

INTRODUCTION

Alas! I am the son of Crown Prince Sado.

—King Chǒngjo to his officials, November 20, 1776¹

ON JULY 4, 1762, THE KING OF KOREA ORDERED THE EXECUTION OF THE heir to the throne, his son. In the four hundred years the Yi family—or Chosŏn, as it was called then—had ruled Korea, brothers had slain brothers and uncles had murdered nephews in the struggle for the crown, but thus far no king had killed his own son. The situation was a strange one, the execution itself stranger still. The crown prince had been suffering from madness for six years, attempting to kill himself in 1756, and committing his first murder the following year. Sneaking out of the palace at night, carousing with ruffians and prostitutes, beating servants to death in fits of rage—there seemed no end to the crown prince’s bizarre behavior. The court lived in fear in the months leading up to the execution, paralyzed by the dread of being on the receiving end of his bouts of insanity. But what could be done? Crown Prince Sado was the only legitimate son of the king. There was no precedent in Korean law for disinheriting him in favor of another candidate. And what of Sado’s son, the future heir, who under Chosŏn law would be punished along with his father should any action be taken?

It was not until the summer of 1762 that Sado finally made the mistake that would seal his fate. He committed the unforgiveable crime of threatening the survival of the dynasty, and therefore, the state itself. In a fit of madness, he threatened regicide, to take his father’s life. The king vacillated for three weeks while the prince awaited punishment, but in the end even Sado’s mother urged the king to act: Sado had to die. In order to protect the line of succession, the crown prince could not be executed as a common criminal. Some alternative had to be found, something that would result in Sado’s death without the stigma of a legal judgment impugning his own son’s legitimacy. Suicide would have served, but Sado’s tutors prevented him from strangling himself, much to the king’s ire, if Yi Kwanghyŏn’s diary is to be believed.² As the king shouted in exasperation, “Why don’t you just kill yourself?,” Sado’s son, a boy of ten, begged the king for his father’s life until he was physically dragged out of the

palace. Sado was ordered to enter an empty rice chest—a sturdy wooden box about four feet high and wide—which then was sealed. His wife and son were expelled from the palace, and eight days later, during a mighty thunderstorm, the crown prince died.

Fourteen years after the tragedy, that boy ascended the throne. Born Yi San in 1752, he is best known by the posthumous title Chŏngjo 正祖 (“Rectified Ancestor”). Now a man of twenty-five, Chŏngjo never forgot that he was his father’s son, and his first statement to his officials upon his accession, quoted above, reflects this. A child at the time of Sado’s death, Chŏngjo never understood his father’s illness. He was convinced Sado had fallen victim to the endemic, deadly court factionalism that had held the Chosŏn government in its grip for two centuries. Chŏngjo’s overriding goal was to free the throne from domination by any faction so that he and his descendants would never be manipulated into tragedy, as he believed his grandfather had been. This goal took time, intensive effort, and extraordinary talent to accomplish, as revealed by his inability to prevent his half-brother’s execution on what were likely false charges of treason in his first year on the throne. In his relentless drive to make the king the ultimate arbiter in the land, the singular figure from which all power flowed, Chŏngjo—like Louis XIV and the Qianlong Emperor—acted as an absolute monarch in an early modern world.

For most of the twentieth century, the late Chosŏn period (roughly 1700-1910) was regarded as a long, slow decline into corruption and chaos, ending with the ignominy of Japanese colonialism. This is in large part due to the justifications put forward by Japanese scholars in the years leading up to the annexation of Korea and throughout the colonial period: that Chosŏn was backward and had failed to modernize on its own (as Japan had) and so needed Japanese colonial guidance. Korean scholars writing in the early decades of independent South Korea sought to recover their history, but they had been trained in modern historiography by scholars steeped in the colonial paradigm and so accepted many of its assumptions, even as they sought to refute or refine that paradigm. They adopted the Marxist perspective of their former occupiers and looked for evidence of Korean development out of the “feudal” stage of late Chosŏn, finding varying degrees of what they sought.³ This is exemplified in the “sprouts of capitalism” argument, the claim that proto-capitalism had developed in Korea and that therefore the country’s impending modernization had been derailed by the Japanese colonial project.

