

**EXCERPTS FROM THE YÖYUDANG CHŎNSŎ: CHŎNG YAGYONG ON THE
ROOTS OF ROYAL AUTHORITY**

Introduction

Late Chosŏn was beset with a number of political issues, most notably factional power struggles between different groups of elites and officials. Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836) was an important late Chosŏn political thinker associated with a loose, reform-oriented school of thought called *Sirhak* or Practical Learning. Here Chŏng argues within the framework of Confucian thought — indeed, for a return to the supposed standards and practices of earlier times — in favor of a fundamental reform of Chosŏn political principles that might strike at the root of its problems.

Document Excerpt with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from the Yöyudang chŏnsŏ:
Chŏng Yagyong on the Roots of Royal Authority

Since the time of the Han dynasty, the emperor has appointed the various nobles, the nobles the county heads, the county heads the hamlet chiefs, and the hamlet chiefs have selected the neighborhood chiefs. If anyone is so bold as to challenge his superiors, he is castigated as a rebel. ... Why do they lambaste as rebels those suspected of lack of respect for their superiors? In the past authority went from those below to those higher up. These days, however, authority runs from the top down, and anyone who tries to reverse that order is labeled as a rebel.

[Translated by Donald Baker]

Longer Selection

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Where do rulers come from anyway? Do they drop out of the sky like rain? Or do they well up out of the ground like spring water? Here is what I think. Five households, making up

one neighborhood, chose one of their number to be the neighborhood chief. Then five such communities, which together made up one hamlet, chose one of those neighborhood chiefs to serve as their hamlet chief. A few such hamlets constituted a township, and five townships together made up one county, with one of those five townships' leaders chosen to serve as the county head. The person the various county heads chose as their leader became the local feudal lord. And the person the various feudal lords chose as their leader became the ruler. So the ruler was someone whom the populace selected. Since he could only be the ruler if the populace selected him to be the ruler, if the populace did not choose him, then he could not be the ruler.

Therefore, if the five family heads found they could not support their neighborhood chief, they met and decided on a replacement for him. If the five neighborhood chiefs found they could not support their village head, the twenty-five families met and decided on a replacement for him. If the various feudal princes and barons found they could not support their ruler, they met and decided on a replacement for him. If five family heads could change their neighborhood chief and twenty-five families could change their village chief, then why is it when subjects change their ruler, that is called a subject overthrowing his sovereign? This does not mean that when the sovereign is changed, the person who once sat as sovereign cannot step down to a lesser post as a feudal prince. ...

Let's say there is a troupe of sixty-four dancers serving the court. The members of the troupe choose one of their number to go to the forefront, holding the ornamental plume and serving as their leader. If he does a good job of setting the pace for the dances, then the rest of the troupe calls him "our master of the dance." But if he turns out to be incapable of doing what is required of him, then the troupe removes him as head and tells him to rejoin the ranks of the other dancers. They then select another from their ranks and elevate him to the leadership position, calling him "our master of the dance." In this situation, the troupe as a whole decides who should serve as the leader, who should be elevated to that position and who should be unseated. So what grounds would there be for hurling a charge of rebellion from within the ranks at the person chosen to replace the previous leader?

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Questions:

1. For Chŏng, what constitutes a ruler's legitimacy or right to rule? What might be an alternative to his position?

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

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2. What does Chŏng think of those others label “rebels”? Under what conditions might he find the rebellion of inferiors against superiors justified?
3. In Chŏng’s perspective, what deleterious effects might authority flowing from the top down have upon a society?