangjaengsa* vol. 2: *T'angp'yǒng kwa sedo chǒngch'i: Sukchong ~ Kojong cho*. Seoul: Tongbang midio. 2000, 188-193.

<sup>38</sup> Haboush. *Confucian Kingship*, Chapter 5.

<sup>39</sup> To the objection that the testimony of women was not valued in Chosǒn, it will be remembered that the sources—including the *Annals*—agree that Yǒngjo executed his own son due to the testimony of Lady Sǒnhui, a woman.

<sup>40</sup> *Yǒngjo sillok* 1776.2.4.

herself, her natal family, or to her son Sunjo that could be gained by manufacturing such an account of madness. Second, as the only surviving son of Yǒngjo, it is difficult to conceive of Sado's intriguing against his father for the throne as a rational political calculation. Unlike the constantly warring sons of Henry II, Sado had no serious rival, nor did he come from a culture emphasizing martial prowess as a quality of kingship. Sado's lamentation that the birth of Chǒngjo meant his father no longer needed him as heir<sup>41</sup> does not strike the ear as in any way the reasonable conclusion of a sane man, for there was in the history of the dynasty—all 350 years of it to that point—not a single instance of a son being passed over in favor of his own son in the succession. Though Haboush believes Sado's claim to be a possibility,<sup>42</sup> Sado, as the sole legitimate adult son of the reigning monarch, could not have been displaced as heir were he of sound mind and body in late Chosŏn without sparking a rebellion, if not a dynastic war, exactly the sort of thing Yǒngjo spent his entire reign trying to avoid. Indeed, Yǒngjo was sure to have Sado killed rather than allowing him to remain in the capital or even to be exiled, for a living Sado would have been a constant threat around whom enemies of the king could rally. With our foreknowledge, we historians know that Yǒngjo lived for another fourteen years after Sado's death, but Yǒngjo himself did not know this, so passing over Sado would mean in all likelihood giving the throne to a child (Yǒngjo was 67 years old when Sado died), making it extremely unlikely either that Yǒngjo would have considered it or that his officials would have accepted it. Finally, Yǒngjo spent virtually the entirety of his reign struggling against calls that he side with one faction or another and

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<sup>41</sup> Lady Hyegyŏng. *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng: The Autobiographical Writings of a Crown Princess of Eighteenth-Century Korea*. Trans. JaHyun Kim Haboush. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1996, 305-306.

<sup>42</sup> Haboush. *Confucian Kingship*, 208-209.



conduct bloody purges against others. That he would chose to do murder upon his own son for involvement with a particular faction beggars the imagination.

Whatever the reason, what is pertinent for purposes of the present work is that, in addition to the horror and grief felt by a parent who made the decision to end the life of his child, Yǒngjo was profoundly disturbed by the possible implications of Sado's execution on the dynasty. Under Chosŏn law, a criminal's family was punished along with him, including his sons, and they all shared the status of a convicted criminal. Considering the moral dimensions of a Confucian kingship, the son of a criminal ascending the throne was unthinkable. Thus, Sado was not officially convicted of any crime, and he was not technically executed. Rather, he was ordered to enter a rice chest, which was then sealed, and eight days later he died. But Yǒngjo still was not convinced, so two years later he had Chǒngjo adopted by Sado's deceased elder brother, known to history as Crown Prince Hyojang 孝章世子.

All of this legalistic jiggery-pokery had one ultimate goal: to avoid any taint on the legitimacy of Chǒngjo's accession. To a large extent, it was successful; as noted, no serious challenge to Chǒngjo's rule ever emerged. That does not mean, however, that Chǒngjo was completely free of legitimacy issues. Indeed, he addressed the matter on the very day of his succession in 1776.

召見大臣于殯殿門外。下綸音曰嗚呼。人思悼世子之子也。大王爲宗統之重。命予嗣孝章世子。嗚呼。前日上章於先大王者。大可見不貳本之予意也。禮雖不可不嚴。情亦不可不伸。饗祀之節。宜從祭以大夫之禮。而不可與太廟同。惠慶宮亦當有京外貢獻之儀。不可與大妃等。其令所司。議于大臣。講定節目以聞。既下此教。怪鬼不逞之徒。藉此而有追崇之論。則先大王遺教在焉。當以當律論。以告先王之靈。

The King met with the high officials outside the gates of the Funereal Palace. The King said, "Alas! I am the son of Crown Prince Sado, but because the Late King took the royal succession seriously, he ordered that I become the

heir of Crown Prince Hyojang, alas! Some time ago there was a memorial sent up to the Late King in which it was pointed out that I cannot have sprung from two different roots. Although the regulations governing rites must be strictly observed, feelings likewise cannot be suppressed. The regulations for this sacrificial offering of food ordain that this should be a ritual for the sacrifice to great men and should not be the same as those to the royal ancestors. Lady Hyegyŏng also properly receives gifts outside the capital but cannot be treated as the Queen Dowager,<sup>43</sup> so I want the high officials to discuss and inform me of the proper procedures. As soon as I hand this down, if any fiendish cliques attempt to use it is a pretext to have a debate over my father's having been given a posthumous title, it was the Late King's wish that I decide according to the law and inform his spirit of the decision.”<sup>44</sup>

Here we see the King express the fundamental contradiction between the roles he was assigned publicly (as ruler) and privately (as son) and his manipulation of views of his private life in the service of his public (political) goals. He could not title his mother Queen Dowager because her husband, his father, had been effectively cut out of the line of succession by the adoption. He could perform a ritual appropriate for a great man for his father, but he could not perform for him a ritual that implied he was part of the ancestral line of Chosŏn kings.

Still, the King paid great attention to honoring his birth parents as part of his moral legitimacy, and much effort went into finding the most laudatory titles that ritual precedent would allow him to bestow upon them. Ten days after his succession, Chŏngjo likewise lamented his inability to title his father as posthumous king, as would have been ritually permitted (indeed, demanded) but for his adoption:

追上思悼世子尊號曰莊獻。封垂恩墓曰永祐園。廟曰景慕宮。仍命尊奉儀節。遵宋濮王故事。封園都監合設於追崇都監。召見議諡諸臣。上曰先朝以思悼賜諡者。聖意有在。今予只欲寓終天之悲慕而已。從古帝王之與聞諡法。予嘗非之。如或過於溢美。則豈予本意。諸臣其知之也。

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<sup>43</sup> Because she was no longer the King's legal mother, Lady Hyegyŏng could not properly accept gifts inside the city gates.

<sup>44</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok*, 1776.3.10.

Crown Prince Sado's title was raised to Changhŏn ["Offering Solemnity"]. The name of his tomb was changed from Bestowed Mercy Royal Tomb to "Garden of Perpetual Blessings", and the name of his shrine became "Veneration Palace". Thereupon [the King] commanded the preparation of the rules for paying respect in accordance with the ancient ways of Pu Wang of the Song and established the [Perpetual Blessing] Garden Directorate as part of the Directorate for Those Who Died Before Becoming King. When discussing the posthumous name, the King said, "When the Late King bestowed the posthumous name 'Sado [Mournful Thoughts]', he had a Sagely intention. Now I only desire to express my lifelong sadness and longing. Since ancient days, kings have wanted to participate in the practice of creating of posthumous names, and I have not yet done this. If perhaps [the name] is excessively beautiful, is that my fundamental intention? The various ministers should know this."<sup>45</sup>

However, he could not bestow these honors upon his father until the day after he had properly honored his adopted father by bestowing upon him the title appropriate for the legal father of a reigning king:

遵英宗遺旨。追崇孝章世子爲眞宗大王。孝純賢嬪爲孝純王后。議定眞宗諡曰溫良睿明哲文孝章。王后諡曰徽貞賢淑孝純。陵曰永陵。殿曰延福。召見議諡諸臣。命以昌慶宮孝純廟舊魂殿。爲延福殿。入廟前奉安。告訃使行兼請追崇上號。追崇都監。合設於國葬都監。

In accordance with the unfulfilled instructions of King Yŏngjo, Crown Prince Hyojang was posthumously made Great King Chinjong and [his wife] Sun, Lady Hyo was made Queen Sun. Chinjong's posthumous name became "Virtuous Bright Wise and Filial" and Queen Sun's posthumous name became "Virtuous Chaste Pure and Filial". The name of their tomb became "Perpetual Tomb" and the name of their shrine became "Spreading Good Fortune". These things were discussed at a royal audience by the various ministers, and the King commanded that the old Soul Altar<sup>46</sup> that was in the Shrine of Filiality and Honesty in Ch'anggyŏng Palace be moved to the Spreading Good Fortune shrine. He also commanded that the Announcing Death Envoy's comings and goings be combined with the raising of the titles. He also commanded the joint establishment of the Directorate for Those Who Died Before Becoming King and a State Funeral Directorate.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.3.20.

<sup>46</sup> This is the shrine at which the legitimate wife of a deceased king mourned his death for the heavy three-year mourning period. Presumably Hyojang's wife did not do this upon his death because he did not reign as king, but installing one of these shrines in the tomb conferred additional kingly honor upon him.

<sup>47</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.3.19.

It is telling that Chǒngjo had his father's tomb administered by the directorate he established to deal with Hyojang as an "uncrowned king", though Sado was legally not such a person. According to Lady Hyegyǒng, when Chǒngjo re-interred Sado's remains in a new tomb, the site he chose for the tomb was originally intended for King Hyojong,<sup>48</sup> who reigned from 1619 to 1659. The King made frequent trips to his father's tomb throughout his reign. As with all royal processions, these were lavish spectacles. Equal spectacle was provided by Chǒngjo's displays of filial affection in front of his officials. While these displays were undoubtedly the result of deep personal feelings, Chǒngjo could scarcely have been unaware of their political meaning as well. For the Chosŏn monarch, there was no distinction between public and private, no moment—save perhaps those in his bedchamber—where he was not observed, recorded, and monitored. So his every gesture, no matter how personally motivated, carried political weight as well,<sup>49</sup> and the King was willing to use this tool in his arsenal to cow his officials. The following displays are not atypical occurrences throughout Chǒngjo's reign:

詣永祐園。行啓園禮。駕至安樂峴。膈氣添劇。駐轎連進湯丸。入齋室。

...

時至上具總服。詣版位。及啓園。上詣甕家內。攀撫莎草。號擗踰節。藥院提調閣臣承旨諸大臣。迭請止哭。上皆不聽。時更漏已深。膈候復劇。哭不能成聲。連有嘔吐之候。大臣以下齊進奏曰臣等不得不犯此死罪。遂扶掖聖躬而起。至小次乘便輿入齋室。少頃氣定還宮。

The King went to the Garden of Perpetual Blessings to perform the rites there. When the royal carriage arrived at the Peaceful Repose Hill, [his] breathing became labored. The palaquins all stopped, and liquid and pill medicines were presented to him. He then went into the Sacrificial Hall.

...

When the time arrived, the King mourned his father and did homage to his father's spirit tablet. Upon reaching the garden, the King entered the *on'ga*<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Lady Hyegyǒng. *Memoirs*, 203.

<sup>49</sup> Park Hyunmo. *Chǒngch'i ka Chǒngjo*, 23-25; Yi Tae-Jin. "King Chǒngjo: Confucianism, Enlightenment, and Absolute Rule." *Korea Journal* vol. 40, no. 4. Winter 2000, 172.

and, grabbing and pulling at the grass covering the tomb, he wailed and beat his breast. Those in charge of the palace clinic, the officials of the Royal Library, the Royal Secretaries, and the various high officials repeatedly requested that he stop, but the King did not listen to any of them. By that point, much time had passed, and the King's breathing symptoms had returned more severely, such that even his crying made no sound, as if something were caught in his throat. Those ranked below the high officials came forward with a memorial: "We your subjects must take this step which is such that it might be punished with death." Following this, they took the royal person by the arms and helped him to stand. From the rest lodge, he rode in the palanquin and entered the Sacrificial Hall. After a moment, his breathing became settled and he returned to the palace.<sup>51</sup>

展拜永祐園。判中樞府事徐命善等。齊進轎前奏曰稍待十數日。聖候復常後動駕。則道理也事面也。實合允當矣。上曰此時豈易得乎。欲爲一時洩哀。卿等退去。左議政李在協攀轎奏曰夫薛廣德。一御史也。能回主聽。臣等雖甚無狀。其官則保護也大臣也。何殿下固拒之至是也。上曰爲卿等所困。膈氣復欲衝上。命善曰哭泣不過小節。今番則除之似好。上曰受服而不哭。於禮不可。更勿煩請。上入齋室。具總服。詣甕家內。哭盡哀不止。膈氣復添。命善等曰雖犯死罪。敢效牽裾之義矣。遂進伏扶護。連請止哭。上不聽。神氣漸益昏綴。又有嘔逆之候。命善等進前扶掖而起。仍還齋室。

The King went to the Garden of Perpetual Blessings to perform the rites there. Brevet Second Deputy Commander Sŏ Myŏng-sŏn and others together approached the front of the palanquin and informed the King, "Should we not wait a few weeks until the royal health has returned? Then we can embark on the royal procession. It is truly appropriate to do so in terms of both morality and external appearances." The King said, "Will it truly be that simple this time? I desire to pour out my heart all at once. Your Lordships will retire." Councilor of the Left Yi Chae-hyŏp climbed onto the carriage and informed the King, "Xue Guangde in the [Western] Han Dynasty<sup>52</sup> was a censor<sup>53</sup> who was able to have the ear of the ruler. Although we your subjects are extremely undutiful, those whose duties are to watch out for you are the high officials. How can Your Majesty solidly oppose us to this extent?" The King said, "Being harassed by Your Lordships is going to cause my breathing trouble to flare up again." Sŏ Myŏng-sŏn said, "Grief is only a minor point of etiquette. Now this time it would be good to eliminate this [behavior]." The King said, "Wearing funeral garments and then not weeping is certainly not according to

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<sup>50</sup> A temporary hut for an outdoor funeral to protect against rain and sunlight.

<sup>51</sup> *Chŏngjo* 1789.8.12.

<sup>52</sup> Xue Guangde was respected for his frank memorials.

<sup>53</sup> Yi Chae-hŏp uses the term that normally refers to secret inspectors, but here it clearly refers to Xue Guangde's submission of memorials highly critical of the government as a censor.

the rites. Do not repeat this request.” The King entered the Sacrificial Hall, donned *sibok*,<sup>54</sup> went into the *ong’ga*, and wailed and poured out his heart without ceasing, such that his breathing again became labored. Sŏ Myŏng-sŏn and others said, “Although it is a transgression deserving of death, we dare to follow righteousness and grab you by your raiment and pull you away.” Following this, they entered, kowtowed, and assisted the King, repeatedly begging him not to cry. The King did not listen. He gradually became more and more confused and also choked and gagged. Sŏ Myŏng-sŏn and others entered first and helped him to his feet, and thereupon they returned together to the Sacrificial Hall.<sup>55</sup>

行酌獻禮于景慕宮。時上掩抑悲泣。僅以行禮。還御齋殿。召見時原任大臣閣臣。領議政洪樂性等奏曰慶禮當前。群情蹈忤。願聖上以此慰心。上曰予豈不知此。而心懷自不抑制耳。

The King left for the Palace of Veneration<sup>56</sup> to perform the rites there. At that time, the King did not conceal his tears and was hardly able to do the rite. When he returned to the Sacrificial Hall, he summoned the current and former high officials and officials of the Royal Library. Chief State Councilor Hong Nak-sŏng and others said, “Just before the congratulatory rite, everyone should be happy. We hope that our Sagely Highness will be consoled in his heart.” The King said, “How could I be unaware of this? Yet I cannot restrain what is in my heart.”<sup>57</sup>

領議政洪樂性等率百官，庭達于惠慶宮曰

...

聖懷益不自抑。玉體投地。淚徹穹壤。手撮莎土。至損爪甲。

Chief State Councilor Hong Nak-sŏng and others at the head of the hundred officials informed Lady Hyegyŏng [of what happened during the royal procession to and from Sado’s tomb],<sup>58</sup> “The feelings in the Sagely [i.e., the King’s] bosom could not restrain themselves, and the royal person was thrown to the ground and the tears flowed unceasingly. He dug up handfuls of earth until his fingernails were torn.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Mourning garments worn for only three months.

<sup>55</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1789.8.20.

<sup>56</sup> The palace constructed at Sado’s tomb.

<sup>57</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1794.1.1.

<sup>58</sup> This is the day of Chŏngjo’s return from the procession to Sado’s tomb, and the high officials are informing Lady Hyegyŏng of his condition.

<sup>59</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1794.1.20.

Chǒngjo was fortunate enough to ascend the throne as an adult, with the full support of his predecessor and with no serious contender. However, as is often the case with the accession of a new monarch, the King and his supporters immediately moved to secure the throne. The death of Sado had profound repercussions for Chǒngjo's reign. Yǒngjo, the king who spent his entire fifty-year reign trying to contain factionalism, by this act created two new factions: the Intransigents 僻派 (*pyŏkp'a*), who supported Yǒngjo's decision to end his son's life and initially clustered around Kim Kwi-ju 金龜柱 and his Kyǒngju Kim clan, and the Expedients 時派 (*sip'a*), defenders of Sado who were generally regarded as supportive of Chǒngjo and initially rallied around Chǒngjo's maternal grandfather Hong Pong-han 洪鳳漢. Though these new factions cut across existing factional lines, the Intransigents were strongest in the Patriarchs faction while the Expedients were concentrated in the Disciples and Southerner factions. There was presumably great fear among the Intransigents that the son of Sado would, upon his accession to the throne, wreak vengeance upon those who advocated his father's execution. Chǒngjo, however, astutely refused to follow the example of King Yǒnsan and did not set off a round of bloody violence to avenge the death of his parent. Rather, he emulated Yǒngjo's refusal to purge the Disciples who had opposed Yǒngjo's own succession. Chǒngjo resolved instead to continue his grandfather's Policy of Impartiality of minimal bloodshed and factional violence, though as we will see, his conception of that policy was in reality distinct from Yǒngjo's. This is not to say some officials did not attempt to use vengeance as a tool to manipulate him.<sup>60</sup> But Chǒngjo would not be moved, for his ultimate goal was to carve out a space for independent action of the throne, and he was to make it clear again and again that he would be beholden to no one: not

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<sup>60</sup> Yi Han-wu, *Chǒngjo: Chosŏn ŭi hon i chida*, 226-227.

to the Expedients faction, not to his mother's clan, not even to graduates of his *ch'ogyŏ* *munsin* system or to his key supporters like Ch'ae Che-gong and Hong Kuk-yŏng.

So despite his understandable bitterness with the Intransigents, he did not move against them *en masse*, nor did he sweep the Expedients into power. Indeed, relatively few men suffered immediately. People like Kim Sang-no 金尙魯, Hong Kye-hŭi 洪啓禧, and Mun Sŏng-guk 文聖國 were posthumously stripped of office for their role in the Sado affair, and their families were banished or enslaved or both.<sup>61</sup> Yet the sons were not killed, and the King refused demands that other men be punished simply for being connected to Kim or Hong.<sup>62</sup> He also initially rejected calls to execute Mun Sŏng-guk's aunt, Lady Mun 淑儀文氏, presumably due to her position as Yŏngjo's consort.<sup>63</sup>

In the end, King Chŏngjo is a study in contrasts. He was torn between his filial duty toward his natural father and his public responsibility to his predecessor on the throne, between loyalty to his birth father and respect for his adopted father. He was undoubtedly genuinely devastated by Sado's death and needed to express this, but he was not above using these very public displays of grief for political purposes. He seems to have genuinely believed that strengthening his own position was for the good of the state and the people of Chosŏn. He had to construct a base of support without *looking like* he was building a base of support, lest he be open to the charge of arbitrary rule through favorites rather than wise governance in consultation with virtuous men. And he had to do all of this while constantly being monitored by his officials, unable to take them privately aside to discuss what he

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<sup>61</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.3.30, 1777.8.23.

<sup>62</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.3.30, 1776.4.2, 1777.8.23. Hong Kye-hŭi's grandson Hong Sang-bŏm and some of his relatives were killed after they were implicated in a plot to assassinate Chŏngjo, not for the Sado affair.

<sup>63</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.4.2.



wanted. Instead, he was forced to communicate his intentions by allusion and innuendo and had to read his officials to determine not only whether or not they understood his intentions but how they felt about them as well. He had to build a base of support while ensuring that he was not dependent on that base, and so he reached out even to the very people who opposed his project to enlist their aid by hook or by crook. Indeed, in a letter to Sim Hwan-ji in the 10<sup>th</sup> month of 1797, Chǒngjo asked Sim if he successfully communicated his disagreement with his close associate Ch'ae Che-gong, since his reply appeared on the surface to be sympathetic:

承慰。明日講筵，欲爲入來耶。左相筭批，見之耶。雖是優批，本事不以爲是，覽者可領會耶。還呵也。

I was very happy to receive your letter. Will you come to the lecture hall tomorrow? Have you seen my reply to the Councilor of the Left [Ch'ae Che-gong]'s memorial? Although my response was kind, basically I do not think Ch'ae was correct. Could those who saw it understand my meaning? It makes me laugh.<sup>64</sup>

## A BRIEF NOTE ON PRIMARY SOURCES

The primary source for the present work is the *Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty* 朝鮮王朝實錄 (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok*), the official record compiled for each reign after the death of the king. Though it is not immune to factional bias, it is generally accepted as a reliable account. In order to facilitate the use of present and future printings and electronic versions of the *Annals*, I follow Edward Wagner in citing it by date rather than page number, in the format “year.month.date”. Also of great help are the *Complete Works of Chǒngjo* 弘齋全書 (*Hongjae chŏnsŏ*) and a collection of 297 private letters written by Chǒngjo

<sup>64</sup> Chǒngjo. *Chǒngjo ŏch'ap'ch'ŏl* 224, 1797.10.20. The reply he refers to can be found in the *Annals* entry for that day.

himself and sent to a powerful Intransigent official, Sim Hwan-ji, between 1797 and 1800, a printed collection of which is available under the title *Chǒngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 正祖御札帖. These letters modify or even contradict the official record as contained in the *Annals*. This is not because the *Annals* did not accurately record the actual events but because much official business was conducted outside of official channels, meaning that the official record does not contain much of the politicking going on behind the scenes. The letters give some indication of how extensive such behind-the-scenes politicking was. Since private meetings between the king and one or more ministers (that is, without the presence of historians to record the conversation) were forbidden by custom, royal politics played out in an arena of subtle communication, with the officials trying to read the King's unstated, elliptically-hinted-at intentions and the king trying to suggest what he wanted done while maintaining plausible deniability. These private letters, which probably were also customarily frowned upon, were undoubtedly a vital channel of communication outside of the historians' scrutiny. They will be cited both by the sequential numbering system used in the Korean translation listed in the bibliography of the present work and by the date of the letter, the latter to facilitate comparison to the *Annals*.

Along with these three, the present work also makes use of the *Records of the Royal Secretariat* 承政院日記 (*Sǔngjǒng'wŏn ilgi*), the *Complete Works of Tasan* 與猶堂全書 (*Yōyudang chōnsō*), and the *Memoirs of Lady Hyegyong* 閑中錄 (*Hanjungnok*). The last is an invaluable eyewitness account of 18<sup>th</sup> century court life not from the perspective of a male Confucian scholar-official, despite its evident bias toward its author's natal family. Taken together, these sources provide a relatively comprehensive picture of Chosŏn political culture during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Educated men during Chosŏn made frequent reference to the Confucian canon. For texts that have been translated into English, for consistency's sake I follow a single version from those that are available. Thus, all translations from the Five Classics are those of James Legge, while those from the *Analects* of Confucius are those of Edward Slingerland. For texts that have not been translated, the included translation is my own. To avoid excessive footnotes, I list only the title and chapter of the work being referenced in the notes.

### A BRIEF NOTE ON NAMES AND TITLES

For official titles, I have generally followed the renderings of Edward Wagner's *The Literati Purges* and James Palais's *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*. On those occasions I was unable to locate a title or (rarely) disagreed with their rendering, I next turned to Charles O. Hucker's *Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*. Finally, if all else failed, I turned to my own rendering. For royal family members, I refer to individuals using the title by which they are most commonly known in English, to avoid the confusion of variously identifying the same person by different names. Hence, I refer to Chŏngjo by that name even when he was crown prince, and I refer to his father as Sado rather than his later titles Changhŏn 莊獻 or King Changjo 莊祖. To avoid endless repetition of the name "Chŏngjo", I also refer to him as "the King" capitalized, as distinct from "the king" lowercase, which can refer to any king or to the king in the abstract. Exceptions are made where there is significance to the different titles. For example, Princess Hwawŏn was stripped of her title and thenceforth known as Madame Chŏng. At the risk of confusion, I retain the different titles to reflect her loss of status. Similarly, in translated passages, I chose as much as possible to hold to Chosŏn convention, in which the king's name is not used and

he is simply called “the King”, “His Majesty”, “His Sageliness”, and other such honorifics. Thus such terms in translated passages always refers to the reigning monarch, while “the Late King” 先王 (*sŏnwang*) refers to his immediate predecessor, normally Yŏngjo. For *yangban* I use their birth names, unless they are commonly referred to in English by their pen names, such as Tasan or Yulgok.

## Chapter 2: The Politics of Confucianism

In addition to enhancing royal power through structural innovation, Chǒngjo enlisted his extensive Confucian education to propagate a royalist political philosophy to combat the minister-centered thought of the aristocracy. This chapter examines the discourse by which Chǒngjo attempted to redefine the sage-king concept away from the standard ideal in Korean Neo-Confucianism of a passive, even aloof king who need only determine who the virtuous men were and then hand the reins of government over to them. Instead, Chǒngjo sought to formulate the sage-king as an active ruler who instructed his ministers rather than received instruction from them, was directly involved in the administration of the state, and exercised discretion when and how he, in his Sagely wisdom, deemed fit. For Chǒngjo, that the king was above factions was due to his position at the center of political world, the source from which legitimate power flowed, not a result of his being uninvolved in the dangerous game of politics.

Chapter 1 briefly discussed how Neo-Confucianism, as an instrument of royal power, was a two-edged sword, with contradictory tendencies contributing to the balance of royal/bureaucratic and aristocratic forces in Chosŏn. For the monarch, Neo-Confucianism is powerful because it is predicated on there being a king who necessarily rules both *de jure* and *de facto*. The Confucian virtue loyalty (*ch'ung*) is paramount, with the king retaining the sole right to appoint and dismiss officials. For the *yangban*, the right to remonstrate and the steep requirements for service in the bureaucracy—rigorous education and illustrious family background—restricted the ruler's ability to curtail *yangban* privilege. As well, the *yangban* could justify their grossly unequal wealth and high status by portraying them as rewards for

virtuous men like themselves. Finally, the theoretical subservience of the Korean king to the Son of Heaven—while rarely of practical relevance, as the Chinese emperor did not intervene in Chosŏn's domestic affairs—did weaken the ideological basis for absolute monarchy.

Also noted in Chapter 1 was the widespread belief that Neo-Confucianism after the early Chosŏn period was a metaphysical preoccupation with little relationship to the execution of policy. This was the basis of the modern scholarly dichotomy that divided mainstream Neo-Confucianism, rigidly conservative and concerned with esoteric matters of ritual and philosophical navel-gazing, from the “School of Practical Learning” (*Sirhak*), a radical new school of thought that sought concrete solutions to real problems. Yet more recent scholarship has questioned the usefulness of this distinction, pointing out both the continuity of *Sirhak* scholarship with earlier strands of practical-oriented Confucianism<sup>65</sup> and the connection between seemingly esoteric debates and practical matters.<sup>66</sup> Thus, Neo-Confucianism has become prominent in the study of Chosŏn politics, with scholars noting that ideology and political reality intertwined to form a complex relationship. Still, even if *Sirhak* was not distinct from Neo-Confucianism or even a distinct school within it, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was a recognition that practical administration had been neglected in favor of metaphysics. And while the men commonly associated with *Sirhak* reacted against this, they by no means became dominant, and a divide persisted, a divide that Chŏngjo himself lamented. His view of “learning” as embodied in the classics and “governing” as

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<sup>65</sup> Mark Setton. *Chŏng Yagyong: Korea's Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 13-15.

<sup>66</sup> This is a running theme through the chapters of *Culture and State in Late Chosŏn Korea*, particularly those of Baker, Deuchler, and Haboush. See also Jung Ok-ja. “New Approaches to the History of Ideas in the Late Joseon Period.” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* vol. 5. 1992, 152-170; Keum Jang-tae. *Confucianism and Korean Thoughts*. Seoul: Jimoondang, 2000; Lee Kyungku. “The Horak Debate from the Reign of King Sukjong to King Sunjo.” *Korea Journal*. Vol. 51, no. 1. Spring 2011, 14-41; Christopher Lovins. “The King's Reason: Yi Sŏng-gye and the Centralization of Power in Early Chosŏn.” *Korea Review of International Studies*. Vol. 9, no. 1. 2006, 51-60.

embodied in the dynastic histories can be compared to the division between emphasizing practical matters and emphasizing more theoretical issues. In a discussion with Royal Library officials, he expresses his dismay at the failure of some to combine both of these:

三代以上。經卽史。史卽經。說命爲論學之書而治在其中。洪範爲制治之具而學在其中。未始有教學之篇。另行於法令之外。降及秦漢。道問學者。指法書爲末務。志經濟者。指儒家爲迂闊。或有體而無用。或循末而舍本。於是乎經史始分。而治道之汙隆。亦決於此。

Before the end of the Three Dynasties, the Classics were the Histories and the Histories the Classics. The “Charge to Yue” chapter of the *Book of Documents*, even while discussing scholarship, places government at the center. The Great Plan is a tool for governing, yet it places learning at the center. None of these texts discussed teaching and learning apart from promulgating laws and statutes. Descending to the Qin and Han Dynasties, those who discussed the Way placed their duty to read law books last, while those who focused on statecraft looked at Confucianism as overly abstract. Some of them were able to get the basics right but were unable to apply them, and others pursued the final results without even mastering the basics. This is the origin of the division between the Histories and the Classics. The rise and fall of the proper Way of governance is also decided in this.<sup>67</sup>

The importance placed on education in Chosŏn, coupled with the necessity of ruling in line with the ancient Chinese classics—or perhaps merely appearing to do so—ensured that Chŏngjo took education seriously, and rather than bringing his rule into conformity with the rule of the Chinese antiquity, he sought to re-shape interpretation of the classics to bring views of ancient Chinese governance into conformity with his own conception of kingship.

## EDUCATION AND THE CLASSICS

As part of his effort to exalt his own position, Chŏngjo sought to place the king not only at the political apex but also at the ideological apex by emphasizing the king-as-teacher,

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<sup>67</sup> Chŏngjo. *Hongjae chŏnsŏ* 165. “Ildŭngnok” 5, “Munhak” 5. The *Ildŭngnok* 日得錄 is a record of the discussions the King held with officials of the Royal Library from 1781 to 1787. Contained in Chŏngjo’s *Complete Works*, they are undated and grouped by subject, so it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when each discussion occurred. Still, their six-year representation of Chŏngjo’s views agree well with other sources.

thereby unifying practical administration with learning once again. He balked at the notion of being instructed by his officials in the inferior position of student, for it was the king who was the instructor in his conception of kingship. Thus, he sought to portray himself as a scholar-king who ruled and taught his ministers, whom he deemed subordinate and receptive. Chǒngjo also looked for ways to counteract the minister-centered thought of mainstream Korean Neo-Confucianism, which emphasized the self-cultivation aspects of the Confucian canon to the neglect of the aspects that dealt with governance, namely that loyal ministers were to dutifully carry out the orders of their ruler. Chǒngjo's keen mind coupled with the thorough education he received as a prince in the line of succession from early childhood ensured that he was well-equipped to do intellectual battle with his officials.

### Scholar-king

予雖否德。君師之責。在予一人。

Although I am not virtuous, the responsibility of ruler-teacher is held by myself alone.<sup>68</sup>

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, one of the constraints on the Chosŏn king was the expectation that he would attend the Royal Lectures. These were meetings with elderly scholars who would educate the ruler in the ways of Confucianism so that he could perfect his virtue and thereby bring order to the state. This meant that the king was in the subordinate position, the student, and that his own officials were, in a sense, placed above him. It is thus no surprise that the two strongest kings of the dynasty, T'aejong and Sejo, hardly bothered to hold these lectures, while Yŏnsan eliminated them entirely along with

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<sup>68</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1797.6.11.



other perceived trappings of bureaucratic power.<sup>69</sup> These were not options for kings by late Chosŏn, but Yŏngjo was able to turn the tables on his officials and become the effective teacher during the lectures, thereby reinforcing his own power, though it took him decades of effort to do so.<sup>70</sup>

Chŏngjo continued to argue that the king was the teacher, not the student, to avoid ever being in a subordinate position to his own ministers. In a discussion with Royal Library officials, he represents himself as instructor:

三代以前。師道在上。故治隆俗美。而天下歸仁。三代以後。師道在下。故空言無補。治日常少。苟有聖人者作。身任君師。道德齊禮。今之天下。卽三代之天下。日新於變之化。卽不過轉移間事耳。予雖否德。乃所願則竊以爲當仁不讓於師。

Before the end of the Three Dynasties [of China: Xia, Shang, and Zhou], the Way of the teacher lay with the ruler, and therefore rulership was at its peak, customs were beautiful, and All-under-Heaven was given over to benevolence. After the Three Dynasties ended, the Way of the teacher was in decline, and therefore there was a lot of worthless, empty talk and day by day we saw less and less good governance. If a Sage arose, he could assume the position of scholar-king, lead the people to virtue, and bring order to the rites. If All-under-Heaven today were suddenly to become like All-under-Heaven during the Three Dynasties, the changes we would see on a daily basis would mean no more than a slight change in the way things are handled. Although I lack virtue, this is what I desire, and I think I do not lag behind teachers in taking benevolence seriously.<sup>71</sup>

庠序學校之政。予實有愧。而自念艱大之投。亦豈可過自菲薄。不以君師之責自居乎。

As for the administration of schools and academies, I am truly ashamed, but let us not overreact. How can I underestimate myself and say that I am not qualified to assume the responsibility of being scholar-king?<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Yŏnsan'gun ilgi 1505.1.4; 1505.1.10; Sohn. *Social History*, 43. Edward Wagner. *The Literati Purges: Political Conflict in Early Yi Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974, 16.

<sup>70</sup> JaHyun Kim Haboush. "Confucian Rhetoric and Ritual as Techniques of Political Dominance: Yŏngjo's Use of the Royal Lecture." *The Journal of Korean Studies* vol. 5 1984, 39-62.

<sup>71</sup> Chŏngjo. *Hongjae chŏnsŏ*. "Ildŭngnok", "Hun'ŏ" 4.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

Chǒngjo claimed that he was sage-king who knew the right thing to do and that no one had anything to teach him. In reply to Yi Pyǒng-mo's proffering of his fellow Patriarch Cho Chin-kwan, then serving as Minister of Taxation, as an example of a man without principle, the King said:

三代以上。聰明睿智之聖。作之君作之師。三代以下。則師道在下。未聞有能盡君師之責者。當仁不讓於師。聖人有訓。於今之世。予安得不以師道自任乎。

Before the end of the Three Dynasties, Sages of brilliance and wisdom were made lords and teachers. After the Three Dynasties ended, the Way of teachers declined. I have never heard of a man who was able to exhaust his responsibility of being lord and teacher. [Confucius said,] 'When it comes to being Good, defer to no one, not even your teacher.'<sup>73</sup> That is what the Sage tells us. In the world of today, how can I not bear the responsibility of modeling myself on the way of teachers?<sup>74</sup>

In Chapter 4, we will see that Chǒngjo did not simply talk the talk of a scholar-king but walked the walk. Early in his reign he suspended the Royal Lectures, in which he was the student, and instituted the *ch'ogyē munsin* system, in which the learner became the master.

### **Recovering the Classics: Countering Zhu Xi's Minister-Centered Thought**

Another front in the King's struggle with the aristocracy was the Song reorientation of interpretations of the classics. What had been viewed primarily as political advice for the ruler became self-cultivation advice for the aspiring Neo-Confucian gentleman. Chǒngjo sought to reverse this trend and return to earlier ruling-based interpretations as part of his argument for a larger role for the king, since any such argument would have to be grounded in the classics if it were to gain any traction. As he did with his predecessor's policies, Chǒngjo did this by subtly redefining existing concepts in the name of recovering their "true" meaning, which had been lost or misunderstood. In this case, he argued that, in altering the

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<sup>73</sup> *Analects* 15.36.

<sup>74</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok*. 1798.7.20.

accepted interpretation, he was only restoring it to its state during the Three Dynasties. In so doing, he and his supporters adopted some techniques recognizable from the School of Evidential Learning,<sup>75</sup> though he did not openly admit this. In fact, if one relied solely on explicit references to the School of Evidential Learning/Han Learning in Chǒngjo's official writing, one would conclude that he did not care for it. Observe the following from his discussions with officials of the Royal Library:

今人之最稱博雅者。考据辨證之學強半。就古人已成之語。鈔謄一過。作為新見。

...

大抵近來所謂名儒皆此類。為學者不可不擇術也。

Of those people are often called elegant and learned these days, more than half of them are studying the Schools of Evidential Learning and Demonstrative Learning. They say as if it were new what men of old have already said.

