



Chapter One. Freedom and Fate in the People and Monarchy: The Early Joseon Era, Fifteenth to Sixteenth Centuries

Playbill

“The King and the Clown” (*Wang ui namja* [“The King’s man”]);
Yi Jun-ik, 2005

“The King’s Letters” (*Narat malsami* [“Our country’s language”]);
Jo Cheol-hyeon, 2019

“Forbidden Dream” (*Cheonmun: haneul e munneunda* [“Studying
the stars: questioning the heavens”]); Heo Jin-ho, 2019

“The Face Reader” (*Gwansang* [“Face reading”]); Han Jae-
rim, 2013

“The Treacherous” (*Gansin* [“Wicked officials”]); Min Gyu-
dong, 2015

In the closing scene of “The King and the Clown”, the two main characters, both jesters, stand precariously over a tightrope in the royal palace grounds and together vow to be born again as minstrels. The film, after having followed them unwittingly infiltrating, disturbing, and suffering the lofty environs of peak privilege, then ends with a still shot of the two as they bounce high off the springy tightrope, in front of the main palace



Image 1 Ending still shot of “The King and the Clown”

building and, beyond that, an infinitely blue sky (Image 1). Their juxtaposition against these three elements—rope, palace, sky—shows these men’s fates literally being thrown up in the air, somewhere between shaky grounds, worldly privilege, and heavenly destiny. This pair of “low-born” entertainers had found that despite their impressive talents and even moments of good fortune, their base hereditary status would become cursed and exploited by the dominant actors in politics and society, starting with a monarch, Yeonsan, who wrestled with his own personal debilitations and demons. In history, this man, ruling at the turn of the sixteenth century, was overthrown for his manifold cruelties and instability, consigned eventually to standing as the worst tyrant of the entire Joseon era.

The Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) would survive King Yeonsan and his bloody reign for another four centuries. But this durable polity’s beginnings—from the end of the fourteenth century to the early sixteenth—established a full range of patterns, from the most forward and enlightened to the worst excesses of social and political depravity, that would mark the kingdom, indeed premodern Korea, as a whole. Perhaps not coincidentally, the most tumultuous episodes of this time have drawn some of the most accomplished cinematic treatments, especially those that connect the lives of regular people with those at the other end—the famous and infamous royals and high officials who battled each other in such an expansively fevered pitch that they could not but pull into their toxic corridors

innocents and lower-status Koreans. Such a mismatch, at least, is highlighted by filmic dramatisations that retell the stories of famed figures and events from the early Joseon era through, considerably, characters who did not anticipate or even desire gaining entrance into these stratospheric realms but whose lives and fates were damaged, indeed corrupted, by such brush with privilege. Still, while they embody the sapping struggle for survival in such an environment, they also represent the modernistic spirit of freedom and agency, for both the individual and the nation, in shaping their circumstances.

Koreans have long understood this formative era of the Joseon as one dominated by major monarchs, both good and bad, such as Yeonsan. The leading figure in this regard is undoubtedly King Sejong the Great (r. 1418–1450), credited as the inventor of the cherished Korean alphabet and readily accepted as the greatest of all Korean rulers, hence also as King Yeonsan’s polar opposite despite being the latter’s great-grandfather. Indeed, Sejong’s own father, King Taejong, and son, King Sejo, were even more bloodthirsty, usurping the throne from brothers and a teenaged nephew, respectively, while killing scores. The violent ambition of Sejo (as Prince Suyang) drives the film, “The Face Reader” (see the opening of the book’s Introduction and below), which like the other works examined in this chapter portrays the balance of fate and freedom through the nexus of politics and the people. And after the raucous reign of King Yeonsan, who has understandably attracted much historical curiosity, the governing order would steadily stabilise over the sixteenth century, at least until the devastating foreign invasions starting in the 1590s (Chap. 2). But for the early fifteenth century, the period of dynastic founding, the crowning personage has been King Sejong the Great, as two recent films demonstrate.

