Gunpowder as a Vehicle for the Power Aggrandizement of King Sukchong

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Abstract

The military revolution model explains that the development of gunpowder weaponry helped to consolidate modern European states with centralized monarchical power through institutional and financial reforms. In order to examine this centralization of royal power, I suggest a model of aggrandizement of monarchical power that can be categorized into two mechanisms: strengthening of the relationship between the king and the nobles, and between the king and his people. Through the military revolution, European monarch allegedly bolstered the relationship with nobles and with the people. In this paper, I will study whether this military revolution model fits in the case of Chosŏn Korea. Chosŏn Korea, according to a military historian No Yonggu, experienced a military revolution during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Chosŏn also went through massive financial and institutional reforms, which allegedly strengthened the power of King Sukchong. Unlike European monarchs, he could only centralize his power through one type of aggrandizement of monarchical power: the relationship between himself and his people. In order to ensure military conscription and collection of tax, King Sukchong bolstered the responsibilities of local magistrates. Secret royal inspectors were also sent to oversee the local magistrates and to observe the general provincial situations, and the function of Bibyunsa was bolstered in order to control local administration and financial management. Through these multiple levels of monitoring by the central government, King Sukchong’s power was strengthened with the consolidation of the relationship between himself and his people. However, because strong yangban elites frequently intersected his authority, he was often hindered from enacting his proposed reforms. In the conclusion, I suggest another factor, the geography of Korea, which influenced the difference in consolidation of royal power between Europe and Chosŏn, other than the strong yangban interest. Therefore, European military revolution model is not applicable to the case of Chosŏn.
Introduction

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the introduction and development of gunpowder initiated the military revolution. According to military historian Geoffrey Parker, gunpowder development, through political and social change, led to the consolidation of the modern European state. That is, the increase in army size, transformation in artillery and fortress design, innovative war tactics, and new military technology ignited waves of profound institutional and financial reforms that centralized monarchical power in Europe.\(^39\) The breakdown of the feudal relationship between nobility and peasants furthered this centralization of power. As a crucial element in instigating this change in the power dynamics of Europe, the change in warfare should be explored in order to question how the development of gunpowder influenced the politics of Choson Korea (1392-1910) during the reign of King Sukchong (1674-1720).

Historiography

A military historian, No Yonggu, insisted that Choson Korea, like Europe, experienced a military revolution after Imjin War of 1592-1598. The Choson dynasty, having realized the backwardness of military technology, initiated the extensive development of gunpowder— revolutionizing war tactics and technology, thereby converting to a “musketry-based” style of warfare.\(^40\) In the seventeenth century the Choson dynasty experienced the various social and political transformations of the Korean military revolution specifically the effect it had on state centralization. Both in Korea and in Europe, parallel military innovations allegedly triggered similar socio-political consequences, particularly the


aggrandizement of monarchical power. Many military historians such as Geoffrey Parker and William McNeill argue that the introduction and development of gunpowder led to the consolidation of the modern European state. Michael Roberts emphasizes unavoidable centralized power of state by stating that, since only the state could provide “the administrative, technical and financial resources” necessary for large-scale warfare, the new form of war inevitably led to an increase in the state authority.

However, some scholars such as John Hale and Kelly DeVries disagree with the idea that European military revolution led to the “feudalistic decline/central state rise pattern.” Hale claims that even though the development of gunpowder constrained an occasional rebellious magnate, the centralized governments of kings can be explicated without the role of gunpowder weaponry. DeVries explains that the role of gunpowder weaponry in confirming the centralization of royal power does not exactly match all the paradigms. That is, even though the cases of France and Burgundy demonstrate the pattern proposed by Parker and others, the case of England does not follow the pattern because the Kings of England already had absolute control.

Because no state is identical, generalization of the influence of gunpowder weaponry on the aggrandizement of royal power is impossible. Moreover, I agree that it is not just gunpowder weaponry that brought about the centralization of power in Europe. Decline in feudalism is also an important factor. However, referring back to the historical significance of battles in which weapon advancement

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changed the result of the war, the importance of gunpowder development cannot be reduced to a minor influence in the transition. Thus, regarding gunpowder weaponry as a significant factor that contributed to the aggrandizement of power in Europe proposed by Parker and others, I will examine whether the military revolution model fits the case of Chosŏn Korea. In this paper, I will address the interplay between military reform and monarchical power, and argue that the former reinforced the latter through a rigorous case study of King Sukchong’s reign.

