

# **Too Rational To Be Modernized? Confucian Rationality and Political Modernity in Traditional Korea**

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This essay argues that the unique mode of rationality in Confucian politics and its various ethico-political practices prevented the Korean Confucian state from becoming a western-style modern state. Drawing on Max Weber's sociology of ideas and ideal interests, I characterize the Weberian concept of rationality as a dynamic relation between ideas and interests and understand their relationship as mutually constitutive. I show how Confucian rationality became institutionalized through the tension between Princely-Line (monarchical power) and Sagely-Line (bureaucratic power) through various symbolic, rhetorical, and ritualistic practices, and how these practices reformulated their own cultural structure, making it viable, and thus preventing it from transforming into a qualitatively different form. In order to do so, the essay focuses on the politics of sagacity of King Jeongjo, eighteenth-century Korean monarch, and the religious persecution of 1801 that ensued after his sudden death.

Keywords: Confucian rationality, modern state, ideal interests, Princely-Line, Sagely-Line, King Jeongjo

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## **Introduction**

It has long been questioned why Confucian states failed to be transformed into a modern state in their own right (Levenson 1968). "Modern state" is defined as a centralized territorial state built on national citizenship (Greenfeld 1992; Poggi 1978; Rae 2002; Tilly 1975). Institutionally it must be composed of a well-organized bureaucracy, a formal legal system, and political organizations to check

the arbitrary power of the ruling authority, be that a king or a modern executive power.<sup>1</sup> In the political development of modern states, the last element has been emphasized because, through the development of institutional apparatus of checks and balances, a modern state can advance to a full-fledged democracy. In this respect, it is indeed one of the greatest achievements of modern political theory to have constitutionalized the checking apparatus of power, thereby making the state more moderate and accountable. Taming the prince without weakening the executive power of the government was the guiding passion of early modern constitutional theorists, and their most important contribution to political thought and practice (Mansfield 1989).

If Western political modernity centers on the “Machiavellian puzzle” that includes both the empowerment and the domestication of the prince, it provides a very useful theoretical litmus test of the Confucian state’s failure to become modern. A standard belief, attested by the noted earlier sinologists Karl Wittfogel and Etienne Balazs, has been that the Confucian states of China and Korea only sought the empowering aspect by building a vast and permanent bureaucracy as the ruler’s patrimonial instrument (Balazs 1964; Wittfogel 1957). This stereotypical image of the Confucian state was strongly influenced by Max Weber’s patrimonial image of the Confucian state, characterized as a worldly religion whose essence lies in “the adjustment to the world, to its orders and conventions” (Weber 1964: 100-4, 152). At the center of this worldly image of Confucianism is a charismatic ruler of whom Weber depicts as “caesaropapistic,” having both temporal and religious charisma (Weber 1964: 30-2).

This autocratic, patrimonial characterization of Confucianism has reinforced, or even cemented, the ever-lasting image of Confucianism as a fundamental impediment to political modernity. Therefore, for example, Samuel Huntington, a renowned political scientist, has even denied the possibility that Confucianism could be compatible with, let alone facilitate, modernity. For him, the authoritarian and hierarchy-centered Confucian worldview is fundamentally irreconcilable with, and even hazardous to, a modern liberal-democratic, and essentially Western, worldview (Huntington 1993).

However, what is crucially problematic in the existing view on the relation

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1. This was the case with Japan’s modernization in the Meiji Restoration period in which the modern nation-state and democracy were constructed at the same time. This essay’s conception of political modernity is modeled on Japan’s “compressed modernity.” For Japan’s modern nation-state building process, see Ikegami (1996).

between Confucianism and political modernity is its rigid understanding between these two key concepts of Confucianism and modernity. Both concepts, operationalized as independent and dependent variables in social science literature, are always treated as a fixed category of analysis rather than a dynamic category of practice. All the more problematic, such “scientific” approaches tend to bring history into such a problematic teleological orientation (e.g., “why X failed to do Y while the others could”). Yet, culture is by no means a well delineated substance. It is, rather, and essentially, an effect of various sociopolitical practices. The Confucian world image is not so much a given reality, but a social construct by variegated forms of symbolic, rhetorical, and ritualistic practices by now so-called “Confucians.”<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising that in the Confucian tradition, statehood had been a product of cultural practices and had been subject to constant reformulations.

In this essay, drawing on Max Weber’s theory of sociology of action, I define the cultural effect of Confucian practices in terms of “Confucian rationality.” By “Confucian rationality” I mean two competing—yet mutually intertwined—ideals in Confucian politics: the sage-king paradigm and the myth of the sage-minister. While the former refers to the unity of Heaven and man by the mediation of the king, providing the foundation of the first rationalization in Chinese history, the latter is predicated on the superiority of the moral power of the Confucian scholar (or the scholar-official) over the kingship, which can be termed the second stage of rationalization.<sup>3</sup> Historically, both ideals were institutionalized in terms of the Confucian kingship and the Confucian ministership, respectively, in court politics. Theoretically, the second stage of Confucian rationalization, namely, the perennial tensions between the kingship and the ministership, which I find essentially “proto-liberal,” were prompted by the actual derailment of the Princely-Line (*wang-tung*) from the Sagely-Line (*dao-tung*) as it was epitomized in Zhu Xi’s (1130-1200) famous preface to *Zhongyong*. Hence, it can also be termed the Neo-Confucian rationality.<sup>4</sup> My central focus is to

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2. In fact, Confucians were those who shared such practices.

3. But this is not to say that the second rationalization was independent of the first rationalization. The fact of the matter is that the former evolved out of the latter as the logical response to the overt breakdown of the Sage-King paradigm in actual politics. As will be shown, it was because of the fundamental intertwining of these two rationalizations that Confucian Korea was curbed from developing a different form other than what we see in late Joseon history.

4. For more detailed discussion on Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian rationalism, see Maruyama (1974: 27).

explain how Confucian rationality led Korea's traditional Confucian state, in which the second rationalization had been most ideally and firmly entrenched, down a different historical path from that of its Western counterpart, eventually preventing it from becoming a Westernized modern state.

Special attention is paid to the politics of sagacity pursued by Korea's eighteenth-century monarch King Jeongjo (r. 1776-1800), which was practiced in terms of "teacher-kingship" and/or "sage-kingship." Of course, this traditional Confucian rhetoric is found universally in the Confucian tradition<sup>5</sup> and thus can hardly be King Jeongjo's exclusive political property. Two intertwined reasons explain why King Jeongjo's reign merits special attention with regard to Korea's political modernity. First, it was in this period that the internal tensions between the first and the second rationalizations in Confucian rationality were made most saliently manifest when King Jeongjo, by virtue of his masterful use of the rhetoric of teacher-kingship, of which political effect is reminiscent of the absolutist monarchy in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, attempted and partly succeeded in restructuring Joseon's ethico-political and cultural-political framework. Second, because of the sudden dissolution of King Jeongjo's absolutism after his death Joseon suffered the unprecedented scale of the religious and also political massacre.

Even though the internal connection between King Jeongjo's "political" absolutism and the "religious" persecution of 1801 have never been taken seriously in Korean historiography or Korean social sciences, this essay submits that King Jeongjo's absolutist monarchy that was predicated on the first Confucian rationality indeed helped to prevent religious catastrophe, and laying—however rudimentary—foundations for steps toward a modern state.<sup>6</sup> The problem was that his pursuit of absolutism was vehemently repudiated as tyranny by the Confucian scholar-officials because it was thought to violate the very premise of

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5. For China, see Dardess (1983), and for Korea, see Haboush (2001); also see Pye (1985).

6. Greenfeld (1992: 129) argues that at the formative stage of state-formation, the first event is the perfect unity between the sovereign and the state. For example, according to her, the history of the state-formation of France witnessed "the referent of symbolism shifted first towards the person of the sovereign, and then to the state." It is also Charles Tilly's view that only after the indisputable centralization of the state that can be facilitated by the formation of the "body politic" via the symbolic unity between the king and the state, the democratic negotiations of citizenship become possible. That is, for the negation of citizenship to occur, there should be one salient negotiating party that in this earlier stage of political modernity happens to be the king. See Tilly (ed.) (1996).

