



**HAL**  
open science

# Confucian identity, political ideals and philosophical exegesis

Isabelle Sancho

► **To cite this version:**

Isabelle Sancho. Confucian identity, political ideals and philosophical exegesis: The reception and reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism in the beginnings of Chosŏn Korea. Doctoral. Harvard University, Korea Institute, Lecture and Performance Series, France. 2008. hal-02905217

**HAL Id: hal-02905217**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02905217>**

Submitted on 23 Jul 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Lecture and Performance Series: History and Culture of Chosŏn Korea (1392-1910)**  
**Sponsored by the Academy of Korean Studies (Korea), Provostial Fund in Arts and Humanities,**  
**and the Korea Institute, Harvard University**

February 28, 2008

**Dr. Isabelle SANCHO**  
Korea Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow  
Korea Institute, Harvard University

***Confucian identity, political ideals and philosophical exegesis:  
the reception and reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism  
in the beginnings of Chosŏn Korea***

Chosŏn Korea is commonly described as having elevated Neo-Confucianism to the status of state ideology, in contrast to Koryŏ period, which is defined as a Buddhist state. The adjective Confucian is then often used to qualify the institutions, bureaucratic system, examination system, and scholar-officials of Chosŏn period. A major trend in the academic world is to study Confucianism as an ideology, deliberately chosen and used by the specific social group – or even social class – of *yangban*, in order to secure its political and economical predominance, aristocratic status, and social prestige. This type of studies, both in South Korea and Western countries, has allowed a better understanding of the history of Chosŏn period since a few decades, and is still a work in progress that might successfully develop further. However, one might deplore that this approach is massively focused, especially in Western scholarship, on the second half of Chosŏn period. Confucianism or what we call Neo-Confucianism is mostly studied through the single prism of its social and cultural impact, its actual effects and results rather than its nature and features. For instance, the neologism of Confucianization has been used to define the continuous spread and acculturation of Confucian values, practices, rituals and norms in the whole Korean society from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on, and which remaining traces can still be found in contemporary South Korea. However, the formation of an ideology that could be defined as Neo-Confucian in the Korean elites, who are the very actors of this process, has been running from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries to the very end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This first stage of the Confucianization of Korea – or

conversely the Koreanization of Confucianism – could be called the Confucianization of the scholar-officials. This rather fascinating phenomenon, which lasted three to four centuries, is crucial to understanding precisely the later Confucianization of the Korean society. Besides, the studies in social history tend to consider Confucianism as a fixed ideology, a body of principles and rules supposed to be known by almost anybody. By doing so, they tend to erase and forget the human and thus shifting dimension of Neo-Confucianism. Confucianism might indeed be defined also as what generations of Confucian scholars identify themselves with, that is to say what explains the worldview as well as the diverse practices and discourses of these Confucians. Confucianism is an historical phenomenon that it is both an ideology and a philosophy. It is related to both collective and individual levels. It concerns a variety of mindsets, discourses, and practices that have been changing in the course of history. This complexity should be also what has to be explained in Korean history, rather than only what explains it. To put in other words, instead of conveying the rather vague notion of influence – the influence of Neo-Confucian ideology – as a master-key explanation, it is worth examining the very making of the Korean Neo-Confucian ideology in itself. Neo-Confucianism is not solely a package of texts, concepts and rules chosen at random one day in the Chinese market of ideas, to be transported and transplanted mechanically in Korea in order to secure the predominance of an elite, crystallized in its own arrogance – a morgue based on painfully acquired skills for Byzantine debates. I am deliberately using a provocative image, for I would like to underline the limit, and even the danger of speaking of Neo-Confucianism as a fixed ideology that has no history. Besides its nature of an academic subject studied for two centuries now, Neo-Confucianism is indeed part of the memory and the national identity of contemporary Korean society. It is then an important task to avoid the temptation of either oversimplification or idealization. To illustrate the interest of considering Neo-Confucianism as a progressively built and shifting ideology, and to try to understand the mechanisms that might be at work in its building, I would like to invite you today to follow the tribulations of a text from Song and Yuan China to Korea, the *Great Learning*, one of the Four Books of the Neo-Confucian orthodox corpus (*sishu/sasŏ* 四書), as well as one of its most important philosophical notions: *chŏngsim* 正心, "straightening one's heart".

