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The Intellectual Activities and Political Tasks of Eighteenth-Century Joseon Korea: *A Comparison Between Confucian Politics in Joseon and Contemporary* Meritocracy

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Abstract

This study explores Confucianism's emphasis on capabilities by analyzing eighteenth-century Joseon's scholarly debates and political dynamics, comparing Confucian meritocracy with modern concepts. The ancient Chinese system of succession, *shanrang* (*seonyang* in Korean), which valued virtue and ability, influenced the perception of Confucian politics as meritocratic. Korean kings and scholars believed that individuals with virtue and competence should hold political roles, aligning with meritocracy. However, in Confucian thought, ability was tied to contributing to community care and coexistence, contrasting with modern meritocracy's focus on individual competition and rewards.

Late Joseon scholars and kings viewed human nature as inherently public, expressed through relationships like filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence. These virtues, rooted in family, were extended to the community through Confucian rituals. Scholars stressed the importance of voluntary participation in these rituals and local political activities to foster mutual prosperity.

In King Jeongjo's era, Confucian classics, particularly Mencius' views, guided politics and scholarship. Unlike the centralized power in the Ming dynasty, late Joseon promoted a balance of power, where King Jeongjo engaged with scholars on Confucian ideals. This collaboration helped people grow as ethical and political subjects, offering insights into ethical participation in contrast to modern meritocracy's individualism.

Keywords: Confucian meritocracy, filial piety, fraternal respect, parental benevolence, Confucian rituals, mutual care, coexistence

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I. Introduction: Is Confucianism a Form of Meritocracy?

The aim of this research is to critically examine the relationship between Confucian tradition and meritocracy by delving into academic debates and political situations of eighteenth-century Joseon Korea.

In contemporary South Korea, faith in meritocracy is gaining popularity. As evident from the intense competition in university admissions and job placements, South Koreans believe that the various contemporary tests fairly evaluate individual abilities. Interestingly, (at least a significant number of) Koreans attribute the belief in the procedural and substantive fairness of examinations to the historical Confucian tradition.

The history of civil service examinations (科擧制) in Korea spans over a thousand years, from the Goryeo to the Joseon dynasties.[1] While it is true that substantial doubts about the civil service examination's reliability in assessing officials' morality existed, the idea that the examination was a viable and effective method for evaluating officials' intellectual and professional capabilities remained more prevalent. Furthermore, although a capitalist way of thinking rather than Confucian values might largely influence contemporary Korean society, and the ways abilities are evaluated and verified may differ from those in the past, it is not reasonable to completely disregard the connection between the Confucian tradition and individual beliefs in meritocracy, especially in regions like China and Korea with extensive histories spanning thousands of years. In simpler terms, we can see a manifestation of meritocracy partly associated with the Confucian tradition through various modern examination systems.[2]

If this premise holds true, what aspects of the Confucian tradition can be associated with meritocracy? More fundamentally, can Con-

[1] In 958, during the reign of King Gwangjong, Goryeo began selecting officials through the civil service examination for the first time. The number of Confucians who passed the exam in the Goryeo era exceeded thousands. The civil service exams of the Joseon era became even more intricate and complex, persisting until the late nineteenth century into the Korean Empire period.

[2] On the issue of so-called Confucian meritocracy in Joseon and modern Korean society, see Na (2017, 235–56) and Park (2021, 39–42).

fucianism be regarded as a kind of meritocracy? To address such questions, it is necessary to first examine the meaning of the term meritocracy. The work that made the term meritocracy popular is *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, written by Michael Young, which was published in 1958 in England.[3] This notion refers to a social system in which individuals' abilities are recognized through various examination processes, and those with widely acknowledged capabilities are believed to have a rightful claim to higher authority and access to societal resources as a rightful reward.

Let us explore if this concept is applicable in the context of the Confucian tradition. The political authority of the ruling class in ancient China, where Confucians believed an ideal governance was realized, was justified not only by inherited social status but also by individual abilities. A representative example is the abdicate system in ancient China, called *shanrang* 禪讓 (*seonyang* in Korean). *Shanrang* is to pass the throne to a virtuous and competent subject rather than to the ruler's offspring. The "The Story of King Shun" (舜典) chapter in the *Book of Documents* (書經) and the "Speaking of King Yao" (堯曰) chapter in the *Analects* (論語) depict the scene where the ancient sage king Yao passed the throne to the virtuous and cable individual, Shun, instead of handing it to his own child (See "Shun dian" 3, in *Shujing*; *Analects* 20.1). In the "Wan Zhang 萬章" chapter of *Mencius* (孟子), it clearly reveals that King Yao's decision was not due to a subjective preference but rather conforming to the heavenly mandate (天命) and the collective

[3] After the publication of Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, the term "meritocracy" gained widespread popularity, becoming as commonly recognized as its inclusion in dictionaries. He criticized meritocracy for exacerbating class discrimination and inequality, but after the 1960s, meritocracy evolved into a positive term emphasizing individual achievement. In *The Meritocracy Myth* (2009), American sociologists Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller critiqued situations where success is determined by non-merit factors rather than an individual's abilities. Michael Sandel, in *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020), criticized how meritocracy has become an ideology justifying inequality and elitism based on factors like parental inheritance, economic power, and innate cultural capital. This criticism is well-known in Korea. Meritocracy also faces critique from authors in the English-speaking world. In this paper, I aim to reflect on the dangers and deficiencies of contemporary meritocracy by highlighting the differences between Confucian tradition and meritocracy.

will of the people, which recognized Shun's virtue and exceptional abilities (*Mencius* 5A.5).

Also, Mencius argued that if a ruler respects and appoints wise and competent individuals, then all literati of the world would aspire to work in his royal court (*Mencius* 2A.5). Mencius stated that showing respect to esteemed individuals (貴貴) is to show reverence to higher-ranking individuals by lower-ranking individuals, and honoring talented individuals (尊賢) (*Mencius* 5B.3). Mencius said that although these two principles are different, they share a similar function in fostering harmonious relationships between people of different hierarchical levels. In Confucian politics, there was a strong emphasis on both loyalty to superiors and respect for capable subordinates. Indeed, in ancient Chinese society, it was common to choose wise and capable individuals for governmental positions rather than relying solely on hereditary succession. The *Huainanzi* 淮南子, a book that describes various aspects of ancient customs, also offers advice to give preferential treatment to capable individuals (*Huainanzi* 11.4). Also, the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) proposes five principles for governing the world: showing reverence to virtuous individuals (貴有德), showing reverence to esteemed individuals (those of higher status) (貴貴), showing reverence to seniors (貴老), showing respect to elders (敬長), and protecting the young and weak (慈幼) (See the "Jiyi 祭義" chapter, no. 12). This list reveals that the *Book of Rites* also advocates social preference for virtuous and capable individuals.

The examples mentioned above suggest that Confucians think that political authority should be entrusted to competent individuals, leading us to perceive Confucianism as a form of meritocracy. However, this impression is superficial. While Confucianism emphasizes individual competence (a trait it shares with meritocracy), it is not adequate to classify Confucianism as a form of meritocracy.

For Confucians, political authority was not perceived as rewards tied to privileges, personal interests, or appointments solely determined by individual competence. In short, for Confucians, the political responsibilities were considered a duty they willingly embraced. Instead of viewing their status as mere personal achievements or pursuits of individual interests, they saw it as a profound calling and arduous task

that they were obliged to fulfill.[4] This feature separates the Confucian tradition from contemporary meritocratic discourse.

For example, in *Mencius*, a question (to Mencius) was raised by a disciple regarding King Shun: If Gu Sou 瞽瞍, the father of King Shun, commits homicide, how would King Shun respond to his wrongdoing? (See *Mencius* 7A.35). Mencius answers that King Shun would carry his father on his back and run away to the end of the world, gladly serving him for a lifetime. This remark intriguingly suggests that King Shun would consider the kingship so worthless that he would abandon it without hesitation, treating it as if it were merely a pair of worn-out shoes.

In the context of King Shun, the authority to govern the realm of *tianxia* 天下 ("the whole world under Heaven") is regarded as a duty of service and dedication rather than simply a reward for individual competence. If King Shun pursued the status of governing *tianxia* solely for personal ambition, such emotions would likely be criticized as selfish desires rather than being seen as a public and impartial mind. Mencius explained that "virtuous and capable individuals like Bai Yi 伯夷, Yi Yin 伊尹, and Confucius 孔子 believed that if anyone in the world did not receive the political benefits of Kings Yao and Shun, they considered it as if they had fallen into a pit. They willingly embraced the burdens of the difficult responsibilities for the world (天下)" (*Mencius* 5A.7). In short, for Confucians, the political responsibilities were considered an obligation they willingly embraced (自任).

