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Confucianism

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Confucianism is associated with strong characteristics of early modern Korea that often appear as conflicting with one another and conjures up a variety of representations. On the positive side, it evokes merit-based recruitment system, stable institutions, intellectual achievements, sophisticated culture written in Literary Sinitic, sober esthetics, self-cultivation based on moral values, such as loyalty, filial piety, decency, modesty, and appreciation of effort, as well as a cohort of great men turned into cultural heroes. At the other end of the spectrum, it also evokes abusive elites, rigid social hierarchy, patriarchy, conservatism, national chauvinism, religious intolerance, economic underdevelopment, military weakness, factionalism, and historical stagnation. Depending on the stance taken, the topic of Confucianism and Korea generates polarizing views and value-loaded judgements. The problem revolves around whether the Korean “past,” which is, by itself, heavily loaded with a range of conflicting emotions going from pride to shame in modern perceptions, can be explained, and to which extent, by Confucianism. The reason is that, since Chosŏn time and the Japanese colonization as well, Korea has been depicted as an authentic Confucian kingdom for its most recent and longest past, that is to say during the Yi dynasty. Confucianism has been coined as the state ideology of Chosŏn kingdom and, as such, poses in retrospect the problem of how to interpret the role of ideology in history. A side problem, which is not less complex and not less emotionally loaded, is whether Confucianism should be defined as an alien –Chinese– ideology or, conversely, as a universal philosophy that Korea has adapted in its own, unique, way. It is hence crucial to properly understand the philosophical premises of Confucianism and its theoretical developments in both China and Korea, as it is equally important to consider its real usages in society and tangible effects in Korean history. Bearing all this context in mind, this chapter will try to present an overview of the issue by adopting a thematic approach that may help understanding how Confucianism affected Korea and how Korea, in its early modernity, affected in turn Confucianism. The aim is to avoid a solely philosophical depiction of Korean Confucianism, but also a teleological description of its history, since the historical trajectory of Confucianism in Korea was neither linear nor self-explanatory.

Confucianism: Essentials

As the word itself shows in English, Confucianism designates the teaching of Confucius (551-479 BCE), the latinized form of *Kong fuzi*, meaning Master Kong. Confucius was neither a god nor a prophet. He was not the founder of a religion, taken in the common sense of a belief

in sacred entities governing the world, a specific institution organized around a clergy and a theology, or a worship centered on one spiritual leader. His followers would rather claim to be part of his “school” (*jia*), a term encompassing the meanings of family, household, and philosophical school. The school of Confucius constituted one intellectual trend among many others in pre-imperial China and was basically defined as a scholarly tradition characterized by the expertise in specific texts and rituals. As an impoverished scholar of probable noble ancestry and a specialist of the rituals and textual legacy from the Zhou dynasty of Chinese Antiquity, Confucius spent his life trying to get employed as a political advisor by different rulers and, later in life, teaching to disciples. He was surrounded by numerous disciples, with different backgrounds and personalities, who would progressively forge the “School of experts-scholars” (*rujia*), commonly called in Western languages the Confucian school. This school evolved and expanded over the centuries, and was represented by many prominent figures, among whom Mencius and Xunzi in the fourth century BCE, who were also experts in philosophical argumentation and political advisors to different rulers.

Sometimes called a “king without a throne,” Confucius was also turned into a semi-legendary figure over the centuries and erected as an icon embodying the essence of Chinese civilization. He has, ever since, been revered with a form of religious piety nourishing various forms of religious practices. Although Confucius was not a religious founder, his teaching is devoid of neither spirituality nor belief in supernatural entities –be they called “spirits,” “ghosts,” or “Heaven”–, contrary to what a certain European gaze has attempted to make it believed from the 18th century onwards, by praising in Confucianism a form of a rationalism without God. The development of anthropology and sociology, which filtered in historical studies, has helped nuance this view, which was idealist in the philosophical sense, and Confucianism, taken in its historical dimension, can no longer be understood as devoid of religious aspects.

Confucius fundamentally epitomizes the Master, the ideal teacher who is able to emulate and transform his disciples through his knowledge, wisdom, and moral exemplarity. Moral exemplarity is less an ideal perfection given by birth than a moral tension, understood as a state of equilibrium and stability that must be constantly cultivated and sustained during an individual’s lifetime. The exemplarity of the Confucian master lies in his “virtue,” meaning a moral power and persuasive force that is capable to affect and transform others in order to forge a better world. The teaching of Confucius might be defined as a form of humanism centered on ethics and grounded in one strong conviction: human beings are morally perfectible and possess internal resources to achieve a society of peace and order.

Realizing such a society, understood as the very expression of human civilization, is explained as the fate of humankind. Among all the living creatures of the natural world, only human beings are bearer of this fate, also called the “mandate endowed by heaven,” which is ascribed by natural order. This specific mission is made possible thanks to human mental and emotional abilities to understand and follow a moral path, called the Way. The Confucian Way is envisioned as a process of refining human nature or natural dispositions. This process is generically called Learning and is twofold. It consists in putting in practice the spirit of ancient rituals in daily life, through the performance of ritualized behaviors in all sorts of social, changing, interactions, the ultimate goal of practising Confucian Rites being to cultivate the mind/heart, which is the seat of both emotions and thoughts. Learning also implies studying the civilizational model set by the Sage kings of Antiquity. This model is encapsulated in a body of reference texts that must be studied in details, which requires commitment, endurance, and efforts.

The message of Confucius is preserved in the *Analects*, a vivid collection of sayings compiled by his disciples in a dialogic form, in which two key terms might be singled out, among a constellation of related notions : “Learning” and “benevolence/humanity.” The latter points at the social dimension of human condition, while highlighting the internal attitude of the individual towards their fellow humans. This inner disposition has to be understood as sympathy and empathy, but also as a moral exigence resembling the Golden Rule shared by many moral traditions, which commands to treat others with the same dignity and gravity as oneself. The Confucian moral injunction consists in perfecting the ability of “knowing men” and cultivating “clear-sightedness,” by practising virtue in ritualized human interactions. Virtue does not come from blind obedience to moral rules but from a subtle wisdom acquired from a demanding ethical work understood as a training, almost in a sporting sense, that requires efforts and endurance. Benevolence should not be understood as an expression of a mild good intention, but rather as a challenging exercise which might, potentially, empower both the self and the whole society.

