The modern transformation of Korean political thinking : revisiting the political ideas of the Late-Nineteenth-Century Reformists

Kim, C.Y.

PART ONE TRANSFORMATIONS

Chapter One

The Development of Confucian Political Ideas in Chosŏn Korea

The late nineteenth-century reformists' ideas, or *Kaehwa sasang*, are located at the last phase of the history of Confucian political ideas in Chosŏn and, at the same time, the first stage of Korean political thinking in the post-Confucian era. *Kaehwa sasang* has been viewed by a number of researchers as related to the late eighteenth-century 'practical learning' trend *Sirhak*, but others have argued that the two are rather discontinuous than continuous. While the former group of scholars have pointed out the commonalities of both *Sirhak* and *Kaehwa sasang* as against Neo-Confucianism, the latter have claimed that *Sirhak* is still a variant of Confucianism, while *Kaehwa sasang* is far from the Confucian thought system. Both of these views are reasonable, yet we should point out that the two groups of researchers touch upon different aspects of the same matter. From the perspective of research stages in the history of political thought, those researchers' discussions are focused on the question of continuity and discontinuity between the two thought systems. In general, in the studies of political thinking, researchers see, firstly, the ideas of individual thinkers; secondly, they investigate the continuity and discontinuity of political ideas in a certain period; and finally, they try to capture a long-term tendency of political ideas. Roughly speaking, the advance of research in the history of political thinking is possible when individual thinkers' idea systems are clarified and broadly shared among academic circles and the idea systems of the thinkers are

compared. The academic debate over *Kaehwa sasang* and *Sirhak* was caused partly by the deficiency in shared grounds for comparison. Indeed, scholars have not yet reached an agreement on the essential characteristics of Confucian political philosophy, and likewise, on the identity of *Sirhak* as a specific idea system. Due to this reason, the scholars could not reach a common ground and consequently have failed to compare them appropriately, let alone finding an agreeable long-term intellectual tendency. This chapter, as the first chapter in Part One of this study, in which we aim to understand *Kaehwa sasang* in terms of the development of the Confucian political ideas in Chosŏn Korea, suggests an analytical framework for the investigation of Confucian political ideas, which will function as a benchmark for the comparison of diverse intellectual trends. By means of this framework and through an analysis of the development of the Confucian political ideas, we can expect to find a long-term tendency.

Previous studies on the history of Korean political thinking have rarely attempted to establish an analytical framework as a method to understand a long-term trend. For instance, the work, *Han'guk chŏngch'i sasangsa*, written by the members of the Association for Korean and Asian Political Thoughts, which covered the entire period of Korean history, simply listed the themes of political thinking in each era, without a consideration of their continuity/change and of a pertinent analytical framework.[46] Other works on Korean political thought by political scientists hardly differ from this template.[47] Historians, on the other hand,

---

[46] Han'guk tongyang chŏngch'i sasangsa hak'hoe (ed.), *Han'guk chŏngch'i sasangsa: Tan'gun esŏ haebang kkaji* [The History of Korean Political Thought: From the era of *Tangun* to that of National Liberation] (Seoul: Paeksan sŏdang, 2005).

[47] This does not mean that they did not consider the context of the internal development of political ideas in each era; yet the inner connections of ideas are not distinctive in those works. See, representatively, Pak Ch'ungsŏk, *Han'guk chŏngch'i sasangsa* [The History of Korean Political

have considered intellectual continuity and change in a certain period as well as individual thinkers' idea systems, but they did not develop an analytical framework either. They mainly focused on the shifts in political thinking during specific periods. For example, in his book Jung Jae-Hoon has examined the process of deepening ethicalisation in Confucian understanding during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[48] Kim Chunsŏk and Chŏng Hohun have illuminated a new intellectual trend turning toward practicality in late Chosŏn in opposition to the Neo-Confucian ethical preoccupation of mid-Chosŏn.[49] Other researchers, such as Chŏng Okja and Yu Ponghak, have focused on the practical and variegated intellectual and cultural trends in the late eighteenth century and their development into the early nineteenth century.[50]

This chapter first draws out a conceptual framework as a model for the analysis of Confucian political ideas in Chosŏn and then, in the second section, interprets the history of Confucian political ideas by means of that framework.

1. A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of Confucian Political Ideas in Chosŏn: A Tension between Political Necessity and an Ethical Ideal

---

Thought] (Seoul: Sam'yŏngsa, 2010); Shin Bok-ryong (Sin Poknyong), *Han'guk chŏngch'i sasangsa* vol. 1, 2 [The History of Korean Political Thought] (Seoul: Chisik san'ŏpsa, 2011).

[48] Jung Jae-Hoon (Chŏng Chaehun), *Chosŏn chŏngi yugyo chŏngch'i sasang yŏn'gu* [Studies of Confucian Political Thought in Chosŏn in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries] (Seoul: Sŏul taehakgyo ch'ulp'anbu, 2005).

[49] Kim Chunsŏk, *Chosŏn hugi chŏngch'i sasangsa yŏn'gu* [A Study of the History of Political Thought of Late Chosŏn] (Seoul: Chisik san'ŏpsa, 2003); Chŏng Hohun, *Chosŏn hugi chŏngch'i sasang yŏn'gu* [A Study of the Political Thought of Late Chosŏn] (Seoul: Hye'an, 2004).

[50] Chŏng Okja, *Chosŏn hugi Chosŏn chunghwa sasang yŏn'gu* [Chosŏn's Self-Consciousness of Chinese-ness in Late Chosŏn] (Seoul: Iljisa, 1998); ____, *Chosŏn hugi yŏksa ŭi ihae* [Understanding of the History of Late Chosŏn] (Seoul: Iljisa, 1993); Yu Ponghak, *Yŏnam ilp'a pukhak sasang yŏn'gu* [A Study of Yŏnam Pak Chiwŏn and His Group's Ideas of *Pukhak*] (Seoul: Iljisa, 1995).

In his book highlighting the statecraft ideas of the seventeenth-century Confucian scholar Yu Hyŏngwŏn (1622–1673), James Palais classifies the manifestation of Confucianism in Chosŏn into "Confucian philosophy" (or "Confucian ethics and metaphysics") and "Confucian statecraft." [51] Palais's main focus is on the ideas and practices of Confucian statecraft in Chosŏn, so his division primarily reflects his intellectual concerns. His division, which distinguishes Confucianism as philosophy from Confucianism as statecraft, has been considered a standard way of understanding the state ideology Confucianism. [52] This framework assumes that 'Confucian philosophy' is singular, implying that it does not have conflicting elements within itself. What this interpretation misses is the fact that Confucian philosophy is not only about "ethics and metaphysics" but also includes political teachings on governance. These two aspects of Confucian philosophy, though seemingly consistent and mutually augmentative, are basically diverse in character and thus may create conflicts in specific circumstances. Palais appears to have seen Confucian thought as hierarchical, imagining a model in which Confucian ethical philosophy is dominant and Confucian political teaching is drawn from it. The model suggested here sees Confucian philosophy as having an inner tension between ethical character and political character. From this standpoint, we can create a new framework in which the two theoretical orientations within Confucianism affect the political and the intellectual reality in separate and conflicting ways.

I understand Confucianism as a 'reasonable comprehensive doctrine' in which

---

[51] James Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), pp. 5, 18.

[52] In Korean academia, the similar distinction was labelled *kyŏnghak* (經學, study of Confucian texts) and *kyŏngsehak* (經世學, statecraft ideas) (or *simuhak* (時務學)). Yet this distinction is slightly different from Palais's division because *kyŏnghak* mainly refers to the interpretation of classical Confucian texts, not merely the philosophical aspect of those texts.

reasonable religious, ethical, and political philosophical aspects are blended.[53] Due to its political philosophical aspect, it naturally contains core ideas of politics within itself, such as what a political community is by nature, how it is to be governed, and which vision people should or can have for an ideal community. When seeing Confucianism as a system of political thought, we can get some help from Plato in order to obtain a suitable analytical framework, because he suggested significant theoretical insights that can be developed as a theoretical framework. Indeed, Plato's *The Republic* is one of the earliest treatises on the nature and aim of political community in the Western intellectual tradition, and the ideas within that book are applicable regardless of cultural particularities.[54] In the book Plato suggests that any political community must satisfy two essential aspects in order for it to be sustained as a state. The first one is needs or necessity. In Book Two of *The Republic*, he says that the city state where he lived originated for the purpose of meeting each individual's "needs" (369 c) or for resolving "the matter of necessity" (373 b). Here, needs or necessity basically indicates food, housing, and clothing, yet beyond these he enumerates other necessary things on behalf of the city state, such as the arts, music, poetry, and many other services. He does not stop there and argues that for a state to be an ideal state the guardians' role is important. In Book Two he briefly mentions that the guardian ideally should be a philosopher, and then in Books Five and Six he paints a picture of an imagined city ruled by a

[53] When defining Confucianism, the most distinctive point is its comprehensiveness. It encompasses political philosophical, ethical, and religious aspects. In this regard, Rawls' expression "reasonable comprehensive doctrines" is pertinent to define it, although the context of use is different. By that expression, Rawls indicates a social aspect in a liberal and plural society, where reasonable people can choose a doctrine as proper. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 58–66.

