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## Does Confucianism matter in the study of Korea?

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**"Does Confucianism matter in the study of Korea?"**

When Andrew Jackson invited me for this talk, he asked me to present, as an introduction, the basic ideas, texts, and history of Neo-Confucianism in Korea in order to give you a more precise idea of what Confucianism means in a philosophical and textual level. I first agreed with the proposal, thinking: "Oh that will be an easy job!" But as the talk was approaching and I started to think more about what I wanted to discuss with you, I changed my mind. I believe that one straightforward question may be asked before talking in detail about Confucianism: "Does Confucianism matters? Does it matter in the study of Korea, especially modern and contemporary Korea?" Recently, I have been struck by the increasing demands and questions about the nature, features, and history of Confucianism coming from a wide range of people around me: students, colleagues in KS, but also general audience (French press, etc.). The reason is that Confucianism is a catch-all word, assumed to explain almost everything and its opposite in Korean culture, mindsets, social practices, politics, economy, legal provisions, etc, past and present and even on both sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Confucianism is indeed often summoned to account for diverse and sometimes totally antagonistic standpoints on modern Korean history and society.

To start with North Korea, Confucianism is sometimes mentioned by scholars as an explanation for the *juch'e* ideology in DPRK as well as the dynastic nature of the North Korean regime. This standpoint is generally adopted by Russian scholars who tend to underline the focus placed on filial piety and loyalty in North Korean's official propaganda. The reason may be that for these scholars from post-soviet era, the main difference of North Korean ideology with Marxism-Leninism lies in the Confucian legacy of premodern Korea, i.e. from the Chosŏn period. For North Korean scholars however, Confucianism of the Ri dynasty (in North Korea, Chosŏn period and state is designated by the Ri Dynasty, *Rijo*) is identified as one obvious sign of the degenerate feudalistic state of Korea before the advent of communism. Confucianism is hence the ideology of oppressive elites and illustrates the backwardness of premodern Korea that did not take the path of historical progress driven by the masses of the people. Only a very few Confucian scholars received positive evaluation, but they are slightly different from the icons put forward by South Korea. For example, the emblematic Confucian class enemy in North Korea is T'oegye Yi Hwang and the best of all

is Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk who is qualified as a materialist thinker. This North-Korean view takes root in the intellectual reflections and heated debates of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Korea, exemplified by the revolutionary scholar and nationalist Sin Ch'aeho (1880-1936) who was the most famous of the early anti-Confucianists (see his 1925 article, "The Biggest Event in the Last 1,000 Years of Korean History").

Contrary to the premodern and "Confucian" view of history, which considered that what is ancient is better (the model of civilization dates back to old antiquity), our modern vision of history sees the present and future as better than the past. These two contrary views of history are both ideological and normative, and the change of view between premodern and modern cultures lies in this significant paradigm shift.

**Thinking Confucianism in contemporary society basically means thinking about the problematic of "modernity":**

- For more than a century now, Confucianism has mainly been used to explain the "missed modernity" of Korea, providing an easy narrative for the tragic fate of the country in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that successively led to the loss of national sovereignty, colonization, civil war, and finally the division into two nations that are technically still at war. This belated entry into modernity has often been attributed to a missed encounter with European industrial revolution, resulting from the supposed Confucian despise for economy, wealth, technical and scientific progress and the so-called "isolationist" position of the "orthodox" Neo-Confucian state of Chosŏn.

- However, this view has been challenged in Korea during colonization and after liberation by many historians who, paradoxically resorting to Confucianism as well, rejected it, considering that it was a eurocentric viewpoint relayed by the Japanese colonial discourse. It is worth noticing that the creation of the *Hangukhak* ("Korean studies") or "National Studies" (*Kukhak*) dates back to the colonial period. It was mainly initiated by Japanese scholars taking part in the *Bunmei kaika* movement 文明開化 (= Westernization) from the Meiji era. These scholars were inspired by the German –Prussian– model. They explained Korean essential "backwardness" by the adherence to Confucianism and the subsequent servility towards China that Confucianism is supposed to imply. The still dominant historiography of Confucianism, reducing Korean Neo-Confucianism to opposing schools (or factions) and endless Byzantine debates, is also heavily tributary to the colonial scholarship, especially the

