

Historical Background: Korean Neo-Confucianism

Confucianism was the most common intellectual, moral and cultural heritage of East Asia. Korea had a long and rich tradition of Confucianism since the early period. Particularly in the Chosŏn dynasty, it affected Korean philosophy, religion, social and political systems, and ways of life. For many centuries in Korea, it has been a code of family and social ethics and an intellectual discourse, as well as a political ideology. It also maintained some religious dimension in terms of its spiritual teaching and practice and its ritualistic tradition. And yet, it differs from other religious or philosophical traditions because it tends to integrate most aspects of human life and culture, including learning, moral and spiritual self-cultivation, family regulation, social harmony, political order, and cultural identity.

In the Three Kingdoms period (57 B.C.E.–668 C.E.),¹ Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism were all officially accepted by the ruling class and later spread to the commoners. In fact, each of three kingdoms supported Confucianism not only as an important part of Chinese learning, but also as an institutional means of maintaining its aristocratic power and its socio-political order. In addition, Confucian ritualism was embodied in official court ceremonies, including the veneration of deceased kings and other leaders. The people of Silla, for example, learned Confucian ethics and put it into practice in their daily life. The impact of Confucianism on Silla society indicates that even some Buddhist monks tried to incorporate certain Confucian moral teachings.² The people of Silla had a custom of a three-year mourning for the death of parents, one that originates from the Confucian rite system.³ Another good example of Confucian influence is Silla's Hwarangdo (way of the flower youth), a quasi-religious and military academy for aristocratic sons, which promoted the Confucian way of learning and self-cultivation.⁴ This academy was particularly important in welding together Silla Korean society. The Confucian virtue of loyalty, its cohesive force, facilitated Silla not only to maintain the authority of the throne, but also to unify two neighboring kingdoms.

In the Unified Silla period (668–935), Confucianism began to rival Buddhism. In the eighth and ninth centuries, many Korean students were sent to Tang China and studied Confucianism at its national academy. Still, Confucianism was studied mainly in Buddhist temples and monasteries, the

academic and religious centers of Unified Silla. Meanwhile, Confucian scholars promoted Confucianism as an alternative system of learning, self-cultivation, and political ideology for building a bureaucratic state in which they and their followers could prosper under state patronage. The establishment of the state examination system clearly reflects Unified Silla's decision to promote Confucian learning, rather than noble lineage, as the basis of selecting government officials.

The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Koryŏ Period

On the whole, there is not enough evidence to argue that Confucianism was important to everyone in the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla periods. It played a subordinate role to the traditional ideas and institutions maintained by noble families and hereditary aristocrats, as well as by the Buddhist tradition. Not until the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the late thirteenth century did the Confucian tradition begin to exert a profound impact on Korean thought, religion, socio-political systems, and ways of life.

Confucian Academies and State Examinations

In the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392), there was a serious blow to high officials of aristocratic origin. King Kwangjong (949–975), following the model of T'ang China, appointed many Confucian scholars who had passed the state examination (*kwagŏ*) to official government positions.⁵ The civil service examination system consisted of three major sections: the composition examination (*chesul kwa*), the classics examination (*myŏnggyŏng kwa*), and the miscellaneous examination (*chap kwa*).⁶ All members of aristocratic families and the freeborn peasants were allowed to sit for the examinations, but the low-born slaves and the children of Buddhist monks were ineligible. During the Unified Silla period, the criteria for selecting government officials tended to privilege the members of hereditary aristocratic families. However, the Koryŏ people of local elite groups had their opportunities to advance into the central bureaucracy. It was possible for more young men to become government officials in the Koryŏ period.

While relying on the views of Confucian scholars, Sŏngjong (r. 981–997), the sixth king of Koryŏ, instituted a reform of the local government structure and laid the new foundation of Koryŏ's aristocratic order. He liked Confucianism and was well versed in Confucian classics. In the second year

of his reign (982), a portrait of Confucius, the tableware used in Confucian ceremonies, and the texts regarding the achievements of the “Seventy-two Worthies” (Confucius’ disciples) were brought to Koryŏ Korea from Sung China. In fact, these stimulated the observance of Confucian ceremonies for the veneration of the Confucian sages throughout the country.

Meanwhile, Buddhism and Confucianism maintained a mutually supportive relationship. However, Confucian scholars, who had more interest in promoting their own scholarship as well as in capturing the political power of the central government, urged that Confucianism be fully established as the state ethico-political ideology. For example, in his *Simu sippal cho* (Twenty-Eight Proposals for Government Administration) submitted to the king, Ch’oe Sŭng-no (927–989) describes Buddhism as the religious foundation for personal salvation and Confucianism as the moral and socio-political basis of ordering the state and governing the people.⁷ Following Ch’oe’s and others’ recommendations, King Sŏngjong, built the first national Confucian shrine, called Sajik tang, in 991 and then another one, Taemyo (Great Shrine), for venerating the Confucian sages of China.⁸ More important, he organized a national Confucian academy (Kukchagam) in the following year, which quickly led to establishing Koryŏ’s educational system on the basis of Confucian learning.⁹

In a state committed to the principle of rule by civil officials in accordance with Confucian political ideals, Confucianism began to prosper from the early eleventh century. According to Confucianism, a centralized state should be governed by a benevolent ruler and his loyal ministers, whose political legitimacy is sanctioned by a morally rational view of the harmony of human beings, society, government, and the universe. As such an ethico-political thinking gradually received more nationwide support among the leading elite classes of the Koryŏ dynasty, Confucianism, which previously had little political power in comparison with Buddhism, began to develop into an institutionalized state ideology from the middle of the eleventh century. Local Confucian academies centers were not yet fully organized during Sŏngjong’s reign. To spread Confucian education in local areas, King Sŏngjong first brought young students from the countryside to the capital.¹⁰ When this program failed, however, he sent Confucian scholars to the countryside to establish regional schools known as Hyanggyo and to teach students in local areas.¹¹ Such an educational system, despite its high cost, expanded to produce a new elite class of scholar-officials. But as the state gained social mobility and political stability, it relied more on its examination system, which cost much less to recruit new qualified officials, thereby no longer being able to adequately support its educational institutions in local

areas. Consequently, private Confucian schools began to appear and quickly became popular among most aristocratic sons, who depended on the quality of these private academies founded by some of the famous former scholar-officials.

