

King Chǒngjo:

Confucianism, Enlightenment, and Absolute Rule

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I. Introduction

In the fifth intercalary lunar month of 1762 (the 38th year of King Yǒngjo's reign) a tragedy was unfolding at the royal palace. Stripped of his title and rank, the young Crown Prince lay dying inside a wooden chest by the order of his own father, the King. The Crown Prince's only son was undoubtedly a witness to the affair. Designated as heir to the throne three years before, the Crown Prince's son was just eleven years old when his father was put to death. Fourteen years later, he would ascend the throne as Chǒngjo.

Nearly every Korean is familiar with the wretched death of Chǒngjo's father. The story became a legend thanks in part to Han-jungnok (A Record of Sorrowful Days), a bitter account of the affair written by the Crown Prince's wife, Lady Hong of the Hyegyǒnggung palace. But few are aware of Chǒngjo's accomplishments as king, obscured perhaps by the famous story of his father's tragic death. Although Chǒngjo reigned for twenty-four years, from 1776 to 1800, the founding of Kyujanggak, the royal library, is the only well-known legacy of his reign. Moreover, what people do know about Kyujanggak is less than accurate. More than a library, it was a major political

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structure where academic and policy research was conducted and papers were published. Kyujanggak played a central role in the formulation and dissemination of policies, and as such it was the most important political institution of Chǒngjo's administration. The fact that Chǒngjo created such an important interdisciplinary body combining scientific research with politics indicates that his ruling policies were quite advanced; however, modern scholars have only recently begun to give his ruling policies the consideration they are due.

Parallels can be drawn between Chǒngjo's efforts to achieve his political agenda through scholarship and research and those of Sejong, who reigned during the early part of the Chosŏn dynasty. Indeed, it can be said that Sejong's purpose in establishing Chiphyŏnjŏn (Hall of Worthies) was similar to Chǒngjo's in founding the Kyujanggak. However, there is a 350-year span between the two reigns, and their respective accomplishments and historical stature are quite different. For one thing, a new dynasty was trying to establish its legitimacy when Sejong took the throne, and many of his policies were aimed at developing the nation's agrarian-based economy. By the time Chǒngjo became king about 300 years after the establishment of the new dynasty, the entire administrative system was due for an overhaul, while economic policies needed to be updated to take into account the rise of commerce and industry over the three centuries. In other words, Chǒngjo's reign came at a crucial crossroads in Korean history. In order to meet such challenges, Chǒngjo established the Kyujanggak and went to great lengths to prepare the nation for the modern age. Chǒngjo's policies may be best understood in the context of what was happening in Western Europe at the time. It was the age of Enlightenment, the age of absolute monarchy. Though half a world apart, East and West not only experienced similar economic conditions, as seen in the burgeoning development of commercial capitalism, but also had similar types of monarchy. Chǒngjo's policies were thus quite significant in that they ushered in a uniquely Korean form of modernization.

II. King Reaching Outside the Walls

One notable aspect of Chǒngjo's policies was his willingness to leave the royal palace and venture outside the city walls to meet with his subjects face to face. In order to become familiar with the thoughts and sentiments of his subjects, Chǒngjo frequently toured the city, more so than any of his predecessors. The Chosŏn kings were certainly not kept under lock and key inside the palace, but until the reign of Sukchong, they generally remained within the palace compound except for special occasions, such as hunting exercises for military training, processions, royal funerals, or visits to the royal tombs. The practice of going outside of the palace to ascertain the hearts and minds of the people began with Chǒngjo's grandfather, Yǒngjo. Yǒngjo (r. 1725-1776) frequently met with petitioners at the palace gates or city gates. According to the most recent scholarship, Yǒngjo held 55 such sessions with commoners during his 52-year reign.¹ One story has it that Yǒngjo was in the midst of revising the Equalized Tax Law (Kyunyŏkpŏp), but he could not come to an agreement with his ministers. After soliciting opinions of commoners outside the Myǒngjǒngmun gate, he went back inside and implemented the law according to his original wishes. Yǒngjo would often walk through the market district to listen to the opinions and plights of licensed merchants and tradesmen, calling them the foundation of the nation.

As the heir apparent, Chǒngjo observed firsthand his grandfather's frequent contact with the people, so it was natural for him to continue the tradition after he became king. In fact, Chǒngjo preferred to meet with a wider variety of people than his grandfather had and see them more often. While Yǒngjo met with his subjects at

1. Han Sang-gwŏn, "Chosŏn hugi sahoe munje-wa sowŏn chedo-ŭi paltal—Chǒngjo-dae sangŏn · kyŏkchaeng-ŭi punsŏk-ŭl chungshim-ŭro" (Social Issues and the Sowŏn System of the Late Chosŏn Dynasty: An Analysis of Chǒngjo's Sangŏn and Kyŏkchaeng Systems) (Ph.D. dissertation, Seoul National University, 1993). Most of the information in this paper regarding the sangon system, or petitioning of kings by commoners, is based on this thesis.

the city or palace gates, Chǒngjo went outside the walls. Chǒngjo would create opportunities to leave Seoul with the objective of paying homage to the royal tombs of all previous Chosŏn kings and queens, starting from Kŏnwŏnnŭng, the royal tomb of T'aejo, founder of the Chosŏn dynasty. Yǒngjo also left the city proper to visit royal tombs, but only twice as far as can be confirmed—Üinŭng in his first year as king, and Kwangnŭng in the twelfth year. In contrast, during his twenty-four-year reign, Chǒngjo made 70 such visits, particularly throughout Kyŏnggi-do province, where most of the royal tombs and graves are scattered.² There was probably no royal tomb that he did not visit.

The first place Chǒngjo visited was the grave of his father, Suŏnmyo. Shortly before Yǒngjo's death (the second month of the 52nd year of his reign), Chǒngjo was authorized to reign on Yǒngjo's behalf as heir apparent. During this time, Chǒngjo made a special request to excise all mention of imo ch'ŏbun (the act by which the Crown Prince was stripped of his title and reduced to commoner status in the 38th year of Yǒngjo's reign) from the historical records. Yǒngjo agreed to the request and even allowed Chǒngjo to visit Suŏnmyo. Chǒngjo's visit to his father's grave can be seen as a prelude to his father's reinstatement to royal status. After Chǒngjo ascended the throne, he conferred on the Crown Prince Hyojang (the half-brother of the Chǒngjo's father, upon whose death Chǒngjo became the next in line to the throne) the posthumous name of Chinjong and renamed Hyojang's tomb Yǒngnŭng, in accordance with his grandfather Yǒngjo's wishes. He also conferred upon his father the title the Crown Prince Changhŏn and renamed Suŏnmyo Yǒnguwŏn. After restoring the authority of his father and making other changes to the royal lineage, in his third year on the throne Chǒngjo paid a visit to Wŏnnŭng, the tomb of his grandfather, Yǒngjo. This was the first of his planned visits to all of the royal tombs. According to biographer Yi Man-su's account of the life of Chǒngjo, Chǒngjo made at

2. This information was taken by the author from the records of Chǒngjo's life appended to the Chǒngjo shillok (Annals of Chǒngjo).

least 75 visits to the royal tombs during his twenty-four-year reign, an average of three visits outside the city walls each year.

Chǒngjo's visits to the royal tombs were more than expressions of filial piety towards his ancestors and predecessors. The visits had a political purpose as well; as Confucianism was the foundation of Chosŏn's ruling policy, it was important for him to observe Confucian rites and put its precepts into practice. However, it is known that Chǒngjo also regarded these visits as opportunities to meet with the people. Yi Man-su's records of Chǒngjo's life relates several anecdotes about these royal processions. One of the more notable events occurred in autumn of the 12th year of his reign, as he was travelling to Sŏnnŭng and Chǒngnŭng. Chǒngjo had just reached the ferry crossing at Sŏbinggo, but heavy rains from the night before had damaged the pier so badly that his subjects entreated him to return to Seoul. Chǒngjo replied that he could not turn back the entire procession over such a minor matter. He said that because so many people knew that the royal carriage had departed Seoul and were waiting for him, he could not disappoint them now. He ordered the commanding officer of the troops, the Minister of Taxation, the Minister of Public Works, and Kyŏnggi-do officials to join forces in conscripting the residents of Kwach'ŏn and Kwangju to repair the pier. The soldiers and the many onlookers answered the call with such alacrity that they almost fought each other for the chance to repair the pier. And by daybreak the royal procession was able to cross the Han'gang river. The following day, on his way back to Seoul, Chǒngjo returned to the pier and thanked the residents of Kwach'ŏn and Kwangju. In reward for their loyalty and assistance, he gave a special order exempting the two towns from paying the grain tax.

