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Joseon Literati's Righteous Principles (*Yiriron*) as a Moral Practice in the Political Realities – Its Meaning and Limitation in a Historical Context

Introduction: *Dohak* – the Joseon Neo-Confucianism

Neo-Confucianism flourished as a central ideology and absolute social order during the Joseon dynasty (朝鮮 1392–1910). “Neo-Confucianism” is a general term commonly applied to the revival of the various strands of Confucian philosophy during the Chinese Sòng dynasty (宋 960–1280 C.E.), re-examined and reconstructed by Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200 AD.) It provided Koreans with philosophical speculation, moral and social norms, and a most strongly functional lifestyle. However, the terms of Joseon Neo-Confucianism connote some specific characteristics, compared to classic Confucianism and the Chinese version of “Neo-Confucianism”².

The term of *Dohak* (道學 Chin. *Dàoxué*) – *Dao* (Way) Learning – already existed in classical Confucian context. However, in Korea, it is generally called *Dohak* (道學), which concerns Neo-Confucianism of the Joseon dynasty in a holistic scale. Thus, a proper understanding of the term *Dohak* is essential to comprehend the essence and particular characteristics of Korean Neo-Confucianism. Among the similar terms which refer to Neo-Confucianism, such as *Jujahak* (朱子學 Chin. *Zhūzǐxué*: Zhu Xi's Science) and *Jeongjuhak* (程朱學

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² The Korean Neo-Confucianism 1) was condensed rather into an anthropological, centripetal, and inward way such as the “Four-Seven” theory and Human Nature; 2) pursued to seek religious and ethical legitimacy under the name of Confucian teaching, even beyond logical rationality; 3) put much more emphasis on Righteousness and Fidelity in a macroscale; 4) clarified the Righteousness as a theoretic speculation on moral propriety. See. Lee Haesung, *Neo-Confucianism of Joseon dynasty – its theoretical foundation and main issues*, “Asian Studies” 2016, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 193–194.

Chin. *Chéngzhūxué*: Cheng Xi and Zhu Xi's Science), are overly concentrated on particularly great masters; while *Songhak* (宋學 Chin. *Sòngxué*: Science of Sòng dynasty) and *Songmyeonghak* (宋明學 Chin. *Sòngmíngxué*: Science of Sòng and Míng dynasty) are limited within the Chinese dynasties and neglect the Korean Confucian tradition. In a similar vein, though *Seongrihak* (性理學 Chin. *Xìnglǐxué*: Science of Nature and Principle) and *lhak* (理學 Chin. *Lǐxué*: Science of Principle) are major academic spheres of *Dohak*, they are insufficient to cover it entirely. Moreover, *Sinyuhak* (新儒學 Chin. *Xīnrúxué*: New Confucianism) covers not only Zhu Xi's school but its opposing Wáng Yángmíng's school of Mind (心學 *Simhak* chin. *Xīnxué*: Science of Mind), i.e., *Yangmyeonghak* (陽明學 Chin. *Yángmíngxué*) as well which values the *Gi* (氣 Chin. *Qì*: Matter) higher than the *Ri* (理 Chin. *Lǐ*: Principle)³. Hence, *Dohak* is the only term that suffices for the requirement of the necessary and sufficient condition regarding the Neo-Confucianism of the Joseon dynasty.

Dohak covers these items of Korean (Neo-)Confucian issues⁴:

- 1) *Seongrihak* (性理學 the philosophical spheres: theory of Great Absolute, theory of Principle and Material Force, the theory of The Mind and True Self, etc.);
- 2) *Yiriron* (義理論 the matters of world view and morality: Righteousness, Sino-centrism, the theory of Fidelity to Principle, etc.);
- 3) *Yehak* (禮學 the Ritual Formalities: state, provincial, family, etc.);
- 4) *Suyangron* (修養論 the matter of individual cultivation: theory of Sincerity and Reverence, the theory of Preservation, Nourishment and Self-examination, etc.);
- 5) *Byeokidanron* (闢異端論 Confucian Apologetics: the theory of rejecting heresy, etc.);
- 6) *Gyeongseron* (經世論 statecraft: governing norms, etc.).

These issues were closely connected and developed to be a totality of science and morality. In other words, *Dohak* during the Joseon dynasty was a holistic approach to cosmological truth included the promotion of individual mindfulness, sincerity, and duties through moral practices for justice through earnest research to acquire wisdom and skills for the administration of social welfare based on insights from (Neo-)Confucian classics.

³ Keum Jang-tae, *Hankkuk Jongyo Sasangsa II. 韓國宗教思想史. Part One, "Yugyo Sasangsa"* (History of Korean Confucianism) 儒教思想史, P'aju 2002, pp. 58–59.

⁴ Ibidem.

Theoretical Backgrounds

Righteousness and Fidelity

"Righteousness" (Yi 義 Chin. Yi) – is generally regarded as a virtue of "the right thing in social norms" or "proper way as a human being". Righteousness is the original, conscience-based distinction between good and evil, which ripens in the form of genuinely moral wisdom (Ji 智 Chin. Zhi). It also defines doing what is right or virtuous.

In the book Confucius named "Spring and Autumn (*Chunchu* 春秋 Chin. *Chūnqiū*) – the history of ancient Lǔ state" (魯 1048–256 BCE), he institutes the new sacrament of the contract of allegiance called the "Code of Honour" (*Daeyimyeongbun* 大義名分 Chin. *Dàyimíngfēn*). This sacrament is therefore often and generally spoken of as the "Great Principle or Code of the Spring and Autumn Annals (*Chunchudaeyi* 春秋大義 Chin. *Chūnqiūdàyi*)" and was perceived as the principle of loyalty even when the state was collapsing in relation to its historical background.