The reception of Neo-Confucianism in Korea is often traced back to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, with An Hyang 安珦 (1243-1306) and Kwŏn Po 權溥 (1262-1346) who introduced the Chinese Neo-Confucian texts, and especially the works of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200). But this reception is difficult to date precisely, for it probably started already since the early Song period through diplomatic, commercial and scholarly exchanges between China and Korea. Since the reception of a thought is neither imposed by force nor a sudden event, and since it is the fruit of a convergence of many different causes and shifts in history, the interesting question is: why and when did the properly tremendous enthusiasm of Korean scholars for Neo-Confucian texts and ideas start? One tentative answer is that it is due to the Korean context of mid-Koryŏ and the specific features of Yuan Neo-Confucianism. Generally speaking, scholars have considered that Neo-Confucianism was adopted by a new rising social group from the middle to the end of Koryŏ, a class of reformists whose exemplary figure is Chŏng Tojŏn 鄭道傳 (1342-1398), the so-called architect or ideologist of Chosŏn. I would like to add that the reception of Neo-Confucianism is more precisely the result of the alchemy between diverse reformist aspirations among a few scholar-officials with a strong sense of mission and the highly formalized ideology of the Yuan version of Cheng/Zhu Neo-Confucianism. The fortune of Neo-Confucianism in East Asia is much indebted to the Mongol conquests and domination. The reception of Neo-Confucianism in Korea is intimately linked to this period, and the specific features of the Yuan version of Song Neo-Confucianism have partly determined the later Korean development and reappraisal.

The Yuan Neo-Confucianism could be summed up as been designed and formalized by Xu Heng 許衡 (1209-1281), the teacher of Kubilai (emperor Shizong 世宗 ; 1260-1294) who played a decisive role to “sinicize” the Mongol dynasty. Xu Heng is the spiritual heir of Zhen Dexiu 真德秀 (1178-1235) of Southern Song (1127-1279), a Chinese dynasty that has been forced to flee to the South from Jürchen and Mongol’s invasions and attacks. Zhen Dexiu is well known for having systematized the theory of the “Learning for the Sovereign”, *dixue/chehak* 帝學 and centered it on one text and one notion: the *Great Learning* (*Daxue/Taehak* 大學), and “straightening one’s heart”

(*chǒngsim* 正心). Zhen Dexiu pretended to be a strict follower of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) who, it is worth reminding, was accused of being heterodox at this time. But Zhen Dexiu made in fact a synthesis of various Southern Song Neo-Confucian and reformist tendencies. He combines notably Zhu Xi's thought with the "historical studies" that have been developed previously in Northern Song China (960-1127) by political reformists like Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072) and Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086). So he shaped a political ideology out of diverse theories for reformist purposes, to save the Southern Song from its supposed weakness and degeneration. But his ideas have only been applied and get fame thanks to their later use in Yuan and Ming China, as well as in Chosŏn Korea. So the *Great Learning* was emphasized by Zhen Dexiu in the framework of what scholars called the "Learning for the Sovereign", *dixue/chehak* 帝學 elaborated first by Fan Zuyu 范祖禹 (1041-1098) and in vogue in Northern and Southern Song. This name designates one Confucian theory in which Emperor and kings (*diwang/chewang* 帝王) are regarded as the axis of state and universe. One quotation of Han dynasty scholar, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 B.C.E.), could illustrate the general idea: "Straighten the heart [of the Sovereign] to straighten the court; straighten the court to straighten the hundred officials; straighten the hundred officials to straighten the ten thousand folks" 正心以正朝廷, 正朝廷以正百官, 正百官以正萬民 (*Hanshu* 56.26, *Dong Zhongshu zhuan*). Besides, this theory is focusing on the well-known paradigm of the *Great Learning*. Indeed, the programmatic text of the *Great Learning*, which was exhumed from secularly oblivion and has been considerably rearranged by Zhu Xi, could be summarized in one sentence or one slogan: *xiuji zhiren/sugi ch'iin* 修己治人, "cultivating one's self in order to participate in the socio-political ordering". The text is constructed in the shape of a funnel describing the successive steps to follow in order to achieve the Confucian main goal: cultivating one's self to transform the society and the world, and thus "bringing peace (that is to say the proper equilibrium) to everything under heaven" (*ping tianxia/p'yǒng ch'ǒnha* 平天下). This particular construction of the text not only facilitates the memorization, for it allows mnemonic recitation, but it also emphasizes one core step that plays the role of a pivot or crucial point of an extreme tension, *chǒngsim* 正心: "Self-cultivation lies in straightening one's

