

REFORM OF CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATION SYSTEM AND NEO-CONFUCIANISM IN THE 14TH CENTURY KOREA: AN EAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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I

Besides reference to the Chinese origin, generally most of researches on the civil service examination system in Korea are conducted within the perspective of national history. But it often neglects the changes caused by international transactional factors. The Perspective of international history or comparative history could make up such defects.

Fortunately the civil service examination system is a common cultural experience among three East Asian people: the Chinese, Koreans and Vietnamese. The Chinese firstly invented the system in 606 C.E. and abolished it in 1905. The Koreans adopted it in 958, and gave it up officially in 1894. The Vietnamese adoption was made in 1075, abolition in 1919. The duration of that institutional system is 13 centuries in China, 9.4 centuries in Korea, 8.4 centuries in Vietnam. The system enjoyed quite a long lasting period in each country, which implicates wide and deep influence on social life and people's consciousness.

In this paper, I am going to deal with the impact of the institutional reform of the examination system upon the reception of a new thought, namely Neo-Confucianism. The contents of civil examinations reflected the common notion of cultural at that time. There were two main subjects: poetry & prose composition and Confucian Classics. If a new trend of thoughts arises and the

cultural notions change, it would be very likely to bring about controversies and relevant reforms. Actually there were controversies and reforms about the contents of civil service examinations in accordance with the rise and spread of Neo-Confucianism during Sung and Yuan dynasties in China. And similar phenomena also occurred in the Koryo dynasty during the 14th century. This paper tries to reveal one aspect of the institutional impact upon the reception of Neo-Confucianism, which has been neglected due to the dominant perspective of national history in the field of Korean Studies.

II

Since the peace treaty with Mongols in 1259, the Koryo dynasty maintained closer relationships with China than ever in history, and came in contact with Neo-Confucianism in various ways. Traditionally there were two theories about the channel of introduction of Neo-Confucianism. One theory considers An Hyang as the initiator of this new thought. The other theory regards Baek I- Jung as the forerunner. Prof. Lee Sung-Moo criticized both theories in that they stuck to a narrow view focusing only upon the individual role and his achievements as the major cause of the reception of Neo-Confucianism.¹ Lee stressed the socio-political demand that the Koryo dynasty confronted in that period. He pointed out the counter-ideological characteristics of Neo-Confucianism as functioning to enable the New Literati Class to oppose and defeat the vested interest groups (Powerful Families, Buddhist Monks).

I think the spread of imported ideology operates differently from the circulation of imported goods in that the former needs some time and process for assimilation and accommodation to a new situation. If this is right, Prof. Lee's explanation points to the internal condition of Koryo society, which had allowed rapid

¹ Lee Sung-Moo, "Influences of Neo-Confucianism on the 14th-15th Century Education and Civil Service Examination in Korea", *Hankook Sahak* (published in Korean) Vol. 4 (Sungnam: Kyonggi-do), 1983, pp.362-364.

dissemination of Neo-Confucianism among literati class. So there still remains the possibility of more extended perspective.

For a possible explanation within such an extended perspective, I propose to explore the institutional aspect in the process of the reception of Neo-Confucianism. The Yuan empire established a liaison organ, the Eastern Expedition Field Headquarters(Chong Dong Haeng Song) on the Korean peninsula to subjugate Japan in 1280. Although the Koryo royal house maintained to the end its position as sovereign ruler of an independent nation, Chong Dong Haeng Song persisted until the end of Yuan dynasty. This meant Koryo dynasty had been under direct Yuan dominion, though in name only. Under this circumstance, Koryo had to act in concert with Yuan's administrative decree.

More specifically, Yuan dynasty restored the civil service examination system in 1313 by Examination Decree, and elected 56 applicants in 1315. According to Decree, Koryo was supposed to send 3 applicants after its own local competitive contest. Having renamed its own Jesool-up² as Unggeo-si(Applying Examination), Koryo had sent successful candidates 9 times. Eighteen candidates in total went to China, but only half of them were successful in the final exam.