[54] The ideas or insights in *The Republic* are significant in that they provide pertinent conceptual tools to capture the core characteristics of Confucian political ideas. Plato's ideas also endow a moment for Confucian ideas to be rephrased in more generally accepted terms.

philosopher king.[55] Thus, Plato's description of both the origin and ideal form of the state serves our purpose. Plato did not disregard the importance of "necessity"; yet, at the same time, he thought that necessity alone was not enough to maintain the state. In other words, a long-sustained state must satisfy both necessity and an ideal model. Confucianism as a political philosophy must contain both aspects within it.

We can develop these insights of Plato in a theoretical manner. If a political community is to endure over a long period of time, it must first resolve the problem of needs or necessity, i.e., the question of how to maintain a community as an independent and long-lasting state, a primary task for any political community. For the sake of this task, a state should resolve a number of matters, which primarily include national security from foreign invasions, economic sustenance for the members of the community, and the resolution of conflicts among domestic groups and individuals in orderly ways. We can conceptualise this aspect of political community as the question of 'political necessity.'

Secondly, a political community must resolve the problem of how to lead it to a desirable model of society, which is the matter of an 'ideal.' Every stable and long-lasting state in history has had its own ideal model of society, whether strong or weak, which works as a goal binding diverse parts of society together and provides them with a certain direction. Such an ideal has mainly been furnished by an ethical religion, a collectively shared idea of a better society inherited through the memory of the glory of the past, or a political ideology. In John Rawls's term, this kind of desirable model is "a well-ordered society," which he found in a liberal democratic society where its basic institutional principle is to be grounded upon

[55] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

"fair justice."[56]

In the case of Chosŏn Korea, the desirable model of society was mainly drawn from (Neo-) Confucianism (or the Song Studies), the state-sponsored orthodox teaching. The Confucian ideal model of society envisaged a society regulated by the Confucian 'ethical' system, which contained elaborate teachings to cultivate a person's mind and body and developed metaphysical theories of ethics, as well as functioning to underpin the legitimacy of the stratified social division and other socio-cultural institutions and customs. Governing the mind and behaviour of a person, the interrelationship of members within a family and clan, and divisions between those of upper and lower status, the Confucian ethical system furnished resources for the order of the society and stabilised it.[57]

---

[56] Rawls thinks that in a pluralist democratic society two principles of justice should work as a foundation of basic institutions: first, each person should have "equal basic rights and liberties"; second, in social and economic matters, each person should have "fair equality of opportunity" and social policy should satisfy the condition of "the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society." (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 5–6.) On the other hand, in *The Republic* Plato also suggested his own ideal model of society. As shown in Books Five and Six, a number of conditions must be satisfied, including production and consumption being operated in a communal way, the family system no longer prevailing, a philosopher king controlling the city tightly, and citizens being united in their thoughts and feelings. For the idea of "a well-ordered society," see Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 35–40.

[57] Confucianism has a tension within itself between its recognition of the existing social hierarchy and an ideal that anybody can become a noble man by cultivation of the self. However, in practical terms, Confucianism is not so much a philosophical theory propagating inborn equality of people, but rather as a secular ethico-religious and political theory taking for granted a human division between the high and the low. For example, the basic assumption of Confucian ritual propriety *ye* (禮) was based on the human division between the upper and the lower, and the near and the far, while its spirit of the pursuit of propriety in dealing with persons and situations is universally acceptable. (See Rhee Wontaek (Yi Wŏnt'aek), "Kaehwagi yech'i robut'ŏ pŏpch'i roŭi sasangjŏk chŏnhwan: miwan ŭi 'taehan'guk kukje' wa kŭ sŏngkyŏk" [From Rule by *Ye* to Rule by Law in the Opening-up Period: The unfinished '*Taehan'guk kukje*' and its characteristics], *Chŏngch'i sasang yŏn'gu* 14(2) (2008), p. 67.) Although Confucianism does not mention human division according to inborn social status, in Chosŏn the existing social status system did not give rise to serious conflicts with Confucian doctrines. This weak tension between the ideas and the reality is also revealed in Confucian ethics itself. Confucian ethics functioned in two ways: an individual's moral perfection and inner transcendence, and its support of the existing social class, values, and customs. These two aspects, as Max Weber has well pointed out, did not create conflict. Generally, the former was pursued upon the basis of the wider social hierarchy, as Confucian thinkers mainly belonged to the upper class. For Weber's

At the same time, Confucianism as a political idea system supporting 'monarchic rule' also had clear ideas concerning the question of political necessity. As far as classical Confucian texts are concerned, the issues regarding necessity were never neglected. Above all, such issues as the importance of agriculture for the economic sustenance of a state, a proper tax rate for land products for peasants' lives, preparation of the military for national defence, the need to build peaceful relations with neighbouring countries, fair treatment of legal disputes, and the need to revamp national laws and abstain from inhumane punishments are testimony to this. Improving state laws and institutions and stabilising the state were the main concerns of sage kings in ancient China. Indeed, the virtues of the sage kings, as seen in *Shujing* (書經, Book of History), were virtues of political necessity, rather than ethical virtues.

In these matters, apart from the principle of convenience, Confucianism developed very political principles, which worked to sustain a state. A number of ideas such as *minbon* in *Shujing* and *Mencius* (孟子) that governance should be executed for the sake of the interests of the ruled; the Mencian idea that a despotic ruler who does not care about the people's well-being can be legitimately expelled from the throne; and the teachings of the sage kings Yao and Shun that rulers should follow the public opinion (公論) of their subjects, all functioned as principles in addressing state affairs and formed the core ideas of Confucian political philosophy. Some scholars have erroneously regarded these principles as stemming from Confucian ethics rather than political necessity. Yet these teachings were closely related to the end of maintaining a kingdom and preventing its collapse.[58] As both Confucius and

---

analysis of Confucianism as little in tension between the secular and the transcendental world, see Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. and ed. by H. H. Gerth (The Free Press, 1962), pp. 227, 235.

[58] Indeed, whenever Chosŏn Korea faced serious national crises, the most commonly cited passages in government dialogues were those from political necessity ideas within classical Confucian texts.

Mencius put it, the loss of the support of the ruled (民信) endangers a state more than anything else.[59] These ideas of governance coming from deep thoughts about the rise and fall of states thus arose from the need to sustain a state and functioned as principles in framing laws, institutions, and government policies in Confucian polities.[60]

For example, when the *Tonghak* peasants uprising took place in 1894, the previously common, ethically-embellished phrases and way of speaking in the royal court disappeared and, instead, the passages concerning political necessity reappeared, such as "common people are the foundation of the state" quoted from *Shujing*. See *Kojong sillok* [高宗實錄, Annals in the Reign of King Kojong] 31/5/25 and 31/12/13. Entries in *Kojong sillok* in the period from 1863 to 1895 were written in the lunar calendar system, but entries from 1 January 1896 were written in the solar calendar system. I will not specify this hereafter. I have referred to *Kojong sillok* translated into modern Korean, which is found on the website of *Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe* [National Institute of Korean History]. (http://sillok.history.go.kr/main/main.jsp). Whenever I found unnatural translations, I have referred to the original passages and corrected them. Hereafter, '*Kojong sillok*' is abbreviated to *KJSL*.

[59] See *Analects of Confucius*, Book 12, ch. 7; *Mencius* 4A9 and 7B14.