heart” (修己在正其心, *Great Learning*). In the Yuan Neo-Confucianism formalized by Xu Heng, in Zhen Dexiu’s wake, “straightening one’s heart” is both the final result of self-cultivation and the source from which order, harmony and peace could literally gush out. It is the articulation between the two Confucian imperatives of “self cultivation” (*xiuji/sugi* 修己) and “ordering the state” (*zhiren/ch’iin* 治人). It is the One that could control the multiplicity in philosophical terms. In the Yuan orthodox version of Neo-Confucianism, this notion of “straightening one’s heart” is mostly interpreted as “straightening the heart of the sovereign”, *zheng junxin/chǒng kunsim* 正君心. This gloss, notably based on two quotations attributed to Mencius, highlights the role of the educators of the sovereign: 1) “Mencius said: regarding the men [who are governing], it is not sufficient to discuss their personal abilities, regarding the way they are governing, it is not sufficient to criticize the dysfunctions: only a great man is able to correct the errors of the Prince’s heart.” (孟子曰:人不足與適也, 政不足間也, 惟大人為能格君心之非, *Mengzi* IV.A.20); 2) “When Mencius came to visit for the third time king Xuan, he did not talk about governmental matters. His disciples asked then him: How is it that you visit three times the king of Qi without talking about government? Mencius answered: I must first fight his lopsided heart.” (孟子三見宣王, 不言事. 門人曰: 曷為三遇齊王而不言事? 孟子曰: 吾先攻其邪心, *Xunzi* 27). In the original Confucian perspective, the Sovereign should be a Saint, in the sense of accomplished human being. But another ancient Confucian idea reinforced in Neo-Confucianism is that a Sovereign is not Saint by birth. Just like any other man, he has to conquer his own humanity by cultivating himself properly. But, because most of the time he is randomly gifted with the throne, it falls to him, more than any other man, to become a Sage. For this purpose, he must study texts. But, as the Confucian Learning has strongly stressed since the Antiquity and the *Analects* of Confucius especially, he also must be helped and seconded by wise and sincere men. Neo-Confucian scholars reinforced this idea that a sovereign, who might be a young boy or even a Barbarian, must get educated by skilled tutors and counselors, and must be later advised constantly in his actual practice of power. As one can easily notice, one major aim of such a theory, which has been elaborated by scholar-officials, is to strengthen the role of these men defending their power and their position. But it is also

important to understand that they were trying to prevent the pitfalls of despotism and excessive authoritarianism. For the Korean scholar-officials studying at Beijing from the middle of Koryŏ, the example of what *han* scholars like Xu Heng have done with the Mongol emperors might have been a good stimulation. It is not surprising that the Korean scholar-officials, whose power has been progressively growing throughout the whole Koryŏ dynasty, could have been seduced by this theory of the necessary collegiality of power.

But to understand fully the attraction of Neo-Confucianism on Korean scholars, a few features of the late Yuan and Koryŏ period should be recalled. The late Mongol rule was characterized by a rather innovative mindset in a context of cosmopolitanism resembling much that of Tang times. In this context, the transformation of the multi-faced Song Neo-Confucianism into a simplified and unique version paradoxically enlarged the prospects of what Confucianism could be, and above all what it could do. Neo-Confucianism has reached one of its first major peaks when it became a worldview that can be universalized to anyone, even a barbarian ruler. The Yuan version of Neo-Confucianism transcended the supposed limits of the Confucianism of preceding periods. It ceased to be an ensemble of rather meaningless political recipes based on erudite quotations and exegesis recited either for examinations, or for frivolous and aristocratic pastime. The zeal, energy and creativity of Yuan Chinese scholars to produce in a rather short period of time an efficient ideology to build a strong state under a foreign rule might have exerted a huge attraction on their Korean counterparts. The Neo-Confucian revolution has been understood and theorized as an ideology capable of civilizing any country, and as a practical learning, a *shixue/sirhak* 實學. This name has been given to Neo-Confucianism by the first Neo-Confucian scholars themselves, but it is of course different from the so-called *sirhak* of the second part of Chosŏn period, for the “practice” here must be understood as ethical *praxis*. By the way, it is misleading to picture Neo-Confucianism only as metaphysics, by applying too hastily this Western category to an extremely diversified body of theories mainly elaborated by the authors to discuss ethics and politics in an epoch marked by highly technical philosophical discussions. One main feature of the Neo-Confucianism received and developed in the beginnings of Chosŏn

Korea is indeed its practical and political orientation. In this perspective, we could even say that Neo-Confucianism kept being mainly a political thought at this period in Korea.