Confucius presented himself as the transmitter of the wise rule coming down from Chinese Antiquity. This culture is fixed in what has been called, after him, the Confucian Classics. These authoritative texts, the exact number of which varied throughout history, are commonly listed as five: the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Book of Changes*. They provide moral, political, institutional, literary, historical, and cosmological principles, and present as well esthetical and stylistic norms. They deal with all areas of knowledge that had been regarded as worthy of

transmission at Confucius time, during the so-called golden age for classical Chinese philosophy. Because of their concise and, at times, curt style, the Classics intrinsically require commentaries to be understood. Considered as enclosing the ultimate—and unique—wisdom of human civilization, their canonicity lies in their being, paradoxically, open texts. Classics and their commentaries are regarded as “warp and weft threads” that reveal their meaning only when they are read together. Confucius is considered as the first editor, compiler, and exegete of the Classics and a large part of the Confucian tradition consisted in studying them and further reflect from them. Classics and their many and, at times, conflicting commentaries constituted the core curriculum for higher civil service examinations in later times. They contributed to lay the theoretical foundations for the progressive shaping of the institutions of imperial China. This system would, eventually, be emulated and adapted outside of China as a civilizational model capable of universalization.

Confucianism has been conceptualized, ceaselessly renewed, and passionately defended for more than two millenia in different countries and contexts in East-Asia, notably for its political philosophy. One striking feature is that it was mainly advocated by a specific elite group, who happened to hardly exercise the supreme political power. Confucianism, in its core essence, can be defined as the ideal for society designed by a limited social group that is called, by default, the scholars-officials. This minority consisted of highly educated men, who identified themselves and were identified by others as followers of Confucius. They shared common views and values attributed to Confucius and its school, which provided them with a sense of belonging to a special community. Confucians might be defined by their expertise in sophisticated rhetoric, extensive textual knowledge, in-depth exegetical skills, fine political argumentation, and, last but not least, a benevolent but sharp assessment of human behaviors grounded on a strong moral concern. Forming an “aristocracy of the spirit,” they contented themselves with remaining teachers and, at best, influential advisors to holders of power and, later, servants of imperial or monarchical bureaucracies, without ambitioning to seize the throne for themselves.

History has showned that the principles of Confucianism were well suited to be utilized and tailored to either build up or reinforce political institutions and social structures of authoritarian regimes functioning in an apparently top-down manner only. But it cannot be denied that these principles were also crucial in monitoring and limiting autocratic drifts from rulers. They also provided moral norms and legal standards to protect not all but large segments of societies in which they were actually applied. Confucius was the first to clearly dissociate moral merit from merit by birth. The Confucian “gentleman” must prove himself to

be noble and, most importantly, be acknowledged by others as noble. This Confucian moral elitism gave rise to a powerful and rather seductive political thinking rooted, in theory, in morality rather than brute force or birth. This feature, regarded as a hallmark of human civilization, was a matter of pride for Confucian literati and scholars-officials who felt collectively empowered and entitled in their exceptional legitimacy, thanks to a shared sense of serving a higher, noble, mission.

Neo-Confucianism: Characteristics

Due to its coexistence over a millenium with Buddhism and Daoism, which attained great sophistication while permeating both elite and popular cultures, Confucianism in China underwent drastic changes in its doctrine and usages. It became a standardized knowledge and produced rhetorical tools and prescriptive norms for the Chinese imperial system, as it fed religious practices and fueled complex philosophical reasoning. During the “long transition” from Tang to Song dynasties, which was marked by military, technical, economical, social, and cultural upheavals of unprecedented scale, this evolution also generated doubts. As it often happens in a changing world, ideology was reshaped to adjust to and get a grip on new circumstances. Some scholars came to question what Confucianism should be in order to maintain a strong state and reach peace and prosperity. They turned themselves into defenders of a supposedly genuine Confucianism, prior to the introduction of Buddhism of foreign origin. They narrowed their focus on the figures of Confucius and his direct disciples, by going “upstream” the established Confucian tradition of their time and calling for a return to what they identified as the real sources of Chinese civilization.

This Confucian tradition, reinvented under the two Song dynasties and further developed later, was characterized by many novelties: a considerable augmentation and new exegesis of the canonical corpus, a revisited vocabulary and conceptual toolkit to cope with the elaborate metaphysical speculations of Buddhism, a strong emphasis on the extensive and correct practice of Confucian rituals, and a new sense of identity for Confucian literati who claimed to be keepers of a moral orthodoxy. On the philosophical level, it revitalized the classical holistic vision of Confucianism by articulating ethical and political issues with an intricate thinking capable of competing with Buddhist philosophy: the cosmology of the most abstruse Classic, the *Book of Changes*, which was thoroughly reinterpreted. Yet, despite this common ground, the new version of Confucianism was multifaceted. It was elaborated in different directions by various scholars, then in distinct intellectual lineages, which were

organized in local communities, notably around Confucian academies starting from the Southern Song. These privileged places producing knowledge and sociability were dedicated to the ritual worship of carefully selected, old and new, Confucian masters, as well as the study and dissemination of their teachings in local areas, far from the court and turmoil of political life.

This new Confucianism bears several names, depending on the founding figures of the lineages, the localities where the masters used to be active, or the core notions stressed in their teachings, such as the Confucian Way, the Nature and the Principle, the Principle, the Vital Energy, to name only a few. In Western languages, all these schools are generically subsumed under a single neologism, Neo-Confucianism, which tends to reify a diverse and discontinuous reality. The term reflects the tempting parallelism established between this Confucian revival from the Song and the Renaissance movement in European history, which is notably studied in “Neo-Latin studies.” In Korean studies, Neo-Confucianism is generally referred to as “The Learning of the Way” (*Tohak*), “The Learning of Nature and Principle” (*sŏngnihak*) or the “Learning of Master Zhu” (*Chujahak*). The latter term specifically highlights the figure of the great synthesizer of Neo-Confucianism in the Southern Song dynasty, Zhu Xi (1130-1200). It particularly emphasizes the orthodox nature of the Neo-Confucian trend that is generally described as the state ideology of Chosŏn Korea. Other terms are sometimes used as well, such as New Confucianism (*sinyuhak*), patterned after Neo-Confucianism in English, or more traditional terms such as *yuhak*, *yugyo* or *yugyo sasang*, all formed from the basic word that means “[Confucian] scholar” (*yu*). In a broad sense, Neo-Confucianism designates the versions of Confucianism that became classical after the turn of the first millennium in East-Asia and present significant differences with earlier exegetical and political Confucian traditions from pre-imperial and Han to Tang times. In a narrow sense, it tends to designate orthodox Confucianism and, even, blind adherence to Zhu Xi in the Korean context.

