

Choson Period

Historians usually divide the five hundred years of the Choson dynasty (1392–1910) into an early and a late period, separated by the Japanese invasions of Korea under Hideyoshi in 1592 and 1597. Choson's founder, Yi Song-gye, who established the capital in Seoul, had a struggle to win the confidence of the old Koryo aristocracy because he came from a non-aristocratic background. He therefore cultivated the support of the Chinese Ming dynasty, using the term *sadae* or 'serving the great' to describe Choson's position. At least three regular embassies were sent annually to Ming China, resulting in much trade between the two countries. Choson exported horses, ginseng, furs, ramie and decorated straw mats and imported silk, medicines, books and porcelain.¹

The fifteenth century is often regarded as a golden age in Korea's history, largely through the role of King Sejong the Great (reigned 1418–50), the fourth Choson king (see p. 113).²

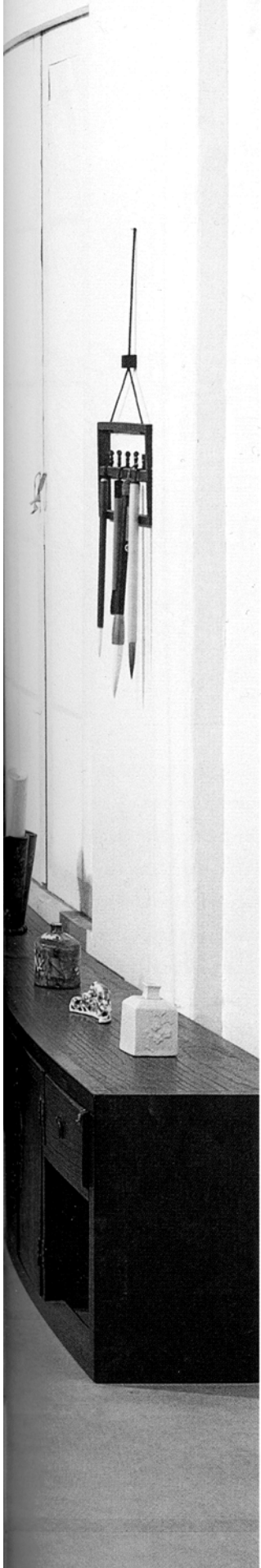
Continuing Koryo's struggles with the people to its north, Choson's relations with its northern neighbours, a Jurchen tribe whom they called Ya'in or 'barbarians', were troublesome in the early years of the dynasty. Six fortresses were established in the northeast, along the Tuman and Amnok rivers. Submission was encouraged with the opening of markets where their furs and horses were traded.³

The Japanese on Tsushima island frequently sent forays to Korea in search of food. This led to a Korean attack on Tsushima in 1419 and a subsequent rapprochement, with the Japanese being granted some trading privileges. Following the opening of three southern Korean ports to Japanese vessels there was a huge increase in the export of Korean rice, cotton, beans, hemp, ramie, inlaid lacquer, porcelain, decorated mats, Buddhist and Confucian books, Buddhist sculptures and temple bells. In return the Japanese exported minerals such as copper, tin and sulphur, spices and medicines to Korea. Limits were twice imposed by the Koreans on the amount of exports to Japan and at one point in 1510 trade was stopped altogether.⁴

The Japanese invasion of 1592 was the result partly of the Confucian aristocracy's failure to take the Japanese threat seriously and partly of Toyotomi Hideyoshi's ambition to attack the Ming through Korea, having recently succeeded in unifying Japan's Warring States.

Having attacked the southeast coast at Pusan, the experienced Japanese troops quickly overran nearly the whole country. The king fled north from Seoul, to the disgust of his people, who refused to support his two sons' call to arms. At this point Admiral Yi Sun-sin began to win a series of sea battles, cutting off the Japanese ships from their ground troops. The major factor in these victories was his development of the famous

57. View of the interior of a reconstructed *sarangbang* or gentleman's study, showing the simple furniture and the traditional *ondol* floor and floor cushions for seating.