Another point worth noting in the explanation of the reception of Neo-Confucianism in Korea is Buddhism. Indeed, Koryŏ scholars have been trained by several centuries of development of Buddhism to use and even excel at manipulating highly elaborated conceptual tools. It is well known that the reception of Neo-Confucianism in Korea went along with criticisms against Buddhism, first at the socio-economical level, and then at the philosophical level. Beyond the apparent but undeniable aspect of intolerance, what should be understood is that these criticisms have certainly been one of the most evident ways to implement and develop Neo-Confucianism for the scholars of that time. Indeed, criticizing a philosophy and an ideology widely known and mastered by any scholar of the time was certainly the best and fastest way to present and even talk about Neo-Confucianism. When reflecting on the theories of Neo-Confucianism that were introduced by polemical reformists, Korean scholars had already the tools to understand and discuss them easily. Moreover, the orthodox Neo-Confucian focus on the heart, and “straightening one’s heart” sounded familiar to the Korean scholars studying Buddhist texts and commentaries that were also dealing with the notion of heart. Neo-Confucian texts conveyed terms that all scholars were familiar with, for Neo-Confucianism shares many terms with Buddhism. But because their meanings are different, Neo-Confucian prose and rhetoric sound paradoxically both familiar and new. The attraction exerted by a new perspective, a new theory on cultivated scholars used to erudite exegetical practices and philosophical discussions have been decisive. The fevered, passionate and sharp debate between Confucians and Buddhists, and especially the Confucian criticisms have played a significant role in the making of one of the most striking and interesting features of the Korean reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism: the shaping of a Confucian identity.

The reception of Neo-Confucianism in Korea engendered the birth of a new phenomenon of great importance in Korean history: the self-consciousness of Korean scholars as Confucians, or what I would tentatively call a proper Korean Confucian identity. This phenomenon can notably be examined through the Korean exegesis of the

*Great Learning* and the notion of *chǒngsim* in the framework of the “Learning for emperors and kings”, the *chihak* 帝學. In my PhD dissertation, I have analyzed the fortune of the *Great Learning* and its diverse exegesis in Korea from the end of Koryŏ to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. One preliminary remark is that the Korean scholars were far more reading and studying Zhen Dexiu’s exegesis of the *Great learning*, the *Daxue yanyi* 大學衍義, rather than the canonical text itself or even Zhu Xi’s orthodox commentary, the *Daxue zhangju* 大學章句. Although Zhen Dexiu’s work was not part of the syllabus for the examinations, it became in fact one of the most important texts read, in Mongol translations, by Mongol emperors, their counselors and part of the bureaucracy since the 1320’s in Yuan China. It enjoyed the status of a canonical text, even if it was not part of the orthodox curriculum. This text was most probably introduced in Koryŏ court at the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, under the reign of king Kongmin 恭愍 (r. 1352-1374). It was notably read by the so-called *sinjin sadaebu*, or reformist scholar-officials, but also by two of the first Chosŏn kings, who got their education in Koryŏ: T’aejo 太祖 (r.1392-1398) and his son T’aejong 太宗 (r. 1400-1418). After that, his success grew in the first half of Chosŏn and inspired new exegesis by Korean scholars that tell much about the Koreanization of Neo-Confucianism. A study that I conducted in the *Annals of Chosŏn* shows the two following results.

Firstly, Zhen Dexiu’s interpretation of the *Great Learning* has been used to strengthen the royal authority and support its *aura* inside and outside the peninsula. The work of Zhen Dexiu and the diverse exegesis that followed were part of the cultural products exchanged between Ming China and Chosŏn Korea through scholarly and diplomatic exchanges. Besides, in Korea, these texts have been especially studied extensively by a few kings with a high sense of royal authority, and who were using this Neo-Confucian ideology to reinforce it: T’aejong 太宗, Sejong 世宗 (r. 1418-1450) and Chungjong 中宗 (r. 1506-1544). For these kings, the texts related to Zhen Dexiu’s version of the *Great Learning* were subject to royal patronage. For example, they ordered several printings and commentaries, and they publicly offered selected extracts to their officials or the royal family. Both the kings and the scholars emphasized that these texts

were not only needed for royal learning in the Royal Lessons (*kyöngyön* 經筵), but that they were also strongly participating in the building of royal authority.

