

【研究論著】 General Article

DOI: 10.6163/TJEAS.201812_15(2).0004

Spirit of Confucianism and Characteristics of
Zhu Xi Learning in Chosŏn Korea, Focusing on
Confucius, Zhu Xi and Yi Hwang
儒家精神與朝鮮朱子學的特徵：
以孔子、朱熹和李滉為中心

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Keywords: Confucianism, Zhu Xi Learning in Chosŏn Korea, Confucius,
Zhu Xi, Yi Hwang, Religion

關鍵詞：儒家、朝鮮朱子學、孔子、朱子、李滉、宗教

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Abstract

This paper takes a comparative approach to understanding the Confucian tradition as it evolved in China and Korea. The paper consists of three sections. The first section is devoted to showing how Confucius succeeded in shifting men's concerns from the divine world to the human world. The second section deals with Zhu Xi's philosophical exploration of mind and universe beyond the practical ethics espoused by classical Confucianism. In the third section, it is argued that Yi Hwang revitalized Zhu Xi's philosophy of principle by reformulating it in line with the utmost goal of moral cultivation and also by opening the possibility of worshipping it religiously.

Neo-Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea basically succeeded the great tradition of Confucianism in China. Thus the practical ethics of classical Confucianism and Zhu Xi's theories of principle and mind/heart were faithfully embraced by the Chosŏn Confucians, notably Yi Hwang. Nevertheless, the adoption of Chinese Confucianism in Korea underwent dynamic innovation, reflecting the political and intellectual changes during the late Koryŏ and the early Chosŏn. The architects of the new dynasty, like Chŏng Tojŏn, took a political approach in adopting Confucianism as a source of institutional reforms at the time of the dynastic transition. Despite their political victory, the Confucian politicians in the early Chosŏn were challenged by the moralist Confucian literati who had stayed outside the central political scene.

In reaction to the politicization and rationalization of Confucianism during the dynastic change, the Korean moralist Confucians, led by Yi Hwang added a religious dimension to Zhu Xi's philosophy of principle by opening the possibility of worshipping it as the transcendental and autonomous master of the moral universe. Yi Hwang put forms of activity and functionality into the concept of *i* 理, the principle of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism. Furthermore, he conceived *i* as equivalent to the Emperor in Heaven, who is a personified god. The study on reverence that Yi Hwang emphasized was similar to the attitude of religious devotion towards the Emperor in Heaven. Afterwards, the T'oegyŏ School created a strict scholarly community based on religious reverence and formed the unique characteristics of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism in Chosŏn, in which scholarship, religion and politics were integrated.

摘要

本文旨在從比較視角探討儒家傳統在中、韓兩國的演變情況。全文由三部分構成：第一部分重點考察孔子是如何成功地把人們的注意力從神的世界拉回人的世界，第二部分集中探討朱子是如何在原始儒家的實踐倫理基礎上對人的精神和宇宙進行哲學探索的，第三部分則提出這樣一個觀點，即李滉通過對朱子理學的重新表述而使其在吻合「修德」這一終極目標的同時又打開了它作為宗教被信仰的可能性，由此為朱子理學注入了活力。

基本而言，朝鮮理學承繼自中國儒學這一偉大傳統。因此，原始儒學的實踐倫理和朱子的理氣哲學受到了朝鮮儒者的虔誠歡迎，李滉是其中最突出的人物之一。但朝鮮在接受中國儒學的過程中也實現了一系列創新，這些創新反映了高麗末期、朝鮮初期的政治與思想變化。新王朝的設計師們，比如鄭道傳，處於政治動機而主張採納儒學思想，以作為王朝更替時期進行制度改革的源泉。儘管這些儒家政治精英們在政治上取得了勝利，但在朝鮮初期，他們卻受到了那些身處中央政治格局之外的道德主義儒家士人的挑戰。

作為對王朝更替時期儒學被政治化和工具化的一種反應，以李滉為首的朝鮮的道德主義儒家士人們為朱子理學添加宗教維度，由此開啟了將其作為超越性的、自立自主的道德宇宙之主宰進行崇奉的可能性。李滉往朱子理學的「理」概念裡添加了各種形式的活力和功能性，並進一步把「理」視為天帝——一個人格神——的等價物。李滉對「崇敬」的強調，類似於對天帝的宗教式虔敬態度。最終，退溪學派創立了一個基於宗教崇敬的嚴格的學術共同體，並由此塑造出了朝鮮朱子學的獨特特徵：學術、宗教和政治三位一體。

1. Introduction

Since Confucianism (*ruxue* 儒學) was initiated as a school by Confucius (孔子, 551-479 BCE), it has gone through many paradigmatic changes, such as Confucian Exegetics (*xungu xue* 訓詁學) in the Han and Tang periods, Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200) and others in the Song, Neo-Confucianism of Wang Yang-ming (王陽明, 1472-1529) in the Ming, and Evidential Learning (*kaozheng xue* 考證學) in the Qing. In Korea it has been the Zhu Xi Learning (*Chuja hak* 朱子學) that has prevailed throughout the country's Confucian studies, while Japan witnessed a flourishing of the Neo-Confucianism of both Zhu Xi and Wang Yang-ming, followed by Ancient Learning (*kogaku* 古學).¹ From the time of Confucius onward, Confucianism has taken a variety of forms over time and space, each one reflecting contemporary spiritual aspirations. Any new form of Confucianism, however, shared the following two characteristics in common: First, it formed a stream related to yet distinct from the existing traditions; second, it served as a rallying point for its supporters to form a scholarly community, schools of strong ties and sustainability. Each new form of Confucianism, based on an innovative ideology and its supporting community, exerted profound influence on political, social and cultural life in China.

