

Special Feature

“The Transmission of the Canon is Difficult”: The Problematic Formation of the Confucian Way in Korea

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“The Transmission of the Canon is Difficult!”

This quotation from *Reflections on Things at Hand* (*Jinsilu* or *Geunsarok* 近思錄) may evince the tortuous history of the Confucian Way in Korea (Chan 1967, 292). What was the meaning of Confucianism, especially of what is conventionally called neo-Confucianism, in Korea? Did anything we would call Confucian “orthodoxy” ever develop in Korea? Did the Koreans establish a reservoir of Confucian knowledge from which they could draw to substantiate their claim to have received the Way (*dao*; *do* in Korean 道) directly from the Chinese sages and worthies? Indeed, did the Koreans institute a tradition that was equal to the Chinese “lineage of the sages” known as *daotong* (*dotong* 道統) or the transmission/succession of the Way? (Soffel 2012, Ch. 3; Adler 2014, 49)¹ And, if so, what were the criteria for scholars to become recognized as official links in the transmission of the Way from China to Korea and its fate in Korea? The answers to these questions largely depend on how we embed the reception of neo-Confucianism in Korea in a larger historical and societal context. There are many studies on *dotong* in Korea, but they usually focus on philosophical aspects in the “history of ideas” tradition (*sasangsa* 思想史), often ignoring the sociopolitical background against which *dotong* emerged as a key instrument for legitimizing social and political power.

What follows, then, is a brief examination of some critical stages in the development of *dotong* in Korea, foregrounding sociopolitical aspects.

Historical Background

Confucian classical literature was known in Korea since Silla times (ca. sixth century), transmitted to the peninsula by Buddhist monks. Though

* This is a revised version of a lecture given at the City University of Hong Kong on January 16, 2014. I thank two anonymous reviewers for their pertinent suggestions to expand my paper. Unfortunately, I was unable to take them fully into consideration within the limits of my short survey article. I am also grateful to Hoyt Tillman for having commented on an earlier version of this paper.

1. The creation of the term *daotong* 道統 or “the succession or transmission of the Way” has conventionally been attributed to Zhu Xi who introduced it in his introduction to the *Zhongyong* 中庸, but there is evidence that it had already been used in the Northern Song.

Confucianism in those early days stood in the shadow of Buddhism, the Confucian Classics became essential reading when the Chinese-style examination system was introduced in Korea in the mid-tenth century. In Goryeo 高麗 (918-1392), then, there were a few scholars who independently immersed themselves in Confucian learning, but Confucianism was more important institutionally as it provided a corpus of knowledge deemed essential for administrating the state.

It is a unique circumstance that the Cheng-Zhu 程朱 version of neo-Confucianism was introduced to Korea during a period of sociopolitical crisis. To clarify why these new teachings were so attractive to a number of Goryeo scholar-officials, a few words about the social constitution of the ruling elite are warranted.

From at least the fifth century, Korean society was organized into graded status groups that gained participation in government and society through their social credentials, that is, through birth and descent. High social status depended on belonging to an officially recognized ranked descent group, and such ranking determined the extent to which an individual could take part in politics. In short: one's *social standing* conditioned one's chances of taking part in the *political* process. This narrowly defined descent “ideology” put a small social elite in power and, significantly, formed the basis of aristocratic rule throughout Korean history (Deuchler 2015, 1-5).

The Crisis of Late Goryeo

In Goryeo, the capital-based civilian aristocracy held power until the late twelfth century when it was challenged by a line of military dictators. Later, in the mid-thirteenth century, the Mongols extended their lordship into Korea and forced the Korean royal house into an almost one hundred year-long submission. Both events fostered the emergence of non-elite elements so that during the last decades of the fourteenth century the Goryeo ruling elite was confronted by a non-elite which had come to power through extra-legal means, amassed landed wealth, and used Buddhism as a spiritual prop. These political climbers also clung to their pro-Mongol sympathies when the rising Ming attracted ever larger numbers of supporters among the elite. In addition, frequent incursions of the Red Turbans from the north and devastations along the coasts brought on

by marauding Japanese pirate bands further deepened the general calamity and strengthened the military's influence. In short, the country was in crisis until 1392, when Yi Seong-gye 李成桂 (1335-1408), a military man, finally ended the chaos by founding a new dynasty (Deuchler 2015, 39-45).

The Introduction of the Learning of the Way (*dohak* 道學)

Some high-placed Koreans would traditionally go as members of royal retinues to Beijing, take the civil examinations there, and serve for a few years in the Yuan bureaucracy before returning to Korea. This was especially the case during the Mongol period when the connections between the Mongol court and the Goryeo court were close. During their time in the Yuan capital Korean scholars actively engaged in scholarly exchanges with Chinese neo-Confucians and thus became aware of the Learning of the Way's civilizing power. Looking at the malaise in their home country, they strove to use their newly won knowledge as an instrument to renovate state and society in Korea. In other words, these new converts availed themselves of their Confucian learning to try to end the misrule of the non-elite and win back dominance at the center for the old elite. It was, however, only through active partnership with the military, represented by Yi Seong-gye, that their chance came to rebuild the country on neo-Confucian premises. Indeed, the founding of the Joseon 朝鮮 dynasty (1392-1910) was a truly historic conjunction of diverse forces and interests (Deuchler 2015, 45-51; 64-68).²

The kind of neo-Confucianism the late-Goryeo scholars received from the Mongols was the "Learning of the Way" (*daoxue; dohak*), that is, the Confucian Way as developed by Song Confucians, especially by Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), and was elevated to the status of national orthodoxy in 1241. With the introduction of the Yuan examination system in Korea in 1369, the Five Classics and the Four Books with Zhu Xi's commentaries became the standard literature that Korean examination candidates were expected to master. It was, thus, with a highly sophisticated kind of Confucianism, also called the "school of principle" (*ihak* 理學), that

2. The literature used to draw these conclusions is included here.

the Confucian-educated founders of Joseon shifted the military-dominated tradition of late Goryeo to a civilian rule in the new dynasty.