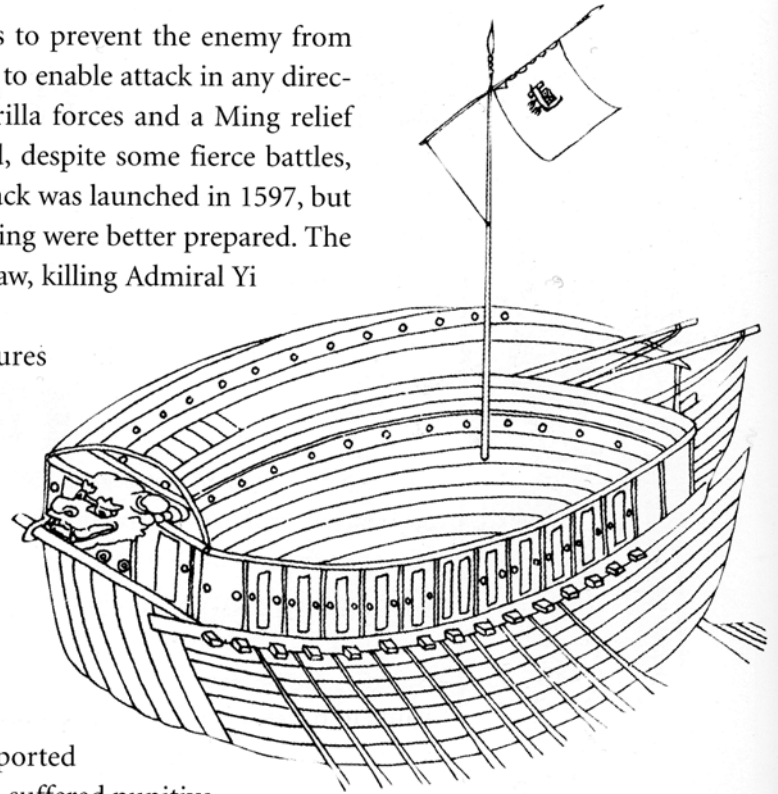
'turtle ships', which had an iron-clad covering, spikes to prevent the enemy from boarding and cannon around the entire circumference to enable attack in any direction (fig. 58).⁵ Together with a combination of guerrilla forces and a Ming relief army, these ships enabled the Japanese to be repulsed, despite some fierce battles, particularly at Chinju on the south coast. A second attack was launched in 1597, but this was much less successful as the Koreans and the Ming were better prepared. The death of Hideyoshi in 1598 led the Japanese to withdraw, killing Admiral Yi Sun-sin with a chance shot on the way.⁶

There was great loss of life and of cultural treasures during the wars with Japan. Many wooden palace and temple buildings were burned, archives were lost and potters abducted. Both the books and the potters seized by Japan had a great influence on Japan's cultural development, particularly in the fields of printing and ceramics, both of which made huge strides in Japan in the seventeenth century. Korea's animosity towards Japan was widely felt and long lasting.

In the seventeenth century, the Choson court supported the Ming during its struggles against the Manchus, and suffered punitive military attacks by the victorious Manchu. King Kwanghaegun (reigned 1608–23) wisely adopted a wait-and-see approach before deciding whom to support. However, he was succeeded by King Injo (reigned 1623–49), whose policy of Ming royalism resulted in the first Manchu invasion of Korea in 1627. When the Manchu ruler, who was to establish his dynasty as the Qing, demanded Korean acknowledgement of his suzerainty, Injo refused and this led to a second Manchu invasion in 1636. Despite Korea's feeling of cultural superiority to the barbarian Manchus, Injo was forced to capitulate.⁷ Ming royalism persisted throughout the Choson, and is reflected in the use of Ming reign titles in dates noted on documents and objects.