Secondly, exegetical practices have participated in the strategy of Korean scholars to defend their own position in this apparently sovereign-centered ideology. In China, Zhen Dexiu's work inspired a 15<sup>th</sup> century Ming scholar-official, Qiu Jun 丘/邱濬 (1420-1495), a monumental *Supplement: the Daxue yanyibu* 大學衍義補. Qiu's work is a gigantic administrative textbook, and has been used in Ming and Qing China and in Chosŏn Korea for a long time. Zhen Dexiu's *Daxue yanyi* was a general work and it was idealistic, for it considered that concrete administration does not need to be explained in detail, since it will necessarily and naturally follow through the Sovereign's proper self-cultivation. Even when it discussed concrete, and even trivial details by examining precedents in history (like exerting a strict control over the extended imperial family, or even letting the emperor wear the pants in inner apartments), the *Daxue yanyi* remains in the wake of Zhu Xi's idealism and focuses on the first part of the *Great Learning's* paradigm: the self-cultivation. On the contrary, the *Daxue yanyibu* of Qiu Jun is overflowing with concrete and technical details, often accompanied with figures and numbers. It deals with public finances, military organization, transportations, hydraulic control, taxes, etc. Qiu Jun explained that he wanted to supply the shortcomings of Zhen's work concerning the second part of the paradigm: ordering the state. In Korea, these two texts were studied in the first half of Chosŏn. But a controversy took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries to determine which text should have the priority in the royal curriculum, not to mention the existing Korean revisions of Zhen and Zhu Xi's works on the *Great Learning*. Today, some Korean scholars are arguing that the *Daxue yanyibu* of Qiu Jun was preferred by conservative scholar-officials, the so-called representatives of *posu seryök* 保守勢力, whereas the reformist scholars, the *sarim* 士林, preferred the *Daxue yanyi* of Zhen. Even if the rigid opposition between these two tendencies usually underlined by Korean historiography (conservatives *versus* reformist *sarim*) could be questioned because of its very rigidity, it is nevertheless important to understand that the Korean scholars were profoundly divided on the curriculum that should be studied by kings. This division is interesting, for it gives a possible explanation of the difference between the Chinese and Korean histories of Neo-Confucianism and bureaucracy.

Chosŏn Korea and Ming China shared a common ground of Neo-Confucianism, the orthodox Yuan version of it, which stressed the authority of the sovereign. But the Chinese Ming and Qing dynasties became more and more authoritarian states with strong emperors. Then, the bureaucracy tended to become an anonymous body of technicians, who must study in priority practical administrative textbooks like the *Daxue yanyibu* in order to be good administrators at both central and local levels. On the contrary, prominent Korean scholar-officials whose name are cited in Korean history as great Confucian scholars tended to stress the ideal of a collegial power, shared by the king and his wise counselors. Of course, the features of Chinese and Korean bureaucracies, social organizations and political structures are radically different, and any comparison should be done carefully. However, this tentative and general comparison is interesting for our purpose here. Indeed, the exegetical practices on the *Great Learning* and the notion of “straightening one’s heart” have provided Korean scholar-officials an opportunity to develop their own political ideals and their own identity.

Whereas Chinese official exegesis of the “Learning of the Sovereign” is expressed in a highly technical work like the *Daxue yanyibu* that bears a strong legal and formalist aspect, Korean exegesis is rather expressed in idealist works that resemble much Zhen Dexiu and even Zhu Xi’s models. From the beginning of Chosŏn until the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, nine scholars are known as having written at least one commentary specifically dedicated to the *Great Learning*. However only two texts pertain to our discussion: the *Taehak yŏnŭi chimnyak* 大學衍義輯略 of Yi Sŏkhyŏng 李石亨 (1415-1477) and the *Sŏnghak chipyo* of Yulgok Yi I 栗谷李珥 (1536-1584). Contrary to the other commentaries, these two works have been written in the framework of the “Learning for Sovereign” and are both royal commands. So they not only illustrate the evolving Korean understanding of Zhen’s work, but they also reveal the strategy at work in the philosophical exegesis of the scholar-officials. Yi Sŏkhyŏng presented his revision of Zhen’s work at the young king Sŏngjong 成宗 (r. 1470-1494), who was fifteen years old in 1472. The main interest of this summary of Zhen’s work lies in the appeal to use examples taken from Korean history (the *Koryŏsa* has been achieved a few years before) rather than Chinese history. Yi Sŏkhyŏng was also more rigorist than Zhen Dexiu regarding the rules that the king must follow in both his attitude and thought. In his

