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Korean women philosophers and the ideal of a female sage: essential writings of Im Yunjidang and Gang Jeongildang, by Philip J. Ivanhoe and Wang Hwa Yeong, New York, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 304, £19.99 (pb), ISBN: 9780197508695

Korean Women Philosophers and the Ideal of a Female Sage explores the lives of two Korean women Confucian scholars of the late Joseon Dynasty, Im Yunjidang (1721–1793) and Gang Jeongildang (1772–1832). The book is part of the *Oxford New Histories of Philosophy* (ONHP) series, which aims to diversify philosophy by shedding light on understudied philosophical figures and their thoughts, including “ideas and works by women, people of color, and movements in philosophy’s past ... [that are] left out of traditional accounts” (ix, Series Editor’s Forward). This book is the only volume in the series that comprehensively meets all these conditions: it introduces the writings of East Asian female philosophers who are deeply devoted to the Confucian ways of contemplative living, which deviate from Western philosophical schools and traditions.

The book significantly expands the available English translations of East Asian philosophical texts, which were predominantly authored by men. Although billed as the ‘Essential Writings’ of Im and Gang, the book offers complete translations and detailed annotations of their surviving writings, which were posthumously collected and published by their respective family members. The part *The Extant Writings of Yunjidang* is the translation of *Yunjidang yugo* (1796), edited by Im’s younger brother; while *The Extant Writings of Jeongildang* translates *Jeongildang yugo* (1836), which Gang’s widower compiled. These collections demonstrate the bereaved families’ desires to preserve the women’s thoughts and attest to the virtuous influence of Im’s and Gang’s Confucian moral practice. Additionally, these compilations suggest that both philosophers valued the act of writing, as it provided them with an open field for moral self-cultivation and theoretical refinement. Thanks to their lifelong practice, we can now read the discourses that Im wrote before her marriage at nineteen and the brief missives that Gang occasionally sent her husband.

Both Im and Gang shared the Confucian aspiration of becoming sages. In the Joseon Dynasty, which was founded on and sustained by Neo-Confucian philosophical and sociopolitical grounds, those in the high gentry (Kr. *yangban* 兩班) class were expected to learn and practice Confucian teachings. They did so not only to pass the civil service examinations for bureaucratic appointments, social recognitions, and family honour but also to maintain the stability of social hierarchy. For Confucians, moral self-cultivation is the primary prerequisite for sociopolitical stability since their virtues enable the ideal of ‘benevolent governing’ (*renzheng* 仁政) that benefits others and helps society to flourish.¹

¹Mengzi advises rulers to provide “benevolent governing” to their people (*Mengzi* 1A5). This ideal of benevolent governing includes establishing the “human roles (ethical principles)” that enables people to

Confucian moral self-cultivation requires endless effort: “Exemplary people (*junzi* 君子) cultivate themselves and bring peace to all people” (*Analects* 14.42). Nonetheless, Confucius acknowledges that even the ancient sages found this continuous moral cultivation and its extension difficult. The sages do not differ from ordinary humans in moral potential, yet they cultivate their virtue incessantly. Because they are the same as sages in terms of human nature, Confucians can become sages by learning what the ancient sages left to posterity. Joseon scholars understood Confucianism as ‘Sage learning’ (Kr. *seonghak* 聖學). To provide sociopolitical remedies for their time, they attempted to teach rulers to become sages while they considered achieving sagehood as the spiritual culmination of their own lives.

One way to achieve moral self-cultivation is to fulfil the human roles and ethical principles that ancient sages instructed people to follow. According to Mengzi, the sage worried about the state of people who are merely satisfied with physical and material comforts, and thus taught them about human roles (*renlun* 人倫), and the (moral) relationships: “affection between father and son, righteousness between ruler and ministers, distinction between husband and wife, precedence between elder and younger, and faithfulness between friends” (*Mengzi* 3A4).² Confucian rituals (*li* 禮), which reflect conventional codes of conduct in society, were developed on the basis of these distinctive human roles. Living in accordance with inherited rituals becomes a practical way to engage in moral self-cultivation. In short, those who follow the Way of Confucius believe that, in theory, everyone has the moral potential to become good, benevolent, and sages, while in practice, each person should abide by their assigned roles and conventional rituals that originate from the distinction of their roles.