This concept was much stressed by Mencius (385–302 BC) in the frame of Five Constant Virtues of Confucianism (五常 Chin. *Wuzhang*)⁵. For him, right-

⁵ They are: benevolence/humaneness (仁), righteousness/justice (義), propriety/rituals (禮), wisdom/knowledge (智) and faithfulness/trust (信). 孟子曰：人皆有不忍人之心。先王有不忍人之心，斯有不忍人之政矣。以不忍人之心，行不忍人之政，治天下可運之掌上。所以謂人皆有不忍人之心者，今人乍見孺子將入於井，皆有怵惕惻隱之心。非所以內交於孺子之父母也，非所以要譽於鄉黨朋友也，非惡其聲而然也。由是觀之，無惻隱之心，非人也；無羞惡之心，非人也；無辭讓之心，非人也；無是非之心，非人也。惻隱之心，仁之端也；羞惡之心，義之端也；辭讓之心，禮之端也；是非之心，智之端也。人之有是四端也，猶其有四體也。有是四端而自謂不能者，自賊者也；謂其君不能者，賊其君者也。凡有四端於我者，知皆擴而充之矣，若火之始然，泉之始達。苟能充之，足以保四海；苟不充之，不足以事父母。[公孫丑章句上 六章] Mencius said, "All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. The ancient kings had this commiserating mind, and they, as a matter of course, had likewise a commiserating government. When with a commiserating mind was practiced a commiserating government, to rule the kingdom was as easy a matter as to make anything go round in the palm. When I say that all men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others, my meaning may be illustrated thus: even now-a-days, if men suddenly see a child about of all into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain the favour of the child's parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of their neighbours and friends, nor from a dislike to the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing. From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man, that the feeling of shame and dislike is essential to man, that the feeling of modesty and complaisance is essential to man, and that the feeling of approving and disapproving is essential to man. The feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence. The feeling of shame and dislike is the principle of righteousness. The feeling of modesty and complaisance is the principle of propriety. The feeling of approving and disapproving is the principle of knowledge. Men have these four principles just as they have their four limbs. When men, having these four principles, yet say of themselves that they cannot develop them, they play the thief with themselves, and he who says of his prince that he cannot develop them plays the thief with his prince. Since all men have these four principles in themselves, let them know to give them all their development and completion, and the issue will be like that of fire which has begun to burn, or that of a spring which has begun to find vent. Let them have their complete development, and they will suffice to love and protect

teousness is not to be calculated for profit or to achieve something for oneself but extends itself for the good of others⁶. Likewise, he illustrated coherent logic that righteousness is the very passion for appropriate conscience. So, in that sense, that righteousness is realized when society perceives virtue as a higher value than profit and justice as more precious than property.

The meaning of “Righteousness” has been further broadened and expanded in the Neo-Confucian view of the world. Neo-Confucianism undertook a hermeneutic shift from the exegesis and annotation of textual particulars to the elucidation of a text’s “great significance/righteousness” (*Daeyi* 大義 Chin. *Dàyi*) or “Righteous Principles” (*Yiri* 義理 chin. *Yìlǐ*). This term has been used as the embodiment of Righteousness and Rational Principles (*Yiriron* 義理論 Chin. *Yìlǐlùn*). Along the same lines, the compound word of “Fidelity” (*Jeolyi* 節義) in Korean comes from “integrity” (*Jeolgae* 節概) and “righteous principles” (*Yiri* 義理)⁷.

Simultaneously, these terms became subdivided and elaborated on a macroscale. The principles encompass: 1) the theory of Rectification of Names (*Jeongmyeongron* 正名論 Chin. *Zhèngmínlùn*)⁸ – against injustice and unright-

all within the four seas. Let them be denied that development, and they will not suffice for a man to serve his parents with”. Mencius, *Gong Sun Chou*, part I, chapter 6.

⁶ 孟子見梁惠王。王曰、叟、不遠千里而來、亦將有以利吾國乎。孟子對曰、王何必曰利。亦有仁義而已矣。王曰、何以利吾國。大夫曰、何以利吾家。士庶人曰、何以利吾身。上下交征利、而國危矣。萬乘之國弑其君者、必千乘之家、千乘之國、弑其君者、必百乘之家。萬取千焉、千取百焉、不為不多矣。苟為後義而先利、不奪不饜。未有仁而遺其親者也、未有義而後其君者也。王亦曰仁義而已矣、何必曰利。[梁惠王上一章] Mencius went to see King Hui of Liang. The King said: “My good man, since you haven’t thought one thousand *li* too far to come and see me, may I presume that you have something with which I can profit my kingdom?” Mencius said: “Why must you speak of *profit*? What I have for you is humaneness and fairness, and that’s all. If you always say ‘how can I profit my kingdom?’ your ministers will ask, ‘how can we profit our clans?’ The elites and the common people will ask: ‘How can we profit ourselves?’ Superiors and inferiors will struggle against each other for profit, and the country will be in chaos”. “In a kingdom of ten thousand chariots, the murderer of the sovereign is usually from a clan of one thousand chariots. In a thousand-chariot kingdom, the murderer of the sovereign is usually from a clan of one hundred chariots. Now, to have a thousand in ten thousand, or one hundred in a thousand is not a small number. But if you put justice last and profit first, no one will be satisfied unless they can grab something”. “There has never been a humane man who neglected his parents, and there has never been a just man who put his prince last in his priorities. King, can we not limit our conversation to humaneness and justice? Why must we discuss profit?” Mencius, *King Hui of Liang*, part I, chapter 1.

⁷ The word “Righteous Principles” (*Yiri* 義理) is used in horizontal (equal) as well as vertical (high and low) relationship, while the usage of the “Fidelity” (*Jeolyi* 節義) is just limited in vertical one in Korean. In other words, the “Fidelity” refers to duty or loyalty toward higher and prestige authority – such as vassal’s attitude to a sovereign.

⁸ 齊景公問政於孔子。孔子對曰。君、君。臣、臣。父、父。子、子。公曰。善哉。信如君不君、臣不臣、父不父、子不子、雖有粟、吾得而食諸。[論語 十二卷 十一章] Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied: “Let the ruler be a ruler, the minister be a minister, the father be a father and the son be a son”. *Analects of Confucius*, part XII, chapter 11.

teousness; 2) the Discourse on Revering the King (*Jonwangron* 尊王論 Chin. *Zūnwánglùn*) of the Kindhearted governance (*Injeong* 仁政) and rule by virtue (*Deokchi* 德治); 3) a Sino-centric view of civilization and barbarism (*Hwairon* 華夷論 Chin. *Huáyílùn*) revering Hàn China and expelling the Barbarians; and 4) the idea of Great Unification of the Nations (*Daeiltong* 大一統思想 Chin. *Dà'yītǒngsīxiǎng*), which calls for the unification of the nations in peaceful co-existence.

