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PANEL: CONFUCIANISM (pre-modern history)

Chosŏn Confucian scholars’ attitudes toward the Laozi

KIM Daeyeol (INaLCO, Paris)

Incontestably Confucianism, as a whole system of culture, was a dominant current to Korean society and provided models in almost every field of culture for Chosŏn period. If it was a model, a model for what was it? A cultural pattern has a role in relation with meaning or further purpose which man aspire to attain to. In working on a cultural model, we must distinguish the model from . This sort of question can arise in various fields and in particular we can think it regarding moral thought and religious behaviour, in which man throws his sight over the way of thinking, expressing, or seeking something more fundamental or ultimate. Then we can compare Confucianism or ‘confucianization’ to a keyhole through which we can begin to see an inner space of spiritual or religious world of Korean people for Chosŏn period. In my today’s talk, I would like to give an example by presenting some cases of Chosŏn literati whose attitudes toward the Laozi are interesting in this respect.

The established and general position of the Neo-Confucian orthodox school from the beginning of Chosŏn Dynasty is that Daoism is ‘heterodox’ (idan 異端). However, after about two centuries’ evolution during which the Korean Neo-Confucianism developed on its own, the literati started to show diverse attitudes: tolerant, open or even receptive vis-à-vis the ‘heterodox’ tradition. For example: Daoist hygienic system was highly estimated and adopted in the former chapters of the Precious Mirror of Eastern Medicine (Tong’ŭi pogam 東醫寶鑑) published by a royal order; also, many poems of Confucian literati were inspired by the idea of Daoist Immortals’ world.

With regard to Daoist philosophical ideas, several scholars of Chosŏn commented the Laozi and tried to interpret it differently from their predecessors. About twenty scholars also left shorter texts about this Daoist book. Some of them said, for example, that those who considered it as a heterodox text did not correctly understand it. In general, they
read it while keeping their Confucian eyes. Still, it would show that, seen from this angle too, the boundaries between Confucianism and other traditions could be ambiguous for some intellectual groups in Chosŏn.

Five commentaries on the *Laozi* fully transmitted to the present day attract our first attention (see Table 1). Indeed, they are the subjects of very recently published research works (see Bibliography). Excepting Yi Ch’ungik, all of these commentators were well known authors and thinkers by their time, and moreover, they all occupied one of the highest official posts in government at a point of their life. In general, they found out that Confucianism and certain ideas from the *Laozi* can be in accordance with each other on the level of fundamental thought. Their central interests focus on principles and moral values to which Confucian literati adhere.

One of the pivotal figures in history of Korean Confucianism, Yi I left a commentary on the *Laozi*. This is characterized by an interpretation of the *Laozi* in a pure Confucian terms and point of view, as in the example of his reading of the word ‘inaction’ (*muwi* 無為) into governing the people according to the ‘decree of Heaven’ (*ch’ŏnmyǒng* 天命). But, regarding the issue developed in this paper, the most interesting point is that a large part of his commentary selects the passages concerning ‘making mind empty’ (*son* 損) or ‘frugality’ (*saek* 嚇) and interprets them from the viewpoint of Confucian moral concerns related to ‘self-cultivation’ (*ch’igi* 治己) and ‘governing the people’ (*ch’iin* 治人). It raises an interesting question: why did this great Confucian scholar rely on the *Laozi* to remind the fundamental moral duty of Confucian literati? In the epilogue to his commentary, he deplores that moral persons are too rare in his time, as if he were warning the leading class of Confucian society of his time by professing the moral instructions drawn from the *Laozi*.

As to Pak Sedang who frankly criticized Zhu Xi, he exposèd in his commentary Daoist characteristics different from those Confucians but tried to prove that basically these Daoist characteristics are not contradictory to Confucian logic and thought. This attitude is also seen in the commentary of Sŏ Myŏng’ŭng. Considered as one of the pioneers of
‘Northern learning school’ (pukhak’ap北學派), Sŏ Myŏng’ŭng even introduces in his interpretation of the Laozi some proper Daoist cosmological notions (as chŏng 精, ki 氣, sin 神) or practical ideas (as yangsaeng 養生). Moreover, he explains the criticisms in the Laozi against some Confucian ideas (‘sense of humane’ (in 仁), ‘sense of just’ (ŭi 義), ‘learning’ (hak 學), for examples) and tries to clarify the real meaning of these criticisms. For him, this is not contradictory to but even accordant with Confucian fundamental spirit. This kind of attempt is also seen in the commentary done by Yi Ch’ungik. A scholar of the Kanghwa school, a Korean Yangming school, entirely dissociated from orthodox Zhu Xi-ism, he even called the author of the Laozi as a ‘mysterious sage’ (hyŏnsŏng 玄聖).

