The effective removal of Mongol power in Korea by King Kongmin in the mid-
1350s was followed by a period of chaos, marked by incursions from the north
by Mongol remnants and Chinese bandit armies called the Red Turbans in the
1360s, and by constant pillaging of the Korean coastal regions by pirate fleets
that were based mainly in Japan. Once freed from Mongol oversight, Kongmin
also urged a program of reforms that involved purges of the pro-Yüan families.
But when his Premier, Sin Ton, a Buddhist monk of lowly birth, struck against
the interests of yangban officials with proud aristocratic lineages, they forced
him from office and later executed him. Kongmin fared no better, being dis-
patched from this world in 1374 by palace courtiers and eunuchs. Killing the
premier and the king, however, did nothing to alleviate internal tensions and
external pressures.

To cope with the continuing insecurity of the kingdom, the court called
upon the military, which proved fatal to the monarchy. The most important of
the new military generals was a man named Yi Sŏnggye (1335–1408), from the
northeast, who had gained prominence through his military prowess against
the pirates beleaguer ing Korea's long coastline. Then, when the Ming dynasty
took over power from the Mongol Yüan in China in 1368, Yi Sŏnggye, who was
pro-Ming, began forming crucial alliances with the disaffected aristocrats with
the object of turning on the Koryŏ court. In 1388 General Yi calculated he had
gained sufficient support to mutiny against orders to lead troops against the
Ming, who were threatening to take possession of territories formerly held by
the Mongols in Korea's northeast. The general engineered a coup d'état in the
capital, killed off a number of other generals, deposed the king, and finally in
1392 proclaimed himself the first king of a new dynasty, the Chosŏn dynasty.
This dynasty has at times been referred to as the Yi dynasty, after the family
name of the new royal Yi clan.

The Koryŏ dynasty had lasted four and one half centuries and the Chosŏn
was to last another five. It was thus the only dynastic change in a period close
to one thousand years. There were major changes under the Chosŏn rulers,
many of them deliberate and considered. These changes resulted not only in
a major shift away from Buddhism to a veritably religious adherence to neo-
Confucianism, but also in different relationships between the aristocracy, the
throne and the military forces, a reordering of gender relations, and a new
dynamic between élite and folk cultures.
In deference to these far-reaching changes, it is easy to assume that a change of parallel significance occurred in the leadership of the new dynasty. However, as John Duncan has demonstrated, there is scant evidence in support of a social transition accompanying the dynastic transition. There was no new aristocratic power-base. On the contrary, there was a narrowing of access to power to the traditional leading clans. The top seven clans of early Chosŏn had been well-established members of the Koryŏ bureaucracy. Although these clans had no marriage relations with Yi Sŏnggye's military clique in the northeast before the late fourteenth century, at that point a number of such alliances were formed that reinforced the power of the leading clans and thereby ensured substantial continuity in the leadership class between the two dynasties. The alliance formed with these landed aristocracies by the new dynasty's founder, General Yi, underlined his dependence on the traditional leadership élites. It was, therefore, the decision by the latter to back a new horse in support of their own economic and political interests that brought about the demise of the Koryŏ monarchy.\footnote{John Duncan, The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).}

Yi Sŏnggye, for his part, deemed it politic to embrace neo-Confucianism as the ruling ideology of his kingdom, and so despite the military beginnings of the Chosŏn dynasty, the relegation of the military to a politically and ethically inferior position vis-à-vis the literati is one of the chief characteristics of the Chosŏn era. The Chosŏn monarchy was thereby relieved of the domestic military challenges that from time to time plagued the United Silla and Koryŏ monarchies. Even so, an unassailable bureaucratic centralisation was never attained, and political and economic power rested on balancing the authority of the monarchy against the interests of both the capital and regional yangsŏn. In place of military might, the yangsŏn competed for influence over the throne through membership in schools of neo-Confucianism, which operated as political factions aligned with aristocratic lineages and their home bases.

Unlike the Chinese literati, who were employees of a monarchy that had done away with the aristocracies so that they would not be competitors, the Korean yangsŏn remained the aristocracy and maintained a strong aristocratic identity. They married outside the clan in order to retain their own property and slaves and compounded their assets and regional solidarity through marital alliances. Genealogies became very important early in the Chosŏn era, and when they were published for the first time in 1475, which is very early historically, they covered the male and female sides, included codes designed