For the small number of scholars who occupied themselves with the new creed and who are thus regarded as the intellectual architects of Joseon, *dohak* blended two strands of thought: one that was “idealistic-moral” (*do* 道) and another that was “pragmatic-practical” (*sil* 實). Both were thought to be equally relevant to the revitalization of state and society. These two components of *dohak* were outlined in the Great Learning (*Daxue* 大學)—used by the dynastic reformers as a handbook of renovation that linked “ordering of the state” (*chiguk* 治國) to “self-cultivation” (*susin* 修身), making the former contingent on the latter. It was along these two concepts that the early *dohak* adepts split: the majority opted for a pragmatic and action-oriented course outlined in the *Daxue*, whereas a minority pursued an “idealist” path that concentrated on self-cultivation and moral and ritual purity. From the beginning of the dynasty, thus, there were two groups who differed in their vision of what role the Learning of the Way should play in Korea. To the pragmatists belonged such institution-builders as Jeong Do-jeon 鄭道傳 (1342-1398), Jo Jun 趙浚 (1346-1405), and their later successors, such as Ha Ryun 河崙 (1347-1416), Gwon Geun 權近 (1352-1409), and Byeon Gye-ryang 卞季良 (1369-1430); they put “ordering the state” above self-cultivation and derived their inspiration and blueprints for action principally from such ancient Chinese works as the *Rituals of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮) and the *Records of Rituals* (*Liji* 禮記). Although the two visions did not exclude each other, they proved nevertheless divisive and spawned adversarial attitudes and conflicts in the Confucian community that reverberated far into the sixteenth century.

From the outset, then, the appropriation of *dohak* in Korea was closely intertwined with politics. For the majority of Confucian scholar-officials it had to provide the blueprints for renovating state and society and recapturing, after a long phase of political weakness, the supremacy of the traditional elite in government and society. Secondly, it was to be an intellectual and spiritual bulwark against Buddhism that, in their view, had contributed to the general misery at the end of Goryeo.

The Fifteenth century as a Period of Discord and Conflict

Throughout the fifteenth century the pragmatists, who took part in developing the legislative basis for transforming the bureaucratic system and the socio-ritual organization of society, struggled with the idealists, who pleaded for making self-cultivation and a ritually pure life the center of all human activities, and who accused the statecraft-oriented higher officialdom of betraying the message of the *Daxue*.

The fifteenth century was also a time of political conflict between the higher officialdom and the royal house over staking out the limits of each other's domains of power. With the usurpation of the throne by King Sejo 世祖 (r. 1455-1468) at mid-century, the idealists, who were advancing into government positions and were eventually identified as a separate political entity, called *sarim* ("scholars of the forest" or "forest of scholars" 士林), heightened their moral pressure on the ruler and his closest ministers. The situation escalated at the end of the century in a series of purges that eliminated a large number of *dohak* practitioners and, especially after 1519, left the Confucian community in disarray. Had the Confucians failed to create a Confucian polity because of their inability to realize the moral dicta of the *Daxue* in state and society? The convulsions at the threshold of the sixteenth century led some Confucians to take an inward turn that ushered in a period of unprecedented reflection on human nature and its cultivation through moral education.

First Attempts to Construct a Korean "Genealogy of the Way"

Central to the Confucians, who led the renovation of the political and moral foundation of Joseon, was their quest to legitimize themselves as the rightful heirs to the Song 宋 Chinese Confucians, in particular to Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, by formalizing an official line of transmission of the *dao* 道 from the Song masters to their own time. In Goryeo, a shrine to Confucius and to a great number of Chinese worthies (Munmyo 文廟) had already honored two Koreans (Seol Chong 薛聰 [in 1022] and Choe Chi-weon 崔致遠 [in 1020]), but this shrine had been built foremost for cultural prestige. In early Joseon, the shrine gained critical significance for institutionalizing a particular doctrinal tradition, making it, in Jeong Do-jeon's words, the "ritual pivot

under Heaven.”³ Enshrinement in the Munmyo was thus not only a ritual-intellectual statement, but equally a declaration of political legitimacy. In China, an imperial proclamation endorsed the Dao School as state orthodoxy in 1241 and at the same time fixed an official Genealogy of the Way (*daotong*) with a number of Song 宋 worthies (Wilson 1995, 43-47; Adler 2014, 23-27). In Joseon Korea, enshrinement in the Munmyo was equally a state act needing the king’s endorsement, but sectarian ambitions of intellectual legitimacy turned the construction of the Korean Genealogy of the Way (*dotong*) and the concomitant selection for Munmyo honors into a highly contentious affair.

During the fifteenth century, a number of Korean neo-Confucian scholar-officials of the early Joseon were recommended for shrine honors, apparently for personal reasons rather than for constructing a chain of succession to substantiate claims of legitimacy (Deuchler 1980, 18-19; Jin 2005, 147-80; Kim 2008, 329-64). With the *sarim*’s short comeback after the purges of 1498 and 1504, Jo Gwang-jo 趙光祖 (1482-1519), their iconic leader, instilled in his traumatized followers new hope for a revival of what they called the “School of Principle” (*ihak* 理學)—a close enactment of the moral dicta in the Cheng-Zhu tradition. Intent on linking their line of thought to a widely recognized forbearer, Jo and his circle, now entrenched in middle-level government posts, requested the canonization of Jeong Mong-ju 鄭夢周 (1337-1392). Jeong Mong-ju was generally revered for his loyalist stance at the end of Goryeo, but Jo Gwang-jo singled him out as a scholar who not only had acquired his learning directly from China but whose educational endeavors, Jo thought, compared favorably to those of Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-1073) and the Cheng 鄭 brothers—three of the principal thinkers of the early Song *daoxue* tradition.⁴ To bridge the time gap between Jeong Mong-ju and himself, Jo intended to bolster Jeong’s candidacy with two victims of the 1504 purge: Kim Goeng-pil 金宏弼 (1454-1504) and Jeong Yeo-chang 鄭汝昌 (1450-1504). The selection of both of these men was immediately challenged, however; choosing Kim Goeng-pil was seen as a partisan move because Kim had been Jo Gwang-

3. Jeong Do-jeon, *Sambongjip* 三峯集 7:225. For the Chinese enshrines in the early-Joseon Munmyo, see Jeong 1990, 8-9; Seol 2004.

