

Zhou of the East



*"In what respect were these great men?
Have you never studied the rites?"*

— Mencius¹



In the insular world of 14th century Korean politics, it is intriguing that many of the once-dismissed government officials of late-Goryeo reappeared during King Taejo's time—released from incarceration, brought back from exile, restored to good name. Relatives of old malefactors like Yi In-im and Woo Hyun-bo found their way into high government position in little time.² The return of the exiles suggests that Taejo's revolution was nothing more than a small-scale political event—the emergence of a new cohort of political elites associated with Yi Seong-gye who claimed a bit of power to share with old Goryeo elites, but without broader social or ideological meaning.³

This would be a mistaken assessment. We have already detailed how land, tax, and other social reforms improved the quality of life for thousands in Joseon, helping win popular support and securing the financial health of state. But it was not these social reforms that most defined the Taejo revolution, most animated the moral vision of the *sadaebu* or most bound the Joseon reformers one to another—no, that glue of state was the righteous ideological foment of the scholastic Confucians. Undergirding the new order, providing the animating spirit of the Taejo revolution, was the notion of Joseon as a new moral polity—in accord with Confucian precepts of righteous behavior.

The heart of Taejo's revolution was that the *sadaebu*—those philosopher-kings of Joseon—now sat at the right hand of state. For these idealistic scholars, Goryeo was in social and

political crisis, and Confucianism had an answer. Widespread corruption among the aristocratic class was well known. Repeated famines, droughts and invasions had rocked the country. Recent Goryeo kings had proven themselves ineffective rulers and disinterested in national welfare. Amid late-Goryeo's social and political collapse, scholars of the Confucian academy found themselves in possession of dangerous new ideas, built around the notion of leading a life of perfect virtue, following the "Four Beginnings" of Mencius: commiseration, righteousness, propriety and wisdom.⁴

Living and studying together for endless hours at the Academy, scholars constantly absorbed the Confucian classics, and a new world of virtuous politics took shape in their imaginations. Amid the moral crud of late-Goryeo, we find constant reference to how scholars believed Confucian thinking and social reform could save the nation. These were not just dead letters on the ancient scrolls of Mencius laid out before the scholars at Sungkyunkwan. Rather, these venerable Confucian precepts illuminated an intellectual adventure and pointed to political action. They were the map to a new world.⁵

Records from the *Sinjung Tongguk Yoji Sungham*^{*} describe the intense environment of the Confucian Academy during these days, where a radical force of intellectual transformation brewed. Every daybreak, the drums would beat and the scholars would begin their long lectures and discussions. "For days and months, they work and rest together as one body to train themselves until they become new men. It is from these students that the future loyal ministers and the future filial sons are produced in prolific number to serve the state and their families. Never before in our country's history have we seen such knowledge and filial piety."⁶

It was all a bit grandiose and romantic, this high philosophizing at the Academy, but none of these radical ideas had much hope of actually changing the course of society until the coming of Yi Seong-gye to power. Yi embraced the moment, and an alliance of his military forces with the *sadaebu*

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philosopher-kings was born. Once on the throne, King Taejo elevated many scholars to the status of “merit subjects,” joining his military associates and members of his ancestral Jeonju Yi clan in that recognition.⁷ These earnest scholars had received a rigorous Confucian education and came into their status as a recognized *yangban* by passing the top civil service or military exams, not simply due to privileged family background.⁸

These “great priests of the soul”⁹ were characterized by sincerity, self-denial, and absolute dedication to the Confucian precepts. They worked diligently to lay down a neo-Confucian moral and intellectual basis to all of political and social life.¹⁰ Because this rising class of scholar-officials sat at the very highest levels of government under King Taejo, Confucianism became the state religion of Joseon Korean—more so than in any other Asian country.

Among the Confucian *sadaebu*, none were more influential Jeong Do-jeon, Taejo’s Chief State Councilor and principal architect behind the ideological, legal, and socio-economic framework that would shape Joseon for centuries. “The master’s virtue and righteousness are exceedingly lofty,” fellow scholar Gwon Geun said of Jeong Do-jeon. “His scholarship is most profound.”¹¹ This well-regarded Jeong Do-jeon was extremely close to King Taejo, so when the new King set out to create a new nation, he put the scholars in charge of much of it. Jeong was given the highest authority over both civilian and military affairs, and was entrusted to reform the nation’s land laws, tax system, legal codes, and political institutions, all in accordance with Confucian theories of a virtuous new nation.