If we label Confucianism as a form of meritocracy, we can refer to it as a virtue-based meritocracy rooted in morality and knowledge. This perspective entails respect for individuals with exceptional moral character and learning, with the belief that such virtuous individuals should engage in politics. However, in this paper, I argue that such Confucian meritocracy was meaningful only when it contributed to higher societal values of care and coexistence. Therefore, I contend that

[4] Jang Eun-ju argues that Confucian meritocracy, characterized by a strong sense of publicness, is considered as contributing to the common good rather than individual gain, even though individual abilities are inevitably tied to personal interests. According to her, this aspect of Confucian meritocracy provides crucial insights for offering an alternative to contemporary meritocracy (2021, 98–102).

Confucianism is not synonymous with modern meritocratic discourse, as it held significance within the framework of contributing to these higher communal values.

Moreover, in the Confucian perspective, contributing to the community is seen as actualizing one's inherent nature rather than an artificial or unwilling sacrifice. Confucians believe that self-actualization involves harmonizing one's actions and attitudes with the inherent heavenly principle (天理), also referred to as *ren* (仁). *Ren* is the compassionate and empathetic life force that interconnects and animates all beings in the world, fostering mutual revitalization. The concept of "Oneness of All Things" (萬物一體) represents the ultimate harmonious coexistence, and this is precisely what *ren* 仁 embodies.[5]

Neo-Confucian scholars believed that *ren* 仁 is a public nature, which can be realized only through constant and successful interactions with others in multi-fold levels of relationships. This virtue can be nurtured when one excellently performs the assigned relational roles within various contexts, such as family and society. More specifically, they considered *ren*, the ability to effectively express human nature by aiding coexistence through mutually beneficial interactions, as the most crucial human capacity.

Neo-Confucians particularly highlight the virtues of "filial piety and fraternal respect" (孝悌) as a well-known and tangible manifestation of the highest embodiment of human nature. To put it another way, filial piety and fraternal respect constitute the specific content of *ren*. Confucians believed that through affection toward parents and respect for siblings, one could demonstrate well the public characteristic of human nature. They viewed parents and siblings not as mere biological relations, but as the first public relations one experiences within the family.

[5] *Ren* denotes the intention to nurture mutual support and empathy to help others thrive in the relationship between oneself and others. In Confucian society, *ren* was considered the most important virtue and a critical capability for politicians. However, the concept of merit in meritocracy fails to clearly convey the notion of reciprocal growth. Unlike the merit in meritocracy, the essence of *ren* lies in the pursuit of coexistence and harmony with others.

Cultivating these virtues to transparently and entirely manifest nature was seen as the task of education and the final goal of politics in the Confucian community. Consequently, while Confucians emphasized individual abilities in justifying the authority of governance, they did not regard the statuses assigned to them as personal achievements. Furthermore, they believed that the criteria for evaluating individual abilities should hold a public-oriented nature.

In this paper, I will delve into the functioning of virtue-based politics based on filial piety and fraternal respect, as well as the governance guided by rituals that embody these virtues. This exploration will involve an examination of the academic discussions that took place in eighteenth-century Joseon. The politics of late Joseon were fundamentally based on Confucian classics, particularly Mencius's interpretation of filial piety and fraternal respect. In this regard, it shared the political ideas of ancient Confucianism. However, in the Ming dynasty, which was contemporaneous with Joseon, the emperor's authority was strengthened, leading to the control of Neo-Confucian ideology and institutions by the central government based on state power. In late Joseon, where the power of ministers was stronger compared to royal authority, King Jeongjo conducted extensive academic seminars with the literati, critically reflecting on the political ideals of Confucianism. This resulted in the spontaneity of implementing local village rituals through the collaboration of scholar-officials and the common people. This phenomenon became a significant stepping stone for the people to grow as ethical and eventually political subjects by participating together in virtue politics and ritual-based politics. Furthermore, based on these historical and philosophical backgrounds, I will highlight that the Confucian politics of late Joseon significantly differs from the modern concept of meritocracy.

II. Scholarly Debates and Politics in Late Joseon

King Jeongjo (r. 1752–1800) of Joseon was a scholarly and politically adept monarch who left behind an extensive collection of personal

writings called *Hongjae jeonseo* 弘齋全書, consisting of 184 volumes.[6] King Jeongjo also led the compilation of over 2,000 volumes of books, which were referred to as "king-authored books" (御定書). Additionally, under the King's directive, officials from government institutions known as Gyujanggak 奎章閣 and Hongmungwan 弘文館 collaborated to compile a substantial number of books. When considering these "king-mandated books" (命撰書), the total number of books surpasses 4,000 volumes, spanning over 150 different kinds (Kim 2000, 29–33).

Among others, the 56 volumes of *Lectures on the Classics and Histories* (*Gyeongsa gangue* 經史講義) within the *Hongjae jeonseo* are works that document scholarly discussions spanning over 20 years involving King Jeongjo and intellectuals from diverse scholar-political factions. In 1781, King Jeongjo commenced the selection of young officials who had fulfilled specific qualifications through state examinations, thus initiating a series of scholarly debates centered around the Confucian classics and histories.[7] In the scholarly debates, various topics emerged, such as the significance of the Confucian classics, the status of sages, the meaning and limitations of the studies of Zhu Xi's teachings, and more. The King and scholars freely expressed their opinions and engaged in critiques on these subjects.

King Jeongjo particularly put significance on the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學; *Daehak* in Korean), one of the main Confucian classics since the time of the Song dynasty, when Zhu Xi elevated it to the status of the Four Classics. King Jeongjo's conviction that the *Great Learning* encapsulates the essence of Confucian classics motivated him to compile the Classified Meanings of the *Great Learning* (*Daehak*

[6] The complete collection can be accessed online at the Database of Korean Classics managed by the Institute for the Translation of Korean Classics (https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#/dir/node?dataId=ITKC_MO_0584A).

[7] The scholarly seminars sponsored by King Jeongjo were inaugurated in 1781, commencing with *Reflections on Things at Hand* (近思錄) and the *Book of the Mind-heart* (心經), followed by the *Great Learning* (大學), the *Analects* (論語), *Mencius* (孟子), *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸), *The Book of Poetry* (詩經), The *Book of Documents* (書經), and *The Book of Changes* (周易) in sequence. These seminars continued until 1800, just before the King's passing. Various officials from different factions such as Noron, Soron, and Namin put forth numerous responses, which were compiled in the *Lectures on Classics and Histories* (*Gyeongsa gangui* 經史講義).

yuui 大學類義), which includes his interests in political strategies and institutions.[8]

By examining the debates between King Jeongjo and scholars regarding the *Great Learning*, we gain insight into the virtues emphasized by Confucian scholars during the Joseon period. King Jeongjo analyzed the entire framework of the *Great Learning* through the lens of Zhu Xi's interpretation that analyzes the text using specific concepts, such as Three Cardinal Guides (明明德, 新民, 止於至善) and the Eight Articles (格物, 致知, 誠意, 正心, 修身, 濟家, 治國, 平天下). Among these Three Cardinal Guides, he notably emphasized the significance of the first one, illustrious virtue (明德). In a seminar on the *Great Learning* in 1786, he posed questions to scholars regarding the meaning of Zhu Xi's interpretation of this concept presented in his *Commentary on the Great Learning* (*Daxue zhangju* 大學章句), wherein this virtue was explained as "the ability to respond to every affair by possessing the principle" (具衆理而應萬事者) (See the *Daxue zhangju*, ch. 1). In response, drawing upon the theory of the innate heart-mind (本心說) propounded by Luo Xiaosun, a scholar of the Song dynasty, Song Sang-ryeom conveyed that virtue finds its origin in the inherent human heart-mind. He expounded, "there is no one who does not love their parents when they are young, and there is no one who does not respect their elder siblings when they grow up. These are things everyone knows without being taught. Such sentiments take root in the hearts of most of us."[9] In short, Song Sang-ryeom perceived "illustrious virtue" as deeply associated with the innate sentiments of loving parents and respecting siblings. King Jeongjo appears to embrace this perspective; as we can observe, he later describes illustrious virtue as the "innate heart-mind" (本心).[10]

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[8] This is a compilation of essential passages from the *Daxue yanyi* 大學衍義 by Zhen Dexiu and *Daxue yanyibu* 大學衍義補 by Kou Zhun. King Jeongjo integrated their arguments with his own judgments to create the book titled *Classified Meanings of the Great Learning*. He took pride in including strategies for realizing an ideal governance system from ancient times (Kim 2007, 145–54)

[9] "孩提之童無不知愛其親, 及其長也, 無不知敬其兄, 不待教而知之者, 蓋以腔子之中, 本有此心也. 如是看則本心二字, 恐無可疑" ("*Gyeongsa gangui* 經史講義," ch. 7, no. 1; In *Hongjae jeonseo*, book 70).