Although Zhu Xi did systematize different trends from the polymorphous Confucian Renaissance, his synthesis only gained official recognition long after he died, in favor of an unexpected turn of event: the mongol rule of China. It only became an orthodoxy when his version of the Four Books were added in the official curriculum for civil service examinations of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). The Four Books are the *Analects of Confucius*, the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean*. The first two texts are attributed to single authors, and not the least: Confucius and his indirect disciple Mencius. The latter two were originally short chapters from the *Book of Rites*, also attributed to disciples of

Confucius, but were singled out for their content by Neo-Confucian scholars, among whom Cheng Yi (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi. Zhu Xi in particular wrote prefaces and compiled commentaries on this set of texts to form the core teaching of his synthesis. Described as an introduction to the Classics, the Four Books provided, in fact, strict reading guidelines for a new understanding of the Confucian Canon. Neo-Confucianism brought the body of Confucian reference texts to an unparalleled level of both sophistication and scale, in a relatively short period of time in view of the history of Confucianism. It rebuilt Confucian Learning on a solid framework of both renewed and new textual knowledge. Starting from the 15th century, a voluminous compilation of texts written by numerous masters, called the *Compendium on Nature and Principle*, supplemented further the body of required reference texts. This compilation can be regarded as the Neo-Confucian counterpart to the Buddhist Canon, the Tripitaka. Besides, the works of Zhu Xi himself, notably the records of his deeds and sayings, as well as many primers to Neo-Confucianism and historical works written by Neo-Confucian literati became indispensable for the proper education of scholars-officials. A remarkable feature of this new body of reference texts is the increasing importance given to authors. Neo-Confucian tradition favored, valued, and manufactured compilative works of individual thinkers in the form of complete works, in which the life of Confucian scholars was presented alongside their written legacy. Personalities and characters were key to highlight the exceptional status of scholars who were also assessed on their moral stature.

The place given to individual figures, great masters in particular, in Neo-Confucianism finds its best expression in one theory that will be adopted and transposed with much success in Korea: the “Transmission of the Way.” This idea, which describes the genealogy of a unique, orthodox, and exclusive Confucian tradition in history, was elaborated by the Cheng-Zhu version of Neo-Confucianism. To justify the complete renovation of Confucianism, while keeping a historical continuity, which is crucial for legitimizing purposes in a premodern view of history in which the past prevails over the present and future, Zhu Xi asserted that the original Confucian tradition, that of Confucius, had been “spiritually” transmitted from great men to great men, through an intangible transmission of minds-hearts. A first transmission would have directly connected the Sage Kings of a quasi ahistorical Antiquity to Confucius and the school of Mencius to the exclusion of any other spiritual heir of the Master, and a second, unmediated, leap of more than a millenium would have happened from Mencius to Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi himself. In this way, Zhu Xi cleared new ground of the integral tradition of imperial Confucianism and denied legitimacy to discuss higher political matters to any other competing school of thought, except his own version of Confucianism. The theory

of the Transmission of the Way neatly distinguishes the political Way of Sage kings, the Kingly Way that could never be reenacted in history since Antiquity, from the transmission of the spirit of that Way, which was handed down from Confucius to its rightful successors who were scholars, not rulers. The Transmission of the Way set an authoritative argument to justify the special role designed by—and destined—to Confucian scholars in the Neo-Confucian holistic civilizational project.

The Korean Neo-Confucian project: premisses

Although Neo-Confucianism was known in Korea since the Song, through books gifted in diplomatic exchanges, as well as the circulation of men and objects with China, it did not replace earlier versions of Confucianism until the Yuan empire came to impose its direct domination over the Koryŏ court after several decades of intense military conflicts. In a context of a deep political upheaval, Korean scholars-officials started to embrace this new version of Confucianism, which appeared as offering a possible way out from the troublesome time they were living in. The elites in Koryŏ were well versed in Buddhism, which was the state ideology, as well as Han and Tang Confucianism that was studied for state examinations and applied in institutions, policy making, and diplomacy for centuries. They adopted without much difficulty the basic elements of the Neo-Confucian argumentation, since it was mainly crafted through the theoretical confrontation between Confucianism and Buddhism. The Neo-Confucian urge to purify the ideological basis of the state by moralizing political life and purging all sorts of moral fallacies was appealing for those of the scholars-officials who wanted to build a state that could grow stronger than the Koryŏ and maintain its autonomy. The precedent set by the Yuan, in which tribal people succeeded in defeating the highly sophisticated, wealthy, and powerful Song dynasty to build up, on Neo-Confucian grounds, their own immense Mongol empire proved one thing to Korean scholars: Neo-Confucianism was a universal ideology that could be acculturated and used to build—or rebuild anew—a strong state.

The version of Neo-Confucianism that was introduced from Yuan China to Korea had a vocation to become hegemonic. It was didactic, moralistic, systematic, and normative. It primarily focused on establishing a strong kingship based on the general framework of the *Great Learning*. As a social project, Confucianism always bears a political perspective. This feature is often summed up by the motto, “self-cultivation and governance of men,” which could also be read as “self-cultivation for the governance of men” (*xiuji zhiren/sugi ch’iin*).

