The Socio–Economic Background of Neo–Confucianism in Korea of the 15th and 16th Centuries

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I. Introduction

It was towards the end of the 13th century that Neo–Confucianism, which had risen at the end of the 10th century in China and had come to maturity the 12th century, was introduced to Korean for the first time. It is unusual to have such a lag in the cultural exchange between these two adjacent countries, but once introduced and adopted Neo–Confucianism became more deeply rooted in Korea than in China and maintained its dominant position for some five hundred years.

This particularity in the adoption and development of Neo–Confucianism in Korea has been seen in a negative light more often than not. That is, there has been a tendency to regard its late adoption as a cultural failing on the part of Koreans and its long survival as a symptom of cultural inertia or stagnation. However, it can be understood in a positive manner, too. The late adoption of Neo–Confucianism can be explained on the ground that, superior though it may be, a foreign culture can only gain influence in response to some internal necessity, while its longevity in Korea can be seen as reflecting the unprecedented success of its transplantation.

Of these two perspectives, one should evaluate Neo–Confucianism in Korea from the latter point of view, as no ideology or system of thought can survive unless it contains major features that elicit a positive response in

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the society that adopts it. On this assumption, my study will examine the positive contribution that Neo-Confucianism has made to the development of Korean history from a socio-economic viewpoint. At the same time, such a study will help to offset the strong tendency to view Korean Neo-Confucianism as mainly theoretical and academic.

I will focus on two problems. First, the influence of Neo-Confucianism upon the development of Korean agricultural technology, and second, the historical role of the social system prescribed by Neo-Confucianism, particularly the communal granary system (sach’ang) and the community compact (hyangyak). Though these matters could be discussed as affecting the whole Chosŏn dynasty, here I choose the 15th and 16th centuries, its period of absorption. In fact, the predilection among Korean Neo-Confucianists to engage in philosophical inquiry, a development of the latter half of the 16th century, may be seen as the blossom of the ideological and scholarly spheres of the socio-economic advances in the 15th and 16th centuries.

II. Neo-Confucianism and the Development of Korean Agricultural Techniques in the 15th and 16th Centuries

Neo-Confucianism began to be introduced into Korean from the Yuan dynasty during the last decade of the 13th century. What was introduced into Korean at that time was the cumulative product of developments throughout the Sung and Yuan periods. In the early Sung dynasty, there had been a development of the so-called "classified" or "encyclopedic" learning (lei-shu-hsüeh) which was addressed to the practical art of governing. Then after the middle of the period, especially during the Southern Sung period, the study of human nature and principle (hseng-li-hsueh) flourished and came to be regarded as the core of Neo-Confucian scholarship. These two were the main trends of Neo-Confucianism, and developed continuously until the Yuan period, while the new historical studies which emerged in the early Sung are known to have played a role in mediating between these two tendencies.¹

These different branches of Neo-Confucian study were introduced to Korea together and simultaneously. This left Korea free to choose, admittedly on the basis of superficial knowledge, whatever it found useful at any given time. In fact, in the 15th century, in consonance with the establishment of the new system of governance of the Chosŏn dynasty, Korean

¹ See Naitō Torajirō, Shina shugakushin (History of Chinese Historiography), (Tokyo, Kōbundō, 1967), pp 241–300
literati concentrated their attention on the encyclopedic learning aspects of the new doctrine, and only in the 16th century did the philosophy of human nature and principle begin to develop in earnest.

Neo-Confucianism in Korea in the 15th century has been referred to as the study of literary style (sajanghak). But since this is merely a subfield of the encyclopedic learning, the term is at best imprecise. Learning in this period was not only concerned with the study of literary style but was also addressed to the study of such encyclopedic works the General Treatise (T'ung-chuh), Comprehensive Inquiry into Recorded Institutions (Wen-hsien-t'ung-kao) and the Jewel Sea (Yu-hai), because of their relevance to a Confucian restructuring and reform of Korean institutions. This mode of scholarly inquiry, which reached its zenith during King Sejong's reign, constituted the predominant academic tradition for about a century. The discovery of the importance of the philosophy of human nature in the 16th century can be understood as the result of the search for a means to overcome the defects of a centralized system of government that rested upon doctrines found in the encyclopedic learning, when its limitations became apparent.

While the development of Neo-Confucianism in Korea in the 15th–16th centuries may be described in two stages as above, it must be emphasized that Korean Neo-Confucians recognized from the beginning the socio-economic advantages attached to this ideology. It is believed that Neo-Confucianism was introduced first by An Hyang in 1289. But a more important year to be remembered in the exchange and adoption of this ideology is 1314. King Ch'ungsŏn, who had failed to reform his fading dynasty, handed over his throne to his son, Ch'ung-suk, and went to Peking, there to create the "Library of ten thousand volumes" (Man'gwŏndang). This library assisted Koryŏ scholars in their scholarly exchanges with Yuan scholars. In the same year Koryŏ's Royal Confucian Academy (Sŏnggyun'gwan) dispatch-
ed members of its faculty to the Chiangnan area of central China to purchase ten thousand new books. It was not until King Kongmin's reign, some 50 years later, that Neo-Confucianism won its political dominance. It is worth noting, however, that the first contact had been made in the Chiangnan area. Going to Chiangnan to purchase new books about Neo-Confucianism was not surprising, since from the Southern Sung period bibliophiles had published many books in this area. But Chiangnan had a broader meaning than merely a place to purchase books. The region was not only the principal center for the development of Ch'eng-Chu Neo-Confucianism in the latter half of the Sung period, but it was also the place of origin of the new Chiangnan agricultural technology which economically made possible the rise and development of Neo-Confucianism. It can be suggested that this direct contact with Neo-Confucianism in the Chiangnan area offered an opportunity not merely to understand Confucian scholarship but also its relationship to agricultural development. In this respect, the fact that in 1319 former King Ch'ungsŏn with Yi Che-hyŏn and Kwŏn Han-gong traveled in the Chiangnan area does not seem to have been mere happenstance. Similarly, the significance of Koryŏ's contacts with rival leaders in South China, including Chang Shih-ch'eng during Kongmin's reign, is not found only in their effectiveness as diplomatic maneuvers but also in the strong suggestion that this episode conveys that cultural reorientation was then under way in Koryŏ.

