

From People as Foundation (*Minbon*) to Concept of a Republic (*Minkuk*): Tracing Neo-Confucianism in Korean History

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This article is the memoirs of the author's long-time research on the Neo-Confucian history of the Chosun dynasty Korea. The author recalled his academic achievement of the several stages of the historical changes of Korean society with the Neo-Confucianism. The time range covered from the late 14th century to the nineteenth century. The research position was adhered to the view of the positive function of Confucianism which aimed to overcome the negative understanding highly influenced by the Japanese colonialism. He examined the socio-economic development accompanied with the Neo-Confucianism at the first stage. In the part of the sixteenth century the formation of *Sarim* group was interpreted as critical forces and the prevailed factionalism as the principle of politics rather than the chronic political strife. The author introduced his unique achievement that the ideology of the Neo-Confucianism had been strongly intensified with the response to the long term natural catastrophes of the Little Ice Age (c.1490-1760). The republican concept of 18th-century impartial rulers, the most important achievement of Korean Neo-Confucianism, was viewed as the result of effort to overcome the natural disasters. This topic was connected to the concept of republic which shows in a diagram of the Korean national flag.

Keywords: *Chiangnan* Agriculture, Long Term Natural catastrophes, Concept of Republic, Korean National Flag

Prologue

When I was a graduate student in late 1960s, my teacher, Prof. Koh Byong-Ik, told an anecdote that he had heard from an American scholar of East Asian Studies. While traveling to Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, the American scholar attempted to feel what real Confucian society is. In Tokyo he felt nothing of what he had imagined as the atmosphere of Confucian society, and failed to find it in Taipei as well. The atmosphere of the Gimpo International Airport in Seoul fulfilled his expectation at last. He told Prof. Koh that he felt "this is a Confucian society" at the moment when he passed through the customs zone. The way in which people at the airport were meeting and greeting those coming out from the custom zone created an atmosphere that he was looking for. Since Korean society had not changed a lot in the Confucian traditional custom and lifestyles until 1960s, I think his sense of the disparity between Korean society and Japan and Taiwan was correct. If he had gone to mainland China at that time, his anecdote would still remain the same. This is a story that shows how much Korean society was influenced by Neo-Confucianism.

Confucianism was actually not welcome by the Korean people in the 1960s. Many Koreans thought that the intention of Confucianism to take a serious view of morality and rituals had hindered modernization and

economic development, and they also believed that Choson Dynasty fell because of this backwardness. Furthermore, they thought they had to remove the remains of Confucianism entirely to achieve economic development.

Under this belief, the history of Choson Dynasty which took Neo-Confucianism as the state religion of course could not be understood and interpreted in a positive light. The understanding that Choson Dynasty went to ruin because of the Confucianism prevailed in the interpretation of Korean history at that time. My study of Korean Confucianism began to doubt this prevalence. Could we be happy and correct by this kind of self-criticism which renders an important and long part of our history meaningless? That was my question.

As a graduate student it did not take a long time for me to find out that Japanese colonialism created that kind of interpretation to rationalize their occupation and rule. Although the criticism of “colonialism history” emerged during the 1960s among the Korean historians, it was not easy to correct the incorrect understanding of history. At that time the academic circle of Korean history was very young and weak. There were a few scholars who researched Confucianism. It can be said that this academic field was barely kept alive. History of Confucianism was not popular at all and even though some took it as a research topic, the research consisted of a narrow range of perspectives from Confucian individuals. And even these individuals professed thoughts more or less like Yi Yulgok, Yu Pankye, and Cheong Tasan, et al. Yi Togye was not popular because of his orthodox position in Korean Confucianism and his thought, which was similar with Chu-Hsi’s. It was not until the late 1970s when he and his thoughts began to be considered.

Research on the Socio-Economic Background Than the Thoughts Itself

My study of Neo-Confucianism in Choson Dynasty, from the beginning, focused on its social function rather than the thought itself. My debut research was on the Neo-Confucian’s social movements, which shaped the changing social structure into Confucian order during the 14th and 15th century. It specifically was on the spread of the communal granary system devised by Chu-Hsi, and the Hyangsarye and Hyang’eumjurye or Community Archery Ritual and the Community Wine Drinking Ritual from the *Rites of Chu*. It was my aim to clarify the social reason why the Neo-Confucianism was able to be a ruling ideology in Korean society. I expected that this would open a way to overcome the prevailing negative understanding. I supposed that there were obviously some big social changes that made intellectuals consider Neo-Confucianism as a means of reshaping society. I got the following results from this subject.

