Progeny of the Koryŏ Dynasty: The Kaesŏng Wang in Chosŏn Korea*

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As the descendants of the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) supplanted by the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), the Kaesŏng Wang negotiated a new sociopolitical terrain in early modern Korea. Once the Chosŏn state ended a bloody persecution (1394–1416) which virtually exterminated the Wangs, the lucky survivors and their descendants performed the state-sanctioned ancestor veneration ritual of sacrificial offering (ponsa) to Koryŏ kings. Moreover, many passed the government service examinations, entered officialdom, commanded armies, and constituted local elite lineages in various parts of Korea. The most privileged among the Wangs were no different from the general aristocracy, yangban, pursuing classical Chinese education and prescribing to Confucian moral norms such as the cardinal virtue of a subject’s loyalty (ch’ung) to the ruler. All the same, an emerging body of subversive narratives, written and oral, began expressing sympathy toward Koryŏ and its progeny as victims of Chosŏn. The Wangs themselves refrained from openly dissenting until after the end of the Chosŏn dynasty.

Keywords: Kaesŏng Wang, Chosŏn, Koryŏ, yangban, ponsa

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* Many have provided helpful feedback and assistance during the various stages of my research and writing for this study. I would like to thank Ahn Yootack, Don Baker, Frank L. Chance, John B. Duncan, Hong Soon-Min, Kang Hosun, David L. Howell, Sun Joo Kim, Kim Yong-Sun, Noh Kwan-Bum, Sem Vermeersch, B. C. A. Walraven, and Yang Jin-Suk.

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In early modern Korea (ca. 1392–ca. 1880), the Kaesŏng Wang 開城王, the descendants of the Koryŏ 高麗 dynasty (918–1392), duly served the succeeding Chosŏn 朝鮮 dynasty (1392–1910) and negotiated new social terrain. Initially, the Chosŏn state conducted an extermination campaign (1394–1416) against the former royals so thorough that over ninety percent of today’s Kaesŏng Wang are descendants of a single survivor—who could only claim Wang Kön 王建 (877–943), the Koryŏ dynastic founder and later King T’aejo 太祖 (r. 918–943), as his most recent royal ancestor. After ending the persecution, the court searched for and secured a descent line of surviving Wangs to perform the ritual of sacrificial offering (ponsa 奉祀) to their royal Koryŏ ancestors. Moreover, the Kaesŏng Wang passed government service examinations, attained prestigious offices, commanded troops, and remained members of the Chosŏn aristocracy, yangban 兩班. All the same, an emerging body of subversive narratives, written and oral, expressed sympathy toward Koryŏ and its progeny as victims. The Wangs stayed clear of the discourse until the end of the Chosŏn monarchy in 1910.

The post-Koryŏ plight of the Kaesŏng Wang as outlined certainly raises historically meaningful questions. Above all, why did the Chosŏn state seek to exterminate the members of former royal house only to revive them? How did the descendants retain yangban status (though certainly not all Kaesŏng Wang were yangban) in the Chosŏn period? How did the fate of a long-departed dynasty serve as a medium for dissent centuries after the dynastic change?

Answers to these questions reveal the nature of politics, society, and culture of Chosŏn Korea. This study argues that although superficially a unilinear internal development, the Koryŏ-Chosŏn dynastic change entailed the “founding of a [new] state” (kaeguk 開國) and the latter’s wrestling with the

1. Date citations in this study are according to the Gregorian solar calendar unless noted otherwise. In Korea, the Chinese lunar calendar was the official standard until the seventeenth day of the eleventh lunar month of 1895, the Gregorian New Year’s Day of 1896, when the government went solar. This study uses the format of, for example, “January 1, 1800” for Gregorian dates and “1800/1/1” for lunar ones. Also, according to the lunar calendar and now the Gregorian, customary Korean age count regards a person at birth to be one se 歲 (Ch. sui) in age, gaining a year upon each New Year’s Day. Thus, one’s age in se is either one or two years more than the age according to contemporary Western practice.

legacies of the “vanquished state” (sŏngguk 賢國) before coming to terms with them. By 1392, the aristocracy comprised descent groups that had been producing central officials for centuries, and what to do with the Wangs was an issue with implications for the survival of the new dynasty. After drowning, beheading, or strangling as many Wangs as possible for twelve years, the court chose to secure a Wang line to perform sacrificial rituals to former Koryŏ rulers. Addressing Buddho-shamanistic and Confucian concerns, such rituals were necessary for appeasing anguished spirits of victims as well as reaffirming the legitimacy of Chosŏn as the successor of Koryŏ. The official position of Chosŏn as such allowed ample room for the surviving Wangs to even prosper as long as they prescribed to cardinal Confucian moral virtues, especially loyalty (ch’ung 忠) to the ruler. This meant that those with means enjoyed membership in the yangban aristocracy, officeholders and non-officeholders alike, though the descent group as a whole consisted of members of all shades of social status. All the same, Chosŏn as an early modern society increasingly featuring a plurality of views on its past and present, including narratives critical of the establishment if not outright subversive. In such an environment, the early Chosŏn plight of fallen royals provided inspiration for later memories, real or not.

Other than the massacre of the Kaesŏng Wang in 1394, post-Koryŏ history of the Wangs has received little attention, and the veracity of related claims remains untested. For example, a well-known account relates that during the 1394–1416 persecution, many Wangs assumed other surnames, adding one or more additional strokes to the ideograph for Wang 王 (“king”), that is Ok 玉 (“jade”), Kŭm 琴 (“lute”), Ma 馬 (“horse), Chŏn 全 (“all”), or Chŏn 田 (“field”). According to another popular claim, even after the persecution ended the Chosŏn state kept watchful eyes on the Wangs, making it difficult for them to enter officialdom, and that the Wangs did not bother. One account relates that in the late nineteenth century the authorities arrested and executed a Pak朴-surnamed man when he petitioned the court to reclaim his ancestor’s original surname, allegedly Wang.

3. The most up-to-date discussion of court politics prior to the massacre is Han Chŏngsu, “Chosŏn ch’ogi Wang-ssi ch’ŏbun ron ŭi taedwa wa chŏn’gae,” Sahak yŏn’gu 114 (June 2014), 13–29.
5. Interview of Wang Yŏngnok, August 5, 2014, Yŏnch’ŏn 漣川, South Korea.
Trying to shed more light on the history of the Kaesŏng Wang in the Chosŏn era, I have found informative a wide range of primary sources as well as interviews and site visits. To be sure, much of the information on the post-Koryŏ Wangs derives from court histories, supplemented by law codes, literary anthologies (munjip 文集), town gazetteers (upchi 邑誌), local yangban registers (hyangsan 鄉案), household registers (hojok 戶籍), examination rosters (pangmok 榜目), tombstone inscriptions (myojimyŏng 墓誌銘), and genealogies (chokpo 族譜). Not surprisingly, these sources tend to comply with the official line, which justifies the early Chosŏn court’s initial persecution of the Wangs and stresses the benevolence of the Chosŏn monarchy in pardoning the surviving Wangs. Thus, constructing a more nuanced narrative demands examining various written works of so-called “unofficial history” (yasa 野史) as well as oral history. The latter includes interviews with the present-day Wangs who can tell stories they have heard for years, if not passed down for generations. Moreover, visits to various sites associated with the post-Koryŏ history of the Wangs helped me narrate a more vivid story.

Narrating the plight of the Wangs permits a presentation overall both chronological and topical. Organized accordingly, the four sections of this study discuss (1) the 1394–1416 persecution; (2) the court’s subsequent search for a ritual heir (pongsa son 奉祀孫) of Koryŏ; (3) the overall standing of the Wangs in terms of examination success and office-holding; and (4) emerging subversive narratives. Examining how an early modern state dealt with the legacies of its predecessor, the Koryŏ dynasty, this study presents a dialogue between a sociopolitical history of Chosŏn Korea and the story of a family’s revival.

The Persecution

The early Chosŏn court targeted the Kaesŏng Wang as a dangerous, sizable descent group comprising royals and scions of the Koryŏ dynasty that had lasted nearly half a millennium. In the medieval period (ca. 850–ca. 1392), the Kaesŏng Wang evolved from a local strongman (hojok 豪族) clan to the Koryŏ dynasty itself. King T’aejo posthumously honored three generations of his patrilineal ancestors with temple names (myoho 墳號), but conflicting explanations of the relationship between his grandfather and great-grandfather as recorded in various sources reflect the relative obscurity of the Wangs as a family on the rise in the ninth century. The Kaesŏng Wang descended from the cousins of T’aejo, who had no brothers, led a more mundane existence as hereditary local functionaries (hyangni 鄉吏) residing in the vicinity of Kaesŏng 開城, the
dynastic capital. Also, even among the direct descendants of T’aejo, those farther removed from the line of royal succession received spotty coverage in the royal kinsmen (chongb’ìn 宗親) section of the History of Koryŏ (Koryŏsa 高麗史) completed under the succeeding Chosŏn dynasty in 1451. All the same, the potential threat the Wangs posed as a whole as perceived by the early Chosŏn court is understandable in light of the nearly contemporaneous Yuan-Ming dynastic change of 1368 in neighboring China. Since the court of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) had fled to Mongolia, the succeeding Ming dynasty (1368–1644) dealt with the former royals, the descendants of Chinggis Khan (r. 1206–1227), outside the Ming realm rather than having an enemy within.

