

Introduction

The Author and Autobiographical Discourse

The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng consists of four autobiographical narratives written by Lady Hyegyŏng, an eighteenth-century Korean noblewoman. She was born in 1735, a daughter of Hong Ponghan (1713–1778) of the illustrious P’ungsan Hong family. As a consequence of Korean custom of the period, her personal name remains unknown.¹ In 1744, she married Crown Prince Sado (1735–1762). They were both nine years old at the time, and consummation did not take place until five years later. On the day of consummation, Prince Sado was appointed prince-regent and assumed an official role in governing. However, his father, King Yŏngjo (r. 1724–1776), still made the most important decisions. Lady Hyegyŏng bore Sado two sons and two daughters, the Princesses Ch’ŏngyŏn and Ch’ŏngsŏn. One of her sons died in infancy; the other later became King Chŏngjo (r. 1776–1800).

On one hot summer day in 1762, King Yŏngjo ordered Prince Sado, then twenty-seven, to get into a rice chest. The chest was sealed, and Sado died eight days later. This tragic episode hung over the Chosŏn court for many years, inexorably shaping the lives of those who had been close to Prince Sado. Despite deep chagrin

and a professed desire to end her life, Lady Hyegyŏng lived on and lent support to her son who had been left vulnerable by his father's tragic death.

This decision, however, haunted her all her life. Although widows were not expected to follow their husbands to death in Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910),² this was a special case. Prince Sado's bizarre execution by his father was an attempt to avoid the appearance of a criminal execution, which would, under Chosŏn custom, have required punishment of his entire family.³ Sado's son, the only remaining heir to the throne,⁴ would have likewise borne the stigma of criminality, something the Chosŏn court could not afford. Had Lady Hyegyŏng chosen to die, her death could have been seen as a protest against the royal decision or, alternatively, it might have deepened the suggestion that Sado had been guilty. Neither possibility would have furthered Chŏngjo's legitimacy. Lady Hyegyŏng's maternal allegiance as well as her sense of public duty to dynastic security precluded her suicide. In the context of the Chosŏn mentality, which would have seen suicide as an honorable alternative, to be indebted for her life to the king who had killed her husband definitely left her in a compromising position.

The circumstances of Prince Sado's death became a focal point for severe political turmoil. The immensity of its political implications cannot be exaggerated. That the conflict was between a reigning king and an heir apparent was troubling enough; more troubling was that the heir's son became the heir apparent and was subsequently enthroned. In 1764, to lessen the impact of the incident of Prince Sado on Chŏngjo's legitimacy, King Yŏngjo made Chŏngjo a posthumously adopted son of Prince Hyojang (1719–1728), the deceased older brother of Prince Sado. This measure legally severed Chŏngjo from Prince Sado; it meant that Chŏngjo was not in any legal sense the son of one who might be called a criminal. Despite these benefits, the adoption made an already delicate issue far more complex.

Because of the sensitive nature of this situation, any discussion of Chŏngjo's legitimacy became taboo, but the issue lurked just beneath the surface, always ready to ignite another round of political furor. Royal and affinal relatives, powerful families, and officials were divided on the issue of Chŏngjo's acceptability and became involved in debilitating feuds. Hong Ponghan, who served as a

high-ranking minister on the State Council at the time of Sado's death, emerged as his grandson's principal protector, leading the faction known as *sip'a*, whereas the Kyŏngju Kim, the family of Queen Chŏngsun (1745–1805), King Yŏngjo's second queen, emerged as a major force in the opposing camp known as *pyŏkp'a*. In the post-Sado court of recriminating politics, Lady Hyegyŏng not only had to navigate with extreme caution for her own preservation but also had to witness attacks against her father and the decline of her family's political fortunes.

When Yŏngjo died in 1776, Chŏngjo succeeded his grandfather to the throne. He displayed a certain ambivalence toward his maternal family, and the Hong family did not fare well under him. In the first year of his reign, Hong Inhan (1722–1776), Hong Ponghan's younger brother, was suspected of disloyalty to Chŏngjo and was executed. This cast a terrible pall over the Hong family. Nevertheless, Chŏngjo was devoted to his mother, and after this initial shock, the Hong family was allowed to live for a time in peaceful retirement. If they entertained hope of returning to their former glory, it ended with the sudden death of Chŏngjo in 1800. The accession to the throne of Chŏngjo's son, Sunjo (r. 1800–1834), not yet eleven, necessitated the regency of Queen Dowager Chŏngsun, the archenemy of the Hong family. Soon the Hong family suffered another tragedy. In 1801, Hong Nagim (1741–1801), Lady Hyegyŏng's younger brother, was accused of having converted to Catholicism and was executed. With Sunjo's assumption of personal rule in 1804, Lady Hyegyŏng's trials finally seem to have ended. King Sunjo was attentive to his grandmother and did what he could to comfort her.

The four narratives that comprise *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng* were written from 1795 to 1805, a ten-year period spanning the end of Chŏngjo's reign and Sunjo's accession. Lady Hyegyŏng began writing when Chŏngjo was still on the throne and did not complete the last memoir until after Sunjo had personally assumed power. She lived for ten years after finishing her last memoir and died in 1815, at the age of eighty.

The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng, known as *Hanjungnok* (Records written in silence) or *Hanjung mallok* (Memoirs written in silence), is viewed in contemporary Korea as a great literary masterpiece and an invaluable historical document. Rather than being composed in literary Chinese as were most writings by men before the modern

era, these memoirs were written in Korean, in *han'gŭl* script, making them accessible to the modern reader. To a certain extent, the reader's fascination is with the incident itself—a frightening story of a filicide. The fourth memoir depicts, in all its terror, the father-son conflict that culminates in Sado's death. It explores the sources of Sado's madness—and the aberrant behavior, uncontrolled rages, and violence that threatened the safety of the dynasty. The fact that a woman narrates this most public of incidents, an event that can be described as the ultimate in male power rivalry, makes *The Memoirs* unique in autobiographical literature. In the West until the modern period, autobiographies by women were a mere fraction of the total number of autobiographies. Moreover, the overwhelming majority focus exclusively on the private and domestic sphere of life.⁵ There seems to have been even fewer women autobiographers in East Asia. Japan produced a few self-narratives by women, but they tend to be diaries, and thus introspective and fragmentary.⁶

The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng is much more than a description of filicide, however. Of the four memoirs, only the last is devoted to that event; the first three focus on the author and the lives of people other than the central players in that incident. Although the four memoirs were conceived of and written as separate works on separate occasions for specific audiences in defense of specific individuals, they constitute an integral whole that moves from the personal to the public. The first, written in 1795, is a narration of Lady Hyegyŏng's life and, to a lesser extent, the lives of her natal family. Addressed to her nephew, the heir of the Hong family, it is an apologia for herself and her father, defending their choices to live on after Prince Sado's death. Each of the last three memoirs, which are addressed to King Sunjo, is increasingly public in subject matter and genre. The second memoir, written in 1801, is a defense of Lady Hyegyŏng's younger brother, Hong Nagim, and her paternal uncle, Hong Inhan, both of whom had been executed. The third memoir, written in 1802, describes the unrelenting obsession of her son, King Chŏngjo, with restoring honor to his father. The fourth and last memoir, written in 1805, finally recounts the history of the Sado incident—the tension in the Yŏngjo-Sado relationship, the son's mental illness and violent outbursts, and his death ordered by his father. Although the first three memoirs describe at length the emotional turmoil and political repercussions of the Sado in-

cident, the incident itself is referred to only cryptically. Hence, the last memoir functions almost as the resolution in a detective novel in that it answers many unanswered questions raised by the first three memoirs.

Written over a tumultuous ten-year period, these memoirs were in part prompted by external events such as Lady Hyegyŏng's sixtieth birthday or the execution of her brother. Writing a memoir was a very unusual activity for a woman at that time, and Lady Hyegyŏng had to surmount formidable cultural obstacles to do so. First, she had to overcome an inhibition against self-narration, and then she had to transcend, as she does in the final memoir, the reluctance to discuss the deficiencies and aberrant behavior of her husband and her father-in-law.

What motivated her? In the earlier memoirs, she was intent on justifying herself and her family. As her family lay in ruins, she felt it imperative to plead the causes of those members who had died in disgrace and to restore their honor, albeit posthumously. At some point, she decided that, for her and other members of her family to be judged fairly, their actions had to be seen in the proper perspective, which in turn required an accurate understanding of the Sado incident.