SEJONG AND THE POPULAR BASIS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

As these things tend to do in South Korea, a pair of films dealing with the same topic or theme appeared in tandem, as if their releases were coordinated to both contrast and reinforce.¹³ In 2019, after a long interlude in which King Sejong the Great had been featured often in extended television dramas but not in film, two works appeared in theatres that presented this overly familiar monarch in partnership with a low-status historical figure to pursue revolutionary change in the mid-fifteenth century. That Sejong, the epitome of the sage king, would draw upon the talents of socially shunned and hence secret gems of feudal society in order to realise

his great goals is notable, given that the monarch has generally been given most of the credit for the great accomplishments during his reign. The narrative approach of the two films, then, seems intent on accentuating Sejong's legendary prioritisation of the welfare of common people but also on reiterating the popular basis and hence historical legitimacy of his deeds. The centring of national cultural identity of the time to either the masses or to Buddhism seems overstated, but it's a sign of the appeal of this monarch and the desire to depict his goals as having been hindered by powerful, almost fatalistic forces grounded in longstanding practices of social domination.

An intriguing facet of the continuing fascination with monarchy, including in liberal democracies like present-day South Korea, where the ideals of popular sovereignty have long been normalised—indeed even the stubborn vestiges of inherited privilege continue to arouse widespread revulsion in the country today—is that popular culture serves as a safe zone for celebrity voyeurism into the lives of the rich and famous, in all their regal splendour, from an imagined past. Throwing such a glowing light onto a supposedly gilded age has directed attention most consistently in South Korea to the two monarchs of Sejong, the fourth ruler of the Joseon kingdom, and Jeongjo, from over three centuries later in the eighteenth century (Chap. 3). Given that their standing was based almost solely on the accident of birth, somewhat absurdly these two figures appear as champions of the people's struggle for social liberation against entrenched practitioners of inherited domination and the decay that that entailed. Like mutant superheroes compelled to use their accidental powers for the greater good, these sagacious supermen battle evil customs, perspectives, and structures, which, when displaced to the realm of larger society, constitute forces shaping the nation's fate. In films about King Sejong the Great, the effort to overcome this uncomfortable paradox of a hereditary monarch leading populist endeavours has been to pair him with a representative of the mass of the exploited, demeaned, but valorous common people.

This partner in "Forbidden Dream" (*Cheonmun: haneul e munneunda*, "Studying the stars: questioning the heavens"; Heo Jin-ho, 2019) is the historical figure Jang Yeong-sil, originally a government slave. The story arc takes the viewer across several moments over a 20-year period in the increasingly close relationship between Sejong and Jang, as they struggle together to overcome both scientific and political challenges. Jang's rise to influence, then, represented a test case for the nexus of agency and structure, as suggested in the film's Korean title, "Studying the

stars—Questioning the heavens”. The astronomy reference alludes to the real scientific tools that Jang helped devise under the curious king’s encouragement, a body of work that brought about fierce resistance, according to the film, from high officials who were aghast at the presence in court of such a low-born individual. The film’s treatment of social identity and its connections to political power thus places the high officials and aristocrats in opposition to the joint effort by the monarch and people for a more equitable society, the “Forbidden Dream” of the English title. The subject matter reflecting this ideal is heaven itself or at least its starry night. Numerous shots appear of characters, especially the main pair of King Sejong and Jang Yeong-sil, looking upward and reaching for the stars, even while they are inside or riding in a palanquin. In one nighttime scene of the two in the palace courtyard, they reveal to each other that they like to look up at the sky because they are used to looking down—the king at his subjects, and the slave in kowtowing prostration. While lying down side-by-side to gaze upward, they recognise the heavens as the great unifier, a common source of wonder and origins that ignores earthly differences such as the maximum gap in social standing between the king and the slave. The other memorable scene in this regard is of an incarcerated Jang lying down together with fellow prisoners and looking at the night sky through a hole in the dilapidated jailhouse ceiling (Image 2). The symbolism here is inescapable.



Image 2 Jang Yeong-sil and fellow prisoners looking up at the nighttime sky through a hole in the jail’s roof, from “Forbidden Dream”

The heavens, representing a deeper and hence more genuine repository of human essence and fortune, thus stands in contrast to the artificial divisions implanted by men, a metaphysical relationship shown being debated between the high officials and the monarch. Upon hearing again from his ministers about the basic immutability of human beings, especially those of low status, the king immediately takes this cue to highlight a glaring contradiction: “If commoners’ nature cannot be changed”, he asks, “then why are you officials governing them?” This rejoinder thus tugs at the heart of Confucian ethics—officially the ruling ideology of the Joseon dynasty—which is supposedly premised on the transmutability of people through education and ritual, the point of statecraft itself. Some ministers’ self-serving hostility to Jang’s reach for the stars, even while recognising his talents and utility, is thus unmasked, revealing deep social prejudice and the protection of hereditary privilege cloaked in faithfulness to a purportedly universal principle.