In Munjong's reign (1046–1083), for example, the great Confucian scholar, Ch'oe Ch'ung (984–1068), who held a top government position as chancellor, established a specialized Confucian academy, called the Nine-Course Academy, where lectures were given in nine specialized areas of study.¹² This academy offered aristocratic sons who planned to take state examinations the following three basic programs: the Five Classics and Four Books; the Three Histories; and the study of literature.¹³ Also known as Master Ch'oe's Assembly, it, in fact, marked the beginning of private Confucian academies in Korea. For this reason, Ch'oe's followers called their master the Confucius of Korea. His academy and eleven other private academies were known as the Twelve Assemblies (*sibi to*).¹⁴ In fact, most instructors in these Confucian schools were eminent scholar-officials of the day, and many of them supervised the state examinations. This circumstance and the emphasis placed on aristocratic lineage background led many aristocratic sons to consider it a great honor to attend one of these private academies. However, one serious problem was that such a trend helped the private academies, instructors, and students monopolize the state examination system in the capital. The examiner was called an examination master, and his student who passed the examination was called his disciple; that is, the master-disciple relationship formed a very close personal relationship.¹⁵ This tradition later became a major factor for causing and maintaining academic and political factionalism. In addition to the financial burden, this is why the freeborn peasant youth found it virtually impossible to attend these academies and take part in the civil service examinations.

As the state academies declined in popularity, the private schools flourished. This led King Yejong (r. 1103–1122) in 1107 to establish seven programs in the specialized fields of Confucian classics at the National Confucian Academy.¹⁶ He appointed distinguished instructors in each area. After establishing a scholarship foundation called *yanghyŏn'go* (Fund for Nurturing Worthies), he built more Confucian institutes in the palace and recruited young scholars for promoting the study of Chinese Confucian classics and histories. During the early twelfth century, then, this brought about a number of famous Confucian scholars. Among them was Kim Pu-sik who is well-known for his *Samguk sagi* (History of the Three Kingdoms), an important book on the early history of Korea in the annalistic form. Another eminent Confucian scholar was Yun On-i, who studied Confucianism in Sung China

for seven years and who wrote two important works, *Yōkhak* (Philosophy of Changes) and *Yōkhae* (*Book of Changes Explained*), which had been lost.¹⁷ While continuing to support state institutes on the basis of Confucian learning, King Injong (r. 1122–1146), Yejong's successor, completed Koryō's education system by establishing the so-called Six Colleges of the Capital at the National Confucian Academy, as well as by building more local academies in the countryside.¹⁸ The first three colleges were designed especially for the study of the following Confucian texts: Five Classics, Four Books, *Hsiao-ching* (Classic of Filial Piety), *Tso chuan* (Tso's Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals), *Chou li* (Rites of Chou), and *I li* (Rules of Rites).

During the most of the Koryō period, however, Korea was isolated from Sung China because of the Liao and Chin states that occupied northern China. However, following Koryō's surrender to the Mongols after thirty years of struggle, the Korea-China relationship began to improve.¹⁹ This historical event then reopened channels of intellectual contact between Sung China and Koryō Korea. Thus many of the Koryō scholars traveled to Sung China and studied the new form of Confucianism, known as the Ch'eng-Chu school. This then introduced Sung Neo-Confucianism to Korea in the late thirteenth, or early fourteenth, century.

The Introduction of Neo-Confucianism to Korea

There has been some dispute over when and how Neo-Confucianism was brought to Koryō. Some say that the scholar-official An Hyang (1243–1306) introduced it during the reign of Ch'ungyōl (1274–1308). This claim is based on the biography of An Hyang,²⁰ and modern historians tend to favor it.²¹ However, others argue that Paek I-jong (fl. 1275–1325) was the first Korean scholar to propagate Sung Neo-Confucianism in Korea, and this occurred a few years later in King Ch'ungsuk's reign (1313–1339). This view corresponds to the biography of Paek I-jong,²² and some early Korean historians accepted it, without giving further historical evidences.²³

An Hyang was a member of the new elite class of Confucian scholar-officials. He believed that the most effective way to confront the entrenched aristocrats and corrupt Buddhists was to follow the Chinese model of adopting Sung Neo-Confucianism as the new state religion and ideology. In 1290, he accompanied King Ch'ungyōl on a royal trip to Beijing, where he met Chinese Neo-Confucian scholars. After becoming deeply impressed by Chu Hsi's writings in particular, he brought home in the following year a copy of

Chu Tzu ch'üan-shu (Complete Works of Master Chu).²⁴ As a high-ranking government official, he then revitalized the National Confucian Academy to disseminate Neo-Confucian learning.²⁵ He also found it necessary to expand the state schools so that they could overcome the popularity of private academies. For this task, he established a scholarship fund to support state academies and purchase Sung Neo-Confucian texts from China. In recognition of these accomplishments, he was later appointed as the head of the Confucian Shrine. These facts support the view that An Hyang was the first Korean who introduced Neo-Confucianism to Koryŏ Korea.

According to another view, An Hyang's junior Paek I-jong brought Neo-Confucianism to Korea in 1314. Paek is considered as "the first Korean to study the Ch'eng-Chu learning" in China where Neo-Confucianism was flourishing under the state support of the Yüan dynasty.²⁶ He stayed with King Ch'ungsŏn (r. 1298 and 1308–1313) in the Yüan capital for about a decade, and there he devoted himself to the study of Sung Neo-Confucianism.²⁷ When he returned to Koryŏ, he taught it to Yi Che-hyŏn (1287–1367), Pak Ch'ung-hwa (1287–1349), and other Korean scholars. Several historical points are relevant here. Although An Hyang might not have had sufficient time to study Sung Neo-Confucianism or teach it to other Koreans, he actually laid the foundation for the transmission of Sung Neo-Confucianism in Korea. On the other hand, we have to give a good deal of credit to Paek I-jong for mastering Neo-Confucianism in China, as well as for helping to propagate it in Korea.