Thus Chǒngjo's visits to the royal tombs were a means of widening the scope of contact with his subjects from inside the city walls to the whole of Kyŏnggi-do province. One of his reasons for doing so was to see and hear for himself the hardships suffered by ordinary people. Recent study on sowŏn (petition) system, the means by which people could file grievances to higher authorities, during the reign of King Chǒngjo was an epoch-making event in the develop-

ment of the sangǒn system.³ The history of the sangǒn system originates with the implementation of the shinmun'go (petitioners' drum) in the reign of T'aejong, the third king of the Chosǒn dynasty. If a person had a particular grievance, he could bring it to the attention of the relevant government office in Seoul or to the provincial governor. If the matter was not resolved through those offices, the petitioner could appeal to the king directly by pounding on the shinmun'go, a large drum installed near the palace. Thus from the early days of the Chosǒn dynasty there was a mechanism by which people could file petitions, at least in theory. In practice, it was rarely used because commoners were not able to bring suit against government officials unless they were accusing them of treason. Furthermore, the shinmun'go was often situated in a location that was inaccessible to the ordinary people. The petition system was revised in the sixteenth century, which enabled people to file petitions with government officials for four reasons: to appeal a death sentence, to clarify paternity issues, to clarify the legality of a marriage union, and to clarify class status. In the eighteenth century, the right to file a petition was expanded so that a petitioner's grandsons, sons, husband, younger brothers and servants could do so on his/her behalf. It was not until Chǒngjo that restrictions on the class of the petitioner were eliminated.

Every time Chǒngjo visited the royal tombs, crowds flocked to the front of the royal procession seeking an audience with him. Chǒngjo saw how earnestly they sought an avenue for redress and realized that to deny their requests would go against righteous rule. In response he revised the sangǒn system by removing all restrictions on bringing suits. Sukchong (r. 1675-1720) faced a similar problem when commoners were allowed to strike a gong to alert him to their petitions; as a result, the gong was sounded quite frequently. However, until Chǒngjo there was no active effort to find a solution. Indeed, most of Chǒngjo's subjects were quite opposed to his revolutionary approach to dealing with such grievances. Chǒngjo did not yield to their arguments, and in fact went to great lengths to systematically

3. Han Sang-kwǒn, *op. cit.*

implement a new sangŏn and kyŏkchaeng, direct petition systems establishing bureaus specifically for processing and resolving the petitions. He thereby ensured that the reforms were permanent and not piecemeal.

For the ordinary people, there were two ways of filing a petition, sangŏn and kyŏkchaeng. Under the former, the petitioner would wait until the royal carriage reached a designated stop and petition the king either as an individual or as part of a group by presenting an official document. Under the latter, the petitioner would strike a gong during the procession, thus creating an opportunity to file a grievance. This method was also known as wioe kyŏkchaeng. Here, petitioners were subject to a minor fine or punishment in return for having their grievances heard, for they were in fact impeding the royal procession. In any case, people from all across the country took advantage of both methods. To ensure that the petitions were duly processed and resolved, Chŏngjo ordered his subjects to record all matters relating to them in the Ilsŏngnok (Records of Daily Reflection), the royal diary that he started when he became king. According to Han Sang-gwŏn's analysis of sangŏn and kyŏkchaeng, there are 3,217 petitions noted in the Ilsŏngnok, and 2,671 petitions recorded in the Chŏngjo shillok (The Annals of Chŏngjo). They range from disputes over graves, recommendations of fidelity, filial piety, and chastity, to issues of birthright and inheritance. Apart from disputes and grievances stemming from matters related to Confucian ethics and practices, there were also complaints over taxation and conflicts among merchants and craftsmen over their economic interests. From this, we can clearly see there were a wide range of cases covered by sangŏn and kyŏkchaeng systems.

III. Kyujanggak and Changyongyŏng ōng

Chŏngjo needed new institutions to help implement and support his new policies. Kyujanggak and Changyongyŏng (Royal Guards Garri-

son) were two such institutions he founded, one representing the scholar and the other the soldier.

As mentioned in the foreword, Kyujanggak was one of the most important institutions in Chǒngjo's government, serving a variety of functions.⁴ However, this was not the case from the beginning. Chǒngjo was enthroned on the tenth day of the third lunar month of 1776. The very next day he ordered the building of the library, personally selecting its location in the back garden of Ch'angdǒkkung palace (widely known as Piwǒn, or Secret Garden), on a hill north of the lotus pond. Next to the lotus pond was Yǒnghwadang, the pavilion where civil service examinations were conducted. The library enjoyed the most spectacular views in the entire garden. Two buildings were being erected on the hill. One of these, in the middle of the hill, was a two-story tower. The upper level of the tower was called Chuhamnu, pavilion where all principles of the universe gather, and the lower level, Ŏjejon'gak, was a storehouse containing tens of thousands of books. To the west of the tower was Sǒhyanggak, a building for reading and writing. Just as construction was nearing completion in the seventh month of the year, however, Chǒngjo proposed a last-minute change in design. Originally the writings and calligraphy of previous kings were to be safeguarded in the first story of Chuhamnu, but Chǒngjo decided to store his own portraits and writings there instead. He decided to build a separate building called Pongmodang as a repository for the writings of his predecessors. As the functions of the buildings changed, the name Ŏjejon'gak was changed to "Kyujanggak." Furthermore, new buildings such as Yǒlgogwan (library for old books), Kaeyuwa (storehouse for all books), Sǒgo (West library) and others were built nearby for the storage of books

4. The following description of Kyujanggak (Royal Library) is based largely on Yi T'ae-jin, *Kyujanggak sosa* (A Brief History of Kyujanggak) (Seoul: Seoul National University Library, 1990), and "Chǒngjo-üi taehak t'amgu-wa saeroun kunjuron" (Chǒngjo's Study of Daxue and His New Theory of Monarchism), in Yi hoe-je-üi sasang-gwa kü segye (Yi Hoe-jae's Thoughts and His World), vol. 11 of *Taedong munhwa yǒn'gu ch'ongsǒ* (Taedong Cultural Research Series) (Seoul: Sungkyunkwan University, 1992).

and manuscripts, while Sōhyanggak, which was originally conceived as a study area for reading and writing, had its name changed to Ihyanggak, and it became a center for airing the books.

The changes in the design of the new library amounted to more than an expansion in scale. Because Chōngjo chose the first story of the main building to house his writings and other documents and materials related to his reign, he clearly considered the library to be the foundation of his monarchy. Kyujanggak was modeled after Tianzhangge (tower for the writings of heaven) and Longtuge (tower for drawings of dragons), which were among the ten royal libraries of Song China. Considering how many of Korea's institutions and systems originated from China, Chōngjo thought the lack of a royal library system was a glaring omission to be rectified immediately. "Kyujang" refers to the monarch's astrology as well as to the monarch's writings, and by establishing Kyujanggak Chōngjo was aiming to elevate the status of both monarch and monarchy.

Thus Kyujanggak was established as the royal library to house the writings of the reigning king, but it was not until the second month in the fifth year of Chōngjo's reign that it assumed a significant role in political affairs. Until that time Chōngjo had entrusted the day-to-day administration and implementation of policy to Hong Kuk-yōng, a retainer who had assisted Chōngjo since his days as the heir apparent, while he himself spent much of his time at Kyujanggak planning policy and his political agenda for the future. However, Hong, emboldened by his newfound authority, harbored other ambitions. When Chōngjo learned of these plans in the fifth year of his reign, he expelled Hong and took over the handling of administrative affairs himself. As Kyujanggak's functions expanded to political administration, so did its strategic importance. Chōngjo 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 Sūngjōngwōn (Office of Royal Secretariat) in addition to their scholarly duties at Kyujanggak. Chōngjo allowed them to use the former building of the Owi Toch'ongbu (Five Military Commands Headquarters), which was near the main hall of Ch'ang-

dōkkung palace, as a working office and conferred on the building the new name “Imunwǒn,” building for compiling writings. Chǒngjo even referred to Kyujanggak as his Cabinet because of its importance in his handling of political affairs.

