Confucian Perspectives on Egalitarian Thought in Traditional Korea

Seung B. Kye

What roles did Confucian ideas and ruling mechanisms play in germinating and developing egalitarian thought in Korean history? Was Confucianism a great contribution or a critical obstacle? Or, did it take a neutral stance? Do those two ideologies, Confucianism and egalitarianism, mutually support each other in contemporary Korean society, or are they incompatible with each other? In order to understand the transition of Korean society from traditional to ‘modern’ as continuous rather than discontinuous, these questions are worth discussing not only because Confucian modes of social behavior still remain strong among the Koreans, but also because egalitarianism is one of the universal values for which humanity must continue to march.

Since the late nineteenth century when Korea’s vulnerability to imperialist powers became readily apparent, Korean views of Confucianism have broken somewhat into two different sets of evaluation. While some put the blame on Confucianism for the setback of Korean civilization and its reduction to a colony, others valued Confucianism as the spiritual prop of the Koreans and an important part of their cultural identity. In a broader sense, on the other hand, studies emphasizing Confucian heritage as a common factor of the economic success of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong

* HK Research Professor, Institute of Korean Culture, Korea University
Kong, and Singapore had appealed to many scholars during the Cold War, and China was added after the war. Another study aimed at creating an Eastern model of democracy has also been booming since the turn of the 1990s, by attempting to emphasize and extract democratic or egalitarian strands from Confucianism. Because egalitarianism is essential to democracy, a more thorough examination is needed: whether egalitarian strands are really immanent in Confucianism or not, and how such strands, if immanent, functioned in traditional Korean society.

The definition of Confucianism varies, and was indeed applied to the reality differently depending on the politico-intellectual trends of each period and the interests of each political group or faction. By Confucianism in this paper, I will be referring to ‘Korean Confucianism,’ which had flourished in the late Chosŏn Dynasty since 1600, drawing primarily on the works of Zhu Xi (1130-1270) of the Chinese Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) concerning the universe, human nature, and the meaning of the Classics, with emphasis on its sociopolitical aspects. The meaning of egalitarianism may also vary. It is generally defined as a “belief that all people are of equal worth and should be treated equally in society.” As a sociopolitical ideology, however, encompassing the idea of equality of all individuals in political, social, and economic affairs, the historical origin of egalitarianism cannot be traced back further than the Reformation and the spread of Protestantism and the law of nature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this paper on traditional Korea, therefore, I will use the term ‘egalitarian strands,’ rather than ‘egalitarianism’ per se, in order to inhibit misunderstanding.

I will first examine the statuses of secondary sons and slaves, the classes most discriminated against under the hereditary status system in ‘Confucian’ Korean society, with emphasis on the role of Confucianism in justifying such discriminatory practices. I will also look at the innate nature of Confucianism, which consequently provided theoretic foundations for Korean elites who wanted to discriminate against secondary sons and slaves, focusing on the Confucian ideas of ye (禮), which means propriety, and myŏngbun (名分), which means distinction between statuses. This
paper, I hope, will help better the understanding of how and why Confucianism served as an obstacle to the germination of egalitarian thought in traditional Korea.

**Confucianization: A Discriminatory Trend against Secondary Sons**

The secondary son (sŏŏl 庶孽) had never been a social issue in Koryŏ (918-1392), a pre-Confucian society, because Koryŏ was a polygamous society in which men were legally allowed to take up to four wives. In contrast, Chosŏn (1392-1910), well-known as a Confucian society to the core, was legally a ‘monogamous’ society in which all secondary wives and their sons were classified as concubines and secondary sons, and thus deprived of as the rights enjoyed by primary wives and sons. This law was enacted in 1413 and spread its roots, sending forth its branches within Korea through various civil suits throughout the fifteenth century. As a result, this trend had an adverse affect on the social status of secondary sons, and in 1471 they were eventually prohibited from taking the civil service examinations by the National Code.

Harsh discrimination against secondary sons, one of the characteristics of the Korean version of Confucian society, was a combined product of the ‘monogamous’ law and the hereditary social status system. Under the new law, naturally enough, the yangban never wanted to marry off his daughters as concubines, with the consequence that concubines were usually supplied from non-elite strata such as commoners and slaves. As a result, the secondary son had a defect in his matrilineage, and this served as the critical factor preventing him from inheriting his father’s yangban status. In Korea, in which matrilineage was as important as patrilineage, indeed, the concubine who came from a non-elite family could not give her son yangban status. Only yangban women could bestow the yangban qualification upon their children. The discrimination against secondary sons, therefore, was closely related to the social status system based on the distinction between noble and base as well as the monogamous law
itself. For this reason, the discrimination against secondary sons would be at issue unless the hereditary status system was abolished and concubinage was prohibited by law.

So then, to what extent was Confucianism involved in justifying such discrimination against secondary sons? The key source for the standardization (Confucianization) of family regulations was *Family Rituals* (*Karye* 家禮, *Jia li* in Ch.), written by Zhu Xi and his disciples. In general, the founders of the Chosŏn Dynasty were eager to spread copies of *Family Rituals* in the early phase of the dynasty, and *Family Rituals* indeed served as a national handbook to regulate human relations in the family as well as family rituals throughout the 500-year dynasty. One of the principles emphasized in *Family Rituals*, not expressly stipulated though, was monogamy. The hierarchical order and various statuses in a family were determined by the combination of the monogamous and patrilineal principles, along with filial piety. Under this principle, few seats were reserved for concubines and their children in family rituals, even though a husband often lived together with his wife and concubine in the same residence. This discrepancy between the polygamous reality and the monogamous law resulted in harsh discrimination against concubines.

The proponents of the strict discrimination between wife and concubine contended that discrimination against concubines was essential to enhance great moral laws (*taeryun* 大倫) and rectify the laws of family (*kado* 家道), citing some cases from *The Spring and Autumn Annals*: Confucius’s admonishing criticism of Huigong for his taking the new wife from his concubines and Confucius’s applause of Xuangong of the Qi state for his oath not to select his wife from concubines. That is, the Confucian scholar-officials of Korea based their argument for strict discrimination between wife and concubine on Confucian values such as morality and family laws. Discrimination against concubines, needless to say, was transferred to their offspring; for example, the ineligibility for civil service examinations.

