[page 37]

**Confucianism: Tradition and Transformation in Korea**

by CHUNG, Chai-sik

A Lecture to the Royal Asiatic Society March 9,1988

According to Menander (343-292 B.C.), the Greek writer of comedies, “‘Know thyself, is not well said. It were more practical to say ‘Know other people’”.1 In trying to know other people, which is to grow in the understanding of a culture, an interpretive understanding of the sources that shaped, directed, and transformed the bases of a culture identity in a society or civilization is essential. Among others, the study of ethos, or the conscious beliefs about the nature of man and the cosmos from which peoples in a civilization derived their moral and ethical values, is fundamental. Traditionally, the Chinese and the Koreans and, to a certain extent the Japanese as well, called their ethos “the Way of Confucius.” The “Way” meant the principles governing the nature of man and the world. The Way of Confucius was the most sacred spiritual legacy of the Chinese people, and it underlies Chinese and East Asian character today. As broad rules of ethical conduct, Confucianism provides the web of relations that holds society together. But of no less importance, Confucianism has given the East Asian peoples what can be called “transcendental” ways to their civilization. As Greek philosophy, the Upanishads, Buddhism, or Biblical Judaism have given the peoples in the Near East, Greece, or India the way by which to transcend the givenness of everyday life, Confucianism has provided the East Asian peoples a kind of perspective to rise above and go beyond the limits. What, then, were the essential teachings of Confucianism? And in broad generalization, how did it find its way into Korea, forming, pointing, and transforming the bases of Korean society and, in turn, in the process, how was it transformed into a peculiarly Korean variant of Confucian tradition?

[page 38]

CONFUCIUS AND THE WAY

Central to the teachings of Confucius, found in the Analects, is the “Way” or Tao. “Tao is a Way, a path, a road,” and more concretely it means “the right way of life, the Way of governing, the ideal Way of human existence, the Way of the cosmos, the generative-normative Way (pattern, path, course) of existence as such”.2 The metaphor of traveling the road is the imagery that appears frequently in the Analects.3 The right path or way that we should travel makes us aware of the gap that exists between the human order as it ought to be and as it actually is. The Way points us to the ideal path of human life, the means by which everyday life can be transcended, both in religious and ethical terms.

Confucius was a great teacher and a gentleman. He was born in 551 B.C., a generation before the Buddha in India, and died in 479, a decade before the birth of Socrates in Greece. The times preceding and including the life of Confucius is known in Chinese history as the Spring and Autumn period, when the moral and religious authority of the Cho Dynasty (1122-249 B.C.) had begun to collapse and in the absence of the bonds of loyalty, all the states struggled with each other for survival. The Spring and Autumn period was followed by the Warring States period (463-222 B.C.) when the ancient moral order completely crumbled and princes fought each other and dictators arose. During these periods, “wandering intellectuals” preached conflicting doctrines of moral and political solutions of the problems of the day. The fact that the so-called “hundred schools” were wrangling with each other about how to save the world bothered Confucius, who was himself one of the wandering intellectuals from the state of Lu in present-day Shantung province. He took this as a disturbing symptom of moral chaos or the situation in which the Way had either been lost or not yet found. Like Socrates, attracting to himself a host of disciples, Confucius became a teacher — the “transmitter” of the Way. But unlike Socrates, he became a “cultural hero” to the Chinese people. Even today many tradition-oriented Chinese continue to venerate Confucius as the truly essential embodiment of the “Chinese mind,” and in a more or less similar way he is regarded as one who provided one of the basic orientations of East Asian cultures.

The vision to shape an ideal moral and political order that he presented is found in the collection of brief dialogues and aphoristic sayings in a collection called the Lun-yu, translated by James Legge as Analects and by Arthur Waley as Selected Sayings. A central concern that pervades the Analects is that “The Tao does not prevail in the world,” that “The Tao is not practiced.”  [page 39]

The fact that good moral order did not prevail in the world at that time, coupled with his great disappointment about the way things were, prodded him to look for a way out of this moral chaos. Unlike Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who were critical of their Hellenistic past, Confucius came to believe in lost golden ages. Through his knowledge of the classics (i.e., the Book of Documents and the Book of Poetry, he believed that the truly good society had already been achieved in the past and that the hope of the future was to recapture the lost splendor of Hsia, Shang and especially, the early Cho dynasties. Although one might label him “reactionary” or “conservative,” these labels do not do justice to what he really stood for. Although he saw himself as a “transmitter” and not as “one who makes up anything on his own” he wanted to add fresh insight and an innovative touch to the heritage of the Tao, or good moral order, that had been preserved in records.4

If we take the word Tao as an inclusive concept that refers to the outer domain of the sociopolitical order, as well as the inner moral life or man, on the more concrete level li (in Korean ye) — another basic concept in Confucianism translated into English as ceremony, rites, or etiquette — refers to “the behavior of persons related to each other in terms of role, ,status, rank, and positions in structured society.” Li refers to all those concrete prescriptions about proper behavior of father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger (and vice versa).5 These social rules may have grown out of a primitive animism in which the spirits of land, wind, and water played important roles in the human world. By Confucius’ time, and thereafter, it became a common belief that improper human conduct could throw the natural world out of whack. With particular emphasis Confucius preached that proper observance of the rites toward the spirits of ancestors and nature was a sign of the perfect social order. To him, a correct observance of the rites was a sign that all was well in human society and nature, and to abuse or neglect the outer form of rites was to abuse the inner moral order that they represented.6 To many of us, the li may seem rather formalistic and stuffy: how to speak and behave in the presence of superiors, where to sit, how to receive a highly honored guest, and how far to go in seeing him off. A good East Asian host still is quite fussy about good manners, the social face, and the details of etiquette. The importance of doing things according to the correct ritual form has persisted to date in East Asia and even in China under the Communists.7