[10] See Song Sang-ryeom's comments in the following passage from the *su* 首 section of chapter 1 of "Jeungcheon churok 曾傳秋錄" (In *Hongjae jeonseo*, book 126): "明德明命之序, 豈有先言後言之可言者哉. 明明德之明字, 卽與顧諟明命之顧諟字同義. 而明德卽本心也, 得於天以後之稱. 而明命如中庸首章言天命之謂性也"

This perspective becomes even more evident and detailed in the response of Jeong Yak-yong (1762–1836), a scholar of the Namin faction (another scholar-political faction in Joseon). In his participation during the discourse on Confucian classics in 1789,[11] Jeong Yak-yong put forth the argument that "illuminating virtue" should be comprehended as encompassing filial piety towards parents, reverence for the sibling, and benevolence towards one's children.[12] He drew support from texts predating the *Great Learning*, such as the *Rites of Zhou* (周禮) and the *Book of Documents* (書經). After a thorough analysis of these historical texts, Jeong Yak-yong reached the conclusion that the core six virtues emphasized within the preeminent educational institution for the offspring of rulers and high-ranking officials in antiquity, referred to as Taixue 太學 (Taehak in Korean), encompassed moderation, harmony, respectfulness, industriousness, filial piety, and fraternal respect. Particularly, the curriculum laid a strong emphasis on filial piety and fraternal respect. Considering that the *Great Learning* was intended to be taught at the Taixue (the higher education institution), the primary focus on the first Cardinal Guide, "illuminating virtue," is thus best understood as filial piety and fraternal respect. Also, Jeong Yak-yong believed that five teachings from Sacred King recorded in the *Book of Documents*—namely, the righteousness of father, benevolence of mother, older brother's fraternity, younger brother's respectfulness, and children's filial piety—can be encapsulated into three virtues grounded in family ties: filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence.

Why did Confucian scholars emphasize filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence? During the Joseon dynasty, these

[11] These arguments can be found in the "Jaemyeong myeongdeok 在明明德" chapter of Jeong's *Daehak gongui* (See book 1, ch. 3). (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_MP_0597A_0270_010_0030_2014_006_XML)

[12] Based on the sources I have consulted, I sometimes refer to two virtues, filial piety and fraternal respect, while at other times I mention three virtues, including the addition of parental benevolence toward children. Traditionally, when Confucians mention only two virtues, filial piety and fraternal respect, it actually encompasses three virtues, including parental benevolence. These virtues form a cohesive set. I adhere to this traditional approach in my paper. Therefore, even when I mention only two virtues, it encompasses all three virtues.

scholars believed that cultivating these virtues had the political effect of inviting members of society to engage more deeply in moral relationships. This is evident in the following examples: In 1786, a discourse transpired between King Jeongjo and scholars, centering around a passage in Chapter 9 of the *Great Learning* that expounds upon three virtues grounded in family ties: filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence (孝弟慈).[13] King Jeongjo questioned the meaning of a ruler's realizing three virtues in a household, encouraging the national officers to engage in appropriate exemplary governance related to this point. In response to the King's inquiry, scholar Yun Gwang-an of the Soron school, one of the Neo-Confucian scholar-political factions in Joseon, provided the following argument: Only when three virtues are embodied in a ruler—these virtues being filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence—and only when three teachings are embraced by the public officers and citizens of the nation—these teachings being the service of the ruler, the respect for elders, and the compassionate treatment of others—can we truly witness the essence of the genuine governance as a Confucian role model. This essence involves influencing and inspiring others through self-cultivation.

In short, Yun Gwang-an's interpretation of Chapter 9 of the *Great Learning* advocates for an approach where rulers themselves first practice the three virtues, thereby naturally inspiring individuals to willingly serve both the ruler and their elders and treat their children benevolently. Also, Jeong Yak-yong shed light on the passages in Chapter 10 of the *Great Learning*: Governors treat elders with due respect, honor venerable senior individuals accordingly, and take care of lonely orphaned children (上老老, 上長長, 上恤孤). He perceived these passages as pointing to three rituals that were regularly conducted in Taixue, encompassing the practices of respecting elders (養老), honoring venerable elders (序齒), and caring for orphaned children

[13] This discourse can be found in the *Lectures on Classics and Histories* (*Gyeongsa gangui* 經史講義, ch. 7, no. 9) in *Hongjae jeonseo* (book 70). (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_MO_0584A_0700_010_0110_2006_A264_XML)

(恤孤).[14] According to him, the goal of ancient politics was to encourage people to willingly honor elders, respect venerable individuals, and attend to the well-being of the young through rulers conducting these three rituals. In short, scholars of the Joseon era believed that if the ruling class practiced moral actions based on filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence, it would contribute to making the people more morally upright.

As the discussions held in seminars, particularly those centered on the *Great Learning*, show, King Jeongjo and Confucian scholars shared the belief that the goal of Confucian governance lies in fostering the people, which naturally embodies virtues deeply rooted in familial relationships.[15] Furthermore, these virtues are also connected to the concept of political legitimacy. As mentioned above, Confucians believed that moral actions resulting from these virtues inherently lead to the spread of moral influence. This expansion of moral influence, in turn, empowers individuals to wield political authority and legitimacy. Therefore, scholars assessed that individuals who practiced filial piety towards their parents showed respect to their elders, and displayed benevolence towards their children were deemed suitable candidates for achieving the political objectives of the Confucian state.

Also, a correct interpretation of the Confucian classics is essential to becoming a capable and authorized ruler. The reason for this is that the Confucian classics served as arbiters concerning cultivating and practicing these virtues, which ensured political legitimacy. From this perspective, the prolonged scholarly discussions of this period can be comprehended as their struggle for the goal of Confucian politics. In other words, scholarly discussions in the royal court during Joseon hold the significance of collaborative efforts to establish the groundwork for political leadership rooted in Confucian ethics. Consequently, for Confucians, scholarly accomplishments become closely intertwined with political authority.

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[14] This argument can be found in Jeong's *Daehak gongui* (See book 3, ch. 3). (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_MP_0597A_0270_010_0030_2014_006_XML)

[15] In the *Analects* and *Mencius*, it is emphasized that the essence of politics lies in guiding the people to practice filial piety and fraternal respect. See the *Analects* 1.3 and *Mencius* 1A.1.

Confucian scholars in Joseon pursued a mode of governance rooted in a ritual-based system rather than a rule-based one that enforces or prohibits specific behaviors. This is because rituals are believed to encourage people to engage in moral actions spontaneously. Scholars in Joseon aimed to establish virtue-based governance through ritual practices, emphasizing filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence. Naturally, the rituals in Joseon were designed to express and proliferate these virtues, and scholarly debates also played a significant role in many of these rituals. Let us examine some representative examples.

Since the establishment of Confucianism as the guiding philosophy of the Joseon dynasty, the memorial rite for Confucius at the Confucian shrine called Munmyo 文廟 within the national higher educational institution known as Seonggyungwan was regularly held. According to historical records such as the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* (朝鮮王朝實錄) and *The Records of Royal Rituals* (春官志),[16] starting from King Sejong's reign, kings visited Seonggyungwan every three years to conduct the memorial rite for Confucius.

In April 1478, following the memorial rite at Munmyo, King Seongjong proceeded to the main hall, known as Myeongnyundang 明倫堂, within Seonggyungwan. It is noteworthy that scholarly debates took place there, followed by a ceremony honoring esteemed elders (See Yi 1744). Attired in ceremonial garb, King Seongjong respectfully knelt before the Confucian shrine, bestowing special honors upon his subjects and senior scholars. Drawing inspiration from classical Confucian texts, he engaged in discussions concerning the core tenets of politics. Furthermore, King Seongjong sent out written questions to scholars at Seonggyungwan, seeking their responses. This process helped him choose qualified individuals for various administrative positions (See Yi 1744). These practices exemplify the integration

[16] *Chungwanji* 春官志 (*The Records of Royal Rituals*) is a book compiled by Yi Maeng-hyu in 1744 during the reign of King Yeongjo. He reorganized various historical cases that were recorded in the Office of Royal Decrees, which was a compilation of royal orders and instructions, related to state events and royal rituals.

between scholarly debates and the operation of political affairs in the Joseon dynasty.