Jeong Do-jeon was a strong advocate of social changes like land reform and tax equity, but even more than specific policy reforms, he believed people needed soul-felt hope that the new era was righteous and had the Mandate of Heaven. After the rot of Goryeo, Joseon needed to be a nation people could put their faith in, a nation of rectitude. In this great task, Jeong Do-jeon pointed King Taejo towards the example of the Zhou dynasty of ancient China, which “had claimed the Mandate of Heaven from the decaying Shang,” and built itself on Confucian foundations. Joseon could also be “modeled on the glorious age

of Zhou," Jeong dreamed,¹² becoming a smaller efflorescence to mirror the "Central Efflorescence" of Chinese Confucianism.¹³ With the coming of King Taejo, Jeong Do-jeon believed it possible "to transform the state into Zhou itself in the East." Joseon would become a perfectly righteous country, "more than Confucius would have dreamed of."¹⁴

In accordance with this thinking, just days after deposing Gongyang and assuming the throne, King Taejo received a report from the Office of the Inspector General. A lasting kingdom will only succeed with proper behavior, these prestigious advisors argued. Confucian reverence must begin now, with your very first royal decrees.

Oh, how can he be other than reverent? So-called reverence is central to the mind, serving as the foundation of all things. Therefore, one needs it all the time, whether one worships and performs the sacrifices to the Lord on High, which is a great priority, or one follows a daily routine such as rising, sleeping, eating, and resting, which is of relatively less priority...If you look back on history, suppression and rebellion and the rise and fall [of states] are all related to that. The so-called "reverence" alone is the beginning of the king's good reign. Now is the start of your reign, when Your Majesty has risen to the throne. Establishing a sound government and leaving a good legacy for posterity depend on this day, and the blessings and curses on your dynasty, as well as the duration of your kingdom ordained by Heaven, also depend on this day.¹⁵

The Inspectors General than offered a long list of Confucian precepts and policy recommendations to the new king. After laying out each principle, the inspectors offered detailed reasoning to support their points. Their lengthy analysis meant the session with Taejo must have lasted a good while—the affair fills several pages of the official records. Here, just a

list of the principles themselves—without the scholars' additional exegesis—will suffice to demonstrate their thrust.

“First is to establish order and discipline,” including establishing clear expectations of good order and behavior by all officials.

“Second is to clearly distinguish between rewards and punishments,” and not “to deliver either frivolously or as a favor.”

“Third is to keep good people close by and distance oneself from petty people.”

“Fourth is to accept remonstrances from your subjects,” for a good ruler must be able to hear criticisms.

“Fifth is to prevent slander.”

“Sixth is to watch out for indolence and greed.”

“Seventh is to respect frugality and simplicity.”

“Eighth is to keep away from Eunuchs”—they are well trained and intelligent, but often the source of court intrigue.

“Ninth is to eliminate Buddhist priests and nuns,” who have become corrupted and indolent while living in luxurious temples.

“Tenth is to tighten access to the royal palace,” and don't let every friend, family member, or supplicant visit you at will.

The King listened carefully to the lengthy arguments in favor of each principle. At the end of it all, King Taejo offered a simple response that must have pleased his Inspectors. “Rejecting eunuchs and eliminating Buddhist priests and nuns cannot be done immediately because we are in the early stages of the new dynasty. As for the remaining proposals, however, I will have them all implemented.”¹⁶

Continuing from these very first days of Taejo's reign, the moral and intellectual aspirations of Joseon's "great priests of soul" were evident throughout Taejo's rule. In Confucian thinking, the scholar official played a key role in society and state, serving as the "morally superior man" who guided both commoners and the sovereign through his deep knowledge. Jeong Do-jeon described this virtuous gentleman as "a man who had the capacity to store morality (*todok*) and apply it to government—a versatile man who delved into the natural sciences, morality, history, philosophy, education, and literature. He was a scholar as well as a bureaucrat—a man who edified the people at the same time advised his sovereign."¹⁷