In Chosŏn Korea (朝鮮王朝, 1392-1910), Confucianism of Confucius and the Song masters was the most influential. Remarkably, Chosŏn Korea had been under the strongest influence of the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi among East Asian countries, which had exercised deep transformative power on the

1 For the development of Confucianism in China focusing on the issue of moral self-cultivation, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation* (Indianapolis/ Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 2000). For the transformation of Confucianism in Japan, see Chun-chieh Huang 黃俊傑, *Dechuan Riben Lunyu Quanshi Shilun* 德川日本《論語》詮釋史論 [*History of Lunyu Translation in Tokugawa Japan*] (Taipei: Taiwan Daxue Chuban Zhongxin [National Taiwan University Press], 2006).

intellectual, political and cultural life in Chosŏn Korea among not only the central elite but also rural villagers especially after the seventeenth century. Yet it should be noted that Zhu Xi's philosophy of principle (*li* 理) was refined and made equivalent by Yi Hwang (李滉, 1501-1570) to the transcendental supreme being reminiscent of the Emperor in Heaven (*shangdi* 上帝) in ancient China. Thus it can be argued that Neo-Confucianism as embraced by Yi Hwang and his followers came to have innovative elements which helped create a category of "Zhu Xi's Confucianism of Chosŏn." The Korean school founded on this strand of Zhu Xi's Confucianism formed a strongly cohesive scholarly community and exerted tremendous cultural and political influence on Chosŏn society. This paper takes a comparative approach to understanding the Confucian tradition as it evolved in China and Korea. The paper consists of three sections. The first section is devoted to showing how Confucius succeeded in shifting men's concerns from the divine world to the human world. The second section deals with Zhu Xi's philosophical exploration of mind and universe beyond the practical ethics espoused by classical Confucianism. In the third section, it is argued that Yi Hwang revitalized Zhu Xi's philosophy of principle by reformulating it in line with the utmost goal of moral cultivation and also by opening the possibility of worshipping it religiously.

2. Significance of Confucianism Initiated by Confucius

Confucianism initiated by Confucius came into being in the context of civilizational transition in China, eventually resulting in an epochal change in the course of civilization in all of East Asia. Confucius was born and lived in the Spring and Autumn Period (春秋時代, 771-476 BCE) of the declining Western Zhou Dynasty, which had replaced the Shang Dynasty. However, the transition from the Shang to the Zhou did not merely mark dynastic transition; more importantly it entailed profound change in cultural patterns. From time immemorial until the Shang Dynasty, people's minds had been swayed by

worship of gods and spirits. That the authority of the spiritual world had been absolute can be seen from the predominance of varied sacrificial rites for gods and spirits in the rule of ancient dynasties. For example, it is recorded in *Shangshu* (尚書 *Book of History*) that Emperor Shun offered *lie* sacrifice to the Emperor in Heaven (*shangd* 上帝), *yin* sacrifice to celestial bodies like heaven and earth, stars, the sun and the moon, as well as *wang* sacrifice to mountains and rivers in his excursion.² The ancient rulers paid animistic worship to all natural and celestial objects deemed sacred. This pristine worship of gods and spirits had been carried over to the Shang Dynasty, as mentioned in the “Biaoji” (表記) chapter of *Liji* (禮記 *Records of Rituals*): “the Shang rulers worshiped spirits, leading the people to serve spirits, and valuing ghosts more than the rituals/rule of propriety (*li* 禮).”³ Besides the heavenly emperor and gods of nature, the Shang people put a high premium on the worship of ancestral spirits.⁴

The establishment of the Zhou Dynasty, however, marked the onset of reversing such an ontological subjugation of human life to the divine forces of natural gods and ancestral spirits. In the beginning of the Zhou, the sage kings of Wen (文王) and Wu (武王) along with the duke of Zhou (周公) established rituals, music, and institutions based on the man-made concept of the rituals/rules of propriety. The principles of the rituals/rules of propriety not only guided the feudal relations between the Zhou kings and his vassal lords but also regulated human interactions. The onset of institutions and practices based on the rituals/rules of propriety in the early Zhou can be understood as a revolutionary shift of axis of focus from the divine world to the human community, paralleling the rise of the spirits of humanity over the power of gods and spirits.

Confucius stood in the center of this rising tide of the spirits of humanity,

2 “Shundian 舜典,” in *Shangshu* 尚書 [*Book of History*] (Daejeon: Hakminmunhwasa, 1999), p. 6.

3 “Biaoji 表記,” in *Liji* 禮記 [*Records of Rituals*] (Daejeon: Hakminmunhwasa, 1995), p. 27.

4 Yun Nae-hyŏn, *Sang-Chu sa* [*History of the Shang and the Zhou*] (Seoul: Minŭmsa, 1984), p. 74.

and played a pioneering role in bringing about this new cultural paradigm.⁵ Declaring that he would follow the splendid culture of the Zhou,⁶ Confucius treasured the rituals, music and institutions of the early Zhou as embodiment of the sprits of humanity. Furthermore, he tried to form a nucleus of classical Confucian curriculum based on the *Six Classics* (*Liujing* 六經),⁷ and proposed it to his followers as the methods of learning and practicing the ideals embodied in the classics. In this way, Confucius initiated the first school of Confucianism, though he regarded himself not as an initiator but a transmitter of culture.⁸ Examining the meaning of “learning” (*xue* 學) as used in Confucius’ *Lunyu* (論語 *Analects*) may well shed light on the classical Confucian perception of ideal human community.