Lady Hyegyŏng also came to believe that the motives and actions of Prince Sado and King Yŏngjo, the central players in the incident, should be accurately portrayed and recorded. Discussion of the incident had been forbidden because it was against custom to mention royal misconduct. Moreover, it was hoped that silence would put those painful memories to rest. Instead, the silence only encouraged misrepresentation and misinterpretation. Exaggerated and distorted versions of royal motives and princely actions were whispered about and disseminated. Lady Hyegyŏng finally concluded that brushing the incident aside was not the answer. What had happened was horrible, but it would become even more monstrous in people's imaginations if left unexplained. She felt that the versions in circulation blamed or attributed willful misdeeds to one party or the other rather than seeing the event in the totality of complex human interaction, and she concluded that although she might not have been able to save them from their tragedy, she should at least rescue them from the more ignoble fate of being viewed as perverse villains by future generations. This required presenting them in their human complexity, caught between better

intentions and inexplicable impulses. This conviction led her to surmount a powerful reluctance to expose the failings in her husband or her father-in-law.

It was clearly difficult for her to present this relentlessly gloomy and terrifying tale—that was why she resisted writing it for so long—but she tells it with compassion as each player moves toward the tragic denouement. A special sympathy is reserved for her husband, Prince Sado, as she portrays his suffering and pain. She felt that by not following her husband in death, she left her conjugal duty unfulfilled. Writing this memoir was her way of seeking forgiveness.

The “imperatives of imaginative discourse”⁷ that an author follows when transforming a life lived into a life recounted are not confined to what the author professes them to be. In the process of recounting, the author desires to “recompose” as much as to “discover” self.⁸ Through the very act of writing, Lady Hyegyŏng was engaged in a quest to recompose and discover historical or human truth. She took great pains to reconstruct how it all happened, what each individual did, and in what order. But on a deeper, almost subconscious level, she searched for something more fundamental, some understanding that would explain the vagaries of human fate and the waywardness of the moral order.

Narrating Lives and the Sense of Self

Writing *The Memoirs* was a political act for Lady Hyegyŏng; the very act of writing them meant that she wished to testify for herself and the actors in her narration and to persuade others of her testimony. To be persuasive, she had to present causes and represent lives in accordance with the cultural grammar of her time.⁹ What resources in the repository of tradition did Lady Hyegyŏng possess? What paradigms of autobiographical and testimonial writing were available to her? Can her memoirs be described as identifiably in the feminine mode? How is her writing related to her sense of self?

Traditional Korean literature includes various kinds of first person, nonfiction narratives that are, if not necessarily autobiographical, revelatory of the writer's interior life. These include

travel literature and *chapki* or *chapnok* (miscellaneous writings).¹⁰ There are also straightforward memoirs, often with the title *mallok* (leisurely writing). Many powerful officials wrote reminiscences of their active service under this title. Most official memoirs, however, tend not to reveal anything remotely private in the lives of the royal family or the authors' own lives.¹¹ An interesting example is the memoir by Lady Hyegyŏng's father, Hong Ponghan, *Igikchae mallok*, which begins in 1733 when he was a young student and ends in 1748. He comments on his daughter's royal marriage in 1744, his passing the civil examination shortly thereafter, and the period when his career began to flourish. The memoir records several of his memorials¹² and various long conversations with Yŏngjo that were presumably indicative of his and the king's intellectual makeup and social stance. On the private or emotional life of either the king or himself, however, it is completely silent.¹³

Pei-yi Wu's study of autobiography in China underscores the enormous impact that biography had on autobiographical writing, which developed under its powerful and ubiquitous shadow. Wu argues that biography was conceived of as mainly fulfilling the historical function of transmitting moral principles; therefore it revealed only those facts deemed historically relevant, remaining silent about emotional and interior lives. Autobiographers had to overcome the inhibitions on self-expression imposed by the conventions of biography.¹⁴

In Korea, the biographies written in literary Chinese were in the same subgenres as those written in China, such as *chŏn/chuan* (biography), necrology, and *yŏnbo/nien-p'u* (life chronology).¹⁵ Biographies of Hong Ponghan by his sons, for instance, give some indication of what topics were considered worthy of inclusion in works in that genre. One, a life chronology of Hong Ponghan by his oldest son, Hong Nagin (1730–1777), records his public career but makes no mention of his marriage or the birth of his children except for that of Lady Hyegyŏng.¹⁶ The other, titled *Sŏnbugun yusa* (Memorable anecdotes from father's life), consists of reminiscences by his three younger sons.¹⁷ This piece pays homage to his familial virtues, but the focus is on Hong Ponghan as a son and brother—the loss of his mother when he was six, his remembrances of her, his devotion to his stepmother, his generosity to his sisters and brothers especially when they were in need, and so on.

Very little is said of his immediate home life. Nothing is said of his marriage or his children, except for occasional admonitions by him.¹⁸

After the Korean script, *han'gŭl*, was devised in the mid-fifteenth century, the written culture, which had previously been composed exclusively in literary Chinese by men, greatly expanded its scope to include many more subjects, genres, and participants. The writing of a certain class of women, including court ladies, aristocratic *yangban* women, and some courtesans, came to constitute a special portion of the written culture in the latter half of the Chosŏn period.

Men continued to write in literary Chinese, except for letters to women, certain genres of poetry, and other incidental pieces that concerned mostly private aspects of their lives. Women wrote almost exclusively in Korean. They used the vernacular as a means of self-expression and communication as well as a mode of social and political empowerment. They wrote poetry, essays, and manuals of manners and housekeeping for other women. Letters were the most usual form of writing and generally fulfilled social obligations to kin such as greetings and condolence.¹⁹ This custom changed the texture of social life by allowing women to play a distinct role in the written discourse, though within the limited sphere of domestic concerns.

Conscious attempts by women to seize control of the narratives of their own or others' lives also emerged, though tentatively. Epistolary form was occasionally resorted to for self-presentation.²⁰ In the royal court, palace ladies began to write about the lives of their mistresses in the form of romans à clef, which have been classified as "court novels" (*kungjŏng sosŏl*) but are increasingly viewed of late as documentary court literature (*kungjŏng ilgi munhak*).²¹ Recently, necrologies of men written by women in Korean have also come to light.²²

It is commonly believed that writing in Chinese and writing in Korean were dichotomous traditions, separated, respectively, by the gender of author and audience (male versus female), subject matter (public versus private), and genre (classical versus vernacular). While this perception may be valid to some extent, there was a closer relationship between the two traditions than has been acknowledged, as well as a large area in which the two converged,²³

at least when it came to the practice of writing about lives. The common thread binding these writings is adherence to a paradigm of virtue. Necrologies, court novels, and narratives of self present their subjects as paragons of familial or social virtue and arrange chronological details to construct the closest approximation to the ideal.

Lady Hyegyŏng's memoirs depart from this model. It is not that she renounces the paradigm. Though she confesses to a deviation from the ideal, she never eschews her wholehearted commitment to it. Nonetheless, her narration is informed by a realization that life does not allow one to live up to the ideal. In the first three memoirs, this inability is attributed to the multiple roles with which one must contend, each carrying its own demands that can and often do clash with the demands of other roles. In the fourth memoir, the conflict is no longer presented as stemming from external factors alone but from internal forces as well. True, the conflict is between father and son, but each is driven by his innermost dark forces. As Lady Hyegyŏng probes the human psyche, she accepts the imperfections and weaknesses of her subjects and allows space for autonomous interior life. In this, her memoirs clearly depart from standard paradigmatic representations of lives.

Her narration is imbued with poignancy and complexity. She accepts human imperfection and acknowledges the inability to live up to the ideal but maintains the Confucian belief in the perfectibility of humanity and the notion that social privilege should be based on moral renewal. She is acutely aware of the exacting demands that exalted position makes on her and the other highly placed persons in her memoirs. The tension of her narration derives from the fact that she is influenced by two seemingly opposing forces, to each of which she appears strongly committed. In other words, she unfolds her extraordinary tale as "an elaborate drama of honour,"²⁴ a drama of her class and milieu.

In studies of Western autobiography, it has been posited that a sense of the discrete self, a consciousness of self as an isolated being, is a precondition for writing autobiography.²⁵ Women autobiographers, however, are seen in a somewhat different light. The female sense of self, as opposed to the male sense of the discrete self, is defined by its relationships to the persons surrounding the self.²⁶ This is given as a reason why women sometimes appended a

short autobiography to long biographies of their husbands, as did Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, in the seventeenth century.²⁷ The English noblewoman, however, clearly wishes to assert her own identity.²⁸ She expresses a conscious desire to be different from the norm, declaring that she prefers writing to needlework and that this sets her apart from other women.²⁹ In contrast, Lady Hyegyŏng does not display the faintest desire to depart from the norm. Because of her exalted position, she seldom had a chance to speak of her own accomplishments in such skills as needlework, but she does boast of her mother's talent. In fact, her idea of being extraordinary was not to depart from but to adhere to and excel by the norm.