Interest in Chiangnan agricultural technology can be perceived during the first stage of the adoption of Neo-Confucianism, when Paek Mun-bo, a representative Neo-Confucian scholar of the age, proposed the manufacture and diffusion of the water wheel (shui-ch'ec/such'a, a kind of water pump). Commenting that it was only by dint of using the water wheel that the people in the regions of Chiangnan and Hun-shui were freed from concern about flood or drought, Paek Mun-bo maintained that drought could be overcome through the manufacture and diffusion of this device and that the transplanting of rice would also be possible. The use of the water wheel and the technique of rice-transplantation were the cornerstone of Chiangnan agricultural technology.

In 1349, thirteen years before Paek made this suggestion, Koryŏ scholars had obtained a copy of Nung-sng ch'i-yao (Collection of agricultural and

4 Koryŏsa, 34 20a–b
6 Koryŏsa, Sikkhwaj 2, Nongsang, 79 9b–10a
sericultural practices), and made an abridged popular edition. As is known, Nung-sang chi-yao was published before Yuan defeated Southern Sung, and the contents cover agricultural techniques in territory occupied by Yuan, that is, the traditional dry farming regions in northern China, excluding the Chuangnan area with its new agricultural technology. In spite of its limitations then, Koryŏ’s scholars were persuaded to publish the popular edition—a clear indication of their deep concerns to improve their nation’s agricultural practices. Most of the new ruling elite that had begun to emerge towards the end of Koryŏ came from the class of middle or smaller landlords, so they were naturally more interested in the agricultural economy than had been the aristocrats in the previous period, who functioned mainly as absentee landlords.

In Korean agriculture, dry farming prevailed until the late Koryŏ period, and its technique is known to have been similar to that of north China. The dissemination of a Korean edition of Nung-sang chi-yao resulted from a desire to improve this traditional technique. However, once the advantages of Chuangnan agricultural technology had become known through direct observation, it was soon put into practice in Korea. The first Chinese book reflecting the new agricultural technique was Chen Fu’s Nung-shu (Book of Farming). It is not certain to what use this work may have been put at the end of Koryŏ dynasty, but direct references to it can be found in Nongsa chikseol (Guide to Farming) published in 1429.

Since the use of agricultural techniques is often subject to restrictions by natural conditions, some problems in the adoption and application caused by differences in natural conditions had to be solved. Excellent results could not be achieved quickly. Though the advantages of Chuangnan agricultural technology were known at the end of the Koryŏ dynasty, it took at least one century to introduce and apply it to Korean agriculture because of the difference in local conditions. Nongsa chikseol in 1430 displayed conspicuous achievements in the development of traditional techniques, but only a portion of the new theory of Chuangnan agriculture found application. The

7 See “Nongsang chipyo husŏ” written by Yi Saek, Yi Saek, Mogiun mun’go (Writings of Yi Saek) (Seoul, Taedong Munhwa Yŏngusyo, 1973), in Koryŏ myŏnghyŏn’ip (Writings of Famous Scholars in Koryŏ Dynasty), vol. 3, 92b-4a
8 See Amano Gennosuke, Chūgoku nōgōshu kenkyū (Studies on the History of Chinese Agriculture) (Tokyo, Ochanomizu Shobō, 1962), pp. 481-82
9 See Nishiyama Takechi, Ajia-teki nōgō to nōgō shakan (Asian Agriculture and Agricultural Society) (Tokyo, Tokyo University Press, 1969), pp. 154-55
10 Yi Kwang-nun, "Yangjam kyŏnghŏm ch’iwalyo e tachayŏ" (On a Book on Sericulture titled Yangjam kyŏnghŏm ch’iwalyo), Yŏksa hakpo (1965), 28-32
remainder had to wait a half century for successful assimilation.

Chiangnan agricultural technology enabled wet-rice cultivation to make great progress. Its principal improved features are facilities for water control and techniques of fertilization, which made it possible to overcome limitations imposed by having to let land lie fallow in the dry season, and this in turn led to adoption of the practice of rice-transplantation. Chiangnan, as is well known, had much rainfall and many rivers, so its natural condition is favorable to wet-rice cultivation. The agricultural technology of rice transplantation in Chiangnan was made possible by the development of channels to use rivers or streams as irrigation water. Rice-transplantation is the practice of setting out young rice plants in a paddy field after they have been started as seedlings in a separate seedbed. This raises productivity by speeding up root growth and, since the young rice plants are reared in a separated seedbed, simplifies considerably the task of weeding after transplantation. However, in spite of these advantages, this method could not be used without a secure water-supply, so even in China it had become widely diffused only after the Sung period when river water came to be pumped by water wheel, and “water fences” (shu-cha/such’ack), embankments built of earth and often bamboo, served to channel it to the fields.

Another characteristic of Chiangnan agricultural technology was the development of a fertilizing technique making use of human excrement and ashes. Up until this time, the recovery or maintenance of the fertility of the soil, in the case of wet-rice cultivation, had relied on the use of the mud of irrigation water, as had been practiced in north China, or the method of burning rice straw after the harvest as had been done in south China. Both of these methods, however, depended on the land lying fallow for one year. In dry farming, the method of using the green manure of leguminous plants also was premised on the land lying fallow for one year.