works written in the 1920's by Japanese scholars like Takahashi Tooru 高橋亨 (1878-1967). This scholarship is highly debatable and criticized today, for it was mostly driven by a colonialist agenda. To go back to the South Korean historians who developed the *naejajjök paljöllon* 內在的發展論 or "internal development theory," in the 1960's, they ironically took model on the post-colonial, Marxist Japanese scholarship. They identified the "seeds" of Korean "lost modernity" in the "*sirhak*" Confucian school. (By "lost modernity," I am referring here to the book by Alexander Woodside: *Lost Modernities. China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History*. 2006. Cambridge: Harvard University Press) These South Korean historians were looking for the sprouts of what they call the theory of "the capitalism in gestation" (an unborn capitalism that already existed inchoately though) (*Chabon chuüi maeng'a ron* 資本主義萌芽論). It is important to note here that the term "*sirhak*" is a by-product of the "invention of tradition" in Korea (to use the fashionable expression of Eric Hobsbawm et Terence Ranger). This invented tradition has been leading, in recent decades, to fetishise the 18<sup>th</sup> century for instance and some of its prominent historical figures like Tasan Chöng Yagyong or King Chöngjo. It also led to dichotomize an orthodox/bad/conservative Neo-Confucianism on the one hand, and a good "*sirhak*" school on the other hand. Although this "*sirhak* school" is certainly of Confucian obedience, it is generally considered as a subversive trend. As such, it is hence believed to provide today a sort of moral backing to the original, pure and "genuine" Confucianism, unsoiled by any compromise with government and real exercise of power. This moral backing provided by the *sirhak* school also saves the Chosön dynasty from the historical shame in which it was relegated and it is expected to prove the Korean native developmental capability, without resorting to any foreign involvement.

**In the economic level of contemporary South Korea** (i.e. from the 1960's onwards; according to the mainstream historical periodization dividing the modern and the contemporary periods in South Korea, contemporary history starts in 1961 with Pak Chönghui's military coup d'etat):

- the so-called "Confucian capitalism" (the expression was notably used by Samuel Huntington, the author of the best-seller *Clash of civilization*) and then the "Asian economic development model" have been used, again and again, to explain the economical success of the Four Asian dragons (SK, Taiwan, HK, Singapore). This concept of Confucian capitalism was based upon the strong rejection of Max Weber's assumption that Confucianism and

capitalism were incompatible –Cf. *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* and *The religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*–. The concept has been widely spread in journals of international policy and economy by journalists and scholars after the theories proposed by US based intellectuals, among which influential Chinese American academics like Tu Weiming, professor at Harvard University and one ideologue of the "New Confucianism movement" (also called Boston Confucianism). The Confucian capitalism, together with its paired notion of "Confucian democracy," were then turned into the controversial issue of the "Asian values" in the US but also in Asia.

After what South-Koreans usually call the "IMF crisis" in the late 1990's, these same "Asian values" (i.e. respect for authority and self-development through education) were also paradoxically used to explain the economical crisis in South Korea. This took place in the context of scholarly debate about the theory of the "Capitalist Development State," first applied to Japan and then extended to South Korea and Taiwan. This theory of Asian development state focus on state interventionism into business and is interested in the role of culture in economy. Today, after economic recovery, these Asian values are seen in a positive light again. They are put in the forefront of the "Korean economical development path" by some influential New Right people in South Korea [like Yu Sökch'un (Lew Seokchoon) and Hahm Chaibong] who advocate for the Korean "affective networks" or "ascriptive associations" (*yön'go chiptan* 연고집단) and state interventionism that, they believe, are subsumed under the Confucian ethos.

### **In the level of society,**

- Confucianism is often blamed for producing and maintaining rigid social hierarchy, gender inequality, and oppressive corporate culture in South Korea. To sum up roughly, Confucianism is seen as a Korean avatar of patriarchy mixed with authoritarian regime, social discrimination, male chauvinism, and military culture plaguing South Korean society and culture –no less!