...

Generally these days so-called famous scholars are in this category. Those who engage in scholarly work must not fail to choose their scholarly pursuits carefully.<sup>76</sup>

近聞燕中學士大夫。一切學問。以詩律與考證。為無上真儒。此皆捷於成就。便於誣耀。而其才器分限。亦有所不能過者。或見其全集之流布東方者。譬如烟雲之過眼。百鳥之感耳。非不欣然接之。其於去而不復念。

These days I hear that among the scholars and great men of Beijing, poetic rhythm and Evidential Learning are regarded as the highest pursuits worth studying for true scholars. These two things can be done quickly, and it is easy to fool people with the dazzle of apparent scholarship. Yet, there are those whose ability and usefulness cannot be surpassed. On occasion, I read various collected works of individual authors that circulate in the Eastern Lands [Chosŏn], but they are like clouds and smoke passing before the eye or the feelings one gets when seeing a flock of birds. It is not that I do not joyfully receive them, but that once I have finished, I do not think of them again.<sup>77</sup>

目今文體之日卑。至於莫可收拾者。即考訂之學。有以啓之。出自家杼軸。能列之作者樊籬。則自度其不能。故於是乎尋摘古人所著中地理人名世代

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<sup>75</sup> Jung Jae-hoon. "Meeting the World through Eighteenth-century *Yŏnhaeng*". *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* vol. 23, no. 1. 2010, 67.

<sup>76</sup> Chǒngjo. *Hongjae chŏnsŏ* 162. "Ildŭngnok" 2, "Munhak" 2.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

譜系之或有差誤者。旁引曲援。敷衍爲說。全以滿卷充編。爲究竟法。若是而能爲文章者。固幾希矣。用功深者。收名也遠。初不用功而欲收身後之名者多矣。其鄙悖可笑。

These days literary style is becoming base day by day, until it reaches the point that there is no one who can make sense of it. This all started with the School of Evidential Learning. Because they work within the confines of assumptions of their own particular school, they are able to write a lot within a very narrow range, but it is difficult for others to figure out what they are saying. They fill up entire books with explanations of how they found evidence of all manner of mistakes among the writers of old in terms of geography, names, generation, and lineage. Yet few are those who can write this way well. Those who put in a lot of effort and delve deeply into those old texts can gain a reputation that lasts far into the future. But those who from the beginning exert little effort and only desire to earn a long-lasting reputation are many. Their lowly “scholarship” is so absurd and insular that it makes me laugh.<sup>78</sup>

Yet the King was not above saying one thing while doing another, and his actions throughout his reign certainly show affinity to Evidential Learning, even if he publicly denied this (though the last quotation does not actually condemn “finding evidence of mistakes among the writers of old” but rather points out that most who attempt to do so are unsuccessful). As part of his effort to redefine Confucianism into a more pro-royal mode of thought, Chǒngjo encouraged the study of the Five Classics in an attempt to escape the scholar-official-centered view of the Four Books as understood through Zhu Xi’s commentaries (and later scholars’ commentaries on Zhu Xi’s commentaries), calling the Five Classics the “root of writing” (using the character that also refers to “culture/civilization”, *mun* 文) and criticizing the late Ming period for neglecting them.<sup>79</sup>

Of the Five Classics, Chǒngjo was particularly fond of the *Book of Documents* and in particular the section known as the Great Plan 洪範 (*hongbǒm*), Kija’s 箕子 instructions in nine articles for how to run a state. Given the Chosŏn belief that Kija left China to found the

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<sup>78</sup> Chǒngjo. *Hongjae chŏnsŏ* 162. “Ildŭngnok” 3, Munhak 3.

<sup>79</sup> Chǒngjo. *Hongjae chŏnsŏ* 161, “Ildŭngnok” 1, “Munhak” 1.

earliest Korean kingdom, the Korean elite took great interest in the “Great Plan” purportedly written by him, and King Chǒngjo was no exception. He often required that answers to “policy questions” 策問 (*ch’aengmun*) be grounded in the Imperial Pivot portion of the Great Plan.<sup>80</sup> When he ordered the compilation of *One Hundred Chapters from the Five Classics* 五經百篇 (*Ogyǒng paekp’yǒn*) to increase scholars’ knowledge of the Five Classics as against Zhu Xi’s Four Books, the Great Plan was one of the included chapters.<sup>81</sup> He lamented that the Five Classics, when they were studied at all, were merely memorized rather than understood and put into practice in officials’ lives, and so he made *One Hundred Chapters* required reading for all scholars in the Royal Library.<sup>82</sup> (See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the Royal Library and its place in Chǒngjo’s reform effort.) Such compilations sought to restore the text of each classic to its original, pre-Han state,<sup>83</sup> and the king encouraged both direct readings of the text without reliance on commentaries<sup>84</sup> and the use of older interpretations than Zhu Xi-approved Song-era commentaries.<sup>85</sup> These older interpretations were usually centered on the ruler and were more practically than metaphysically-oriented, and therefore were more supportive of Chǒngjo’s own conception of the sage-king.

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<sup>80</sup> Park Hyunmo. *Chǒngch’i ka Chǒngjo*, 99. Park provides one such question as an example, recorded on the thirteenth day of the tenth month of Chǒngjo’s year of accession (1776): 以洪範皇極內篇。策試趙憲喆。 (“Cho Hǒn-ch’öl is to write using the Imperial Pivot section of the Great Plan”).

<sup>81</sup> Kim Moon-sik. *Chǒngjo ūi kyǒnghak kwa chujahak*, 120 (Table 7).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>83</sup> Kim Moon-sik. *Chǒngjo ūi chewanghak*. Kyǒnggi-do P’aju: T’aehaksa. 2007, 254.

<sup>84</sup> Kim Moon-sik. *Chǒngjo ūi kyǒnghak kwa chujahak*, 18-20; *Chǒngjo ūi chewanghak*, 252.

<sup>85</sup> Paek Min-jǒng, “Chǒngjo ūi sadaebu insik kwa chǒngch’i ch’ǒrhakchǒk ipjang yǒngu”. *Hanguk sirhak yǒngu* vol. 20, no. 0. Hanguk sirhakhoe. 2010, 399-474.

The King appreciated those officials willing to depart from Zhu Xi's interpretations, including men who made use of Evidential Learning techniques. One official who was frequently in Chǒngjo's favor was Tasan, a man not shy about openly disagreeing with Zhu Xi. In his *Supplemented Lectures on the Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸講義補 (*Chungyong kang'ũibo*), he writes, "Zhu Xi's doctrine of human nature 性 [*sǒng*] and the Way consistently conflates human beings with animals. Therefore, much of what he says on this subject is an obstruction that is difficult to fathom [朱子於性道之說。每兼言人物。故其窒礙難通。多此類也。]." Tasan then discusses how Zhu Xi erred in claiming that all one needs to do to cultivate the self is act naturally, according to human nature:

由是觀之。所謂率性。不過其自然。恐與古聖人克己復禮之學。不相符合。聞之似覺滉洋。學之無可依據。

From this we can see that what [Zhu Xi] means by "following one's nature" is nothing more than acting naturally. I fear this is not in harmony with the practice of the sages of old, which was "to restrain oneself and return to the rites."<sup>86</sup> It sounds, rather, like the mad teachings of Daoists like Zhuangzi, which are totally unreliable.

Tasan also argued against some aspects of Zhu Xi's rearrangement of the text of the *Doctrine of the Mean* and expressed doubt about the authenticity of the *Household Teachings of Confucius* 孔子家語 (*Kongzi jiayu*) in two of his responses to Chǒngjo's policy questions.<sup>87</sup> All of this is consistent with Evidential Learning, which reached back to older commentaries to understand texts, sought to correct textual errors, and challenged the authority of more recent established texts, commentaries, and authoritative interpreters,<sup>88</sup> and the King frequently praised Tasan's scholarship and his policy question responses.

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<sup>86</sup> *Analects*, 12:1.

<sup>87</sup> Tasan. *Yǒyudang chǒnsǒ*. "Munjib". "Taeche'aek", "Chungyongch'aek".

<sup>88</sup> William T Rowe. *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2009, 86-88.

Chǒngjo, from his position as scholar-king, strove to emphasize both the understanding of older classics and older interpretations of the classics in order to bolster his argument that the king was the center of politics and that loyalty to the king (*ch'ung*) was the cardinal virtue. While openly he never embraced Evidential Learning nor rejected Zhu Xi, a close examination of his words and actions reveal that, at least when it came to a strengthened kingship, he was willing to do both to some extent.

### DISCRETION 權

The right way is not unalterably fixed, rather it changes with circumstances and time.<sup>89</sup>

A serious constraint on the Chosŏn kings was the example set by their own predecessors. The legitimacy of the Yi family by the late Chosŏn period rested on the moral character of the dynastic line. There was thus a great reluctance on the part of the Yi monarchs to overturn a predecessor's policy because it implied an imperfection in one's own ancestor. The Confucian emphasis on a past golden age led to the widespread belief that the system of that age had only to be reproduced in the present, and then no further change need be made. Even the most radical reformers often argued for the adoption of the land distribution system that supposedly prevailed in the early Zhou Dynasty, for example. Han Feizi's criticism that Confucians did not adjust to contemporary circumstances was not entirely unfounded.

Yet conditions did change, and Korean Neo-Confucian reformers had recognized that the system of the Zhou could not be transplanted completely into their Eastern Kingdom,

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<sup>89</sup> Lady Hyegyŏng quotes Chǒngjo as making this remark. *Memoirs*, 205.

since the Korean peninsula was not the Yellow River basin. Likewise, some alteration of past decisions had to be accepted in order for the political system to continue to function at all. The monarch had a certain freedom of action to make adjustments in accordance with changing circumstances, particularly in times of crisis. This was the king's discretion 權 (*kwŏn*, literally “weighing”), which had roots going back at least to *Mencius*. When asked what the gentleman should do if his sister-in-law is drowning, Mencius replied, “Men and women’s not allowing their hands to touch in giving and receiving is proper etiquette. Using your hand to rescue your sister-in-law is discretion. [男女授受不親禮也。嫂溺援之以手者權也。]”<sup>90</sup>

What King Chŏngjo sought to do was expand the throne’s freedom of action. As will be shown in the case of the Policy of Impartiality in Chapter 3, one of the ways he did this was by subtly altering a predecessor’s policy while claiming to uphold it. Chŏng Ch’ang-sun, a Disciple appointed as Royal Secretary immediately upon Chŏngjo’s accession, defended the King’s use of discretion by claiming that it was in keeping with Yŏngjo’s policies:

先大王深軫矯救之道。設爲蕩平之目。息爭端祛偏黨昔之傾軋者。自至和同。前之矯激者。變爲雍容。導一世於會極歸極之域。囿群生於無偏無黨之化。而古聖王建中之治。罔俾專美。此蓋出於一時權宜之政。而若論其導率之效。焉可誣哉。

The Way of the Late King that he thought deeply about was established as [the Policy of] Impartiality. Its purpose was to end disputes and to eliminate factions. Men in those days who jockeyed for power would come to agreements, and those back then who were firm and unwavering would change to a more amenable position. The Late King led the whole world to the place of understanding the [Imperial] Pivot and gathering around the Pivot; he focused on eliminating bias and favoritism in everyone. The ancient sage kings who established the rule from the center did not do so to monopolize power. It was a result of their policy of using discretion in a timely manner. If

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<sup>90</sup> *Mencius*, “Li Lou I” 17.



we discuss the benefits that came from this guidance, how can we possibly denigrate it?<sup>91</sup>

Chǒngjo used the precedent of the ruler's *kwǒn* to justify his attempts to go outside of established state mechanisms, since these mechanisms often acted as a barrier that could obstruct royal initiatives. Chǒngjo argued that the king, as the source from which all political power flowed, should be the primary actor, and the role of the scholar-official was to carry out the king's will. Only the king was in the position to put the good of the people first, only the king was capable of understanding what needed to be done for their sake, and only by obeying the king could the people and the state be kept tranquil. As he put it when discussing the exile of three criminals from Ch'ungch'ōng Province:

春秋尊主庇民之義。主不尊則民何以庇。民不庇則焉用討逆爲哉。

The principle of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is that when the ruler is exalted, the people are protected. If the ruler is not respected, then how will be the people be protected? If the people are not protected, then what use is it to try to suppress traitors?<sup>92</sup>

Even before he took the throne, Chǒngjo complained that officials' failure to obey the king caused suffering for the common people before issuing a decree to the provincial governors and village heads:

王世孫坐景賢堂。受百官賀。令承旨書令旨曰余惟民爲邦本。食是民天。是以先王愛民之道。必以務農爲先。我大朝五十載懷保之恩。浹洽于人心。每奉絲綸之下。心在元元爲教。至誠惻怛。如父視子。而宣化分憂之臣。未善於仰承明命。布揚德意。使實惠未究。聖心徒勞。哀我民斯。豈不窮困之日甚乎。

The Crown Prince sat in the Hall of Worthiness and received officials' congratulations. He commanded the Royal Secretaries, "I believe the common people are the foundation of the state and the food they need to eat is as important to them as Heaven is. This is why the Late King [Sukchong]'s Way of loving the common people was certainly to regard agriculture as his priority. Our great king [Yǒngjo] has held the people's welfare within his heart for

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<sup>91</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1783.10.21.

<sup>92</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1798.6.21.

fifty years and his thoughts have been aligned with theirs. Every time he handed down a royal decree, the people were always in his heart. With utmost sincerity and concern, he was as concerned for them as a father caring for his children. Because the ministers who were supposed to share his concern for the people and work with him to transform the people were not effective at upholding his luminous commands or promoting his virtuous intentions, making the practical benefits not apparent and the Sagely heart's efforts be in vain, how could our sad common people's impoverishment not become more severe every day?"<sup>93</sup>

As Chǒngjo put it in a few months after ascending the throne, when discussing the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Mencius*, and successive Chinese rulers, "Heaven has made me ruler and teacher for the sake of the people. [天之所以作之君。作之師者。爲民也。]"<sup>94</sup> Three years later, discussing Zhu Xi's *Reflections on Things at Hand* 近思錄 (*Jinsilu*) with the Royal Lecturers, he argued that the ruler should lead people to be moral, as they were not able to do so on their own: "Were all the common people sages in the time of Yao and Shun? Were all the common people petty men in the time of Jie and Zhou? It was the guidance of their rulers that alone made them behave as they did [大抵堯舜之民。豈皆聖人。桀紂之民。豈皆小人。惟在上者導率之如何耳。]." Sim Hwan-ji pronounced these words "most correct".<sup>95</sup> Chǒngjo also lamented to Royal Library officials that factionalism was harmful to the state's obligation to serve the people because the ministers put factional disputes above their service to the king:

爲國之務。無出愛民。而一自黨論歧異之後。朝廷之上。惟以言議可否。看作事業。而民憂國計。且置一邊。是豈體國之道哉。士大夫立朝事君。有志於仁民愛物。不應如此。

One of the inescapable duties of the state is love for the people, yet factional division leads the high officials at court to regard their disputes over the rightness or wrongness of phrasing and definitions as dealing with national

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<sup>93</sup> *Yǒngjo sillok* 1776.1.1.

<sup>94</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1776.8.8.

<sup>95</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1779.2.22.

policy and addressing the people's sorrows, while they are in actuality placing these things to one side. Is this the Way to look after the state? If the scholar-officials at court served their ruler and had the will to treat the people with benevolence and to love the Ten Thousand Things, they would not behave this way.<sup>96</sup>

The King criticized officials who did not obey him. He argued that they were not in the position to challenge his decisions, because he, as a sage-king, was the only one who knew how to properly employ discretion.

大抵臣之忠。女之貞一也。君雖無禮。臣不可以不忠。亦猶夫。夫雖不良。女不可以不貞也。

Generally speaking, the loyalty of ministers is the same as the fidelity of a woman. Despite the ruler's discourtesy, ministers may not be disloyal, just as a woman may not be unfaithful to her husband, even if he is not good.<sup>97</sup>

以予否德。雖乏禮待之方。古人豈不言君雖無禮。臣不可以不忠乎。予固不欲自大而所可念者。君綱國體。此意宜使僚相知之。

Because I am not virtuous, I am not courteous when it comes to dealing with my officials. Still, did men of old not say, "Ministers cannot but be loyal,"<sup>98</sup> though [the ruler] is lacking in courtesy"? I do not wish to place myself up on a pedestal, but I do keep in mind at all times the obligations of the ruler and the dignity of the court. Ensure all the officials [of the State Tribunal] know this.<sup>99</sup>

無論此事他事此人他人。阿於知舊而不言者。嫌於踪跡而不言者。闔眼於推遞罷削之罪。而挺身於罔測難明之案者。當隨現重繩。以勵臣工不率教之俗。

No matter whether it is this matter or another, this person or another, those who flatter me to those close to me yet do not speak frankly, those who fear their words will come back to haunt them and so do not speak, those who close their eyes to criminal acts in the dispatch and dismissal [of officials] yet

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<sup>96</sup> Chǒngjo. *Hongjae chǒnsǒ*. "Ildǔgnok", "Chǒngsa" 8.

<sup>97</sup> Chǒngjo *sillok* 1794.9.30.

<sup>98</sup> The phrase "ministers cannot but be loyal [臣不可以不忠]" is a partial quotation of Dong Zhongshu's *Chun qiu fan lu*, "Tiandi zhi xing" 2, where the text deals with how the ruler and minister are to behave to each other according to ritual. It reads, "Therefore when it comes to etiquette between ruler and minister, it is like the mind and body. Just as the mind cannot but decide, the ruler cannot but exert himself; just as the body cannot but obey, the ministers cannot but be loyal. [是故君臣之禮。若心之與體。心不可以不堅。君不可以不賢。體不可以不順。臣不可以不忠。]"

<sup>99</sup> Chǒngjo *sillok* 1792.2.14.

stand up in legal cases and muddle the issue with deceit and baseless conjecture; these are the ones that I appropriately keep in line with punishments, and I punish those ministers who do not regularly comply with royal orders.<sup>100</sup>

Nor did Chǒngjo have a place for the scholar-officials whose view of kingship entailed merely a morally perfect king who brings harmony without action. The kingship he envisioned—and carried out—was activist. In response to the charge leveled at him by Sim Hwan-ji, then serving in the Royal Library, that he was not listening to his officials, the King responded:

自以爲內聖外王。權而合經事。如日月星辰高照耀道。是皇王帝霸大鋪敘。非予自聖所仰述者。卽我家法也。

I think of myself as inwardly a sage and outwardly the king. The matter of my joining discretion with immutable principles is like way the sun, the moon, and the stars shine high in the sky and illuminate the road. The titles majesty, king, supreme ruler, and hegemon are not titles I give to myself but titles I respectfully accede to according to the laws of our royal family.<sup>101</sup>

At a royal audience in 1798, Chǒngjo noted he was working so diligently in this time of drought that it was afflicting his eyesight. He then goes on to defend his continued exertion:

予嘗孜孜不息。猶恐或弛。而災祲之至。亦豈無所由而然耶。意者必有所失於下。而誠未知其在於何事也。經云萬方有罪惟予一人。予一人有罪。無以爾萬方。苟究其由。誰任其咎。惟當反之於心。以爲修省之方。周公之坐以待朝。文王之日昃不遑。古聖人不息之工。如是其至。而後人受氣。雖不及於古人。苟能自殫其精力所到處。則其所處心。亦庶幾乎古人之思兼三王。而若於精力所及。猶不能盡分。則有非至誠不息底道也。予所以耿耿憂惕，焦心勞思，而不敢自己者此也。

I work ceaselessly, as if I fear relaxation. Yet disaster does not strike without reason, does it? It looks as though you people below me might have done something wrong, but actually I cannot be sure. The Classic [*Book of Documents*] says, “When there is wrongdoing in [you all in] the ten thousand localities, it is mine alone. When there is wrongdoing in this one man, it is not because of you all in the ten thousand localities.”<sup>102</sup> If we probe the reason,

<sup>100</sup> Chǒngjo *sillok* 1791.1.26.

<sup>101</sup> Chǒngjo *sillok* 1795.3.25.

<sup>102</sup> *Book of Documents*. “Announcement of Tang”, 1.

who is responsible for the mistake? The only appropriate response is to search for the reason within my own mind and reflect on my own conduct. The Duke of Zhou was seated when he greeted the morning [i.e., he was already awake and active], and King Wen had no leisure before the sun set. The Sages of old did not rest for a moment from their labors but worked as hard as they could. Although those who came after them were endowed with their *qi*, they did not rise up to the level of the men of old. If they were able to exert maximum effort, then they could also earn as much respect as the Three Kings.<sup>103</sup> But if they do not exhaust their vigor, for them there is no Way of utmost sincerity and ceaselessness. Therefore I constantly worry and exert my mind and do not dare to hold myself back.<sup>104</sup>

On the other hand, those officials who supported increased royal power were often close to the King. One of these, Hong Yang-bo, argued in favor of discretion in his “Discussion of Discretion in the Classics” 經權論:

故孔子曰。可與立。未可與權。惟聖人能達權也。天下之事變無窮。不可一準於經。則聖人許之以用權。孟子曰。嫂溺援之以手。言處變而合於義也。然權之得名。

Therefore when Confucius said, “Just because [someone] can take his place alongside you does not necessarily mean that he can join you in employing discretion”,<sup>105</sup> this means that only the Sage can successfully employ discretion. All-under-Heaven changes without end and cannot be said to follow one sort of standard. Therefore Confucius gave permission to employ discretion. When Mencius said, “Using your hand to rescue your sister-in-law is discretion”, he was saying that adapting is in harmony with righteousness and this is what we call discretion.<sup>106</sup>

Though Chǒngjo refused to be beholden to any faction, he did appreciate the pro-royal bent of many Southerners such as Tasan, who wrote extensively on the centrality of the king in politics. The following quotations lay out Tasan’s belief that the king was the source of

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<sup>103</sup> King Yu, the founder of the Xia Dynasty; King Tang, the founder of the Shang Dynasty; and, collectively, Kings Wu and Wen, founders of the Zhou Dynasty.

<sup>104</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1798.5.12

<sup>105</sup> *Analects* 9.30.

<sup>106</sup> Hong Yang-bo. *Igejib* 17. “Ron”, “Kyǒnggwǒllon”.

political power, using the same metaphor of the Imperial Pivot that Chŏngjo himself used extensively.<sup>107</sup>

然天地定理。人主宜富。下民宜均。故古之聖王。立經陳紀。凡天下富貴之權。總攬在上。降德于兆民。洪範曰。皇建其有極。斂時五福。用敷錫厥庶民。此之謂也。故天下之田。皆王田也。天下之財。皆王財也。天下之山林川澤。皆王之山林川澤也。夫然後王以其田。敷錫厥庶民。王以其財。敷錫厥庶民。王以其山林川澤之所出。敷錫厥庶民。古之義也。王與民之間。有物梗之竊。其斂時之權。阻其敷錫之恩。則皇不能建極。民不能均受。

The fixed pattern of Heaven and Earth is that the ruler deals with riches appropriately and the people are dealt with appropriately and fairly. Therefore the Sage Kings of old established the classics and exhibited standards, and they placed in the king the discretion of bestowing riches and honors in All-under-Heaven so that he might bestow Virtue upon the myriad people. The Great Plan says, “The Emperor establishes the existence of the Pivot and continually accumulates the Five Blessings, spreading them far and wide among the people.” What this is saying is that the fields of All-under-Heaven are the royal fields, all the wealth of All-under-Heaven is the royal wealth, all the mountains and forests, rivers and marshes in All-under-Heaven are the royal mountains and forests, rivers and marshes. Having so said, the king uses the fields to spread blessings to the people, the king uses riches to spread blessings to the people, and the king uses the mountains and forests, the rivers and marshes to spread blessings to the people. This is the principle of old. If there is anyone coming between the king and the people, *usurping his use of discretion* to accumulate [blessings] in a timely manner and throttling his grace which he bestows upon them, then the king cannot establish the Pivot and the people will not be equally cared for [emphasis added].<sup>108</sup>

Tasan explicitly connected the king’s exclusive use of discretion with the stability of the state and the welfare of the common people, tying it to the Great Plan that commanded so much attention from Chosŏn scholars. In another text, Tasan again explicated how the Great Plan gave the king central place in the political system.

鋪按極之爲字。本起於屋極。太古之時。屋如笠形。其中央突起者。謂之屋極。北極者天樞也。爲天之中心。故名曰北極。亦屋極之義也。詩云商

<sup>107</sup> I discuss an example of Chŏngjo’s use of the Imperial Pivot metaphor in detail in “Making Sense of the Imperial Pivot: Metaphor Theory and the Writings of King Jeongjo.” *Korea Journal* vol. 52, no. 3. 2012, 177-200.

<sup>108</sup> Tasan. *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ*, “Yŏmch’ŏl koha”.

邑翼翼。四方之極。亦此義也。皇極居九疇之中。如公田在九畝之中。爲四方四維之攸極。

The term “pivot” 極 (*kūk*) essentially arises from the central pillar of a house or “house pivot”. In ancient times, the house was like the form of a hat. The central beam in the roof was called the “house pivot”. The North Pivot [the North Star] is the Pivot of Heaven. It is in the centre of Heaven, and therefore it is named the North Pivot. This is the same reason that the house pivot is so named. The *Odes* say, “The capital of Shang was full of order / The model for all parts of the kingdom.” This has the same meaning. The Imperial Pivot is the center of the Nine Divisions of the Great Plan. It is like the plot at the center of the nine plots of the equal-field system and serves as the point around which the four corners of the world and the four virtues turn.

Having compared the Imperial Pivot of the political world to the center of the cosmos, the center of the world, and the central point of the Great Plan, Tasan explained how the king, by setting himself up as this Pivot, made possible the propagation of the “five blessings”.

故曰建其有極也。斂時五福者。人主總攬權綱。握之在手中也。噓之爲雨露。吸之爲霜雪。生死存亡。唯辟是順。一曰壽之柄。在皇極也。尺土寸地。無非王田。斗祿鞭土。罔非王臣。二曰富之柄。在皇極也。休養生息。唯辟其恩。驅使勞動。唯辟其命。三曰康寧之柄。在皇極也。立教以明倫。修道以達天。王命司徒。王命典樂。四曰攸好德之權。在皇極也。稽其功行。定其善惡。或許之陟配。或賜之惡謚。五曰考終命之權。在皇極也。 Therefore it is said [in the *Documents*], “[The ruler] establishes the existence of the pivot and concentrates in himself the five blessings.”<sup>109</sup> The king takes the reins of government, grasping them in the center of his palm. He breathes out rain and dew [blessings] and breathes in frost and snow [curses]. Life and death, existence and destruction, are beholden to the king. Thus, control over the first blessing, longevity, lies in the Imperial Pivot. There is no part of the kingdom, no matter how small, that is not the king’s land. Men limited to small stipends are not excluded from being royal ministers. Thus, control over the second blessing, wealth, lies in the Imperial Pivot. Only the king’s benevolence can bestow long life. Only by the king’s command do people strive at their labors. Thus, control over the third blessing, good health, lies in the Imperial Pivot. The king establishes moral instruction in order to illuminate human relationships and cultivates the Way in order to reach Heaven. The king commands the high ministers. The king regulates music and ritual. Thus, discretion over the fourth blessing, good relations with others, lies in the Imperial Pivot. The king examines what people have done and decides whether it is good or evil. Sometimes he permits people to rise according to their abilities, and other times he bestows unfavorable

<sup>109</sup> Long life, wealth, good health, good relations with others, and natural death.

posthumous titles. Thus, discretion over the fifth blessing, natural death, lies in the Imperial Pivot.

Because these five blessings flow from the king, obstructing his ability to teach morality or undermining his economic foundation throttled his propagation of them.

凡此威福之權。皇則攬之。皇則布之。斂時五福。用敷錫厥庶民也。後世人私其田。皇無寸土。則皇無以錫民富矣。家立其教。皇不布道。則皇無以錫民德矣。孔子論治。曰富曰教。而二者之柄。皆已下移。則餘無不然者矣。將何以建極出治哉。經田所先務也。…周禮六篇。其首章皆云設官分職。以爲民極。正是皇建其極。易有太極。兩儀四象。六十四卦三百八十四爻。皆於是乎分出。如皇極斂福。用敷錫萬民也。

As for each power of these blessings, the king grasps them and the king propagates them. When the king concentrates the five blessings in himself, he then uses and applies them, bestowing them on his common people. If later generations privatize the fields so that the king lacks even a tiny bit of land, then the king would lack any means to grant blessings to the common people. If every family establishes its own moral instruction and the king does not propagate the Way, then the king would lack any means to endow the common people with Virtue. When Confucius discussed government, he talked about blessings and moral instruction. If the king hands down these two things, then everything else will not fail to be realized as well. How ought the king establish the Pivot and manifest it in government? Regulating agriculture is the first duty.

...

The *Rites of Zhou* has six chapters, and the first establishes ranks of officials. This perfects the people. Rectification is the king establishing the Pivot. At the heart of the *Changes* is the Supreme Polarity, which is manifest in the yin and yang, the four forms,<sup>110</sup> the sixty-four diagrams, and the three hundred eighty-four trigrams. In this way the Imperial Pivot concentrates in himself the five blessings in order to bestow them on the myriad peoples.<sup>111</sup>

Tasan's view that the king's position and his exclusive use of discretion as central to maintaining good order stands in stark contrast to the view of the Patriarchs faction, who criticized Chǒngjo for taking too much of the responsibility to govern upon himself. One who articulated this criticism was Yi Pyǒng-mo, a member of the Intransigent branch of the Patriarchs. Yi, serving as Councilor of the Left in 1798, admonished the King for his refusal

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<sup>110</sup> The sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars.

<sup>111</sup> Tasan. *Yōyudang chōnsō*, "Sangsō kohu" 4.



to treat his half-brother Prince Ŭnŏn more harshly. Yi argued that Chŏngjo was using discretion improperly because it was not in accordance with how the kings of old used it:

殿下自信之篤，終始不撓。特權之一字。視作參倚之資。而臣不敢知從古聖人之權。亦嘗有以一事而歲以爲例如殿下之爲者乎。

Your Majesty has great self-confidence, which arises from your refusal to back down, particularly when you refer to the ability to take advantage of this word “discretion”. I your subject do not presume to know for sure, but has there ever been a time that the sages of old used royal discretion the way Your Majesty does on a yearly basis?<sup>112</sup>

Fifteen years earlier, Chŏng Chon-gyŏm, despite being an Expedient (and therefore supposedly a supporter of Chŏngjo) took the King to task for arrogating too much authority to himself in a memorial criticizing Chŏngjo’s employment of men, while also putting forward a fair representation of the *yangban* view of kingship:

帝王之學。雖與聿布有異。而立志成功。本無二道。今殿下欲堯舜。而可爲堯舜。欲文武而可爲文武。莫有禦者。此所謂君志定。而天下之治定者也。古之聖王。莫不勤於爲政。而亦未嘗以弊。弊精神。躬親庶務爲勤。任賢使能。使之各效其職。統攬之董飭之而已。一人之聰明有限。天下之事物至繁。以一人之聰明。欲窮天下之事物。則聰明有時乎不及。不任一己之聰明。以明四目達四聰。取人爲善者。實以此也。不患治道之不成。惟患聖志之不立。期以悠久。毋或退轉。則將見二帝可三，三王可四。

Although the learning of the king is in some ways different from that of the country scholars, there are not fundamentally two ways to establish a firm will and accomplish great things. Now if Your Majesty desires to be Yao or Shun, you can become like Yao or Shun. If Your Majesty desires to be King Wu or King Wen, you can become like King Wu or King Wen. There is none who would oppose you in that. It was said, “When the ruler’s will is fixed, the order of All-under-Heaven order is fixed.”<sup>113</sup> None of the Sage Kings of old refrained from working hard at governing, yet they never were sullied by it. A sullied mind is the result of focusing too much effort on insignificant matters. Instead, they appointed the worthy and employed the able, employing them each effectively in his office. *They merely gave them guidance, and that is all* [emphasis added]. The cleverness of a single person [the king] has limits, and the affairs of All-under-Heaven are of the utmost complexity. If one wishes to use the cleverness of one person to exhaust the affairs of All-under-Heaven,

<sup>112</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1798.9.8.

<sup>113</sup> This is a reference to Cheng Yi. The text can be found in *Texts of the Southern Song* 南宋文範 Book 70, *waibian* Book 4, volume 1, no. 8.

then on occasion that cleverness will fall short of the mark. The best way to govern is not to trust your own cleverness but to see clearly through the eyes of the people around you and thereby reach your goals through the cleverness of the people around you. Truly, it is in employing good people that you can succeed. It is not a disaster that one has not completely ordered the Way. It is only a disaster not to have established a Sagely will. If you remain steadfast and do not sometimes change direction, then the Two Emperors will become three and the Three Kings become four.<sup>114</sup>

Two years later, Patriarch O Chae-sun also articulated this criticism in a similar memorial:

噫。總攬權綱。人君之盛節。而及其過也。弊亦隨之。殿下深懲戚臣之禍國。痛惡權凶之竊柄。遂以提綱挈領。無少假借。獨任聰明。漸成一副規模。不遺巨細。於是乎君道日亢。

Alas! The ruler flourishes when he takes hold of the reins of government, but he can also on occasion cross a line, and corruption indeed follows this. Your Majesty harshly punished those maternal relatives who brought disaster to the state, and you held great hatred for those evil sorts who improperly usurped power that was not theirs. Even now you relentlessly hold fast to the reins of government, on not a few occasions assuming the powers of others, trusting only to your own brilliance and gradually taking over all matters, great and small. In this, the Way of the ruler grows more overbearing day by day.<sup>115</sup>

By “remain steadfast”, Chǒng was arguing that the King not deviate from established precedent (“change direction”), in effect arguing against Chǒngjo’s use of discretion. The Censorate also criticized the king for being too active. Ch’oe Hyŏn-jung, in a memorial detailing a litany of problems, complained that “the royal penetrating intelligence and energy is wasted on numerous affairs, and the Sagely attention is occupied with trivial matters [神情太費於庶事。聰察過致於細務。]”,<sup>116</sup> while Sǒng Tǒk-cho, also memorializing about the employment of men, argued that the King’s activity was contrary to the Sage Kings:

易曰易簡而天下之理得。夫天下之理。本自平易。而無甚委曲。本自簡當。而無甚繁頤。循而行之。萬事自理。古之聖王。端拱垂衣。若無所爲。而

<sup>114</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1783.7.4. The last sentence implies that by not taking action Chǒngjo would become the equal of Emperors Yao and Shun and Kings Yu, Tang, and Wen.

<sup>115</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1786.1.22.

<sup>116</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1785.5.22.

百度順軌。萬化僉應者無他。只從其方寸虛靜之地。而廓然大公。儼然至正。沛然行其所無事。而坐收百官衆職之成功。卽所謂易簡之道也。惟我殿下。睿性特達。問學夙就。其於古聖王傳心之法。深體實得。而第才智之過。而或遜於寅畏之工。聰察之詳而或忽於易簡之方。長爲所困德以是病。高明之過。恐猶不及。而發政害事。勢有必然。

The *Book of Changes* says, “With the attainment of such ease and such freedom from laborious effort, the mastery is got of all principles under the sky.”<sup>117</sup> The patterns of All-under-Heaven follow their proper course on their own, without any deviations. Their very nature is extraordinarily simple, without any unnecessary complications. If we align with them and act accordingly, then the ten thousand affairs will naturally follow their proper patterns of their own accord. The Sage-Kings of old clasped their hands and wore their clothes as if there was nothing to do, yet all the rules matched the norms, and there was nothing inappropriate in the myriad interactions. They only followed their method of quietude, yet they were broadly fair-minded and strictly proper, and they never had any serious problems. Though they merely sat, they succeeded with the various officials and the multitudes. This can be called the Way of simplicity and ease. Your Majesty’s character is exceedingly special, and your scholarship was marked by achievement early on. Truly you deeply understand the methods that the old Sage-Kings transmitted in their hearts, and your wisdom and ability are also exceptional. Yet sometimes perhaps because you are too clever or because you are not cautious or restrained enough, sometimes you get bogged down in details or you are rash and handle affairs in a simplistic way. This has gone on for a long time, and because you rely so much on your royal virtue, problems have arisen. Though Your Majesty is exceedingly noble and wise, I fear it seems even you cannot continue this way, and so the promulgated royal orders bring harm, and so the situation inevitably became like this.<sup>118</sup>

Even a Northerner 北人 (*pugin*), a censor by the name of O Ik-hwan, criticized Chǒngjo for his excessive employment of his own judgment in a memorial requesting the elimination of private academies, the reform of the examination system, and a number of other policy changes:

騁聰明。則反涉於自用。察情僞。則有近於臆逆。好臣所教。而摧折之威。或加於違拂。厭薄具僚。而狎侮之旨。或示於貴近。

If you trust in your own cleverness, it is instead arrogance. When you examine truth and falsehood, it approaches mere speculation. You like what ministers teach, yet you overwhelm them with your majesty and sometimes add threats.

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<sup>117</sup> “The Great Treatise” I, 1.

<sup>118</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1777.1.29.