4. For the controversial inclusion of Zhou Dunyi, see Tillman 1992, 144ff; Adler 2014. Zhou Dunyi was the teacher of the young Cheng brothers; Zhu Xi made him the first to have recovered the *dao* in Song times.

jo's revered teacher and Jeong Yeo-chang's scholarly qualifications were in doubt. So, in 1517 only Jeong Mong-ju was endorsed as the first Korean *daoxue* scholar to be enshrined in the Shrine of Confucius. Though this was a milestone in the *sarim's* quest for legitimacy, Jo Gwang-jo's efforts to embed his School of Principle in an ongoing tradition failed and even ended disastrously in the purge of 1519.⁵

The Sixteenth century: The Defining Stage of *Dohak*

The sixteenth century turned out to be the most intellectually prolific and creative period in Korean neo-Confucianism, despite the tragic start of the Confucian cause. A fresh generation of thinkers emerged who took *dohak* learning in new directions, giving rise to intense debates on the roles of the two neo-Confucian key concepts of principle (*i* 理) and mind-matter (or “psycho-physical stuff”) (*gi* 氣) in constituting human nature and determining the workings of the human mind. Indeed, these debates (*igiron* 理氣論) eventually created two propositions of thought, each originating from a towering thinker—the “School of Principle” from Toegye Yi Hwang 退溪 李滉 (1501-1570) and the “School of Mind-Matter” from Yulgok Yi I 栗谷 李珥 (1536-1584). These two scholars imprinted upon Korean *dohak* its distinctive *dual* character—divergent intellectual (and eventually also political) positions that encumbered the formation of the Way and divided its practitioners.

With his emphasis on principle and later fixation on the mind-and-heart (*simhak* 心學), Toegye tended to give his teachings a contemplative direction demanding from a student to “get the truth for himself” (*jadeuk* 自得). Thrusting doubt on the usefulness of examination knowledge and office-holding in the formation of a “true” Confucian, Toegye, like Zhu Xi before him, shifted the meaning of “true Confucian” from political man to cultured man for whom Confucian learning was a vocation independent of state service. Toegye's image of a true Confucian thus differed fundamentally from Yulgok's ideal according to which a Confucian fulfilled his mission only by actively participating in regulating the political world and human society (*chiguk* 治國—*chiin* 治人).

5. For the discussions leading up to Jeong Mong-ju's canonization, see Wagner 1974, 88-92.

Although Zhu Xi continued to constitute a clear point of convergence, their deviating ideological premises and patterns of engagement in the public realm eventually split Toegye’s and Yulgok’s discipleships into two camps that toward the end of the sixteenth century engaged in a partisan struggle over doctrinal superiority. This was a fateful schism; it had political repercussions and also created a serious rift in elite society as membership in one or the other camp was closely intertwined with considerations of kinship and marital ties.

The Construction of the Korean Genealogy of the Way after 1519

The disaster of 1519 sparked a discourse on the credentials a Confucian scholar needed in order to be recognized as a valid link in the succession of the Korean Way. When voices demanded the rehabilitation of the victims of 1519, the evaluations of the candidates followed, not surprisingly, along doctrinal lines. Toegye was happy to endorse Jo Gwang-jo, who, in Toegye’s estimation, had shown unprecedented moral valor in defending the Way. Toegye, however, was skeptical when in 1570 Confucian students requested that three earlier scholars, Kim Goeng-pil, Jeong Yeo-chang, and Yi Eon-jeok 李彦迪 (1491-1553), be simultaneously canonized with Jo. Kim and Jeong were both victims of the purge of 1504, and Yi Eon-jeok had suffered humiliation during the fourth purge in 1545. But would these “four worthies” constitute valid links in the Genealogy of the Way?

Toegye and Yulgok differed in their views of the origin of the Way. Toegye argued that the Way had emerged from a mandate of Heaven and reached its apogee with Yao and Shun, not with Confucius or Mencius who, though elucidating the Way, had never held influential political offices to practice the Way in the public domain. After a long eclipse by heterodox thought, Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi resurrected the Way in Song times and gave it its ultimate and unalterable shape. Though this Way was transmitted to Korea at the end of Goryeo, it was, Toegye felt, still endangered by “conventional learning” (*sokhak* 俗學) and Buddhism, and he even reproached Yulgok for Buddhist leanings (Jeong 2002, 1-43).⁶

6. Jeong bases his assessment on Toegye’s relevant texts.

For Yulgok, like for Zhu Xi, the Way had started with the first Confucian sage, Fuxi 伏羲,⁷ but *dohak*—the Learning of the Way—had really begun to blossom with the scholars in Song China, most prominently, of course, with Zhu Xi. Yulgok was reluctant to connect early Korean scholarship to Zhu Xi and opined that *dohak* in Korea had started with Jo Gwang-jo. In Yulgok’s opinion, Jo was superior even to Toegye because he judged the latter as too one-sidedly oriented toward Zhu Xi (Song 1990, 201-15).

The enshrinement of the “four worthies” in the Munmyo thus posed problems. Jo Gwang-jo alone gained unanimous endorsement from the Confucian community. Although Yi Eon-jeok was recognized for his scholarly achievements, his deviations from the norms established by Zhu Xi in his textual rearrangement of the *Daxue* were sharply criticized by both Toegye and Yulgok. Since scholarship—rather than loyalty or personal integrity—was now being made the benchmark of worthiness, Kim Goeng-pil and Jeong Yeo-chang were regarded as doubtful candidates because only fragments of their scholarship were preserved. Nevertheless, following the pattern of Zhu Xi’s history of the *daoxue* school, the *Origins of I-Lo Learning (I-Lo yuan-yuan lu 伊洛淵源錄)*, Yu Hui-chun 柳希春 (1513-1557) collected the biographies of the four in his *Records of the Confucian Forebears of the Dynasty (Gukjo yuseollok 國朝儒先錄)* with the intention to convince King Seonjo (r. 1567-1608) of the four’s Munmyo worthiness. After Toegye’s death in 1570, his name was added to the list, lending additional prestige to the canonization requests. Moreover, Yu reminded the king that the canonization of the five worthies of Song China (Zhou Dunyi, the Cheng brothers, Zhang Zai, and Zhu Xi) in 1241, had been an outstanding occurrence that should be repeated in Korea.⁸ New petitions for the simultaneous enshrinement of now five worthies were brought forward, but the Japanese invasions at the end of the century halted all discussion. It was thus only in 1610 that the canonization of the Five Worthies (*ohyeon* 五賢) finally took place, advertised as a signal event that would revitalize the Confucian spirit of the devastated post-war country.

