

CHOI BYONGHYON (ed. and trans.):

The Annals of King T'aejo: Founder of Korea's Chosŏn Dynasty.

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The *Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok*) that contain the records of the first twenty-five kings of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) from 1392 to 1863 (the year when the direct royal line ended) are a rare historiographical monument (National Treasure no. 151) of which the Koreans are justly proud. Because of their great significance for Korea's national history, they have been translated in recent decades from their Chinese original into modern Korean in both North and South Korea.

The *Annals of King T'aejo* cover the seven-year reign of the dynasty's first king, Yi Sŏng-gye (1335–1408), posthumously known by his temple name T'aejo, from his ascension to the throne in 1392 to his abdication in 1398. Choi Byonghyon's translation is the first in English. Choi explains his decision to start such an arduous undertaking by his "desire to make this vital source of pre-modern Korean history accessible to general readers throughout the world" (p. ix). The critical question of who these general readers will be diminishes in no way Professor Choi's heroic effort, but the annals were never intended to be read as a "history book". They are a collection of royal edicts and instructions, memorials of individual officials or governmental departments to the throne, reports on events in the provinces and religious affairs, and biographical data, among many other topics. This is certainly not a text for the uninitiated student, and even the more advanced reader versed in Korean history will have some difficulties digesting the chronologically arranged random information and putting it into an interpretative context. Although it is one of the shorter *Sillok*, the English translation comprises 897 pages. A brief introduction gives data on King T'aejo's life and on the compilation of his *Sillok*, completed in 1413 and amended in 1448. Two glossaries and a detailed index conclude the work.

The longest and most compact piece of the *T'aejo Annals* is the General Introduction (Ch'ongsŏ), some 100 pages in translation. It recounts the history of four generations of T'aejo's patrilineal ancestors and sets the background for T'aejo's extraordinary rise to rulership. It portrays his wonderful, almost mysterious nature from birth, recalls his exploits as invincible military commander during the last decades of Koryŏ (938–1392), and describes him as a magnanimous ruler to whom the people spontaneously submitted but, despite several plots against him, remained to the very last loyal to the last Koryŏ king and only reluctantly ascended the throne, in the end as the humble founder of a new dynasty. This lengthy introduction mixes history with hagiographical lore, introduces a confusing dramatis personae, and spins a many-faceted, wondrous account. The copious notes Choi supplies greatly ease the understanding of this complicated text. The core of the *Annals* consists of fifteen books (*kwŏn*) each of which covers roughly six months.

Choi's translation is a veritable tour de force. In general it reads smoothly, even though at times it sounds a bit forced and wordy. Since the Chinese original is terse and compact, as many entries are mere summaries of much longer documents (contained in the *Records of the Royal Secretariat*), it is indeed difficult to cast it into readable English. A random example: "His Majesty [T'aejong] said, 'It would not be in accord with righteousness if you killed him,' and labored to dissuade him

[from doing so]”. This could be shortened to: “It would not be righteous to kill him, and strongly dissuaded him [from doing so]” (p. 102).

More problematic is the translation of kinship terms, official titles, and designations of government institutions. *Chongch'in*, for instance, means a king's closest patrilineal kinsmen, his primary and secondary sons and four generations of their respective descendants, and not “kindred” (p. 109). On p. 117 it is said that “T'aejo moved his family to the private residence of Assistant Chancellor Yun Ho”. What is translated as “his family” (*munha*) is in reality part of Yun Ho's title (*munha ch'amsōngsa*). In T'aejo's programmatic decree of the seventh month of 1392 a lengthy passage elaborates on the importance of a fair examination system. Part of the translation reads: “[The exams] have degenerated to such a degree that, rather than being fair and impartial, success and failure in them is determined by private connections and favoritism, which is quite contrary to their original purpose” (p. 120). This reads smoothly, but is rather far from the original; a closer reading is: “By calling the examiners ‘masters’ and the candidates ‘disciples’, the system of impartial selection has been converted into personal favor; this is indeed not the meaning of the original law.” This rendition would, of course, require an explanation of the Koryŏ examination system. Near paraphrases, here and in many other places, may please the reader, but at the same time blur the original sense of the text. There are also quite a number of inaccuracies in the translation of technical terms. On p. 581, for instance, it is said that the king presided over (Yi Saek's) funeral, something a king would never do. The term *ch'ije* means that the king sent, as a sign of his special appreciation, a eulogy and ceremonial items. In “Wives who have serious problems in their families [in terms of morality and loyalty]” (p. 588), the term *se'gye* is mistranslated as “in their families”. Rather, women whose descent line (*se'gye*) had clearly a blemish (i.e. were not elite women), were not allowed to receive a title.

On the whole, however, we have to applaud Choi's audacious translation. It will give the Western reader, who is unlikely to be familiar with Koryŏ/Chosŏn history, a taste of the raw material with which the historian reconstructs the events surrounding the building of Korea's last and longest dynasty. Such knowledge is indeed invaluable even for appreciating the mood of the country's most recent history.

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SUN JOO KIM and JUNGWON KIM:

Wrongful Deaths: Selected Inquest Records from Nineteenth-Century Korea.

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Wrongful Deaths: Selected Inquest Records from Nineteenth-Century Korea appears in the context of ongoing academic interest in East Asian pre-modern legal records and recent research into the complexity of Chosŏn history that uses previously untapped sources. *Wrongful Deaths* adopts a similar format to Robert E. Hegel's *True Crimes in Eighteenth-Century China: Twenty Case Histories* (Washington,