From the late Koryŏ period, the Ch'eng-Chu school in Korea began to receive strong support from the new class of Confucian scholar-officials who did not find fulfilment either in Buddhism or in the old tradition of philology-centred Confucianism. Its development can be divided into three stages: first, the early fourteenth century when it was first introduced to Korea; second, its increasing acceptance a half century later; and third, its expansion with a harsh criticism against Buddhism during the last years of the Koryŏ dynasty. During the first stage, a great number of Sung Neo-Confucian writings were imported from China. An Hyang, for instance, sent Kim Mun-jong to bring back portraits of Confucius and his seventy-two disciples, Neo-Confucian texts, and officials vessels for performing Confucian rituals.²⁸ With an increasing recognition of Neo-Confucianism, the government renamed Kukhak (National College) as Sŏnggyun'gwan (Royal College) in the early fourteenth century. It sent two instructors of the Sŏnggyun'gwan to China, and they brought home more Confucian classics and Neo-Confucian writings, numbering over 10,000 volumes. The Sŏnggyun'gwan instructed these texts to its students, a few of whom became famous Neo-

Confucian scholars, such as Kwŏn Po (1262–1346), Yi Chin (1244–1321), U T'ak (1263–1342), and Yi Che-hyŏn (1287–1367) in the late Koryŏ period. In the Chosŏn dynasty, this Confucian academy produced many more eminent Neo-Confucians, especially T'oegye and Yulgok, and continued to serve as the most important center for education, scholarship, and political influence in Korea up to 1910.²⁹

Kwŏn Po was a student of An Hyang, who published Chu Hsi's *Ssu-shu chi-chu* (Collected Commentaries on the Four Books) with his own comments. According to his biography, "Korean commentaries on Neo-Confucianism began with Kwŏn Po."³⁰ U T'ak was well-known for mastering Chu Hsi's commentary on the *Book of Changes*. It is said that after teaching it to his students, the Ch'eng-Chu school began to prosper in the late Koryŏ period.³¹ Yi Che-hyŏn was Kwŏn Po's friend and a student of Paek I-jong. He went to the Yüan capital with King Ch'ungŏn. At the Hall of Ten Thousand Volumes, a library built by the Korean king,³² he met several leading Chinese Neo-Confucian scholars, including Yao Sui (1238–1313), a disciple of the eminent Yüan Neo-Confucian Hsü Heng (1209–1281). There, Yi Che-hyŏn developed friendly relationships with them and was fully exposed to current Neo-Confucian thought. These circumstances then led to the development of Neo-Confucianism in fourteenth century Korea.

Chŏng Mong-ju and Other Neo-Confucian Scholars

The second stage of development began when Neo-Confucian scholar-officials especially Yi Saek (Mogŭn, 1328–1396), Chŏng Mong-ju (Poŭn, 1337–1392), Yi Sung-in (Toŭn, d. 1392), Kim Ku-yong (1339–1384), and Pak Sang-chung (1332–1375) began to institute the state education system at the Sŏnggyun'gwan and attack the Buddhist institutions. These men strongly supported the status of the Sŏnggyun'gwan as the national center for Confucian education. In 1363, for example, Yi Saek proclaimed that everyone, who wished to take any state examination, must first study Neo-Confucianism at the Sŏnggyun'gwan. Several years later, at the request of him and others, the Sŏnggyun'gwan revised its programs to establish specialized course offerings in the Five Classics and Four Books.³³ They taught Sung Neo-Confucianism to such brilliant students as Chŏng To-jŏn (Sambong, 1342–1398), Kwŏn Kŭn (Yangch'on, 1352–1409), and Kil Chae (Yaŭn, 1353–1418), all of whom became influential Neo-Confucian scholars in the transitional Koryŏ-Chosŏn period. Thereafter, the Sŏnggyun'gwan

continued to flourish, many more students came to study there, and the Koryŏ government finally closed the private academies in 1391.

Chŏng Mong-ju, like Yi Saek, was an influential scholar-official and served as an instructor at the Sŏnggyun'gwan. He was well versed in the Five Classics, Four Books, and Chu Hsi's commentaries on the Four Books.³⁴ Yi Saek once praised Chŏng's knowledge of Sung Neo-Confucianism highly, saying that Chŏng's understanding of Ch'eng-Chu teachings was accurate, rich, and original. He even called Chŏng the "founder of the school of principle (*ihak/li-hsüeh*) in Korea." The term *ihak* is one of the common terms used for referring to Sung Neo-Confucianism; it is usually reserved for the Ch'eng-Chu school as something opposed to the Lu-Wang "school of the mind" (*simhak/hsin-hsüeh*), a main outgrowth of Neo-Confucianism associated with the Ming philosopher Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) and his predecessor Lu Hsiang-shan (1139–1192) in Sung China.³⁵ Chŏng seriously learned Sung Confucianism and put it into his practice of the moral life. For this reason, his contemporaries praised him as the first Korean who elevated Confucianism in Korea to the level of philosophical thinking and moral self-cultivation.³⁶ Of course, this claim is valid partly because Confucianism, ever since its introduction to early Korea, was studied from the standpoint of either literary composition or political ideology.

