Chŏngjo wa Chosŏn sidae (King Chŏngjo and the Chosŏn period) by Kim In'gol et al. Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2011. 248pp.
(Sŏul taehakkyo Kyujanggak Han'gukhak yŏn'guwŏn Han'gukhak yŏn'gu ch'ongsŏ 38)

A man of wisdom, a sovereign of reform, a king of culture, an impartial monarch, a man of misfortune. These are just some of the epithets used to characterize the last king of the 18th century and 22nd king of the Chosŏn Dynasty, King Chŏngjo. Along with the dramatic events that filled his life, King Chŏngjo has so far been an object of fascination among both scholars of Korean history and the general public because of the changes his rule brought to Chosŏn society and the possibility that he might have transformed the eventual fate of Chosŏn. The epithets listed above can be considered the outcome of the interest and research dedicated to King Chŏngjo so far. However, if one were to ponder on whether these descriptions have indeed led to a firm and common ground for understanding King Chŏngjo and his era, a number of contradictions emerge. For instance, should King Chŏngjo be viewed as the last king to have maintained tradition? Or should he rather be considered as a sovereign of reform, who led the way towards modernity? We should also ask ourselves whether or not these are the right kinds of questions to ask. The debates are still ongoing. The interpretations and evaluations on King Chŏngjo and his rule still range from one spectrum to another, and very different historical perspectives emanate from each distinct interpretation. This book seeks to overcome these contradictions.

How can one evaluate King Chŏngjo’s real contribution to history? What kind of society did he pursue? What is the meaning of Chŏngjo’s reign for the history of Chosŏn, and by extension, for the general history of Korea? This book raises such fundamental questions about King Chŏngjo and his reign to generate new perspectives. By taking a long-term perspective, it sheds new light upon several historical trends bisecting the Chŏngjo era. The book in question is the outcome of a joint research seminar revolving around the era of King Chŏngjo, and the common framework the writers selected for this research is based on the “self-perception” of his period. By clearly explaining, in the context of the era in question, how King Chŏngjo and the intellectuals of his generation perceived their time and country, the contributors to this research propose a new framework for the historical issues surrounding the Chŏngjo era.

The book is composed of six chapters written by six researchers. It is divided in two main parts; the first part discusses the perception of time and space, while the second looks into the perception of Chosŏn and the issue of governance. The first article, written by Mun Chungyang and titled “A History Lesson on the
Development of Science in Late 18th Century Chosŏn” explores the place of Chŏngjo’s era in the history of science of the Chosŏn period, and the direction it developed in. The author especially emphasizes Chŏngjo’s personal commitment as a crucial element in the development of science during this period. He points out that the main force behind the establishment of the ponkungnyŏk 本國曆 as an independent calendar was King Chŏngjo’s firm intention of leading the country out of its state of subordination to the Qing Dynasty and to see it rise as a cultural country based on equal relations. He also argues that whether or not the ponkungnyŏk was based on the new Western rules or the traditional rules was not a significant issue for the king.

The second chapter, “Knowledge on Space and the Chŏngjo Era,” written by Pae Usŏng, examines how the issue of self-perception during this era was articulated in terms of space. The author emphasizes that Chŏngjo’s perception of space and his policies were based on a clear and sufficient awareness of the government, learning, and culture of the Qing Dynasty. He further explains that the Chosŏn “self” was re-discovered and re-defined in the light of the Qing “other.”

The third chapter, “Chŏngjo’s Awareness of ‘the National Political System’ (kukch’e)” by Kim In’gŏl draws attention to the limitations of dealing with the issue of Chosŏn’s self-perception only by contrasting it with the outside. He emphasizes that outside influences should always be considered together with internal aspects when examining the state system and the principles of government. According to the author, Chŏngjo’s view of the national system was based on a realistic perception of its conditions: thus, externally he firmly regarded Qing as a real entity to be acknowledged, while internally he considered the political system in terms of the management of the political institution and the direction it should pursue. While maintaining the pre-existing loyalty to the Ming Dynasty, Chŏngjo also wished to continue a realistic tributary system with the Qing Dynasty. The author also points out that the sovereign aimed for more freedom than the existing Sino-centric order provided, and prioritized the welfare of the general population when it came to the internal management of the country, emphasizing that it was the crucial philosophy for preserving the political system.

