

Korean Philosophy 2

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3. Korean Confucianism

3.1. The Character of Korean Confucianism

Korean Confucianism can be divided into two periods: the early period, which runs through the Goryeo Dynasty, and the later period, which is the Joseon Dynasty and afterwards. Korean Confucianism of the early period was based on study of the Chinese classics, and centered on the education and cultivation of the nobility, while in the later period it was the Neo-Confucianism of Chu-Hsi, playing a far greater socio-political role as universal ideology and philosophy.

Accordingly, in the early period, the ways of statecraft and governing must be studied through an examination of the educational system, scholars, and Confucian ethics in each dynasty. In the later period, the Confucian policies of the early Joseon period and the essence of Chu-Hsi's Neo-Confucianism – *jugiron* and *juriron* – must first be explained, and then the deterioration of Confucianism in the late Joseon period should be emphasized. That is, it is important to examine the foundation of the "righteous armies" and the rejection of Western influences on orthodox Neo-Confucianism. Finally, we will conclude by discussing the role Confucianism plays in society today, and we will examine a general outline of Confucianism in Korean history.

3.2. Confucianism in the Three Kingdoms Period

The three kingdoms that emerged from ancient tribal-federation states required strong sovereignty and a strict class system. Thus, the ideal of monarchy and the class consciousness of the aristocrats brought about the development of the study of Chinese classics, along with the morality of loyalty and filial piety. Therefore, in the Three Kingdoms period Confucianism first emerged in the educational system. This was fueled less by a desire

of the rulers to increase the knowledge of the people than it was by their desire to establish their authority. The form of Confucianism at the time can be seen in Goguryeo's *Taehak* (a national educational institute) and *gyeongdang* (private schools in the provinces which taught the Chinese classics), Baekje's Five Classics (of Chinese Literature) Scholar System, and the Confucian items of virtue of Silla's *hwarangdo* [Way of the Warriors philosophy]. That is, Confucianism during this time emphasized putting the Chinese classics into practice and was an ideology of kingship. Thus, it was a rational means of organization and ruling for rulers.

3.3. Confucianism in the Unified Silla Period

The establishment of absolute royal authority in Unified Silla facilitated the development of Confucian politics. With this the political ideas of Confucianism were emphasized and the *Gukhak* (a national educational institute) was established in 682 by King Sinmun, increasing the importance of Chinese classics such as the Analects of Confucius and the Book of Filial Duty. King Wonseong's establishment of a system for rating prospective government officials in 788 reflects a focus on the selection of accomplished Confucian scholars. Also, Confucian scholars such as Gang Su, Seol Chong and Choe Chi-won's advocacy of governing based on Confucian ethics was this influence of Confucianism. Choe Chi-won's advocacy of pacifism, which held military force to be a last resort, and his support of royal authority in his royal ruling philosophy based on etiquette and morality, clearly shows the role of Confucianism in the rule of ancient states.

3.4. Confucianism in the Goryeo Period

3.4.1. Early policies in support of Confucianism

In the last days of Unified Silla, Wang Geon (the founder of Goryeo) received a great deal of help from the intellectuals of the "head-rank six" class in Silla, and so he made an effort to develop Confucianism. The result of this was the establishment of a Confucian academy in Seogyeong (present-day Gaeseong). Following him, King Gwangjong implemented the civil service examination system, King Seongjong promoted Confucian scholar Choe Seungno and completed the educational system, and King Munjo promoted Choe Jung. Thus, pro-Confucian policies continued to be implemented.

During the time of King Seongjong the school *Gukjagam* was established and became the center of *Gwanhak* (a national Confucian school), and during the reign of King Yejong in the twelfth century, the *Gukhak* was reorganized.

3.4.2 Early and Mid- Goryeo Confucian Ideologies

Confucian ideologies in early Goryeo developed in accordance with the nation's policies supporting Confucianism. Goryeo Confucianism, based on the theories of civilian government, focused more on composition than the Chinese classics and emphasized political practicality over academics. Thus, the Confucian ideologies of 10th century scholars such as Choe Seungno and Kim Sim-eon not only sought harmony between Confucianism and Buddhism, but also supported strong royal authority and were active in participatory government and social construction.

However, from the 11th century on, there was a conservative tendency to glorify the leisurely lifestyle of the nobility and support that ruling order. In the 12th century, the social atmosphere was that of trying to exist peacefully within the status quo, centered around the cliques of such men as Kim Bu-sik, and an ideology that tended towards toadyism was adopted.

3.4.3. Social Changes and the Introduction of Neo-Confucianism in the Late Goryeo Period

After the military uprising Goryeo experienced a period of change. The nobility was fundamentally shaken, and the land allocation system collapsed. Also, self-consciousness withered when the Mongols came to power, and the related social contradictions were harshly criticized. In this atmosphere Buddhism became extremely corrupt and lost its status as a traditional guiding ideology. The times demanded the emergence of a new, more appropriate philosophy to fill this ideological void.