To propagate Neo-Confucian ethics, Chŏng Mong-ju encouraged others to use the Confucian custom of a three-year mourning for the death of parents.³⁷ At the same time, he criticized the traditional Buddhist 100-day mourning and observed the Confucian custom for the death of his father.³⁸ This was especially noteworthy because other Neo-Confucian scholars saw it as crucial to changing a social and ethico-religious practice on the basis of Neo-Confucianism. Furthermore, Chŏng was the first Korean Neo-Confucian who also advocated study and practice of Chu Hsi's *Chia li* (Family Rituals).³⁹ Following Chu Hsi's recommendation, he strongly urged every family to build a Confucian shrine called *sadang* (place of worship) for performing ancestor veneration and other Confucian rituals.⁴⁰

The Criticism of Buddhism in the Late Koryŏ Dynasty

Toward the end of the Koryŏ dynasty, the state patronage of Neo-Confucianism gained its stronger momentum. Most leading Neo-Confucians began to attack Buddhism, criticizing its spiritual and institutional decay. From Confucian perspectives, Koryŏ Buddhism was charged with causing corruption in government institutions. Criticizing the Buddhist

monastic life, Chŏn Mong-ju, for example, said: "The Confucian way is simply about our daily affairs. It is the way of Yao and Shun. The Buddhist teaching is not natural not only because it ignores parents and family and neglects the distinction between men and women, but also because it urges people to sit in caves away from society."⁴¹ Yi Saek also argued that, although the Buddha was a great "sage," Korean Buddhist monks had corrupted Koryŏ society, and that the government should be reformed according to Neo-Confucian ideals.⁴²

Another serious critique of Buddhism was on economic grounds. For centuries, Koryŏ scholar-officials were dissatisfied with the political factionalism of Buddhist institutions, as well as with their control over estates, slaves, and financial monopolies. Yi In-jok (?–1395), for example, demanded that the Buddhist temples and their lands and slaves must be subject to the secular state control, and that one should be prohibited from becoming a monk unless one has an official approval from the state.⁴³ Kim Cha-su (fl. 1374) criticized Buddhist rituals for being "superstitious" and, therefore, argued that they should be supervised by the state.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Pak Cho (1367–1454) attacked Buddhism in several ways: Buddhism is a religion that distorts human nature and creates evil; Buddhist monks should be subject to military service; and Buddhist texts be destroyed.⁴⁵

As the Koryŏ dynasty was falling apart, most Neo-Confucian scholars of this time supported Sung Neo-Confucianism as a new philosophy of life with emphasis on the self, family, society, and government; as an educational system focused on rational learning and moral cultivation; and as a practical religion whose spiritual teachings support a concrete set of ethical and political guidelines for governing the people. In short, it offered them the hope of creating a new moral and socio-political order out of the old society dominated by the Buddhist tradition.

Neo-Confucianism in the Early Chosŏn Dynasty

Instead of his duty to fight the Ming Chinese forces in 1388, General Yi Sŏnggye, who had already witnessed the collapse of the Yüan empire and the rise of the Ming dynasty, withdrew his army from the Yalu River and marched toward the Koryŏ capital to seize political power. This led to the beginning of the Yi Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910). Liberal Neo-Confucian scholar-officials, such Chŏng To-jŏn and Kwŏn Kŭn, supported Yi's claims of the legitimacy of the new dynasty. However, others like Chŏng Mong-ju opposed Yi's revolt by maintaining that it was an immoral act and the new

regime could never, according to Confucian moral principles, achieve political legitimacy. As a result, Chǒng was murdered by one of Yi's sons, and Koryŏ quickly fell. Chǒng is still admired by modern Koreans not only because he suffered martyrdom to defend his loyalty to Koryŏ, but also as a Korean paradigm of the Confucian virtues of loyalty and righteousness.

Chǒng Mong-ju's followers, such as Yi Saek (Mogŭn), Kil Chae (Ch'iŭn), and Yi Sung-in (Toŭn), chose to have the term *ŭn* (literally, "retirement") as the second character of their pen names. To them, this was important not only for sharing the same second character of Chǒng's pen name (P'oŭn), but also for paying respect to their spiritual leader. These Neo-Confucians, in fact, retired from the political world of the day; therefore, they and their followers became known as the Mountain-Grove School (*sallim hakp'a*), referring to their retirement to the countryside.⁴⁶ For example, Kil Chae withdrew to his home province of Kŏyngsang, the southeastern Yŏngnam area of the Korean peninsula, and established an academy there to train his students in Neo-Confucianism. Many eminent Neo-Confucian scholars, especially Yi T'oegye and his followers, came from this region during the later period. In fact, they developed the famous Yŏngnam school that became closely associated with the school of the primacy of principle (*churip'a*), one of the two leading schools of Korean Neo-Confucianism.

*Chǒng To-jŏn: The Establishment of
Neo-Confucianism as the State Religion
and Political Ideology*

In a period of dynastic and ideological transition, Sung Neo-Confucianism facilitated Yi Sŏnggae to ascend to the throne and to begin the Chosŏn dynasty as King T'aejo (r. 1392–1398). As a military man rather than a scholar, he was initially not interested in Neo-Confucianism partly because he tended to remain faithful to Buddhism. Although he condemned the political corruption of Koryo Buddhism especially in terms of its corrupt monks, its land holdings, and its control over slaves, he did not quite reject the basic religious doctrines of Buddhism.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, by taking advantage of Yi's rise to power, many Neo-Confucian scholar-officials began to establish Sung Neo-Confucianism as the new state religion and ideology. These men were concerned with the social, political, and economic problems of this time; therefore, the Ch'eng-Chu school offered them not only the hope of creating a new socio-political order out of the corrupt old society but also an ethical and religious system of thought that provided a refreshing set of goals and methods to legitimize the authority of the new dynasty.

Among Yi's close supporters was Chŏng To-jŏn (Sambong, 1342–1398) who assisted his ascent to power.⁴⁸ Sambong was a graduate from the Sŏnggyun'gwan and a disciple of the eminent late Koryŏ scholar Yi Saek. As an influential Neo-Confucian and a close friend of Yi, he laid the foundation of the major institutional structures of the new government, thereby playing a crucial role in establishing the Ch'eng-Chu tradition of Neo-Confucianism as the ethical and religious basis for it. His first approach to reform was a revision of the legal code according to Neo-Confucian ethical and political ideals. As the principal architect of the new dynasty, he wrote major political works, such as the *Chosŏn kyŏngguk chŏn* (Chosŏn's Codes for Governing the Country),⁴⁹ *Kyŏngje mun'gam* (Historical Mirror for Managing the World and Saving the People),⁵⁰ and *Kyŏngje mun'gam pyŏlchip* (A Supplement to *Kyŏngje mun'gam*).⁵¹ All of these provided a general framework of the polity and social order of the new dynasty, becoming the basis of his *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* (Great Codes for Governing the Country), the new dynasty's political canon. In addition, he wrote the first draft of a history of Koryŏ that constitutes the core of Koryŏ's official history known as the *Koryŏsa*.

