

Special Feature

The Relationship between Neo-Confucianism and Korean Literature

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Introduction

Literature influences and is influenced by the thoughts and ideas of the society, which consequently manifests unique characteristics in various aspects including genre, theme, topic, and sentiment. Before the 20th century, Confucianism, Buddhism, and the Way of Immortals (*seondo* 仙道) were the main lines of thought that influenced literature in Korea. Among these, Confucianism was dominant, exerting a broad and continuous influence. Ever since the period of the Three Kingdoms, Confucianism changed from that of the Han and Tang dynasties to the Song and Yuan Neo-Confucianism in tandem with the change of times, but it was during the Joseon dynasty that Confucianism exerted the largest influence on the state ruling system and overall culture. From beginning to end, Neo-Confucianism exclusively interfered in all areas of Joseon as the state ideology.

As the Neo-Confucianism dominated the intellectual landscape, literature during the Joseon period became predominantly intellectual, theoretical, and conceptual, rather than romantic and imaginative. Literary themes mainly consisted of a sense of duty towards social norms, human imperatives, and morality and a sense of concern over the security of the community, the state, and the household. Epistolary writings, the main genre of literature, took up most of the collected works of elites, and the aspiration towards a hermit-like life, leisurely spending his days immersed in nature, was not unrelated to the influence of Neo-Confucianism.

As an independent art, it would be incorrect to excessively highlight the influence of a society's thoughts and ideas on literature, but given the complete and broad influence Neo-Confucianism exerted on literature during the Joseon period, its significance cannot be overlooked. It would not be an overstatement to say that there was nobody free from the thinking of Neo-Confucianism among the literary figures of Joseon. In the field of literature, as was the case in other areas, there was a choice that had to be made: either to accommodate the influence of Neo-Confucianism or reject it. Literary figures consequently grew accustomed to seeing the world through the prism called the Neo-Confucianism.

This article aims to examine the relationship between Korean literature and Neo-Confucianism. I will first take a macroscopic look at how literature related to various flows of thought in the history of literature prior to the

20th century. Based on this, I will then look at how literature related to Neo-Confucianism took shape throughout late Goryeo and Joseon as well as its form and main contents.

The Historical Development of Korean Literature and the Influence of the Neo-Confucianism

First, let us take a look at how thoughts and ideas influenced literature in the history of Korean literature. This will naturally bring us to the period when Neo-Confucianism starts exerting its influence. As intellectuals during late Goryeo and early Joseon took up Neo-Confucianism, literature gradually reflected its influence, the extent of which spanned a wide range depending on the period, the group of people, and the authors. Here, I focus mainly on how the Neo-Confucianism was introduced.

Choe Chiwon 崔致遠 (857-?), one of the leading writers of Unified Silla and the father of classical Chinese literature in Korea, was a scholar of Confucianism who sought to unite Buddhism with the Way of Immortals (*seon-gyo* 仙教). He also showed an interest in the pursuit of the Way of refined sophistication (*pungnyu*) (Jang 2005, 247-78). Choe, who represented his times and continued to exert a large influence after that, did not see the two areas of thought as mutually exclusive, nor did he give exclusive preference to one over the other. On the stele for the Buddhist monk Nanghye at the Seongjusa temple site (Seongjusa Nanghye hwasang bi 聖住寺 朗慧和尚碑), the engraving clearly states that it is not right for Confucianism and Buddhism to reject each other since the truth is eventually one and the same (Choe 1999). His writings also elucidate his encompassing way of thinking in several places.

Choe's way of thinking, which sought to embrace multiple lines of thought, is historically significant. Not only does his way of thinking reflect the perspective of intellectual circles during then, but it also largely influenced the intellectuals of Goryeo that came later. In Goryeo, Confucian scholars focused on the finesse of their writing skills rather than the study of Confucian Classics 經學 and valued the *Book of Han* (*Han shu* 漢書) and *Selections of Refined Literature* (*Wenxuan* 文選). Being good at writing was the key to the way one passed the civil examination and became an administrative official bureaucrat, which was what a successful life for intellectuals looked like. Scholars of

Confucianism studied the Classics, history texts, and poetry and prose only to the extent that it was needed for ruling the state and carrying out practical administrative tasks. They did not focus that much on the study of Confucian Classics in itself (Yi 2004, 165-84).

Before Neo-Confucianism was introduced, the intellectuals of Goryeo were mostly made up of scholars of Confucianism and Buddhist monks. Since Buddhism was worshipped as the state religion, most of the Confucian scholars accepted Buddhism as a religion, and neither side was closed off to each other. The way of defining a different thought as heterodoxy and rejecting it had much to do with the exclusivism of Neo-Confucianism. Thus, before the popularity of Neo-Confucianism, Confucianism was not on bad terms with other religions. The intellectuals, as Confucian scholars that had been appointed after passing the civil examination, accepted Buddhism as their religion, and some literary figures were absorbed with Taoist thought. Confucian scholars, therefore, were not fastidious about maintaining purity as in the period of Joseon. The thought that dominated those writing literature was Buddhism, and Confucianism remained supplementary.