Two Mechanisms of Aggrandizement of Monarchical Power

Before the examination of the politics behind the development of firearms, it is necessary to explain how monarchical power can be bolstered. By demonstrating several requests from civil officials to Yeonsangun and King Jungjo—before the reign of Sukchong—about controlling aristocrats who constantly exploited commoners, Yi Taejin insisted that ruling elites intercepted the relationship between the king and his people. With the interpretation of his statement, I propose a model of centralization of royal power that can be categorized in two ways: strengthening the relationship between the king and the aristocrats, and between the king and his people. These two mechanisms help to explain whether or not the centralizations of royal power through the military revolution in Europe and Chosŏn were different. The idea of a military revolution in Europe states that this military innovation begot expanded royal power through both types of centralization mechanisms. The king, by interfering in local governance, could meddle in the lives of both his aristocrats and his people. Thus, through the close surveillance of the aristocrats, the distance between not only the king and the aristocrats, but also the king and his people grew smaller in Korea than it did before the military revolution in Europe.

Then comes the question, how did the development of gunpowder throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries strengthen the power of King Sukchong?

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Was his influence enlarged by diminishing the power of the aristocrats, similar to European crowns? I argue that the improvement of gunpowder influenced the political and social environment to help King Sukchong to aggrandize his power mainly through the reformatations in taxation and bureaucratic administration. That is, the Korean military revolution theory supports the idea that these state-level reforms allowed the centralization of his power. However, unlike European monarchs, by restructuring institutions and bureaucracies, King Sukchong became powerful through only one type of centralization of monarchical power: the close relationship between the people and himself. Therefore, in contrast to the crystallization of the European state system through gradual decrease in noble power with the close supervision by the king, the empowerment of Chosŏn monarchy was established only through the relationship with the people—not with the nobility.

**Political Dynamics Between Kings and Nobles Before the Development of Gunpowder Weaponry in Europe and Chosŏn Korea**

In order to explore how the power of King Sukchong was strengthened in the midst of the development of gunpowder weaponry, an examination of the dynamics between the monarchy and the aristocrats before the development of gunpowder in the Chosŏn dynasty is fundamental in light of the medieval European state system of feudalism. A combination of “a rough balance between crown and nobility, decentralized military systems, and peasant property rights and reciprocal ties to the landlord” was exclusive to Western Europe. 47 The relationship between peasants and nobles was the core of feudalism, which was “a [decentralized] military system with a supportive manorial economy, the former bringing about the latter.” 48 Since warrior-aristocrats had jurisdictional and administrative prerogatives over their lands, they could control men and arms directly and

48 Ibid, 23.
independently: this decisive influence of noble magnates over peasants distanced European kings from their people.\textsuperscript{49} With “feudal stone castles,” “the traditional curtain walls of towns,” and private armies, nobles enjoyed autonomy and control over the military.\textsuperscript{50} Also, medieval battles can largely be characterized as fights between “mounted and armored nobles,” which meant that individual courage and valor of warrior-aristocrats emphasized their prestigious status.\textsuperscript{51} Bert Hall emphasizes the importance of the self-image of aristocratic knights by stating that:

...but it is important to grasp that the ideal of a warrior-aristocrat was central to the self image of an elite group. The badge of membership in the class was skill in the use of the traditional arms of the knight. Virtually any member of the group, as well as any aspirant to membership, regarded these traditional weapons as essential, together, of course, with a horse capable of carrying man and weapons into battle.\textsuperscript{52}

The practical power of warrior-aristocrats relative to the theoretical power of the Crown dramatized the breakdown of feudalism. The social and political situation of Chosŏn Korea was different from that of medieval Europe: the Chosŏn rulers already had a strong monarchy with centralized bureaucracy.