These principles were also introduced to the Goryeo dynasty of Korea (918–1395) with the Neo-Confucian thinking in the fourteenth century and became merged with Joseon *Dohak*. Therefore, Righteousness and Fidelity contributed to the main events in the historical processes of Joseon in political developments. However, they have also displayed rigidity as a fossilized dogma while dealing with a changing world order, especially since the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, it was possible to combine Righteousness and Rational Principles (*Yiriron*) in *Dohak* with any issues during the Joseon dynasty.

Confucian Literati's Spirits

The word “literati” comes from Latin in the seventeenth century. It is a plural form of *litteratus* ‘acquainted with letters (the initials of a degree or other qualification)’, which generally refers to “well-educated people who are interested in literature” or “people with a good education that **know a lot about literature**”⁹. In the narrower sense, it refers to Scholar-officials, Scholar-gentlemen, or Scholar-bureaucrats with the entire Confucian knowledge and virtue in the Chinese dynasties. On the other hand, there is pure Korean word *Seonbi* (선비) which is relevant to the Chinese term (*Sa* 士 Chin. *Shi*)¹⁰. The difference between these two terms lies in taking up the position of a public officer. The Korean term of *Seonbi* implies that a public position is a necessary condition; however, it is not fully seen as sufficient. Rather, it is a matter of timeliness – whether it is taken up or not.

Confucius pointed out that the ashamedness in one’s conduct is the condition for being among the literati and stressed that a morality-centric posi-

⁹ *Literati*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/literati> and *Literati*, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/literati>.

¹⁰ Whereas the original Chinese *Shi* (士) means “take up a public office” i.e. “take up a public position with some kind of knowledge or skills”, *Seonbi* (선비) in Korean infers “benevolent/benign person with knowledge and refinement”. Etymologically, it is analyzed that in the word’s old *Seon* comes from Mongolian pronunciation [sain] – the corruption of, ‘сайхан’ which means “benevolent” and *bi* from the ‘byi’ – the corruption of БАГШ which means “man of knowledge”. Keum Jang-tae, *Yugyosasang Munje*deul. 유교사상의 문제들 (*Some issues in Confucian thought*), Seoul 1991, p. 115.

tion is the most important requirement¹¹. As he clarified¹², the true worth that a literatus pursues lies in personal ethics, not in position. Mencius also emphasized that the literati are in charge of Confucian ideology, referring to Benevolence (or Humaneness 仁 Chin. *Rén*) and Righteousness (or Fairness 義 chin. *Yì*) as noble qualities which should be nurtured during one's lifetime¹³.

Confucian literati were principally supposed to play both sides between the rulers and the ruled as a chain between the two classes. They were at the bottom of the ruling class in the pyramid of feudal hierarchy: an emperor (*Cheonja* 天子 Chin. *Tiānzǐ*) – feudal lords (*Jehu* 諸侯 Chin. *Zhūhóu*) – ministers (*Daebu* 大夫 Chin. *Dàfū*) – literati (*Sa* 士 Chin. *Shì*) – ordinary people (*Seoin* 庶人 Chin. *Shìrén*). However, their position was situated at the top in four traditional occupations in social function: literati (*Sa* 士 Chin. *Shì*) – farmers (*Nong* 農 Chin. *Nóng*) – artisans (*Gong* 工 Chin. *Gōng*) – tradesmen (*Sang* 商 Chin. *Shāng*). Therefore, they could benefit the populace, connect themselves with and exploit the ordinary people, and serve as the ruler's governing tool.

As mentioned above, in forms of social class, the literati (*Sa* 士 Chin. *Shì*) tried to actualize their ideals as ministers (*Daebu* 大夫 Chin. *Dàfū*) thus creating a specific group of Scholar-officials or Scholar-bureaucrats (*Sadaebu* 士大夫 Chin. *Shìdàfū*). It was possible owing to the up-and-downward social mobility between both statuses. In Korea, the *Sadaebu* were formed in the

¹¹ 子貢問曰。何如斯可謂之士矣。子曰。行己有恥。使於四方、不辱君命。可謂士矣。曰。敢問其次曰。宗族稱孝焉、鄉黨稱弟焉。曰。敢問其次曰。言必信、行必果。硜硜然、小人哉。抑亦可以為次矣。曰。今之從政者何如。子曰。噫。斗筭之人、何足算也。[論語 十三卷 二十章] Zi Gong asked: "What must a man be like to be called a *shi*?" The Master said, "One who in conducting himself maintains a sense of honor, and who when sent to the four quarters of the world does not disgrace his prince's commission, may be called a *shi*". *Analects of Confucius*, part XIII, chapter 20.

¹² 子曰。志士仁人、無求生以害仁、有殺身以成仁。[論語 十五卷 九章] The Master said: "The earnest officer (士 *shi*) with a truly humane mind (*ren*) will not save his life if it requires him to sacrifice of his humaneness. He will even sacrifice himself to consummate his humaneness". *Analects of Confucius*, part XV, chapter 9.

¹³ 曰。尊德樂義、則可以器矣。故士窮不失義、達不離道。窮不失義、故士得已焉。達不離道、故民不失望焉。古之人得志、澤加於民。不得志、脩身見於世。窮則獨善其身、達則兼善天下。[盡心上九章] Mencius said, "If you value virtue and enjoy fairness, you can be content. Hence the gentleman in difficulty does not lose his sense of fairness, and when successful, does not lose the Path. Since he does not lose his sense of fairness when in difficulty, the gentleman is able to keep a grasp on himself. Since he does not lose the Path when he becomes successful, the people are not disappointed in him". Mencius, *Jin Xin*, part I, chapter 9. 王子墊問曰、「士何事。」孟子曰、「尚志。」曰、「何謂尚志。」曰、「仁義而已矣。殺一無罪、非仁也。非其有而取之、非義也。居惡在。仁是也。路惡在。義是也。居仁由義、大人之事備矣。」[盡心上三十三章] The king's son, Tien, asked Mencius, "What does a gentleman do?" Mencius said, "He elevates his motives". "What does that mean?" Mencius said, "To live by humaneness and fairness and nothing else. If you kill a single innocent man, you are not Humane. If something is not yours and you take it, you are not Just. Wherever you dwell, make it Humane; whatever course you travel, make it Just. Abiding in humaneness and acting through fairness – this is how the great man completes his work". Mencius, *Jin Xin*, part I, chapter 33.

fourteenth century in the late Goryeo dynasty. This intellectual bureaucratic group projected the ideal state of (Neo-)Confucian ideology and played a leading role in establishing a new dynasty of Joseon. During the dynasty, *Sadaebu* dominated all political and academic activities with (Neo-)Confucian thought. Their contentions and logic became the standards of social morality and state management. This tendency of the *Sadaebu*'s domination over all academic and state affairs was much more potent than in China.