Thus, even through the 1980s, late Chosŏn Korea was viewed as a period of missed opportunity and failure. Locked into rigid Confucian ideology and riven by hereditary factions that argued over minutiae like proper mourning

garments and classical writing styles, it was powerless when confronted with the modern world. This view is mistaken. Eighteenth-century Chosŏn was an early modern society, and Chŏngjo was an early modern monarch. It is my contention that, through expert explication of Confucian ideology, constructing and garrisoning the Illustrious Fortress 華城 (Hwasŏng) in the city of Suwŏn 水原, and establishing and subsequently empowering the Royal Library 奎章閣, King Chŏngjo was the most successful of late Chosŏn rulers, and perhaps of the entire dynasty, in maximizing the power of the monarchy. 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.

Scholars in the 1950s and 1960s 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 Chŏngjo as a “generous and forgiving monarch” who was a successful ruler because he followed “the Confucian ideal of [putting] the best scholars in the highest positions.”⁴ 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 Chŏng Yag-yong, a low-ranking minister, “was constantly consulted in secret council by the King, and his opinions were of great influence,” and that Chŏngjo “broke with the post-1694 Yi tradition proscribing the elevation to high position of Namin adherents and gave official advancement to a Namin leader, Ch’ae Che-gong, a man so brilliant that, *despite his faction*, he succeeded in winning and retaining the king’s personal favor.”⁵ The article does not mention Chŏngjo again until he dies, and Henderson only mentions his death in connection with the immediate reassertion of aristocratic dominance over the king’s favorites, leading to a purge of Chŏngjo’s supporters from the government and, hence, the exile of Chŏng Yag-yong.

Scholarship in the 1970s, including such seminal works as Ki-baik Lee’s *New History of Korea*, generally regarded Chŏngjo’s reign as largely a failure. Lee gives Yŏngjo and Chŏngjo credit for stability through putting “[a] lid on factionalism,” and there is a brief mention of Chŏngjo’s appointment of sons of consorts 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 Chŏngjo’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 Chŏngjo’s policies.⁶ These views retained adherents in later decades. 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 1994.⁷ In 2000, Sohn Pokee argued that the monarch was merely the arbiter who helped the *yangban* achieve a consensus or, at most, selected from among several alternatives proposed by the *yangban*, taking at face value the *Veritable Records*’ portrayal of the king as initiating discussions of *yangban* proposals rather than putting forward his own.⁸ 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.⁹

In the late 1980s and early 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 disagreements over actual policy. Earlier views of factionalism as a cover for personal power struggles gave way to more nuanced views that saw power struggles as inextricably tied up with philosophical positions.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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 were not merely a cover to attack political enemies but also reflected genuine concern with the danger a strange ideology might represent. Scholars such as Yi Tae-Jin argued that Chŏngjo’s concern with culture, such as writing style and “right learning” 正學, were part of how he dealt with substantive issues, while Yu Pong-hak called attention to the unsophisticated use of dichotomies, like practical learning 實學 (*sirhak*) versus Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism 性理學 (*sŏngnihak*) and progressivism versus conservatism that oversimplified analysis of the Chosŏn period. All of this lent support to the notion that Chŏngjo’s erudition and prolific scholarship were pursued not in lieu of policy objectives but to further them.

Chŏngjo likewise received quite the scholarly rehabilitation in the 1990s. The dullard, the useless monarch who failed to prepare the country for modernization in the 1980s, became Chŏngjo the Great, Confucian enlightened despot, in the 1990s. Why the sudden shift? Kim Paek-chŏl, very much himself a part of this shift, perhaps surprisingly does not argue that the history of Chŏngjo demanded such a reevaluation. Instead, he connects the shift to conditions in contemporary South Korea, namely, the longing for desperately needed