Li teaches human beings to perform their separate roles well in a society and thereby maintain harmony within a large whole. Li requires that within the family the father exercises authority and power. The child owes his parents [page 40] filial obedience as the minister owes his ruler obedience and loyalty. Thus hierarchy and authority were the necessary bases of society. But li also required reciprocity. In return for a child’s filial piety the parents owe their children parental love. In dealing with his minister, who renders obedience and loyalty, the ruler “should be guided by the prescriptions of ritual”.8 Confucius had a vision of a better world, or cooperative world in which “antagonism and suspicion, strife and suffering, were largely unnecessary”.9 In contrast to Plato’s elitist vision in the Republic, Confucius envisioned the model of government in which the harmony of an ideal family reigns rather than a government in which hierarchy and authority are based on “brute force or mere interest without any sense of spiritual-moral contraint”.10 Confucius, major concern was the problem of how one humanizes the exercise of authority and inequalities of social power. According to Herbert Fingarette, li — as “sacred ceremony” or “holy ritual” — has the power to shape and humanize those who participate in them by dint of their “magical quality”.11 “Men become truly human as their raw impulse is shaped by li. And li is the fulfillment of human impulse, the civilized expression of it — not a formalistic dehumanization”.12 Cordial human gestures like bowing and ritual rites are “characteristic of human relationships at their most human” according to Fingarette; and he insists that “we are least like anything in the world when we do not treat each other as physical objects, as animals or even as subhuman creatures to be driven, threatened, forced, maneuvered”.13

What was the inner meaning or spirit of li? Simply, it mean the spirit of yielding to others as it was stated in the Analects: “If it is really possible to govern countries by ritual and yielding, there is no more to be said. But if it is not really possible, of what use is ritual?”.14 The spirit of yielding to others would overcome such passions as “the love of mastery, self-aggrandizement, resentment and covetousness”.15 An “ultimate concern” of Confucius was to achieve a community of man by the spirit of spontaneous yielding, and this, he said repeatedly was “the only thing that mattered, more than the individual’s life itself”.16

While Confucius was greatly concerned with the outer space of social behavior of man, he was, in fact, just as much interested in the inner moral life of the individual person. The key concept to understand this inner dimension of reflective individual was the famous word jen (in Korean in), which is translated as love, benevolence, and humanity. Jen is “the perfect giving of oneself to the human way”17 Jen embraces all the social virtues that make up true humanity at its best, and with jen on can perform li in the proper spirit. It is “an existential goal” which one can achieve for himself after one has done [page 41] what is difficult, that is, “by curbing one’s ego and submitting to li”.18 As a matter of fact, to Yen Hui, one of his disciples who asked, “What is jen?” Confucius replied, “He who can submit himself to ritual is good”.19 As Fingarette stated it, “Li and jen are two aspects of the same thing”.20 “Li directs our attention the to the traditional social pattern of conduct and relationships; jen directs our attention to the person as the one who pursues that pattern of conduct and thus maintains those relationships” .21 To put it differently, a man who cannot make a disciplined effort to overcome those evil impulses that prevent the expression of what is best in man (that is, jen) in the relationship between man and man, can have nothing to do with li. On the other hand, to relate oneself to others in reciprocal good faith and respect as defined by civilized pattern of conduct and relationships (li) is jen’s way.

To Confucius, according to Lin Yutang, “… the kingdom of God [was] truly within man himself”.22 Confucius spoke about the self-realization of humanity, but he did not put this problem in terms of “individual” and “ society,” as we are accustomed to think in Western categories. Rather, he maintained that man is born into the world with the potentiality to be socialized into a true human being. He emphasized the process of self-cultivation and learning, which he compared to the process of continuous “cutting, filing, chiseling, and polishing”.23 By developing a unique dignity and power inherent in man through the process of self-cultivation or education, man can be civilized and thus become a truly human man. To become a civilized being is “to establish human relationships, of an essentially symbolic kind, defined by tradition and convention and rooted in respect and obligation”.24 Man is at his best when he “is transformed by participation with others in ceremony which is communal”.25 Thus “the noble man is the man who most perfectly having given up self, ego, obstinacy and personal pride follows not profit but the Way”.26

Confucius had a vision that humanity could find happiness only as a cooperative community of spontaneous moral beings. In the ideal community that Confucius envisioned, the use of legalistic sanctions and punishment is clearly contrasted as an “undesirable alternative to the use of virtue te (in Korean tdk), of humaneness (jen), of ceremonial propriety (li), and of such related strategies as “yielding” jang (in Korean yang).27 In contrast to the use of legal punishment, which people will evade shamelessly, Confucius insisted to govern them by moral force (te), appealing to their sense of shame ch’i (in Korean ch’l) or “self-respect” and “keeping order among them by li”.28 Here we may raise the questions whether Confucian “shame” comes the closest to Western “guilt” or whether the Confucian view of man provides [page 42] the conception of man as a tragic being tormented by inner crisis and guilt as we find the Orphic, Hebrew, and Christian imagery. The central moral issue in Confucius, thought does not seem to have been the responsibility of morally autonomous being with an inherent capacity to choose among alternatives. Instead he was merely expected to be civilized by education of the Way to become a true human being.29 Those who wanted salvation from the profound tension between human potentiality and frustrations had to look for a way out in such heterodox religions as Buddhism and Taoism. But Confucius’ vision that provided a basis for personal dignity eventually became China’s official ideology, or orthodoxy, dominating the Chinese mind for more than two thousand years.

