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Universal Equality vs. Neo-Confucian Class Structure in the Late Period of Joseon

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Abstract

The Joseon dynasty (1392-1897) adopted the Neo-Confucian class system as a means of upholding social stability. Despite its inherent flaws, especially slavery, this class structure played a role in supporting Korean society in the early and middle periods of Joseon. However, in the 18th century, the introduction of Western studies and the rise of Catholic communities spurred individuals to question the legitimacy of the existing class structure. This paper examines the collision between the Western concept of universal equality and the Neo-Confucian class system in Joseon, detailing the process and characteristics of this clash. The research illuminates how the idea of universal human rights found its way into Korea, a society that was, at the time, devoid of the concept of equality. Despite decades of persecution that resulted in the execution of thousands, Joseon Catholics taught and practiced universal equality within their religious communities. Serving as pioneers who fundamentally challenged the Neo-Confucian class structure, Joseon Catholics exemplify a compelling instance of historical progress toward safeguarding human rights and universal equality. However, their meek Christian approach toward political power hindered the transformation of their conviction from becoming a full-fledged political and social revolution. The findings of this paper underscore the profound impact the ideological clash had on the development and articulation of human rights discourse in the Korean context.

Introduction

The Joseon Dynasty, a monarchical state that flourished on the Korean Peninsula from 1392 to 1897, had an entrenched neo-Confucian caste system. Based on the hierarchical Confucian understanding of humanity, this caste system perpetuated discrimination and oppression between social classes in Joseon society. However, in the eighteenth century, the introduction of Western studies – a Catholic doctrine that was localized to avoid exasperating Chinese and East Asian scholars – to Joseon prompted a shift in the perspective of Koreans regarding the caste system. Western studies, in principle, taught that “all men are equal before God,” and the ruling class and rigid Confucian scholars of Joseon perceived this idea of universal equality as a challenge to the social order. However, a few progressive Confucian scholars and the lower class accepted the idea of universal equality as a legitimate tenet of human existence. Eventually, the ideological conflict between the Joseon ruling class and proponents of Western egalitarian ideas ignited, culminating in an extended eighty-five-year Catholic persecution within Joseon during the nineteenth century.

This paper investigates the ideological clash between Western studies’ egalitarian ideas and Confucianism’s hierarchical view of human beings in Joseon, spanning from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. The historical evidence of the Joseon Catholic community embracing the idea of equality despite facing severe persecution can be seen as a testament to the notion that historical progress inherently facilitates the dissemination and solidification of the idea of equality. This acceptance reflects the undeniable reality of human existence, emphasizing the intrinsic dignity of everyone. In addition, this paper examines why the egalitarian ideas of Western studies did not result in a broader social revolution but were instead confined to acceptance and practice within the Joseon Catholic community. The Joseon Catholics refrained from dismantling the monarchical apparatus or implementing sweeping societal alterations, as they rigorously upheld the Catholic doctrine, which emphasized their obligation to obey the authority of the state. The politically moderate stance exhibited by Joseon Catholics served as an impediment to the widespread dissemination of discourses pertaining to human dignity and universally applicable principles of equality within the Joseon societal construct.

Joseon’s Neo-Confucian Caste System and Its Challenges

Prominent Neo-Confucian scholars like Dojeon Jeong, the architect of Joseon’s fourteenth- and fifteenth-century governance

structure, held the conviction that legal distinctions were indispensable for societal equilibrium.¹ Adherents to this school of thought established a stratified societal system comprising five distinct tiers: *wangsil*, *yangban*, *jungin*, *sangmin*, and *cheonmin*.² *Wangsil*, the royal family, was the highest ruling class, and *yangban* referred to well-educated neo-Confucian scholars who worked as high-ranking bureaucrats or military officers.³ *Jungin* occupied subaltern officialdom, primarily engaged in technical and administrative functions. *Sangmin* comprised the agrarian populace, primarily engaged in agricultural pursuits.⁴ *Cheonmin* constituted the lowest class. They held jobs that Joseon people considered lowly, such as *nobi* (unfree people or slaves), butchers, monks, jesters, and courtesans.⁵ *Cheonmin* endured denigrating pronouncements and prejudicial attitudes from members of all other societal strata. Their labor was ruthlessly exploited, and they were frequently subjected to acts of physical brutality.⁶ Even among *cheonmin*, the lowest of the low were the slaves (*nobi*).⁷

During the Joseon era, two primary methods fueled the institution of chattel slavery. First, during widespread famines, destitute farming families, facing the imminent threat of starvation, were often compelled to relinquish their young children into servitude within wealthy *yangban* households.⁸ Second, during periods of dynastic strife, the Joseon government engaged in the brutal practice of executing not

¹ “The Veritable Records of King Taejo, vol. 1, July 28, Year 1 (1392),” National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 10, 2023, https://sillok.history.go.kr/popup/viewer.do?id=kaa_10107028_003&type=view&reSearchWords=&reSearchWords_ime=.