You despise your ministers and treat them coldly, and sometimes you are rude even to those near and dear to you.<sup>119</sup>

Chǒngjo himself complained that ministers who held too closely to old ways were a hindrance. For him, it was the effectiveness of a measure that mattered rather than its precedent or lack thereof. Tradition and moral Virtue hallowed the actions of past rulers, but the sage-king knew when to follow their precedents and when to adapt to the times. In the former quotation, the King defends his decision to lift the exile of Madame Chǒng, the former Princess Hwawan. In the latter, he discusses alterations to the military uniform.

拘禮之人。不足以言事。制法之士。不足以論治。

People who stick too closely to the rites are not worth talking with about matters of state. People who are restrained by the written law are not worth talking with about politics.<sup>120</sup>

雖是無於古之事。苟有所益。當斷然行之。

Even if something did not exist in antiquity, if we can benefit from it, it is appropriate to decisively execute it.<sup>121</sup>

Part of the challenge for Chǒngjo was the general suspicion of reform of any kind among the *yangban* class. Even when there was general agreement that there was a problem and that urgent action was needed, the *yangban* consistently refused to make radical changes and often watered down or rolled back even minor reforms. The case for reform was not helped by the acceptance of the Cheng-Zhu strain of Neo-Confucianism as the basis for society, because its discourse sided with Sima Guang against the reforms of Wang Anshi. Because of Wang's fall from power and the perceived failure of his reforms during the Song Dynasty, officials opposed to change could cite Wang as evidence that reform was dangerous to the stability of the state. Chǒngjo could not ignore the ideological basis of resistance to

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<sup>119</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1788.1.23.

<sup>120</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1799.3.24.

<sup>121</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1793.10.11.

reform, and so he could not ignore Wang Anshi. Because of the immense prestige surrounding Wang's rival Sima Guang, the King could not simply declare Sima wrong and vindicate Wang. Instead, on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> month of 1071, he tried to justify taking what was good from Wang's reform effort, all the while praising Sima. That day, the *Doctrine of the Mean* was the subject of discussion. After discussing whether the classic teaches that action proceeds knowledge or vice-versa, the King moved the discussion to Wang Anshi's reforms, the New Law 新法 (*xinfa*).

上曰人雖云談龍肉。不如喫猪肉。而如司馬光。以其常時念中觀之。眞可謂實踐篤行者。而然於知分數。終是不足。如議孟子一事。雖屬於大朴未散。而至於罷新法。何爲急遽乃爾。熙寧之政。固多弊端。而如兵制變通。實是美法。何必盡罷。終使戎政不振。國勢益弱也。以其出於王安石。則必亟罷之者。何其太過也。程子謂吾輩激成之者。誠大賢之公言公心矣。大體王安石。執拗太過。而其才則豈無可以需世者耶。神宗之用安石。其志則亦可謂有爲之主矣。

The King said, "Although people talk about eating dragon flesh, that is not as good as eating pig flesh. When we look at how someone like Sima Guang normally thought, truly he can be called one who was practical and sincere. But in the end, knowing how to figure things out was not enough. For example, look at the way he interpreted Mencius. Although he did not lack a pure character, he did finally eliminate the New Law. Why would he suddenly do this? There was certainly much government corruption during the Peaceful Prosperity Era 熙寧 [*xining*, 1068-1077], yet such like the new military system truly were good laws. How could they be entirely revoked so that in the end military affairs were worse off and national power was left weakened? They were revoked simply because they came from Wang Anshi. Isn't that excessive? Master Cheng said, 'We incited him to be this way.' Truly the great worthies had minds for the public good and spoke of the public good. Generally Wang Anshi may have gone too far, but did he lack talent as a Confucian? When it comes to Emperor Shenzong's use of Wang Anshi, his intention also could be called being a ruler."

Chǒngjo defended Shenzong's employment of Wang Anshi in order to carry out need reforms and criticized the sudden reversal of all of Wang's policies as throwing out the good along with the bad. The officials responded with unfavorable comparisons of Wang to that paragon of antireformers, Sima Guang.

義鳳曰神宗雖是有爲之主。用非其人矣。上曰人品則固有賢不肖。而若其需世之才。則王安石必不讓於司馬光矣。祉永曰安石誠有奇才。而至於做治。則何能當司馬光之九分人乎。義鳳曰若使司馬光。得君專而行政久。則非特少康之治。亦將挽回三代矣。

Yi Ũi-bong said, “Although Shenzong was a ruler of talent, those he employed were not.”

The King said, “It is true that some people are wise and others are not, yet when it comes to his talent as a Confucian, Wang Anshi certainly was not the inferior of Sima Guang.”

Yi Chi-yǒng said, “Wang Anshi truly had extraordinary talent, yet arriving at the policies he carried out, how could he not run afoul of someone like Sima Guang?”

Yi Ũi-bong said, “If Sima Guang had obtained the exclusive trust of the Emperor and been active in government for a long time, not only would he have been like Shaokang,<sup>122</sup> but it would even have been like restoring the world to the way it was during the Three Dynasties.”

Chǒngjo’s old ally Ch’ae Che-gong disputed the comparison, arguing that because implementing effective reforms is a challenge while holding to the status quo is easy, Sima’s success was not comparable to the difficulties Wang faced. Chǒngjo readily agreed to this.

濟恭曰近儒議論。至有司馬光王安石不可比方之言。誠窄矣。臣則謂司馬光當新法撓民之餘。如廉吏之代貪吏。而易得清名矣。故天下至今稱之。誠好八字矣。變舊法至難。罷新法至易。有何才幹之勝於安石者乎。上曰然。儒臣雖以宋神宗謂之用非其人。當其時天下之勢。不得不大振刷。故銳意圖治。堅定不貳。予則以爲漢武帝後。惟神宗頗有事事之志矣。國初宋史之未及出來也。諸名碩預度之。或曰‘安石必入佞幸傳。或曰當入名臣傳。及得名臣錄。則果編入其中。而宋史亦然。朱子既以名臣許之。豈非難得之人乎。

Ch’ae Che-gong said, “That Confucian scholars today say Wang Anshi is not comparable to Sima Guang is truly narrow-minded. I your subject say that Sima Guang regarded the New Law as disturbing to the common people. As an honest official replacing greedy officials, it was easy for him to get a stellar reputation. Therefore everyone under Heaven calls him honest and knows him by those eight good characters.<sup>123</sup> Changing the old laws is of the utmost

<sup>122</sup> Shaokang was the alleged sixth king of the Xia Dynasty. After his father was killed by sons of the usurper Han Zhuo, his mother escaped to her natal home and gave birth to him. He eventually led an army to defeat Han Zhuo and took his rightful place as king, restoring Xia rule.

<sup>123</sup> This may be a reference to a compliment Wang Anshi supposed paid to Sima: “Junshi [Sima Guang]’s writing is just like the writing of the Western Han [君實之文。西漢之文。].” That is, it was as pristine as the ancient writing before it became corrupted over time.

difficulty while abolishing the New Law was of the utmost simplicity, so how can anyone think this means Sima Guang was more able than Wang Anshi?" The King said, "It is as you say. Although the Confucian ministers say they were not made use of because of Shenzong, at that time the situation of All-under-Heaven could not but bring about great disturbances. Therefore he calmed his mind and planned how to bring about order with certainty and without wavering. I believe that after Emperor Wu of Han, only Shenzong had the correct idea of what to do in all matters. At the founding of the [Chosŏn] state, the *History of Song* had not yet been published. When deciding which section the names of various scholars should go in, some said, 'Wang Anshi should certainly be in the "Flatterers" chapter', and others said, 'It is appropriate to list him in the "Illustrious Ministers" chapter.' In the end he was included in the *Record of Illustrious Ministers* and in the *History of Song*. Zhu Xi is also recognized as an illustrious minister, so is this not something that is very difficult to obtain?"<sup>124</sup>

Chŏngjo supported Ch'ae's point by noting that in the end later scholars recognized Wang Anshi as an outstanding official, ranking him in a category that included Zhu Xi himself. Reform, then, was not something that was always to be avoided.

Chŏngjo astutely recognized that the concept of discretion, with its long-established history and grounding in the classics gave him an opening to expand the King's freedom of action. Southerners and other supporters of Chŏngjo tended to support his readings, while the Intransigents and other opponents argued against it. Yet the opponents could not convincingly argue that the king was not permitted to employ discretion—though some like Chŏng Chon-gyŏm certainly tried. More reasonable—and more successful—were the complaints of men like Yi Pyŏng-mo, who conceded that discretion was necessary but criticized Chŏngjo for employing it too often, in trivial matters where it was not needed. But how far a power extends and when it is legitimate to use it are thorny questions, and Chŏngjo was comparatively successful in having his way, as long as he was willing to expend both his intellectual energy in defending it publicly and his political capital in promoting it privately.

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<sup>124</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1791.4.30.

## CONCLUSION

Chǒngjo was a master of the Confucian canon who deployed that mastery to produce ideological justification for a stronger throne. He portrayed himself as a scholar-king who sat above his ministers and taught rather than a student who sat below them and was taught, and he pushed interpretations of the Chinese classics toward a ruler-centered view over the minister-centered view of mainstream Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism. When it came to his freedom of action, Chǒngjo argued that as a sage-king he had the power to act out of accordance with precedent when necessary and, moreover, that only a sage-king such as he could determine when doing so was, in fact, necessary. These ideological justifications were the intellectual framework for his concrete reforms: the Royal Library, the *ch'ogyŏ munsin* system, and the employment of men from groups that were marginalized from political power in Late Chosŏn. Ideology is all well and good, but Chǒngjo also knew how to play politics: how to gain support, how to defeat or convert opposition, how to make deals. It is to the shady world of politics that we now turn.



## Chapter 3: Power and Factions

義理天下之公也。不當偏主。世或有乘機藉重。挾己私而傾奪人者。其亦不仁之甚矣。

Morality refers to the common good of All-under-Heaven. It does not permit favoring one thing at the expense of everything else. In the world there are sometimes opportunities to take advantage of someone else. Those who cling to their own selfish interests and take advantage of others are the extreme of inhumanity.<sup>125</sup>

As noted in Chapter 1, the reality of Chosŏn factionalism co-existed uneasily with the Neo-Confucian notion that virtuous men could not legitimately disagree about the right way to govern. Neither the king nor the scholar-officials were unaware of this tension, and factionalism was long recognized as a hindrance to the smooth and effective operation of the state. This chapter discusses Chŏngjo's policies for dealing with the narrowness of the pool of capital families from which the king was expected to draw his officials and the fractious factionalism of those officials. After the initial difficulties of establishing his position as king, Chŏngjo addressed these issues in two key ways.

First, the King made efforts to unite the three major factions behind his own leadership by portraying himself as superior to them. On the surface, this was simply a continuation of Yŏngjo's Policy of Impartiality 蕩平策 (*t'angp'yŏngch'aek*), an attempt to placate the factions by allocating offices equally ("impartially") among them. However, Chŏngjo's implementation of this policy was quite different both in theory and in practice, because he faced a changed political landscape. Yŏngjo's Policy of Impartiality was largely an attempt to get the rival descendents of the Westerner faction 西人 (*Sŏin*), the Patriarchs

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<sup>125</sup> Chŏngjo. *Hongjae chŏnsŏ*. "Ildŭngnok 16," "Hun'ŏ."

老論 (*Noron*) and the Disciples 少論 (*Soron*), to work together.<sup>126</sup> While the Intransigents 僻派 (*p'yŏkp'a*) and the Expedients 時派 (*sip'a*) factions arose due to the death of Sado, Yŏngjo was able to keep them in check by demanding silence on the Sado issue. Chŏngjo's reign was more complicated. He brought Southerners 南人 (*Namin*) into the government for the first time in a century, and as the son of Sado, it was expected that he would deal with that issue, and so the Intransigents/Expedients divide moved to the fore during his reign. Thus, a mere tit-for-tat Policy of Impartiality was unsuitable for the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Chŏngjo's solution was to free himself from factional considerations altogether. He argued that, as king, he was the only one in a position to make an unbiased judgment. He explains in a discussion with the Royal Library officials:

嘗論薦人事。教曰分黨以後。士無公議。聽於甲則某人實賢。而乙則否之。問諸東則其事極是。而西則非之。是將惡乎決哉。予只當恢著眼平著心。一以公理觀之。雖或不中。亦不遠矣。

When discussing the business of recommending men, the King instructed, "After they divided into factions, the scholars have nothing to say that is relevant to the common good. I hear from Mr. X that a certain person is truly worthy, and from Mr. Y I hear that he is not. When I ask those in the east, I am told that a given matter is ultimately correct, but asking those in the west, I am told it is not. So how am I to make decisions? All I should do is broaden my vision and make my heart impartial. When I examine something via the principle of impartiality, although I am not always on target, I am also not far off the mark."<sup>127</sup>

Rather than balancing factions, Chŏngjo claimed to choose men without regard to faction and then to work with whatever he got. As revealed through his letters to Sim Hwan-ji from 1797 right up until his death in 1800, Chŏngjo was adept at building support by appearing to be all

<sup>126</sup> Lady Hyegyŏng confirms this in her *Memoirs*, noting that Yŏngjo required all lists of candidates for office to include both Patriarchs and Disciples; the Southerners are not included (p. 154).

<sup>127</sup> Chŏngjo. *Hongjae chŏnsŏ*. "Ildŭngnok" 13, "Inmul" 3.

things to all people while in reality manipulating them for his own ends, to the point that his even own mother doubted his word.<sup>128</sup> Avoiding the charge leveled at Yŏngjo—that the Policy of Impartiality just created a new faction of pro-Policy royal toadies—Chŏngjo tried to convince all the factions that he was really on their side and that supporting him would further their own goals. So he was perfectly happy to criticize the Qing as barbarians to anti-Qing Patriarchs like Sim Hwan-ji<sup>129</sup> while using Qing technology to build the Illustrious Fortress (Chapter 5) and employing Qing Evidential Learning techniques to justify his king-centered philosophy (Chapter 2). Similarly, he disavowed one of his key supporters, Sŏ Yong-bo 徐龍輔, in a letter to Sim while continuing to bolster Sŏ's career and to draw on his support.<sup>130</sup>

In this, Chŏngjo was not entirely honest, but neither was he completely unfair; he was willing to give something minor in exchange for support on an issue that was, for him, major. Thus he was able, for example, to drive a wedge that split three leading Intransigents, his nominal opponents, so that he could gain support from one of them on this issue and from another of them on that issue. So much the better if, all the while, all three of them believed he actually agreed with them. Thus, Kim Chong-su 金鍾秀 opposed Chŏngjo's military reorganization while supporting the Policy of Impartiality, Sim Hwan-ji was an enemy of the Southerners who supported the Illustrious Fortress, and Yi Pyŏng-mo 李秉模 opposed the Illustrious Fortress and reforms associated with it but supported the abolition of slavery.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Lady Hyegyŏng. *Memoirs*, 205.

<sup>129</sup> Chŏngjo. *Chŏngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 142, 1797.6.25; 331, 1798.8.8; 641, no date.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 534, 1799.11.2.

<sup>131</sup> Ch'oe Hong-gyu. *Chŏngjo ūi Hwasŏng kŏnsŏl*. Seoul T'ŭkpyŏlsi: Ilchisa. 2001, 222; Park Hyunmo. *Chŏngch'iga Chŏngjo*, 320; Park Hyunmo. "18 segi Noron ūi chŏngch'igwan kwa chŏngguk unyŏng kisul." In

In his letters to Sim Hwan-ji, Chǒngjo reveals his willingness to exploit the rift between these men by reassuring Sim: “I know without asking that Yi Pyǒng-mo has evil intentions towards Your Lordship [秉也之向卿有惡意。不問可知。]”<sup>132</sup> Though we have no extant letters to Yi, one can easily imagine the King telling him the very same thing about Sim. He also joked that Yi’s list of successful examination passers seemed to have been drawn up while Yi was drunk<sup>133</sup> and wryly noted that Kim Chong-su was hated by everyone.<sup>134</sup>

### EARLY SETBACKS: HONGS AND PRINCES

The early years of Chǒngjo’s reign saw the young king push back against those who would dominate him. As noted in Chapter 1, some of the men who allegedly brought about the death of Sado had to be posthumously dealt with. The King also eliminated a number of men who spoke out against his regency in 1775 and their supporters, including a key member of his mother’s family, so that the Hong clan would have no illusions that its support for his accession would translate into domination over his reign. He brought in a number of men who had served him well while he was Crown Prince, the core group on which he would construct his power base.

However, not everything went smoothly. The instrument he used to free himself from his mother’s clan in turn sought to take that clan’s imagined place as Chǒngjo’s puppeteer, and while the King in his youth was slow to respond to his close friend’s machinations, his

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*Chǒngjo ūi pimil ōch’al: Chǒngjo ka kǔ ūi sidae rŭl marhada.* Edited by Paek Sŭngjong. Seoul: P’urŭn yōksa. 2011, 314-315; Yu Pong-hak. *Kaehyōk kwa kaldŭng ūi sidae*, 193.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 449, 1799.4.15.

<sup>133</sup> Chǒngjo. *Chǒngjo ōch’alch’ōp* 448, 1799.4.10.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 252, no date.

conviction that the throne must be controlled by no outside force eventually ended that friend's life.

### **The Trouble with Hong Kuk-yŏng**

Hong Kuk-yŏng (1748-1781) passed the *munkwa* examination in 1771 and found himself fortunately appointed as one of the Crown Prince's tutors, though he was only four years older than Chŏngjo. He was a member of the Expedients branch of the Patriarchs and worked closely with Kim Chong-su, at least until Kim, with his considerable political acumen, detected the shift in the political climate and turned against him. Hong, along with Sŏ Myŏng-sŏn 徐命善 and Chŏng Min-si 鄭民始, were with Chŏngjo from his time as Crown Prince, and they would largely remain his loyal supporters until the end of their lives. Hong, though, overstepped the bounds of Chosŏn propriety, and so he reached the end of his life rather earlier than Sŏ and Chŏng.

An implacable foe of Chŏngjo's maternal family, Hong is unsurprisingly painted in damning colors by Lady Hyegyŏng, and she has little positive to say about his relationship with Chŏngjo. Yet whatever his motives were, his actions supported Chŏngjo in the early years of his reign, when the King was most vulnerable to whatever challenger might emerge. Hong denounced opponents of Chŏngjo's regency, Chŏng Hu-gyŏm 鄭厚謙, Hong In-han 洪麟漢, and Hong Pong-han's rival Kim Kwi-ju. Chŏng and Hong were executed, and Kim was banished. Hong Kuk-yŏng, in the meantime, quickly rose to relatively high offices in the Ministry of Personnel and the Office of Inspector-General 司憲府 (*sahŏnbu*) despite being barely over thirty years old.

Not satisfied with this fairly rapid rise, Hong concocted a scheme to become a royal uncle. He convinced Chǒngjo to take his sister as his second wife in 1778. Marrying a relative to the king was not particularly unusual, but having his sister titled “Wǒnbin” 元嬪洪氏 or “First Consort” was a provocative act when Chǒngjo’s primary wife remained both alive and childless. The next year, his plans were thrown into disarray when Wǒnbin died, but rather than being deterred, Hong made even bolder and more dangerous moves. He labored to have Wǒnbin treated as a queen in death while attempting to displace Chǒngjo’s primary wife, Queen Hyoŭi. For the former, the *Annals* records that Wǒnbin’s funeral was so lavish the officials would have spoken against it but for fear of Hong’s power,<sup>135</sup> and Lady Hyegyŏng tells us the funeral was held in the same place Queen Chǒngsŏng’s was.<sup>136</sup> Hong had the court mourn his sister and dismissed from office a high official who did not participate in the incense burning ritual for her.<sup>137</sup> For the latter, he brutally interrogated Hyoŭi’s ladies-in-waiting in a failed attempt to implicate her in Wǒnbin’s death.<sup>138</sup> At the same time, his close ally Song Tŏk-sang, almost certainly at Hong’s behest, sent a memorial with the veiled suggestion that Chǒngjo adopt an heir.<sup>139</sup> This was tantamount to suggesting that the line of succession be transferred to a collateral line, a treasonous act for which Song’s illustrious ancestor Song Si-yŏl had been executed.<sup>140</sup> When Hong Kuk-yŏng fell

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<sup>135</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1779.5.7.

<sup>136</sup> Lady Hyegyŏng. *Memoirs*, 174. Chǒngsŏng, Yŏngjo’s first queen, had died in 1757.

<sup>137</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1779.6.22.

<sup>138</sup> Lady Hyegyŏng. *Memoirs*, 172, 175.

<sup>139</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1779.6.18.

<sup>140</sup> Song Si-yŏl argued that King Hyojong should not be mourned with the heaviest mourning because he was not the eldest son. Hyojong’s son Hyŏnjong thought Song’s argument implied the line of succession should have continued through descendents of Hyojong’s elder brother rather than through Hyojong and, consequently, that Hyŏnjong was not the legitimate king. Hyŏnjong had Song executed for treason. Later generations,

from power, Song Tök-sang tried to downplay his connection to Hong, but he could not downplay this memorial and was banished, despite Chǒngjo's professed reluctance to punish a descendent of Song Si-yŏl.<sup>141</sup>

As if suggesting a shift in the succession to a collateral line were not enough, Hong then had the son of Chǒngjo's half-brother Prince Ŭnŏn posthumously adopted by Wŏnbin, strengthening the child's claim to the throne as long as Chǒngjo remained without a son. The *Annals* records that Hong raised the child himself.<sup>142</sup> The boy received the title Prince of Wanp'ung, and the *Annals* again records official dismay at these actions and that fear of Hong muzzled any dissent.<sup>143</sup> On top of that, according to Lady Hyegyŏng, Hong had the boy publicly escorted by royal eunuchs as if he were Chǒngjo's heir.<sup>144</sup>

Finally, in 1780, Chǒngjo had had enough, removing Hong from all of his offices and revoking the boy's princely title. Once Hong was out of office, the official torrent against him was unleashed. Kim Chong-su, either because he recognized the tide had turned against Hong or because he genuinely believed Hong had gone too far with his schemes, did an about-face and vehemently denounced him. Lady Hyegyŏng could not understand why Chǒngjo tolerated Kim's reversal:

Later, [Kim] Chong-su sent a memorial to the throne attacking [Hong] Kuk-yŏng, but he did this under pressure from the King. I said to my son, "Chong-su acted as if he were Kuk-yŏng's own son. Now he recriminates against him mercilessly. How can this be?" The King answered, "It isn't his intention, but if he wants to survive, what choice does he have?" I said, "He

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however, came to admire Song. A full account of the controversy that led to Song's execution can be found in Haboush's "Constructing the Center" in *Culture and State in Late Chosŏn Korea*, 46-90.

<sup>141</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1781.9.14.

<sup>142</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1780.8.15.

<sup>143</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1779.9.26.

<sup>144</sup> Lady Hyegyŏng. *Memoirs*, 173.

must be a nine-tailed fox who is capable of a thousand changes and ten thousand transformations.” “It is an apt description of him,” the King answered laughingly. This shows that my son was not unaware of Chong-su’s true character.

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But despite his knowledge of Chong-su’s character, the late King remained constant to him to the end. Because of his frugal habits and his uncorrupted tenure in office, Chong-su did not alienate people. The King felt that, under the circumstances, he could maintain his old affection for him. But Chong-su’s so-called frugality and incorruptibility were all posture.<sup>145</sup>

Undoubtedly she was correct that Chŏngjo knew Kim’s character, but she did not see that Chŏngjo could make use of a man who appeared incorruptible but was in fact a realist. As we will see later, the King would even help officials to appear uncompromising while actually compromising with them in secret.

Chŏngjo initially resisted calls to punish Hong further, but he eventually conceded to banishment, and Hong died in exile the following year. In another instance of Chŏngjo’s dual public and private roles, he was likely genuinely reluctant to banish his old friend, but he was also astute enough to know that, regardless of Hong’s actions, he had to defend him; suddenly and immediately executing or banishing a close associate, without showing any reluctance to do so, would have appeared inhumane and might have created sympathy for Hong. As it was, no one mourned Hong’s passing, and his name would be referenced for the rest of Chŏngjo’s reign as the worst kind of traitor, even by the Intransigents. The King also undoubtedly learned the dangers of relying too heavily on one person. From this point forward, no one would gain that level of trust from him.

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<sup>145</sup> Lady Hyegyŏng. *Memoirs*, 176-177. An Tae-hoe argues that Kim Chong-su’s memorial was an indirect attack on Hong directed by Chŏngjo himself. See An. “Chŏngjo ūi pimil p’yŏnji”, 76.



## The P'ungsan Hong Clan and Royal Relatives

Chǒngjo's relationship with his mother's family was complicated. Though he doted on Lady Hyegyǒng herself throughout his life, her family members were not thereby given a pass. Chǒngjo's relationship with his deceased maternal grandfather Hong Pong-han is a case in point. On the one hand, though Lady Hyegyǒng is vehement that the execution of Sado was not Hong Pong-han's idea and that he did not provide the rice chest in which Sado was sealed, it is clear that Hong acquiesced to the killing of Sado.<sup>146</sup> Despite this, Hong was just as dedicated as Yǒngjo to preserving the legitimacy of Chǒngjo and was a key member of the Expedients faction that protected Chǒngjo while he was Crown Prince. Undoubtedly a posthumous punishment of Hong would have devastated Lady Hyegyǒng, but Chǒngjo did not shy from executing her uncle for treason, so it is likely that Chǒngjo defended the deceased Hong Pong-han against incessant criticism because he was reluctant to accept attacks on his own grandfather.

But if Chǒngjo was careful to protect those who had a blood relationship to the throne from any diminution of their virtue, Lady Hyegyǒng's uncle Hong In-han had no such protection. The controversy here revolved around a remark Hong made during Yǒngjo's last full year on the throne (1775) when the ailing Yǒngjo desired to establish Chǒngjo as regent. This type of regency—an ill or elderly king appointing the heir apparent as regent to relieve himself of much of the burden of governing—did not have a positive history in Chosŏn. Despite the early Chosŏn precedent for abdication—the first three monarchs of the dynasty all having done so—Sejo's usurpation and the attendant forced abdication of Tanjong 端宗 seem to have eliminated abdication as a viable option for succeeding kings, leaving the

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<sup>146</sup> Chǒng Pyǒng-sŏl. *Kwŏllyŏk kwa in'gan: Sado seja ŭi chugŭm kwa Chosŏn wangsil*. Munhak tongnae. 2012, 255-258.

regency of an adult heir apparent as the alternative. But Yǒngjo's regency for his brother Kyǒngjong 景宗—and the Patriarchs' quick acceptance of it—had been the cause of a purge of the Patriarchs under Kyǒngjong, and their desire for revenge upon their Disciple rivals when “their” king took the throne was a constant thorn in Yǒngjo's side early in his reign. Further, Sado's regency for Yǒngjo was regarded as an unmitigated disaster.<sup>147</sup> So when Yǒngjo proposed a regency for Chǒngjo, there was little enthusiasm for it despite Yǒngjo's evident age and ill health, and not just because the king's officials were expected to be reluctant to accept anything that would involve having a legitimate authority apart from the reigning king. Still, the officials did not outright oppose the regency, either, lest they impugn the majesty of the heir apparent.

Yet according to the *Annals*, Hong In-han did oppose the regency. Chǒng Hu-gyǒm was executed for this, and Hong's relationship to Lady Hyegyǒng would not protect him. When the regency was proposed, on the twentieth day of the eleventh month of 1775, Hong said that “The Crown Prince [Chǒngjo] need not know anything of the Patriarchs or Disciples, nor need he know who the Minister of Personnel or the Minister of War is, much less the affairs of the court. [東宮不必知老論少論。不必知吏判兵判。至於朝廷事。尤不必知矣。]”<sup>148</sup> Lady Hyegyǒng claims that Hong merely misspoke, a “slip of the tongue”, she calls it.<sup>149</sup> And as James Palais has noted, the line between acceptable criticism and *lèse-majesté* in Chosŏn Korea was never clearly established, so officials had to be very

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<sup>147</sup> For an account of Sado's regency and all the troubles it entailed, see Haboush, *Confucian Kingship*, chapter 5.

<sup>148</sup> *Yǒngjo sillok* 1775.11.20.

<sup>149</sup> Lady Hyegyǒng. *Memoirs*, 100.

careful how they phrased their opinions, lest they be accused of slighting the king.<sup>150</sup> Still, even on this reading it was a foolhardy statement, for it is well-nigh impossible not to view its meaning—not merely its phrasing, but the underlying meaning—as accusing the Crown Prince of lacking the ability to govern the state. Such a statement was bound to get Hong in trouble, and so it did. Presumably despite the desperate pleas of Lady Hyegyŏng, Chŏngjo ordered Hong to take poison on the fifth day of the seventh month, 1776, after repeated official demand, with Chief State Councilor Kim Yang-t'aek remarking that allowing Hong the dignity of suicide made the death sentence too light a punishment.<sup>151</sup> The next day, the King refused a request to make Hong's children slaves.<sup>152</sup>

For those who were blood relatives of the royal house, however, Chŏngjo was reluctant to mete out harsh punishment, especially death. He justified his leniency in deviating from the strict punishments required by law as falling under the purview of royal discretion (see Chapter 2), citing the Duke of Zhou's tailoring of punishments to individuals in the *Documents*.<sup>153</sup> Early in his reign, before his power base was secure, the King struggled to protect royal relatives. Princess Hwawan 和緩翁主, the sister of Sado and Chŏngjo's aunt, was accused of opposing the regency along with Hong In-han and her adopted son Chŏng Hu-gyŏm. Since Chŏng was not Hwawan's natural son, he was quickly executed, as was Hong In-han, but the King stubbornly resisted the Intransigents' demands to send Hwawan to the grave along with him. Still, he was forced to strip Hwawan of her title and banish her

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<sup>150</sup> Palais, *Politics and Policy*, 240.

<sup>151</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.7.5.

<sup>152</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.7.6.

<sup>153</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1777.8.11. The reference to the Duke of Zhou can be found in the *Book of Documents*. "Zhou Shu". "Kang Gao", "Cai Zhong zhi Ming" 1. It is also recorded there that the Duke rewarded the son of the Prince of Cai despite punishing the father.

from the capital. Over the course of his reign, as his position strengthened, Chǒngjo progressively lightened her sentence. Initially she was banished to Cheju Island. She was then allowed to move first to P'aju and, later, to the outskirts of the capital, and she was finally pardoned entirely and her title restored in the third month of 1799, despite continuous official protests from the Intransigents over the course of that month.<sup>154</sup> Strikingly, the King declared this to be in keeping with the intentions of Prince Sado, which will become relevant in the discussion of the Illustrious Fortress in Chapter 5. Further, as will be discussed in the next section, the King had at least one Intransigent leader's support for this action, though that support was not publicly expressed.

Chǒngjo's half-brother Prince Ŭnjŏn 恩全君 was not so fortunate. As noted, Hong Kuk-yŏng was an enemy of Lady Hyegyŏng's branch of the Hong family and thus pressed for the elimination of the pro-Hong group—including both Chǒng Hu-gyŏm and Hong In-han—immediately upon Chǒngjo's accession. Prince Ŭnjŏn was implicated in the course of these interrogations, when it was claimed that the pro-Hong group was laying the groundwork for the installation of Ŭnjŏn as king.<sup>155</sup> A number of executions were ordered, but Chǒngjo demurred at the demands for Ŭnjŏn's death. However, barely a year on the throne and faced with accusations of treason against his half-brother, the King was forced to relent, and Ŭnjŏn was forced to commit suicide.<sup>156</sup>

Nine years later, however, a stronger Chǒngjo had much greater success in protecting another half-brother, Prince Ŭnŏn 恩彦君, the older son of Sado by his consort Lady Im, when he was accused of poisoning Chǒngjo's son. The Intransigents, along with Queen

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<sup>154</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1799.3.4.

<sup>155</sup> Park Hyunmo. *Chǒngch'i ka Chǒngjo*, 65-66.

<sup>156</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1777.8.11.

Chǒngsun, accused Ŭnǒn of poisoning him, along with a number of others who had recently taken ill and died, including Ŭnǒn's own son Prince Sanggye.<sup>157</sup> This time, not only was Ŭnǒn not killed, he did not even lose his title. He was merely exiled to Kangwha Island, one of the mildest punishments in terms of exile. Even after he escaped from exile and was recaptured, Chǒngjo refused to have him executed or even to increase his punishment; Ŭnǒn was simply returned to Kangwha. Chǒngjo also continued to see him in spite of his exile.<sup>158</sup> Ŭnǒn did not meet his fate until after Chǒngjo's death, when the Intransigents executed him in the 1801 purge for the heinous crime of having a Catholic wife.

As prominent as Lady Hyegyǒng's family became, there remained the four major factions, or the Four Colors 四色, with which Chǒngjo had to deal. The King inherited the Policy of Impartiality, Yǒngjo's central vehicle in his fifty-year struggle with bureaucratic factionalism. In his familiar way, Chǒngjo claimed only to be continuing the Policy his grandfather had bequeathed him, but the reality turns out to paint a more complicated, and interesting, picture.

## THE POLICY OF IMPARTIALITY

今政惟以周便平蕩。爲對揚之端爲可。

I would like this to make widely known my intention to promote impartiality and appoint talented men equally.<sup>159</sup>

The Policy of Impartiality originated with Chǒngjo's great-grandfather Sukchong 肅宗 (r. 1674–1720). His version of the policy amounted to playing the factions off against

<sup>157</sup> Park Hyunmo. *Chǒngch'i ka Chǒngjo*, 67.

<sup>158</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1794.4.10; 1794.4.11; 1794.4.13; Park Hyunmo. *Chǒngch'i ka Chǒngjo*, 68-69.

<sup>159</sup> Chǒngjo. *Chǒngjo ōch'alch'ōp* 236, 1797.12.19.

each other by alternately putting one faction in power and then purging it in favor of a rival faction.<sup>160</sup> Chǒngjo himself explains this in his veiled criticism of Sukchong, who despite his “sagely intention” could not control factionalism, in a discussion of the crimes of one Kim Ha-jae, an Intransigent executed for *lèse-majesté* in 1784:

曾在肅廟朝。黨習漸痼。莫可收拾。聖意或謂此勝於彼。而專用之。或謂彼勝於此。而更進之。逮我先朝之初。戈戟相尋。膠固難解。先大王。以保合陶甄之化。行建極平蕩之政。以貽我燕翼之謨。惟予苦心。亦在於此。 In the reign of Sukchong, the custom of factionalism gradually worsened, and there were none who could bring it under control. Sukchong sagely favored first this faction and appointed its members and then that faction and appointed its members, and back again. My predecessor’s court at first faced conflict, and untangling the mess [created by Sukchong’s policy] was certainly difficult. The Late King [Yǒngjo] promoted harmonious cooperation in order to transform the character of his officials. He enacted the establishment of the Pivot and the Policy of Impartiality. He handed this sage counsel down to his grandson. This is the only task I labor after.<sup>161</sup>

Yǒngjo, in contrast, strove to avoid the bloody purges associated with this policy and tried to contain factionalism. This policy was essentially Yǒngjo refusing to give one faction the right to take vengeance upon another<sup>162</sup> and trying to force the Patriarchs and Expedients to work together, while himself avoiding the appearance of favoring either of them by rewarding or punishing a member of each faction commiserate with one another.<sup>163</sup> Yǒngjo’s Policy of Impartiality was only partly effective, and it required suppression of the censorial voice—Chosŏn Korea’s equivalent of “free speech”—in order to achieve even that partial success.<sup>164</sup> While that success did mark Yǒngjo’s increasing power, it gave rise to

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<sup>160</sup> Lee Song-Mu. *Chosŏn sidae tangjaengsa*, 142.

<sup>161</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1784.12.8.

<sup>162</sup> Palais. *Politics and Policy*, 47.

<sup>163</sup> Lee Song-Mu. *Chosŏn sidae tangjaengsa*, 143, 169.

<sup>164</sup> Haboush, *Confucian Kingship*, 152-153.

criticism that supporters of the policy were in effect forming yet another faction.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, Chǒngjo himself tells us he heard this criticism as well soon after taking the throne, during a discussion of factionalism that ended with an official ban on factional disputes: “Alas! [The Policy of] Impartiality will soon be rid of factions, so that I will forget their names. Yet it is said that the Impartiality faction is worse than the old factions, and unfortunately that is not far off the mark. [噫。蕩平卽祛偏黨。無物我之名。而世傳‘蕩平之黨。甚於舊黨之說。不幸近之。]”<sup>166</sup>

While Chǒngjo’s Policy of Impartiality built on that of Yǒngjo, there were important differences. Chǒngjo sought to employ able men and to build a coalition of men centered on himself within the existing factions to reduce tensions between them, as opposed to Yǒngjo’s efforts to use moderates unaffiliated with the existing factions and to placate them through balancing their representation in the government.<sup>167</sup> Chǒngjo cultivated relationships with the down-and-out Southerners and even the Intransigent Patriarchs, who with few exceptions opposed the Policy, and he subtly criticized Yǒngjo for having a formal Policy of Impartiality that lacked substance, in the very discussion of factionalism noted above.<sup>168</sup>

大抵蕩平一事。先大王苦心本意。何嘗髣髴於曩時規模。而特以當時承佐之臣。實不能仰體聖意。惟以彌縫爲事。甚至於一通一望。參互彼此。以爲調停之計。以故行之未久。浸浸然轉而生弊。祇足爲戚里權奸濁亂鉗制之資。

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<sup>165</sup> Yi Kūnsun. *Chosŏn hugi tangjaengsa yŏn’gu*, 135.