This simple maxim reflects the philosophy summed up, with a striking economy of words, in the *Great Learning*, which did not go unnoticed by the Cheng-Zhu school who precisely extracted it from the *Book of Rites*. But the philosophy of the *Great Learning* was not taught in early Chosŏn in Zhu Xi's commentary. The version designed by Zhen Dexiu (1178-1235), the *Extended Meaning of the Great Learning*, which was orthodox in the Yuan was preferred, for it emphasized the idea of training the king's mind-heart correctly. This specific Neo-Confucian school is called the "Learning for the Sovereign." But the Korean interpretation of the *Great Learning* diverged from the Chinese one that would develop on the same ground. It emphasized that a balance of power must preside over the relationships between kings and bureaucracy. Kings were expected to dedicate themselves to self-cultivation under the guidance of learned scholars, whereas bureaucracy must consist of men recruited on merit, for their moral stature and expertise on Neo-Confucianism, through reformed state examinations or, exceptionally, by special recommendation. Contrary to Ming China, where Qiu Jun (1420-1495) wrote a monumental and intricate administrative compendium called *Supplement to the Extended Meaning of the Great Learning*, which would greatly contribute to a long tradition of practical administrative culture, Chosŏn Korea chose to develop a more holistic and moral approach. The *Outline of the Sagely Learning (Sŏnghak chibyŏ)*, an outstanding achievement of Korean Neo-Confucianism, was written by Yi I (1536-1584) to replace Zhen's work and was made compulsory for kings and scholars alike in the later part of Chosŏn, in the so-called Classics Mat lectures (*kyŏngyŏn*).

These Classics Mat lectures, where the most brilliant scholars-officials were commissioned to teach Neo-Confucian statecraft and ethics to kings, constituted an essential device for the actual practice of collegial power. The Classics and their commentaries provided the essentials of Confucian moral and political instruction, while history books provided the concrete cases illustrating the truth of these theoretical principles. Beyond their pedagogical purpose, the lectures provided occasions for discussing contemporary policy and state affairs. They were carefully recorded by official historians for the judgment of posterity. This feature is extremely significant, for the Korean political understanding of Neo-Confucianism also explains one remarkable feature that characterizes Chosŏn: the birth of Korean historical writing and the very special role given to official histories. Neo-Confucianism was grounded on new ways of understanding and writing history. When adopting Neo-Confucian ideas, Korean scholars also acclimated the strong, new, belief that history serves an important political function and its writing should be given full attention and care. Commissioned by the king but overseen by officials who were specifically in charge of

historiography, official historical writing was extremely rigorous in Chosŏn. It was collective and compilatory and intended to be factual yet educational. Centered on the life of the court and the king, as well as government and administrative affairs, the Korean official historiography differed from its Chinese model. Every meeting between the king and his officials was recorded in a diary. The annals of one reign, completed and printed in the next one, followed the format of Veritable Records (*sillok*). They were kept under lock while the notes that had served as primary material could not be consulted or edited. Infringements did occur but were sanctioned by historians themselves. Yŏnsangun (r. 1495-1506), for example, who consulted these notes and ordered the first “purge of scholars,” lost his temple name of king. The principle was to record facts for posterity and, at the same time, limit access to historical material, in order to instill, on a daily basis, the fear of later historical judgment to those who were seen as making history.

But a major problem encountered in these lectures by those among the scholar-officials who were high profile Confucians was the actual level of commitment and knowledge of both the successive kings and their fellow officials. As seen above, Neo-Confucianism is based on an extensive textual corpus and requires time to be understood in its full extent. The reception of Neo-Confucianism was not an easy process, especially with regard to the intellectual processing of the full range of its various ideas and perspectives. Although, most of the time, scholars-officials tried to keep the Confucian Learning process for kings at minimum, by focusing on the “Learning for the Sovereign” and ritual training, it was still difficult to turn them into authentic Confucian scholars. Kings Sejong (r.1418-1450) and Chŏngjo (r.1776-1800) were certainly the iconic exceptions to the general rule that Chosŏn kings were knowledgeable enough on Confucianism to be able to rule by playing with its political rhetorics and debating with high officials, without being true experts of texts, rituals, and regulations. Similarly, most of scholars-officials in the bureaucracy had an average knowledge sufficient to pass the civil service examinations, but were not men of deep philosophical knowledge. The most skilled scholars, hence, dedicated their efforts to the writing of primers, synthesis, general introductions, and easy handbooks to inculcate basic principles of Neo-Confucianism, especially in the first half of Chosŏn.

The strategy of educating the kings in Neo-Confucianism was not, overall, a failure. Many kings ruled by following Neo-Confucian moral principles. A remarkable illustration is the royal patronage of Confucian Learning. Kings oversaw the highest session of the civil service examination, which selected the best experts in Confucianism for bureaucracy. They regularly commanded the writing, printing, and circulation of Confucian books, especially in

abridged or basic versions with a koreanized presentation (*ōnhae*), for both their officials and the common people. They officially acknowledged and materially supported several Confucian academies throughout the country, which would then enjoy advantages thanks to their special status of recipients of royal charter (*saek sōwōn*). They also enabled the best scholars among civil service examination passers to take a fully funded sabbatical leave (*saga toksō*) to keep perfecting their Confucian studies. It comes as no surprise that this system of continuous education, placed under direct royal patronage, was first implemented by Sejong and, then, perfected by Chōngjo, before disappearing towards the end of the dynasty. Ultimately, it is a royal prerogative to decide which Confucian scholars should be enshrined and paid ritual homage at the official Confucian Shrine, Munmyo. The shrine was placed under the supervision of Confucian masters and students from the highest Confucian educational institution, Sōnggyun'gwan, and consecrated the orthodox lineage of Korean Confucianism.

The Confucian Project in Korea: Difficulties

Many aspects of the Korean understanding of Yuan version of Song Confucianism might be easily explained by the context of early modern Korea. At its beginning, Neo-Confucianism was essentially conceived as an incentive for carrying large scale reforms and changing institutions to design a Confucian state and kingship for Korea. The initial reform project was carried out by prominent figures, such as Chōng Tojōn (1342-1398) or Kwōn Kūn (1352-1409), who not only dedicated themselves in writing works to diffuse Neo-Confucian ideas but advised, also, the first rulers of Chosōn. Chōng Tojōn in particular can rightfully be seen as the real policy maker for the military man Yi Sōnggye, who became the first Chosōn king. But Chōng Tojōn was a controversial figure who can also be seen as having brought the initial divide within the Korean Neo-Confucian tradition. Chosōn and the Yi dynasty were established by confiscating power, overthrowing the Koryō, and eradicating the Wang royal family, which constituted an unmistakable breach in loyalty in a Confucian perspective. Many respected Confucian scholars, such as Yi Saek (1328-1396), who might be defined as the first Neo-Confucian Master in Korea, refused to take an official position in Chosōn, by adopting an ostentatious posture of moral protest. The initial sin of the founding of Chosōn was aggravated by an event: the murder of the high profile scholar, Chōng Mongju (1337-1392), who publicly stood against the founding of Chosōn, which was commissioned by futur king

T'aejong who was his disciple, with the silent consent of Chǒng Tojǒn who used to be his close friend.