Following scholarly debates, rituals that honored elders were instituted. During the rituals to honor elders, King Seongjong and his courtiers conducted elaborate ceremonies to highlight the virtues of filial piety and fraternal respect, giving preference to old officers and scholars. The King, along with hundreds of government officials, scholars, and students from Seonggyungwan, took their places in an orderly manner. They organized a grand ceremony by referring to the procedures of honoring elders mentioned in ancient Confucian classics, such as the *Book of Rites*, the *Record of Rites*, and the *Rites of Zhou*. Interestingly, during the progress of this ritual, King Seongjong requested scholars to engage in open discussions about governance policies, as he believed that principles governing the nation are extensively covered in the *Book of Documents*. While conducting the ceremony to honor elders and venerable individuals, the king facilitated discussions about the political methods of governance. The scene where King Seongjong explored governance strategies while exemplifying the practice of filial piety and fraternal respect through the ritual at Seonggyungwan provides us with a glimpse into how Confucian politics operated in Joseon. In the eyes of Joseon scholars, the objective of politics was to inspire people to embody Confucian virtues such as filial piety and fraternal respect. The concrete enactment of these values found expression in rituals like the ceremony to honor elders.[17]

[17] According to *The Records of Royal Rituals*, in 1525, King Jungjong engaged in debates with officials and scholars at Seonggyungwan 成均館 over various classics. In the years 1733 and 1742 during the reign of King Yeongjo, the King similarly conducted extended discussions with his officials at Myeongnyundang Hall (明倫堂) after performing memorial rites to Confucius at Seonggyungwan. During these discussions, texts like the *Rites of Zhou*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Great Learning*, and *Reflections on Things at Hand* were deliberated upon.

III. Politics of Virtue and Emphasis on Rituals: Mutual Care and Coexistence

The virtues upon which Confucian politics is founded have their roots in familial affection. However, scholars of Confucianism perceived that these virtues extend beyond the realm of the family. This perception is well exemplified in the following case.

The year 1795, the twentieth year of King Jeongjo's reign, marked the sixtieth birthday of his deceased father, Crown Prince Sado, and his mother, the queen dowager, Lady Hyegyeonggung (惠慶宮 洪氏). King Jeongjo performed ancestral rites at Crown Prince Sado's shrine (Gyeongmogung), and in the second lunar month, he led a procession to Hwaseong Fortress in Suwon to honor his mother over a seven-night journey (See Kim 2020, 13–36). Following that, he paid his respects at the actual tomb of Crown Prince Sado, known as Hyeollyungwon. Then he hosted a celebration for the sixtieth birthday of his mother at Bongsudang Hall within the Temporary Palace at Hwaseong Fortress. King Jeongjo elevated the importance of this feast, transforming it from a personal celebration for his parents into a public event with broader significance. Notably, during this feast, King Jeongjo issued a royal instruction to the people (*yuneum* 綸音). In this edict, he expounded on the significance of filial piety towards one's parents and the extension of this ethical value to encompass others.[18] In other words, King Jeongjo emphasized the nurturing love given to children and, in return, the sense of filial piety they should exhibit towards their parents as they mature. He also highlighted the significance of extending kindness from parents to encompass other elders, presenting this as the genuine embodiment of filial piety—an expression of following and reciprocating the love initially received from one's parents.

[18] The title of this edict is "Hwaseong jinchanil yujungoe yuneum 華城進饌日諭中外綸音" (Royal Instruction Proclaimed on the Day of the Royal Banquet at Hwaseong Fortress). The full text can be found in the "Royal Instructions" (Yuneum 綸音) section (ch. 3, no. 17) in *Hongjae jeonseo* (book 28). (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_MO_0584A_0280_010_0170_2006_A262_XML)

> Good governance is nothing more than extending to others the benevolence we received from our parents. This is what Mengzi referred to as "applying the same mind to others." Just as, from Hwaseong as a single district, we can see how a province is, and from the province, we can see how the rest of this country's seven provinces and the two capitals are. Now, if benevolence by the king reaches only within Hwaseong, without reaching the eight provinces and the two capitals, and it were implemented only for this year and not practiced for thousands of years to come, how could we call it an extension of parental benevolence to others?. . . When it comes to loving one's parents, there is nothing better than following their wishes, and when it comes to following their wishes, there is nothing better than expanding upon the benevolence received from parents. You, my officials, should clearly understand my sincere intentions and diligently put them into practice.[19]

The three values Confucian scholars emphasize—filial piety, fraternal respect, and benevolence—encompass a child's love for their parents and a parent's love for their children. These concepts are rooted in mutual care rather than one-sided devotion or obligation. As the King's emphasis on acts of extending the benevolence received from parents to others shows, these values are not confined within the family sphere but rather constitute open and expansive norms, acquiring their worth through the extension of parental benevolence and filial piety toward others in society (Kim 2020, 233–39).

Following the celebration of his parents' sixtieth birthday, King Jeongjo hosted a grand feast honoring the elderly. He invited elderly individuals aged 70 and above among the officials, those aged 80 and above among the commoners, and individuals who turned 60 in the current year, similar to the King's mother. A ritual to honor and serve these elderly individuals was included in this feast. Moreover, the King also actively demonstrated the Confucian state's commitment to inclusivity and coexistence by separately gathering elderly individuals

19 "仁政在乎推之而已. 孟子所謂擧斯心, 加諸彼者是爾. 今以華城一府推之, 一道可知, 一道而推之, 七道兩都又可知矣. 今玆施惠, 只及於華城一府, 而不及於八道兩都, 只行於今年一年, 而不行於千年萬年, 是豈曰推之云乎? . . . 愛親莫尙於順志, 順志莫尙於廣恩. 咨爾有司之臣, 知予至意, 明聽恪遵" ("Yuneum 綸音," ch. 3, no. 17; In *Hongjae jeonseo*, book 28).

who were not officially registered in the resident records. He treated them to food and drink, showing respect and care for these aging individuals. This gesture highlighted the Confucian state's proactive stance in not excluding social minorities and striving for their co-existence.

Beyond this occasional action, there were efforts to normalize the extension of these values in daily life. To encourage the voluntary practice of filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence, King Jeongjo published books like the *Lesser Learning* (*Sohak* 小學, Xiaoxue in Chinese), the *Illustrated Guide to the Five Relationships* (*Oryun haengsildo* 五倫行實圖), and the *Compendium of Local Village Rituals* (*Hyangnye happyeon* 鄕禮合編). These publications were distributed to local government offices, local Confucian schools (*hyanggyo* 鄕校), and private Confucian academies (*seowon* 書院).

In particular, King Jeongjo saw local village rituals (*hyangnye* 鄕禮) as a crucial foundation for cultivating moral virtues within society and spreading the values of Neo-Confucianism. The *Compendium of Local Village Rituals* (*Hyangnye happyeon* 鄕禮合編) is prefaced with an instruction to the people and includes sections on the local wine-drinking rite (*hyangeumjurye* 鄕飮酒禮), the local archery rite (*hyangsarye* 鄕射禮), and the village code (*hyangyak* 鄕約). The book's appendix also introduces the procedures and meanings of coming-of-age ceremonies and wedding ceremonies.

In the book's preface,[20] King Jeongjo's emphasis on the local wine-drinking rite, which is the ritual of village festivities, stands out; King Jeongjo expressed his political stance by stating that governing the nation was not as difficult as he had thought after learning about the local wine-drinking rite.