During the early medieval period from the 10th century on, Korean society has formed a structure of the triple composition. A communal village composed of several small villages was the predominant basic unit of rural organization while the small village by itself was elemental but very weak in function. It was the communal villages that usually had proper names. The local functionaries (*hyangni*), who exercised administrative authority in the county and district offices and who thus constituted the rural ruling power, were drawn from the interest of respective communal villages. However, the community organization, which includes religion, social, and cultural affairs, did not have representatives from communal villages, but was operated on a county level. Conventionally community organization was called *Hyangdo* community which means the circle of burning incense for the worship to Buddha and regional deity. The regional guide deity was erected on this unit and the religious, social, and economic activities were mainly held within this unit. I suggested that this large-scale organization *Hyangdo* was the characteristic of medieval society during the Koryo Dynasty.

Toward the 14th century this characteristic changed to a social structure centered on the small village. Most of the small villages were given the unit name *li*, and village inhabitants tended to band together within small village units, using the same name *Hyangdo* to perform sacrificial rites in honor of the respective guardian deities of each village. My conclusion was that it was this significant change that made the intellectuals and officials consider Neo-Confucianism as a new ideology. It was the disappearance of the local powers' large-scale organization that put the centralized administration system in operation in the late 14th century. This became the foundation of Neo-Confucian monarchy. This was a new beginning of the Korean medieval society.

In my recent research I found that the concept of “the people as foundation (*minbon* in Korean, *min ben* in Chinese)”, the most significant concept of Neo-Confucianism, was introduced based on this change in Korea. Under the social structure of large-organization of local powers, the people were called *Kun paekseong* which means the people of *Kun* or county. The monarchs could obtain direct loyalty of people after the structure of the local powers' large-scale organization disappeared. In other words, the monarch could hoist the banner of *minbon* or the people as foundation since the people of county were released from the local powers' control. Needless to say, the movement to spread the abovementioned communal granary system was also aimed to stabilize the newly growing small villages in Neo-Confucianism.

Chiangnan Agriculture Accompanied With Neo-Confucianism

Simultaneously I carried out the research of agricultural development during the same period. This subject was necessary to perceive what the trigger of the social change was and to check whether there was any practical aim in receiving Neo-Confucianism. The enquiry into the latter was particularly necessary to overcome the negative concept that Neo-Confucianism is a non-practical thought. Another reason for me to do this work was that I could not ignore the fact that kings and officials repeatedly emphasized the importance of increasing the agricultural products under the Confucian precept that “Food is the Heaven of the People”. Furthermore, it was intriguing that they frequently referred to the advanced technology of *Chiangnan agriculture* in China as the standard that they wanted to reach. The *Chiangnan agriculture* method was the most advanced one, centered on paddy rice cropping which began to be developed from the Sung period.

My research on agricultural development was not so easy because it must be coupled with population history. The agricultural development required enough labor power which could be guaranteed only by population growth. Therefore, my study of Neo-Confucianism has to cover two more fields, population and agricultural technology. Later, I even had to incorporate research on medicine techniques.

Population history was most difficult among them. It was almost impossible to trace the trend of population during the Koryo period because of the serious shortage of related records. We have only one record from *Sung-Shi* or Sung History which cited that the total size of population in the early 12th century Korea was 2.1 million. There was, however, a gateway in the corner. I found that 256 existing grave epitaphs of the Koryo Dynasty provided very good information of historical demography because they contained basic description of births and deaths of children. Through the analysis of this birth and death data, I could confirm that the early Koryo society had high rates in child mortality. There was the tremendous difference in child mortality rates before and after the mid-13th century. In the first period, the mortality rate for boys was 10% and for girls was 13%, whereas the

rate declined to 3% and 2% respectively in the second period. Accordingly, the average number of surviving children per family increased from 3.08 to 3.55.

The main reason for the significant decline in child mortality rates in the second period was advances in medical techniques. From its foundation, Koryo society was much stimulated by the technically advanced Sung medicine and made efforts to implement Sung techniques. As a result of these efforts, “local medicine” (*Hyangyak* in Korean) began to make use of domestically produced herbs and became completely re-conceptualized, leading to the compilation of several new medical books in the 14th century. The state also pursued a policy of improving access to this medicine in an effort to increase the size of the rural work force. The newly emerging “scholar-officials” (*shinheongsadaebu*) of Neo-Confucianism played an important role in the development of local medicine since the 14th century.