Kyujanggak was more than a center for scholarship. On the day of the inauguration ceremony for Imunwǒn in the third month of the fifth year of his reign, Chǒngjo personally gave a special lecture at Kyujanggak and the Office of Special Advisors on the texts of *Jinsilu* (Book of Thoughts) and *Xinjing* (The Way of the Mind), employing all the formality and ceremony of the Song dynasty. This special lecture, called *ch'in'gang*, marked the last time that Chǒngjo held *kyōngyōn* (discussions between the king and his subjects regarding texts on Confucian studies and historical records), a tradition that he had observed until then with Kyujanggak civil servants. *Kyōngyōn* was a sort of round table in which the king read Confucian classics and histories together with his most learned scholars while discussing politics. Previous kings had also held similar forums, but Yǒngjo began holding them much more frequently. Following his example, Chǒngjo held *kyōngyōn* three times a day at Kyujanggak, in the morning, afternoon and evening. However, after this *ch'in'gang*, Chǒngjo never held a *kyōngyōn* again. Instead, he introduced the *ch'ogyē munshin* system, under which the most promising civil servants under the age of 37 working in administrative bureaus were handpicked for intensive study at Kyujanggak for a set length of time. Previously, government officials had asked the king to study *sōnghak* (the study of the Sages) but with the new system, it was the king who chose the officials to study *sōnghak*, or provided them with the opportunity to do so. Thus the initiative had changed.

Since his appointment as heir apparent, Chǒngjo had studied *sōnghak* with such devotion that he could read texts that were difficult for even the most advanced scholars. Chǒngjo cultivated himself with strict discipline and upheld the highest standards. He personally deplored the tendency of many young bureaucrats to never read a book again after passing the torturous civil service examination. The *ch'ogyē munshin* system was designed to reverse that trend. On

another level, Chǒngjo felt that it was necessary to encourage civil servants to study sǒnghak as part of his efforts to have them embody his concept of an enlightened monarchy. If nothing else, the system would fortify the number of subjects and civil servants who supported Chǒngjo's politics. In fact, after ten sessions of ch'ogye munshin over twenty years, the number of alumni reached 100, so that by the end of Chǒngjo's reign all of his subjects had graduated from the system. Thus Chǒngjo was able to gradually expand his base of support from the Kyujanggak subjects to the graduates of the ch'ogye munshin system.

Chǒngjo is often called the "scholar-king." From an early age he showed great skill in writing. In an appended record of the Chǒngjo shillok (the appendix itself was an unusual addition), Lady Hong of the Hyegyǒnggung palace describes how clever her son Chǒngjo looked even as a young baby wrapped in swaddling cloth, and that Chǒngjo was often praised by his grandfather Yǒngjo for his extraordinary features. She relates how Yǒngjo was particularly pleased with the back of Chǒngjo's head, which was nicely rounded, and his high forehead. Chǒngjo was able to stand on his own before the 100th day mark, and he was walking at ten months. At his first birthday celebration, Chǒngjo walked right to the table, and of all the symbols of future fortune from which to choose, he picked up a writing brush and opened a book to read. Onlookers were amazed by his mature demeanor and precocity. By the time he was two, he was able to form brushstrokes correctly; within a couple of years, he became proficient at calligraphy and painting. Chǒngjo practiced writing and painting every day, so that by the time he was five or six, examples of his penmanship were made into folding screens. Chǒngjo had mastered speaking and writing by the age of four, and his letters and compositions were comparable to an adult's.

Chǒngjo excelled not only in writing, but also in the martial arts due to his large physical frame. He was particularly renowned as an archer. Once, he participated in an archery contest with his subjects in which they took turns shooting rounds of five arrows each. Chǒngjo continued to hit the target through the fourth arrow of the tenth round

(i.e., 49 out of 50 arrows), before leaving the last arrow in accordance with archery traditions. His subjects congratulated him on his performance and proposed sending the scoring board to T'aejo's palace in Hamhŭng to commemorate the event. As part of their congratulatory message on the plaque, they extolled Chǒngjo's prowess as directly descending from the legendary T'aejo himself, whose skill was said to have been superhuman.

Because of his extraordinary talents in both academics and martial arts, it was natural that as king, Chǒngjo would place equal emphasis on scholarship and the military. In restructuring the functions of Kyujanggak in the second month of his fifth year on the throne, Chǒngjo said, "Lectures on the literary classics, lectures on military affairs, composing literary works and the martial arts—they are like the wheels of a wagon or the wings of a bird. No one side can gain advantage over the others." He also implemented a system similar to *ch'ogyŏ munshin* for high-ranking military officers and guards to study military theory and practice martial arts skills. Chǒngjo's efforts to raise the quality of military personnel such as *sŏnjŏn'gwan* (the elite royal heralds also in charge of guarding the king) had the strategic effect of bolstering support for his reformist government and laying the groundwork towards building up the nation's military strength. Chǒngjo believed deeply in military strength as a deterrent force, so he invested great effort in building up arms and developing training for defensive purposes. To improve the skills of his soldiers in the martial arts, Chǒngjo took up the task of compiling a book that his father had started but never completed. In the fourteenth year of Chǒngjo's reign, the book was completed and entitled *Muyedobo t'ongji* (Comprehensive Illustrated Manual of Martial Arts). In addition to that, he edited or compiled six more volumes of military strategies and tactics, including the *Pyŏnghakt'ong*, or *Manual of Military Science*. Chǒngjo also tried to strengthen his fighting force by recruiting troops and officers on the basis of skill rather than family background, upholding the principle of cultivating talent as a national resource. His efforts to implement these military policies culminated with the founding and the operation of Changy-

ongyǒng.

Chǒngjo spent the early part of his reign trying to eliminate hostile factions. One night, an intruder broke into the outer hall of his sleeping chamber. The incident may or may not have been connected with his initial purges, but it spurred Chǒngjo to form a night guard, or Sugwiso, and to beef up the Royal Guard. However, the night guard, which was under the administration of Hong Kuk-yǒng, was disbanded after Hong's seditious acts were discovered. Hong's treachery convinced Chǒngjo that the Royal Guard system could not depend on a specific person. Instead, he decided to raise the caliber of the entire regular military. This turnabout was evident in the fifth year of his reign when he embraced the principle of promoting the sǒnjǒn'gwan based on their individual improvement and achievements. Based on his principle that even the Royal Guard should be commanded by elite military professionals, Chǒngjo established a policy for elevating the quality of the sǒnjǒn'gwan, from whose ranks the elite would be culled, and also promised to expand upon this system in the future.⁵

During his seventh year on the throne, Chǒngjo officially changed the name and title of his father from the Crown Prince Sado to the Crown Prince Changhǒn and conducted a special session of the national examination (kyǒnggwa) to commemorate it. From the 2,000 finalists who passed the martial arts test, he selected the most outstanding ones and tried to press them into the service of the Royal Guard. He believed that those who passed an exam that had been conducted in honor of his father would naturally show him greater allegiance. Even if the occasion of the examination did not necessarily merit a greater degree of loyalty, it remained nonetheless symbolically significant. It took two years for Chǒngjo to realize his plans. The first step was to establish a new royal guard unit called Changy-

5. Descriptions of Sugwiso, Changyongwi and Changyongyǒng that follow are from Yi T'ae-jin, *Chosǒn hugi-ŭi chǒngch'i-wa kunyǒngje pyǒnch'ǒn* (The System of Central Army Gamisons in the Development of the Political Structure in the Late Chosǒn Dynasty), *Han'guk yǒn'guwǒn ch'ǒngsǒ* (Publications of the Korean Research Center), no. 53 (Seoul: Korean Research Center, 1985).

ongwi. Changyongwi slowly grew in size, but it was not until the first month of Chǒngjo's seventeenth year, when he decided to move his father's grave to Suwǒn and build the new city Hwasǒng there, that it developed into a full-scale army unit. Originally the function of Changyongwi had been to guard the king, but Changyongyǒng, as it was later called, evolved into the nation's central army unit. It was divided into two garrisons, one to defend the capital (inner garrison) and the other to guard the castle in Suwǒn (outer garrison). Because Chǒngjo often left the city limits, he needed to strengthen his Guard detail, which would explain in part why Changyongwi developed into the two garrison-system of Changyongyǒng (literally, stout brave garrison). However, another likely reason is more political: Chǒngjo wanted to crush those vested interests that opposed his new politics.