This new, warranted discrimination against secondary sons, however, was always at issue because in Koryŏ, as well as contemporary Ming
China, there were no legal restrictions on the eligibility of the secondary sons for the examinations and appointment to government posts. The new provision, therefore, was not always observed as stipulated. In the mid-sixteenth century, as an ad hoc compromise, grandsons of a secondary son born of a commoner concubine and great-grandsons of a secondary son born of a base concubine were allowed to sit for the exam.

Why did the Chosŏn government not enforce the provision strictly and sometimes give secondary sons and their children permission to sit for the exam and to hold government posts upon passing? The situation, in which the state was in dire need of grains and human resources to wage a war against the Japanese in the late sixteenth century, served as the main factor to the relaxing of restrictions on secondary sons. Now, if a secondary son donated a certain amount of grains to the state, or if he distinguished himself in battlefield, he would become eligible for exam. During the war (1592-98), indeed, any secondary sons who donated a certain amount of grains were granted the right to sit for exam, as were his children. In addition, the kings in the eighteenth century such as Yŏngjo (r. 1724-76) and Chŏngjo (r. 1776-1800), who wanted to secure and strengthen royal authority, appointed many talented secondary sons to the government posts with intent to hold powerful yangban family members in his court in check. The growing population of secondary sons, whose numbers were by no means negligible in late Chosŏn and who had already formed a social class, also served as social pressure.

So then, what about the role of Confucianism? To what extent was Confucianism conducive to this trend of relaxing the discrimination against secondary sons in political affairs? The following is the most representative appeal by a renowned official, Ch’oe Myŏnggil (1586-1647), for the secondary sons, which manifested the idea of ‘equality’ immanent in Confucianism.

“The law of propriety was not strictly enforced in China in antiquity. Discrimination between the sons by wife and concubine was only put in effect in families, not in force in
court. The distinction of lineage and province was not detailed in the court of six ministries: when one was to be appointed, he was only asked about his father’s family name, not about mother’s family. When heaven and earth beget talent, in general, they do not discriminate between noble and base. When the (moral) king employs subjects, he disregards their family affiliations and home provinces. This is a natural principle of heaven, the very one that many kings did not change. …”¹⁷

The underlined Confucian saying, however, should not be simply understood as an idea of human equality because it only talks about ‘talent,’ not ‘humanity’ per se. That heaven produces talent and that heaven begets men are not identical but two different propositions. In other words, one’s level of talent is not correlated to whether one is noble or base: the issue of hŏt’ong (許通 allowed to sit for exam and, upon passing, to be appointed to government posts) is one thing and the issue of human equality is another.¹⁸

Even the hŏt’ong itself, such as by grain donation or military merit, was enforced on a conditional basis, not on an equal basis: sons by base concubines were even more discriminated against than sons by commoner concubines. The idea that hŏt’ong and myŏngbun (discrimination between statuses, between primary and secondary sons in this case) were two different things was even reflected in the Act of 1777 (Chŏngyu chŏlmok丁酉節目), by which almost all government posts were eventually opened to secondary sons: it was stipulated that the office-holding secondary son who demolished myŏngbun, by looking down on his half-brother, primary son, holding no office, was to be severely punished. (CWS Chŏngjo 1.3.21)

Throughout the Chosŏn period, many well-known officials advocated hŏt’ong, such as Cho Kwangjo (1482-1519), Yi I (1536-84), Ch’oe Myŏnggil (1586-1647), and Song Siyŏl (1607-89).¹⁹ None of them, however, mentioned ‘equality’ to strengthen their argument for hŏt’ong. They only stressed that there should not be discrimination between noble
and base in recruiting men of ability, suggesting that they had no idea of human equality concerning the issue of secondary sons. The memorial of Yi Hwang (1501-70), a Korean ‘sage’ who opposed hŏt’ong, more clarifies this point.

“… There are two difficult points in amending this (discriminatory) law (against secondary sons). … The other is that taebang (大防) should not be demolished suddenly. … The so-called taebang means discrimination between primary and secondary sons and the hierarchy between noble and base. Thanks to this taebang, the state and family can be based on sound foundations, and the low and the base do not dare to throw contempt on the high and the noble. If this taebang were demolished, secondary sons would harass primary sons, and the low and the mean would look down on the high and the noble. How can (we) rashly amend (this law of propriety)? … If the state takes the lead in demolishing the taebang and incite (the people to do) so, what would be the end (of such an action)? …

In our country the talented occasionally comes from secondary sons, but it is only one out of one thousands or hundreds. Rather, rogues have always come from secondary sons. How can (we) rashly demolish the taebang, which has been transmitted from antiquity? …”

The main point of Yi Hwang is that since the distinction between primary and secondary sons and between noble and base are essential to the law of propriety, by which the state and the family are maintained firmly, the state must not eliminate the essence. In other words, Yi placed much more emphasis on social order based on the Confucian law of propriety than obtaining a couple of men of ability from the stratum of secondary sons. Many other scholar-officials also opposed hŏt’ong for the same reason throughout the dynasty.

It was nevertheless a tendency in the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries that restrictions on secondary sons were gradually relaxed in political affairs, as examined. Despite full support from the throne, however, hŏt’ong was not realized completely because the idea of myŏngbun was still predominant among yangban circles. Within the family, ironically enough, discrimination against secondary sons was rather getting more severe.21

In short, Confucianism played a main role in discriminating against secondary sons and providing an ideological foundation, whether it was a self-serving interpretation or not.22 In the course of debate on the issue of hŏt’ong, in general, Korean Confucianists kept silent or rather prevented it. It will be fair, therefore, to conclude that when it comes to the matter of discrimination between primary and secondary sons, Korean Confucianism disseminated anti-egalitarian thought and warranted harsh discrimination against secondary sons.