In the long run, Neo-Confucianism, as the main culture of Sung Dynasty, was introduced into Korean society as a new way to settle and develop its socio-economic conditions. Neo-Confucianism was such a progressive concept at that time, that it changed the dynasty from Koryo to Choson.

The Great King Sejong as Korean Yao Shun

The Choson Dynasty proclaimed to take Neo-Confucianism as the state religion in 1392, the very year when the dynasty launched. Although it is called a religion, it is actually an ideology that embraces the realization of Heaven Will (*Ch'eondo* in Korean, *Tien tu* in Chinese) in the human world as the highest duty.

The most important achievement of Korean agriculture during this period was to overcome the restrictions of fallow farming and establish the intensive use of land through annual cropping. This development caused a big change of landscape—the location of the fields moved from upland to lowland areas. There were many villages which newly emerged on the plain along the rivers and oceans. Though I recognize that peasants had the will to create new agricultural technologies, I agree that it was really the newly emerged intellectuals who had the ability to access and distribute information on advanced technology. They were active and committed to agriculture development because of the belief that the Heaven’s great virtue is “To let all live existences be alive”, which was cited from *I-Ching* or Scripture of Changes.

In 15th century the monarchs sustained their ambition to improve people’s everyday life and to develop state management ability in the Confucian way. Among them the Great King Sejong, who reigned for 32 years from 1419, was most successful in this achievement. Although the creation of Hangeul was his most brilliant work, there were a large number of noteworthy achievements. These included the publication of a guide book of agricultural technology for spreading the new technology nationwide; the compilation of the comprehensive and the essential books of medicine; whole revision of the land tax system suitable to new arable lands and technological conditions; making astronomical instruments and the time measure equipment; and compiling a national calendar based on the location and the time of the main royal palace in Seoul which were accurately measured by the newly designed instruments and equipment. He also operated the centralized bureaucracy to the utmost effectiveness and expanded territory into the north.

Few peasant uprisings in 15th century indicate the high social stability of the early Choson Dynasty, which was accomplished by Neo-Confucianism. This is comparative with the case of Japanese Buddhist society during the same period, which has suffered from incessant peasant uprisings. There occurred hundreds of protests and uprisings called *ikki* in Japan from the 14th century to early 16th century. That difference could be proof of the effectiveness of Neo-Confucianism in the pre-modern period.

Formation of *Sarim* Group as Critical Forces and Factionalism as the Principle of Politics

The 16th to 17th century is an important period in Korean Neo-Confucian history because during this time the philosophy of the orthodox Cheng-Chu School flourished and spread widely. However, the historical image of this period was very negative until 1960s. The occurrences of literati purge in 16th century and the subsequent serious political conflicts of factionalism from the late 16th century were understood as the worst aspects of Korean history by Japanese “colonialism history” scholars. Japanese scholars marked the tendency for strife and conflicts as racial characteristic of Korean people based on these historical phenomena. This negative criticism was the obstacle that the new approach to the Korean Neo-Confucianism had to overcome. I tried to pass through this obstacle by the same research method as before.

The ruling system of the Choson Dynasty began to uncover the limitation and contradiction of the Confucian centralized bureaucracy in the late 15th century. The bureaucrat-centered statecraft resulted in political and social stiffness. The policy of establishing a powerful centralized political structure created a number of problems for segments of the elite whose roots remained in the countryside. In particular, the legal immunity, which cleared county magistrates from complaints of maladministration, forced influential local leaders to subordinate their own interests to those of the central authority.

In these circumstances the critical local literati began to consider the local institutional principles provided by the Cheng-Zhu School; for example, the community compact (*Hyangyak* in Korean, *Xing Yue* in Chinese) devised by Lue Tai-chuen and amended by Chu-Hsi. This kind of principle was welcomed as the concrete means to remedy the errors of previous policy and establish complete social stability. The local literati who were approaching the Cheng-Zhu School more closely were composing a new political force. This, generally called the “*sarim*” or “forest of literati”, pursued an orthodox line in the interpretation of Neo-Confucianism and kept strong opposition against the faction of the “*hungu*” or “meritorious elite”, who then exerted preponderant influence in the central political arena. My research of comparing the differences surrounding the social order and the statecraft between the local elite group and the established central powers made it possible to interpret the literati purges called *sahwa* in a positive light. That was only a political phenomenon of strife surrounding the present situations and the directions between the progressive and the conservative, not the manifestation of a racial characteristic.