Prior to the extermination campaign against the Kaesŏng Wang, a raging debate on what to do with the Wangs consumed the Chosŏn dynasty from the outset. According to official accounts, Yi Sŏnggye 李成桂 (1335–1408), the dynastic founder and later King T’aejo 太祖 (r. 1392–1398), begrudgingly gave in to the pressures of his officials bent on dispatching the former royals, although such a portrayal still leaves room for other interpretations, as discussed below. After killing the Wangs at three internment sites in May 1394, the state continued to hunt down the remaining Wangs and kill any apprehended. Nearly two decades later in 1413, T’aejo’s son and the third Chosŏn ruler, King T’aejong 太宗 (r. 1400–1418), released a captive—in effect paving the way for the persecution to end three years later.

During the sixteen months following the Koryŏ-Chosŏn dynastic change, the court took a series of measures that ultimately sealed the fate of the Kaesŏng Wang as a whole. On August 8, 1392, three days after T’aejo’s accession, the Inspector-General (Taesahŏn 大司憲) and other officials petitioned the throne to relocate the Wangs outside the capital. In response, T’aejo ordered that all—except the brother of the last Koryŏ ruler King Kongyang 恭讓 (r. 1389–1392), two of the brother’s sons, one other Wang, and his son—be sent to Kanghwa 江華 and Kŏje 巨濟 islands. A month later, the court reduced the number of slaves possessed by the Wangs, in effect reducing their economic base. Nine months later in July 1393, the court divided the Wangs at Kŏje into three groups, dispersing them to Wansan 完山, Sangju 尙州, and Yönghae 寧海—all in

9. T’aejo sillok 太祖實錄, 1.40a (1392.7.20). All veritable record (sillok) citations of this study refer to the original text as reprinted in Chosŏn wangjo sillok (Seoul: Kuksa p’yo’ngch’ang wiwo’n’hoe, 1955–58), 48 vols.
10. T’aejo sillok, 1.53b (1392/8/20).
the southern part of mainland Korea. Seven months later in February 1394, after investigating a report that two individuals had asked a fortuneteller about the fate of former King Kongyang and other Wangs, the court moved some Wangs back to Kōje. Citing the incident, four days later the Censorate (Taegan) and the Ministry of Punishments (Hyŏngjo) petitioned T’aejo to exterminate the Wangs, but he refused. A month later on March 23, the two agencies pleaded that four particular Wangs, all personally close to Kongyang, be moved to the islands, followed by memorials on the next day and the day after seeking punishment of all Wangs, but T’aejo again refused. Three days later when a memorial petitioned for (1) “subjecting Kongyang and his immediate kinsmen to the law,” (2) expelling the four aforementioned Wangs to the islands, and (3) banishing the Wangs then on Kanghwa to more remote islands, T’aejo held firm. When the officials of the Censorate and the Ministry of Punishments protested by refusing to perform their duties, T’aejo ordered the four Wangs in question banished to Kongju, Anbyŏn, Yŏnghŭng, and Hopp’o. On the following day, March 29, T’aejo ordered the Office of the Inspector-General (Sahŏnbu) to look after the old and the infirm among the Wangs residing on Kanghwa, but this was the lull before the storm. On May 1 and May 10, the king received memorials urging him to kill the Wangs. Upon receiving such a memorial yet again four days later on May 14, T’aejo ordered all Wangs put to death.

Some studies have examined the above series of events without coming to a consensus on T’aejo’s intentions. As is well known, T’aejo ruled not so much as a powerful monarch but rather as a primus inter pares assisted by the powerful scholar-officials and military commanders who had enthroned him. Evidently taking the court’s discussions as documented in the veritable records at face value, some historians view T’aejo as a king who begrudgingly consented to putting the Wangs to death after resisting his officials’ demand for almost three months. Reading between the lines, others see in T’aejo a strategizing

11. T’aejo sillok, 3.9b–10a (1393/5/26).
12. T’aejo sillok, 5.2a–b (1394/1/17).
13. T’aejo sillok, 5.2b–3a (1394/1/21).
14. T’aejo sillok, 5.9a–b (1394/2/21), 5.9b (1394/2/22, 2/23).
15. T’aejo sillok, 5.10a–11a (1394/2/26).
17. T’aejo sillok, 5.17a (1394/4/1), 5.17b–18a (1394/4/10).
18. T’aejo sillok, 5.18b (1394/4/14).
19. For example, see Han Sanggil, “Chosŏn chŏn’gi suryuk chae sŏrhaeng ūi sahojeŏk ūmi,”
political actor who went through the motions of being compassionate before finding an opportune moment to issue the inevitable ultimate order.20

A massacre commenced on the following day, and the Kaesŏng Wang at all three internment sites died. On May 15, 1394, the agents of the state threw the Wangs of Kanghwa into the sea from a harbor.21 Two days later on May 17 in Samch’ŏk 三陟, the former monarch and his household members met their doom—Kongyang and his only son both by strangulation.22 Then on May 20 at Kŏje, the troops threw the Wangs interned on the island into the sea.23 An unofficial account claims that when the court declared that the Wangs would be able to live as commoners on various islands, they happily boarded the ships sent to transport them; during the voyage, they drowned when divers drilled holes into their hulls and the ships sank.24

According to the Tonghak Temple Record of Perished Souls (Tonghaksa bon’gi 東鶴寺魂記), at least 133 Wangs died during the massacre. A source no longer extant as far as I can determine, the content has survived thanks to a Reformed Confucianism (Sirhak 實學) scholar, Sŏng Haeŭng 成海應 (pen name Yŏn’gyŏngjae 研經齋, 1760–1839), who analyzed it in light of other documents. One or more versions of the victim list probably existed after the massacre, given the Buddhist Ritual of Water and Land (suryuk chae 水陸齋) performed especially for the salvation of the creatures inhabiting the most painful domains of samsara;25 in 1395, T’aejo ordered the Ritual of Water and Land performed at temples near the three internment sites every spring and autumn on behalf of the dead Wangs.26 Sŏng correctly identifies some Wangs on the list who did not actually die during the massacre.27 Such an error may reflect a text corrupted

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20. For example, see Kang Hoso˘n, “Chosŏn ch’og˘i Wang-ssi,” 22–27.
24. Nam Hyoon 南孝溫, Ch’ugang sŏnsaeng munjip 秋江先生文集, 7.4a–b, reprinted in Ch’ugang chip 秋江集 (Seoul: Han’guk kojo˘n po˘nyo˘gwo˘n, 2013), http://db.itkc.or.kr/itkcdnb/text/imageViewPopup.jsp?bizName=MK&seojiId=kc_mk_j011&gunchaId=av007&muncheld=01&finId=001&startPage=mk_j011_v002_052a&endPage=mk_j011_v002_062a&setid=-1&Pos=-1&TotalCount=-1, accessed 29 December 2014.
27. Sŏng Haeŭng 成海應, Tonghaksya bon’gi sŏk 東鶴寺魂記, in Yŏn’gyŏngjae chŏnjip 研經齋全集:
after repeated copying.