The agricultural techniques described in the Nongsā chiksŏl point the way to the use of fecces and ash as in Chiangnan agricultural technology. But

11 This discussion is largely based on Amano, Chūgoku nōgyōshi, Nishiyama, Ajua-teki nōgyō, Okazaki Fumio and Ikeda Shizuo, Konan bunka haisatsushigi (History of the development of the Chiangnan Culture) (Tokyo, Kōbundō Shōbō, 1941), Sudo Yoshiyuki, Sūdan kezaushi kenkyū (Studies in the Economic History of the Sung Period) (Tokyo, Tokyo University Press, 1962) and Nishijima Sadao, Chūgoku kezaushi kenkyū (Studies in Chinese Economic History) (Tokyo, Tokyo University press, 1966).
12 Nishijima, Chūgoku kezaushi, pp. 184–94.
13 Nishijima, Ajua-teki nōgyō, p. 62.
14 Yi T'ae-jin, “Sipsa-e segi pongŏp kisul paltal kwa sunhŭng sajok” (The Role of the Emerging Literati in the Development of Agricultural Technology in 14th–15th Century
the book warns of the danger of crop failure in the transplantation of seedlings in a wet-rice cropping system, and it recommends that “seeding dry rice fields” continue as a general practice. Seeding dry rice fields is a way to supplement wet cropping since, during the rainy season, rice seeds are sowed directly in the rice field, not on a seedbed. Nevertheless the crop yield from “seeding a dry rice field” utilized land that would otherwise have been left fallow through the development of fertilizing techniques. This pattern of Korean rice cultivation in the 15th century resulted from natural conditions in the area. The climate of Korea provides less rainfall than in the Chiangnan area. Drought in spring is especially common, and it presents a condition unfavorable for wet rice cultivation, so adopting the method of dry field farming, as in the case of seeding dry rice fields, was a special adaptation meant to overcome spring droughts. The climate of Korea, however, is more humid than in northern China, and thus more favorable to dry field farming. It was owing to this favorable natural condition in Korea that the Nongsŏ chikseol recommended the technique of triple-cropping—m—two—years, which is not mentioned in Nung-sang-chi—yao of the Yuan period

Upto the 15th century, dry field farming constituted 70 percent of Korean agriculture. And significant improvements had been made in dry field farming techniques, improvements attributable more to efforts of Koreans themselves than to the influence of China. In fact, even the fertilizing techniques described in the Nongsŏ chikseol, despite their basic similarities to those of Chiangnan, differ considerably in detail. Nevertheless insomuch as there was interest in farming manuals and techniques from China, some direct influence can be inferred. Although Korea went ahead with the development of its own fertilizing techniques, the contact with Chiangnan agricultural technology is believed to have been helpful in adjusting to this change in farming. Interest in Chiangnan agricultural technology in the latter half of the 14th century such as that expressed by Paek Mun-bo in his suggestions on techniques of water control had focused on adopting Chiangnan hydraulic technological methods to the Korean situation. This was the

Korea), Tongyanghak(1979), 9 337–39

15 The Nongsŏ chikseol argued that this method was vulnerable to drought, and in fact its use already had been barred, in the 14th year of King T’aegong(T’aegong sikkok, 27.43a)


17 Ibid, p 23

18 Yi T’a’-jun, 1979, p 337
most important problem for the Chosŏn dynasty in the 15th century

Probably before the 15th century the only technique of water control in Korea was the use of mountain streams, dammed up in valleys—the so-called “dammimg”(cheŏn) method 19 One should not overestimate the contribution of irrigation of this type to the development of rice production in Korea, since one official gazetteer compiled in the middle of the 15th century reveals that only one sixth of the paddy fields got the benefit of water control, even in the “three southern provinces” which were favorably situated for rice cultivation 20 In these circumstances the diffusion of the rice transplantation method involved some risk, as it might endanger the supply of rice. Apparently the seeding of dry rice fields continued to prevail for some time as a more dependable alternative.

The method of using water wheels and water fences in Chiangnan agricultural technology was seen as a way of overcoming the limits imposed by Korea’s traditional “dammimg method”. The water wheel, one of the two innovations in Chiangnan agricultural technology, was tried first, as the simpler of the two. After the beginning of the new dynasty, attempts to spread the use of this invention were made, once during King T’aejong’s reign(1400–18) and again later by King Sejong during a seven year period starting in 1429, the year the Nongsă chıksŏl was begun to compile. But these two experiments failed. The problem was how to lift the water, in view of the fact that most Korean rivers and creeks were rambling streams. But even after this problem was solved, it turned out that the soil in river beds and creeks was too coarse or sandy to hold water and let it accumulate properly 21

After the failure of the water wheel, the use of the water fence was encouraged. This structure, called ch’ŏnbang in 15th century Korea, had been tried earlier, but it was regularly encouraged only after King Munjong(1450–52) acceded to the throne 22 The water fence, later often termed po (“banked river”) irrigated the fields by first storing water at a higher level built with earth and wood reinforcement and then leading it down through channels to fields below. This enabled water to be brought in over long

19 The following discussion of methods of irrigation is largely drawn from the author’s “Simnyuk segi ūn ch’ŏnbang(po) kwan’gae ūn paltal” (The Development of the “Water Fence” Irrigation Technique in the 16th Century Korea), Han U-gŭn paksa chŏng-nyŏn kunyŏm sahak nonch’ong(Seoul, Chńsk Sanŏpsa, 1981), pp 345–48
20 Yi Kwang-nim, Yiyo sunsa yŏng’gu(History of Water Control Techniques in Chosŏn Dynasty Korea) (Seoul, Han’guk Yŏn’guwŏn, 1961), p 28
21 Yi T’ae-jin, 1981, pp 349–52
22 Ibd , pp 352–58
distances and facilitated the use of water in larger quantities, thus overcoming some of the problems revealed in the experiments with water wheels, so that the water fence, though more difficult to construct, prevailed. This method was disseminated in the beginning only through initiatives taken by the central government, but as recognition of its advantages grew, widespread use of the water fence in the “three southern provinces” was brought about through the efforts of the local social elites.

The progressive diffusion of the “banked river” method of irrigation can be traced in records of the period. Some local gazetteers compiled in the late 16th century or early 17th century note as many as twenty to thirty “banked river” systems, as distinct from facilities of the damming method.23

The above development of “banked rivers” represented a turning point in Korean rice cultivation. As control of water by this technique became established, conditions for the diffusion of rice transplantation became more favorable. The further diffusion of rice transplantation through water control techniques led to a detailed description of rice transplantation being given in Nongga chipsŏng (Compilation for farmers), which was published in 1655. This contrasts sharply with the casual discussions of transplantation in the Nongsa chiaksŏl.24 Thus, the widely-held view that transplantation became a common practice only in the 18th century must be revised; its further diffusion must be regarded as a natural development of trends initiated in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Apart from the development of “banked rivers” in inland areas, Korean agriculture also advanced through substantial reclamation efforts in the western coastal region in the 16th century, whereby new farm lands called “dammed fields” (onyŏn) were obtained by constructing dikes to keep out sea water.25 This reclaimed land corresponds to the hai-tang which had been systematically developed in Sung as an aspect of Chiangnan agricultural technology. Because of technological limitations, land reclamation of this type had been undertaken in Korea in the late 14th century only to provide “garrison lands” (tunjŏn) in limited areas, but in the 16th century the

23 Ibid., pp. 359–64. These include gazetteers of Andong, Chinju, Hamyang, Sŏnsan and Sunch’ŏn.
24 Ibid., p. 369, Nongga chipsŏng added nine items on rice transplantation that are not found in Nongsa chiaksŏl.
entire coast from Cholla province to P'yongan province saw the spread of this practice. In such "dammed field" areas, of course, rice fields normally were located at lower elevations, which facilitated the flow of water.  