Since Sukchong, the greatest impediment to the monarchy's stability and growth had been the influence of certain powerful clans known as *kyomok sega*. These families derived their authority from generations of members in high-ranking offices. The driving force behind factional politics, these families not only held a vise-like grip over such policy-making bodies as the *Pibyǒnsa*, or the Border Defense Council, but they held sway over the *Ogunyǒng*, or the Five Army Garrisons, and other military affairs. Yǒngjo introduced the *t'angp'yǒngch'aek*, policy of impartiality (literally, "leveling factions policy") to neutralize their influence, but he was not entirely successful. The unfortunate fact that Yǒngjo had to kill his own son was evidence of the vicious, yet ever so delicate, power play warring between him and the various factions. Although Yǒngjo managed to build a base of support for *t'angp'yǒngch'aek* policy, he failed to wrest away control over the centralized army and its attendant economic interests. In creating Changyongyǒng, Chǒngjo sought to address the limitations of his grandfather's politics. By widely expanding the functions and roles of *Kyujanggak*, Chǒngjo shifted the center of political operations away from the traditional stronghold of *Pibyǒnsa*. He also weakened the authority the powerful clan families had traditionally held over the *Ogunyǒng* by expanding the scope of his guard detail, Changyongwi. With its two garrisons,

Changyongyōng expanded in size and financial strength at the expense of the rapidly downsized Ogunyōng. It boasted 20,000 troops, enough to guarantee political stability for Chōngjo.

The two-garrison structure of Changyongyōng also held symbolic significance for Chōngjo. After bestowing on his father the posthumous name of Crown Prince Changhōn in his seventh year, ten years later Chōngjo decided to relocate his father's tomb to Suwōn because of problems with its site and scale. He chose a site south of the Han'gang river, where the Suwōn military command was stationed that was considered the most propitious place for a royal tomb. The command had to be moved before the tomb could be. Thus Hwasōng, today known as Suwōn, was conceived and designed. As the new city developed, the Suwōn military command was promoted to the Hwasōng military command. It was about this time that the tomb of the Crown Prince Changhōn was relocated to the new auspicious site. The new tomb was named Hyōllyungwōn about the time that Changyongwi was being transformed into Changyongyōng. The new city was nearly completed by the 18th year of Chōngjo's reign, which was the year his mother Lady Hong of Hyegyōnggung palace turned sixty. Since Chōngjo's mother and father were the same age, that year held great personal significance. Chōngjo celebrated the two birthdays with his subjects by promoting all civil servants over the age of seventy, literati and scholars over eighty, and all long-married couples even if they had not reached eighty by a full rank. It is recorded that 75,145 people benefited from this gesture; Furthermore, Chōngjo published Insōrok (Records of Auspicious Events) which contains records of such events in order to magnify the significance of the celebrations. In the following year, when Hyōllyungwōn was at last completed, Chōngjo took his mother with him to pay their respects. Undoubtedly, the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth years of Chōngjo's reign were marked by many significant changes and events, reinforcing the impression that his reign was then at its peak.

IV. Theory of the Virtuous Absolute Monarch

With the relocation of his father's tomb and the construction of Hwasǒng, Chǒngjo felt supremely confident of his political power. Buoyed by this confidence, in his twenty-second year he wrote a treatise of political philosophy called "Manch'ǒn myǒngwǒl chuinnong chasǒ" (hereafter "Chasǒ"), in which he argued about the proper relationship between a monarch and his subjects.⁶ The title refers to the nature of the politics being pursued by Chǒngjo, describing the people as countless streams of water and the monarch as a bright moon reflected in each stream. In addition, the text is significant as an account of how the Chosǒn dynasty had evolved by the late eighteenth century. Chǒngjo's philosophy of the relationship between monarch and subject represents the highest level that can be attained according to Confucian political thought. To fully appreciate Chǒngjo's new theory of the monarchy, it is necessary to understand what Chǒngjo studied as he was being groomed for the throne. His theory is derived from the concept of myǒngmyǒngdǒk (Ch. mingmingde; brightening man's inherent virtuous nature) as described in the first part of Daxue (The Great Learning), that he studied devoutly, spurred by the influence of his grandfather Yǒngjo.

Neo-Confucianism is widely known as essentially the study of sugi ch'iin. The premise of this philosophy is that unless a ruler makes the effort to attain sugi, or self-discipline and self-edification, he is not fit to rule. This applied not only to high-ranking officials but also to the king himself, as seen in the aforementioned tradition of kyǒngyǒn, or the royal lectures. Sugi ch'iin was the rationale by which Yǒngjo introduced his t'angp'yǒngch'aek policy, which called on the monarch to be absolutely impartial and to show no favoritism to any faction or party. Such an ideal of impartial politics in the Yao-Shun period was recognized as a level which could not be attained by a king without thoroughgoing efforts at sugi. Indeed, before his

6. See Yi T'ae-jin (1992).

officials had to urge him toward self-cultivation, he himself zealously studied *sŏnghak*, the study of Chinese sages. As a measure of his zeal, Yŏngjo held 3,458 royal lectures during the fifty-two years of his reign. That averages to 66 lectures per year, or roughly five per month—far more often than any of his predecessors.⁷ If he had not temporarily suspended the lectures when he had his son the Crown Prince rule as regent (from the 25th to the 34th year), the number would have been higher still.

For the royal lectures Yŏngjo read the Confucian classics extensively. After resuming the royal lectures in his 34th year, he began to focus on two texts in particular, *Daxue* and *Zhongyong* (Book of the Doctrine of the Mean). In the tenth month of that year, Yŏngjo visited *Sŏnggyun'gwan*, the National Confucian Academy, where he gave a lecture on *Daxue*. Encouraged by the lecture, he even wrote a preface for the classic, something that nobody had done since Zhu Xi, the founder of Neo-Confucianism. Yŏngjo asserted that the essence of *Daxue*, which he considered to be study for the spirit and for the mind, was encapsulated in the concept of *myŏngmyŏngdŏk* found in the first part of the book. Yŏngjo believed that by attaining that level of virtue, it would follow that he could become as worthy of the throne as had been the legendary Emperor Shun of China. Yŏngjo's keen interest in the *myŏngdŏk* ideology profoundly influenced his heir to the throne, Chŏngjo.

Chŏngjo was appointed heir in Yŏngjo's 35th year, the year after Yŏngjo began to study *Daxue* in depth. Chŏngjo began his formal studies, or *kanghak*, in the first month of Yŏngjo's 36th year. After Chŏngjo finished the first book *Xiaoxue* (Lesser Learning), Yŏngjo personally selected *Daxue* as his next text. Chŏngjo pursued his studies of *Daxue* earnestly. According to the *Ch'unjŏrok* (Record of the Days of the Crown Prince), a record of the discussions he had with the lecture officials (*shiganggwan*), Chŏngjo questioned why Zhu Xi

7. Kwŏn Yŏn-ung, "Chosŏn yŏngjodae-ŭi kyŏngyŏn" (Royal Lectures of Yŏngjo), *Tonga yŏn'gu* 17: *onŭl-ŭi han'guksa yŏn'gu* (Dong-A Research 17, Special Edition: Korean History Studies Today) (1989): pp. 370-373.

only discussed human nature in general in his foreword to Daxue and made no references to myǒngdǒk at all. He presented his own personal interpretation regarding this fact. Chǒngjo also believed that the concepts of myǒngdǒk and shinmin, or renewing people were not mutually exclusive but that a ruler who attained the former would naturally encourage the formation of the latter. That is, if a person who was so inspired by the example of his monarch became a wholly new person himself, then the king's role would merely lie in encouragement and promotion of the people. By this line of thinking, Chǒngjo's expectations of the active role of his people were great.