At the same time, Sambong launched a serious attack against Buddhism. He was, in my view, the first Korean Neo-Confucian to formulate a systematic philosophical criticism of Buddhist doctrines, as revealed in his two essays: *Simgii p'yŏn* (On Mind, Material Force, and Principle) and *Pulssi chapp'yŏn* (Arguments Against the Buddha). The three-part work *Simgii p'yŏn* is a critical comparative analysis of Taoism, Buddhism, and Neo-Confucianism in which Sambong quotes Confucius, Mencius, and Chu Hsi to criticize both Buddhism and Taoism.⁵² Sambong's main argument is that Neo-Confucianism is metaphysically and ethically superior to the other two traditions, which are, according to him, "false teachings." The Buddhist method of self-cultivation is concerned too much with what he calls the "subjective calmness" of mind (*sim/hsin*), ignoring the objective reality of things, society, and culture, whereas the Taoist teachings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu are charged for emphasizing only the attainment of physical longevity by means of nourishing "material force" (*ki/ch'i*).⁵³ Sambong's conclusion is that the Neo-Confucian learning of human nature (*sŏng/hsing*) and principle (*i/li*) is more valuable in the context of not only integrating both Buddhist and Taoist teachings, but also emphasizing the objective reality of learning, self-cultivation, and socio-political orders.

The *Pulssi chapp'yŏn* is a more systematic critique of Buddhism, one that presents Sung Neo-Confucianism as the orthodox tradition of learning and self-cultivation, defending Ch'eng-Chu metaphysics and ethics.⁵⁴ Following two Sung Neo-Confucians, Ch'eng I and Chu Hsi,⁵⁵ he addressed the fol-

lowing points: first, the Buddhist ideas of *samsara* and *karma* and their implications for “rewards and punishments” are “wrong and immoral”;⁵⁶ second, the Buddhist theory of knowledge neglects objective principles because it regards the phenomenal world as only an “illusion”;⁵⁷ and finally, its ethico-spiritual teachings on the method of self-cultivation are focused too much on the “emptiness” of the mind, ignoring the family and society.⁵⁸

Kwŏn Kŭn and Neo-Confucian Scholarship

In addition to Sambong, Kŏwn Kŭn (Yangch'on, 1352–1409) was an important Neo-Confucian, a former dean of the Sŏnggyun'gwan who helped the new government in establishing Neo-Confucianism as the basis of its state religion and ideology. He did so by preparing a number of influential scholarly works. Most of his writings are collected in *Yangch'on munjip* (Collected Literary Works of Yangch'on),⁵⁹ which contains a good deal of historical information as well. Among them are *Yegi ch'ŏngyŏk nok* (Commentary on the *Book of Rites*) and *Sangjŏl karye* (Annotated Edition of *Family Rites*); these are, in fact, the first Korean Neo-Confucian commentaries on Confucian rituals and ceremonies. These texts facilitated the promotion of the state rituals of the Chosŏn dynasty during its first century. Yangch'on wrote another important text, *Ogyŏng ch'ŏngyŏng nok* (Commentary on the Five Classics), which is now lost. Finally, his name was also known for his annotation of Sambong's anti-Buddhist literature.

Yangch'on was a close friend of Sambong. Like Sambong, he used Ch'eng-Chu Neo-Confucian doctrines to criticize Buddhism. He argued that Buddhism is “partial,” whereas Neo-Confucianism is “correct”⁶⁰ and that the Confucian virtue of filial piety is the greatest virtue to be cultivated and put into practice.⁶¹ In his view, Neo-Confucianism is superior to Buddhism because it “perfects both substance and function”; that is to say, its way of self-cultivation integrates both inner life and outer life.⁶² Thus, he emphasized the unity of knowledge and action in learning and self-cultivation.

Yangch'on's most famous work is the *Iphak tosŏl* (Diagrammatic Treatise for the Commencement of Learning), the first systematic formulation of Neo-Confucian metaphysics and ethics in Korea.⁶³ He completed it in 1397, and then it was published fifty-five times in both Korea and Japan, due to its highly scholarly significance. It consists of twenty-six diagrams relating to the Five Classics, Four Books, and Sung Neo-Confucian writings. The first diagram is the *Ch'ŏnin simsŏng habil to* (Diagram of the Unity and Oneness of Heaven, Human Beings, Mind, and Nature); it is especially significant because it summarizes the basic teachings of Neo-Confucian metaphysics, ethics, and psychological theory.⁶⁴ Yangch'on based it partly on the *T'ai-chi*

t'u (Diagram of the Great Ultimate) by the Sung Neo-Confucian Chou Tun-i (1017–1073), as well as on Chu Hsi's commentaries on the *Great Learning* and *Doctrine of the Mean*.⁶⁵ Presenting Ch'eng-Chu teachings, it mentions, for the first time in Korea, the ideas of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom that pertain to the "Four Beginnings"; more to the point, it lists the emotions of pleasure, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hatred, and desire and briefly describes them in terms of principle (*i/li*) and material force (*ki/ch'i*). In Korea, Yangch'on was, then, the first Neo-Confucian who spoke of the Four-Seven topic. Although he did not directly speak of the terms "Four Beginnings" and "Seven Emotions" in his *Ch'önin simsöng habil chi to*, he assigned benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom to human nature (*söng/hsing*), and the list of Seven Emotions to the mind-and-heart (*sim/hsin*). As we will see later, this aspect of his diagram had some influence on the initial stage of the Four-Seven debate.

Upon the impact of Chöng's and Kwön's writings in particular, the Chosön dynasty declared Sung Neo-Confucianism as the basis of its orthodox school. The announcement was made memorable in King Sejong's royal edict of 1421. According to it, even the king, his sons, and all scholar-officials, should go to the Confucian shrine and humble themselves before the sages and worthies.