There remains a question why the literati so harshly criticized the meritorious elite and why the meritorious elite lashed back at the literati. I looked for the answers from two angles. One is from society; the other is from nature. Specifically, the former is regarding to the distribution of wealth, while the latter refers to long term natural catastrophes.

In my early studies I emphasized only the two opposing views of the elite and the literati concerning the proper method for agricultural production and distribution as the cause of serious conflict in the political arena. There was a remarkable increase in the total wealth of Korean society in the early 16th century, which resulted from the development of new agricultural techniques during the 15th century. At the end of the 15th century rural markets emerged based on the increase of small peasants’ surplus products and the international trades with China and Japan activated and enlarged rapidly with cotton products, silk product, and silver. The newly enlarged Korean economy was linked with the developing commerce of late Ming China and Japan of Warring State Period. It was natural that strife and confrontation within the ruling class over newly-created wealth became serious. The ruling class split into two abovementioned groups: the meritorious elite with their royal in-law allies

(*hungu, chokshin*), who as established officials showed a strong propensity for special privilege, and the *sarim* group, whose members were newly-risen officials, was very critical of the way of the meritorious elite. Of these two, the meritorious elite attempted to guarantee their status through a special relationship with royal authority or the royal household establishment. This coalition of the meritorious elite and royal in-laws would order local officials in coastal areas in the south-west to forcibly mobilize local manpower to develop low-lying tidal land, and then use profits reaped from such newly-secured land as the capital for trade in grain or as investment in mine development. The *sarim* group, on the other hand, was only active in the construction of “water fences” in inland areas for irrigating their rice paddy cropping fields. It was not so easy for them, the middle or lesser landowners, to deal well with these kind of projects. Therefore, they emphasized the needs of community cooperation in local society during this period.

Needless to say, the former group, *hungu-chokshin*, committed as many abuses, injustice, and unlawfulness as their enterprises were large. They were intolerable in the endless blames and renunciation from the *sarim* group and lashed back at them. This socio-political phenomenon was almost similar with the one between the *Tunglin* faction and the group of courtiers and eunuchs who enjoyed a great deal of actual power derived from the absolute authority of the emperor after the mid-Ming China.

It is easy to understand that the *sarim* group as the new critical force, under this situation, reevaluated the importance of the Neo-Confucian statement “Cultivation of one’s own self for governance of people”. The “Cultivation of one’s own self” itself aims to remove the sprout of injustice and immorality of the mind. The *sarim* group preferred the Chung-Zhu School among several schools in Neo-Confucianism because this school was the very to emphasize the importance of self-cultivation as the primary method of realizing “Will of Heaven” in human world. I hope that the existence of *Tunglin* faction in Ming Dynasty will help you understand what I discuss about here.

It is also noteworthy that there occurred a controversy regarding factionalism as a subsequent issue between the *sarim* group and meritorious elite group. Since political strife was getting severe, the meritorious elite with their royal in-law allies attacked the *sarim* group as a kind of “vicious faction” based on the historical prohibition of faction during Han Dynasty. To this the *sarim* group defended and counterattacked with a new interpretation that acknowledged that factions in the Sung Dynasty were legal. As you well know, Ouyang Xiu argued, in the early Sung period, that the monarch should make the “Party of men of virtue” as the “Real faction” superior to the “Party of small minded persons” as the “Pseudo faction”. And Chu-Hsi also urged Premier Rui, who asked for him an opinion about the uneasy existence of factions in court, not only to enter himself into the “Party of men of virtue” but also to usher the Emperor into the same party as possible. The *sarim* group adopted this doctrine of factionalism as a principle of state management when they advanced to a position of greater influence in the central government in the late 16th to 17th century.

Neo-Confucianism in Long Term Natural Catastrophes

My examination of socio-political phenomena during 16th century led me to conclude that the political deeper confrontations surrounding the increase of social wealth made them attack each other more severely. My conclusion was, however, not sufficient to interpret the situation in which the achievements of philosophy were centered on the late 16th century. As a possible subject to fulfill this insufficiency, I began to study the natural catastrophes of the same period utilizing the records of *Choson wangjo shillok* or the Veritable Records of Choson

Dynasty from the late 1980s. This study gave the shape to the Little Ice Age phenomenon theory which was developed in the geographic research on the glacial tongue of the Alps.