These morally unglorious circumstances of the establishment of Chosŏn were immediately followed, in the 15th and 16th centuries, by the decisive reigns of a few kings with autocratic tendencies, among whom the aforementioned T'aejong (r. 1400-1418) and Sejo (r. 1455-1468), who were both influential monarchs but usurpers of throne in the first place. These kings with strong characters would set the tone for the rest of the dynasty: they would not easily accept the advice and criticisms from their Confucian scholar-officials, which they would see as an interference with royal authority. They resisted some parts of the Neo-Confucian program and designed their own policies. Several other kings would oppose the power of the bureaucracy and aristocracy, using different strategies, among which the universally proven divide and rule policy which materialized in factionalism in late Chosŏn. But some happened to lose their ritual titles of kings in the Confucian historiography as seen above; while others were sacrificed on the altar of the political game and, even, in the name of Confucianism, like Crown Prince Sado who could not access the throne and was left to die in tragic circumstances by his own father, king Yǒngjo. In sum, the Confucian political project had to be tested and negotiated at every single reign.

Korean Confucian kingship was difficult to implement and sustain since its very beginning. On the kings' side, the aim of the project was to legitimate a strong monarchy. But on the literati's side, it aimed at guaranteeing the stability of a regime based on checks and balances but, also, at safeguarding the prerogatives and status of aristocratic lineages. This feature is crucial in order to understand the historical evolutions of the initial Confucian project. These lineages, some of which were ancient and consubstantial with the history of Korean successive kingdoms, were paradoxically led to be curialized and somewhat domesticated in the very process of the confucianization of the monarchy and the actual functioning of the state in its institutions and socio-economical regulations. They were more and more subjected to downward social mobility, impoverishment, and loss of political power. This recurring tendency to be exposed to fragility may explain the unfolding of later developments of the Korean applications of Neo-Confucian ideas on society by the aristocracy, especially far from court in rural areas: special interest for Confucian Rites, religious function of conducting ancestor worship (*chesa*), exclusive prerogative of local elites to take over moral education in their respective local areas, intolerant scholarly competition between different schools, aggravation of social discrimination and male chauvinism against secondary wives and sons of concubines to maintain land property,

economical privileges and aristocratic social status, rapacious attitudes, bribery and frauds of all sorts that harmed state finances and military resources while imposing a higher burden to all non-elite people and slave population who were the actual producers of the country's wealth. In a regime where noble families were mostly meant to foster human resources for the bureaucracy, the elite status had to be proved and reestablished at each generation. The main horizon for young men from aristocratic descent, who were forbidden from taking part in activities that could produce either wealth, military power, or new knowledge, was rather short. It mainly consisted in making the best marriage possible to secure or consolidate social connections and pass the civil service examination to gain power and influence, as well as lands and means to sustain the economic resources of their family clan.

One recurring problem throughout the dynasty was to foster and select competent scholars to feed the needs of an extensive bureaucracy, which could, also, properly match with the needs of their historical circumstances that are, by definition, evolving. Discussions mainly revolved around determining the criteria of selection and the definition of a coherent curriculum, since the ideal of merit-based recruitment was, in fact, difficult to put in practice. The main bone of contention was whether mastery of literary composition in Literary Sinitic, which was crucial notably in diplomatic relations with China, should prevail over moral, philosophical, education. What did higher bureaucracy need: language experts or Confucian "gentlemen"? Besides, the general, formative, training in moral Confucianism was not, most of the time, synonymous with encyclopedic curiosity, especially in a society where the social hierarchy was more and more rigorously maintained. The reason why those among the scholars who were regarded as true Confucian masters hardly ever became scientists or experts in applied sciences, be they technical or natural, might have more to do with the evolutions of the economic and social structures as well as the political system of the Chosŏn kingdom than with the nature of Neo-Confucianism itself.

In the later part of the dynasty, several scholars, such as Yi Ik (1681-1763), Pak Chiwŏn (1737-1805), Pak Chega (1750-1805), and Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836), did show encyclopedic interests. These polymaths were forcefully grouped, in modern times, under the generic label "Practical Learning" (*sirhak*) to demonstrate that Korean native intellectual tradition also bore "enlightened" and free-spirited minds who did step out of the comfort zone of orthodoxy. But these exceptional individuals never constituted a clearly defined philosophical school or a consistent social group. They mainly illustrate the new aspirations coming from a handful of personalities who, thanks to their status, network, or personal predisposition, happened to encounter and study new forms of scholarship coming from Qing

China: the so-called Evidential Learning (*kaozhengxue*) and Western knowledge, Catholicism included. But it is crucial to understand that these scholars were trained in the exact same principles of Neo-Confucianism as their predecessors and contemporaries who would not show the same broad intellectual curiosity. Also, they had been able to enjoy and process the various fruits of the Korean maturation of Neo-Confucian philosophy, which took place over almost four centuries, from the late 14th to the 19th centuries. The common denominator of Korean Confucian scholars that has been running like a red thread throughout the dynasty is the strong eagerness to acquire knowledge to put it in practice, that is to say to really practice “self-cultivation for/and the governance of men.”