In sum, Confucianism did not take an exclusive and dominant role in the intellectual circles of Goryeo. Some intellectual figures including Jeong Jisang 鄭知常, Gwak Yeo 郭興, Yi Jahyeon 李資玄, and Yi Jungyak 李仲若 were absorbed in Taoist thought. King Yejong also showed an interest in this pursuit of Taoist thought that sought uncontrived action and clear tranquility (*wuwei qingjing* 無爲清淨) amidst the corrupt reality of politics, and these intellectuals, who excelled at poetry and prose, responded enthusiastically (Chae 2008, 105-41). They were closer to the tendencies of the Way of Immortals that Choe Chiwon spoke of.

Before coming into contact with Yuan, Goryeo interacted frequently with Northern Song but not so much with Southern Song. In terms of thought and literature, Goryeo exchanged influences with Northern Song, accepting the New Policies of Wang Anshi 王安石 in the areas of politics and ideology and the influence of Su Shi 蘇軾 regarding literature (Jeong 2019, 147-72). Su Shi's influence on literature was particularly large. Because there was little exchange with Southern Song, Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi, which was hugely influential during this period, did not directly influence Goryeo. That occurred only after the founding of Yuan.

When Goryeo was defeated by the invasion of Mongol and thereby

entered the period of interference by Yuan, the intellectual landscape went through enormous changes. After coming into direct contact with the Yuan Empire, the intellectuals of Goryeo started to accept Confucianism and the literature of Yuan in earnest, and Neo-Confucianism gradually started to influence Goryeo. A group of students from Goryeo studying abroad in Dadu (Daidu 大都), the capital of Yuan, encountered the Neo-Confucianism of Southern Song. The intellectuals studying abroad there including An Hyang 安珣, Yi Gok 李穀, An Chuk 安軸, Choe Hae 崔滢, Yi Jehyeon 李齊賢, and Yi Saek 李穡 encountered Neo-Confucianism and spread it in Goryeo after returning.

The intellectuals during the Yuan interference who encountered Neo-Confucianism displayed distinct characteristics from the preceding scholars of Confucianism. Above all, they displayed a clear sense of the theory that literature was what carried the Way (*jaedoron* 載道論). They preferred the ancient-style of prose (*guwen* 古文) rather than the four-six prose, were interested in issues of the mind and nature, and had a stronger tendency to make it their own responsibility to preserve the security of the community. Although a variety of background factors led to such changes in writing style, topics, sentiment, and ideology, it is hard to deny the major effect of Neo-Confucianism as a new way of thinking.

The literary figure that left traces of the Neo-Confucianism across all literature of Goryeo was Mogeun 牧隱 Yi Saek 李穡 (1328-1396). Yi Saek, who returned from studying abroad in Yuan, was an unparalleled literary giant of his times. Moreover, during the reign of King Gongmin, who reorganized the Royal Confucian Academy (Seonggyungwan) and changed the education and civil examination system, Yi Saek was made in charge of the academy, in effect taking on the role as master of Confucianism as he oversaw the education of the Royal Confucian Academy for a long period. Now renowned in both literature and scholarly pursuits, Yi influenced many individuals during late Goryeo and early Joseon such as Sambong Jeong Dojeon and Doeun Yi Sungin. He accepted Neo-Confucianism as the leading ideology, which became the political ideology of the newly emerging elites, the scholar-official class (Do 2011, 22-89).

The prose of Yi Saek displays a strong influence of Neo-Confucianism, and Kim Taekyeong, who focused on this aspect, commented that "The writing of Yi Saek, the pupil of Yi Jehyeon, who paved the way for the Cheng-Zhu

learning, shows influences of commentaries and records of oral teachings. For over 200 years after that...many writers of Joseon all acquired their sickness from Yi Saek.”¹ He was criticizing how the writing styles of commentaries and records of oral teachings, which were characteristic of the texts of Neo-Confucianism, permeated Yi Saek’s writing, which went on to make many writers of Joseon take up a style that was undesirable. Although it was a critique based mostly on prose, it may as well be applied to poetry as well (Yi 1996, 103-36). Yi Saek, in this way, introduced the way of thinking of Neo-Confucianism into literature and opened the doors of the basic tendencies of prose and poetry writing during the Joseon period.

Joseon made Neo-Confucianism the exclusive and monopolizing state ideology. It would not be an overstatement to say that the Joseon dynasty was built on the foundations of the Neo-Confucianism. This learning influenced all areas of the Joseon dynasty for 500 years, and literature was no exception. Joseon sought to realize in its society the thoughts and literature of the Song era, when Neo-Confucianism had been born. King Jeongjo, in explaining the political system and general features of literature of the Joseon dynasty, said that “The framework for the founding of Joseon completely imitated Song. The political system is the same as that of Song as is the writing style.”² This was also the reason why King Jeongjo studied the learning of Zhu Xi and the history of Song in depth as he sought to restore the basic spirit of the founding of the state and strengthen the order of the state again (Ahn 2000, 87-111). King Jeongjo understood the Song dynasty, which had given birth to Neo-Confucianism, to be the model state Joseon should emulate, and regarded Song poetry and prose as the model in literature. In fact, during practically the entire Joseon period, the scholarship and writings of the Song dynasty were the mainstream. The basis running through it all was Neo-Confucianism.