Unlike the noble-peasant relationship, which was essential in the social structure of medieval Europe, in Chosŏn, the interrelationship between the king and the aristocrats, the yangban elites, was more critical in structuring both

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 11.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 11.
political and social environments because of Chosŏn’s unique political dynamics. The surprising stability of Chosŏn “was in large measure the result of a state of equilibrium produced by the interrelationship between a monarchical, bureaucratic, and centralized government structure and an aristocratic and hierarchical social system.” The yangban aristocrats, who were also bureaucrats and administrators, enjoyed legal and de facto social, political, and economic privileges. The king legitimized these yangban elites’ privileges, and the bureaucracy and social elites assured the perpetuation of the king. A stratified system of social classes drew a clear distinction between those who govern and those who are governed. The power dynamics between king and aristocrat emphasizes that both are “mutually antagonistic and mutually supporting.” That is, each side relied on the other in order to maintain a place in the political and social structure. Even though there were times when “the state of equilibrium [shifted from] relatively strong monarchy to aristocratic-bureaucratic domination of the throne,” the balance of power was never demolished. This stable social and political system contributed to the extraordinary longevity of Chosŏn Korea.

However, the power of the yangban tradition was one aspect that contributed to the relative weakness in the Korean monarchy. The interdependent relationship between king and aristocracy restrained both the decentralization of power and the aggrandizement of royal or central power. The king was in charge of a council of high officials not as an absolute governor, but as primus inter pares—first among equals. Even with the centralized and autocratic government structure, bureaucratic system was controlled by the yangban aristocrats, who were more

54 Ibid., 4-5.
56 Ibid., 5.
57 Ibid., 5.
58 Ibid., 5.
interested in maintaining the status quo relatively weak for the purpose of limiting monarchical power.\textsuperscript{60}

The \textit{yangban} aristocrats maintained their positions throughout the Chosŏn dynasty and monopolized access to high-ranking position. The early Chosŏn kings never tried to challenge the property rights of the aristocrats, and the \textit{yangban} elites always sought opportunities for personal gain by narrowing the pool of examination-taking candidates (individuals who passed state-sponsored civil service exam could acquire the \textit{yangban} title) and preventing local clerks from being promoted to the central bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{61} In provincial regions, some local magistrates regarded the people as objects of exploitation for their economic interests. Civil officials in the capital and local magistrates were often corrupt. The local governors abetted the civil officials in exploiting people, and the civil officials covered up the wrongdoings of the local magistrates when those misdeeds were discussed in the royal court. Hindered by such corrupt local magistrates and civil officials, the relationship between the king and his people was weak.\textsuperscript{62} The symbiotic relationship between king and aristocracy was an essential element that contributed to the longevity of Chosŏn, but also a hindrance when Chosŏn needed to strengthen central power to organize resources for defense and development.\textsuperscript{63} In contrast with European nobles who ruled autonomously during the Middle Ages, the \textit{yangban} elites prevented the growth of feudalism or political decentralization in Chosŏn by “[identifying] with the centralized structure as bureaucrats and [using] it to maintain their privileges.”\textsuperscript{64}

**Institutional and Bureaucratic Reforms in Western Europe and Chosŏn Korea**

The development of gunpowder caused reformations in taxation and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{60} Palais, \textit{Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea}, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ebrey, \textit{East Asia}, 243.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Yi, \textit{Chosŏn Hugi T'angp'yoŋ Chŏngch'i U'i Chaemyoŋ}, 29.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Palais, \textit{Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea}, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 5.
\end{itemize}
bureaucratic administration in Western Europe. As the ever-increasing cost of producing, maintaining, and supplying gunpowder weapons overwhelmed the European states, their rulers needed to rapidly revolutionize taxation as well as administrative standards and methods. Supplies of arms and armaments, materials, goods, clothing, and transport were now supervised by the state. For example, the Spanish Netherlands monopolized the manufacture of gunpowder, and, furthermore, the Swedish Trading Company was formed in order to control copper production.\textsuperscript{65} The kings developed “financial instruments and a structure of credit” while also resorting to “currency debasement, sale of monopolies, sale of crown lands, inflation of honours, and above all the sale of offices”.\textsuperscript{66} In addition, centralized and royal administrations, such as secretaries of state for war and war offices, were created and flourished. With a centralized conscription method, which became widespread throughout Western Europe, state and royal armies and navies were built.\textsuperscript{67} During the reign of King Sukchong, Chosŏn Korea also experienced the increase in military strength due to the extensive development of gunpowder during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. How then, compared to Western Europe, did the Chosŏn dynasty revolutionize its political and social system?