The development of Confucianism in Chinese history, however, is too complex to delineate even its outline here. In gross generalization it may be pointed out that Confucianism became the state ideology 350 years after Confucius’ death. In 213 B.C., under the short-lived Ch’in dynasty, Confucianism went underground and Legalism reigned. But during the time of Emperor Wu, who reigned from 140 to 87 B.C., the situation was reversed and Confucianism was proclaimed as the state ideology. Later, with the establishment of the imperial university for the study of Confucianism and the examination system, the vision of Confucius that provided a basis for personal dignity eventually became China’s official ethos, and it remained as such until 1911. During the long process of its development the transcendental and ethical vision of Confucius was syncretized with the cosmological philosophies of Taoism and other naturalist schools, taking on a kind of religious trapping. Under official patronage, the idea of a morally conscious person chun-tzu who could criticize the existing order was compromised; he came to assume more of the role of a model official who blindly obeyed the commands of his ruler. Legalism, a thought antagonistic to early Confucianism, also seemed to have played an important role in the development of official Confucianism.

The philosophy of Mo Tzu (circa 480-390 B.C.), called Mohism, emerged as a principal rival to Confucianism in the centuries of the Warring States period, posing a considerable challenge to the Confucianists. But the more plebeian, anti-establishment-oriented, and stern philosophy of Mo Tzu, which denied all natural human feelings in search for an impersonal and practical society of universal love, had little lasting appeal to the Chinese people. Shortly after the first century B.C., it disappeared from sight. Interest in Mo Tzu was revived only recently under Communist rule.

Buddhism that spread to China from India around the beginning of the [page 43] Christian era offered an attractive new way of spiritual life to the Chinese, dominating the Chinese mind for roughly a thousand years. Ironically, Buddhism also played a significant role in the formation of Neo-Confucianism, which arose during the Sung dynasty (960-1279) as a counter to the religion from India. But despite all these ideological challenges, in the end it was the simple and humane teachings of Confucius Mencius, who was born about a century after Confucius,death and defended Master Confucius, that became China’s dominant ethos.30

THE CONFUCIAN TRADITION IN KOREA

The Choson dynasty (1392-1910) is often called “Neo-Confucian,” whereas the societies of Silla and Koyryo (918-1392) that preceded it are generally labelled as “Buddhist.” This is, of course, only a generalization of the prevalent ethos that informed the institutions, values, customs, and lifestyles of the respective dynasties. Even in the most strictly Confucian-oriented Choson dynasty, other religions such as shamanism and Taoism coexisted with Confucianism to meet the religious needs of the people. Confucianism was only one of the religions that formed the total religious landscape of Korean society. In fact, none of the religions that appeared in Korea has been able to establish itself as a monolithic tradition entirely eclipsing the others. Buddhism in Silla and Koryo and Neo-Confucianism in the Choson dynasty, for example, seemed to have attained the predominant position, but none could entirely overwhelm the others; eventually they all blended into a syncretic whole in the spiritual life of the people. Thus, even today, it is not unusual for a Korean to adhere to all these different religions at the same time with no sense of conflict. The Korean can pray to Buddha for consolation in times of trouble, but in order to bury his parents, with all the respect of Confucian ritual, he will consult the Taoist geomancer to pick out an auspicious place for burial. In times of harvest or drought, he may very well resort to shamanistic rituals for celebration or prayer for rain. And it is not impossible for the same person to have a Christian wedding ceremony in church as a modern touch.31

Confucianism appeared in Korea as early as the time of the Three Kingdoms (circa 57 B.C.-A.D. 668). The Confucian beginnings in Korea seem to be traceable all the way back to the period around the third and fourth centuries when Koreans had begun to adopt Chinese writing. But the traces of the early stage of the beginnings of Confucianism remain obscure. By A.D. 372, Koguryo had founded a university for the teaching of Confucian classics and [page 44] history. From an early period, therefore, we may surmise that the Confucian classics continuously influenced the intellectual life of the scholar-officials. Yet overshadowed by the native cults, shamanism, Taoism, and Buddhism, Confucianism could not make any substantial progress until the rise of the Choson dynasty in 1392. However, it is true that from the late tenth century Confucianism had served to provide the state of Koryo with educated civil servants. As Ch’oe Sung-no (927-989),the famous Confucian statesman, put it, while Buddhism was mainly interested in the other-worldly salvation of the individual, Confucianism served as the “basis for regulating the state” here and now.32 The kind of Confucianism Ch’oe and his contemporaries understood was still limited at the level of statecraft in the form of Han and T’ang “imperial Confucianism”.33

Toward the end of the 13th century, however, the emerging scholar- officials in Korea began to be attracted to Neo-Confucianism, which arose in China during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In this new system of thought, they found a promising alternative to the decadent Buddhism long dominant in medieval Korea. Neo-Confucianism came to be known in Korea as the Ch,eng-Chu learning (Chongju-hak), or better as the Chu Hsi learning (Chuja-hak), because its history was traceable from Chu Hsi (1130-1200), the great Chinese thinker. Chu Hsi is often compared to Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian who systematized Christian doctrine with the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Like the famous Church Doctor’s efforts at synthesis, Chu Hsi put classical Confucian thought together with the rivalling thoughts of Buddhism and Taoism, forming an elaborate systematic philosophy of human nature and the cosmic order. The Chu Hsi learning had the potential to fill the need in the inner space of the spirit, a need the classical Confucianism could not meet; and it also retained the means to deal with the outer world of society and ethics, a means Buddhism lacked.34

The old Confucianism in Koryo had primarily served as the chief means of training scholar-officials in the composition of prose and poetry for the civil service examination, and it lacked a fresh moral meaning and spiritual impetus. The Neo-Confucianism of Chu Hsi was different. Armed with the elaborate metaphysics of Buddhism and Taoism, it rationalized that the Confucian moral principles undergirding society were founded on the heavenly principle of nature. The new Confucianism, as interpreted by Chu Hsi, offered a fresh moral meaning to bring order and direction to Korean society floundering in moral confusion on the eve of the founding of the Choson dynasty. Yi Song-gye, the founder of the Choson dynasty, who had overthrown in Koryo dynasty, teaming up with the emerging scholar-officials,  [page 45] adopted Neo-Confucianism as the official ideology of the new dynasty. The change from Koryo to the Choson, meant the replacement of Buddhism with Neo-Confucianism and the restructuring of the government and society after the models laid out in Chu Hsi’s exegesis of Confucian classical literature. By initiating a reform program of unprecedented scope, Korea was set to become more Confucian than China.35

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF KOREAN CONFUCIANISM

The Confucianization of Korean society, however, did not take place overnight. It was well after more than a century had elapsed that Korean society was transformed into a Confucian-oriented state. For example, it was not until roughly 1600 that Choson Korea could finally organize the social structure on the basis of a highly structured patrilineal descent group. In early Choson Korea, the old tradition of the Koryo dynasty still persisted; and with an uxorilocal, or a matrilocal kin group, daughters, even after marriage, retained close ties with their natal group instead of joining the husband’s patrician. After 1600,patrilineages and primogeniture prescribed by Chu Hsi became firmly established.