If the *Tonghak Temple Record of Perished Souls* is indeed reliable for the most part, then dividing the Wangs into three groups was well justified. To Samch’ŏk, the court banished at least ten Wang males—Kongyang, his immediate relatives, and others who had special ties to him.\(^{28}\) Although not an island, the location was remote enough to keep the vanquished royal household in isolation. As for Kanghwa, perhaps the court could claim that it was a special accommodation for the Wangs sent there since the island was a former capital of Koryŏ, although the location was exposed to Wako raids.\(^{29}\) Likely mindful of its proximity to the capital, the court evidently sent there mostly the Wangs of more advanced age. Out of fifteen recorded in the *Tonghak Temple Record of Perished Souls*, at least five had adult sons.\(^{30}\) Kŏje, which accommodated the largest group of internees (at least 111),\(^{31}\) is a large, distant island located off the southern coast of Korea, and the Wangs there were younger. Kŏje too was vulnerable to Wako raids to such an extent that earlier the Koryŏ government had relocated its administrative seat from the island to the mainland.\(^{32}\)

The Chosŏn state may have targeted only the bona fide royal Wangs, possibly numbering no more than hundreds. Excluding the five erroneously included, at a glance the 133 documented by the *Tonghak Temple Record of Perished Souls* may appear to be only a small fraction of the total population of Kaesŏng Wang at the time. Presumably, after half a millennium of recorded existence as a descent group, the Wangs must have numbered in the thousands. If this were the case, then either the list is woefully incomplete or the Chosŏn court killed only those Wangs that mattered. In fact, as mentioned above, during the Koryŏ period the Kaesŏng Wang living outside Kaesŏng city proper continued to perform duties as hereditary local functionaries.\(^{33}\) Also, any direct male descendant more than two generations removed from a king did not enjoy recognition as royalty although more remote descendants who, generally in late

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30. Koryŏsa, 90.5b–12b, 91.1a–4a; and Sŏng Hae’ŭng, *Tonghaksa hon’gi sŏk*, 37.106d–107c.
Koryŏ, married princesses appear in the royal kinsmen section of the History of Koryŏ.34

The Chosŏn state was determined to exterminate all royal Wangs as well as all reminders of the family, even banning the usage of the surname Wang. On the day of the Kŏje massacre, May 20, the court launched a mass hunt throughout the country that would last two decades, killing those who were apprehended.35 T'aejo’s aforementioned order to hold the Ritual of Water and Land for the perished Wangs stemmed not so much from compassion as a desire to placate anguished spirits, project the image of a tolerant monarch, and ensure the overall wellbeing of the new dynasty,36 even while merciless agents of the state continued to strangle or behead captured Wangs. Recorded cases of such Wangs suggest that those who somehow survived the 1394 massacre were illegitimate sons or descendants of royal Wangs.37 On May 26, that is six days after commencing the nationwide hunt, the court even ordered those who had received the surname Wang from the Koryŏ state and the descendants of such Wangs to assume their original surnames, whereas other Wangs, even if not of royal descent, had to use their maternal surnames.38

The court spared the lives of Kongyang’s brother and his two sons, but their positions were precarious. Through his enthronement edict issued on August 16, 1392 and again nine days later, King T'aejo reaffirmed the ritual heir status of Kongyang’s brother Wang U 王瑀 (n.d.–1397), whose daughter was married to T'aejo’s seventh son. Giving U land in Majŏn 麻田, located between Kaesŏng and Seoul, the court granted him a condescending enfeoffment title, Kwiŭi Kun 歸義君 (“Prince submitting to the righteousness [of Chosŏn]”).39 In May 1395, a Censorate official requested that U and his two sons, Wang Cho 王珇 (n.d.–1398) and Wang Kwan 王琯 (n.d.–1398), be banished to Kanghwa, regarding them as the cause of Heaven’s displeasure as expressed through a

35. T’aego sillok, 5.19a (1394.4.20).
37. T’aego sillok, 12.9a–b (1397/12/1), 12.9b (1397/12/8); T’aegjong sillok 太宗實錄, 26.41a–42a (1413/11/15), 26.45b–46a (1413/11/26), 26.46a–b (1413/11/29), 26.46b–47a (1413/12/1); and Sŏngjong sillok 成宗實錄, 137.9b–10a (1482/1/18).
39. T’aego sillok, 1.43b (1392/7/28), 1.51a (1392/8/7).
recent natural disaster, but T’aejo refused.40 Upon U’s death in March 1397,41 it took the court seven months to raise the rank of the elder son, Cho, ordering him to inherit his father’s title of Kwiūi Kun and thus the position as the ritual heir of Koryō.42 Cho also received permission to reclaim the surname Wang,43 as presumably in May 1394 per the court’s order he and his brother had assumed their mother’s surname, No Ḥ. The brothers did not long outlive their father. Ten months later in July 1398 when T’aejo’s ambitious fifth son, the future King T’aejong, killed two of his half-brothers, both favored by their father, and all those supporting them, Cho and Kwan too died as their sister was married to one of the doomed half-brothers.44

With hardly any Wangs around, T’aejong eventually granted clemency to the progeny of the vanquished royal house. For two weeks in December 1413, officials repeatedly requested that Wang Kōuromi 王巨乙吾味 (n.d.), an illegitimate son, be put to death, but T’aejong was firm in upholding his decision to release him.45 Three years later, in November 1416, when the authorities apprehended two brothers of royal descent, Wang Sangu 王上尤 (n.d.) and Wang Hwasang 王和尙 (n.d.), and interrogated them, T’aejong released them.46 Along with his decision in September 1416 posthumously promoting Kongyang from a prince (kun 君) to a king (wang 王),47 T’aejong’s orders that the captured Wangs be released reflect the overall political stability and the monarch’s self-confidence. By then, not only was a Koryō restorationist effort out of the question, T’aejong had defeated all other challengers both potential and real, including Cho Sāui 趙思義 (1402) and the queen’s brothers (1410). Also, as the Chosŏn court was coming to terms with the human legacies of Koryŏ, T’aejong began honoring as loyal subjects of Koryŏ Chŏng Mongju 鄭夢周 (pen name P’o’in 園隱, 1338–1392) and other scholar-officials who had resisted the

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41. *T’aejo sillok*, 11.4a (1397/2/24).
42. *T’aejo sillok*, 12.6b (1397/10/10).
43. *T’aejo sillok*, 12.6b (1397/10/10).
44. *T’aejo sillok*, 14.28b (1398/8/26). Considering how T’aejong 太宗 and his troops outright killed his half-brothers in cold blood, both Cho 祖 and Kwan 琳 likely suffered the same fate. Without explaining his reason for favoring suicide over homicide as the probable cause, Han Chŏngsu conjectures that deaths of Cho and Kwan were “closer to suicides than deaths due to natural causes.” See Han Chŏngsu, “Chosŏn ch’ogi Wang-ssi,” 29.
46. *T’aejong sillok*, 32.25a (1416/11/1), 32.25a–b (1416/11/5).
47. *T’aejong sillok*, 32.10b (1416/8/5).
Progeny of the Koryŏ Dynasty

A concern for legitimacy and security shaped the Chosŏn state’s interest in securing a Wang line of ritual heirs. As discussed above, upon the dynastic change the court designated Wang U, the brother of the last Koryŏ king, as the ritual heir to perform ancestral veneration rituals. In crediting T’aejo for this act of virtue, Cho Chun 趙浚 (1346–1405), a senior official who played a leading role in effecting the dynastic change, referred to how the founder of China’s Zhou 周 dynasty (ca. 1046–256 BCE) invested Weizi 微子, a brother of the wicked last ruler of the Shang 商 dynasty (ca. 1600–ca. 1046), in the state of Song 宋 (eleventh c.–286 BCE) so that the ritual heir and his descendants could continue offering sacrifice to the Shang. At the same time, the Chosŏn court was aware of how the Ming court too was faithful to the hallowed tradition, as the latter notified its vassal states, including Chosŏn Korea. Even while confronting the last Yuan emperor’s successors now based in Mongolia, the Ming court attempted to maintain Maidarbal (n.d.)—a captured grandson of the last Yuan emperor in China proper, Toghon Temür (r. 1333–1370)—to perform ritual obligations to the forefathers. Besides, a more purely Buddho-shamanistic concern for appeasing the anguished spirits of the Wangs and their ancestors—surely enraged by the persecution—led the court to sanction a Wang line of ritual heirs as well as having Buddhist temples perform the Ritual of Water and Land, as discussed earlier. Even if more secular Confucian scholar-officials were not so worried, addressing the Buddho-shamanistic concern in such a manner must have been critically important for allaying fear among the general population and ensuring the long-term security of the new dynasty.

The court’s effort to secure a line of ritual heirs of Koryŏ faced illegitimacies, false claims, and the overall dearth of surviving Wangs. T’aεjong’s successors searched for a Wang to perform veneration rites in honor of select Koryŏ monarchs, but the best candidate that the court could identify by 1452 could only claim an eleventh-century Koryŏ king as his most recent regal ancestor.

48. T’aεjong sillok, 1.7a–b (1401/1/14), 2.17b (1401/11/7), 3.16b (1402/4/3), 5.25b (1403/6/5).
49. T’aεjo sillok, 2.16a (1392/12/16).
When in 1540 the third heir from the line died without a legitimate son, the court searched elsewhere, and the effort took almost five decades. This time the chosen heir’s most recent ancestor-monarch was King T’aejjo of Koryŏ. Most of the Kaesŏng Wang today belong to this line.