Thus by the end of the 14th century Korean agriculture had undergone a transition from extensive cultivation to intensive cultivation, with many technical improvements in rice cultivation through the stimulus provided by Chiangnan agricultural technology. Considering the dominance of agriculture in the Korean economy, one can easily surmise what an influence these technical improvements had upon society. Moreover, with the growth of the agricultural economy and the attendant cultural efflorescence, the understanding of Neo-Confucianism too advanced. It was in the 16th century that the "learning of human nature and principle" came to full flower in Korea, and, as we have noted, the 16th century was also the age when Chiangnan agricultural technology came to be utilized in the expansion of the agricultural economy. Assuming that Chiangnan agricultural technology had already played a part in supporting the development of Neo-Confucianism in China, the relation between the utilization of Chiangnan agricultural technology and the social adaptation of Neo-Confucianism in 16th century Korea must be understood if we are to perceive the nature of the historical development of Neo-Confucianism in Korea.

III. The Change in Social Structure and Problems Arising from the Spread of Local Granaries, Community Rituals, and Community Compacts

Toward the end of Koryo, when the transition from extensive agricultural cultivation to intensive cultivation took place, other changes were occurring at the same time in Korean society. That is, while most of the natural villages were given the unit name li, village inhabitants tended to band together in fraternal communal orders called hyangdo to perform sacrificial rites in honor of the respective guardian deities of natural villages. This phenomenon, centered on the natural village, must be viewed as a complex

26 So Yu-gu, Imwŏn simnyukch'ot (Sixteen Treatises for Rural Life) (Seoul, Seoul National University Press, 1966), 156
27 Morimoto Jun'ichirō has stressed the socio-economic aspects of Neo-Confucianism in China Tōyō seisai shoissōshii kenkyū (Study on the History of Political Thought in the Orient) (Tokyo, Marusha, 1967)
28 Yi T'ae-jun, "Sarimp'a un Yuhyangso pongnip undong" (The movement of the Neo-Confucian Literati for Reestablishing the Yuhyangso) I, Chundan hakpo (1972a), 34 9–10
and significant change from the previous situation.

In the early or middle period of Koryǒ, a communal village composed of several natural villages was the predominant basic unit of rural organization. The communal villages usually had proper rural names in this period. And the local functionaries (hyangni) who exercised authority in the county and district offices, and who thus constituted the rural ruling elite, were drawn from the interest of respective communal villages. The fraternal orders of the communal villages at this time, whose role as performers of religious services was considered vital, were large-scale organizations. We can even find cases during the early or middle period of Koryǒ such organizations undergoing large-scale expansion to the extent that they formed county or district units extending beyond the communal villages. The emergence of smaller fraternal orders based on the natural villages during the last period of the Koryǒ dynasty thus represented a down-scale transformation of what had existed before. It was another characteristic of these fraternal orders in the early and middle periods that they had a strong Buddhist orientation.

To explain the cause of this clear differentiation between the fraternal orders of the early or middle period and those in the late period, we must examine the changes in the agricultural economy. Comparing the productive capacity of intensive agriculture in late Koryǒ with that of extensive agriculture in early or middle Koryǒ, much more land must have been used in the early period to obtain the needed crop yields because of the low productivity of extensive cultivation. This necessitated a more extensive mobilization of labor, as a consequence of which forms of social organization naturally expanded to form larger units. Conversely we can say that the later concentration on the natural village as the matrix of social organization was the natural consequence of the collapse of these large-scale units when intensive agriculture came to be practiced.

These changes in the socio-economic sphere, which Korean society experienced towards the latter half of the 14th century, brought the society to a new stage of development, which called for a new political order based on these changed social conditions. The main historical event which occurred in consequence was the foundation of the Chosǒn dynasty at the end of the century.

From the beginning, the new dynasty had to give first priority to the task

of devising a new social order, one that was responsive to changes in the
basic units of the social fabric. The solution was eventually to be found in
institutions such as the communal granary or the community compact re-
commended by Chu Hsi. The appeal of these systems was based, not on
simple imitation of Chinese patterns, but rather on a recognition of their
appropriateness to Korean social conditions of that period.

Both the communal granary system and the community compact were
innovations which had been promoted in China during the Sung period.
The first was devised by Chu Hsi, the great architect of Neo–Confucian-
ism, the second by Lü Tai-chun but amended by Chu Hsi. The advanced
nature of these institutions may be understood as linked to the progress in
agriculture during the same period and the new importance of the natural
villages as the basic unit of social organization. This means that they re-
lected the changed social conditions which resulted from the development
of Chiangnan agricultural technology as an aid to intensive cultivation. In
the community compact, the fundamental ethical harmony among the
members of each community was emphasized without regard to individual
social status.\(^{30}\) It is evident that this reflected an improvement in the rela-
tionship between the rulers and ruled as compared to earlier periods. This
point appears clearly in “Recommendations for the Encouragement of
Farming” in which Chu Hsi expressed his view about social relationships
within the village setting.