The eighteenth century was a relatively peaceful period of great cultural development, especially under King Yongjo (reigned 1724–76) and his grandson King Chongjo (reigned 1776–1800).⁸ Yongjo's son and Chongjo's father, Prince Sado, never became king: Yongjo, disillusioned and alienated by his son's strange behaviour, ordered him to climb into a rice chest and had it closed. Prince Sado died eight days later, still in the rice chest.⁹

Factional conflict was a recurring feature of Choson politics, but in the early nineteenth century in-law families played a particularly important role. Notable among these families, who typically rose to prominence through the marriage of a family member to a prince or crown prince, were the Kims of Andong and the Chos of Pungyang; the latter usurped power so completely that the kings reigned in name only. In 1864 the Taewon'gun, father of the twelve-year-old King Kojong, came to power as Prince Regent. He carried out many reforms designed to reassert the strength of the monarchy and cure the economic decline. He also organized an elaborate and costly renovation of the Kyongbok palace in Seoul, financed by greatly resented taxes. His move against the tax-exempt Confucian private academies or *sowon* provoked great opposition. It is perhaps for his isolationist policy that he is best known, however.



58. Drawing of one of Admiral Yi Sun-sin's famous iron-clad 'turtle ships', which are thought to have helped the Korean navy to repel the Japanese invasions of 1592–7.

The Taewon'gun resisted the growing pressure of Western demands for trade relations, aware of China's fate in the Opium War of 1839–42 and afraid of contamination by Western ideas and the spread of Catholicism (see following section on Philosophy and religion). His renewed suppression of Catholicism in 1866 resulted in the death of nine French missionaries and retaliatory action by the French under Admiral Roze commanding seven warships. They seized Kanghwa island, west of Seoul, taking away important documents and books from the Royal Library. In 1871 five American warships tried to attack Kanghwa island, in retaliation for the destruction of the American trading ship *General Sherman* on the Taedong river in 1866. This time they were driven back by improved Korean defences. It was, however, not any Western power but the Japanese, after the Meiji imperial restoration and their subsequent rapid modernization, who finally succeeded in opening Korea up to trade and who were eventually forcibly to annex and then colonize Korea in 1910, bringing the Choson dynasty to a close.¹⁰

Philosophy and religion

Towards the end of the Koryo period, a group of educated scholar-officials, called *sadaebu*, came to the fore. They spread Confucian ideas and encouraged Confucian studies, particularly the Neo-Confucianism that had originated in Song China and which concentrated on a philosophical explanation of the origins of man and the universe. The practices of Neo-Confucianism in Choson Korea were centred on the Jia Li or Family Rites of the Chinese philosopher Zhu Xi.

Under the first Choson king, Taejo, a policy was followed of strictly controlling Buddhism. However, Taejo, as other later Choson kings, was personally close to Buddhist monks and had Buddhist temples and shrines built. This ambivalent attitude to Buddhism by the Choson monarchs continued, with a pattern being set of official government suppression of Buddhism coexisting with the personal piety of some of the monarchs.¹¹

It was through a deep commitment to the development of a truly Confucian society that the suppression of Buddhism was intensified during the fifteenth century. Under King Sejong, only thirty-six temples of any significance were allowed to remain open. However, he too built a Buddhist shrine in the palace and wrote Buddhist works. Under King Songjong (reigned 1469–94), Prince Yonsan (reigned 1494–1506) and King Chungjong (reigned 1506–44), the suppression of Buddhism reached its height, with the Buddhist examinations being suspended and the major temples closed. There was a relative revival in the fortunes of the Buddhist church under King Myongjong (reigned 1545–67), when the Buddhist monk Hyujong had a certain amount of influence at court, with his appeal for the essential unity of Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. He was also responsible for organizing bands of warrior-monks to assist in the country's defence during the Hideyoshi invasion in 1592.¹²

The climax of the Confucianization of Korea was reached in the seventeenth century. The sixteenth century was characterized by a rising competitiveness amongst the Confucian literati as they fought against each other for office. Factionalism developed, together with purges. However, the power of the literati grew, supported particularly by the private academies or *sowon*, many of which received royal patronage and ended up by occupying a position in Choson society that was very similar to that of Buddhist temples in the Koryo.¹³ Two

schools of Neo-Confucianism developed in the seventeenth century, one led by Yi Toe-gye and one by Yi Yul-gok. The latter was also famous for many proposals for practical reform.¹⁴