Another reason for their hostility is just as problematic but very real in the circumstances of the time: the tributary, subordinated diplomatic relationship to the Chinese Ming dynasty, which Jang’s activities and the monarch’s support for them have endangered. The high officials worry that one of Jang’s instruments, an astronomical observatory that would allow Joseon to construct a native calendar reflecting its own geography, has invited anger and warnings from a Ming envoy. This foreign dignitary insists that only the Chinese emperor can carry out such deeds and therefore that the offending designer of the Korean observatory, Jang, should be taken to China as a prisoner. Sejong’s nationalist retort to this apparent contradiction seems forced, but it is instructive of the film’s aim of condemning the toadying aristocratic interests looking to “serve the great” China (*sadae*). National identity, then, becomes bound to the innovative scientific devices that Jang develops under Sejong’s sponsorship, which promise discoveries (“Seoul is an hour faster than Nanjing!”) from Koreans’ own readings of the sky and hence a more accurate calendar than one based on Chinese star maps. A whole new world of the heavens opens up through this process, a reflection of a whole new Korea on earth. This dualism becomes visualised in an extraordinary scene of Jang creating for his monarch a makeshift planetarium out of a paper screen door and candlelit backlighting, revealing the Big Dipper and showing the pair arriving simultaneously at a recognition of the grand connections (Image 3). Alas, this synchronicity shatters when it appears that Jang, who at first cannot fathom the significance of the alphabet when Sejong introduces it to him,



Image 3 Former slave Jang Yeong-sil showing a makeshift star chart to King Sejong the Great, from “Forbidden Dream”

eventually chooses to sacrifice his own work for the even greater cause of the new script, a concession that the king himself has to make as well.

The same axis of conflict between monarchically driven populism and elite resistance appears in the other recent film on Sejong, “The King’s Letters” (*Narat malssami*, “Our country’s language”; Jo Cheol-hyeon, 2019). As the title suggests, this story depicts the effort to devise the native Korean script, with the monarch’s partner this time being a Buddhist monk, Sinmi, who inspires and then leads the great enterprise. Though not as fulsome in dramatic conflict or as rich in symbolism as “Forbidden Dream”, the film exudes a similar look and feel. As suggested by the opening blurb’s warning that the film is a dramatisation of one particular theory about how the alphabet came into being, this account forwards that Buddhism, and more specifically, the Buddhist clergy, acted as the creative agent, along with the sagely monarch himself. The scenes include illustrative gatherings of like-minded people—like the monks and Sejong’s two youngest sons (including Prince Suyang)—pursuing a scientifically belaboured but socially and culturally unifying process of inventing a national written vernacular. In this way “The King’s Letters” is reminiscent of “Malmoe” (Chap. 5), which dramatises the crafting of a standardised dictionary in the 1930s under Japanese occupation through a collectivising creativity.

What is more historically viable is the depiction of Sejong's embrace of other scripts in the great alphabetical chain that stretched across Eurasia, with connecting links to the Mongol and Tibetan scripts and extending back to the Sanskrit of Buddhism's originating heritage. The film's intellectual tracing of this lineage thus constitutes a kind of Buddhist pilgrimage in itself. This in turn not only integrates Korea more firmly into the continental civilisational sphere but re-centres Buddhism in Korean cultural identity through a setting when the Buddhist clergy, stripped of political influence by the early Joseon state and elite, were suppressed into the realm of popular religion catering to the common people. In response to his ministers' hostility to the monks' presence in the court, Sejong responds that the Buddhists, not "you Confucians" who have grabbed political power, have a better feel for the pulse of the people. This implicates Confucianism as the primary culprit behind what Joseon would eventually become, a kingdom run by hereditary elites who dismissed the utility of the alphabet and hence prevented the social progress that surely an embrace of the new script could have engendered, just as it did later in the modern era.