Not very surprisingly, the secondary sons themselves did not develop their discontent with the discrimination against themselves into a new idea of human equality, but were only interested in achieving yangban status. The fact that they also possessed slaves clearly suggests that their ‘movement’ for the abolition of legal and social restrictions on themselves had nothing to do with the concept of human equality. Indeed, the idea of human equality is not found from any memorials proposed by secondary sons, collected in Kyusa (葵史  History of sunflowers), compiled with the intent to incite the abolition of restrictions on secondary sons. Their main argument was that since the secondary son inherited his father’s blood anyway, he deserved to inherit his father’s yangban status as well.23 Interestingly, this patrilineal principle was emphasized and established by Neo-Confucian scholars. This suggests that the Korean secondary sons were not very interested in developing their own idea of human equality but in borrowing the Confucian authority to promote themselves to the status of yangban. In other words, even the very parties (secondary sons) to the suit, let alone the defendants, had no concept of human equality.
Korean Slavery and Confucian Pharisees

How about Confucian views on slavery? There has been a long debate on the nature of Korean slavery, but I will confine my discussion here to legalized slavery as a system. The origin of Korean slavery can be traced back to the body of law of Old Chosŏn (?-196 B.C.): It was then enforced as a punishment for crime, and seems not to have been hereditary. The slave population is believed to have remained about ten percent of the whole population or less until early Koryŏ in the eleventh century. From the thirteenth century onward, however, specifically under the situation in which the preexisting state systems had been destroyed by military rule and Mongol interference, the slave population steadily increased, with the result that it reached about thirty percent in the next century.

Interestingly enough, this period is also famous for the introduction of Neo-Confucianism to Korean society. The concurrence of these two phenomena, an increase in the number of slaves and the spread of Neo-Confucianism, suggests that the Confucian scholars generally kept silent about the issue of the increasing slave population, despite their harsh and systematic criticism of the reality of the time, and rather warranted it. Even Chŏng Tojŏn (1347-1398), the de facto organizer of the new Chosŏn dynasty and the most ardent preacher of the equal-field system, the most ‘egalitarian’ land distribution system in the Northern Wei and the early Tang (400s-800s), was not very radical in dealing with the issue of slavery. He himself, a first-rank merit subject, was a large slaveholder. This attitude of Confucian scholar-officials toward slavery betokens that slavery as a system would remain intact and stable in the Chosŏn dynasty founded by ‘Confucian devotees.’

The founders of the Chosŏn dynasty indeed made no serious effort to reduce the slave population, but rather tried to strengthen slavery. To justify such a stance, they laid high emphasis on the usefulness of slavery as punishment, the long tradition of Korean slavery, and the necessity of slavery to maintain social order based on the principle of myŏngbun. Here we need to pay close attention to myŏngbun because it is the core
concept indispensable to the Confucian view of human relationships.

For the meaning of *myŏngbun*, Kim Sisŭp (1434-93) expounded it as follows:

“...What does *myŏng* mean? It refers to the son of heaven, lords, court nobles, scholars, and commons. What is called *bun* (*pun*)? It means distinction between the upper and the lower, the high and the low, and the noble and the mean. There has already been a distinction of status, but if there were no law of propriety to observe it, law and order would not be maintained of its own accord, and the distinction of status would simply be a futile substance and be unable to keep control. For this reason, the son of heaven is to control lords; lords are to control court nobles; court nobles are to govern scholars and commons. The noble is to master the base, and the base is to follow the noble. As the head and eyes handle hands and feet, so the upper orders the lower. As twigs and leaves guard the stem and root, so the lower is to serve the upper. After that, the upper and the lower would help each other, and means and ends would support each other. If a country is founded based on this (principle), it would be governed of itself. If a house is built based on this, it would be managed by itself. For this reason, lord is to be lord, subject is to be subject, father is to be father, son is to be son, husband is to be husband, wife is to be wife, elder is to be elder, and younger is to be younger. So then, orders would go on smoothly...”

That is, Kim defined *myŏngbun* as strict distinction between the upper and the lower, the high and the low, and the noble and the mean, and explained it as the very principle indispensable to govern a state and manage a family. This concept of *myŏngbun* garnered full support from the yangban stratum throughout the dynasty, and served as an ideological justification of slavery. Almost all scholar-officials, from powerful merit
subjects to Confucian ‘sages,’ relied on this concept of *myŏngbun* to justify discrimination against secondary sons and slaves.

Distinctions between primary and secondary sons and between masters and slaves, however, were not included in the original version of the Three Bonds and the Five Moral Rules (*Samgang oryun* 三綱五倫) in human relations, not in Kim’s treatise examined above, either. As slave owners, nevertheless, Korean Confucian scholars and officials identified the obligations of slaves to their masters with the obligations of subjects to the throne, and added the master-slave relationship to the original version of the Three Bonds. This expansive and self-serving reinterpretation of the Three Bonds was not very surprising because most powerful families of the Koryŏ dynasty were carried over into the new Chosŏn dynasty without losing any slaves.

In addition to this arbitrary justification, the Confucian scholars and officials made various efforts to increase their slaveholdings. In case of conflict between Korean tradition and Confucian values, they did not hesitate to make self-serving decisions from the standpoint of slaveholders. The enactment of the matrilineal succession law in combination with the patrilineal principle was the case for this arbitrary decision-making: slave status was inherited by children even if only one of the parents were a slave. This ‘mixed’ law of matrimony and patrimony had already been put in force in the year of 1300, and contributed to a remarkable increase in the number of slaves in the late Koryŏ period. The founders of the Chosŏn dynasty might have believed that the proportion of slaves in society was too large and had to be cut back to some degree, and some of them indeed argued for the adoption of the patrilineal succession rule in case of mixed marriages. The object, however, was neither abolition nor major reduction of the slave population, but a freezing of the status quo. For this reason, although the patrilineal rule was adopted in 1414, it soon became a dead law. In 1471, rather, the mixed law was restored and stipulated eventually in the National Code.

This mixed law based on the matrilineal succession rule, however, ran counter to the patrilineal principle of Neo-Confucianism. The absolute
majority of Korean Confucianists nevertheless supported the matrilineal rule on the pretext of two reasons: If the patrimony was adopted, it would be very difficult to recognize the real father of the offspring of female slaves because of their promiscuous intercourse, and it would be followed by a serious decrease in the number of slaves. Furthermore, as examined, they made an exceptional rule pertaining to the matrilineal law: in the case of mixed marriage between a male slave and a female commoner, their children were to inherit father’s slave status. Some Confucian fundamentalists criticized it for its violation of the Confucian principle of patrimony and argued for the adoption of patrilineal principle, but could not draw any support despite their reputation among intellectual circles. In other words, the Korean Confucianists, as slaveholders, enacted the law that would only satisfy themselves. They never hesitated to ignore Confucian principles that they thought would infringe on their vested rights as slaveholders on some pretext or other. They even emphasized that slavery was necessary to maintain social order based on the theory of myŏngbun.