Confucian rationality, the second stage of rationalization. To underpin their political positions, both the monarch and the scholar-bureaucrats utilized peculiarly Confucian symbols and rhetoric that were derived from the first and the second rationalizations respectively in Confucian rationality, instead of using violence or pure power. My argument is that it was in the course of the Confucian bureaucrats' dismantling of King Jeongjo's symbolic construction of a new statehood that the persecution of 1801 was occasioned, thus reinforcing the Neo-Confucian logic of rationality of which essence lay in the co-government by the king and the scholar-bureaucrats and therefore preventing the total transformation of the Neo-Confucian state into an absolutely different form.

The first part discusses what, in Max Weber's sociology of action, "rationality" refers to and how dynamic it is by exploring the dialectic between the idea and ideal interests. The second part applies this conceptual framework to the Confucian political tradition by examining how two mutually intertwined yet perennially competing Confucian rationalities had been generated. In the third part, the two theoretical Confucian rationalities are applied to the actual Joseon political context, particularly to King Jeongjo's reign and the first year of King Sunjo's reign. Here, it will be discussed how strongly King Jeongjo's politics of sagacity was aimed at a total transformation of the Neo-Confucian politics centered on the scholar-bureaucrats, and how its failure entailed such a massive political and religious debacle, thereby preventing the Western type of political modernization. I conclude by contending that modernity, especially political modernity, hangs heavily on historical contingency, and that it is therefore fairer to think of the possibility of multiple modernities rather than a single highway to modernity.

## World Images and Practices

### 1. Rationality as Cultural Dynamics

Max Weber, in his classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, grappled with the elective affinities between religion and modern-rational capitalism. Yet, scholars have often failed to discuss this classic work within the context of his life-long project of the sociology of religion: how to provide a *rational* answer to the absurdity of this world—violence, pain, suffering, cruelty, and, above all, death. Special attention should be placed on his problematic concept "rationality." In order to clarify Weber's "rationality" Benjamin Schwartz, draw-

ing on Karl Jaspers's notion of "axial age breakthrough,"<sup>7</sup> has captured the breaking moment of *rationalization* in human history in terms of "the first rationalization." Obviously, the first rationalization of human history is markedly distinguished from the modern entrenchment of instrumental rationality (Weber 1958a: 181). Schwartz (1996: 66) thus asserts, "[in studying the origin of world religions,] the Weberian coupling of 'rationalization' with 'disenchantment of the world' hardly applies. In all of these civilizations (the higher civilizations of world religions) we find a world permeated throughout with the divine, the sacred, and the mythic."

Therefore, in the Weberian sense, the famous formula, "rationalization = the disenchantment of the world" pronounces a very recent phenomenon found only in the modern West as with the rise of commercial republics. What was more pervasive and universal in pre-modern societies since the axial age breakthrough was the first rationalization. Yet, Weber's more profound insight seems to be in his problematic notion of "multiple rationalities." In his sociology of religion, rationalism (or rationality) is a "historical concept which covers a whole world of different things" (Weber 1958a: 78). To be rational, however, the things that compose each culture's world image need to hold its own unique "logical or teleological consistency" (Weber 1958b: 324). In other words, social, political, and religious actions are to be oriented towards a certain end. Accordingly, then, the meaning of the actions should be construed only by having the logical and teleological structure between the end and the action as an interpretive backdrop.

But, it is important to note that Weberian rationality is not just a composition of static cultural norms. Instead, it is a living dynamic between the end and the actions for while the end guides the overall direction of the actions, the actions often reinforce, reformulate, or reshape the end in the course of accomplishing their cultural missions. Therefore, one should remember that the core of Weber's discussion of a dynamic of ideas and ideal interests centers on this mutually constitutive relation between the end and the actions.

## 2. Ideal Interests and the Mutual Constitution of System and Practices

What, then, constitutes the end on which the whole dynamics of rationality is

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7. Jaspers (1953) called the moment of the birth of world religions (seven or eight hundred B.C. across East and West) an "axial age breakthrough" in human history.

based? Here we need to turn to Weber's discussion on ideas and ideal and material interests in his famous "switchman" metaphor.

Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the "world images" that have been created by "ideas" have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest. (Weber 1958b: 280)

Gerth and Mill's classic interpretation of the above lines appears to be misleading, because they, by taking "interests" exclusively for "material interests," only discover the tensions between ideas and interests. Yet, by attributing ideas to Nietzsche (or his psychology) and interests to Marx (or his materialism), they failed to grasp the creative tensions between ideas and ideal interests (Weber 1958b: 61-5). But, if not material interests, what then are "ideal interests"?<sup>8</sup> Ann Swidler (1986: 274) provides one of the most persuasive interpretations when she says, "Ideal interests, such as the desire to be saved from the torments of hell, are also ends-oriented, except that these ends are derived from symbolic realities." Then she rephrases Weber's original lines as follows:

Interests are the engine of action, pushing it along, but ideas define the destinations human beings seek to reach (inner-worldly versus other-worldly possibilities of salvation, for example) and the means for getting there (mystical versus ascetic techniques of salvation). (Swidler 1986: 274)

Swidler believes not ideas alone but interests are the engine of action. What is crucially missing in her analysis, however, is a serious attention to the mutually constitutive dynamic between ideas and interests. While rediscovering the power of interests as a locomotive of action and thereupon criticizing Parsons's quick equation of ideas and values (hence rejecting the post-Parsonian equation of value(s) and culture),<sup>9</sup> nevertheless, Swidler downplays the power of the idea

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8. In general, my discussion of the interesting concept of "ideal interests" is indebted to SangJun Kim (2000: 47-9).

9. On the one hand, Swidler appraises Parsons' heroic attempt to synthesize Weber and Durkheim, taking from Weber the image of action as guided by culturally determined ends and from Durkheim the notion of culture as a shared, collective product. But on the other hand, as with

or the world image that was so crucial to Weber. She rather understands a culture more like a “tool kit” or repertoire from which actors select differing pieces for constructing “lines of action” (Swidler 1986: 277).

To be sure, what “directly” determines actions is not ideas but varied interests. Yet, in Swidler’s scheme, there is no creative role for ideas, the creativity that Weber’s world images indicate. Although Swidler begins her discussion of the switchman metaphor with ideal interests that mediate between ideas and actions, in the end, both ideas and ideal interests become marginalized in her final analysis. Her reformulation of the switchman metaphor is still underdeveloped between ideas and ideal interests.

Unlike material interests that are inextricably intertwined with instrumental rationality (the *rational* calculation of profits and losses), ideal interests are indispensably associated with “the dynamics of rationality.” Recall Weber’s insightful phrase: “Furthermore, each one of these fields may be rationalized in terms of very different ultimate values and ends, and what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another” (Weber 1958a: 26). Ideal interests are propelled and justified only in relation to the ultimate ends. If material interests are universally applicable across different cultures, ideal interests are “rational” only with reference to their internal relation to the ends.

It is also important that ideal interests not only carry out the ideas but, often, they in turn affect ideas that originally propelled them. The best example is the emergence of the various confessional sects within Protestantism. Historically, the Puritans’ ideal interests to realize the Calvinist theological doctrines indeed entailed a series of violent politico-theological debates, and, in doing so, they finally gave rise to the throngs of competing sect communities. It can hardly be justified that they were mutually incompatible. Yet it is equally true that they unflinchingly competed for supremacy in orthodoxy and authenticity. Ideal interests that generate multifaceted forms of practices for the actualization of ideas often reshape the system of ideas (or rationality) itself. Hence, of pivotal significance is not so much the static and teleological relation between the meaning system and practices (or ideal interests), but rather the dynamics between the two. The meaning system and practice constitutes an indissoluble duality or dialectic (Sewell, Jr. 1999: 47). Combined together, it can be justly called

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her criticism of Weber’s ideas, she does not accept a direct and deep cognitive influence of values on social actions. See Swidler (2000: 270-2).