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF PERILOUS GRANDEUR

If Sejong, befitting his legendary standing, served as a conduit for commoners and low-status individuals to engage fruitfully with splendid power, two very impressive films that feature Sejong's immediate royal descendants present an opposing tale. They highlight the perils for regular people lured into the heights of privilege before being destroyed by them and in the process discovering the connections between fate and freedom that render the latter especially difficult to actualise. Such outcomes also invite interpretive interventions about the history of early Joseon, as well as lessons—like in the films above on King Sejong—about the stifling rigidity of the social structure for anyone who dares to enter and witness, much less overcome, the corridors of power. Hence, while the well-known transgressions committed by particular early Joseon kings are featured, their baneful impact at once reflects and is surpassed by the brutal political climate and accompanying deterioration in the moral order dominated by the entrenched elites. The films' plebeian protagonists thus are tamed, humbled, and deeply scarred by their brief forays into this dangerous realm, just as the country itself seems to have been during this opening era of the Joseon kingdom.

The scarring occurs literally in both of the films examined here, through the disabling of the eyes, which reflects the dangers of seeing too much, whether in the present or the future. Prognostication is indeed the main activity of the title character in “The Face Reader” (*Gwansang* [“Physiognomy”, “Face reading”, or simply “The Face”]; Han Jae-rim, 2013), who at the start of the film is a widower who lives in penurious exile, along with his younger brother-in-law and son, due to his father having been condemned as a national traitor. The face reader, however, possesses a wondrous capacity to divine peoples’ character and thus destiny through their countenance, an insight that eventually overwhelms him in a pivotal scene when he first encounters a chillingly dangerous royal face (Image 4). For while his power of foresight undeniably gains him ever-increasing access to the highest realms of courtly privilege, it also renders him a target and tool for ruthless political intrigue. The intersection of individual skill as freedom and social status as destiny thus becomes the film’s overarching motif, to show that striving for something beyond one’s assigned station in life can provide a fleeting reward at best, and often the outcome is immeasurably worse. This principle is expressed in the film’s denouement, which invokes the metaphor of ephemeral ocean waves, with their ups and downs, obscuring the forceful wind that pushes them. It is thus also a lesson about the workings of national history, of the cyclonic inertia accumulated through social decay, inequality, and exploitation.



Image 4 The title character of “The Face Reader” at the moment he first sees Prince Suyang

The victims in this dynamic, as usual, are the regular people like the clairvoyant face reader, who at first is hired by the madame of a capital brothel, a dilettantish soothsayer herself who, despite her wealth, is still hemmed in by her lowly social standing. As an expert in makeup, she would play a key role later in the storyline in advancing the relationship between facial features—both inherited and crafted—and self-realising destiny. Meanwhile, the face reader's son, a highly intelligent young man with a slight physical disability, seeks to make his own life by escaping the clutches of his tainted family background. He thus serves as an example of the remote possibilities for transcending social constraints. But the main counterpart to the face reader's embodiment of predetermined destiny is a ruthless prince who is suspected by everyone, including his older brother, the ailing King Munjong, of harbouring nasty designs on the throne. This man is Prince Suyang, whose facial scars and unsettling gaze signify his wickedness but also his unavoidable perception by others (Image 5), a bias that he both overcomes and reinforces by indeed brutally overthrowing the next monarch, Munjong's teenaged son King Danjong. Before this inevitable scene arrives, the viewer is introduced to other competing



Image 5 Prince Suyang in “The Face Reader”

characters in court politics, including the most influential official of the time, Kim Jong-seo, who is determined to thwart the evil prince's designs.

They are all involved in the brutal machinations surrounding the issue of royal succession, a source of violence since the start of the Joseon dynasty that defined the kingdom at its birth. The Joseon founder, a general named Yi Seong-gye who took down the Goryeo dynasty in 1392, had indeed laid the foundations for such approaches to political conflict, even though he soon came to decry the behaviour of his progeny who followed his harsh example. In one scene, "The Face Reader" nods to this troubling legacy when referencing the portrait of Yi's son, Yi Bang-won, who killed his brothers to take the throne in 1400—a foreshadowing and rationalising of the coup that was about to come from Bang-won's grandson, Prince Suyang. (Inexplicably and troublingly, as noted above, the sagely King Sejong was the son of the former usurper and the father of the latter.) Appearing also are the famed "Six Martyrs" (*sayuksin*) from the ranks of high officials who gave their lives in righteous opposition to Suyang's takeover, and Han Myeong-hoe, the prince's devious right-hand man, who would play a part also in the next bloody royal succession conflict, as featured in "The King and the Clown" (see below).