² “The Veritable Records of King Taejong, vol. 27, April 2, Year 14 (1414),” National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 10, 2023, http://contents.history.go.kr/front/hm/view.do?levelId=hm_084_0020.

³ Michael D. Shin, “The Intimate Past: An Introduction to the Joseon Period,” in *Everyday Life in Joseon-Ear Korea: Economy and Society*, ed. Michael D. Shin (Boston: Global Oriental, 2014), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Sang-hyuk Lim, *I am a Nobi: The Law and Society of Joseon Seen through Lawsuits* (Goyang: Yeoksabipyeongsa, 2020), 7.

⁷ Joong-hwan Lee, “A Book for Choosing Inhabitable Towns, introduction (1751),” National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 11, 2023, http://contents.history.go.kr/front/hm/view.do?levelId=hm_107_0010&whereStr=%40where+%7B+IDX_TITLE%28HASALL%7C%27%EC%A1%B0%EC%84%A0+%EB%85%B8%EB%B9%84%27%7C100000%7C0%29+or+IDX_CONTENT%28HASALL%7C%27%EC%A1%B0%EC%84%A0+%EB%85%B8%EB%B9%84%27%7C100%7C0%29+or+IDX_ALL%28HASALL%7C%27%EC%A1%B0%EC%84%A0+%EB%85%B8%EB%B9%84%27%7C1%7C0%29+%7D.

⁸ Jong-seong Kim, *Nobi in Joseon: Lowborn but Special* (Goyang: Yeoksaeui-achim, 2013), 7.

only the defeated faction, irrespective of their elevated social standing within the *yangban* class or even the royal family, but also extended their punishment to enslave the dependents and close kin of those deemed politically undesirable.⁹ The members of *wangsil*, *yangban*, *jungin*, and *sangmin* had the authority to buy and sell slaves;¹⁰ wealthy and powerful slaveholders had the authority to subject their slaves to torture or even execution, provided there was a justified reason for such punishment.¹¹ Furthermore, it was not uncommon for slaveholders to subject their female slaves to sexual assault through coercion, often utilizing threats as a means of control.¹² While it was illegal for slaveholders to inflict punishment or take the lives of their slaves without a valid reason,¹³ the government rarely penalized those who mistreated or abused their slaves.¹⁴ Slaveholders did possess the right to emancipate their slaves if they desired and acquired permission from the local authorities.¹⁵ Yet, since enslaved individuals were essential for providing labor that sustained the economic power of their households, it was uncommon for a slaveholder to release their slaves willingly.¹⁶

The hierarchical social order informed by Neo-Confucian tenets, established during the nascent Joseon Dynasty, remained largely intact for approximately two centuries until the late sixteenth century. However, in 1592, Japan's invasion of the Joseon Dynasty plunged the nation into a widespread and devastating war, jeopardizing the very survival of the Joseon royal lineage. As the nation plunged into an acute existential crisis, the administrative apparatus underpinning the Joseon caste system was largely dismantled, significantly destabilizing the very foundations of societal stratification. In 1592, the outbreak of war prompted the royal family and government to flee northward, seeking

⁹ Ibid., 66-67.

¹⁰ "The Veritable Records of King Taejo, vol. 1, August 20, Year 1 (1392)," National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 11, 2023, https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kaa_10108020_003.

¹¹ "The Veritable Records of King Taejo, vol. 12, July 25, Year 6 (1397)," National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 11, 2023, https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kaa_10607025_004.

¹² "The Veritable Records of King Jungjong, vol. 71, June (intercalation) 10, Year 26 (1531)," National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 12, 2023, https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kka_12606110_001.

¹³ "The Veritable Records of King Sejong, vol. 105, July (intercalation) 24, Year 26 (1444)," National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 12, 2023, https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kda_12607124_003.

¹⁴ Kim, *Nobi in Joseon*, 40.

¹⁵ Kyoung-mok Jeon, "The Sok'ryang (a lowborn becoming a commoner by paying a price) and Survival Strategy of Slaves in the Late Chosun Dynasty," *Namdo-minsok-Yeongu* 26 (2013): 331.

¹⁶ Lim, *I am a Nobi*, 7.

refuge from the advancing Japanese army. Meanwhile, in the abandoned Joseon capital (present-day Seoul), enslaved individuals, left behind amidst the chaos, initiated an act of defiance by setting fire to the Ministry of Rites and the Ministry of Justice, consuming in flames all records pertaining to their enslavement, resulting in a substantial lacuna in the Joseon government's documentation of its servile population. The *Revised Veritable Records of King Seonjo* describes the situation as follows:

When King Seonjo's carriage left the capital city [to escape the Japanese invasion], the mob set fire to the Ministry of Rites and the Ministry of Justice. The mob set fire to these two government offices because they contained official slave documents.¹⁷