[60] In explaining the two aspects of Confucian political ideas, we should consider the historical context of classical Confucianism in the time of Confucius and Mencius. The original Confucian ideas emerged in the *Chunqiu zhanguo* (春秋戰國, B.C. 770–A.D. 221) era in which Confucius who had erudite knowledge on extant classical texts unfolded his own thought on the contemporary Chinese world. China at the time was divided into a number of states, big and small in size, fighting against and allying with one another. Contemporary China was losing the old mores which had been maintained under the Zhou (周) kingdom (a feudal system). Yearning for the old Zhou's institutions and customs, Confucius endeavoured to restore the old social mores of the peaceful times of the past. Keeping in mind the disorder of his age, he set up his vision with an ideal of a morally complete person (君子) and an ideal governance run by a morally mature ruler. He also established core ethical concepts, which would be developed further by the scholars of later ages. So the most important contribution of Confucius to Chinese thought was his substantiation of Confucian *ethical* philosophy by augmenting existing words of values with philosophical meanings. However, as we can see in *Lunyu* (論語, Analects of Confucius), the ethical emphasis was largely balanced by the needs of people. In other words, he did not disregard the sphere of necessity for people, though his priority still lay with the ideal of a moral man and moral virtues. Likewise, Mencius who lived in the warring states era saw recovering the "stability" of the Chinese landmass as the most critical question. He thus reinterpreted the rule of the sage kings including Yao and Shun and that of the peaceful era of Xia, Yin and Zhou (夏殷周) as "lenient rule" (*injŏng* 仁政), a concept connoting ethical nuance. Put differently, in the warring states era, states pursued their needs, and in many cases the rulers sought their own needs, not their countrymen's needs or interests, which easily led to wars. It is in this context that Mencius put weight on the so-called "moral politics," inheriting the ethicalisation of politics made by Confucius. He wanted to achieve peace and stability through the ideas of moral politics. Yet it does not mean that he did not care about the problems of needs for a state. Rather, in Mencius the two were balanced. He just aimed to domesticate the sheer pursuit of political interests of the states. So, it would be reasonable to argue that in Mencius the ethics-based understanding of politics was in harmony with the necessity-based understanding of politics.

The two aspects, political necessity and an ideal model of society, need each other if a political community is to sustain itself over a long period of time. Thus, the two are complementary and may be well balanced. However, they may create a tension. If a political community pursues the demands of necessity to an extreme degree, it may find it easy to neglect the question of the ideal and this could result in serious social instability. In contrast, an unbalanced pursuit of a certain ideal may put the needs of the community in danger. It is a common thread throughout history that states put matters of necessity above ideals, since the former is more urgent and directly related to the survival of the political community itself. However, in Chosŏn, national security was guaranteed under Chinese regional hegemony so that it enjoyed a long peace for the first two centuries and its agrarian economy maintained stability. These conditions gave birth to a characteristic political thinking that focused on the goal of building an ethically well-ordered society rather than pursuing the goal of political necessity. This tendency, furthermore, was encouraged by Cheng-Zhu Confucianism itself. The Neo-Confucianism, which was considered to be the orthodox Confucian teaching by Chosŏn Confucians, did not strictly distinguish the values or virtues of the private domain from those of the public domain, and the cultivation of high ethical virtue in the private

---

Let us turn our sight to Confucius's and Mencius's interpretation of ancient texts. For instance, *Shujing*, one of the earliest history books in China, contains the facts regarding the great political achievements of famous historical figures in the ancient peaceful times. Confucius reinterpreted these figures' "political" accomplishments *ethically* in the context of his time. By doing so, in *Lunyu*, both the political (or historical truth-based) and the ethical aspect came to coexist. Mencius in a more vivid fashion synthesised both the view of politics in *Shujing* and that in *Lunyu*. This is the original form of *classical* Confucian political ideas. Later in Song China Confucian scholars thoroughly investigated the ethical concepts originally established by Confucius, and other texts like *Daxue* and *Zhongyong*, and elaborated the ethical aspect into a philosophical system. This would be the reason why many modern researchers see Confucian philosophy simply as an "ethical" philosophy. Considering the original form of Confucianism from a *political* perspective, however, we can see that even its ethical ideas were motivated by the political demands of the era. In this context, *injŏng*, the ideal of lenient rule, taught by Confucius and Mencius, should also be interpreted as an ethically domesticated concept of essentially political necessity-based teachings shown in *Shujing*.

domain was demanded of the ruling class as a precondition of their entering the government officialdom. Thus, in Chosŏn, ethical cultivation through the study of Confucianism was an integral process to be pursued before engaging with the public service, and this gave Chosŏn's government officials an intense ethical character. Eventually, this peculiarity of Chosŏn, the pursuit of the ethical ideal over political necessity, created seriously *ethicalised* politics on the one hand, and on the other, led to a fundamental tension between the two.

The conceptual framework of 'a tension between political necessity and an ethical ideal' is basically related to an essential way in which political communities exist, or it indicates two different spheres to handle within communities. Yet it is also a framework signifying *different methods* of statecraft. Since the framework concerns two diverse but essential spheres to deal with, they are complementary, but at the same time, due to their different methods, the two are competitive with each other. In this respect, it is different from the commonly used framework in political theoretical analysis, that is, political idealism versus political realism, which are rather grounded on the interest or preference of an agent in choosing a policy alternative. The model suggested here covers not only the matter of different objects (or spheres) but also different approaches to 'good governance.' In Confucian Chosŏn, the *ethical ideal-based understanding of politics* subordinated politics to the ideal of an ethical society. Ideal politics was conceived as rule by a *sage king* or *junzi* (君子, noble man) who had all virtues and wisdom within himself. Governance was seen as an extension of a person's thorough moral cultivation. The expression of *sugi ch'iin* (修己治人 (Ch.: *Xiuji zhiren*)), which means "cultivate oneself before governing others"

represents this Confucian ideal.[61] On the other hand, in the *political necessity-based understanding of politics*, politics was viewed as being based upon the elaboration of pertinent laws, institutions, and customs rather than an individual ruler's cultivation of virtues. In other words, by improving common people's material conditions of life, such as safety, eating, and housing, it is possible to attain a good governance. And only after satisfying these could people pursue moral dignity. Considering material conditions as the primary means for a better life, this necessity-based understanding of politics counter-balanced the Neo-Confucian metaphysical theories and had the resources to open up a new perspective on the world.

In Chosŏn's political and intellectual arenas, the tension between the two approaches to politics reflects a number of conflicting relations. Firstly, in the academic arena, scholars who had more interest in political necessity underscored pragmatic studies or *kyŏngsehak*, alongside philosophical discourses on ethics, in opposition to those on the side of an ethical ideal, who put emphasis single-mindedly on the latter. Secondly, in regard to the purpose of Confucian studies, the former thought that statecraft and the well-being of the ruled was the primary value of Confucianism, while the latter regarded ethical cultivation and the sophistication of Confucian philosophy as the most crucial. Lastly, in terms of worldview, the scholars interested in political necessity had a propensity for seeing the world more

---

[61] In reality, *sugi* and *ch'iin* are only weakly connected to each other. As is understood when carefully considered, *ch'iin* (the public in character) is not simply an extension of *sugi* (the private matter), but an area beyond individuality. *Ch'iin* is the realm in which multiple interests of numerous people compete against one other and thus different approaches are required. While different in context, the peculiarity of a political arena as *public sphere* different from private (or economic) sphere was propounded by Arendt. (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998).) And the ideal of ethical politics in Confucian Chosŏn in which *sugi* and *ch'iin* were thought to be consecutive and its problems in the sixteenth century were well pointed out by Kim Yŏngsu. See Kim Yŏngsu, "Chosŏn kongnon chŏngch'i ŭi isang kwa hyŏnsil" [The Ideal and Reality of the Politics of Public Opinion in Chosŏn], *Han'guk chŏngch'i hakhoebo* 39(5) (2005), pp. 7–27.

rationally and practically, while those who focused on the ethical ideal interpreted the world from an intensely ethical perspective. We will address this difference of worldview of the two elements of the Confucian political ideas in concreteness in the following two chapters.[62]

2. An Outline of the Development of Confucian Political Ideas in Chosŏn

2.1. The Deepening of Ethical Politics (15th and 16th C.)

The tension in Confucian political ideas can be seen both in an individual scholar's thought system and in the development of the intellectual history of Chosŏn as a whole. In what follows, we focus on the changing dynamic between the two aspects of Confucian political ideas throughout the Chosŏn period. Since the aim of this chapter is to lay bare the general trend of the development of Confucian political thinking in Chosŏn, we will highlight the characteristics of each century in a succinct manner rather than embracing all aspects of a certain period.