Chosŏn Korea during the reign of King Sukchong also experienced multiple reforms in taxation, institutions, and conscription methods with the substantial development of gunpowder. Unlike Europe, Chosŏn already had centralized government structure, and its economy was stimulated through the efforts of King Sukchong to institute wide range of financial, administrative, and institutional reforms.\textsuperscript{68} He largely strengthened existing military institutions such as, Military Training Agency (訓鍊都監), the Imperial Battalion (御營聽), and the Imperial Defense Army (守禦聽) in the capital in order to bolster capital defense. The

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 21-22.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{68} Hyeok Hweon Kang, Big Heads, Bird Guns and Gunpowder Bellicosity: Revolutionizing the Chosŏn Military in Seventeenth Century Korea, Undergraduate Thesis (Emory University, 2013), 13.
Military Training Agency and the Imperial Battalion defended both the palace and the capital, and the Imperial Defense Army defended strategically important places on the outskirts of the capital.\(^\text{69}\) Due to the function of central military institutions as the base of political power and legitimacy, this intensification of these institutions also bolstered King Sukchong’s power.\(^\text{70}\) Thus, the garrison in the capital was a matter of primary interest to the ruler and central bureaucrats; the garrison, receiving concentrated financial support from the central government, formed institutions of military units in order to use firearms effectively.\(^\text{71}\) These institutions, the Military Training Agency, the Imperial Battalion, and the Imperial Defense Army, not only increased the size of the army but also replaced traditional units of cavalry and archers with musketeers.

Moreover, King Sukchong established the Royal Cavalry Guard (親騎衛), an elite military corps, in Hamgyông province, the Forbidden Guards Army (禁衛營), and the Special Military Officers (別武士) in Pyongan and Hwanghae provinces, responding to the change in infantry tactics which focused on musketeers. The establishment of these special military institutions, the Royal Cavalry Guard and the Special Military Officers, was extended to major provinces of the whole country. These institutions gradually transformed into professional military units of firearms.\(^\text{72}\) Similar to Western Europe, Chosŏn also suffered from the financial burdens of maintaining these new and reformed military institutions, since the government paid salaries to the professional and permanent armies. Paying soldiers in the Military Training Agency alone “amounted to as much as two-thirds of the entire Ministry of Finance’s budget in the late seventeenth century.”\(^\text{73}\) Thus, in order to sustain larger central armies and newly formed standing armies, financial

\(^\text{69}\) Han'guk Yŏksa Yŏn'guhoe. 17-segi Chŏngch'isa Yŏn'guban, Chosŏn Chunggi Chŏngch'i Wa Chŏngch'aeak =: Politics and Policy in the Middle Chosun Period.(Sŏul: Ak'anet), 150.
\(^\text{70}\) Ibid., 28.
\(^\text{71}\) Han'guk Yŏksa Yŏn'guhoe, Politics and Policy in the Middle Chosun Period, 151.
\(^\text{72}\) No, “Kihoek nonmun” 43; Pak, Yŏng-gyu, Han'gwŏn Uro Ingnun Chosŏn Wangjo Sillok (Sŏul-si: Ungjin Chisik Hausu, 2004), 379.
\(^\text{73}\) Kang, Big Heads, Bird Guns and Gunpowder Bellicosity, 13.
and logistical resources were required.