Faced with the overwhelming numerical advantage of the Japanese forces, high-ranking government officials and Joseon military commanders desperately sought to bolster their ranks by mobilizing enslaved individuals. In a controversial move, the Joseon government offered conditional emancipation to any enslaved person who could demonstrate their loyalty and prowess by killing a Japanese soldier in battle and presenting proof in the form of the enemy's head.¹⁸ This policy served as a potent catalyst for the destabilization of the hierarchically structured Joseon slave system during the period of armed conflict. A considerable segment of the privileged *yangban* strata also witnessed a paradigm shift in their societal standing, enduring the confiscation of their landed estates and the dispossession of their previously held territorial domains. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the war, the exacerbated depletion of the national coffers necessitated novel revenue-generating measures. The Joseon government promulgated a policy whereby sinecures within the state bureaucracy were bestowed upon individuals of opulent means in exchange for monetary contributions. This novel system facilitated the upward trajectory of individuals born outside the privileged confines of the *yangban* elite, thus enabling them to achieve a hitherto unattainable degree of social mobility.¹⁹ As a result, Japan's invasion significantly weakened the social order of Joseon.

¹⁷ "Revised Veritable Records of King Seonjo, vol. 26, April 14, Year 25 (1592)," National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 12, 2023, https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/knb_12504014_028.

¹⁸ "The Veritable Records of King Seonjo, vol. 51, May 8, Year 27 (1594)," National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 13, 2023, https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kna_12705008_007.

¹⁹ Han Kyo Suh, "The Implementation and Its Outcomes of the Napsok Measure in the 17-18th Century," *History Education Review* 15 (1990): 130-131.

After a few years, the Joseon government, which had recovered from the damage of the war to some extent, focused on strengthening the praxis of neo-Confucianism and spreading it throughout Joseon society to restore the weakened social order. This new school of thought led by eminent Confucian thinkers to strengthen the Confucian governing order was generally called “the study of rites” by Joseon scholars.²⁰ The study of rites emphasized the strict practice of Confucian rituals throughout society, from the home sphere to the public sphere. It aimed to reinforce the patriarchal and authoritarian hierarchy of the daily lives of the Joseon people. The study of rites successfully reinforced the Confucian social hierarchy in Joseon society. Eventually, Joseon’s neo-Confucian caste system became far more rigid than before the war against Japan, and this retro social atmosphere continued for about 150 years until the mid-eighteenth century.²¹

The entrenched rigidity of social mobility across more than a century exacerbated the stagnation of Joseon society in terms of national development and fomented internal social discontent. The royal family and the high-ranking *yangban* officials, who benefited from a system of entrenched privileges, displayed little to no interest in modernizing administrative structures or bolstering the national economy. Instead, their primary focus remained entangled in the machinations of court politics, aimed solely at preserving their institutional and economic dominance.²² As most of the capable *yangban* lower-ranking officials and *jungin* people were not able to become high-ranking officials, they did not have sufficient opportunities to exercise their abilities in the operation of the state. *Sangmin* and *cheonmin* people could not even think of escaping their low social status, so they led a passive life of just maintaining their livelihood. Even the ostensible impartiality of the government evaporated, accompanied by a concomitant stagnation in agricultural productivity.²³

In the mid-eighteenth century, some *yangban* lower-ranking officials who observed the accumulation of social problems within Joseon society began to seek new ideas and cultures that would bring

²⁰ MoonHyoung Choi, “An Analysis of the Modern Interpretation of the Study of Rites in the Joseon Dynasty: With Focus on the Social Philosophy of Adorno and Horkheimer,” *Journal of Eastern Philosophy* 64 (2010): 118-119.

²¹ Soo-chang Oh, “18th Century’s Political Thoughts of Joseon Dynasty Seen in the Historical Perspective of Before and After,” *Yoksa Haebo* 213 (2012): 37.

²² Joo-sin Chong, “A Study on the Party Strife in Late Joseon Period,” *The Journal of Northeast Asia Research* 22-1 (2007): 95.

²³ Do-won Jeong, “A Study on the Philosophical Characteristics and Political Implications of the 17th Century Korean Neo-Confucianism,” *The Journal of T’oegye Studies* 147 (2020): 143.

about a transformation. They determined that the excessively metaphysical and formalist study of rites was the leading cause of blocking the historical progress of Joseon society. Thus, they tried to create a new academic trend, focusing on the spirit of “seeking truth from facts”, which prioritized solving problems in the reality of life.²⁴ The lower-ranking officials who responded to the new academic trend led by the reformist neo-Confucians such as Ik Lee and Jiwon Park were deeply interested in the Western religious thought and academic system that were introduced to Joseon through China at that time.²⁵ As Joseon people had almost no contact with foreign countries other than China, the newly imported Western thought and culture were exotic and fascinating to them. The Joseon scholars referred to this new knowledge as “Western studies”.