“rationality.”

To rightly capture the nature of traditional Confucian politics, it is imperative to understand what kind of rationality the Confucians had constructed and how and with what kinds of practices they had exercised their ideal interests to sustain, reinforce, or reformulate it. Confucianism was by no means a static, if not unstable, cultural system. Through various practices, it engendered two competing, yet mutually interdependent, rationalities. The entire system of Confucian rationality was the ethico-political effect of the symbolically and physically violent competition between the two. This is not to say that such competition was doomed to a political catastrophe. The fact of the matter is that it rather promoted what I call “proto-liberalism.” It was only when the two attempted to appropriate the other and finally overcome it, in other words, only when the creative tensions were collapsed that the political (and religious) debacle like the persecution of 1801 was occasioned. The next section will examine what constituted the two competing Confucian rationalities, and how the tensions between the two created the proto-liberal effect in Confucian politics, especially after the rise of Neo-Confucianism.

## Two Powers and Two Competing Rationalities

### 1. The First Rationalization and the Sage-King Paradigm

The premise of Confucian politics is built on the stark contrast between the bygone Golden, virtuous, peaceful time of sage-kings and the unjust, bloody wars and usurpations of the contending states of later times (Kim 2002: 60). In this regard, the praxis of Confucianism simply lies in the moral admonition for the later kings and the restoration of the ideal sage-kingship. The famous passage from *Lunyü* describes such ideal politics as this: “Governing with excellence can be compared to being the North Star: the North Star dwells in its place, and the multitude of stars pays it tribute” (*Analects* 2.1). This is what Confucius referred to as the legendary sage-king Shun’s government (see also *Analects* 15.5). In another place, Confucius describes the ideal politics in a more concrete manner when he said,

[The Master said:] “Lead the people with administration injunctions (*zheng*) and keep them orderly with penal law (*xing*), and they will avoid

punishment but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de*) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (*li*) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves. (*Analects* 2.3)

Attending to the obvious non-action, not to mention the use of violence, in political action in Confucius' thinking, scholars like Herbert Fingarette (1972), Benjamin Schwartz (1985), J. G. A. Pocock (1971) have echoed that the aforementioned lines speak of a sort of "magical" power emanating from the excellent moral virtues and institutionalized rituals. But, how could politics without coercion ever be possible? Certainly, in the Confucian ideal, the violent image of the kingship is eradicated from scratch. All the more striking is that Confucius attributes such unrealistic governance to the dynasty founders such as Yao, Shun, Yu, T'ang, Wen, and Wu. For example, *Lunyü* describes the oath of King T'ang, the founder of the Shang dynasty (B.C. 1500-1000), to *Shang-di* (Lord-on-High) before the expedition war against King Jie, last emperor of the Xia dynasty, as below:

I, Lu (T'ang's name), dare to humbly offer in sacrifice a black bull, and dare to call upon the August High Ancestor (Lord-on-High). Those who do wrong will not be pardoned. I will not shield your subjects from your sight, but will let all decisions rest with you. If I, your subject, personally do wrong, let not the many states be implicated; if any of the many states do wrong, the guilt lies with me personally. (*Analects* 20.1)

What an impeccable moral virtue this is! But *Shujing* (*The Book of Documents*), reportedly one of the oldest documents in China, conveys a strikingly different story about King T'ang. Here is his oration stirring his people to attack King Jie.

[And] now I must go punish him (King Jie). I pray to you, assist me, the One Man, to carry out the punishment appointed by Heaven (Lord on High). I will greatly reward you. On no account disbelieve me; I will not eat my words. *If you do not obey the words I have spoken to you I will put your children to death with you. You will find no forgiveness.* (Waltham 1971: 68, emphasis added)

At stake is how to understand the apparent disparity between the classics in the

descriptions of the sage-king—one is virtuous and the other is violent. According to Henderson, the original texts of the old Confucian classics like *The Book of Songs* and *The Book of Documents* had more expanded versions. The inchoate collections of ancient writings were never exclusively Confucian classics but rather served as a *bonum commune* to several schools and strands of classical philosophy (Henderson 1991: 34-5). Despite Confucius' own evaluation of himself as a mere transmitter of the old tradition, rather than an inventor of the classics (*Analects* 7.1), Henderson (1991: 27) argues that by most traditional accounts Confucius did not merely transmit. Rather, his chief contribution was his deliberate expurgation of the allegedly inappropriate elements in precanonical writings in the course of the transmission of them. The myths of the sage-kings were thus invented.

As Julia Ching (1997: xii-iv) has shown, the “sage-king paradigm” was not solely a Confucian asset because sage-kings were originally shamans who practiced magic, thereby mediating between Heaven and Earth. But it is indisputably the Confucian tradition that created a more humanized and rational political paradigm out of such inchoate shamanic images of the sage-kings. More important, as Mark Lewis (1990: 168) has demonstrated, the invention of the myths of the sage-kings was basically a part of “the political and social programs” of the Confucian school in the Warring States period when the existing order was collapsing and the primitive power was rampant through violent competitions among the warring states.

Karl Jaspers believed that the invention of the sage-kings myths was the Confucian mode of the “axial age breakthrough.” It was a rationalized yet sacred myth that replaced inhumane, immoral, violent, and thus profane myths of prehistoric ages. At the heart of the ethico-political “programs” pursued by the early Confucian schools were the construction of the classics and the invention of various forms of ceremonies, rites, and rituals. Underlying all these cultural practices were their unflagging ideal interests to restore the humane world order as it could correspond to the moral order of Heaven. In short, it was a uniquely Confucian way to resolve the tensions between the transcendental and the mundane orders.

## 2. The Second Rationalization and the Myth of the Sage-Ministers

The perennial tensions between moral impeccability and primitive power in Confucian politics were in marked contrast to Weber's characterization of

Confucianism as a religion of worldly-adjustment. Correcting Weber and echoing Schwartz, Eisenstadt (1985) has defined this special mode of tension in Confucianism in terms of “this-worldly transcendentalism.” However, the first rationalization was far from perfect. Albeit empowering the Confucians with powerful moral, symbolic, and religious apparatus to tame the ineluctable violent kingship, the Confucian king’s dual identity as Son of Heaven and Emperor (Ching 1997: 45-6) always lent him a substantial leeway to evade moral shackles. If he did not mind being condemned a tyrant, the king could punish and further take the lives of his scholar-bureaucrats (Fairbank 1992: 68).

In fact, the greatest problem with the first rationalization consisted in its ideal aspiration of politics itself. The early Confucian endeavor to eradicate violence and coercive power from the kingship turned out to be too ideal to be actualized in real politics. In every real situation, the Confucians’ pure moral claims were in stark contrast to the kings’ realist claim to monopoly of violence for the centralization of the state structure (Lewis 1990: 245-7; also see Creel 1964). All the more problematic was the symbolic manipulation of the image of the sage-kings by the warring kings. It was due in part to the inevitable inclusion of the elements of violence in inventing canons. For example, King T’ang’s purge of King Jie and King Wu’s (the founder of the Zhou dynasty) execution of King Zhou (the last king of the Shang dynasty) still remained in *The Book of Mengzi*. However humanely rephrased (*Mencius* 1B.7), the “sanctioned violence” allegedly vindicated by Heaven could be easily accommodated to the worldly ambitions of the kings. Even worse, the theory of the Mandate of Heaven was permeated with internal contradictions, because the power to rule that revealed the Mandate was itself won through defeating in battle and killing the preceding king (Lewis 1990: 205).<sup>10</sup>

Mencius, the most forthright pacifist in ancient China, in defense of the Confucian moral project, had to refute the kings’ realist claims. His foremost ethico-political project was how to control the ruler’s sanctioned violence in an absolutely moral, non-violent and humane way. In other words, the taming of the prince without completely forsaking the sage-king paradigm constituted the core of Mencius’ political theory that later inspired the Neo-Confucian

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10. Hon’s study (1999) deals exactly with this case. He shows how the new Emperors of the Five Dynasties (907-60) utilized the Mandate of Heaven for their own political advantages. I also find Wood’s (1995: 9-10) discussion of the dual interpretations of the theory of the Mandate of Heaven useful.

redeemers. But how? Mencius' genius was in inventing a counterbalancing myth, which is best illustrated in Mencius' following remark.