Whereas *Sadaebu* implies an operative function as a government official, *Seonbi* has more comprehensive and moral meanings. In conjunction with *Gunja* (君子 Chin. Jūnzǐ) – the ideal, perfect, exemplary “Confucian gentleman”, the *Seonbi* made a noble notion of *Sagunja* (士君子 Chin. Shījūnzǐ)¹⁴. It means that *Seonbi* is similar to *Gunja*, whose personality is based entirely upon Confucian moral practices.

Seonbi is a preserver of (Neo-)Confucian ideology who regards the “Righteous Principles” (*Yiri*) as a spiritual foundation because *Dohak* covers righteousness in seeking for the proper and suitable life in concrete reality. At the same time, it also includes religious conviction as to sacrifice *Seonbi* himself for justice and truth.

Yiri as *Seonbi*'s spirit of *Dohak* comprises sound criticism, which is intended to realize human dignity and social justice by revealing irrationality and fraud. It also includes active resistance and national identity, which protects a nation against unfair foreign invasions. Namely, *Seonbi*'s spirit (*Seonbi Jeongsin*) can be defined as the Korean Neo-Confucian gentlemanship. Such characteristic features of *Yiri* could be broadly divisible into three criteria¹⁵: 1) Righteousness of entrance or resignation (*Chulcheojiyi* 出處之義) as a standard for evaluating an individual's conduct toward a state and society; 2) Distinction between righteousness and profit (*Yirijibyeon* 義利之辯) in the legitimization of social issues; 3) Distinction between civilization and barbarism (*Hwaijibyeon* 華夷之辯) as a standard in evaluating world order and cultural legitimacy. Similarly, *Seonbi*'s spirit of *Yiri* had worked as practical ethics from an individual's minor matters to severe international affairs during the Joseon dynasty.

¹⁴ This conception had been much more common in Joseon Korea – than any other countries in Confucian civilization.

¹⁵ Keum Jang-tae, *Hankukyugyoy Ihae 한국유교의 이해* (Understanding Korean Confucianism), Seoul 2001, p. 73.

Historical Processes of the Righteousness

Literati's Loyalty to a State and a Monarch

During the transitional period from Goryeo to Joseon, some of Neo-Confucian literati kept their loyalty to the former dynasty, thereby not joining the new dynasty though most of them had very negative attitudes toward the society of Goryeo. On the other hand, other Neo-Confucian literati participated in the revolution – or at least were in sympathy with it – under the slogan of saving people's lives. While the former represented the view of the “Code of Morals” (*Gangsangron* 綱常論) to keep the old Court, the latter highlighted the “Revolutionary Ideas” (*Hyeokmyeongron* 革命論) to replace the old social system with a new one. For the latter group, the revolution seemed to be the adaptation for the new “Heaven's decree”¹⁶. It was a very significant issue of the “Righteous Principles” (*Yiri*) to judge which the legitimacy depends on – *Hyeokmyeong* or *Gangsang* in the historical transition period¹⁷.

Seizing state power, the former revolutionary group lost the function of criticism against the ruling class. On the contrary, the “Code of Morals” supporters became the critical force and continued the legitimacy of the righteousness. *Sarimpa*¹⁸ was the fraction that refused to serve the new dynasty and criticized the immorality of the ruling party, called *Hungupa* (勳舊派) in the new dynasty. The spirit of the literati's Righteousness (*Yirijeongsin* 義理精神) of *Dohak*, which highly respects the Moral Code (*Gangsang*), and Fidelity (*Jeolyi*) to Confucian principles was the core standard of how to evaluate *Dohak* during the Joseon dynasty. Though *Sarimpa* was opposite to the new Joseon dynasty, ironically, Neo-Confucian state ideology strongly acknowledged its loyalty to Goryeo since the fifteenth century because of the Confucian teaching that “[a] loyal subject never serves two kings (*Chungsinbulsaign* 忠臣不事二君)”.

¹⁶ According to the Confucian ideology, both aspects have their own meaning. The *Gangsang* is the moral of everlasting truth, given from the Heaven, while *Hyeokmyeong* is the Heaven's will which manages the human society. They have something to do with to recognize correlative but mutually confronting the Heaven's destiny.

¹⁷ When Goryeo collapsed, Gil Jae – one of the greatest Neo-Confucian scholar of the times – was invited to occupy the title of the “Learned of Taesang” (*Taesangbaksa chin.* 太常博士) by king Jeongjong. But he refused the appointment by changing his adherence to the principle of “not serving two dynasties”. When his son was raised to the official rank, he said “you must model yourself after me thinking of Goryeo, but you have to serve your king of Joseon dynasty with the same sincere attitude what I have”. The fact implies that Gil Jae taught the younger generation to serve one's country loyally – even though the object to serve was different what he himself had.

¹⁸ *Sarim* (士林) literally means “forest of scholars” or the “scholars in the rural district”, namely the term implies the “literati out of state office”.

It was the victory of *Sarim*'s spirit of Righteousness. In the "Stories Exemplifying the most important Three Relationships with Illustrations (*Samgang-haengsildo* 三綱行實圖)", compiled in King Sejong's reign (1418–1450), there had been no praise for the revolutionists but for Jeong Mongju – the representative of the "Code of Morals" (*Gangsangron*) – as the loyal vassal who served to the end of the Goryeo dynasty. It stems from the fact that the value standard of completing the maintenance changed to reinforcing *Gangsang*, and respecting the legal legitimacy was an obligation unless there was an anomalous situation.