The Origin of Western Studies and Joseon Neo-Confucian Scholars’ Response to Western Studies

The scholarly pursuit known as Western studies originated in China’s Ming Dynasty, rather than in Joseon Korea. Credit for its inception is generally attributed to Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), a Jesuit missionary active within the Ming Dynasty during the seventeenth century. Arriving in China in 1583, Ricci embarked on a mission to disseminate Catholicism, and in the process, catalyzed the emergence of this novel intellectual movement.²⁶ He deeply pondered how to widely spread the Catholic faith in the Ming Dynasty, given its entirely distinct cultural environment from that of Europe. Acknowledging the discrepancies between Catholic doctrines and local Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist beliefs, Ricci devised an approach to propagate Catholicism that would not elicit unfavorable sentiments among the Chinese people, particularly the ruling class and intellectuals. After mastering the Chinese language and literature, Ricci meticulously analyzed the dominant spiritual cultures of the Chinese: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Based on his profound understanding of these Eastern philosophies, Ricci repeatedly debated religion and philosophy with Chinese intellectuals and reconstructed the teachings of Catholicism in a way that Chinese intellectuals could accept without any sense of rejection. He wrote a book in Chinese titled *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* and

²⁴ Tae-Heui Kim, “Reconstruction of Silhak Discourse and Yang Deuk-joong’s Proposal of ‘Silsagusi,’” *Korean Silhak Review* 41 (2021): 22.

²⁵ Oesoon Ahn, “The Development of Joseon Silhak Thought in Response to the Acceptance of Western Learning,” *Dongbanghak* 5 (1999): 405.

²⁶ R. Po-Chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552-1610* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xiii.

distributed it to Chinese intellectuals.²⁷ In addition, Ricci authored several books introducing Western science and technology, such as astronomy, mathematics, and calendar, as well as Catholic doctrine.²⁸

At that time, the invasion of the Qing Dynasty, which the Manchus in northeastern China founded, greatly shook the declining Ming Dynasty. Many Ming Dynasty officials and scholars believed that Ricci's introduction of Western science and technology would assist in the restoration of national power and strengthen the military, so they eagerly read Ricci's books. Several scholars were intrigued by Ricci's Catholic doctrine and later converted to Catholicism.²⁹ Ricci's missionary strategy using their interest in Western science and technology was a significant success. Ricci died in 1610 in the Ming Dynasty, which collapsed in 1644. However, intellectuals in China continued to circulate the Catholic doctrine and Western science and technology books that Ricci left behind. Joseon was an extremely closed country, but it never stopped sending diplomatic and trade envoys to China. The envoys who visited the newly founded Qing Dynasty enthusiastically embraced China's advanced culture and technology. They also brought back Joseon books on Western science and technology, along with Catholic doctrine books written by Ricci and his colleagues.³⁰

The ruling class and intelligentsia of Joseon exhibited a nuanced approach toward Western studies. Notably, the neo-Confucian elite harbored no inordinate antipathy toward Western scientific and technological advancements. They recognized the inherent utility of Ricci's introduced Western astronomy and calendar system for bolstering the agricultural sector, the lifeblood of Joseon. Consequently, the adoption of Western scientific and technological texts by Joseon's neo-Confucian scholars proceeded with minimal resistance. However, Ricci's proselytizing efforts through his Catholic doctrine books elicited profound consternation among the neo-Confucian scholarly community.³¹ One of the main reasons Joseon neo-Confucians were outraged upon encountering the Catholic doctrine book was that the teachings of Catholicism taught that all human beings are equal before God. Since the neo-Confucians were critical of Western studies' ideology of equality, they focused their attack on Ricci's Catholic doctrine, which

²⁷ Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 255.

²⁸ Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City*, 111.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

³⁰ Hyeon Beom Cho, "Confucian Scholars and 'Western Learning' in the Late Choseon Period: A Critical Review on the Dichotomy of 'Religion/Science,'" *The Society for Study of Korean History of Thoughts* 50 (2015): 99.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

emphasized worshipping God over humans. They criticized the Catholic teachings for encouraging people in society to abandon their duties to serve their superiors, including the monarch, and neglecting their obligations to their parents in their homes. According to their perspective, such teachings fundamentally deconstructed Confucian ethics, which strictly follows the hierarchy of class, character, and age. In this context, Hoodam Shin, a Joseon neo-Confucian, wrote the following criticism of Catholicism in 1724:

The Catholic Church's pursuit of heaven is like a son who does not care about serving his parents, and a minister who does not care about serving his king. The Catholic Church's teachings despise ethics, violate propriety, and remain in the pursuit of selfish interests. How can we not hate it deeply!³²