After succeeding Yǒngjo to the throne, Chǒngjo continued debates over myǒngdǒk during the royal lectures. In fact, even after he replaced the royal lectures with the ch'ogye munshin system, Chǒngjo frequently discussed myǒngdǒk with the scholar-officials selected for the program. According to the synopsis of Daxue compiled in Kyǒngsa kangūi (Lectures on the Classics), Chǒngjo again raised questions about Zhu Xi's preface. Chǒngjo considered the first volume of Daxue to be a "guide for learning and a charter for governing the world." As for the central problem that had intrigued him for so long, the relationship between myǒngdǒk and human nature, Chǒngjo concluded that "man's inherent virtue (myǒngdǒk) controls his nature." As part of his lifelong study of Daxue, in his 23rd year on the throne Chǒngjo even edited and published a new book called Taehak ryuūi, a compilation of key passages from three volumes: Daxue, Daxue yanyi (Further Explication of Daxue), and Daxue yanyibu (Supplement to Daxue yanyi). Shortly before publishing Taehak ryuūi, Chǒngjo had published the aforementioned "Chasǒ," which originated from his years of studying Daxue. Below is the first paragraph of "Chasǒ":

The master elder of ten thousand rivers and the bright moon (manch'ǒn myǒngwǒl chuinong) speaks. In the beginning was the t'aegūk (the Great Ultimate) and then the yin and yang came into being. Therefore, the Emperor Yao was able to reveal li (Principle) with the yin and yang. After the yin and yang, the five elements of

which all nature is composed (water, wood, metal, fire and earth) came into being and the Emperor Yu governed with these elements. As I observed water and the moon, I began to comprehend the logic of t'aegŭk, of the dualistic nature of the cosmos (yin and yang) and of the five elements. There is but one moon, and there are countless streams of water. The water is filled up by the moon, so before the water is the moon, and behind the water is also the moon. The moon in the water and the rivers are the same, even if there are ten thousand rivers. This is so because there has originally been only one moon in the sky.

The emphasis on the oneness between the moon and water is the essence of the first paragraph. The moon may cast its reflection on countless bodies of water, but because it is the origin, it is as though the moon were filling up each and every body of water. In the latter part of the book, Chŏngjo refers to the moon as t'aegŭk, and likens himself to the moon. He comes to this conclusion after observing the moon and its relationship to water, and understanding the logic of t'aegŭk, of yin and yang, and of the five elements. The rest of his writing explains the relationship, from which is derived his philosophy of the relationship among these three.

Chŏngjo summarized the principles that he observed after his inauguration thus: "The dao (in Korean to), or moral principle, of the heavens and the earth is to view the world honestly (chŏnggwan); the dao of the sun and the moon is to shine righteously (chŏngmyŏng). By following the counsel of the sages, which was to seek brightness to govern, he conceived of an "ambitious scheme to rule the world," and thus he was able to lead thousands of kinds of subjects for twenty years. He recalled that previously he had been guided by his heart when he selected them, and he trusted them to follow him. He taught them to find a way out of difficulties. He melted them in fire and recast them in the proper mold so that they became pure. He united them like a chieftain reigning in rival feudal lords, responding to their every countermove. Fortunately, after he came to understand the order and the principles that governed t'aegŭk, yin and yang, and the five elements, he was able to look at a person with

such clarity that he knew to treat the strong man with a velvet glove, and the mild man with steel. For the dull-witted man he was very clear and thorough. He made up for their shortcomings and flaws so that they were all able to become complete, proudly comparing them to ducks and cranes that formed into flocks, not unlike the group of 3,000 followers of Confucius. What Chǒngjo meant by understanding the principles of t'aegŭk, yin and yang, and the five elements was both the effort of ruling and the result of that effort.

Chǒngjo compared his achievement to that of the legendary Emperor Shun. As he tried to embody the concept of myǒngdǒk, he found that being virtuous came easily like King Wen's rule of Western Zhou, and he could see all things in terms of the grander scheme of t'aegŭk. And finally although he left all things in their basic nature, they all became his own "possessions." He explained the process that led to these conclusions in terms of the principles found in Yijing (Book of Changes). T'aegŭk produces two halves (yin and yang). T'aegŭk remains t'aegŭk, while the yin and yang produce Four Forms, by which both yin and yang become t'aegŭk. Four Forms in turn produce eight signs of divination. Each of the Four Forms then also becomes t'aegŭk. Chǒngjo felt that if he endeavored to achieve myǒngdǒk, it would be possible for all of his subjects to "enjoy the Five Blessings (longevity, health, wealth, love of virtue and a peaceful death), to be at peace in mind and body, and to be bright in countenance." What is noteworthy about his explanation in terms of Yijing is that in contrast to Zhu Xi, who considered the 16,770,000 divinations produced from all possible combinations of trigrams and hexagrams to be "limitless divinations" in Yixue qimeng (Enlightenment through Divination), Chǒngjo maintained that the number of changes corresponded to the "number of my subjects." He went on to say that his own myǒngdǒk directly influenced the sǒmin, or common people, thus reinforcing his basic tenet that the monarch and his subjects are one. He summarized his thoughts on the matter as follows:

My thoughts regarding the king are based on the thoughts held by

the old Confucian sages. In the very beginning of *Yiji* (The Twisting of Divinations) Confucius introduces the idea of *t'aegük*, with which to educate succeeding generations. In *Ch'unqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), he revealed the universality of righteousness, how every nation is united under one king, how a thousand streams and a hundred waves converge into one sea, and how a thousand purples and ten thousand reds form one *t'aegük* What I seek is to learn about the sages. If I compare this to the moon in the water, the nature of the moon is to emanate light (wisdom, purity), but its light is transmitted only when it is reflected in the water below. The vast waters of the Longmen river flow swiftly; the Huanghe river (Yellow River) is salty; the Jing river is muddy; and the Wei river flows clear. Since the water reflects the moon, the moonlight depends on the course and flow of the river. If the stream ceases, so too does the moonlight If the water swirls, so does the moon. If I can grasp the essence of water, it is the purity (*chöng*), the essence of the moon. I see the water as people, and the reflections cast by the water are the faces and types of people. The moon is the *t'aegük* and the *t'aegük* is I. Is this not what the sages meant when they compared the ten thousand faces of the bright moon to the reflection cast on the *t'aegük*? The true light of the moon is proper; if there is anyone who seeks to grasp the *t'aegük* (i.e. kingship) or peek from the aura of the *t'aegük*, I tell him that his efforts are in vain. It is as futile as trying to catch the moon in the water.

Thus in "Chasö," Chöngjo argues that a monarch can improve the welfare of his people through wise policies based on the concept of *myöngdök* as described in *Daxue*. In fact, these principles may be applied to all things in the same way *t'aegük* is equally applied to all things and makes everyone pure. These were the basic teachings of such illustrious rulers as Emperors Yao and Shun and the sages. Towards the end of "Chasö," Chöngjo cautions against those who covet the throne as "though they were waiting at the edge of *t'aegük* for a chance." He says it is as futile and unattainable as grasping for the moon in water. To be a monarch as a monarch should be, Chöngjo emphasized, one must expend a great deal of effort and

preparation to attain myǒngdǒk.

Until Chǒngjo there had been no theory of monarchy writing the king and his subjects as described above. Even if the case could be made that Yǒngjo laid the foundation, “Chasǒ” was nevertheless the first systematic and rational exposition of this theory. Another unique aspect of the text is the fact that Chǒngjo downplays the role of government officials and functionaries. In the traditional view of monarchy, if the king was a boat and the subjects the water, then the prime minister was the ferryman. By way of context, Chǒngjo’s theory of the monarchy derived from his opposition to factionalism, a system which granted its functionaries enjoyed immense influence. In his eighth year on the throne, Chǒngjo wrote an essay titled “P’abungdang” (Anti-factionalism), which appears in the first part of Hwanggūkp’yǒn (Book of Emperors). Although Ou Yangxiu and Zhu Xi had contended that it was the duty of a superior man (kunjia) to associate with each other and overcome the faction of an inferior man (soin), Chǒngjo argued that since the factions of his day included both kunjia and soin, the original meaning and purpose of factions had been lost. He believed that factions should be dissolved, and that it was more appropriate for people to support the policies of the monarch as individuals. Chǒngjo was so firm in his conviction that he claimed he would not change his mind even if the sages appeared today and disagreed with him.