The serious issue of gender inequality has always been associated with Confucianism by Korean feminists who have been arguing that Confucianism advocates patriarchy. Confucianism became a true pet peeve during the societal debates about the abolition of the *hoju* system. This family registration system was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in 2005 and finally abolished in 2008 after the concerted effort made by

the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and non-governmental organizations such as Korea Women's Associations United. According to *hoju* system, created in 1953 under Civil Law, all members of a family had to be registered under the *hoju* or "family head" who were generally male members of family. When a father died, the eldest son inherited the position of *hoju* and younger sons established separate families on marriage. As for daughters, they became members of their husbands' families when they married and women only inherited the position of family head when there were no surviving males. During the public debates about the *hojuje* in 2003 and 2004, most of the religious leaders (Christians –Catholic Church and Protestants denominations– as well as Buddhists –*chogye* and *wŏn* orders–) crafted a common official statement for the abolition of this system. The only social group announcing a position against the abolition was the Association of Korean Confucians, named *Sunggyungwan*, arguing that this would be a threat to the Korean family system and traditional values. But the confrontation between feminists and Confucianists existed long before the debate about the *hojuje*. Under the attack of feminists, the issue of gender inequality was directly addressed in the late 1990's by specialists of Confucianism in academic circles. First attempts at dialogue were made through a series of conferences in which the possible coexistence of Confucianism and feminism was debated. Ch'oe Yŏngjin, a male professor at SKK Univ., notably defended the idea of a "Confucian feminism," arguing that Confucianism was not incompatible with modern society and feminist claims. He advocated removing all elements of gender discrimination in order to create a new philosophy based on both Confucian texts and gender equality. Many discussions followed and feminists were even divided among themselves. Today, the issue remains open. However, as underlined by Koh Eunkang in her article "Gender Issues and Confucian scriptures: Is Confucianism Incompatible with Gender Equality in South Korea" (Bulletin of the SOAS, University of London, Vol. 71), because of the increasing feminization of Confucian students in universities, the topic will certainly be further discussed in South Korea in the future.

In academic literature, the issue of women and Confucianism in history has been discussed in some reference books, such as *Women and Confucian Cultures in premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (edited by Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush and Joan R. Piggott. 2003. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press). In this book, Jahyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler, two leading female figures of Korean Studies and Confucian studies, have given enlightening descriptions of the way in which Chosŏn women used to negotiate their own space of empowerment within a Confucian social and ideological framework. Recently, a

few Koreanists also issued in a collective book the papers of a conference: *Women and Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea. New Perspectives* (edited by Yougmin Kim and Michael J. Pettid. 2011. New York: Suny). These two works both give a more nuanced and balanced view on the issue of gender and Confucianism and they are really worth reading for anybody interested in the topic.

**Another issue related to modern Korean society and Confucianism is the question of the "Confucian democracy."** John Duncan has given a useful summary of the topic in the chapter he wrote in the book edited by Charles Armstrong *Korean society: Civil society, Democracy and the State*" (2002, 2006. Oxon & New York: Routledge). As the title of the chapter suggests, "The question of civil society in Chosŏn dynasty Korea," Duncan summarizes the debate that opposed Cho Hein and David Steinberg in 1997 about Confucianism, democracy, and civil society. He deals notably with the significant divergences between Western notion of public versus private and *kong* versus *sa* in Chosŏn dynasty, especially in the realms of family organization and political party system.