Chu Hsi insisted that for social control and continuity, the family should be the basis of society and that tracing the descent through the male line and passing all properties and the right to handle ancestor worship from a father to the eldest son be strictly observed. In order to insure the continuity of the family and the solidarity of the clan, the Koreans honored their ancestors and took their origins more seriously than the Chinese. Clarifying the line of descent and establishing the head of the descent group, through meticulous attention to genealogy and ancestor worship, became the most important matters of concern to the Koreans. In fact, these matters became the bases upon which the whole social order rested.36 Today, in translating the English word, “society,” we use the Chinese characters, sa-hoe (社會). The characters, sa, consists of two ideographic elements: the one on the left (示) stands for “spirit,” and the one on the right (土) means “soil or earth.” the character hoe (會) stands for “assembly or gathering.” What these characters mean literally is that people gather round on the earth under which lies the spirit of the ancestor. Thus, society in Korea and East Asia literally means the natural community of blood lineage grounded on ancestral land. The problem of how to stay home or of keeping the ancestral ground and maintaining the solidarity of the family and clan became an utterly important matter to the Koreans. Living with one’s parents until death, venerating [page 46] parents and ancestors throughout one’s life, and leaving descendants to continue the family-these were matters of ultimate concern.

In culture like that of the United States where “the autonomy and self- reliance of the individual” is emphasized, the primary problems of childhood are “separation and individuation.” As soon as children are ready they are packed off to schools and camps to be prepared for the all-important event of “leaving home.” In America, leaving home is the normal expectation, and childhood means partly to prepare for it. In Confucian-oriented East Asia, however, the expression “leaving home” was reserved for those who entered Buddhist monastic life.37 One of the reasons why the Neo-Confucian scholar-officials in the Choson dynasty consistently blasted Buddhism was that Buddhism stood for leaving home, or neglecting the family, destroying the basis of society. For the same reason they attacked the abstract principle of “universal love” of Mo Tzu,which gives no priority to the family as does Confucianism, as a heterodoxy.38 The common Korean expression ch’ulga, which literally means “leaving home,” is also used when a daughter is married out of her natal home to join the husband’s patricians, revealing the importance of the agnatic principle of descent in Korean society. In contemporary usage, kach’ul (reversed form of ch’ulga) denotes a juvenile delinquent running away from home.

The familistic orientation of the Koreans can be seen in how seriously they took the so-called “learning of ceremonial rite” (Ye-hak), which was primarily concerned with learning the three rites of passage appropriate to capping (of the scholar-official’s son at his coming of age), marriage, and mourning and sacrifice to the spirit of the ancestor according to the Family Rituals of Chu Hsi, Chu Tzu Chia-li. For example, people wrangled endlessly over such problems as the succession to the throne by the son of a legal wife and whether the spirit tablet of a second wife should be enshrined besides that of the original primary wife or the duration of the mourning period for the second wife.39 Even today, we live with this legacy and, in the eyes of outsiders, Koreans appear to be overly concerned with elaborate ceremonies of marriage, funeral, and sacrifice. In Korea today, to be a successful Christian pastor, one has to be able to cater to the family-orientation by managing wedding and funeral ceremonies in a pleasing manner.

Defining the characteristics of the Korean Confucian tradition is not easy. Besides familism, Koreans also showed an extremely zealous commitment to guarding the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. How is one to interpret the fact that Koreans showed a more ardent commitment to stand for orthodoxy than the Chinese and the Japanese?  [page 47]

It took nearly a century for the Choson dynasty to establish its ideological direction, but it was not until the sixteenth century that Neo-Confucianism finally secured a position of unrivalled preeminence as the state’s official ideology. When Max Weber characterized Confucianism as “an innerworldly morality of laymen” oriented to “adjustment to the world,” perhaps he overstated the case. Yet it cannot be denied that Confucianism was not an independent religious force, such as Christianity was, to develop a doctrine of salvation or an autonomous ethic and education, which might possibly compete with the power of officialdom.40 In the spirit of Confucius, who had never discussed “prodigies, feats of strength, disorders or spirits”.41, Confucianism was opposed to magic powers and the manipulation of spirits. Such magical activity was allowed to go on as “the religion of the masses” with contemptuous indifference, as long as it did not threaten the status quo. Nevertheless, “the proud, masculine, rational, and sober spirit of Confucianism”.42, which was the state cult and the official status ethic of the yangban or the scholar-official class, could not appeal to the feminine emotional touch, as Buddhism did. As it turned out, during the initial centuries of the Choson dynasty, compassionate buddhas and bodhisattvas, and other popular religions such as Taoism and shamanism, still had a large following among women and the people in the lower strata of society, meeting their personal, religious needs. And so the yangban elite, who were set bulla the new society in the model of clearly defined human obligations and rational social order, took to suppressing Buddhism and popular religions as “heterodox” religions that posed threat to the state and society.43

