The proposition that the descent group was the principle agent of Korean history has an antecedent in a statement that the prominent scholar-official Ryang Sŏng-ji (1415–82) made in the mid-fifteenth century:

In the same way as the sun, the moon, and the stars give substance to the formless Heaven, and mountain peaks, the sea, and rivers to the formless Earth, a great country is great because great and hereditary descent groups [taega sejok] give it substance. Because there are great and hereditary descent groups, even traitorous fellows are unable to find an opportunity [to rise], and therefore internal disturbances cannot occur. Great and hereditary descent groups, like foundation stones and protecting walls, support each other and guard [the country]. This is the reason why indignities from outside cannot have an effect.¹

Contemplating the political events of the first few decades of the newly founded Chosŏn dynasty, Ryang evoked his country’s traditional social stability across dynastic change and ascribed it to the existence of “great and hereditary descent groups.” In his view, it was these descent groups’ presence inside and outside the capital that prevented frequent dynastic upheavals. In Korea, he continued, there had therefore been only seven dynasties from the time of the nation’s mythic founder Tan’gun to Ryang’s own time—this in contrast to China, which experienced twenty-six such cataclysms from antiquity down to the Great Ming.² In sum, Ryang ascribed the endurance of Korea’s polity to the existence of these self-perpetuating elite descent groups that, he thought, gave “substance” to the country.

What was the nature of these descent groups, which by Ryang Sŏng-ji’s time had evidently become a “historically determined perception”³ of elite society, and to which Ryang thus attributed singular historical agency? Assuming that Ryang had good reason to assign to aristocratic descent groups (sejok) a historic role in securing the country’s stability, did they in fact participate in the dynastic transition? Or did Ryang
remember them purely as relics of bygone days? And who were the “traitorous fellows” he referred to? Can Ryang’s evaluation be verified by the historical record? Or did it simply derive from Ryang’s well-known penchant for highlighting Korea’s singularity vis-à-vis China?

To answer these questions it is indispensable not only to assess the nature and activities of the pre-Chosŏn descent group but also to pursue such an assessment across dynastic boundaries. Most previous studies of Korean society concentrate on specific time slots and neglect dynastic transitions. But it is precisely the contingencies pertaining to the conditions leading to dynastic change that pose the most difficult but also the most crucial questions as to stability and continuity or change and discontinuity. Did the descent groups survive, or were they replaced by new social elements and organizational patterns at each dynastic change? There were only two transition periods in Korean history—from Silla to Koryŏ in the tenth century and from Koryŏ to Chosŏn in the fourteenth century. These transition periods provide key testing grounds for examining the fate of elite descent groups across dynastic boundaries.

The first dynastic transition that led to the foundation of Koryŏ (918–1392) has elicited relatively moderate scholarly interest because it was principally a territorial reunification of three regions that had been formerly united and held together (from 668) under Sillan rule, but which had reverted to separate units because of regional antagonism. Since a number of territorially based descent groups (not all by any means of Sillan origin) started to vie for power at the center, the early decades of Koryŏ witnessed several power struggles. Nevertheless, the vortex of capital politics eventually amalgamated them into a compact central aristocracy variously called kwijok or munbŏl, which upheld strict criteria of birth and descent for the recruitment of new members.

The second transition, which prepared the founding of the Chosŏn in 1392, has, in contrast, engendered a long-running, heated scholarly debate because an understanding of the driving forces involved in this dynastic change has been considered vital for an evaluation of whether or not the new dynasty was capable of offering the historic conditions for incipient “modernity” in Korea. During the colonial period (1910–45), Japanese scholars argued that Korea was a country mired in political and economic stagnation brought about by the dominance of an overpowering aristocratic scholar-official class that prevented the country from moving toward modernity. To repudiate this negative appraisal, Korean historians began in the course of the 1960s and 1970s to come up with revisionist interpretations of Korean history. Inspired by various Western concepts of “progress,” some Korean scholars postulated a progressive view of history and insisted that the founding of the Chosŏn in 1392 was the result of “revolutionary acts” (kaehyŏk) initiated by a new group of forward-looking activists. This group, variously called “newly rising scholar-officials” (sínhŭng sadaebu) or “newly upcoming Confucian scholars” (sínjin yusa), supposedly consisted of men of recent origin and modest economic means who, inspired by Neo-Confucian learning, rallied to topple the established leadership class (ku–kwijok) and found a new dynasty. In brief, the dynastic transition from Koryŏ to Chosŏn was interpreted as principally resulting from a socioeconomic struggle between old and new forces that ended with the victory of the latter—a view that brought the history of early Chosŏn close to the revolutionary patterns of Western European regime
changes, and recently enticed some scholars to locate the Korean “early modern” in the fifteenth century.1

The “newly rising scholar-officials” interpretation is, however, far too simplistic to explain the reasons for and the consequences of dynastic change in 1392 and tends to essentialize the early Neo-Confucians as an isolated group of actors detached from their sociopolitical backgrounds. It is also short-sighted insofar as it neglects to take into account the long-term historical developments before and after 1392. Although research conducted over the past two decades has thrown serious doubts on a “class struggle” explanation of dynastic change, it is regrettably still widely adhered to in Korean and Western historiography.

If this book, then, aims to demonstrate that it was the descent-group model that empowered the elite to persist through time and space and across dynastic boundaries, an alternative interpretation of the establishment of the Chosŏn dynasty is called for. The task of the three chapters in part I is therefore to provide, however briefly, the historical details that will illuminate the evolution of the descent group and its status-preserving role in dynastic change. It thus recasts and occasionally modifies some of the ideas first expressed in The Confucian Transformation of Korea.

Chapter 1 traces the origin of the descent group model in Silla and its development into the normative organization of elite society during Koryŏ. It also discusses the introduction of the Chinese-style examination system and the elite’s reaction to changing conditions of government service, and finally explores the fate of elite descent groups under Military Rule (1170–1250) and Mongol Overlordship (1250–1350). The second chapter deals with the crisis of identity that elite descent groups experienced during the late Koryŏ and suggests the political, economic, and religious factors that led to the founding of Chosŏn (1392–1910). It also examines the reconstitution of the early Chosŏn elite. The third chapter, finally, details the intellectual and political uses that Neo-Confucianism was put to in the recalibration of state and society during the first two centuries of the new dynasty.