**One last field arousing growing interest from scholars and society at large is the Confucian legacy in Korean legal history.** Korean traditional laws were founded on Confucian doctrines. Since the adoption of the Chinese law codes in the Chosŏn dynasty, Confucian moral principles were even more stressed in Korean legislation than they were in their Chinese counterpart. However, the Westernization of East Asian laws at the end of the 19th century greatly undermined the consistent Confucian legal tradition, which cultural significance has been overlooked by modern jurists. Though it seems nearly impossible to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity in Korean legal culture, Confucian values and norms are still influential to the Korean legal system. One interesting feature is the political culture of petition that we might be tempted to see revived in the very recent protests of the Sewŏl families and their supporters at the first anniversary of the ferry sinking. Indeed, in Chosŏn period, the government sought for its legitimacy within the Confucian ideal of "virtuous government." Thus various forms of petition and litigation for wronged commoner people were established and implemented by the state as a governmental attempt to institutionalize "rule by virtue." One of the various forms of petition operated by the state was "direct petition" or *chikso*, by which aggrieved people could make a direct appeal to the king. There were three different forms of direct petition: beating the drum, stopping the royal cart in the official procession, and submitting a petition to the royal court. The Chosŏn government

tended to accept direct petitions, in particular stopping the royal procession, very leniently in contrast with China and Japan. Despite some institutional barriers, the people could find a way to reflect popular interest on government policies, for instance, by making the government dismiss corrupt officials through direct petition. President Pak Kūnhæ used to be placed in the 1970's at the head of the New Spirit movement (*saemaūm*) by her father Pak Chōnhŭi, who after having harshly criticized Confucianism at the time of his coup had radically changed his outlook. So she was sent around the country to address mass rallies on the importance of Confucian virtues such as loyalty and filial piety. But today, when we see how much she care about the petition of the citizen, she does not seem to be an actual follower of the Confucian rule by virtue...

All of the above-mentionned social phenomena, often linked to Confucianism by modern and contemporary observers of Korean societies, could be certainly better explained by the very evolutions of the socio-economical structures and mindsets of modern Korea (by which, I mean, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the colonial period and up to the years following the end of WWII). These evolutions are specific to modernity and don't have much in fact to do with the Neo-Confucian ideas and practices of the pre-modern Chosŏn dynasty. **If one must have to pinpoint one constant feature of Korean culture and society, it certainly would not be Confucianism, but rather the kinship-based social hierarchy and the importance of social status.**

Even the idea of "**Confucianization**" of Korean society and culture, systematized by Martina Deuchler in her reference book *The Confucian Transformation of Korea* and repeated again and again like a mantra, has been recently criticized by professor Deuchler herself. In her new book to be launched this summer (*Under the Ancestors' Eyes: Kinship, Status, and Locality in Premodern Korea*; Harvard Asia Center), she is indeed criticizing her own previous research, demonstrating, if need be, that she is a great scholar. The book makes the point that the "descent group" is the constituent part of Korean society and traces the history of descent groups from Silla to the late 19th century. In short, the "social" (i.e., birth and decent from certified ancestry) determined the degree of "political participation" from the Silla *kolp'um* system to late Chosŏn, dividing society into elite and nonelite. The book also deals with the impact of Neo-Confucianism and the emergence of the lineage system, but argues that it was not Neo-Confucianism but the native kinship system that gave Korean

society continuity over centuries. It was also the native Korean kinship system that contributed to the inflexibility of Neo-Confucianism, which finally led to its own breakdown in the 1890s.

This idea of the unchanging and constant feature of Korean society that would be driven by native, pre-Confucian kinship system, as well as social discrimination through social statuses has also been very well demonstrated by Hwang Kyöngmun for example, for the modern period, in his book *Beyond Birth. Social Status in the Emergence of Modern Korea* (2004. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press).

To sum up, everybody seem to have their own idea of what Confucianism is, means, does, but at the very same time nobody would like to or could define it in plain wording. Generally speaking, Confucianism lies between two extremes, two *clichés* (between "oriental despotism" and "Asian wisdom"). But in the Korean case especially, Confucianism is overwhelmingly perceived as something negative and retrograde, causing more trouble than good, for good and bad reasons. So Confucianism basically appears as a controversial topic. It is a "trouble," to use the famous title of Wm. Theodore de Bary's book, *The Trouble with Confucianism* (1991, reissue 1996. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press).