Confucius said:

If a gentleman in his eating does not seek to be filled and in his dwelling does not seek comfort, if he is assiduous in deed and cautious in word, if he associates with those who possess the Way and so is corrected by them, he can be said to love learning.⁹

What Confucius meant by “learning” (*xue* 學) is internalizing of ethical norms needed for human interactions. Moreover, Zixia (子夏), one of his disciples, defined “learned” man as “respecting the virtuous,” “exhausting his strength in serving parents,” “exerting himself in serving the ruler,” and “keeping his words

5 Lao Siquang (勞思光, 1927-2012) points to Confucius’s humanistic turn from the authority of god as great Innovation in the cultural world of ancient China. See Si-quang Lao 勞思光, *Chungguk Ch’ŏlhaksa* 中國哲學史 [*History of Chinese Philosophy*], In-jae Chŏng (trans.) (Seoul: T’amgudang, 1987), pp. 56-58.

6 “Bayi 八佾,” in *Lunyu* 論語 [*Analects*] (Daejeon: Hakminmunhwasa, 1999), p. 14.

7 Si-quang Lao, *Chungguk Ch’ŏlhaksa*, pp. 56-59.

8 “Shuer 述而,” in *Lunyu*, p. 1.

9 “Xueer 學而,” in *Lunyu*, p. 14. The translation is quoted from E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks (trans.), *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 148.

in associating with friends,”¹⁰ which were concrete examples of ethical behavior in human relations. For Confucius and his disciples, “learning” meant learning necessary etiquettes and practicing them as respectable members of the human community.

Confucius’ call for learning and practicing the rituals/rules of propriety of the early Zhou reflected his spirit of humanity, that saw human life as defined rather by the social actions of human beings themselves rather than by the heavenly dictates of God. Deeply committed to this human world, he traveled all over it to propagate his teachings despite indifferences, dangers, and insults.¹¹ A world without human interactions was out of the question to him.¹² Although well aware that his task for this world was hopeless, he believed that his Way of life was attainable and even enjoyable, as the first words of his sayings clearly show.¹³ This spirit of humanity manifest in classical Confucianism runs throughout all subsequent forms of Confucianism in China and beyond.

In sum, Confucius, at the epochal shift in cultural orientation from the world of gods to that of human beings, brought to life the spirits of humanity as embodied in the institutions and practices of the early Zhou. In order to bring peace and harmony to the human world, he proposed that the principles of ritual/propriety inform not only interstate but also inter-personal relations. His holistic emphasis on learning and practicing the ancient doctrines of the sage Zhou rulers initiated the first school of Confucianism. The strong this-worldly orientation of his school set the general tone for the subsequent schools of Confucianism and separated them from Taoist or Buddhist pursuits of transcendental beings in East Asia.

10 “Xueer 學而,” in *Lunyu*, p. 7.

11 Sometimes he was mocked as “a dog of house in mourning.”

12 “Weizi 微子,” in *Lunyu*, p. 6. “Our Respected Master said consolingly, Birds and beasts cannot be flocked together with. Were I not a follower of other men, with whom should I take part?” The translation is quoted from *The Original Analects*, p. 174.

13 “Xueer 學而,” in *Lunyu*, p. 1. “The Master said, To learn and in due time rehearse it: is this not also pleasurable?” The translation is quoted from *The Original Analects*, p. 145.

3. Zhu Xi's Innovation of Confucianism

Classical Confucianism, with its emphasis on learning and practicing the rituals/rules of propriety indispensable for social interactions, had received further refinement even before the Song Dynasty, when Buddhism and Taoism had gained ascendancy. *Lunyu Jijie Yishu* (論語集解義疏 *Collected Works of Commentaries on Analects*), an influential commentary on *Lunyu* by Huang Kan (皇侃, 488-545), elaborates on the “learning” in its first chapter on the three fields of what ought to be learned for the whole life, during one year, and every day. For example, the subjects to be learned during the adolescent years in one’s life include the numbers and directions at the age of six, the etiquette of sex separation at the age of seven, humility at eight, reading of the calendar at nine, writing and calculation at ten, music and poetry at thirteen, and dancing at fifteen. During a given year, spring and summer are reserved for poetry and music, while autumn and winter are reserved for the *Shangshu* and *Liji*. And every day ought to be spent continuing to learn and practice all these subjects.¹⁴ Huang Kan’s curriculum adjusted to the student’s ages and seasons represents his programmatic approach to what early Confucian masters had in mind as Confucianism. Still, Huang Kan shared their conviction that “learning” was meant to produce social beings who could interact on the basis of the rituals/rules of propriety.

The precept of “learning,” however, changed radically by the time of Zhu Xi, who has been credited with synthesizing his predecessors’ philosophical and ethical innovations and reviving Confucianism into a new form called Neo-Confucianism in the West. His interpretation of the “learning” in the first “Xueer (學而)” chapter of his *Lunyu Jizhu* (論語集注 *Collected Commentaries on the Analects*) is predicated on an entirely new definition of what constitutes “learning”:

14 Huang Kan 皇侃, “Xueer 學而,” in *Lunyu Jijie Yishu* 論語集解義疏 [*Collected Works of Commentaries on Analects*] (Osaka: Huái Dé Tang, 1923), p. 1.