The Ch’eng-Chu philosophy could rise as the orthodox ideology only through protracted battles with the lingering influences of Buddhism and popular religions. In the process of prolonged conflict with these religions, the Korean yangban came to develop a defensive or polemic attitude to condemn any ideas that differed from their views or threatened them as dangerous “heterodoxy” (sa, morally off the correct path; or idan, literally the “other strand”). In fact, after the seventeenth century, the Confucian establishment in Korea reacted to the challenge of Christianity by labeling the religion from the West as “heterodox,” if anything, worse than anything that they had known before.44 From the middle of the nineteenth century on, as the pressure on Korea grew stronger for her to open the doors closed to the Western nations and Japan, the Confucian ruling elite continued to condemn the outsiders as “heterodox,” an alien force, refusing to open the country to the outside world In the process of holding on stubbornly to the stagnant tradition, the Korean Confucian leaders, as a whole, proved themselves to be [page 48] too rigid and closed-minded to adjust with flexibility to the changing realities in the modern world. Rigidly stifling tradition to which the Korean leaders were bound has often been pointed out as one of the reasons why Korea could not adapt to the modern world as effectively as the Japanese.45

The traditional Korean Confucian intolerance toward other religions can be put into sharper relief when we place it against the traditional Chinese Confucian attitudes toward other religions or philosophies. In China, Buddhism, Taoism, and other popular beliefs and practices were “outsiders,” or pagans to Confucianism, just as paganism was alien to Christianity in the West. Yet such religions did not suffer severe repression but were allowed to exist together with Confucianism. In Korea, however, the situation was quite different. Korean Confucian literati stigmatized not only these religions as heresies, but condemned as heterodox even the Wang Yang Ming School, which grew out of Neo-Confucianism, offering an alternative to the Buddhist approach to mental cultivation. Since “there was no room for idan (heterodoxy),” the Ch’eng-Chu philosophy was the only thing that was permitted to go on in Korea.46; and religious conflict, if any, took place within the Chu Hsi learning camp, surrounding the problem of how to correctly interpret the authoritative commentary of the Chinese Classics by Chu Hsi and his views. Over the question of who has the final say about the correct interpretation of Chu Hsi’s axiomatic stance, the scholars were engaged in endless debates, at times lasting for years and even resulting in factional strife and deaths. The sad clash between Song Si-yol (1607-1689), a fanatic defender of Hsi orthodoxy, condemning Yun Hyu (1617-1680), who revised Chu’s interpretation of the Doctrine of the Mean and the Great Learning was a famous case in point. Whereas Song adhered to Chu Hsi’s views to the letter, Yun dared to question the master Chu’s commentary while he still insisted that he was the one who truly understood Chu Hsi.47

During the reign of Sonjo (1567-1608), the Neo-Confucian literati, with their monopoly on access to learning and influence through the private academies (sowon) and village code (hyangyak) along with their agricultural land- holdings, finally came to dominate the political and intellectual process. But this came only after the struggle for power, over a period of half a century or more, with the entrenched bureaucrats in the central government, the heirs to the meritorious elite. Seriously devoted to learning in the Confucian classics, the literati’s attitude toward learning and life was marked by moral idealism and commitment, distinguishable from that of the bureaucrats in the capital. The literati’s moral bent was deepened further by a series of political purges (sahwa) they had to undergo before eventually seizing dominant political [page 49] power. In the process of the successive purges many of the literati came to turn away from the cruel political struggle in the center and began to pursue Confucian studies in the periphery of the “mountains and forests” (sallim). The unremitting factional purges left a solemn impression on the minds of the literati with regards to the depth of human destructiveness and the degradation of social morality. The orthodox Chu Hsi scholars began to reflect on the problems of cultivating man’s moral character and improving human nature and society. Along with this awakening of moral consciousness, the speculative metaphysical foundation of Chu Hsi’s thought began to receive more attention.48

Among these scholars, Yi Hwang (1501-1570), better known as Toegye, often referred to as the Chu Hsi of Korea, for one, was persuaded that there should be moral reconstruction in politics and social life, despite excessive egocentric forces that disturbed society’s moral integration, and that it should be founded on the enlightenment of the Way of the sages in the minds of the individual and in the community of Confucian scholars so that the individual would value the public more than himself.49

In Chu Hsi’s metaphysics, man, all things, and the world are held to be accountable in terms of two inseparable components, li (principle, in Korean i) and ch’i (materia force, in Korean ki). Li is a formative principle that accounts for what things are and how they should be. Li is not only the structural principle behind all things of heaven and earth but also the principle of the original goodness of human nature and the source of human morality. Ch’i is the concretizing material force that accounts for physical form and substance and plurality and change in all things of heaven and earth. The two are interdependent and inseparable. However, in accounting for man and tnings in the world, one can give primacy to either li or ch’i. Because Chu Hsi was primarily interested in the ethical problems of moral cultivation, rather than metaphysics, he learned to emphasize li more than ch’i. He spoke more of the ethical problem of how to realize li, that is, the original goodness in man, by overcoming ch’i which obstructs the full manifestation of the original goodness of human nature. Chu Hsi, however, left the problem of the relation between li and ch’i somewhat ambiguous. It was T’oegye who stated more clearly than Chu Hsi that principle has priority over material force in respect of value.

In accounting for the relation between principle and material force involving the famous “Four-seven Debate,” or the problem of the issuance of the Four Beginnings (which constitute the inherent goodness in human nature) on the one hand, and the Seven Feelings that may work for either [page 50] good or evil on the other, T’oegye emphasized the active and dominating character of principle in an effort to underline the spontaneous goodness of man’s moral nature. Yi I (1536-1584), another great Confucian thinker better known as Yulgok, two years after the death of T’oegye, took the master to task for his definition of human nature, which was bent to the ethical problem of manifesting principle in man. By interpreting human nature within the broader framework of metaphysics, Yulgok maintained that material force alone was responsible for the functioning of the mind. Yulgok thus became a viable rival of T’oegye.

