

Regional Events 1839-1882

Confucianism and Politics in East Asia

Although Confucius started teaching his philosophy around 5th century BC, its full integration into the social and political spheres of East Asia did not occur until hundreds of years later. In Korea, Neo-Confucianism was ushered in shortly after the Choson Dynasty came to power, fully asserting itself as the underlying philosophy of government by the 15th Century.

The five key relationships of Confucian thought were: ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend. Subjects were expected to loyally support their ruler in the same manner sons were expected to be loyal and helpful to their fathers. Wives were to obey their husbands, and younger brothers were to respect and honor their elders. Male friendships, while technically equal, often had a hierarchy according to the friends' ages and social status. In Confucian philosophy, so long as these relationships were maintained scrupulously, order and harmony would reign, and society flourish.

There was no distinction between public and private behavior. To neglect one's role was to damage universal harmony, and thus a grave infraction against all of society, not just one's family or social circle. Particularly in the Choson Dynasty, to disobey or show disrespect to one's father was not simply disrespectful, but rather akin to treason (Chandra, 5-6).

The Choson government expounded and exploited this line of reasoning as a method of social control. Rebellions are more difficult to manage when sedition is seen as an act of misanthropy (Chandra, 7). The ruling class, however, abided by Confucian philosophy just as much as their subjects, as we see when looking at Korea's foreign policy with China.

When applied to regional politics, the Confucian model brought about a system known as the Brotherhood of Nations. In this, China was the perpetual eldest brother, due respect and loyalty from its neighboring, younger brother nations, including Korea and Japan. Every year these tributary nations would send envoys to China, proving their loyalty and piety while enriching Chinese prestige and coffers. Given China's far superior size, militarily and geographically, this system made sense for all parties involved. China got wealth without the expense of armed expansion; tributary states avoided armed conflict with a better-equipped antagonist. The other bonus, as far as the smaller nations were concerned, was the safety China offered them. Much like an elder brother, China was protective of the very objects of its superiority.

This suzerainty relations between Korea and China worked so well, and for so long, because of its grounding in Neo-Confucian thought. Governments willingly gave tribute for hundreds of years, not simply to avoid conflict, but because by avoiding this conflict and fulfilling their role as the younger nation, they perpetuated cosmic harmony and peace. The duty was not looked upon as a something that negatively impacted their nation or people. Fulfilling it meant the administration was ruling morally and responsibly, and in fact doing its best to ensure good fortune for its people.

Despite this strong Confucian influence, Korean indigenous family norms of gender equality and egalitarian treatment of both husbands' and wives' kin as well as maternal and paternal kin were evident in the mid-eighteenth century. The persistence of Korean indigenous family norms in the Confucian state is clearly documented with an analysis of 18th century Korean criminal cases. (Koh, 1998, 7-36)

Western Politics Meets Eastern Philosophy

The dissolution of the Brotherhood of Nations, or the notion of a family of nations began in 1839, when war broke out between Britain and China. After unsuccessfully attempting to trade various goods with the Chinese, the British merchants devised a three-way trading system, where British goods would be traded in India for opium and then the opium traded to the Chinese, despite its illegality. This system blossomed, much to the horror of the Chinese government. After a diplomatic request to Queen Victoria to halt the foreign opium trade in China's ports was ignored, the Chinese government seized over 20,000 chests of the narcotic, destroyed them, and detained all foreign nationals. The trading companies called in the British Navy to free their employees and revenge their loss profits, and war was declared. Taken by surprise as much by the "barbarians'" daring act as by their underestimated martial strength, the Chinese found themselves, for the first time in centuries, fighting a losing battle. By 1842 the Chinese had been soundly defeated and were forced into the first of a continual line of unequal treaties with Western powers.

In 1851, the beleaguered Qing government had to actually rely on the military strength of the French and Chinese to put down the Taiping Rebellion. Two years later Commodore Perry famously "opened" Japan to Western trade, forcing on them a series of unequal treaties the Meiji government deemed a "national dishonor." (Lee, 7) Korea staunchly upheld its policy of national isolation from all countries but China, repeatedly and forcefully rejecting all attempts at contact from Russia, France, Germany, Britain and the U.S. By the 1860s, faith in China's ultimate supremacy, and its ability to play its elder brother role, faltered on all sides. Japan overthrew the shogunate and was contemplating the benefits of its own brand of imperialism. Korea had a ruling regent - the Taewon'gun - whose policies antagonized everyone, including his own ruling class. The stage was set for grand upheaval, and no one was disappointed.