Chǒngjo’s political philosophy as described in “Chasǒ” can be encapsulated in the concept of “virtuous absolute monarchism.” This model of government bears many striking similarities to the enlightened absolute monarchies in Europe during this time. Europe’s enlightened monarchs held intellectual debates and investigations into what constituted the ideal man, the model upon which their absolute political authority was founded.⁸ The idea that within the nation the monarch must come the closest to attaining perfection is

8. Kim Ŏn-shik, “Kyemong chǒltaejuŭi-ŭi sǒngkyǒk” (The Character of Enlightened Absolutism), in *Togilsa-ŭi che kungmyǒn* (Diverse Aspects of German History), by Yi Min-ho et al. (Seoul: Zekova, 1991).

no different from Chǒngjo's view of the monarch. In Europe the enlightened absolute rulers sought that objective by establishing the rule of law, which, as we shall see later, Chǒngjo also tried to do. It is not inaccurate to say that Chǒngjo's philosophy was a Confucian-based concept of enlightened absolute rule. Voltaire may have advised Friedrich, the King of Prussia, that Emperor Ganlong of the Qing dynasty was such an example of an enlightened ruler, but in terms of actual achievement Chǒngjo may have come closer to the Confucian ideal.

V. Abolition of Slavery

In theory, Chǒngjo believed that monarch and his subjects were one, just as the moon and water, but what did this mean in practice? It was mentioned above that Chǒngjo reformed the sangǒn and kyǒkchaeng systems in order to ascertain the opinions and sufferings of the people more directly and on a wider basis. The fact that he traveled so frequently outside the palace and city gates allowed the ordinary people far more opportunities to take advantage of the new petition systems. Based on what he wrote in the "Chasǒ," he purposely planned the many royal visits to the tombs of the former kings. Wanting to be as the moon that reflects on ten thousand rivers, Chǒngjo sought to leave the palace compound as often as he could.

The concept of serving the people was the objective and goal of Confucian politics. It was by no means exclusive to Chǒngjo, but as for actually achieving that goal, the various monarchs of the Chosǒn dynasty had a mixed record. Chǒngjo's revolutionary approaches to the sang'ǒn and kyǒkchaeng systems came the closest to achieving the Confucian ideal of wimin, or serving the people. However, by no means were these the only manifestations of Chǒngjo's political philosophy. Records of Chǒng's life written by Yi Man-su show many examples during his administration in which he put the concept of wimin into practice.

Yi termed Chǒngjo's love for his people shiji yǒsang, meaning

that Chǒngjo's concern for them extended as far as actively worrying about whether they would come to harm. Thus he instructed governors and local officials to observe people and to actively assist them when needed; he also dispatched Royal emissaries throughout the country to uncover corrupt or unjust laws and false charges. In addition, Chǒngjo solicited the opinions of high-ranking provincial functionaries and held audience with the people to ask about their sufferings. As part of his agricultural policy, he bolstered programs to help alleviate impoverished farmers during years of poor harvest and installed rain gauges and windmills, even dipping into the royal treasury to do so—actions that certainly set him apart from any of his predecessors. For city residents, he abolished the practice of business and trade transactions on palace grounds and eliminated abuses committed by royal slaves. On behalf of slaves, Chǒngjo eliminated the Ch'uswaegwan, which hunted down runaway slaves, and rectified the Sǒnduan, the official register of public slaves owned by the government. For those who dwelled in the mountains and wilderness, he also eliminated the yǒpkun, the hunting brigade that caught pheasants on royal lands to present to the king. For the people who live near the "river and sea," he instituted a new fleet system of boats for ferrying the grain tax, and he implemented a new method of selecting dried fish. The categorization of people by occupation came about as a social consequence of economic developments in commerce and industry in the eighteenth century. Chǒngjo felt it was an important part of his obligations as monarch to resolve the social problems facing all classes of people.

Yi Man-su recounts further anecdotes of Chǒngjo aiding people of all regions and of all ages. He reduced the quantity of abalone which Chejudo island inhabitants were required to send as tribute; he also lightened the burden of residents of the western provinces who sent him ginseng. Concerned about the welfare of children, Chǒngjo implemented the Chahyul chǒnch'ik, a welfare law for the needy or abandoned children in a famine year. He also reformed burial rites and procedures. It may be said that his grace extended from the cradle to the grave. There was virtually no segment of the popu-

lation that did not benefit from his munificence.

Chǒngjo was particularly concerned about criminal justice and sought to eradicate any injustice committed against any individual. He is said to have diligently pored through judicial decisions of all provinces, sometimes all through the night, and would often append footnotes. To reach a judgment he would examine the case no less than ten times, an indication of his unflagging dedication. Even as early as the second year of his reign, Chǒngjo acted decisively to halt executions carried out under the whim of administrative officials. He immediately dispatched secretaries from the criminal law division of the Royal Secretariat to the Corrections Tribunal and the Ministry of Punishment to inspect instruments used for torture and execution for violating of legal standards. Not only did he enforce the proper implementation of these standards by the criminal offices, he also promulgated a new, more exacting standard (Hǔmhyul chǒnch'ik) for determining the guilt of prisoners, notifying officials in every province to comply with the standard or face punishment themselves. In his seventh year, he chided the Corrections Tribunal and the Ministry of Punishment for lax record keeping, and ordered them to document the trial and punishment procedures of all offenders. These reports were to be compiled together into book form and delivered on a regular basis to his personal attention. Chǒngjo would then spend the entire night reading the reports, adding notes and retrying the cases repeatedly. He felt that such keen interest in criminal justice administration and strict oversight were necessary as part of the monarch's obligations to his subjects. Indeed, Chǒngjo felt it was his personal duty to correct injustices suffered by the ordinary people, which is why he set about reforming the existing slave system.

There was earlier mention of how Chǒngjo aided the slave class by abolishing the ch'uswaegwan and by establishing the sǒnduan, but in truth he considered more far-reaching reforms. He entrusted to longtime confidant Yun Haeng-im the task of compiling *chuch'ǒng* (petitions to the throne) and *kyesa* (submitted to the throne), written by his maternal grandfather Hong Pong-han. Hong Pong-han was a man of many accomplishments who served in various posts for three

generations of monarchs: from Yǒngjo's reign, through the Crown Prince's brief period on the throne, to the beginning of Chǒngjo's administration. By compiling his grandfather's papers Chǒngjo intended to reveal the solidarity of the three administrations. The volume was completed early in the 24th year of his reign, just months before his death, under the title *Hongikchǒnggong chugo*. The book was not simply a series of related papers. Chǒngjo himself wrote an introduction and a treatise for each section. Under the topic "slaves," Chǒngjo wrote of his conviction that the abolition of slavery was inevitable, and declared his firm resolve to pursue abolition himself.

Chǒngjo believed that of all the injustices suffered by his people, being a slave was the worst. Slaves were not only purchased and sold like livestock, but like land, the status of enslavement was passed down from generation to generation. According to the inhumane slavery system, slaves had no identity; they were not allowed to take their father's last name, much less marry. They were forced to do backbreaking labor until the day they died. Chǒngjo wondered how any fellow human being could accept the system as the status quo. The common justification was that Kija, the legendary founder of Kija Chosǒn who migrated from Yin China at the end of the second millennium B.C., himself had introduced slavery, and so as an institution it was immutable. To that argument, Chǒngjo responded that the law most likely stipulated enslavement as a temporary form of punishment and not as a condition to be transmitted from generation to generation. He declared that no longer would that be a valid justification to maintain the institution. Chǒngjo intended to abolish the institution in the following manner. For privately owned slaves, he intended to eliminate all rules and regulations regarding slavery and to replace them with new laws for employment. Thus the relationship between slave and master would be transformed into one between employee and employer. This new obligatory relationship would apply only to the former slave himself; it would not carry over to the children of the ex-slave. As for losses in national revenues incurred by losing labor remission fees collected from the freed slaves, Chǒngjo believed it would not be difficult to make up these

losses through other financial sources.