**Tax Reforms and the Centralized Conscription Method in Chosŏn**

King Sukchong launched different types of tax reforms, one of them being the *Taedong* reform ("Law of Great Equity" 大同法). The extensive *Teadong* reform began in 1608 by "replacing tribute with a surtax on land, province by province." However, it was during the reign of King Sukchong when the reform was enforced throughout the whole country. This reform "introduced a new uniform land surtax that allegedly reduced the burden of the commoner taxpayers as well as rectifying the existing inefficiencies of indirect payment and regional differences of taxing." He also actively attempted to implement a far-reaching census-taking *hopae-bup* (號牌法), *ogajaktong-bup* (五家作統法), and *yeojaipjuk-bup* (女子入籍法). *Hopae-bup*, the requirement of male commoners’ to carry identification tags, was bolstered not only to collect taxes, and thus enlarge the military institutions’ financial base, but also to improve conscription method. *Yeojaipjuk-bup* allowed names of women to be entered in family registers; King Sukchong consolidated this law in order to bolster census-taking, including all women, who were previously prohibited from placing their names in the registers. By tying five households into one group, *ogajaktong-bup* prevented people from running away in order to avoid paying military taxes.

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76 Yi, *Chosŏn Hugi T'angp'yŏng Chŏngch'i Uī Chaejomyŏng*, 104.
78 Yi, *Chosŏn Hugi T'angp'yŏng Chŏngch'i Uī Chaejomyŏng*, 105.
Figure 1. Progress in the number of registered households and population in the seventeenth century shows an increasing trend in general. Kyungshin famine of 1670-1671 and Eulbyung famine of 1695-1696 greatly decreased the number of registered household and that of population.\(^79\)

These reforms had specific purposes: increasing state revenue and fortifying

\(^79\) Ibid., 105.
the national defense.\textsuperscript{80} King Sukchong, in order to reinforce the mechanisms of taxation, bolstered census taking, and his efforts resulted in an increase of registered households throughout the seventeenth century (see Figure 1). The active implementations of \textit{Hopae-bup}, \textit{ogajaktong-bup}, and \textit{yeojaipjuk-bup} demonstrated an increase of household registers that allowed more precise measurement of population per registered household up to 4.65 at the end of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{81} Also, the government could easily grasp the accurate number of casualties caused by natural disasters and great famines: \textit{Kyungshin} famine of 1670-1671 and \textit{Eulbyung} famine of 1695-1696 (see Figure 1).\textsuperscript{82} Thus, the development of gunpowder sparked the restructuring of institutions, bureaucratic administrations, and the central conscription method in order to organize bigger and professional armies capable of large-scale warfare. During the reign of King Sukchong, the promulgations of diverse tax reforms, census taking, and the heightened supervision of the conscription method certainly had social and political impacts on the Chosŏn state throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. As the bureaucratic and administrative level of changes strengthened the responsibilities of the central government, the question of how these changes affected the royal power of King Sukchong should be examined.

\textbf{Political Dynamics Between the King and Nobles After Various Tax Reforms and Centralized Conscription Methods in Europe and Chosŏn}

In both Western Europe and Chosŏn, the institutional and bureaucratic transformations made in order to support large armies with new weapons affected royal power. Gunpowder technology catalyzed the development of the sovereign territorial European state through mainly weakening the power of the noble magnates who used to rule their own lands from within stone castles. As firearms converted the pattern of battle from private warfare to centralized and

\textsuperscript{80} Pak, \textit{Han'gwo'n Uro Ingnun Chosŏn Wangjo Sillok}, 379-401.
\textsuperscript{81} No, “Kihoek nonmun,” 46.
\textsuperscript{82} Yi, \textit{Chosŏn Hugi T'angpyŏng Chŏng'i U Chaejomyŏng}, 104.
proletarianized warfare, gunpowder provided kings with the means to go beyond fortifications of the castles of the nobility. That is, the consolidated central power through royal armies and navies subjugated the nobles to royal authority; irregular and private armies of nobility gradually vanished with the fall of feudalism. Hence, through the introduction of gunpowder, this new pattern of war helped to shift the balance of power within each European state from the nobles to the king.  