During the interval of 1398–1452 when an official ritual heir was unavailable, the early Chosŏn court saw a need to create an edifice honoring the previous dynasty. On the plot of land granted earlier to Wang U in Majŏn, in 1399 the court constructed a shrine to venerate a select group of Koryŏ kings.51 During the reign of T’aejjo’s son and sagacious successor, King Sejong (r. 1418–1450), most of the recorded actions of the court regarding the Wangs concern the wellbeing of the surviving female members of the last Koryŏ monarch’s family, such as U’s daughter who was the widow (n.d.–1449) of the half-brother that T’aejjo had killed, for upkeep of the shrine.52 Formally naming it Sungūijŏn (”Hall of Venerated Righteousness”), in 1451 King Munjong (r. 1450–1452), the son and scholarly successor of Sejong, had four Koryŏ kings and sixteen eminent Koryŏ officials honored there.53

In November 1451, Munjong ordered a search for a Wang to perform proper ancestral veneration rituals,54 and a few months later in April 1452 the court found someone, suddenly changing his life. A descendant of the eleventh-century Koryŏ king Hyŏnjong (r. 1009–1031) and himself an illegitimate son,55 a certain Che Uji (n.d.–1485), using an alias, was hiding out in Kongju when he happened to get into an argument with a neighbor over the boundary of their plots. When the neighbor’s report to the authorities reached the court, Munjong honored Che Uji with gifts.56 When the king died shortly thereafter, his command that Uji receive land and slaves had to wait until June after Munjong’s son and successor, who was not yet of age, King Tanjong (r. 1452–1455), ascended the throne.57 In July, the court formally entrusted Uji

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51. Majŏn 麻田 is located on the bank of the Imjin 臨津 River near the furthest reach of the high tide. Interview of Hong Sunmin, August 4, 2014, Yŏnch’ŏn, South Korea.
52. Sejong sillok (1421/1/13), 20.29b (1423/6/29), 53.10a (1431/7/30), 96.9a (1442/5/10), 125.5b (1449/7/19).
53. Hong Ponghan 洪鳳漢, Tongguk munbŏn pigo 東國民事備考, as cited in Koryŏ Sungūijŏn sa 高麗崇義殿史 (Seoul: Sungūijŏn Angamjae chung, 1992), 112.
54. Munjong sillok (1451/11/1).
55. So ˘ngjong sillok, 137.9b–10a (1482/1/18).
56. Munjong sillok, 12.25a (1452/3/4), 12.35b (1452/3/18); Tanjong sillok (1452/5/19); Sŏngjong sillok, 137.9b–10a (1482/1/18); Hŏ Pong, Haedong yaŏn, as cited in Koryŏ Sungūijŏn sa, 114; and Nam Hyoon, Ob’ugang sŏnseang munjip, 7.3b–4a.
57. Tanjong sillok, 1.7b (1452/5/19).
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with the duty of performing rituals at the Sungūijŏn and also bestowed him with a fitting name, Wang Sullye 王循禮 (“in pursuit of propriety”).

Sullye continued to enjoy royal patronage until his death in 1485. The veritable records mention seven occasions when Tanjong’s uncle and usurper, King Sejo 世祖 (r. 1455–1468), or his grandson King Sŏngjong 成宗 (r. 1469–1495) invited him to a royal banquet or granted him food and drink. On more than one occasion reminding Sullye of his special status as the heir of the Koryŏ dynasty, Sejo went so far as declaring that he was a “honored guest” (pin 賓) rather than a subject (sin 臣). At one point, the court dismissed Sullye for favoring a concubine over his wife, and he was out of office for three years (October 1459–January 1463). For the most part, though, he presumably knew better than to take advantage of his position. Even without Sejo’s admonition to carry himself with caution, Sullye had to be sensible enough to know that the all-too-powerful meritorious subjects (kongsin 功臣) the throne had been rewarding repeatedly with land and slaves since Sejo’s usurpation were the real power holders. Any upstart seeking the king’s special attention and exploiting it would do so at his own risk.

Finding Sullye, the court institutionalized the position of Sungūijŏn caretaker by including provisions in a new law code promulgated in 1471, the Great Code of State Administration (Kyŏngguk taejŏn 經國大典). Entrusted with the responsibility of performing ancestor veneration rituals in honor of select Koryŏ kings, the official as locally chosen by the Kyŏnggi 京畿 provincial governor (kwanch’alsada 觀察使) could be of any one of the four levels, namely sa 使 (lower third rank), su 守 (lower fourth rank), yŏng 令 (lower fifth rank), and kam 監 (lower sixth rank)—all civil posts. In Sullye’s case, the court granted him the lower third rank post.

In 1540, the line of ritual heirs ended when Sullye’s grandson died without a legitimate son, and it took the court forty-nine years to find another Wang.

58. *Tanjong sillok*, 2.1b (1452/7/2).
59. *Sŏngjong sillok*, 180.8b (1485/6/10).
60. *Sejo sillok* 世祖實錄, 36.11a–b (1465/6/2), 38.2b (1466/1/3), 41.1a–b (1467/1/3), 43.64b–65a (1467/9/24); and *Sŏngjong sillok*, 11.9b (1471/7/29), 70.6b (1476/8/10), 75.1a (1477/1/1).
61. *Sejo sillok*, 36.11a–b (1465/6/2), 41.1a–b (1467/1/3).
62. *Sejo sillok*, 17.27a–b (1459/9/19), 30.3a (1463/1/10).
63. *Sejo sillok*, 41.1a–b (1467/1/3).
65. *Chungjong sillok* 中宗實錄, 94.15b (1540/10/21).
66. Evidently neglected sometime thereafter, the grave of Wang Sullye 王循禮 was rediscovered during road construction when the crew unearthed a Chosŏn era tombstone with his name.
Although in 1485 Sŏngjong’s court had allowed Sullye’s illegitimate son to assume the father’s position since the former had no legitimate son, by the mid-sixteenth century aristocratic notions about inheritance had come to marginalize illegitimate sons even in the absence of a legitimate son. In the following months, the court of King Chungjong (r. 1506–1544), the second son of Sŏngjong, considered various candidates, seeking a Wang of yangban status living in Seoul with many sons. Eventually eliminated from further consideration were a physician’s unmarried son, Wang Inwi (王仁偉 n.d.), who made an unverifiable claim of descent from King Ch’ungyŏl (忠烈 r. 1274–1298, 1299–1308), and others descended from illegitimate sons. In July 1541, Chungjong appointed Wang Hŭi (王希 1496–1561), reportedly a yangban with multiple sons living in Sinch’ang 新昌 in Ch’ungch’ŏng 忠清 province. Nearly five decades later, in August 1589, however, the court of King Sŏnjo 宣祖 (r. 1567–1608), a grandson of Chungjong, investigated an allegation that Hŭi was not of royal descent. Reportedly, the military examination roster recording Hŭi’s son indicated the latter’s ancestral seat (pon’gwan 本貫) as Chŏnju 仝州, whereas Hŭi’s own household register document showed his ancestral seat as Chuch’ŏn 酒泉. Concluding that the family was not of true royal Wang descent, the court stripped Hŭi’s successor’s successor, the grandson, of his position as caretaker of Sungŭijŏn. Using the earlier search criteria as well as making sure that the candidate’s advanced age did not compromise his overall mental acuity, Sŏnjo appointed Wang Hun (王勳 ca. 1520–1590). Compared to the earlier Wang Sullye line descended from King Hyŏnjong, Hun was an even more distant scion of the main line of Koryŏ royal succession. He was a descendant of another lucky survivor of the 1394–1413 persecution, Wang Mi

Interview of Wang Kyusik, August 4, 2014, Yŏnch’ŏn, South Korea. The tombstone is of eighteenth-century style. Interview of Hong Sunmin. Since no descendants of Sullye are known, private donors funded restoring the grave area. Interview of Wang Kyusik.

67. Sŏngjong sillok, 180.11a (1485/6/14).
68. Chungjong sillok, 94.15b (1540/10/21), 94.17b (1540/10/22), 95.53a–b (1541/6/21).
69. Chungjong sillok, 95.53a–b (1541/6/21).
70. Sŏnjo sillok 宣祖實錄, 23.4b–5a (1589/7/4), 23.5b (1589/7/9).
71. Sungŭijŏn t’aeng nok 崇義殿譜錄 as cited in Koryŏ Sungŭijŏn sa, 173.
72. Sungŭijŏn t’aeng nok as cited in Koryŏ Sungŭijŏn sa, 172. Centuries later in 1918, as discussed below, the comprehensive Kaesoŭg Wang genealogy would admit the Wang Hŭi 王希 line as that descended from the Duke of An’gyŏng 安慶 (n.d.), the second son of Koryŏ King Kojong 高宗 (r. 1213–1259).
73. Sŏnjo sillok, 23.4b–5a (1589/7/4), 23.5b (1589/7/9); and Koryŏ Sungŭijŏn sa, 172.
74. Sŏnjo sillok, 23.4b–5a (1589/7/4), 23.5a (1589/7/5).
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Hun (1365–n.d.), who was a descendant of the fifteenth son of Koryŏ King T’aejo, Grand Prince Hyo˘n (n.d.), and kin by blood or marriage to various scholar-officials of late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn. This time the court’s decision proved to be far more fortunate: not only would Hun’s direct descendants continue to fill the position of Sungūijŏn caretaker almost throughout the remainder of the Chosŏn period, more than ninety percent of the living Kaeso˘ng Wang in South Korea are direct descendants of Mi.

