



Special Feature

Joseon Confucianism in the 19th century:
Challenges and Response

Volume 26 Number 1

June 2023

The Review of Korean Studies



doi: 10.25024/review.2023.26.1.6

Editor's Note

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For Korean religion and philosophy, a few years ago the *Review of Korean Studies* (hereafter, *RKS*) hosted fascinating studies on Korean Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism from foreign scholars, and published them in the June 2020 issue. It was a rewarding experience to hear from all these distinguished scholars and read their takes on the subject. After that, we at *RKS* felt the need to expand on that experience, host a group of Korean scholars, and ask them to contribute articles on various religions and philosophies on a more concentrated fashion. One result of such intentions was the Special Feature on Joseon Confucianism that was published for the December 2020 issue, and another Special Feature on Korean Buddhism published on the June 2022 issue.

In addition to those efforts, *RKS* also felt that it would be nice if respective religions and philosophies could receive another treatment with a specific theme or period as a focus. So for this issue, we chose to employ a selective angle, focusing on certain challenges that a religion or philosophy could meet in a time of change or crisis. We also decided to invite three Korean experts on Korean Confucianism, so that they could provide us with their own takes on how Korean Confucianism responded to several academic and philosophical challenges in the time when the world was urging the peninsula to shift from premodern to the modern age. Hence the title for the Special Feature in this June 2023 issue: “Joseon Confucianism in the 19th century: Challenges and Response.” All three Korean scholars have graciously agreed to contribute their works for the occasion.

Professor Baek Minjung of the Catholic University of Korea contributed an article under the title of “The Understanding of and Response to Western Learning by Confucian Scholars of the Yeongnam Region in the 19th Century: Emperor Above, Master of Heaven, and Worshiping Rites for the Spirit.” In this study, Prof. Baek examines how the 19th century Joseon scholars of Confucianism, located in the peninsula's Yeongnam region, perceived Western

Learning and Catholic concepts from a Neo-Confucian worldview, and how differently from the Southerner scholars of the Gyeonggi area. In this article, she examines how Western books and Confucian scholars viewed certain concepts, not just differently but from different contexts and premises, and further elaborates on how the Korean scholars responded to the meaning of Emperor Above, ancestral spirit, and worshiping rituals.

Professor Kim Seonhee of Ewha Womans University contributed an article with the title “Choe Hangi's *Gihak*: Universal Science and the Fusion of Eastern and Western Knowledge.” Choe was a 19th-century Korean scholar, and according to Prof. Kim, excelled in *Qi* studies that went beyond the traditional Confucian intellectual boundary by using Western Learning he studied from European missionaries' books. Prof. Kim argues that Choe's *Qi* studies should be defined as a meta-discourse and universal science if we are to properly understand his intention behind adopting Western knowledge. According to the Professor, it is because Choe did so to prove that the movement and action of *Qi* can be used to interpret the nature and purpose of the universe as well as all living things, with the hope of addressing problems of the time and pursuing peace through the fusion of Eastern and Western knowledge.

Professor Lee Haenghoon of the Hallym University contributed an article entitled “Historical Semantics of Confucianism during the Transitional Period of Modern Korea.” In this article, he examined how Western scholarship penetrated the disintegrating Sino-centrism and its world view and focused on the existing Confucian knowledge system's transformation in the wake of incoming Western concepts, through various responses from Korean Confucian intellectuals. According to Prof. Lee, while trying to preserve the Eastern values while embracing means of the West, the Joseon scholars also tried to prove the validity and relevance of the Eastern way, and in the process of repositioning key Confucian concepts in the realm of philosophy and science, the religiosity of Confucianism was questioned. He presents that as a vital part of modern Confucianism's legacy.

With these three articles, the readers will be able to have a grasp on what kind of period Joseon Confucianism was going through at the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries. It was an interesting period to be sure, as all things were rapidly changing, and traditional philosophies were asked to move along as well. How Korean Confucian scholars viewed the advent of Western culture, what kind of coexistence they envisioned, and what was the result of certain clashes

of ideas are all discussed here in details. I am sure the readers will find what the authors have to say most intriguing and be enticed to learn more of premodern Korean thoughts that changed while entering a new era.

We at *RKS* again salutes the three authors who graciously agreed to contribute their works. We also encourage the readers to place themselves in the position of past thinkers while reading all these excellent works. We will continue our endeavor to host distinguished scholars and their works regarding Korean philosophy and thinking, with another selective focus similar to the one we had for this issue, in the future.