Analyzing 25,670 records during 1392-1863 years, I got a new fact that a long term natural catastrophes had lasted from c. 1500 to 1750, which was caused by meteor falling (Tables 1 and 2). The associated phenomena clarified through analyzing records included: (1) meteor appearances and fallings; (2) colored vapors in the sky (white vapors, black vapors, red vapors, “fire” vapors, bright lightning flashes); (3) the daytime appearances of Venus; (4) halos around the sun and moon; (5) thunder and lightning in winters; (6) hail; (7) violent windstorms; (8) frost; (9) unseasonable snow; (10) sudden darkness during the day; (11) dust (micrometeorite) storms; (12) fog or fog-like clouds; (13) changes in the sun or moon; (14) colored snow or rain; and (15) earthquakes. It was proved that they accorded with the phenomena in the famous theory of “Dinosaurs Extinction” caused by the falling of a huge meteoroid diameter about 10 km.

Table 1

Total Number of Occurrences for Each Period

Period	Corresponding years	Total number
Period 1	1392-1450	2,117
Period 2	1451-1500	1,420
Period 3	1501-1550	6,109
Period 4	1551-1600	4,785
Period 5	1601-1650	3,300
Period 6	1651-1700	3,563
Period 7	1701-1750	2,716
Period 8	1751-1800	936
Period 9	1801-1863	724
Total		25,670

Table 2

Regional Distribution of Disastrous Natural Phenomena Recorded in the Chosun dynasty Veritable Records

Phenomena	Seoul	Other areas	Total
Meteors	3,363	68	3,431
Colored vapors	1,018	34	1,052
Strange sounds in the Heavens	10	0	10
Comets	1,212	2	1,214
“Guest stars” or new stars	265	0	265
Abnormal sun	82	14	96
Abnormal moon	19	1	20
Halo effect/sun	4,459	28	4,487
Halo effect/moon	1,139	3	1,142
Daytime appearances of venus	4,882	5	4,887
Thunders, lightning	1,434	936	2,370
Hail	630	1,376	2,006
Frost	170	435	605
Unseasonal snow	68	309	377
Heavy rain	129	58	187
Frightful rainstorms	303	330	633

Table 2 to be continued

Violent windstorms	92	140	232
Heavy snow	21	15	36
Colored snow and rain	43	47	90
Dust storms (micrometeorites)	25	4	29
Daytime darkness	46	8	54
Fog	621	30	651
Earthquakes	216	1,284	1,500
Tidal waves	4	108	112
Change of water color	8	25	33
Unusually low temperature	40	24	64
Unusually high temperature	61	26	87
Total	20,360	5,310	25,670

Confucians interpreted aberrations in nature as a celestial warning that humans were doing something wrong. It is easy to suggest that the incessant unnatural phenomena, under this belief, have made the *sarim* group regard the injustice and unlawfulness more severely. The unnatural phenomena on heaven and unlawful behaviors on the earth made them reconsider the absoluteness of Heaven's decree. According to my result of analyzing the records of unnatural phenomena from *History of Koryo Dynasty*, there occurred the same phenomena occurred during c. 1100 to 1200 when the Chung-Zhu School had formed. It is not by chance that the schools which emphasized the importance of the Will of Heaven emerged in the periods of long-term natural disasters.

In western world of Christianity there were particular religious trends at the same periods: the Crusades in the 12th to 13th century and Protestant movement in 16th to 17th century. Impacts of meteor falls have influenced the history of earth and mankind. This cosmic phenomenon occurred in sporadic intervals only every several hundreds or thousands years. In 1997 Society of Interdisciplinary Studies in London confirmed a long term meteoroid impacts during the late Holocene period and suggested that concept of god among human societies appeared for the first time by the dreadful horrors accompanied by the impacts during this long period.

Although this subject is very interesting one, I would like to point out that these phenomena influenced the development of rites in the 17th century Korea, and China's name for Korea "a State of Decorum on the East".

Emergence of Concept of Republic in 18th Century Korea

Now I would like to shift my talk to the change of Korean Neo-Confucianism during the 18th century. The Confucian culture of the Choson Dynasty was not a product of the ancients. 18th-century rulers such as Sukchong, Yongjo, and Cheongjo, were concerned about the ill treatment of the common people, even by the political factions of the day, and under the banner of protecting the common people they called out for the end of factional politics and insisted on the propriety of direct rule. It was stressed by them that as the rulers Yau and Shun had done, it was only through direct rule that they were able to achieve the world of impartiality which marked the governance of the Three Dynasties. The doctrine of protecting the common people espoused by these impartial rulers (*T'angpyong kunju* in Korean) jumped beyond the concept of the people as foundation (*minbon*).

