The earliest extant playscript in Korea stands as an enigma. It is an anonymous work written to celebrate a wedding arranged by King Chŏngjo. Called the Story of the Eastern Chamber, the play evokes not only the Chinese Story of the Western Chamber through titular reference but also the Chinese vernacular tradition as a whole. Written entirely in Chinese characters, the text weaves vernacular Korean words into the syntax of Chinese baihua vernacular, an unusual form which upsets the conventional diglossic binary of literary Chinese (hanmun) and vernacular Korean (hangŭl). This essay situates the text in a late Chosŏn discourse of linguistic difference marked by pronounced anxieties about the temporal and spatial contingency of language. Some late Chosŏn writers, including the text's putative author, Yi Ok, embraced difference to carve out a localized literary space in Chosŏn Korea. For King Chŏngjo, it threatened the textual foundation of royal authority. The Eastern Chamber spoke to these dilemmas by imagining a linguistic space where vernacular Korean usage could be represented as a literary language in the Chinese script, reconciling kingly authority with local specificity.

Keywords: Diglossia; vernacular; late Chosŏn; Yi Ok; King Chŏngjo