7. For Fuxi and Zhu Xi’s version of the lineage of Confucian sages, from earliest times to Song, see Adler 2014, Ch. 2.

8. For this see *Seonjo sillok* 10:16 (1576); Deuchler 1980, 29-32.

A Split in the Confucian Discourse

The reason for the protracted debates on canonization in the Munmyo lay not merely in the controversial definition of the Way's nature in Korea and its precarious connection to Song roots. It was also connected to the power constellation at the center. Throughout the sixteenth century, political hardliners, who had been responsible for Jo Gwang-jo's demise in 1519, and royal in-laws, who took advantage of the weakness of youthful occupants of the throne, tried to consolidate their control of government by preventing the Confucians (*sarim*) from regrouping in leading government positions. The purge of 1545 epitomized this struggle, and thirty years later, in the fateful year 1575, the Confucians themselves, under pressure to take sides in a bitter factional contest, split into two groups: the so-called Easterners (Dongin 東人)—the discipleship of Toegye and Nammyeong Jo Sik 南冥 曹植 (1501-1572), and the Westerners (Seoin 西人)—the discipleship of Yulgok. Although Yulgok had desperately tried to smooth out the differences between the two groups, the split proved irreconcilable. Indeed, it sparked a partisan struggle that not only had far-reaching intellectual consequences for the further development of *dohak* in Korea but also divided elite society; the ensuing factions remained entrenched over generations, through kin-based memberships.

The estrangement between the two Confucian blocs deepened with King Injo's 仁祖 (r. 1623-1649) accession to the throne in 1623 that brought the Westerners to power at the center and marginalized the Southerners (Namin 南人)—the splinter group of the Easterners that had survived the political turmoil at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Although political forces had initially caused the alienation, it was the intellectual conflict between Toegye and Yulgok followers that bifurcated the Confucian discourse and created two ideological positions. Indeed, this schism had even a geographic dimension insofar as the Westerners—Yulgok's discipleship—were ensconced in the capital and its environs, whereas the Southerners were principally concentrated in Toegye's homeland, Gyeongsang Province, with only a small contingent of followers active at the center. In short, it was a complex mix of intellectual, political, social, and geographic factors that henceforth determined the tenor of factional conflict and endangered the fixing of the Way.

The Ascendance of the Westerners and the Enshrinement of Yulgok and Ugye

The undisputed spiritual leader of the Westerners in the seventeenth century was Song Si-yeol 宋時烈 (1607-1689). He was not only an erudite scholar but also a forceful advocate of the moralistic standards by which he judged the world and humankind. By insisting that Yulgok was the direct heir of Zhu Xi and by honoring Gija 箕子, the immigrant from Shang 商 China, as the historic founder of morality in Korea, Song Si-yeol established new criteria for defining the Korean Genealogy of the Way. He rejected late-Goryeo scholars who had earlier been mentioned as transmitters of *daoxue* to Korea because of their close relations to the “barbarian” Mongols, but accepted Jeong Mong-ju as a valiant moralist in Gija’s tradition. He disavowed, however, early Joseon attempts to establish successors to Jeong. Song acknowledged only Jo Gwang-jo as the first true practitioner of *dohak* before Yulgok, calling him the Zhou Dunyi of Korea, a clear reference to Zhu Xi (U 2006, 89-124).⁹

Although he did not disparage the scholarship of Toegye or Yi Eon-jeok, Song extolled the Westerners’ intellectual and moral superiority and strove to bolster the Western position by designating Yulgok and the latter’s friend and correspondent, Ugye Seong Hon 牛溪 成渾 (1535-1598), as the chief representatives of state orthodoxy. Song’s resolve to canonize Yulgok and Ugye in 1650 was strengthened by similar partisan demands, but was fiercely opposed by Namin scholars from Andong (Deuchler 2015, 314-18).

The issue was, however, soon overshadowed by the so-called Rites Controversy of 1659 that again pitched the Westerners and the Southerners against one another and ended in the Southerners’ defeat. Similar altercations over ritual correctness recurred in 1674, this time with the Southerners as the victors. Each of these “turn-overs” (*hwanguk* 換局) had grave political consequences: in 1675, Song Si-yeol was sent into exile, and in 1680, when the Westerners once again returned to power, Yun Hyu 尹鑄 (1617-1680), the mastermind of the Southerners’ earlier victory, was forced to take his life. This cycle of violence repeated itself when the Southerners regained supremacy in 1689 and condemned Song Si-yeol to death. Finally, in 1694, a branch of the

9. Zhu Xi had made Zhou Dunyi the first true Confucian sage since Mencius. For this see Adler 2014, Introduction.

Westerners, the Noron 老論, expelled the Southerners from government for good. These events, which decimated the Confucian community, had little to do with *dohak* learning; rather, they originated from partisanship in matters concerning the ritual mourning etiquette of the royal court and the ambition to gain sole legitimacy as Zhu Xi’s successors in Korea.¹⁰

In the 1680s, Song Si-yeol’s voice was often heard when the request of Confucian students for the enshrinement of Yulgok and Ugye incited a general debate about rearranging the spirit tablets in the Shrine of Confucius. Since Joseon Korea had taken on the role of Eastern Zhou 東周 or “little China” after the fall of the Ming 明, it was, the argument ran, obliged to newly co-enshrine three Song worthies: Yang Shi 楊時 (1053-1135), Luo Congyan 羅從彥 (1072-1135), and Li Tong 李侗 (1093-1163).¹¹ Thus, in the early summer of 1682, a thorough reorganization of the Munmyo took place, and the tablets of Yulgok and Ugye were solemnly enshrined together with four Song scholars (among them Zhu Xi’s chosen successor and son-in-law Huang Gan 黃幹 (1152-1221); at the same time the tablets of nine Chinese no longer regarded as worthy of such high honors were eliminated.¹² The new arrangement closely corresponded to Song Si-yeol’s ideas of a correct Genealogy of the Way that started with Mencius and included the five scholars of Northern Song,¹³ as well as Zhu Xi, Jeong Mong-ju, and Yulgok.

The tablets of Yulgok and Ugye did not long remain in the Munmyo, however. When the Southerners briefly regained power in 1689, the tablets were unceremoniously expelled, only to be reinstalled after the Southerners’ final defeat in 1694. Clearly, these reversals were not sparked by controversies over Confucian philosophical issues; rather, they epitomized the degree to which the construction of doctrinal legitimacy played a vital role in the bitter fight over political hegemony. After 1694, the Westerners (Noron) dominated the central government and firmly put the Shrine of Confucius under their control.