During the first century since the establishment of the dynasty (15th C.), Chosŏn's political ideas were largely balanced between the aspect of political necessity and that of ethical ideal. This was closely related to the character of Confucianism in this era as well as to the reform-oriented political circumstances in the early years of the dynasty. Chosŏn was founded upon the initiative of Confucian scholar-officials who objected to the former

---

62 This duality is similar to the model that Fukuzawa Yukichi drew in interpreting the "low development" of East Asian countries. He ascribed the relative backwardness of the East, in comparison with the West, to the tradition that cherishes "virtue" or "ethics" and, conversely, the relative advancement of the West to the tradition that heightens "knowledge" or "truth." He then confronted the former theoretically, asserting that the accumulation of knowledge or truth built the advanced Western civilisation. Fukuzawa's model is different from mine, but, in terms of the intention of the duality, both look compatible. See Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Bunmeiron no Gairyaku* (文明論之概略: 福澤諭吉著作集 vol. 4) (Tokyo: 慶應義塾大學出版会, 2004), ch.6.

kingdom Koryŏ (高麗, 918–1392), which, as of the late fourteenth century, faced serious national problems that threatened its survival. The scholar-officials followed Neo-Confucianism, or Cheng-Zhu studies (or *Xinglixue/Sŏngnihak* (性理學)) – which had been established during the Song dynasty of China (宋, 960–1279) from the tenth to the twelfth century and transmitted to Koryŏ in the late thirteenth century. Under the influence of the Neo-Confucianism, they called Buddhism, the dominant religion in Koryŏ, a heretical theory, with a group of scholars criticising it harshly and naming it a core social problem.[63] This new intellectual trend from Song that strengthened the metaphysical base of classical Confucian ethics had a theoretical depth comparable with Buddhist philosophy. Yet its effects on Koryŏ were still limited, as a consequence of the course of transmission of that teaching. Concerning the introduction of the Neo-Confucianism into Koryŏ, previous studies largely agree that the new teaching was not directly introduced from Song, but done later through Yuan (元, 1260–1368) during the years when Koryŏ was subjugated by the Mongolian empire. Thus, the characteristics of Yuan Confucianism were accepted into Koryŏ. In Yuan, Confucianism, which was established under the leadership of the great scholar Xu Heng (許衡, 1209–1281), was a practical teaching combining self-cultivation and statecraft rather than mere metaphysical debates on ethics.[64] Consequently, in late Koryŏ, the core philosophical and

[63] Confucians' attack on Buddhism in the late fourteenth century is well shown in Chŏng Tojŏn (1342–1398)'s *Pulssi chapbyŏn* (**佛氏雜辨**, Miscellaneous Remarks on Buddha). Kim Yŏngsu, reviewing both Buddhist and Confucian political ideas in a theoretical manner, saw the shift of state-sponsored religious teachings that took place in accordance with the shift of dynasty as "the transformation of Korean civilisation." Kim Yŏngsu, *Kŏn'guk ŭi chŏngch'i: Yŏmal sŏnch'o hyŏngmyŏng kwa munmyŏng chŏnhwan* [The Politics of Building the State: Revolution and Civilisation Shift in the Last Years of Koryŏ and Early Chosŏn] (Seoul: Yihaksa, 2006).

[64] Almost all recent studies on Confucianism in late Koryŏ appear to agree on this view. See Moon Chul-Young (Mun Ch'ŏlyŏng), "Koryŏ hugi sinyuhak suyong kwa sadaebu ŭi ŭisik segye" [The Introduction of Neo-Confucianism in Late Koryŏ and the Confucian Scholars' World of

metaphysical discussions of Cheng-Zhu studies, which would become a predominant academic subject since the sixteenth century, did not occupy a dominant position. Even pivotal sources on the Cheng-Zhu studies compiled in Song China were not yet introduced into contemporary Koryŏ.[65] As researchers like M. Deuchler and J. Duncan have argued, the Confucian scholars in late Koryŏ adopted the novel theory on top of the existing Ancient Learning of Confucianism focusing on classical texts, and a number of Confucian scholars still thought that the Buddhist philosophy was compatible with the Neo-Confucian ideas, seeing the former as a method of self-cultivation.[66]

This trend did not shift radically in the first century of the Chosŏn dynasty. Despite the widespread Confucianisation of Chosŏn society, the Neo-Confucian philosophical themes were not thoroughly comprehended yet, and besides the Neo-Confucian studies, scholars heeded practical studies, such as the military and agriculture. This academic trend in the fifteenth century was also linked to the conditions of the early years of the kingdom.

Consciousness], *Hanguksaron* 41, 42 (1998), pp. 335–417; To Hyŏnch'ŏl, *Koryŏ mal sadaebu ŭi chŏngch'i sasang yŏn'gu* [Studies of the Confucian Scholars' Political Thought in the Last Years of Koryŏ] (Seoul: Iljogak, 1999); Jung Jae-Hoon, *Chosŏn chŏn'gi yugyo chŏngch'i sasang*.

[65] Indeed, in the late fourteenth century, core works like *Zhuzi daquan* (朱子大全) and *Zhuzi yulei* (朱子語類) were not yet introduced into Korea. To Hyŏnch'ŏl, "<Kyŏngje mun'gam > ŭi inyong chŏn'gŏ ro pon Chŏng Tojŏn ŭi chŏngch'i sasang" [The Political Thought of Chŏng Tojŏn with Reference to His *Kyŏngje mungam* (經濟文鑑)], *Yŏksa hakbo* 165 (2000), p. 92.

[66] John Duncan emphasises that the existing Ancient Style Learning of Confucianism was mixed with the newly adopted Cheng-Zhu Learning shared by bureaucratic aristocrats (or scholar-officials) in late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn, and finds the practical nature of Confucian learning at the time in this respect. On the other hand, To Hyŏnch'ŏl argues that the Confucians' treatment of Buddhism is divided into two groups: a moderate group led by Yi Saek (李穡, 1328–1396) admitted it as a teaching for self-cultivation, regarding both Buddhism and Confucianism as essentially similar, but another group represented by Chŏng Tojŏn severely criticised it as a fundamental problem of Koryŏ society. To Hyŏnch'ŏl characterises these two groups' different views as based on different understandings of the Neo-Confucianism, finding their diverse attitudes toward the founding of the new dynasty Chosŏn in this regard. See Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992), pp. 20–24; John B. Duncan, *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (University of Washington Press, 2000), pp. 237–65; To Hyŏnch'ŏl, *Koryŏ mal sadaebu ŭi chŏngch'i sasang*.

Confucian scholar-officials were largely concerned with the matters of necessity during the epoch. They had to establish a firmly centralised administrative system, as well as new institutions, rituals, and values. Moreover, in this century, academic activities were mainly stimulated by the government, with government academies (*kwanhak*, 官學) functioning as institutes to educate young Confucians to do the government a service. This environment gave Confucians leeway to pursue practical studies and engendered Chosŏn's development in the material dimension, as shown in scientific inventions and agricultural growth during King Sejong's (r. 1418–1450) and the ensuing kings' reigns. This balanced setting in academia in the fifteenth century between practicality and ethical serenity has been regarded by researchers as being placed in the midst of the transition from late Koryŏ's focus on statecraft and literature to mid-Chosŏn's attention to philosophical ethics.[67]

In contrast to the fifteenth century, the sixteenth century witnessed the deepening of the Neo-Confucian philosophical themes and the general ethicalisation of Confucian understanding in Chosŏn. This change was closely related to the early establishment of peaceful diplomatic relations with the Ming dynasty of China (明, 1368–1644). As a consequence, from the late fifteenth century, new sources on the Neo-Confucianism were introduced from Ming China, which soon fostered academic activities in Chosŏn including the compilation and printing of a number of new books. Among the newly introduced books, the core texts which greatly influenced the Confucians and determined the character of

[67] This interpretation was put forward in early studies conducted by such researchers as Hyŏn Sang'yun and Yi Pyŏngdo, and was reiterated by Kim Hongkyŏng. See Hyŏn Sang'yun, *Chosŏn yuhaksa* [The History of Confucianism in Chosŏn], edited and annotated by Yi Hyŏngsŏng (Seoul: Simsan, 2010), p. 58; Yi Pyŏngdo, *Han'guk yuhaksa* [The History of Confucianism in Korea] (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1987), p. 100; Kim Hongkyŏng, *Chosŏn ch'ogi kwanhakp'a ŭi yuhak sasang* [The Confucian Ideas of the School of Government Academy in Early Chosŏn] (Seoul: Han'gilsa, 1996), pp. 17–18.

Chosŏn Confucianism were *Xinjing* (心經, Classics on the Human Mind and Heart) by Zhen Dexiu (眞德秀, 1170–1235) of Song and *Xinjing fuzhu* (心經附註, Supplementary Exegeses on the Classics on the Human and Mind and Heart) by Cheng Minzheng (程敏政, 1445–1499) of Ming, which extracted passages on the nature of the human mind and heart (心) from classical texts. These texts and other sources drove Chosŏn scholars to delve into the psychological structure of the human mind and heart, especially the bases of humanity's ethical behaviour, leading to the famous and ever-lasting academic debate on *li* (理) and *qi* (氣).[68]

This ethical inclination also prompted Chosŏn Confucians to maintain high ethical standards in all their thought and actions, with *susin* (修身 (Ch.: *Xiushen*), ethical self-cultivation) becoming the core notion representing Confucianism. While in the fifteenth century *ch'iin* (治人), or secular accomplishments through humans' voluntary acts, was still thought to be significant, in this century the focus was shifted to *susin*, the internal cultivation of ethical virtues. This change is well registered in the shift in the king's study at the royal lectures (*kyŏng'yŏn,* 經筵). According to Jung Jae-Hoon, the Confucian text *Daxue* (大學, Great Learning) and its supplementary exegeses by Zhen Dexiu, *Daxue yanyi* (大學衍義, Supplementary Exegeses of Great Learning), were used in different ways in the two centuries.