The fourth chapter, by Han Sangkwŏn, is entitled “Chŏngjo’s theory of monarchy and royal government,” and discusses how Chŏngjo overcame the existing system based on the power of ministers and sarim and attempted to put the monarch at the center. Chŏngjo anointed himself as “monarch-teacher” (kunsajŏn 師君) to his people, taking the lead in both politics and learning, and was thus actively pursuing the realization of the political ideals of Confucianism.
author also argues that Chōngjo aimed to establish an equal society by reducing the conflicts between regions and classes, and concludes that during his reign the public spirit of the state was comparatively high.

The fifth chapter is written by Pak Hyōnsun and is entitled “The Division between Seoul and the Provinces during the Chōngjo Era and the Deployment of the Elites (sajok) in the Countryside.” This chapter explains the historical significance of Chōngjo’s policy in appointing officials commensurate with the issues confronting Chosŏn society in the 18th century. The author views this period as a time of inflexibility and changes, and argues that the most pressing tasks were making society more flexible and reaching out to those who had been alienated so as to achieve more unity and integration. However, as the division between Seoul and the rest of the country accelerated, wealth and power converged in Seoul and people from the provinces were left out. This development was a noticeable sign and proof of how inflexible society was. The author explains that Chōngjo’s deployment and cultivation of elites in the countryside was part of his effort to enhance social stability and unity.

The final chapter, written by Chong Chaehun, is entitled “The Reorganization of the Government System in the 18th Century.” It analyzes the structure and principles of the government systems developed by the so-called “impartial” monarchs, Yongjo and Chōngjo. According to the author, the reforms can be summarized as follows: the bureaucracy was strengthened by reorganizing it unilaterally around the monarch; the power of the ministers and high officials was realigned on the basis of the policy of impartiality (t'angp'yŏngch'ae); the reach of the state’s authority was extended and strengthened through legal and structural adjustments. The model on which the “impartial” monarchs based themselves to accomplish this process was the early Chosŏn monarch-centered political system.

Despite the countless studies and books that have been devoted to the Chōngjo era so far, their inability to agree on any objective indicators of the society of his time has impeded a clearer and more accurate understanding of the period. To remedy this, the joint research that constitutes this book primarily aims to offer new and diverse indicators that allow us to understand the society and history of the Chōngjo era. The authors’ focus is nevertheless not limited to Chōngjo and his era. Throughout the book, one can perceive the authors’ effort to find clues that would lead to a better understanding of the 19th century, a period that remains a conundrum in the study of the Chosŏn era. Their common desire to eventually find and suggest new directions and methods for the study of late Chosŏn history, which is currently based on the “theory of indigenous development,” suffuses this work, and hopefully will bear fruit in future
research.

Young-in Kim
Lecturer, Department of Korean History
Seoul National University


“Why do North-South Korean relations remain in a perpetual state of stagnation and why can’t the Korean peninsula evade this state of armistice?” Any self-respecting Korean must have asked herself this question at least once in her lifetime. *Division Hysteria* by Hong Sŏngnyul [Hong Seuk-ryule] starts off with this sentence and progresses at a pace that makes it almost impossible to lay the book down for even a short moment.

The reconstruction and new facts it offers on contemporary Korean history are based on a detailed inquiry on diverse documents, including the latest ones made public by the government. Moreover, the author’s creative insight and his logical analysis make this book even more valuable. These elements allow for a fascinating and well-balanced depiction of the big picture related to the progress of relations between North and South Korea.

This book analyzes the internal political fluctuations within North and South Korea revolving around the movements for the improvement of US-China and North-South Korean relations in the early 1970s. The period under the microscope of direct analysis by the author ranges from the 1.21 event in 1968 to the axe murder incident at P’anmunjŏm in 1976. As the author writes, we witness the evolution of an analysis of “the first cycle in North-South Korean relations, a perpetual repetition of moving forward and coming to a stop.”

The elements of the international political background analyzed in this book include the rise in tension during the Vietnam War and its end, the improvement in US-China relations leading to a worldwide detente, and the increasing distance and competition the Soviet Union displayed towards China. By explaining how this international political scene interlinked with the special situation of North and South Korea, the author draws a clear yet multidimensional picture of how such background can explain this lack of certainty, foreclosing any short-term or