King Mu frequently went to see Zi Si. "How did kings of states with a thousand chariots in antiquity make friends with virtuous Confucian scholars?" he asked. Zi Si was displeased. "What the ancients talked about," said he, "was serving them, not making friends with them." The reason for Zi Si's displeasure was surely this. "In point of position, you are the prince and I am your subject. How dare I be a friend with you? In point of virtue, it is you who ought to serve me. How can you presume to be friends with me?" (*Mencius* 5B.7)

What is striking in this passage is the dichotomous distinction of king = power and Confucian scholar (the king's potential subject) = virtue, which is reminiscent of the Western medieval theory of "two swords": Emperor's power (*potestas*) and Pope's authority (*auctoritas*).<sup>11</sup> Here, the king's minister, originally a Confucian scholar, is emerging as a powerful counterbalancing force to the king's power. Mencius even warned King Xuan of Qi of this: "If a prince treats his subjects as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds, they will treat him as a stranger. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy" (*Mencius* 4B.3).

Throughout *The Book of Mengzi*, Mencius, unlike Confucius who exclusively praised the sage-kings, takes pains to highlight the virtue of the so-called "sage-ministers" like Bo Yi, Yi Yin, Liu Xia-hui, Jing Zi, and Zi Si.<sup>12</sup> The case of Yi Yin is even striking when Mencius says:

Yi Yin worked in the fields in the outskirts of You Xin, and delighted in the Way of Yao and Shun ... When T'ang sent a messenger with presents to invite him to court, he calmly said, "What do I want T'ang's presents for? I much prefer working in the fields, delighting in the way of Yao and Shun." Only after T'ang sent a messenger for the third time did he change his mind and say, "Is it not better for me to make this prince a

11. For the medieval theory of two swords, see Gierke (1992).

12. See 2B: 1 (Jing Zi), 2B: 11 (Zi Si), 5A: 7 (Yi Yin), 5B: 1 (Bo Yi, Yi Yin, Liu Xia-hui, Confucius), 5B: 6 (Zi Si), 5A: 9 (Bo-li Xi), 5B: 7 (Zi Si), 6B: 6 (Bo Yi, Yi Yin, Liu Xia-hui), 6B: 13 (Yue-cheng Zi), 7A: 28 (Liu Xia-hui), 7A: 31 (Yi Yin), 7B: 15 (Bo Yi, Liu Xia-hui).

Yao or Shun than to remain in the fields, delighting in the way of Yao and Shun? ... Heaven, in producing the people, has given to those who first attain understanding the duty of awakening those who are slow to understand; and to those who are the first to awaken the duty of awakening those who are slow to awaken. I am among the first of Heaven's people to awaken. I shall awaken these people by means of this Way. If I do not awaken them, who will do so?" (*Mencius* 5A.7)

Inventing the myth of the sage-ministers as a powerful counterbalance to the myth of the sage-kings and making it an integral part of the sage-king paradigm, Mencius deliberately institutionalized within the Confucian monarchical system the Confucians' moral power, which can be termed the "second rationalization" in Confucianism. Passing Han and T'ang, this second rationalization culminated in the Neo-Confucian revival in the Song dynasty.

### 3. The Two Lines and the Institutionalization of the Second Rationalization

Throughout *The Book of Mengzi*, the Confucian scholar's special sense of moral mission like the kind we have seen in Yi Yin's case is found widely including Mencius' own (*Mencius* 2B.13). But, it was in Song China that this Confucian sense of moral mission became entrenched in the form of the "Sagely-Line" (*dao-tung*). This mysterious line was constructed by noted Neo-Confucians such as Cheng Yi (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi (1130-1200), who claimed to have rediscovered the Sagely Way that had been transmitted from the legendary sage-kings to Confucius and Mencius after its discontinuity for more than a thousand years. Zhu Xi's famous preface to the commentary of *Zhongyong* provides one of the most succinct and shrewd justifications of the exclusive transmission of the Sagely Way, part of which reads

The legendary Sage King Yao transmitted to his Sagely heir Shun four esoteric characters which implied the core meaning of the Way. Shun added twelve characters to it and transmitted them to the next Sagely heir Yu. The meaning of the now sixteen characters was too deep and subtle for any plain minds to understand. The transmission of the Sagely Way continued, albeit intermittently, to Confucius and Mencius. After Mencius, the transmission was discontinued until the mysterious emer-

gence of the Neo-Confucian founders.<sup>13</sup>

What is notable is that the transmission of the Sagely-Line was redirected from the Princely-Line to the scholarly line (Kim 2002: 67). In fact, at least in its origin, the myth of the sage-ministers vis-à-vis the myth of the sage-kings was more complementary than confrontational as Mencius himself often paired the sage-ministers with the sage-kings. The unity, albeit permeated with tensions, rather than confrontation was central. However, the construction of the Sagely-Line vis-à-vis the Princely-Line brought these potential tensions to the fore, and instead of eliminating them, it institutionalized them within the political system. Now, political struggle between kingship and ministership is theoretically inevitable and, in the Weberian sense, it even becomes routinized as everyday events. In the Neo-Confucian stage, the second rationalization was pronounced in terms of such institutional struggles (Eisenstadt 1985: 173).

For the Neo-Confucian theorists, central to the *rationalization* of the institutional structure was the establishment of strong censorship. The censorial system, firmly established in the Neo-Confucian dynasties of Ming and Joseon beginning in the fourteenth century, had nothing to do with governmental control of private publications or entertainment, but rather it represented an organized and systematic effort by the government to police itself (Hucker 1959: 186). Certainly, the censorial system in the Confucian political structure was the most intense institutional expression of the “prophetic voice” (de Bary 1991: 9-14), the uniquely Confucian moral prophecy of the Mandate of Heaven that was always believed to be manifested through the voices of the people. Confucian scholars, irrespective of their official positions, claimed to be carriers of public opinion, and it was the censorial system through which their collective voices were heard by the government.

The dynastic foundation of Neo-Confucianism notwithstanding, Joseon’s wholesale Neo-Confucian transformation had yet to be seen until the late sixteenth-century, when more orthodox Neo-Confucian scholars seized power in the central government. Arguably, it brought about critical changes within the bureaucracy, and the most salient feature was the rise of the censorial voice (Haboush 2001: 19). Much of the political upheaval in the first half of the Joseon dynasty, which culminated in the four literati purges, was linked to the

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13. This succinct version is from Kim (2002: 66).

question of whether the Censorate, composed mostly of younger and more ideologically committed Confucian officials, could secure the institutional and legal independence of the king's sway and the vested interests of the high echelons (Wagner 1974). The late sixteenth-century saw the eventual triumph of the orthodox Neo-Confucian scholar-officials over the old echelons, and this resulted in the inviolability of the censorial voice, referred to as the conscience of the nation, that obviously placed an enormous limitation on the king's freedom of action (Palais 1975: 11).

If the key to Confucianism's second rationalization was the institutional power of the censorial system and more institutionalized struggle between kingship and ministership, Joseon since the late sixteenth-century presents the ideal image. Throughout the latter half of the Joseon period, Neo-Confucian scholar-bureaucrats' ethico-political and cultural affiliations with the Sagely-Line brought them to intractable and unflinching confrontations with the kingship. Central to such vehemence was the Confucian scholar-bureaucrats' ideal interests to secure the Confucian rationality attained in the second rationalization not only by taming, but also by controlling the king. I find such institutionally-generated perennial tensions between the kingship and the ministership in Joseon's Neo-Confucian politics "proto-liberal" in nature. It was "liberal" given its constraining force, but it was still "proto" because it was not backed by individualism of the kind one sees in the modern West.