[20] The title of the preface is "Yangno, munong. Banhaeng Sohak, Oryunhaengsil, hyangeum uisik, hyangyak jorye yuneum 養老, 務農. 頒行小學, 五倫行實, 鄕飮儀式, 鄕約條例綸音" (Revering Elders and Encouraging Agriculture—A Royal Instruction to Enact the *Lesser Learning*, the *Illustrated Guide to the Five Relations*, the Local Wine-Drinking Rite, and the Regulations of the Village Code). The full text can be found in the "Royal Instructions" (Yuneum 綸音) section (ch. 4, no. 1) in *Hongjae jeonseo* (book 29). (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_MO_0584A_0290_010_0010_2006_A262_XML)

> Graced by the blessings of Heaven, I am able to commemorate the sixtieth birthday of the Queen Dowager [King Jeongjo's mother]. With the intention of sharing joy with the subjects from all directions, I have made utmost efforts to hold rituals that elevate elders and spread the virtuous deeds of filial sons. . . . Those who love their parents cannot easily hate others, and those who respect their parents cannot easily belittle others. This is attributed to their adherence to the fundamental principle, extending filial piety beyond their parents to encompass others. While ancient Chinese dynasties like Xia, Shang, and Zhou had differences in the way they favored those with virtues or titles, they never neglected the reverence for elders. Generally, esteeming elders was closely tied to serving one's parents. However, nowadays, people do not fear treating elders with disrespect. . . . As stated in *Mencius*, "If everyone shows filial piety to their parents and respect to their elders, the world would be well governed." In my view, conducting a ritual like the local wine-drinking rite for a day is an excellent way to educate and encourage the people. This ritual allows elders to rest and comforts the farmers, bringing happiness. It corrects the order based on age, discriminates between the noble and humble, and establishes a clear distinction between high and low.[21]

According to King Jeongjo's remarks, virtuous and capable individuals were held in high esteem within the model of governance in ancient China, spanning the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. Above all, throughout this era, elders were profoundly respected.[22] Jeongjo

[21] "肆予膺天之嘏, 恭逢慈宮週甲. 期與八方臣庶共其樂, 尊年錫類之典, 無所不用其極. . . . 夫愛親者, 不敢惡於人. 敬親者, 不敢慢於人. 以其廣敬而因本也. 故虞夏商周之相承, 富德親爵之有殊, 而齒則不遺者. 蓋年之爲貴, 次於事親也. 凡今之人, 不畏遺年也. . . . 傳曰, 人人親其親長其長, 而天下平. . . . 予又思之, 一日禮行, 風動四方, 惟鄉飮酒近之. 是禮也, 休老而勞農, 導歡而序齒, 明貴賤而辨隆卑" ("Yuneum 綸音," ch. 4, no. 1; In *Hongjae jeonseo*, book 29).

[22] I find it difficult to view the emphasis placed by Joseon's kings on rituals for the elders as simply granting unfair privileges or rewards to elders solely based on their age. Michael Young, in Chapter 4 of The Rise of Meritocracy, points out that conferring power or positions to unqualified individuals based on their age is no different from giving positions to children solely because their parents belong to the upper class. He discusses the issues of gerontocracy and warns of the dangers of governance by elders in a democratic society becoming a government "for," "by," and "of" elders. The idea that "age was the crucial characteristic of the most enduring ruling class" mentioned in the book's statement is worth contemplating. (Of course, these statements are just hypothetical musings from a meritocratic standpoint.) It's necessary to understand that the respect

considered honoring elders nearly as significant as showing affection to parents. As a proponent of Confucian politics, he affirmed Mencius' assertion that governing the world becomes manageable through practicing filial piety towards parents and respect towards elders. More specifically, he identified the local wine-drinking rite as a compelling illustration of imparting educational influence within a single-day ritual. He highlighted its primary functions, including setting an age-based order, demonstrating reverence for elders, and discerning hierarchical distinctions based on these conditions.

As previously examined, King Jeongjo's emphasis on the local wine-drinking rite aimed to encourage the practice of filial piety and fraternal respect through rituals, thereby prompting the people to voluntarily embrace these virtues. On the other hand, Jeong Yak-yong (pen name: Dasan) also underscored the importance of other rituals, drawing on ancient classics to propose ways of expanding Confucian virtues. According to him, there were two representative rituals for honoring elders during ancient times when Confucians believed that ideal governance had been achieved. One focused on elderly individuals affiliated with the government, and the other on elders within the general populace. These rituals took place at *Taixue* 太學, the state-sponsored institution of higher education, and *hyanggyo* 鄕校, the local Confucian schools.

For government officials who had reached the age of 70 and retired to the countryside, Dasan mentioned that Taixue held rituals where the emperors directly cared for them. On the other hand, in the case of elderly individuals among the commoners, Dasan particularly emphasized they were parents of those who had contributed to the community, such as fathers and grandfathers of deceased individuals who had made significant contributions to the country, such as sacrifice for the nation during wartime. He elucidated that these rituals, which seemed to have taken place in imperial palaces and educational

accorded to elders in Confucian society wasn't about granting them status or power, but rather a policy aimed at protecting them as socially vulnerable individuals, including the sick and weak. Considering the inclusion of elders, seniors, children, and the weak in the pursuit of filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence by scholars, it's important to reflect on this aspect (Young 2020, 131–33).

establishments of other kingdoms in ancient times, could be reinstated by local officials through specific rituals even in his contemporary era, the Joseon dynasty.

> In the past, at Taixue, rituals were held to honor and serve elders, aiming to promote filial piety among the populace. There were also rituals designed to differentiate between elders and the young, fostering a sense of mutual respect. Additionally, rituals were conducted to provide sustenance to orphans. These practices aimed to prevent the abandonment of the vulnerable. This is why filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence were regarded as fundamental teachings at Taixue. The officials in charge should keep this in mind and conduct rituals at local schools (*hyanggyo*) that exemplify care for elders, and they should perform the local wine-drinking rite to foster filial piety. When the nation faces external threats and challenges, it's essential to uphold the intention of looking after those who sacrificed their lives for the country by supporting their surviving children (orphans) and helping those who are left alone. Only then can it be said that the system is well-established. If it has been a long time since the crisis, it is also advisable to seek out the descendants of those who upheld righteousness during those trying times and invite them to the educational institutions in spring to carry out the caring rituals, which involves providing meals to orphans. This practice encourages loyalty.[23]

In the "Yejeon 禮典" section of his book *Admonitions on Governing the People* (*Mongmin simseo* 牧民心書), Dasan mentioned that when a sense of reverence towards elders is cultivated, the people naturally engage in filial piety. As a means to cultivate respect towards elders, he suggested that asking elders about good governance should be included in the rituals that show respect and care for them. During these rituals, the governor acts as the host seeking advice on governance, while elders of community members play the role of guests answering the

23 "古者, 太學行養老之禮, 以之興孝, 行齒學之禮, 以之興弟, 行饗孤之禮, 使民不背, 此孝弟慈之所以爲大學之宗旨也. 牧宜存此意, 學宮行養老之禮, 行鄕飮之禮, 以興孝弟. 其或新經寇難, 民有死於王事者, 饗其孤子, 以存恤孤之意, 亦足以備文也. 若經亂已久者, 訪求倡義家子孫, 春饗于學宮, 是亦勸忠之要務也" ("Yejeon yukjo 禮典六條," "Heunghak 興學" chapter 1; In *Mongmin simseo*, book 7).

questions. In practice, Jeong Yak-yong provided paper and brushes to elder participants in the ritual, asking them to write down wise sayings related to governance. Officials then collected these sayings and presented them to the governor for consideration. The practice of seeking advice was missing from the chapter on "Venerating Elders" (*Yangno* 養老) in the Joseon dynasty's *Ceremonies of the Five Rites of the State* (國朝五禮儀). Yet, Jeong Yak-yong reinstated the seeking advice tradition within the rituals dedicated to the common elders, thus replenishing the previously absent elements of the nation's ritual practice (Lee 2018, 78–84).

The phase of seeking advice in the ritual to serve and honor elders reflects political intention to foster a natural spontaneous inclination among the people to practice filial piety and fraternal respect. Instead of viewing the people as a passive mass that requires one-sided education from the governing authority, this approach can be interpreted as encouraging the people to willingly participate in rituals by incorporating their advice. It reflects Jeong Yak-yong's perspective to regard the people as voluntary agents of morality, simultaneously providing them with an opportunity to participate in politics through this perspective.

Unlike rituals aimed at honoring elders, there was a lack of clear references in Confucian classic texts endorsing practices for the welfare of orphans and other children, which embodies the virtue of parental benevolence for children. However, Jeong Yak-yong elaborated on ways to protect orphans and young children in more detail, drawing inspiration from the six policies of "Six Rules to Protect and Care" (Baoxi liuzheng 保息六政) in the "Deguan situ 地官司徒" chapter of the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮).[24] In a manner similar to the section in the *Rites of Zhou*, in *Admonitions on Governing the People*, Jeong Yak-yong formulated six policies under the "Aemin 愛民" chapter (*Mongmin simseo*, book 4). These encompassed the practices of honoring and serving elders, protecting young children, assisting the impoverished, mourning and empathizing together, mutual care for the sick, and joint

[24] See following passage (no. 69) in the "Deguan situ 地官司徒" chapter of the *Rites of Zhou*: "以保息六養萬民, 一曰慈幼, 二曰養老, 三曰振窮, 四曰恤貧, 五曰寬疾, 六曰安富."

response to disasters. Also, in his commentaries on the *Great Learning*, Jeong Yak-yong explains that virtuous kings established systems to protect orphans in ancient times. Orphans of deceased state merits were publicly cared for by the state, while private citizens' orphans were encouraged to be entrusted to one another's care. People were advised to nurture each other's children collectively.[25]

As we can see from the review of various examples above, the virtues of filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence, along with the various rituals designed to realize them, can ultimately be seen as advocating a politics of coexistence. Confucian politics aimed to collectively assist and protect diverse socially vulnerable groups—namely elders, children, the sick and infirmed, the impoverished, those grappling with frustrating affairs such as funerals, and those afflicted by disasters—with the goal of promoting harmony and support.[26] Both the king and the officials, including Jeong Yak-yong, believed that through regular participation in rituals, the people could practice Confucian virtues, thus fostering a Confucian community of coexistence. This vision extended from the household to the village, encompassing broader communal domains where individuals would mutually support and care for one another (Song 2010, 76–77).