These impartial rulers, who advocated protecting the common people, newly coined and began using the term republic (*minguk* in Korean, *Min Guo* in Chinese) meaning that the country was made up of the people and the king (roughly equated with *kuk* as state). A figure such as Cheongjo the Great even went so far as declaring

that the people were the ruler's other self (*punsin* in Korean). He clarified the nature of the politics being pursued during his reign by himself through an essay titled "Manch'onmyongwol ju'in'ong chaso". It described the proper relationship between a monarch and his subjects by using a metaphor with the people as countless streams of water and the monarch as a bright moon reflected in each stream.

He did not expel the literati or deny their role; however, even if one was a member of the scholar-official class at this time and one did not endorse the idea of the republic, one's attitude demonstrated that one did not need to be part of the administration. The impartial rulers had judged that this was the only possible route for protecting the people from exploitation by the ruling literati class. Cheongjo the Great decided to entirely do away with public and private slaves (*kongsanobi*) and worked to overcome inequalities among the people.

The republican concept of 18th-century impartial governance was by no means the result of thoughts handed down from the monarchy. The progress of the common people society made such new ways of thinking possible. By way of social and economic progress, the number of individuals among the common people who displayed social influence and accumulated wealth increased apace with the existing "scholars-officials" class. The rivalry which arose between this up-and-coming class and the existing "scholars-officials" class created a state of affairs that exhausted the common people. The monarch determined that the position of protecting the common people could be at once a goal and the first step to solve this problem.

It is very noteworthy that new results in the research of Silhak or Practical Learning during the same period were coincident with the political change I discussed above. Many Korean scholars in this field argued that while the Chung-Zhu School sought the way to realize the morality and political principles given by the Sages of Three Dynasties, the Silhak acknowledged the intelligence and subjectivity of the human mind. Furthermore, the Silhak scholars thought that we had to assist the monarch to display his ability to advance the utilization and public welfare fully since the Three Dynasties was not always advanced in utilization and public welfare than the posterity. Surely Neo-Confucianism was changing in Korea at this time. Additionally, it is also a noteworthy interpretation that *Tonghak* or Learning of East was a movement that common people wanted to be the subject of the Confucian morality themselves. The late 18th to early 19th century was a period of great change, whereby the subject of Confucianism shifted to the masses.

Concept of Republic Reflected on Korean National Flag

The republican concept of 18th-century impartial rulers would be the most important achievement of Korean Neo-Confucianism. This concept became popular among the intellectuals beyond the court during modern period until the Japan's forced annexation of Korea in 1910. It means that Korea used the concept of the republic before the introduction of western democracy. There is high possibility that the current name of country of Korea, "*Taehan minkuk*" or "Republic of Korea", is originated from the republican concept of the 18th century. As you know, the current name of the country was taken by Provincial Government in Shanghai. At first the Constitution Preparation Committee provided the name of "*Choson Kongwhakuk*" or "the Republic of Choson" for the National Representatives Conference in Shanghai. But the Conference replaced it with "*Taehan minkuk*" or "Republic of Korea" because they believed that the new republic state should succeed the previous "*Taehanjekuk*" or "The Great Han Empire", by following the people's strong loyalty to the Emperor Kojong, which was shown at the March 1st (Anti-Japan) Movement with the Funeral Ceremony of Emperor Kojong.

We need to notice the meaning of the Korean current national flag from the view point of the republican *minkuk* concept. The Korean national flag called *T'aegeugki* was designed by King Kojong himself for the ceremony for the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Korea and United States on April 1882. This flag was called "*T'aegeuk p'algyueki*" or "Supreme Ultimate—Eight Trigram Flag" (Figure 1). "*T'aegeuk sagyeki*" or "Supreme Ultimate—Four Trigram Flag" appeared for the first time when the government announced the enactment of an official national flag on January 1883 (Figure 2). At this announcement the government decided to use the eight trigram flag as the royal flag. Park Yonghyo, who had incorrectly been given creator for the design of the flag for long time, was involved in the decision of two flag system. The core problem was the basic idea of the design of the flag.