Why is it that Joseon's proto-liberal state failed to become a full-fledged liberal modern state? Put differently, why couldn't Korea's traditional Confucian state transform itself into a "modern" one despite its high degree of rationalization and proto-liberal institutional developments? The remaining part will examine how the very proto-liberal features in Joseon's Neo-Confucian state paradoxically kept it from transforming itself into a completely different form.

## **Aborted Political Modernity: The Case of Korea**

### **1. Precondition: The Center-Constructing Movement in the Seventeenth-Century**

The development of the censorial system since the sixteenth-century notwithstanding,<sup>14</sup> until the eighteenth-century, the intense, yet relatively firmly institutionalized, tensions between the kingship and the ministership never led to the



complete breakdown of the Neo-Confucian political system despite intermittent political upheavals. As the Neo-Confucian scholar-bureaucrats' ideal interests became institutionalized, as with the entrenchment of the Neo-Confucian political institutions, and their institutional (political and often factional) interests grew intertwined with material interests, the two competing Confucian rationalities achieved a highly developed checks and balances system, thus mutually ensuring political stability. James Palais (1975: 4-5) theorized that the peculiarly Korean political viability hampered, rather than helped, Korea's advancement to the absolutely centralized modern state—in terms of an “equilibrium of power(s).”

King Jeongjo's political reform was geared toward political modernity in terms of the establishment of a sovereign power by overcoming the separation of two powers and was the monarchical attempt to go further than a “relatively” strong monarchy vis-à-vis aristocratic-bureaucratic power. But King Jeongjo's efforts at the construction of the center did not take place in a political vacuum. In fact, the latter half of the seventeenth-century was devoted to heated disputes amongst Confucian intellectuals in and out of court as to how to conceive of Joseon's Confucian kingship and her statehood when there was no longer a symbolic center of the Confucian culture after Ming was conquered by the “barbarian” Manchurians (Haboush 1999: 67). The notorious ritual controversies (*yesong*) exemplify this.

In a world where politics and religion and politics and culture are massively interwoven, political change on a system level can hardly take place unless there is a widespread consciousness of the breakdown of the meaning of symbols and a felt-need to redefine it.<sup>15</sup> For the Joseon Neo-Confucian intellectuals, the collapse of Ming signaled the very breakdown of the symbolic meaning system of the Neo-Confucian structure that had sustained the essence of Joseon's statehood. A new symbolic system was urgently sought. The ritual controversy was indeed a search for a new identity of Joseon's statehood on the Confucian intellectuals' part.

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14. It includes the accentuation of the censorial function of the Office of the Special Counselors (*Hongmungwan*) as well as the reinforcement of the Censorate (*Daegan*) in terms of remonstrance and impeachment. See Choe (1997).

15. In this regard, the modernization theory that finds the source of political change exclusively in the economic factor is limited in explaining the transition from the traditional regime to the modern one.

It is well known that Seoin and Namin confronted each other about what kind of mourning the deceased king Hyojong's surviving stepmother Queen Dowager Jauí should wear—a one-year mourning period (*ginyeon*) or a three-year period in untrimmed mourning (*chamchoe*). The difference originated from whether or not to see the late King Hyojong as King Injo's primary son. This constituted the confrontational line between the “two Songs” (Song Siyeol and Song Jungil) in the Seoin faction and Heo Mok in the Namin faction. Despite both parties' confrontation, it was more of a question of interpretation of the classics, particularly the *Ceremonials and Rites*, as to how to understand the definition of the primary son. In effect, Heo Mok agreed with Song Siyeol that the queen dowager's mourning for King Hyojong should be based on his filial rank, although his elevation of that rank differed from Song's.<sup>16</sup> In other words, both Song Siyeol and Heo Mok never distinguished the royal house from the state, and thus their dispute was on whether or not the royal succession was a special case and had to be evaluated by a separate rule.

But for Yun Hyu, another Namin scholar, who claimed that “the legitimate line (*jeok-tong*) lies where the succession (*jong-tong*) has gone,” it was in no case the question of King Hyojong's filial rank in particular and the issue of familial ritual in general. What differentiates Yun Hyu not only from the Seoin scholar Song Siyeol but also from fellow Namin scholar Heo Mok is his complete separation between the state and the royal house. The king was not merely the head of the royal house that is *primus inter pares* but was to be treated as the head of the state. Yun Hyu introduced the concept of sovereign that by definition could not be divided. On the surface, the issue is between Seoin's one-year mourning versus Namin's three-year mourning. But from a political theoretical standpoint, whereas the confrontation between Song Siyeol and Heo Mok is within the same Neo-Confucian reasoning, the line between Song and Heo on one side and Yun Hyu on the other is the confrontation between medieval Neo-Confucian rationalism and modern (Machiavellian) reasoning.

It is of no surprise that more than a century later, Jeong Yag-yong, one of King Jeongjo's most important political pundits, adopted Yun Hyu's interpretation. More importantly, in the course of inventing a sovereign power while deconstructing Neo-Confucian rationalism underscored primarily by the Seoin

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16. Recent studies on the Controversy of 1659-60 (*gihae yesong*) make a clear point of this. See Yi (2000); Kim (2001); Haboush (1999).

(and later by the Noron) faction, both Yun Hyu and Jeong Yag-yong not only separated the state from the royal house, but, in order to theoretically underpin the absoluteness of that power, both lent, under the banner of sovereignty, the image of *Shang-di*, a personified form of Heaven, which proactively intervenes in the worldly affairs (Haboush 1999: 79; Yi 1996). By replacing Heaven (or Heavenly Principle) by *Shang-di* as the sovereign power of the cosmos and concomitantly by envisaging the human sovereign in terms of all-powerful *Shang-di*, Yun Hyu and Jeong Yag-yong ultimately posed a crucial challenge to the Neo-Confucian rationality, and, thus, the dynasty's ethico-political structure.<sup>17</sup> Politically, Yun Hyu and Jeong Yag-yong's shared idea of "indivisible sovereignty" was most vividly pronounced in their unflagging demand for the abolishment of the Censorate (*Daegan*), which, in Joseon court, constituted one pillar of the two powers alongside the monarchical power.

That Jeong Yag-yong's anti-Neo-Confucian and proto-modern (if not proto-liberal) political theoretical project had King Jeongjo as its actualizing political force is no secret (Park 2003). The critical question was whether the monarch was capable of living up to such a daunting political project. In this regard, King Jeongjo's politics of sagacity was not only the monarch's proactive response to such post-Neo-Confucian demands on the construction of sovereign power. It also highlighted its culmination when, right after his sudden death, all of his political achievements were deconstructed by the Noron orthodox Neo-Confucian scholar-bureaucrats armed with Neo-Confucian rationalism.

## 2. King Jeongjo's Politics of Sagacity: Incarnation of "Teacher-King"

Why King Jeongjo wanted to strengthen royal authority is not so difficult to understand. It was not unrelated to personal tragedy. His father had been put to death by his grandfather, an action King Jeongjo blamed on factionalism, particularly the Noron faction that was in control. In fact, one of the things King Jeongjo did after he ascended to the throne was to proclaim a continuation of his grandfather's policy of factional impartiality (*tangpyeong* policy), so that he could weaken the grip of the Noron faction on his bureaucracy. For him, it was only natural to turn to the Namin and secondary sons who were free of the taint

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17. For Jeong Yag-yong's theoretical challenge to Neo-Confucian rationalism, see Han (1996) and Setton (1997).

of involvement with his father's death. For the Namin's part, since they had been kept out of power for decades, it was sensible to support King Jeongjo's plans to strengthen royal authority at the expense of the bureaucracy which was still largely in the hands of the Noron faction.