<sup>166</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1776.9.22.

<sup>167</sup> Kim Sungmoon. “Too Rational To Be Modernized? Confucian Rationality and Political Modernity in Traditional Korea.” *The Review of Korean Studies* vol. 9, no. 4. 2006, 156-157; Paek Minjŏng. “Chǒngjo ŭi sadaebu insik kwa chǒngch’i ch’ŏrhakchŏk ipjang yŏngu.” *Hanguk sirhak yŏngu* vol. 20, no. 0. Hanguk sirhakhoe. 2010; Park Hyunmo. “King Chǒngjo’s Political Role in the Conflicts between Confucianism and Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century Korea.” *Review of Korean Studies* vol. 7, no. 4. 2004, 208.

<sup>168</sup> Yi Han-wu. *Chǒngjo: Chosŏn ŭi hon i chida*, 236-239.

In general the affair of [the Policy of] Impartiality was the fundamental intention that the Late King took great pains to implement, so why does the situation appear to have not changed all that much? Yet particularly at that time the ministers who assisted him truly were unable to fathom the Sagely intention and considered themselves to be serving [Yǒngjo] with their makeshift implementation of it. Matters reached the point that, when it came to candidates to office, he considered this one and that one and merely mediated between the various factions. For this reason, after a short time of doing this, the process became mired and gave rise to corruption, such that royal relatives and meddlesome officials brought society into disorder and restriction.<sup>169</sup>

Instead, in a letter to Sim Hwan-ji in 1797, Chǒngjo defended his prerogative to choose officials as he saw fit, regardless of faction or family lineage.

豈無十室之忠信。特未之聞耳。大政不遠。須思廣採之方。卽無論地閥之高庳。色目之東西。惟人望是取。使之霑祿。則豈不大勝於石竇內分排青黃之政耶。

Are there not loyal and sincere men hidden in small villages? It is just that we have yet to see them. The six-month evaluation is not far off, so we need to think of a way to search widely for talented men. If we select men without distinguishing high and low ancestral lineage or Easterner and Westerner faction, instead choosing men of good repute and giving them well-paying official posts, would this not be better than dividing offices between the Shi and Dou clans?<sup>170</sup>

Here, Chǒngjo was also criticizing monopolization of power among a small number of clans by equating it with the monopolization of office by the Shi and Dou clans during China's Northern and Southern Dynasties. The reference to giving officials stipends implies that men of little economic means could also be recruited, since they would have funds to support themselves. Thus, Chǒngjo is suggesting, if not a radical notion of recruiting men from all classes, at least reaching comparatively much wider and deeper into the state's pool of talent than the twenty or so monstrously wealthy *yangban* clans based in the capital.

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<sup>169</sup> Chǒngjo *sillok* 1776.9.22.

<sup>170</sup> Chǒngjo. Chǒngjo *ŏch'alch'ŏp* 145, 1797.7.6.



Further, while Chǒngjo worked closely with Ch'ae Che-gong and the Southerners, he had no intention of instituting a Southerner-dominated government, for he would be beholden to no faction. Still, Southerners became a force in the central government for the first time since 1694. Ch'ae Che-gong served on the State Council, the highest organ in the state, and Chǒngjo made efforts to get the Southerners greater representation at all levels. In another letter to Sim Hwan-ji, Chǒngjo writes:

大政順成甚行。而公退安勝耶。閣聞物情。時與少頗不以爲非之。或有稱道者。而甚至武弁。無不叫奇。一辭譽之云。何幸何幸。午人初仕之不得爲頗憤菀云。此後金誠一子孫收用。以塞如屋之謗。如何如何。

The six-month official evaluation went well, I hear. That is fortunate. Are you enjoying your freedom from public service? I have heard the general outline of scholarly consensus, and I think the Disciple and Expedients factions did not do so badly. There are praiseworthy individuals even among them. Even the military officials are surprising, so that there is no one unworthy of praise. How fortunate! The Southerners are very dissatisfied that they had no new officials enter service. What about appointing the grandson of Kim Sǒng-il and avoiding a big fuss over it?<sup>171</sup>

Earlier that year, Chǒngjo complained in another letter about bias against the Southerners and also protected a loyal supporter, Tasan:

三銓之政。猶言其太偏。并與虛閒之殿未擬少午。不爲舉論。豈成說耶。丁也之不爲送西。大非勸善之意。一事二事。半世之怨憾日甚。此等處。何不留意耶。亞銓當入來矣。今政則使之送西如何。此三銓辭疏。須卽瞻見如何。儘有可觀耳。

As for the administration of the Third Minister of Personnel, he is too biased. Will he not broach the subject of putting forward Southerner or Disciples candidates for even the lowliest offices? As for not sending Tasan to the military side, surely there are no good intentions there. Because of one or two incidents, the grudges and remorse of half a lifetime grow worse day by day. Can I ignore this? Vice-Minister Hong Myǒng-ho will come in, so how can I send him to the military in this political climate? Would you read and copy the Third Minister's resignation memorial? It is truly worth reading.<sup>172</sup>

<sup>171</sup> Chǒngjo. *Chǒngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 237, 1797.12.21.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.* 143, 1797.6.27.

While he claimed to be but continuing Yǒngjo's marvelous Policy of Impartiality, in reality Chǒngjo was expanding the Policy such that he could chose freely among factions rather than being expected either to choose one faction as the "right" one and hand the government over to its members (as each faction wanted for itself) or to maintain a balanced system that gave rival factions an "equal" say in the government, as Yǒngjo had tried to do.

### **Playing Both Sides: Ch'ae Che-gong and Sim Hwan-ji**

Chǒngjo's masterful manipulation of politics can be seen in his treatment of two of the most powerful men of the last ten years of his reign: Ch'ae Che-gong, head of the Southerner faction, and Sim Hwan-ji, a leader of the Intransigent Patriarchs. Conventionally Ch'ae is regarded as Chǒngjo's friend and Sim as his enemy, and while the general tenor of the relationships does follow these broad contours, things get much messier in the details. What the sources reveal is that Chǒngjo was adept at making men who held widely divergent views believe that he shared those views, while actually pursuing his own goals.

Ch'ae Che-gong passed the *munkwa* in 1743 at the relatively young age of 23 and spent his first two decades in government serving in fairly minor posts. He had the good fortune of being out of office for the Sado affair, so he was not tainted by association with that tragedy, though he had refused to carry out a royal order to depose Sado as Crown Prince in 1758. Eventually, in 1771, his career received a significant boost when he was placed in charge of Chǒngjo's education. It was during this time that he cultivated his relationship with the future king, and he would remain a staunch supporter until his death in 1799. In return, Chǒngjo promoted him to high posts that no Southerner had held since their fall from power a century before, including positions on the State Council. Naturally, the Patriarchs were not about to allow the return of their old enemies to a position of even shared prominence

without complaint. The King had to push through Ch'ae's special appointment<sup>173</sup> as Troop Commander of P'yŏngan Province over official opposition, even to the point of dismissing officials who protested too vociferously.<sup>174</sup> The same thing occurred two years later when he appointed Ch'ae Councilor of the Right, again by special appointment. Despite dismissing officials for opposing the appointment the very next day, six months later, protesting memorials were still coming in.<sup>175</sup> It is also true that Chŏngjo valued Ch'ae's advice. As an example, he refused to appoint an official based solely on Ch'ae's criticism:

特補吏曹參判金文淳爲穩城府使。文淳與右議政蔡濟恭有嫌。不受薦望。  
下嚴教譴補。

Vice-Minister of Personnel Kim Mun-sun was specially appointed to the office of Magistrate of Onsŏng. Kim was criticized by Councilor of the Right Ch'ae Che-gong and so he did not receive recommendation for a higher post. The King severely rebuked Kim and sent him away.<sup>176</sup>

But Ch'ae was not always in agreement with the King, nor was Chŏngjo's support unequivocal. For example, in 1790, Ch'ae, then serving as Councilor of the Left 左議政, suggested the King may have made a "mistake" in recalling the former governor of Kangwha Island to the capital. Chŏngjo refused to change his decision and ordered Ch'ae not to speak of it again.<sup>177</sup> As well, Ch'ae's call in 1792 for a purge of the Intransigents in response to the Memorial of the Yŏngnam 10,000 demanding justice for Sado was likewise refused,<sup>178</sup> and a

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<sup>173</sup> That is, the King did not follow the regular procedure, which called for the Ministry of Personnel to present to the throne a list of three candidates for a given post, from which the king selected one. Instead, Chŏngjo simply appointed the man he wanted, a "special appointment" 特旨.

<sup>174</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1786.9.

<sup>175</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1788.2.11; 1788.2.15; 1788.2.12; 1788.9.7; 1788.9.9; 1788.9.10.

<sup>176</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1789.5+.10.

<sup>177</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1790.11.14.

<sup>178</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1792.4+.17.

year later he was dismissed from his post on the State Council for quarrelling with another of Chǒngjo's supporters, Kim Chong-su, who also lost his own State Council post.<sup>179</sup>

Considering the royal reaction to it, the Memorial of the Yǒngnam 10,000 was probably orchestrated by Chǒngjo himself to exacerbate the rift between the Expedient and Intransigent branches of the Patriarchs Faction,<sup>180</sup> another ploy to keep the ministers from uniting against him. However, it was never his intention to get rid of the Intransigents, even though the memorial provided the perfect opportunity to do so. There were plenty of officials both inside and outside the government that hungered for justice for Sado (not to mention the rewards they would no doubt receive once those who supported Sado's execution were eliminated), and the early 1790s were the height of Southerner power. But Chǒngjo preferred to convert his opponents rather than to crush them, because a living friend could do more for him than a dead enemy. Thus he continued to cultivate his relationship with Kim Chong-su even after Kim switched from Expedient to Intransigent, and none demonstrates Chǒngjo's capacity to make use of a supposedly intractable foe than Sim Hwan-ji, the "wall Chǒngjo could not cross".<sup>181</sup>

Sim Hwan-ji passed the *munkwa* in 1771 at the age of 41, though it was not until 1793 that he reached high office. From that year until his death in 1802, he was a leading figure of the Intransigents. Sim had a reputation as uncompromising, and scholars generally considered him Chǒngjo's implacable enemy, one he could not be rid of despite his considerable power,<sup>182</sup> before the recent discovery of Chǒngjo's extant "secret letters" to

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<sup>179</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1793.6.4.

<sup>180</sup> Yi Han-wu. *Chǒngjo: Chosǒn ūi hon i chida*, 361-364.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 399-406.

him from 1796 to 1800. While the letters do not completely overturn this view, they do reveal one reason Chŏngjo was never rid of Sim: The two men could actually work quite well together, so long as the King was able to convince Sim that he was “illuminating principle” and “rectifying affairs” because, after all, “what minister could reject a king’s offer to illuminate principle and rectify affairs?”<sup>183</sup>

The “secret letters” are an extraordinary discovery. We learn from them that much of what is recorded in the *Annals* is political theater. Chŏngjo asked Sim Hwan-ji if a man’s submitted memorial was “only a formality for my refusal [辭疏。豈慾一番例讓而然耶]” or if he would “stubbornly continue to submit [抑一味固執云耶]” them,<sup>184</sup> cluing us in that memorials’ stated purpose and actual purpose need not coincide. A few years later, Chŏngjo asked Sim, “Do you want to return to office immediately, or do you prefer that I beseech you once or twice before you return? [欲爲一番辭職後出脚耶。抑一二番敦諭後出仕耶。]”<sup>185</sup>

The letters also reveal that much politicking was going on behind the scenes that the official sources do not speak to. While this has long been suspected, the letters provide strong evidence. For example, it was never guaranteed that the man who submitted a memorial was the sole author of that memorial, or even that he wrote it at all, but now we have King Chŏngjo telling us this matter-of-factly, as if it was a common occurrence, which it undoubtedly was. The scholar-officials of late Chosŏn regularly showed each other and the king drafts of memorials they had yet to submit,<sup>186</sup> edited or wrote memorials for other

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<sup>183</sup> Kwŏn Tu-hwan. “Chŏngjo ŏch’alch’ŏp ūi sŏldŭngnyŏk kwa nollŭ”. In *Chŏngjo ūi pimil ŏch’al*, 162.

<sup>184</sup> Chŏngjo. *Chŏngjo ŏch’alch’ŏp* 120, 1797.2.20.

<sup>185</sup> Chŏngjo. *Chŏngjo ŏch’alch’ŏp* 522, 1799.9.28.

<sup>186</sup> *Chŏngjo ŏch’alch’ŏp* letters 342 and 344.

people,<sup>187</sup> collaborated with each other or even with the king himself in drawing up memorials that they did not necessarily affix their names to,<sup>188</sup> and feigned illness in order to delay taking action.<sup>189</sup> Factional leaders had unofficial control over what lower members of the faction could and could not submit and were held accountable by the king for allowing divisive memorials to come out.<sup>190</sup> Chǒngjo asked Sim to write memorials for him so that he could bring up an issue for discussion without appearing to be the one to do so,<sup>191</sup> showed him drafts of his official responses and communiqués before he presented them in open court or sent them to their recipients,<sup>192</sup> and instructed him to limit the number of memorials his faction sent regarding a particular issue.<sup>193</sup> He also subjected at least some of Sim's memorials to his approval before they were submitted and at times demanded revisions.<sup>194</sup> These revisions could be quite specific. The King once directed Sim to ignore his official command and to resign, and even went on to explain exactly what sort of language he wanted Sim's resignation memorial to contain:

夜間安未。醫監試役待牌。一直違召。辭疏則草出後。必爲先示如何。措語則決不可反詈以此言奚爲而至及言之若浼。聽之若汚。名以堂堂內閣。得此羞恥。實欲無言爲言。而乙卯以後。以闡揚聖德及尊朝廷於日月之上等語闡發於章奏者。何嘗見之於時輩與少論耶。然則其疏當極意嘉獎扶植。然後卿等可謂有辭。辭直者。豈不勝人耶。疏中略帶似此意思爲可。對人亦必稱詡。如何如何。疏草待構得。卽示之如何。姑此。

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<sup>187</sup> Letters 319, 320, 340, 342, 344, 418, 435, and 606.

<sup>188</sup> Letters 342, 344, 347, 348, 402, 503, 504, 535, and 634.

<sup>189</sup> Letters 405 and 406.

<sup>190</sup> Letters 117 and 435.

<sup>191</sup> Letter 432.

<sup>192</sup> Letters 118 and 308.

<sup>193</sup> Letter 225.

<sup>194</sup> Letters 423 and 536.

Did you pass the evening well? As for the business of supervising the test for the Palace Medical Office, although you are waiting for the royal summons, remain in defiance of my royal order. As for the resignation memorial, would you be sure to show me a draft of it first? When you compose the language, say, “Rather, you can never rebuke anyone by saying ‘How could this language come out?’” Also, say, “Saying it is defiling; hearing it is contaminating. That the illustrious Royal Library could be shamed this way is unspeakable. Since 1795, have you not read such phrases as ‘we extol the Sagely Virtue’ or ‘we respect the court more than the sun and moon’ from the Disciples or Expedients? But it is appropriate to praise and encourage that memorial [by one Yi Ŭi-jun], and then Your Lordships can be said to have replied. Is it not less important who wrote the memorial than the accuracy of its contents?” I would like your memorial to generally include this sort of thing. What about also expressing this praise to other people? Show me a draft as soon as you have written it. I will end here.<sup>195</sup>

As if telling Sim the sort of language he wanted was not enough, on another occasion the King even told him *verbatim* what to say, to the point of virtually dictating memorials himself. Here, Chǒngjo instructs Sim how to compose a memorial requesting posthumous office for one Im Wi, a loyal retainer of Sado:

故承旨任瑋。以昔年宮官當溫幸時。爲隨駕承旨。偏承異渥。臣不敢畢陳。而及其再明年。出宰洪州。自五月二十四日不食痛哭。仍爲減性於旬日之內。其孤忠特節。可謂昏衢之一星。千載之下。志士灑泣。其在崇報之道。宜施褒贈之典等語。敷衍措辭爲可。

“Late Royal Secretary Im Wi used to serve Crown Prince Sado as an official when the prince went by carriage to the hot springs. He received the office of Royal Secretary by special favor and did so much more that I dare not try to explicate all of it. After two years he was appointed Magistrate of Hong County, yet from the 24<sup>th</sup> of the fifth month he was unable to eat, for he was wailing so, and ten days later he died. His singular loyalty and special integrity could be called a shining star in the dark sky. Though one thousand years pass, later scholars will be moved to tears. So that we might repay him properly, we must bestow upon him by special grace a posthumous office.” I would like you to expand upon this.<sup>196</sup>

Two weeks after this letter was sent, we find in the *Records of the Royal Secretariat* Sim Hwan-ji saying:

<sup>195</sup> Chǒngjo *Chǒngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 302, 1798.4.6.

<sup>196</sup> Chǒngjo. *Chǒngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 404, 1798.10.14.

故承旨任瑋。有卓然之節。而至今幽沒。未著于世。臣之所嘗嘸嘆者也。瑋以昔年宮官。當溫幸時。爲隨駕承旨。偏承異渥。臣不敢畢陳。而及其後二年。出宰湖邑。自五月二十四日。痛哭不食。仍以減性於旬日之內。其孤忠特節。可謂昏衢之一星。千載之下。志士尙爲之灑泣。其在崇報之道。宜贈以一品之職。仍施節惠之典矣。

Therefore, Royal Secretary Im Wi had moral integrity that stood apart, yet even now he is hidden and is unknown to the world. I your subject am one who has sighed in sadness at this. Im Wi used to serve Crown Prince Sado as an official when the prince went by carriage to the hot springs. He received the office of Royal Secretary by special favor and did so much more that I dare not try to explicate all of it. Two years later he was appointed Magistrate of Ho Township, yet from the 24<sup>th</sup> of the fifth month he was wailing such that he was unable to eat, and ten days later he died. His singular loyalty and special integrity could be called a shining star in the dark sky. Though one thousand years pass, later scholars will cry tears of reverence. So that we might repay him properly, it is appropriate that an office of the first rank be bestowed upon him by special royal grace.<sup>197</sup>

Later, Chŏngjo dictates not just part but virtually all of Sim's memorial:

辭疏名意。則臣無他能。斷斷一心。在於明聖志尊聖德爲主。而雖微事細節。聖恩之闕而不揚。小民之愚不知感處。必欲闡揚。無論風傳之虛實。竊附知無不言之義。敢陳淺見爲說。友以爲近俗於明聖志尊聖德。看作嘲訕之資。而聖人有事君盡禮。人以爲諂之訓。雖以此萬口譏臣。臣所不辭爲言。又以爲誠如諸道狀辭。無一犯者。爲朝廷賀紀綱之不挫。而萬一草草行查。泛泛封啓。則緣臣一言。重壞紀綱者。此尤臣難贖之罪爲說。而又以爲目下病勢之外。不被不當被之律。以爲妄言者之戒。則夫夫也。皆曰波夫官高職親。有罪倖逭云爾。則其爲紀綱之乖損。反有甚於犯科守令之倖逭當律爲言。措語各別倔彊。如何如何。疏草出後。卽示之也。

Make the following points in your resignation memorial: "I have no other ability. I did naught but clarify His Majesty's intentions and raise up the virtue of those intentions as my priority. Accordingly, although this is a trivial matter, I intended to make clear your Sagely benevolence so that the common people who have been unaware of it will learn of it and be moved by it. Rumor does not distinguish truth from falsehood. I simply reported to the King all that I know according to principle."

Also, write: "These days it is fashionable to mock clarifying His Majesty's intentions and raising up the virtue of those intentions. His Majesty instructed me saying, 'People say that serving the ruler and exhausting oneself in pursuit of ritual is merely toadying.' Because of this, although everyone blamed me, I did not refuse His Majesty."

Also, write: "Truly if what these memorials to the King say regarding important affairs is true, that there is not a single lawbreaker in the land, it

<sup>197</sup> *Sŭngjŏnwŏn ilgi* 1798.11.1.



would be a time to celebrate at court that moral order remains intact. But if we had made only halfhearted inquiries and did not inform the King of everything that is going on, that will further endanger moral order, so it is all the more difficult for me to atone.”

Also, write: “At present, apart from my acute illness, since there is a law against reckless talk, if I am not punished, everyone would say, ‘That man [Sim] takes advantage of his high position close to the king even though he is guilty of crimes.’ If this were done, if I am not punished, it would not have the benefit of causing officials who have done wrong to face punishment. Rather, it would hasten the collapse of public order.”

When you write the memorial, will you make sure you say all of this? Show me a draft of the memorial as soon as you have written it.<sup>198</sup>

By this point we should not be surprised to find that nearly all of this appears, often word-for-word, in Sim’s memorial submitted on the fourth day of the twelfth month, 1797.<sup>199</sup>

This puts a new spin on our understanding of events recorded in the *Annals*. As it turns out, sometimes officials took positions contrary to the throne in open court at the express direction of the king. Observe the following. According to the *Annals* account, Sim Hwan-ji staunchly opposed Chǒngjo’s pardon of Princess Hwawan, still known as this time as Madam Chǒng:

上曰古人之氣節習尚。比今時何如。而雖以臺閣之爲執法之官。尚有一二敢言之人。倡爲全恩之論。不少爲諱。以今氣節之委靡。習尚之渝愴。而語到此等懲討。則無非唐之魏徵。漢之汲黯。此其故何哉。古之人所以大過人者。能於衆論崢嶸之中。獨立異議。其言則雖似危言。而不言之中。裨補君德爲不少。所謂今人之人人宣言者。予不欲誣一世。而見今時態俗習。以爲如是而後。予乃樂聞也。若從此等風習。痛祛而亟改之。使有利風易俗之實效。則億萬斯年之基。亶在於斯矣。至於此事。則初無爭不爭之可論。卿等所請。果何事也。

The King said, “Is there anything today that can compare to the moral integrity and noble manners of the men of old? Of the officials who are responsible for enforcing the law through the Censorate there remain one or two who speak boldly, and without holding anything back call for the dispensing of royal favors. However, overall moral integrity has withered, noble manners have deteriorated, and there is a lot of talk of harsh punishments. What is the reason for this if everyone is a Wei Zheng of Tang

<sup>198</sup> Chǒngjo. *Chǒngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 643, undated.

<sup>199</sup> As recorded in the *Records of the Royal Secretariat*.

or a Ji An of Han?<sup>200</sup> What made the men of old so greatly exceptional is that in the midst of the clamor of a lot of voices, they stood out for their different point of view. Though they took a risk by speaking out the way they did, there were things they left unsaid, which aided the ruler's virtue in no small measure. Now I do not mean to censure the many people in the current generation who speak out when appropriate. Taking into account how things are these days, I am happy to open my ears up to what you have to say. If the practical effect would be to thoroughly eliminate bad practices and rectify the customs so that the customs would be beautified and practices proper, it would truly be the groundwork for a hundred million years. As for this matter, can we begin discussion of it without rancor or controversy? You ministers who requested this audience, what is your issue?"

After Chǒngjo opened up the floor for discussion, Sim Hwan-ji immediately denounced Madame Chǒng and flatly refused any suggestion that she be forgiven.

右議政沈煥之曰義理有本末。亂賊有源委。自某年義理而爲乙未義理。自乙未義理而爲丙申義理。乙丙亂賊。鄭妻卽其根柢。而麟謙恒簡養厚啓能輩諸賊。皆以鄭妻爲奧援矣。今若遽爾宥釋。以此傳教。頒之八方。垂諸後世。則明義錄將爲無用之書。而國不國人不少人矣。臣所以藉手事君者。惟此義理而已。臣等有死而不敢奉承矣。上曰卿言過矣。

Councilor of the Right Sim Hwan-ji said, "Moral principles have their foundation and their implications, and rebels are composed of ringleaders and followers. The principles behind 1762 [Sado's death] became the righteous principles of 1775 [the execution of opponents of the regency], and the righteous principles of 1775 became the righteous principles of 1776. As for the traitors of 1762 and 1775, Madame Chǒng was the root cause of their treachery. People like Chǒng In-gyŏm, Hang Kan, Yun Yang-hu, and Hong Kye-nŭng, these traitors all secretly supported Madame Chǒng. If we were now to suddenly pardon and release her and news of this action spread to all corners of our country, and even to future generations, the *Record Clarifying Righteousness*<sup>201</sup> would become a useless book. The nation would no longer be a true nation and people would no longer be real people. The reason I rely on Your Majesty and serve is because of moral principles. I your subject may face death, but I do not dare to flatter you [by not opposing this]."

The King said, "What Your Lordship has said is going too far."

<sup>200</sup> Wei Zheng (580–643) served as chancellor under Taizong and was widely admired for his wise counsel. Ji An (?-112 BC) served under Emperor Wu. He advocated peace with the Xiongnu.

<sup>201</sup> This is the account of the purge following Chǒngjo's accession, as written by the Intransigents.

After another official came to Sim's defense, the King cut him off and dismissed him. More opposition to Madame Chǒng followed, with Sim and his fellow Intransigent Yi Pyǒng-mo standing together until Chǒngjo angrily dismissed them both.

吏曹判書李時秀奏曰鄭妻匈謀方劇之時。惟我慈聖。炳幾燭奸。至誠保護。今若宥釋鄭妻。則其於慈聖保護之功德何如也。奏未畢。上曰吏判之奏。何可藉重爲說乎。吏判罷職。退出可也。時秀退出。上曰卿宰則有難一一盡奏。三司進前也。大司諫宋銓等。又力爭明義錄賊魁之不可宥釋。不許。煥之曰臣以何顏。自處於具僚之上乎。厚被國恩。豈敢爲求退之念。而忱誠淺薄。不能回天。臣則當退而竢罪矣。伏階下免冠。上曰右相舉措。萬萬過矣。勿爲免冠。卽爲陞殿。煥之不膺命。秉模曰今日處義。臣與右相無異。而右相則未蒙俞音之前。必不陞殿。如欲慰釋。則卽爲還收處分。區區之望也。上曰右相事過矣。命承旨往傳下教。煥之退而胥命。上曰右相事萬萬過矣。仍教曰到今國體。事面爲重。敬禮有不暇顧。況聞今日之教。而爲此舉。有非所知於此大臣者。右議政沈煥之罷職。秉模曰僚相之言。卽臣之言也。僚相旣被譴。臣亦當待命矣。

Minister of Personnel Yi Si-su said, "When the terrible plot of Madame Chǒng was afoot, only the sagely Queen Mother saw clearly this evil treachery and with utmost sincerity protected [Your Majesty]. Now if Your Majesty pardons Madame Chǒng, how could there be meritorious virtue in the Queen Mother's protection?"

Before Yi finished, the King said, "How can the Minister of Personnel try to blow this up all out of proportion? You are dismissed from your post. Get out." When Yi left, the King said, "You ministers of the State Council, if you have more difficulties to continually memorialize about, bring them before the Three Censorial Offices." Censor-General Song Chǒn and others also strongly complained that the *Record Clarifying Righteousness* explicated that traitorous ringleaders may not be forgiven, and so royal permission should not be granted.

Sim Hwan-ji said, "How can I maintain my dignity if I continue to occupy this position on the State Council? Since I have been immersed in the grace of the state [i.e., the King's favor], how could I dare to think of saving myself by asking to be dismissed? Yet I am truly shallow and unable to change Heaven [the King's mind]. It is appropriate that I resign and await punishment." He prostrated himself below the stairs and removed his official headgear.

The King said, "The Councilor of the Right's behavior is outrageous. Do not remove your headgear but instead approach the throne at once." Sim Hwan-ji did not obey the royal command.

[Councilor of the Left] Yi Pyǒng-mo said, "I your subject and the Councilor of the Right are no different in holding fast to righteousness today. Yet he cannot approach the throne before receiving the royal judgment. If you desire to relieve his distress, let him receive his punishment at once. This is my humble wish."

The King said, “In this matter, the Councilor of the Right is being totally ridiculous!” He commanded the Royal Secretaries to come in and take down a royal order. Sim Hwan-ji withdrew to await the order. The King said, “The Councilor of the Right in this matter has been exceedingly egregious.” Thereupon he directed, “This is a serious affront to the dignity of the state. Not even a minute of thought was given to reverence or propriety. Moreover, today even after hearing my instructions, he [Sim] went ahead and continued to protest as though he had not heard me at all. This is not the sort of behavior I expect from a high official. The Councilor of the Right is dismissed from office.”

Yi Pyŏng-mo said, “Speaking of my colleague on the State Council is the same as speaking of me, your subject. If he receives this rebuke, I your subject will also await such an order.”

The King then turned on the Censorate, demanding that they censure Sim. They, in the face of Sim’s “holding fast to righteousness”, demurred, so Chŏngjo dismissed them as well.

上曰臺臣既備員。何不傳啓乎。銓等曰鄭妻事。在於合辭之首。今宜先請還收全宥之命。然後始可以次第傳啓矣。上曰不必相持。三司諸臣。速爲退去。仍敕曰日前請對時。做錯有難寬恕。則不可強令察任。大司諫宋銓許遞。上仍還內敕曰三司諸臣。卽爲退去。

The King said, “All of you Censors are here. Why have you not prepared a charge for this offense?”

Song Chŏn and others said, “As for the affair of Madam Chŏng, we are still in the early stages of dealing with it. First we need to recall the order for a pardon and then we can go on to the next step of preparing charges.”

The King said, “There is no need for you to stick up for each other. All the officials in the Three Censorial Offices are at once dismissed.” Again he instructed, “When I requested a reaction to this proposal the other day, you said it would be difficult to pardon someone who had done wrong. And you said you could not be forced to implement this order. Censor-General Song Chŏn has to be replaced.” The King went into his personal quarters and directed, “All the officials in the Three Censorial Offices are dismissed forthwith.”<sup>202</sup>

Sim Hwan-ji certainly appeared to have openly defied the King and was dismissed from office as punishment for refusing to accede to royal desires regarding Madame Chŏng. The letter the King sent to Sim the previous evening, however, presents a different picture:

除煩。今番絲。極難處。而其實入置城內已多年所。朝廷之知若不知。太欠誠實。而昔在孝廟朝。亦有似處分。故老傳以謂上闕備邊司許接云。其

<sup>202</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1799.3.7.

時未聞以此上疏陳筭。然則今日廷臣。未必謂之不誠耶。至於日前處分。言足聽聞。而義理嚴。至於卿則夢閤去後。卿當不讓主人。事關於明義錄義理。寧過無不及爲可。明日當召見諸臣矣。出班力陳。仍卽下庭免冠請譴。則當觀事勢。免相與譴罷間區處。其後復拜之道。自有料量者。似此連意。而當以此意。使徐僚以吾意傳之耳。此書想未及傳於徐使之前矣。姑此。

I omit the greeting. This time the situation is very difficult. Truly it has been a long time since Madame Chŏng has entered the capital. Whether the people at court realize it or not, this shows a serious lack of sincerity. I dealt with her just like the situation in the court of Hyojong, and old men say this issue should be forwarded to the Border Defense Command in the palace. At that time I did not hear of memorials regarding this. This being the case, would you not say that the ministers at court are not acting with sincerity toward me these days? I have heard enough about how to deal with this issue yesterday, but the relevant moral principles here are very strict. Now that Kim Chong-su has passed on, *you must not concede the leading seat* [emphasis added]. This matter is related to the moral principles of the *Record Clarifying Principle*. How can we avoid bringing that record up when we discuss the matter? Tomorrow, I will solicit opinions from the ministers. When it is your turn, complain strongly. Then you will go down at once to the courtyard, remove your official hat, and request censure. Then I will look at the situation, remove you from office, and decide either to dismiss the State Councilors or to censure and remove them from office as well. I am even thinking of reappointing you, so give that some thought. I will make sure Sŏ Yong-bo understands my intentions, though it seems this letter will not reach his messenger in time. I will end here.<sup>203</sup>

Sim Hwan-ji's actions that day were in fact requested by Chŏngjo himself. The entire display of Sim's opposition to pardoning Princess Hwawan was a sham, probably staged to help Sim avoid the charge of being a royal puppet; whenever someone accused him of knuckling under to the King, he could point to this as a time he lost his office over principle, a badge of honor among the Intransigents. Chŏngjo, ever-ready to be all things to all men, reassured Sim that he would remain a leader of the Intransigents and, in fact, might soon receive another appointment. It may also have been a way to get Yi Pyŏng-mo to remove himself from office as part of a public show of solidarity with his fellow Intransigent, an incentive for Sim, publicly his factional brother but privately his rival, to go along with the charade.

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<sup>203</sup> Chŏngjo. *Chŏngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 442, 1799.3.6.

Chǒngjo routinely requested that Sim Hwan-ji intervene with his faction to deal with problems outside official channels,<sup>204</sup> and even consulted him for advice on how to protect Ch'ae Che-gong from accusations from within Ch'ae's own faction.<sup>205</sup> Despite Sim's public commitment to principle and precedent, Chǒngjo wooed him by offering to break with precedent in order to grant his request to leave the capital despite his recent appointment to central government office.<sup>206</sup> Chǒngjo was crafty enough to realize that men opposed to his expansion of royal discretion might be made more amenable were they to find that discretion exercised on their own behalf. Clearly, the King was able to placate to some extent even his avowed opponents, though those opponents would not hold back upon his untimely death.

#### CONCLUSION

As referenced in Chapter 1, Yi Han-wu details in his monograph how Chǒngjo learned the game of politics through early mistakes.<sup>207</sup> As we have seen, the King was initially uncertain of how to proceed, allowing his close friend and ally Hong Kuk-yǒng to dominate the first years of his reign and proving unable to protect royal relatives like his aunt Princess Hwawan and his half-brother Prince Ŭnjǒn from extreme banishment and death, respectively. Chǒngjo was a fast learner, however, and it was not long before he demonstrated what he had learned of the game of thrones. Hong Kuk-yǒng, seemingly at the height of his power, was cast down, all his might turned to vapor before the young king's wrath. A plot against his second half-brother Prince Ŭnǒn was stymied, and Princess Hwawan was slowly but irresistibly restored to her old place in the palace.

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<sup>204</sup> *Chǒngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* letters 120, 209, 431, and 503.

<sup>205</sup> Chǒngjo. *Chǒngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 138, 1797.6.5.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 432, 1799.1.28.

<sup>207</sup> Yi Han-wu. *Chǒngjo: Chosŏn ŭi hon i chida*.

When it came to the major political factions, Chǒngjo altered Yǒngjo's balance of power between two factions into a complex shifting of alliances designed to ensure that he himself was always in the supreme position. Chǒngjo rewarded his staunch supporters like Ch'ae Che-gong but was not beholden to them, lest they entertain pretensions of becoming a second Hong Kuk-yǒng. Neither did the King wantonly punish his opponents but sought ways both clear and shady to enlist their support. The consummate politician, Chǒngjo built relationships, portrayed himself as fair and impartial, and told his officials whatever it took to get them on his side. While the King was not the only skilled player of the game—men like Sim Hwan-ji were masters themselves who probably understood exactly what Chǒngjo was doing—they all, in the end, understood the system within which they had to work and knew they had to find some way to work together to avoid serious unrest and bloody purges, which no one by this point in the dynasty's history wanted to relive.

## Chapter 4: Building a System

As seen in Chapters 2 and 3, King Chǒngjo was a master both of the ideological tools available to him in Confucianism and of the political realities of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Chosŏn state. He deployed his extensive education and the Confucian emphasis on both kingship and scholarship to argue for increased royal discretion and aristocratic subservience while cultivating relationships with both supporters and opponents to accomplish his policy objectives.

All of this relied, however, on Chǒngjo himself. An energetic monarch with a keen mind, Chǒngjo was able to weld together a core of support among at least the high officialdom for his policies, but this would not be enough to perpetuate increased royal prestige and power beyond his own effective ruling years. For that, institutional reform was needed. This would be if anything even more difficult than managing factionalism and convincing the independent-minded *yangban* to follow the throne's lead, but the benefits would also be more long-lasting. Hence Chǒngjo sought to build a system that would ensure the continued centrality of the king in decision-making. This chapter deals largely with reforms on the civil side in pursuit of this goal, with the following chapter focusing on his military reforms.

The King sought to institutionalize both his own version of the role of the king in government and his notion of expanded discretion. Thus, after an early misstep with the position of selection secretary, he constructed the Royal Library to serve as an institutional basis for a pro-royal wing of the government and the *ch'ogyŏ munsin* system to educate officials in his own views on Confucianism and to place himself in the position of teacher



rather than student. He also expanded the king's freedom of action by recruiting men into the government who had been traditionally excluded, by dealing with problems directly through petitions rather than allowing officials to control his ability to take action through refusal to bring issues to his attention, and by planning the replacement of slavery with hired labor, thereby circumventing restrictions on the throne's employment of people for service.