Although the principles of Confucianism are basically egalitarian, in practice its teachings were irreconcilable with the traditional Korean social hierarchy. Choson society was divided into three distinct status groups: the *yangban*, who were the élite, the commoners (*yang'in*) and the slaves or base people (*chon'in*). The strict adherence to the Family Rites of Zhu Xi only really applied to the yangban élite and the rituals were in reality status symbols. The examination system, which had originally been adopted from China, was never really intended to introduce egalitarian standards for recruitment of officials in Choson Korea because an impeccable social background was a prerequisite for candidates. If a yangban took a wife from a lower class, the sons produced would be ineligible to take the examinations. Social discrimination was a major factor in Choson society. In Korea, Neo-Confucianism was adapted to the traditional patrilineal lineage system. This unique version of Neo-Confucianism is known as *kuksok* or 'national practice'.¹⁵

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of a school of thought which aimed to address social problems, such as the growth of wealthy merchants and large-scale farming. It is known as *sirhak* or 'practical learning' and was in general critical of the small number of yangban who held power. Many of the Sirhak scholars came from the southern faction (*Namin*) who had long been excluded from office. Their scholarship was essentially pragmatic and tried to reform agriculture and develop commerce and industry. There was a flourishing of studies of history and geography, law and government at that time, which is seen as a latter-day golden age in Choson history. Although the sending of tribute missions continued under the Qing rule of China, Koreans looked down on the Manchu regime and regarded themselves as the only true adherents to Confucianism, morally superior to the 'barbarian' Manchus. Kings Yongjo and Chongjo were activist rulers who patronized the arts. Court-sponsored encyclopaedias were completed, such as the massive *Tongguk munhon pigo* or *Reference Compilation of Documents on Korea*. Many elaborate paintings and screens of court rituals were completed, as well as regular formal portraits of the kings. There was also a surge of writing in the vernacular Korean script and of genre paintings of scenes of everyday life.¹⁶

It was during Chongjo's reign that Catholicism or 'Western learning' (*sohak*) started to spread in Korea, particularly among the reform-minded Namin, who were critical of the existing order. Contact with Catholicism came about through Koreans who visited Beijing and encountered Jesuit missionaries. Perhaps the most famous Catholic convert at this time was Chong Yag-yong. King Chongjo proscribed Catholicism in 1785 in response to a papal ruling that ancestor worship and belief in Christianity were incompatible, and in 1801 a severe suppression of Catholicism resulted in many leading figures being put to death or banished.¹⁷

Shamanism was a continuing popular belief and practice during the Choson period, as it had been in the Koryo. Shamanism was largely practised by the lower classes and particularly by women (see section on folk religion in chapter 5, pp. 144–7).

Inventions, science and technology

The first half of the fifteenth century in Korea was a period of remarkable cultural and scientific creation, largely through the work of the fourth Choson king, Sejong the Great

(see figure 2, Appendix 2, p. 234). The country was at peace, and the ruler was wise and surrounded himself with able officials. It is perhaps for his personal involvement in the invention of the vernacular Korean script, now called han'gul, that King Sejong is best remembered. This phonetic syllabary was originally called the 'proper sounds to instruct the people' (*hunmin chong'um*) and its creation was motivated by a desire to further the moral education of the populace as a whole, as opposed to that of the yangban élite alone, who used the difficult Chinese writing system. At that time it is very doubtful that Sejong envisaged that it should completely replace Chinese characters, as some extreme nationalists advocate in present times. Its invention is thought in fact to have had a secondary aim of helping in teaching the common people how to pronounce Chinese characters.¹⁸