Certainly, his father's tragic death amid the violent factional strife exposed King Jeongjo to a realization of the precarious nature of the Joseon kingship.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, his grandfather's life-long agony that grew to the point in which to sacrifice his own son to establish his absolute kingship against *yangban* aristocrat-bureaucrats' factional interests must have given him a poignant lesson about the evils of factionalism. But, King Jeongjo's extraordinariness lies in the fact that he saw beyond his personal tragedy. He saw the chronic problems of Joseon politics that stemmed from the very premise of Neo-Confucian rationalism as an ideological endorsement of factional politics, and furthermore that he channeled his inner torment into a remarkable political creativity. As Haboush (1984: 42) hints, rather than worry whether he was a sage king or not, King Jeongjo, to be sure, used the rhetoric and ritual available to him to pose as one. That is, King Jeongjo utilized the most powerful symbolism and rhetoric available to him—the image of “teacher-king” (*gumsa*), the quintessential mark of the legendary sage-kings.

Again, the rhetoric of “teacher-king” and/or “sage-king” is hardly unique to King Jeongjo. The point is how this traditional rhetoric had been used in a particular political context. Previously, especially after the institutional power of the orthodox Neo-Confucian scholar-bureaucrats had been secured in central government in the late sixteenth-century, the “teacher-king” rhetoric was and could hardly be initiated by the king himself. Quite the contrary, in the heyday of Neo-Confucian politics, the symbolism of “teacher-king” or “sage-king” was one of the most powerful cultural resources by which the Neo-Confucian scholar-bureaucrats could control not only the arbitrary power of the kingship, but in actuality the monarchical power itself. All in all, the rhetoric of “teacher-king” or “sage-king” was expressed in terms of “sage-learning” rather than “sage-teaching” (Kalton 1988). What is special about King Jeongjo is he appropriated this rhetoric. Above all, for him, to establish an undisputed authority of the sov-

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18. Compared to the emperors of China, the Joseon king had less symbolic and actual authority because the sage-king paradigm, the right to communicate with Heaven, was the Chinese emperor's exclusive privilege. Besides such a symbolic deficit, it was the strength of factional alliances and firmly entrenched factional competition that seriously compromised the Joseon king's political freedom.

ereign power of the kingship by the restoration of the ancient (or legendary) unity of the Sagely-Line—then privatized by the incumbent Noron faction<sup>19</sup>—and the Princely-Line was one of the most impending tasks. Let us first look at what exactly King Jeongjo had achieved by the judicious use of the “teacher-king” rhetoric.

Although King Yeongjo also took pains to restore the image and the authority of the sage-kingship, in the most critical moments, he could not but opt for political bargaining with the Noron faction. That he finally let Song Siyeol and Song Jungil, two prominent Seoin (Noron) scholars, be honored in the National Shrine (*munmyo*) is a case in point (Haboush 2001: 191). So, for King Jeongjo, in order to retrieve the Sagely-Line “usurped” by the Noron faction and not to suffer the ideological deficit like his grandfather, the exaltation of the monarchical authority in scholarship was the foremost task. The first step King Jeongjo took for this purpose was to build Gyujanggak (the royal library) within the compound of the palace, and then he made it a locus for his cabinet to produce reform policies. “*Gyujang*” refers to the monarch’s astrology as well as to his writings (Yi 2000: 176). Obviously, the construction of Gyujanggak was aimed at the ideological propagandization of the previous Joseon monarchs’ erudition in the Confucian classics and their great scholarship. But the role of Gyujanggak was not limited to such apparently ideological projects. More crucially, Gyujanggak provided King Jeongjo with a political headquarters by which he could drive such provocative cultural movements as the Literature-Style Refreshment and the Classic-Learning Movement (Park 2001: 131-145, 161-166), which seemed not directly related with politics, but indeed was closely associated with the practice of teacher-kingship and by implication the challenge to Neo-Confucian rationalism. In particular, his adamant advocacy of the Classical Styles allegedly used in the ancient “Three Dynasties” over the New Styles developed in the later dynasties like T’ang, Song and Ming pressed the Neo-Confucians (particularly the Noron scholars) to focus more on the Six Classics than the Four Books canonized by Zhu Xi.

But, the most impressive action taken by King Jeongjo regarding the teacher-king rhetoric was the creation of the reeducation program of young prominent bureaucrats by the monarch himself, which is called the “*Chogye Munshin*” sys-

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19. For how, since the seventeenth-century, the Korean Sagely-Line (Joseon Do-tong) had been privatized and further politicized by the Seoin (later Noron) faction, see Yi (2004: 142-9).

tem that replaced the Royal Lecture, one of the most important institutional pillars of Neo-Confucian rationalism.<sup>20</sup> In Joseon, the Royal Lecture had been firmly institutionalized as a central means of royal education. As a matter of fact, the monarch's eagerness for the Royal Lecture was often considered one of the cardinal duties of the throne, a yardstick by which his virtue could be measured. In reality, however, it was the Neo-Confucian scholar-bureaucrats who taught Confucian classics to the king in the Royal Lecture. In theory, a king should be a student of the classics, but in reality he was a student of the bureaucrats. Nevertheless, if the king could surpass his bureaucrat teachers, he could claim the role of arbiter, because as far as the classics were concerned, his own teachers were also students of them (Haboush 1984: 44).

To go one step further than his grandfather King Yeongjo, who moved on from student to arbiter (Haboush 2001: 63-75), King Jeongjo created the *Chogye Munshin* system by which the most promising young scholar-officials under the age of thirty-seven could be handpicked by the king himself for intensive study at Gyujanggak for a set length of time. Previously, government officials had asked the king to study Sage Learning. With the new system, it was the king who chose the officials to study it, or provided them with the opportunity to do so (Yi 2000: 177). Thus sage-learning had been subverted to sage-teaching as with the shift of an initiation.

Gaining an upper hand for the monarchy by the artful use of "teacher-king" rhetoric in seemingly non-political arenas, King Jeongjo could judiciously maneuver a variety of radical sociopolitical reform policies. One reform policy was a dramatic weakening of factional politics. Differentiating his own *tangpyeong* policies from his grandfather's, which was called "*wallon tangpyeong*," the focus of which was on maintaining a balance of powers among the factions in office and choosing moderates who were relatively independent of any factional interests, King Jeongjo aimed his so-called "*jullon tangpyeong* at total harmony and cooperation (*daedong*) by allowing each faction's righteous principle (*uiri*) to be actively addressed in court, rather than merely suppressing it as King Yeongjo did. In this spirit, he restored the previous governmental office-grade to the leaders of each faction, taken away due to the violent factional politics in earlier governments.<sup>21</sup> Underneath such "political pluralism" was indeed the monarchical

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20. For the Joseon Royal Lecture system, see Haboush (1984: 44-45).

21. For example, he restored Yun Seon-geo and Yun Jeung, the leaders of the Soron faction

proclamation that all factional principles—however public they were—be subsumed by the monarch’s “Great Principle” (*daeuri*). Transcending the separation of the two powers in Neo-Confucian rationalism, King Jeongjo’s “Great Principle” is seen not qualitatively different from the proclamation of the *raison d’etre* of the sovereign. In fact, drawing on *Shujing*, he claimed the following:

Isn’t it said in *Shujing* that “the monarch alone establishes the measure”?  
 ... Just as [all those appending facilities like] the hinges of a door, a door post, a door latch, and the side posts of a door can be put on their right places only after the ridge of the house has been constructed, and just as millions of stars can revolve only if the North Star is placed at the right spot, so is the case with establishing the monarchical measure (*hwanggeuk*). (*Jeongjo sillok*, 24/6/16)

Its political implications are straightforward: the kingship is to be equated with the state, and therefore the king is the embodiment of state’s sovereignty. The invention of sovereignty in turn paved the way for King Jeongjo to propel such revolutionary, even proto-democratic social policies as the abolition of discriminatory laws against secondary sons and the abolition of slavery. From a comparative historical viewpoint, it could be the invention of universal citizenship. For King Jeongjo, it was the creation of national brethernship (*dongpo*) (Park 2001: 294-5). What is notable is such policies were rationalized in terms of the revitalization of the ancient sage-king’s wishes to share joys with his people. That is, it was predicated on the first Confucian rationalization, the sage-king paradigm.<sup>22</sup>

With all these political accomplishments and proto-modern qualities (in terms of the growing idea of universal citizenship and state sovereignty), why was it that Joseon had to suffer the national religious massacre that apparently negated all such achievements after King Jeongjo’s sudden death? Was there any internal connection between his absolutism and the persecution of 1801?