[68] These new sources were influenced by the popularity of Wang Yangming's philosophy in Ming. Wang Yangming's new Confucian theory, arisen from the criticism of Zhu Xi philosophy, however, was criticised by Confucian scholars in Chosŏn such as Yi Hwang and his disciples from the early years of its introduction, and was accepted by only a small number of scholars throughout its entire history. For the trend of Confucian thoughts in the sixteenth-century Chosŏn, I have mainly referred to Jung Jae-Hoon, *Chosŏn chŏn'gi yugyo chŏngch'i sasang*. Specifically, on the introduction and effects of the books on human's heart and mind, see Jung Jae-Hoon's, pp. 175–203. For the historical development of the Wang Yangming philosophy in Chosŏn, see Chŏng Ch'akŭn, *Tongyang chŏngch'i sasang: han'guk yangmyŏng sasang ŭi chŏn'gae* [The Eastern Political Thought: the Development of Wang Yangming's philosophy in Korea] (Seoul: P'yŏngminsa, 1996).

During the fifteenth century, they were mainly used as texts for the method of statecraft with an emphasis on ancient Confucian sage kings' great political deeds, but, in the sixteenth century, were used as texts for ethical cultivation as the basis of statecraft.[69] In accordance with this change, generally, in selecting texts for the king's Confucian study, books on ethical cultivation were preferred to those on great examples of statecraft. Moreover, as *susin* was emphasised, Confucianism itself was interpreted as a study for following sages' minds and hearts (or learning to become a sage), with Confucianism being frequently named *sŏnghak* (聖學, sages' teaching). Indeed, a number of works composed in this century used the term *sŏnghak* for their titles, an example of the ethical disposition of Confucianism at that time.[70]

This switch in Chosŏn Confucianism is well shown in the works of Yi Hwang (李滉, 1501–1570). Yi, the most prominent Confucian scholar in this age, reached the highest stage of the Neo-Confucian philosophical theories for the first time in Chosŏn. His scholarship is characterised by his stress on the *a priori* existence of humans' ethical nature, or *li*, and its preponderance over human temperaments and desires, or *qi*. In his famous debate with Ki Taesŭng (奇大升, 1527–1572) about the psychological basis of humans' ethical behaviour, he refuted Ki's empiricism based on the primacy of *qi*, while arguing for the predetermining character of *li* and its working within *qi*.[71] As he took the transcendental, ethical principle-centred approach to norms, his understanding of politics was seriously tilted

---

[69] Jung Jae-Hoon, *Chosŏn chŏngi yugyo chŏngch'i sasang*, 95–150, 204–239.

[70] The titles of the main works of the two respected Confucian scholars of the sixteenth century, Yi Hwang and Yi I, were *Sŏnghak sipdo* (聖學十圖) and *Sŏnghak chip'yo* (聖學輯要). Ibid., pp. 296–374.

[71] This famous debate over *li* and *qi* became a perennial topic among Chosŏn Confucians. The division of political factions from the late sixteenth century largely coincided with the fault lines in the academic discussions over this issue. For the debate between Yi and Ki, see Yi Hwang, "Non sadan ch'iljŏng sŏ" [Discussions on the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings] in *T'oegye sŏnjip,* edit. and trans. by Yun Sasun (Seoul: Hyŏn'amsa, 1993), pp. 211–96.

ethically. In his memorial presented to King Sŏnjo (宣祖, r. 1552–1608) in the year of the king's enthronement, he exhibited this view of politics. In that memorial, he advised the king to cultivate himself through diligent study of Confucianism if he wanted to become a great ruler. He viewed achieving ethical virtue through studying Confucianism as the essence of political matters.[72] Except for the ethical cultivation, he scarcely mentioned the matter of political necessity of his time and the factual side of politics. He perceived politics simply as a sub-field of ethics in accordance with his *li*-centred interpretation of the Neo-Confucian ethical philosophy.

While this extreme predilection for ethical politics had some positive effects on Chosŏn, it had serious negative influences on Chosŏn politics.[73] The *susin*-based education reinforced the ethical concerns of scholar-officials and led them to assert ever more dogmatically their claims in handling national affairs. Perceiving issues only from the ethical point of view, they failed to resolve conflicts through mediation and compromise. Hence, in spite of the demands for high ethical integrity, in reality, the sixteenth century witnessed severe political conflicts and purges between political factions. The literati purges between the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth century were closely associated with this ethical definition of politics. As the Neo-Confucian ethical understanding of the world was deepened, the younger groups of bureaucrats who internalised the Neo-Confucian teachings as their

---

[72] "其三曰 敦聖學 以立治本. 臣聞 帝王之學 心法之要 淵源於大舜之命禹. 其言曰 人心惟危 道心惟微 惟精惟一 允執厥中. 夫以天下相傳 欲使之安天下也. 其爲付囑之言 宜莫急於政治 而舜之於禹 丁寧告戒 不過如此者. 豈不以學問成德 爲治之大本也. 精一執中 爲學之大法也 以大法而立大本 則天下之政治 皆自此而出乎. 惟古之聖謨若此 故雖以如臣之愚 亦知聖學爲至治之本 而僭有獻焉." Yi Hwang, "Mujin yukjoso" [Memorial of Six Articles Presented in the Year of *Mujin*] in *Kukyŏk T'oegyejip* (Seoul: Minjok munhwa ch'ujinhoe, 1997), p. 106.

[73] Chosŏn's ethical politics had a positive effect in that it caused the subjugation of the king to the authority of Confucianism and, consequently, there was no despotic ruler throughout its entire history. However, this taming of the throne engendered the weakening of the king's power and irresolute kings at times of national crises.

tenets in both private and public life attacked the high-ranking, merits-based officials who had practical attitudes towards national issues. From the standpoint of the intellectual transformation in this era, the purges of the young literati by the senior merit subjects, called *Sahwa* (士禍), represented a collision between the existing practical approach to statecraft and Confucian fundamentalism.[74] After the ethical fundamentalist view came to predominate in the political arena from the sixteenth century, the scholar-officials' dogmatism and sternness in repelling different opinions yielded the invigoration of factional strife. As a typical case, the disputes of political factions over the funeral costume in King Hyŏnjong's (顯宗, r. 1659–1674) reign, or *kihae yesong* (己亥禮訟, 1659), represented the limits of ethical politics.[75]

---

[74] Edward Wagner found a core reason for *Sahwa* in the intellectual shift of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, specifically the emergence of young literati who committed themselves to Confucian tenets. Edward W. Wagner, "Chŏngch'isa chŏk kwanjŏm esŏ pon Yijo sahwa ŭi sŏng'kyŏk" [The Characteristics of the Literati Purges in Chosŏn seen from Its Political History], *Yŏksa hakbo* 85 (1980), pp. 150–51; ____, "Yijo Salim munje e kwanhan chaegŏmt'o" [The Question of *salim* in Chosŏn Revisited], *Chŏnbuk sahak* 4 (1980), p. 170.

[75] In the issue of the proper funeral costume of King Hyojong's (孝宗, 1649–1659) step-mother at Hyojong's funeral, the core issue was how to regard the deceased king who was the second son of his father Injo (仁祖, 1623–1649). The representative debaters of the *namin* (南人, the Southerners) faction, Yun Hyu and Hŏ Mok, argued that while Hyojong was the second son, once he was enthroned as the king, he should be treated following the funeral rite of the first son. On the opposite, the *sŏin* (西人, the Westerners) discussant, Song Siyŏl claimed that King Hyojong's step-mother should wear a second-son's funeral costume, while emphasising the universal application of Confucian funeral rituals. In this debate, Yun Hyu upheld the principle that the royal family's status (公) should be separated from that of private families (私). Song Siyŏl took the opposite view. Hŏ Mok was rather eclectic, arguing that although Hyojong should be treated as the first-son's case (due to his position of king (尊尊)), his step-mother should wear a second-son's funeral costume (親親). In this debate, while Song relied on Zhu Xi's texts on *ye*, Yun and Hŏ mainly depended on ancient texts on *ye*. Concerning this debate, Chi Duhwan has argued that at the core of this debate lies how to see the royal family's rituals in comparison with commoners' rituals. Chŏng Okja, accepting this view, has extended its implication so that the *yesong* and the ensuing party competition (or *hwan'guk* (換局)) were not the characteristic illness of Chosŏn politics, but a normal evolution of party politics (*pungdang chŏngch'i*) among political forces or parties. Rhee Won-taek rephrased the arguments over *ye* in more common terms and insisted that the core points of the debate were the conflict between *ch'inch'in* (親親, Treat those who are close closely) and *chonjon* (尊尊, Respect those who are respectful) and between the logic of the private (私) and that of the public (公), and that the pivotal