In this way, Neo-Confucianism, as the scholarly trend of the Song dynasty, influenced Joseon across all areas. However, the way in which the Neo-Confucianism permeated literature was complex and differed largely depending on the time period, genre, and author. This article suggests an overall trend

based on how literature was viewed and the direction its creation took, and seeks to understand the relationship between Neo-Confucianism and the literature of the Joseon period.

The Instrumentalization of Literature and the Worship of Rationalism

The Instrumentalization of Literature and the Argument that Literature is What Carries the Way (jaedoron 載道論)

As the dynasty changed from Goryeo to Joseon, there was a shift from Buddhism to Confucianism, i.e., Neo-Confucianism, in the areas of religion and thought as well. Intellectuals during this time of transition clearly contemplated the relationship between their view of literature and the Way (*dao*; K. *do* 道). The Way here can be briefly explained as an ethical and political ideal that Confucianism, or Neo-Confucianism, pursued. In his assessment of the literature of his colleague Yi Sung-in 李崇仁, Jeong Dojeon 鄭道傳, who led the founding of the state and established the basic ideology of the new dynasty, said that “Literature is the vessel that carries the Way.”³ This statement expressing *jaedoron* was the key expression that was used thereafter to explain the relationship between the Way and literature.

Jeong Dojeon’s statement stems from the way of thinking of Neo-Confucianism. As the influence of this learning grew stronger and the status of the scholar-officials grew higher, the two concepts of the Way and literature became the key to understanding literary activities. In all cases, the Way maintained a position surpassing literature. The superiority of the Way over literature did not change until the very end when Joseon fell.

Accordingly, the expressions “*mun i jaedo*” 文以載道 that literature is the vehicle transmitting the Way; “*mun i gwando*” 文以貫道 to penetrate the Way by literature; “*dobon munmal*” 道本文末 that the Way is the basis and literature is the tip; “*do mun ilchi*” 道文一致 that the Way and literature must agree; “*munjong do chul*” 文從道出 that literature derives from the Way; and “*inmun*

1. Kim Taekyeong 金澤榮, “Jabeon” 雜言, *Collected Works of Sobodang Kim Taekyeong (Sobodang jip 韶漫堂集)*, *gwon* 8.

2. King Jeongjo, “Munhak 1” (On Literature), *Ildeognok 1 (Daily Quotations 日得錄)*, in *Complete Works of King Jeongjo (Hongje jeonseo 弘齋全書)* *gwon* 161.

3. “Gyeongsan Yi Jaan Doeun munjip seo” 京山李子安陶隱文集序, *Dongmun seon (Anthology of Korean Literary Works in Chinese)*, *gwon* 89.

ipdo” 因文入道 to realize the Way by literature, all slightly differ in content but share the way literature was viewed through its relationship to the Way. In other words, this perspective saw literature as an instrument to transmit or grasp the Way. In academic circles, this perspective is commonly called *jaedoron*, the argument that literature is what carries the Way (Pan 1999, 185-213).

Although there were similar ways literature was viewed through its relationship with the Way in neighboring countries including China or Japan, it was not as constant and universal as in Joseon (Song 2010, 77-97). This shows just how broad and strong the influence of Confucianism—Neo-Confucianism—was in Joseon. This did not mean that it directly led to a denial of the value of literature. Because the use of literature was essential in order to reveal the value of the Way, it was inevitable that literature was valued as well. However, the purpose of life for elites lay in the Way, not in literature. According to this logic, there could be no literature separate from the Way nor should there be any.

Those who sought to more strictly adhere to the ideology of Neo-Confucianism saw that making literature itself the object or putting too much value on the creation of literature was to forget one's original duty as a scholar. The reason was that literature, which appealed to sentiment, tempted human beings, preoccupying them with aesthetic pleasures, and ultimately obstructed the serious objective of pursuing the Way. They regarded it as the same as how delicious food, flamboyant dance, and fast music threw people into sensational pleasures and ruined wholesome lives. Ever since Master Cheng 程子 argued that writing hindered the Way (*zhuwen haidao* 作文害道), there were many scholars of Confucianism that agreed with him and disapproved of the writing of literature.

As the viewpoint valuing the Way became the dominant ideology, literature increasingly became seen as a petty skill (*sogi* 小技). It was common sense during then to describe poetry and prose as petty skills since they were arts of little value compared to the learning of the Way (*daoxue* 道學) or the study of Confucian Classics. Several expressions that looked down on literature and art such as marginal skill (*yeogi* 餘技), leftover work (*yeosa* 餘事), end craft (*malgi* 末技), or the petty Way (*sodo* 小道) are similar examples (Kim 1995, 23-54). Throughout the Joseon period, such terms were used as clichés dominating the thoughts of learned men.