As managed by the new line of caretakers, the Sungūijŏn came to inspire the popular imagination as an edifice protected by supernatural forces. According to an early seventeenth-century account, a thief stole some sacrificial meat from the Sungūijŏn, and on the night of the same day, the ritual officiant had a dream in which three enraged kings dragged out the perpetrator and beheaded him. The next day, the officiant found and interrogated the same man, who readily confessed his crime and received an appropriate punishment. According to another story from the early seventeenth century, someone tried to steal various ritual objects from the Sungūijŏn, but before reaching the entrance he felt as if his arms and legs were bound—and the caretakers caught him. Accordingly, the local functionaries in charge of sacrificial rituals performed their duties with utmost seriousness, respect, and diligence.

We must take these accounts with a grain of salt, as the court continued to receive reports on illegal use of the land surrounding the Sungūijŏn and various Koryŏ royal tombs for private graves, cultivation, or harvesting timber. Evidently the presence of government personnel as headed by the court-appointed Sungūijŏn caretaker was inadequate, even with the Kaeso˘ng

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75. I base my post-Koryŏ Kaeso˘ng Wang genealogy on a database that I put together using the History of Koryŏ (Koryŏsa); the Chosŏn veritable records; the Origins of Descent Groups (Ssjok ṭwŏlhyu 氏族源流) compiled by Cho Chongun 趙從耘 in the mid-seventeenth century; and the 1918 edition of the comprehensive Kaeso˘ng Wang genealogy, the Kaeso˘ng Wang-ssi chokpo 開城王氏族譜 (Kaeso˘ng: Wang Chaejung, 1918), which largely reduplicates the genealogical information as provided by the first comprehensive Kaeso˘ng Wang genealogy published in 1798. The most recent edition, the four-volume Kaeso˘ng Wang-ssi sebo 開城王氏世譜 published in 1991, replaces the early Chosŏn Wang Mi 王亹 with a namesake from a century earlier—a descendant of Koryŏ Hyŏnjong 显宗—as the direct ancestor of most of the living Kaeso˘ng Wang (1.221). I would like to devote another study for discussing the chronological discrepancies of and possible motivation for the revised genealogy.


77. Hyŏnjong sillok 顯宗實錄, 6.12a (1662/10/7); Hyŏnjong kaesu sillok 顯宗改修實錄, 4.27a (1660/9/4), 4.41a–b (1660/10/7); Sukchong sillok 肅宗實錄, 12.65a (1681/12/28); and Sunjo sillok 純祖實錄, 21.6b–7a (1818/2/24), 21.7b–8a (1818/3/8).
magistrate (延師 留守) occasionally reporting local conditions to the court.\(^{78}\) By the reign of King Hyŏnjong 顯宗 (r. 1659–1674), a great-great-grandson of Sŏnjo, the court was paying more attention to the upkeep of Sungŭijŏn and Koryŏ royal tombs, and this attitude continued throughout the Chosŏn period.\(^{79}\) In practice, what was probably more effective for ensuring better maintenance is the growing population of Hun’s descendants living in Majŏn.\(^{80}\) Other than a brief crisis during 1876–1878, the descendants of Hun continued to perform the role. At that time a descendant of the aforementioned Wang Hŭi, Wang Sahŭ 王師熙 (1848–1885), got himself appointed as the caretaker before the court eventually sacked him as a false Kaesŏng Wang following vigorous protests from the descendants of Hun and a report by a secret censor (暗行御史).\(^{81}\)

The Sungŭijŏn caretaker post was hardly a central office of political power at the national level. In October 1659, King Hyŏnjong approved the proposal that a caretaker serving fifteen years or more be promoted,\(^{82}\) but over time the court downgraded the position. By the time the state completed the Amended Great Code (續大典) in 1746, only the two lowest ranked among the original four were still current, that is the lower fifth rank and lower sixth rank caretaker posts.\(^{83}\) A century later in 1865, the Great Code Reconciliation (大典會通) further reduced the number of caretakers to just one.\(^{84}\) Then in 1870, the court downgraded the only remaining position to a

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78. Sungjongwŏn ilgi 永政院日記: Kojong 高宗, reprint (Seoul: Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 1968), 3.576 (93b–94a) (1870/8/28); Hyŏnjong s̱illok, 18.43a (1670/10/23); Hyŏnjong kaesu s̱illok, 23.16b (1670/10/23); Yŏngjo s̱illok 正祖實錄, 13.38b (1727/10/21); Chŏngjo s̱illok 章祖實錄, 44.60b (1796/6/3); and Sunjo s̱illok, 21.7b–8a (1818/3/8).
79. Sungjongwŏn ilgi, 160.12a–b (1660/9/5), 172.132a–133a (1662/8/26), 409.58a (1703/11/8), 630.107a–b (1727/12/26), 1201.69b–70a (1762/5/11), 1650.59a (1789/12/10), 1889.72a–b (1805/12/10), “Wŏnmun charyo kŏmsaek,” Sŏul taeakkŏyo Kyujanggan Han’gukhak yŏngguwŏn, accessed 25 December 2014, http://kyujanggan.snu.ac.kr; Sungjoongwŏn ilgi: Kojong 3.11 (54b–55a) (1868/9/14), 14.1010 (101b) (October 25, 1902); Hyŏnjong s̱illok, 21.7b (1673/2/28); Hyŏnjong kaesu s̱illok, 26.51b (1673/2/28); Sukchong s̱illok, 4.50b (1675/10/2); Yŏngjo s̱illok, 13.38b (1727/10/21); and Sunjo s̱illok, 21.6b–7a (1818/2/24), 21.7b–8a (1818/3/8).
80. Descended from one of the sons of Wang Hun 王勳, the Kaesŏng Wang in Majŏn currently constitute about twenty households. In the early twentieth century the locale had as many as one hundred Wang households. Interview of Wang Kyusik; and interview of Wang Yo’ngnok.
82. Hyŏnjong s̱illok, 1.42b (1659/9/10); and Hyŏnjong kaesu s̱illok, 1.57b (1659/9/10).
83. Taejŏn hoet’ong 大典會通, reprint (Seoul: Pogyŏng munhwasa, 1985), 1.42a.
84. Taejŏn hoet’ong, 1.38b.
junior ninth rank civil post of tomb guardian (ch’ambong 參奉).  

Regardless, the nature of the caretaker post as that held by state-approved heirs of the Koryŏ dynasty continued to occasionally attract competing Wangs, as discussed above. Thus in 1878 when the court fixed the tenure to sixty months, the likely intention was to ensure that the post did not pass from one short-term holder to another in a society valuing state-sanctioned status trappings such as examination degrees, court ranks, and offices. What follows is a consideration of the links among the state, birth, and status vis-à-vis the Kaesŏng Wang.

Standing in Chosŏn Politics and Society

While an increasingly small number of Seoul yangban families dominated court politics, the aristocracy as a whole remained defined by birth, and both phenomena affected the Kaesŏng Wang. Although not known for any descent line wielding political power at the highest level for generations, the revived Kaesŏng Wang as a descent group maintained a degree of representation in officialdom. Also, by the mid-Chosŏn period the Wangs established themselves as local yangban lineages in various parts of Korea. All the same, the Kaesŏng Wang as a descent group was no different from most of the others in that it comprised members of all shades of status.

To begin, the overall examination successes of the Kaesŏng Wang were not impressive but certainly not insignificant. Their success was especially limited in the munkwa 文科 examination, which was the most prestigious competition and critically important for a yangban aspiring to attain the highest, most politically meaningful civil offices, and also in the licentiate (sama 司馬, saengwŏn-chinsa 生員進仕) examinations for admission into the State Confucian Academy (Sŏnggyun’gwan 成均館), the participant pool of which significantly overlapped with that of the munkwa examination. The Wangs fared better in the mukwa 武科 examination, the candidate base of which became more socially diverse in late Chosŏn. Among descent groups of population size between 10,000 and 19,999 as of 2000 in South Korea, such as the Kaesŏng Wang, the Hamjong Ŭ咸從魚 (13,321) were the most successful vis-à-vis the munkwa competition in the Chosŏn period. Whereas the less populous Hamjong Ŭ produced twenty-four munkwa passers in the Chosŏn period, only nine Kaesŏng Wang were

85. Sŏngjŏngwo’n ilgi: Kojong, 3.576 (93b–94a) (1870.8.28); and Koryŏ Sungūijo’n sa, 173.
86. Sŏngjŏngwo’n ilgi: Kojong, 6.375 (119a–b) (1878.6.22).
successful (population 19,808 as of 2000 in South Korea). The Ōs also produced sixteen mukwa, one technical (chapkwa 雜科), and fifty-eight licentiate examination graduates, whereas the Wangs put forth twenty-one mukwa, one technical, and twenty-seven licentiate examination passers.