2.2. The Resurgence of the Ideas of Political Necessity (17th and 18th C.)

This ethical understanding of politics lasted into the seventeenth century, with Zhu Xi's philosophy still being powerful as orthodox study. A representative scholar of this century, Song Siyŏl (宋時烈, 1607–1689), indeed, maintained Yi Hwang's view of politics, although the political faction he belonged to (*sŏin*) was the opposite of Yi Hwang's disciples (*namin*). Song's view of politics is well shown in his memorial to King Hyojong (孝宗, r. 1649–1659), which was submitted in the year when the king was enthroned. Song stated there that his memorial was intended to cultivate the king's mind and heart, which he regarded as the essence of a king's rule. Concretely, he advised the king in a highly ethical manner that maintaining his mind and heart still and reflecting on himself are the essence of governance.[76] This ethical understanding of politics, which ascribed governing to the king's ethical cultivation of mind and heart, lasted throughout the century and even to the late nineteenth century.[77] In this century, however, the philosophy of Zhu Xi had apostates too. This is well

---

difference between them is shown in Song Siyŏl's inclination to *ch'inch'in* (the private) and Yun Hyu's *chonjon* (the public). On the other hand, Kim Sang-joon approached the *yesong* by means of a social scientific concept "*moralpolitik*", arguing that the *yesong* is an attempt to tame the real politics with *ye* or morality and the feuds in that process is not specific in Confucian Chosŏn. See Chi Duhwan, "Chosŏn huki yesong yŏn'gu" [A Study of the Disputes over Ritual Propriety in Late Chosŏn], *Pudae sahak* 11 (1987), pp. 77–125; Chŏng Okja, "17 segi sasang'gye ŭi chaep'yŏn kwa yeron" [The Intellectual Re-arrangement in the Seventeenth-century Chosŏn and the Debates over *Ye*], *Han'guk munhwa* 10 (1989), pp. 211–40; Rhee Won-tak, "Kihae pŏkje nonjaeng kwa kŭ i'nyŏm chŏk chi'hyang" [The Controversy over Funeral Costumes in the Year of *Kihae* and Its Ideological Direction], *Han'guk chŏngch'i hakhoebo* 34(4) (2002), pp. 23–39; Kim Sangjun, "Chosŏn sidae ŭi yesong kwa moralpolitik" [The Disputes over Ritual Propriety in Chosŏn and *Moralpolitik*], *Han'guk sahoehak* 35(2) (2001), pp. 205–36.

76 Song Siyŏl, "Kich'uk pongsa (己丑封事)" in *Kukyŏk Songjadaejŏn* 5 (Seoul: Minjok munhwa ch'ujinhoe, 1980–88), p. 240.

77 For example, when King Kojong (高宗, 1864–1907) came to the throne in 1864, Yi Kyŏngjae (李景在, 1800–1873), one of the three highest officials at the time, advised the new king on the right

shown in Song Siyŏl's stigmatising of '*samun nanjŏk*' (斯文亂賊, enemy of Confucianism) on the two scholars, Yun Hyu (尹鑴, 1617–1680) and Pak Sedang (朴世堂, 1629–1703), who made critical remarks regarding Zhu Xi's interpretations of core Confucian texts. The co-existence between Zhu Xi's extreme adherents and opponents formed the seventeenth-century academic environment in Chosŏn.

The impetus of the intellectual shift was the Confucians' concentration on the ideal of an ethical society and consequently their neglect of the state's necessities. The symptoms of national crisis had already appeared in the late sixteenth century. Since the staple state institutions concerning taxation, such as the land tax, the tributes of local products to the royal court (貢物), and the military service system, were not reformed appropriately, a number of problems arose and reformist officials spoke up. This situation further worsened as the country was invaded by Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Japan for eight years from 1592. After the war ended, the government endeavoured to reform and reconstruct the country. Prince Kwanghae (光海, r. 1608–1623) in alliance with the *puk'in* (北人, the Northerners) faction made an attempt to reform the country, but the prince's rule was soon overturned by the mainstream moralists, since his deeds ran counter to Confucian ethical norms. The following attacks by Manchus and Chosŏn's eventual submission to them in 1637 illustrated the precarious situation of Chosŏn, which was related to the neglect of the necessities of the country.

As Kim Chunsŏk has persuasively argued in his analysis of Confucian political thinking in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the face of this predicament, the

---

way of governance, saying that "once your Majesty's mind is upright, the royal court will stand right and our whole country will also do so." *KJSL*, 1/01/10.

Chosŏn government and Confucian scholars had to deal with two essential tasks.[78] The first one was to resuscitate the Confucian social order that had been loosened by the foreign invasions, especially the Manchu invasion and their following occupation of the Chinese lands. For aristocratic *yangban*-class Confucians, the chaotic domestic and international situation was evidence of crisis of their predominance in the social status system, so they aimed at strengthening the hierarchical social system by tightening the Confucian ethical order. The second task was to carry out national reform to redress chronic ills resulting from outdated state institutions. This task was combined with the crucial socio-economic change in the age. As their salary was paid in the form of rice, instead of tax rights on fields (as had been the case earlier), owing to the shortage of available land, the *yangban* officials sought to accumulate private land. This situation gradually divided the population into a small number of big landlords and a majority of self-employed peasants cultivating small plots or tenants owning no land.[79]

The different factions within political elite responded differently to the two tasks mentioned above, although it cannot be denied that all regarded them seriously. According to Kim Chunsŏk, the *sŏin* (西人, the Westerners) party focused on the rehabilitation of the existing social order, while they viewed the need to address state reforms in a limited way mainly through the amelioration of the existing tax system. Later, the *soron* (少論, the Disciples' group) faction, the minority within *sŏin*, were more reformist and practical, and moderate in handling their opponent party, *namin* (南人, the Southerners), as opposed to the

[78] Kim Chunsŏk, *Chosŏn huki chŏngch'i sasangsa yŏn'gu*.

[79] Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe (ed.), *Han'guksa 30: Chosŏn chunggi ŭi chŏngch'i wa kyŏngje* [The History of Korea: Politics and Economy in Mid-Chosŏn] (Seoul: Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, 1998), pp. 379–516.

noron (老論, the Patriarchs' group), which was the majority faction and took a sternly repelling attitude to the *namin*. On the other hand, the *namin* party, and especially those originally from the *puk'in* faction, placed more weight on national reforms, and their reform ideas were more radical than those of the *noron* faction.[80] Some scholars in this minority faction moved further toward the relativisation of orthodox Zhu Xi's philosophy, turning back to classical texts in pursuit of the original ideas of Confucius.[81]

Let us now briefly see the scholars who paid attention to the political necessities of their time and then those who triggered the academic shift in the century. As far as the attention to political necessities are concerned, we should first mention Yi I (李珥, 1536–1584) who himself was a great Confucian ethical philosopher in the sixteenth century while having acute interest in the problems of his time and thus encouraging later generations to turn their eyes to the problems of their time. Yi's academic character is well shown in his main works that are marked by his balanced interest in both the Neo-Confucian ethical philosophy and statecraft. The core writings composed during his serving as a government official, i.e., *Tongho mundap* (東湖問答, Dialogue at an Eastern Lake) and *Manŏn bongsa* (萬言封事, A Secret Memorial of Ten Thousand Words), addressed the emerging crises in contemporary Chosŏn. Likewise, one of his main works named *Sŏnghak chip'yo* (聖學輯要, A Digest of the Sages' Teachings) treated both Confucian ethical ideas (*susin*) and thoughts on governance (*ch'iin*). Yi's interest in necessity was inherited by a number of scholars including Yu Hyŏngwŏn (柳馨遠, 1622–1673), the famous seventeenth-century scholar.

[80] For the political ideas of the main academic figures in each political faction after the Hideyoshi invasion, see Kim Chunsŏk, *Chosŏn huki chŏngch'i sasangsa yŏn'gu*.

[81] For the political ideas of the *namin* scholars whose origin was from the *pukin*, such as Yu Hyŏngwŏn and Yun Hyu, see Chŏng Hohun, *Chosŏn hugi chŏngch'i sasang yŏn'gu*.