Since its beginnings, Neo-Confucianism defined itself as a *sirhak* in the sense of a “practice-oriented Learning,” in contrast with Buddhism, criticized for propagating empty–fruitless–knowledge that is not only irrelevant but harmful for society and state. Free-spirited minds also existed in other periods of Chosŏn, as shown by several examples from the 15th and 16th centuries: Kim Sisŭp (1435-1493), Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk (1489-1546), or Cho Sik (1501-1572). An interesting aspect is that all these scholars were deliberately “retired” or eremitic, whereas some of their later counterparts from late Chosŏn were forcefully retired, since they were banned, as illustrated by the extreme case of Chŏng Yagyong (pen name, Tasan) who had to spend eighteen years in exile, that is to say in house arrest far from his home. But, as shown in this specific case, banishment or exile (*yubae*) provided opportunities to deepen learning and gain a better insight into society and natural world. Serving or retiring was an overwhelming concern for Chosŏn Confucian scholars. The discrepancies between what they were learning, by genuine interest or under social pressure, in Confucian scriptures and what they had to live through, or, in other words, the gap between theory and praxis, were, for some, difficult to cope with. This situation aroused conflicting emotions affecting individual and collective decisions, as can be seen in scholars’s collected works. In general, it can be said that many of the best scholars, be they retired or serving in the bureaucracy, took Neo-Confucianism seriously. Though reservations might be expressed about the actual level of the Confucian impregnation of Korean society taken as a whole throughout the dynasty and the territory, it cannot be denied that Neo-Confucianism used to be the Alpha and the Omega for a little segment of the learned elite. This minority would come to embody Korean Confucianism, understood as an intellectual tradition.

Korean Neo-Confucianism: Dynamics of Division

A major problem encountered by Korean Confucians in their attempts at implementing the political project of Neo-Confucianism in the long run was factionalism. Factionalism, also commonly called in a set expression, “factional strife” (*tangjaeng*), in Korean studies, started developing in the late 16th century. It is generally considered as the reason why Chosŏn kingdom ultimately fell and the Confucian project also failed after six centuries, sealing the fate of Korea by ineluctably precipitating the country into the modern world without much preparation or resources. The over-emphasis given to political history and, especially, factionalism in the reading of the late Chosŏn history is correlated with the parallel emphasis given, in intellectual history, to what have been identified as their origins: the division of Korean Neo-Confucianism into different, and, most importantly, competing schools. The Confucian schools (*hakp'a*) are believed to have grown into factions (*tangp'a*), which would have wasted and exhausted the human, economic, and ideological resources of the Chosŏn kingdom, by leading the “Confucian” elites and monarchy to simply ignore the struggles of the people and the country. Confucianism and its supposed avatar, factionalism, would hence be the causes of Korea being left behind in historical stagnation, in a radically transformed world that was already heading at full speed towards the enchanted promises of modernity from the 18th century onwards. This view is not only obviously teleological, but it also bears a bias. It is based on the assumption that all these schools were real schools functioning as genuine social institutions, which members were clearly identified and which philosophical basis was consistent, uniform, and unchanging from the 17th to the 19th centuries. One reason why such a view, which diagnoses a serious intellectual sclerosis in late Chosŏn, was made possible in colonial and post-colonial times, may be that the history of Korean Confucianism was written, already since Chosŏn times, by specific actors of the Confucian project. These actors happened to play a prominent role after a major historical turn that took several decades to happen: the victory of the so-called *sarim* scholars in the political scene.

The history of Korean Confucianism is generally periodized mirroring the general division in two or, sometimes, three periods of Chosŏn dynasty, with a caesura around the Japanese and Mandchu invasions which, along with the so-called little ice age, would have radically transformed the deep structures of Korean society, economy, and political life. The late 16th century, right before the *imjin* war, is regarded as the golden age for Korean Neo-Confucianism, which is conveniently embodied in two national icons of today South Korea: Yi Hwang (pen name, T'oegye) and Yi I (pen name, Yulgok). These two contemporary

Confucian scholars happen to be seen as the founding figures of the most representative Confucian schools, respectively the Yŏngnam school and the Kiho school, that gave birth to more schools and, ultimately, political factions that would have been characterized by clear-cut political and ideological disagreements. In such a perspective, starting from the late 16th century, the history of Korean Confucianism is simply made of a natural—and almost inexorable—phenomenon of subdivision of the schools initially centered on this pair of towering thinkers in a generative process. But, contrary to cell division to which it might seem comparable, this generic process is considered as having led, after a period of vital regeneration, to a general intellectual marasm due to the paralyzing effects of Confucian orthodoxy or Zhu Xi-ism, which raises questions to the historian. The political groups that have been superimposed on diverging philosophical lines of argumentation would have enabled, at first, a stimulating political culture of consensus (*kongnon*) but they would have quickly turned into bitter conflicts created for selfish interests. Philosophical schools would, hence, have become mere interest groups and bastions of political conservatism and twitchy ideological orthodoxy.

However, if is considered the full frame of the history of Korean Neo-Confucianism taken from its very reception in Koryŏ, a more accurate periodization might be drawn, by identifying a major caesura in the victory of *sarim* scholars in the 16th century. The initial moral divide that happened at the founding of Chosŏn, between scholars who chose loyalty over pragmatism and those who accepted to play the game of the new dynasty to carry out reforms or advance their interests, can be seen as a first step leading to this turning point. It evolved into a bigger divide that will have a major impact on the history of Korean Neo-Confucianism. The *sarim* scholars, literally meaning “the forest of literati” or “literati in the forest,” are generally defined as the secluded literati who refused to serve in bureaucracy in the early decades of the dynasty, in the wake of Yi Saek and Chŏng Mongju, but, also, after Sejo’s coup. They were disciples of Kil Chae (1353-1419), who was himself a direct disciple of Chŏng Mongju, and dedicated themselves to the study of Neo-Confucian philosophy in rural areas far from the court. When they finally accepted to take part in the Confucian project by entering the bureaucracy in the 15th century, especially after Kim Chongjik (1431-1492), a influent master, was called by king Sŏngjong (r.1457-1495), they had to undergo a series of traumatic events before succeeding, one century later, in their conquest of the most powerful organs of Chosŏn administration, the Three Offices (*samsa*).