This way of referring to literature, which was not used during the Goryeo

period, started to be used by Yi Jehyeon or Yi Saek after Neo-Confucianism was introduced. Yi Jehyeon apparently said after passing the civil examination that writing prose was nothing but petty skill and that he would further devote himself to studying the Classics.⁴ Yi Jehyeon's words bring into sharp relief the difference between Goryeo, which prioritized literature, and Joseon, which prioritized the study of Confucian Classics. After the view of Neo-Confucianism—that the study of Classics surpassed literature—was introduced, the latter had to endure being placed lower than the former.

Consequently, no matter how good the *yangban* scholar-officials of the Joseon period were at composing poetry and writing prose, they were reluctant to be called a poet or writer. “Once you're called a writer, you're regarded as having nothing more to offer,” they said and taught that one should become a scholar, not a literary figure.⁵ Scholar meant a scholar of Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism, who worshiped the Confucian Classics. They prioritized studying the Classics over the art of literature and conduct over the study of the Classics: such was their logic. Thus, in the Joseon period, there were no *yangban* scholar-officials who called themselves poets or writers; instead, the common people who did not serve on governmental posts (*yeohang-in*, who occupied a lower rung on the hereditary social status system, owned that title) (Ahn 2013, 273-98).

Rationalism and the Themes of Literature

The Way also influenced the theme of literature in a practical sense. As I have defined earlier, the Way was the moral and political ideal pursued by Confucianism, or more specifically, Neo-Confucianism. The Confucian values as explained by the Confucian Classics including the Six Classics were reinterpreted and systematized by the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi during the Song era, which then constituted the actual contents of the Way. These contents dealt with things that spanned across the entire realm of human and society. It is worth noting what Hong Gilju 洪吉周, the renowned literary figure of the early

4. “Biography of Yi Jehyeon,” *History of Goryeo (Goryeosa)*, gwon 110.

5. These words, which scholars of Joseon regarded as precious as gold and jade, originates from the words the Northern Song scholar Liu Zhi 劉摯 (1030-1098) said to his descendent and comes out in *History of Song (Song Shi* 宋史).

19th century, wrote regarding the characteristics of the writings of Joseon as he was selecting old texts during that period in relation to the theme of literature.

Holding Confucian Classics in high esteem, adhering faithfully to the rules of propriety, and not emulating what is not Confucianism are what our country values like gems. Devotedly worshiping human imperatives and polishing and honing decorum and the sense of shame is what our country thinks as style. Humility, knowing one's place, and not boasting ostentatiously is what our country thinks as honorable. Discarding the empty husks and only keeping the insides from poetry and prose is what our country regards as wealth. Not engaging in eccentric crafts and quietly shinning subtly is what our country regards as technique. All the virtuous men who led such lives well were people in the past. Without their remaining writings, there is no way to confirm the facts. The sound and color and spirit of the writings of our country are pure and as invaluable as all precious things under the heavens are. (Hong 2006, 178-80).

Most of what Hong writes as the characteristics of the prose of Joseon is what Neo-Confucianism considers as ideal virtues. In essence, excellent literature is none other than that which is able to express such an ideal life. Hong Gilju prided himself on the fact that the literature of Joseon was the most vividly brilliant in the world under the heavens. He himself was also one of the elites of Joseon. In the following, I look more specifically at two aspects among the aforementioned characteristics Hong Gilju spoke of with pride.

The first is the moralism of “devotedly worshiping human imperatives and polishing and honing decorum and the sense of shame.” The importance placed on *Elementary Learning* (*Xiaoxue* 小學), which valued the ethics and morality of loyalty, filial piety, and chastity (*chung hyo yeol* 忠孝烈) and prioritized the ethical praxis of humans more than any other branch of learning, led to moralism becoming mainstream across literature. Moralism of Neo-Confucianism also influenced the society in general, making moral economics mainstream in economics as well. The degree of influence it exerted on literature was similar.

The majority of biographies naturally dealt with elites and featured the abovementioned characteristics. In the biographies of women and lowly people, which were relatively less in number, such features were in fact more prominent. Biographies of slaves increased in late Joseon, and it is difficult to find any that are not about male slaves being loyal to his master or about the

chaste faithfulness of female slaves toward their husbands. In sum, the sheer number of loyal subjects, filial children, and chaste and virtuous women among the characters of biographical literature resulted from the large influence of the moralism pursued by Neo-Confucianism.

The second was the craft of non-craft of “not engaging in eccentric crafts and quietly shinning subtly.” The modest attitude that did not show off one's abilities and hid one's accomplishments was the desirable conduct, and shying away from fancy and decorative rhetoric was desired in literature. Natural and simple rhetoric was preferred while sophisticated techniques were shunned. Yi I 李瑀, one of the main figures of Neo-Confucianism of mid Joseon said the following:

Generally speaking, the literature people of the past spoke of was different from these days. They produced literature without any intention of composing literature. [...] People of the past composed literature with the Way. Because they wrote literature with the Way, literature was composed even without their trying to write it. Oh! Who would know that the literature that is composed without trying to write it is the utmost literature under the heavens?⁶

Yi I is speaking from the standpoint that literature derives from the Way (*munjong dochul* 文從道出). He argued that if one had accomplished the Way, literature would be composed even without the intention to do so. Since the utmost literature naturally arose even without the intention to write it, it was a kind of intentional non-intention. There was absolutely no space allowing for contrived technique or rhetoric. Yi I spoke, in no uncertain terms, on behalf of the scholars of Neo-Confucianism regarding how they viewed rhetoric. These terms of writing were prevalent and later expanded into automatic writing or theory on natural spontaneity, which was to write from and in accordance with the heart (*cheon-gi ron* 天機論), as proposed by Yi Cheonbo 李天輔 in late Joseon (Ahn 2001, 125-41).