Such a strong belief in Righteousness was revealed again during King Sejo's reign (1455–1468). Apart from the major group of the *Sarim* Faction, there were also some minor groups following the *Seonbi*'s spirit of Righteousness in the early Joseon dynasty. They are *Jeolyi* Faction (*Jeolyipa* 節義派) and *Cheongdam* Faction (*Cheongdampa* 淸談派). The *Jeolyi* Faction was the literati group who committed themselves to fidelity against King Sejo's "unfair accession" to the throne. Among them, the "Six martyred ministers" (*Sayuksin* 死六臣) are those who were killed by the new power group, while "Six loyal ministers" (*Saengyuksin* 生六臣) resigned their government posts and lived in seclusion. They judged that King Sejo, who was tainted by the usurpation of his nephew's (king Danjong) throne, impaired Neo-Confucian morality, and Righteousness, thereby refusing to serve King Sejo against the injustice of breaking the legitimacy¹⁹. The *Cheongdam* Faction was the "Seven Virtuous Men of the Bamboo Grove" (*Jukrimchilin* 竹林七人) who turned their faces away from the "unjust world" and enjoyed lofty and puritanical discourses while wandering the country.

Both *Sarimpa* and *Jeolyipa* were the real guardians of *Dohak* ideology, keeping *Seonbi*'s spirit as the literati's Righteousness, in distinction from Neo-Confucian intellectuals as state officials. The pair of *Yi* (Righteousness 義) and *Ri* (Principle 理) were core values of the Korean Neo-Confucian literati of *Seonbi*.

Sarim's Domination and Sino-Centrism

From King Sejong's reign (1418–1450), some members of *Sarimpa* began to enter into politics but still assumed a critical attitude toward *Hungupa*, who

¹⁹ King Sejo's usurpation was: 1) disloyalty, because a vassal expelled and killed the existing king (Danjong) by the vassal; 2) violation of eldest son's succession principle to the throne; and 3) injustice, betrayed the former kings' (Sejong and Munjong) will. Resisting against the usurpation is the fidelity as a righteousness keeping. Yun Sasun, *16segi Joseon Yugyosahoeua Jukcheon* (Pak Hwang-Jeon) *Seobi-jeongsin, 16세기 조선 유교사회와 죽천(박광전)의 선비정신* (The Confucianist Society of Sixteenth-Century Chosun and the Seonbi Spirit of Juk-cheon Pak Gwang-Jeon), *퇴계학과 한국문화* ("Toegye studies and Korean culture") 2003, No. 32, p. 7.

was in charge of high-ranking positions. They regarded themselves as enterprising *Sagunja* (士君子), keeping *Seonbi*'s spirit of righteousness while ruling the *Hungupa* (勳舊派) party as overly power-oriented *Sadaebu* (士大夫). With righteousness in mind, *Sarimpa* often clashed with the interests of the privileged strata. After suffering a series of literati purges (*Sahwa* 士禍)²⁰, *Sarimpa* dominated the political stage in earnest from the second half of the sixteenth century²¹. Through the literati purges, their sacrifice was regarded as the martyrdom of *Seonbi*'s spirit, and the social legitimacy of righteousness became verified.

The spirit of the Righteousness (*Yirijeongsin* 義理精神) implies a specific view in the frame of traditional East Asian (of Confucian civilization) political order. China was the center of "All Under Heaven" as a territory, and a capital region ruled directly by the Son of Heaven (*Cheonja* 天子, Chin. *Tiānzǐ*; the Emperor)²². Accordingly, during the Joseon dynasty, the Sino-centric vision of the world (*Hwairon* 華夷論) was deep-rooted among *Dohak* scholars²³. Moreover, such a point of view was widespread among Joseon scholars after the Second Manchurian (Qīng dynasty) invasion (*Byeongjahoran* 丙子胡亂 1636–1637) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even though the Hàn Chinese Ming (明) had already collapsed in 1644. They strove to sustain the identity of Joseon as the protector of genuine (civilized) Confucian culture and tradition (*Junghwamunmyeong* 中華文明). They felt confident that Joseon was the very state that succeeded Sino-centrism: Joseon as a smaller, but the only post-Sino-centric state (*Sojunghwa* 小中華)²⁴.

²⁰ There were four literati purges during the Joseon dynasty. They are: the First Literati Purge (*Mu-asahwa* 戊午士禍) in 1498; Second Literati Purge (*Gapjasahwa* 甲子士禍) in 1504; Third Literati Purge (*Gimyosahwa* 己卯士禍) in 1519; and Fourth Literati Purge (*Eulsasahwa* 乙巳士禍) in 1545.

²¹ It was because of Sarim literati's constant effort to foster the younger generation in local communities. The firm conviction in *Seonbi*'s spirit of righteousness made it possible.

²² However, this concept referred only to Han (漢 Chin. Hàn) Chinese dynasties. Neither Khitan Liao (遼; 916–1125), nor Mongolian Yuan (元 Yuán; 1260–1368), nor Manchurian Qīng (清 Qīng; 1616–1912) were considered as the "real" Chinese – thus Confucian – dynasties. It was a Sino-centric idea of Great Unification of the Nations (大日統 *Daeiltong*). Kim Youngwhan, *Junghwajuyiroseoyi Yuhak*, *중화주의로서의 유학* (Confucianism as Sino-centrism), 철학사상 ("Journal of Philosophical Ideas") 2011, Vol. 40, pp. 17–20.

²³ Among modern Korean historians, the Sino-centric vision of the world often was criticized as a blind view following just the Hàn Chinese tradition (*Mohwasasang* 慕華思想) or submission to the stronger (*Sadaejuyi* 事大主義). However, it was the most important norm of the principle of Confucian righteousness (*Yiriron*) in traditional society, led by the Sino-centrism as well as Neo-Confucian ideology in Joseon.

²⁴ Choe Yong Chul, Joseonhugi Junghwasasanggwa Hwaseohakpayi Hwadonggangmokki Ganhang, 조선 후기 중화사상과 화서학파의 화동강목(華東綱目)의 간행 (Sinocentrism and Hua-Dong Gangmok (<<華東綱目>>)'s Publication in Late Joseon Period), 중국학논총 ("Journal of Chinese Studies") 2016, Vol. 54, pp. 113–143. Joseon Neo-Confucian literati from the 16th century aspired to be the orthodox

At the end of the Manchurian invasions (1627 and 1636–1637), King Injo (1623–1649) was humiliated to kneel before Hong Taiji – the emperor of the Manchurian Qīng dynasty – and had to become his vassal. Before the capitulation, there were two groups of Korean officials with opposing views: *Juhwaron* (pro-reconciliation 主和論) vs. *Jujeonron* (anti-reconciliation 主戰論 or *Cheok-wharon* 斥和論). *Juhwaron* was the utilitarian view of capitulation to reconcile for safeguarding the nation and the people's submission after humiliation, whereas *Jujeonron* was intransigent in its persistence and the King and all the officials had to fight to the death. King Injo was supportive of the anti-reconciliation group, which presented a solid impetus to fight²⁵. However, he changed his mind at the last moment because of the absolute inferiority of his military power.