These dramatic events are given a specific name in Korean historiography, “sufferings inflicted on literati” or “literati purges” (*sahwa*). They represent one foundational moment

and important step in the history of both Korean Neo-Confucianism and political history. The purges started under the reign of Yönsangun, considered mentally sick, and happened by no less than four times: 1498, 1504, 1519, and 1545. In retrospect, it might be suggested that these bloody events shaped the sacred history of *sarim* scholars and, also, Neo-Confucianism taken as a whole in Korea. It is the narrative of a special moral community that fell victim of persecutions that were perpetrated by either kings or other groups of immoral scholar-officials who were driven by personal interests. Purges were massive and graphic enough to leave strong impressions on witnesses and survivors, as well as their descendants who will maintain the memory of *sarim* martyrdom: murders, forced suicides, execution by quartering. The corpse of Kim Chongjik was even dug up postmortem and beheaded in public. The most decisive purge was the one targetting, in 1519, Cho Kwangjo (1482-1519) who attempted to implement radical reforms inspired by strict Neo-Confucianism with the initial support of king Chungjong (1506-1528). When the *sarim* finally won the battle at court, under Sönjo's reign, they might have felt entitled from this initial sacrifice of their great men, which might explain how they could later justify their own political actions, even bloody ones.

The category of *sarim* scholars, historically constructed, would be later blended within the general depiction of "schools" and "factions" of the late Chosön, generally described as driven by dynamics of power struggles. Their heirs were turned into founding figures of many intellectual schools, which were organized on the anthropological model of Korean lineages centered around common ancestors to whom pious rituals would be performed in private Confucian academies. These followers, who were the actual manufacturers of the Confucianization in late Chosön, made and wrote the history of Korean Confucianism, both at court and in academies. Yi Hwang and Yi I, who might be qualified as *sarim* scholars in the sense of authentic scholars, are undeniable pivotal figures for two main reasons. Firstly, they initiated the Korean version of the Transmission of the Way. Yi Hwang considered himself the successor of Zhu Xi and discarded all Chinese scholars after the Song Master in his genealogy of the Confucian Way. As for Yi I, who prematurely died before the *imjin* war, he was erected as one model of the ideal Korean Neo-Confucian scholar-official who was selflessly devoted to the country. Secondly, Yi Hwang and Yi I designed the spectacular development of Confucian academies (*söwön*) and community compacts (*hyangyak*) in the countryside. These institutions, connecting closely Confucian scholars with local elite and common people, were the actual sites of experimentation of the Confucian social project. In the course of carrying this holistic experiment in most parts of the country, theoretical conflicts were aroused and political ambitions fostered, which explains the regional aspect of

factionalism. Problem was also posed by the loyalty that should be kept for ancestors and masters of different lineages. Partisans of Confucian schools are generally designated by an expression that literally means those who “lived behind the same doors” (*kamun*). Schools were considered as families, which implies an emotional engagement. The main issues causing power struggles among different groups of scholars, at court and in local areas, generally revolved around the assessment of Confucian personalities and “masters,” who would correctly embody and make the history of Korean Confucianism. They concerned the enshrinement of specific scholars in the Munmyo, the ancestor worship to be performed in diverse academies, the decision to compile and print at great expense *Collected works* (*munjip*) of individual scholars, the writing of collective petitions voicing one single moral or political position often associated with a specific school.

The grand narrative of Korean Confucianism as the history of successful *sarim* scholars is satisfactory, for it is simple, lively, and colourful. Yet, it is myopic at best and partial at worst. It was written at the exclusion of many, among whom the vast majority of the Confucian scholar-officials themselves. Those who are often described as practitioners of “bureaucratic Learning” (*kwanhak*) in early Chosŏn are left out, despite their undeniable contribution to the actual implementation and management of the Confucian program in Korea.

Korean Neo-Confucian Learning: some characteristics

Neo-Confucianism, as an ideology, was successfully utilized and further developed in a way that suited most the Korean context. The evolution of Korean Neo-Confucianism worked hand in hand with the evolution of society that were due to material, non-ideological, factors. When adopting the basic Neo-Confucian project, Korean scholars cherry-picked some aspects that were the most appealing for them. It is commonly believed that the so-called Confucian transformation—or Confucianization—of Korea was mostly achieved by the 17th century, about three centuries after the initial reception of Neo-Confucianism. The main effect of the whole process has been understood as a major anthropological shift.

This shift transformed the family structures and inheritance system, and ended up rigidifying society in a constraining status system. But, at the same time, the process exacerbated intrinsic features of Korean society, which existed well before the adoption of Neo-Confucianism, such as slavery, unequal social status, and agrarian—subsistence—economy. In their zeal to implement the Neo-Confucian project, Korean scholar-officials did

focus on disseminating moral primers, such as the *Lesser Learning* and the *Family Rituals* of Zhu Xi, that played an immense role in enabling this anthropological transition. They also crafted and diffused, under royal patronage, their own primers, such as the *Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds* (*Samgang haengsildo*), praising filial piety, female chastity, and loyalty in picturesque stories taken from Chinese and Korean histories. This literature of edification, which can be seen as a form of Confucian catechism, targeted the general population or children, in an attempt to moralize, on a global basis, popular manners and customs of segments of the population who were either non-educated or not yet educated. Examples of the concrete process of confucianization of Korea are often epitomized in this type of written production, which provides a simple cause-effect explanation. But as significant as it seems at first sight, this focus on the popular education—or indoctrination—in Confucian basic principles does not help to fully understand the bigger picture, which is the specific taste for orthodoxy and orthopraxy among Korean Neo-Confucian scholars. This feature might be related to a strong interest for ritualism or the philosophy of Confucian Rites (*Ye sasang*).

Rites and ritualism are among the most difficult topics to address in Confucianism, for it is not immediately intuitive. In general, these terms evoke boring rules, obsolete rituals, or etiquette or, even, simple politeness. It is, also, related to another major topic that requires, potentially, extensive explanations: Neo-Confucian cosmology. Confucian rites are meant to be practiced as performative exercises of ethical training. This ethical training aims essentially at training the mind-heart. It is an individual effort of the self on the self, as seen in a famous maxim that is most difficult to translate properly, “to overcome the self to return to the ritual” (*kŭkki pongnye*), which is one definition of the Confucian virtue of “benevolence-humaneness.” This individual effort, consciously exerted on the self, can only be achieved through social—interpersonnal—interactions, because of human nature. The Confucian man is a social animal, to paraphrase a catchy formula. “Human Bonds” are experimental sites of this effort exerted by the self on the self, which involves the individual but also all the individuals taken together. These relations are commanding on a moral level, for they are precisely moments and places where the human emotions and thinking abilities, which are universally shared, are aroused and, in Confucian terms, “set in motion.” Besides, human mind-heart is full moral potential, for it is directly connected with the principles—the forces and energies of the cosmos—presiding over the workings of the natural world. Understanding the laws of what governs this natural world and abiding to these laws enables the authentic moral cultivation of the self, which, in turn, enables an efficient—virtuous—action, which is

potentially able to transform and perfect the world. Correct understanding and correct practice are keys to a successful ethical training, or, in other words, to genuine Confucian Learning.