The question is, To what extent was Neo-Confucianism compatible with the social and political conditions of the Koryo-Chosön transitional period? Undoubtedly, the first step for scholar-officials was to establish it as the state religion and ideology by giving an ethico-spiritual and political justification for the new dynasty's legitimacy. For the new elite class, it meant a renewed commitment to China and its Confucian tradition. For example, Sambong and Yangch'on supported the new dynasty to promote the Ch'eng-Chu school. They argued that because the old dominance of Buddhism was morally and spiritually corrupt, cultural progress must involve a reform to bring about moral, social, and political orders according to Confucian principles. Their rejection of what the Ch'eng-Chu tradition saw as a "pessimistic" Buddhist worldview was not a difficult matter in an environment whose culture had already been considerably Confucianized from early times.

Why did this generate such irreversible enthusiasm and conviction in the Korean context? As we have seen in Sambong's and Yangch'on's writings, Neo-Confucianism was considered as the new intellectual, ethical and spiritual guide for scholar-officials to sustain a centralized, bureaucratic Confucian state. Following the Four Books and Neo-Confucian commentaries, they found an inseparability of Confucian scholarship and politics. Confucian ethics emphasizes the essential link between learning, self-cultivation, family

regulation, social harmony, political order, and cultural prosperity. To Korean scholar-officials, it represented a cultural universalism based on the harmony of the natural, social, and political orders, which reflects the "secular as sacred" symbol (to use Herbert Fingarette's terminology).⁶⁶ Of course, the entire Confucian tradition tends to reveal certain complexity about the notion of "sacredness." In addition to the family as the basic locus of sacredness and continuity, the Korean Neo-Confucians took the socio-political order as another source of them. They saw no separation between the church and the state, as well as no room for any utopian spiritual sanctuary outside the world of here and now. The Ch'eng-Chu tradition was considered a convincing force that could universalize an ethico-political ideology and an educational and social system. In other words, the state itself assumed a good deal of ethico-religious significance.

To Sambong and his fellow scholar-officials, Neo-Confucian metaphysics, moral teachings, and political ideologies were an effective alternative to the corrupt Buddhist tradition of the Koryŏ dynasty, one that had a concrete and practical way to govern the country including educational, social, and spiritual matters. This was addressed in the light of what Neo-Confucianism, especially its statecraft tradition, calls *kyŏngse/ching-shih* ("to manage the world"), *chemin/chi-min* ("to save the people"), and *kyŏngguk/ching-kuo* (or *ch'iguk/chi-kuo*; "to rule the country"). In fact, Sambong used all of these ideas not only to address the essentials of Confucian political thought, but also to title his writings, such as the *Chosŏn kyŏngguk chŏn*, *Kyŏngje mun'gam*, and *Kyŏngje mun'gam pyŏlchip*. For example, the Sino-Korean term *kyŏngje* (or *kyŏng-che* with a hyphen) in the last two titles is the combined form of the *kyŏngse* and the *chemin*. For Sambong and his followers, then, even economic issues were to be addressed in the Confucian context of administrating a political economy. These Neo-Confucian political ideas and concerns were the focus of their statecraft school; in the later period, they also played a major role in the works of other eminent Korean Neo-Confucians, especially Cho Kwang-jo (Chŏnggam, 1482–1519) and Yi Yulgok.

Neo-Confucian Education and State Examination System

With the establishment and spread of Neo-Confucianism, the state examination system, which was put into effect in Koryŏ as a way of recruiting government officials, took on a more central role in the Chosŏn dynasty. The Neo-Confucian literati had great socio-political might in the entire society. They devised a system of administrative law infused with ethico-

political ideals of Confucianism. They constituted *yangban*, the privileged two orders of civil and military officials. The term *yangban* distinguishes them from other social classes.⁶⁷ Given the fact that marriage between *yangban* and lower classes was prohibited, the *yangban* state became exclusively hereditary in this Confucian society. As a result, social classes of literati and commoners were strictly separated according to birth and lineage. For example, occupational distinctions maintained a hierarchical order with the *yangban* class occupying the highest place. Rights and duties were prescribed for each group by law. Although the elite class enjoyed political, social, and cultural privileges, its men became government officials through civil-service examination or by the merit of their ancestors to the state. They commanded the administration of government, economy, and culture. We may designate this Confucian society as an elite, *yangban*-dominant society.

One of the most fascinating facts about the entire Confucian tradition in East Asia is Korea as the most thoroughly Confucianized state during the five centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty. From the early fifteenth century, Chosŏn society accepted Neo-Confucianism; by the eighteenth century, almost all levels of the whole society became transformed into what JaHyun Kim Haboush calls a *Confucian normative society*.⁶⁸ As the conscious attempt of the *yangban* elite to Confucianize the whole society became stronger, many elite families and Neo-Confucian bureaucrats began to compete in their power struggle. Indeed, one can argue that Neo-Confucianism played a powerful intellectual and ethico-political role that engendered an elite *yangban* society, on the one hand, and a conservative bureaucratic tradition, on the other. This has been the most popular area in current scholarship in traditional Korean history, society, and politics, one that need not be rehearsed here.⁶⁹

To protect common interests of the whole *yangban* class, the early Chosŏn dynasty found it wise to put primary emphasis on state examinations. From the early fifteenth century, then, Confucian education thus became a primary gateway to personal and family success. However, note that, although any commoner of free-born status theoretically was allowed to write examinations, the *yangban* quickly monopolized the state examination system, partly because financial and educational opportunities to attend Confucian academies and, thus, to prepare for the examinations were available almost exclusively to the sons of the *yangban* class.

These examinations were conducted at two levels: lower examinations (*sokwa*) and higher examinations (*taekwa*).⁷⁰ The former included the classics licentiate examination (*saengwŏn si*) on the Five Classics and the Four Books and the literary licentiate examination (*chinsa si*) on skill in composing such

Chinese literary works as poetry, documentary prose, and problem essays. The texts used in the examinations also included Neo-Confucian commentaries, histories, and other books. The most important ones among the Neo-Confucian texts were the *Hsing-li ta-ch'üan* (Great Compendium on Human Nature and Principle), Chu Hsi's *Hsiao-hsüeh* (Elementary Learning) and *Chin-ssu lu* (Reflections on Things at Hand), and the *Ssu-shu chang-chü chichu* (Collected Commentaries on the Words and Phrases of the Four Books). The first three were especially important to the extent that, in the early fifteenth century, many copies of these texts were regularly brought from Ming China. Hence, the government continued to develop its public academies, which was, in fact, significant for Neo-Confucian scholar-officials to establish a thoroughly Confucian society on the basis of the state examination and education systems. However, as they began to accumulate more political power throughout the whole country, this soon led to the severe purges of Neo-Confucian literati.