Witnessing the devastated state after the two invasions, Yu aimed to rebuild staple state institutions on his own in his magnum opus *Pan'gye surok* (磻溪隨錄, A Miscellaneous Account of Pan'gye Yu Hyŏngwŏn). He reviewed the ancient institutions of both China and Korea in a very meticulous manner, and traced the ideas of state institutions through both classical texts and the works of previous scholars. His radical opinion of the nationalisation and redistribution of land to the people in order to eliminate the evils of the private amassment of land is famous.[82]

On the other hand, from this century, scholars began to harbour a 'relativist' view on Zhu Xi's interpretation of Confucian texts and, at the same time, went back to classical texts without clinging to Zhu Xi's philosophy. Scholars like Hŏ Mok (許穆, 1595–1682), Yun Hyu, and Pak Sedang objected to Chosŏn scholars' excessive adherence to Zhu Xi's exegesis of Confucian texts and led the eighteenth-century practical learning trend.[83]

The eighteenth century saw blossoming of statecraft ideas, as well as the ongoing relativisation of Zhu Xi's orthodoxy. Groups of scholars who are now named *Sirhak* (實學) scholars led this academic trend. The practical academic circumstances of this century were closely associated with the settlement of previous crises and the development of Chosŏn under the great leadership of King Yŏngjo (英祖, r. 1724–1776) and his grandson Chŏngjo (正祖, r. 1776–1800). And under these kings' rule, the country saw a resurgence from its previous decline. The intellectual characteristics of this century, that is, diversification of academic interest and intellectual liveliness, was in tandem with the socio-economic changes,

---

[82] For Yu Hyŏngwŏn's reform ideas on staple national institutions, see Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*; Kim Chunsŏk, *Chosŏn huki chŏngch'i sasangsa*, ch. 2.

[83] Concrete analyses of these scholars' new interpretations of Confucian texts and their views on contemporary Chosŏn will be discussed in the next chapter.

such as urbanisation of Seoul and the general development of commerce.[84] Along with this vivacity, the legacy of the ethical ideal and its worldview continued in this century. Specifically, Manchu's rout of Chosŏn and rise as a new empire in the Chinese landmass imprinted a deep sense of uneasiness and indignation on the part of Chosŏn Confucians and led them to claim a military expedition to Qing (北伐), though made surreptitiously. As Qing's predominance of mainland China became stable, the Chosŏn court's attention now turned to efforts to commemorate Ming China's grace toward Chosŏn by building an altar for the late Ming emperors. In line with this, many of them claimed that the orthodoxy of Confucian civilisation was moved onto Chosŏn, calling their country voluntarily "little China" (小中華).[85] While the distinction between civilisation and barbarism (*hwaigwan*) largely decreased together with Qing's firm political and cultural power, the ethical view still affected orthodox Confucians' way of thinking and had them sustain the ethical understanding of politics in the century.

The stabilisation in relations with Qing brought about significant intellectual changes in Chosŏn. Firstly, as new books, especially those on Western sciences and

---

[84] For the urbanisation and social change and their effects on the emergence of *Sirhak*, see Ko Tonghwan, "Chosŏn hugi tosi kyŏngje ŭi sŏngjang kwa chisik segye ŭi hwakdae" [The Growth of Urban Economies and the Expansion of Knowledge in Late Chosŏn], *Tasi, Sirhak iran muŏt'inga* [Again, What is *Sirhak*?] (Seoul: P'urŭn yŏksa, 2007), pp. 249–75.

[85] Chŏng Okja has seen that the mainstream Confucians' self-consciousness of their country as "little China" was their honour and pride in view that Chosŏn inherited the glorious Confucian civilisation which was tarnished in China by Manchu Qing. Kye Sŭngbŏm, however, has interpreted it critically. Highlighting the Chosŏn court's construction of *Taebodan* (大報壇, Altar for Great Recompense) for the purpose of paying tribute to three Ming emperors, he argued that that ceremony, which continued during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, indicated a continuity of the anachronistic conception of *hwaigwan* (華夷觀) in Chosŏn. Indeed, this episode tells the resilience of the ethical view of politics in Chosŏn. See Chŏng Okja, *Chosŏn hugi chosŏn chunghwa sasang yŏn'gu* [Chosŏn's Self-Consciousness of Chinese-ness in Late Chosŏn] (Seoul: Iljisa, 1998); Kye Sŭngbŏm, *Chŏngji toen sigan: Chosŏn ŭi taebodan kwa kŭndae ŭi munt'ŏk* [Time Stalled: Chosŏn's *Taebodan* and the Threshold of Modernity] (Seoul: Sŏgang taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 2011).

technology, were introduced, scholars began to see the world from a more empirical and scientific viewpoint. They came to know that the new knowledge system better explained physical and natural phenomena than the classical Chinese texts did.[86] Secondly, visiting Qing as members of diplomatic entourages, Chosŏn's intellectuals witnessed Qing's advance in material standards. This experience forced several of them to abandon the derogatory view of Qing of the past and, conversely, to assert that backward Chosŏn should learn from them. While Confucians in the minority, namely the *namin* faction, mainly adopted the Western knowledge from the newly introduced books, many Confucians of the mainstream, or the *noron* faction, realised the need to learn from the northern empire (*pukhak* (北學)) through opportunities to visit Qing.[87]

Among the scholars of the minority *namin*, Yi Ik (李瀷, 1681–1763) and Chŏng Yakyong (丁若鏞, 1762–1836), the representative scholars of the faction, are famous for their coverage of a wide range of studies beyond the Neo-Confucian philosophical themes. They addressed not only the interpretation of Confucian texts and national problems of their time but also the issues of science and technology. The important is their approach to scholarship, in which the hegemonic ethical view of the world was restricted by empirical, practical, and positivist worldviews.[88] These characteristics are largely shared by reformist scholars of the majority *noron* faction. Among these, Hong Daeyong (洪大容, 1731–1783)

---

[86] For the introduction of Western Studies and their effects on Chosŏn, see Kang Chae'ŏn, *Chosŏn ŭi sŏhak sa* [The History of Western Studies in Chosŏn] (Seoul: Min'ŭmsa, 1990); Roh Dae-hwan (No Taehwan), "Chosŏn hugi ŭi sŏhak yuip kwa sŏgi suyong ron" [The Introduction of Western Studies and the Adoption of Western Technology in Late Chosŏn], *Chindan hakbo* 83 (1997), pp. 121–54.

[87] For the formation of the *pukhak* school and its ideas, see Yu Ponghak, *Yŏn'am ilp'a pukhak sasang yŏn'gu*.

[88] I will discuss the characteristic ideas and worldview of both Yi Ik and Chŏng Yakyong in the next chapter.

adopted the Western scientific knowledge in earnest and upon this basis attempted to deconstruct the world grounded in the traditional knowledge of the physical world. After witnessing Qing's advance in material life, scholars like Pak Chiwŏn (朴趾源, 1737–1805) and Pak Chega (朴齊家, 1750–1805) had special interest in the development of technology and the need to encourage trade and commerce, which were disregarded traditionally as low and base works.[89]

2.3. The Decline of the Orthodox Teaching (First Half of the 19th C.)

The variegation of academic interest and the relative decline of Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy in the late eighteenth century faced a setback in the early nineteenth century due to the introduction of Roman Catholicism. At first, books on Western studies, especially those concerning geography, astronomy, mathematics, and the almanac, helped Chosŏn Confucians receive Western scientific achievements and undermine the Confucian ethical worldview. The Confucian scholars' study of Western sciences had not been prohibited by the authorities, because the new knowledge provided better explanations on the physical and natural world. However, the diffusion of Roman Catholicism created some serious problems. For instance, Catholic priests were openly opposing the widely accepted ancestral memorial rites (*chesa*) in Chosŏn, calling it an idol worship service. They also stressed equality between people from different social statuses. In contrast, conservative Confucians, as is seen in An Chŏngbok's

[89] Hong Daeyong's scientific interpretation of the world is well exhibited in his essay *Ŭisan mundap* (醫山問答). (I will analyse Hong's adoption of Western scientific knowledge and his worldview in the next chapter.) Pak Chiwŏn's social ideas are well shown in his short stories that ridiculed contemporary Chosŏn and his travel story *Yŏlha ilgi* (熱河日記). Pak Chega's ideas of the need to adopt new technology and the importance of trade and commerce is well shown in his book *Pukhakŭi* (北學議).

essay, harshly criticised Western religion for its erosion of the social foundation of Chosŏn.[90]