Joseon Catholic Christians' Practice of the Ideology of Equality

The central theory of Western studies originated from Christian theology, and as a result, the anthropological view that Western studies put forward included the ideal of equality for all people. This idea directly conflicted with the Confucian understanding of human beings, the ideological system that dominated social ethics in East Asia. Unlike Western thoughts, Confucianism maintained a relatively strict hierarchy based on innate character differences. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, classified human beings into four categories in his *Analects*. These classifications were: "those born with understanding," "those who study and gain understanding," "those who face difficulties and yet study," and "those who face difficulties but never study."³³ This system of classification implied that people were born with different moral qualities, and Confucius believed that those born with high qualities were entitled to virtuous rule over those born with low qualities. Zhu Xi further sophisticated Confucius's theory of human nature with his theory of *li* and *chi*, which stated that all things in the universe exist because of two forces: *chi* as a material force, and *li* as a principle. Since both *li* and *chi* are inherent in the material world, *li* corresponds to the actual manifestation of *chi*. "Every material being has its corresponding *li*, or principles."³⁴ In other words, the different moral qualities that

³² Hoodam Shin, "Discussions on Western Studies," in *Writings That Repel Evil Ways and Follow the Right Teachings*, ed. Manhae Lee (Seoul: Youlhwadang, 1971), 39.

³³ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, tr. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 32.

³⁴ "A Collection of Conversations of Master Zhu, vol. 15, verse 36," Chinese Text Project, accessed December 16, 2023, <https://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/15>.

Confucius observed were differences in a person's "qualities of *chi*."³⁵ Within Zhu Xi's philosophical framework, individuals within a societal structure were enjoined to acquiesce to the prevailing hierarchical order, owing to its perceived inherent potential to contribute to the flourishing of morality within the broader community.

Contrary to this view was the idea that Western studies upheld, namely that there is intrinsic equality among human beings. Through his teachings, Ricci asserted that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God:

Although human beings make distinctions between sovereign and subject, father and son; when they are seen in their relationship to the common fatherhood of the Lord of Heaven, they all become brothers with an equal standing; it is essential to understand this principle.³⁶

As Ricci elucidated, Catholic Christians acknowledged the existing social hierarchy, but in terms of the divine-human relationship that transcends the social order, they advocated universal equality.³⁷ They believed that all human beings, formed in the image of God, had religious potential to believe in and serve God faithfully, regardless of their social status or abilities in the world they live in. Therefore, in Catholic views of human nature, all human beings are equal on a fundamental level, in terms of their religious standing before their Creator. Most neo-Confucian scholars in Joseon regarded Ricci's idea of universal human equality as impure. However, a small number of progressive and reform-minded Joseon scholars, such as famous scholars Seunghoon Lee and Yakjong Jung, accepted the teachings of Catholicism and converted to the religion in 1784.³⁸ Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* was the most influential catechism among early Catholic converts in Joseon.³⁹ They learned Catholic doctrine from Ricci and

³⁵ "A Collection of Conversations of Master Zhu, vol. 4, verse 50," Chinese Text Project, accessed December 16, 2023, <https://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/4>.

³⁶ Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, trs. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen (Chestnut Hill: Institute of Jesuit Sources, Boston College, 2016), 355.

³⁷ Jong-ik Chon, "Introduction of Roman Catholicism and Equality during King Jeong-Jo Era," *Korean Journal of Legal History* 44 (2009): 115.

³⁸ Kwang Cho, *The Late Joseon Society and Catholicism* (Seoul: Kyoungin-munwhasa, 2010), 115.

³⁹ Yong-pil Noh, "Characteristics of Annotation on Korean Manuscript of T'ien-chu Shih-i & its Historical Significance," *Research Journal of Catholic Church History* 14 (2017): 227.

accepted his ‘moderate’ notion of equality.⁴⁰ Though they did not pursue the abolition of the neo-Confucian hierarchical system through a nationwide revolution, they actively advocated for its abolition within the Catholic community.⁴¹

Early Joseon Catholics did not distinguish between *yangban*, *jungin*, *sangmin*, and *cheonmin* during their meetings and educational activities. In the Joseon Dynasty, a person of low social status sitting down or conversing with a person of high social status on an equal footing was considered disrespectful and impolite. Their families and villages severely criticized those who violated this taboo, and in some cases, local officials officially imposed punishments on them. Even when a child was born to a *yangban* and an enslaved woman, the child was considered a slave because he followed his mother’s status. Therefore, he could not call his *yangban* father “father” for the rest of his life and had to treat his biological father only as a master.⁴² Likewise, those with high status were extremely reluctant to associate with those of low status in Joseon society. However, the first Catholic Christians in Joseon realized that these taboos did not conform to the Christian idea of equality introduced by Ricci. They believed that all humans are fundamentally equal because they all bear the image of God, and they did not accept the traditional justification of inborn discrimination in Joseon society. Yakjong Jeong, one of the key leaders of the early Joseon Catholic Church whom the Joseon government executed during the Catholic Persecution of 1801, justified the idea of equality for all by basing it on the creation story in the Bible:

God created the first two people and gave them the ability to have children. All the people in the world are their descendants. Therefore, we should love each other as brothers and sisters who were born from the same parents.⁴³

Thus, there was no discrimination based on social status in the Joseon Catholic community. This egalitarian community culture greatly impressed the *sangmin* and *cheonmin* people, who were first invited to Catholic meetings. For instance, Ilkwang Hwang, a *cheonmin* who worked as a butcher, reported being deeply moved by the equality within the

⁴⁰ Cho, *The Foundation for the Study of Catholicism in the Late Joseon Period* (Seoul: Kyoungin-munwhasa, 2010), 28.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁴² Kim, *Nobi in Joseon*, 111.