10. On the Rites Controversies, see Haboush 1999, 46-90.

11. All three were closely related to the Chengs and Zhu Xi; Yang Shi, Cheng Yi’s student, brought the teachings of the Chengs to the south; and Li Tong became Zhu Xi’s teacher. For this see Adler 2014, 29.

12. For the rearrangement of the Munmyo, see Jeong 1999, 10-15.

13. The five were Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, the Cheng brothers, and Shao Yong.

Enshrinements of Noron Scholars Continued

It was thus the Noron, now in full political command, who pressed for the continued enshrinement of their worthies to cement their standing as the legitimate representatives of the Way. In the early summer of 1717, Kim Jang-saeng 金長生 (1548-1631), was canonized in recognition of his having “combined the great achievements of Yulgok and Ugye and received [the Way] from the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi; this made him heir to the genealogy of the Way.” Indeed, Kim was Yulgok’s principal disciple and the most influential ritualist of his time. His candidacy for Munmyo honors had earlier also been propagated by Song Si-yeol.¹⁴

Kim Jang-saeng’s canonization set into motion a series of further Noron enshrinements during the eighteenth century. Most prominent, of course, was the canonization of Song Si-yeol and his colleague (and distant kinsman) Song Jun-gil 宋浚吉 (1606-1672) in 1756. Although this act had been demanded by memorialists throughout the 1730s and 1740s, King Yeongjo 英祖 (r. 1724-1776), well-known for his efforts to appease factional strife, was reluctant to give his consent for fear of reigniting sectarian dissent (he sent some outside protesters into exile). Yet, as the two Songs were at times compared to the two Cheng brothers and praised as Korea’s “ancestral teachers” (*jongsŏ* 宗師), revered by the “whole world” across generations,¹⁵ and because of pressure from his Noron ministers, the king finally had to concede. The tablets of the two Songs were installed in the Shrine of Confucius in the early spring of 1756. It was henceforth they who were celebrated as the true and legitimate representatives of the Way.

The last scholar enshrined under Yeongjo in 1764 was Bak Se-chae 朴世采 (1631-1695), a moderate Soron scholar, who was recommended for his strong commitment to the Westerners’ cause at crucial turning-points in that faction’s political fate (in 1689 and 1694).¹⁶

Whereas Yeongjo was urged by his Noron ministers to endorse their

14. *Sukjong sillok*, 12:57a-59b (1681); 59:15a-b, 37b-38a (1717).

15. *Yeongjo sillok*, 8:18a-b (1725); 40:38a, 38b, 41a (1736); 41:9b-10a (1736). There were numerous memorials throughout the 1730s, 1740s, and 1750s. For this see *Yeongjo sillok*, 87:4b-5b, 15a (1756).

16. Bak Se-chae had been sent into exile in 1674, but from 1680, again held several important high offices. In 1694, he was the Left State Councilor in the so-called “Soron cabinet,” as he had sided with Yun Jeung’s 尹拯 (1629-1714) Soron 少論 in 1683. For this see *Yeongjo sillok*, 103:24a (1764).

candidates, it is remarkable how the tone changed when his successor, King Jeongjo 正祖 (r. 1776-1800), was confronted with requests for the enshrinement of Kim In-hu 金麟厚 (1510-1560), Kim Jip 金集 (1574-1656), and Jo Heon 趙憲 (1544-1592) in 1796. A scholar himself, Jeongjo confidently claimed that he alone bore the responsibility of teaching the Way and chided his ministers for thinking that he had been waiting for their council to recognize Kim In-hu’s scholarly virtues. He thus approved the enshrinement of Kim, often likened to Zhou Dunyi in 1796, but refused to grant the same honors to Jo Heon and Kim Jip. In the case of the latter, Jeongjo doubted the appropriateness of giving the same honors to the son as to the father. No such scruples were voiced in 1883, however, when Kim Jip’s tablet was put beside that of his father—the only such pair in the Munmyo. With Jo Heon elevated to shrine honors in the same year, the number of Korean worthies—now eighteen in toto—surpassed that of the sixteen Chinese enshrinees revered in the Korean Shrine of Confucius to this very day.¹⁷

The Namin after 1694

With the Noron consolidating their position as the principle designers of Confucian orthodoxy, the Namin, who were ousted from government in 1694, never regained much political or intellectual authority. Concentrated in Gyeongsang Province and alienated from central power, the Namin also lost much of their intellectual unity. Right after Toegye’s death, the community of his disciples split into competing segments formed by local descent groups, each segment striving for recognition as Toegye’s true successor. Lacking a collective platform, the Namin were no longer able to defend *their* version of the Confucian Way against continued Noron antagonism. Their last attempt in the early nineteenth century to rectify the Noron bias in the Shrine of Confucius with the enshrinement of four Namin luminaries—Kim Seong-il 金誠一 (1538-

17. *Jeongjo sillok*, 45:13a-b, 21b-22b, 27b, 27b-28a (1796). The sixteen Chinese enshrinees were ten disciples of Confucius and six Song dynasty worthies, among them Zhu Xi and the Cheng brothers. In contrast, the Chinese Shrine of Confucius in Late Qing times contained the spirit tablets of twelve “wise men” (*seonhyeon* 先賢) positioned in front of the tablets of Confucius and his four correlates (*seong* 聖), and a large number (79) of former worthies (*seonhyeon*) positioned in the two side cloisters (*mu* 廡) of the shrine. For diagrams, see Wilson 1995, Appendix A.

1593), Yu Seong-ryong 柳成龍 (1542-1607), Jang Hyeon-gwang 張顯光 (1554-1637), Jeong Gu 鄭述 (1543-1620)—dismally failed because King Sunjo 純祖 (r. 1800-1834), bewildered by the rivalries among the petitioners, refused to give royal consent. Indeed, although Toegye's outstanding scholarship was also recognized by the Westerners, his local inheritors were incapable of using his prestige to build up a unified and viable force to counter Noron supremacy (Deuchler 2015, 366-69).