IV. Rituals and Public Values of Filial Piety and Fraternal Respect

In the eighteenth century in Joseon, both kings and scholars believed

[25] This argument can be found in Jeong's *Daehak gongui* (See book 3, ch. 6). (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_MP_0597A_0270_030_0060_2014_006_XML)

[26] In *Admonitions on Governing the People*, Jeong Yak-yong suggests that local officials should regularly conduct ceremonies to protect elders, adults, and children. He proposes conducting ceremonies for "venerating elders" (養老) in the ninth lunar month, aiming to educate on treating elders according to their age; in the tenth lunar month, conducting rituals for "a ceremonial practice of raising toasts" (鄕飮酒) to educate on respecting village elders; and in the second lunar month, conducting rituals for "practices for the welfare of orphans and other children" (恤孤), aiming to teach the care and support of orphans (See "Yejeon yukjo 禮典六條," "Heunghak 興學" chapter 6; In *Mongmin simseo*, book 7).

that virtues such as filial piety and fraternal respect possessed a communal dimension that initially bridged the gap between oneself and others, particularly during birth and early life. Furthermore, they posited that while initially developed within the confines of the domestic sphere, these virtues can serve as a foundation for imparting a communal principle that extends to a wider spectrum of relationships.

In general, Confucians viewed adhering directly to a parent's wishes as the initial stage of filial piety. As seen in the "Liren 里仁" chapter of the *Analects*, Confucius taught that even when a child's intentions are not followed by their parents after making a request, a child should still show even greater respect for the parents (*Analects* 4.18). However, the concept of filial piety, as discussed in Confucianism, cannot be narrowly confined to simplistic blind obedience. Within the school of Xunzi, filial piety is seen not as a mindless submission or affection toward parents but rather as an attitude where children, based on a sense of duty and integrity, engage in constructive discussions to evaluate their parents' right and wrong. They argue that "true filial piety involves discerning the principles of what should be followed and what should not, and then, with great respect, devotion, and sincerity, executing the former with careful consideration. . . . The term great filial piety can be used when one can, with proper reason, carry out what needs to be followed."[27] This perspective suggests that simply conforming to parental actions cannot be considered as true filial piety. Instead, the focus lies in examining the reasons behind actions that ought to be followed. Indeed, even among Confucian scholars, those aligned with the school of Xunzi argued that "children who engage in constructive debates with their parents would be less likely to commit rudeness in society."[28]

While Mencius emphasized that filial piety is fundamentally an innate virtue, Confucians did not interpret it in a simplistic manner. For instance, Dasan admitted that the only instinctive action humans possess is the love for their own children as parents. However, he

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[27] "明於從不從之義, 而能致恭敬·忠信端慤, 以愼行之, 則可謂大孝矣. . . . 故子從父, 奚子孝? . . . 審其所以從之之謂孝" (*Xunzi* 29.2).

[28] "父有爭子, 不行無禮" (*Xunzi* 29.2).

also proposed a nuanced model of human relationships. According to him, experiencing love for one's own children enables a person to comprehend the love they received from their own parents during childhood. This understanding of parental love then encourages care for siblings who are also loved by those same parents. Moreover, this progression facilitates a broader scope of affection, extending to the care for elderly neighbors as the sphere of love expands.

Jeong Yak-yong answers (to King Jeongjo) as follows:

> Among these three virtues, the affection for one's own children is the only one readily achievable by humans. Therefore, the intention of the Confucian classics was to prompt filial piety and respect by relying on this innate sentiment. As the old saying goes, "It is only through raising their own children that one truly comprehends the grace of their parents." This saying highlights that a parent's love for their child awakens a sense of filial piety within them. As a result, guided by this filial sentiment, they come to respect and cherish even the other children their parents bring into the world. This love for their own child fosters an understanding of reverence towards siblings.[29]

The statement above is Dasan's response during a discussion concerning the Great Learning with the King. He believed that among the virtues emphasized in the classical texts, the reason why filial piety and fraternal respect were highlighted is that being affectionate towards one's own children comes naturally without much effort while practicing filial piety and fraternal respect requires conscious effort.[30]

For Dasan, filial piety, and fraternal respect are not solely about inherent and blind affection or reverence towards parents and siblings. While these virtues originate within the context of family, it is worth noting that family members are essentially strangers we meet for the first time at birth—this makes filial piety and fraternal respect virtues that extend beyond personal desires and encompass public values.

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[29] "鏞曰, '三者之中, 惟慈, 人所易有, 故必因此立喻, 勉其孝弟. 古人云, 養子方知父母恩. 是喻於孝也. 因孝而敬父母所生之子. 是喻於弟也'" (*Daehak gangui* 大學講義, no. 9).

[30] This argument can be found in the "Wongyo 原教" section of *Dasan simunjip* (book 10). (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_BT_1260A_0100_010_0010_2000_005_XML)

Mencius and his disciple Wan Zhang discussed whether King Shun could blame his cruel father, Gu Sou 瞽瞍 (See *Mencius* 5A.1). Zhu Xi and many Joseon scholars interpreted this passage as the child not blaming the parents, but rather reproaching themselves for their own shortcomings in not being loved by their parents. Dasan criticized the interpretations of his predecessors, arguing that King Shun did indeed blame his parents. He claimed, "If Gu Sou attempted to kill King Shun every day and King Shun indifferently said, 'I will respectfully fulfill my duty as a child. What does it matter to me if my parents do not love me?', then King Shun would have been cold-hearted, distancing himself from his parents as if they were mere strangers."[31]

Dasan argues that one should blame bad parents who do not love their children. He believed that blaming such parents is actually a way of practicing filial piety. If one does not blame cruel and indifferent parents, it is treating them as if they were strangers. For him, filial piety was not about mere obedience to parents but about a reciprocal and mutually respectful relationship that includes the parents' obligation (慈) toward their children. Dasan analyzed the concept of resentment in his writing: "If a father is not benevolent (不慈), can a son resent him? Not yet. However, if the child has fulfilled his filial duties and the father remains not benevolent, treating the child as Gu Sou treated King Shun, then it is permissible to resent the parents."[32] The principles of Confucian human relationships can be said to extend from the family to society. However, an important point is that even within the family relationship between parents and children, both private and public principles were already at work. Filial piety and fraternal respect, which denote affection and respect respectively, encompass both the principles of intimate and close relationships and those of respectful and reverent, yet distanced, relationships.

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31 "瞽瞍日以殺舜爲事, 舜且恝然而莫之愁曰, '我恭爲子職而已, 父母之不我愛, 於我何與哉?' 則舜冷心硬腸, 視父母如路人者也. 故號泣于旻天, 怨之慕之, 天理也" ("Man Jang 萬章," ch. 5, no. 1; In *Maengja youi*, book 2).

32 "父不慈, 子怨之, 可乎? 曰未可也. 子盡其孝, 而父不慈, 如瞽瞍之於虞舜, 怨之可也" ("Wonwon 原怨"; In *Dasan simunjip*, book 10). (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_BT_1260A_0100_010_0060_2000_005_XML)

In addition to Jeong Yak-yong, who was a member of the Namin faction from Gyeonggi-do Province, Choe Jwa-hae 崔左海 (1738-1799), a scholar from the Noron faction, also left critical commentary on the dialogue between Mencius and Wan Zhang.[33] He argued that while children should be filial to their parents, they also have the right to resent parents who do not love them, and that parents have a duty to show benevolence to their children. These scholars critiqued both Mencius and Xunzi, contemplating the private and public significance of the relationships between parents and children within the family. In fact, the issue of filial piety and fraternal respect was not limited to individual morality but was central to Confucian family values and kinship culture. These values upheld the norms of the "normal family"—including blood relations, marriage, and adoption—that were managed and sanctioned by the state. The critical readings of filial piety and fraternal respect by late Joseon intellectuals played a crucial role in recognizing the family as part of the public sphere.