preface, Yi Sŏkhyŏng is quite condescending with his royal pupil, and enounces imperatives and strict rules with a doctoral tone. The reason is that he is talking from the viewpoint of a scholar who survived the terrible and successive waves of the 15<sup>th</sup> century *literati* purges, and the reign of six different kings. When he addressed his work to Sŏngjong, he was an old man who occupied one of the most prominent positions in the bureaucracy. Aware of his mission of education and his moral superiority, Yi Sŏkhyŏng expresses himself with all the legitimacy of the tutor and the Neo-Confucian scholar. As for Yulgok, he presented his famous *Sŏnghak chipyo* 聖學輯要 in 1575 to the king Sŏnjo 宣祖 (r. 1568-1608). Contrary to Yi Sŏkhyŏng, he is elaborating in his voluminous work some new interpretations of the paradigm of the *Great Learning* and turns back to certain aspects of Zhen Dexiu's ideas by enlarging his explanation to the Four books but also the Ancient Classics, and expressing his own, original ideas. But the *peri*-texts of the *Sŏnghak chipyo* are also interesting, and even fascinating. His preface and his address to the throne especially have been written in the specific context of the beginning of the factional strives at court, a phenomenon that worsened so much in the following centuries so that they tended to even discredit the whole Neo-Confucianism of the Chosŏn period. Yulgok was torn between different streams and ceaselessly pressured by both his excited friends and the high officials above him. However, in this context of serious divisions among the scholar-officials inside and outside the court, he affirms again and again the necessity of a collegial power. He appeals to a strong royal power, but he also defends the prominence of the scholars, by stressing notably that without the scholars, the king is almost nothing. His tone is more deferent and, conversely, much more sharp than his predecessor's. To understand fully this point, the relationship between Yulgok and Sŏnjo should be explained, as well as Yulgok's personality. But I will content myself today to summarize the interest of these two works, when compared to each other and with Chinese texts. Yi Sŏkhyŏng and Yulgok's works are mainly destined to their respective kings: Sŏngjong and Sŏnjo. They are designed for didactic use and are not primarily destined for posterity, contrary to Zhu Xi and Zhen Dexiu's works. They are circumstantial works. Besides, contrary to the Chinese works, they reveal an intimate relationship between the kings and the scholars. They were produced by the actual practice of counseling and educating the prince in daily audiences, and they are

expressing the astonishing intimacy between these men, beyond their respective status. These two general features recount one strong particularity of Korean reappraisal of the “Learning for the Sovereign”: the focus on the collegiality of power and the interpersonal relationship between a prince and his ministers.

To deepen this general overview, it is now necessary to examine the Korean exegesis of the notion of “straightening one’s heart” that was, as we already noticed, the key notion of the Neo-Confucianism centered on the *Great Learning* received from Yuan China. But first of all, what does *chǒngsim* mean? Contrary to what one can think at first sight, *chǒngsim* does not designate any coercive action exerted from outside on the mind/heart. The character *zheng/chǒng* 正, as shown in its very graphic, refers to an axis, or even the hinge of a door. It bears similar ideas as the character *zhong/chung* 中 which does not designate a vague “middle”, but rather the center of gravity, the concentration of maximum tension and the ultimate point of equilibrium. So “straighten” does not mean forcing to become straight or obeying blindly to fixed rules or principles. It means “putting in its own, proper axis”, and the goal is to get the most efficient functioning, or even growing – since the authors are conveying metaphors taken from the observation of nature: a plant, a source, etc. *Chǒngsim* is a working out, the *gongfu/kongbu* exerted on the mind/heart to let it function properly, but it is also the result of this work. That is why it is the ultimate point of self-cultivation, and the articulation between this inner training and its outer expression that is supposed to be a natural extension or growing. There is no actual distinction between the inner and the outer sides which are in a relation of continuity. Far from the legalist viewpoint, Confucianism stresses the natural aspect of ethical cultivation, and Neo-Confucianism reinforced the idea of a vital energy at work. The discussions about the Principle and the Vital Energy (*LiQi/yiki* 理氣), which are sometimes regarded as abstruse and purposeless speculations repeated by goatee elders of past and present, are in fact attempts to explain this vital process through which men become really men. The problem is: how can a human being really become what he is destined to be, that is to say a real man, and then the third agent of the famous cosmic triad (Heaven/Earth/Man) ruling the universe. The meaning of “real” in “real man” is *shi/sil* 實, that is to say something full, or the pit of a fruit. From this pit, another fruit could be generated in a natural process, at the condition of course to be cultivated

