

On This Topic

Texts and Contexts: *Women in Korean Confucianism*

Guest edited by Hwa Yeong Wang^{*}

A growing number of scholars have produced research focused on the distinctive ideas, roles, status, and social activity of women within the Confucian tradition. Most of this work has taken texts of various kinds, some written by women and others by men, as their primary objects of study. In addition to the analysis it provides, such research has the important added value of making original writings on women available to English-speaking audiences and thereby granting scholars and students access to material that many would be unable to read or teach.

This special issue brings new works on Korean Confucian textual sources on women to the English-speaking world. The three invited articles focus on short essays or excerpts written in Classical Chinese on or by women. All contributors translated the texts that serve as the focus of their contributions anew, in most cases offering the first English language translations of these works and wrote a short introductory essay explaining their core ideas and significance.

“Two Korean Women Confucian Philosophers: Im Yunjidang and Gang Jeongildang” by Philip J. Ivanhoe and Hwa Yeong Wang introduces two remarkable Korean Neo-Confucian women philosophers. Both women are known for advocating women’s moral equality based on Neo-Confucian philosophical claims in quite distinctive ways. Their lives and thought challenged the gendered structure of late Joseon society. Recently, Im and Gang have received

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more scholarly attention, especially from philosophical perspectives. Yet, only very short excerpts of their works are available for English language readers and often the same short passages are repeated by different authors. This essay provides access to more substantial translations of their works and offers a new perspective of comparative philosophy.

Jungwon Kim's "Negotiating Conventions: Geumwon and Her Nineteenth-Century Travel Record" presents a long-awaited resource for understanding the lives and thought of late Joseon women: a travel record written by a woman. In many ways, Geumwon's *Travelogue* occupies a unique position in Korean history. Her *Travelogue* is one of only a precious few examples of this genre written by women and the only one written in literary Chinese. In the process of composing this remarkable record, Geumwon not only describes her idiosyncratic journey but also interweaves her experience with her own identity, reshaping and recreating her self-perception. Through Kim's essay, readers not only will be able to travel across the Korean peninsula along with Geumwon, but also gain some sense of why and how she presents herself as a noble person 君子 in her imaginary textual context.

The third and last essay, "Contentious Source: Master Song, the Patriarch's Voice," brings a male voice on women and ritual into the broader conversation on Joseon women. The "male" is a well-known and influential figure in Korean philosophy and politics, Song Siyeol 宋時烈 (1607-89). The author focuses on Master Song's writings on women in relation to the four family rituals—capping/hair-pinning, marriage/ wedding, funeral/mourning, and sacrifice. The essay sheds new light on sources that have been hardly read or discussed and analyzes their importance from a feminist philosophical perspective. Song Siyeol's text requires one to keep the complexities of the historical context in mind. Readers will see how a male philosopher addressed issues, in the context of Korean Neo-Confucianism, and some of the tensions and strains that existed in this male scholar's life and thought on women and related philosophical issues. This contribution offers a new way to approach this kind of contentious source.

All three essays in this special issue are distinctive in their content and style, but all will increase the understanding of important texts on and by Joseon women and provide access to accurate and highly readable English translations of these works. They will guide those who are interested in the topic of women and Confucianism in Korea through new material with new perspectives for further research and teaching.