In the midst of the challenges to the Confucian world, as King Chŏngjo, the defender of several *namin* bureaucrats who converted to Catholicism, suddenly passed away, the opposite faction (僻派) that came to have power did not hesitate to persecute them. With this event, promising *namin* officials and the aides of the former king fell victim to persecution in 1801.[91] This incident and subsequent persecutions that lasted to 1866 dampened the enthusiasm of Chosŏn's progressive scholars in their pursuit of the new knowledge from the West, and consequently undermined the liberal and critical academic atmosphere of the late eighteenth century. Moreover, after King Chŏngjo's demise in 1800, Chosŏn's political process was seriously distorted, with a couple of families of the ruling *noron* faction controlling the government. Under these circumstances, the practical studies popular in the previous century lost their momentum. Yet the *relativisation* of the orthodox Zhu Xi's philosophy continued in the nineteenth century. Scholars retreated to purely academic disciplines, grappling with Han Learning or *Kaozhengxue* (考證學) used as the main method for understanding Confucian canons. Most of the prominent scholars in this era, including Kim Chŏnghi (金正喜, 1786–1856), were interested in both the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy (*Xinglixue*) and *Kaozhengxue* and believed that both of them were complementary

---

[90] An Chŏngbok's essay is a representative counter-argument against Roman-Catholic doctrines. He pointed out unreasonable elements of Christianity and criticised them one by one. Specifically, he claimed that the religion taught the people the equality between father and son, and king and subjects. He also regarded Catholicism as a heretical theory (異端) just like Daoism and Buddhism. An Chŏngbok, "Ch'ŏnhak mundap" [天學問答, Questions and Answers on the Heavenly Studies] in *Kukyŏk Sun'amjip* 3 (Seoul: minjok munhwa ch'ujinhoe, 1996), pp. 227–51.

[91] Pyŏn Chusŭng has interpreted the 1801 persecution (辛酉迫害) not simply as the ruling group's removal of their opposites (時派), that is, King Chŏngjo's aides including *namin* officials, but also as the oppression of the grassroots who adopted the new religion and were about to turn against the existing order. Pyŏn Chusŭng, "Sinyu pakhae ŭi chŏngch'i chŏk pae'gyŏng" [The Political Backdrop of the Persecution of Roman Catholicism in 1801], *Han'guk sasang sahak* 16 (2001), pp. 91–116.

and indispensable. The main academic debates in the Seoul region in this era were done over how to see the relationship between the two strands of Confucian studies. What is deficient in their academic practice, however, was the liberal and critical attitude that the reformist scholars of the late eighteenth century had.[92] The erosion of Confucian social foundation was being made continuously by Catholicism. Despite the persecutions, the number of Catholic believers did not shrink; rather, Catholicism spread further among commoners.

In the midst of the domestic reaction, a greater challenge was posed by the outside world. The news that Qing was invaded by Western powers was spreading across Chosŏn from the early 1840s. By this time, some pioneering scholars like Ch'oe Han'gi (崔漢綺, 1803–1877) and Pak Kyusu (朴珪壽, 1807–1876) developed an interest in the Western powers through newly introduced books from Qing; yet their understanding of the West was based on limited sources and Chosŏn was not directly exposed to Western imperialist pressure, so that the pioneers' concerns about the Western penetration did not develop further

[92] The introduction of *Kaozhengxue* and its wide-spread effects on Chosŏn Confucians have been analysed by Kim Munsik, yet the intellectual trends in the first half of the nineteenth century have not yet been fully explored. The retreat of the eighteenth-century practical studies (*Sirhak*) in this era looks obvious, but recently scholars like Yu Ponghak and Roh Dae-hwan have argued that the late eighteenth-century practical intellectual trend did not dissipate. In the same context, Yi Kyŏng'gu has insisted that the grand shift in literary trends made in the late eighteenth century lasted to the early nineteenth century. According to Yi, the vivacity of the academic environment in the late eighteenth century retrieved its energy soon after the shock of the persecution of Western studies in 1801. I think it is pertinent to argue that in literature the lively and liberal trend did not wither away, given a number of recent studies in the field, but in social and political thinking the enthusiastic environment of the previous century declined. At any rate, in the midst of the political bewilderment, the position of the orthodox Neo-Confucian teaching was undermined, too. See Kim Munsik, *Chosŏn hugi kyŏnghak sasang yŏn'gu* [Studies of the Trends of the Interpretation of Confucian Classics in Late Chosŏn] (Seoul: Iljogak, 1996); Yu Ponghak, "18, 9 segi noron hakgye wa sallim" [The Academia of *Noron* scholars and *Sallim* in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries], *Hansin nonmunjip* 3 (1986), pp. 23–46; Yu Ponghak, *Chosŏn hugi hakgye wa chisik'in* [The Academia and Intellectuals in Late Chosŏn] (Seoul: Sin'gu munhwasa, 1998); Roh Dae-hwan, "19 segi chung'yŏp Yu Sinhwan hakp'a ŭi hakp'ung kwa hyŏnsil kaehyŏkron" [The Academic Trend of the Yu Sinhwan School and Their Reform Ideas in the Mid-Nineteenth Century], *Han'guk hakbo* 72 (1993), pp. 191–228; Yi Kyŏng'gu, "18 segi mal 19 segi ch'o chisik'in kwa chisikkye ŭi tonghyang" [The Intellectuals and Intellectual Trends in the Era of the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries], *Han'guk sasang sahak* 46 (2014), pp. 283–310.

to create a distinct intellectual trend. The real threats to Chosŏn came from the mid-1860s.

It is meaningful to consider that the intellectual configuration of the first half of the nineteenth century developed into three main political factions in the late 1870s and early 1880s. The moderate reformists, mainly practical government officials of the ruling *noron* faction in the Seoul region, were brought up in the eclectic academic atmosphere in the first half of the century. While maintaining a practical view about opening up of ports for trading with foreign countries, they upheld Confucian values at the same time. The radical reformists, who also hailed from the *noron* faction residing in Seoul, started their learning with Confucian texts at their early age, but they soon developed a vivid interest in the outside world under the influence of Pak Kyusu, Oh Kyŏngsŏk (1831–1879), and Oh's colleague Yu Hongki (1831–?). Moreover, they were affected by the eighteenth-century practical and critical studies (*Sirhak*) spearheaded by Pak Kyusu, which drove them to hold generally reformist views. On the other hand, the conservatives (or *wijŏng ch'ŏksap'a*), who still adhered to the Cheng-Zhu teachings, mainly resided in the local regions. Staying isolated from Seoul, they were largely excluded from new intellectual sources from Qing China. Moreover, the conservativeness of the countryside would have contributed to their upholding of the traditional Confucian view of *hwaigwan* and as a result their serious opposition to the Government's opening up policy in the early 1880s.[93]

To summarise, the history of Confucian political ideas in Chosŏn had a certain tendency in

[93] For Ch'oe Han'gi, Pak Kyusu, and Oh Kyŏngsŏk's interest in the new knowledge of the West, see Kwŏn Oyŏng, *Ch'oe Han'gi ŭi hakmun kwa sasang yŏn'gu* [A Study of Choe Han'gi: His Scholarly and Ideological Attitude] (Seoul: Chipmundang, 1999); Son Hyŏngbu, *Pak Kyusu ŭi kaehwa sasang yŏn'gu* [Pak Kyusu's Ideas of the Opening up of Chosŏn] (Seoul: Iljogak, 1997); Shin Yong-ha, "Oh Kyŏngsŏk ŭi kaehwa sasang kwa kaehwa hwaldong" [Oh Kyŏngsŏk: His Ideas and Activities for the Opening up of Chosŏn], *Yŏksa hakbo* 107 (1985), pp. 107–87.

which the first propensity for philosophical ethics was balanced by the scholars' interest in the necessities of the country from the late seventeenth century. In line with this development, Zhu Xi's philosophy began to be relativised from the late eighteenth century, which continued to the first half of the nineteenth century. The intellectual shifts between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century reflected the historical circumstances of each period, yet at the same time, they reflected the two main aspects within the Confucian political ideas. Confucianism as a political philosophy contained in itself the ideas of an ideal society, as well as those of governing a country practically. This duality of idealism and practicality within the Confucian idea system furnished various intellectual shifts in Chosŏn.

On the other hand, the criticism of the Neo-Confucian philosophical themes in late Chosŏn, which was linked with the resurgence of the ideas of political necessity, meant that an aspect of Confucian ideas endowed a resource to overcome the Neo-Confucianism itself. Although the eighteenth-century practical studies (*Sirhak*) were not focused on in this chapter, within *Sirhak* there were sources that could reconstruct Confucianism and even surmount its bounds. From the perspective of 'worldview', the *Sirhak* scholars' vision greatly differed from mid-Chosŏn ethicists' one. If we assume that late nineteenth-century *Kaehwa sasang* is connected to Confucian political thinking in any way, then the eighteenth-century *Sirhak* as the medium between the two thought systems obtains a critical status. In this regard, we will explore some aspects of *Sirhak* in the next chapter.