It is clear that Lady Hyegyŏng and Margaret Cavendish had different senses of self. One of the more obvious differences lay in the way they perceived the relationship between their private and public selves. Margaret Cavendish may sometimes express her sense of self through her relationship to other people around her, but there is no question that she regards her private self as distinct from and prior to her public self. In both, the private self is given a certain autonomy and space apart from the public self. In Lady Hyegyŏng's work, however, the space between private self and public self becomes quite small as the relationship between the two becomes ever more closely intertwined. She acknowledges the distinction between the private and public selves but feels that the redemption of her public self is indispensable to the integrity of her private self. Time and time again, Lady Hyegyŏng stresses the depth and acuteness of shame she felt for failing to live up to what she accepts as the legitimate demands of her multiple roles. She is convinced that only by feeling and confessing the acuteness of her shame, the degree of which should be proportional to the distance she has fallen from the ideal, can she be redeemed. She tries to atone for the failings of her public self by the intensity of the remorse of her private self, and in this way the interdependence between the two selves becomes complete. Even in the fourth memoir, though she allows space to the autonomous interior lives of Yŏngjo and Sado, she does not deviate from her belief in the close relationship between their private and public selves. For Sado, she merely replaces remorse with suffering. That is, she pleads for understanding of his public misconduct on the basis of the depth of his private suffering.

The Genres

The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng has given rise to a certain ambiguity concerning genre, caused largely by a desire to define *The Memoirs* as a single integrated work. When these four memoirs were compiled into a composite work during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, compilers and editors did not respect the individual pieces; they split individual memoirs and rearranged them into a chronological account.³⁰ The titles given by different compilers to the integrated memoirs, *Hanjungnok* or *Hanjung mallok*, indicate that the work was regarded either as a testimony or reminiscence. In the modern era, until quite recently, *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng* has been classified as a court novel.³¹ At present, there are a number of views concerning the genre of *The Memoirs*,³² but the tradition of describing the four memoirs as a single work in a single genre persists. However, once we acknowledge that the four memoirs were separate pieces written in different genres, the task of defining these genres becomes much clearer.

From the beginning, Lady Hyegyŏng was keenly aware that narration was a mode of empowerment.³³ She drew not only from the resources of the tradition of women's writing in the *han'gŭl* script, including letters, testimonials, and court novels, but also from men's writing in literary Chinese. Not having a ready-made form available to her, she appropriated for each memoir a genre that had hitherto been used almost exclusively by men. As the subjects of the memoirs move from the personal to the public, so do the genres in which the memoirs are written.

The first memoir, addressed to the heir of her natal family, takes the form of a family injunction. The remaining three memoirs, adjusted to a royal reader, are in properly and progressively more public genres. The second memoir is in the form of a memorial, the third a biography, and the fourth a historiography. Lady Hyegyŏng transforms these formal and impersonal genres into narratives full of passionate testimony in a personal voice.

In 1795 when Lady Hyegyŏng wrote her first memoir, she had just reached her sixtieth birthday, and her son, King Chŏngjo, was on the throne. Although it was almost exclusively men who left injunctions to the younger members of their families, it is perhaps not strange that her nephew asked Lady Hyegyŏng, the Hong family's

most prominent member, to write something for the family, or that she complied. To provide such a memoir for one's children has been a common practice in many cultures. In the West, autobiography has frequently been addressed to the author's children. The format easily accommodates both the urge to impart to youngsters life's hard-learned lessons and the desire to be remembered by them for one's distinct self.³⁴

In Korea, family injunctions tended to be purely instructional, brief, and written in an impersonal voice.³⁵ Lady Hyegyŏng's first memoir, *The Memoir of 1795*, departs from this usual form. Although it contains advice and exhortations to the younger generation, its main body is a self-narration followed by a postscript devoted to short family remembrances. This is the only piece among the four that is in accord with the principle that Lejeune calls the "autobiographical pact," in which the writer, the narrator, and the protagonist are the same person.³⁶ Lady Hyegyŏng selects and orders her experiences into an integrated pattern, a process for the writing of autobiographies described by Northrop Frye.³⁷ In the postscript, as she briefly sketches the lives of her parents, her siblings, their spouses, her uncles and aunts, and even her servants, she attempts to bring order and meaning to their lives.

One is struck by a pointedly defensive tone in her presentation of self and other members of her family. It is the defensiveness of someone who feels that she has been deeply compromised by some terrible event and believes that she must assert her innocence. Though Lady Hyegyŏng does not discuss the death of Prince Sado in much detail here, she obviously felt that she and her family had been irrevocably marked by their association with the incident. Indeed, in the eyes of the world, this was the case. Although the political fortunes of the Hong family did not wane until a decade after the tragic incident, the decline was tied to issues associated with Sado's death. Inevitably, stinging attacks ensued on the moral character of its members, especially Hong Ponghan. Her writing should be understood in this context. She felt acutely responsible for her family's downfall, believing that her marriage into the royal house had led to their suffering and decline. That her marriage was not in the least at her own initiative did not diminish the deep sense of guilt that pervades her first memoir.

More to the point, she wrote the memoir as a rebuttal to decades of implicit and explicit accusations made against her family. Thus she persistently stresses the moral integrity of each of her sub-

jects—how virtuous each was, and how, placed repeatedly at moral crossroads, each chose unfailingly the alternative that fulfilled the most public of his or her duties.

However unusual in form, *The Memoir of 1795* is in spirit a genuine family injunction. By refuting criticisms and charges made against herself and her family, she wishes more than anything else to reestablish their moral legitimacy so that younger generations will reclaim the honorable family tradition. She is fully aware that moral integrity is an elusive thing, subject to different views and interpretations. In this sense, she is clearly seizing narratives of self and family in order to control destiny, turning what is usually an impersonal form into a self-narration and family chronicle with which to restore family honor and integrity.

The Memoir of 1801, her second memoir, was written to protest the then-recent execution of her brother, Hong Nagim, during the 1801 persecution of Catholics that reflected the changing ideological climate in the Chosŏn government following the death of King Chŏngjo in 1800. These persecutions would continue for the rest of the nineteenth century.³⁸ The charges against Hong Nagim, however, were unsubstantiated and unfounded.³⁹ Lady Hyegyŏng attributes the accusations entirely to an acrimonious interfamilial feud. Still reeling from the grief of losing her son and the shock of seeing her brother executed, she reveals herself at her bitterest and most emotional as she defends not only her brother but also Hong Inhan, her paternal uncle, whose execution in 1776 had signaled the decline of the Hong family.

The Memoir of 1801 had been written for the king and was prompted by a profound sense of outrage. Hence, it is not strange that its form resembles a memorial. Although most memorials to the throne discussed matters of a public nature, there was a category reserved for those who felt aggrieved about something concerning themselves or persons close to them such as family members or mentors. These memorials tended to be narratives in which the authors refuted unfavorable accounts by presenting contrary evidence and displaying appropriate emotions. Hong Nagyŏn, Lady Hyegyŏng's younger brother, wrote such a memorial in 1809 and sent it to King Sunjo. He was provoked by a memorial criticizing Hong Ponghan, who was long since dead.⁴⁰ The younger Hong's memorial passionately defends his father and his older brother, emphasizing their loyalty, public spiritedness, and the terrible injustice of the accusations against them.⁴¹ Although memorial

literature has always been viewed as a forum for public policy, it would be more fitting to view memorials such as Hong Nagyun's as testimonial literature. There are many memorials of this type, and they perhaps should be studied as such.

The privilege of sending a memorial to the throne was open to educated men who were deemed qualified to participate in public discourse conducted in literary Chinese. Lady Hyegyŏng's *Memoir of 1801* is remarkable in that she privatizes a mode of writing that had been reserved exclusively for public discourse among men. Availing herself of her position as the grandmother of the king, she appropriates this genre and uses it for testimony in Korean. She contends that the charges used to send the two Hong men to the gallows were purely political and that both men's fates were extremely unjust. She makes these assertions by presenting as much evidence as possible with commensurate moral outrage.