⁴³ Yakjong Jeong, *The Essentials of the Lord’s Teaching*, vol 2 (Seoul: Bible Printing Press, 1897), 39 a.

Catholic community. He said, “For me, there are two paradises, one on earth because of the too honorable way I was treated given my condition [class], and the other in the afterlife.”⁴⁴ Some Catholic Christians practiced the idea of universal equality more radically than others. Recognizing the inconsistency of Joseon’s slavery system with the Catholic faith, they took action and emancipated their slaves, granting them the status of *sangmin*. Gunmyeong Ryu stands as a prominent exemplar of such individuals.

Ryu, hailing from a wealthy *yangban* family in Myeoncheon, Chungcheong Province, owned a significant amount of land and possessed a number of slaves.⁴⁵ He was a person of gentle character, so it is unlikely that he recklessly abused or used violence against his slaves. However, as a member of the neo-Confucian elite in Joseon, he acknowledged the legitimacy of the slave system and felt no conviction about exploiting their labor. Ryu faithfully adhered to the ethical teachings of neo-Confucianism until his conversion to Catholicism. And as Charles Dallet (1829-1878), a French Catholic missionary and ecclesiastical historian who worked for the Paris Foreign Missions Society, recorded of Ryu’s pre-conversion life: “He (Ryu) was called the excellent man, or, even, the pious son, because of his good conduct toward his parents and the assiduous care he lavished on them.”⁴⁶ Although the exact year is not known, Ryu converted to Catholicism at the age of fifty-nine, when Western studies spread through the Chungcheong Province in the 1790s.⁴⁷ After receiving baptism and becoming a formal Catholic, he emancipated all the slaves belonging to his family and used his wealth to provide charity to the poor in the surrounding areas. as evidenced in Dallet’s further writing:

He [Ryu] always showed himself to be a model for his brothers, sharing all his income with the poor and the unfortunate. He freed his slaves and made it his main occupation to instruct and exhort the numerous Christians who came to him.⁴⁸

While there had been instances of freeing slaves in Joseon before, Ryu was the first person in historical records to grant freedom to his slaves based on the principle of human equality. It is probable that there

⁴⁴ Charles Dallet, *Histoire de l’Église de Corée*, Tome 1 (Paris: Librairie Victor Palmé, 1874), 140.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

were others among the Joseon Catholics during Ryu's time who also emancipated their slaves.⁴⁹ A neo-Confucian scholar in the early nineteenth century strongly criticized the early Joseon Catholics for their belief in human equality:

As those who believe in evil studies [Catholicism]... deny that social classes exist, they treat even slaves and lowborns as brothers when the slaves and lowborns join their community. This is an effective way to mislead naïve people.⁵⁰

Based on this record, it is reasonable to infer that some Catholic believers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Joseon, as Ryu did, would have rejected the slave system and freed their slaves.

The Conflict Between the Social Order of Neo-Confucianism and the Egalitarian Thinking of Western Studies

In 1801, the Joseon government initiated a widespread persecution of Catholics, deeming that the Catholic doctrines posed a fundamental threat to the neo-Confucian social order. In January 1801, the Grand Queen Dowager Jeongsun, who was ruling Joseon in place of the young king Sunjo, declared the reason for her decision to persecute Catholics as follows:

Those who believe in evil studies [Catholicism] nowadays have neither parents nor kings, and they are falling apart in terms of humanity and [neo-Confucian] education, regressing to a state of barbarism and savagery.⁵¹

The persecution resulted in the deaths of at least one hundred Catholic Christians, either by torture, execution by poison, or beheading. Furthermore, about four hundred Christians were exiled to remote areas with extremely harsh living conditions.⁵² For example, Ryu, who was mentioned earlier, was among those exiled. The local officials of Chungcheong Province imprisoned Ryu due to his reputation as a devout Catholic believer. They proceeded to interrogate him, demanding

⁴⁹ Kwang-ho Woo, "The Life of Gywoo-chon Catholics," *Catholic Times*, September 17, 2006, https://m.catholictimes.org/mobile/article_view.php?aid=156860.

⁵⁰ Si-je Hong, *The Summarized Records of Nul-am* (1814), 12.

⁵¹ "The Veritable Records of King Sunjo, vol. 2, January 10th, Year 1 (1801)," National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 18, 2023, https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kwa_10101010_001.