The expansion of recruitment in particular represented Chǒngjo's most direct challenge to one of the pillars of *yangban* power, the virtual monopolization of office-holding by a small, self-selected group of *yangban* clans. The King attempted to bring men into the government who lacked a significant power base other than royal patronage, so as to ensure their support for his policies. These included men from the northern provinces (traditionally regarded as lesser *yangban* than those from the southern provinces whose capital branches dominated the central bureaucracy), secondary sons 庶孽 (*sǒŏl*, men born of a *yangban* father and a concubine), and men of the Southerner faction that had been effectively excluded from power since 1694. The last is particularly interesting, since the Southerners were ideologically in line with Chǒngjo, calling for a strengthened, activist throne as against the more aloof throne of the Patriarchs and Disciples. Yet, as Park Hyunmo points out, the King did not turn the government over to the Southerners, instead taking great pains to keep the throne above factionalism.<sup>208</sup> Chǒngjo kept a careful balance of bringing Southerners into the government as a source of support while not making them his sole pillar of power, lest they in turn gain power over him.

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<sup>208</sup> Park, *Chǒngch'i ka Chǒngjo*.

## EARLY SETBACKS: THE STRUGGLE OVER SELECTION SECRETARIES

Yǒngjo and Chǒngjo both attempted to expand the pool of talent from which they could draw officials. A key to controlling access to the halls of power was the position of selection secretary 銓郎 (*chǒllang*). This was an office in the Ministry of Personnel of rank 5a, assisted by an official of rank 6a. A rank 5 office is not obviously important, but the selection secretaries had enormous influence over recruitment, such that the office could be considered a “gateway” to high office. Lee Ki-baik summarizes its importance:

Although these posts were only of middle rank and so well below the ministerial level, the incumbents had major responsibilities in the process of recommending and selecting candidates for appointment to certain vital offices. Moreover, the importance attached to the *chǒllang* positions was such that it generally was necessary to serve therein if one hoped to progress steadily upward into the high ranking offices of minister or state councilor. Because of the power wielded by the *chǒllang*, not even the minister of personnel was permitted to involve himself with appointments thereto, and it became customary for an incumbent to recommend his own successor.<sup>209</sup>

Indeed, the existing factional lines in the 18<sup>th</sup> century trace back to a dispute over appointments to this office in 1575, and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Chosŏn scholar Yi Chung-hwan blamed the office itself as the cause of factionalism.<sup>210</sup> Even if the position of selection secretary did not cause factionalism, it was a key weapon of the factions.<sup>211</sup> Through control of this gateway to higher positions, a faction could monopolize access to the highest official posts. Thus, much factional strife revolved around appointments to this office, since control of these appointments meant control of the highest offices of state.

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<sup>209</sup> Lee Ki-baik. *A New History of Korea*, 208.

<sup>210</sup> Lee Song-Mu. “Factional Strife in Late Chosŏn”, 3.

<sup>211</sup> Park Hyunmo. “18 segi Noron ūi chǒngch’igwan kwa chǒngguk unyǒng kisul”, 330-331; Song Chan-sik. “The Power Structure of *Sarim* Politics”. In *The Institutional Basis of Civil Governance in the Chosŏn Dynasty*. Edited by John B. Duncan et al. Seoul: Seoul Selection, 2009.

Yŏngjo recognized the divisive potential of selection secretary appointments and accordingly abolished their power to influence higher offices.<sup>212</sup> Shortly after he took the throne, Chŏngjo restored this power.<sup>213</sup> His reasons for doing this are not clear. Chŏngjo himself claimed he had no choice but to do so in the face of official clamor. Yi Han-wu argues it was part of Hong Kuk-yŏng's bid for favor from the Patriarchs to secure his position early in Chŏngjo's reign,<sup>214</sup> while Park Hyunmo notes that Royal Library officials could be recommended to the office,<sup>215</sup> suggesting the King may have initially intended to funnel his supporters into the position and so did not wish to weaken it. Whatever his reasons, the restoration led to problems, and the King would eventually abolish the power again. In 1782, he lamented that the selection secretaries were just as partisan as ever:

銓通復設之後。或冀一分有淬勵之成效。迄今無益而有害。最是陽托激揚。陰濟己私。將使朝著。殆無完人。餘者亦莫不沈淪棲屑。念彼枯項黃馘。足可上干天和。又若有文跡之成憲。無不廢閣。以言傳之謬例。率欲遵守。似此許多弊端。指不勝擣。然朝家無矯揉之舉者。誠以太涉於銷刻故耳。自今三銓及郎官。少加惕念。毋致重究。

After the re-establishment of selection secretaries' recommendation [power], I occasionally held out hope that it would have some small effectiveness at changing things. Yet even now there has been not benefit, but harm. People appear supportive and inspiring while concealing their selfish interest. This has made the court all but bereft of perfected people, and among those who are left, there are none who are not mired in squabbles. With their withered necks and sallow faces, how can they be capable of rising up to the level where they can bring about Celestial Harmony? Further, if the law of our ancestors were without exception discarded and erroneous examples were handed down and followed, it would create an uncountable number of problems. Truly there are all sorts of problems at court because there is too much interference with the proper procedures. From now on, the Third

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<sup>212</sup> *Yŏngjo sillok* 1741.4.22.

<sup>213</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.5.29.

<sup>214</sup> Yi Han-wu. *Chŏngjo: Chosŏn ŭi hon i chida*, 280-281.

<sup>215</sup> Park Hyunmo. *Chŏngch'i ka Chŏngjo*, 154; Kim Sung-Yun. "T'angpyŏng and Hwasŏng: The Theory and Practice of Chŏngjo's Politics and Hwasŏng." *Korea Journal* vol. 41, No. 1. Spring 2001, 150.

Minister of Personnel and the selection secretaries should be more aware of this. It has not been given due examination.<sup>216</sup>

Thirteen years after restoring it, Chǒngjo abolished the power of the selection secretaries, never to re-institute it. His old ally Ch'ae Che-gong presented his case, probably the King's own case.

復罷銓郎通清之規。上謂判中樞府事蔡濟恭曰向者銓郎望筒中。前望之人。無故見拔。予甚訝惑矣。濟恭曰臣等每見躁競成風。廉恥日喪。故心以爲銓郎翰林復舊。然後或可掄得此弊。及夫銓郎舊法更設之後。只見其爭端日甚。私意日長。於是乎始知祖宗朝屢設而屢罷。蓋出於灼見弊源也。且以官方言之。銓郎是極望也。一經此任。則雖冢宰相府。無一可礙之處。一代之中。設有可合者。當不過數人而已。而遞易無常。新望頻數。纔經玉署。則便作循例輪通之窠。最初設置之意。豈宣然哉。聖上已悉此弊。使之有闕勿補。有延謐則差出。事過則旋即區處。論以國體。亦甚苟簡。臣意則此等處。只論其利害有無而決之。不當置之於可罷不可罷之間。上問諸臣。徐有隣鄭昌順沈頤之等。皆言可罷。

The regulations for selection secretaries to recommend men for key positions were again abolished. The King said to Brevet Second Deputy Commander Ch'ae Che-gong, "Formerly, when it comes to recommendations from selection secretaries, men who had previously desired the office were excluded without reason. I was startled and baffled by this." Ch'ae Che-gong said, "The ministers are forever engrossed in advancement, and day by day they lose any sense of shame. Therefore, we thought it best to restore selection secretaries and court diarists as they were before so that some abuses could be corrected. After the re-establishment of the ancient law for selection secretaries, contention at court only became more severe, and private interests expanded. The source of the abuses is the royal ancestors' repeated establishment and abolition [of the recommendation power]. Moreover, if you listen to the way officials talk, selection secretary is the most sought-after post. Once this post has been attained, not even a State Councilor or State Tribunal can stand in your way. Although there may be no more than a few people in a generation who are suitable, the holders of the office are changed without any regard for consistency, and there are many new lists of candidates that pass quickly through the Office of Special Councilors and are turned around in accordance with precedent. Can this truly be what was intended with its initial establishment? Your Sagely Highness, having already learned of this corruption, has ordered that the post be kept vacant. If there is a need to grant someone a posthumous title, then someone can be dispatched from another office to do that. Then, once that matter has been handled, that person should immediately return to his original post. Discussing it according to the way

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<sup>216</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1782.9.26.

things have been done at court would indeed fall short. In the opinion of I your subject, only by discussing what advantages or disadvantages there are can we decide the matter. We can leave it in this in-between state, neither committing to preserving it nor abolishing it.”

In response, Chǒngjo reiterated his earlier claim that he thought restoring the power was a bad idea:

上曰自初復設。決知其無益。而既設之後。欲罷不能。因循至今。適因言端。聞卿言。政合予意。銷刻何拘。吏郎復設之規。革罷。

The King inquired of the various officials what should be done. Sō Yu-rin, Chǒng Ch’ang-sun, Sim Yi-ji and others all said it should be abolished. The King said, “From the first moment it was re-established, I knew it was not beneficial, yet immediately after its re-establishment, my desire to end it was not possible to carry out and so it has been in place until now. According to what you have said, the words I hear from my ministers accord with my own intention. How can I be restrained by any suspicion that it is not prudent? The regulations re-establishing the selection secretaries[’ power] are abolished.”<sup>217</sup>

This fit in with the King’s overall goal of increasing royal discretion, in this case flexibility in the selection of men for office. By eliminating selection secretaries’ right to nominate their own successors, Chǒngjo removed a check on royal prerogative in the selection of officials to that office and, due to its importance, to all higher offices. Yet selection secretary remained a key office, and Chǒngjo developed another avenue for exerting royal control over it.

## KYUJANGGAK AND CH’OGYE MUNSIN: EDUCATION AND TRAINING

As noted in Chapter 1, King Chǒngjo understood that the amount of time he needed to implement serious reforms would have to be measured in months, if not years. Living in such a thoroughly agricultural society as Chosŏn, he would undoubtedly have understood the metaphor that one had to plant seeds that would only be harvested much later. Two of these seeds were the institutions of the Royal Library and the *ch’ogye munsin*. One began minor

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<sup>217</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1789.12.8.

and slowly became major, while the other cultivated those who were minor in order to take advantage of them once they became major.

### **The Royal Library: A Place of Learning and Power**

As part of his attempt to elevate the ruler and strengthen the throne against the aristocracy, Chǒngjo established the Kyujanggak, or Royal Library, an institution dedicated to the preservation of royal writings, using the precedent of Song China's royal library system to legitimize the construction. To its officials, Chǒngjo explained in moral terms his reason for setting up the Library:

設置內閣。勅立儀規。或當以爲不急之務。而予意別有在焉。近來士夫之名檢掃地。動作周旋之際。全沒收斂之意。進退相與之間。亦無揖讓之風。良足慨然。近臣者。遠臣之所效則者也。若使出入內閣之人。修飭威儀。不至放肆。酬接溫恭。秩秩有序。則風聲所暨。亦當有觀感之效。豈不足爲治化之一助乎。

I do not think establishing the Royal Library and creating rules and regulations for it are urgent matters, yet my intentions lie in doing so. The morality of the scholar-officials these days has been swept from Earth. This means they are utterly without comportment and fail to act properly. In their comings and goings and in their speech, they likewise have no habit of observing courtesy, to a regrettable extent, and even the officials close at hand imitate the officials who are far away. If they are made to go in and out of the Royal Library, they will show restraint and decorum and will not reach the point of behaving recklessly. If they are gentle, modest, and orderly, the effect will be that when they hear a baseless rumor, they will be strongly outraged. Would this not be sufficient to help bring order to the court and transform the officials?<sup>218</sup>

The Royal Library expanded, both in physical size and in scope and function, over the course of Chǒngjo's reign. In the beginning it served as a symbol of royal erudition and scholarship, but it would come to serve as a centerpiece of Chǒngjo's effort to bolster royal power through restructuring the central government. This vesting of importance in the Royal

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<sup>218</sup> Chǒngjo. *Hongjae chǒnsǒ* 174. "Ildŭgnok 14", "Hun'ŏ."

Library weakened the traditional aristocratic strongholds of power.<sup>219</sup> Kim Sung-Yun argues that the weakening of those government positions monopolized by powerful *yangban* meant that “a new power system [had] formed around [a] talent pool that received benefits and education directly from the king.”<sup>220</sup> Coupled with the *ch’ogye munsin* system, the Royal Library constituted a way to funnel pro-royal officials into the bureaucracy; a majority of appointees to the Library came through the system.<sup>221</sup> Young officials just beginning their careers were educated by the King in his own interpretation of Neo-Confucianism through the *ch’ogye munsin*, cultivating a relationship with him as he evaluated them. Then these men served in the Royal Library, and then as selection secretaries, and finally reached the high ranks of officialdom, and by this point they were well known by the King.

The Royal Library began as a repository for the writings of preceding Chosŏn monarchs. Chŏngjo ordered the construction of a “Pavilion for Receiving and Protecting the Writings of Previous Kings” 先朝御製奉安閣 in the Rear Garden 後園 of Ch’angdŏk Palace 昌德宮 immediately upon his accession to the throne, and the project was completed six months later.<sup>222</sup> The familiar face of Ch’ae Che-gong was charged with the project, and key Chŏngjo supporters like Hong Kuk-yŏng were immediately given high-ranking offices in it.<sup>223</sup> Originally the lower floor of the building, the *ŏje chon’gak* 御製尊閣 or “Pavilion for Respecting Royal Writings” was to house the written work of the Chosŏn monarchs. However, in the seventh month, the King suddenly announced that his own material would

<sup>219</sup> Yi Tae-Jin. “King Chŏngjo,” 181.

<sup>220</sup> Kim, “T’angpyŏng and Hwasŏng,” 153-154.

<sup>221</sup> Kim Moon-sik. *Chŏngjo ūi chewanghak*, 251.

<sup>222</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.3.11; 1776.9.25.

<sup>223</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1776.9.25.

be stored there and that a separate building, called the Hall for Receiving the Royal Plan 奉謨堂 (*pong'modang*), would be constructed for the writings of previous kings.<sup>224</sup> Administratively, the Royal Library was headed by two Superintendents of Scholarship 提學 of ministerial rank, specifically ranks 1b to 2b, and initially lacked a Director 大提學. It also consisted of two Auxiliary Superintendents of Scholarship 直提學 of ranks 2b to 3a, one Auxiliary Pavilion Official 直閣 of ranks 3a to 6b, one Assistant Educator 待教 of ranks 7a to 9a, and thirty-five lesser officials (including four Examiners 檢書官), supplemented by seventy clerks. This last meant that the Royal Library had approximately twenty percent more functionaries than the Office of Special Advisors, marking it as administratively important.<sup>225</sup> Yi Tae-Jin compares the Royal Library, to Sejong's Hall of Worthies 集賢殿 (*chiphyŏnjŏn*),<sup>226</sup> a center of scholarship, and contemporaries made the same comparison. In a memorial regarding problems with the crown prince's education, former high-ranking censor Cho Sŏk-mok wrote:

今之奎章閣。若漢之白虎觀。唐之瀛洲。宋之邇英殿。我朝集賢殿。其選則一代之英才。其榮則三接之寵眷。

Now the Royal Library is the same as the White Tiger Hall of the Han Dynasty, Land and Water Pavilion of the Tang Dynasty, Nearby Flower Hall of the Song Dynasty, and our own Hall of Worthies. As for the men selected for these organizations, they are reckoned men of talent of a whole generation. As for the honor of this appointment, they are favored by the king with three audiences.<sup>227</sup>

<sup>224</sup> Yi Tae-Jin. "King Chŏngjo", 175.

<sup>225</sup> Sŏl Sŏk-gyu. "Kyujanggak yŏngu (sang): Chŏngjo tae ūi chŏngguk kwa kwallyŏnhayŏ." *Taegu sahak* vol. 29, 22.

<sup>226</sup> Yi Tae-Jin. "King Chŏngjo," 169-176.

<sup>227</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1792.2.11.



In some ways the comparison of the Royal Library to the Hall of Worthies was apt. Both were centers of learning that stored royal writings, and the officials of both bodies were personally chosen by the king and worked closely with him as advisors. Nor did either institution retain its importance after the reign of its founder. But the differences are as illuminating as the similarities. The Library had about forty officials while the Hall of Worthies typically numbered around twenty. While officials in the Hall of Worthies escaped the frequent transfers of office typical of government service in Chosŏn and might serve for years or even decades in their positions, a post in the Royal Library often signaled royal favor that led to further promotion in the bureaucracy. The Royal Library was also the center of the *ch'ogye munsin* system, which had no counterpart in Sejong's time, and it became involved in politics at a king's behest (discussed below) rather than in opposition to a king, as the Hall did with Sejo.

At the time of its completion, the institution finally received its permanent name, “Kyujanggak”, a term that first appeared in Korea during the reign of Sejo, though it was not used.<sup>228</sup> The Royal Library bolstered monarchical prestige because the institution itself drew on Song precedent and gave central place to the writings of kings, and the name Kyujanggak reinforced Chŏngjo's portrayal of the king as being apart from, and above, everyone else in the state. “Kyujanggak” literally translated reads “Pavilion for the Writings of Kui”, a Chinese literary deity whose name eventually came to refer to the Chinese emperor's writings, with corresponding connotations of divinity. By housing his writings in a building

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<sup>228</sup> Sŏl Sŏk-gyu. “Kyujanggak yŏngu (sang)”, 13-14. According to Hucker, the Chinese equivalent “Kuizhangge”, which he renders as “Hall of Literature”, originates in the Yuan Dynasty, being established in 1329, though the name was very quickly changed. It does not seem to have housed imperial writings but instead was a place to hold what Hucker calls “Classics Colloquia”, which resemble the Chosŏn Royal Lectures discussed below. See his *Dictionary*, 290, #3382.

with such a name, Chǒngjo was not only implying equality with the Chinese emperor but comparing his scholarship to the divine.

It was not long, however, before the Royal Library became more than a vehicle for boosting royal prestige and assumed a more direct role in politics. This new role was marked by Chǒngjo's suspension of the Royal Lectures, or "Lectures from the Mat" 經筵 (*kyǒng'yǒn*). These "lectures" were supposed to be readings of the classics and discussions of Neo-Confucianism between the king and senior officials, held three times daily. In reality, of course, the king's schedule did not allow for such frequency, and so even dedicated monarchs like Yǒngjo could hold but a fraction of what the ideal called for.<sup>229</sup> As well, they were free-wheeling discussions that could stray far from the classic being examined and often ended up being about contemporary policy, which meant confrontation.<sup>230</sup> Yǒngjo, through extreme dedication to learning over the length of his long reign, went from being lectured to by his officials to defeating them on "all critical challenges on matters of interpretation or policy" there.<sup>231</sup>

Chǒngjo, on the other hand, chafed under a system that placed him as the student to be instructed by his own ministers, as this hardly lined up with his assertion of authority on the basis of his status as teacher-monarch. (See Chapter 2.) Though Yǒngjo managed to turn the system against his officials, he was the exception rather than the rule, and he was only able to do so after decades of intensive effort, helped by the sheer length of his life and reign. Apart from Yǒngjo, the Royal Lecture system generally obstructed royal authority, and

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<sup>229</sup> Haboush, "Confucian Rhetoric", 45-46. Haboush notes that routinely having more than five of the regular Royal Lectures per month was unusual and that having more than one on the same day was rarer still.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

supporters of increased monarchical power like Yu Hyŏng-wŏn called for its elimination for this very reason.<sup>232</sup> Further, Chŏngjo had been treated as heir to the throne throughout his childhood and youth, and he had therefore studied Confucianism with the most able tutors Yŏngjo could find for two decades before he took the throne. He was already a master of Confucian rhetoric and probably saw nothing to be gained from taking up the position of diligent student once he was on the throne, as his grandfather, a man not expected to rule, had been forced to do. Up until 1781, Chŏngjo held the Royal Lecture at the Royal Library. However, on the eighteenth day of the third month, he held his final Royal Lecture. From this point forward, *he* would be the teacher of young officials through his *ch'ogye munsin* system.<sup>233</sup>

The catalyst for the expansion of Royal Library influence was the fall of Hong Kuk-yŏng. Hong had been in charge of the daily operations, and with his fall from power, Chŏngjo took over direct administration himself. Thus, in his fifth year, “Chŏngjo ordered all the civil servants at *Kyujanggak* to assume duties at such bureaus as the *Yemun'gwan* (Office of Royal Decrees), *Hongmun'gwan* (Office of Special Advisors), and *Sŭngjŏngwŏn* (Office of Royal Secretariat) in addition to their scholarly duties” in the Library.<sup>234</sup> Strikingly, the officials of the *Kyujanggak* had the power to censure officials in the existing government organs but were not subject to censure in turn by the *Sahŏnbu* (Office of the Inspector-General).<sup>235</sup> This gave the King a way to control overzealous censors short of punishing them directly and opening himself up to charges of closing the channel of

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<sup>232</sup> Palais. *Confucian Statecraft*, 616.

<sup>233</sup> Yi Tae-Jin. “King Chŏngjo,” 177.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>235</sup> Kim Sung-Yun. “T’angpyŏng and Hwasŏng,” 149; Park Hyunmo, *Chŏngch’i ka Chŏngjo*, 154.

communication 言路 (*öllo*). Library officials could also be recommended directly to the office of selection secretary which, though weakened by Chǒngjo's abolition of its recommendation powers, was still a key office because it offered close contact with the King and Crown Prince and served as a stepping stone to high office.<sup>236</sup> In keeping with Chǒngjo's emphasis on face-to-face interaction, officials in the Royal Library had frequent daily contact with him. Thus, service in the Royal Library was both a weapon against the established state organs and a method of getting Chǒngjo's own supporters into those organs. It became such an important body that even high-profile Intransigents like Sim Hwan-ji and Yi Pyǒng-mo served in it.<sup>237</sup> Indeed, its highest offices were primarily filled by Patriarchs and Disciples rather than Southerners,<sup>238</sup> again illustrating Chǒngjo's intention to institute a system that would produce loyalty to the monarch in all officials, not just in a single faction of them.

### **The *Ch'ogyŏ munsin*: Studying at the Foot of the Throne**

So why were the Royal Librarians the King's "private officials"? Under the *ch'ogyŏ munsin* 抄啓文臣 ("selecting and leading civil officials") system instituted by Chǒngjo, the King personally selected promising passers of the *munkwa* under age thirty-eight to be re-educated in his philosophy of government—sometimes receiving lessons from the King himself. If the candidate already held an official post, he was given an exemption from his official duties for the duration of his studies; if he did not, he received a military sinecure such as Senior Military Protector 上護軍 (*sangho'gun*, rank 3a) or Junior Commander

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<sup>236</sup> Kim Sung-Yun. "T'angpyǒng and Hwasǒng", 149-150.

<sup>237</sup> Yi served in 1790, Sim in 1798.

<sup>238</sup> Park Hyunmo. *Chǒngch'i ka Chǒngjo*, 156.

司猛 (*sameng*, rank 8a). Chǒngjo instituted the system in his fifth year, not coincidentally the same year the Royal Library began to make its presence felt on the political scene. Due to his mastery of advanced Confucian texts, Chǒngjo was able to design the program he wanted these officials to learn, ignoring the demands of the older officials around him that he teach their preferred *sǒnghak* 聖學 (study of the sages).<sup>239</sup> Men re-educated under the *ch'ogyemunsin* system were the pool of talent from which Chǒngjo drew his support, and they were recruited without regard to faction.<sup>240</sup> Even secondary sons like Pak Che-ga, Yi Tŭk-kong, and Yu Tǒng-mu were recruited, often by special appointment. Virtually all appointments to the Royal Library were graduates of the system, and they slowly began to take over other parts of the government as well. By the closing years of Chǒngjo's reign, half of all officials to serve in high office in the central the government came through the *ch'ogyemunsin* system.

In the course of the King's quarter century on the throne, selections of usually sixteen men were made for the system ten times, for a total of 138 graduates. They were examined on seven texts—the Four Books together with the *Rites of Zhou*, the *Book of Odes*, and the *Book of Documents*—twice a month 試講 (*sigang*) and given problems to respond to once a month 試製 (*sije*). Also once a month, the King would personally administer an additional exam. All examinations were written by Chǒngjo himself. Outstanding responses—as determined by the King, of course—were published together 奎華名選 (*kyuhwa myǒngsǒn*), and students were rewarded based on their performance. An example of such a publication is

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<sup>239</sup> Yi Tae-Jin, "King Chǒngjo," 177-178.

<sup>240</sup> Jung Ok-ja. *Chǒngjo sidae ūi sasang kwa munhwa*. Tolbegae. 1999, 26; Pak Kwang-yong. *Yǒngjo wa Chǒngjo ūi nara*. P'urŭn Yōsa. 1998, 229.

the *Chǒngsi munjǒng* 正始文程, a collection of responses from students at the National Academy and the *ch'ogyē munsin* system, published in 1795. Students were freed of nonessential duties in order to concentrate on their studies and were expected to graduate at age forty.<sup>241</sup>

In addition to training officials in the importance of the king, the lessons also imparted the tools Chǒngjo regarded as necessary to carry out reform. Students learned the classics so that they would have the prestige of eminent scholarship to go head to head with other officials, and they discussed contemporary policy issues in order to understand the problems facing the government. They were frequently assigned policy questions, written questions from the King to officials about how to deal with a given problem or issue.<sup>242</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, Chǒngjo was concerned with the proper arrangement of the classics in ways that appear influenced by the School of Evidential Learning. An example of this is one of Chǒngjo's policy questions to the *ch'ogyē munsin* students, calling on them to investigate the Old Text/New Text problem that Evidential Learning scholars in China also revisited:

六經之中。最刳缺者。莫如尚書。其疑信相半。至于今未決者。又莫如尚書。蓋以孔壁所出稱古文。伏生口傳。稱今文。而古文不行於漢時。惟司馬遷乃得師授。其傳端的。今文盛行於漢時。而鼂錯自以己意。傳會屬成。此尚古文而絀今文之論也。古文文體平易雅馴。今文文體佶屈聱牙。佶屈聱牙者似乎古。平易雅馴者似乎今。故吳澄又疑千年古書。最晚迺出。豈有字畫文勢。略無齟齬者乎。

Among the Six Classics, there is none more deficient than the *Book of Documents*. It is fifty-fifty whether any part of it can be trusted or should be doubted, such that now nothing in the *Documents* is certain. The so-called Old Texts came out of the walls of Confucius's home, and what are called the New Texts are the texts that were passed on orally by Master Fu [after the Qin

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<sup>241</sup> Jung Ok-ja. *Chosǒn hugi munhwa undongsa*. Sǒul T'ŭkpyŏlsi: Ilchogak. 1988, 114. Kim Moon-sik. *Chǒngjo ūi chewanghak*, 251-255; Park Hyunmo. *Chǒngch'i ka Chǒngjo*, 157. For a detailed description of the contents and structure of the lessons, see *Chosǒn hugi munhwa undongsa*, 125-149. Kim says the four graduates' names were omitted from the official record.

<sup>242</sup> Kim Moon-sik. *Chǒngjo ūi chewanghak*, 254-256.

restriction of access to books]. The Old Texts were not used in Han times. It was only when Sima Qian took them as a model did they begin to be taken seriously and passed on. The New Texts were in vogue during Han times and Chao Cuo<sup>243</sup> imposed his own interpretations on them. The discourse esteeming the Old Texts and excluding the New Texts says that the literary style of the Old Texts is simple and elegant while the literary style of the New Texts is opaque and abstruse. [Yet] what is opaque and abstruse seems old, while what is simple and elegant seems new. Therefore Wu Cheng<sup>244</sup> doubts that the “old version” of a thousand years ago before they actually appeared later. So how could there not be contradictory views of what the writing styles of these two versions tell us?

Having laid out the overall disagreements between the two schools, Chǒngjo brings out the confusion of the multitude of different interpretations and orders his students to rectify this “blot” on Confucianism.

此尚今文而絀古文之論也。或以汨作九共稟飫等四十二篇。謂之亡書。或以孔安國家所得十餘篇。謂之逸書。又或以舜典篇首二十八字。出於南齊。得於大航頭。爲古文非眞之證。而同異之說。凡若此類。不勝其紛紜。夫尚書之在世間。猶天之有日月。地之有江河。江河決而復完。日月蝕而復圓。而尚書之決裂錯亂三千餘年。尚未得完且復焉。豈非儒家之一大欠典乎。何以則正其訛謬。辨其眞僞。一復先聖刪定之舊歟。願與諸大夫講之。 The discourse esteeming the New Texts and excluding the Old Texts say that that some [of these Old Texts] “Guzuo”, “Jiugong”, “Kaoyu”, and others, 42 in all that are called the “destroyed books”, along with around ten others found in Kong Anguo’s house that are called the “left out books”, and some 28 characters from the first part of the “Canon of Shun” came from the Southern Qin and were obtained from Dahangtou. Therefore, this is evidence that the Old Texts are not genuine. Discussion of these kinds of similarities and differences cannot overcome confusion. As for the existence of the *Book of Documents* in the world, it is like Heaven having the Sun and the Moon and Earth having rivers and streams. Rivers and streams overflow their banks and then return, and the Sun and Moon eclipse one another and then come round again, yet the confusion and disorder of the *Book of Documents* has persisted for more than three thousand years and still we have not been able to restore it to its original version. Surely this is a blot on the record of we Confucians. How can we rectify these errors, distinguish the true from the false, and

<sup>243</sup> ?-154 BC. Chao Cuo helped Emperor Jing eliminate a number of Han kingdoms. When these efforts sparked a rebellion against Han, the Emperor executed Chao in a failed attempt to placate the rebels.

<sup>244</sup> 1249-1333. A Yuan Dynasty scholar who criticized “superstitious” elements of the Great Plan in the *Documents*.

restore the proper arrangement of the Former Kings of old? I desire that the various scholars discuss this.<sup>245</sup>

Chǒngjo also put to his students the problem of the *Analects* and the compilation of the received text from the so-called “Lu” and “Qi” versions.<sup>246</sup> In addition to this, the King also handed the students a number of policy questions on how to implement reforms to recruit men widely, extending outside of the capital *yangban* to men in the countryside and outside of elite lineages, and incorporating secondary sons.<sup>247</sup>

Familiar names pop up as the official selector of men for the *ch’ogye munsin*. This official was of State Councilor rank, and the list of men Chǒngjo appointed is conspicuously made up of his supporters. The by now familiar name of Ch’ae Che-gong appears twice, as do those of Sǒ Myǒng-sǒn, Hong Nak-sǒng and Kim Chi’in, with Yi Pyǒng-mo holding the position shortly before Chǒngjo’s death. With a Southerner (Ch’ae), two Disciples (Sǒ, along with Yi Sǒng-wǒn), two Intransigents (Kim and Yi), and one Expedient (Hong), the head position illustrates Chǒngjo’s attempt to build a broad base of support. The system produced Tasan (1789) and his brother Chǒng Yak-jǒn (1790), Sǒ Yong-bo (1781), Yi Sǒ-gu (1784), and Kim Cho-sun (1786), he who would institute rule by in-law families. It is telling that, as soon as Chǒngjo died, his opponents immediately attempted to exclude these men from power.<sup>248</sup>

The *ch’ogye munsin* system and the Royal Library were Chǒngjo’s efforts to develop and then employ officials amenable to his program of a strengthened crown. However, what incentive would powerful *yangban* clans have to accede to a resurgent throne whose

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<sup>245</sup> Chǒngjo. *Hongjae chǒnsǒ* 50. “Ch’aengmun 3”, “Sangsǒ.”

<sup>246</sup> Chǒngjo. *Hongjae chǒnsǒ* 50. “Ch’aengmun 3”, “Non’ǒ.”

<sup>247</sup> Kim Moon-sik. *Chǒngjo ūi chewanghak*, 255.

<sup>248</sup> Kim Sung-Yun. “T’angpyǒng and Hwasǒng, 151-152.



increased authority would have to come at their expense? The King, as discussed in Chapter 2, tried to persuade them that it was morally correct to do so. Yet he was astute enough to attack on another front as well, and so he turned to men who might be more open to changes in the existing power structure, that is, men who were disadvantaged by that structure.

## EXPANDING RECRUITMENT: NORTHMEN AND BASTARDS

Chǒngjo believed that he alone, as king, was able to judge men appropriately and so had the power to select men without regard to faction, and he chafed under the prejudice of the elite capital families against men from the provinces and the resulting difficulty the king had in employing them:

昔諸葛亮猶曰宮中府中。俱爲一體。

In ancient times, Zhuge Liang<sup>249</sup> likewise said, “Those in the palace and those in the provinces are of one substance.”<sup>250</sup>

此外必有卿居讀書之士。救之以誠。寧或遺珠。更須廣求如何。

...

卿外讀書之人。必以收用爲心。則當有得聞之名姓。何必峻選爲也。先自一名而試之。其效當如何耶。

There are certainly literate scholars living in the countryside and reading books. If we were to search wholeheartedly for them, we would not overlook important talent, right? What about searching again, more widely this time?

...

If I make up my mind to gather and employ literate men from the countryside, there would be names worth hearing. What need is there to be strict in choosing? What would be the [negative] result if I were to appoint them to the lowest rank?<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> 181–234. A renowned general and statesman of the state of Shu during the Chinese Three Kingdoms Period.

<sup>250</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1776.9.22. This is the same conversation about factionalism discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>251</sup> *Chǒngjo. Chǒngjo ōch'alch'ōp*.449, 1799.4.15.

One of the greatest constraints on the authority of late Chosŏn kings was the monopolization of high office by a small number of *yangban* clans based in the capital. It was difficult for the king to impose his will on his officials when he could turn to no one else. Because the capital *yangban* were loathe to implement any reforms that jeopardized their own sources of wealth and power—landed estates largely hidden from tax collectors, elite Confucian education, and illustrious family background—the government was hampered in its attempt to strengthen state power, and kings were likewise hindered in their struggle to expand their freedom of action. If an official obstructed a monarch's expansion of power, that official could be dismissed, but he would be replaced by a man from the same class, background, region, perhaps even family—in short, a man just as likely to obstruct the king's efforts as the man he replaced, at least when it came to expansion of state or royal power at the expense of the *yangban*. Thus, supporters of greater royal power like Yun Hyu argued that the king should be able to choose ministers of any social class.<sup>252</sup> While Chŏngjo does not go that far, he does recognize the problem of being limited to the capital *yangban*, telling officials of the Royal Library:

人才何間於京鄉。而近來銓注。皆出京華。至於遐方。則百不舉一。此豈立賢無方之道哉。十室之邑。亦有忠信。鄉曲遐外之士。亦豈無抱才虛老之歎乎。況嶺南。尤是人才之冀北也。近來加意收用。竝與湖南而甄拔。或陞擢之。或獎詡之。庶有咸造之美。而但在銓衡者。莫體此意。一番注擬之後。更無繼用之實。與京洛之人有異。此豈朝家一視之道哉。

What is the difference between a man of talent from the capital and one from a rural village? Now if I were to send only men from the capital out to all the outlying districts, I could not raise one man for every hundred I would need. Is this placing the worthy without restriction? A village of ten houses also has loyal and honest men. Why should worthy scholars in distant and isolated villages lament that they grow old without their talent ever being recognized? Moreover, Yŏngnam produces many excellent men of talent. Recently I have noticed and made use of them, and as with the men of Honam, I have selected

<sup>252</sup> Haboush. "Ritual Controversy". In *Culture and State in Late Chosŏn Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1999, 82-83.

men of talent. Some I will promote and others I will reward, and a thing of beauty will be constructed. Only those vested with screening men will not comprehend that this is my intention. Once a candidate has been nominated one time, I will not appoint him to that office again. How could the court be even-handed and without discrimination if I treated men from the capital differently?<sup>253</sup>

Part of Chǒngjo's effort to combat this was to bring into the government men without an existing power base in the capital, who would therefore owe their positions to him alone. These men were also distinct from the capital elite in several ways. The northern elite were not generally considered true *yangban* by the capital elite and their branches in the southern provinces, nor were secondary sons 庶孽 (*sǒŏl*)—that is, sons of *yangban* fathers by consorts other than the primary wife. Thus, they lacked the elite status granted to the capital *yangban* by birth. They were also considered lacking in their Confucian education, northmen in particular due to their involvement in commercial activity, something a good Confucian aristocrat avoided.<sup>254</sup> This emphasis on commercial activity as opposed to landed estates was another point of divergence.

The primary method to incorporate the northerners was the military examinations. Neither Yǒngjo nor Chǒngjo could, at a stroke, flood the higher offices with “barbaric” northmen. After all, Chǒngjo had enough trouble getting a Southerner like Ch'ae Che-gong to high office, despite Ch'ae's Confucian erudition and relatively illustrious ancestry. Therefore, these two kings, “in their efforts to bolster royal power, tried to promote talented men from the north” through the military examination system, of lesser prestige than the civil system.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Chǒngjo. *Hongjae chǒnsǒ*. “Ildǔngnok” 8, “Chǒngsa” 3.

<sup>254</sup> Hwang Kyung Moon. “From Dirt to Heaven: Northern Koreans in the Chosǒn and Early Modern Eras.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* vol. 62, no. 1. June 2002, 154.

西北別付料試射之規。自昔已然。況聞近因兵曹公文。北路武士。多有上京者云。今則都政不但已過。皆是無薦之類。雖欲收用。其勢末由。皆將空來空往。明日西北別付料軍官試射時。一體待令。

... 向以遐方武士之不得沾官。屬勤飭教。今番都政。須有別般聳動之舉。可責實效。三南兩西北關松都人。果已搜訪準擬乎。此意另飭西銓。

The regulations for administering the Northwestern Special exam have been this way for a long time. Moreover, I hear that now, because of official notices by the Ministry of War, there are many military men coming to the capital on the northern road. Now not only has the six-month evaluation already passed, but none has been recommended for office. So although I desire to appoint them to office, the situation is such that I cannot. They all come with nothing, and they leave with nothing. Tomorrow I will hold a special military examination for Northwesterners. Receive my order.