Hong Sŏkchu is one of the central figures of the history of Confucian ideas in 19th century Korea. While being widely interested in diverse intellectual traditions out of Confucianism, he tried to replace the perspective of ‘ordering the world’ (kyŏngse 經世) in the center of the Zhu Xi-ist Neo-Confucianism. In his close examining of the similarities and the differences between the ideas of the Laozi and Confucianism, he finds out that some ideas of the book are closer to Confucianism, not only than the individualism of later Daoists, who were only looking forward to their salvation, but also than the immorality of vulgar Confucian literati, and even than both of the dhyāna school of Buddhism and the Yangming school of Neo-Confucianism who neglect the necessity of accumulating efforts at learning, which Confucianism advocates. While scrutinizing the limits of the Laozi, however he also elucidates valid meanings of this Daoist book expressed in its peculiar ironies, which were employed only to criticize the abuses of it’s time disguised with moral virtues.

In addition to these commentaries, some shorter but not less significant texts for my argument confirm that many Chosŏn Confucian literati read and even appreciated the so-called ‘heterodox’ writing (see Table 2). These texts appeared from the beginning of the 16th century on. Before Yi I, Yi Haeng declared that the Laozi deserved esteem, and Sin Hŭm, contemporary with Yulgok, sang that it enlightened him and made his mind empty. The latter also argued that the author of the Laozi didn’t consider the Confucian
virtues as defects, but that he was distressed about the loss of the Way and the Virtue, and that its profound meanings were distorted by later Daoists and Buddhists. Along with Sin Hŭm, Hŏ Kyun expressed a similar opinion and Chang Yu agreed with Yi Haeng to say that the Laozi should not be neglected. Since Yun Hyu, many of them balanced their criticisms against the Daoist book with the esteem they expressed about it. On the one hand, they underlined its limits: for example, the Laozi concerns the principles of things (mulli 物理) not those of human being (Yun Hyu, Cho Kumyŏng), or it talks about the Dao without careful consideration. “He was good in beholding the Dao, wrote Im Sangdŏk, but not good in expressing it.” On the other hand, they regretted that people, even Confucian literati, did not rightly understand these five thousands words and criticized what could not be criticized (Yi Tŏksu, Im Sangdŏk, Yun Ki). In Yi Tŏksu’s opinion, one could easily misunderstand the book’s profound meanings about Dao because of its ambiguous and subtle expressions, and one could thus be misled as most of Daoists were; but one should meet ultimate beauty and joy in the idea of frugality and of lack of concern expressed in the book.\(^1\)

To conclude, we could at first underline the fact that most of these literati were high officials in government, that is to say, not marginal persons but central, active and influential figures in Chosŏn society. This seems me to raise an important question in relation with the general issue of our panel: to what degree did the founders of the Zhu Xi-ist school and Korean Neo-Confucian predecessors have authority on later Confucian literati? We can say at least that the attitudes of these literati toward the Laozi are not dogmatic or sectarian. More than to certain canonic texts, schools, or charismatic persons, they referred to comprehensive principles or fundamental values, which could possibly weaken the Confucian identity. Further research should be done in order to confirm this interpretation and to understand better these positive attitudes regarding the Laozi. The cases analyzed in this paper, however, seem to suggest the idea of an erosion of the border line between orthodox Confucianism and philosophical Daoism, coming from the very side of Confucian literati group itself. After all, beyond these misty and instable boundaries between Confucianism and the other intellectual

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\(^1\) 李德壽, 老子要解序.
traditions of Chosŏn society, it may be more judicious to ask what were the practical goals or ultimate concerns in the quest of which some groups of Chosŏn literati in their proper circumstances adopted Confucian legacy as one of the available ways.