Kim Sangheon, who protected the “three anti-reconciliation gentlemen” (*Cheokhwa Samhaksa* 斥和三學士) 's view, also composed a poem in prison in Shěnyán to express his firm belief that “the matter of success or failure depends on the will of Heaven. However, I abide the issue following Righteousness”²⁶. That was the genuine faith in Righteous Principles (*Yiriron*), whose attitude was determined by Righteousness, regardless of any success, failure, profit, or loss.

After the war, the Joseon Neo-Confucian literati had espoused the “righteous doctrine” of “Enhancing Ming and Rejecting Qing” (*Sungmyeong Baecheong* 崇明排清), which excludes the Qing dynasty (清 1616–1912) as the “Manchurian barbarians” and respected the already ruined Ming dynasty (明 1368–1644) as the only Chinese orthodoxy. Namely, the slogan of “revering China and expelling the barbarians” (*Jonjunghwa Yangijeok* 尊中華攘夷狄) was regarded as the great truth of *Yirion* at that time. Such an attitude of Confucius's critical spirit of the “Great Righteousness” (*Chunchuyiri* 春秋義理) was widely recognized among the Joseon *Dohak* literati²⁷.

successor of Chinese civilization. However, this kind of smaller Sino-Centrism had been existed before the collapse of Chinese Ming dynasty. The Korean literati considered Joseon as a civilized state almost to the level of Chinese version. In that context, the kings of Joseon occupied higher positions as the “mini center” leading some less civilized rulers of neighbor countries like Governor of Tsushima islands or Head of Jurchen tribe. K.R. Robinson, *Centering the King of Chosŏn: Aspects of Korean Maritime Diplomacy, 1392–1592*, “Journal of Asian Studies” 2000, Vol. 59, No. 1, pp. 109–125.

²⁵ “What I really want to keep is the ‘Great Righteousness’. No matter the consequence of it – whether to succeed, to continue to exist, or to be ruined. If all of vassals and ordinary people, one and all, agree with me, there are only a few days left for you to see your country's collapse”. *Songjadaejeon*, Vol. 213, chapter: *Three anti-reconciliation gentlemen*.

²⁶ Jang-tae Keum, *Hankkuk Jongyo Sasangsa Il...*, op.cit., p. 137.

²⁷ See: Kyung Sup Woo, *Songsyeolyi Hwairngua Joseonjunghwajuyiyi Seongrip*, 송시열의 화이론과 조선 중화주의의 성립 (*Theory of the Civilized and the Barbarians & Choson Chunghwa Ideology of Song Si Yol*), 진단학보 (“The Chin-Tan Society”) 2006, Vol. 101, pp. 272–279.

In this context, the Qing imperial calendar was not adopted in Joseon, though the Manchurian dynasty dominated mainland China. Instead, the “Sungjeong” (崇禎 Chin. *Chóngzhēn*) – that of final emperor Yizōng’s of Ming dynasty – was widely used in everyday life in all records. The reasons for the reverence shown to the collapsed Ming dynasty were: 1) Ming was the very orthodox dynasty of Han China and repaid a debt of gratitude to Ming’s emperor Shénzōng, who helped Joseon “favor for the escape of a peripheral country from the crisis” (*Jaejobeonbangjieun* 再造藩邦之恩) during the Japanese invasions (1592–1598); and – to go below the surface – 2) to accentuate the belief that Joseon did not want to serve Qing, which dominated mainland China at that time because of the “barbaric” Manchurian culture²⁸.

Righteous Army

The “Righteous Army” (Yibyeong 義兵), which means a volunteer corps, and its regard for the righteous spirit is worth mentioning. The emergence of the “Righteous Army”, led mainly by Joseon *Dohak* literati (*Seonbi*), first emerged during the Japanese invasions of Korea (*Imjinwaeran* 1592–1598)²⁹. The word of *Changyi* (昌義 or 倡義) – which means “let righteousness prosper” – is a synonym of the verb “to organize the Righteous Army” in the Korean language. These volunteer corps were organized in the cause of justice to resist Japanese invaders and to preserve the Joseon dynasty with loyalty and righteousness³⁰. It is easy to estimate the righteous spirit, considering that most of the “Righteous Army” corps was *Seonbi*. Among the 102 leaders, 81 people were Neo-Confucian literati (including the former government officials)³¹.

²⁸ Seung Beom Kye, Joseon Sokyi Myeongnara: *Daebodaneul Tonghaeseo Bon Joseon Jidocheungyi Junghwainsik*, 조선 속의 명나라: 대보단을 통해서 본 조선 지배층의 중화인식 (*The Altar of Great Gratitude: Korean Elites’ Adoration for Ming China under Manchu Dominance*), 명청사연구 (“Journal of Ming-Qing Historical Studies”) 2011, Vol. 35, pp. 153–185 and Boo Yeon Lim, *Yugyo Yiryeuhwayi Jeongchihak: Mandongnyowa Daebodaneul Jungsimeuro*, 유교 의례화의 정치학: 만동묘와 대보단을 중심으로 (*Confucian Politics of Ritualization*), 종교문화비평 (“The Critical Review of Religion and Culture”) 2009, pp. 159–182. Moreover, showing his faith on the “Great Righteousness”, the next King Hyojong (1649–1659) was persistent with his goal of a “Northern Expedition” (*Bukbeolron* 北伐論) – the plan of Military Expedition to Qing dynasty – all the time during his reign to overcome humiliation from the Second Manchurian invasion in 1637.

²⁹ There were some “righteous armies” in Korean history emerged during the Khitan invasions in 11th century and the Mongol invasions in 13th century. However, they were not led by Confucian literati but by the peasant or Buddhist monks. Strictly speaking, they were irregular militia, irrelevant to the Confucian ideology of righteousness.