...

Before, military men from distant regions could not obtain office, and I have repeatedly handed down instructions to change that. Now the action taken at this six-month evaluation has been so especially disturbing to me that I should demand practical results. I have already found people in the three southern provinces, the two western provinces [P'yŏngan and Hwanghae], the northern frontier, and the Kaesŏng region, but will they be accordingly appointed to office? For this reason, I explicitly order the Ministry of War to do this.<sup>256</sup>

According to Eugene Park, “the center’s effort to accommodate northern residents through the military examination reached its limit by about 1800”,<sup>257</sup> that is, the year of Chŏngjo’s death. This discrimination was, in turn, a direct cause of a serious rebellion in 1812.<sup>258</sup>

Less successful was Chŏngjo’s attempt to get secondary sons into the government, partly because he also pushed for them to be included in the civil branch, which the powerful *yangban* clans more jealously guarded. While Yŏngjo began the process of appointing secondary sons, little had been accomplished even by 1772. Ch’ae Che-gong asked Yŏngjo

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<sup>255</sup> Park. *Between Dreams and Reality*, 115.

<sup>256</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1781.6.22.

<sup>257</sup> Park. *Between Dreams and Reality*, 114-115.

<sup>258</sup> Sun Joo Kim, *Marginality and Subversion in Korea: The Hong Kyongnae Rebellion of 1812*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009.

to address secondary sons' failure to be listed to the list of candidates for government office despite their qualifications, but he refused to intervene on their behalf:

慶尙道庶孽儒生全聖天等三千餘人。以庶類通清後。不許入鄉案。陳疏仰請。上哀其志。特賜批許之。是日蔡濟恭奏曰嶺南鄉案。防限甚嚴。雖有朝令。嶺儒必不順從。如是之際。恐生亂階。上然之。更批曰朝廷自朝廷。鄉案自鄉案。予何區區於此等事。蓋濟恭南人也。知嶺南風俗。故有此請。 A secondary son and student from Kyōngsang Province, Kim Sōng-ch'ōn, and 3000 others submitted a memorial because, after being screened by the Incorruptible Officials [清官 *ch'ōnggwan*],<sup>259</sup> these secondary sons did not receive permission to be added to the list of names for service in the provinces. Kim and others requested an audience before the King [Yōngjo], who was saddened by their intention and specially granted an audience. That day, Ch'ae Che-gong reported to the throne, "The official list in Yōngnam is severely restricted. Although there are court commands, the Confucian scholars of Yōngnam must not be obeying them. If the boundaries are this rigid, I fear it will give rise to disorder in the ranks of officialdom." The King considered this and gave another answer: "The court is the court, and the local official list is the local official list. How could my humble self have anything to do with matters such as these?" Ch'ae Che-gong, being a Southerner, knew the customs of Yōngnam. That is the reason he made this request.<sup>260</sup>

Chōngjo argued against the discrimination against secondary sons mostly by appealing to his prerogative as king to select whom he would, as noted above, but he did occasionally make a more general criticism of the distinction of secondary sons from "genuine" *yangban*. In 1791, the King ordered that the National Academy cease seating secondary sons apart from primary sons:

敎大司成柳憲曰序齒一事。先朝飭敎果何如。則近聞一名人。別坐南行云。凡民俊秀。皆入太學。王公貴人。與之序齒。則一名之人。地雖卑微。均是班族。且聖人敎人。只觀其人之賢否。不論地閥之貴賤。則堂堂賢關。豈獨使一名人。別坐南行。俾不得同列乎。且既許上庠。而不欲比肩。義無所據。食堂序齒。何關於朝廷官爵私家名分。而或別坐南行。或降坐末班。萬萬無當。卿職是師儒。其所矯革。非卿之責乎。

The King instructed Headmaster of the National Academy Yu Tang: "Officials in the Late King's court were seated according to age, but now I

<sup>259</sup> *Ch'ōnggwan*, or Incorruptible Officials, served in the Office of Special Counselors. It is not directly stated, but presumably they rejected these men due to their status as secondary sons.

<sup>260</sup> *Yōngjo sillok* 1772.12.28.

hear that secondary sons are seated in the southern row [in the back in the National Academy]. Generally, if all the talented among the people enter the National Academy and sit together with the high nobility according to age, then although the position of secondary son is lowly, they are in the same *yangban* group. Indeed, when a sage instructs people, he only sees whether they are worthy or not and does not discuss whether their positions are noble or base. How then can this grand institution exclusively seat secondary sons in a separate southern row [from the sons of primary wives]? Moreover, these secondary sons have already received permission to enter the National Academy, but they are not permitted to stand shoulder to shoulder [with *yangban* sons]. This has no basis in righteousness. What does the seating of officials in the Meal Hall [of the National Academy] have to do with official titles or private family prestige? Segregating some to the southern row and raising others up to the final row is utterly unjust. Your Lordship is in the position of Headmaster, so rectify this situation. Is this not Your Lordship's responsibility?"<sup>261</sup>

Though Chǒngjo pushed for secondary sons in the civil branch, he also worked to get them into the military, as resistance to their employment in military service was less severe. In 1777, the King directed that secondary sons be permitted to serve in military offices as part of his larger effort to revamp the military:

召見訓練大將張志恒。上曰禁旅卽宿衛之士也。近年以來。漸不成樣。目不識魚魯。身不閑軍旅。無賴白徒。苟充額數。言念軍制。良可寒心。予欲定宣薦內禁衛。取才入屬之法。當下教而馬兵亦無非下賤之類。全昧坐作之法。何以得力於戰陣乎。若以中庶填充。爲遷轉之階。則似有一變之效也。志恒曰馬兵則與禁軍有異。似或不願矣。上曰渠輩既未入於禁軍。又不與於馬兵。則將故甚事。古有甲士宅正兵宅。行伍之不卑。推此可知。予意欲大其規模。一變軍制。雖以大同言之。先自一道始。次次行之。此法亦自一營門先始。則豈無不成之理。目今瘡痍之餘。百弊俱生。拘於俗習。矯變甚難。予言雖似迂闊。若因循宿弊。差過四五年。則予之此心。亦易消磨。及此時變通。庶有振作之效也。

Grand Commander of the Military Training Agency Chang Chi-hang was summoned before the King. The King said, "The Palace Guards are none other than the military officers who are supposed to protect the king, but in recent years, they have not been shaping up. They are so ignorant that they cannot distinguish the word 'fish' from the word 'foolish', and they do not hone their military skills. That these rascals and untrained green troops fill the ranks and people say they think this constitutes a military unit, it is truly pitiful. I want to determine a method to get men of talent as candidates for the

<sup>261</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1791.4.16.

Palace Guards. It is appropriate to hand down an order regarding this, but there is no one in the regular cavalry who is not base. When it comes to establishing a law to govern all their behavior, how can I strengthen the military? If I take the step of using *chung'in* or secondary sons to fill it out, the effect would be a great change.” Chang Chi-hang said, “There are differences between the Palace Guards and the regular cavalry, so this does not seem desirable.” The King said, “If they cannot enter the Palace Guards, nor can they become part of the regular cavalry, what shall we do? In ancient days, there were armored [i.e., elite] soldier families and regular soldier families, and we can surmise that the rank and file soldiers were not regarded as lowly. My intentions are large-scale, and I mean to greatly revamp the military system. Although we talk of the Grand Unity, we have to begin with small steps and slowly implement it. If we use this method of beginning with the entrance to the military base, then how could there be any reason it would not succeed? Now there are a number of sores and wounds and a hundred vices springing forth. Because vulgar customs are causing these problems, correcting them is difficult. Although what I am saying seems unrealistic, if this corruption in the palace guards is allowed to persist for four or five years more, this heart of mine will have been wasted. Thereupon at this time let us bring about a great change, and the effect will be that secondary sons will be heartened.”<sup>262</sup>

The *yangban* swiftly condemned any attempt to allow secondary sons into the government on the grounds that this would blur the status distinction between primary and secondary sons and, therefore, threatened status distinctions in general. Officials of the Office of Special Advisors presented this argument in the context of alleviating a drought:

我國之俗。既以族閥用人。今若以各族之庶。歸之一類。無復區別。則渠輩之稍有知識者。亦必恥之。而嫡之所積。以庶而得通。庶則已顯。以嫡而反微者有之。則非但有混雜倒置之歎。亦必啓以孽凌嫡之弊。法如是而能久者。未之有也。臣謂當各視其嫡。而降一等。以附周禮小宗統於大宗之義。然後其法始可無弊矣。

It has been the custom of our state to appoint men according to their family background. Now if we regard secondary sons of every family as if they are of the same group as primary sons with no way to distinguish them from each other, they will gradually come to realize this and it will cause some awkward situations. If primary sons face obstacles because of the entry of secondary sons into service, so that secondary sons hold high office while primary sons are impoverished, then will there not be confusion and the vice of insulting primary sons? A law like this has never remained in place for long. We your subjects say that looking at each primary son and placing him first is what the

<sup>262</sup> *Chôngjo sillok* 1777.7.22.

*Rites of Zhou* means when it discusses collateral lines' being subordinate to the primary line, and so the law originally can be said to be free from any corruption.<sup>263</sup>

The *yangban* accordingly moved to block the appointment of secondary sons. In 1778, after Hwang Kyŏng-hyŏn and 3272 others from the three provinces of Kyŏngsang, Chŏlla, and Kongch'ung sent in a memorial protesting the discrimination against them, Chŏngjo lamented that his instructions to remedy this were not being carried out:

子續父序。天之理也。嫡妾俱無子。然後許以繼後。國有其典。而臣等。則子不遂續父之理。是父子之親缺矣。臣爲君忠。人之道也。惟才是用。不擇尊卑。萬古通規。而臣等則臣不展事君之誠。是君臣之義阻矣。

...

不意去歲秋。各道鄉人。稱以泮通播傳。其文曰自昨年以來。朝廷之臺望不擬。大學之齒坐已罷。又曰列邑校院。割去衿案。沙汰任掌。使庶類。不得接跡於校院。因爲藉口。起鬧生釁。群聚相謀曰臺望不擬。齒坐已罷。則錄案可削於鄉學。一紙電飛。三南雷和。割臣等既合之儒錄。燒臣等已同之鄉案。罵詈毆逐。果使臣等。不復投跡於學宮。噫。此錄此案既是先朝許通之明命。而鄉人只憑一張白文。擅自毀削。大失臣民之道。而略無顧忌。臣等騷然無樂生之心。

[The memorial said,] "Sons continuing their fathers' examples is the pattern of Heaven. If a [man's] legitimate wife has no sons at all, the state has regulations permitting adoption [from a collateral line]. Yet we your subjects [as secondary sons] cannot become our fathers' heirs, and this creates a lack of closeness between father and son. Subjects being loyal to their lord is the way of human beings, and [the lord's] employment of talent is not a choice between noble and base. This is the rule that has been passed down from time immemorial. Yet we your subjects are not open to serving our lord with sincerity. This is an obstruction to the principle of subject and lord."

...

Last fall, the local village elite throughout the country unexpectedly received a message which was being circulated by the National Academy and the National Confucian Shrine. It read, "From last year to now, the court's candidate list [for office] has not been submitted, and seating according to age in the National Academy has already been eliminated." It also said, "Each village school and private academy has eliminated the names recorded in the student lists and scrubbed away their positions, and secondary sons may not set foot in the village schools or private academies." Due to this, there is great contention. People say to each other, "The candidate list was not submitted, and seating according to age has been eliminated, and the records have been

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<sup>263</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1777.5.6.



removed from the village schools.” This one piece of paper strikes like lightning and the three southern provinces blindly follow it. They have already destroyed the records of students and already burnt the ministers’ list of village student names, and so they are free to heap abuse on us and chase us out. As a result, we your subjects are barred from setting foot in the National Academy. Alas! Although the Late King clearly commanded that we are to be included in these records, these lists of names, the people in the villages use the excuse of this one unadorned paper to destroy them at their whim. They have largely lost the way of ministers and people and have no scruples.

Hearing the plight of these men, Chǒngjo in response charged his officials with failing to carry out the instructions he had already given that should have avoided this situation in the first place.

批曰爾等之七朔守闕。備陳衷曲。爾等之情事。良足苦矣。朝家之所以處爾等者。既有頒下節目。則非不軫念也。外邑不遵朝家德意者。自當有申嚴之道矣。所請序齒等事。雖有先正之論。俱係儒林間事。其令賢關稟處。The King answered, “You all for seven months have stood outside the palace gates with earnest minds, preparing pleas, such that your state is one of much hardship. There are already regulations at court for dealing with what you have said, so it is not something that has not been thought of. Still, when those outside the capital do not respect the Virtuous intentions of the court, the appropriate Way to proceed is to issue the instruction even more sternly. Although there have been discussions of your request to be allowed to register in the village schools before, this matter concerns the whole community of scholars. Let the National Academy deal with it.”<sup>264</sup>

Despite Chǒngjo’s promise “to issue the instruction even more sternly”, seven years later, in 1785, he complained that secondary sons were still not appearing on lists of candidates for high civil offices:

教曰庶類疏通事。丁酉節目。尚不遵行。朝家之失信大矣。渠輩落莫。姑捨是。殊乖疏鬱之本意。又若許要一款。有名而無實。文臣之經三曹郎者。僅止一二人。而蔭官之判官。絕未聞差擬。始自今日政。一遵丁酉節目。着意修明。近來凡事任之。決知無其效。三曹郎官該司判官。雖無見闕。其令作窠。以庶類備擬。排望之際。毋或較量。通同排擬若是。然後始可言許要。銓曹知悉。

The King instructed, “As for the matter of removing the misconception of secondary sons, the decree of the *chǒngyu* year [1777] has not yet been

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<sup>264</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1778.8.1.

faithfully carried out. There has been a great loss of trust in the court. They are dejected at being tossed aside like this, as this is against their fundamental intention of not being treated as worthless. If they get a clause giving them permission for something important, it is only in name and not in actuality. I have heard of all of one or two appointments to the Ministry of Punishments, the Ministry of Taxation, or the Board of Public Works among the civil officials, and none among the top rank officials. In political affairs, from now on, act consistently according to the decree of the *chǒngyu* year. Now I have entrusted this business to you, so know for sure that it has not been effective. Although the offices of section chief of Taxation, Punishments, and Public Works are not presently vacant, I command that they be made so in order that secondary sons be recommended. Do not take into account the status within the family of the various candidates. Instead, list all the candidates together. Thereafter, we can say they are given permission to hold important posts. Make sure the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Personnel know this.”<sup>265</sup>

Chǒngjo was unhappy that secondary sons could not get beyond the rank of borough chief in the capital (*pugwan*).

命部令以庶孽通擬。吏曹啓言部官鄭昌謩。以秩卑之人。有難陞令。敎曰似此地處。文許曹郎。蔭斬部官。可乎。部官雖極選。豈過於守令乎。且與廟令寢令事體有間。此而拘礙。有非定式之本意。仍詢大臣。大臣亦以爲當許。遂有是命。

The King commanded that secondary sons be listed on the potential appointments list [to district magistrate]. The Ministry of Personnel reported to the King, “Because this borough chief in the capital is of low status, it would be difficult to get this order accepted.” The King replied, “Even though this [promotion] is itself to a low-level post, are you saying we can appoint newly-minted examination passers to lower-level positions in the Six Ministries but we cannot give protected appointments to borough chiefs? A lot of care is taken in the selection of those who serve as borough chief, so why should we be more demanding in selecting those who will [merely] serve as local officials in the countryside?”<sup>266</sup> Moreover, such a clerk handles affairs that are different from those of tomb officials and royal chamber officials, so if this is blocked, the reasons behind it are not proper.” Thereupon he put the question to the high officials. They also regarded it as proper to give permission, and accordingly the order went out.<sup>267</sup>

<sup>265</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1785.2.17.

<sup>266</sup> The son or grandson of a high official was entitled to automatic appointment to a low-level office without passing the examinations, known as a “protected appointment” 蔭 (*ŭm*). Appointments to even low-level positions in the Six Ministries were respected, those to district magistrate less so. The King is pointing out that inexperienced recent graduates gain immediate access to higher offices while experienced secondary sons are passed over for even the lowliest posts.

While his efforts to get secondary sons into the regular civilian bureaucracy were stymied, the King had much more control over the officials of the Royal Library, and by this means he was able to get some secondary sons into the government. In the third month of 1779, Chǒngjo appointed Pak Che-ga 朴齊家, Yi Tǒk-mu 李德懋, Yu Tūk-gong 柳得恭, and Sǒ Yi-su 徐理修—all secondary sons—to the position of editor 檢書官 (*kǒmsǒ'gwan*) in the Royal Library. Pak, Yi, and Sǒ were all members of the Northern Learning School 北學派 (*pukhakp'a*), again revealing Chǒngjo's willingness to employ men who took advantage of Qing knowledge even as he disparaged the Qing to staunch traditionalists like Sim Hwan-ji. Each editor also concurrently held a military post of rank 5 or lower; through this entrance into the military bureaucracy, Pak Che-ga would eventually receive an appointment carrying the substantial rank of 3a. Though the military was the less prestigious branch, senior third rank was part of the *tangsanggwan* 堂上官 (“officials permitted to go up to the palace”), the elite of the high officials. As Eugene Park notes,

The vast majority of officeholders never attained the sixth rank, the lowest level at which officials were eligible to attend court meetings held in royal audience, and achieving this rank was considered to be a break-through in one's career. The next milestone, which only a small minority of officials ever passed, was to achieve the senior third rank, divided into upper and lower sublevels. Receiving the upper-senior third rank signaled admission into the top stratum of officialdom.<sup>268</sup>

Thus, military office or not, Pak Che-ga achieved a singularly high rank as a secondary son, due at least as much to Chǒngjo's shepherding of his career as to his own brilliance.

Chǒngjo attempted, with limited success, to take advantage of men from untapped *yangban* branches in order to expand his freedom of action and create a coterie of men

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<sup>267</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1791.4.11.

<sup>268</sup> Park, *Between Dreams and Reality*. 198, note 4.

without their own power bases who would therefore be dependent on him alone for their positions. The military, being less favored by the most prestigious *yangban* clans, was more open to this sort of maneuvering. Yet Chǒngjo fought on many fronts, and even as his efforts to build a coalition of previously-excluded officials that would support him were stymied, he sought to restrict the necessity of that he use officials at all.

### PERSONAL RULE: CIRCUMVENTING MINISTERS

Though Chǒngjo was adept at overcoming ministerial resistance to his policies, he also sought ways to avoid having to go through ministers altogether. James Palais has argued that the ideas of Chosǒn reformer Yu Hyǒng-wǒn did not have much impact before the rule of the Taewǒn'gun. It is possible, though, that Chǒngjo was influenced by Yu's proposals for reform. Yǒngjo in 1770 ordered the compilation of an institutional encyclopedia along the lines of Ma Duanlin's *Comprehensive Examination of Documents* 文獻通考 (*Wenxian tongkao*). This encyclopedia neglected Yu's work, among others, and so Chǒngjo ordered the production of a second edition that included writings both by Yu himself and by others familiar with his ideas. By this time, Palais tells us, "Yu's work had to have been known to the most prestigious scholar-officials at court",<sup>269</sup> and it is not unreasonable to assume it was known to the King as well, given the inclusion of Yu in the second edition. In any case, Yu believed that it was vital for the king to meet with ministers face to face rather than issuing orders to them through intermediaries and that ministers should in turn present themselves in

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<sup>269</sup> Palais. *Confucian Statecraft*, 8. As will be discussed later, Chǒngjo's writing on slavery shares some commonalities with that of Yu Hyǒng-wǒn. Yu was also the first to suggest that military defenses be built in Suwǒn, whose Chǒngjo ordered in 1796. See Roh Young-koo, "The Construction and Characteristics of Hwasǒng Fortress in the Era of King Chǒngjo." *Korea Journal* vol. 41, no. 1. 2001, 194.

person rather than passing messages up the chain of command.<sup>270</sup> Whether or not Chǒngjo read Yu's work, he must have agreed with Yu on these points, since he attempted to circumvent layers of officialdom to obtain information and issue orders directly and insured personal meetings between himself and Royal Library officials. He also took measures to remove prerequisites for office-holding in order to expand his power of recruitment. An example of such a discussion is below:

次對。上曰捕將通望。必待禁軍別將履歷。禁軍別將。必經都監中軍。然後始爲之。卽故相元仁孫筵稟定奪者。卿等以爲何如。領議政金致仁曰禁軍別將都監中軍。均是亞將。豈必爲捕將龍虎將通望之階梯乎。國家用人。惟才是取。人苟可合。則雖未通捕將。有直通將望之例。恐不必太局也。

...

右議政蔡濟恭曰人苟可用。雖將望不害直通以亞將。爲亞將之階梯。臣未見可也。

...

大臣將臣之議如此。此後復舊施行。

There was a royal audience. The King said, "Candidates for the office of Superintendent of the Capital Police must first serve as Adjunct Commandant of the Elite Royal Guard, and the Adjunct Commandant of the Elite Royal Guard must serve as Director's Adjutant. Only after this is he permitted to become a candidate. If I had selected the late State Councilor Wŏn In-son, what would Your Lordships have thought of that?" Chief State Councilor Kim Ch'i-in said, "The offices of Adjunct Commandant of the Royal Guard and Director's Adjutant are junior positions. What need is there to rise through those ranks in order to be on the recommendation list for Superintendent of the Capital Police or Dragon-Tiger General? When the state employs people, it only accepts those with talent. There are cases of men who are suited to the office being recommended even though he has not yet served as a police superintendent. I fear this [service in preliminary offices] is an unnecessary situation."

...

Minister of the Right Ch'ae Che-gong said, "If we are to make use of people, then although there is a set of recommendations, there is truly no harm in considering others. I do not yet see it as right that one needs to rise through those assisting ranks."

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<sup>270</sup> Palais. *Confucian Statecraft*, 603-608.

[The King said, “[S]ince the discussion between the high ministers and generals of the main gate is like this, carry it out as it was done in the old days.”<sup>271</sup>

Chǒngjo’s officials, naturally, did not wish to be bypassed by the king, and so his efforts were resisted. Nevertheless, Chǒngjo persisted, as we shall see in the first example below. Two ways that the King attempted to gain more direct influence over the running of the state were through the expansion of direct petitions to the throne and through the limitation and eventual abolition of slavery.

### **Petitions and Processions**

The King instituted measures that allowed people to come directly to the throne with problems rather than following the traditional bureaucratic channels. Yi Tae-Jin points to Chǒngjo’s frequent trips outside the palace and the resulting contact with his subjects as evidence of Chǒngjo intervening directly with the people, bypassing his ministers.<sup>272</sup> Ko Donghwan agrees that, because of this frequent direct contact with his subjects—from whom he learned about their exploitation at the hands of local officials—the King intended to eliminate the influence of mid-level officials and deal with grievances directly.<sup>273</sup> Petitions allowed the King to act without waiting for, prodding, or cajoling an official into bringing a matter to his attention. By ordering investigations and redress of grievances based on petitions even from commoners, Chǒngjo expanded his freedom of action, for ministers generally did not wish to be seen as blocking such redress.

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<sup>271</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1788.5.5.

<sup>272</sup> Yi Tae-Jin. “King Chǒngjo”; Han Sang-gwǒn. *Chosǒn hugi sahoe wa sowǒn chedo: Sang’ǒn, kyǒkchaeng yǒngu*. Seoul: Ilchogak, 1996.

<sup>273</sup> Ko Donghwan. “Development of Commerce and Commercial Policy during the Reign of King Chǒngjo.” *Korea Journal* vol. 40, no. 4. 2000, 215-216.

Since Chǒngjo was making it possible to receive petitions during his processions, he found excuses to have them—a lot of them, especially to visit royal tombs and the tomb of his father. Yi Tae-Jin offers a striking contrast in the number of such visits; Yǒngjo made only two confirmed processions to royal tombs in his fifty-two-year reign, while Chǒngjo undertook at least seventy-five in twenty-four years. His first visit took place before he even took the throne. As part of the rehabilitation of his father, it was Sado's tomb he went to.<sup>274</sup> This was undoubtedly because, once he became king, his first procession was ritually required to be to the tomb of his adopted father Hyojang, which he duly carried out in the second month of 1777. Indeed, Chǒngjo undertook travel outside the palace for any reason at a fifty percent greater rate than Yǒngjo, whose own annual rate was already nearly double that of any of the five previous kings.<sup>275</sup>

The initial petition system, the *sinmun'go* 申聞鼓, was implemented during T'aejong's reign. It involved striking a large drum located at the palace. It was highly restricted, being limited to threats to the throne and appeals of death sentences, and it soon fell into disuse and was replaced by striking a gong. While the *sinmun'go* petitions could only be made while the king was in the palace where the drum was located, gong petitions could be made during royal processions, since they could be made even with small gongs (*kwaenggari*). The petition could then be made in writing (*sang'ŏn* 上言) or orally (*kyŏkchaeng* 擊鉦). The volume of petitions under this new system quickly led to its being restricted, such that petitions were only accepted in four cases: protesting punishment of oneself, resolving disputes between a father and son, resolving disputes between a wife and a

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<sup>274</sup> Yi Tae-Jin. "King Chǒngjo", 171-172. His first trip to the tomb was actually in 1764, when he was still a child. The visit in 1776, when he was on the verge of ascending the throne, had far more symbolic importance.

<sup>275</sup> Kim Moon-sik. "Royal Visits and Protocols in the Chosŏn Dynasty: Focusing on Wŏnhaeng Ŭlmyo Chŏngni Ŭigwe Compiled during King Chǒngjo's Reign". *Korea Journal* vol. 48, no. 2. 2008, 49.

concubine, and resolving disputes between commoners and base people 賤民 (*ch'ŏnmin*). These four cases were collectively known as the “four matters” (*sa kŏnsa* 四件事). During the reigns of Sukchong and Yŏngjo, the system was expanded with the “new four matters” (*sin sa kŏnsa* 新四件事), which allowed petitioning on behalf of another: a descendant for his ancestor, a wife for her husband, a younger brother for his elder brother, and a slave for his master. Yŏngjo also reinstituted the *sinmun'go*<sup>276</sup> as a replacement for petitions initiated by striking the gong.<sup>277</sup>

Chŏngjo not only kept the gong petition system, he expanded it still further. He noted that, though Yŏngjo had reinstituted the *sinmun'go* to make it easier to petition, the elimination of gong petitions actually made petitioning more difficult.

申明衛外擊鐃推問之法。教曰御闕則擊鐃於差備。動駕則繫鐃於衛外。古制也。先朝申聞鼓復設後。命禁擊鐃之制。聖意祇在勿以鐃而以鼓也。今則并與動駕時而亦禁擊鐃。故初無下該曹之舉。以金吾長之奏。可知其有司之昧於舉行。從今以後擊鐃者。闕內則既有鼓矣。鐃非可論。而衛外則依古例移付刑曹。推問以聞。

[The King] explicated the law examining oral petitions outside the palace. He instructed, “When [the ruler] is in the palace, oral petitions are made at the front and rear gates. When [the ruler] leaves the palace on a procession, oral petitions are made outside the palace. This is an ancient system. The Late King re-established the drum petition [*sinmun'go*] and ordered a ban on the system of oral petitions. His Sagely intention was merely that people petition by means of a drum rather than a gong. Now that this is linked to petitions made elsewhere as well, it effectively bans all petitions whenever I travel outside the palace. Therefore there is no way for me to hand down orders to the appropriate bureau. Memorials of officials with rods only give me a vague idea of officials’ behavior, and so now the drum is there for oral petitioners when I am in the palace. Oral petitions are not something that have been discussed, and I will hand it over to the Ministry of Punishments to examine the matter of [petitions] outside the palace so that I might hear of it.”<sup>278</sup>

<sup>276</sup> Han Sang-gwŏn, “Social Problems and the Active Use of Petitions during the Reign of King Chŏngjo.” *Korea Journal* vol. 40, no. 4. 2000, 233-234.

<sup>277</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1777.2.20; 1777.6.10.

<sup>278</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1777.2.20



A few months later, the Minister of Punishments argued that Yŏngjo had abolished petitioning during processions. Chŏngjo refused to accept this unless the situation fell outside of the four matters:

刑曹判書張志恒啓言。先朝設申聞鼓後。街路擊錚者。有杖配之教。伊後無論四件事與否。竝決杖遠配。日前動駕時。高靈女人街路擊錚。請依舊例舉行。批曰門禁嚴則無入闕擊鼓之路。然則下情不可上達。此後四件事例刑捧供。非四件事。則刑推後勿施。

Minister of Punishments Chang Chi-hang said to the King, “After the Late King established the *sinmun* ’go, there was an instruction that those who make oral petitions in the road be flogged and banished. After that, it goes without saying that whether a situation is one of the four matters or not, it is to be punished with flogging and banishment to a distant place. While Your Majesty was out on a procession yesterday, a woman of Koryŏng made an oral petition in the street. I request that she be treated according to this precedent.” The King responded, “The palace gates are stout and there is no road leading into the palace, so the sentiments of the common people cannot reach my ears. See if the petition regards one of the four matters. If it is not one of the four matters, strike her about the shins so that she will not do this again.”<sup>279</sup>

By doing this, Chŏngjo greatly expanded the petition system, since people no longer needed to travel to the palace itself to reach him, and the palace guards’ ability to choke off petitions by denying access to the drum was circumvented. Allowing petitions to be presented wherever the king was rather than at a fixed point also meant that the king ruled no matter where he was, focusing power on him personally at the expense of the central government apparatus.

Four years later, Chŏngjo allowed petitions from outside the four matters as well:

親試抄啓文臣課講。仍行次對。領議政徐命善啓言...城內舉動。本無擊錚之事矣。近來愚民不知法意。至於衛外擊錚者。多至六人。事甚驚駭。臣意則四件外擊錚人。亟施別般勘律宜矣。上曰此事業欲下教而未果。係是四件事外。則其律當照何律乎。刑曹判書金魯鎮言用充軍律矣。教曰充軍之法。一次充軍。則終不入於赦典。是豈欽恤之道乎。昔則閤禁不嚴。擊

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<sup>279</sup> Chŏngjo *sillok* 1777.6.10

錚者任自擊錚於延英門外。則中禁奪其錚。而出付其人於該曹矣。始自先朝。置鼓於進善門。而擊錚之法遂廢矣。近因閤禁之稍嚴。不得入來擊鼓。故不禁衛外擊錚者。實爲通下情之道。而反致猥雜亦可悶矣。

The King personally administered the examination for the *ch'ogye munsin*. Thereupon he held an audience. Chief State Councilor Sŏ Myŏng-sŏn said, "...Royal processions within the city originally lacked incidents of an oral petition [*kyŏkchaeng*]. These days, the ignorant common people do not know the meaning of the law such that as many as six petitioners try to present their petitions, and this matter is greatly alarming. In the opinion of I your subject, anyone petitioning about something that is not one of the four matters should be specially punished." The King said, "As for this matter, I have wished to issue an instruction regarding it, but I have not yet done so. If a matter falls outside of the four matters, what law would it fall under?" Minister of Punishments Kim No-jin said, "We should apply the law that requires military service in a distant location." The King instructed, "Once someone is sent off to serve in the military in such a fashion, they cannot be pardoned, even if they committed only one offense. What kind of a compassionate king would I be then? In ancient days, the gatekeepers were not severe, and so those making an oral petition struck the drum as they liked outside the Yŏnyŏng [Spreading Flower] Gate. Then the Central Palace Guards accepted the petition and brought out the relevant official. The drum at Chinsŏn Gate [for the *sinmun'go*] has been in place since the last reign, but the oral petition was abolished. Now the gatekeepers have become severe and do not permit anyone to enter and strike the drum. Therefore, I will not forbid oral petitions during processions outside the palace so that there will truly be a Way for me to learn of the condition of the people, yet it is most regrettable that they have become audacious and disorderly."<sup>280</sup>

Chŏngjo's lifting of the restriction to the four matters "meant that the government permitted the common people to petition on non-*sakŏnsa*, namely, social and economic sufferings. It was an epoch-making measure in the development of the petition system."<sup>281</sup> Permitting petitions during royal processions, together with Chŏngjo's frequent travel and the expansion of petition subjects beyond the four matters, led to an explosion in petitions. In 1783, the Inspector-General sent a memorial requesting a ban on petitioning the King when he was

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<sup>280</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1781.7.16.

<sup>281</sup> Han Sang-gwŏn, "Active Use of Petitions," 235.

outside the palace, on the grounds that there were too many of them. Chǒngjo refused, citing the need to keep the path of communication open.<sup>282</sup>

The reform of the petition system presents another textbook example of Chǒngjo's ruling style: slow, painful, subtle alterations, carried out over the course of years, until he finally achieved his aim. From allowing oral petitions, to allowing them as long as they regarded the four matters, to allowing them as regards any matter, the King step by step instituted change that, by the end of his reign, gave him discretionary power that even Yǒngjo had not achieved during his fifty years on the throne. This pattern would be repeated in Chǒngjo's handling of slavery, though his premature death prevented him from reaching what appears to have been his final goal.

## Slavery

Hereditary slavery in Korea, not abolished in Chosŏn until 1888, had a long history, existing from the start of Koryŏ and probably during the Three Kingdoms as well.<sup>283</sup> Chosŏn defenders of slavery stretched back its history still further, claiming it existed from the founding of Korea as one of Kija's eight laws, though the slavery of Kija's law as recorded in the *Book of Documents* is clearly not hereditary. This connection with Kija made it difficult for reformers to argue against it, and when Yu Hyŏng-wŏn did so in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, he declined to address its relationship to Kija's laws altogether.<sup>284</sup>

Hereditary slavery was a contentious issue at various points throughout the latter half of the dynasty, because private slaves were exempt from both military service and corvee

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<sup>282</sup> Chǒngjo *sillok* 1783.7.12.

<sup>283</sup> Hong Sŭng-gi. *Koryŏ kwijok sahoe wa nobi*. Seŏul: Ilchogak, 1983; Ellen Salem. *Slavery in Medieval Korea*. PhD diss. Columbia University, 1978.

<sup>284</sup> Palais. *Confucian Statecraft*, 212.

labor and taxes and, thus, were essentially outside the control of the state. It was not until the Hideyoshi invasions that successive kings succeeded in getting some state control over slaves. On the throne during those invasions, King Sŏnjo directed that slaves be conscripted into mixed units with commoner soldiers, beginning a slow breakdown between slave and commoner that would lead to calls for the outright abolition of slavery in the eighteenth century.<sup>285</sup> Further, this precedent of slave military service meant that slaves could be assessed the military cloth tax, though they paid less than commoners.<sup>286</sup>

Another method the government used to combat the expansion of slavery and increase the state's access to the country's human resources was the matrilineal inheritance law, that is, the limitation of the inheritance of slave status to the mother's line rather than from either parent, but this law's effect on reducing the number of slaves is mixed at best, and other causes for the marked decline of slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century have been cited.<sup>287</sup> Chŏngjo did take some steps during his reign to reduce the slave population, with the aim of eventually eliminating it altogether. Like Yu Hyŏng-wŏn, he did not intend to simply abolish it right away. Instead, he proceeded as he always did, as he had to when taking on the interests of the powerful *yangban* class who provided the very people expected to execute his policies: in fits and starts, spread out over a long period, protesting all the while that this was what he was forced to do.

In 1791, after refusing to abolish slavery outright on the grounds that it would disrupt the Chosŏn status system 名分 (*myŏngbun*), the King did offer a number of ways to allow slaves to escape from their lowly station, again using the military as a way to expand state

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<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 249-252.

control over the people without challenging that which the *yangban* held dear. It began with Chǒngjo's complaint that Yǒngjo's reforms had not eliminated corruption associated with slavery or alleviated the plight of slaves.