⁵² Andrew Eungi Kim, *The Rise of Protestantism in Modern Korea: A Sociological Perspective* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022), 42.

that he recant his faith in God and universal equality, but he refused to do so.⁵³ After repeated torture, the Joseon government decided to exile him to a remote location with deplorable living conditions. Having lost both his social status and privileges as a *yangban*, Ryu had to live an impoverished life in exile for about twenty years under the surveillance of local officials and residents.⁵⁴ However, despite the difficult conditions he faced, Ryu held firmly to his Catholic faith. And it is recorded that, at the age of eighty-six, he passed away while kneeling in prayer.⁵⁵

In addition to Ryu's case, many Christians gave up their wealth and social status and fled their hometowns to live in poverty and hardship to avoid arrest, torture, and execution. For example, Gangyi Kim, who originally belonged to the *jungin* class, acquired a considerable amount of wealth, but after converting to Catholicism, he escaped the persecution of 1801 by abandoning his wealth and becoming a peddler. Afterward, he sought refuge in the mountains of Gyeongsang Province, where he sustained himself through farming and managed to establish a small Catholic faith community. To evade further persecution, he relocated multiple times. In 1815, however, he was imprisoned in the prison of Wonju due to the denunciation of a fellow believer who had apostatized. He was tortured in prison and sentenced to death by beheading, but he died in prison before being executed due to the sequelae of torture.⁵⁶

The persecution of Catholics in Joseon began in 1801 and continued intermittently until 1886, a period of eighty-five years. The persecution was finally ended by the signing of the France–Korea Treaty of 1886.⁵⁷ This treaty allowed for trade and commerce between Joseon and France and for French Catholic missionaries to freely proselytize in Joseon. Before this, there were four major persecutions in Joseon, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 Catholics.⁵⁸ The response of Catholics in Joseon to the government's persecutions, which occurred intermittently for eighty-five years, was radical from a religious perspective, but somewhat passive from a political perspective. Confronted with the specter of death, torture, or exile, devoted Catholics

⁵³ Dallet, *Histoire de l'Église de Corée*, Tome 1, 271.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 286–287.

⁵⁷ Franklin Rausch, "Christian Martyrdom in Korea," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Christian Martyrdom*, ed. Paul Middleton (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 408.

⁵⁸ Johnnie Moore and Jerry Pattengale, *The New Book of Christian Martyrs: The Heroes of Our Faith from the 1st Century to the 21st Century* (Carol Stream: Tyndale Momentum, 2023), 329.

demonstrated unwavering resolve in resisting apostasy. Within their community, they steadfastly embraced the tenet of equality among believers, even though this very egalitarian practice constituted the primary catalyst for their persecution. However, Joseon Catholics did not actively endeavor to propagate the notion of universal equality beyond the confines of their community nor did they engage in revolutionary action aimed at overthrowing the established caste system.

The Significance and Limitations of the Egalitarianism Transplanted to Joseon through Western Studies

Adherents of Catholicism within Joseon, whose faith was deeply rooted in and animated by the egalitarian tenets embedded within Western studies, were perceived as a potent threat to the hierarchical edifice of the Joseon Confucian caste system by the ruling elite. Although their aspirations for its complete dismantlement remained unrealized, the indelible mark left by the Joseon Catholic community's embrace of egalitarian ideals cannot be expunged from the historical narrative of human rights development in Korea. The introduction and diffusion of egalitarianism through Western studies represented a paradigm shift in how individuals within Joseon, a society with its distinct notions of human relations and responsibilities, came to understand themselves and their place in the world. The idea of universal equality has never existed in Korea, even in principle, for over 1,600 years since the establishment of the first full-fledged monarchy in the 1st century CE. In Korea, the value of a human being was perceived as being inherently different, depending on the size of wealth, power, knowledge, and fame, and the power of the family.⁵⁹ In particular, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the idea of discriminating against the value of a human being was even more firmly established as a social convention due to the extreme neo-Confucian study of the rites.

In this situation, the egalitarianism of Western studies had a profound impact on Joseon society. *Wangsil*, *yangban*, and *jungin* people, who had vested interests in society, considered the idea of universal equality a great threat. Conversely, the lower class, such as *sangmin* and *cheonmin*, accepted the egalitarianism of Western studies, which was propagated and practiced through the Catholic community, as a belief that opened up opportunities for a more humane life. In the end, the egalitarian thinking of Western studies instilled the concept of class struggle, albeit vaguely, in the Joseon people who had taken for granted

⁵⁹ Laura C. Nelson, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 20.

the rigid hierarchical class system.⁶⁰ Those who experienced the abolition of class segregation within the Catholic community inevitably doubted whether the class discrimination outside the Catholic community was justifiable. In particular, Catholic Christians who had learned and experienced egalitarianism, even to a small extent, could not ignore the social injustice caused by the deception and evil deeds of the immoral and greedy individuals among the *wangsil* or *yangban* families toward the lower class. The idea of universal equality in Western studies enabled Joseon people who had come into contact with Catholic doctrine to keenly sense the absurdity and harm of the neo-Confucian understanding of human beings prevalent in Joseon society. Within the context of Joseon's modernization period commencing in the late nineteenth century, the evolving thought patterns embraced by Joseon Catholics constituted a pivotal historical foundation for Korean Christians to become the initial adopters and practitioners of modern Western ideals of equality and human rights.⁶¹