The issue that greatly concerned these two scholars and their later followers, was the problem of human nature rather than the phenomenal world of universe and nature, as was the case, partly at least, in China and Japan. As a matter of fact, the development of Korean Neo-Confucian thought unfolded almost entirely within the context of how to account for the nature of man. Little wonder, then, that in Korea Ch’eng-Chu teaching came to be called a philosophy of “human nature and principle” (Songni-hak). Simply stated, the issue was whether human nature should be studied primarily as a matter of emphasizing the moral principle in man and society (i-hak or li-hsueh in Chinese) or whether it should be interpreted in the context of the metaphysics of the cosmos. T’oegye, an orthodox heir of Chu Hsi in Korea, represented the former position, commonly known as the School of Principle (Churi p’a); whereas Yulgok stood for the latter position, known as the School of Material Force (Chugi p’a). As it is said that the history of Western philosophy consists of a series of footnotes to Plato, it can be generalized that the mainline of the Choson dynasty philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to what T’oegye and Yulgok had said about the nature of man. Though the dialogue between the two may appear hairsplitting, as was sometimes the case, the intellectual and moral seriousness with which they and their followers approached the problem of human nature not only clarified certain ambiguities in Chu Hsi’s thought but also deepened understanding of human nature in terms of a profound, inward, and personal experience, which was unmatched even by Chinese scholars. With T’oegye and Yulgok, although Korean Chu Hsi learning reached its golden age, the philosophical differences between the two had sown dissension among their followers, embroiling them in wrangles over such problems as principle and material force and nature and feeling. Soon these philosophical quarrels developed into factional struggles for political influence, wealth, and social position. In the process, the uncompromising censure, intolerance, and the manipulation of truth, through a textual interpretation of the classics, developed As a [page 51] result, a belief that there is only one right path and that a variety of philosophical views could not exist side by side permeated almost all areas of intellectual and social life. This belief came to be deeply entrenched after the sixteenth century,foreshadowing the eventual fossilization of Chu Hsi orthodoxy by the end of the nineteenth century.50 The remnant of this undesirable legacy remains with us still today.

What is most distinctive about the Korean tradition of Confucian thought is that the Korean scholars approached the problem of the world of the mind not just as a cognitive knowledge but more as matter of taking a proper religious attitude of all seriousness (kyong, in Chinese ch’ing). This was especially the case with the School of Principle, which emphasized the understanding of principle more as a deep, inward, and personal experience than as the intellectual understanding of principle as the law of being of material force. In this school, a man of high moral integrity with utmost commitment to his conviction was idealized as model man.51

Chu Hsi saw education and self-cultivation as a life-long process involving the dual, balanced processes of learning the Confucian Classics to plumb the principles governing man and the cosmos (ch’iung li, in Korean kungni), on one hand, and meditation, or quiet-sitting (ching tso, in Korean chongjwa), like the Buddhist, to abide in reverence (chu-ching, in Korean kyogyong), that is, to be watchful over evil thoughts and impulses in the self that come from the physical, sensual nature, on the other. In the case of most Korean orthodox Neo-Confucians, however, the balance seems to have shifted more toward maintaining a “reverence with a moralistic and puritanical ‘seriousnes’” and proper behavior than intellectual endeavor, although the latter was not slighted.52 T’oegye, for one, associated the image of the mind as a battlefield in which a life-or-death struggle went on between ever-present selfish human desires and moral will to live a correct life by nourishing and preserving his inherent good nature, or principle. The greatest enemy of man is not in the outer realm of political and economic institutions but man himself, that is, the human selfish desires that “gnaw” at the mind. And “reverence” or “seriousness” means nothing less than to give the mind control of itself through moral striving in order to cultivate the inner self and consequently to regulate the outer space of politics and society.53

In the spirit of Chu Hsi, the emphasis on reverence or seriousness as the root of all things made the scholars morally conscious, devoting even their lives to the cause of moral principles of loyalty and filial piety, for example; but, on the other hand, such a life style had the pitfalls that left long-lasting marks in the Korean personality and culture. To take moral principles seri- [page 52] ously is to take propriety and ceremonies that embody them with equal seriousness. The kind of Confucian thought and behavior pattern that prevailed in Korea did unwittingly encourage such traits as attentiveness in manners, solemn silence, obedience to authority, and a rigoristic and ascetic attitude toward human desires and emotions. An ideal Confucian gentleman who maintain a serious attitude toward life is not taken lightly by others because he has an aura of seriousness and dignity that reflects his state of mind. He also has that “immovable” mind unperturbed by unexpected happenings in life or by various temptations of the flesh. A legalistic attitude, which tends to adhere to the letter rather than to the spirit, and a rigorously methodical character may also result from such a life orientation. Excessive adherence to marked ceremoniousness and the weight of tradition and custom can easily stifle individual spontaneity, creativity, and freedom.54 Free thinking — spontaneous and creative thinking — was a quality of the mind that was very much limited in traditional Korean society.

By the middle of the nineteenth century it became very evident that Neo- Confucianism of Chu Hsi, which had earlier started as a vital ideology to define the direction of Choson Korean society and to fill the void left by decrepit Buddhism, was drained of its spiritual vigor and strength in the course of prolonged scholastic controversies and factional strifes. Reduced to a mere traditum handed down from the past and secure of its orthodox status, the ideology of the yangban had not longer the vibrant capacity to adapt to the needs of the changing times. The yangban intellectuals, who had lived their lives according to the beliefs and values defined by Neo-Confucianism orthodoxy, found themselves completely disoriented when the axiomatic philosophy of Chu Hsi was suddenly challenged by new outside influences — Western culture, Christianity, and modernization.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

CONFUCIAN TRADITION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CONFLICT TODAY

By 1976, Korean had been opened to the modern world for one hundred years. The year 1984 marked the centennial of the Korean Protestant missionary movement. At this point in the life of Korean society, one wonders if the outlook of the Korean people has not been influenced more deeply by Christianity and by Western ideologies such as scientific rationalism, democratic liberalism, and Marxism-Leninism. While we are impressed by the fact that the Confucian tradition and other strands in Korean tradition still have a tenacious hold on the people, we also recognize that Korea can never return to [page 53] its past. In the process of forming its own modern (civil or democratic) culture, while maintaining the values of the past, Korea is most likely to make a syncretistic adaptation of one kind or other.