To be sure, the portrayal of these figures through fictionalised common people offers a historical judgement on this era and its well-known events. But most of all, "The Face Reader" seeks to raise questions about the interaction between individuals and socio-political structures that drives national history, as well as about the connection between this process and received notions of social morality. In this sense, the physiognomist protagonist is a stand-in for the viewer, observing and being manipulated by powerful figures while under the delusion of agency, but ultimately collapsing in despair in the face of destiny. Rather, the real main character is the ruthless prince, for he is the primary carrier of freedom—freedom for evil deeds, to be sure, but exemplary in taking fate into one's own hands for not only oneself but the country as a whole. During a solitary audience with his nephew, the teenaged monarch Danjong asks Suyang, his uncle, about scuttlebutt, confirmed by the face reader's condemning evaluation of his face, that Suyang seeks to take the throne by force. The prince has to deny this of course, but he also rejects the notion that fate is insurmountable. If his face gives him away as a traitor, he insists, he will exert his full effort to act otherwise. Suyang does indeed change his destiny, but not as a usurper—for this is exactly what he becomes—but rather as someone otherwise heading to a foreordained, socially bound, or even morally

bound end. He will remain unbound, and the force of his will will shatter any attempt to constrain his individual agency, as reinforced by the scene, described at the opening of this book, in which he himself expresses surprise at his power to alter fate. At the other end of the social horizon is the face reader's pitiable son, who, despite his stigmatised family background and physical disability, had shown the potential of individual will and skill by passing the state examination and becoming an upstanding junior official. But in the end, he is killed by Prince Suyang, in a victory of one man's pursuit of personal freedom over another's, but which also shows that one's predetermined social standing does indeed matter.

The visual signalling of fate, or of freedom, by the face is a representation, then, also of the ways people and societies assign value to outward characteristics as reflections of inner character, which often induces the transformation of perception into reality, a social feedback loop resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Here, DNA is destiny as a biological as much as a social construct. The manifestations of this orientation are numerous and have a long tradition in Korea that continues strong today, but of course every society has done this, from equating superficial features with some personal essence to valuing people according to their sex, skin colour, height, parentage, or anything else that lies beyond control. In "The Face Reader", reading faces in the fifteenth century highlights such customs and ponders their determinative historical power. The face also serves as an entry point for deciphering the eyes as an even sharper manifestation of an individual's fixed character. What is more, the eyes can act on their own, reading others' eyes, faces, and fates as well as the truth of larger circumstances. This explains why the powerful worldly figures in the story who recognise the face reader as a threat threaten his eyes, and why his son, an honest seer who detects the underlying structures of corruption and malevolence, suffers blinding as the price for his own insight.

The scaffolding of this abusive system is visualised in periodic shots of the imposing main palace gate (Gwanghwamun), which signals the Kafkaesque posture of standing "before the law" (*vor dem Gesetz*) as a representation of the intimidating enigma that lies behind the walls. Whether shrouded in darkness or clouds of dust, the palace gate (featured on this book's cover) as a symbol of social privilege, political power, and fate itself appears mysterious and dangerous for those common people who stand before it or, worse, enter it. The face reader and his son, both of whom have briefly and separately breached this gateway, suffer eternally

for having attempted such a crossing. In contrast, the man who breaks through the wall of destiny from *within* the palace compound, Prince Suyang, is rewarded, at least in the temporal realm although perhaps not in terms of historical judgement.¹⁴

THE DERANGED MONARCH AS NATIONAL MORALITY AND DESTINY

As with Prince Suyang, who through his coup took the throne as King Sejo, a royal tyrant can serve as a potent vehicle for exploring the ramifications of socio-political power's relationship to historical contingency. When the horrible actions of a monarch, or potential monarch, also stem clearly from madness, the potential avenues of such considerations multiply. The results, in cinematic depiction, can be extraordinary, such as with "The Throne" (Chap. 3), which centres on the relationship between King Yeongjo and his son, the crown prince, in the eighteenth century. For the early Joseon era, the primary figure in this regard was King Yeonsan (r. 1494–1506), a Caligula-like figure who did many wicked things out of depravity but also mental illness. And as a result of the deeds of his grandfather, King Sejo (above), Yeonsan reached the throne as a teenager amid courtly strife and purges, which had earlier victimised several court figures, including his own birth mother. When as king he later discovered, or was led to suspect, the events and people behind these traumatic episodes from his childhood, he took revenge by killing several family members by his own hand. He also did many other awful things, enough to become the first Joseon monarch to be forcibly deposed (the second, Gwanghae, occupies a more ambivalent historical standing—see Chap. 2).