Fixation of the Korean Way on Paper

No “official” *dotong* list exists, but fixing scholarly descent lines on the model of Zhu Xi's history of the Cheng school, the *Origins of I-Lo Learning (I-Lo yuan-yuan lu)* was a central concern (Tillman 1992, 114-19; Adler 2014, 29). An early example of locating “origins” and collecting biographies of worthy predecessors is Toegye's *Traces of Famous Korean Worthies (Dongguk myeonghyeon sajeok 東國名賢史蹟)*, a short compilation containing biographical notes on some thirteen early *dohak* scholars whom Toegye regarded as personifiers of his *sarim* ideal; only two of them (Kim Jong-jik 金宗直 and Jeong Yeo-chang) figured on any later *dotong* list (Yun 1980, 363-73).¹⁸

The most ambitious work in this genre is Bak Se-chaе's *Records of Scholarly Relationships among Korean Confucians (Dongyu saurok 東儒師友錄)*. Inspired by Zhu Xi's prototype, Bak Se-chaе brought together biographical data of Learning-of-the-Way scholars from late Goryeo to the early seventeenth century. Though a moderate Westerner (Sorun 少論) Bak's factional inclination is nevertheless obvious, he allotted to Toegye's scholarly line only half the space he devoted to the discipleships of Yulgok and Ugye Seong Hon, his teacher, and revealed subtle discrimination by the titles he chose for individual scholars.¹⁹

The impact of the bifurcation of the Way on government policy or on the formulation of civil service examination questions has not yet been fully

18. Another early biographical compilation is by Kim Yuk 金堉 (1580-1658), *Records of Famous Scholar-officials of Korea (Haedong myeongsillok 海東名臣錄)*.

19. See Yun Sa-sun's haeje 解題 in *Dongyu saurok*. Bak's disciple, Yi Se-hwan 李世煥, added a supplement (*bopyeon* 補編) in 1736. A term of respect that in the eighteenth century seems to have become current for designating outstanding scholars was “leader of his generation” (*seyujong* 世儒宗), given, for instance, to Kim Jip, Song Si-yeol, Song Jun-gil, and Bak Se-chaе among others.

explored,²⁰ but it is clear that those in power (in the eighteenth century it was the Noron) used their privileged status at court to influence the king’s understanding of *dobak* and to steer his policy choices. High officials served concurrently as royal lecturers and in that capacity were able to bring their factionally slanted interpretations to bear on the royal mind. In addition, ideological instructions were contained in anthologies of political thought offered to the king. A good example is Yi Hui-jo’s 李喜朝 (1655-1724)²¹ *Memorials Submitted by Korean Worthies* (*Donghyeon juui* 東賢奏議), a collection of memorials presented to the throne by the nine worthies, by then enshrined in the Munmyo.²² The reading of these memorials, Yi stated, would enhance the king’s moral stature and his way of ruling. Yi added to this work a collection of statements and opinions formulated during royal lectures by the five Munmyo enshrinees most revered by the Noron. Though first offered to King Gyeongjong 景宗 (r. 1720-1724) in 1720, both of these books were subsequently highly esteemed by King Yeongjo who ordered their printing.²³ Surrounded by Noron ministers and indoctrinated by Noron ideology, it does not come as a surprise that King Yeongjo was once pushed to admit that he had never held a work by Toegye in his hands.²⁴

The deep split dividing the Noron/Soron and the Namin into opposing segments of the Way was equally present in the reality of scholarly life outside of government. Many private academies (*seowon* 書院) turned from citadels of higher learning into strongholds of sectarian thinking, closed to scholars of the opposite faction as well as to their books. Yulgok’s works, for instance, were banned from the libraries of Namin academies. On the other hand, the Noron who dominated the court seldom granted a royal charter to a Namin academy (Jeong 1997, 142-43).

20. Duncan (2002) has made a first attempt in “Examinations and Orthodoxy in Chosŏn Korea.” He does not, however, take factional politics into account and speaks of “a rigid (uniform?) Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy.”

21. Yi Hui-jo was a Song Si-yeol disciple and experienced the ups and downs of factional strife. With King Gyeongjong’s shift from Noron to Soron officials in 1721, he was exiled and eventually died in exile.

22. The nine were Jeong Mong-ju, Kim Goeng-pil, Jeong Yeo-chang, Jo Gwang-jo, Yi Eon-jeok, Yi Hwang, Yi I, Seong Hon, and Kim Jang-saeng.

23. *Sukjong sillok*, 64:20a-b (1719); *Gyeongjong sillok*, 1:7b (1720); *Yeongjo sillok*, 39:1b (1734); 44:15b (1737); Yi Hui-jo, *Jichon seonsaeng munjip* 芝村先生文集, 4: memorials (1719). In reference to an earlier work in which Bak Se-chaе collected statements made during royal lectures by Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, Yi called his second submission *Statements Made during Royal Lectures Continued* (*Sok gyeongyeon gosa* 續經筵故事); it contained pronouncements by Jo Gwang-jo, Yi Hwang, Yi I, Seong Hon, and Kim Jang-saeng.

24. *Yeongjo sillok*, 36:15b, 42a (1733).

“Dissenters of the Way”

By the end of the seventeenth century, Song Si-yeol was the awe-inspiring grand old gentleman of Korean Confucianism who had imprinted the seal of unalterable truth on his version of the Way. Indeed, he expanded the Confucian canon to include, besides the Five Classics and Four Books, all of Zhu Xi's works, and propagated this extended corpus of literature as the final and definitive stage of the transmission of the Way. It is this heritage that Song bequeathed to his followers, the Noron 老論,²⁵ who continued to dominate the government as well as the Confucian establishment throughout the eighteenth century.

It is ironic that Song Si-yeol, who regarded Yi Yulgok as his intellectual ancestor, sponsored growing doctrinal rigidity along factional divisions because it was Yulgok who had pleaded for making the Mencian concept of “obtaining truth through one's own efforts” (*jadeuk* 自得) the touchstone of creative scholarship—a notion also propagated by Yi Toegye.²⁶ Had the very struggle for doctrinal correctness and fixing genealogical lines of intellectual descent gradually stifled scholarly originality?

To be sure, Korea did not lack a tradition of textual “dissent.” A famous early example is the above mentioned Yi Eon-jeok who boldly created his own version of the *Daxue*—a venture that was censured by both Toegye and Yulgok but which did not lead to serious consequences for the author.²⁷ With the general atmosphere under Song Si-yeol's influence turning against deviations from factionally sanctioned scholarly norms, the pursuit of classical scholarship could no longer be a purely “private” (*sa* 私) affair. Although warnings were occasionally voiced that the Learning of the Way should not be monopolized by one faction, it may well be that Song's doctrinal intransigence provoked the emergence of a few independent seekers of the Way among Song's opponents, the Namin and the moderate Soron.