Those who were active in the revival of *Gwanhak* that resulted from this, such as Jeong Dojeon, Jeong Mongju and Yi Jehyeon sided with those who wished to do away with Buddhism, and the Neo-Confucianism of Chu-Hsi from China developed rapidly as a weapon of the up-and-coming *sadaebu* (aristocrats). The emergence of this new ideology meant a new start for society, and the exclusive character of Neo-Confucianism as a religion and its active political philosophy meant the arrival of a new age for Korean society.

3.5. Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty

3.5.1 Pro-Confucian Policies of the early Joseon Period

The Joseon Dynasty began with the support of up-and-coming *sadaebu* who adhered to Neo-Confucianism, and so early Joseon kings promoted pro-Confucian policies. This can be seen in the policies of Yi Seonggye (the founder of the Joseon Dynasty), which were based on Jeong Dojeon's "Statesmanship in Joseon" (*Joseon gyeonggukjeon*), King Taejong's pro-Confucian policies, and King Sejong's series of Confucian policies. The pro-Confucian policies of the Joseon Dynasty are exhibited in the pro-literary policies of King Sejong and King Seongjong's historical compilations, *Jiphyeonjeon* and *Hongmungwan*, and through the educational system

of the National Confucian Academy (*Seonggyun-gwan*). However, although Neo-Confucianism was greatly developed through these traditional Confucian policies, the conflict between the different schools came to the fore as a severe social problem.

3.5.2 The Flourishing of Neo-Confucianism

Neo-Confucianism developed as two basic factions in the late Goryeo period and early Joseon period. One of these was the Gwanhak Faction of those who participated in the founding of the Joseon Dynasty, such as Jeong Dojeon and Gweon Geun, and this faction focused on composition. The other was the Sahak Faction, which inherited the academic tradition of Gil Je, who lived in seclusion, and this faction focused on the Confucian classics. Neo-Confucianism reached its zenith in the 16th century thanks to the grand intellectual and practical-social achievements of Yi Hwang and Yi I.

Yi Hwang, who brought about the integration of the *Juri* Faction, focused on humanity's inner and moral inclinations, as well as reason. On the other hand, Yi I, who brought about the integration of the *Jugi* Faction, was interested in humanity's external emotions and the physical world, and actively participated in politics. The scholars that followed after them formed the Yeongnam Faction and the Giho Faction, which opposed each other, and other philosophies such as Jo Gwang-sun's moral philosophy and Song Shi-yeol's theories of etiquette also emerged.

3.5.3 The deterioration of Confucian thought in the late Joseon period

Metaphysical Neo-Confucianism ultimately focused on problems separated from reality and gave rise to factional strife, and it only promoted conflict among government officials. Realizing this, a number of scholars reconsidered Neo-Confucianism after the Japanese Invasion of 1592 and the Manchu War of 1636. Bak Sedang and Yun Hyu are the most representative of those who adopted anti-Neo-Confucian stances, and most *Silhak* ("practical learning") scholars also criticized the unrealistic nature of Neo-Confucianism.

This *Silhak* of the late Joseon period is significant in that it laid the foundation for the Enlightenment philosophy as the first philosophy that considered the people, and with its theories of active changes through rational thinking and the introduction of technology.

After the Enlightenment movement, foreign influence fundamentally shook Korean society. Furthermore, the economy of Joseon was ruined by the interference of the Japanese Empire, and an anti-foreign movement, centered around Confucian scholars, arose. This was not merely a nationalistic movement that rejected foreign influence, but a nationalistic movement based on the conservative orthodox ideology of Neo-Confucianism that sought to protect the autonomy of the people, a protective movement with a lucid national consciousness.

3.6 The role and influence of Confucianism

Above we discussed the process of change in Confucianism, in particular the development of Neo-Confucianism and its anti-foreign political nature. Ultimately, Confucianism influenced Korean society in the following ways:

Firstly, Confucianism strengthened royal authority and a thorough class consciousness through political ideologies that included thoughts on the principles of royalty, firmly establishing the basic social order of feudalism. Furthermore, it realized social justice through ethics and developed social morals.

Secondly, Confucianism's exclusive conservatism naturally created factional division and led to such problems as purges of the literati by opposing factions, and other forms of factional strife. In addition, its excessively closed nature led not only to the atrophying of learning, but also greatly limited development in commerce, industry and the arts. However, *seowon* and *hyanghak* schools, though they may have been a means of perpetuating the feudal social order, contributed greatly to the improvement and development of farming villages.

Finally, the exclusive conservatism and orthodoxy of Neo-Confucianism ultimately became the spiritual foundation for overcoming national crisis, and this was realized in the righteous armies (*uibyeong*) and the anti-foreign movement. This lent strength to a spirit of protecting the people.

4. Modern Thought

4.1 Silhak

4.1.1. Concepts and Characteristics of Silhak

A) Concepts of Silhak: Silhak ("practical learning") was a new trend in the academic world that arose with national self-examination and changes in politics, the economy and society after the Japanese Invasion of 1592 and the Manchu War of 1636. It was a departure from the empty theories and words of Neo-Confucianism that sought to reform social contradictions with realistic methods. It also refers to the changes in academia that developed on the basis of King Yeongjo and King Jeongjo's promotion of the arts.