The three essays that Chu Hsi wrote and published during the several
years when he was a local official are the best examples of social concern in
his scholarship. He recommended more efficient farming technology in
these essays, arguing from the premise that food was the first requisite if
moral character were to be cultivated. He also described the kind of ideal
relationship which should obtain between landlords and tenant farmers, and
also between the people and government officials in respect to the collection
of taxes. His statements about the relation between landlords and tenant
farmers are particularly noteworthy. He said that the tenant farmer should
respect the landlord’s rights, because it was owing to the landlord that he
had the means to support his own family. Likewise the landlord should not
exploit the tenant farmers, because it was owing to the labor of the farmer
that his own household prospered.\(^{31}\) In Chu Hsi’s community compact,
landlords and tenant farmers were all members. Therefore, the harmony of

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the members in the community compact could only be realized on the
premise of mutual cooperation between the two. In fact this argument had
no precedent even in China, and were it not for the improvements in
agricultural technology at this time, with their attendant increases in agri-
cultural productivity, one wonders whether it would have been possible to
accomplish such a change in the landlord’s basic attitude toward the tenant
farmer. Here then is evidence of the progressive role of Neo-Confucianism
at this time.

Though Korean rulers in the 15th century were not completely inattentive
to these Neo-Confucian institutions, it was only in the 16th century
that they began to show a deep interest in them. As was noted previously,
the 16th century was the period when the advanced Chiangnan agricultural
technology of China was utilized to the full in wet-rice cultivation. Also, in
the same century came the first systematic efforts at the Neo-Confucian
social engineering. These facts are noteworthy because they confirm the
relation between Neo-Confucianism and the development of agricultural
technology, especially wet-rice cultivation, in Korea.

Before the spread of Neo-Confucian institutions in the 16th century,
 attempts to establish a new social order had been based mainly on the raw
exercise of authority by the new centralized government. The central
authorities attempted to secure their own power to govern the localities by
dispatching officials to the provinces with an almost unrestricted mandate to
gain control over all forms local organization.

For example, in the case of natural villages, the village chief, the head of
the lowest unit in the local administrative structure, was given the title of
ijang(or ijöng) and the village shrine system(isa) was instituted in an effort
to bring under state control the religious function that the village fraternal
orders had hitherto performed. Though this was never achieved, this move
resulted in the state’s taking control over religious affairs, because it led to
the establishment of an altar of guardian deities of the state in each county,
with the county magistrater presiding over the sacrifices.

From the beginning of the new dynasty, influential rural leaders tried to
strengthen local autonomy by founding a Local Agency(yuhyangso), an asso-
ciation designed to enhance their decision-making role in community
affairs, in each county. But these organizations before long became sub-
ordinate to the office of the county magistrate, whose own authority was

32 See Yi T’ae-jun 1972a, pp. 16–28
33 T’aejong sillok, 274a–b
thereby strengthened. Furthermore, as the system of Capital Liaison Offices (*Kyônggae*sa) was implemented, officials in the central government who had connections through kinship, with each Local Agency were able to exercise direct control over them. The desire to create a social order on the local level in which central government authority held predominant power is evident in an early Chosôn provision forbidding local inhabitants from presenting petitions against the county magistrate.34 Although early Chosôn government gave relatively little attention to Chu Hsi’s theories of social organization, this regulation was taken from Chu Hsi, who saw it as deriving from the doctrine of the rectification of names. In Chosôn the purpose of the provision was to suppress criticism of county magistrates by commoners and village clerks, and perhaps particularly by the local elites who belonged to the Local Agency.

That efforts for a new social order on the local level during the 15th century ended in the strengthening of central government authority cannot be easily explained by either economic factors or considerations of agricultural technology. It is true that farming in this period entered the stage of intensive cultivation, during which its high dependency on the government35 is shown by its having to rely upon it for seed grain in many cases. Although I must postpone to the future a more concrete study of this problem, the one thing clear at this point is that during the 15th century no social grouping was strong enough to correct or counterbalance the trend toward centralization of government authority, although this centralization gave rise to many problems.

The policy of establishing a powerful centralized political structure created a number of problems for segments of the elite whose roots remained in the countryside. In particular, the legal immunity afforded county magistrates from complaints of maladministration not only enabled these key instruments of centralized authority but also forced influential local leaders, Local Agency, including literati with official rank, to subordinate their own interests to those of the central authority in order to preserve their standing in the local social order. This itself presented some structural problems, but the Local Agencies came to be utilized more openly because the high officials of the central government took part in profitable dealings through the system of Capital Liaison Offices. In fact, towards the end of the 15th century, the economic bases of such groups as Merit Subjects and royal

34 *Sejong sillok*, 9:16a
35 cf. 37
in-law families were enlarged by both the Local Agency and the Capital Liaison Office Systems.

The creation of strongly authoritarian central government at the expense of parochial interests meant that genuine social stability could not easily be achieved. Among the many indications of the magnitude of this problem are the frequent proposals for reconsideration of the statute “forbidding petitions” against county magistrates, as well as the fact that the Local Agency System was repeatedly abolished and reestablished.

The basic pattern of central authoritarian rule, however, was not changed, so that by the end of the 15th century, problems attendant upon the many contradictions in Chosŏn society had reached serious proportions. In these circumstances institutional reforms proposed by Neo-Confucian scholar-officials were welcomed as concrete means to remedy the errors of previous policy and achieve basic social stability.

In Neo-Confucian concept, social stability could only be achieved through the cultivation of Confucian moral character, and this in turn would most readily be accomplished through autonomous institutions designed to function the basic units of the socio-political order. Two developments of this sort presently occurred the spread of the community archery ritual (hyangsaźye) and the community wine drinking ritual (hyangumjuźye) in the late 15th century, and the spread of the community compact (hyangyak) in the early half of the 16th century. Before considering these, it is important to take note of an effort in the mid-15th century to put into effects a communal granary system.

In 1448, a communal granary system was experimentally established in Tageu county in the hope of overcoming problems associated with the existing government granary (tuch'ang), which was controlled by the county magistrates. This test was very successful. It was carried out by distributing stocks of grain from the government granary to thirteen sites throughout the county, following Chu Hsi’s plan, and by selecting “impartial and upright” men as managers. It achieved such success that, three years later, the plan was extended to ten other counties of Kyŏngsang province where the inhabitants had volunteered to adopt the system. The low interest rate charge by the management of the communal granary system was more attractive to farmers than that offered by the government granary, which already was charging high rates in consequence of the frequent improp-

36 For a discussion of this experiment with the Communal granary system, see Yi T'ae-jun, 1972a, pp 28–34
rieties of county magistrates themselves or the shady practices of clerks in the county offices. Furthermore, the communal granary system reduced the burden of making long journeys from farmers' homes to the county offices. Farmers liked this system, so then there was less need to take out private long term loans at high interest.