Neither descent group had a specialist chungin line; each produced a lone technical examination passer, who was a mid-Chosŏn figure and did not give rise to the kind of specialist chungin line that would constitute a distinct status category in late Chosŏn.

The above observations reflect significant differences in the pattern of presence in central officialdom. Almost all of Hamjong Ō examination passers resided in the so-called “yangban crescent” comprising Seoul and Kyŏnggi province as well as the northern Ch’ungch’ŏng, western Kangwŏn 江原, and southeastern Hwanghae 黃海 regions. In fact, most of the late Chosŏn Hamjong Ō hailed from a yangban lineage of the Patriarch (Noron 老論) faction. Not only did the Ōs achieve high-level civil offices such as Second State Councilor (Chwa ūijo˘ng 左議政), Sixth State Councilor (Chwa ch’amch’an 左參贊), and Minister of Taxation (Hojo p’ansŏ 戶曹判書), a daughter married King Kyŏngjong 景宗 (r. 1720–1724). Compared to the Ōs, the presence of the Kaesŏng Wang in officialdom was modest, mirroring their more limited mukwa examination success. The most important offices achieved by the Wangs include the Third Minister of War (Pyŏngjo ch’amûi 兵曹參議), the First Counselor (Pu chehak 副提學) of the Office of Special Counselors (Hongmun’gwan 弘文館), and the Third Inspector (Changnyŏng 掌令) of the Office of the Inspector-General. From the seventeenth century onward, kings occasionally commanded that the descendants of the Koryŏ dynasty be appointed to offices as well as reconfirming their exemption from military conscription. Since this was true for most yangban lineages anyway in late Chosŏn, we can surmise that the royal commands were mere gestures of special grace toward the Wangs rather than

87. On the number of Chosŏn munkwa 文科, technical (chapkwa 雜科), and licentiate (sama 司馬, saengwo˘n-chinsa 生員進士) examination passers by surname and ancestral seat, this study cites data from Han’gukhak chungang yo˘n’guwo˘n, Han’guk yo˘ktae inmul chonghap cho˘ngbo sisut’em, http://people.aks.ac.kr/index.aks, accessed 3 January 2015.

88. Mukwa 武科 examination data derive from my database of 35,053 degree holders, accounting for about a fifth of all Chosŏn mukwa examination graduates.


90. Hyŏnjong sillok, 3.29b (1660.9.4); Yongio sillok, 13.38b–39a (1727.10.21); Chŏngjo sillok, 35.46a (1792.8.21), 44.60b (1796.6.3); and Sunjo sillok, 21.6b–7a (1818.2.24).
an indication of their unusually disadvantaged position in society.

As is true with *yangban* as a whole, by late Chosŏn the Kaesŏng Wang residing outside Seoul had to be content with their inherited status, at best that of local elite. By the eighteenth century, most provincial *yangban* were not earning an examination degree, a court rank, or an office. An exceptional case, the northwestern regional elite enjoyed impressive success with both *munkwa* and licentiate examinations, as they were members of an educated sub-*yangban* social force—such as the specialist *chungin* of Seoul—on the rise but unable to win meaningful representation in the power structure. In fact, by the end of the eighteenth century, only about a dozen Seoul-based *yangban* lineages, predominantly members of the Patriarch faction, were monopolizing the most important civil offices in central officialdom. What follows is a survey of four Kaesŏng Wang lineages that maintained local elite standing in Chosŏn society.

Among them, the lineage based in Kwach’ŏn 果川 neighboring southern Seoul was the flagship Kaesŏng Wang descent line in terms of political prominence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Descended from the aforementioned survivor Mi’s great-grandson, Classics Licentiate (*Saengwo˘n* 生員) Wang Chong˘ui 王宗義 (n.d.), the Kwach’ŏn lineage produced three *munkwa* examination graduates, at least three *mukwa* examination passers, and five licentiates. Their most prominent member, Wang Hūigŏl 王希傑 (1505–1553), was not only the first among the Kaesŏng Wang to pass the Chosŏn *munkwa* examination, but as a scholar famed for his prose and calligraphy he also rose all the way to a prestigious senior third rank civil office, the First Counselor of the Office of Special Counselors. Nonetheless, the lineage’s political fortune faded in a generation or two as the descendants moved to locales farther away from Seoul. In late Chosŏn society, a *yangban* family’s relocation from Seoul typically led to detachment not just from central officialdom but also from examination success, and the Kaesŏng Wang lineage of Kwach’ŏn evidently was no exception. What also seems to have worked

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93. Han’guk yo˘ksa yo˘n’guhoe 19 segi chŏngch’isa yŏn’guban, Chosŏn chŏngch’isa (1800–1863) (Seoul: Ch’ŏngnyŏnsa, 1990), 1.165.

94. Unless noted otherwise, all biographical information presented in this study comes from Han’gukhak chungang yo˘n’guwo˘n, Han’guk yo˘ktae inmul chonghap chŏngbo sisŭ’em, http://people.aks.ac.kr/index.aks, accessed 3 January 2015.
against them is a demographic crisis. Far too many lineage members had trouble continuing their lines to the extent where the increasingly common elite practice of adoption was unable to keep up with a large number of males dying without heir. In the seventeenth century, the lineage survived the population bottleneck and its population began increasing steadily, but the damage presumably was irreparable.\(^9^5\)

In the mid-Chosŏn period, the Kaesŏng Wang residing in Kaesŏng replaced their Kwach’ŏn kinsmen as the descent group’s standard bearer vis-à-vis national politics. Descended from Wang Chang 王燁 (n.d.), a senior third rank official of the Royal Stable Administration (Saboksi 司倉寺) and a second cousin of the father of Wang Chonggū, the progenitor of the Kwach’ŏn lineage, the Wangs of Kaesŏng produced some mukwa examination passers and minor officeholders in the early and mid-Chosŏn periods. In late Chosŏn, the Kaesŏng lineage not only enjoyed greater success in licentiate examinations and careers in central officialdom but also saw five of its members passing the munkwa examination. The first among the five munkwa examination graduates, Wang Chŏngyang 王庭楊 (1824–1894), somehow won the attention of King Kojong 高宗 (r. 1864–1907). Denoting him a descendant of the “vanquished state” (sŭngguk 勝國), the monarch observed that Chŏngyang harbored lofty ideas. Even though Chŏngyang had just earned his degree, Kojong appointed him as the Third Minister of War.\(^9^6\) I have yet to examine any source that can shed much light on the economic foundation of the family’s examination successes in the nineteenth century, although it is well known that the city of Kaesŏng occupied a prominent place in the increasingly commercialized economy of late Chosŏn. Perhaps the lineage was able to convert accumulated economic capital, if any, to cultural capital, ultimately the munkwa examination success. Possibly reflecting the status anxiety of a relative social newcomer, eight-generation candidate genealogies (p’alsebo 八世譜) of nineteenth-century munkwa and mukwa examination passers consistently—and wrongly—record the Kaesŏng lineage members as direct descendants of the aforementioned Wang Hūgŏl, probably the most prominent Kaesŏng Wang post-Koryŏ even though they were actually descended from Hūgŏl’s fourth cousin.\(^9^7\)

In contrast to their kinsmen of Kaesŏng and Kwach’ŏn, the Kaesŏng Wang of Kurye 求禮 in Chŏlla 全羅 region constituted a classic local yangban lineage.