### **But what is Confucianism?**

#### **Some may ask, is that a religion? A philosophy? An ideology?**

This is a huge topic and I would just like to precise that "religion" (*chonggyo*) and "philosophy" (*chörhak*) are Western categories that did not exist in their modern sense in East-Asia in the past. "Religion" for instance was *invented* in Japan in the late 19th century, as has been explained by Joseph Ananda Josephson (*The invention of Religion in Japan*. 2012. Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

As for "philosophy," it is also a modern term that is much indebted to the rise of the "philosophy of professors" in Europe. Philosophy, taken as an institutionalized field of study, is illustrated by Kant or Hegel who were university professors and who both denied that China ever had a philosophy or even history, turning their backs to the pronounced infatuation of previous philosophers such as Voltaire or Leibniz who saw on the contrary in Confucianism a laudable moral and political philosophy. On this topic see, in French, *Y a-t-il une philosophie chinoise? Un état de la question* ("Is there a Chinese Philosophy? A state of

the issue") edited by Anne Cheng (2005. Saint-Denis: Extreme-Orient, Extrême-Occident, Presses universitaires de Vincennes, vol.27; there are two articles in English though).

These two invented categories of "religion" and "philosophy" were originally ideologically and politically driven, but they still have long-lasting effects in Asia but also in the Western representation of Asian culture. Today, these categories tend to obscure rather than enlighten what they are supposed to define. That is the reason why specialists of humanities and social sciences tend to prefer using other terms and notions such as "thought" instead of "philosophy" and "religious facts" instead of "religion."

To discuss a little bit more about the case of "philosophy," I would like to remind you that one distinct feature of East-Asian scholars and intellectuals in the 20th century has been the repeated effort to gain, for their native intellectual, religious, or cultural traditions, the international acknowledgment of the status of "philosophy," in a gesture of recognition policy. But there is still some ambiguity today. In South Korean academia for example, Confucianism (Confucian texts, notions, thinkers) is studied in diverse university departments: *chonggyo hakkwa* (religious studies), *chŏrhakkwa*, *tongyang chŏrhakkwa* (philosophical studies, and East-Asian philosophy), *tongyang hakkwa* (East-Asian studies) and *kungmun hakkwa* (national –Korean– literature), which means that the institutional categories under which "Confucian studies" are carried out are blurred, but open. On the contrary, most of Western specialists of Confucianism are working in the field of area studies, not disciplines. Indeed, flirting in their practices with diverse methodological approaches such as history, philology, philosophy, anthropology, religious study or sociology of religion, specialists working on Confucianism usually end up being hired in East-Asian area studies in European countries. Confucianism, as well as Buddhism, Shamanism, Daoism, etc. are not taught in Philosophy departments, except in very rare cases and in limited circumstances. So the battle to gain the label of philosophy for Confucianism is still going on and one might even wonder whether it is worth –or not– the trouble.

**As for the people that might be qualified as proper "Confucians" in Korea,** they consist of the confucian community (*yurim*) and sympathizers. They are usually organised in many associations and various semi-private organizations without forming a real religious clergy. These associations either organize the performance of Confucian rituals or promote one or other past Confucian scholar-official, especially in the case of "learned societies" (*hakhoe*) that publish journals or books, and organize festivals, academic conferences in Korea and

abroad. The three main *hakhoe* of this kind are, in order of importance, the *Tasan hakhoe*, the *Toegye hakhoe*, and the *Yulgok hakhoe*. The people gathered in these associations and learned societies are composed of descendants of *yangban* lineages, university professors, but also (and this is important) local, municipal officials in charge of promoting Confucian heritage throughout the peninsula (ritual shrines, Confucian academies called *sŏwŏn*). Cultural geographers and South Korean politicians use to locating the privileged and "natural" Confucian region of Korea in the Northern Kyŏngsang province, in the Andong area, which is debatable in many ways. Anyway, in the effort to promote tourism and maybe also for proselytism, politicians and some Confucianists of the Andong region have been working hard together to create in June 2013 a very incongruous thing: the Culture Theme Park called Yugyoland (Confucian Land)...