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(6/12/3), Heo Jeok, the leader of the Namin faction (19/10/12), and Park Sungjong, the figure of the Bugin faction (23/9/19). See Park (2001: 187).

22. Of course, the bureaucratic opposition was violent. It was argued that such policies would cause confusion in the order between legal son and secondary son in the *yangban* family and thereby shake the fundamentals of the Confucian family-based ethical order. In spite of this vehement resistance, King Jeongjo could at least achieve the abolition of state-owned slavery, which was still deemed revolutionary.

### 3. The Religious Persecution of 1801 and the Reinforcement of Neo-Confucian Rationalism

#### King Jeongjo's Reaction to the Issue of Catholicism

Admittedly, Catholicism brought with it an entirely different worldview that from a Neo-Confucian perspective was simply incompatible with its worldview. But, the “clash of the worldviews” thesis posited by Don Baker (1997, 1999) can hardly explain why, for example, the Yun Jichung Incident in 1791,<sup>23</sup> in which the deep cultural clash between Catholicism and Neo-Confucianism was pronounced, did not grow into mass persecution, whereas in 1801 an unprecedented national religious massacre did occur. Baker’s otherwise insightful philosophical interpretation is limited in explaining the question of “timing.”

Park Hyun Mo (2004) has called attention to the political role played by King Jeongjo in avoiding potential debacles. He argues that the incident in 1801 was essentially a “political” catastrophe necessitated by the factional strife between the Noron (especially the *byeokpa*) and the Namin factions after King Jeongjo’s unexpected death. But Park’s argument is also problematic because he fails to see how, in the Joseon Neo-Confucian tradition, politics was completely interwoven with religion and/or culture. What both Baker and Park have glossed over is the question of Confucian rationality and of state sovereignty.

To be sure, Catholicism was more than just an ideological challenge to Neo-Confucian rationalism that provided ideological support for the bureaucracy. It rejected traditional state control over religious activity by proclaiming the right to perform its own rituals to the “God of Heaven,” something the Joseon government could never allow because worshipping Heaven, after all, was the prerogative of the Chinese emperor. However, it seems that such theological questions did not constitute King Jeongjo’s most impending concern, for he regarded the apparent despoilment of the Way perpetrated by Yun Jichung and Gwon Sangyeon in the incident of 1791<sup>24</sup> as at most a morally defunct or criminal act, and, therefore, an issue that the local magistrate could handle (*Jeongjo sillok*,

23. Besides the Yun Jichung incident (1791), in King Jeongjo’s reign, there were three more so-called “Western-Learning (*seohak*)” incidents, which took place in 1785, 1787, and 1792.

24. Upon Jeong Minsi’s interrogation, Yun Jichung defended his “immoral” action by arguing that “They [ancestral tablets] have no flesh and blood relationship with me. They did not give me life nor educate me. ... How can I dare to treat these man-made pieces of wood as though they were actually my mother and father?” Reprinted from Baker (1999: 218).



15/10/23). Even though King Jeongjo was convinced that “authentic learning” (*cheonghak*) should be enhanced while “perverted learning” (*sahak*) excluded, expunging heterodox learning that would entail “private” disputes between the contending factions (*Jeongjo sillok*, 15/10/25) was by no means what he desired. Rather, he opted for the enhancement of authentic Confucian learning by means of two academic innovations, the *Chogye Munshin* system and the Literature-Style Refreshment movement. The rectification of corrupted mores in Confucian scholarship was a more crucial issue to him.

What he was most afraid of was that the issue of Catholicism might entangle his Namin stalwarts into a politically unproductive dispute—much like the orthodoxy-heterodoxy controversy, which was occasionally brought up by the Noron orthodox Neo-Confucians—and, thus, that it would jeopardize his entire reform project. Therefore, despite his awareness of the gravity of the issue, King Jeongjo took pains to keep it on a private level (the individual’s moral question or a question of perverted learning) rather than frame it as fully religious or overtly political.

That such a religiously and politically volatile issue like Catholicism did not grow into national persecution under King Jeongjo’s reign cannot be attributed solely to his political prudence. More consequential was the fact that, given his masterful exercise of teacher-kingship that created the image of sovereignty, the religious and ethico-political issues directly concerned with the question of the Way, like Catholicism, could hardly be entrusted to the jurisdiction of the Neo-Confucian canonists. They could discuss it and make it a public issue to which the monarch should turn his attention. But, in King Jeongjo’s court, the final decision of whether the issue is one of religion (or politics) or of mere private antagonism, and of the culpability of the accused, hung indisputably on the monarch’s discretion. In King Jeongjo’s court, it should have been and was the monarch alone that could establish ethico-political measures.

#### Let Me Tell You Your Father’s True Intention: The Deconstruction of the Politics of Sagacity

When King Jeongjo suddenly died in 1800, everything changed. The court was caught in violent disputes as to which faction’s righteous principle reflected the true intention of the deceased king’s Great Principle. All the more problematic, King Jeongjo’s Great Principle, having been held indisputable, rendered itself to reinterpretation by the mostly Noron bureaucrats. They argued that the Great Principle was indeed an expedient political measure (*gwondo*) rather than an

ever-lasting moral measure (*sangdo*). Virtually “all” bureaucrats voiced that King Jeongjo’s *tangpyeong* policies were in essence a *modus operandi* contrived to cope with particular political problems in particular situations. They were even assured that King Jeongjo’s “true” intention was undoubtedly—as Zhu Xi taught—to single out wrong from right and thereupon to eradicate the former while espousing the latter. In the course of reinterpreting King Jeongjo’s Great Principle and reintroducing Neo-Confucian factional politics, each faction launched a war against one another, calumniating the other as disloyal and together deconstructed the sovereign image of the kingship.<sup>25</sup> The escalating tensions between the kingship (King Sunjo and Queen Dowager Jeongsun) and the Noron-dominant bureaucracy around the question of how to treat the Korean Catholics arrested in 1801 presents the best case of the way in which the Neo-Confucian bureaucracy “artfully” disarmed the once enhanced kingship by dismantling King Jeongjo’s major political achievements through peculiarly Neo-Confucian symbolism.

When it was reported to the court that some “heretics”<sup>26</sup> had been arrested near Seoul, King Sunjo and the Regent Queen Dowager Jeongsun, following the footsteps of King Jeongjo’s moderate dealing with that particular problem, issued an utterly conventional order: to find the surest way by which to return their perverted minds to authentic Confucian learning. Then, as King Jeongjo would also have done, they, in order to counterbalance the wicked mores, ordered awards to moral exemplars like loyal subjects, filial sons, and exemplary women across the country (*Sunjo sillok*, 0/1/26).

Before long, Prime Minister Shim Hwanji handed down a series of requests to punish the “heretics.” More specifically, they impeached Chae Jegong, former Prime Minister and leader of the Namin faction, and Hong Nakim, one of King

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25. One clarification is that such deconstruction could be easily opted for by the Noron bureaucrats because the next monarch King Sunjo was only 11-years old and the actual power was held by the Queen Dowager Jeongsun. By extension, the overall weakness of the kingship during the entire nineteenth-century would be due to the fact that a succession of minors ascended the throne. But, from a political theoretical viewpoint, what merits special attention is “in what way” such strong kingship of the kind King Jeongjo (with King Yeongjo) had established was dismantled. It was certainly not by means of military menace or any physical threat for that matter, but by means of symbolic rhetoric that was essentially Neo-Confucian. My interest is in how Neo-Confucian rationalism functioned in this entire deconstructing process, although it is far from my intention that it alone can explain everything.