A famous dissenter was above mentioned Yun Hyu 尹鑄 (1617-1680), a

25. Song Si-yeol was the leader of the Seoin (Westerners 西人) and, after 1683, when they split into two groups, the Noron (Old Doctrine 老論) and the Soron (Young Doctrine 少論), he dominated the Noron, largely consisting of his numerous disciples.

26. For Yi Yulgok's views on independent efforts of scholarship, see Deuchler 1985, 392-95.

27. For Yi Eon-jeok's case, see Deuchler 1980, 28-31.

Namin, who infuriated Song Si-yeol with his “novel theories” (*sinseol* 新說) of *Zhongyong* 中庸. Yun justified his “deviations” by stating that he did not care to become a “blind” follower of Zhu Xi and therefore was trying to arrive at his own personal understanding of the Classics. How could Zhu Xi alone, he irreverently asked, know the profound meaning of the Classics, and we not? Song Si-yeol admonished him to correct his erroneous views and soon labeled his incorrigible counterpart a “despoiler of the true Way” (*samun nanjeok* 斯文亂賊)—a label that made Yun the target of vicious attacks, which continued even after his abrupt death in 1680 and were fueled by feelings of revenge for Song Si-yeol’s martyrdom by the Namin in 1689.²⁸

An equally notorious case was that of Yun Hyu’s slightly older contemporary, Bak Se-dang 朴世堂 (1629-1703), a moderate Soron. Calling himself in his autobiographical tombstone epitaph “woodcutter Seogye” 西溪樵叟, Bak, who was in his later life a rusticated scholar, incited the Confucian establishment with his *Thoughtful Elucidations* (*Sabyeollok* 思辨錄). In this major work, which consisted of annotations of the Four Books, Bak insisted on maintaining a critical mind in the study of the Classics and avoiding easy compromises. He suggested that “even those with exceptional knowledge and unique understanding, deep insights and subtle attainments, might still be unable to get the Classics’ profound meaning without losing some details.” He therefore blamed Zhu Xi’s commentaries for promoting the “superficiality and crudeness” of his contemporaries’ understanding of the Classics. Although he insisted that with the *Sabyeollok* he did not intend to depart from the established scholarly norms and put forward his own “theories” (*seol* 說), the book prompted the most celebrated Classics controversy of the early eighteenth century.

As soon as Noron scholars got wind of Bak’s unorthodox views, they accused him of going against Zhu Xi and, by extension, against Song Si-yeol, and subjected him to a defamation campaign that lasted for almost a decade. Song was dead by that time, but his disciples, allegedly out of concern for “this Way,” started to attack Bak’s “novel theories” (*sinseol* 新說), judging them worse than Yun Hyu’s textual manipulations. An apologist emerged who argued that

28. For the relationship between Song Si-yeol and Yun Hyu, see Haboush 1999, 46-90; Deuchler 1999, 93-94; 99-103. Song and Yun were also opponents in the Rites Controversies (*yesong* 禮訟) of 1659 and 1674.

the state had never prohibited the jotting down of private notes, and that Bak's case should be judged against historical precedents, mentioning Toegye and Yi Eon-jeok, among others. But King Sukjong (r. 1674-1720), under Noron influence, stripped Bak of rank and office and expelled him from the capital. Bak retired to his country seat where he died shortly thereafter. He became the second "despoiler of the Way."

After Bak's death, intense discussions about how his work had infringed upon orthodox tenets continued to rage, and calls for the further censure of Bak's scholarship were made. Memorialists even made King Sukjong responsible for defending the Way by castigating Bak publicly and thus forestalling the further dissemination of Bak's ideas. The alarmed king then ordered an official refutation of Bak's views. Few senior Noron scholars, however, felt qualified to produce a thorough and comprehensive refutation. Concerned that the *Sabyeollok* might be burned on royal order, a student of Bak came forward with a blistering defense of his teacher. Choe Chang-dae 崔昌大 (1669-1720) not only presented a detailed and carefully reasoned discussion of Confucian scholarship in general but also stood up for Bak's hermeneutic method of reading the Classics. Renouncing the idea that the writing of private notes could be judged as a criminal act, Choe insisted that Zhu Xi himself had commanded later scholars to continue searching for the true meaning of the Classics. He claimed that "complete" commentaries were an impossibility. Indeed, proclaiming Confucian scholarship as "the general property of the world," Choe blamed the singling out of Bak's work for censure on factional animosity and narrow personal interests. In the end, the Refutation was submitted to the king in 1704, and the *Sabyeollok*, presumably only available in hand-written copies, was spared destruction on the grounds that this would leave no evidence of how wrong Bak's "shallow" scholarship had been. Bak's case ended with a full royal rehabilitation in 1706, after high officials under Soron leader Choe Seok-jeong argued that Bak had never intended his notes for public circulation and that it was therefore doubtful whether the state had been justified in finding him guilty.²⁹

It is possible, though not verifiable, that Chang-dae's father Choe Seok-jeong's 崔錫鼎 (1648-1715) intervention on behalf of Bak Se-dang drew attention to his own "heterodox" work, the *Classifications of the Liji* (*Yegi*

29. Bak Se-dang's oeuvre is complex. Besides the *Sabyeollok*, he also studied Taoism, annotated several of the Six Classics, and wrote on agricultural techniques and natural sciences. See Deuchler 1999, 103-21.

yupyeon 禮記類編). In 1700, Choe wrote in a memorial to the king that he had rearranged the *Liji* 禮記 because Zhu Xi’s commentaries and later Ming emendations were too complex for the beginner, and suggested that the book be printed. Upon royal consent ten copies were printed and distributed for use during the Royal Lectures. A few years passed, until, in 1709, a royal secretary, Yi Gwan-myeong 李觀命 (1661-1733), who had been one of the authors of Bak Se-dang’s Refutation, poured his Noron ire on Choe, accusing him of having tried to upstage Zhu Xi with his emendations of *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) and *Centrality and Commonality* (*Zhongyong* 中庸). This unexpected assault on Choe, a Soron and close associate of the king, angered King Sukjong who maintained that he had found no reprehensible passages in the book, and ascribed Yi’s attack to factional animosities. Although he defended his work by referring to earlier similar “discussions” and claiming that he had endeavored to maintain an “impartial” (*gong* 公) heart and wide-open eyes, Choe found himself under increasing pressure, despite royal protection, and handed in his resignation. Yet, factional attacks started to come in even from the countryside, and demands were voiced for the destruction of the *Yegi yupyeon*. Under a barrage of anti-Choe memorials, even the king had to finally yield and sacrifice one of his highest officials; in the spring of 1710 he stripped Choe of his office patent, expelled him from the capital, and allowed the destruction of the *Yegi yupyeon*. All the text’s printing blocks and printed copies went up in flames. This was the only book-burning in Joseon.