The literature of Joseon, which showed all of the aforementioned features, was in general constituted by a dry and plain writing style and Confucian

6. Yi I, “Yeo Song iam” 與宋頤菴, *Yulgok Jeonseo* (*Complete Works of Yulgok Yi I* 栗谷全書), Seubyu 拾遺 *gwon* 3.

ethics for its theme. The authors did not prefer ornamental rhetoric or flowery descriptions. There were not many pieces that were highly imaginative or dealt with strange topics. Both literary critics and readers alike held the literary works showing moralism and the craft of non-craft in high esteem. Song Baek-ok 宋伯玉 (1837-1887), a literary critic of late Joseon, selected works of prose and compiled them into the *Collection of Writings of the East* (*Dongmun jipseong* 東文集成). Sim Uipyong 沈宜平 wrote in the foreword that “This collection looks at showy, decorative writings with disdain and instead worships elegant writings that follow the custom. Most of them are about rectifying the family and passing it down to future generations, warmly caring for the common people, and improving local culture. They do not deal with anything besides these” (Sim 1994, 3-5). If Hong Gilju mentioned the features of Korean prose writing, Sim Uipyong referred to the view of the critic and the reader. He made it clear that the chosen themes were moral and ethical ones, while the rhetoric that was prioritized was non-craft, that is, the plain ones that followed the custom. He clearly stated his intentions to exclude the rhetorical aspect, which was one of the innate values of literature.

The Literary View of Neo-Confucianism and its Backlash

The prolonged dominance of Neo-Confucianism gave rise to a strong intellectual backlash from those who had tired of it. Moreover, the free souls literary figures tended to possess by nature did not sit well with the way Neo-Confucianism demanded that literature agree with the Way. While the way Neo-Confucianism viewed literature continued to hold dominance from the founding of Joseon until the 17th century, opposition also sprouted, mainly among those literary figures that valued literature and consequently began to seek change. In the 18th century, more and more writers reflected upon the dogmatic and blind way Neo-Confucianism saw literature and made attempts to recover the autonomy of literature. Jo Gwimyeong 趙龜命 criticized the false ideal of making literature agree with the Way and stated that the two should be separate (*do mun bulli* 道文分離). He argued that “Literature is literature and the Way is the Way, and the two cannot mix”⁷ or that “Principle 理 and writing 辭

have nothing to do with each other,”⁸ outright denying any relationship between the Way and literature and instead emphasizing the independence of the latter. He also denied the logic that saw that good literature would happen to come if the one reaches the utmost principle. To put it simply, he fully denied the logic Yi I espoused. Jo Gwimyeong wrote:

The mystery of writing is like that of a hot spring in spring water, the chill in fire, the jade in stone, and the magnet in iron, and thus must have its own unique energy. It must also be written with a self-taught opinion and does not necessarily need the common principle of Yi Yun, the Duke of Zhou, Confucius, or Mencius.⁹

Jo argued for the distinct value of literature and did not recognize the relationship between literature and the common principle advocated by Confucianism. He made it clear that literature, as an art that expressed an individual’s distinct experience and individuality, was not subordinate to the Way and instead was an independent area separate from Neo-Confucianism (Song and Bak 2010, 109-41). The principle of Confucianism, the common principle that Duke of Zhou and Confucius represented, is within the same boundaries as the Way or the principle of Neo-Confucianism. By proclaiming that literature did not need such things, Jo denied the relationship between literature and the Way. The quote above displays a bold tone that almost amounts to a declaration of independence of literature.

Jo’s argument was revolutionary for his time. It soon, however, became seen as normal. Yi Eonjin, a literary figure of the generation following Jo, said that “not traveling the path of preceding sage men/ is what makes true sage men of the future”¹⁰ and demanded the rejection of all tradition, including that of the Confucian sage men. Such was the extent of the large wave rejecting tradition that washed over literary circles, refusing to acknowledge old ideas of the past and raising the banner of the creation of new literature. One of the central traditions that needed to be rejected was the way Neo-Confucianism saw literature. The literary figures based in the Seoul and Gyeonggi areas led

8. Ibid., “Budap Joseong suk seo” 復答趙盛叔書.

9. Ibid.

10. Yi Eonjin, “Dongho geosil” (My House in an Alley 衚衕居室), verse 54, in *Songmokgwan jip* (Collected Works of Songmokgwan Yi Eonjin 松穆館集).