reforms and the failure to achieve them. This, he argues, mirrored the King's reform-mindedness and tragically short life. The 1980s view of Chǒngjo itself stands in contrast to the view of the King's near-contemporaries in the nineteenth century, who looked at his reign as a dynastic high point. His reign served as a model for reform in Kojong's time, even as a modernized Japan was knocking at Korea's door. Evaluations by postliberation scholars, having been trained under Japanese colonialism, judged it a failure—an example of the failings and backward “feudal” nature of the dynasty as a whole according to such influential historians as Ki-baik Lee and Han Woo-keun. It was not until the 1980s that the dynasty's achievements began to gain recognition (such as surviving for 300 years after the devastating Imjin War that would have toppled another government). However, even in the 1980s, with South Korea struggling under a dictatorship, Korean scholars were reluctant to praise strong kingship, leaving Chǒngjo to be seen as well-meaning and filial, tragic, but still inept, the puppet of Hong Kuk-yǒng, remembered primarily for dying young and leaving a legacy of in-law government. Passing unmentioned were many of the aspects of the Chǒngjo reign emphasized in the 1990s: the Royal Library, the Illustrious Fortress, the Robust and Brave Garrison. In connection with the '90s push to retrieve Korean books brought back to France during the 1866 French Incursion and the 1997 publication of Han Yǒng-u's *Finding Our History Again* (*Tasi ch'anŭn uri yǒksa*), Chǒngjo received a new evaluation, in tandem with the emerging movement to “rescue” Korean history from colonial historiography and its goateed mirror-universe counterpart, nationalist historiography. In Kim's view, the “syndrome” of Chǒngjo is the pinning of Korea's failure to resist Japanese colonialism on his early death, allowing Korea's fall to be treated as an inevitable tragedy that avoided the need to take a hard look at the actual failures. Kim points out that King Sǒngjong died at age thirty-seven, a full ten years younger than Chǒngjo, and having reigned less than half of the time Chǒngjo did. Yet Sǒngjong's death is not viewed as a tragedy, making the tragedy of Chǒngjo's death image rather than fact, or history that reflects the desires of people in the present.¹²

This “syndrome” survives into the twenty-first century, as exemplified by Song Ki-ch'ul's *T'onghap ŭi chǒngch'iga Yi San* (Chǒngjo, the Complete Politician), published in 2012. In this history of the reign, “Chǒngjo the Great” is the representative case of one who overcame all obstacles through the exercise of creative leadership, as the maverick King escapes from the constrictive Confucian framework to undertake modernizing reforms according to his “democratic consciousness”(!), which he apparently does by maximizing his own autocratic power to crush the resistance of the stodgy old aristocrats

who disapprove of the King's efforts to empower the people of the nation.¹³ In accounts like these, Chŏngjo is unmoored from history, affecting the future while seemingly unaffected by the past, since his Policy of Impartiality is explicitly described as not a continuation of Yŏngjo's but singularly his own creation. The old "sprouts of capitalism" argument is trotted out (though the term itself does not appear), along with the dubious claim that Chŏngjo shook off Sinocentrism as part of his nationalist consciousness. (Chŏngjo was very conscious, it seems.) Chŏngjo's processions are discussed under the section heading "The Realization of Direct Democracy [Chikchŏp minjujuŭi ūi silhyŏn]"! Thus, the Chŏngjo period is seen as a turning point in both Korean nationalism and democratization, though Song is hardly alone in making such grandiose claims.¹⁴ Yi Tae-Jin, to take another example, also attributes Korea's more rapid democratization than neighboring China and Japan to Yŏngjo's and Chŏngjo's focus on the common people.¹⁵ How North Korea's continuing brutal totalitarianism fits into such a model is not addressed. Taking the diametrically opposed, if not altogether any more useful, view is Kim Ki-bong, for whom Chŏngjo was not an enlightened ruler but a reactionary who tried to block the dawn of the modern age in Korea, and his success in doing so at the expense of the modernizing "advanced intellectuals" (*sin chisik'in*) condemned the country to the fate of Japanese colonialism. Kim contrasts him with Louis XIV, whose legacy was the French Revolution and, in consequence, modernity in France.¹⁶