However, the egalitarian ideology of the Joseon Catholic community had clear limitations in spreading the concept of human rights in Joseon society. First, Joseon Catholics seldom tried to realize their egalitarianism through political movements or revolutions. Their education and practice on equality were carried out actively within the Catholic community. There were two reasons for their detachment from socio-political actions. First, Joseon Catholics valued the reward in the afterlife rather than the transformation of reality.⁶² They firmly believed that they would receive eternal rewards in the afterlife when they overcame the social injustice and persecution of reality with their unwavering faith. This attitude of expecting rewards in the transcendent realm made Joseon Catholics look at the absurdity and suffering of reality with a somewhat detached attitude.⁶³

Second, the Joseon Catholic Church learned the biblical doctrine of obedience to state power through Ricci and faithfully followed this teaching. With a few exceptions, almost all Joseon Catholics did not seek to bring about the collapse of the Joseon government or the Confucian system. They maintained the position of the oppressed weak against the

⁶⁰ Chang-won Park, *Cultural Blending in Korean Death Rites: New Interpretive Approaches* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 37.

⁶¹ Seon-hye Choi, "The Growth of Catholicism in Late Chosŏn and the Fall of Patriarchal Society," *Research Journal of Korean Church History* 38 (2012): 37.

⁶² Anselm K. Min, "A Rational Approach to the Study of Korean Religions: An Overview," in *Korean Religions in Relation: Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity*, ed. Anselm K. Min (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 7.

⁶³ Choi, "The Growth of Catholicism in Late Chosŏn and the Fall of Patriarchal Society," 37.

sanctions or persecution of state power, as all pacifistic churches in Christian history did, and they had little interest in politicizing the church. As the Joseon Catholics showed a tendency to comply with the political power, the French missionaries who actively helped the Joseon Catholic mission tried to teach the Joseon Catholics that they should resist or criticize the unfair oppression of the king or officials to some extent from a Western perspective. Marie-Nicolas-Antoine Daveluy (Anthony Ahn), a French bishop who was executed with Korean Catholics in 1866, taught the following way to deal with political power: “We should reflect on how we can righteously challenge or resist the king or officials.”⁶⁴ Thus, Western missionaries taught Joseon Catholics to have a somewhat critical view of political power, but the majority of Joseon Catholics generally conformed to the Joseon political system in the political sphere. As a result, the Joseon Catholic Church ultimately succeeded in preserving the idea of equality internally, but it did not attempt to pursue the ideal of universal equality through social revolution externally. The limited diffusion of egalitarian ideals beyond the confines of the Joseon Catholic Church reflects the inherent constraints within the particular interpretation of Christian equality embraced by Joseon converts. From a politico-philosophical perspective, the egalitarian tenets introduced through Western studies failed to fully permeate the fabric of Joseon society, remaining largely confined within the insulated sphere of the Catholic community and practiced in a manner characterized by relative seclusion.

Conclusion

The infiltration of egalitarian tenets associated with Western studies into Joseon society sparked awareness among a select group of progressive neo-Confucian intellectuals harboring aspirations for social change, who began to perceive the inherent flaws within the rigidly stratified caste system of Joseon. These neo-Confucians who embraced Catholicism subsequently championed the ideal of universal equality, drawing upon Christian doctrine, to the *sangmin* and *cheonmin* populations of Joseon. While it is important to note that the extent of their acceptance and active engagement with this teaching varied within these lower-class groups, it is undeniable that many found resonance with this message. However, they did not attempt radical social movements or political revolutions because they followed Christian religiosity in accepting and practicing the idea of equality. Christian religiosity is characterized by moderation in faithfully obeying the state’s political power while anticipating spiritual rewards in the afterlife, rather than seeking transformation in the present world. Therefore, the Catholic

⁶⁴ Anthony Ahn, *A Brief Record of Reflection* (1864), The Fourth Commandment, 20 a.

Christians of Joseon only taught and practiced the idea of equality within their faith community. While their efforts to instill a political notion of equality within Joseon society fell short, they diligently labored to adopt and uphold a novel conceptualization of humanity centered around the principle of equality in the ideological sense.

Amidst the prevailing neo-Confucian ideology which deemed class-based disparities as inherent and ethically justifiable, Joseon's early Christian converts, profoundly influenced by Western studies' egalitarian principles, endured significant hardships in their pursuit of challenging this system. Their tenacious pursuit, alongside the efforts of early Western studies researchers, contributed to the gradual emergence of discourses highlighting human dignity and equality within Joseon society. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that historical progress toward these ideals is neither linear nor guaranteed. Rather, such advancements often arise from sustained struggles and complex social dynamics, and the experiences of Joseon's early Christians and Western studies scholars serve as a significant illustration of this ongoing pursuit.

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