Great developments also took place in printing technology during Sejong's reign. The first bronze type of the Choson dynasty, produced under King Taejong (reigned 1400–1418) and called Kyemi type, was cast in sand moulds and set in beeswax. This caused the type to move sometimes when pressed, thus creating misalignment. Under King Sejong techniques were improved and the Kyongja type produced, which enabled one man to set type for twenty sheets of paper a day. By the time of the development of the following Kabin type in 1434, it had become possible to print forty sheets a day. Both small and large type could furthermore be produced. Repeated efforts were made to produce a copper alloy with improved fluidity for moulding durable and clean type. The bronze type made in 1455 included some zinc and lead in addition to copper and tin. No mechanization of printing had evolved at that time to compare with Gutenberg's press, but type became gradually smaller and books cheaper. This progress was halted by the Japanese invasions in the sixteenth century but recommenced in the seventeenth century. There was much division of labour and the government controlled both casting and printing.¹⁹ The Japanese adoption of movable-type printing in the seventeenth century followed their invasions of Korea and the removal of many important printed books.

Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries the population growth rate quadrupled, and there was a change to more intensive, continuous cultivation and a dramatic increase in the size of harvests, a result of advances in farming technology. There was a growth in medical knowledge and the compilation under King Sejong of the *Great Collection of Native Korean Prescriptions* (*Hyang'yak chipsongbang*). Also invented under Sejong were the rain gauge (1441) and the bowl-shaped or scaphe sundial. The rain gauge, the first in the world, was an iron cylinder with a depth of 42.5 cm (16.5 in) and a diameter of 17 cm (6.6 in). It was employed in an effort to alleviate the difficulties caused by seasonal fluctuation in rainfall, such as are recorded in the *Sejong sillok* (Veritable Record of King Sejong) around the year 1441. The scaphe sundial, based on Chinese Yuan dynasty ones, served as the first public clock in Korea. Two were ordered by Sejong to be placed in the centre of Seoul for the use of the general public. The originals were lost during the Japanese invasions and later versions were installed in the court.²⁰

Clepsydras or water clocks were first made in Korea in 718 according to the *Samguk sagi*. A night clepsydra was installed in Seoul in 1398 together with a belfry to ring the standard time throughout the capital. The neighbourhood of the belfry and the clepsydra was called Chongno (i.e. Bell street), the centre of present-day Seoul. A clepsydra with an automatic time-signal apparatus was completed in 1434, under King Sejong, and installed in the Kyongbok palace (see figure 2, Appendix 2, p. 234), and a jade clepsydra is recorded

夜坐巴向

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八道全蜀于府

北極城距老九十里
 南海關距老九十里
 東海關距老九十里
 西豐川距老九十里
 南北三平八里
 東西一百里



as having been constructed in 1438. The clepsydra now preserved in Toksu palace was the standard clock in use from the reign of King Hyojong (reigned 1649–59) until the end of the Choson. Portable clepsydras, for use in border stations and military camps, were first used in 1437.²¹

Cartography flourished during the early Choson and the world map produced in 1402 has been called the first accurate such map drawn in East Asia. It was based on Yuan Chinese and Arab sources and takes China as the central point. Choson dynasty maps were often collected together in portable atlas form, a practice which was not as common in China or Japan. A typical Choson atlas contained a world map, a map of China, a map of Korea, maps of each of the eight provinces of Korea, a map of Japan and a map of the Ryukyu islands (Okinawa) (fig. 59). The maps were usually folded in half or in six folds and the atlas had a stiff, oiled paper cover. They were either copied by hand or printed from woodblocks. Maps of Korea and the eight provinces were usually based on the 1487 edition of the *Tongguk yoji sungnam*, a geographical encyclopaedia of Korea, the result of King Sejong's encouragement of map-making and the invention in 1467 of a triangular surveying instrument. Efforts were made in the early Choson to produce maps of Korea based on actual survey, and the accuracy of maps gradually increased. Perhaps the best and most famous Choson dynasty map of Korea is that produced on woodblocks in about 1861 by Kim Chong-ho, under the title of *Taedong yoji chondo*, based on his work of thirty years earlier called the *Chonggudo*. They were both made up of rectangular units and Kim introduced the use of a map key. He also concentrated on natural and topographical features in his notes on the map, instead of the earlier emphasis on information about population and administrative centres. Kim's map was also remarkable for the accuracy of coastal lines and mountains.²²