Chǒngjo held many debates over whether to abolish slavery in the royal court or not, and because of the complexity of the arguments on both sides he was unable to reach a quick decision. Apart from these official debates, however, Chǒngjo himself conducted studies in detail, together with “one or two followers,” and came to the final decision as stated above. Thus, he wrote that just before declaring the abolition of slavery, he once again deliberated upon the social turmoil that would result in the elimination of such a deep-rooted institution. He believed that this could be controlled by instituting new rules and regulations, and that this should not be the reason to perpetuate the misery of the slaves. This led him to the final conclusion that slavery had to be abolished. Chǒngjo ended his treatise by asserting that “people should be allowed to mingle with each other regardless of their status, but codes or classes should be strictly followed lest they behave contrary to reason. Therefore, the abolition of slavery should be carried out without any reservation henceforth.”

Had Chǒngjo’s lofty resolution to abolish slavery been carried out according to his original intention, this might have been a shining chapter in Korean history. Unfortunately, shortly after making the resolution Chǒngjo succumbed to death from a chronic skin disease. According to royal records, Chǒngjo had contracted tumors that destroyed his skin six years before, and the disease never abated. His condition was exacerbated in early June of his twenty-fourth year from overwork, and he died weeks later on the 28th day of the month, at the age of forty-nine.

After Chǒngjo’s death, his supporters continued to press for the abolition of slavery. However, in the first month of the following year, the royal court erupted into a turbulent period under the regency of the Queen Dowager Kim (second queen of Yǒngjo), who ruled on behalf of Chǒngjo’s son Sunjo. Shinyu saok, or the purges of 1801, was originally a crackdown on Catholics, but ultimately many of the officials who had been cultivated by Chǒngjo became sacrificial pawns. In the midst of this bloody purge, the social class system was radically reformed. Under the reforms, the illegitimate offspring

of concubines could at last take the civil examination for government office and slaves belonging to government offices were freed. Based on this fact, some scholars had hitherto attributed the abolition of slavery to the interim government of the Queen Dowager and the ascendant Old Doctrine faction,⁹ without any consideration of Chǒngjo's long study of the effects of abolition. In actuality, the groundwork for not only the abolition of slavery but also the elimination of restrictions against illegitimate offspring was laid during Chǒngjo's reign, and the reforms had only to be implemented. In other words, both reforms were initiated by Chǒngjo, but they were only partly carried out by the Old Doctrine faction, which dominated after Sunjo ascended the throne. Thus, the abolition of slavery cannot be credited to the Old Doctrine faction. Chǒngjo's supporters would have naturally advocated the fundamental abolition of slavery, while the opposing faction would have adopted a more passive and limited stance. To gain hegemony, the Old Doctrine faction launched the purges of 1801 in the name of suppressing Catholicism, but also to eradicate Chǒngjo's supporters. The new ruling faction recognized the need to curry public support¹⁰ and thus it announced the freeing of public slaves and the elimination of restrictions on illegitimate offsprings of concubines, claiming that this too was the will of the late Chǒngjo. However, the measures proved to be a sham. The Old Doctrine supporters excluded private slaves entirely, but a great many public slaves were also excluded according to their position. Ultimately, only 66,067 slaves belonging to royal estates were freed by the measure. Furthermore, the Old Doctrine faction restored the deficit that resulted from emancipation by dissolving Changyong-yǒng, the garrison that Chǒngjo had labored so hard to build up. Thus, the freeing of public slaves ended up becoming just another means of destroying Chǒngjo's political base.

9. Chǒn Hyǒng-t'aek, *Chosǒn hugi nobi shinbun yǒn'gu* (Study of the Status of Late Chosǒn Slaves) (Seoul: Ilchokak Publishing Co., 1991), pp. 238-239.

10. Korean History Research Institute under the auspices of the Nineteenth-Century Political History Division, *Chosǒn chǒngch'isa 1800-1863* (Chosǒn Political History 1800-1863), vol. 1 (Seoul: Cheong Nyun Sa Publishing Co., 1990).

One of the victims of the purges of 1801 was Yun Hyaeng-im, who as mentioned above had been entrusted with the compilation of Hongikchōnggong chugo. He was convicted of proselytizing Catholicism with Hong Nak-an, the younger brother of Chōngjo's mother, Lady Hong of the Hyegyōnggung palace, and was killed in the ninth month of that year. Yun was one of the "one or two followers" who was privy to Chōngjo's discussions and investigations regarding the abolition of slavery. His death is proof that the new ruling faction, which centered around the Queen Dowager Kim's brothers (of the Kyōngju Kim clan), was fundamentally opposed to Chōngjo's vision of completely abolishing slavery. The reactionary politics of the sedo chōngch'i, or government by royal in-law families, in the nineteenth century originated from this opposition to the total emancipation of slaves.

VI. Conclusion

The nation's agrarian-based economy experienced phenomenal growth towards the end of the seventeenth century due to new methods of rice planting and an expansion in the commercial cultivation of crops. Commercial and industrial development was also on the rise in terms of both volume and quality. This is evident in the burgeoning industrialization of Seoul and its outlying areas and other centers of political importance. In the case of Seoul, peasants who left farming for the city settled in Yongsan, Map'o, Sōgang and other areas that had originally been storehouses for grain, turning them into thriving centers of commerce and industry. By the end of the seventeenth century, Seoul had expanded well beyond the city walls that had once defined its limits. Its population increased from 100,000 to over 200,000, and its geographical size and administrative scale expanded as well. The end of the century marked a paradigm shift from wholly agrarian economy to the beginnings of commercial capitalism.

Accompanying such socioeconomic developments was a sea of change in politics as well. Just as socioeconomic developments were

largely urban, political changes were also manifest in the city. Until that point, factional politics had centered on the interests of the landowning class, but by the end of the seventeenth century it was becoming increasingly difficult for rival factions to maintain the principle of coexistence. In the interests of the monarchy and for the sake of political stability, t'angp'yǒngch'aek, a new policy to promote impartiality, was introduced. The need for such a policy was first discussed in Sukchong's day and the groundwork was laid during Yǒngjo's reign, but it was not until Chǒngjo that the policy took root, developing simultaneously with the propound shift in the economy.

The challenges that faced the monarchy's implementation of t'angp'yǒngch'aek policy in the eighteenth century were numerous indeed. Among them was the matter of dealing with officials who favored the former policy of factionalism. Another was resolving conflicts arising from a new, more diverse social structure in which the landed gentry were no longer the focus of politics. There was also the more mundane problem of unifying and systematizing bureaucracy so that officials could address issues in a way that reflected the new socioeconomic and political context. Such complex problems could hardly be resolved without trial and error and suffering, and indeed, the eighteenth century monarchs made their share of mistakes. Even though the Chosŏn monarchs absolutely supported the t'angp'yǒngch'aek policy, it was not fully implemented until much later. Their efforts at reform had to take into account the role of Confucianism, the ideology that was the very heart of Chosŏn dynasty rule and whose influence on government administration remained strong up to that time. They had to find new interpretations of Confucian doctrines, imparting to them fresh meaning and relevance, especially as many precepts were ignored or neglected despite being widely known. By renewing Confucianism, the monarchs could strengthen their legitimacy and their power base as well. Thus, if the monarch himself could embody the highest ideal of Neo-Confucianism, sugi ch'iin, or roughly, one who could govern himself and thus govern others, he would also embody the ideology of sǒnggun, or virtuous ruler. In other words, to ideally govern others (ch'iin), the king would have to

develop self-discipline and self-edification (*sugi*), thereby strengthening political stability. However, the kind of self-discipline or self-improvement willingly assumed by the *t'angpy'ongch'aek* rulers in order to embody the ideal of *sönggun* contrasted sharply in nature to the passive nature of previous rulers whose study of *sönghak* had been imposed on them by their subjects. In theory the virtuous ruler who attained perfection could exercise absolute authority. There was also the practical purpose of cultivating the skills and talent necessary to tackle many challenges. Of note is how similar the new ideal of monarchy as envisioned by Chöngjo towards the end of the eighteenth century, over the span of nearly a quarter century on the throne, was to the ideal of enlightened absolute monarchy that prevailed in Europe at roughly the same time.