The gradual procedure of the transformation in power from the nobility to the Crown was accomplished especially through extensive bureaucratic and financial reforms. As the cost of a large-scale warfare continuously escalated, the nobility, who could not afford this ever-increasing expenditure, gradually lost their power. Agreeing on the effect of firearms in diminishing the noble power, McNeil asserted that, “the balance of power between central and local authorities was thereby transformed, making whoever controlled the new siege cannon into a sovereign and reducing those who could not afford them to a subjection they had not previously experienced”. Thus, only centralized states were, through the monarch, able to restructure bureaucratic administration and taxation to support large-scale hostilities.

Through substantial fiscal, institutional, and bureaucratic reforms in centralized European states, feudalism, which in part was a devolved military system, collapsed. In place of the feudal relationship between nobility and peasants, a new relationship between Crown and peasants was established. In Medieval Europe, the Crown was a distant figure for the peasants, as they were bound by a strong feudal relationship with the nobility. However, with the state-level reforms required for military apparatus, monarchs began to intrude on the lives of the people. In order to mobilize growing fiscal and logistical military resources, monarchs needed to access the materials from urban workshops. This resulted in monarchs having greater influence in not only military enterprise but also

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commercial enterprise.\textsuperscript{85} For example, in Sweden, the close inspection of a saltpetre-collector sent by a monarch aroused complaints among the people.\textsuperscript{86} Compulsory military service jumbled all “volunteers and felons, international brigades, local militiamen, vassals, lieges and conscripts from many lands” together to create a united national identity.\textsuperscript{87} Furthermore, through centralized military conscription, “relatively small feudal levies and militias,” so characteristic of Medieval Europe, were transformed into state and royal armies and navies.\textsuperscript{88} Therefore, the reforms in taxation and bureaucratic administration operated as the link between the monarch and his subjects in Western Europe.

What, then, were the aftereffects of the reformations in taxation and new administrative methods on the power of King Sukchong? The reforms and creations of various military institutions not only bolstered his power, but also signaled the need of enormous fiscal and logistical resources to maintain these institutions. Thus, similar to Europe, effective taxation methods and a centralized conscription method were required to sustain the revolutionized and new professional military organizations. Before the reign of King Sukchong, the attempts of previous kings to successfully perform census-taking had failed, mainly because of the financial regulatory institutions based at the provinces. By having controlled these institutions, local aristocrats had had authority over financial management and that of human resources; this had allowed these aristocrats to expand their basis for dominance through exploitation of taxes or labor from the people.\textsuperscript{89}

Furthermore, the \textit{Teadong} reform was enacted not just in certain provinces— which was the case before the reign of Sukchong—but across the whole country. It intended to “make peasants pay a fixed amount of tax based on the productivity of land, [so that] the reform shifted some of the burden from peasants to large

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{87} Parker, \textit{The Military Revolution}, 52.
\textsuperscript{88} Downing, \textit{The Military Revolution and Political Change}, 56.
\textsuperscript{89} Han’guk Yŏksa Yŏng’guhoe Chosŏn Sigi Sahoesa Yŏng’guban, \textit{Chosŏn Un Chibang Ul Ottok’e Chibae Haennu’n’ga} (Sŏul: Ak’anet, 2000), 184.
landlords, and government revenue increased.” Unlike early Chosŏn, in which the government enacted strict oversight of household registers mainly for commoners (良人), the period of the reign of King Sukchong took on a new aspect of control over the people. That is, the successful implementation of new bureaucratic systems, such as the inclusion of lowborns (賤民) in household registers, meant that the government was preparing for effective military conscriptions. Hence, the ruler and the central bureaucracy acquired the unified perception of financial resources and then centralized financial management.

This attempt to grasp the most accurate measure of the number of registered households demonstrated that the central government weakened the authority of local institution that was previously used for local elites as the means of accumulation of wealth. Enacting these bureaucratic systems, King Sukchong consolidated the responsibilities of local magistrates and sent them to certain counties and districts in order to ensure military conscription and taxation. Then, he also sent secret royal inspectors who had the responsibilities not only of overseeing the local magistrates, but also of helping the king in understanding local situations. Even though this inspection system was firmly settled in the mid-eighteenth century, it was during the reign of King Sukchong that sending secret royal inspectors became more active and direct than before.