Xue 學 (to learn) means ‘to emulate’ (*xiao* 效). Human nature in all cases is good, but in becoming aware of this goodness, there are those who lead and those who follow. Those who follow in becoming aware of it must emulate what those who lead in becoming aware of it do. Only then can they understand goodness and return to their original state.¹⁵

Now the aim of “learning” was inwardly shifted to realizing the innate goodness of the self from learning and practicing the manifested forms of the rituals/rules of propriety. Thus Zhu Xi gave new substance to the “learning” aimed for the student “to understand goodness and return to original state” (*mingshan fuchu* 明善復初). This new definition of “learning,” however, encompassed the subjects of abstract nature that ought to be addressed, such as goodness, human nature, and original state, in contrast to the proper forms of behavior to be learned and practiced in human interactions, as espoused by the classical school of Confucianism.

It is well known that Zhu Xi founded the authoritative Four Books comprising the two chapters from the *Liji*—*Daxue* and the *Zhongyong*, besides Confucius’ *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi* (孟子 *Mencius*). Among the Four Books, *Daxue Zhangju* (大學章句, *Great Learning in Chapters and Verses*) and *Zhongyong Zhangju* (中庸章句, *Doctrine of the Mean in Chapters and Verses*) are explicitly concerned with Zhu’s definition of “learning” as a self-renewal of innate goodness and the steps to realize it. He calls the original human nature or what one is given by Heaven as “Luminous virtue” (*mingde* 明德), which is “open, spiritual, and unobscured, being replete with all the principles by which one responds to the myriad things.”¹⁶ However, such original nature can at times

15 The translation is quoted from Daniel K. Gardner, *Zhu Xi’s Reading of the Analects: Canon, Commentary, and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 31.

16 Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Daxue Zhangju* 大學章句 [*Great Learning by Chapter and Phrase*] (Daejeon: Hakminmunhwasa, 1999), chapter 1. The translation is quoted from Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, compl. *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600*, Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 725.

obscured by the restraints of individual physical endowment and also by the obstacles of human desires aroused in the course of selfish pursuits. Still, the original nature is never lost, therefore “learning” means to clarify it and restore it to its original state.¹⁷

In *Zhongyong Zhangju*, Zhu Xi sees the unaroused states (*weifa* 未發) of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy as human nature and distinguishes them from the aroused states (*yifa* 已發) of them.¹⁸ In the unaroused state, the learner is required to preserve and nourish reverently (*zhuangjing hanyang* 莊敬涵養) his innate nature, while in the aroused state the learner is required to bring all human feelings to the state of harmony and equilibrium.¹⁹

In this regard, Zhu Xi’s model of “learning” (i.e., moral self cultivation) is predicated on the “recovery” (*fu* 復), as opposed to development, of the original goodness of human nature. As human nature takes two modes of existence depending on the operation of human feelings, proper methods of “learning” accord with each mode, thus “preserving” (*hanyang* 涵養) the original state of mind, while “rectifying” the obscured state of mind (*zhengxin* 正心), with the whole process of “learning” (i.e., self cultivation) being guided by the conscientious effort of *chengyi* (誠意 making one’s thoughts sincere). To put simply, what constitutes Confucianism changed from learning and practicing the forms of proper etiquette to recovering and realizing of one’s “original nature” (*benxing* 本性). The two great paradigms of Confucianism by Confucius and Zhu Xi, though centered on human morality, show distinctive orientations respectively. While Confucius had shifted the axis of civilization from the spiritual world to the human world, Zhu Xi turned the human aim to the renewal of one’s abstract self. This great paradigm shift in Confucianism was largely a

17 *Daxue Zhangju*, chapter 1, Zhu Xi’s commentary.

18 Zhu Xi, *Zhongyong Zhangju* 中庸章句 [*Doctrine of Mean by Chapter and Phrase*] (Daejeon: Hakminmunhwasa, 1999), chapter 1, Zhu Xi’s commentary.

19 Zhu Xi, “Yu Hunan zhe gong lun zhonghuo diyi shu 與湖南諸公論中和第一書,” in *Zhu Xi Ji* 朱熹集 [*Collected Works of Zhu Xi*] (Chengdu: Sichuan Education Publishing House, 1996), p. 3383.

product of the Song Confucian masters' struggle against what they deemed the baneful influence of sophisticated Buddhist metaphysics of the Sui and Tang Dynasties on human moral relations and social ethics.²⁰

4. Characteristics of Zhu Xi's Confucianism as Reformulated by Yi Hwang

The original Confucianism initiated by Confucius and the Neo-Confucianism innovated by Zhu Xi and others played a critical role in shifting cultural paradigms in East Asia. While the former had moved the axis of human existence from divine world to human community, the latter deepened the pursuits of Confucianism into human beings' inner world beyond human beings in the society. The two schools of Confucianism gave rise to a solid scholarly community and exerted powerful political influences on the succeeding states and societies. The Chosŏn Dynasty founded on the Cheng-Zhu Learning (程朱學), was no less experimental than a philosopher kingdom in its belief in the power of ideology. Therefore, the Cheng-Zhu Learning as a political ideology to reorganize the state, society and family created a serious political and social crisis in its adoption at the time of dynastic transition from Koryŏ to Chosŏn.²¹

In Korean historical writings, those late Koryŏ intellectuals accepted the Cheng-Zhu Learning are referred to as "newly rising scholar-officials" (*sinhŭng sadaebu*). In foreign relations, the late Koryŏ was under the dominance of the Yuan Dynasty. In domestic politics, the well-established powerful aristocratic families who practiced Buddhism exercised control over the state's land and labor at the expense of the king and his government. In scholarly circles, the

20 For Zhu Xi's philosophical struggle against an accommodation of Buddhist ideas of universe and human, see Araki Kenko 荒木見悟, *Pulgyo wa Yugyo 佛教與儒教 [Buddhism and Confucianism]*, Kyŏng-ho Sim (trans.) (Seoul: Yemun Sŏwŏn, 2002).