In 1873, the Taewon'gun was ousted from his role as regent, and his adult son, King Kojong, took his place as ruler. He held the same attachment to China and wariness of Japan as his father, without having raised the ire of his countrymen.

King Kojong, Kanghwa, and the Regent's Last Stand

At twenty-three, with his father banished as regent, King Kojong looked to his wife, Queen Min, and her family for advisors. Falling back on ancient custom, he also relied heavily on Chinese counselors for information about the Western world and international politics. Such news was difficult for Kojong to get himself since there had

been virtually no non-military contact with any nation, barring China, since his father had become regent.

This included Japan, whose attempts at opening independent trade relations with Korea had been harshly rebuffed at every turn. This treatment in turn increased Japan's anxiety regarding Korea and its strategic position. The Japanese felt sure that either Russia or the United States would invade and annex Korea, leaving the Japanese mainland vulnerable to attack. The Meiji government itself had been constantly testing the boundaries of its relationship with China and felt confident that the weakened elder brother could no longer play a substantial role in maintaining the balance of power between players on the East Asian political stage. After its diplomatic attempts at opening trade relations with Korea were repulsed, a growing number of Japanese leaders recommended the use of force in opening Korea. In 1875, Japan sent a military expedition to Korea which resulted in the Kanghwa Treaty of 1876, the official "opening" of Korea to foreign trade. Not only was the treaty enacted with typically Western "gunboat diplomacy," it held all the same unequal clauses so decried by the Japanese when applied to themselves. It also designated Korea as an independent nation; a blow to Chinese sovereignty the Japanese hoped would be fatal.

The Chinese, however, were not so far out of the game as the Japanese supposed. In 1874, King Kojong's Chinese advisors counseled him to open up trade relations with the Western powers. They assumed - correctly - that Japan was seriously considering an invasion of Korea, and further assumed - incorrectly, this time - that political ties with Western nations would prevent this. China's politicians, so astute in their judgments of their fellow Confucians, erred in applying their philosophy of governance to Western powers. They assumed the United States would play the role of protector once Korea had opened up favorable trade relations, simply because that is what powerful nations were supposed to do under the Confucian philosophy. In reality, the US felt loyalty only to its own merchants. Treaties were documents regarding commerce and trade, not family relationships. In 1876, after the Kanghwa treaties were signed, the Chinese pushed more forcefully for Korea to open its ports to Western powers and end the Japanese monopoly on trade. King Kojong had an uphill battle ahead of him, since most of the ruling class and literati remained staunchly anti-West.

In 1881, however, the King had bigger things to worry about. His father, the Taewon'gun, staged a coup. Still rabidly anti-Western and horrified by the accommodation of the Japanese after the Kangwha treaties, the regent sought to assassinate the King and Queen Min, and put his other son, Kojong's half-brother, on the throne. The coup failed, however, with China removing the Taewon'gun, and returning Kojong to power. This pleased the Japanese just as much as the Chinese, since the Taewon'gun would surely have immediately put up a military resistance to the Japanese presence in Korean ports. The Chinese again pressed their case for forging relations with the US, and this time Kojong listened. What the Chinese did not count on was the young king's own independent streak. He followed up the opening of trade talks with the US by requesting an end to the sovereign relationship between China and Korea. This was denied by the Chinese, but the 1882 treaty signed between Korea and the US established Korea's independence just as effectively, even if the Chinese refused to acknowledge the final blow to their tattered empire.

Korea-US Treaty of 1882

Though brokered entirely between the Chinese envoy and Admiral Schufeldt of the US Navy, the Korean treaty with the US firmly established Korea as an independent nation, and ushered in similar treaties with other Western powers. Unfortunately for Korea, the art of treaty negotiation, and the precise nature and power of treaties were definitively foreign concepts. Certain clauses, articles, and phrases carried cultural connotations that differed greatly between nations. For example, China and Korea viewed the "good offices" clause in the treaty as the verbal endorsement of a typically Confucian brotherly relationship between Korea and the US, where the United States assumed a moral, as well as legal, duty to protect and defend Korea from other nations outside the family circle. The United States, however, simply saw "good offices" as a throwaway term of courtesy, indicating little, if any, obligation to the treating partner (Lee, 27).