7. Jo Gwimyeong, “Dap Chihoe hyeong seo” 答稚晦兄書, *Donggye jip* (Poetry and Prose Collection of Donggye Jo Gwimyeong 東谿集), *gwon* 10.

the new trend. A shared tendency to shun the uniquely intellectual, moralistic, and conceptual writings of Neo-Confucianism and the rejection of its unique writing style that followed a certain fixed formulae became widespread. A good example of this new wave is the composition of short vignettes (*sopummun* 小品文) that sought emotive writings.

After the 18th century, realism literature, which abounded with the individuality of the author and truthfully described the reality of Joseon, was born across poetry and prose. In poetry, the Joseon-style Chinese poems of the White Stupa Poetry Circle (*baektap si pa* 白塔詩派) emerged, while prose saw the emergence of the creation of short vignettes by Bak Jiwon, Yi Deokmu, and Yi Ok, who led the transformation of literary circles. By describing the unique reality of the Joseon society and the ways of the world and of men, revealing the vulgarities of human life, and creating literature expressing the distinct spirit of the times, they boldly broke free from the world of literature of the Zhu Zi Neo-Confucianism, which sought a universality transcending time and space. This tendency continued into the 19th century.

Although the literature of Joseon did escape from the fetters of Neo-Confucianism for the two centuries following the 18th century, it was not complete. The anti-conservative literary figures of Seoul and the Gyeonggi areas strongly rejected tradition, but across literary circles in general, the way Neo-Confucianism saw literature was still powerful. Geographically speaking, the areas outside of Seoul and Gyeonggi, particularly the folk societies of the Yeongnam and Northwestern areas, continued to follow tradition. In addition, if the scholars of Confucianism, who constituted most of the intellectuals, improved their traditional way of thinking, they nevertheless maintained their former views of literature. In short, tradition should be seen to have been more dominant than anti-tradition across literary circles as a whole.

Idealism and the Tendency to Seek Nature

Mind and Nature, and Idealist Tendencies

Under the influence of Neo-Confucianism, the idealist and theoretical tendencies of Korean classical literature grew stronger. Poetry and prose that dealt with the mind and nature flourished, while works on ethical and

moral themes increased in number. Based on Neo-Confucianism and its explanation on the mind and nature, literature that directly explained emotional fluctuations, the conflict between good and evil, and the fight between reason and desire within the minds of human beings, as well as works dealing with people practicing feudal ethics based on the innate goodness of human nature were preferred. Most of them ended with a restored peace of mind and the punishment of evil and encouragement of good virtue. Scholars of Neo-Confucianism, who preferred these features more than ordinary literary figures, wrote about issues of the mind and nature in a straightforward manner and did not deviate beyond them. They also made it clear in their poetry that poems were instruments to express the Way.

Many works that narrated the human mind in the form of fables such as the *Romance of the Human Mind* (*Cheon-gun yeonui* 天君演義), the *Tale of the Human Mind* (*Cheon-gun jeon* 天君傳), the *Record of the Heart* (*Sinmyeong sagi* 神明舍記) were seen during this time. Like the *Song of Movement and Stillness* (*Dongjeong eum* 動靜吟) of Chae Jihong 蔡之洪, which dealt with concept of movement and stillness (*dongjeong* 動靜) with regard to Neo-Confucianism, the work during this time plainly and directly discussed main concepts and themes from the self-cultivation of the human mind to extending knowledge by fully apprehending the coherence of things. Although they proclaimed to be literature, many are conceptual and schematic, and their value as literature is not readily obvious.

Among the scholars studying Neo-Confucianism, those with literary talent acknowledged the limits of such awkward and schematic works. As an alternative, they enjoyed creating pieces that obscured the abstractness and appealed to emotion like other ordinary poetry, thus incorporating the unique characteristics of literature. Instead of directly expressing philosophical thought processes, they emphasized the literary features in their composition at the same time they cast Neo-Confucianism over it in general. Such pieces were called the Lian-Luo style (*yeomnak pung* 濂洛風).

The origin of these kinds of works lay in those of Neo-Confucianism of the Song period. Shao Yong 邵邕 wrote 135 verses of “Shouwei yin” 首尾吟 and Zhu Xi wrote 29 verses of “Zhaiju ganxing” 齋居感興 as well as the serial poem “Wuyij jingshe zayong” 武夷精舍雜詠, describing the self-cultivation of Neo-Confucianism and the Way of the heavens. Compilations or explicated selections such as *Lian Luo feng ya* 濂洛風雅, *Ganxing shi zhujie* 感興詩註解,

Zhuzi xingli yin 朱子性理吟, and *Ya song* 雅誦, which featured the collected poetry of the scholars of Neo-Confucianism and/or included explications, were composed of pieces that realized the way of thinking of Neo-Confucianism.