The Memoir of 1802, written a year later, is much more sober. It discusses some of the same issues as the second memoir, but instead of flaring with outrage, it relies on the force of Chŏngjo's filial devotion. It presents a moving portrayal of Chŏngjo as a son obsessed with restoring honor to his ill-fated father, whose tragic death he witnessed as a ten-year-old boy. As discussed earlier, soon after Sado's death, probably fearing that Sado's criminality would undermine his grandson's legitimacy, Yŏngjo made Chŏngjo an adopted son of Sado's deceased older brother. Legally and ritually this limited the honor which Chŏngjo could render to Sado. Lady Hyegyŏng recounts that, in his unrequited obsession, Chŏngjo drew up a plan in which he would fulfill his dream of restoring honor to his father as well as to the dishonored members of the Hong family. Yet he died before he could enact his plan. In appealing to Sunjo by recounting to him Chŏngjo's unfulfilled aspirations, Lady Hyegyŏng privatizes the genre of biography as well as its subject. This memoir is the biography of a filial son rather than the biography of a king who was, in fact, one of the most brilliant rulers of the Chosŏn dynasty. Moreover, it is written by the mother of this filial son and addressed to his son, upon whom filiality presumably weighed just as heavily.

The Memoir of 1805 presents the incident of Prince Sado. With Lady Hyegyŏng's claim that it recounts the truthful history of the royal filicide of the crown prince, it enters the realm of historiography. However, historiography as practiced in Korea was written

according to well-defined conventions. These included third person narration based on sources other than the writer's personal observations so as to impart objectivity and credibility to the narrative.⁴² Since Lady Hyegyŏng's narrative of the incident of Prince Sado was a first person eyewitness account, it flagrantly defies historiographical conventions in several crucial aspects despite its claim to historiographical status.

The first violation of historiographical convention is its emphasis on the personal. Though Lady Hyegyŏng is aware that the incident was a complex mixture of the political and the personal and intimates the political dimensions of the affair, she presents the incident primarily as a personality conflict between father and son.

The second violation of convention is the mode of narration. Not only does she narrate in the first person, but she eschews the customary indirection in describing the failings of the king and the royal family. One senses her belief that the only redemption for them and the other players involved lies in her portrayal of them in their full human complexity and imperfection, causing and enduring pain. This offers the psychological insight so rarely found in historical documents.

The third violation concerns the source. In discussing Sado's life before she married him and entered the palace, she relies upon accounts she heard from other people. But as soon as the narration enters the period when she was present, she relies almost exclusively on her own memory and observation.⁴³

The genre of Lady Hyegyŏng's *Memoir of 1805* constitutes a curious exchange of the public and the private. On the one hand, the history of a ruler and his heir is recounted as the story of father and son by the son's wife. Here, the privatization of an "impersonal" and "public" genre finds an extreme manifestation. On the other hand, it exteriorizes and historicizes her private memory as public history.

The Individual Memoirs: Themes and Issues

THE MEMOIR OF 1795

In *The Memoir of 1795*, Lady Hyegyŏng organizes her life into a simple pattern: her Edenic childhood, which ends abruptly with

her wedding at the age of nine; her life in the palace, which soon turns into an unremitting ordeal, first because of her husband's strange illness and then, after his death, because of labyrinthine court politics; and her death wish, which repeatedly punctuates her interior life and finally dissolves in a moment of epiphany as she embraces life when her grandson, Sunjo, a long-awaited heir to the throne, is born on her fifty-fifth birthday in 1790. Despite the extraordinary life she recounts, this pattern is a variation on one of the most common archetypes. What gives her story its particular flavor and force is the exploration of what constitutes peace and ordeal and how the final resolution is reached.

The existence of peace or ordeal in her life is determined by the absence or presence of conflicting demands placed upon her. Childhood is characterized by their absence; adult life, by the presence of a multitude of sharply conflicting ones. Unable to meet all of them satisfactorily, she feels deep shame and guilt. The final resolution is achieved when Sunjo is born on her birthday, because she takes this as a sign that Heaven has affirmed her worthiness and approved of her life as one lived for the public cause.

Childhood functions as a special signifier in her narration. It represents a golden age of perfect harmony in which emotion and duty naturally and spontaneously cohere. She had only one role, that of a daughter. She was loved by her parents, and she loved and obeyed them in return; this mutual affection brought only pleasure to everyone concerned. Her move from her natal home to the palace, obviously a passage from childhood to adulthood, signifies passing from private life to public life and from a life of harmonious simplicity to a life of multiple roles. When she married and acquired other roles—wife, daughter-in-law, then mother, and Crown Princess Consort (*sejabin*)—she was no longer able to satisfactorily discharge the duties of all of these roles. The most conspicuous conflicts were between her role as a daughter to her natal family and her newly acquired roles in marriage. By the norms of eighteenth-century Korean Confucian society, she was to transfer her primary allegiance to her husband's family, yet this social prescription did not acknowledge the legitimacy of the emotions of newly married young women. It was unreasonable to expect that a young woman, on joining a husband whom in most cases she had not seen before, should naturally transfer her loyalty to him and his family of strangers.⁴⁴ Thus a discrepancy was created between her

continuing affection for her natal family and the limits placed on what she was permitted to do for them. This was brought home to Lady Hyegyŏng when she was not permitted to wear proper mourning after her mother died.⁴⁵ In fact, this sense of unrequited affection for their natal families appears to have been a recurring theme in the daily lives of women.

In her study of autobiographies of Victorian women, Valerie Sanders proposes that in Britain, it was in women's autobiography that childhood was discovered. She attributes this to the fact that "many Victorian women are relatively unselfconscious," a tendency that enables them to describe this rather comical period of their life.⁴⁶ This is not the way Lady Hyegyŏng perceives herself as a child. She presents herself as having been a perfect little girl with no trace of childishness. Nonetheless, her idealization of childhood and her strong nostalgia for it are noteworthy. One seldom encounters such sentiment in writings by men during Chosŏn Korea. Lady Hyegyŏng, having left her childhood home, remembers childhood with special affection and "invents" it in her narration.

Lady Hyegyŏng also experienced conflict between the demands imposed by the roles that came with her marriage, each of which included both public and private aspects. The most extreme example of this concerned what was proper for her to do when her husband died. Wifely and maternal duty claimed her with almost equal force, but each required an opposite course of action. One demanded taking her own life, the other living on in shame. Lady Hyegyŏng justifies her decision to live as choosing the most public of her duties, the course that benefited dynastic security. This coincided with her maternal duty. However, the fact that this duty had a primary claim does not obliterate the fact that she failed to discharge her wifely duty. Thus she says, "Wishing to repay the throne and to protect the Grand Heir, I gave up the idea of killing myself. Nevertheless, how can I ever forget, even to the last moment of my consciousness, the shame of not having known the proper end and my regret over my long and slow life."

In defending her family, Lady Hyegyŏng applies the same logic, stating that they were placed in situations in which they had to choose the more public of their duties. Her father chose to remain in office in support of his grandson after Prince Sado's death. Her younger brother, Hong Nagim, chose to compromise his honor to save his father's life. The list goes on; the choice between personal

honor and public cause is a familiar theme in her narration. The choices she and her father made required deep compromises of personal honor, which were the cause of her shame. But at the same time, she implies that it was also their ultimate sacrifice born of their devotion to the public cause.

Yet in one crucial instance she fails to reason in this manner. She greets with shock and bitterness Yǒngjo's decree of 1764 that made Chǒngjo an adopted son of the deceased Prince Hyojang. Though the reasons for this measure were not specified in the decree, it is difficult to see it as anything but an attempt to protect Chǒngjo's legitimacy, since the adoption passed the line of succession from Yǒngjo to Chǒngjo through Prince Hyojang, bypassing Prince Sado completely and avoiding the ominous shadow that Sado's death cast upon his son's legitimacy. Under this ruling, Lady Hyegyǒng lost her claim to status as the legal parent of the heir apparent and her future status as Queen Dowager. That she greeted the news with shock and bitterness is understandable. However, writing this narration thirty-one years after the ruling's enforcement, Lady Hyegyǒng still does not acknowledge that the decree might have been issued to protect her son's legitimacy or even that it served any public purpose. To the end, she maintains that the decree was unjust and needless. We can only speculate on Lady Hyegyǒng's refusal to view this more objectively. Perhaps it was too painful to acknowledge that she and her husband had become encumbrances to her son's legitimacy. If she had to sacrifice her personal honor for the public cause, then she could accept the sacrifice. But it was entirely different to believe that she and her husband had become the very sources of dishonor.

Although she does not confront certain issues, the act of writing the narrative probed her most profound doubt and disillusion over the discrepancy between her expectations and her experiences. She grew up believing in a correspondence between the moral order and human affairs. This belief, however, was constantly challenged. In her own life, she was repeatedly confronted by events beyond her wildest imaginings. More than that, life generally seemed chaotic and random. Thus it seemed to her that a vision of harmony and order was only briefly glimpsed during her childhood; with childhood's passing, that vision was irretrievably lost.