³⁰ During the War, Joseon deployed approximately 84,500 regular troops, assisted by 22,000 volunteers (義兵, Righteous Army). S. Turnbull, *Samurai Invasion: Japan’s Korean War 1592–98*, London 2002, p. 109.

³¹ Choi Younghee, *Imjinwaeran Jungyi Sahoe Dongtae*, 임진왜란 중의 사회동태 (*Social movements during the Imjin War*), Seoul 1975, p. 67.

In the book of “Miscellaneous Records of the Korean-Japanese War” (*Nanjungjaprok* 亂中雜錄)³², written by Jo Gyeongnam – one of the righteous army’s leaders, the 41 appeals (*Gyeokmun* 檄文) and circular letters (*Tongmun* 通文) against the Japanese invasion are included. The keywords of the appeals and circular letters display the spirits of *Seonbi* and consist of: 1) the Great Righteousness (*Daeyi* 大義); 2) Loyalty (*Chungseong* 忠誠); 3) serving one’s country/people (*Wiguk/Wimin* 爲國/爲民); 4) responsibility (*Chaekim* 責任) and revenge (*Boksu* 復讎).

Among the leaders, Jo Heon – a former government official – criticized the Japanese envoy for its unreasonableness³³ just before the “Japanese invasions of Korea” reflecting the “spirit of righteousness” in “Spring and Autumn Annals” (*Chūnqīu* Chin. 春秋). He explained that the diplomatic principle between the two countries should be based on trust and justice, and that he charged the envoy with opposition to this principle. Addressing the memorial – cutting the envoy’s head – to the Throne, he displayed resoluteness to keep the faith at his peril – the so-called, “appeal with an axe” (*Jibusangso* 持斧上疏) – he was ready to die in the case of the king’s rejection. When the war broke out, he raised an army of volunteer corps in the cause of justice and defeated the Japanese invaders in the battle of Cheongju castle. He showed his ardent spirit as a strong-willed *Dohak* literatus (*Seonbi*) when he died an honorable death along with seven hundred righteous volunteer soldiers³⁴.

These volunteer corps were also organized during the Japanese plundering of Korean national rights³⁵ to attain complete occupation (1910–1945). The most famous uprisings were: the Righteous army of *Eulmi* (*Eulmi Yibyeong* 乙未義兵) in 1895, the Righteous army of *Eulsa* (*Eulsa Yibyeong* 乙巳義兵) in 1905, the Righteous Army of *Jeongmi* (*Jeongmi Yibyeong* 丁未義兵) in 1907 and

³² Jo Gyeongnam, *Miscellaneous Records of Korean-Japanese War*, (*Nanjungjaprok* 亂中雜錄), “Unofficial Records of the Great East” (*Daedongyaseung* 大東野乘) 1972, Vol. 6, No. 7, <http://www.davincimap.co.kr/davBase/Source/davSource.jsp?Job=Contents&SourID=SOUR002247&Lang=%ED%95%9C%EB%AC%B8>.

³³ The Japanese envoy addressed Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598; Japanese military leader in the Sengoku period who unified the political factions of Japan)’s message to the Koreans on the other shore requesting them to open way for expedition to Ming China.

³⁴ Before the battle, he gave his last words to the soldiers like this: “Today, we have only once death, so let not be ashamed of your life, death, advance, and retreat in the character of ‘Righteousness’ (*Yi* 義).” “今日只有一死 生死進退 無愧義字”. Ibidem.

³⁵ The period of plundering national rights is narrowly or widely defined. Narrowly, from the beginning of Russo-Japanese War (1904) to Japan–Korea Treaty of 1910 (韓日併合條約). On the other hand, widely, from Japan–Korea Treaty of 1876 (朝日修好條規 or 江華島條約) to Japan–Korea–Japan Treaty of 1910 including Korea–Japan Agreement of August 1904 (第一次韓日協約), First Sino-Japanese War (清日戰爭 1894) Donghak Peasant Revolution (1894), The Eulmi Incident (乙未事變 1895), Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905 (乙巳條約) and Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905 (韓日新協約).

the Thirteen Province Alliance Righteous Army (*Sibsmado Changyigun* 十三道倡義軍) in 1908. For this reason, some Korean historians define the period in 1895–1910 as the “War of Righteous Armies Period (*Yibyeong Jeonjaenggi* 義兵戰爭期)”. The Dohak literati initiated these movements under the slogan of “Defending Orthodoxy and Resisting Heterodoxy” (*Wijeong Cheoksa* 衛正斥邪)³⁶. In other words, even though their movements emerged in response to the foreign power, their strong will did not break, and they managed to practice the spirit of fidelity.

Yu Inseok – one of the leaders of the righteous army in 1895 – advocated the faith of intensive resistance and pure martyrdom following the spirit of “Righteousness”. He said that “death is a scholar’s righteousness. Everybody dies, but death is more glorious than a miserable life. Therefore, it is time for us to offer our lives”. Raising a “Justice Army”, he presented three guidelines of: 1) beating back the enemies to raise the “Righteousness” (*Geoyisocheong* 舉義掃清); 2) committing suicide to maintain fidelity to one’s principles (*Chimyeongsuji* 致命遂志); 3) living in exile abroad to keep the tradition (*Geojisugu chin*. 去之守舊).³⁷ Furthermore, Bak Sehwa – the founder of Yidang School – wrote the final words of the Four Sino-Korean characters “Joseon with propriety and righteousness alive” (*Yeyi Joseon* 禮義朝鮮) and starved himself when the Japan-Korea Treaty in 1910 was declared. Likewise, for Dohak literati, the cultural morality of courtesy and the national state of Joseon were the most important values to maintain. Namely, Righteousness for *Seonbi* was the core value of standing prepared for death against the foreign invaders as well as the very *raison d’être*.

The xenophobic theoretical foundation of “Defending Orthodoxy and Resisting Heterodoxy” emerged, replacing the “righteous doctrine” of “Enhancing Ming and Rejecting Qing (*Sungmyeong Baecheong*)”. The target of the struggle had to be changed from Qing to Japan and western countries. At the same time, a Sino-centric view of civilization and barbarism (*Hwairon*) also intensified from the late nineteenth century. Some conservative Dohak literati affirmed that Japan is the “traditional ghost who was devoured by a tiger” (*Changgui* 倭鬼) for the West. They regarded Japan as the invader just like the West and stressed that “Japanese and Westerners are one” (*Waeyangilcheron* 倭洋一體論).