26. It is important to note that this particular term (*idan*) was not allowed in King Jeongjo’s court.

Jeongjo's most beloved stalwarts, because they were alleged to have defended some of the heretics. Yi Gahwan and Jeong Yag-yong, a favorite subject of King Jeongjo's, and Yi Seunghun, the first Korean baptized Catholic, were also arrested and then interrogated. Befuddled, King Sunjo only sought to downsize the issue by appealing to his father's prohibition law (*geumryeong*) that banned the bureaucracy from questioning the moral integrity of other factions and the legitimacy of the throne's transfer. However, Shim Hwanji, a member of the Noron faction, was adamant in claiming that the late majesty's prohibition law should hold effect only temporarily and that, even if it were not the case (if the law was truly a constant measure), the late majesty's true intention was not in prohibiting the bureaucracy from distinguishing right from wrong. After all, he continued, to turn a deaf ear to the "sincere" requests of his subjects would destroy the basis of the Neo-Confucian political tradition.<sup>27</sup>

For King Sunjo's and the Queen Dowager's part, the bureaucrats' concerted claim that the late king's prohibition law held merely temporal validity could not be bought. First, it went against the virtue of filial piety. But, more important, it was associated indispensably with the extent of the monarch's law-making power itself. Lacking power and rhetorical skills comparable to King Jeongjo's, the kingship under both King Sunjo and the Queen Dowager could do nothing but stand by and watch the persecution of the Korean Catholics by the Noron-led bureaucracy. Eventually, upon constant pressure from the bureaucracy, King Sunjo officially endorsed the Noron's factional principle as truly representing King Jeongjo's Great Principle by acknowledging that the true intention of the Great Principle consisted in the protection of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy (*Sunjo sillok*, 0/2/28).

Furthermore, the arrest of the Chinese priest who allegedly spread Catholicism around the country entailed far-reaching and more violent debates.

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27. Shim Hwanji reasoned as such: "If their sins cannot be discussed because of the prohibition law [of the late Majesty], it would impair Your Majesty's sagacity on the high and renounce the public [censorial] voices from the below. Our late Majesty had so mysterious an insight into the sources of all principles and possessed such a wonderful brightness on the smack of all affairs that he could use alternately the way of the Principle (*jeongdo*) and the expeditious measures (*gwondo*) in both jurisdiction and execution. Nevertheless, when the situation had changed, despite his own law, the late Majesty often said, 'It is not a constant and perpetual [legal] measure deserving to be transmitted. If law is well abided and my government becomes stabilized, I will remove (my current) rule by expeditious measures. [Thus] you don't have to worry about it'" (*Sunjo sillok*, 0/2/23).

For, upon his confession, it was newly revealed that not only the middle men and commoners, but also part of the royal family as well as many *yangban* aristocrats (mostly associated with King Jeongjo) were implicated in the heretic teachings. Once again, Shim Hwanji submitted a memorial in which he said:

Although [Your Majesty might find] your servants not loyal and unworthy of consideration, how dare we not [faithfully] follow the late Majesty's sacred will (*seongnyeom*)? Nevertheless, as far as this issue is concerned, we all wholeheartedly ask Your Majesty to punish [the perverts]. Since [the interrogation] has already begun, we cannot delay [the procedure]. If Your Majesty gives an order after the national civil examination, how could the national body (*gukche*) be like this? If Your Majesty takes an [immediate] measure on this, the source [that has incurred the monarchy and the subjects] to confront with each other shall naturally disappear. (*Sunjo sillok*, 0/4/25)

Central to Shim's argument was that "the monarch's will" (*seongnyeom*) could never be equated with the state or "the national body" (*gukche*) itself. Obviously, it was exactly the opposite reasoning than King Jeongjo held. According to the bureaucracy, the Confucian statehood was more of a cultural question than a purely political one. To this culturally redefined state (the true "public" state), they implied, both the kingship and the ministership should be serviceable. In the bureaucrats' view, what the heretics committed was not simply disloyalty to the king. In its profound ethical-cultural sense, it was a sin against "This Culture of Ours" (*samun*), over which the orthodox (Noron) Neo-Confucian scholar-bureaucrats alone, as faithful followers of the Sagely-Line, were thought to possess the ultimate jurisdiction.

The first mass Catholic persecution in Korea only ended after the executions of more than three hundred believers, including members of the royal family, ex-court ladies, high and low officials, rich middlemen, and poor peasants (Baker 1999: 98). The emerging new citizenship and proto-democracy thus ended. Yet, to morally blame the Neo-Confucian bureaucrats from today's perspective that are mainly framed (based on Western experiences and perceptions) as conservative, strong-headed, irrational, or even reactionary would be anachronistic. If we approach the entirety of the issue from each party's point of view, neither the kingship nor the bureaucracy was completely free from ideal interests interwoven with their institutional interest. We might be able to see the general vector of

power struggles by understanding the logic and symbolism available to each party, but it should be admitted that the actual historical path hinged on circumstantial contingency.

## Conclusion

In a traditional world where politics was inextricably fused with religion and/or culture, a vivid line between the two could hardly be drawn. In such moralpolitik, a meaning of political action was derived from ethico-political and cultural ideas that constituted the world images, rather than from pure power, as the power itself was culturally constructed. In this essay, I defined a complex dialectic between ideas and actions that are carried out through ideal interests that are to be eventually intertwined with material interests, forming the institutional interest as “rationality.” What is notable in Confucian moralpolitik was that two competing yet hardly antagonistic (at least originally) rationalities formed the creative tensions between what I called “Confucian two swords,” thus producing the effect of proto-liberalism. Particularly, I have examined how the Neo-Confucian formula of Confucian rationality, namely, the separation of the Sagely-Line from the Princely-Line had generated a typically Neo-Confucian but uniquely Korean competition between the kingship and the ministership since, if not before, the late sixteenth-century.

Most importantly, I have focused on the eighteenth-century Korean monarch King Jeongjo’s politics of sagacity by interpreting it as the Korean equivalent to the seventeenth-century Europe’s political theology that is now understood as an indispensable step toward political modernity.<sup>28</sup> For it was seen to provide the most compelling case in which the monarch was determined to overcome the prolonged Neo-Confucian rationalism and its proto-liberalism, which he found to be detrimental to any drastic social and political reforms in Joseon. I understood King Jeongjo’s anti-liberal, yet proto-democratic (in terms of universal citizenship) reform politics as fundamentally oriented toward what we now call “political modernity.” Finally, I have argued that the religious and political persecution of 1801 was occasioned, if not caused, when proto-democratic policies

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28. It is in this sense that this historically special stage was observed cross-culturally especially in the West and Japan, two most advanced modern civilizations.

like religious pluralism (and universal citizenship) lost the powerful protection of the sovereign monarchy after King Jeongjo's sudden death and when they were reinterpreted against the Neo-Confucian backdrop.

Political modernity hangs heavily on historical contingency. To say, therefore, as Huntington does, that Confucianism is inherently incompatible with, and/or fundamentally lacking an internal impetus towards modernity is simply misguided. But to say that traditional Korea had within its cultural viability a potential to transform itself to the Western or Japanese type of modern state is not to say that it should have done so. In fact, the Western and Japanese type of political modernity was only one of multiple possibilities that the Confucian pre-modern rationality could give rise to. Certainly, it would be far-fetched to say that multiple rationalities (or simply multiple cultural systems) naturally lead to multiple modernities. To discuss modernity, its qualifications—however culturally diversified—should be scrutinized in the first place. Nevertheless, nothing could be more dangerous and imperialistic than to say that modernities should converge into a monolithic “Modernity.” One of the goals of this essay was to show that it was (and is) not always *rational* to be modernized.

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