To go back to more authentic experience if I may say so, let me allude now to the major Confucian rituals: the bi-annual sacrifice at the Confucian Shrine, Munmyo, at *Sŏnggyungwan* (the former Royal Academy that is now part of the campus of SKK University). The performers of these sacrifices are Confucianists and also professional musicians and dancers. That is precisely the reason why you can see female musicians at these modern performances for instance. These official rituals, that are sacrifices, are called *taesŏkchŏn*. They are organized since 1986 by the Association for the preservation of the *Sŏkchŏn taeje* 釋奠大祭 (석전대제보존회). This association is related in turn to the Sung Kyun Kwan Seok Jeon Academy which main goal is to "educate society" and which is placed under the authority of the Cultural Heritage Administration (*Munhwa chaech'ŏng*), the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, The Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation, and the Korea Tourism Organization. The *Sŏkchŏn taeje* is indeed part of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (중요무형문화재 重要無形文化財 제 85 호) since 1975. In the same way, let me remind that the very first item of South Korea's Intangible Cultural Heritage registered in 1964 was "The Royal Ancestral Ritual in the Jongmyo Shrine... and its Music" 宗廟祭禮樂 종묘제례악 (the ritual performed at the Chongmyo, the Royal Shrine of the Yi dynasty). This means that Confucianism has been valued since the mid-sixties mainly as an artistic performance of the past, consubstantial with a dead monarchy and premodern Confucian state.

Lastly, after having been labelled as one item of the Cultural heritage of South Korea for decades, Confucianism is now relegated to a new fate. It is used to give moral approval to

youth training camps in "traditional ethics." These programs are organized by the Association for Korean Confucian academies 한국서원연합회 established in 2005. They are called "sowŏn stay," after the model of the successful Buddhist "temple stay." The main difference with the "temple stay" however is that the "sowŏn stay" targets school boys and girls and the goal is to inculcate them with traditional ethics that are said to be critically needed in this time of disenchanting modern society that hungers for moral values.



There are many more things that could be said about Confucianism in Korea today, but I am afraid that I am running out of time. Since my field of study is intellectual history and textual approaches (after all, I am a specialist of the first three centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty, before the *imjin* Japanese invasions and long before the rise of the problematic of modernity on Korean soil), I would like to turn now, before concluding, to a very brief introduction to Confucianism, and more precisely Neo-Confucianism.

Let me first precise what is the difference between these two English labels. Confucianism is a Western neologism created after the name of Master Kong, Kongja or Kongbuja, that is to say Confucius, according to the Western pronunciation given by European Jesuits sent in mission into China. Some sinologists have recently proposed to rename Confucianism by *ru-ism* or the *ru* school to go beyond the figure of Confucius and underline the pre-Confucius Confucianism. *Ru-ism* designates the ideology and ethics of the *Ru/Yu* 儒 (*literati/scholar-officials*) that Confucius and his followers had been advocating for throughout the centuries. This new label, *yu-ism* (from "yuhak" in Sino-Korean) has not been adopted by academic circles in Korean Studies; it does not even have unanimous support within the circles of sinologists.

As for Neo-Confucianism, it is also a neologism created after a tempting comparison made with European Renaissance and neo-Latin studies. Just like the Renaissance period, Song China was indeed the stage of deep social, political, economical, technical, and intellectual changes that led to a renewal of Confucianism stimulated by Buddhism and Daoism but also

by its own developments. This rejuvenated Confucianism was characterized by a call to "get back to the source," that is to say to the Confucian Way/Dao. Neo-Confucianism hence designates the new version of Confucianism that developed starting from the 9th in China and spread throughout East-Asia (China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan). Qualified as heterodox and banned at its beginning in Song China, this Neo-Confucianism finally gained the status of the orthodox Learning under the mongol rule of Yuan dynasty over China and Korea, and was associated until the dawn of the 20th century with the well-known state examinations and institutions of pre-modern East-Asian states. Neo-Confucianism is precisely the Confucianism that has been commonly regarded as the "dominant ideology" of Chosŏn period in a Marxist sense (= a mechanism of state control).