Starting from oneself to parents, and from parents to oneself, and further expanding to neighbors, this concentric structure of relationships, King Jeongjo depicted in a similar manner, elucidating the virtues that carry communal significance surpassing individual desires. As with the aforementioned intellectuals, for King Jeongjo, thevalue of filial piety was not confined to the private or familial realm. Instead, its spirit was most fully realized when it extended into the public sphere.

> On the first day of the New Year, at an auspicious moment, I extended congratulations to my mother for her long and healthy life. As I beheld her countenance, unmarked by the passage of time, my heart brimmed with delight. Inspired by this sentiment, I wish to spread joy and comfort among other elderly individuals. For doesn't the happiness and contentment of many seniors depend on the abundant ripening of all grains during a year of prosperity? With this in mind, I aspire to establish policies that uplift the peasants and bring happiness to

[33] See the following passage in the "Man Jang sang 萬章上" (Wan Zhang—A) chapter of Choe's *Hidden Meanings in the Mencius* (*Maengja jeorui* 孟子竊意) (In *Oseo jeju jeorui* 五書諸註竊意, book 4): "夫慕父母深者, 必不得則怨亦深, 故不得而怨, 則知其慕矣. 槩舜平生則只是慕也, 而從不得後言之怨, 便是慕也. 故怨慕也者, 非謂怨而又是慕也, 猶言怨以慕之也."

> elders, serving as the foundational principle. . . . Since Heaven has entrusted me with the duty to ensure the people's well-being, I shall engage diligently in agricultural management. I hope that I may see the people's responses that hint my adhering to Heaven's mandate. If every year brings prosperity, just as it has this year, and if bountiful harvests continue for countless years, then the pleasure of every farmer shall become the pleasure of their children, which shall, in turn, become pleasure of the nation.[34]

King Jeongjo mentioned that upon seeing his mother's joyful demeanor, he was delighted by it that he felt a strong desire to bring happiness to elders in the country. While this statement could potentially hold political undertones as a ruler's rhetoric, I believe the Confucian focus on filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence has a long historical significance that makes it challenging to dismiss as a mere political strategy. The attempt to extend the dynamics of parent-child relationships to encompass interactions with other elderly individuals, as well as the King's dedication to agricultural management, represents his belief that contributing to the well-being and contentment of elders is his own duty. In other words, the King's position and influence were considered as contributing to the peace and welfare of fellow citizens through the broad application of filial piety and fraternal respect in his actions. It's reasonable to assume that as a monarch, he considered this effort to be the most genuine expression of filial duty while also recognizing it as a means of contributing to the overall well-being of the people.

While the communal value inherent in filial piety and fraternal respect lies firstly in their expansiveness and openness, another communal value is rooted in the voluntary nature of practicing these virtues. In Confucian society, both monarchs and their subjects aimed to educate the people about filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence through national educational institutions, local schools,

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34 "値三元之嘉會, 祝萬壽於慈宮. 仰瞻韶顔, 喜騰難老. 推而廣之, 休寧羣老, 羣老之休且寧. 顧不係於豐年之多黍多稌乎? 故勞農休老之本. . . . 天以錫我康功, 我亦勤玆田功, 徯志之應, 庶可質諸. 歲歲年年, 如昨如今, 以至萬斯年無斁. 農夫之慶, 人子之慶也. 人子之慶, 朝廷之慶也" ("Yuneum 綸音," ch. 4, no. 1; In *Hongjae jeonseo*, book 29).

and private academies. However, they believed that it was not feasible to compel the people to actively practice these values. In a broader sense, this marks the boundary between Confucian scholars and legalists (法家).

Even within Confucianism, there were varying interpretations of the learning and practice of these values depending on the scholars. The *Compendium of Local Village Rituals* (*Hyangnye happyeon* 鄕禮合編) by King Jeongjo aimed to foster the moral values of the people in the rural areas. Among several rituals included in the compendium, the village code (*hyangyak* 鄕約), a ritual related to local village rules for self-governance, raised concerns. King Jeongjo posed a question, wondering whether, in a society divided between the noble class and the common people, it was possible to truly uphold the spirit of mutual assistance, as stated in the village code.

King Jeongjo referred to a past incident where conflicts arose in local areas due to the village code, leading to clashes between officials, the wealthy, and the common people. While a high minister, Yun Si-dong, suggested that as long as the system was well-defined and managed by local officials, it would work, King Jeongjo still expressed his concerns. He worried not about the inadequacy of the system itself but about the potential negative consequences. He feared that if the village code allowed local officials, as well as local temporary representatives, to supervise ethical conduct of the people and forcibly collect contributions for assistance projects, it might lead to a situation where morality was enforced through coercion, causing serious harm.[35]

[35] The village code consists of four fundamental commitments: mutual cultivation of virtues, mutual instruction in rituals and traditions, fault-finding according to regulations, and mutual support during times of crisis. Expanding familial ethics, the village code included a slight element of compulsion by not just stopping at voluntarily showing respect to others but also pointing out their mistakes and encouraging correction. The village code involved pooling resources together to collectively address disasters, illnesses, and misfortunes in the community, which led to conflicts over financial management between the wealthy and the less fortunate residents. Consequently, King Jeongjo cautioned that the village code should be managed autonomously and voluntarily within each region, as he believed it couldn't be effectively controlled by the central authority. Despite such circumstances, there were many scholars who advocated for the implementation of the village code to promote the ethical upliftment of villages and communities.

King Jeongjo initially considered excluding the village code from the *Compendium of Local Village Rituals* because he believed that imposing a standardized version could lead to negative consequences, given that its implementation could vary depending on local circumstances. However, due to strong requests from his advisors, he included the village code in the ritual manual. King Jeongjo was mindful of Yi I's concerns that implementing the village code for the sake of guiding the people (正民) without first establishing proper governance for officials (正官) could potentially result in harm. Keeping Yi I's worries in mind, he emphasized that the village code should not become a coercive means to oppress the people.[36] These measures were taken to prevent the transformation of virtuous governance and ritual-based governance aimed at cultivating the spontaneous ethical conduct of the people into coercive means driven by legal enforcement.

In Joseon's publicly circulated manuals for rituals, such as the *Five Rites of King Sejong* (*Sejong sillok orye* 世宗實錄五禮) and the *Ceremonies of the Five Rites of the State* (*Gukjo oryeui* 國朝五禮儀), local village ceremonies notably lacked obligatory mandates, which differed from the practices observed during China's Ming dynasty (Kim 2020, 114–24). For instance, while conducting local village rituals, the local officials would have the people recite ethical pledges that they should uphold and swear to abide by. This practice, which existed during the Ming dynasty, carried coercive implications, as seen in the *Ming Legal Code* (明會典) and the *Collection of Ming Rituals* (明集禮), where violations were subject to punishment.[37] For example, in the *Great Ming Code* (*Da Ming lu* 大明律), there is a term stating that anyone who violates norms proclaimed in community rituals would face a penalty of fifty lashes (See *Dae Myeong nyul jikhae* 大明律直解, book 12, no. 201).

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[36] This argument can be found in "Ildeungnok 日得錄" (no. 4) of *Hongjae jeonseo* (book 164) (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_MO_0584A_1640_010_0010_2006_A267_XML)

[37] Peter Bol (2016) argues that Neo-Confucianism during the Song dynasty aimed for ethical communities in villages that were run voluntarily. However, during the Ming dynasty, various systems of village administration proposed by Neo-Confucianism were legislatively enforced by imperial decree, thus acquiring a compulsory aspect (392–415).

Dasan emphasized once again that while the king and local officials could lead by example in practicing virtue, it was not within their power to forcibly make the common people follow virtuous actions.[38] He believed that at local schools, the village rituals should be conducted regularly by the local officials. However, he was of the opinion that this could not be achieved through a method of reading a list of ethical norms and compelling the people to follow them. Specifically, he stressed that the local wine-drinking rite—as a ritual intended to foster filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence—should revolve around active engagement, thereby encouraging individuals to willingly embrace and embody these values through direct participation.[39] He was concerned that a collection of intricate norms and enforced loyalty oaths might actually have adverse effects on fostering ethical relationships within a community (Lee 2018, 83–84).