21 For adopting of Neo-Confucian ethics as blue print for radical social reforms in the early Chosŏn, see Martina Deuchler, "Neo-Confucianism: The Impulse for Social Action in Early Yi Dynasty Korea," *Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 2 (1980), pp. 71-111.

Koryŏ Confucian intellectuals showed preference for *belles lettres* rather than philosophical discourse or statecraft ideas. Under this milieu of dynastic decline, the reform-minded Koryŏ intellectuals, who visited the Yuan capital as part of diplomatic missions, were exposed to Song Confucianism and they found in it a new ideology to denounce the Koryŏ Buddhism, which they believed provided little for solving the ethical and practical problems confronting their country.²² The first generation of these intellectuals, such as An Hyang (安珣, 1243-1306), and Paek Yi-jŏng (白頤正, 1260-1340), introduced Song Confucianism to their homeland, and the next generation of scholars like Yi Saek (李穡, 1328-1396), Yi Sŏn-gin (李崇仁, 1347-1392), Chŏng Mon-gju (鄭夢周, 1337-1392), Kil Chae (吉再, 1353-1419), Chŏng To-jŏn (鄭道傳, 1342-1398), and Kwŏn Kŭn (權近, 1352-1409) deepened their knowledge of the Song Confucianism along the line of Cheng-Zhu ideas. All these intellectuals, who at the same time served the government as officials, shared a strong conviction in substituting the Cheng-Zhu Learning for Buddhism as state ideology, and formed a close community of political interests in their efforts to reform what they deemed the corrupt and incapable kingdom.²³

Before long, however, this reformist community of scholar officials was split over the issue of dynastic change. The moderate group, including Yi Saek, Yi Sŏng-in, Chŏng Mong-ju, and Kil Chae, held on to the existing Koryŏ Dynasty, whereas the radical group including Chŏng To-jŏn and Cho Chun (趙浚, 1346-1405) insisted on overthrowing it in favor of the new Chosŏn Dynasty, relying on the military force of a general, Yi Sŏng-gye (李成桂, 1335-1408). The radical reformists proved victorious in the subsequent struggle, and they laid the institutional foundations of the new dynasty. As powerful founding ministers of the new monarchy, they succeeded in working out a fine balance in the power

22 John Duncan traces the roots of Korea's bureaucratic system far back to the early Koryŏ, but this paper focuses on the point when Korean Confucians adopted Confucianism as ideology of reform and revolution. John Duncan, "The Social Background to the Founding of the Chosŏn Dynasty: Change or Continuity," *Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 6 (1988/ 89), pp. 39-79.

23 Ki-baik Lee, *Hanguksa sillon* (Seoul: Ilchisa, 1987), pp. 200-201.

structure between monarch and ministers. The king remained absolute, yet his power was effectively checked by the moral admonitions given by his Confucian ministers to transform him into a sage king.²⁴ The leading architect in this direction was Chŏng To-jŏn, who was chiefly responsible for orienting the Confucianism of the early Chosŏn toward rational and practical objectives.²⁵ In the early centuries of the Chosŏn, Cheng-Zhu Learning was employed as a rationale for institutional changes rather than a philosophical or scholarly pursuit. In China, the adherents of the Cheng-Zhu Learning were very wary of the absolute power of the emperor, so they were far less zealous in challenging dynastic power than their Korean counterparts who played a leading role in the dynastic change. The Cheng-Zhu Learning in the early Chosŏn rendered itself as revolutionary ideology not only to overthrow the existing dynasty but also to overhaul the political and social institutions engineered ultimately to transform the people's way of behavior and thinking. Thus the Cheng-Zhu Learning in the early Chosŏn Korea is marked first of all by its politicization in the course of dynastic transition.

In the meantime, among the disciples of those Koryŏ Confucians who upheld the lost cause formed a scholarly community called "Rusticated Literati" (*sarim* 士林) emphasizing their position outside the government in contrast to the group of political appointees (*hungu* 勳舊), who did meritorious service to the new dynasty. Their scholarly disposition was philosophical and ethical, distinguishing them from the practical and institutional approaches taken by their opponents' active role in the government. From the generation of Kim Chong-jik (金宗直, 1431-1492), however, these "Scholars of Forest" began to make their appearance in the central political stage and challenged not only the political

24 For the analysis of balance between bureaucratic and aristocratic forces in the Chosŏn society, see James B. Palais, "Confucianism and the Aristocratic/ Bureaucratic Balance in Korea," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 44, 2 (Dec., 1984), pp. 427-468.

25 Yŏng-su Kim, *Kŏnguk ūi chŏngch'i: yŏmal sŏnch'o hyŏngmyŏng kwa munmyŏng ūi chŏnhwan* [Politics of Building the State: Revolution and Shift of Civilization During Late Koryŏ and Early Chosŏn] (Seoul: Yihaksa, 2006), pp. 678-680.

power but also the intellectual direction of well-established capital officials. It is an irony that the group that had originated from the politically losing group of the fallen dynasty ultimately prevailed in its replacement. On the path to the predominance of the “Scholars of Forest,” Yi Hwang—better known for his pen name T’oegye (退溪), stood out as the leading pioneer who brought philosophical and religious dimensions to the Confucianism of Chosŏn Korea. T’oegye focused on Zhu Xi’s interpretations, yet he realized a religious dimension obscured in Zhu Xi’s worldview, as would be shown shortly.²⁶

This study’s inquiry into the distinguishable characteristics of Chosŏn Korea’s Confucianism may well be assisted by the previous studies of the same question that started in earnest in the 1920s. The following brief survey of the relevant works from Japan, China, Taiwan, and North America will bring varied insights on the topic, so that this study may benefit from engaging them in communication and debate.