However, this Western term of Neo-Confucianism embraces in fact a wide range of schools, tendencies, and phenomena that are designated by many different terms in East-Asian languages. The most common ones in Korean are *sŏngnihak* (the Learning of Human nature and Principle) and *Tohak* (The Learning of the Way) but there are also *simhak* (Learning of the heart/mind), *chehak* (Learning for the ruler), *kihak* (Learning of Vital Energy) and even *sirhak* ("practice-oriented Learning"). The term "*Chŏngjuhak*" or "*Chujahak*" are also often used in Korea, but they specifically refer to the orthodox teachings of either the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi taken together, or that of Zhu Xi, the great Neo-Confucian master who systematized the Confucian Way of Song China.

In Korea, Confucianism started to really play a crucial role in all aspects of society, culture, and mindset after the rather long-lasting reception of the Neo-Confucianism transmitted from Song dynasty China but mostly during the Yuan dynasty. This means that the Korean reception was much tributary to the features of that Song Neo-Confucianism "digested" and summarized under the mongol dynasty. The version of Neo-Confucianism received in Korea was strongly didactical and explains many characteristics of the Korean actual practice and understanding of Neo-Confucianism.

Since it is neither the time nor the place to present a complete history of Korean Neo-Confucianism, I would like to simply remind you of the core ideas of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. **Basically Confucianism is humanism**, to paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre about existentialism as my former supervisor and friend Anne Cheng did in her French translation of the *Analects* of Confucius. **It is a holist worldview** that encompasses almost every aspects of human society and human life, ranging from existential questionings, moral anthropology, to political wisdom. **But it is above all an ethic to live by, it is a commitment.** This is

something often forgotten or easily overlooked in modern and contemporary evaluations of the non identified and question-begging object "Confucianism." There is a Confucian message that crosses boundaries and that explains why, beyond the obsessive and well-understandable focus on contextualization in historical approach, generations of men –and sometimes women as well– have dedicated their lives studying and trying to practice it.

Confucianism might appear as paradoxical at first sight: it implies some extensive book knowledge, but all the books/Classics and commentaries that are needed to understand it deal in fact with one idea, summarized by Yulgok Yi I in the following formula in his *Kyōngmong yogyōl* (the Confucian primer for the youth): “If the heart does not exercise and the body does not act according to what the mouth is reciting, what would be the benefit of a book remaining a book, and me remaining myself ?” (若口讀而心不體身不行, 則書自書我自我. 何益之有。KMYG 4). Confucian Learning is indeed grounded on praxis, which means that it needs social interaction, duration, effort, self-reflection, commitment, and action. The Confucian motto could even be summarized by "just do it." Here, "Action" has to be understood as a progressive and repeated practice, almost in the sense of practising in physical training.

One of the most difficult part of Confucianism is certainly **the rites or rituals**, and it is precisely on its related topic –such as filial piety, ancestral rites, or gender and age differentiation– that Confucianism appears as a controversial ethics in modern eyes. The Confucian ritualism may be summarized by **the “Five Bonds” or “Five Humans Relationships”** (prince/minister, father/son, elder brother/younger brother, husband/wife, friend/friend). These Five Bonds are metonymical of all possible human interactions and should not be understood in a very narrow sense. Confucian ethics has been described by some Western scholars (Roger Ames, Henry Rosemont) as “role-ethics,” in the sense that it basically stresses the different roles that any individual, within a society, has to live in a lifetime.

The word “role” is to be understood here as a role to be “lived” or “experienced” personally and not simply as a role to be “played” outwardly without any personal commitment. It is crucial to understand that rituals are not simple decorum or etiquette coming from exotic old ages, interesting only antiquity lovers. They are not authoritarian and prescriptive rules solely meant to assign rigid tasks and constraints to some segments of society. Contrary to what is sometimes believed, Confucian rites are not meant to be tools of oppression for women,

young people, and lower classes in general. I am not saying that Confucianism is an egalitarian ideology –far from it!– but such a questioning would be somehow anachronistic. Rituals are in fact thought in Confucianism as performative acts meant to truly transform the people who perform different ritual roles in different ritual situations. To understand correctly this point, let me remind you that rituals are fundamentally related to music in Confucianism.