He also bolstered the function of Bibyunsa (備邊司), the core national administration that controlled both internal and external affairs, which could also supervise the local magistrates. Bibyunsa was in charge of human resources for local magistrates. It also controlled local administration and financial management. Moreover, during the 39th year of King Sukchong’s reign, in order to tighten control of the local governance, a new government position called Provincial

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90 Park, *Between Dreams and Reality*, 52.
91 No, “Kihoek nonmun,” 46.
92 Han’guk Yŏksa Yŏn’guhoe Chosŏn Sigi Sahoesa Yŏn’guban, *Chosŏn Un Chibang Ul Ottŏk’e Chibae Haennŭn’ga*, 190-191.
93 Ibid., 189.
Kukwandangsang (八道句管堂) of Bipyunsa was created. This position was first introduced to control provincial military operations, but was expanded to govern local finance and administration.\(^94\) These multiple levels of supervision by the king and his central government indicate that the autonomy previously enjoyed by the local governors was systematically reduced by the national institutional reforms. Therefore, the financial and bureaucratic reformations, caused by the development of gunpowder, led to the extended and enhanced monitoring of local authorities.

During the reign of King Sukchong, the expansion of armaments and the increase in the number of soldiers ignited financial needs.\(^95\) This dire need of financial support resulted in several taxation reforms, in which the responsibility of local magistrates was strengthened under the greater supervision of the central government. With the strengthened role of local magistrates, the responsibilities of secret royal inspectors and Bipyunsa were also bolstered in order to further maintain public order. Thus, the power of King Sukchong was reinforced with the Korean military revolution; it allowed the king to monitor the local governance.\(^96\) That is, his efforts in inspecting local authorities strengthened the relationship between the king, the local governors, and the people; his relationship with his subjects certainly intensified. However, the question as to whether the military revolution also resulted in the other aspect of the power aggrandizement of King Sukchong, the strengthening of the crown-aristocrat relationship, should also be examined.

**The Validity Behind the Power Aggrandizement Theory With Regard To King Sukchong**

Military historians such as, Parker, McNeill, and Roberts, respond specifically to the aggrandizement of monarchical power in Europe. European

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\(^94\) Yun-hong Pan, *Chosŏn sidae Pibyōnsa yŏn'gu* (Sŏul T'ukpyolsi: Kyŏngin Munhwasa, 2003), 37.

\(^95\) Han'guk Yŏksa Yŏn'guhoe. 17-segi Chŏngch'isa Yŏn'guban, *Chosŏn Chunggi Chŏngch'i Wa Chŏngch'ae = Politics and Policy in the Middle Chosun Period*, 171.

\(^96\) Yi, *Chosŏn Hugi T'angpyŏng Chŏngch'i U'i Chaejomyŏng*, 28.
monarchs accomplished centralization by weakening the authority of nobles, who enjoyed great autonomy during the age of feudalism, and by strengthening the relationship between himself and his subjects. However, as Chosŏn is renowned for maintaining political and social stability for more than five hundred years, King Sukchong experienced a different kind of centralized authority from the European crowns. That is, unlike European rulers, Sukchong could not aggrandize his power by weakening the power of yangban aristocrats. Thus, the relationship between kings of Chosŏn and aristocrats did not undergo any significant change. Similarly to Western Europe, Chosŏn was also pressured to maintain larger armies, creating an increased cost of warfare that triggered state-building and extensive fiscal and institutional reforms, according to Parker and McNeill. King Sukchong centralized his power and controlled Chosŏn’s society, but he did not intensify his power through “the death of [nobility].”

One of the reasons for the dissimilarity in the mechanisms of aggrandizement of royal power between Chosŏn and Western Europe is the strong yangban interest. King Sukchong frequently confronted strong yangban aristocrats’ opposition, which prevented the reforms from fully taking effect. For example, King Sukchong and the Board of Military Affairs discussed “the household tax (hop’o) … which would have increased revenues both by broadening the tax base and by sealing obvious tax loopholes.” However, even though he actively pushed for the household tax, the aristocrats won the intense dispute, which lasted about a year. The debate on the issue of tax reform reopened in 1681, but it only produced a tentative negotiation. This dispute reemerged in early 1682 and in 1711. When his final effort to enact the household tax was discouraged, he proposed “a variation of the household tax—