The communal granary system to have had the effect not only of aiding the distressed with loans of grain, but also in establishing a more stable order in the natural village itself. Advocates of the communal granary system suggested that its functions be expanded to include the collection and management of seed grain so that certain undesirable practices might be checked, such as the use of even grain reserved for seed to provide food and liquor for the monthly gathering of the village fraternal order (hyangdoeyon). 37 This particular proposal indicates that, from the beginning, the advocates of the communal granary were conscious of its significance for the establishment of a new social order. The locale of the monthly gatherings of fraternal orders, namely the natural village, corresponded to that of the original communal granary system.

Much was expected from the communal granary system, but there were limits to it insofar as the policy of this period was not free from the distortions which arose from the predominant position of central authoritarian rule. Most of the advocates of the communal granary system were purged because of their opposition to the usurpation of the throne by King Sejo (r. 1455–68). 38 But it was the nation-wide imposition of the communal granary system by King Sejo in 1462 which led ironically to its total abolition, essentially for reasons of mismanagement, eight years later. 39 While the decision to abolish it was undoubtedly influenced by powerful officials acting out of economic self-interest, it was internal administrative problems that were crucial in bringing about the demise of the system. Those entrusted with the management of the system simply were not schooled in the policies and procedures necessary for its successful implementation.

The communal granary system could never be put into effect successfully unless those who managed it understood the aims of the system. Kyongsang province where the first experiment had been carried out had certain special features. Chông Mong-ju and Kil Chae, renowned Neo-Confucian in the late Koryo period, who objected to the establishment of the new Cho-

37 Munyong sildok, 4:22b, Yi Chungsok’s Memorial to the king
38 See Yi T’ae-ju, 1972a, 28–43
39 Sejo sildok, 24:29a Sŏnggong sildok, 3:20b, Sejong sildok, 105:29a–b
sŏn dynasty, were natives of this province and many scholars remained faithful to their teachings; the spirit of Neo-Confucianism was felt more deeply than elsewhere. Furthermore, until the 15th century, Kyŏngsang province was the area where facilities for water control were best developed and thus was the only province where rice-transplantation prevailed before the mid-15th century. In addition, this favorable economic factor led the leaders of Kyŏngsang society to feel the need for restoration of local autonomy earlier than the elites in less favored provinces.

The reformist spirit of Neo-Confucianism in the Kyŏngsang-do are, which had first been given expression in the experiment with the communal granary system, asserted itself anew in the active movement to popularize the community archery ritual and the community wine drinking ritual. This movement, which lasted for fifteen years, from 1483 to 1498, was launched by Kim Chong-jik (1431–91) and his disciples, of whom the main body came from Kyŏngsang province. This emerging political force, generally called the “sarim group”, pursued an orthodox line in the interpretation of Neo-Confucianism, but at this time its influence hardly went beyond the region of Kyŏngsang province. It was only with the momentum generated by the community compact movement twenty years later that the influence of the sarim definitely expanded to regions other than Kyŏngsang province, particularly into the central regions of the country. This expansion of the sarim group, at least from the latter part of the 15th century, can hardly be seen as accidental, for the areas to which this movement spread, the three southern provinces in particular, had seen the fullest development of the new water fence system of irrigation.

In certain respects the movement to popularize the community archery ritual and the community wine drinking ritual supported by Kim Chong-jik and his followers took the form of a campaign for the reestablishment of the Local Agency institution. Since this had been officially abolished in 1468, owing to the rampant corruption of the officials and county magistrates concerned, their strategy was first to create an organ charged with the actual performance of the archery and wine drinking rituals, as pre-

40 See Kim Yong-sŏp, Chosŏn hugi nongŏpsa yŏng'gu (Studies in the Agricultural History of the Later Chosŏn Dynasty) (Seoul, Ilchogak, 1974), vol 2 pp 11–18
41 For an account of the movement for popularizing the hyangsarye and hyangŭinyurye, see Yi Tae-jin, “Sarimp'a ŭi Yuhyangso pongmu undong” II, Chundan Hakpo (1973), 35 7–29
42 ibid pp 29–30 The discussion that follows here is essentially drawn from this study See also Sŏngjong sillok, 137: Yi Kūk-pae’s memorial
liminary to restoration of the abolished institution itself. Then, having
made the Local Agency responsible for the communal archery and wine
drinking rituals as described in the Rites of the Chou (Chou-li), they hoped to
make it central to the effort to establish a comprehensive new order in
provincial society. These two rituals differed somewhat from those of the
community compact, but in their respective emphases upon "men of right-
egeous deeds and morality" as in the archery ritual, and upon men of old age,
as in the wine drinking ritual, the two rituals and the community compact
had a common goal - the suppression of factors undermining social order
and the establishment of a new order firmly based upon Confucian stan-
dards.

Confronted by immediate and strong opposition from the faction of the
"meritorious elite," who then exerted preponderant influence in the central
political arena, the new institutions had great difficulty getting established.
In the judgment of these senior ministers, the performing of the new rituals
threatened to deprive them of the advantageous ground upon which they
stood, since their power owed much to the strong ties they maintained with
county magistrates. But after five years of seemingly endless debate, Kim
Chong-yik's proposal was finally adopted. That it could succeed was due
principally to the increase in the number of those senior ministers who
came to be persuaded that, even if the rituals were to be implemented, they
might easily get control over the Local Agencies if only they could continue
their personal relationships with county magistrates and exploit the Capital
Liaison Office system.