This change in the academic world was led primarily by *yangban* [aristocratic] officials and rural scholars of the small to medium landowning middle class, as well as scholars from the Namin Faction, who were ruined yangban. The field of academic research transcended the metaphysical theories of Neo-Confucianism and expanded into such areas of social sciences,

Korean studies and natural sciences as politics, economics, society, Korean history, the Korean language, agriculture, and medicine.

B) The Characteristics of Silhak: As Silhak is the historical product of the social upheaval in the late Joseon period, its characteristics are varied. It is impossible to define it as having a fixed nature, but in general the following can be said to be its basic characteristics: a) it clearly criticized the institutions in place in farming villages, the bureaucracy and for slaves, and offered solutions to these problems; b) it proposed practical, substantial learning and issues, not empty theories and words, and in particular strove for a strong and wealthy nation and the peace of the people while thinking of the entire populace, and c) it brought about a new understanding of the nation through positivist, scientific and rational thinking, and emphasized reform for the people through technology, commerce and industry.

Let us take a closer look at these three characteristics. Firstly, as a search for the truth based on facts, the essential principles of Silhak were the idea that learning should promote practical benefit and the idea that ethics will follow if the basic needs of the people are met, and it focused on more substantial and practical reforms. That is, the academic theory that learning should promote practical benefit was the voice for those who favored agriculture-first policies, led by Yi Ik, while the theory that ethics follow if basic needs are met was adopted by the Bukhak school, centered around Bak Jiwon, which favored commerce-first policies.

Secondly, Silhak offered original, critical academic theories with rational and positivist methods. In particular, it consistently criticized the reality of farming villages, the political system, and the institution of slavery, and offered solutions to these problems. At the time, Silhak emphasized a land-distribution system and agriculture-first policies as reforms for the problems of poverty and land-ownership, while the Northern School promoted mercantilism, proposing reforms through the introduction of Qing China technology.

Thirdly, Silhak offered a new way of thinking about the nation and its people. That is, it sought to reclaim national territory and tradition through Korean history, the Korean language, and geography, and emphasized a clear national consciousness. This originated as the historical view of the Geungi School, and developed into a reconsideration of Goguryeo and Balhae and an independent historical view.

4.1.2 The origin and background of Silhak

A) A reflection on society: Silhak originated during political, economic and social chaos after the Japanese Invasion of 1592 and the Manchu War of 1636 as a reflection on corruption and a spiritual movement to avoid the ruin facing the Joseon Dynasty. Awareness and criticism of the state of ruin Joseon society was in after the Japanese Invasion and the Manchu War began

with the Namin Faction, who were excluded from government, and rural scholars from the small to medium landowning class. Silhak developed to take on a critical and defiant character.

B) The transmission of Western culture: With the introduction of Western culture from the 17th century on came a new understanding of a material and scientific civilization, and the flaws and futility of the empty words and theories of Neo-Confucianism were revealed. Academic reconsideration and criticism of metaphysical Neo-Confucianism sprung up, and a new, practical academic theory that helped people in everyday life was called for.

C) The influence of bibliographical study of the Chinese classics: Joseon academic research focused solely on Neo-Confucianism and did not allow other forms of Confucianism such as the doctrines of Wang Yang-ming. However, with the transmission of Qing China bibliographical study in the 17th century a positivist and critical spirit was aroused, and the attitude toward learning was changed. This first appeared in the study of Korean history and geography and developed into a criticism of Neo-Confucianism as a whole.

D) Yeongjo and Jeongjo's encouragement of learning: King Yeongjo and King Jeongjo's encouragement of learning and policies to prevent factional strife and promote the arts in the 18th century led to the publication of many books and the appearance of many scholars. In particular, the establishment of the Gyujanggak archives played a decisive role in the development and flourishing of learning and helped Silhak develop as well.

4.2 Donghak ("Eastern studies")

While the common people suffered under the political corruption and cruel extortion of the yangban class, Western religions gained in power and influence, leading to social unrest. In 1860, a man from Gyeongju named Choe Je-u formed a religious order to contest Western religions (Catholicism), and a religion for the simple common people was founded. Donghak was renamed Cheondogyo by Son Byeong-hui, the third head of the religion, and that name persists today. Cheondogyo sets as its goal a state of "union of the heavens and humanity."

4.3 Daejonggyo

This is a folk religion unique to Korea that worships the deity "Haneol-nim" [a honorific of Heaven, supposed to be the origin of the deities ancestral to humanity]. It was founded on the fifteenth day of the first month of the lunar year in 1909 by Na Cheol.

1. When was Confucianism first accepted to Korean and what was its function?
2. For a long time Confucianism has taken an important role in pedagogical terms, What are related to Confucianism in the Korean educational system?
3. In Joseon Period Confucianism had developed into diverse forms and discuss

these trends.

4. Discuss the backgrounds for the beginning of Silhak and the following characteristic.
5. What are the religions developed in Korea since the late 19th century?