召見備局堂上趙鼎鎮。教曰諸道奴貢之弊。曾所稔知。而昨年咸陽御史之還。益聞此弊。不可不矯,尙無舉行。寧不駭痛。先朝乙亥節目。實爲莫大之特恩曠典。萬有餘口。自戶曹使之給代。而獨成均館尙衣院。尙今收貢。未知別有委折。而諸道奴弊。誠甚切矜。就考本曹及內司奴婢案後。往議大臣。各別措辭。行關諸道。俾無一夫一婦之冤也。予於初元。特罷刷官。而若干貢弊。尙未夬革。是所憧憧焉者。一一查櫛後。逃故據實後錄。使之報本司。此後摘奸時。若有綻露。該倅依法典重勘。如有可以稟處者。道伯狀聞。

The King summoned high official of the Border Defense Command Cho Chǒng-jin. He instructed, "In every province the slave labor system is corrupt, as we all well know, yet last year after the secret inspector returned from Hamyang, I began to hear more frequently that this corruption must be rectified. If there is no remedy, is this not lamentable? The Late King's directive of 1755 was a special dispensation, and it allowed more than 10,000 people to offer payment in lieu of labor service to the Ministry of Finance, but the National Academy and the Bureau of Royal Attire continue to hold out and still collect this labor tax. I do not even know if [those people] have any onerous obligations beyond that. Nevertheless, the corruption in the slave system in the various provinces is truly pitiful. Immediately after scrutinizing the slave register of the Palace Offices and the various Ministries, I will go to a discussion among the high officials, and come up with special ways to deal with this situation. I will inform the relevant offices in every province to take measures to ensure that not a single man or a single woman suffers unnecessarily. The year I ascended the throne, I made a special decision to abolish the directorate of slave registration, yet I have not been able to reform the slave labor tax system. I have not been firm enough about this matter. After examining each case one by one so that escaped or deceased [slaves] are recorded accurately, make a report to the relevant department. After assessing these things, if there is [any corruption] to expose, mete out severe punishment according to the relevant laws, and if there is something to report, inform the examiner."<sup>288</sup>

In the ensuing discussion two days later, the King suggested that slaves with skill in the military be permitted to take the military examinations and to be placed in special units of approximately commoner rank, leaving behind the stigma of the label "slave". They could

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<sup>288</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1791.3.27.

also buy their freedom outright, though the price was probably beyond what most slaves could hope to amass. Ch'ae Che-gong lamely offered up that there was no plan to accomplish the King's aims, while another Chǒngjo supporter, Yu Sǒ-rin, voiced tentative support.<sup>289</sup> Palais notes that, "this discussion presaged a significant liberalization of the rules for escaping the burdens of slavery."<sup>290</sup> In 1797, with the support of Yi Pyǒng-mo, Chǒng Min-si, and Kim Hwa-jin, Chǒngjo eliminated the distinction between slave troops and commoner troops in the Military Training Agency 訓練都監 (*hullyǒn togam*), which Hiraki Makoto calls an "epochal" moment in the history of Chosǒn slavery,<sup>291</sup> though, of course, the King made a show of reluctance about carrying out this reform.<sup>292</sup>

In 1801, a decree was issued in the name of Sunjo that abolished official slavery. Private slaves, by far more numerous than public slaves, were of course excluded. However, even among public slaves, only 66,067 were freed by this decree: "those of the Royal Treasury, palace estates of royal relatives (*kungbang*), and the capital bureaus of the regular bureaucracy";<sup>293</sup> in short, only those of the king and central government.<sup>294</sup> Thus, the power of the *yangban* class was not threatened, and their vast slave holdings withered away through social forces other than government abolition. According to Palais, the decree's explanation for abolishing official slavery was distinct from Chǒngjo's view, and he quotes the decree in support of this:

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<sup>289</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1791.3.29.

<sup>290</sup> Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*, 266.

<sup>291</sup> Hiraki Makoto. *Chosǒn hugi nobije yǒn'gu*. Seoul T'ŭkpyŏlsi: Chisik Sanŏpsa. 1982, 195.

<sup>292</sup> *Sŭngjǒngwǒn ilgi* 1798.3.16.

<sup>293</sup> Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*, 266.

<sup>294</sup> Yi Tae-Jin, "King Chǒngjo", 195.

Slavery [in Korea] in recent times is more reflective of an age of decline because officials impose great burdens on slaves, and ordinary people treat them as extremely base. Their lineages and communities are kept separate [from the rest of the population], they have to live in separate villages or areas, and for their whole lives neither sex is capable of legitimate marriage. How could Kija ever have been called a sage if he [devised] a system like this?<sup>295</sup>

However, if we look at Chǒngjo's explanation of his plans for slavery in his introduction to a collection of Hong Pong-han's memorials 翼靖公奏藁 (*Ikjǒnggong chugo*), it does not seem that distinct after all:

周官臣妾爲奴婢之始。而其役止於一身與賃傭等耳。箕聖東來。設八條之教。相盜者沒入爲奴婢。自三韓。行世傳之法。屬於官者。謂之公賤。屬於家者。謂之私賤。設職而理之。定貢而收之。我國朝定鼎之初。立勒令。爲賤者從良之法。又立辨定都監。辨別之。獻陵朝立大限法。三年成績案。二十年成正案。藏于京外官。

Slavery originates in the male and female servant system of the *Rites of Zhou*, the service it requires stops at a single body and is placed in the same category as hired labor. When Kija came east, he established the teachings of the eight items, and [one of these was that] thieves are to be made slaves, and this law has been handed down from the period of the Three Hans. Those [who serve] the officials were called “public base people”, and those [who serve] in the home were called “private base people”. Their responsibilities were clearly defined, and their taxes were determined and levied. When our dynasty was first set up, an order was issued that the child of a common father and a slave mother would be a commoner. At the same time, a directorate to distinguish slaves and determine slave status was established. T'aejong established the Great Limiting Law, three years later completed it with a ledger of slaves, and twenty years later completed it with a rectified ledger [for slaves] that was kept in both the capital and in the provincial government offices.

Chǒngjo introduces the Chosŏn distinction between public and private slaves, but this distinction is immediately dropped. After claiming a patrilineal slave law at the start of the dynasty, he proceeds to argue that Kija did not intend that slavery be hereditary, while also detailing the discrimination suffered by slaves.

予嘗以爲天下之冤。莫切於奴婢。箕聖教條。不過出於一時懲惡之意。而歷代沿襲。莫之變更。生生世世。受人賤蔑。計口計齒而賣買。則便同畜

<sup>295</sup> *Sunjo sillok* 1801.1.28, quoted in Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*, 267. The translation is Palais's.

產。傳子傳孫而分析。則無異土地。必先母而與胡相近。不從父而以奴爲姓。婚姻不通。隣比不與。踣高躋厚。若窮無歸。天之生人。豈宣使然哉。雖因列聖朝煦濡漸磨之仁。保其身奠厥居。而哀矜惻怛則極矣。

I have thought that, of the injustices in All-under-Heaven, there is none more urgent than slavery. Kija's tenets were simply intended as temporary punishment of evil, it has continued without change from generation to generation. Those who endure it are lowly and regarded with disdain. They are bought and sold in the same way as beasts, with their price determined by the size of their families and their ages. They are distributed to sons and grandsons as inheritance, no different from the way land is treated. Certainly deriving their status primarily from the mother and taking a slave surname instead of their father's surname is a custom that puts us closer to the barbarians. Slaves are not permitted to marry and they are treated differently from those who live near them. They contort themselves beneath the high and bend themselves to the wealthy, as if they have no place to go. How can it be that people to whom Heaven gave birth are caused to be like this? Although I rely on the royal ancestors and their cultivation of benevolence to protect my virtue and act in accordance with the respect due the throne on which I sit, I have the utmost concern and sympathy [for them].

Given his concern and sympathy for slaves, what did Chǒngjo plan to do about their plight?

In the next selection, he makes clear his intention to replace slaves with hired laborers.

予於清燕萬幾之暇。思得均齊兩便之策。一掃奴婢之規。刪行傭雇之法。限以己身。不許世傳。措處指劃。先定方略。給代出處。皆有定數。一二臣同。行將發令。第念我國專尚名分。若使良賤相混。班閥不明。則凌犯者必接迹而起。母方執役。子反抗主。殘驛小堡。廝圉乏人。窮士貧婦。樵爨無路。實有祛一弊。生一弊之慮。此所以遲徊趑趄者也。然則其將因此而不得不之拯救耶。莫曰推刷官革罷。亦足以逐續景命。此特節目間事耳。苟可使之廁平民守常分。竝行不悖。則斷當決然行之。因公奏藁。略示予意如此云。

When I rest from the myriad affairs of state, I worry that there is no easy method to deal with these two things. First, the regulations regarding slavery should be swept away and a law establishing hired labor be set up. Slavery should be limited to individuals and will not be inherited by later generations. Specific measures should be enacted that will provide compensation [for freed slaves] according to a fixed amount. In consultation with a few like-minded officials, I will propagate such an order. Next I will consider that our state esteems moral obligations according to social status. If the common people mix with base people and the *yangban* families are not clearly distinguished, then criminals will come together and arise, mothers will [be required to] carry out corvée labor [instead of raising their children], sons will resist their rulers, small fortresses and post stations will have no underlings, and impoverished scholars and poor wives will have no way to stoke their stoves.



Truly there is concern that driving off one vice gives rise to another vice, and because of this there is hesitation [to abolish slaves]. But is this a reason not to offer relief to [slaves]? Do not say that the abolition of the slave registrars [carried out by Yǒngjo] indeed sufficiently fulfilled the royal command. This particular section is problematic. If [slaves] can be made to occupy the humble position of commoner while still protecting the social distinctions without contradiction, then [abolition] must be carried out resolutely. Due to public memorials, I have outlined my intentions this way.<sup>296</sup>

Again we see a connection between Chǒngjo and Yu Hyǒng-wǒn, as the King refers to the replacement of slavery with hired labor. Also like Yu, he calls for abolition of all slavery quickly, though not immediately. Unlike Yu, however, he also makes the argument of reformers like Yu Su-wǒn regarding Kija, pointing out that the slavery of Kija carries no implication that this status is to be inherited, as it is a punishment for criminal activity.<sup>297</sup> The 1801 decree cites, as Chǒngjo does, the suffering of slaves and their mistreatment even by commoners, along with their segregation and lack of legal marriage. Unlike the decree, however, Chǒngjo's preface gives no indication that he refers only to public slaves. He simply notes that there are two categories of slaves but does not refer to the distinction again, including, crucially, in the section declaring his intention to abolish slavery. This is the key difference between Chǒngjo's intention and the actual measure that was implemented after his death; with Sunjo a minor and Queen Chǒngsun's influence restrained by gender and literary prejudice, the Patriarchs in charge of the government had no intention of freeing their own private slaves. *Ikjǒnggong chugo*, with its extensive introductory material penned by the King himself, was not completed until shortly before Chǒngjo's death in 1800, and the abolition of slavery would wait another eighty years.

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<sup>296</sup> Chǒngjo, *Hongjae chǒnsǒ*. "Sǒin 5", "Ikjǒng kongju kojae puryusǒ".

<sup>297</sup> For a discussion of Yu Su-wǒn's critique of slavery, see Palais. *Confucian Statecraft*, 253-257.

## CONCLUSION

As with the Hong Kuk-yŏng affair, Chŏngjo erred early in his reign when he restored the recommendation power of selection secretaries that his grandfather had abolished. Realizing his mistake, the King eventually abolished the power again while also looking for other ways to control an office that remained important even without that power. Through the creation of the Royal Library, he both exalted his own position and gave his personally selected ministers a way to restrain official criticism of his policies. The *ch'ogye munsin* put his scholar-king rhetoric into action, with Chŏngjo instructing young officials rather than being beholden to the wisdom of aged aristocrats. The Library also served as a vehicle for another of his policy objectives, namely, the inclusion in the state apparatus of men who had long been excluded from power: members of the Southerner faction, men from the northern provinces, and sons of *yangban* fathers by concubines. This dilution of political power among a wider group of *yangban* was fiercely resisted, though less so on the military side. Finally, Chŏngjo greatly expanded the direct petition system so that he would be less reliant on his officials when it came to addressing administrative problems. He also took advantage of changing economic and social conditions to progressively restrict slaveholding and seems to have intended to abolish it entirely, though his sudden death ensured that this intention would be ignored.

## Chapter 5: Military Matters

The Chosŏn military in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was hardly an intimidating force. Long gone were the days of Koguryŏ menacing China's borders and Silla's repulsion of Tang expansion onto the Korean peninsula, or even Sejong's successful expansion of the kingdom's northern frontier. The military of late Chosŏn was primarily a force to put down domestic rebellion,<sup>298</sup> a role it performed adequately until confrontation with the modern world unleashed social forces that led in 1894 to a rebellion of a kind never before seen in Chosŏn. Chŏngjo made no serious effort to build a military capable of waging war, even defensively, against Chosŏn's neighbors. Protected by the Qing Empire to the north and west and facing a Japan uninterested in further continental adventures, there was no pressing need to do so; the window of opportunity to overhaul the military sufficient to enable it to repel either the Qing or the Japanese had passed two hundred years earlier, when the Hideyoshi invasions revealed a Chosŏn army disastrously unready to fight a foreign enemy. Nor did Chŏngjo experience the humiliation of living as a hostage in Qing China as his ancestor Hyojong had, and so there was no question of his revenging himself upon the Manchus. By the time of his reign, the notion of a Northern Expedition was effectively dead, and Chŏngjo was more interested in what benefits he could gain from Great Qing than in fighting it.

What Chŏngjo did do, though, was strengthen the military's ability to serve his own purpose, namely, giving him a freer hand to rule than even his grandfather had had. He primarily did this in two interconnected ways. First, he ordered the construction of a large, modern (by Chosŏn standards) fortress to guard the tomb of his father, the Illustrious Fortress

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<sup>298</sup> Palais. *Confucian Statecraft*, 1108.

華城 (*Hwasŏng*) in the city of Suwŏn. Taking nearly three years to build, the Illustrious Fortress stands today as a testament to Chŏngjo's filial piety, but the Fortress was more than a symbol. It was strategically placed to provide the King a refuge that would be well-protected from the greatest threat to his throne—his own officials in command of ostensibly royal armies. Second, Chŏngjo established a new military unit to be stationed in the Fortress, the Robust and Brave Regiment 壯勇營 (*chang'yong'yŏng*). Beginning as a tiny company to protect Sado's tomb, the Regiment was continuously expanded at the expense of existing army units. It stood outside the regular military hierarchy, since its command was held as a concurrency with the governorship of Suwŏn. By appointing a supporter to this office, Chŏngjo brought a significant military force under his control, without which he could not carve out a space for independent royal action.<sup>299</sup> The Illustrious Fortress garrisoned with the Robust and Brave Regiment represented a formidable military challenge under Chŏngjo's control.

### THE ILLUSTRIOUS FORTRESS: A MONUMENT TO SADO?

In the first month of 1794, construction began on the Illustrious Fortress in what is now Suwŏn, thirty kilometers south of the capital. Yu Hyŏng-wŏn first suggested that defenses be constructed in Suwŏn,<sup>300</sup> and Chŏngjo cited this in Yu's *Collected Works* 磻溪隨錄 (*Pan'gye surok*) when discussing the construction of the Fortress.<sup>301</sup> Its ostensible purpose was the protection of the tomb of Prince Sado, which Chŏngjo had moved to Suwŏn

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<sup>299</sup> Park Hyunmo. *Chŏngch'i ka Chŏngjo*, 307.

<sup>300</sup> Roh Young-koo. "Hwasŏng Fortress," 194.

<sup>301</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1793.12.8.

in 1789. Initially, scholars accepted this explanation at face value, but as Roh Young-koo puts it, “[t]he naïve understanding that the construction of Hwasŏng Fortress was an embodiment of Chŏngjo’s filial devotion to his father has been completely overturned.”<sup>302</sup> While it is true that the fortress was part of the King’s desire to rehabilitate his father, it was also intended to be a center of royal power. In the words of Kim Sung-Yun, Chŏngjo’s “intention was to set this area as the background for full-scale reform by creating a pro-monarch region.”<sup>303</sup> To this end, the King stationed royal guards at the fortress and designated it as an administrative center. He also took measures to develop commerce in the area that was not tied to Seoul by lending money to merchants to open shops in Suwŏn and relaxing restrictions on merchants in the area, leading to increased commerce and, accordingly, an increased population.<sup>304</sup>

### **Run-up to Construction**

In his familiar pattern, Chŏngjo moved slowly, step by step, laying the groundwork for the fortress’s construction years before he ever broached the subject. As noted, in the seventh month 1789, he ordered that his father’s tomb be relocated there.<sup>305</sup> Four months later, in the second month of 1790, the King and his officials discussed improving the Suwŏn area.<sup>306</sup> Also in 1790, a mid-level military official, one Kang Yu, proposed the construction of military defenses in Suwŏn:

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<sup>302</sup> Roh Young-koo, “Hwasŏng Fortress,” 169. It should be noted that Roh acknowledges on page 186 that the construction of an elaborate tomb for Sado effectively recognized him as royalty rather than criminal, thus strengthening Chŏngjo’s own legitimacy.

<sup>303</sup> Kim Sung-Yun, “T’angpyŏng and Hwasŏng,” 159.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*; Roh, “Hwasŏng Fortress,” 195.

<sup>305</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1789.7.16.

水原乃摠戎廳之外營。而爲國家之重鎮。況又奉莫重之地。宜有別般制置之道。今此新邑移設。而無城池之設險。臣謂因此移設。竝與城池而經紀宜矣。古人曰金城湯池者。卽設塹之謂。而我國山多野少。每依山爲城。而不得設塹。非古制也。新邑旣是野中。果令築城設塹。則實合置城之制。今若築城於此。與禿山之城爲角犄之勢。當不虞之時。而成夾攻之形。則雖有桀黠之賊。亦知兵法之所忌。不敢窺兩城之際矣。議者若以石城之多費難之。則土城之完實。反勝於拳石之相累。若於土城。又設女堞。而間置雉城。則防守之道。石與土無間矣。又聞築室於新邑者。半是儒生云。緩急難與守城。亦爲募入軍兵。使之築室。復戶五百結內。折半除給軍兵。以爲聊賴之地。又使各軍門。設置屯田於新邑近地。使軍兵作農。而自軍門收稅。則軍兵之無田土者。必爭應募矣。

Suwŏn being an external base of the Command of Northern Approaches, it is an important area for the state, and moreover it is the precious ground that received [Sado's tomb], so it is appropriate that there be special measures taken. But the new town is being established there as a military base without a moat or fortifications. Your humble servant would like to suggest that fortifications and a moat be built along with this new town. The men of old talked of walls of metal and a boiling moat. This means to set up a moat. Our state has many mountains and few plains. Everywhere our fortresses rely on mountains and there are no moats set up. This is not the way things used to be done. The new town is in the plains, so if you order that fortifications and a moat be constructed there, that will surely fit well with the way to build fortresses.

Having laid out the geographical reasons for building a sizable fortress in this area, Kang moved to the strategic reasons and then segues into how it should be garrisoned.

Now if a fortress is constructed there, together with the Toksan Fortress, they will reinforce each other, so when there is a situation such that they are taken by surprise and attacked from two sides, then although the bandits may be cruel and crafty, they also know this is a military strategy they need be aware of and will not dare even to look for an opening between the two fortresses. There may be those who say the use of stone is so expensive that it is too difficult, and so we would be better off using earth rather than piling up stones. If for an earthen fortress we also establish battlements and set up parapets, then there will be a way to defend it and it will make no difference whether it is made of stone or earth. Also, I have heard that, of those building homes in the new town, half are students. In a crisis it would be difficult for such men to defend the fortress, so we should also bring soldiers to the area and direct them to construct dwellings for themselves, and of the 500 taxpaying households, we could take half of the farmland set aside to cover shortfalls from tax exemptions given to meritorious subjects and use it to support those

<sup>306</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1790.2.19.

troops. [If instead you] establish a farm in the new town near each barracks gate to be worked by the troops when they are idle and make the soldiers engage in agriculture and collect taxes from them at the gates, then the landless soldiers would certainly respond with contention.<sup>307</sup>

Roh Young-koo notes that Kang Yu's plan "was not very different from the direction Hwasŏng Fortress later took",<sup>308</sup> with the conspicuous exception of being constructed of stone rather than earth. The same year, one Sin Ki-gyŏng also suggested strengthening Suwŏn's defenses.<sup>309</sup>

The following year, while Ch'ae Che-gong was serving as the sole State Councilor, the King pushed through the Commercial Equalization Law 辛亥通共 (*sinhae t'onggong*).<sup>310</sup> This loosened restrictions on commercial activity by permitting it to take place outside the confines of the Six Licensed Shops 六廛 (*yukchŏn*).<sup>311</sup> This "meshed with the political intent of diluting the vested commercial rights of Seoul licensed merchants in order to attract and recruit merchants and thus nurturing the Hwasŏng commerce."<sup>312</sup> Also in furtherance of this aim was Chŏngjo's policy to move prosperous commoner families to the area around the Fortress, discussed below. In the winter of 1792, the King instructed Tasan to review existing fortress designs and develop plans for a new fortress system to be used for the Illustrious

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<sup>307</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1790.6.10.

<sup>308</sup> Roh Young-koo. "Hwasŏng Fortress," 195.

<sup>309</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1790.1.22.

<sup>310</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1791.1.25.

<sup>311</sup> While the *yukchŏn* system did not restrict commercial activity to literally six shops, it did allow a few merchants to effectively monopolize commercial activity in and around the capital.

<sup>312</sup> Kim Sung-Yun. "T'angpyŏng and Hwasŏng," 156.

Fortress.<sup>313</sup> While a number of other officials also drew up plans, the Fortress was largely based on Tasan's design.<sup>314</sup>

In 1793, Chǒngjo changed the name of Suwǒn district to the name of the fortress itself, Hwasǒng, and raised the status of the official in charge from the more common and generic “magistrate” 府使 (*pusa*) to “governor” 留守 (*yusu*), a term reserved for the official running an important city apart from the capital, and also personally wrote a tablet 懸板 (*hyǒnp'an*) to be hung from the front gate of the governor's office. The presence of the “guard” character 守 (*su*) is significant, giving the title a more military character in keeping with the city's importance to Chǒngjo's military reforms. The governor of Hwasǒng was concurrently made Minister of the Robust and Brave Outer Garrison 壯勇外使 (*chang'yong oesa*), a position in Chǒngjo's new military unit whose importance will become clear. Unsurprisingly, the first man to hold this elevated-status office was none other than Ch'ae Che-gong. He was appointed, by special appointment (and therefore bypassed the normal recommendation process with the Ministry of Personnel), the very same day.<sup>315</sup>

### **Building the Fortress**

At the end of 1793, final plans for construction of the Illustrious Fortress were drawn up, and construction began in the first month of 1794. Chǒngjo personally inspected the construction three times, once in each year of the project, including a large celebration for his mother's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday and his 20<sup>th</sup> year on the throne. Due to the advanced techniques

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<sup>313</sup> Tasan. *Tasan simunjip* 10. “Sǒl”, “Sǒngsǒl”; Tasan. *Saam sǒlsaeng nyǒnbo*, 33-34.

<sup>314</sup> Roh Young-koo. “Hwasǒng Fortress,” 187; Ch'oe Hong-gyu. *Chǒngjo ŭi Hwasǒng kǒnsǒl*. Seoul T'ŭkpyŏlsi: Ilchisa, 2001, 11.

<sup>315</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1793.1.12.



involved, the relatively rapid completion, and Chǒngjo's insistence that the Fortress be constructed of stone rather than wood, the cost was substantial, coming out to 873,517 *nyang*, nearly three and a half times the estimated cost of 250,000 *nyang*. Roh Young-koo notes that the King broke with Chosŏn precedent by paying wages to the workers building the Illustrious Fortress rather than using the corvée system, including different pay scales for different jobs, and that this likely contributed to its quick construction.<sup>316</sup> It is also an example of the King's preference for hired labor over coerced labor, as noted in Chapter 4's discussion of slavery, since the former was not subject to the latter's restrictions on the number of working days permitted.

This construction period included a six-month halt ordered by the King shortly after construction began, due to a drought.<sup>317</sup> Key Chǒngjo supporters like Ch'ae Che-gong, Cho Sim-t'ae, and Yi Pyŏng-mo opposed the delay, arguing that stopping and re-starting construction would be very difficult, but the King rejected this reasoning. The discussion was rather lengthy and carried out over an extended period, but the *Annals* entry for the nineteenth day of the tenth month of 1794 is typical:

展拜于景慕宮。次對於齋室。上曰今日引見卿等。欲問華城城役事也。當初城役之創施。爲本府之有所重也。故決意始役。而顧今歉荒無前。民情遑急。秋冬如此。則來春可知。向者以上自御供節減之事。詢及筵中。蓋出於苟利於民。靡不用極之意。予則以爲城役之停止。爲目下荒政之一大先務。人皆曰是役也。不煩民力。給價雇軍。荒歲無食之民。乃反賴此而糊口。今若中止。則役夫輩之失望。反有甚焉。且是城也。所重有在。不可以些少事端。遽然停止。予意則不然。

After worshipping at the Palace of Adoration [the shrine to Prince Sado] there was an audience at the Pavilion of Purification. The King said, "At today's royal audience with Your Lordships, I would like to ask about the matter of the Illustrious Fortress project, because since the earliest days it was being constructed, it has been something I consider very important for the Seoul

<sup>316</sup> Roh Young-koo. "Hwasŏng Fortress," 200.

<sup>317</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1794.7.11.

magistracy. Therefore I decided to begin the project, yet looking back on it now, this has been an unprecedented famine and the state of the common people is dire [lit. urgent]. If autumn and winter are like this, then we can know about the coming spring. Earlier I inquired at the morning meeting about issuing an order on my own to reduce the royal tribute, and what emerged was that it would truly be a benefit to the common people and would not be considered an extreme measure. When I considered stopping the construction of the fortress, for the primary duty is to deal with the bad harvest, everyone said, 'This project is not a burden on the people. Since it pays wages to the men it employs, those who have nothing to eat will thereupon be able to rely on it to feed their families. If it is stopped now, then the men working on the project will lose hope for survival and that means making things even worse. Moreover, it is important that we have this fortress. Suddenly stopping its construction cannot be regarded as a small matter.' But I do not agree.

Here Chŏngjo has positioned himself as the champion of protecting the people from excessive hardship, even when that hardship is in the service of his father's memory. He goes on to discuss the problems with his officials' reasoning in the face of the people's suffering.

以所重言之。則實有間於園所之役。且給價雇軍。雖曰無妨於民事。而祈寒盛暑。有難一例董役。夏間之特命停役。良以此也。顧今諸路告歉。民情遑急。一邊講蠲減懷保之策。一邊行興作運築之役。終恐是行不得之政。況百官之頒祿軍兵之支放。前頭經用。苟簡可知。今此城役。雖不關於經費。而亦不無推此補彼之道。予所謂停役者。非謂即今停役也。聞南北門役。頗有頭緒云。趁明春園幸之時。則庶可訖工。此役訖後。姑爲停止。使看役及役軍工匠輩。休息一二年。以待財聚力裕之後。更爲始役。而董役人及工匠。仍舊任使。蒙終始之惠。不亦宜乎。

It is vital to note that this is different from the important matter of the construction of the tomb. Although you say the laborers are paid wages and so there is no interference with the common people's livelihood, it is difficult to keep them working constantly through severe cold and heat so truly there should be a special dispensation to stop construction during the summer. When I think about it, there are many ways to deal with a famine year. The state of the people is dire [or, greatly urgent], one side deliberates protecting them and decreasing taxes, and another side deliberates executing new projects and transporting materials to construct them. In the end, I fear we are at an impasse. Moreover, it is known soon we will be short of enough funds to provide officials' stipends and soldiers' pay. Now this work of building the fortress, although it is not part of the regular budget, it is also not something whose financial impact we can ignore. When I say we are going to stop the work, we are not going to stop it immediately. I have heard that the southern and northern gates of the fortress, the very first step, will be mostly finished

by the common people by next spring, when the royal procession to the Manifesting Prosperity Garden takes place. After this is done, work on the fortress can stop for a while and the overseers, artisans, and laborers can rest for a year or two. After we have had time to accumulate a surplus, the work can again be begun. And the overseers and the artisans thereupon will take up their old positions and will be blessed to see the project through to the end. Would this not be appropriate?”

Chǒngjo, having thus positioned himself as arbiter between bickering sides (whose bickering gets in the way of taking any action), thinks it no trouble to re-start work on the fortress. His ministers are not convinced.

領中樞府事蔡濟恭曰此役之中止甚重難。目今工匠募軍。自八路來聚。今若放遣。則數年之後。恐難復合。且自願赴役。餬口庇身者。在渠輩命脈所關。停役遣歸。則狼狽當如何。城役亦爲救荒之一端。且貫牛運石。施設不少。而遽然中止。則日後物力之費。必倍於初矣。上曰民皆曰城役必不可止。留守亦以爲大役既始。遽爾中撤。則亦有妨於聽聞。予則曰今當公私匱乏之時。凡係不急之務。可已則已。此役豈可曰不急之務。而當初既限以十年。則不必時日爲急。且工募輩之既往還來。何難之有哉。

First Minister-without-Portfolio Ch'ae Che-gong said to the King, “Interrupting this project is a very serious matter and difficult to do. Now the artisans and conscripted laborers have come from all over the Eight Provinces and assembled [in Suwǒn], and now if they are released and leave, then after a few years, I fear it will be difficult to get them together again. Moreover, they volunteered to labor on this project in order to feed their families and protect themselves, so their lives are intertwined with it. If you stop the work and send them back [to their homes], would it not be very difficult for them? The work of building the fortress is one means to alleviate the famine. Moreover, what it costs to get the oxen to haul the stones was no small amount. If work is suddenly stopped, then later the fees will certainly be several times what they were originally.” The King said, “People all say, ‘The work of building the fortress must not be stopped.’ The provincial government also said, ‘This great work is already begun. If it is suddenly taken away, then the people will be upset when they hear about it.’ But I say that now when we face the fact that there is a shortage of both public and private funds, if the funds are tied to a job that is not urgent, it can be stopped and it will be stopped. Surely we cannot say this job is not urgent, but we have planned for it to take ten years, so it is not necessary at this time to regard it as urgent. Moreover, how difficult will it be to get the artisans and laborers to come back once they have left?”

With Ch'ae failing to persuade the King that re-starting the work would be difficult and costly for the government, the State Council takes the tack of stopping the work being difficult and costly for the people.

左議政金履素右議政李秉模曰城役非但所重之有在。雖以事勢言之。中止實難。頒祿之不足。非不可悶。而區劃各異。以臣愚見。城役少無害於荒年矣。

Councilor of the Left Kim Yi-so and Councilor of the Right Yi Pyŏng-mo said to the King, “The work of building the fortress is not only an important matter. Even considering the affairs and situations brought up in this discussion, interrupting this work will be difficult. The fact that there is not enough money to pay everyone who needs to be paid is a matter for concern, yet that is a different issue. In the opinion of we your foolish subjects, the building of the fortress causes not even minor harm in this bad harvest year.”<sup>318</sup>

The King was not convinced by this, either, and the work was stopped. The work stoppage is an example of Chŏngjo's mastery of the political process. It may seem strange at first glance that Yi Pyŏng-mo, an outspoken opponent of the Fortress, would counsel that its construction not be stopped on account of drought. Nor was Yi known for working with Ch'ae Che-gong, as Kim Chong-su and, on occasion, even Sim Hwan-ji were willing to do. It is possible that Yi wanted to stir up resentment against the Fortress by portraying the King as unwilling to ease the burden on the common people through ordering a halt on its construction. Chŏngjo, though, again took a long-term view. Six months was not a serious delay, as it gave him time to further expand the Robust and Brave Regiment. Instead of appearing uncaring or even oppressive by forcing its completion, Chŏngjo was able to win political points by portraying himself as a benevolent monarch who put aside even his own widely-known and sympathetic concern for his father's memory for the sake of alleviating the common people's suffering. Chŏngjo also proved to be correct that construction, once halted, did not prove particularly troublesome to re-start. He emerged from the months-long controversy as the champion of

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<sup>318</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok*. 1794.10.19.

mercy and charity against the officials, even his own key supporters, who had urged him to remain steadfast. Despite the six month delay, two years and nine months after construction began, in the ninth month of 1796, the Illustrious Fortress was complete.

### **A Center of Royal Power**

So King Chǒngjo constructed a new fortress. This was nothing new for Chosŏn monarchs, nor was constructing a fortress to guard royal tombs. Why then does the Illustrious Fortress figure so prominently in scholarship on Chǒngjo?

There are a number of reasons the Illustrious Fortress was more than just another building project. The first and most obvious reason is that it served as another step in Chǒngjo's long, slow, meticulously careful rehabilitation of his father, which would culminate in Sado's being posthumously made king by Kojong in 1899. Having such a large and impressive structure built to protect Sado's tomb boosted not only his prestige but that of his son and of the dynasty as a whole. Also, as noted above, the King could cloak his other intentions for the Fortress in the mantle of filial piety and the rehabilitation of Sado, which even the Intransigents found hard to oppose in principle.

But Chǒngjo had more concrete reasons for constructing such a large and expensive building than mere prestige, and this is revealed in part by the details of its construction. It would be beyond the scope of this work to deal with these extensively, but suffice to say that, at the time of its completion, the Illustrious Fortress was the most technologically advanced military structure of Chosŏn Korea. When its architect, Tasan, submitted initial plans that were too conservative and traditional, the King instructed him to use Qing works

incorporating Western techniques in order to make use of all the latest advances from the Qing Empire in its design.<sup>319</sup>

The Fortress's location was also significant. Being in Suwŏn, it anchored the capital's southern flank, and together with Kaesŏng to the north and Kangwha Island to the west, constituted a key component of the capital's defense.<sup>320</sup> However, crucially, the Fortress was not intended to defend against foreign enemies, but domestic. Kim Sung-Yun explains why:

The following actions were taken to prepare Hwasŏng for an attack from Seoul rather than from outside enemies: the Toksŏng Mountain Fortress located in the Hwasŏng area was repaired and reconstructed to set the joint defense system with Hwasŏng fortress; Sihŭng and Kwach'ŏn were placed under the jurisdiction of Hwasŏng; reconstruction of Kwangju South Fortress was followed by an appointment of an official of first rank; and military left division of the Kyŏnggi-do province was placed under the jurisdiction of Toksŏng Mountain Fortress. When Sihŭng, Kwach'ŏn and Kwangju were bound together, it formed a defense line that surrounded the lower part of Seoul and in the background of such defense line was Hwasŏng. In other words, Hwasŏng and the three regions were located in almost all paths to reach the southern part of Chosŏn where the rich agricultural field regions were concentrated. The strategic unity of these regions was to secure the southern rich agricultural district to provide advantages in the long-term battle. Therefore, it can be seen that Hwasŏng was planned and built as the military foundation of Chŏngjo monarch.<sup>321</sup>

That is, in keeping with the purpose of the late Chosŏn military, the King reinforced its ability to protect the dynasty. In furtherance of this, he stationed the Robust and Brave Regiment there. This military unit was directly under his own command because it was controlled by the governor of Suwŏn, a position to which Chŏngjo consistently appointed key allies. Two Chosŏn monarchs, Yŏnsan and Kwanghae, had been overthrown by officials in command of ostensibly royal troops, and Chŏngjo's own grandfather faced a rebellion of

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<sup>319</sup> Tasan. *Tasan simunjip* 10. "Sŏl", "Sŏngsŏl".

<sup>320</sup> Park Hyunmo. *Chŏngch'i ka Chŏngjo*, 318.

<sup>321</sup> Kim Sung-Yun. "T'angp'yŏng and Hwasŏng", 159-160.

extremist Disciples in key military positions; had the conspirators not been betrayed almost before their rebellion began, they would have been well-positioned to seize the king and capital before they could be effectively countered.<sup>322</sup>

There exists the possibility that Chǒngjo intended to abdicate and retire to the Illustrious Fortress, perhaps in 1804 or 1806. While none of his writings or public speeches directly state such an intention, there is circumstantial evidence. The temporary palace 行宮 (*haenggung*) he constructed there was the largest in Chosŏn and was not completed until the Fortress itself was.<sup>323</sup> This may suggest that Chǒngjo considered it more than just another temporary palace. Further, the King based his new military unit in the Fortress. The *Regulations for Royal Processions* 園幸定例 (*wŏnhaeng chǒngnye*) records that, during Chǒngjo's annual progressions to his father's tomb there, the royal carriage was accompanied by 6200 guards and that Chǒngjo himself wore military dress.<sup>324</sup> Upon his arrival at the Fortress in the year of his mother's sixtieth birthday (1795), the King held a massive celebration, including a personal review of the troops. When the Fortress was completed, he again conducted a review of troops, including personal inspection of the cannon there, and he demonstrated his own personal archery skill in front of his officials at every opportunity.<sup>325</sup> These steps, in addition to emphasizing the oft-neglected martial role of the king, may also have been meant to intimidate the *yangban* with a display of the military power at his disposal when combined with the Fortress's power. Indeed, Yi Pyŏng-mo once opposed the King's calling up of troops for the mere purpose of "displaying

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<sup>322</sup> Haboush. *Confucian Kingship*, 138.

<sup>323</sup> Ch'oe Hong-gyu. *Hwasŏng kŏnsŏl*, 23, 238.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 270, 272.

the army's capabilities [觀保障軍容]" since such a military display was frightening to officials.<sup>326</sup>

Why would Chǒngjo have wished to abdicate? Assuming the King's penchant for cloaking his real intentions behind the obvious held in this case, abdication may have been another ploy in his drive to strengthen his position. 1806 would have been his thirtieth year on the throne, and his son would have been sixteen, old enough to reign but not quite old enough to rule as long as his father lived. If he had successfully abdicated, he could have ruled on the model of T'aejong and Sejong; Chǒngjo, free of the ritual and moral burdens of a reigning king, could have ruled behind the scenes. (As discussed in Chapter 1, it is unclear if Chǒngjo's abdication in favor of his adult son would have been acceptable in late Chosŏn.) Far enough away from the capital to escape prying eyes yet close enough to influence events there, protected by loyal troops located in a place where they posed a significant threat to the capital, and no longer weighed down by onerous royal obligations, Chǒngjo could have had significant freedom from the restraints on the Chosŏn monarchy, perhaps even greater than the Taewŏn'gun had. And unlike the Taewŏn'gun, Chǒngjo had been king himself and so could have resisted attempts by his son to rule in his own right, which in any case Sunjo would have been unlikely to attempt for at least the better part of a decade.