The Purges of Neo-Confucian Literati

During King Söngjong's reign (1469–1494), many rural Neo-Confucian intellectuals were appointed to high-ranking government positions. The Sino-Korean term *sarim* (forest of literati) commonly designated groups of these Neo-Confucian literati who maintained their academic bases in the countryside. In the southeastern Kyöngsang province, a few Neo-Confucians carried on the teachings of Kil Chae, a follower of the late Koryö scholar-official Chöng Mong-ju, who had retired to his home province. Like their spiritual masters, Chöng and Kil, these men had remained faithful to the declining Koryö court, refusing to accept any government positions under the Yi Sönggae faction. Their leading figures were Kim Chong-jik (1431–1492), Kim Il-son (d. 1498), and the former's disciples, Kim Koeng-p'il (1453–1504) and Chöng Yö-ch'ang (1449–1504). Their scholarship was generally based on an idealistic philosophy of learning and self-cultivation, one that significantly differed from the statecraft tradition of scholar-bureaucrats in the capital. They made their appearance and exerted their political influence on the central government when King Söngjong appointed these *sarim* Neo-Confucians in an effort to prevent the further expansion of the dominant power of the court aristocrats. Consequently, severe political conflict developed between the two forces: the Neo-Confucian literati and the aristocrats in the central bureaucracy. This, then, led to a series of political events known as *sahwa* (literati purges) that continued from the mid-fifteenth century to the early sixteenth century.

Under the power of the tyrannical king Yönsan'gun, the first two purges of 1498 (*muo sahwa*) and 1504 (*kapcha sahwa*) resulted in the banishment or death of many members of the aristocratic elite, as well as numerous *sarim* Neo-Confucian scholars.⁷¹ King Chungjong (1506–1544), who highly respected the Neo-Confucian literati, brought forward the young Neo-Confucian Cho Kwang-jo (Chöngam, 1482–1519) to a succession of influential government positions. Cho's primary political objective was a rational reform of the state in accordance with the Neo-Confucian ideal. For example, he proposed the village code (*hyangyak*),⁷² a model of local self-government; encouraged the translation of basic Confucian writings to promote and spread its moral and social teachings among the populace at large; and put into practice a much more simplified examination system for recruiting men of virtue.⁷³ As his political power grew quickly, a greater number of Neo-Confucian scholars who supported Cho were appointed to high-ranking official positions, and his reform group became known as the school of political thought.⁷⁴ However, the aristocratic families managed to get rid of him and his reform faction, and this political event was the third literati purge of 1519 (*kimyo sahwa*). T'oegye and Yulgok later praised Chöngam highly as a true Neo-Confucian political thinker. Another literati purge occurred in 1545 after a series of factional events surrounding the successive enthronement, which once again broke the political power of the Neo-Confucian scholar-officials.

The circumstances of these four persecutions of Korean Neo-Confucians differed in each case, but their major cause was the factional struggle for political power between the aristocratic class and the Neo-Confucian elite. The latter suffered a setback as victims in this political strife. However, the result was not entirely unfruitful because most of them retired to their home regions and continued to build private academies (*söwön*) for promoting Confucian scholarship.⁷⁵ With their solid bases in the countryside, the power of the Neo-Confucian literati became stronger. In fact, these Neo-Confucians controlled the village codes, thereby solidifying the economic, social, and political power in their own regions.

The Paegundong Academy is the most famous *söwön* established in the Yöngnam region in 1543. It adopted the rules that Chu Hsi laid down for his Pai-lu-tung Academy in Sung China. Obviously, the Korean Neo-Confucian scholars built the *söwön* as something that came to occupy a significant position in Chosön society exactly like that maintained by the Buddhist temples in the Koryö period. It must be emphasized, therefore, that, during the difficult period of the literati purges, they found in these private academies the hope for laying the intellectual basis for their revival, as well as for their return to political power. Historically speaking, this trend also led many of

the Korean Neo-Confucians to maintain serious dedication, more than ever, not only to the education of the younger generations but, more significant, to the philosophical development of Sung Neo-Confucianism.

Unfortunately, however, another historical fact is that most private Confucian academies gradually became stronger breeders of political and intellectual factionalism. Nevertheless, they served as the important local centers for Neo-Confucian education and scholarship through which many retired scholars were able to make a significant progress in the study of Ch'eng-Chu teachings from the middle of the sixteenth century. Indeed, during this period, the most glorious period in the entire history of Korean Neo-Confucianism, many eminent thinkers emerged, including T'oebye and Yulgok. This, then, brings us to the philosophical scene of Korean *söngnihak* (school of human nature and principle) prior to, and including, T'oebye's and Yulgok's lifetime.

Söngnihak Before T'oebye and Yulgok in Sixteenth-Century Korea

Sö Hwadam's Philosophy of Ki

Sö Kyöng-dök (Hwadam, 1489–1546), T'oebye, and Yulgok are known as the “Three Masters” (*samja*) of Korean Neo-Confucianism, who determined the unique patterns of its *söngnihak*. After turning his back on the political world of the Chosön dynasty, Hwadam dedicated himself to the study of Sung Neo-Confucianism and became the first Korean Neo-Confucian to have formulated a philosophy of material force (*kihak*). His well-known works include the *Wön iki* (Principle and Material Force as the Origin of Things), *Iki söl* (Principle and Material Force Explained), and *T'aehö söl* (Great Vacuity Explained).⁷⁶ In these short philosophical treatises, he presented his own metaphysics, especially in terms of the working of *ki* in the process of all cosmic transformation.