In the eighteenth-century Joseon era, both monarchs and officials shared the belief that the central goal of governance should be fostering the moral advancement of the people through voluntary engagement in rituals. From their perspective, virtues rooted in family values, such as filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence, serve as the cornerstone for nurturing broader societal bonds. Furthermore, there was a belief that exemplifying these values within the leadership class would organically inspire the general population to willingly embrace communal values of their own volition. While this strategy might appear as a form of top-down enlightenment, its purpose also extends to empowering individuals as independent learners on their educational journey. In reality, the monarch, governors, local gentry, and patriarchs were the key subjects in politics and education, while the people remained passive recipients of enlightenment for a long time. However, from the eighteenth century onwards, the spread of Neo-Confucian education and the dissemination of books in local villages provided the people with the opportunity to grow into autonomous agents of

[38] This argument can be found in Jeong's *Daehak gongui* (See book 1, ch. 5). (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_MP_0597A_0270_010_0050_2014_006_XML)

[39] This argument can be found in the "Yejeon yukjo 禮典六條" chapter ("Heunghak 興學" no. 6) of *Mongmin simseo* (book 7). (http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_BT_1288A_0080_050_0060_2014_002_XML)

learning.[40] Furthermore, these autonomous agents of learning could become the subjects of politics in the Confucian context, meaning they could establish ethical norms and practice them independently, thereby becoming active participants in political action. Ultimately, this could be seen as a catalyst for the people to become the subjects of politics. When examining the politics and civic consciousness of Korean society after the twentieth century, it's challenging to explain without considering the aspirations for education and morality that have been present since the late Joseon period.

V. Conclusion

Recently, some scholars in mainland China, who have conceptualized a Chinese-style political model, argue that political elites possessing a combination of knowledge, moral integrity, and a commitment to public welfare should genuinely be granted greater authority in making significant public decisions. Daniel A. Bell, one of the leading lights of this intellectual current, has been exploring the theoretical foundations and practical implications of meritocratic governance based on Confucian principles (See Bell 2006; 2015).[41] Furthermore, the stance of Joseph Chan, who argues for granting differentiated political participation rights to citizens based on their political capabilities, and the viewpoint of Tongdong Bai, who opposes political egalitarianism, are also prominent examples (See Chan 2013; Bai 2020).[42] These scholars, adhering to a modern Confucian meritocracy, draw upon the

[40] For more on the social changes in late Joseon, the spread of *seodang* (elementary education institutions), particularly the role of *seodang* as educational communities in rural areas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the social transformation where small farmers grew into educational agents centered around *seodang*, refer to Jeong (2013, 463–87).

[41] His book, *Beyond Liberal Democracy,* has received some noteworthy criticisms from fellow scholars. See Dallmayr et al. (2009). I largely agree with Dallmayr and Tan's positions in this debate. They sharply criticized the implications and limitations of Bell's Confucian meritocracy model as an alternative to modern liberal democracy.

[42] The aforementioned works are representative works advocating Confucian meritocracy. On the other hand, Kim (2012; 2020) critically analyzed the dangers of Chinese intellectuals advocating political meritocracy based on Confucian traditions.

political tradition of ancient Chinese Confucianism. They articulate a rationale that a select group of politically skilled elites possessing a strong sense of public consciousness and exceptional practical abilities should serve the welfare and happiness of the majority of citizens. This perspective rejects the idea of political egalitarianism.[43] As exemplified by the case of *shunrang* 禪讓 (*seonyang* in Korean), which is the abdication of capable rulers in favor of their successors found in the Confucian tradition, Confucian political tradition possesses certain characteristics that can be labeled as meritocratic. It is evident that Confucian scholars placed great emphasis on both extensive knowledge and moral virtues as the basis for political authority.

Another important point to consider is the significant difference between discussing Confucian meritocracy in the premodern era and in today's modern context. In premodern times, discrimination based on race, status, and gender was prevalent in all regions, both East and West. During the late Joseon period, discrimination based on status and gender also existed. However, the Confucian meritocracy of that time, which was based on scholarship, virtue, and communal dedication, played a role in breaking down these barriers of discrimination. This was because people of that era emphasized the universality of morality, scholarship, and learning. In contrast, contemporary discourses on Confucian meritocracy, such as those by Daniel A. Bell and Joseph Chan, seem to fail to seriously consider the evolved political sensibilities of today's citizens, who have been influenced by the ideology of democracy.[44] The aspiration for universal citizenship

[43] Vol. 37 of the *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* (2022) was a special issue dedicated to the topic of Confucian meritocracy. This issue featured articles addressing the issue of Confucian meritocracy, including a response by Tongdong Bai, who opposes political equality, to criticisms against his position. The issue also includes various papers presenting perspectives on Confucian meritocracy from scholars in the English-speaking world.

[44] Sor-Hoon Tan's research deeply explores how traditional Confucian values can interact with modern political systems, focusing particularly on the integration of Confucian democratic elements with modern democracy. She lucidly answers people's doubts about the compatibility of Confucianism and democracy. She has been exploring the possibilities and implications of Confucian democracy as a model of communitarian democracy, while critically reflecting on the problems derived from the liberal democracy. See Tan (2004; 2012).

and equal voting rights among citizens has now reached a point where there is no turning back to the past.[45] Therefore, I believe that modern discourses on Confucian meritocracy, which emphasize different levels of scholarship and practical abilities and argue for differential access to citizenship or political participation based on these factors, are unlikely to gain widespread support. Rather than building on certain elements of Confucian meritocracy to create differential political institutions that are contrary to equality of citizenship and human rights today, I believe we need a process of broader sharing and deeper understanding of certain ideals and values of the Confucian democratic tradition.

I believe it is necessary to focus on the more fundamental differences between Confucianism and meritocracy, rather than any superficial similarities, such as the emphasis on administrative abilities or differences in scholarship and knowledge. The notion of political competence in the eyes of Confucian scholars encompassed the ability to contribute to the coexistence and care of the members within the Confucian community. They considered their positions and authority not as rewards for exceptional skills but rather as demanding tasks and responsibilities that were central to their roles. These tasks were viewed as opportunities to realize their intrinsic nature, which was believed achievable within interactions with others. Consequently, many Confucian scholars voluntarily undertook and diligently fulfilled such tasks, driven by the belief that these responsibilities allowed them to manifest their true selves and contribute to their community.

In this regard, there is a clear divergence between the contemporary discourse of meritocracy, which emphasizes differential reward systems based on individual capabilities, and Confucianism. Confucianism focused on the voluntary practice of ethical virtues such as filial piety, fraternal respect, and parental benevolence, seeing them as essential for individuals to engage with communal values. This perspective maintains that such virtues, if they possess public value, extend beyond the confines of family to encompass local communities

[45] The Park (2024) and Hong (2018) argue that Confucian meritocratic democracy is more effective at ensuring equal rights for citizens and protecting the interests and rights of minorities than the typical Western model of democracy.

and society at large. They are practiced not through coercion by others but through an individual's autonomous choice and effort.

The other hand, if the effort of ethical practice is solely left to individual disposition, it could lead to significant political shortcomings. If neither individuals nor rulers willingly practice virtuous conduct, and if there are no institutional mechanisms to correct such situations, addressing communal challenges becomes a concern. In this regard, the legal mechanisms found in Joseon-era legal texts such as the *Great Code for State Administration* (*Geonguk daejeon* 經國大典), the *Supplement to the Great Code* (*Sok daejeon* 續大典), and the to the *Comprehensive Compilation of the Great Code* (*Daejeon tongpyeon* 大典通編), along with supplementary compulsory measures established by law, are also indispensable and cannot be overlooked. Nonetheless, procedural fairness and obligatory laws, while essential, do not inherently embody the overarching goals of coexistence and mutual prosperity among individuals and with others. The independent choices of capable individuals do not provide a sufficient reason for capable individuals to ultimately share the responsibility of protecting vulnerable or disadvantaged members of society, such as the weak, children, and the sick. The common perspective of liberalism and contemporary meritocracy is that if opportunities are equal and processes are fair, individuals should be responsible for their own outcomes, no matter what kind of outcomes they are.

I think we need, first and foremost, a deeper understanding of this communal and public nature of human beings, and of the essential need for mutual care and coexistence among vulnerable human beings, through the intellectual resources of the Confucian tradition. If we regard human nature itself as a communal nature, then in order to fully actualize ourselves, we need to establish appropriate relationships with various others. Just as I can receive assistance from them, I would also contemplate ways to care for them and find paths to live alongside them harmoniously. This, in turn, completes me. In this sense, the Confucian political tradition offers us crucial insights into the necessity of coexistence with others for our self-fulfillment. I believe that, in order to critically reflect on the shortcomings and risks of the individualistic perspective of contemporary meritocracy and

the competitive logic of libertarianism, it is crucial to contemplate the clues within Confucian traditions. In a similar vein, I believe it is also meaningful to reconsider the achievements and roles of late Joseon Confucianism, which focused not only on the monarch but also on the ethical initiative and political maturation of the scholar-officials and, more importantly, the people themselves.

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