An analogy with musical performance is indeed rather enlightening. Performing rituals or having proper ritual behaviors is just like playing and interpreting a score within a musical ensemble. Each performer plays according to his own capacities, talents, and emotions, but he has to be always in tune with the other performers playing their own scores at the same moment. The general score that they are all playing together is not written in advance. Ritual rules might be described as rough sketches, rules and guidelines for that still unwritten score, a score that remains to be played to really exist. The score is in fact created on the spot by the magic of the performance itself, and each musical performance is in that sense unique. Each human interaction is unique and participates at the same time in the common building of a properly human society.

Before concluding, I would like you to keep in mind **four fundamental ideas about Confucian ritualism and role-ethics**. Firstly, leading a human life in a Confucian sense means that there are different roles to be experienced in a life-time: being a subject of a ruler, being a father, a spouse, a brother, a friend, etc. These roles are not fixed once for all, and one single person lives in fact different roles, depending on circumstances of his personal situation. Circumstances are indeed always evolving and changing.

Secondly, the idea of the Five Bonds cannot be understood correctly without taking into account the Golden rule (or the ethics of reciprocity), common to many intellectual and religious traditions and known in Confucianism as the virtue of *shu/sǒ* 恕 (the pictogram of the “heart” topped by the character meaning “reciprocity,” or “similarity,” in the sense of “putting oneself in the place of others”). This golden rule was expressed by Confucius in the *Analects*: “What you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others” (*Analects* 12.2 and 15.24).

Thirdly, Confucian ritualism is intimately connected to the cosmology of the *Book of Changes*, one Confucian Classic. This means that ritualism is not synonymous with rigidity or fixity.

On the contrary, it is related to a philosophy that is basically preoccupied with the question: “how to bring and maintain “constancy” in a world regarded as ceaseless changes”? The cosmology of the *Changes* involves in turn different temporalities in ethical practice and points at the tension between “duration” and “moment.” This means that the outward conduct of an exemplary person might change under different circumstances, but his character should remain constant; which implies repeated practice. The state of constant balance that the Confucians seek to achieve is comparable with that of a tightrope walker: it is only when he keeps walking on the rope that he can keep the balance and stay on the rope. So duration, constancy, and active practice are intimately linked one another.

Lastly, this long-lasting and repeated ethical practice is precisely what is meant by the word “Learning” (*hak*) in Confucianism. Learning is learning to walk on the Confucian Way. The Confucian way expresses the unwillingness to separate theory and practice, but also privilege and responsibility. So there is no distinction between end and means, speech and act. The goal to attain is an everyday “practice,” to be performed until death, a constant walking on the right path. Moreover, this path lies in ordinary life, in “things near at hands,” in daily routines and thus in basic human relationships. The purpose is to live a proper human life and to perform common human destiny according to natural order – or in other words according to natural, cosmological “patterns.”

## CONCLUSION

So, does Confucianism matters in the study of Korea? I think that you have now understood that this question needs to be answered by a "yes and no" answer. No, Confucianism does not matter if you are interested in studying modern and contemporary Korea, except if are interested in contemporary Confucianists. I mean that Confucianism cannot give you any useful clue about the main characteristics of contemporary societies in both North and South Korea, and even in their respective diasporas. Confucianism is not a magic answer to your questionings. You must make an effort to find other explanations, be they sociological, economical, anthropological, etc. But, yes, Confucianism still matters to some extent, because to really understand why Confucianism cannot explain everything, you must know basic features of Confucian thought and you must know about the common trajectory of Confucianism with the institutions, practices, and mindsets of Chosŏn Korea. And of course, if you are interested in pre-modern Korea (literature, history, art history, religious studies,

architecture, legal and institutional history, social history, intellectual history), you absolutely must be knowledgeable about Confucian core notions, thinkers, and texts. In this particular case, let me assure you that studying Confucianism can be a very rewarding journey – I can attest to that.