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, monarchs entertained the pretensions of acting as “representatives of God,” and arbitrarily exercised absolute rule. By the eighteenth century, however, the concept of monarchy had changed, largely due to the influence of the Enlightenment. Rulers began to see themselves as the utmost “public servants of the people.”¹¹ This change in philosophy manifested itself as rulers faced a host of new challenges in the course of resolving the inherent contradictions of feudalism. However, dismantling the legacies of feudalism did not necessarily lead to the emergence of enlightened rulers. In England, France, the Netherlands and other economically advanced nations with an active citizenry, it was only through a popular revolution against the absolute monarchy that they developed into a republican form of government. Elsewhere in Europe, in nations like Prussia, where the economy was still largely agrarian and which had no citizen class, enlightened absolutism had to grapple with the remains of feudalism and a backward economy. The problems that faced European enlightened rulers were quite similar to those of Chöngjo, especially in how the monarchy’s authority was regarded. Although there was yet no challenge to the concept of monarchy as a hereditary right, a ruler had

11. Kim Ŏn-shik, *op. cit.*

the responsibility to “do his best and strive to be the most perfect person in the nation,” in the words of Prussian King Friedrich. Furthermore, a monarchy could enjoy legitimacy only to the extent that it was based on legalism, or the rule of law. We can draw a parallel between Friedrich and Chǒngjo as Chǒngjo, guided by myǒngdǒk philosophy, sought to become an enlightened and virtuous king and create a just and humanitarian society in which all subjects were treated fairly, and tried to reform the legal system through efforts such as compiling the Taejǒn t’ongp’yǒn (Comprehensive National Code). That the two contemporaneous monarchs could be so similar, despite being half a world apart, is most likely due to the fact that both nations were undergoing similar socioeconomic and political changes. Even Confucian ideology called for a new kind of rule as demanded by the advent of capitalism.

Historians recognize that European enlightened absolutism, inherently unable to sustain itself, served as a bridge in the transition from feudalism to republican forms of government. However, in Korea the Confucian ideal of enlightened absolutism and virtuous absolutism that reached its summit under Chǒngjo collapsed with his death. Chǒngjo’s vision failed to take root not because of its inherent limitations but because of the concentrated efforts of his political enemies to eradicate his legacy. Chǒngjo’s lofty ideals were displaced by sedo chǒngch’i, or government by royal in-law families. Reactionary in both form and policy, the government was unable to cope with the various conflicts and contradictions arising from a changing society. It was almost preordained that under sedo chǒngch’i popular discontent would foment into revolts in the nineteenth century. Does this mean that the Confucian-based enlightened absolute monarchy that reached its peak under Chǒngjo passed away completely with Chǒngjo? The answer is not so simple. It requires further research into what positions successive monarchs took up under sedo chǒngch’i and how the leading intellectuals of the time conducted themselves, and how ordinary people themselves who benefitted from Chǒngjo’s wimin policy remembered Chǒngjo, who carried out an unprecedented policy for the people.

GLOSSARY

Chahyul chŏnch'ik	字恤典則	Hyŏllyungwŏn	顯隆園
Ch'angdŏkkung	昌德宮	Ihyanggak	移香閣
Changhŏn	莊獻	li (Ch.)	理
Changyongyŏng	壯勇營	Ilŏngnok	日省錄
Changyongwi	壯勇衛	Ihyanggak	移香閣
ch'in'gang	親講	imo ch'ŏbun	壬午處分
Chinjong	眞宗	Imunwŏn	摺文院
Chiphyŏnjŏn	集賢殿	Insŏrok	人瑞錄
ch'ogyŏ munshin	抄啓文臣	Jing (Ch.)	經
chŏng	精	Jinsilu (Ch.)	近思錄
chŏnggwan	貞觀	Kaeyuwa	皆有窩
Chŏngjo	正祖	kanghak	講學
Chŏngjo shillok	正祖實錄	Kija	箕子
chŏngmyŏng	貞明	Kŏnwŏnnŭng	建元陵
Chŏngjo	正祖	kunja	君子
Chŏngjo shillok	正祖實錄	Kwangnŭng	光陵
Chŏngnŭng	靖陵	kyesa	啓辭
chuch'ŏng	奏請	kyŏkchaeng	擊錚
Chuhamnu	宙合樓	kyomok sega	喬木 世家
Ch'unjŏrok	春邱錄	kyŏngkwa	慶科
Ch'unqiu (Ch.)	春秋	Kyŏngsa kangŭi	經史講義
ch'uswaegwan	推刷官	kyŏngyŏn	經筵
dao (Ch.)	道	Kyujanggak	奎章閣
Daxue (Ch.)	大學	Kyunyŏkpŏp	均役法
Daxue yanyi (Ch.)	大學演義	Longmen (Ch.)	龍門
Daxue yanyibu (Ch.)	大學演義補	Longtuge (Ch.)	龍圖閣
Ganlong (Ch.)	乾隆	Manch'ŏn myŏngwŏl	萬川明月
Hanjungnok	恨中錄	chuinong chasŏ	主人翁自序
Hongikchŏnggong chugo	洪翼靖公奏稿	mingmingde (Ch.)	myŏngmyŏng- dŏk
Hongmun'gwan	弘文館	Muyedobo t'ongji	武藝圖譜通志
Huanghe (Ch.)	黃河	Myŏngjŏngmun	明政門
Hŭmhyul chŏnch'ik	欽恤典則	myŏngmyŏngdŏk	明明德
Hwanggŭkp'yŏn	皇極編	Ogunyŏng	五軍營
Hyegyŏnggung	惠慶宮	Ŏjejon'gak	御製尊閣
Hyojang	孝章	Ou Yangxiu (Ch.)	歐陽脩

Owi Toch'ongbu	五衛都摠府	Sukchong	肅宗
P'abungdang	破朋黨	Suñmyo	垂恩墓
Pibyōnsa	備邊司	Taehak ryuüi	大學類義
Piwǒn	秘苑	T'aejo	太祖
Pongmodang	奉謨堂	T'aejong	太宗
Pyǒnghakt'ong	兵學通	Taejön t'ongp'yǒn	大典通編
Sado	思悼	t'angp'yǒngch'aek	蕩平策
sangǒn	上言	t'aegük	太極
sedo chǒngch'i	勢道政治	Tianzhangge (Ch.)	天章閣
Sejong	世宗	Üinüing	懿陵
shiganggwan	侍講官	Wei (Ch.)	渭
shiji yōsang	視之如傷	wimin	爲民
shinmin	新民	wioe kyökchaeng	衛外擊錚
shinmun'go	申闡鼓	Wönnüing	元陵
Shinyu saok	辛酉邪獄	Xiaoxue (Ch.)	小學
Shun (Ch.)	舜	Xinjing (Ch.)	心經
Söbinggo	西水庫	yang (Ch.)	陽
Sōgo	西庫	Yao (Ch.)	堯
Sōhyanggak	書香閣	Yemun'gwan	藝文館
soin	小人	Yiji (Ch.)	易繫
sōmin	庶民	Yijing (Ch.)	易經
Sōnggyun'gwan	成均館	yin (Ch.)	陰
sōnduan	宣頭案	Yixue qimeng (Ch.)	易學啓蒙
sōnggun	聖君	Yölgogwan	閱古觀
sōnghak	聖學	Yǒnghwadang	映花堂
sōnjön'gwan	宣傳官	Yōngjo	英祖
Sönnüing	宣陵	Yōngnüing	永陵
sowǒn	訴願	Yōnguwǒn	永祐園
sugi ch'iin	修己治人	yöpkun	獵軍
Sugwiso	宿衛所	Yu (Ch.)	禹
Süngjǒngwǒn	承政院	Zhongyong (Ch.)	中庸
Sunjo	純祖	Zhu Xi (Ch.)	朱子

(Ch.: Chinese)