This account will endeavor to be a little more sober in dealing with Chŏngjo, examining how he expanded and modified while also being constrained by the policies inherited from his predecessors and the cultural and social conditions under which he operated. Chŏngjo's primary goal was not to empower the people or modernize the country, as these are two concepts were hardly known in eighteenth-century Korea, where the notion of allowing the masses to choose their leaders sounded like chaos.¹⁷ Instead, he sought to expand his power to carry out his own will as ruler of the country. Convinced that his grandfather had been manipulated by others into executing his father, Chŏngjo's goal was to be the law unto himself, relying on his own judgment, manipulated and controlled by no one. Although as a good Confucian monarch he may have believed that his expanded power would be good for the state and the people, since only the king was able, through effective rule, to benefit the people's livelihood, this was not his main intention. He pursued policies that would put not only himself but his successors in the unassailable position of final decision-maker, which meant not only increasing his own power but setting up structures that would solidify the king's power for the reigns to follow his. But controlling the course of events after one's death is perhaps the

most challenging thing for any ruler. Louis XIV had his will annulled and his envisioned joint-regency for his young son and heir was instead dominated by the Duke of Orleans. Qianlong's powerful and fabulously wealthy favorite, Heshen, was disgraced and executed almost immediately after his patron's death. And while Chǒngjo himself ruled as a true absolutist, his institutional reforms meant to ensure his enhanced power would be passed to his descendants were not so successful.

The 2000s have seen an explosion of Chǒngjo literature in Korea. From Yi Tae-Jin, who views Chǒngjo as having pretensions to absolute monarchy, to Park Hyunmo and Yu Pong-hak, who see him as a shrewd politician with no firm agenda responding to the vicissitudes of the times, to Yi Han-u, 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 Chǒngjo's reign can be interpreted.¹⁸ The present work builds primarily on that of Yi Tae-Jin to argue for Chǒngjo's Chosŏn as an early modern absolute polity. I contend that he maximized his political and legal discretion within the constraints imposed by the Korean elite's shared understanding of acceptable use of power in accordance with the Confucian Way. His strategy for reform might best be summarized with William Beik's concept of "conservative innovation," that is, the appropriation and revitalization of traditional ruling techniques in new but recognizable ways in the service of goals that are fundamentally conservative—stability, maintenance of elite privilege, and security of the state and the dynasty. Chǒngjo 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 measured in years or even decades. Like Louis XIV, he "strove to fulfill and exercise the fullness of royal sovereignty as it was understood in the context of his time," and his "great achievement was to take up the existing potential of the royal state to exert its power in [Korean] society and push it to its limits."¹⁹

Chapter 1 explores Chosŏn as an early modern polity and interrogates the meaning of the term *absolutism*. Chapter 2 lays the groundwork of eighteenth-century Korea and for Chǒngjo's royal project as arising from the death of his father. It introduces the political world of the Eastern Kingdom, a careful balancing act between the throne and the aristocratic *yangban* ruling class. It also addresses both Chǒngjo's personal grief at his father's tragic end and his Machiavellian willingness to play on the sympathy generated by that tragedy in the service of his political ends. Convinced that nefarious ministers

manipulated Yŏngjo into executing his son, Chŏngjo's overriding goal was royal autonomy so that he might never be subjected to such manipulation.

As the boundaries between politics and culture were not strongly policed in Chosŏn, any analysis of one cannot afford to ignore the other. Chapter 3 deals with political philosophy, as Chŏngjo struggled with the *yangban* over the proper interpretation of Confucian ideology. With his mastery of the Confucian canon—the fundamental basis for governing in Chosŏn—the King was in a position to engage in intellectual combat with the *yangban* over his role in government. He brought his formidable intellect to bear on reinterpreting the classical texts of Confucianism to permit a greater degree of royal latitude. Chŏngjo sought to position himself as a scholar-king who instructed his ministers from a superior position, and he drew on earlier commentaries on the classics that stressed loyalty to the ruler as the supreme Confucian virtue. Through expanding the scope of “discretion” 權 (*kwŏn*)—the ruler's power to depart from accepted practice as the need arose, what in Europe might be termed “royal prerogative”—Chŏngjo sought to build an ideological justification for a strengthened kingship. Just as absolutists in Europe thought the ruler should obey the law except in emergencies, when it is acceptable to violate it,²⁰ Confucian scholars accepted violations of law and ritual in times of crisis.