From a comparative historical perspective one might question why China, Japan, and Korea, whose cultural and religious traditions have so much in common, showed such great differences in the process of modernizing changes. Korea passed through the general stages of rejection, selective accommodation, and search for integration, which most non-Western societies experienced upon contact with the modern world. What is striking is that Korea was the last of the East Asian countries to enter the modern world because it stubbornly clung to the myth of the superiority of the Confucian tradition for a longer period of time than either China or Japan. One may notice that even today that flag of Korea is represented by the symbols of Neo-Confucian cosmology.

Surprisingly alive, even today, is the idea that adaptive means of economy, science, and technology may, be borrowed from the West but that Western social,political, and cultural ideas should be adopted with scrutiny. Selective borrowing of cultural elements, however, involves many complicated philosophical and practical problems, and the Korean search for a synthesis of the old and new will not doubt continue.

Korea today is faced with the urgent problem of reorienting its concepts of man, society, and the world. What are some of the more outstanding areas of conflict between Confucian tradition and modern values? Democratic populism, now in style in Korea under the slogan of pot’ong saram (average or common people), is in conflict with the strong remnants of yangban elitism and authoritarianism. The principles of reciprocity and harmonious human relations, prescribed by Confucian tradition, are not congruous with the modern social processes characterized by endless competition, maneuvering, bargaining, and conflict. The modern universal values of equality and freedom are not compatible with inherited hierarchical expectations in human relations or the pattern of relations based on the particularistic ties of school, regional origin, and blood lineage. The problem of leaving home rather than staying home faced by adolescents today, equal rights for women and the young, women’s right to education and career, the rise of the nuclear family with all its social implications — these are only some of the more salient problems that come to mind as we reflect on the meaning of Confucian tradition for Korea today.55

[page 54]

**NOTES**

1. From Thrasyleon. Fragment, quoted in Familiar Quotations by John Bartlett, 13th & centenial ed. (boston, Toronto: Little Brown & ca, 1955), p. 27b.

2. Herbert Fingarette, Confucius-The Secular as Sacred (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 19.

3. Ibid. H.G. Creel points out that Tao is used most frequently in the Analects to mean “‘the way’ above all other ways.” See his Confucius and the Chinese Way (New York: Harper & Row, 1949), pp. 122-123.

4. Benjamin Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China (Cambridge, Mass. & London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 56-57; see also Creel, Confucius and the Chinese Way, p. 144.

5. Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China, pp. 67-68.

6. According to Max Weber, Confucianism is rationalist because it is marked by “the absence of all metaphysics and almost all residues of religious anchorage.” However, Weber spoke of Confucianism, not of Confucius. See From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, trans, and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New ork: Oxford University Press, 1946, 1958), p. 293. It seems that Confucius himself did “retain, in the idea of Heaven, a sense of an impersonal ethical Providence.” He seems also to have had “a sense of an ideal cosmic harmony.” See Creel, Confucius and the Chinese Way, p. 120, and also pp. 113-120.

7. See Fox Butterfield, China: Alive in the Bitter Sea (New York: Times Books, 1982), pp. 52-62.

8. Arthur Waley, The Analects of Confucius (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1938), bk. 3, chap. 19, p. 99. Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China, pp. 70-71.

9. Creel, Confucius and the Chinese Way, p. 123.

10. Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China, pp. 69-70. The idea of the state viewed as a large family is clearly pointed out in Vitaly A. Rubin Individual and State in Ancient China, trans. Steven L. Levine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 16-19.

11. Fingarette, Confucius, p. 6.

12. Ibid., p. 7.

13. Ibid., p. 11.

14. Walley, Analects, bk. 4, chap. 13, p. 104.

15. Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China, p. 73.

16. Fingarette, Confucius, p. 17.

17. Ibid., p. 56.

18. Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China, pp. 75-76, 77.

19. Waley, Analects, bk. 12, chap. 1, p. 162.

20. Fingarette, Confucius, p. 42.

21. Ibid.

22. Lin Ytang, The Wisdom of Confucius (New York: Random House, 1938, 1943), p. 17.

23. Waley, Analects, bk. 1, chap. 15, p. 87.

24. Fingarette, Confucius, p. 76.

25. Ibid., p. 77.

26. Ibid., p. 79.

27. Ibid., p. 27.

28. Waley, Analects, bk. 2, chap. 3, p. 88.  [page 55]

29. Fingarette, Confucius, pp. 28-36.

30. Materials to summarize the development of Chinese thought are many, but for a concise overview, see H.G. Creel, Chinese Thought from Confucius Mao Tse-tung (New York: Mentor Books, 1953).

31. See Chai-sik Chung, “Korea: the Continuing Syncretism,” in Religion and Societies in Asia and the Middle East, ed. C. Caldarola (Berlin, New York, Amsterdam, 1982), pp. 607-628.

32. Koryosa [History of Koryo] (reprint ed., Seoul: Yonse Taehakkyo tongbang yon’guso, 1955), 93:19a.

33. For general survey of the development of Confucianism in Korea, see the following: Hyon Sang-yun, Choson Yuhak-sa [A study of Korean Confucianism] (Seoul: Minjung sogwan, 1949); Yi Pyong-do, “Charyo Han’guk Yuhak sa ch’ogo” [A draft history of Confucianism in Korea], mimeographed in 3 pts. (Seoul: Soul taehakkyo, 1959; and also his more up-to-date work based on the abovementioned work, Han’guk Yuhak-sa [A study of Korean Confucianism] (Seoul: Asea Munhwasa, 1987).

34. Wm. Theodore de Bary, Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind and Heart (New York: Columbia University, 1981), pp. 1-66, 68-69.