When Korean scholars-officials embraced Neo-Confucianism, elaborated in a different anthropological context and in a difficult scholarly language, Literary Sinitic, they did their utmost to fully understand its complex theory. The process of understanding was long and took various forms, individual scholars showing diverse interests and taking various stances. Once the urge to use Neo-Confucianism as a political ideology was in the process of being satisfied, and once the full range of this philosophy had been progressively processed by several masters who taught and transmitted their understanding by fostering disciples, came the time of elaborating further on this textual material. As seen above, textual exegesis is an integral part of the Confucian ethos. From the 14th to the 16th centuries, a handful of scholars have started writing their own interpretations of various forms of Neo-Confucianism, non-mainstream trends included. Although Neo-Confucian masters would forbid their students from reading texts of heterodox schools, as well as frivolous literature, many of them did personally read and study Buddhism, Daoism, or the Chinese school of Wang Yangming. Generally speaking, their intellectual production concerned three main areas: policy making, philosophical erudition, and general moral education. This last one reflects the concern to practise Confucian Learning seriously, that is to practise Confucian rites. Since their spirit and practical application were difficult to understand, primers were continuously written and perfected. These didactic texts favored in general a format that would be easy to understand. The recurring use of diagrams and synoptic presentations on different material supports, such as screens, is remarkable in Korean Confucianism. It testifies to the genuine desire and compelling need of teaching correctly the Confucian rites. What was believed is that, with the actual practice of rites, a true understanding could potentially get attained, even for uneducated or less educated people. In spite of most of its features that have been described above, one might say that Korean Neo-Confucianism ultimately aimed at inclusion and cohesion. Indeed, its project concerned and required everyone in society.

The Korean reflections on philosophical Confucianism gave way to what is generally called philosophical “debates” or “controversies” (*non* or *nonjaeng*): the Four-Seven Debate, the Horak Debate, to name only the most famous ones. The specific Korean contribution to Neo-Confucianism is often described by presenting the philosophical content of these debates, which stage, unsurprisingly, the great names of the Korean tradition, to begin with Yi Hwang and Yi I. The two debates are both centered on the explanation of the psycho-physiological origins of morality. The first one, in particular, engages with what puzzled Korean scholars at

the close reading of the works of Neo-Confucian masters, especially Zhu Xi: inconsistencies. Generally speaking, these debates demonstrate the high level of philosophical technicality reached by Korean scholars in their exegetical reading of the Neo-Confucian canon. But these debates do not say more than that. They were not the most important aspect of the philosophical and moral legacies left by Korean Confucian masters, according to Confucians precisely. A comprehensive, but detailed, reading of all the writings and biographical materials of major Confucian scholars that were compiled with infinite care in the *munjip* present a different picture of this legacy. Eminent Korean scholars were not philosophers in a modern sense. They were masters in a Confucian sense. These debates were only written records or letters exchanged in the course of an on-going discussion among scholars and can be understood as testimonial snapshots of the philosophical sociability shared among Confucian scholars, who were supposed to devote time to exegetical work as part of their personal engagement in Confucian Learning. The teaching of Korean masters was envisioned as taught by active teaching in a master to disciple relation during their lifetime, and, then, in the moral legacy studied through their *munjip*. These collected works tended to give equal importance to both the fruits of a master's intellectual labor and the biographic materials, since biography opened access to the moral assessment that was crucial in understanding why they were exceptional men. By highlighting, once again, a narrative favoring a dynamic of conflicts in the history of Korean Confucianism, the approach consisting in focusing on "debates" tend to reduce the teachings of these scholars to disembodied ideas and might, simply, miss the point of what intellectual life meant for a Confucian in early modern Korea.

Besides, the problem of the origin of morality and the topic of the specificities of human nature that are covered in these two debates are grounded on what interested most the Korean scholars since their adoption of Neo-Confucianism: the training of the mind-heart in Confucian ethical self-cultivation. This long-lasting characteristic of Korean Neo-Confucian thinking can be linked to the emphasis placed on ritualism, since the training of the mind-heart has to be done through the practice of Confucian rituals, as explained above. But this characteristic might, also, remind of Buddhism. The importance given in Korean Neo-Confucianism to lineages, masters, and rituals, among which ancestor worship, might, possibly, be considered as a slightly altered continuation of Buddhist religious and social practices, especially funerary rituals and lineages of patriarchs, as well as the philosophical elaborations of *sŏn* Buddhism on the mind that bloomed in Korea before the adoption of Neo-Confucianism. But this point still awaits to be substantiated.

Confucianism, envisioned as an ethical path, takes root in the practice of rites. Korean scholars were faithful readers of the Confucian moral literature and the best of them might be described as having tried to live up to their ideals. It is this moral exemplarity that was praised and celebrated in the continuous transmission and reenactment of the Neo-Confucian project in Korea. This moral spirit was the pride of the Korean *sŏnbi*, a native Korean word designating, interestingly, the Korean version of the ideal Confucian master. The Confucianization of Korea was not solely a social and anthropological shift in Korean history. It might be described, also, a spiritual mutation rather than radical transformation of ideology. Confucian scholars-officials of early modern Korea incorporated the most parts of the moral and political theories of Neo-Confucian philosophy for pragmatic and practical purposes, among which efficient statecraft and social order. However, they also kept what might be described, tentatively, as traces of Buddhist sensitivity. The Confucian legacy in Korea is tangible and visible in many ways: landscape, architecture, cultural products, furniture, arts, and transmitted texts. It is also deeply intangible, for it might be described as both a moral and spiritual tradition of Korean early modern psyche or emotional world.

Summary

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