Two of Chǒngjo's contemporaries wrote of his intention to retire to the Illustrious Fortress. Tasan wrote in his "Tomb Inscription for Yi Ka-hwan" 貞軒墓誌銘 (*Chǒnghŏn myojimyŏng*) that the King said, "After ten years, I will be an old man myself, and I will

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<sup>326</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1797.8.7. Yi said, "Now among those who serve at Your Majesty's court, could it be that no one is shocked and fearful? If there is truly no other reason for this [use of the army], and the only desire is to display the army's capabilities, then I your subject, though I worry it is a crime worthy of death, suggest that Your Majesty's behaviour is excessive. [則今日北面於殿下之廷者。其不有瞠然而驚。稟然而駭乎。設使眞無他事。而只欲觀保障軍容。臣愚死罪。以爲殿下過舉。]"



make the Illustrious Fortress my place of residence to grow old. [後十年。予將老焉。故華城有老來之堂。]” His mother Lady Hyegyŏng directly states that the King intended to abdicate and retire to the Fortress in 1804 and that this would coincide with the exoneration of Sado and of her brother Hong In-han, along with everyone else unfairly punished as a result of the Sado affair, such as Princess Hwawan.<sup>327</sup> This vindication of Sado by Chŏngjo’s son rather than by Chŏngjo himself would be in line with Yŏngjo’s intention to have Sado vindicate him from the specter of his alleged involvement in Kyŏngjong’s death; since a king could not directly overturn his predecessor’s decisions, he was left to intimate to his successor that this be done.<sup>328</sup> Of course, Yŏngjo probably did not have his brother poisoned while Sado probably was guilty of a capital offense, but Chŏngjo may not have accepted his father’s guilt, given that he was only ten years old when Sado died and Yŏngjo immediately banned any discussion of the whole affair.

The King also attempted to develop the Suwŏn area economically. As noted earlier, the Commercial Equalization Law was implemented to encourage commercial development. He offered government loans to wealthy families that agreed to relocate to the area. He also encouraged craftspeople to move there and promoted their cooperation with merchants. His efforts seem to have been largely successful, at least relative to the rest of central Korea, as Suwŏn did experience a comparatively rapid population growth.<sup>329</sup>

One scheme that did not succeed, however, was the King’s plan to relocate twenty of the wealthiest merchant families in the capital to Suwŏn. Kim Sung-Yun explains the plan:

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<sup>327</sup> Lady Hyegyŏng. *Memoirs*, 164, 205.

<sup>328</sup> Haboush. *Confucian Kingship*, 185-187, 233.

<sup>329</sup> Roh Young-koo. “The Construction and Characteristics of Hwasŏng Fortress,” 195.

On the 2nd lunar month of the 21st year of Chǒngjo's reign (1797), the enforcement decree was prepared along with the enactment for the measures to boost Hwasǒng commerce. In order to attract the twenty rich Seoul families (most of whom were presumed to be merchants) who would lead the prosperity of Hwasǒng commerce, this enforcement decree conferred exclusive rights on selling hats used in the government and ginseng, along with providing the funds for settlement. Ginseng at the time was used as the method of payment in trade with China. The permission to trade with China was granted after a certain ratio of hats were provided to public offices. In other words, ginseng and the hats were essential in China trade and forced the traders to pass through Hwasǒng. Therefore, in this plan, it was intended to make Hwasǒng the center of trade both at home and abroad.<sup>330</sup>

In a rare political blunder, the decree would have offered government posts to families who accepted this offer.<sup>331</sup> While the sale of offices was already becoming common, there had been controversy from the start over funding the Fortress's construction, including a rumor that the King had sold offices to raise funds for it.<sup>332</sup> Further, Chǒngjo's go-to weapon for suppressing opposition to the Fortress, his filial piety, could not really save him here. How would moving merchant families—not exactly the most righteous men in the Confucian worldview—to the area around his father's tomb be a filial act? This gave the Intransigents—who despite being willing to work with Chǒngjo on other issues were never comfortable with the Fortress or its garrison—an opening to block the implementation of the decree. Chǒngjo wrote to Sim Hwan-ji to gain his support for the relocation, to no avail (discussed below).

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<sup>330</sup> Kim Sung-Yun, "T'angpyǒng and Hwasǒng," 159-160.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>332</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1795.2.28; Kim Sung-Yun, "T'angpyǒng and Hwasǒng," 161.

## THE ROBUST AND BRAVE REGIMENT: WHOM DO THEY SERVE?

With the Illustrious Fortress, Chǒngjo had a base of royal power to strengthen his hand against opponents among the official class and the landed *yangban* elite. But a fortress is nothing without soldiers to garrison it, and just as he sought a power base outside the vice-grip of the aristocracy, so the King needed a new military unit apart from the existing military apparatus. Rather than a military unit led by a civil official from a prestigious lineage who had performed not a day's worth of military duty or training and made up of old men, dead men, and slaves who had long since run away, Chǒngjo wanted an actual effective unit. After all, two Chosŏn kings had been forced off the throne by officials in command of government troops, and the gravest threat to Yǒngjo's throne had been Disciple opponents in key military positions. Like T'aejong, a former soldier who preferred direct royal control over military units, Chǒngjo knew he could not effectively rule without control over military assets and their attendant economic resources, and like his father, he was determined to pose a credible military threat to a *yangban* class that was not shy about manipulating the succession in the face of a direct challenge to their power. The King's increasing control over the military alarmed the Patriarchs, and even close associates of Chǒngjo among their number opposed it.<sup>333</sup>

The creation of the Robust and Brave Regiment followed the by-now-familiar pattern of Chǒngjo's ruling style. It began in 1777 with the creation of the "temporary" Office of the Palace Guard 宿衛所 (*suk'wiso*) to provide a high official post for Hong Kuk-yǒng, Commander of the Palace Guard 宿衛大將 (*suk'wi taejang*). This office was abolished after Hong's fall in 1779, but the precedent was set for creation of a new military unit. In 1782,

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<sup>333</sup> Park Hyunmo. *Chǒngch'i ka Chǒngjo*, 307, 328.

Chǒngjo created the *muye ch'ulsin* 武藝出身 and in 1785 changed its name to the Robust and Brave Guard 壯勇衛 (*changyong'wi*). Its purpose was to guard the king—despite the criticism that military units for this purpose already existed<sup>334</sup>—and it consisted of three companies 硝 (*ch'o*) of about ninety men each. Thus, despite its designation as a guard 衛 (*wi*), at this time it was only the size of a battalion 司 (*sa*) of 270 men. In 1787 it was enlarged and renamed the Robust and Brave Office 壯勇廳 (*chang'yongch'ōng*). The following year it was made a regiment 營 (*yōng*), giving it its final name of Robust and Brave Regiment, though as yet it remained well under regimental strength.<sup>335</sup>

It was not until Chǒngjo's seventeenth year on the throne (1793) that the unit expanded to become a real force to contend with. Not coincidentally, this occurred alongside the construction of the Illustrious Fortress, and this would only be the beginning of their intertwined relationship. The Fortress was designated as the “southern fortress” 南城 (*Namsōng*) for the defense of the capital, which meant that the Robust and Brave Regiment, being headquartered there, was on equal footing with the Five Military Divisions 五軍營 (*o'gun'yōng*), effectively making it permanent. In the first month of 1793, the Regiment was expanded to coincide with its division into an Inner Regiment 內營 (*naeyōng*) and an Outer Regiment 外營 (*oeyōng*). The Inner Regiment was to guard the royal shrine at Changdōk Palace in the capital, while the Outer Regiment was stationed at the Illustrious Fortress to protect Sado's tomb, the capital, and the king when he was in residence at the Fortress.

<sup>334</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1788.1.23. Third Inspector O Ik-hwan argued, “For guarding Your Majesty inside [the palace], there are the Palace Guards and the Office of Military Arts. For outside, there are the generals and men of the Five Military Divisions. There are no gaps in the defense of the perimeter of the palace, yet you for some reason pursue this path of excessive expense. [殿下內則有禁軍武藝。外則有五營將卒。環衛不缺。綢繆甚固。乃爲此冗長之物。以廣糜費之路歟。]”

<sup>335</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1793.1.12.

Chǒngjo justified the maintenance of a military unit in Suwǒn by noting the importance of having military officials in charge of such a strategic area:

然凡事莫若述古。南城只管保障。而大臣爲使。居留專差文宰。而爲保障。則武臣通擬於南城。況是地是府之所重乎。

However, in all matters it is best to follow antiquity. The southern fortress [Hwasǒng] is only for protection, yet those high ministers appointed to administer [Suwǒn] have been exclusively civilians. For the sake of defense, rather, military officials are to be nominated for the southern fortress. Is not this land, this district, a place of importance?<sup>336</sup>

While military officials did figure prominently in leading the Regiment, the principle of civilian control over the military was maintained. The King did indeed place a civilian official in charge, but in a startling break with his strategy on other fronts, he consistently selected Expedients alone, including his prominent allies Sǒ Yu-rin, Sǒ Yong-bo, Chǒng Min-si, Yi Si-su, and Cho Sim-t'ae.<sup>337</sup> This is probably a result of the Intransigents' unflagging opposition to it; as noted in Chapter 3, Kim Chong-su consistently opposed the King's military reforms, and Yi Pyǒng-mo switched from Expedient to Intransigent over the building of the Illustrious Fortress.<sup>338</sup> While Chǒngjo's successful use of the rhetoric that the Fortress was an expression of filial piety made it impossible to oppose its construction outright, Kim circulated a letter critical of the Fortress<sup>339</sup> while Yi attempted to obstruct troop transfers there<sup>340</sup> and to cancel the military training carried out there.<sup>341</sup> Sim Hwan-ji may have half-heartedly supported it, but this can only be inferred from Chǒngjo's letters to

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<sup>336</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1793.1.12.

<sup>337</sup> Ch'oe Hong-gyu. *Hwasǒng kǒnsǒl*, 259.

<sup>338</sup> Park Hyunmo. "18 segi Noron ūi chǒngch'igwan kwa chǒngguk unyǒng kisul", 314-315.

<sup>339</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1796.7.2.

<sup>340</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1797.8.7.

<sup>341</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1794.9.15.

him regarding the relocation of wealthy families to Suwŏn, which Yi Pyŏng-mo also opposed.

Writing in regard to a memorial submitted by Yi outlining six obstacles to the construction of the Fortress, Chŏngjo writes to Sim:

今日李判府之筭。可謂大得物望。爲公而喜。爲私則幸。大抵本事雖萬全無弊。焉有京師豪富移送留府之經論。古之茂陵徙富。亦不然矣。而節目已成。聽聞不昨。今幸有可否之論。是何等朝廷之美事與消息耶。此大臣坐簪中。公然得喫聲舉。令人捧腹。卿亦對人切勿出預知機微之色。只大加稱道。如何如何。

As for First Minister-without-Portfolio Yi Pyŏng-mo's memorial today, it serves his good reputation well. It is beneficial for both the public good and for me personally. Although generally speaking there is no corruption and it is going off perfectly, what about the policy of relocating wealthy merchant families from the capital to the Illustrious Fortress District? In ancient days, wealthy families were moved [to the site of Emperor Wu's future tomb], but we have not done this. All the necessary procedures have been completed and they have been informed about this, and now fortunately a discussion of the rightness or wrongness of such action has arisen,<sup>342</sup> so is this not good news or a wonderful affair for the court? These great ministers [who oppose my plan to move families to Suwŏn] sit in the dark [not going out to see what is going on at Suwŏn] while publicly getting reputations, and that gives me a belly-laugh. Do not reveal that you learned about this from others. Just extremely praise it, will you?<sup>343</sup>

It appears, however, that Sim did not praise it, as the official record is silent as to his stand on the relocation question, despite a second letter from the King that seems to play on Sim's dislike of Yi Pyŏng-mo to gain his support.<sup>344</sup> Perhaps Intransigent opposition was so great that none among their number could express open support for the development of the area around the King's new fortress.

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<sup>342</sup> This discussion begins 1797.2.22, where the *Annals* records Chŏngjo citing the relocation of wealthy families to Emperor Wu's tomb. The *Annals* also records Chŏng Min-si, naturally, encouraging the King to adopt the relocation policy.

<sup>343</sup> Chŏngjo. *Chŏngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 121, 1797.2.25. Yi's memorial can be found in the *Annals* entry for the same date.

<sup>344</sup> Chŏngjo. *Chŏngjo ŏch'alch'ŏp* 123, 1797.3.5.

Of the two parts of the Regiment, the Outer is of primary concern for the present work, since it was assigned to the Illustrious Fortress. At the same time the commander of the Inner Regiment was raised from Commissioner 壯勇使 (*chang'yongsa*) to Grand Military Commander 壯勇兵大將 (*chang'yong pyŏngdaejang*), the governor of the Illustrious Fortress District 華城部 (*Hwasŏngbu*) was assigned the concurrent appointment of Commissioner of the Outer Regiment 壯勇外使 (*changyong oeyŏng*), inextricably linking the unit to the defense of the Fortress. The Outer Regiment was also further expanded, becoming a respectable standing regiment of over 3000 men, and was tasked with protecting the detached palace at the Fortress. In his decree ordering these changes, Chŏngjo noted that he had been conserving funds for some time in order to pay for the Regiment's needs. Not surprisingly, he justified these reforms as expressions of filial piety to his father, whose tomb should not be in the charge of an official of merely third rank:

御極以後。峙藏儲用。爲所重也。幸荷皇天祖宗之默佑。而龍盤虎踞之宅兆。永奠千億萬年無疆大曆數。是地之所重。實與周之豐漢之沛。竝盛而齊隆。惟其拱護之方。愈勤而愈密。使體貌尊嚴。制度肅虔。卽予小子情文之所當然。譬若宗廟之禮。先言百官之美。其有關於所重者如是矣。是地水原府。自卜園寢。關防增重。美哉。天作之襟帶。長奉月出之衣冠。預建行宮。先寓瞻依之思。摸揭圖像。用替定省之誠。而孺慕結轡。迷不知節。每歲三百日。無日不屈指而企企者。亶在於禮行一日。而旣展省將還駕。駕住府界峴上。瞻望躊躇。不自覺其吾行之遲遲。輒召至[致]守臣於前。申之以恪謹拱護之義。顧其職則一邑倅也。問其品則三品窠也。 Since I ascended the throne, I have regarded conserving resources as important. Fortunately, with the mysterious help of my royal ancestors in unfathomable Heaven, here on the site of the coiled dragon and crouching tiger,<sup>345</sup> we will be blessed with great fortune for countless years to come. This land we cherish truly has prospered like the Feng lands of the Zhou and the Pei lands of the Han.<sup>346</sup> Only by striving to defend this area even more effectively will our prestige be exalted and our state institutions be revered. This is why I feel it is important for me to express my feelings. It is like the

<sup>345</sup> The coiled dragon and crouching tiger were auspicious geomantic formations.

<sup>346</sup> Feng and Pei are both proper names for places that served as the core for their respective dynasties.

rite of the royal shrine in which the first beautiful part is the high officials arrayed before it. If there is any example connected to what is important, this is it. Since the Manifestly Abundant Garden was prepared, this land in Suwŏn District has been more important because it guards the flanks. How beautiful it is! I honor [Sado's] cap and gown each month. In preparing to establish the detached palace, my first thoughts were of trust and respect. I hung up his portrait, and I served my mother faithfully, but the child's longing to connect with his father knows no restraint. For the three hundred days of every year, not a day goes by that I do not count and wait with anticipation [to pay homage to Sado in Suwŏn]. I pass the time in the performance of these rites [for Sado] on one day a year, but as soon as I complete the rites and start the return trip to the palace, when I stop on the hilltop at the boundary of Suwŏn, I turn my face to the sky and hesitate to leave, and I cannot rouse myself from this hesitation to continue on. When I summon the magistrate of my father's tomb before me, I continually insist that he should guard it with reverence and due respect. But if you look at his position, it is that of a township head. When you ask his rank, his is the third rank.<sup>347</sup>

In the seventh month of 1793, the 300-strong cavalry unit of the Regiment was reorganized as the Brave Detached Company 壯別隊 (*changbyŏldae*), and two months later it was designated the King's Personal Military Guard 親軍衛 (*ch'in'gunwi*).<sup>348</sup> In 1795, twelve more battalions were transferred from regular army units to the Robust and Brave Outer Regiment, three months after their associated villages of Yong'in, Chinwi, and Ansan were put under the administration of the Illustrious Fortress District.<sup>349</sup> Three months after that, the regular army was further weakened when two of the Five Armies, the Defensive Resistance Command 守禦廳 (*Suŏch'ŏng*) and the Chief Military Command 摠戎廳 (*Ch'ongyungch'ŏng*) were gutted, effectively putting the Robust and Brave Regiment on the level of the remaining three armies. Here, Chŏngjo's cultivation of Sim Hwan-ji paid off; Sim, serving as Minister of War, gave his assent to the decision.<sup>350</sup> The next year, Yi

<sup>347</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1793.1.12.

<sup>348</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1797.1.25; 1797.7.12; 1797.9.24.

<sup>349</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1795.2\*.7; 1795.5.25.



Chu-guk, a proponent of Chǒngjo who served as Minister of War despite having only passed the military examination,<sup>351</sup> proposed the abolition of all provincial armies. Though this was not carried out, the proposal attracted royal praise,<sup>352</sup> and the Regiment eventually came to number approximately 20,000 troops.

The Robust and Brave Regiment, then, represented a serious royal challenge to aristocratic control over the regular army as represented by the Border Defense Command 備邊司 (*pibyŏnsa*), as it weakened the central army at the expense of a pro-royal unit.<sup>353</sup> From its place in the mighty Illustrious Fortress, commanded by a King's man, the Regiment represented a strong deterrent to any aristocratic challenge to Chǒngjo's hold on the throne.

#### CONCLUSION

The Illustrious Fortress stands today as a visible reminder of Chǒngjo's devotion to his father's memory. It was not just a symbol but a functional military installation that the King garrisoned with a new military unit centered on it. This military unit began as a token tomb guard that Chǒngjo quietly built into a formidable force. He entrusted command of this unit and its fortress to his close allies, and he may have intended to retire to the safety of its thick walls. Some members of the aristocracy opposed these developments, understanding the danger posed by a powerful military unit stationed near the capital that effectively operated under the King's direct control and outside the regular military command. They were outmaneuvered, however, by Chǒngjo's skillful manipulation of filial piety. He turned

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<sup>350</sup> *Chǒngjo sillok* 1795.8.18; 1795.8.19.

<sup>351</sup> Park. *Between Dreams and Reality*, 137-138.

<sup>352</sup> Ch'oe Hong-gyu. *Hwasŏng kŏnsŏl*, 260; *Chǒngjo sillok* 1796.3.22; 1796.3.27

<sup>353</sup> Ch'oe Hong-gyu. *Hwasŏng kŏnsŏl*, 269; Yi Tae-Jin. "King Chǒngjo", 180-182.

the weakness of Sado's shadow into a strength, playing on the sympathy of Sado's tragic end to justify the grand fortress constructed in his name and the elite guard to defend it. The fortress survives, but the guard was not so lucky.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

無樂乎為君

I take no joy in being a ruler.<sup>354</sup>

The man born Yi San 李祘 ascended the throne of Chosŏn Korea in 1776 under the long shadow of his father's execution on the orders of his grandfather. His mother's family were rivals of his close associate Hong Kuk-yŏng, the court was riven by a faction supporting the execution of his father and a faction vehemently demanding justice for the fallen crown prince, and groups such as secondary sons and northern *yangban* were agitating for their share of influence in the government. As king, Chŏngjo had considerable power, but he was not alone in wielding influence. He had to contend with wealthy aristocrats from illustrious lineages that had been respected and politically dominant since before anyone knew of the royal Yi clan. The same Neo-Confucian ideology that he used to demand loyalty and obedience from his ministers could also be used by those ministers to constrain and obstruct his autonomy. While the *yangban* were divided across several factional lines, using one faction against another could be a bloody business, as his great-grandfather Sukchong had discovered, and in any case those divisions were rendered irrelevant when it came to any perceived direct threat to the perpetual power of the *yangban* as a whole. Forbidden by tradition from meeting officials privately, Chŏngjo was forced to communicate his intentions to bolster his own power to officials who might be sympathetic while cloaking those intentions from those who would not. Lacking those weapons of his Ming and Qing

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<sup>354</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok* 1787.1.25. This is a paraphrase of *Analects* 13.15. Interestingly, Chŏngjo, like other Chosŏn monarchs who reference this passage, leaves out the second half of the sentence. The full quotation reads, “I take no joy in being a ruler, except that no one dares to oppose what I say. [予無樂乎為君。唯其言而莫予違也。]”

counterparts—namely, permanent dismissal from office or execution as punishment for disobedience—Chǒngjo instead made and broke alliances, took advantage of supporters without being beholden to them, and pushed his agenda using the methods available to him: his mastery of the Neo-Confucian canon, his shrewd judge of character, and the tragedy of his father’s death.

Perhaps believing Yǒngjo had been misled into ordering Sado’s execution, Chǒngjo was determined to rule, so far as was possible, as he saw fit, and he did not shy away from making this clear in ways that were acceptable in the political world of late Chosŏn. He argued that the king was properly the teacher of his officials, placing himself in the superior position. He worked with scholars who took advantage of textual criticism techniques employed in the School of Evidential Learning to “reconstruct” the classics along the lines of earlier, ruler-centered interpretations, even as he ostensibly condemned that very School. Chǒngjo drew upon the long tradition of the ruler’s discretion to justify his reliance on his own judgment, to the point that some ministers complained that he was excessively cutting them out of decision-making.

Chǒngjo was not always successful in convincing his ministers that he knew what was best, especially early on. As a new king whose legitimacy was under scrutiny, he initially relied excessively on a close associate, Hong Kuk-yǒng, and proved unable to save his half-brother from death. He learned quickly, however, and perceived that his old friend Hong was making an unwise bid for power. Hong was disgraced and politically destroyed, and the King would never put so much trust and power in any one man again. Nor, several years after his half-brother’s death, would he permit his other half-brother to face a similar

fate. Instead, he “punished” his brother with a minor exile, one that he himself continued to violate, to the consternation of his ministers.

The inheritor of his grandfather’s Policy of Impartiality, Chǒngjo altered it in subtle ways to further his own ends. Rather than attempt to balance the two dominant factions of Patriarchs and Disciples, as Yǒngjo had, Chǒngjo expanded the policy to include the politically-eclipsed Southerners. It was no longer a matter of balance but of the King’s discretion to select whom he would. He did not seek to balance enemy factions but to reconcile them to the view that he himself was their primary concern. This is revealed by his canny manipulation of three key leaders of the Intransigents faction, the group of men most visibly opposed to his royal project. Even a staunch opponent like Sim Hwan-ji could be manipulated by the King. While Sim—no green lad himself when it came to politics—undoubtedly manipulated Chǒngjo as well, it was a small price to pay to have a powerful, if inconsistently reliable, friend in the “enemy” faction. In those cases where Sim could not be counted upon, Chǒngjo had other men he could manipulate, not the least of which included other important Intransigents, as he played on that faction’s own leadership intrigues. Even Ch’ae Che-gong, perhaps the King’s closest, staunchest, and most consistent supporter, could not presume that he was above criticism. Chǒngjo was determined not to allow another Hong Kuk-yǒng, another man who thought his position so secure that he could become a threat to the King.

Chǒngjo ran into another problem with the selection secretaries. New to power, he perhaps did not realize why Yǒngjo had abolished their privileged power to recommend their own successors. It did not take long before he realized his error, though it did take some time to correct it. Nevertheless, the Royal Library was set up quickly, though initially it was not

obvious what its real purpose was. Over time, as was his general practice, the King slowly built up its influence, by small increments that were not individually objectionable, but that combined over the years to create a formidable institution for the imposition of the royal will. Following on with his rhetoric of the king as teacher, Chǒngjo replaced the Royal Lectures, in which he was his ministers' student, with the *ch'ogyŏ munsin* system, in which he was their teacher. He also labored to expand the pool of talent from which he could recruit men. The Southerner faction was one example, but he reached even wider, to groups that had been neglected not just for a century but for most of the dynasty: sons of concubines and *yangban* from the northern provinces. His efforts to get these men into the civil branch of the government were largely (though not entirely) frustrated, but he did have some success in the military branch, particularly for northmen. These efforts did not continue beyond his reign, perhaps fostering resentment that erupted in the Hong Kyōngnae Rebellion.

Chǒngjo also expanded the petition system so that he could take a more direct role in administering justice. Again by increments, he permitted the expansion of situations in which a petition could be submitted, and he made it easier for petitions to reach him by allowing them to be presented to him during processions and having numerous processions in order to provide such opportunities. In addition, he appeared to have been in the process of working to abolish slavery, to be replaced by the more efficient and more humane system of hired labor. This would have adjusted the social system to the realities of the late Chosŏn economy and also improved the military situation by adding thousands to the commoner rolls for military duty.

The military was, indeed, the final area of reform under examination. As he so often did, Chǒngjo professed filial piety for his father that, while entirely genuine, also provided a

pretext to construct a fortress and a new military unit that he could use to offset aristocratic military power stemming from their command of dynastic armies. The Illustrious Fortress was the most advanced in Chosŏn at the time of its construction, reflecting the King's willingness to take advantage of the techniques of the barbarian Qing. Likewise reflecting his general distaste for slavery, Chŏngjo ordered that hired labor be used to construct the fortress. Aware that building the fortress was a suspicious (and expensive) project, he also took opportunities to win propaganda victories with it, as when he refused his officials' recommendation that he force workers to continue laboring on the project during a famine, instead painting himself as putting aside his personal filial piety on behalf of relieving the people's suffering.

To garrison the Fortress, the King formed a new military unit, the Robust and Brave Regiment. This he placed under the direct command of the magistrate of the Fortress district, removing it from the standard military hierarchy. The importance of this unit is revealed by his first appointment to its command—none other than his closest associate, Ch'ae Che-gong. As in other areas, the King gradually built up the size and strength of the Regiment, at the expense of the five central armies in the capital that were strongholds of aristocratic power. Whether or not Chŏngjo planned to abdicate and move his residence to Suwŏn, the presence of a large army under the control of a royalist magistrate only a day's march from the capital was certainly a powerful new arrow in the King's quiver.

Testament to the power Chŏngjo centered in himself, after his death his chosen ministers were quickly ousted from their posts and a number of his reforms were rolled back or co-opted by those who had opposed them. Chŏngjo's son Sunjo was only ten years old when his father died, and so the country was governed by Chŏngsun 貞純王后, the

still-living second queen of Yŏngjo. Since Chŏngsun's family were prominent Intransigent Patriarchs, this group struck immediately, despite Chŏngsun's own attempts to rein in their excesses. Sim Hwan-ji was at the vanguard, though he would follow Chŏngjo to the grave a mere two years later. As detailed in Chapter 4, the rhetoric of Chŏngjo's plan to free all slaves in Chosŏn was appropriated in Sunjo's decree to free what were by then an economic liability: government-owned slaves. Further, the resulting loss of central government revenue this emancipation would supposedly generate was made up by disbanding the Robust and Brave Regiment,<sup>355</sup> a major threat to aristocratic power that the Intransigents could not tolerate. The Royal Library lost importance in the political arena, the special powers given to its officials being quickly eliminated. By the 1860s, it was such a shadow of its former self that the Taewŏn'gun removed the royal writings from it and moved them to the Office of the Royal Genealogy 宗親府 (*Chongch'inbu*).<sup>356</sup> After reaching their high-water mark during Chŏngjo's final years, northern *yangban* likely felt stymied by the refusal of southern and capital *yangban* to recognize them as equals and permit them to hold important office, a strong contributing factor to the Hong Kyong-nae Rebellion.

A purge of Catholics immediately followed Chŏngjo's death. Scholars have usually regarded this as resulting from their loss of Chŏngjo's protection,<sup>357</sup> but why was Chŏngjo's protection necessary in the first place, and why was persecution so quick to follow? Many of those persecuted as Catholics were in fact men that Chŏngjo's opponents had failed to remove by other means. The purge was led by Sim Hwan-ji, but it was in collusion with a Southerner, Mok Manjung, then serving as head of the Censorate. Despite being a Southerner,

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<sup>355</sup> *Sunjo sillok* 1801.1.28; 1802.1.20.

<sup>356</sup> Yi Tae-Jin. *Kyujanggak sosa*. Seoul National University Library. 1990, 28-29.

<sup>357</sup> Palais. *Politics and Policy*, 304 n. 16 carries this implication.



Mok had been at odds with Ch'ae Che-gong and his supporters,<sup>358</sup> and the purge was his opportunity to eliminate proponents of Ch'ae and, thus, of Chǒngjo. As discussed in Chapter 3, Chǒngjo successfully protected his half-brother Prince Ŭnǒn from all punishment beyond the tamest of exiles. It was only after Chǒngjo's death that Ŭnǒn was caught up in the 1801 purge and executed because of his wife's Catholicism. Similarly, Lady Hyegyǒng's brother Hong Nag-im had been exonerated by Chǒngjo when he was accused of involvement in the plot to put Prince Ŭnjǒn on the throne in 1778. While Chǒngjo had been unable to shield Ŭnjǒn, he did vindicate Hong Nag-im. Almost immediately after Chǒngjo's death, Hong was again accused a number of crimes, for which his punishment was slight until a probably baseless accusation of Catholicism emerged months after the initial charges had failed to have much effect. It was only then that Hong could be given distant exile to Cheju Island, followed by execution.<sup>359</sup> Tasan was exiled, Yi Ka-whan was executed, and Sǒ Yu-rin was exiled and died the following year. Yun Haeng-im, Chǒngjo's confidante in the planned elimination of slavery, was also executed by his fellow Patriarchs.

Chǒngjo is often blamed for instituting the system of in-law governance, as exemplified by Hong Kuk-yǒng and Kim Cho-sun.<sup>360</sup> It is worth remembering, though, that Chǒngjo quickly eliminated Hong, and Kim did not reach high office until after Chǒngjo's death. Nor was Kim's rise particularly meteoric, and even if it had been, Tasan's career was also impressive, though he had no family connections to either Chǒngjo or his queen. Certainly Lady Hyegyǒng's clan benefited from her marriage to Sado during Yǒngjo's reign, while the Andong Kim clan did not become especially prominent during Chǒngjo's reign.

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<sup>358</sup> Lee Song-Mu. *Chosǒn hugi tangjaensa*, 260.

<sup>359</sup> Lady Hyegyǒng. *Memoirs*, 194 n.16.

<sup>360</sup> Pak Hyunmo. *Chǒngch'iga Chǒngjo*, 397-398 is an example.

Still, even if the in-law governance system could be traced back to Chǒngjo, how much of a black mark is this? Though in-law governance was hated by both contemporaries and later historians, its merits should not overlooked. Rather than the generational blood-letting of the years of intense factionalism, each in-law family seemed more or less to accept defeat when it failed to secure its position by marrying a girl to the heir apparent, and no heads rolled when one family replaced another, to say nothing of digging up corpses and beheading them and executing men for crimes against other men long dead. The Chosŏn government continued to operate disaster relief measures and administer justice,<sup>361</sup> and the state was no more given over to banditry in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century than at any other time.

Thus, not all of Chǒngjo's achievements were undone. Though its garrison may have gone, portions of the Illustrious Fortress stand today as a part of Chǒngjo's legacy. Two centuries of factional violence were finally brought to an end. The Four Colors remained important in the political arena, but their place as the dominant force was replaced by the comparatively benign and nonviolent in-law governance. The Yi family remained on the throne—surviving the serious Hong Kyŏng-nae Rebellion—and the government continued to operate without major disruption until the modern world crashed upon Korean shores in 1876. Tens of thousands of slaves were freed, and even if their economic status was not much improved and their humble origins not quickly forgotten, at least they had some respite from the lowliness of the slave label. The Royal Library remained; though quickly pushed out of real political power, it continued to function in some capacity down to the institution today that bears its name. Just as supporters of Chǒngjo lost out after the death of their patron, the

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<sup>361</sup> Anders Karlsson. "Royal Compassion and Disaster Relief in Chosŏn Korea." *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* vol. 20, no. 1. June 2007, 71-98.

Intransigents did not fare well after the deaths of Sim Hwan-ji and Queen Chǒngsun, and in 1804 it was the Expedients who emerged triumphant. Their man Kim Cho-sun orchestrated the beginning of the in-law government that would dominate the political scene until the arrival of the Taewǒn-gun thereon.<sup>362</sup>

The issues surrounding Chǒngjo's reign are too numerous for any one study to address, and the present work has raised a number of questions that are beyond its scope to answer. First, as revealed in Chǒngjo's letters to Sim Hwan-ji, despite the cohesiveness of late Chosǒn factions, there remained cleavages even within factions, as men vied for leadership. Studies of power struggles in Chosǒn have focused on struggles between factions, but those within factions have not been widely addressed, especially those that did not lead to splitting into new factions. Second, whether a result of conscious imitation or not, Chǒngjo's creation of the Royal Library is strikingly similar to King Sejong's 世宗 (r. 1418-1450) establishment of the Hall of Worthies, which also served as both a repository of the king's writings and an instrument of royal policy. Though the connection between the two has been noted,<sup>363</sup> it may be fruitful to explore in-depth the different ways the two institutions, separated by nearly four centuries, functioned, along with their "fates". The Hall of Worthies was abolished by Sejo, only to be re-established later as the Office of Special Advisors, an obstacle to royal autonomy, while the Royal Library persisted but faded into political obscurity. Third, there is the question of what effects the construction of the Illustrious Fortress—constructed, as it was, largely by hired rather than coerced labor—and the attending attempt to loosen restrictions on commercial activity in Suwǒn had on both the local and the national economy. Did Suwǒn become a bustling center of trade on a larger

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<sup>362</sup> Lee Song-Mu. *Chosǒn hugi tangjaensa*, 268-269.

<sup>363</sup> An example is Ch'oe Tu-jin's "Chǒngjo sidae Kyujanggak ŭi kyoyuk ŭiui".

scale than was typical of late Chosŏn? Was Chŏngjo's use of hired labor a natural outgrowth of changing economic conditions, or was it instead a driving force behind such change? Fourth, did in-law governance result primarily as a result of Chŏngjo's policies? I have suggested, though by no means demonstrated, that it did not, and further investigation would be needed to build a strong case in either direction. Fifth, the present work, focused as it is on the court and to a lesser extent the military, does not deal with Chŏngjo's dealings with local government. Here is another area, perhaps, in which the King may have attempted to expand royal autonomy: appointment of local magistrates, collection of taxes, registration of land, registration of men for military service, and so forth.

In the end, we are left much where we started with King Chŏngjo, a man in many ways a contradiction. He built a fortress that has stood for two hundred years yet was obsolete within fifty, a stronghold that never served to protect the country even when the state most needed to fight the Japanese. His new military unit was disbanded to make up for the loss of slaves that had themselves probably been more expensive to maintain than their labor was worth. His father was fully rehabilitated one hundred years after his death, barely ten years before the family would lose its throne altogether. His son issued in his name a decree that harshly punished the Catholics that he himself had taken pains to shield from harsh punishment, and men like Tasan who had supported him were laid low as Catholics, whether they were or not. He labored under his father's long shadow while becoming in many ways the man Yŏngjo had wanted Sado to be.

If Chŏngjo had two major political goals—to create freedom for royal action and to maintain that freedom beyond his own reign—we might say that he succeeded in the first but failed in the second. So long as Chŏngjo himself was alive and dedicated his considerable

intellect and indefatigable energy toward playing the game of thrones—expounding on Confucian rhetoric; cajoling, manipulating, and intimidating his officials; making dozens of processions and responding to thousands of memorials and petitions—he could create a space for himself to operate with some degree of freedom. But his efforts to build institutions that would perpetuate his own power into future generations did not succeed. It is tempting to speculate that if he had lived another twenty years or even ten, allowing his son to take the throne at such an age that he could rule in fact as well as in name, then Sunjo might have been able to prevent the rollback of his father’s policies and keep the new institutions in place long enough that bureaucratic inertia could make them hard to dislodge. Indeed, even if Sunjo himself were a mediocre monarch, perhaps all that was needed was an adult ruler of sound mind to hold the line until the weight of time could root those institutions in place. But Sunjo was but a boy of ten, who probably had no idea what his father’s intentions had really been, no more than Chǒngjo himself, also a boy of ten when he lost his father, had understood Sado’s insanity. Chǒngsun was limited both by Chosŏn prejudice against her gender and by her family’s strong links to opponents of Chǒngjo. It is no surprise that neither she nor Sunjo was able to stop the dismantling of Chǒngjo’s system, even if they had both recognized what it was and desired to save it, and there is little indication that they did either.

Thus, we are left with the final contradiction. Chǒngjo, a king who built institutions to strengthen royal power, failed to provide perhaps the most basic source of royal strength in the absence of such long-standing institutions: an adult heir to succeed him. If Chǒngjo, like James K. Polk after him, worked so hard at governing that he damaged his health such that he died young, then his two goals were fundamentally in conflict, and he could never have

accomplished them both. Perhaps that is the simplest way to describe King Chǒngjo: The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long.

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