35. For the introduction of Neo-Confucianism and its ensuing adaptation to orea, see the standard work, The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). For the changeover to Neo-Confucianism and the Confucian state in the early Choson dynasty, See Chai-sik Chung, “Chong Tojon: ‘Architect’ of Yi Dynasty Government and Ideology,” in Ibid., pp. 59-88.

36. See Martina Deuchler, “Neo-Confucianism in Action: Agnation and Ancestor Worship in Early Yi Korea,” Religion and Ritual in Korean Society, Korea Research Monograph (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1987), 26-55.

37. This point is well put in Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Sten M. Tipton, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 56-58.

38. See Chai-sik Chung, “Chong Tojon: ‘Architect,of Yi Dynasty Government and Ideology,” pp. 79-80.

39. For example, see the famous rites dispute of 1674 between Song Si-yol and Yun Hyu and how serious they were about Chu Hsi’s Family Ritual in Miura Kunio, “Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Seventeenth-century Korea: Song Si-yol and Yun Hyu,” The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea, ed. de Bary and Haboush, pp. 419-420, 434-436.

40. Weber, The Religion of China, pp. 142-143, 152-153, 235.

41. Waley, Analects, bk. 7, chap. 20, p. 127.

42. Max Weber, The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism, trans, ed. Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe, 111.: Free Press, 1951), p. 203.

43. Han Woo-keun (U-gun), “Choson wangjo ch’ogi e issoso ui Yugyo inyom ui silch’on kwa sinang chonggyo” [The practice of Confucian ideals and the traditional beliefs and religions in the early Yi dynasty], Han’guk saron 3 August 1976): 147-228; see also Han Woo-keun (U-gun), “Sejong cho e issoso ui tae Pulgyo sich’aek” [The policy toward Buddnism during the reign of King Sejong] in Chindan hakpo. 25, no. 6 & 7 combined edition (December 1964): 67-153.

44. Chai-sik Chung, “Christianity as Heterodoxy: An Aspect of General CultuOrientation in Traditional Korea: in Korea’s Response to the West,” ed. Yung-Hwan Jo (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Korea Research and Publications, 1971), pp. 57-86. [page 56]

45. Chai-sik Chung, “In Defense of the Traditional Order: Ch’oksa wijong,” Philosophy East and West 30, no. 3 (July 1980): 355-373.

46. See the remarks about the ideological condition in Korea by Pak Che-ga (1750-?) in his Chong’yu chip, pu Pukhak ui [Collected works of Pak Che-ga with Discourse on Northern Learning], (Han’guk saryo ch’ongso, no. 12) (Seoul Kuksa p’yonch’an wiwonhoe, 1961), pp. 437-438.

47. Miura, “Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Seventeenth-Century Korea,” pp. 411-443.

48. For the purges, see Edward Willett Wagner, The Literati Purges: Political Conflict in Yi Korea (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974). Yi I’s reflections on the aftermath of the purges of 1519 and 1945 in his memorial of 1574 in Yulgok chonso [Collected wotks] (Seoul: Songgyun,gwan taehakkyo, 1958), 1:97b. See also 1:60b, 88ab, 320a.

49. Abe Yoshio, Ri Tai-kei (Tokyo: Bunkyo shoin, 1944), pp. 45-49.

50. Chai-sik Chung, “The Rise of Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Problem of Con-formism in Korea,” in Korean Social Science Journal 22 (1985): 7-25.

51. In comparison to Japanese Confucianism, according to Takahashi Toru, Chu Hsi-dominated Confucianism in Korea is characterized by its “very religious” orientation. See his “Chosen ni okeru jukyo” [Confucianism in Korea], Shibun [Confucianism] 5, no. 2 (April 1923): 9-19; see also Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956),2:455-495. For the characteristics of the School of Principle, see abe Yoshio, Nihon Shushigaku to Chosen [Japan’s Chu Hsi schooKorea] (Tokyo: Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, 1965). pp. 528-534; Inoue Tetsujiro, Nihon Shushigaku ha no tetsugaku [Philosophy of the Chu Hsi School in Japan] (Tokyo: Fuzanbo, 1933),pp. 410-436, 449-456.

52. Wm. Theodore de Bary, “Sagehood as a Secular and Spiritual Ideal in Tokygawa Neo- Confucianism,” in Principle and Practicality: Essays in Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learning, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University, 1979), pp. 130-133.

53. Yi Hwang, Toegye chonso [Complete works], 2 vols. (Seoul: Songgyun’gwan taehakkyo, 1958), l:195a-211a, 354a, 2:644a, 816a-818b, 868a.

54. Yamaga Soko (1622-1685), a Japanese Neo-Confucian, turned against his early education in the Ch’eng-Chu School, which appeared to him too grave, silent, closed, and shallow. He found the practice of quiet-sitting to maintain reverence (jikei, in Chinese ch’ih-ching) too constraining, while he found Taoism and Buddhism much more liberating. Likewise, Ito Jinsai (1627-1705), a younger contemporary of Yamaga Soko, characterized the “reverence” or seriousness of the Ch’eng-Chu school as deadening and a “fretful prudery.” See their critiques of “reverence” quoted in Sagara Toru, Kinsei no Jukyo shiso [Premodern Confucian thought] (Tokyo: Hanawa shobo, 1966), pp. 91, 92, and also 73-84, 95. Their critiques may have relevance to understand some pitfalls of the Neo-Confucian attitude. See also de Bary, “Sagehood as a Secular and Spiritual Ideal in Tokugawa Neo-Confucianism,” pp. 139-146, 146-154.

55. Chai-sik Chung, “Confucian Tradition and Values: Implications for Conflict in Modern Korea,” in Religions in Korea: Beliefs and Cultural Values, ed. Earl H. Phillips and Eui-yung Yu (Los Angeles: Center for Korean-American and Korean Studies, California State University, Los Angeles, 1982), pp. 99-116.