This kind of interpretation, however, was nothing more than a self-serving and farfetched one. Following is one of such cases.

“… The slavery of our country is different from that of China. In fact, our country owes its good customs and manners and the sense of honor to this (slavery). …”

This argument employed a logic that strict distinction between noble and base must be maintained in order to promote propriety (yeŭi 禮義) and cultivate the sense of honor (yŏmch’ı 廉恥). In other words, Korean Confucians borrowed those two Confucian values to argue for the necessity of slavery. They kept silent, however, about the questions that could ensue: How Confucius and Mencius, who seem to have possessed no slaves, could put their own teachings of propriety and the sense of honor in practice, and how the Confucian scholars of contemporary Ming China could be cultivating themselves with few slaves. It is easy to find
these kinds of self-serving interpretations of Confucian principles from primary sources such as the dynastic annals. The logic that Yi Hwang employed to justify discrimination against secondary sons, as examined above, can also be placed under this category of self-serving interpretation.

Anyhow, an increase in the number of slaves was a natural outcome under the mixed law of matrimony and patrimony. Slaveholders indeed did their best to have their slaves marry or have intercourse with commoners to obtain more slaves. The heads of peasant families in poverty married off their daughters to male slaves to reduce mouths to feed. Male adults in poverty had little option but to marry themselves to female slaves.\textsuperscript{35} Several cases were reported in which powerful slaveholders even forced female commoners to marry their male slaves.\textsuperscript{36} Some commoners in poverty went so far as to conduct themselves into slavery because of debt and heavy taxation. As a result, the Chosŏn government had been seriously losing its tax basis, the commoner population responsible for various taxes and services, already in the early sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{37} The two major wars against the Japanese (1592-1598) and the Manchus (1636-37), made the situation much worse. Now the government had no choice but to resort to an expedient to increase the commoner population, not because of Confucian idea of benevolence: the abolition of the mixed law of matrimony and patrimony and the adoption of matrilineal rule only in 1731 after a series of debates for about four decades.\textsuperscript{38}

The proportion of slaves to the whole population began to drop in the mid-eighteenth century, and this tendency went on into the nineteenth century. In 1801, official slaves owned by the government offices in the capital city were all manumitted, and in 1886, hereditary slavery was abolished. Slavery itself, however, continued to exist until the Reform of 1894\textsuperscript{39} carried out by reform-oriented pro-Japanese progressives under the situation in which the Japanese troops were stationed in Seoul. This timing of the abolition of slavery is very suggestive because it was abolished together with the civil service examination system aimed at recruiting men of ability versed in Confucian Classics. That is, Korean
slavery in the Chosŏn dynasty shared its lifetime exactly with that of Confucianism as the state ideology. This strongly suggests that Korean Confucianists made little or no contribution toward abolishing slavery: they rather took it for granted.

Korean Confucianism, in fact, did not play a role in the slow decline of slavery, which started in the late eighteenth century. Existing studies point out several motives to the decline of slavery such as running away, weakening of the government control over official slaves, social changes resulted from the improvement of agricultural productivity and the growth of commerce and handicraft, adoption of the matrilineal law in 1731, and indistinctive distinctions between commoners and slaves resulting from slaves’ share in military service and tribute tax. None of these studies hesitate to explain ‘running away’ as the primary reason for the decline of slavery. In short, the manumission was an unavoidable outcome produced by the disintegration of traditional order and an impetus from the outside: Confucianism had no part with this.

Even Confucian reformists who had sympathy for slaves’ misery and criticized hereditary slavery were never radical in abolishing it. In his systematic criticism of slavery, Yu Hyŏngwŏn (1622-1673), the most ardent critic to hereditary slavery, wrote as follows:

“Slaves in our country are treated as chattel these days. Now people are of the same type category, how could there be a principle in which one person possesses another person as his chattel?”

Yu seems to have articulated a principle of human equality. By his universal principle that “all men are the same,” however, he meant neither equal shares in the social compact nor possessors of equal rights in the political community, all of which are essential to the concept of egalitarianism. He rather meant that all men shared a common humanity that separated them from animals or chattel. In the same treatise, indeed, Yu revealed his cognizance that discrimination between noble and base
was universal rationality, by writing,

“In the world, in general, there are naturally both noble and base people. The noble employs the base, and the base is employed by the noble. This is an unchanging principle and an unchanging situation as well.”

This cognizance must have prevented him from going further to argue for the immediate and complete abolition of slavery.

Other renowned Confucian reformists such as Yi Ik (1681-1763) and Yu Suwŏn (1697-1755) also argued for the abolition of hereditary slavery and the prohibition of slave trade, but their sympathies for the sufferings of slaves did not encompass a desire for the abolition of slavery or elimination of status-based society, suggesting that they did not have an egalitarian view of slaves. Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836), the most well-known reformist, even harshly criticized the manumission of the official slaves possessed by the central government in 1801. He even warned that if the slavery was not restored, national discipline would be demolished and the distinction between high and low would fall into disorder. This conservative attitude of Confucian reformists toward slavery is closely related to the fact that none of them argued for the total abolition of the status system. Even Pak Chiwŏn (1737-1805), the most ardent critic of the yangban, did not argue for the abolition of the yangban status system, but its reform.

In sum, the Korean Confucianists, whether conservatives or reformists, regarded myŏngbun as a law of nature. In one sense, they admitted that every person was born a child of heaven and earth. As a member of a society as an organic body, in another sense, they emphasized that each person was endowed with a role to play in society by heaven according to his or her position: the lord should act like a lord, a subject like a subject, a father like a father, and a son like a son. Kim Sisŭp’s treatise on myŏngbun, examined above, expounds this clearly. This idea of myŏngbun was expansively applied to the relations between master and slave. For
this reason, they felt no guilt about slavery. Even though a tiny number of conscientious Confucianists had humanitarian sympathies or compassion (ch’ügūn chi sim 惠隱之心) for the misery of slaves, whenever they saw slavery as a system to maintain social order, they always relied on the theory of myŏngbun to justify it. In doing so, they did not hesitate to draw self-serving interpretations. Now, therefore, we have little option but to draw a conclusion that with respect to the germination of egalitarian thought, Korean Confucianism served as eradicator, not fertilizer. In traditional Korea, for this reason, ‘humanistic’ strands immanent in Confucianism should not be simply correlated with ‘egalitarian’ ideas.