Chapter 4 addresses how Chŏngjo dealt with the various power groups at court. After looking at his early struggles with the betrayal of a trusted friend—a betrayal that could only have reinforced his commitment to royal autonomy—we examine the intrigues against several members of his family, revealing how the King sought to protect royal relatives in order to preserve the majesty of the royal clan and to make a clear statement that he would be dominated by no one. The chapter then turns to Chŏngjo's handling of the major political factions and his subtle refinement of his predecessor's factional policy. It takes advantage of the recent discovery of Chŏngjo's “secret” letters to a consistent and prominent opponent of his policies, using them to illustrate how the King navigated the labyrinthine webs of power in late Chosŏn. This chapter reveals that Chŏngjo was willing both to sacrifice his friends and to work with his enemies in pursuit of his goals.

Chapter 5 looks at Chŏngjo's efforts to institute a system that would 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 centralize royal power: a system to train future administrators in his own particular throne-centered interpretation of Confucianism and a locus of power outside the traditional bureaucratic ladder, the Royal Library. The former involved relatively young officials being

selected and trained under the king's direction, sometimes receiving lessons directly from the king himself. Men reeducated in this way were the pool of talent from which Chǒngjo drew his support; by the closing years of Chǒngjo's reign, half of all officials to serve in the government came through the 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 supporting 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. 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 those in the regular bureaucracy who should have had the power to do so. 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 lamenting that “[t]he 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].”²¹

The chapter then moves on to address Chǒngjo'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, 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. 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 6 addresses Chǒngjo's military reforms to increase direct royal power over the military. 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 Suwŏn, perhaps with an eye toward retiring there in order to escape from aristocrat-infested Seoul, or even transferring the capital there; this force eventually became the central army unit. Central to his reform was the construction of the Illustrious Fortress to guard his father's grave. While it is certainly true that 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 Chŏngjo’s understanding of kingship: Everything is political and can be used for political ends. To this end, Chŏngjo stationed royal guards at the fortress and designated it as an administrative center. These guards, known as the Robust and Brave Regiment, began as a token tomb guard that the King slowly and patiently built up into a formidable force outside the regular bureaucratic structure of the military.

Chapter 7 evaluates the King as an absolute ruler as compared to his rough contemporaries: the Qianlong Emperor in China and Louis the XIV in France. Because social and political conditions in eighteenth-century Korea—namely the persistence of a landed aristocracy—more closely resembled those of early modern France, Chŏngjo’s effectiveness as a ruler was more similar to Louis than to Qianlong, despite Korea’s close cultural and diplomatic ties to China. Politically, Korea and France were more typical early modern states, while China emerges as the conspicuous exception due to its enormous size and population and its place as the central power dominating its region to a degree not possible for any state in early modern Europe. The chapter concludes that, according to the definition of “absolute ruler” discussed in chapter 1, Chŏngjo was as much an absolute ruler as these contemporaries, whose rule was made possible by the long-term trends of early modern societies—the further penetration of the state into local affairs and increased interaction between the center and the local, the spread of a shared culture and identity, and bureaucratized administration centered on the king.²² This strengthens the case for an early modern world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The eighth and final chapter concludes with an assessment of Chŏngjo’s reforms. A testament to the power Chŏngjo 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. Chŏngjo’s son Sunjo 純祖 was only ten years old when his father died, and control of the country passed into the hands of Chŏngjo’s opponents. Chŏngjo’s plan to end hereditary slavery in Chosŏn was reduced to the mere emancipation of the by-then economically unnecessary palace slaves. Since this supposedly represented a loss of central government revenue, the “shortfall” was made up by the disbanding of Chŏngjo’s Robust and Brave Guards. The King’s major reforms—such as the abolition of hereditary 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 Chŏngjo belongs whatever credit may be given for these limited reforms. The

chapter evaluates the culturally shaped ways in which the King grappled with the problems of early modernity in East Asia.

King Chǒngjo is a study in contrasts. He was torn between his filial duty toward his 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 been sincere in his belief that strengthening his own position was for the good of the state and the people of Chosŏn, and he tried to institutionalize this strengthening for his successors. 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 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 written in December of 1797, Chǒngjo asks if he successfully communicated his disagreement with a close associate, since his reply to that associate during the court audience did not do so on the surface.