properly, that is to say in conformity with its nature. So Neo-Confucian discourse and philosophy is a reflection and an explanation of humanity, and the human “psycho-physiological” functioning in order to achieve the ideal society. Highly stimulated by the rebirth of the *Yijing* studies in Song, Neo-Confucianism is indeed interested in grasping the very seed, source and pit of human potentiality, in order to try to master the growing process. *Chǒngsim* is then one of the core notions used to explain and find out the secret of ideal governing and ideal society. That is also why Neo-Confucianism elaborated so many theories and debated so passionately on the emotions, feelings, thoughts, etc, that is to say all the aspects and expressions of the functioning of the mind/heart, the seat of the full, concentrated human potential.

Let us now return to our analysis of the Korean exegesis of *chǒngsim*. A minute analysis of the meaning and the use of this notion of *chǒngsim* in the *Annals of Chosŏn*, but also in the remaining various collected writings of Korean scholars from the end of Koryŏ to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century has indeed showed interesting, significant results.

Firstly, the notion of heart has been the very bone of contention between Buddhists and Neo-Confucians. The criticisms against Buddhism have allowed the Korean Neo-Confucians to shape their own philosophical specificity around the notion of “straightening one’s heart” which became the core notion of the Confucian Way, which combines consubstantially self-cultivation and socio-political ordering. In Korea, the *chǒngsim* is part of the self-definition of the Neo-Confucians.

Secondly, *chǒngsim* is treated more in a political perspective than in a strictly philosophical perspective. The notion is found recurrently in official texts presented to the king or to be read at court, but it seldom appears in personal studies and scholarly notes. In the Korean understanding of it, the work of *chǒngsim* is part of the “Learning of the Sovereign” and has mainly two possible and interdependent applications. These two focuses of interest are the king on the one hand, and the scholar-officials taken as a unitary body on the other hand. The well-known metaphor of the king as the heart, and the bureaucracy the body that moves and controls the whole country is fully exploited.

Thirdly, the whole discussion and exegesis of scholar-officials on *chǒngsim* in the paradigm of the *Great Learning* and the “Learning for the Sovereign” is the expression of an acute and complex reflection on the distortion between actual practice of

power or deceptive reality, and the Neo-Confucian idealist theory. In their commentaries, Korean scholars are progressively building a theory that seems a first sight contradictory, since it is both monarchical and collegial. These commentaries are worth studying, since they are showing again different strategies at work. To sum up, Korean scholars are emphasizing the *chǒngsim* applied to the sovereign by using new quotations to support their theory, as for example “If the Prince is straightened, nothing will lack straightness; it is only if we straighten the Prince that the state will be durably stable.” 君正莫不正，一正君而國定矣 (*Mengzi* IV.A.20). The recourse to such a quotation carefully selected in the orthodox corpus is participating in a deliberate strategy to only focus on the sovereign responsibility, instead of the sharing of power. Depending on the circumstances, scholars are either emphasizing the collegiality of power, and then their own position, or conversely they are stressing the king’s ultimate responsibility. But the imperative of *chǒngsim* is much stricter regarding the ruler. There are of course philosophical explanations to this, but another explanation is a certain feeling of confusion. Indeed, many writings prove that these scholars were capable of self-affirmation to defend their position, sometimes with surprising vehemence. So the highlight on the monarchical power might be surprising. One possible explanation is that these scholars were in fact deeply puzzled and felt impuissant: in the idealist ideology they have built, they were supposed to be a unitary body, but they were in fact deeply divided.

Lastly, the exegesis of *chǒngsim* is focusing on the necessary interdependence between the king’s heart and his ministers’ heart. The interdependence between the two poles of the collegial power stressed in the commentaries of the *Great Learning* and the “Learning for the Sovereign” is mainly expressed in this ideal of a direct and sincere transparency of feelings and thought. The mutual and common practice of *chǒngsim* by the kings and the scholar-officials is supposed to unite and associate them in the same unique quest: governing, according to the Confucian ideal. This theory was not only produced in the theoretical discourse, but it was also actually in practice at Chosŏn’s court. One striking feature of the history of the whole Chosŏn period is this particular relationship uniting the scholars and the kings. Many stories and accounts that can be found in the *Annals* and the collected writings of scholars witness this actual practicing of the Confucian ideals, this conjunction of theory and practice.