The characteristic of the *T'aegeuki* is the fact that the Supreme Ultimate is divided. No Chinese examples show the same. The Supreme Ultimate remains in the Two Symbols or Yin and Yang even in the example of the so-called "The Flag of the Vassal State Koryo to the Great Ching" (Figure 3) suggested on March 1882, which was strongly rejected by the King Kojong government. Originally the Supreme Ultimate as the symbol of the monarch could not be divided. The Supreme Ultimate remains undivided at the diagrams of Zhou Liam Xi and Yi T'yogyae, which were the early drafts of the changes in the Supreme Ultimate symbol (Figure 4).

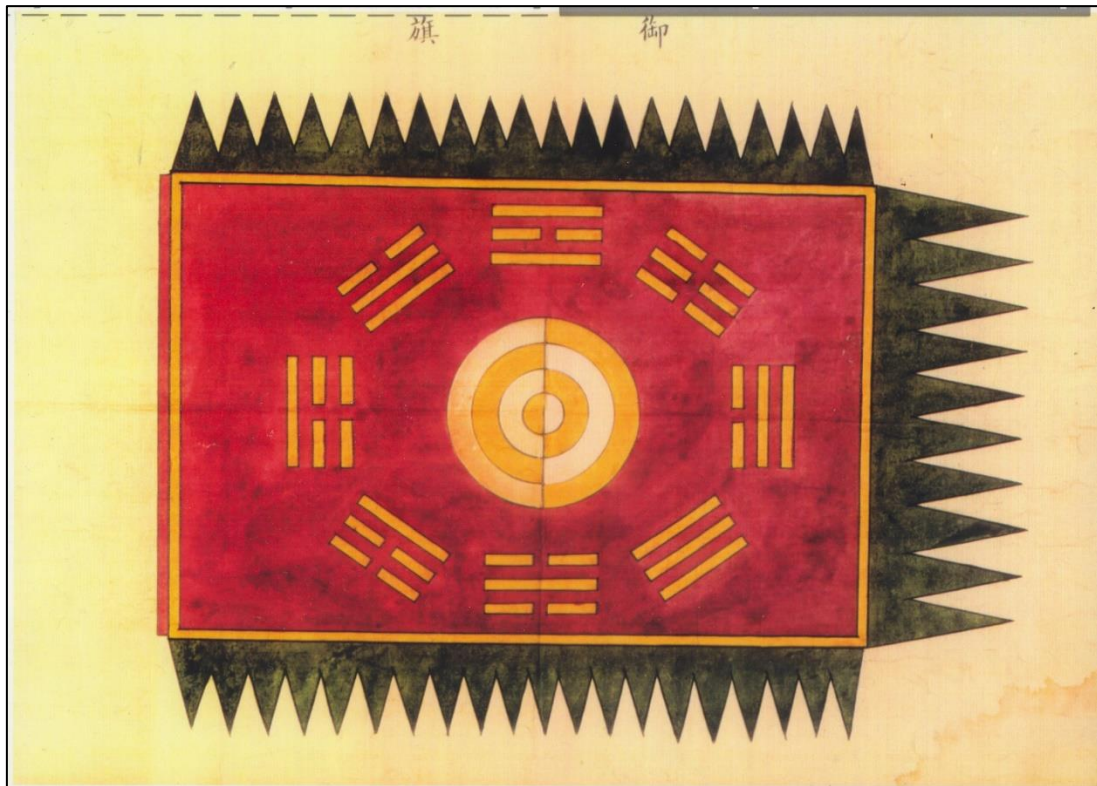


Figure 1. Royal flag of the Chosun Dynasty designed in 1880s,
Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies of the Seoul National University.



Figure 2. National flag design found by the author in 2017 at the Shufeldt Papers of the US Library of Congress.



Figure 3. “The Flag of the Vassal State Koryo to the Great Ching” from the Tongshang Tiaoyue Zhangcheng Chengan Huipian, 1886.