Until late Joseon, this style of poetry was popular, giving birth to many pieces that were titled “Spontaneous Song” (*ueum* 偶吟) or “Miscellaneous Pieces” (*jabyeong* 雜詠). Ordinary writers were also influenced by this style, resulting in the production of a considerable number of similar works. One of the representative examples is Yi Hwang’s “Miscellaneous Pieces at Dosan” (*Dosan jabyeong* 陶山雜詠). Although some also directly dealt with main concepts such as principle of the heavens, reverent attentiveness 敬, and righteous obligation 義, most expressed the joy of living as a cultivated and civilized person of character in a space formed by the Way of Neo-Confucianism (Gwon 2010, 93-128). Such poems of the Lian-Luo style mostly sang of fragments of thought that happened to occur during everyday life as well as the joy of knowing that the principle of the heavens was being realized in ordinary life. The following work of Seong Hon 成渾 presented to his friend is a good example.

Tilling a patch of land amid the water and clouds,	一區耕鑿水雲中
A white-haired old man indifferent to worldly affairs.	萬事無心白髮翁
Waking up to the sound of mountain birds’ calling,	睡起數聲山鳥語
Slowly strolling the flower garden with a cane.	杖藜徐步繞花叢

The critic Hong Manjong 洪萬宗 (2016, 239-40) assessed this piece as being completely equipped with the right personality as well as the formalities of the poet and included the piece in his selection of poems *Review of Chinese Poetry in Korea* (*Sohwa sipyeong* 小華詩評). In describing the ordinary life of his friend, the only expression that Seong Hon uses is “indifferent to worldly affairs.” At a glance, it is an ordinary poem singing of everyday life. However, this poem contains the language of Neo-Confucianism—the language of principle (*ieo* 理語)—even without using conceptual language. The mountain birds and flowers of nature pulsate with the vitality of the heavens and the earth and all nature between it, and the poem along with its appreciation of this, expresses the communion between nature and human beings. The scene is alive with the principle of the heavens, and the person living amid it has attained the sublime state of Neo-Confucianism. The poem is saying that this appreciation

of the world of the Way in every moment of life is what the pleasure of Neo-Confucianism is.

Hong Manjong said regarding the poem above that “The writing and Neo-Confucianism were one at the highest level” and chose it as a representative example showing that scholars of Neo-Confucianism could also compose poems with literary value. Among the more orthodox poets, he cited the poetry of Gwon Pil 權鐸 as an example to show that even ordinary writers could write poetry like the scholars of the Way. In addition, he listed 18 scholars of Neo-Confucianism who sang of the righteousness of nature and feelings in the first part of the second volume of the *Supplemented Review of Poetry* (*Sipyong boyu* 詩評補遺) and assessed the literary value of the poetry of the scholars of Neo-Confucianism of Joseon.

The Observation of Things and the Centering of Interiority

In Seong Hon’s poem quoted above, the vitality of a spring day is expressed as a bright mood. Poems are directly related to the way intellectuals of the Joseon period saw and treated external objects. The scholars of Neo-Confucianism had a distinctive way of observing things (*gwanmul* 觀物). Scholars of Confucianism thought that things were not seen with eyes but with the mind or through the principle (Jeong 1995, 225-47; Yi 2017, 129-63). According to this perspective, each and every single thing had their *raison d’être* in its communion with the observer’s mind. It was not that the thing itself was genuinely important. One realized that the principle realized in the object was in essence one with the principle realized inside the human. External things that were perceived at every moment of life let humans perceive the truth of the universe or expressed the cultivated and purified inner state of humans. Poetry was the instrument that captured and depicted the moment of such communion.

Feeling and observing nature bursting with life let the observer realize that the principle of the universe was realized in each and every single thing. Such a discovery brought psychological pleasure, and this pleasure purified the nature and feelings of human beings. Observing things in nature was an act carrying philosophical significance, and literature was the tool recording this process (Ahn 2006, 311-49). During the Joseon period, many Chinese poems dealing with such experiences were composed. It was a phenomenon deriving from the

influence of Neo-Confucianism.

However, the mountain birds appearing in the poem of Seong Hon discussed earlier are not specific birds, nor were the flowers certain specific flowers. They were objects of nature that had been abstracted and made into ideas. The foreword of the “Miscellaneous Pieces at Dosan” includes an argument of a Confucian scholar that wrote that “the people of the past derived pleasure from their mind and did not need external things. Yan Yuan 顏淵 found pleasure in a shabby alley, while Yuan Xian 原憲 found pleasure in an impoverished house, and they did not need any mountains or water. Therefore, being dependent on external things, whatever they may be, was not genuine pleasure.” The argument that one could always find pleasure even in the absence of external things was an extreme and skewed perspective of Neo-Confucianism. Yi Hwang, after encountering this argument, said that pleasure differed depending on what the object was, thereby acknowledging the value of external things.¹¹ Like the moderate and broad-minded thinker he was, Yi Hwang affirmed the existence of nature—i.e., eternal things—that gave rise to human emotion. This does not mean that he gave up entirely on the view prioritizing the mind that felt the joy.

Yi I largely thought along similar lines. He said that “Just because external things are worth enjoying, it is not all genuine joy. The joy a virtuous man feels is not on the outside but exists in the inside,”¹² thereby bringing attention not to the beauty of external objects but to the joy that arose from the accordance between external objects and the inner self. From this point of view that prioritized the joy of the inner self, there was no difference in the ordinary mountain around the home or Mt. Geumgang, the great mountain famous for its beauty. In contrast, to Yi Hwang, Mt. Geumgang was very different from ordinary mountains in that it made people become emotionally absorbed with it.