Park In-gan, the first candidates sent to China in 1315, was the top of the list. Other two candidates were very likely to be the second and *the* third from the top of the list. But they all failed the examination in China, and the successfulness of Koryo candidates was relatively low until 1333, when Yi Gok passed the exam with the high ranks. Why were they unsuccessful? Because there were

² The Koryo Dynasty had three categories of examination: Jesool-up, Myonggyong-up and Jap-up. Jesool-up was an examination which tested mainly the literary ability of poetry and prose composition. Myonggyong-up tested the understanding and memory about Five Confucian Classics. Jap-up tested the knowledge and skills of miscellaneous crafts regarded as useful by the state at that time. Because the ruling class youngsters generally applied to Jesool-up or Myonggyong-up, they were called as "Two Big Exams". But Jesool-up had enjoyed much higher reputation than Myonggyong-up. There was also an exam called Gookjagam-si whose function is to encourage young scholars, not to confer government office.

great differences in the subjects of exam between Koryo and Yuan as follows:

	Koryo	Yuan
1 st contest	Discourse or Policies	2 Arguments(Four Books) 1 Interpretation (Five Classics)
2 nd contest	1 Interpretation (<i>Records of Rites</i>)	Archaic Style Prosaic Poem or Royal Edict oAppointment or Diplomatic Composition
3 rd contest	Poem and Prosaic Poem	Policies

Two differences are salient at first sight. One is that “Poem and Prosaic Poem” was the most important subject in Koryo, but only “Archaic Style Prosaic Poem” survived without “Poem” in Yuan. The other is that the portion of Confucian Classics got much more weight in Yuan. The Confucian Classics itself extended from Five Classics to Four Books and Five Classics. The subjects of Yuan examinations reflected Neo-Confucian view of culture.

Now Koryo had to adjust the exam subjects to Yuan system. Otherwise, they must have endured continual failure, as far as Yuan Empire persisted. Bureaucrats of Koryo initially renamed final exam of Jesool-up from Yebu-si to Unggeo-si in 1315, which did not work. Then they exchanged “Poem and Prosaic Poem” with “Policies”, which still turned out to be a partial and insufficient reform. Finally they restructured the whole examination system as identically as Yuan’s in 1344.

III

Since the Silla unification in 668, Korea accepted the China-centered *Chaekbong* system. Under this system, the China occupies the imperial status of “Heavenly Son’s State”, and surrounding states become invested “Prince States”. Small prince states should serve the great China, while having intercourse with the neighboring prince states on the equal basis. In the case of Korea,

sadae diplomacy had been regarded much more important than *gyorin* diplomacy for the national security. This long-standing *sadae* diplomacy also has nurtured Sinophile trend culturally. As a result, Koreans had a pride as a “small but highly cultured country”, and looked down upon surrounding nomadic tribes culturally, even though they are much stronger and dominant militarily and politically. Yuan dynasty of Mongols and Qing dynasty of Manchurians were the typical cases.

Nevertheless Yuan empire tried to interfere with internal politics and to intensify direct control on the Korean peninsula more than any other Chinese regime. For 80years since 1274, a succession of Koryo kings was required to take princess of the Yuan imperial house as primary consorts, while sons born to these queens normally would succeed to the Koryo throne. Koryo thus became a “son-in-law nation” to Yuan. Yuan maintained Chong Dong Haeng Song after they gave up the subjugation of Japan. After all, sizable portions of Koryo territory were, in fact, placed under direct Yuan dominion. While the bulk of these areas reverted before long to Koryo control, the Yuan Ssangsong Commandery that ruled over all the north-eastern quadrant of the peninsula continued in existence until recovery by force of arms in 1356.

The reception of Neo-Confucianism in Koryo proceeded in such a period with high degrees of interference and control by Yuan. If we read the biographies of pioneers like Baek I-jung, An Hyang, Yi Saek, Chong Mong-ju, we could easily find that they were all attracted by Neo-Confucian teachings and doctrines. As such, Neo-Confucianism was a new thought with powerful appeal to the intellectuals of the day. But that does not mean that the reception of Neo-Confucianism had been accomplished without any institutional assistance. The first assistance was the introduction of new subjects in the civil service examination system (Arguments within Four Books & Interpretation within Five Classics). It was an “unavoidable reform” owing to the *sadae* relation with Yuan dynasty.