**The Nature of Confucianism: New Order for the Old Order**

What historical nature of Confucianism enabled Korean Confucianists to put a self-serving construction on the idea of myŏngbun and the law of propriety on the pretext of maintaining social order? Why was the ‘order’ so important to Confucianists? To better understand the historical and social origins of Confucianism, we should first examine the situation in which Confucius lived and developed his ideas and the supreme goals he wanted to achieve. In fact, we should not ignore the sociopolitical situation in which an idea took shape and spread.

Confucius (551-479 B.C.) lived in the so-called Spring and Autumn period (6th-5th centuries B.C.), whose name is a direct quote from the title of one of his favorite books, Chun qiu, which means spring and autumn. This is the earliest chronicle in Chinese history written by Confucius. The eventual success of Confucian ideas also owed much to Mencius (ca. 370-ca. 300 B.C.), who flourished in the period of warring states (4th-3rd centuries B.C.). The times of Confucius and Mencius can be characterized as an age of ‘chaos,’ in which powerful vassal lords took independent stances from the central authority of Zhou China (1027-256 B.C.) and competed with each other in a changing series of alliances, intrigues, and open wars. In this course, the authority and social order of the Zhou
disintegrated, and all the problems were settled by force.

In this situation, naturally, one of the popular questions among intellectual circles was how to cure the social pathology that drove people to only benefit themselves and how to restore ‘good’ order and tradition. Confucius’s answer to this question was that each person should conduct himself or herself properly according to his or her position in society. This thought eventually developed into Confucianism’s rationale for organizing society beginning with the cosmic order and descending into a hierarchy of superior-inferior relationships. For example, heaven was superior to earth even though they were in harmony. Likewise, parents were superior to their children, ruler to subject, husband to wife, and elder to younger. According to Confucians, this hierarchy was a sort of ‘good’ initiated by heaven from the genesis of the world. Each person thus had a role to perform within the group or society to which he or she belonged. These expectations defined by authority guided the individual’s conduct along lines of proper ceremonial behavior. In other words, Confucius wanted to reaffirm and conserve the traditional order and polity. That is why he praised King Yao and King Shun in the legendary period as the model kings all later kings should emulate. And that is why he viewed early Zhou society as a utopia. In a sense, however, the so-called ‘order’ or one’s ‘position’ Confucius talked about was no more than the social stratification of early Zhou China, even though he laid more emphasis on benevolence on the part of the ruler.

On the other hand, however, the times of Confucius and Mencius can also be understood as a period of the inevitable disintegration of a kingdom (the Zhou) being based on Bronze civilization because it failed to adapt itself to new circumstances caused by the new iron civilization. That is, their times can be understood as a period of vigorous advancement of Chinese civilization. Confucians, however, never took up a positive attitude toward this trend of ‘progress’ but saw it as evil, with the consequence that they struggled themselves to put everything back in its place where it was. They were thus reactionaries. In short, Confucius and Mencius saw their times as a period of chaotic disintegration of the
Zhou order, and preached on how to restore it by means of ‘proper’ human relationships. For this reason, Confucianism was born conservative to seek a new order, yet for the old order.\textsuperscript{47}

We can find the same nature from Neo-Confucianism developed by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) of the Southern Song (1127-1279)\textsuperscript{48} because Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism with respect to his views of universal, world, and social order were influenced by the situation of the twelfth century in which he was born. The times of Zhu Xi can be characterized as an age in which the conflict between the ‘traditions’ inherited from the past, also enshrined in the Confucian Classics, was heightened by the complexity of internal and external problems.\textsuperscript{49} Specifically, it was an age of ‘crisis’ in Chinese subjectivity and ethnic superiority.

Chinese Confucianism was being ‘challenged’ by the Jurchen emperors in the north. To govern the expansive land in North China as a minority, the Jurchen emperors applied the existing Confucian concept of the mandate of heaven to themselves to buttress their legitimacy vis-à-vis the Southern Song, by expanding the concept of the mandate of heaven to non-Chinese peoples, which by the early 900s had been reserved exclusively for the Han Chinese. Now, Confucianism was no longer Chinese thought. Heaven would not discriminate between Chinese and non-Chinese. Heaven would install anyone who would perform his role properly according to Heaven’s will as its Son: the legitimacy of the Song dynasty was indeed transmitted to the Jurchen Jin, not to the Southern Song. In other words, China’s original Confucian values could be promoted by non-Chinese rulers.\textsuperscript{50} This kind of universal Confucianism laid foundations for other instances of foreign rule over China, such as the Mongol rule (1234-1369) and the Manchu rule (1644-1911).

In this situation, naturally enough, one of the questions among intellectual circles in South China was how to understand this ‘upside-down’ reality, in which the former ‘Son of Heaven’ had to pay a huge amount of tributes to the new ‘barbaric’ Son of Heaven, and the ‘civilized’ Chinese had to live under ‘barbarian’ dominance. To this Zhu Xi provided an answer, by relating his dualistic \textit{li-qi} theory to the international
situation of the time. Propriety as the cultural identity of the Chinese people, according to him, was correlated with *li*, the general principle essential to every being in the universe, a universal and immutable element not dominated by physical force or circumstances. Meanwhile, barbarian domination was *qi*, the physical function or energy, which is changeable. In his saying “The big fruit cannot be eaten,” no doubt the ‘big fruit,’ indicating the general principle, was a metaphor for the Chinese civilization. Therefore, barbarian domination should be a temporary phenomenon and would change eventually, suggesting that regardless of the international reality, the Chinese entity would be eternal. This interpretation was somewhat convincing, but it was nothing but a kind of self-justification of reduced Chinese power and an effort to restore Chinese order in the metaphysical sphere, despite having already been destroyed in reality.