Seeking out such philosophers of state, King Taejo's first coronation edict lamented that scholastic achievement had deteriorated among civil service officials of Goryeo and ordered that future civil service exams to be more rigorous in testing for mastery of the Confucian classics.¹⁸ In late Goryeo, the "protection privilege" known as "*eum*" had become increasingly prominent. This was the right of powerful families to place their members into government service without taking qualifying exams. The expansion of this *eum* privilege had allowed a few powerful families to dominate government service and produce all the top officials, no matter how inept.¹⁹

That all changed with the coming of King Taejo. The protection privileges were dramatically scaled back so that a meritorious examination system became the main route into government office during Taejo's rule.²⁰ Furthermore, the provincial hereditary aristocrats of the Goryeo era (the *hyangni*) became restricted by the new exam procedures which favored educated elites living in the capital region, who had attended the central Confucian academy, and who could most easily attend exams in the capital city, sometimes scheduled on short notice.²¹ In fact, the previous system of allowing private provincial schools to administer Civil Service Exams was abolished altogether in 1392, in favor of a focus on the national Confucian Academy of Sungkyunkwan.²²

Though these changes undermined provincial academic cliques of locally based masters and disciples and challenged the ability of Goryeo's old provincial elites to claim government position as a right, King Taejo's reformers didn't

mean to wholly upend the social structure, and the exam process was in no way a social levelling mechanism. In fact, almost all the scholars who took the exams came from elite families, as advanced study was expensive. Furthermore, applicants to take the national civil service exam had to submit a rather unblemished list of personal information on four generations of his ancestors and a character reference from an existing bureaucrat of at least mid-rank.²³

As a result, the most accomplished Confucian *sadaebu* were still mostly well-born descendants of recognized clans. These dynamics maintained the foundations of Korea's social hierarchy, but with new rules requiring advanced exams for the top government positions, it became more likely that only the more studious and highly achieved members of these advantaged families would now rise in government.²⁴ Other members of the elite *yangban* class who did not pass the Erudite Exams were distinguished from these prestigious *sadaebu* by being called "*baekdu*," referring to the fact that they were not allowed to wear a scholar's headpiece.²⁵ What distinguished the *sadaebu* (scholar-officials) as a class unto themselves, therefore, was not their patrician background, but their commitment to study, their embrace of classic Confucianism, and their dedication to moral probity and (limited) social reform.

These dynamics maintained the foundations of Korea's strict social hierarchy, but with new rules requiring exams for most government positions, it became more likely that only the more studious and highly achieved members of these advantaged families would now rise in government.²⁶ Civil service exams became a more dominant route into high government office than before Taejo's coup, and examination dates became an increasingly feted moment to honor Joseon's Confucian foundations. In addition to the regular exam dates, early Joseon's leaders began to schedule an ever-growing number of "special exams" offered to a growing circle of eligible candidates, providing an exhortation to learning as the core of Joseon's worldview.²⁷ These civil service exams were rigorous. Schools across the country were expanded to focus on the technical skills (e.g., math and writing) and literary knowledge required for these exams.²⁸ There were "miscel-

laneous exams” on technical subjects like math, language, art and medicine (appropriate to lower level officers such as interpreters or doctors) and “Erudite Examinations” on literature and the Confucian classics (required for higher level government appointments, such as to the Ministry or Rites or Office of Remonstrance).²⁹ The Erudite Exam included a requirement to compose prose and poetry, a highly regarded skill for government literati. Only students who studied in the Sungkyunkwan national academy were allowed to take this literary exam.

Exams occurred in stages (local, national, and a final exam judged by the King himself). Exam candidates would gather in the dim, early morning and sit before a raised stage of ominous empty seats. “Just before sunrise, the examination officers appear on the stage and take seats under torchlight. Their august appearances resemble those of immortals.”³⁰ At sunrise, the heavy drums would beat, the exam questions were posted, and the exam began. Students would write until sunset, when the drums beat again. Exam answers were then gathered and rewritten in red ink to disguise the handwriting of candidates, and the anonymized answers were scrutinized by reviewers. The most successful candidates moved forward to the oral exam stage. If they succeeded again, they received appointments to government offices and palace positions. They had become a member of Joseon’s elite *sadaebu* society. Home villages were so proud of such an achievement that gates of honor, extolling the virtues of successful exam candidates, were often erected at the village entrance.³¹