She had much to ponder. How could she explain her experiences? Why was there so much suffering and disorder? Could it be

that calamities occurred because people were at fault? Were they personally responsible for their misery? By the cultural grammar of her society, a moral person was someone with good intentions and sound judgment. This made it difficult to accept the possibility that a good person could make fundamental errors or harbor a tragic flaw.

If people did not cause their own fate, then was it possible that Heaven had no concern for human society? This was tantamount to denying the existence of the moral order, an impossible thought for her. She had to believe that Heaven manifested its will in some logical pattern, but this pattern was certainly invisible and incomprehensible to her. Thus, it is almost in protest against Heaven that she records its inconsistencies as they were manifested in individual lives. It is as though, by bearing testimony to the suffering and misery in individual lives, she could counterbalance the incomprehensible designs of Heaven. Thus she laments all the imperfections of life. Her childhood, a time of perfect happiness that ended abruptly, becomes an emblem of everything that ends before it runs its natural course and of all the unfulfilled promises. In fact, this sense of unrequitedness defines sadness for her.

Despite her denials of personal responsibility, there lurked deep in her psyche a suspicion that perhaps she was the cause of her own fate. Why should she bear so much misery and tragedy otherwise? If she did not herself invite these terrible events, then at least she was placed in such situations. Did Heaven hate her? Was she somehow intrinsically despicable? This doubt explains her tremendous relief at her grandson's birth on her birthday. She took his birth as a sign that Heaven recognized her life-long devotion to the public cause and affirmed its worth. A tentative conciliation was struck between her belief and her life. It was a fragile peace. The divine sign did not take away her shame nor did it right the wrong, but it did affirm that her life had not been in vain.

THE MEMOIR OF 1801

This fragile peace was to be completely shattered a decade later. When Chǒngjo died in 1800 after a brief illness, Lady Hyegyǒng seems to have become prostrate with grief. He was in his prime, his forty-ninth year, and the death was very sudden. With the assumption of regency by Queen Dowager Chǒngsun, power began

to reverse. Insults were heaped upon the Hong family. Lady Hyegyŏng felt herself humiliated and unwelcome; she was pointedly reminded that she was not Chŏngjo's legal parent, a painful fact that had been glossed over as much as possible during her devoted son's reign. Her will to live was almost destroyed by the loss of her son, for whom she had sacrificed her other duties, and the insults that reawakened all of her terrible memories. But when her brother Hong Nagim was executed in 1801 on charges she thought completely ludicrous, she grew so enraged that she wished to live in order to vindicate him. She expresses a similar sentiment about restoring the honor of her uncle, Hong Inhan, who was executed in 1776.

Writing this memoir was the first step in this endeavor. Unlike *The Memoir of 1795*, this one is written to the king to protest and correct criminal verdicts and is public in content and purpose. It conveys a greater sense of urgency. If the writing of the first memoir can be seen as an attempt to reconcile belief and experience, this one can be seen as born of a sense of betrayal by fate, a sense that Heaven has dealt her more blows than she deserves and that she should take matters into her own hands in the limited time left to her. Thus, much more explicitly than the earlier memoir, this one is written to take control of history.

Written in the heat of aggrieved passion, *The Memoir of 1801* presents rancorous and gloomy views of life. In this description of the labyrinthine politics of the post-Sado court, even the mother-son relationship between Lady Hyegyŏng and Chŏngjo, which is presented in rosy tints in the other memoirs, is not without conflict. In the years between Prince Sado's death and Chŏngjo's accession, they labored under extreme tension. Chŏngjo was made Crown Prince two months after his father's death⁴⁷ and was never free of Sado's spectre and the terror and insecurity that were associated with his death. Under no circumstances could he alienate his grandfather, which was why Lady Hyegyŏng sent her son to live in the same palace precinct as Yŏngjo. Nor could Chŏngjo afford to displease anyone else who might adversely affect his relationship with his grandfather. Princess Hwawan, Yŏngjo's favorite daughter, was said to have exerted much influence over her father and posed special problems. Lady Hyegyŏng draws a damning portrait of Hwawan as a capricious, power-hungry, domineering, ignorant woman, but Chŏngjo had to stay in his aunt's good graces.

In addition, there were Chǒngjo's own complex feelings toward his maternal family. Although he appreciated his maternal grandfather's devotion, he was resentful of what he considered the older man's overbearing interference. One could also imagine that Chǒngjo resented that the Hong family, who initially and for the most part owed their prosperity to Prince Sado, behaved after his death as if nothing had happened. Lady Hyegyǒng argues that this behavior was to assuage Yǒngjo's uncertainty concerning Chǒngjo; if Yǒngjo were to retain as heir the grandson born of the son he had just put to death, he needed assurances of loyalty from everyone associated with the child. But as a child, Chǒngjo may not have understood that fact.

The events leading to Hong Inhan's execution came at the end of Yǒngjo's reign, and Lady Hyegyǒng presents them as the culmination of the tensions born of a highly charged political atmosphere. Yǒngjo was over eighty and in ill health. In an audience with ministers of the State Council in 1775, Yǒngjo proposed that Chǒngjo be appointed to the prince-regency. Hong Inhan, then the Minister of the Left, took a position in that audience that was judged to be seditious and disloyal to Chǒngjo.

The main charges of disloyalty were that Hong Inhan opposed the establishment of Chǒngjo's regency and used language in opposing it that undermined Chǒngjo's qualifications and thus his legitimacy. Both issues, the question of regency and the particular language Hong Inhan used, are so embedded in the intricacies of the history and politics of the eighteenth-century Chosŏn court that they warrant some explanation. There were two kinds of regency in the Chosŏn dynasty. The first type was established when the king was in minority and the most senior queen dowager acted as his regent. The second type, the prince-regency, was established when the king wished to delegate a portion of his administrative duties to the heir apparent either because of age or ill health. The latter variety, because of the tension intrinsic to the situation, was viewed with apprehension. During the political strife of the eighteenth century, when the prince-regency was riddled with factional implications, the question of the regency inevitably took on added complexity.

The prince-regency of Kyǒngjong, Yǒngjo's predecessor and older brother, seems to have set off a long sequence of chain reactions associated with this institution. That regency was installed

in 1717 because of King Sukchong's failing health and poor eyesight. Sukchong was not happy with his heir, Kyŏngjong, who appears to have been mentally and physically quite feeble and deficient.⁴⁸ Only with the pledge of the senior Noron Ministers' loyalty was Kyŏngjong kept and his regency instituted.⁴⁹ Kyŏngjong had no children,⁵⁰ and soon after his accession, his only surviving brother, Yŏngjo, was appointed heir apparent. As Kyŏngjong's health weakened, a censor proposed that Yŏngjo be made regent. Since a prince-regency implied that the king was in some sense deficient, officials were expected to resist the proposal for a time and then agree to it only reluctantly even though the king himself broached the topic. However, the Noron were a little too eager for Yŏngjo's prince-regency, and the Soron used this to fuel Kyŏngjong's resentment of them. No regency was instituted, but the discussion functioned as a catalyst for the famous purge of the Noron of 1721–1722.

The next prince-regency was the ill-fated one of Prince Sado. It was installed in 1749 when he reached his fifteenth year, and it ended with his death thirteen years later.⁵¹

In view of the menacing and complex associations the prince-regency had acquired, it was natural that when Yŏngjo brought up the issue of Chŏngjo's regency in an audience in 1775, those present responded with extreme nervousness and caution. No one assented, and Hong Inhan objected to it quite strongly. This much is clear, but exactly what he said, and when, and why, are not so clear. In fact, conspicuous discrepancies as well as different interpretations exist between the accounts by Lady Hyegyŏng and that presented in the *Sillok*, the official annals. Consistent with official views at the time of its compilation, the *Sillok* states that Hong Inhan was a traitor and presents his objection as an insolent and willful act based on ulterior motives.⁵² Lady Hyegyŏng, on the other hand, attributes it to his flustered state of mind and his desire to get through the situation by saying something as noncommittal and innocuous as possible. Another point of disagreement between the two versions involves Lady Hyegyŏng's alleged note to Hong. The *Sillok* says that Lady Hyegyŏng, hearing of her uncle's stance, sent him a note pleading with him to accept the royal proposal, but that even after having been apprised of royal intentions, Hong still opposed the regency.⁵³ Lady Hyegyŏng says nothing about sending a letter.