Western maps of the world were introduced to Choson Korea through Jesuits in China. Matteo Ricci's world map of 1602 was brought back to Korea the very next year by a visiting scholar, Yi Kwang-chong, and in 1631 Chong Tu-won returned from Ming China with a musket, telescope, alarm clock, world map and books on astronomy and Western culture. Later, in 1644, when Crown Prince Sohyon was held hostage by the Manchus in Beijing, he met the Jesuit Adam Schall and also brought back works on Western science to Korea. Chong Yag-yong, one of the best-known early converts to Catholicism, devised pulley mechanisms which were employed in construction of the fortifications at Suwon, using knowledge acquired from Jean Terrenz's *Description of Ingenious Devices*. Advances were also made in calculating the calendar and in astronomy, using Western science.²³

Tombs

As in China, tombs were constructed at the foot of mountains, facing south between two ridges, in accordance with geomantic theories. The great importance placed on filial piety in Neo-Confucianist teaching led to the tombs of one's ancestors being regarded as sacred places. They played an important part in Confucian ritual and were visited at least twice a year, at lunar new year and at Chusok, the mid-autumn festival. Tombs were also status symbols, as can be seen in the tombs of the last two Korean rulers who were given 'emperor-style' tombs on the Chinese model after King Kojong tried to assert Korea's independence and declared himself emperor in 1899.²⁴ Up until then, the layout of the Choson

59. Map of Korea from a typical Korean-style portable atlas, which would usually also include a map of each province and a Sinocentric world map. Choson period, 19th century. 92.5 × 50.5 cm.

kings' tombs had followed an established pattern, continuing from that of the Koryo dynasty royal tombs. To a certain extent, this pattern was also based on Chinese imperial tombs; for example, the rows of officials, both civil and military, and the pairs of animals, both real and mythical, derive from China.

Korean royal tombs usually consist of a round tumulus surrounded by stone balustrades and low walls on the north, west and east sides, with, on the south side, a stone table and stone lanterns. The tomb is approached via a shrine (*chongjagak* or T-shaped building, called after its shape). In the kings' tombs, the rows of animals and officials are lined up behind the shrine, whereas in the last two 'emperor-style' tombs, they are in front of it.

Architecture

Korean palaces, shrines, temples, houses and many other structures were built on some of the same basic principles as Chinese ones. For example, they were constructed mainly of wood and had curved, overhanging roofs covered in ceramic tiles. The nail-less bracketing system was also employed in both cultures, enabling the heavy roofs to be supported and also allowing great liberty in roof design. Since the brackets could be seen from both inside and outside the building, they developed into a characteristic decorative feature. The rows of timber columns which formed the basic shape of the building were joined by non-structural walls, allowing a very flexible interior floor plan. Important buildings had coloured roof-tiles and painted wooden beams and brackets. Red, blue, yellow, white and green were the main colours used in the painting of wooden buildings, a technique which developed into an art form called *tanchong* in Korean.²⁵ Elaborate patterns and pictures covered wooden beams and brackets in important palaces, shrines and temples. Ordinary houses, however, were of plain wood with grey ceramic tiled roofs.

Although Choson dynasty palaces were generally built following the Chinese practice of symmetrical buildings laid out one behind another on a north-south axis facing south, some of them diverged from this strict model and developed asymmetrically in a uniquely Korean way, creating pleasing effects with hills, gardens and adjoining buildings. The Kyongbok palace in Seoul, which was the main and principal official palace, was most like the Chinese model, while the Changdok palace, likewise in the capital and which included the Piwon or Secret Garden, developed in a more independent way. It was originally a detached pleasure palace and only became the royal residence in 1609 after the Japanese invasions and the destruction of the Kyongbok palace. In 1867, when the royal family moved back to the restored Kyongbok palace, the Changdok palace reverted to its original function. It is the best preserved Choson royal palace. Another of the five main Choson royal palaces in Seoul, the Changgyong palace, was built facing east. This departure from the Confucian norm is probably due to the fact that Koryo palaces usually faced east and there had been a palace on the site of the Changgyong palace during the Koryo. The other two royal palaces were the Toksu and the Kyonghui. The former was only twice used as the royal residence, the last time being by King Kojong from 1897 to 1919, following the murder by the Japanese of Queen Min in Kyongbok palace.²⁶