This theoretical structure of Confucian self-cultivation, while common to then-dominant men, causes challenges for women. For one, women have the same potential as men do to become sages. Mengzi claims that all humans have the natural potential “to become good”, demonstrated by their possession of “the heart of compassion” (*Mengzi* 6A6, 2A6). Moreover, Neo-Confucianism, which Zhu Xi (1130–1200) established through his synthesis of the works of other Northern Song Confucians, understands human nature as Principle (*li*), a metaphysical ground that supports all individual beings. This viewpoint, commonly called ‘Learning of Nature as Principle’ (Kr. *seonlihak*, 性理學) in Joseon Korea, supposes that both men and women have a nature that is Principle, which is pure and good.

However, as the ancient sages instructed, women are socially distinguished from men. So, in their moral self-cultivation, women are encouraged to abide by this distinction: They should pursue conventional, female roles such as being a daughter (-in-law), wife, mother (-in-law), and household manager, while cultivating corresponding virtues, such as being caring, loyal, and chaste.³ This tension in women’s self-cultivation is reflected in a famous

rise above a state “similar to beasts” (*Mengzi* 3A4). To sustain such governance, rulers must cultivate virtues by “extending” their compassionate hearts toward their people (*Mengzi* 1A7).

²These five human roles (*wulun*) are considered the basic principles of Confucian practical living.

³One notable reference for the Confucian teachings on female virtues and manner is *Nü sishu* (女四書). Reading this book, or Ann Pang-White’s translation of *Nü sishu* (*The Confucian Four Books for Women*),

passage from the *Analects*: to achieve the supreme virtue of humaneness (*ren* 仁) like the sages, one must “overcome the self and return to the rituals (*keji fuli* 克己復禮)” (*Analects* 12.1). From a woman’s perspective, the self to be overcome and the rituals to return to differ from the self that men overcome and the rituals they return to.

In her exposition of this passage in the *Analects*, Im Yunjidang reveals her commitment to negotiating these tensions as a Confucian woman. She claims that while the self is a physical form that beclouds the essence of human nature as Principle, the rituals refer to the highest good that originates from Principle (111). Instead of discussing self-overcoming and rituals in detail, she emphasizes the need for “establishing a commitment and making genuine effort” (113). Only through forging her commitment can she continue to recognize the possibility of transcending the strict limitations from the social identity given to the physical self. This intention of self-tempering is implicitly involved in her reinforced commitment by contrasting her physical self with her social restriction: “Though I am a woman, still, the nature I originally received contained no distinction between male and female. Though I have not been able to learn what An Yeon learned, I earnestly share his commitment to become a sage” (114). Unlike male Confucians, every step she takes toward moral self-cultivation, including learning, must be self-propelled, as it is additional to her role. In this period, women were not praised for their diligent learning, particularly in comparison to the praise they received for fulfilling their traditional roles. If learning was peripheral to women’s expected roles, they might be tempted to abandon their studies when faced with obstacles. Thus, this might explain why Im repeatedly emphasizes self-commitment.

Notwithstanding, Confucian women in Joseon who embraced conventional roles could encounter a unique path to the ideal of achieving humaneness (*ren*). Beyond adhering to rituals, one can cultivate this supreme virtue through deep human relationships and empathetic communication, as Confucius emphasizes that the primary principle of his Way is “empathetic concern (*shu* 恕)” (*Analects* 4.15, 15.24). As Sungmoon Kim points out, Im would regard the family as “a public space”, which is “regulated by the moral principles of righteousness and ritual propriety”, and fulfilled her public roles by following the rituals (Kim, *Im Yunjidang*, 61).⁴ However, her role in such a public yet intimate space allowed her to approach the rituals, such as managing relationships, with deeper empathetic concern and more sincere sentiments, bringing her closer to the realization of humaneness through a profound understanding of humanity.