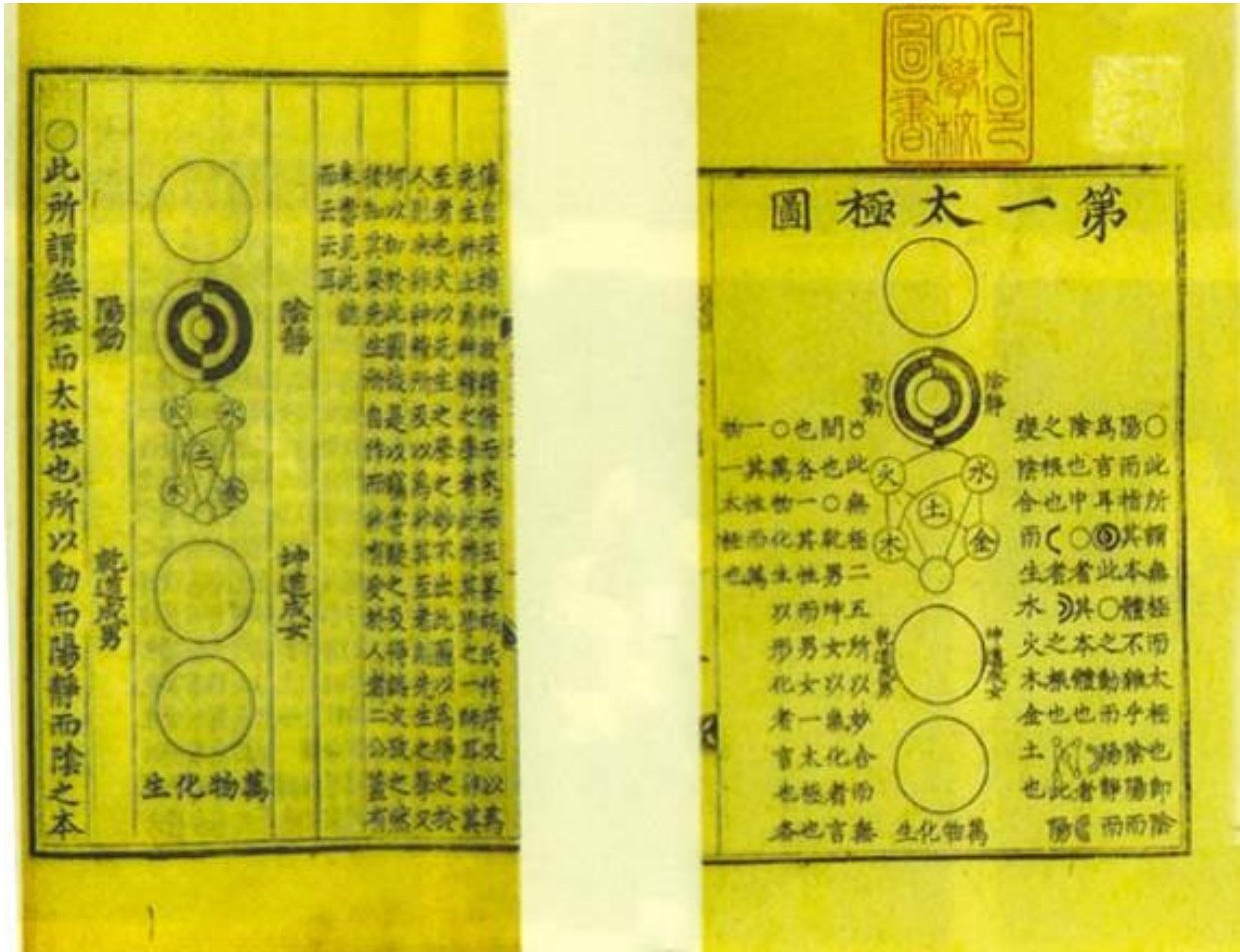


Figure 4. The Supreme Ultimate remains undivided at the diagrams of Zhou Liam Xi and Yi T'yogye(right).

What is the significance of the division of the Supreme Ultimate in the original Korean national flag? I believe that King Kojong used the main idea of the essay “Manch'onmyongwol ju'in'ong chaso” written by King Cheongjo the Great abovementioned. In other words, the division means that the people were the ruler's other self (*punsin* in Korean). According to this interpretation, the Korean national flag contains the meaning of “One body of a monarch and his subjects”. I think it is an unique revolutionary change in history of Neo-Confucianism.

It was not until 1998 that this important meaning was discovered by my research. Most of scholars understood that the design of *T'aegyeukki* reflects the cosmological harmony based on the Fu Xi's Apriori Eight Trigram Diagram. However, King Chongjo's idea was based on the King Won's Posteriori Eight Trigram Diagram. This misunderstanding is of course a tragedy which was caused by Japanese occupation. This is one of the many cases where Korean lost knowledge of their national history and positive traditions due to the confusion and violence of the Japanese occupation. The case of national flag is most sorrowful one. This is one of the reasons why we continue to research the past.

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