Several factors lead one to suspect that though she probably sent a message to Hong Inhan, it was one urging him to oppose the regency. One may accept at face value the *Sillok* statement that she sent a message; *Sillok* historians are not known to fabricate events. They did, however, interpret them freely to suit their views, and so one may certainly question *Sillok* claims concerning the content of the message, which would have been sealed and treated with great discretion. In her *Memoir of 1801*, Lady Hyegyŏng professes a belief that the regency had been the origin of her husband's downfall and that she wished to avoid one for her son at all costs. Such a message to Hong Inhan would explain her acute sense of guilt for his death: "there is not one which is not my responsibility and my fault."

It should be noted that her uncle was judged to have been disloyal to her son, who put him to death, and that *The Memoir of 1801* was written after Chŏngjo had died. What did she say while her son was alive? In *The Memoir of 1795*, she refers to this incident only briefly: "My uncle mysteriously committed a slip of the tongue in the winter of ŭlmi (1775). This led to the ruin of the family." This brevity may have been a concession to her son's feelings, but she maintains that her uncle erred, not that he committed a crime. If Lady Hyegyŏng believed that Hong Inhan had engaged in hostile and seditious actions against her son as the *Sillok* alleges,⁵⁴ it is doubtful that she would have forgiven him, even given her concern to restore her family's honor. More to the point, it is even more unlikely that, during her son's reign, she would have presented her uncle's objections to his regency as a mere slip of the tongue. As it is, she seems to have regarded her uncle with a mixture of family loyalty and certain reservations about his intelligence and integrity.

She displays none of these reservations toward her brother Nagim, who she confesses was her favorite. As she presents it, Hong Nagim's life, more than that of any other member of her family, exhibits the greatest discrepancy between nobility of character and the cruelty of fate. She sees him as an innocent victim whose early promise for greatness was nipped prematurely because of his scruples and filial devotion, and whose life in the remote countryside and conscientious avoidance of worldly fame led to execution as a heretic. She is convinced that her brother was killed in her place. In seeing him as her surrogate, she identifies with him completely.

She does not see his or her plight as merely a personal misfortune; she sees it as a sign of the disruption of the social order. The tentative resolution she had achieved in 1795 is completely shaken, but she could not accept what she saw as prevailing disorder, a state in which personal honor and social justice had no place. This memoir was written in part as an attempt to restore this order. When Sunjo reinstated Hong Nagim's honor in 1807, a few years after he assumed personal rule,⁵⁵ she must have felt at least partially vindicated. Hong Inhan's reinstatement took longer. In 1855, one sexagesimal cycle after Lady Hyegyŏng's sixtieth birthday, King Ch'ölchong (r. 1849–1863) posthumously restored Hong Inhan's honor.⁵⁶ It appears that this was partly motivated by Lady Hyegyŏng's memoir. Though she did not live to see her uncle reinstated, her narrative ultimately prevailed.

THE MEMOIR OF 1802

This memoir covers more or less the same ground as the one written the previous year. But whereas *The Memoir of 1801* is a cry of despair, this is a much more reasoned and calm plea. Over time Lady Hyegyŏng composed herself and developed a more effective way to present her case. No longer are there suggestions of tension between her and her son; the mother-son relationship is once again restored to the pedestal of perfect understanding and devotion. In contrast to *The Memoir of 1801*, this memoir addresses her grandson directly and invokes the primacy of filial piety, a most prized virtue in Confucian society. In this way, she appeals to a personal and ethical imperative.

She rhetorically assumes that Sunjo, out of filial devotion, will wish to carry out those things his father had wanted to do but had left incomplete because of his premature death. Thus she claims that what she asks Sunjo to do is nothing more than what his father had hoped to accomplish. By equating her requests with Chŏngjo's unfulfilled hopes, she is implying that compliance with her wishes would not only please her but his father as well.

What exactly did Chŏngjo want to do for his parents? It was well known that he was extremely pained that his adoption kept him from rendering Prince Sado and Lady Hyegyŏng the full honor due to the parents of a reigning king. On the first day of his reign, Chŏngjo lamented, "Alas, I am really Prince Sado's son. The Late

Majesty made me an adopted son of Prince Hyojang since he thought the main line of the family should be given precedence. Isn't it sad! . . . Though propriety must be strict, human emotion cannot but be expressed."⁵⁷ Lady Hyegyŏng reveals that Chŏngjo had elaborate plans to mend this imperfect state of affairs and that the executor of these plans was to be Sunjo. Chŏngjo planned that in 1804, when Sunjo reached his fifteenth year, he would abdicate the throne to Sunjo, directing that he render full honors to his grandfather and, by extension, his grandmother. In this way, Prince Sado was to be posthumously made king without Yŏngjo's decree having been countermanded. This was obviously an extremely circuitous, even fanciful, plan. After the third monarch, T'aejong (r. 1400–1418), no Chosŏn king had abdicated voluntarily. Because Chŏngjo died in 1800, the question of the feasibility of this plan was moot.⁵⁸ Even as fantasy, it underscores the lengths to which Chŏngjo contemplated going to honor his father without violating the dynastic authority of the Yi royal house. If Chŏngjo had been willing to reverse Yŏngjo's decree, he could have offered honors to his father to his heart's content.⁵⁹ However, Chŏngjo seems to have felt that to reverse the decree would undermine the moral authority of the Yi royal house and, by extension, his own moral authority.⁶⁰

Chŏngjo's unrequited filial devotion is the central force of this memoir. His affection for his father is characterized by intensity and pathos. Chŏngjo was one of the most able and accomplished monarchs of Chosŏn Korea, but what his reign immediately conjures up are the artifacts he left to commemorate his father. These include Suwŏn (Hwasŏng), the city in which he reinterred his father and that he rebuilt as a shrine to his father's memory, and magnificent processional paintings that depict Chŏngjo's entourage in full regalia on the way to Prince Sado's tomb.⁶¹ We can speculate on the reasons for his obsession. One is the traumatic circumstance under which he lost his father. On the day that Sado was ordered to enter the rice chest, Chŏngjo, a child not yet ten, lay prostrate behind his father, begging Yŏngjo for his father's life until he was physically removed from the scene.⁶² Could he ever have forgotten such a moment? Then, when he was made Crown Prince and assumed his father's role, he had to deal with Yŏngjo, a brilliant but tempestuous and erratic man, who probably was quite exacting of his new heir. One might imagine that Chŏngjo felt as

no one else could the difficulty and pain that drove his father to insanity and that he developed a deep sympathy for him.

Beyond the purely psychological factors was the issue of legitimacy—his father's imperfect status signified his own imperfect authority. In the Chosŏn monarchy, the legitimacy of the royal house rested at least conceptually and rhetorically upon its moral authority,⁶³ and paternal criminality was unacceptable for the monarch. Despite the cautionary measures taken by Yŏngjo, the *pyŏkp'a* group apparently did not deem Chŏngjo acceptable. Though Chŏngjo ascended the throne and those who questioned his legitimacy were punished, the fact that he could not render full honor to his father was a constant signifier of his own compromised ancestry. He must have reasoned that the connotations of Sado's criminality, a moral failing that cast a shadow on the royal house, could only be countered through a display of extraordinary moral prowess on his part. Abdication carried out in the name of filial devotion was to be such a display. By relinquishing the throne, he would obliterate Prince Sado's imperfection and thus retroactively legitimate his ancestry.

The central issue, however, was whether the question of Sado's criminality could be resolved without an adequate disclosure of the 1762 incident. Discontent concerning the official court policy of silence on the event was widespread, as evident in the mounting protests to open the discussion.⁶⁴ Nor did the policy of silence prevent speculation and conjecture. Lady Hyegyŏng was troubled by this. She mentions that there were two prevailing opinions, which, depending on whether one assumed Sado's criminality or his innocence, defended either Yŏngjo or his son, and that both were false and distorted. In other words, whether Sado is made a criminal or Yŏngjo a cruel father, the moral authority of the royal house is compromised, and Chŏngjo's status is adversely affected. If she believes that a complete picture should be presented to establish truth, then to what extent is she willing to reveal that complete picture? Not much, at least not in this memoir. She mentions Prince Sado's illness, which she asserts made Yŏngjo's decision unavoidable. There she rests. She is not ready to go into detail.

