

Chongjo Biography

Chongjo

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Biography

Chongjo (1752-1800) was king of Korea and one of the outstanding monarchs of the Yi dynasty. His reign culminated the great 18th-century revival of traditional Korean civilization.

Chongjo, born Yi Sng on Oct. 28, 1752, was the son of Crown Prince Changhn and the grandson of King Yngjo, whose 52-year reign preceded his own. Studious as a youth, Chongjo exhibited an early maturity which helped him to cope with the tragedy of 1762, when his father was tortured and murdered by a crazed and provoked King Yngjo. Chongjo came to the throne on April 27, 1776, upon his grandfather's death.

Chongjo's reign was a watershed between the 18th-century heyday of Korean civilization and its troubled decline in the 19th century. For most of Yngjo's reign Koreans had felt secure in their traditional social system and values, and the country had been at peace with its neighbors. But they were less secure by the time of Chongjo's death. There were economic problems, the aristocracy was under attack by satirists, and Catholicism and Western learning had begun to flood the country, threatening native values. Chongjo responded to these problems by proclaiming Confucian verities: respect for authority, diligence in agriculture, and frugality in expenditure. He confidently issued regulations for everything and was certain that these, together with sincerity and good Confucian principles, would produce solutions.

But Chongjo also encouraged practical measures and supported progressive scholars seeking better ways of administration. In this innovative spirit he was ahead of most officials, who with their outmoded practices blunted or nullified many of his measures. He was also open in his policies on Catholicism despite constant pressure from advisers to persecute the converts. Fundamentally he was opposed to persecutions, believing that the new religion could best be fought by emphasizing Confucianism. He followed this policy steadily to the end of his reign, though it was reversed by his successors.

Chongjo was an enthusiastic bibliophile, probably the greatest Korea ever had. He was concerned with almost every aspect of books, supporting as royal patron authors, librarians, lexicographers, typographers, and printers. The splendid Kyujanggak Library, which he founded in 1776, has been largely preserved and is now part of the library of Seoul National University. Chongjo died on Aug. 18, 1800. He may be said to be the last king of Korea to achieve greatness.