The two “despoilers of the Way and insulters of the Way” were finally rehabilitated, when King Gyeongjong (r. 1720-1724) granted them posthumous honorary names in the early fall of 1722 (Deuchler 1999, 121-28).

While occasional denunciations kept haunting Choe Seok-jeong until his death in 1715, the factional scene seemed nevertheless to relax to some degree during the last years of King Sukjong’s reign after the Noron had gotten the better of heretical exegetes. Yet, at the same time, the Noron themselves started to split into two camps over the interpretation of some key concepts within Zhu Xi’s tradition, leading to the famed Horak Debates (*Horak nonjaeng* 湖洛論爭). Starting out by reexamining the role of all-pervading “principle” (*i* 理) and generative “psycho-physical stuff” (*gi* 氣) in the formation of human nature, one faction, the Horon 湖論, insisted that since *i* was responsible for individualizing *gi*, men and things (such as animals) could not possibly possess the same nature. When applied to society as a whole, the same logic suggested

that the *gi* of the cultivated man differed from that of the ordinary man. In contrast, the other group, the Nangnon 洛論, reasoned that the nature of men and things was identical and that a saint and an ordinary man possessed the same nature. This debate reached great argumentative complexity and engaged the thinking of generations of scholars until in the course of the late eighteenth century it gradually lost vitality.³⁰ Diverse influences from the outside had begun to penetrate Korea and advanced the insight that orthodox Confucianism alone was no longer capable of solving the problems of the time. This provided room for the emergence of individual thinking outside fixed doctrinal tracks.

The Horak debates are remarkable for having occurred within the same faction, and even though the disagreements were stringent at times, they led neither to defamation campaigns nor to blood-lettings. On the contrary, debaters and their disciples on either side held office in the central government and were instrumental in shaping the social policies under King Jeongjong.³¹

The changing mood of the time is noticeable in a remark by the literatus Song Byeong-seon 宋秉璿 (1836-1905) in 1897: “Recently, scholars often hold to their own opinions (*jaju gigyeon* 自主己見). If there are contradictions with the interpretations of former worthies, they bring forward evidence in crooked ways and muster all kinds of rhetorical tricks to make their points. This is not the way of respecting [the] authority [of the former worthies].” Here Song, who shunned government office and authored several works in the classical-scholarship mode, seems to chide some of his contemporaries for their loose and deficient scholarship and their tendency to put forward their own dubious opinions while ignoring classical authority.³² Despite a growing number of such “ego-centered aberrations,” classical scholarship in the Zhu Xi-tradition was by no means fading away. In fact, frequently invoking the legacy of its long and illustrious tradition, mainstream scholar-officials as well as rusticated literati upheld *dao* learning in the belief that it was the sole national resource capable of keeping the country from losing its moral defenses against an increasingly hostile outside world.

30. A comprehensive study is Moon 2006. See also the special issue on the Horak debate in *Korea Journal* 2011 (pp. 5-117).

31. Notable, for example, were their policy disagreements on the emancipation of the public slaves.

32. Quoted from Eggert 2019, 20. I rely on Eggert’s translation, but my interpretation differs from Eggert’s. I added the square brackets.

Conclusion

The transmission of the Learning of the Way to Korea was indeed noteworthy as an example of a transfer of knowledge. However, its extraordinary impact on Joseon’s history acquires full meaning only when assessed against the socio-political realities into which it was lastingly absorbed. To put it differently, as much as Zhu Xi’s neo-Confucianism shaped Korean thought, so did the indigenous social structure give the Learning of the Way its particular contours in Korea. Though Zhu Xi remained a pivotal figure of orientation and inspiration, the definition of the Way was nevertheless largely contingent on the power holders at the center; each faction, when in power, strove to legitimize its own version of *dohak* as “orthodox.”

What, then, are some of the implications of this study? Most obvious, it would seem, is the observation that neo-Confucianism in Korea was more politicized than in China.³³ Indeed, in early Joseon the new teaching principally served as an instrument of renovation, leading the country out of a state of crisis and supporting the old elite to regain political power. Slower was the engagement with the idealistic/moralistic concerns of *dohak*. With Toegye and Yulgok laying the foundations of two differing hermeneutical systems, the community of Confucian learners drifted apart—intellectually as well as politically—preventing, I would argue, the formation of a uniform definition of Korean *dohak*. Its bifurcation created two schools that mutated, due to the typically Korean intertwining of the social with the political, into competing kinship-based factions. The tortuous construction of *dotong*, the Korean Genealogy of the Way, lay therefore in the hands of those in power and was reflected in their struggle of placing partisans into the Munmyo.

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33. For corroboration of this statement, see Tillman in Soffel and Tillman 2012.

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Abstract

This paper narrates the origin of the “Transmission of the Way” (*dotong*) in Korea and the emergence of scholarly lineages. It connects this with the particular socio-political constellation of Joseon society according to which social standing determined participation in the political world. For this reason, Korean *dohak* was always more political than in China. Following the death of Toegye Yi Hwang and Yulgok Yi I, the Way bifurcated, and its application to the intellectual discourse and political reality depended much on those in power. This was equally true for the selection of scholarly candidates for the honor of enshrinement in the Shrine of Confucius (Munmyo). What emerged as “orthodoxy” aroused dissent that was suppressed by the state. Toward the end of the dynasty, the scholarly atmosphere became more fluid, and personal interpretations of the Classics began to emerge.

Keywords: neo-Confucianism, “Transmission of the Way” (*dotong*), Shrine of Confucius (Munmyo), molders of Korean *dohak*, factional conflicts, dissenters of the Way