Lady Hyegyŏng's defense of her father suffers from the same problem as her discussion of Sado's criminality. That is, she has to defend him without getting to the crux of the matter. She reassesses the cause of her family's persistent misfortune and concludes

that the root of the problem lies in her father's involvement in the Sado incident. The most grave charge against him was that he suggested to Yŏngjo that Prince Sado be ordered into a rice chest and that he supplied the chest. She vehemently denies the truth of this charge, but her defense is limited because she cannot discuss the details of the incident, and thus is unable to place his role in context. This disturbed her deeply. She was as committed to reestablishing her own father's honor as Chŏngjo was to reestablishing Sado's, and she pursued this objective as persistently as her son pursued his. She was aware, however, that the filial devotion of a married woman to her natal parents belonged to the private sphere and that it could not be presented as a consuming passion, as that of a man could be. This is why she does not argue, as she does for Chŏngjo, from the primacy of her filial devotion to her father. Rather she evokes the authority of her son to confirm her claim by making a place for her father and her family in his unfulfilled wishes. She says that her son promised that at the time of Sado's posthumous elevation to king, her father's and her family's honor would be fully restored as well. These promises had already been mentioned in *The Memoir of 1801*, but here they are presented as Chŏngjo's wishes for his maternal family, paralleling his wishes for his father. In this way, she attempts to make public her private devotion to her father.

Still, Lady Hyegyŏng understood very well that Hong Ponghan's honor could not rest purely on her protestations of his innocence or, for that matter, on Chŏngjo's tributes. Rather, she had to establish her father's integrity as an implicit quality of his actions, and this required that she present him as a public man engaged in the complex moral and political issues of the court. This would have required a discussion of the incident of 1762. The constraints resulting from the policy of silence about the incident were obvious. They affected the honor of her family as well as the moral authority of the royal house. And finally they made *The Memoir of 1805* a necessity for Lady Hyegyŏng.

THE MEMOIR OF 1805

The Memoir of 1805 is testimony concerning the 1762 royal filicide. She again addresses Sunjo directly, but, unlike *The Memoir of 1802* in which she appeals to him as his grandmother, she befits this

memoir's more public subject matter by speaking to him as a senior royal family member to a royal descendant. The decision to present the entire history of the 1762 incident was one to which she had come only reluctantly. She was aware that a discussion of the father-son conflict would require her to reveal the two principals' strange behavior, a revelation that not only violated Chosŏn sensibility and custom but also contradicted Chŏngjo's policy.

Two issues were involved. One was whether and how to present the strange and insane behavior of the crown prince. Sado's behavior during the last years of his life when he became mad was truly bizarre. In the West, the understanding of madness has undergone continuous change and has only recently come to be seen as mental illness.⁶⁵ We have only the most scant indications of how madness was understood in eighteenth-century Korea. We know that Chŏngjo had the description of his father's conduct deleted from the *Records of Royal Secretariat*, an official record of the court,⁶⁶ because he felt ashamed of the symptoms of his father's madness. In fact, any mention of the topic became taboo. The second issue was whether and how to portray Yŏngjo's role in his son's tormented life, to which he had to put an end. Because of the incident's sensitive implications for the moral authority of the royal house, the official historiography made only the most cryptic references to it, minimizing Yŏngjo's role. Although Lady Hyegyŏng was sympathetic toward her son's position and understood the rationale behind the official historiographical stance, she became convinced that the policy of silence to which she had hitherto adhered was destructive and that the entire history of the filicide including Sado's illness and Yŏngjo's role had to be disclosed. She cites several reasons for this.

The most immediate is the necessity of correcting speculation and theories about the incident that, festering in repression, circulated widely. Whether the theory was that Sado was a criminal, or that Yŏngjo needlessly killed his son, or that officials instigated Yŏngjo to carry out the cruel act, they all reduced a complex tragedy to ill-considered finger-pointing. Silence had been adopted as a way of burying the unfortunate past; instead, an untruthful past was being invented and circulated. Silence was maintained to protect the dead from being subjected to incessant gossip and ridicule; instead, the dead were transformed into monsters and criminals. It

was imperative that these versions be replaced by truthful eyewitness testimony.

Almost as crucial is the right of the living descendant to be truthfully informed about his ancestors. In Sunjo's case, he was entitled to this knowledge not only as a descendant but also as a ruler. His office required him to evaluate and make judgments upon history. Another reason cited, which is closely related to both of these issues, is Lady Hyegyŏng's belief that her experience and knowledge are unique and valuable and thus should be transmitted. Of those who suffered through the grim incident and played a significant role, she was the only one still living. She felt a personal obligation to correct distortions and misrepresentations concerning the dead. This engendered in her a compelling desire to break away from complicity in silence and to reclaim history by recording her memories.

She appears to have been acutely aware that this was to be a momentous endeavor and that its success would depend on her credibility as a reporter. She is clearly mindful of the fact that her claim as a participant in the 1762 incident is a double-edged sword. Her very qualification as an eyewitness—living through the event as the wife of Prince Sado—could also make her biased. She attempts to allay the reader's suspicions by stressing the autonomy of her viewpoint. She maintains that she owes allegiance to both parties, and thus the only course open to her is to be truthful and impartial. She promises "a clear and coherent picture of the incident" to show "how it unfolded from its beginning to its end."

The memoir traces the father-son relationship from its euphoric beginning when Yŏngjo welcomes the long-awaited heir in 1735 to its tragic end when Sado dies in a rice chest in 1762. In the course of narrating the story, various aspects of their conflict are analyzed. First, there were differences in their personalities; Yŏngjo was "articulate, bright," whereas Sado was "reticent and slow, deliberate of movement." Then, more important, their relationship was colored and shaped by their respective public positions as the present and future occupants of the throne. The effects of these combined factors seem to have been deadly. Lady Hyegyŏng presents a tale of a father and a son inextricably locked in a long, tortuous journey into tragedy—the distant abodes that separated them early in Sado's infancy, the growing estrangement between them, Yŏngjo's

high expectations and exacting demands, Sado's fear of his father, Yŏngjo's impatience with his son and his subsequent harshness, Sado's rage over his father's disapproval and rejection, the deterioration of Sado's personality, his madness, his violent explosions, intimations of Sado's attempts at patricide, and the final act. It is a dramatic and shocking tale, complex and sorrowful.

Her presentation of Sado is at once sympathetic and terrifying. So much is at stake in her efforts to dissuade the reader of Sado's criminality that she does not attempt to hide his transgressions. Rather, she places the responsibility for Sado's insanity squarely with Yŏngjo, saying that Sado's illness was caused by rejection and lack of love. The underlying theme is that he lost his battle to meet his father's demands not because he did not want to comply, but because he desired so intensely to live up to his father's expectations that the constant paternal disapproval was too great to bear. She presents his suffering and pain as larger than life. Though she does not condone his transgressions, she implies that even his transgressions were testimony to the depth of his suffering.

However, her apparent sympathy for her husband does not prevent her from admitting that at some point, consumed by rage and madness, Sado turned violent and posed such a threat to his son and his father that there was no alternative but to safeguard the dynasty by eliminating him. Just as her description of the earlier stages of his illness is sorrowful, her description of his explosive rage in the final stage is frightening. She conjures up a vivid image of a court in which all, in shock, horror, and dismay, watch helplessly as Sado descends into destructive violence. This state of terror continues until Lady Sŏnhŭi, Sado's mother, urges Yŏngjo to protect the safety of the dynasty by carrying out the final act, and Sado is placed in the chest. Lady Sŏnhŭi's choice of duty over maternal affection is presented by Lady Hyegyŏng as a choice of tragic dimensions. Thus Lady Hyegyŏng absolves Yŏngjo of any hastiness or overreaction in killing his son.

The picture of the 1762 incident she presents is compelling enough to convince the reader that simple finger-pointing is woefully inadequate. She achieves this narrative authority despite the fact that this memoir is not fully cognizant of the complexities of the political milieu in which Yŏngjo and Sado lived. While she is aware that the relationship of Yŏngjo and Sado was one in which the political and the personal were inextricably linked, she does not

fully grasp the extent of the impact of the political on the personal. For instance, she explains the establishment of Sado's regency by saying that Yǒngjo wished "to let the Prince-Regent take care of those cases which he [Yǒngjo] detested but which were too serious for eunuchs." This might have been a partial reason. The fact remains, however, that she is unable to imagine Yǒngjo at work, constantly battling intractable factionalism and the perpetual threat of rebellion.⁶⁷ Nor is she able to fathom the nature of his hopes for and disappointments in his son as public heir, which leaves much of Yǒngjo's fury and frustration unconsidered.