The scholar who first attempted to define the characteristics of Chosŏn Korea’s Confucianism was Takahashi Tōru (高橋亨, 1878-1967) from Japan. His 1927 essay argues that:

The history of Confucianism in Chosŏn was very simple and monotonous, for the whole debate throughout its history was nothing more than an inquiry on whether or not its interpretations were identical with those set forth by Zhu Xi.²⁷

26 Needless to say, the Yulgok School made great contribution to the deeper understanding of Zhu Xi’s philosophy notably through vast compilation of commentaries on his works. However, this paper focuses on finding paradigm shift in Korean Confucianism in the T’oegy School. Yōng-ho Yi, “T’oegye kyōnghak ūl t’onghae pon Chosŏn Chujahak ūi tokjasōng munje—Yulgok hakt’ong kwaūi pigyo rŭl chungsim ūro [Identity Issue of JuJaHak in the Joseon Dynasty from the Perspective of ToeGye KyungHak],” *T’oegyehak Nonjip* 退溪學論集 [*Yi Hwang Learning Collections*], 8 (2011), p. 57.

27 Takahashi Tōru 高橋亨, “Chōsen Jugaku Daikan 朝鮮儒學大觀 [Outline View of Korean Confucianism],” *Chōsenshi Kōza* 朝鮮史講座 [*Korean History Lecture*] (Seoul: Chōsenshi Gakkai, 1927), p. 233.

The essay admits that two Korean schools can be distinguished based on the primacy of either principle (*li* 理) or material force (*qi* 氣) but points out that these schools did not pose any significant challenge to Zhu Xi's thesis. Takahashi's theory that the Chosŏn Confucianism can be subsumed under Zhu Xi's Confucianism sets a lasting tone for domestic and overseas studies on the topic.

On the other hand, the Chinese scholar Chen Lai (陳來, 1952-) suggests a more positive assessment on the Chosŏn Confucianism in terms of its in-depth understanding of Zhu Xi's philosophy. In his 1992 monograph, Chen maintains that:

Yi Hwang was a successor to Zhu Xi's philosophy [...] He understood Zhu Xi profoundly, found some discrepancies in his philosophy and even proposed the logical solutions for them, thus clarifying what had remained obscured in Zhu Xi's theories [...] Since the mid-Ming, Chinese scholars had not produced innovative interpretations on Zhu Xi's Confucianism. The venue of Zhu Xi study moved to Chosŏn, where his philosophy was revitalized chiefly by the efforts of Yi Hwang.²⁸

Chen's argument, though appreciating Yi Hwang's contribution to the edification of Zhu Xi's philosophy, does not attempt to explore a possible shifts of concern in Yi Hwang's philosophy.

With regard to the ascetic tendency and moral pessimism of Yi Hwang's philosophy, Don Baker from Canada writes in 1999:

T'oegye's writings were a major influence on Korean Neo-Confucian thought for the rest of the Chosŏn Dynasty. Wang Yang-ming never

28 Lai Chen 陳來, *Song Ming Lixue* 宋明理學 [*Learning of Principle in the Song and the Ming*] (Shengyang: Liaoning Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1992), p. 475.

enjoyed the respectability in Korea that he had in China. Moreover, T'oegyŏ's distrust of the body and its instincts and emotions, expressed through his rejection of Wang's overreliance on innate knowledge of the good, stimulated an ascetic and morally pessimistic strand in Korean Neo-Confucianism. T'oegyŏ's separation of *i* (Chin. *li*) and the Four Beginnings of virtue from *qi* (Chin. *qi*) and the Seven Emotions further reinforced this declining confidence in both the trustworthiness of human emotions and the efficacy of human efforts.²⁹

Although Don Baker perceptively recognizes Yi Hwang's concern with possible human frailty in moral character, this is perhaps the undesirable yet inevitable human condition from which Yi Hwang initiated his lifelong moral enterprise. His moral enterprise is much to do with his notion and worship of principle (*li* 理), as will be shown shortly.

Lin Yuehui (林月惠, 1961-), a scholar of Korean Confucianism from Taiwan, gives due notice to the unifying tendency in principle-material force debate in Chosŏn Korea, which had been hitherto understood as dichotomous. She comments that:

The study of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism in Korea took a different path from that in China, which ultimately led to the unity of mind/heart and principle (*simjŏngni* 心即理). The unifying power of principle began to be recognized first by Yi Hwang, when he set out the theory of the mutual issuance of *li* and *qi* (*i-ki hobal* 理氣互發).³⁰

29 Don Baker, "A Different Thread: Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and Catholicism in a Confucian World," in JaHyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler (eds.), *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), p. 208.

30 Yue-hui Lin 林月惠, *Yiqu tongdiao: Zhuzixue yu Chosŏnxinglixue* 異曲同調——朱子學與朝鮮性理學 [*Different Melody but Same Tone: Zhu Xi Learning and Learning of Mind in Chosŏn*] (Taipei: Taiwan Daxue Chuban Zhongxin [National Taiwan University Press], 2010), p. 42.