The scholar-officials produced through this process took their social role seriously, and carefully supervised Joseon’s adherence to Confucian norms and rituals. Joseon’s Confucians were deeply moralist, believing in self-cultivation through a rationalist approach to life, respect for the wisdom of the ages, and reading of the classic texts.³² They also believed that building a society based on Confucian concepts of *Yen* (benevolence towards others), *Li* (proper behavior in key relations, such as child to parent) and *Chih* (moral wisdom) depended on the ritual hegemony of a new Confucian order. People had to be educated and bolstered in their virtuous

commitments and behaviors by constant ritualized behavior in all affairs, grand and small.³³

Confucian cosmology posited a natural order to both the cosmos and human affairs, whereby each person had their particular station in life (e.g., King, virtuous advisor, commoner, slave, father, son, husband or wife), and a particular set of behaviors appropriate to that station. To properly express natural hierarchies and stations in life, Taejo's philosopher kings constantly moralized about such things as proper ritual behavior, how best to venerate one's ancestors, the need to discipline street performers, and the dangers of indolent monks. These zealous reformers regulated what kind of clothes every person could wear, based on their class. Joseon residents were criticized for using "diverse, colorful silks and dyes of various colors" without concern for status, which created a confusing situation on the streets. Commoners would sometimes wear gold and silver decorations, the Confucians critiqued, further complicating things. In 1394, new codes prohibited colorful clothes and jewelry for most Joseon residents, since such garb violated the natural social order. Reinforcing a Confucian aesthetic, only government ministers or royals were allowed to wear such finery or bright, pure colors—at least in the capital city.³⁴

In related rules, lower rank residents were prohibited from wearing hat strings decorated with jade or gold, or any fur at all. Woodcutters and enslaved persons were prohibited from riding horses or cattle in the streets of major cities, due to their low social status.³⁵ Colorful paints were prohibited on most non-governmental buildings. A typical appeal to Confucian austerity came to King Taejo's attention in June of 1394: "Oranges and other rare fruits, brocade flowers and phoenixes, gold and silver spoons, and colorful floral decorations should also be banished, except when entertaining Chinese envoys." The king agreed and made it so.³⁶

To replace licentious disorder, Taejo's *sadaebu* promoted adherence to somber ritualized behavior in all matters. *The Book of Rites* (one of the classics of the Confucian canon, dating to China's Zhou dynasty) instructed that "to show feelings immediately and express them quickly is the way of the barbarians...To control expression of feelings suitably is

indeed what is called a rite.”³⁷ To that end, instructions in orthodox Confucian rites were distributed to scholars across the Korean peninsula, who were expected to promulgate these rites in their region. Proscribed rituals governed communication with the gods (e.g., how to pray for good weather), grand state affairs (e.g., naming crown princes or receiving envoys), special events (e.g., weddings, coming of age ceremonies) and all of daily life (e.g., how to properly drink among friends, how to speak to one’s spouse, how to install an ancestral shrine in one’s home).³⁸ King Taejo announced strict mourning rituals governing the hemp clothes people should wear while mourning and how the hemp girdle “should be worn loosely, so that it can hang down the backside.” Also, the King proclaimed that during mourning “for thirteen days, music cannot be played; for three days, slaughtering is prohibited; for one month, no weddings can take place, and for thirteen days, no ancestral rites.”³⁹ King Taejo even ordered his officials to gather together and frequently practice “the rite of the profound bow to one another,” so that officials could perfect this daily Confucian ritual.⁴⁰

Such all-encompassing rites make people more virtuous, the Confucians believed. Humanity is weak and prone to error—but the rituals of propriety can keep people straight and true. Rites are more than just empty formalisms—they are guideposts on the path to one’s ethical and orderly humanity in all aspects of one’s life. Proper rituals bring the passions under control and “made the people’s minds firm and receptive to order.”⁴¹ As Seong Hyeon articulated in the *Heobaek-tong chip*, (“*The Fundamental Role of Rights*”): “Rites must be cultivated...If a man lies idly and does not have instruction, he is insolent and disorderly and differs but slightly from wild animals.”⁴²