If Lady Hyegyǒng, with her essentially private perspective, fails to perceive Yǒngjo the public man, it is her understanding of him as a private individual with his own agonies that absolves him in the end. Despite her assessment that Yǒngjo's harshness caused his son's psychological problem, Lady Hyegyǒng does not morally condemn Yǒngjo. She achieves this by allowing for the mystery of the human psyche. She maintains a division between the human realm, which is knowable, and the cosmic realm, which is unknowable. Yǒngjo's behavior toward his son belonged to the human realm. Step by step she traces Yǒngjo's harshness, which caused Sado's illness and ended in human tragedy. But the reasons for this behavior belong to the cosmic realm. She implies that, though one can record exterior chronology and speculate on etiology, what compelled Yǒngjo or Sado to do and feel as they did at each point must remain a mystery. Thus, though she describes Yǒngjo as unloving and expresses resentment toward him, she concedes that he, too, battled his own private demons. In the final analysis, the human psyche is unknowable.

In this final memoir, she can claim no greater understanding of the mystery of the workings of Heaven than she did when she wrote the first memoir ten years previously. Unlike the first or second memoir, in which puzzlement is accompanied by a sense of outrage or betrayal, here she seems to acquiesce to the notion that Heaven must have its own way of operating even if it cannot be discerned. Lady Hyegyǒng acknowledges that if the workings of each sphere—the personal, the social, the human, and the cosmic—are quite complicated separately, the relationship between them is even more complex. She does not deny that there is a correlation between them, but she concedes that ultimately these forces are mysterious and not immediately apparent. Thus, while

she validates the moral order, she does not demand its transparency in individual lives.

In the same vein, she upholds the primacy of the social order. Individual consideration, no matter how compelling, must be subservient to this public cause. This view, however, is accompanied by full sympathy for the human condition and respect for individual endeavors regardless of the results. For whatever reason, be it the conflicting demands of multiple roles or inexplicable psychic needs, it is impossible to be all that one is supposed to be. Disappointment, guilt, and sorrow are inevitable. Though people must struggle with conflicting impulses and desires, and though they often lose their battles, the effort to be moral has intrinsic worth. And even when people fail, they deserve sympathy for their suffering. Thus she renders sympathy to all of those who, in 1762, voluntarily or involuntarily had to do what was necessary to uphold the social order.

This cost each a great deal. For Sado, it meant dying in a sealed rice chest; for Yŏngjo, it meant putting his only surviving son to death by a gruesome method; for Lady Sŏnhŭi, it meant urging Yŏngjo to kill her son; for Hong Ponghan, it meant burying Sado, consoling Yŏngjo, and protecting Chŏngjo; for Chŏngjo, it meant inheriting his father's mantle by becoming someone else's son; for Lady Hyegyŏng herself, it meant relinquishing her son to Yŏngjo and living on in shame. While it meant different things for different people, it cost all of them deep pain. By describing their pain and their struggle, Lady Hyegyŏng in these extraordinary memoirs offers a historian's compassion and consolation.⁶⁸

Texts

Despite the popularity of *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng* in contemporary Korea, only recently has it been widely disseminated. The first time any portion of the memoirs was introduced to the public was in 1939, when portions of the first and fourth memoirs were serialized in the short-lived literary monthly, *Munjang* (Literary style). *The Memoirs* was published from the first issue, in February 1939, until the issue of January 1940.⁶⁹ Until

then, the memoirs had circulated within the narrow confines of the Yi royal family. However, this exclusive readership does not mean that the original remained intact or that the textual history is known or easily traced. With the possible exception of *The Memoir of 1795*, the original manuscript is lost.

Reflecting its exclusivity, there is no woodblock edition. Fourteen known handwritten manuscript copies of different varieties exist, and they fall into three categories.⁷⁰ The first contains the manuscripts of all four memoirs collected into a complete series. There are eight sets, six in Korean, two in a mixture of Korean and Chinese. The second category comprises manuscripts of the first memoir. Three are in Korean, and one in a mixture of Korean and Chinese. There is also a manuscript of the first half of the first memoir in Korean. The manuscripts of the first memoir came to scholars' notice after 1979. The third category consists of Chinese translations of the second and third memoirs.

For a long time, the manuscripts that were thought to be important were complete series of memoirs. Of these series, there are three important manuscripts. The first, known as the Karam manuscript, is named after the nom de plume of the late Professor Yi Pyönggi, who discovered it. This manuscript is believed to date from 1919. It consists of six volumes and has acquired the title *Hanjungnok*. The memoirs serialized in *Munjang* were based on the Karam manuscript. The second is the Ilsa manuscript, named after the late Professor Pang Chonghyön. It consists of three volumes entitled *Hanjung mallok*. The Minjung sögwon edition of 1961, edited by Kim Tonguk, which is still regarded as the standard modern edition, is based on the Ilsa manuscript, which is believed to date from approximately the turn of this century. Both are at the Kyujanggak Library at the Seoul National University. The third is in the Asami collection at the University of California, Berkeley. This has six volumes and is titled *Hanjung mallok*. When I acquired a copy of the Asami manuscript in 1978, it was not known to Korean scholars.

I had to make several decisions in the course of translating and studying the memoirs. The first involved which manuscripts I should use as a basis for my translation. After comparing the three manuscripts, I concluded that the Asami manuscript was the earliest and least corrupt version and thus decided to use it. Later I

discovered that in 1979 Professor Kim Yongsuk had independently acquired a copy of the Asami manuscript and come to the same conclusion, dating it at about 1880.⁷¹

The second decision involved the order in which to present the four memoirs. This question arose because none of the complete series of memoirs follows the sequence in which Lady Hyegyŏng wrote them. With little variation, all three manuscripts rearrange the memoirs in temporal sequence. First came the first half of the first memoir, then the fourth memoir, followed by the second half of the first memoir. Then came the second memoir, followed by the third memoir. Was I to follow the order in the Asami manuscript or restore the memoirs to the sequence in which Lady Hyegyŏng wrote them? I chose to do the latter. It seemed that the narrative authority of the memoirs demanded this restoration of original order.

The third decision was considerably more difficult. After I finished translating all four memoirs based on the Asami manuscript, I found a manuscript of the first memoir, also in the Asami collection, which is a considerably earlier version than the one included in the Asami complete manuscript (Asami comp A). I had overlooked this manuscript, which I will call the Asami M (Memoir) 1-A. The catalogue described it as an “abridged” manuscript,⁷² and when I briefly examined it on one of my visits to Berkeley in the 1970s, it seemed that the manuscript fit the description in the catalogue. Later I found that it had this appearance because it included, after Lady Hyegyŏng’s *Memoir of 1795*, a Korean translation of Hong Nagyun’s memorial. This memorial, the Chinese version of which was sent to King Sunjo in 1809, is a passionate defense of his father and older brother and thus discusses some of the same events that Lady Hyegyŏng does in her first, second, and third memoirs. Because Hong Nagyun’s memorial was appended to the manuscript, it appeared to be “abridged.” In any case, it came to my notice that Professor Kim Yongsuk, who has been working on Lady Hyegyŏng’s memoirs for a long time, discovered this manuscript in 1979, and she concluded that this was most likely the original.⁷³ Upon close examination, I agreed that there was no question that the Asami M 1-A was far more authentic and less tampered with than the version of *The Memoir of 1795* included in the Asami complete manuscript. I then had to decide whether to keep translations of all four memoirs from the Asami

complete manuscript, or to replace my translation of the first memoir with a new translation based on this earlier version.

Despite the superior claim to authenticity of the Asami M 1-A manuscript, it could be argued that, for stylistic consistency and flow, all four should come from the same manuscript. However, arguments in favor of the earlier version far outweighed this. First, it is infinitely preferable to go with the more authentic version even if it is only for the first memoir, which amounts to about one-third of the length of the four combined. Lady Hyegyŏng's voice is much more vivid and her conception of her world is much more clearly delineated in this version. Since the four memoirs were written as separate works, using a separate text for the first memoir did not seem to mar the coherence of the work as a whole. Moreover, this earlier version gives some indication of the process of change that the texts of the other three memoirs have probably gone through in the course of being copied and compiled. Thus I decided to translate the Asami M 1-A for *The Memoir of 1795*.

As they stand in this book, *The Memoir of 1795* is based on this earlier version, Asami M 1-A, while the remaining three memoirs, *The Memoir of 1801*, *The Memoir of 1802*, and *The Memoir of 1805*, are based on the Asami manuscript of the complete series, Asami comp A. In the *han'gŭl* texts, the style of the first memoir, the Asami M 1-A manuscript, differs rather considerably from the style of the three later memoirs, which are from the Asami comp A manuscript. The first memoir is written in a more informal and spontaneous style than the rest, which are more polished and contain numerous words of Chinese origin. I have tried to suggest this difference in the translation. The four memoirs are presented in the order in which Lady Hyegyŏng wrote them.