Following Confucian practice, the Royal Ancestral Shrine or Chongmyo was built at the beginning of the Choson dynasty to house the ancestral tablets of the kings. Memorial services were held there five times a year from 1392 until 1945. There is now an annual

ceremony. The present building dates from 1608, when it was rebuilt after the Japanese invasions. Chongmyo lies to the east of the Kyongbok palace, while the Sajiktan altar, where the king carried out rituals to the earth and the five grains, lies to the west. This arrangement differs from and is much simpler than that in China, where there were originally four altars to heaven, earth, sun and moon located to the south, north, east and west of the capital. Ancestral shrines and portrait halls, where the ancestral spirit tablets and portraits of ancestors were kept, were everywhere regarded as sacred places. Confucian rites centring on the ancestral shrine, which was usually in the family house, took place at designated times throughout the year and involved the whole family.²⁷

OVERLEAF

60. Overview of Songgwang temple in southwest Korea. During the Choson dynasty, Confucianism prevailed and Buddhist temples were mainly hidden deep in the mountains.

Buddhist temples during the Choson dynasty tended to be built in remote mountainous areas as they were not officially welcome in the cities. The structure and arrangement of temple buildings therefore came to be determined to a certain extent by their natural surroundings. A traditional pattern of arrangement of temple buildings had, however, evolved in which the southern gate tower, the main hall and the lecture hall ran in a straight line from north to south, with a square corridor surrounding these buildings. This pattern was adapted to fit the mountainous surroundings. The underlying principle was that of the three levels of sanctity of the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon, which governed the layout of the different halls, themselves built to enshrine a particular deity. This principle was also followed in pre-Song China and pre-Kamakura Japan as well as in Korea. Choson Buddhist temples were probably more faithful to early Chinese traditions of Buddhist architecture than were the Chinese, where the residential mansion style developed. Japan, in contrast, developed its own eclectic style of monastic architecture. The destruction of many temples in the Japanese invasions has meant that early Choson Buddhist architecture hardly survives. Late Choson temple architecture and layout can be seen at Songgwang-sa, one of Korea's largest Son (Zen) temples, occupying a beautiful mountainous site in South Cholla province in southwest Korea (fig. 60).²⁸

Koreans, like Japanese but unlike Chinese, generally do not sit on chairs but kneel or sit on the floor. This practice has led to the development in Korea of an underfloor heating system called *ondol* and to the use of waxed paper for covering the warm floors. Shoes are always removed so that the waxed paper floors remain clean and shiny. Plain paper was formerly also used for lining the interior walls of houses and interior decoration was provided mainly in the form of painted screens. There was very little furniture and bedding was rolled up and put away every day in wooden chests. These chests developed into an art form, being decorated with elaborate metal hinges and handles and made in a variety of shapes and sizes according to their particular function. The layout of traditional houses in the Choson dynasty reflected the Confucian principle of separating the sexes and keeping women in the inner rooms, so that they were not seen by visiting men. One of the main rooms of the house (*sarangbang*) was used by the gentleman of the house as a study and for receiving visitors (fig. 57), while the woman's room, called the *anbang* or inner room, was associated with domestic activities such as sewing.

The city walls of Seoul were constructed at the beginning of the Choson dynasty and the surviving South Gate or Namdaemun, originally built between 1395 and 1398, was rebuilt in 1447. It is the oldest wooden structure in Seoul and is now designated National Treasure No. 1. It was originally the main entrance to the capital and a thoroughfare leads from it straight to the Kyongbok palace. The early Choson dynasty style of architecture