In conclusion, what must be underlined is that, as this general overview of the reception of Neo-Confucianism in Korea has tried to illustrate, the Yuan version of Song Neo-Confucianism received in Korea was basically political and practice-oriented. The specific features of the historical context from mid-Koryŏ to mid Chosŏn have also reinforced this orientation. However, this ideology of the “Learning for the Sovereign”, its focus on the ideal paradigm of the *Great Learning*, and even the sophisticated exegesis of the notion of *chŏngsim* have been repeated and reinforced for centuries from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century partly because it was a dream, a theory based on political ideals. In fact, the very repetition of the same ideas, presented in various and different angles through shifting exegesis and commentaries, is telling about the actual feeling of failure by a few scholars. This feeling of failure was increased by the actual attempts to practice these political ideals in real administration. It was also combined with a deeply contradictory and complex identity that might have notably led to the change in the self-representation of Neo-Confucian scholars in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and then to the later Confucianization of the society.

As the sinologist Pr. de Bary has explained, Song Neo-Confucianism was marked by the stigma of heresy and martyrdom. The energy of its representatives was that of the oppressed people, and this desperate energy might explain their ability to survive the Mongol conquest and access to orthodoxy. In Korea, the history of Neo-Confucianism was also marked at first by martyrdom, but a martyrdom that was paradoxically generated by the accession to orthodoxy in Chosŏn. The idealism of Koryŏ reformists remained intact in the first centuries of the Yi dynasty, and it explains the astonishing energy of the scholars to maintain their power in spite of the real martyrdom they have lived. Just for a reminder: Chŏng Mongju 鄭夢周 (1337-1392), Yi Sung'in 李崇仁 (1349-1392), and Kim Koengp'il 金宏弼 (1454-1504) have been assassinated; Chŏng Tojŏn executed; Yi Saek 李穡 (1328-1396), Kwŏn Kŭn 權近 (1352-1409), and Chŏng Inji 鄭麟趾 (1396-1478) imprisoned; Hong Kuidal 洪貴達 (1438-1504) strangled; Ha Wiji 河緯地 (1387-1456) quartered; Cho Kwangjo 趙光祖 (1482-1519) ordered to commit suicide, Chŏng Pon 鄭笨 (?-1454) reduced to slavery and finally assassinated; and the corpses of Sŏng

Hyön 成俔 (1439-1504), Sim Hoe 沈澮 (1418-1493), Hong Han 洪瀚 (1451-1498) and Kim Chongjik 金宗直 (1431-1492) have been decapitated posthumously after that their tombs have been violated. So, a common identity has been progressively created by this common history of martyrdom in the first centuries of Chosŏn period. However, this identity became also more and more complex. Contrary to the image they were conveying in their philosophical exegesis (that of the unitary body of scholar-officials), the world of scholar-officials was in fact deeply divided. This division can be traced back to the very beginning of the Yi dynasty, and the dynastic transition. By becoming a hereditary social elite and getting more and more stuck to their political duty, which was their very *raison d'être*, the scholars developed a multi-faced, and even contradictory identity. Their aspirations of being the intellectual and moral aristocracy entered in conflict with the concrete struggles among them, the partisan interests. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after the trauma of the successive *literati* purges (*sahwa* 士禍 1489-1504-1519-1545), the self-representation of the Neo-Confucian scholars might have achieved a deep transformation starting from the very beginning of the reception of Neo-Confucianism. Notably, their self-representation as a group expressed itself in a huge variety of terms to designate the Scholar, the Confucian, or the Minister. Especially, the growing distinction between the scholar on the one hand and the official on the other hand has been increasing. So the Korean Neo-Confucians of the 16<sup>th</sup> century tended to transfer and replace their mission from the political and governmental level to the local and social level. The Confucianization of the society could then have started, and the idealism of the first Korean Neo-Confucians found a second birth, a second vitality. Yulgok Yi I and T'oegye Yi Hwang 退溪 李滉 (1501-1570), the two iconic figures of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism who have paved the way for the Confucianization of Korean society, were living at this transitory period of the history of Korean Confucianism: the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Heirs of the first Neo-Confucian scholars of Koryŏ, they have been molded by the progressive and seminal transformation and development of Neo-Confucianism among the ruling elites for three to four centuries. This transformation may have been produced by the rather interesting conjunction of political ideals, philosophical exegesis, and also tormented identity.