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's memorial? Although my response was kind, basically I do not think he was correct. Could those who saw it understand my meaning? It makes me laugh.²³

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。

As noted earlier, 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. To paraphrase William Doyle's comment on Louis XIV's kingship, the great weakness of Chǒngjo's system is that it required Chǒngjo to run it.²⁴ 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 would engulf it a half-century later. Still, despite the weakness of the men and boys who occupied it after him, the throne remained the route to power for any family seeking to control the government. Because the king was the source of all legitimate exercise of authority, marrying a daughter to him was the requirement for political supremacy; hence, the term *royal in-law government* for this period.

JaHyun Kim Haboush lamented in 2001 that, thirteen years after the publication of her monograph on King Yŏngjo, English-language scholarship on Korean kingship remained virtually nonexistent.²⁵ This book is a belated first step in filling that void. Haboush's work covers the middle of the eighteenth century, and Sun Joo Kim and Anders Karlsson have dealt extensively with the beginning of the nineteenth, but the late eighteenth century remains critically understudied. This is unfortunate, because the Korean experience has a great deal to offer our view of global early modernity. Despite the substantial cultural differences between two such divergent geographic areas, late Chosŏn monarchs operated in a political world not altogether dissimilar from that of Western Europe—increasing centralization in the face of continued aristocratic privilege, spread of a national identity among the elite, and the challenge of commercialization to landed wealth. Of necessity, this book deals with Confucianism and the particulars of Chosŏn Korea, but the problems King Chŏngjo faced and his ingenious efforts to solve them reflect eighteenth-century Korea's place in the early modern world. I hope this book will shed some light on the early modern period and illuminate the cross-cultural workings of an absolute monarchy largely unknown outside its native land.

This book's main source is the *Veritable Records of Chosŏn* 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 bias, it is generally accepted as a reliable account, especially as the dynasty wore on; the *Veritable Records* in the first hundred years of the dynasty contain events legitimizing the Yi royal line that are of questionable veracity.²⁶ Used judiciously, with a careful eye for embellishment of events in accordance with the court historians' moral judgments of the figures involved, the *Veritable Records* provide a reasonably accurate account of the general course of events, though much is also left out of the official record. We would also do well to recall that the various figures appearing in the *Records* knew their words and actions were being observed and recorded by court historians. Like modern politicians playing to the camera, at least some of what these people did and said in front of the court

historians was done precisely so it would appear for posterity in the historical record. In order to facilitate the use of present and future printings and electronic versions of the *Veritable Records*, 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 chǒnsǒ*) and a collection of 297 private letters written by Chǒngjo himself and sent to a powerful Intransigent official, Sim Hwan-ji, between 1797 and 1800, a printed collection of which is available in Korean translation under the title *Chǒngjo’s Royal Letters* 正祖御札帖 (*Chǒngjo ōch’alch’ŏp*). These letters modify or even contradict the official version of events as contained in the *Veritable Records*. This is not primarily because the *Veritable Records* 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 on, were undoubtedly a vital channel of communication outside of the historians’ scrutiny. I cite them both by the sequential numbering system used in the Korean translation and by the date of the letter, the latter to facilitate comparison to the *Veritable Records*.

Along with these three, I make use of the *Daily Records of the Royal Secretariat* 承政院日記 (*Sǔngjǒng’wǒn ilgi*), the *Complete Works of Tasan* 與猶堂全書 (*Yōyudang chǒnsǒ*), and the *Memoirs of Lady Hyegyǒng* 閔中錄 (*Hanjungnok*). The last is an invaluable eyewitness account of eighteenth century court life that is 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 Chosǒn political culture during the eighteenth century.

Educated men in Chosǒn Korea 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. I list only the title and chapter of the

work being referenced in the notes rather than the full publication information for the translation, which can be found in the Bibliography.

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 when 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 (when he had a different title), 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," lower-case, 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 Hwawan was stripped of her title and thenceforth known as Madame Chŏng (literally, "Chŏng Ch'i-dal's wife"). 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.