All the scholarly efforts to define the characteristics of Korean Neo-Confucianism since the 1920s have brought us to a deeper understanding of it. Takahashi Tōru point out that Chosŏn Confucians—especially Yi Hwang—were strenuously devoted to acquiring and faithfully transmitting correct knowledge of Zhu Xi’s metaphysics and ethics.³¹ It is partially proved by the following admonition given by him to his disciples:

Master Zhu is our exemplar. Never speak other than his words, and never act other than his actions. All words and actions should be derived from Master Zhu. Though we are unable to see his person now, his Way is present right here.³²

Moreover, the centrality of principle in Yi Hwang’s thought and praxis pointed out by both Don Baker and Lin Yuehui speaks to a unique feature of Korean Neo-Confucianism.

Nevertheless, their studies focus on principle as expounded in Yi Hwang’s theory of human mind/heart mainly through the *i-ki* 理氣 debate. Hence, in analyzing Yi Hwang’s anthropology Baker points to the dual dimensions of human mind/heart, and Lin puts stress on the unity of principle and mind/heart. To be sure, their focus of research is on the right track, because Yi Hwang for a long time applied himself to exploring the respective role of principle and material force in operation of mind/heart. Yet, this part of his life should not lead us to assume that his life was devoted to intellectual inquiry of anthropological or psychological issues. More importantly, his primary concern in life was how to elevate one’s moral character through self-cultivation. In order to understand more fully his concept of principle, it is necessary to see it in light of his lifelong task of moral self-cultivation.

31 Tōru Takahashi, “Chōsen Jugaku Daikan,” p. 233.

32 Yi Tōk-hong 李德弘, “Kisŏn ch’ongnok 記善總錄,” in *Kanjae Sōnsaeng Munjip* 艮齋先生文集 [Collected Works of Master Kanjae] (Seoul: Hanguo Gūdiǎn Fānyiyuan, 1998), kwŏn 6, p. 102.

While Confucius had moved the focus of human relations from spirits and gods to fellow human beings, Zhu Xi brought attention to the inner world of human beings, arguing for the unity of human nature with cosmic principle (*xingjili* 性即理). To him, learning meant nothing other than realizing the original goodness of human nature endowed from heaven. As he identified human nature with cosmic principle, human beings in their perfection would not be distinguished from the guiding principle of the universe. The holistic unity of men and the universe makes it superfluous for men to worship a transcendent god. In short, the abstract principle of the universe replaces the personified god in Zhu Xi's cosmology.³³ The principle devoid of willful dynamism posed a serious problem to Yi Hwang, who devoted himself to the life of moral cultivation. To Yi Hwang, it is like a lifeless world where no transcendent gods guides his path to the Way, as he confessed.

Principle in its origin is without desires and designs. When issued, however, principle is seen everywhere working. In the past I only saw the principle in its inaction, not recognizing its subtle functions. Then, principle was conceived as lifeless. Isn't such an idea far from the Way?³⁴

In his early days of learning Zhu Xi's philosophy of principle, it did not occur to Yi Hwang that principle might be a form of activity. It was only after extended years of reflecting on experiential realities that Yi Hwang realized the subtle functions of principle in its movement. Principle, then, no longer remained as a static pattern or ground for the operations of mind and universe. Principle was perceived as an autonomous agent capable of moving mind and universe. By

33 Weiming Du also points out such characteristic of principle. "Chu Hsi envisioned principle to be singular, unitary, above-form, permanent, and omnipresent. It is being rather than activity, reason rather than practice and the ground underlying cosmic transformation rather than the actual creative impulse that engenders heaven, earth and the myriad things." See Wei-ming Du 杜維明, "T'oegye's 退溪 Creative Interpretation of Chu Hsi's 朱熹 Philosophy of Principle," *The Journal of T'oegye Studies*, 35 (1982), pp. 49-50.

34 Yi Hwang 李滉, "Tap Ki Myŏngŏn pyŏlji 答奇明彦別紙," in *T'oegy Sŏnsaeng Munjip* 退溪先生文集 [*Collected Works of Master T'oegye*] (Seoul: Hánguó Gǔdiǎn Fānyiyuan, 1998), kwŏn 18, p. 467.

realizing the principle as the autonomous center of moral activity in the universe, Yi Hwang opened the possibility of conceiving it as equivalent to the Emperor in Heaven (*shangdi* 上帝):

Heaven (*tian* 天) is no other than the principle. Principle is pervasive in everything and every moment, like God in Heaven being omnipresent. He cannot be absent from us even for a single moment. Therefore, we ought to be on constant alert.³⁵

When we remember that Zhu Xi had made superfluous the ancient Chinese notion of God in Heaven by equating universe with principle, Yi Hwang creatively revoked the personified god of ancient China in his reformulation of the principle as the autonomous master of all moral activities of the universe.³⁶ The ancient God in Heaven hitherto superseded by the abstract principle set forth by Zhu Xi was made relevant to Yi Hwang's conception of principle as the central moving spirit of the moral universe. It is well known that Yi Hwang put a premium on reverence (*kyōng* 敬) by which to conduct moral self-cultivation. The fact that this term has a hint of religious reverence in Yi Hwang's usage can be understood only in light of his worship of the principle as equivalent to a supreme transcendent agent of the moral universe.³⁷

After Yi Hwang, Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea was developed by two major schools—one initiated by Yi Hwang (or T'oegye) and the other initiated by Yi Yi (李珥, Yulgok, 栗谷, 1536-1584). Initially, the T'oegye School and the Yulgok School were divided intellectually with their respective emphases on either principle or material force as the key of the operation of mind/heart. Later

35 Yi Tök-hong, "Sang T'oegye sŏnsaeng 上退溪先生," in *Kanjae Sŏnsaeng Munjip*, kwŏn 3, p. 57.

36 Sŏng-hwan Cho, *Ch'ŏnhak esŏ ch'ŏngyo ro* [From the Learning of Heaven to the Religion of Heaven], Ph. D. dissertation (Sogang University, 2012), pp. 76-77.