Also, Zhu Xi’s theory of ‘one principle with many manifestations’ (*li-i fen-shu* 理一分殊) helped him support the existing social hierarchy. According to Zhu Xi, the idea that ‘a principle is one but its manifestations are many’ means that there is one general principle governing all the specific principles, and all the principles come together to make up the one general principle. In this sense, mankind, grass, trees, birds, and animals with all their different manifestations are derived from one origin; in this is found their identification with one another: they share the same origin, the same one principle. Yet at the same time they differ from one another in their manifestations, the difference lying in that each has its particular share of the principle and specific qualities. Now, Zhu Xi applied this theory to humanity: the general principle (*li-i*) was replaced with human nature, and the various manifestations (*fen-shu*) with specific individuality. To him, the manifestations were the distinctions between statuses in family and social hierarchy. In other words, all human beings were born with the same principle or nature, but they were influenced by different material forces or emotions, and it resulted in different personalities, positions or statuses. In a sense, therefore, this kind of interpretation prevented Zhu Xi from being critical towards the existing
social hierarchy. Rather, he strengthened it.

In fact, Zhu Xi strengthened Confucian ethics, including existing hierarchical relationships between lord and subject, father and son, husband and wife, and elder and younger. He also emphasized distinction between statuses (ming fen 名分) and applied it more broadly to the master-servant and wife-concubine relationships. Based on the extant yet fragmented ancient rituals, his *Family Rituals* was indeed designed to standardize various human relationships in a family in the name of propriety as a part of his effort to restore the Confucian legitimacy and eliminate heterodoxy.54

His view of slaves was also discriminatory against them. On homicide, for example, he commented that although murder is felony, murder of a slave should not be placed under the same category.55 To him, murder of a ‘person’ (sha ren 殺人) and murder of a ‘slave’ (sha nu bei 殺奴婢) were two different crimes. Although his view of human nature was based ontologically on universalism in which all human beings were believed to have the same nature and thus could be civilized by education,56 Zhu Xi must have thought that slaves deserved discrimination.

In short, similarities between Confucius and Zhu Xi can be found from their views of their times and their efforts to establish new orders for the old orders. Both of them were very critical to the reality of their times. They were thus innovative yet fixated on the past. They needed to present standards and canons for the proper order, in which the so-called proper conduct was standardized based on one’s place in the hierarchy of his or her family, community, and society in the name of the law of propriety. Frankly speaking, however, the so-called order and one’s position Confucius and Zhu Xi talked about were social statuses. In fact, the Confucian concept of distinction (yubyŏl 有別) meant not only functional differences between persons in their roles in a society but also discrimination between their inborn statuses.
An Aspect of Korean Confucianism in Late Chosŏn

Naturally enough, Korean Confucianism, which inherited this characteristic of Neo-Confucianism, emphasized social order and *myŏngbun* from the beginning and took root in the Korean grounds for criticizing ‘disorder’ in late Koryŏ that resulted from military rule, Mongol interference, and the corruption of secularized Buddhism. The Chosŏn dynasty was indeed founded by those Confucian ideologues, portending that the hereditary social status system would remain intact or might be even strengthened in the name of propriety and *myŏngbun*. It is not strange, therefore, that in the mid-sixteenth century, when the new social order centering Confucian scholars on top was at its final stage, the two top savants of Korean Confucianism, Yi Hwang (1501-70) and Yi I (1536-84), harshly criticized Wang Yangming (1472-1529), whose teaching they thought had the potential to undermine social and intellectual hierarchy, and even regarded him as a heretic.57

This conservative and orthodox trend was seriously affected by the Korean compromise with the Manchus in the early seventeenth century. When Chosŏn surrendered to the Manchus in 1637, suzerain-tributary relations between the Ming and Chosŏn came to an end, and the Qing became the new suzerain. The Korean Confucianists, however, could not accept this reality because of their moral obligation to Ming China: since the early sixteenth century, there had been a growing belief among yangban society that the relations between the Ming and Chosŏn had now turned into a father-son relationship. In the fifteenth century, *sadae* (事大), which literally means serving a bigger state, inferred a sort of utilitarian and contractual relation with the Ming, implying that the suzerain state could be replaced anytime depending on the situation. With the spread of Neo-Confucian moral values and the Ming-centric world view in the early sixteenth century, however, this concept began to change to unconditional relations, in which the Koreans viewed the Ming as a ritual father as well as the suzerain.58 Since then, the Ming had become the object of Chosŏn loyalty and filial piety. This change was critically important in that unlike
the lord-subject relations, the father-son relationship could never change regardless of circumstances.

The spread of this new belief was closely related to the interests of the ruling elites, because the important moral principles relevant to kingly rule in Chosŏn society were loyalty to the ruler and filial piety to the parents. The hierarchical social order was indeed based on those principles. The compromise with the Manchus, therefore, signified that the Korean Confucian elites themselves violated those two primary Confucian values. What is more important, the violation could not be justified as an unavoidable circumstance because filial piety was not a contractual obligation. If the Chosŏn surrender could be justified by reason of unavoidability, the ruling ideology based on loyalty, filial piety and myŏngbun would have no longer been tenable because the lower social strata, such as commoners, secondary sons and slaves, might also have been able to justify a refusal of unconditional submission to the yangban, primary sons, or masters.\(^{59}\)

In this situation, the mainstream Korean Confucian circles began to give absolute authority to Zhu Xi’s interpretations of Confucian Classics and regarded Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism as single orthodoxy.\(^{60}\) All other interpretations were regarded as heterodoxy and prohibited. The ‘Confucianization’ of Chosŏn society was completed in this very special situation in the late seventeenth century. Interestingly enough, the conditions of the Chosŏn dynasty under Manchu interference were very similar to the situation that the Southern Song faced under Jurchen dominance in the twelfth century. That was why Korean Confucianists pathologically adhered to Zhu Xi orthodoxy, and desperately emphasized traditional social order based on the idea of myŏngbun. Even reformists could not get themselves completely free from the deep-rooted Confucian idea of myŏngbun. There was no room for egalitarianism, only traditional hierarchy. Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, and Korean Confucianism; all these were born conservative, lived conservative, and conservative they perished.