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98 Palais, Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea, 4.
99 Hall, Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe, 4.
101 Ibid., 101.
one p’il of cloth levied equally on the entire population of taxable age.”102 This proposal, however, was also rejected. Throughout his reign, whenever a reform that could hurt the interest of yangban aristocrats was discussed, this same pattern of repeated rejections was frequently seen.103 Thus, judging by their ability to frequently refuse reform measures, it is hard to assert that King Sukchong’s power was further centralized by the fall of nobility. Therefore, during the reign of King Sukchong, the distance between the king and the people grew smaller than it had been before the development of gunpowder, while the nobility remained influential.

Conclusion

In response to the Korean military revolution, different reforms in taxation and bureaucratic administrations did not strengthen the royal power of King Sukchong through breaking the authority of yangban aristocrats. In Europe, the crowns aggrandized their power through both types of centralization mechanisms: strengthening the relationship between the king and the nobles by weakening the power of the nobles to pose a threat, and between the king and the people mainly by the fall of nobility. On the other hand, Chosǒn, during the reign of King Sukchong, could only strengthen the relationship between the king and his subjects through heightened monitoring of local elites. This monitoring, however, did not help Sukchong overcome opposition from the yangban aristocrats in enacting reforms. Since the relationship between the king and the yangban bureaucrats is described in terms of “checks and balances,” it was hard for King Sukchong to draw a clearly defined boundary of royal authority.104 Centralization of his power through strengthening of the relationship between himself and the yangban aristocrats was allegedly not achieved by the military revolution, but by his strong charismatic personality up to a certain point.

In the political history of Chosǒn, King Sukchong stands out because his

102 Ibid., 102.
103 Ibid., 102.
104 Palais, Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea, 14.
“divide-and-rule tactic” effectively attempted to control the yangban aristocrats during one of the worst times of conflict between political factions within the dynasty.\textsuperscript{105} His strong and charismatic personality greatly impacted his style of governance, as “he played faction against faction, deepening already formidable animosities,” in order to increase royal power.\textsuperscript{106} Even though King Sukchong’s financial and institutional reforms were not able to subjugate the yangban aristocrats, his specific policy of using multiple hwanguk (turn of the state by factional purge) allowed him to restore royal authority. However, his efforts to overcome the factional fights had limitations. In spite of his will, because two dominant factions—seo\textsuperscript{i}n and nam\textsuperscript{i}n—led violent political strife, King Sukchong’s attempt to push forward national policies based on strong centralized monarchical power ultimately failed in the end. Other than the strong yangban interests, I believe there are several factors that affected the difference in centralization of monarchical power between Europe and Chos\textsuperscript{o}n, one of them being the geographical factor.

I believe that the geography of Korea strongly impacted the difference in bolstering monarchical power between Europe and Chos\textsuperscript{o}n. As Korea was “confined to a small peninsula with a limited range of geographic and climactic differences,” centralization was relatively easy.\textsuperscript{107} That is, the organization of the “centralization system [of Chos\textsuperscript{o}n]…around the interests of central bureaucratic aristocratic elites” is largely affected by geopolitical conditions.\textsuperscript{108} On the other hand, before the development of firearms, European states in general did not have strong central bureaucracies. This “advantage of backwardness” of Europe allowed firearms to initiate massive institutional and bureaucratic revolutions in order to adapt to the

\textsuperscript{105} Haboush, \textit{The Confucian Kingship in Korea}, 31.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 283.
diverse changes in the scale and nature of war. Chosŏn, which already had a strong centralized bureaucracy, could not experience the growth of effective bureaucracy resulting from the development of firearms. On the contrary, European monarchs could enjoy aggrandizement of royal power by establishing centralized bureaucracies through the military revolution. Therefore, the military revolution theory proposed by Parker, Roberts, and McNeill, who argue that European military revolution ultimately led to the consolidation of European state through institutional and bureaucratic reforms, cannot be applied to the case of Chosŏn. This is not only because of the strong yangban interest but also because of Korea’s small geographic size.