Following especially Chang Tsai (1020–1077), a Sung Neo-Confucian who based his whole philosophy on the dynamic role of *ki*, Hwadam identified the “Great Vacuity” (*t'aehö/t'ai-hsü*) with *ki*, the creative and transformative source of the universe: “The Great Void is empty and yet not empty. The void is identical with material force. The void is inexhaustible and all-embracing; material force is likewise inexhaustible and all-embracing. If it is called the void, how can it be called material force? When the void is in repose, it is the substance of material force. Coagulation and disintegration are its function.”⁷⁷ In the *Wön iki*, Hwadam also asserted that *ki* is the “fundamental sub-

stance" of the universe, and everything in it is "pure and void."⁷⁸ He considered *ki* as the formless and unlimited force that creates and transforms all phenomena. By contrast, principle is only an element inside of *ki*. In the *Iki söl*, he argued that "there is no *i* outside of *ki*."⁷⁹ For Hwadam, then, *i* by itself has no ontological status and no creative or transformative power. Life and death are the fusing and intermingling activities of *ki*, and the operation of everything is founded on the dynamic activity of *ki*, not *i*. *Ki* is the actual energy and creative entity, whereas *i* plays only the supportive role of *ki*'s activity; *i* is taken as nothing but the ground for the activity of *ki*. In general, Hwadam's emphasis on *ki* tends to underestimate Chu Hsi's philosophy of *i*. It took an objective and empirical view of Neo-Confucian epistemology that what governs the material world and what becomes manifest in it are *ki*, not *i*.

Hwadam's philosophy of *ki* was carried on by his disciples such as Yi Ku (d. 1573), Pak Sun (n.d.), Hō Yōb (n.d.), and Min Sun (n.d.) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In his Four-Seven debate with Ki Tae Sūng (Kobong, 1529–1592), T'oegye later criticized Hwadam for misinterpreting Chu Hsi's metaphysics of *i* and *ki*; in T'oegye's view, he saw the essence of *ki* as *i*.⁸⁰ However, in his Four-Seven debate with Song Ugye (1535–1598), Yulgok praised Hwadam's originality. Yulgok pointed out that, although Hwadam's interpretation of *i* and *ki* is incomplete, he clearly saw the inseparability of *i* and *ki* and that his thinking is quite independent compared to T'oegye's.⁸¹

Yi On-jok's Philosophy of Principle

In contrast to Hwadam, Yi On-jok (Hoejae, 1491–1553) formulated an early Korean philosophy of principle (*ihak/li-hsüeh*) during the first half of the sixteenth century, before T'oegye. His major works include the following: *Taehak changgu poyu* (Supplement of the *Ta-hsüeh chang-chü*), a commentary on textual ambiguities and problems of the Ch'eng-Chu commentary on the words and phrases of the *Great Learning*; *Chungyong kugyōng yōn'ui* (Extended Meaning of the Nine Rules of the *Doctrine of the Mean*), an elaborated explanation of governing the state and society, outlined in Chapter 20 of the *Doctrine of the Mean*; and *Kuin nok* (Records in Search of Humanity), a commentary on collected quotations on the Confucian concept of benevolence (*in/jen*).

Hoejae is better known as the first Korean Neo-Confucian who emphasized principle with respect to cosmology and morality. Although he generally followed Chu Hsi's theory of *i* and *ki*, his philosophy focuses on the status of *i* as the basis of all activities of *ki*, emphasizing the metaphysical and ethical concept of *i*.⁸² His entire metaphysics can be summarized in terms

of his theory that "since *i* is substance and *ki* is function, the former is prior and the latter is posterior." Principle is the same as the Great Ultimate, the essence of cosmic transformation and moral self-cultivation. In fact, T'ŏegye liked his philosophy of *i* and praised Hojjae as one of the "Four Confucian Worthies of Korea."

Other important thinkers were Yi Hang (Ilchae, 1499–1575), Cho Sik (Nammyŏng, 1501–1572), Chŏng Chi-un (Ch'uman, 1509–1561), and No Su-sin (Sojjae, 1515–1570), who followed the Ch'eng-Chu school. They were T'ŏegye's contemporaries but interpreted Ch'eng-Chu teachings in different ways, developing their own ideas and views.

Yi Iljae on the Relationship of I and Ki

Yi Iljae emphasized the inseparability of *i* and *ki*. Following Chu Hsi, he argued that, if viewed from the standpoint of unity, *i* and *ki* are one; if viewed from the standpoint of duality, they are two. For him, then, although *i* and *ki* are ontologically and conceptually two, they are always one in concrete phenomena.⁸³ In this regard, he was probably influenced by Lo Ch'in-shun, a Ming Chinese Neo-Confucian of the Ch'eng-Chu school, who emphasized the inseparability of *i* and *ki*, as well as the dynamic and empirical role of *ki* in all phenomena. Apparently, Lo's *K'un-chih chi* (Knowledge Painfully Acquired) was an influential text among Korean Neo-Confucians.⁸⁴

It is precisely for this reason that T'ŏegye later criticized Yi Ilchae's theory of the "oneness of *i* and *ki*" for being no different from Lo's philosophy of *ki*. According to T'ŏegye, such a theory is incorrect because it tends to affirm *i* as *ki*. As we will see in his Four-Seven thesis, this already indicates T'ŏegye's full commitment to formulating a theory, which comes from Chu Hsi himself, that *i* and *ki* are ontologically and conceptually distinct and never mixable in phenomena. This is the whole basis of T'ŏegye's metaphysics and ethics. In his Four-Seven debate, Yulgok compared Lo with two Korean thinkers, Hwadam and T'ŏegye, arguing that Lo really understood the Neo-Confucian metaphysics of *i* and *ki* in terms of their inseparability in phenomena. Of course, Yulgok studied the *K'un-chih chi* and praised Lo as a great thinker of the Ch'eng-Chu school in China.

Chŏng Ch'uman on the Four and the Seven

Chŏng Ch'uman is well-known for his *Ch'ŏnmyŏng to* (Diagram of Heaven and Destiny).⁸⁵ In this diagram, he summarized basic Ch'eng-Chu