37 Chang-t'ae Kŭm, "T'oegye ūi mullagwan kwa saengmyŏng ūi segye [T'oegye's Material and Spiritual Worldview and the World of Life]," in U-sŏng Yi (ed.), *Tosan Sŏwŏn* 陶山書院 [Dosan Seowon] (Seoul: Hangilsa, 2001), p. 219.

on, the two schools also represented the division of two rival political forces. Along with the growth of intellectual and political influence of both schools, their membership expanded throughout the country. Both schools gave rise to a good number of scholarly communities centered around the physical institutions called private academies (*sŏwŏn* 書院) or united by a sense of mutual ties. Each scholarly community kept its own leadership, regulations and creed, with the local private academy being its physical center of activities and influence. The first private academy was the Paekundong *sŏwŏn* (白雲洞書院), built by the magistrate of P'unggi Chu Se-bung (周世鵬, 1495-1554) in 1541. That private academy became the first officially chartered one, when it was awarded a new name, the Sosu *sŏwŏn* (紹修書院) by King Myŏngjong (明宗, 1534-1567) in 1550 on the recommendation by Yi Hwang who was appointed to the same magistracy. Since then, private academies proliferated across the country with financial support from local dignitaries and the central government, amounting to 80 to 90 per province by the eighteenth century.³⁸

Yi Hwang, who pioneered the movement of private academies in Korea, once stressed its importance:

If the education at private academies flourishes, it may well make up for the lack of official school institutions. Then, the would-be learners will have schools to go to, greatly fostering their spirit of learning. The customs and mores of the people will be rectified day after day to the completion of kingly instructions. This will be of no little help to the sagely rule of the king.³⁹

Thus Yi Hwang believed that the moral transformation of the people through education was a prime mission of king's rule and that the state ought to function

38 Tong-hwan Yi, "Hanguk mungyo p'ungsok sa [History of Education and Customs in Korea]," *Hanguk munhwa sa taegyŏ* IV (Seoul: Korea University, 1971), p. 822.

39 Yi Hwang, "Sang Ch'im pangbaek 上沈方伯," in *T'oegyŏ Sŏnsaeng Munjip*, kwŏn 9, p. 266.

like school writ large.

The small scholarly communities of the T'oegye School which followed Yi Hwang's premises, were initially intellectual in nature based on master-disciple relations; however, along with the growth of their size and organizational refinement, they grew into political forces. Those communities were marked by strong commitment to spiritual sincerity comparable to religious devotion and a strict code of behavior based on collective regulations for the members. Remarkably, the community members were less visible in the central political scene than in their countryside residence, yet they were nonetheless influential on major political matters of the state through their ability to present political voices in unison. This type of rural Confucian literati were dubbed as "Intellectual Hermit" (*sallim* 山林). Their political influence is succinctly indicated by a metaphor that "Ten state councilors are not worthy of one queen, and ten queens are not worthy of one *sallim*."⁴⁰ The movement to spread private academies initiated by Yi Hwang kept a healthy autonomy from the central political power in a way that served as an effective check on the concentration of political power into the central government. While the Yulgok School was known for scholarly officials who took power as a patriarchal political faction called *noron* (老論) from the mid-Chosŏn era, the T'oegye School produced rural literati called *sallim* (山林), who succeeded in carving out their own sphere of Confucianism in the cultural world of Chosŏn Korea.

5. Conclusion

Classical Confucianism, initiated by Confucius, was concerned with the human world rather than the divine world. The practical ethics governing human interactions were emphasized as essential in order to bring peace and harmony to

40 U-sŏng Yi, "Yijo yugyo ch'ŏngch'i wa sallim ūi chonjae [Confucian Politics of the Yi Dynasty and Sallim]," *Hanguk ūi yŏksa sang* (Seoul: Ch'angjak Kwa Pip'yŏng, 1983), p. 254.

human society. The practical ethics of classical Confucianism lost much of its original vigor, as it had become formalized within the framework of state learning since the Han period. The revitalization movement of Confucianism reached its peak, when Zhu Xi synthesized the previous innovations into a coherent system of philosophy exploring principle, which governed both human mind and universe. This Song school of Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism gained ascendancy as official learning from the late Yuan and the Ming Dynasties, and spread to East Asian countries like Chosŏn Korea and Tokugawa Japan.

Neo-Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea basically succeeded the great tradition of Confucianism in China. Thus practical ethics of classical Confucianism and Zhu Xi's theories of principle and mind/heart were faithfully embraced by the Chosŏn Confucians, notably Yi Hwang. Nevertheless, the adoption of Chinese Confucianism in Korea underwent unique dynamism reflecting the political and intellectual changes during the late Koryŏ and the early Chosŏn. The architects of the new dynasty like Chŏng To-jŏn took a political approach in adopting Confucianism as a source of institutional reforms at the time of the dynastic transition. Despite their political victory, the Confucian politicians in the early Chosŏn were challenged by the moralist Confucian literati who had stayed outside the central political scene. In reaction to the politicization and rationalization of Confucianism during the dynastic change, the Korean moralist Confucians, led by Yi Hwang added a religious dimension to Zhu Xi's philosophy of principle by opening a possibility to worship it as the transcendental and autonomous master of the moral universe. ♦

♦ Responsible editor: Yu-ying KUO

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