I believe that both Im and Gang exemplified this possibility of achieving humaneness. They prioritized caring for their family members and thereby built strong, individual connections that were based on mutual understanding rather than on hierarchical conventions. They became supervisors and teachers within their families, as demonstrated by the impressive missives (Kr. *cheokdok*, 尺牘) that

would benefit scholars and students who want to reconstruct their understanding of Confucianism from a feminine point of view.

⁴Sungmoon Kim (*Im Yunjidang*) offers a brief but profound introduction to the philosophy of Im Yunjidang.

Gang sent to her husband. She virtuously admonishes his wrongdoings, such as reprimanding others too harshly, and urges him to extend his love to their adopted son. She also encouraged her husband to lead a dignified life: "I want you, my husband, to work at real virtue. Do not be ashamed beneath heaven; do not be mortified upon the earth; do not be distressed whether people know or do not know" (200). By guiding others in moral practice through sympathetic understanding, both philosophers exemplified Confucian moral life.

As the translators note, the writings of these two female philosophers are "of great value" as research and instructional sources of traditional literary Chinese composition in Joseon because the writings provide historical and anthropological insights into women's lives in the late Joseon period and female perspectives on Neo-Confucian philosophy (2). The clear translations allow readers to access the thoughts of Korean female philosophers with minimal effort, even when encountering many proper names in Chinese characters. Since each composition is brief and independent, instructors can assign a few sections to students to enrich their experience and understanding of the eighteenth-century Korean female thinkers. For philosophers, this book is a valuable resource for cross-cultural studies, especially when paired with the 'essential writings' of Margaret Cavendish (*Margaret Cavendish*) and Mary Ann Shadd Cary (*Mary Ann Shadd Cary*), which are also published in the *Oxford New Histories of Philosophy* series.

Nonetheless, the book's pedagogical potential would have been enhanced if there were more guidance about the philosophical significance of the two female philosophers. Although the Introduction offers a philosophical overview of Im's and Gang's views (11–32), it primarily provides a sequential explanation of their writings, moving from Im's biographies and discourses to Gang's letters and missives. Though the authors analyze and classify the themes and topics in the two philosophers' writings, first-time readers of Neo-Confucian philosophy would benefit from a more general discussion about Neo-Confucianism and Confucian feminism in order to better understand the philosophical significance of the two women at this moment. Moreover, the sequential explanation of the Introduction sometimes seems repetitive, since most of Im Yunjidang's writings are accompanied by summaries.

The translators note that the book includes the writings of only two female thinkers and excludes the male voices present in the two *Extant Writings*. I think that including or introducing the male editors' and commentators' prefaces and appendices would have provided a useful contrast between female and male perspectives. Readers could then better understand the conventional restrictions ingrained in the minds of ordinary men. For instance, Im's elder brother, a renowned Confucian scholar who cared very much for his wise sister, gave her the pen name 'Yunjidang' from Zhu Xi's line "completely devoted to Tae Sa (C. Tai Si) 太姒 and Tae Im (C. Tai Ren) 太任" (4). This naming reflects the traditional Confucian understanding of individuals based on 'distinction', as the two figures are recognized as female sages because they represent exemplary wives of the ancient sage-kings.

Im and Gang, as Neo-Confucian thinkers, believed they share the original nature of universal Principle, which does not distinguish between male and female. They,

as particular individuals, were nonetheless identified within the Confucian framework of distinction. This inherent contrast between universal sameness and particular distinctions is not necessarily unique to Confucianism—it is a tension we all experience in our everyday lives. The poignant writings of Im and Gang, which reflect their relentless effort to break through their restricted lives, suggest that it is better to focus on the universal potential of human beings and to achieve intellectual and moral excellence than simply reinforcing our particular and conventional distinctions over others.

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