Accordingly, Taejo’s very first royal order critiqued Goryeo’s less strict adherence to Confucian rites and ordered his new Board of Rites to “look closely into this matter and make more appropriate regulations.”⁴³ To maintain proper ritual observance, Taejo’s scholars kept meticulous records of the exact process to be followed in every important state event (e.g., royal weddings, greeting of envoys, holiday feasts and royal funerals), so as to inform future events. These records

are known as *Euigwe*, and there were thousands of them, providing an exact record of the types of foods, table settings, musical stylings, decorations, color patterns, types of incense, and all the other details that were present in every state ritual through all of the Joseon dynasty.⁴⁴

To guide the unruly passions of commoners, there were also rituals for everyday aspects of life: archery contests, drinking and eating, commoner marriages, greeting friends, and school behavior. "To keep the people from becoming disorderly," schools were established across the peninsula with instruction on ritual propriety. Locals were required "to discuss their lessons with one another, in order to stimulate those who were dull or inattentive."⁴⁵

Even the Chinese royalty were impressed with the strictness of Joseon's adoption of ritualized Confucianism, commonly regarding "the Korean adherents as more virtuous than themselves and refer[ing] to Korea as the country of Eastern decorum, referring to the punctiliousness with which Korean observed all phases of the doctrinal ritual."⁴⁶ Looking back, the late-Joseon era scholar Ou-yang Hsiu described the elegance of it all. "This is what I mean by saying that there was but one principle of government, so that rites and music reached everywhere... Ah! How perfect it was!"⁴⁷

Proper rites were important to guide peoples' minds and prepare everyone for virtue and order, but in the end, Joseon's virtue had to flow from the King.⁴⁸ Jeong Do-jeon argued that just as Heaven is "the ancestor of the ten thousand things," so too is the King the "head of the 10,000 states." Only the virtue of the King can bring the "10,000 things" of the world under control.⁴⁹ To achieve such virtuous control, the ruler must behave in such an exemplary way that subjects are in awe of his rectitude and virtue, and adopt it as their own: the King must exert an "irresistible civilizing influence on his subjects."⁵⁰ One Taejo-era *sadaebu* (Pyeon Kye-ryang) described how "it was ruler's all-embracing benevolence that united heaven, earth and the ten thousand things that could bring everything with the radius of his civilizing influence."⁵¹

Committed to these Confucian expectations, King Taejo established a system of regular Royal Lectures so that he could hear daily disquisitions on Confucian virtues. As described in

Jeong Do-jeon's Code of 1394, these lectures were modeled on ancient Chinese practices. "His majesty employed Royal Lecturers for the first time and had them act as advisors. [His majesty] always said 'The Great Learning is for the ruler to establish a standard for the ages...' There is nothing better than this for the order of governing and the foundation of scholarship for the sovereign."⁵²

But the regimen of daily lectures was quite demanding. The King grew busy and weary, and sometimes would miss his daily discourses. The *sadaebu* were merciless and urged the king to get back on track and show up for his lessons each day.

"But my beard and whiskers already became white," King Taejo grouched. "Should I need to attend a lecture, gathering Confucian scholars?"

"Yes," said his advisors, "you must attend daily." The Chief Royal Secretary replied that the lecturers were important not only to study the classics, but as a chance for Taejo to meet daily with the scholars. You should "keep men of integrity close so that you can benefit from their good counsel."⁵³

King Taejo explained that he already *did* visit with scholars quite often, often walking privately in his garden with them and talking about Confucius. Did he really need to attend lectures *every day* as well? Yes, said the *sadaebu*, you do.

In our humble opinion...the reason he attends the royal lectures every day and asks questions is, first, to cultivate his virtue by meeting with good officials; second, not to be neglectful of his duties by reducing the time spent with eunuchs and royal concubines. Furthermore, he sets an example as the ruler who founded the dynasty. If Your Majesty ignores the royal lectures, your descendants will take your example as their excuse and neglect their studies.

Properly admonished, the founding lord of dynasty, who had thrown down both generals and kings, dutifully replied to his scholastic tutors that he would show up to their lectures more often.⁵⁴