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96. Sŏngjŏngwŏn ilgi: Kojong, 2.440 (66b) (1867/1/14).
97. For example, see “Munbo” 文譜 (Changsŏgak K2-1744 manuscript at the Academy of Korean Studies [Han’gukhak chungang yŏn’guwŏn], dated between 1891 and 1910), 3.73a.
Other than a few early to mid-Chosŏn licentiates, mukwa examination graduates, and minor officeholders, the Wangs of Kurye were detached from officialdom.\footnote{Kim Únyŏng, “Chosŏn hugi Kurye Kaesŏng Wang-ssi ka ŭi ko munsŏ kömt’o: Kurye Kaesŏng Wang-ssi ka ŭi sŏngjang kwa hyŏnjo hyŏnyang hwaltong ŭil chungsim ŭro,” Ko munsŏ yŏng gu 31 (August 2007), 172.} As is typical of local aristocrats in Chosŏn Korea, the Kaesŏng Wang lineage of Kurye invested much effort in demonstrating descent from illustrious forebears. The investment yielded dividends in 1804 when the lineage secured the court’s formal recognition of its mid-Chosŏn members as “righteous army” (ũibyŏng 義兵) leaders fighting against the Japanese during the Sino-Japanese-Korean War of 1592–1598. Coupled with publishing literati anthologies of celebrated ancestors, the court’s recognition helped the Kurye lineage solidify and reaffirm its standing as a local elite family, as reflected in the local yangban register which records ten lineage members. The local yangban status was not just about honors or birth: the lineage also owned much land and a large number of slaves.\footnote{Ibid., 169–184.}

Unlike the local elite Kaesŏng Wang lineages examined above, the Majŏn lineage was unique in that for generations it bore the state-sanctioned responsibility of performing veneration rituals in honor of the Koryŏ dynasty. The Wangs coveted the Sungŭijŏn caretaker position, and increasingly in the late nineteenth century a member other than the previous caretaker’s son assumed the post; except for the aforementioned Sahŭi, though, all were direct descendants of Hun.\footnote{Koryŏ Sungŭijŏn sa, 173–174.} Compared to the Kurye lineage, the Kaesŏng Wang of Majŏn enjoyed even less presence in central officialdom—producing some relatively minor officeholders but no examination graduates. The Majŏn lineage nonetheless enjoyed local elite status, as the Sungŭijŏn caretaker commanded respect. Even during the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), the locals reportedly addressed him as “mister tomb guardian” (ch’am-bong nari 參奉 나리). Also, many Wangs at the time not only had servants (hain 下人), the newly wed brides from the local Hong 洪 lineage, with whom the Wangs intermarried for generations, generally brought personal servants (momchong 몸종) with them.\footnote{Interview of Wang Yöngnok.}

In contrast to the Kaesŏng Wang of elite social standing, other Wangs were social newcomers increasingly making problematic genealogical claims. To begin, even the purported genealogical connection between the aforementioned Wang Mi, from whom more than ninety percent of the living Kaesŏng Wang claim descent, and King T’aeso of Koryŏ is not without problems. Not only
does the 1377 licentiate examination roster recording his brother leave out the ancestral seat information, (1) the *Origins of Descent Groups* (*Ssijok wollyu* 氏族源流), a highly reliable mid-seventeenth-century genealogy which correctly records most *yangban* families of the time as descendants of local functionaries, and (2) the oldest extant Kaesŏng Wang genealogy, the 1798 edition, do not fully agree on the number of generations—and the names of individuals of those generations—from the two brothers to T’aedo’s son. 102 Nonetheless, in 1589, King Sŏnjo and his officials searching for a new line of ritual heirs evidently found no problem with the notion that Hun, through Mi, was a descendant of T’aedo’s fifteenth son, Grand Prince Hyoŏn, while regarding other Wangs’ claims of royal descent unreliable or baseless, as discussed above. Perhaps the court had enough genealogical information on at least certain descent lines, especially that of Mi. In fact, as reproduced in the 1798 Kaesŏng Wang genealogy and subsequent editions, the genealogical information on Mi and other Wangs as provided by the *Record of Koryŏ Royal Origin* (*Koryŏ sŏnwŏllok*), likely compiled in early Chosŏn, appears reliable. 103

Other Wangs made farfetched genealogical claims. Two of the unsuccessful candidates mentioned during the court’s search for a new heir in November 1540 were the aforementioned Wang Inwi, a son of a physician, who claimed to be a thirteenth-generation descendant of King Ch’ungyŏl, and Wang Sunson 王順孫 (n.d.), a Seoul-resident Confucian scholar (*yusa* 儒士) who also claimed descent from the same monarch but without knowing the number of intervening generations. 104 Various Wang families continued to make problematic claims during the remainder of the Chosŏn period, and since 1881 the comprehensive genealogy (*taedongbo*) of the Kaesŏng Wang has added four descent lines claiming descent from, respectively, (1) King Ch’ungjŏng 忠定 (r. 1348–1352) (1881); (2) Duke of Yangyang 襄陽 (n.d.), the second son of King Sinjong 神宗 (r. 1197–1204) (1881); (3) Duke of An’gyŏng 安慶, the second son of Kojong 高宗 (r. 1213–1259) (1918); and (4) Duke of P’yŏngyang 平壤 (1021–1069), the fourth son of King Hyŏnjong (1974). 105 Among the four descent lines, the Wangs claiming descent from the Duke of An’gyŏng made up a


104. *Chungjong sillos*, 94.15b (1540.10.21), 95.53a (1541.6.21).

lineage that produced none other than the controversial aforementioned Wang Hūi. In all four cases, the claim is through a son unrecorded in the royal kinsmen section of the History of Koryŏ, and the alleged son of King Ch’ungjong, a minor, is especially problematic. Not only did the court of Koryŏ Korea’s overlords, the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), depose the child-king when he was just fourteen se 岁 old and banish him to Kanghwa, less than three months later the court of the succeeding, Yuan-sanctioned King Kongmin 恭愍 (r. 1352–1374) put him to death. Also, the alleged son of Ch’ungjong supposedly attained the post of supreme chancellor (Munha Sijung 門下侍中), but he does not appear in the History of Koryŏ. It is inconceivable that a high-level official such as a supreme chancellor could have escaped mention in this source. All these cases of Wangs of obscure backgrounds claiming descent from the Koryŏ dynasty suggest that by the mid-Chosŏn period it was safe to be a Wang of royal descent, real or not. In fact, an emerging discourse outright sympathized with the Wangs as victims, as discussed below.

Subversive Narratives

Early modern Korea increasingly tolerated pluralism vis-à-vis understandings of its past, and the history of memories about the post-Koryŏ Kaesŏng Wang is complex. In public sources such as court histories and town gazetteers, the Wangs appear no differently from others prescribing Confucian cardinal virtues, especially loyalty to the ruler and thus the Chosŏn dynasty. All the same, a wide range of unofficial accounts, including private writings from the early seventeenth century on as well as oral histories, suggests a widespread, keen awareness of the early Chosŏn state’s systematic effort toward exterminating the Kaesŏng Wang and subsequent resentment among the victims and their sympathizers.

The Kaesŏng Wang who achieved prominence manifested commitment to the cardinal Confucian virtue of loyalty to the ruler, and the aforementioned Wang Hūgŏl is an exemplary case. Not only was he close to the neo-Confucian scholars of fame at the time such as Yi Hwang 李滉 (pen name T’oegye 退溪, 1502–1571), during the 1545 Literati Purge, as a secret censor he was bold enough to report to the throne that the king’s half-brother implicated in an allegedly treasonous plot was hiding out under the protection of Monk Pou 普雨 (1515–1565). At the time, the cleric was enjoying the patronage of powerful Queen Dowager Munjŏng 文定 (1501–1565) and her brother, Yun Wŏnhyang 尹元衡 (1509–1565). Initially unable to act, after her death the court banished Pou, and Hūgŏl’s report served as critical evidence in the case against Pou. The
local elite Kaesŏng Wang, too, produced those honored for loyalty to the throne, as exemplified by the aforementioned members of Kurye lineage who lost their lives fighting against the Japanese in 1597.

Almost at the same time, however, privately compiled historical works began challenging the orthodox historiography’s condemnation of the royal Wangs. With the discovery of a literary anthology, *Un’gok’s Verse History (Un’gok sisa 耘谷詩史)* by Wŏn Ch’ŏnsŏk 元天錫 (pen name Un’gok 耘谷, 1330–n.d.), historians began questioning the official position that Koryŏ kings U 福 (r. 1374–1388) and Ch’ang 昌 (r. 1388–1389) were false Wangs justly deposed and executed for their crimes by the founders of Chosŏn—as maintained by the court-commissioned *History of Koryŏ* completed in 1452. Criticizing this depiction as unfounded, in the early seventeenth century *Un’gok’s Verse History* began influencing privately authored historical works. Then in the eighteenth century, the *Annotated Account of Korean History (Tong sa kangmok 東史綱目)* by An Chŏngbok 安鼎福 (pen name Sunam 順庵, 1712–1791) and a number of other histories treated kings U and Ch’ang as true Wangs and legitimate Koryŏ rulers. Nonetheless, it was not until the early twentieth century when this revisionism supplanted the orthodoxy of the *History of Koryŏ*. Until then, the Kaesŏng Wang genealogy did not dare to even record kings U and Ch’ang as their members. Post-Chosŏn, the 1918 edition, however, shows U as the son of King Kongmin and Ch’ang as U’s son.

Among the subversive Chosŏn narratives sympathetic toward the Kaesŏng Wang, at least three types have survived. Critiqued below, they are (1) tales of purported survivors of early Chosŏn persecution; (2) alleged accounts of victims; and (3) outright expressions of anti-Chosŏn sentiment. None justifies the overthrow of the Koryŏ dynasty.