To make clearer the Confucian role in preventing egalitarian thought
from sprouting in Korea, let me introduce a treatise on egalitarianism, freedom, and democracy, written by the ‘last’ Confucian fundamentalist of the Chosŏn dynasty. Yu Insŏk (1842-1915) was one of the best-known disciples of Yi Hangno (1792-1858), the most ardent disseminator of anti-barbarian thought and the founder of the Hwasŏ School, the mainstream of Korean Confucianism in the nineteenth century. It will be thus safe to see Yu as one in the main line of Korean Confucianism. So then, his view on egalitarianism can be thought to have represented the mainstream Korean Confucian view, even though there were other Confucian circles, such as Confucian eclectics and Confucian reformists. Specifically, Yu distinguished himself after the opening of Korea (1876) as an ardent defender of Confucian tradition and as an anti-Japanese guerilla leader as well. Yu's treatise, therefore, is a very precious source in the fact that unlike most of his predecessors who had no chances to be exposed to the modern concept of human equality, he actually came in direct contact with it. For this reason, his treatise provides first-hand Confucian criticism of egalitarianism, written in the vestiges of the fallen ‘Confucian’ dynasty: His treatise was written in 1912 in exile in Manchuria, two years after his Confucian heartland (Chosŏn) was annexed to ‘barbaric’ Japan.

“As for heaven and earth, there are high and low ranks. As for all things under the sun, there are great and small sizes. As for mountain, there are lofty peaks and hills. As for water, there are ditches and oceans. How (can we) equalize them with each other? As for the human being, there are distinctions between lord and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger, upper and lower, and noble and base. There are (also) differences between sage and ordinary, and wise and foolish. How (can we) equalize them with each other? As for the Western laws, in the constitutional monarchy there is the monarch and subject. (Even) in the republic there are the presidents and the vice presidents. Also, there are the upper and lower houses in the parliament. (Therefore, human) equality
will not be realized in the end. … Equality is nothing but disorder, and disorder is nothing but chaos. Freedom is nothing but immodesty, and immodesty is nothing but strife. The reason for the current world falling into violence and confusion is nothing but equality and freedom. Arguing for equality and freedom raises a mind of violence and strife, and such a mind of violence and strife brings on such events of violence and strife. … If this (trend) does not stop going on, humankind will eventually perish. The world would also collapse. … (The idea of) equality and freedom is the worst one in the world through all ages. This (idea) only stimulates people not to mince matters and to be profiteers. How can it be put in operation in China and Chosŏn?"  

This treatise clearly shows that the main concern of Yu, like his predecessors, was also hierarchical order and myŏngbun. Yu manifested that propriety is order. In the same treatise, he indeed identified the situation of the contemporary world with that of China in the period of spring/autumn and warring states when Confucius and Mencius lived lamenting the ‘chaos’ of the time. It is thus natural that Yu harshly criticized the so-called enlightenment (kaehwa 開化) movement for its misleading his Confucian moral state to the state of immoral animals, by teaching people to abandon their traditional good laws and adopt heterogeneous Western culture and technologies. His harsh criticism of republicanism, democracy, and women’s schools can also be understood in the same context. How could egalitarian thought sprout in the kind of country that produced a countless number of Confucian fundamentalists like Yu for about 500 years?  

Here we should not confound humanistic strands immanent in Confucianism with egalitarian ones. For example, the Confucian ideas such as minbon (民本), which literally means that the people are the foundation of a country, should not be simply correlated with the belief of human equality or democracy, even though many scholars do, because
humanitarian sympathy for ones in fetters does not necessarily demand a legal device for equal treatment in political, social, and economic affairs, indispensable to the concept of egalitarianism. Based on the Confucian teaching that heaven begot all people and always revealed its will through their opinion, the precept of minbon of course had potential to develop into egalitarianism, but it was no more than potential: it cannot be correlated with egalitarianism per se. It is that the people of a Confucian society had never been the subject of political rights (minju 民主) but the object of the oppressive government.

In conclusion, Korean Confucianism in late Chosŏn (1600s-1800s) ran counter to egalitarian thought, far from contributing to them. Not surprisingly, indeed, the history of egalitarianism in Korea was able to start only when Confucian orthodoxy lost its dominant position among the Koreans.

**Key Word**: Confucianism, Chosŏn, slave, nobi, secondary son, sŏŏl, Zhu Xi, Confucius, barbarian, Manchu, Yu Insŏk, egalitarian.

---

**Notes**:


2. For one of such studies, see Timothy Brook and Hy V. Luong, ed., *Culture and Economy: The Shaping of Capitalism in Eastern Asia* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997). For criticism of the Confucian capitalism theory with respect to the case of Korea, see James B. Palais, “Confucianism and Economic Development in South Korea,” in Elman, et al,

3 Ham Chaebong, Ham Chaehak, and David Hall, ed., *Confucian Democracy, Why & How*, (Seoul: Chŏnt’ong kwa hyŏndae, 2000).


7 The use of the term ‘monogamous’ or ‘monogamy’ may be regarded as a misnomer because in Chosŏn society there was no legal restrictions on the number of concubines men could take. In this paper, however, I use such terms because only one wife (ch'ŏ) was allowed to a husband. In English literature both wife (primary wife) and concubine (secondary wife) can be called ‘wife.’ In Chosŏn Korea, however, Concubine (ch’ŏp) could never be called wife (ch’ŏ). For this reason, in a sense, we can see Chosŏn as a ‘monogamous’ society.


12 For some instances, see Peterson, *Korean Adoption and Inheritance*, pp. 81-106.

13 CWS Myŏngjong 8.10.15.

14 Pae Chaehong, “Chosŏn hugi ŭi sŏŏl hŏt’ong” [Relaxed restrictions on the secondary sons in the late Chosŏn period], *Kyŏngbuk sahak* 10 (1987), pp. 97-149.


17 *Kyusa* [葵史 The history of sunflowers] 1:10b, in *Chosŏn sŏŏl kwan’gye charyojip* [朝鮮庶孽關係資料集 Sourcebook of secondary sons in Chosŏn], (Seoul: Yŏgang ch’ulp’ansa, 1985).