Not surprisingly, the terribly intriguing figure of King Yeonsan has drawn a lot of attention in popular culture, including in films dating back to the 1960s. By far the most memorable and celebrated such dramatisation, however, is "The King and the Clown" (*Wang ui namja* ["The King's man"]; 2005), by director Yi Jun-ik, who later would craft his masterpiece, "The Throne" (Chap. 3), around the equally intriguing and troubled royal figure of Prince Sado of the eighteenth century. "The King and the Clown" also stands as a great film, weaving the Yeonsan story into a multi-layered exploration of the tension between human and heavenly justice, as well as its ramifications for understanding premodern Korean society on moral terms. What better way to go deep in this regard, then,

than through the most famously evil king in Korean history? Still, King Yeonsan, while a major character who is complexly probed, is not the centrepiece; rather, the focus is on a pair of wandering minstrels, wildly skilled gymnasts and jesters who like to mock the pretentiously privileged. As hereditary low-born, indeed “despised” (*cheon-han*) members of the social structure, the clowns are the carriers of motifs and symbols that attack the workings of fate in the social order. Their journey to this discovery, which the audience shares, begins with their flight from a violent predicament in a local setting. They eventually reach Hanyang (Seoul) and find that their brand of entertainment is richly rewarding but also even riskier, and they escape with their lives when the crazy king explodes in laughter at their performance just before they are doomed. They are then brought into the court for the monarch’s personal entertainment, which triggers a passionate backlash from high officials aghast at this violation of social (hierarchical) norms, as well as from the king’s deliciously wicked concubine, Jang Noksu. The ensuing development of these triangular relationships amid such hostility introduces, in turn, a slew of additional factors into the brewing mixture of themes centred on social morality and just fate.

In the meantime, the king’s well-known excesses are depicted as resulting from the psychological scarring of his childhood, to be sure, but also from the mixed signals from his jealous concubine, high officials, received understandings about his duties, and his own growing affection for one of the two jesters, Gong-gil, who happens to possess elegant, indeed feminine traits. Gong-gil’s partner, Jang-saeng, responds angrily to this advance, though less out of romantic possessiveness than a sense of fraternal protection and social grievance. When “The King and the Clown” was released to a rousing popular response,¹⁵ commentators noted that this homoerotic element in the film could help break down longstanding social taboos in South Korea, but the film also stood vulnerable to a painful critique from the other side: by associating the evil king’s behaviour, even his psychological trauma, with homosexuality, the film actually can reinforce easy prejudices attaching deviancy to sexual orientation.¹⁶

The self-loathing that the two performers are pressured into can be interpreted along similar lines, although here it has more to do with the unbearably heavy accumulation of social contempt heaped upon them, which is worse while they cavort in the realms of political power than during their previously unprivileged lives. As with the “face reader” and the two low-status individuals who partnered with King Sejong the Great in the films discussed above, the minstrels invite the full brunt of scorn and

bigotry from the courtly elites for deigning to enter their exclusive grounds. This scorn sharpens because the king delights and even joins in the clowns' performative mockery of the ministers through mask dances and skits, although of course his personal vilification of top officials has much graver consequences. So he finds the lowly clowns as useful revealers of the structures of corruption high in the body politic, and he takes advantage of the onsetting unease to settle scores both real and imagined. From the viewers' vantage point, this leads to an obscuring of the moral stakes, as the famously evil king from history is shown defending commoners against the high-minded officials professing to defend the country from the ravages of a tyrant. Even King Yeonsan's well-known clampdown on popular expression, through his forbidding the use of the alphabet for public communication, is given a twist in the film, wherein the script's use by the minstrels plays a role in both storyline and symbolism. Like in the two films about King Sejong above, the alliance between the highest and lowest elements of the social hierarchy serves to highlight the destructive impact of the power holders in between and the injustices of the system as a whole.