According to various stories of Wangs who survived the early Chosŏn persecution, they changed their surnames to Ok (“jade”), Kŭm (“lute”), Ma (“horse”), Chŏn (“all”), Chŏn (“field”), or Kim (“metal”) as mentioned above. Other than an Ok lineage reportedly reclaiming the surname Wang in 1918 and a claim by some Namyang Chŏn 南陽田 that they were descendants of a Wang who had been banished to Kongju, I have yet to come across any

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verifiable case of a Wang assuming a different surname during the early Chosŏn persecution. Whereas I still need to investigate the circumstances in which an Ok lineage allegedly reclaimed the surname Wang, the Namyang Chŏn claim shows irreconcilable chronological discrepancies.110

Some accounts express outright sympathy toward such Wangs as King U, whom rumors circulating among the common people by the sixteenth century regarded as a true Wang and thus a rightful king.111 A story purporting to describe U’s final moments related that when Ch’a Sik 車軾 (1517–1575) became the magistrate of Kosŏng in Kangwŏn province, Yi Sich’un 李時春 (n.d.), who was the father-in-law of the civil official and famous calligrapher Yang Saŏn 楊士彦 (pen name Pongnae 蓬萊, 1517–1584), was seventy se in age. Yi often mentioned a story he heard from his great-grandmother who was more than ninety se old and once lived in Kangnŭng 江陵. When twelve se old, she went over to the place where the former king was to be executed. According to her, U declared: “We Wangs are descendants of dragons. Every Wang has three scales under the left armpit, and this has served as our mark for generations.” Afterward, when he removed his upper garment, scales each of coin size and shining gold were visible. All those present were awed and saddened.112

Other legends question the legitimacy of the founder of the Chosŏn dynasty outright. For example, by the eighteenth century various versions of the story of the literati of Tumun-dong 杜門洞 in Kaesoŏng were claiming that seventy-two pro-Koryŏ scholars refused to serve in the new Chosŏn government, instead choosing seclusion in Tumun-dong and ultimately dying when the court set the neighborhood ablaze. Other place names such as Pujohyon 不朝嶽 (“Hill of those not serving”) and Kwaegwanhyŏn 掛冠嶽 (alternatively Katkŏrjae, “Hill of hung hats”) had come to honor some fifty scholars who shunned public life by removing their hats or hiding beyond a hill that travelers from Seoul must pass before entering Kaesoŏng.113

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112. Han’goltong 閒骨董, as cited in Yi Kŭngik 李肯翊, Yŏllyŏsil kisul 次流邑記述, in Kugyŏk Yŏllyŏsil kisul (Seoul: Minjok munhwa ch’ujinhoe, 1966), 1.591.

In another legend that is openly critical of Yi Sŏnggye, that is King T’aejo, the Koryŏ loyalists confront the usurper in a dramatic fashion. On the sixteenth day of the seventh lunar month of 1392 (August 4, 1392), when he led a coup and proclaimed himself king, Yi summoned the Koryŏ royalties and officials. Declaring that Heaven raised him to the throne as the fortunes of Koryŏ had waned, he commanded them to become his subjects. When the Koryŏ loyalists loudly responded in unison, asking how they could bend themselves low to become subjects of Koryŏ’s enemy with whom they could not together bear Heaven above, the enraged Yi banished all Wangs and pro-Koryŏ officials to Kanghwa, Samch’ŏk, and Koje, later killing them.\footnote{Tonghak chi 東鶴誌, as cited in Kaeso ounge Wang-ssi taedongbo, 2. purok. 56.}

In various legends, King T’aejo of Koryŏ strikes back. In one story, he appears in the dream of Chosŏn King T’aejo after the 1394 massacre and declares: “Even though I benefitted our people by uniting Korea (Samhan 三韓), you have exterminated my descendants. Before long I will unleash my revenge. I command you to be aware.” T’aejo woke up shaken, and shortly thereafter he pardoned the Wangs appearing on one page of their genealogy.\footnote{Ch’uksup’yon 逐睡篇, as cited in Yi Kŭngik, Yŏllyo surname kisul, 1. 611.} In another story, King T’aejo of Koryŏ, with a blazing gaze, appears in a dream of King T’aejong, and the latter prostrated himself, begging for his life. Shooting forth fire from his eyes, T’aejo commanded: “If it were your father Yi Sŏnggye, I would have decapitated him in a stroke. It took me thirty years to visit the Jade Emperor, and in the meantime your father turned treasonous, vanquished Koryŏ, and as if that is not enough, butchered my descendants. I am on my way back after casting the demon-like spirit of your father into hell fire. If you do not stop murdering the Wangs, then I shall strike you with even greater calamity.” After waking, T’aejong took no action, and about a month later hundreds of army horses on Cheju island died from an unknown disease. Before long the plague spread to the Chŏlla region, killing livestock en masse.\footnote{Chŏn Sun’gu, “Kaesŏng Wang-ssi 500 nyŏn wanggŏp i munŏ chigo myŏlmun ŭi sunan,” http://www.hcmunhwa.or.kr/bbs/board.php?bo_table=sub9_1&wr_id=358, accessed 30 December 2014.}

Besides accounts portraying Yi Sŏnggye in a bad light, various customs of Kaesŏng and its vicinity reflect anti-Yi Sŏnggye sentiments. When preparing chorang ttŏkkuk 조랑 떡국, a soup of sticky rice cake indigenous to Kaesŏng, the women squeezed or cut a lump pretending that it was Yi’s neck. For veneration
rituals in honor of Ch’oe Yong 崔瑩 (1316–1388), a famed military commander who resisted Yi’s coup against King U and paid the price with his life, the residents of Kaesŏng and P’yŏngan 平安 region boiled a whole pig or wild boar as a sacrificial food. Noting that Ch’oe Yong’s nemesis was born in the year of the boar, the locals referred to it as “sŏnggye meat” (sŏnggye yuk 成桂肉) and pork soup as “sŏnggye soup” (sŏnggye t’ang 成桂湯).117

Final Thoughts

Overall, the post-Koryŏ plight of the Kaesŏng Wang in the Chosŏn period reveals elements of continuity and change between the medieval and early modern eras of Korean history. For sure, the Koryŏ-Chosŏn dynastic change was a regime change, and initially the Chosŏn state used all means to exterminate those posing a threat, both potential and real—including the members of Koryŏ royal house and its loyalists. Once the dust settled, addressing Buddho-shamanistic concern for the wrath of the spirits of victims and the Confucian notion of the mandate of heaven transferred from Koryŏ to Chosŏn demanded securing a true Wang line of ritual heirs to the vanquished dynasty. Reflecting the Koryŏ origins of the Chosŏn aristocracy comprising descent groups that had been producing central officeholders and scholars for generations if not centuries, the surviving Wangs too retained their yangban status. As long as they subscribed to Confucian moral norms, especially the cardinal virtue of loyalty to the ruler and by extension the reigning dynasty, the Wangs earned examination degrees, court ranks, and offices, though this is not to say that the descent group’s membership was homogenous in social status. Unlike other yangban, however, the Wangs wisely refrained from questioning or challenging the official explanation of the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty. Increasing pluralism of early modern Korea certainly had its limits.

Unanswered questions remain. First, we may have the big picture vis-à-vis Kaesŏng Wang local elite lineages in central and southern Korea but the sizable population of Wangs in the north requires a closer look. Second, how the Kaesŏng Wang residing in Kaesŏng fared financially in the increasingly commercialized economy of early modern Korea deserves an investigation. If they accumulated wealth, then perhaps it aided their impressive success in the

munkwa examination during the final decades of the Chosŏn period. Third, the subversive narratives raise a range of questions. For instance, does each contain a kernel of truth? Regardless, can we estimate the time when each began circulating? Are some post-Chosŏn constructs? 118

Perhaps a broader consideration of regime change and the fate of the descendants of vanquished dynasties elsewhere in early modern Eurasia can shed more light on these and other related issues. Besides China’s Yuan-Ming dynastic transition discussed above, the Byzantine-Ottoman case shows an interesting parallel. Tired of living in the papacy’s custody since the end of the Byzantine empire, in either 1476 or 1477 Manuel Palaiologos (1455–1512), a nephew of the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI (r. 1449–1453), returned to Constantinople and threw himself on the mercy of the conqueror, Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444–1446, 1451–1481). In exchange for his rights to the Byzantine throne, Mehmed granted Manuel an estate and a comfortable pension. Moreover, Thomas’s only son to survive to adulthood converted to Islam, thus joining the Ottoman elite’s mainstream. 119 A closer examination at the Byzantine-Ottoman and the Yuan-Ming transitions, as well as other analogous cases to be considered in my future, book-length version of this study, may reveal that the early modern aristocracy of Eurasia as a whole comprised families that had deep roots in the medieval period. Its systematic massacre of the Kaesŏng Wang was not so much about the Chosŏn dynasty’s clean break from Koryŏ as a strategic, expedient measure to position itself as the sole, legitimate successor.

118. I would like to thank Boudewijn Walraven for raising this question. Conversation on August 6, 2014, Seoul, South Korea.