18 In 1459 when discrimination against secondary sons was not yet very severe, King Sejo (r.1455-68) made a comment on the prohibition of secondary sons from sitting for exam as follows: “When heaven and earth produce people, essentially there was no difference between noble and base. How (can I) be particular about the pedigree of the primary line? I am impartial.” (*Kyusa* 1:4a) Sejo’s remark may be understood as the idea of human equality because he chose the word ‘people’ (*min* 民) instead of ‘talent’ (*chae* 才). His comment, however, was a reply to a memorial against two secondary sons holding the title of merit subjects, sons of Cho Chun’s (1347-1405) daughter by concubine, who were exceptionally allowed to sit for exam. (CWS Sejo 6.8.27) Sejo seems to have made such a remark to justify his favoritism on the two merit subjects. In short, his remark, despite an egalitarian strand in it, was also related to the matter of ‘special’ *hŏt’ong* rather than human equality itself.

19 For more argument for *hŏt’ong*, see Deuchler, “Heaven Does Not Discriminate,” pp. 142-150.

20 CWS Myŏngjong 8.10.7.

21 Peterson, *Korean Adoption and Inheritance*, pp. 100-104.


23 *Kyusa* 2:25b.

24 This includes the question of whether Korean *nobi* (奴婢) should be understood as slaves or serfs. See James B. Palais, *Views on Korean Social History* (Seoul: Institute for Modern Korean Studies, Yonsei University, 1998), pp. 23-47; Yi Yŏnghun, “Han’guksa e issŏsŏ nobije ŭi ch’ui wa sŏngkyŏk” [The development of slavery and its characteristics in Korean
Confucian Perspectives on Egalitarian Thought in


27 Ironically enough, the most ardent advocators of the reduction of slave population were King Kongmin (r. 1351-74), an ardent Buddhist, and Sin Ton (?-1371), a Buddhist monk, whose mother was a slave but who was promoted up to the de facto prime minister under King Kongmin. On their reform and failure, see Salem, “Slavery in Mediaeval Korea,” pp. 85-87; John B. Duncan, The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), pp. 173-181.


30 Chi, Chosŏn chŏn’gi nobi sinbun yŏn’gu, pp. 291-294; Palais, Confucian Statecraft, pp. 221-225.


32 Palais, Confucian Statecraft, pp. 221-225.

33 Kyŏngguk taejŏn 5:11b.
35 CWS Sejong 21.5.3.
37 Chi, *Chosŏn chŏn'gi nobi sinbun yŏn'gu*, p. 59.
38 Kim Sŏngu, *Chosŏn chunggi kukka wa sajok* [State and landed literati in the mid-Chosŏn period], (Seoul: Yŏksa pip’yôngsa, 2001), pp. 95-159.
41 *Pan’gye surok* [礦溪隨錄 Collected works of Yu Hyŏngwŏn] 26:8b, (Seoul: Kyŏngin munhwasa, 1974).
42 Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*, p. 240.
43 *Pan’gye surok* 26:8b.
44 For more details about Yu’s treatise on slavery, see Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*, pp. 235-243.
45 Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*, pp. 252-257.
46 *Mongmin simsŏ* [牧民心書 A Book from the Heart on Governing the People] 8:4b-6a, (Seoul: Minjok munhwa ch’ujinhow, 1981-1985).
47 Sin Yongha, “Yŏnam Pak Chiwŏn úi sahoe sinbun’gwan kwa sahoe sinbun kaehyŏk sasang” [Yŏnam Pak Chiwŏn’s view and reformatory idea of the social status system], *Han’guk munhwasa* 10 (1989), pp. 119-158.
408-436.


52 Miura Kunio, *Chuja wa ki kūrigo mom* [Zhu Xi, qi, and the human body], translated by Yi Sŭngyŏn (Seoul: Yemun sŏwŏn, 2003), pp. 35-64.


56 Requoted from CWS Sejong 8.12.8. Naturally, this comment was quoted by Korean officials who wanted to protect slave owners’ right to punish and lynch their slaves, including even accidental homicide during discipline or interrogation by torture.


60 This sensation of ideological crisis among the yangban elites after the surrender to the Manchus was well expressed in the two memorials of Song Siyŏl (1607-89), the most influential politician and the most ardent


62 For the life of Yi Hangno and the Hwasŏ School, see Chae-sik Chong, A Korean Confucian Encounter with the Modern World: Yi Hang-no and the West (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies University of California Berkeley, 1995), pp. 43-84.


64 Ŭiamjip 51:33b-34b.

65 Ŭiamjip 51:26b.

66 Ŭiamjip 51:39b-41b.
이 논문은 근대적 개념의 평등사상이 소개되기 전 조선시대 유학자들이 인간평등에 대하여 어떤 시각을 가지고 있었는지 살펴보고, 조선의 유학은 평등사상을 전작시키기는커녕 그 가능성을마저도 없애는 데 기여하였음을 밝힌다. 그 방법으로는 조선사회에서 가장 차별을 받은 계층이라 할 수 있는 서자와 노비 계층에 대한 유학자들의 차별적 태도를 살펴보고, 그러한 태도가 어떻게 유교적 논리로 정당화되는지 분석한다. 조선의 유학자들은 유교적 가치인 禮와 名分을 자의적으로 확대 해석하여 인간 차별을 당연사고, 더 나아가 그것을 사회 질서 차원에서 정당화하였다. 조선시대 유학자들의 이러한 시각은 모든 유학자들이 태생적으로 중시한 질서 의식과 깊은 관련이 있었다. 옛질서를 회복하고자 한 공자와 朱熹의 사유체계, 그리고 역사 옛질서를 흔고한 조선후기 유학자들의 사유체계는 서로 유사하였다. 따라서 상하분별과 상하질서를 天理로 이해하는 유학자들이 독점적으로 지배한 조선사회에서는 인간평등사상의 좌조자 흔들 여지가 거의 없었다. 실제로 한국 역사에서 평등의식의 시작과 보급은 국가 지배에율로기로서의 유교 및 그에 바탕을 둔 과거제도가 공식적으로 종업을 고하게 되는 갓오경장(1894) 이전에는 사실상 불가능하였다. 조선의 노비제도와 서자차별이 그때서야 폐지된 것은 결코 우연이 아니다.

주제어: 서자, 노비, 명분, 주자학, 유교, 유인석