Most of the Local Agencies which were revived in various parts of the
country after the 1488 decision actually did tend to come under the influ-
ence of the meritorious elite, as they themselves had expected. Only in
limited areas of Kyongsang province, where its proponents held an unshak-
able ground, did the Local Agency really perform the two rites in accord
with the original intention. Two or three years later the situation was such
that the advocates of the system now insisted upon its abolition. The prob-
lem surrounding the Local Agencies, from the moment of the decision on
its rehabilitation to the literati purge in 1498, became heated issues in the
power struggle between the meritorious elite and the sarim group. In some
regions, local sarim literati even formed an organization called the Asso-
ciation of Licentiates (Samase) in order to oppose the Local Agency, which
had come under the control of "local powers" tightly inter-connected with
powerful courters. Therefore, when the meritorious elite launched the 1498
literati purge targeted at the sarim group, immediate steps were taken to
abolish anything that bore the label samase.43 This fact is quite significant in that it gives us a vantage point from which to view the Literati Purge of 1498 as something more than a mere political phenomenon ensuing from a typical power struggle.

In the long run, the movement for the communal archery and wine drinking rituals launched by the sarim group ended in enhancing opportunities for the expansion of the economic bases of the meritorious elite. In the wake of the literati purge of 1498, influential courtiers strenously sought to seize control of the Local Agencies through the manipulation of local officials and the exploitation of the Capital Liaison Office system. The conspicuously luxurious lives of those courtiers around this period was made possible indeed through the exploitation of the common people through stringent control of local communities.

It was when Cho Kwang-jo received his first appointment at court in 1515 that the sarim group obtained a new opportunity to assert themselves on the central government scene and to institute reforms that earlier had failed; this time they propose the nation-wide adoption of the community compact.44 This proposal, which was advanced in 1517, had as its main premise the abolition of the Local Agencies,45 now a negative factor in respect to achieving the stability of rural societies.

In contrast to the long struggle to win approval of the communal archery and wine drinking rituals, this proposal on the nation-wide adoption of the community compact was eagerly accepted by King Chungjong, and soon came into force. Positive results were quickly achieved, and the institution was an instant success even in the central regions, to say nothing of Kyŏngsang province. Moreover, it was put into practice also in the capital city.46 These results can be explained by the heightened receptivity to the reform program of the sarim group brought about by reaction against the social ills and corruption of King Yŏnsan’gun’s(r. 1494 – 1506)tyrannical rule, as a growing number of officials came to identify themselves with the sarim group’s ideals. In spite of its initial success, however, the movement for the community compact encountered an angry reaction from powerful courtiers and shortly met the same fate as that of the community archery and wine.

43. ibid., p 26 See also Yŏnsan’gun ilgi, 31.2a–b.
44 For the discussion of the movement to institute the community compact, see Yi Tae-jun, “Chosŏn chŏng’i hyangch’on chilsŏ” (Social Order in Rural Korea in the Early Chosŏn Dynasty), Tonga munhwa(1976), 13 164–68
45 Chungjong sillok, 31; 12a–b, 14/6 ihyae, 36.22a
46 Chungjong sillok, 36.2a 36,18b–19a, 36,46b–47a, 51b
drinking rituals. Two years after its initiation, at the end of 1519, another literati purge occurred and steps were immediately taken to abolish the community compact system.\(^{47}\)

It is evident that the movement of the community compact, both in its aim and historical development, was a successor to the movement for the community archery and wine drinking rituals of King Sŏngjong’s reign. It was of great consequence for the development of Neo–Confucianism that the movement adopted the community compact as practical measure of social reform. During the years between the literati purge of 1498 and the purge of 1519, there developed among the sar˘im group, as was eloquently shown by Kim Koeng-p’i˘l’s identification of himself as “a school boy studying the Elementary Learning (Hsiao-hsüeh),” a strong tendency to emphasize the importance of this text, which Chu Hsi had conceived as the foundation for all learning. Accordingly, the movement for the popularization of the community compact tended to stress the actual practice of what was being taught in the Elementary Learning, because the community compact constituted an integral part of it.\(^{48}\)

The reappraisal of the Elementary Learning and the movement to spread the community compact which was encouraged by that reappraisal were primarily based upon the conclusion that the only remedy for the chronic disease of social corruption caused by the excesses of Chosŏn’s centralized bureaucratic system lay in the fostering of that particular self-discipline which Neo–Confucianism teaches. At the same time the implication of this development is that Neo–Confucian social consciousness for the first time achieved both concrete application and an academic systematization. After these developments, Neo–Confucianism in Korean was brought to maturity in the works of Yi Hwang and other thinkers around the middle of the 16th century. The stress placed on the Heart Classic (Hsin ching) of Chen Te-hsii and widespread popularity of the so-called “Study of Ritual” (yehak) may be explained in terms of this unique foundation upon which Neo–Confucianism in Korea had become established. The movement for the community compact climax ed an epoch, beginning from the middle of the 15th century, in which a series of attempts at the establishment of a new social order were made. Though they failed as social movements, their significance can be seen in that they prepared the soil for the development of Neo–Confucianism in Korea.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 38,2a–b, 8a–b

So far I have tried to demonstrate that there were definite social components to the development of Neo-Confucianism in Korea. In conclusion, I would like to discuss problems in the social structure and in the agricultural economy during the period in which the community compact movement emerged as a pivotal phase in the Korean adoption of Neo-Confucianism. 49

As already noted, the early 16th century, in which the importance of the *Elementary Learning* began to attract new recognition, witnessed an unprecedented development in rice cultivation thanks to the adoption of Chiang-nan agricultural technology. At this time the movement to promote the community compact, which was strongly opposed by forces seeking to retain their control over the Local Agencies, appears to have been closely related to aspects of agricultural policy at that period. Because influential courtiers were using the Local Agencies for their own purposes as instruments for the development of "dammed fields" on the west coast, where they themselves were the principal landowners, they were unyielding in their efforts to maintain their control of these institutions. The community compact, on the other hand, was definitely linked with the construction of "water fences" in inland areas, projects sponsored by middle or lesser landowners.

Because "dammed fields" required large scale labor forces to construct lengthy and solid embankments to keep out the sea, such projects could not easily be undertaken by any single private initiative. Thus most of the "dammed fields" in that period were built by powerful courtiers, who manipulated the Local Agencies through county magistrates, in this way utilizing compulsory regional labor forces for their private purposes. 50 The vast extent of land developed and acquired in this way in turn necessitated the continuance of the same form of enforced mobilization for the cultivation of these fields.

