



Special Feature

Joseon Neo-Confucianism,
Viewed from Different Angles

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Editor's Note

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Earlier, for the Special Studies section of the June 2019 issue, the *Review of Korean Studies* (hereafter, *RKS*) invited five distinctive studies that would examine individual aspects of the 15th century Joseon society. The result was a diverse yet extensive view of the language, literature, music, medicine, and architecture of Joseon in its first century. And now, for the December 2020 issue, not as a direct follow-up but as yet another attempt to delve into the nature of the Joseon society, the *RKS* invited a group of scholars who would provide us with their expert opinions on the role Neo-Confucianism in Joseon played and the influence it had across a number of areas. The result is three outstanding studies that examined Neo-Confucianism from three different angles: Politics, Literature, and Philosophy.

First, Neo-Confucianism and the area of Politics. In his article entitled “The Learning of Principle and the Governing by Culture in Joseon,” Professor Lee Bongkyoo provides us with his take on Joseon Neo-Confucianism as a political ideology. He observes its three different yet inter-connected characteristics: the Joseon people’s embrace of *Garye* in dynastic protocols, their education of kings at *gyeongyeon* sessions based on the learning of principle, and how they dealt with the Manchurian Qing dynasty from the two different stances of; either remaining loyal to the former master of Chinese civilization or spreading Joseon’s own way of governance to Qing.

According to his observations, by upholding *Garye* the Joseon kings were able to mold themselves into public models of filial piety and respect. In addition, by having institutionalized *gyeongyeon* sessions, where officials and civilian scholars would present their own insights on governance, the kings trained themselves as public leaders. Professor Lee also suggests that Joseon’s initial response to the Manchurians was reminiscent of Song’s response to the “barbaric” Jurchen Chin while Joseon’s later stance toward a stabilized Qing, which we can deduce from King Jeongjo’s publication projects and compilations

of legal codes, more resembled a willingness to display a form of governance that could even inspire Qing.

Next, Neo-Confucianism and the area of Literature. On the general relationship between Literature and Philosophy, and how it was like particularly in Joseon, Professor Ahn Daehoe offers his insight in his article entitled “The Relationship between Neo-Confucianism and Korean Literature.”

According to him, a society’s literature usually forms a relationship with the dominant philosophy of the time. Genres, topics, sentiments, and nuances in literature are all destined to be affected. Confucianism hovered over Korean minds for a long time, and Neo-Confucianism as the state ideology during the Joseon period controlled every aspect of the Joseon society. Under such influence Joseon literature came to display traits of rational, theoretical, and conceptual behavior rather than a romantic or imaginative one. Topics and themes overly conscious of social norms, human obligations to communities and the country defined Joseon literature for a long time. Neo-Confucian philosophers would even urge poets to treat poems as vessels to harbor the Way.

It was thus only natural that the tension from such a relationship would inevitably come to a head in the 18th century, during which the literary community tried to break free from such constraints and pursue individualism and their own literary preferences. Professor Ahn suggests that the history of Joseon literature was a history of conflict between those two colliding attitudes.

Finally, Neo-Confucianism and the area of Philosophy. Professor Han Jae Hoon, in his article entitled “The Confucian Concept of *Li* 禮: The Transition from ‘Worship Rituals’ to ‘Governance Norms,’” examines a vital aspect of Neo-Confucianism itself. Unlike the former two studies, this study is dedicated primarily to the examination of the concept of *li*, which the author claims to be the critical component of the practical philosophy of Confucianism. This article is more about the significance of the concept of *li* in general than it is about how Neo-Confucianism affected other areas of Joseon.

Professor Han traces the changes that occurred in the meaning of *li*, the denotation of which, according to his assessment, expanded from worshipping rituals for spiritual beings and deities to governance norms or institutions. He observes that after Zhou fell Confucius lamented the disruption of the Zhou rites, and in order to recover the normative power of *li* in a world where the foundation of political authority came from force and not virtue, Confucius proposed the philosophical concepts of humaneness and righteousness, which

came to form the foundation of Confucian philosophy. After recollecting the history of Confucianism and then Neo-Confucianism of the Song era, Professor Han again emphasizes the importance of examining the true meaning of *li* above all else.

It is regrettable that we were not able to invite other articles to this special occasion that could either examine the “social aspects” of Neo-Confucianism or its relationship with Art of its time. Together with the three angles mentioned above, readers may have appreciated those additional angles as well, which will unfortunately have to wait for another special project. Nonetheless, we at the *RKS* are extremely proud of this issue’s special studies section as it is, and are immensely grateful for all the contributors’ hard work and dedication that culminated in this occasion. In the future, the *RKS* will continue to invite magnificent works dealing with philosophies and their roles in other periods as well. For the moment, please enjoy these excellent works on the Joseon dynasty’s Neo-Confucianism.