The semiotics of the film, too, begins and ends here, and once again the eyes guide the characters and the audience. In "The King and the Clown", however, Jang-saeng's eventual blindness as punishment for seeing too much accentuates his striving for a more meaningful existence, a facilitator for envisioning a utopia as well as a deeper level of reality. The film's ending credits come over a short flashback fantasy scene of the two minstrels frolicking in the mountain meadows, free and happy in the open air of the beautiful countryside as opposed to the confining shadows of the capital, and even joined in imagined performative camaraderie by their troupe from Seoul. Immediately preceding this was the final diegetic scene described in the opening of this chapter, in which Jang-saeng, blinded and facing death but briefly having escaped, and Gong-gil both stand at the foot of the tightrope that had been erected on palace grounds for the king's enjoyment. The shaky tightrope, which throughout the film the clowns navigate masterfully in their performances, now serves more to highlight the inscrutability of destiny. Just before the two take their final bounce off the rope in hurling their lives to inescapable (mis)fortune, they express to each other a desire to return, in their next lives, to their pre-courtly existence as lowly clowns. They had been brutally tossed off this unsullied existence by the lure of outrageous power and privilege, a dynamic symbolised in a later scene in which the angry Yeonsan slings

arrows at an evasively leaping Jang-saeng on the tightrope, as the latter loudly expresses contempt for the mercurial monarch.

Many of these same motifs and symbols for King Yeonsan's stormy reign appear also in "The Treacherous" (*Gansin*—"Wicked officials"; Min Gyu-dong, 2015), a heavily stylised treatment of perhaps the most notorious of this man's many appalling deeds, the organised roundup of thousands of women around the country for his personal harem. Like the king himself, the film ultimately devolves into a self-indulgent bloody mess, with little to say, even with a lot to show, beyond the in-your-face lechery and violence. In the first half of the film, however, appear some intriguing signals of historical themes that, alas, later get lost amid the film's carnage and general loss of direction: As in "The Swordsman", set in the seventeenth century (Chap. 2), the recruitment of women and girls for royal tribute is depicted as having depended on violence, deviousness, and cruelty that paralleled the twentieth-century "comfort women" horrors under Japanese colonial rule.¹⁷ Indeed the two main characters, in addition to the very disturbing and disturbed monarch, are a father-son duo of "evil officials" (the movie's Korean title) whom the film does not know how to characterise aside from showing their insatiable venality. Other motifs include those with social hierarchy implications, as one of the potential maidens is supposedly from the lowest, *baekjeong* class of hereditary butchers—butchering, naturally, is a recurring theme—and, in a disturbing twist, the native alphabet is shown being used to service the crazy king's terrible ends through its appearance in placards posted around the country promoting the roundup of maidens. These potentially fruitful historical angles are obliterated, however, by the film's preoccupation with constructing colourfully elaborate sets and wallowing in salacious preposterousness, a handmaiden to its organisational disarray, but perhaps this in itself serves as a commentary on those times.

The notorious king, Yeonsan, does indeed represent an important feature of the early Joseon dynasty, but as the films examined in this chapter show, a spectrum of monarchical morality represents the popular understanding, and filmic depictions, of this era. In reflecting the very modernist sensibilities eagerly exhibited by *hallyu* historical films, however, these polished dramatisations move far beyond the royal realm even while retelling the familiar tales and legends of famed leaders. Specifically, the pairing of a monarch with lower-status or common people reminds the audience of the wider consequences of the politics of the times. The stifling societal

conventions are shown victimising the populace in general, even when a few representatives of the suffering majority could be shown puncturing the exclusive domains of the elite. These periodic breaches of the sturdy barrier, however, result usually in failure to bring about a correction for the greater good, which furthers a message of the heroic but ultimately unsuccessful pursuit of agency—such as with the depictions of King Sejong the Great’s partnership with commoners—or of the fatalism of accumulated constraints winning out in the end. The outcome in either case, then, is a commentary on the power of structured destiny against that of personal will or freedom. This in turn offers a judgement, when displaced to the level of national history, on not only the founding of the Joseon dynasty but also on the basis of Korea’s premodern civilisation, as shown also by the films examined in the following chapters.

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