The act of communion in human’s encounter with external objects was in essence the experience of becoming one with things (*mul a ilche* 物我一體). Through this pleasure of becoming one with things, poetry and prose composed after roaming nature tried to express the state in which the heavens and human

were one (*cheon in habil* 天人合一), where each entity of the universe, nature, and the heavens corresponded to the entities of micro-universe, interiority, and human, respectively. Such works formed the majority of the literature of the elite. Literature thus naturally took the course of loving nature and aspiring to a kind of hermit-like life away from the secular world, which was also the ideal of Neo-Confucianism. After the first half of the Joseon period, the *sijo* and *gasa* literature that espoused the Way of singing of lakes and rivers (*gangho ga do* 江湖歌道) responded to the outlook on life of Neo-Confucianism. The experience of becoming one with things and the way that pleasure was made into pieces of literary work formed the basis of the elite literature of the Joseon period (Choe 1977, 10-74)

Seoung Hon, whose poem I quoted above, also composed a *sijo* poem that went like the following: “Wordless green mountains, formless running water./Costless fresh wind, ownerless full moon./Let my idle body grow old indiscriminately.” This *sijo* expresses the absence of desire that seeks to live like nature, where no words, style, or wealth and desire to possess exist, without being beholden to any worldly affairs. It is a typical piece of the Way of singing of lakes and rivers that expresses the delight of life as one with nature. It also depicts the typical outlook on life of the elites of Joseon, which also pursued the ideal life of Neo-Confucianism.

However, as we can see in the work of Seong Hon, there was also a one-sided aspect in the view of those studying Neo-Confucianism. The attitude towards objects denied all artificial things and one-sidedly valued only what was natural. It worked to form a static and passive attitude in which the actual object did not mean much in the observation of it. Although things in nature were observed, the investigation of the specific and real actualities of the myriad of things in the universe was not pursued. Furthermore, relatively less attention was given to social phenomena, and there was also a negative aspect of complacency of just leaving reality as it was. As a result, there were relatively little pieces that focused on social phenomena. This is why the poetry and prose lack any analysis on the dynamic society and instead overflow with the theme of nature as well as mind and nature.

11. Yi Hwang, “Dosan jabyeong” (Miscellaneous Pieces at Dosan 陶山雜詠), *Toegye munjip* (Collected Works of Toegye Yi Hwang), *gwon* 3.

12. Yi I, “Song ae gi” (Records of Cliff with Pine 松崖記), *Yulgok Jeonseo* (Complete Works of Yulgok Yi I 栗谷全書), *gwon* 23.

Conclusion

This article has examined the influence of Neo-Confucianism on Korean classical literature mainly during the Joseon period following late Goryeo to reveal the relationship between literature and Neo-Confucianism. The difference in influence depended on the extent of comprehension, hereditary social status, the time period, geographical location, and gender. The highly educated intellectuals; the Yeongnam area, geographically speaking; mid-Joseon, period-wise; and male, in terms of gender, showed a stronger influence of Neo-Confucianism. The close relationship between literature and Neo-Confucianism is a historical phenomenon that is hard to deny.

The unique view Neo-Confucianism had of literature did not just exercise a strong force within the scholars of Neo-Confucianism but also on ordinary writers as well as on common people. The ones leaning towards Neo-Confucianism regarded poetry and prose to be a supplemental activity that had less value than the learning of the Way and demanded that the poetry and prose be composed with the Way. The writing of poetry and prose was very active during the Joseon period, but literature was placed within the boundaries of Confucianism, and its independence was not readily recognized. The conflict between literature and Neo-Confucianism took place for a long time. In particular, the efforts to obtain the independence of literature after the 18th century spread among literary figures, leading to a flourishing of literature that expressed individualism and individuality. This was a phenomenon resulting from the opposition against the self-righteous way Neo-Confucianism viewed literature.

From a macroscopic perspective, the literature of the Joseon period can be explained as a system of conflict and antagonistic opposition between how Neo-Confucianism saw literature, which argued for the agreement between the Way and literature, and the view of literature that argued for the independent value of literature.

Translated by Jong Woo PARK and Boram SEO

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship of Korean classical literature and Neo-Confucianism. By looking at the historical process of how thought and ideas influenced literature, it reviews the way Neo-Confucianism was introduced during late Goryeo and became the exclusionary state ideology throughout Joseon. The article reveals that after late Goryeo, the Way assumed dominance over literature, the latter of which was regarded as an instrument, and Confucian values deeply permeated the themes of literature. The article also analyzes the conceptual tendency, the absorption into nature, and the centrality of interiority in literature as the influence of Neo-Confucianism and concludes that the two—literature and Neo-Confucianism—are closely linked.

Keywords: Neo-Confucianism (*seongnihak*), the argument that literature is what carries the way (*jaedoron*), becoming one with things (*mul a ilche*), idealism, the Way and literature must agree (*do mun ilchi*), observing things (*gwanmul*)