³⁶ However, but later comprised the disbanded Korean imperial guard as well as farmers forming over 60 successive righteous corps to fight for Korean self-reliance and independence.

³⁷ Jang-tae Keum, *Hankuk Jongyo Sasangsa II...*, op.cit., pp. 175–176. Actually, he had been in exile abroad during the Japanese occupation (1910–1945) and continued the righteous army activities in Manchuria and Vladivostok.

Furthermore, they affirmed that Western people are not very different from animals without moral principles³⁸.

This type of view in the second half of the nineteenth century in the Joseon dynasty was the basis for the building up the Righteous Principles (*Yiri*) into a socio-political situation within a Sino-centric framework. The exclusive and xenophobic attitude toward the West and Japan is to be justified from the two points of moral norms. Firstly, it was a resistant struggle to maintain independence against foreign invasion powers. From the literati's point of view, a foreign military threat was an injustice, while resistance with the aim of self-preservation could be affirmed as a form of justice. Secondly, they had firm faith in the tradition of (Neo-)Confucian culture, which respects moral order – in contrast to the western capitalist order, which pursues material wealth and power. They were in the position to deride western people as “barbarians” or “beasts,” a view based on the strong belief that Confucian morality must be superior³⁹.

The *Dohak* literati's conservative traditionalism could be positively evaluated affirmatively in the light of their patriotism and determination to maintain national independence and cultural identity. However, what should not be overlooked is that Korea fell far behind in modernization due to its exclusive stance and ignorance of the changing situation of international order and the power of Western civilization.

Concluding Remarks

The *Dohak* literati (*Seonbi*) were in history the subject of academic activity and the object of moral practice. All major political events were the target to verify their legitimacy through the prism of the Righteous Principles (*Yiri*) from the foundation of the dynasty, to King Sejo's accession, *Sarimpa's* domination, and international relationship, to the righteous armies in a historical context.

³⁸ The conservative *Dohak* literati's views on the West of the times had been worse and worse from the “western barbarians” through the “western animals” and even to the “western beasts.” This viewpoint had something to do with the “Difference of Human Nature and Material Nature” (*Inmulseong Sangiron* 人物性相異論) in the early 18th century. However, it must be reminded that it was not the whole Joseon literati's recognition for the western civilization. There also existed reformative group in the literati. The former is called *Sugupa* (守舊派), while the latter *Gaehwapa* (開化派).

³⁹ Yong-sik Bang defines 19th century of Korea as the period of crash between two civilizations. That is to say, the oriental civilization based on (Neo-)Confucian courtesy and ethnic, resisted the West based on scientific technique and capitalism in two aspects: ideological and political. See, Bang Yong-sik, *Yuinseokgi Munmyeongsikgwa Wigidaeeungron Gochal*, 유인석의 문명인식과 위기대응론 고찰 (A Study on Ryu In-seok's Thoughts of Civilization and the Theory Coping with Crisis), *정신문화연구* (“Korean Studies Quarterly”) 2016, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 180–205.

The Righteousness and Righteous Principles (*Yiriron*) is the ideology putting well-established morality into real-life political situations. It was the root of *Seonbi*'s honorable spirit as well as the source of national consciousness. However, without proper recognition and adaptability to the changing international order, this type of ideology is apt to degenerate into the dogma of self-justification. The Sino-centrism of Hàn China came to an end in the seventeenth century, whereas Joseon literati became the orthodox successor as culturally superior. Such as it was, their self-respect and faith in the status of Joseon Sino-centrism (*Joseon Junghwajuyi* 朝鮮中華主義) were transformed into conservative and closed-minded arrogance on a global scale. Joseon was involuntarily incorporated into the World Capitalist System in 1876⁴⁰.

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⁴⁰ Lee Hunchang, Gaehangwga Jegukjuyi Chimryake Daehan Yoeonguseonggwawa Gwaje, 개항과 제국주의 침략에 대한 연구성과와 과제 (Outcomes and Tasks of Research about Korean Port Opening and Invasion of Imperialism), 한국사론 ("Review of the Korean History") 1995, Vol. 25, pp. 3–36.

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Joseon Literati's Righteous Principles (Yiriron) as a Moral Practice in the Political Realities – Its Meaning and Limitation in a Historical Context

Summary

Righteousness (Yi), one of the core classical Confucian values, has developed to be a hermeneutic concept of "Righteous Principles" (Yiri) in Neo-Confu-

cianism. This term has been used as the embodiment of righteousness and rational principles (*Yiriron*). All the major political events during the Joseon dynasty were the target to verify its legitimacy through the prism of the *Yiri* from the foundation of the dynasty, through king Sejo's accession, *Sarimpa's* domination, and international relationship, to the Righteous Armies in a historical context. These events had closely cooperated with Joseon literati's spirits (*Seonbi Jeongsin*) which practiced a strict Code of Conduct to pursue a high standard of Neo-Confucian gentlemanship. This article focuses on the historical processes of Joseon Literati's Fidelity in the socio-political realities.

Keywords: Neo-Confucianism, Joseon dynasty, Korean philosophy, *Yiri*, *Seonbi*, theory of Fidelity

Праведные принципы (*Yiriron*) учёных (литераторов) династии Чосон как нравственная практика в политической реальности – значение и границы в историческом контексте

Резюме

Праведность (*Yi*), одна из основных ценностей традиционного конфуцианства, превратилась в герменевтическую концепцию «праведных принципов» (*Yiri*) в неоконфуцианстве. Этот термин использовался для описания слияния праведности и «рациональных принципов» (*Yiriron*). Во времена правления династии Чосон – от ее основания, вступления на престол короля Седжона, правления фракции Саримпа, в международных отношениях и до национальных движений армий справедливости – все основные политические события использовались для подтверждения в свете *Yiri* законности власти. Эти события были тесно связаны с духом ученых (Сонби Чонсин), согласно которому соблюдались строгие правила поведения для реализации высоких стандартов неоконфуцианского образования. Статья показывает в историческом ракурсе преданность учёных (литераторов) династии Чосон в социально-политических реалиях.

Ключевые слова: неоконфуцианство, династия Чосон, корейская философия, Йири, Сонби, теория верности