Such illegal levies on the part of the privileged elite naturally met with popular resistance, as may be shown by the rebellion led by Im Kkŏk-chŏng (1559–1562) in Hwanghae province, the north central region abutting the West Sea, where "dammed field" construction was most intensively carried out. 51 Nevertheless these plans were vigorously pursued as a prominent feature of the economic and social development in the early 16th

49 Yi T'ae-jun, 1981, pp 364–68
50 Myŏngjong sillok, 16.37b–39a Yi Kwan's memorial
51 Yazawa Yasui, "Im kkŏkchŏng no hanran to sono shakai-teki kaiten" in Chōsen rekishi ronsō (Articles on Korean History) (Tokyo, Hatada Takashi Kinen kai, ed., 1979), pp 561–71.
century. This was partly because the acquisition and preservation of these privileges offered enormous advantages and so constituted a major concern of mandarin society. Hence the politics of the period centered around the relationships among the relatives of the king and queen, who had easy access to the political power which was crucial to maintaining their control.

Thus, in the light of the key role which the Local Agencies played in the plans of influential courtiers for their construction and maintenance, the significance of “dammed fields” to the sarim group’s campaign for abolition of the Local Agencies and nation-wide adoption of the community compact system becomes apparent. A noteworthy connection between the community compact and “water fence” is to be seen in the scale of manpower it required in comparison with “dammed field” construction. The labor force needed for “water fence” construction usually did not exceed the manpower resources of one or two natural villages. That is, as often cited in documents of the era, ten or so people were needed for a small project, a few dozen for a medium and a few hundred for a large one. In short, it may be asserted that the primary purpose of the efforts to encourage the community compact was to eliminate the exploitation of local labor resources, through the Local Agencies, for the construction of “dammed fields.” Moreover, in its function of mutual help, the community compact system was the effective utilization of the “water fence” technique, which was seen as the instrument of primary importance for the improvement of the agricultural economy. The sarim group, consisting mostly of rural middle or small landowners who took an active interest in “water fence” plans, insisted upon the distribution of the acquired lands in proportion to the labor and capital invested, applying this principle even in the case of “dammed field” plans.

In short, there was a remarkable increase in the total wealth of Korean society in the 16th century, which resulted from the development of new agricultural techniques. At the same time, the two opposing views concerning the proper method for its production and distribution occasioned serious conflict in the political arena. Under the aegis of those who held the more progressive view of the two, Neo-Confucianism helped to lay a firm foundation for a new system of social morality.

52. Sejong sillok, 52:32b-33a, Pak Sô-saeng’s memorial
IV. Conclusion

Considering these facts, I believe it can be maintained that the rise of Neo-Confucianism, especially the "orthodox" Ch'eng-Chu School's philosophy of human nature and principle was closely associated with socio-economic changes that marked the growth of Korean society in the 15th and 16th centuries. Furthermore, I would like to add here some of my views concerning the later unfolding of orthodox Neo-Confucianism in Korea, subsequent to the developments discussed above.

Since the community compact movement had been slowed by the literati purge of 1519, the social endeavors of the sarim group, which had been instrumental in the introduction and promotion of Ch'eng-chu Neo-Confucianism, remained in abeyance for some time. While their academic activities produced noteworthy achievements, problems related directly to social order were little debated. Only when the sarim group had the opportunity to advance into the political arena, could they press for the printing and spread of the Elementary Learning or, rather, its Korean version. Even under the repressive regency of the relatives of royal family, however, the power base of the sarim became enlarged gradually. This group's old dream of obtaining power through local societies found a new outlet through the movement to build private academies, which began to develop in the late 16th century. Private academies had been proposed by Yi I as a local base for carrying out the community compact. From this we can see that the academies took over some of the functions of earlier social movements, in addition to their educational function. Since private academies were seen primarily as educational institutions, less subject to political vicissitudes, they had the advantage of being spared direct official control and suppression, and could sustain their efforts to promote Neo-Confucianism by improving both the quantity and quality of its adherents.

The movement to build private academies represented an expansion of the earlier small studies (Sójae). This in itself meant that the sarim group's economic power had grown even in the midst of political difficulties. In this light too we can appreciate the progress made in the development of the "water fence." The sarim groups' ability to improve their position like this in education and scholarship, as well as in the economy, meant that

53 Yi I, Yulgok chōnsŏ(Complete Works of Yi I) (Seoul, Sŏnggyun'gwan Taehakkyo Teodong munhwa yŏn'guso, 1968), 167a-11a, "Haeju hyangyak" (Community Compact for Haeju)
ultimately they would also take the leadership in politics. This was realized with King Sönjo’s ascension to the throne (1567). As the position of the sarim’s opponents weakened, the sarim advanced to a position of greater influence in the central government. With this, the political scene in the earlier period of King Sönjo’s reign witnessed many difficulties from the cross-currents of old and new forces. Nevertheless, the political and social order gradually moved in the sarim’s direction. Private academies witnessed solid growth. The system of Capital Liaison Office was abolished permanently in 1595. This was an important reform which brought to an end a long standing evil which exploited society at large under the pretext of defending the prestige of the government.

With the abolition of the Capital Liaison Office system, its substructure, the Local Agencies lost much of their old importance. At the same time each locality experienced a change in the social order, that is, private academies began to assume primacy in the rural areas. With the exception of a few in which these Agencies could accommodate themselves to Neo-Confucianism, most areas experienced a new order accompanying this change to the predominance of the academies. While in the earlier part of the 17th century private academies had in many cases contributed to the general cultural uplift through the dissemination of the Neo-Confucian canon, the Local Agency now tended to acquire the new name of the community archery pavilion (hyangsadang), which signified the promotion of the community archery ritual. Moreover, this trend led the natural villages to appreciate the advantages of the community compact. These changes represented the outcome of the series of social movements which had been under way since the late 15th century.

Korean history came to experience many socio-economic changes, including rapid commercial development, towards the latter half of the 17th century. At this juncture Neo-Confucianism, which can be identified as the ideology of the landed proprietors, increasingly revealed serious limitations. Among modern scholars, the negative evaluations of Neo-Confucianism in Korea have been based, in most cases, on the weaknesses and contradictions exposed since then, but these constitute a separate subject for further investigation, observing carefully the changes which occurred over time.
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