Table 1: commentaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>One of the highest official posts/grades occupied by person</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Commentaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>李珥</td>
<td>1536-1584</td>
<td>判書 (正二品)</td>
<td>西人</td>
<td>醇言</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>朴世堂</td>
<td>1629-1703</td>
<td>判書 (正二品)</td>
<td>少論</td>
<td>新註道德經</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>徐命鶚</td>
<td>1716-1787</td>
<td>判書, 大提學 (正二品)</td>
<td>北學派</td>
<td>道德指歸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>李忠翊</td>
<td>1744-1816</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>江華學派</td>
<td>談老</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>洪濟周</td>
<td>1774-1842</td>
<td>左議政 (正一品)</td>
<td>老論</td>
<td>訂老</td>
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Table 2: others texts

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>School</th>
<th>Texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>李荇</td>
<td>1478-1534</td>
<td>左議政 (正一品)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>讀老子2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>申欽</td>
<td>1556-1628</td>
<td>判書 (正二品)</td>
<td>西人</td>
<td>读老子3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>許筠</td>
<td>1569-1618</td>
<td>參議 (正三品)</td>
<td>大北</td>
<td>老子5</td>
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<tr>
<td>鄭忠信</td>
<td>1576-1636</td>
<td>兵馬節度使 (從二品武官)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>讀老子有感6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>張維</td>
<td>1587-1638</td>
<td>右議政 (正一品)</td>
<td>老子見道體7</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>尹鍇</td>
<td>1617-1680</td>
<td>判書 (正二品)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>老子道德經序7</td>
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<tr>
<td>朴世堂</td>
<td>1629-1703</td>
<td>判書 (正二品)</td>
<td>少論</td>
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<tr>
<td>任相元</td>
<td>1638-1697</td>
<td>判書 (正二品)</td>
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<tr>
<td>李德壽</td>
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<td>老子要解序10</td>
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<tr>
<td>鄭來僑</td>
<td>1681-1759</td>
<td>僉知中樞府事 (正三品武官, 中人出身)</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>林象德</td>
<td>1683-1719</td>
<td>牧使 (正三品)</td>
<td>老子論12</td>
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<tr>
<td>姜再恆</td>
<td>1689-1756</td>
<td>縣監 (正六品)</td>
<td>少論</td>
<td>問禮於老子13</td>
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2 『容齋先生集』, 卷之五, 南遞錄.
3 『象村稿』, 卷之八, 七言古詩.
4 『惺所覆瓿藁』, 卷之十三, 文部十, 讀.
5 『晚雲集』, 卷之一, 詩.
6 『谿谷先生漫筆』, 卷之一, 漫筆.
7 『白湖先生文集』, 卷之二十二, 序.
8 『西溪先生集』, 卷之二, 詩.
9 『恬軒集』, 卷之九, 詩.
10 『西堂私載』, 卷之三, 序.
11 『沈巖集』, 卷之二, 詩.
12 『老村集』, 卷之三, 論.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>One of the highest official posts/grades occupied by person</th>
<th>School</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>趙龜命</td>
<td>1693-1737</td>
<td>佐郎（正六品）</td>
<td>老論？</td>
<td>老子&lt;sup&gt;14&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>徐命膺</td>
<td>1716-1787</td>
<td>邑書，大提學（正二品）</td>
<td>北學派</td>
<td>老子&lt;sup&gt;15&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>李匡呂</td>
<td>1720-1783</td>
<td>參奉（從九品）</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>老子&lt;sup&gt;16&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>尹憲</td>
<td>1741-1826</td>
<td>參議（正三品）</td>
<td>星浩</td>
<td>書蘇子由老子論後&lt;sup&gt;17&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>李圭景</td>
<td>1788-?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>老子道德經辨證說&lt;sup&gt;18&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<sup>13</sup>『立齋先生遺稿』, 卷之十五, 辨. This text is not to discuss on the idea of the *Laozi* but to argue that the person with whom Confucius is known to have learned about the rites is not Laozi but Laodan and that the latter had not written the five thousands words, namely the *Laozi*.<br>
<sup>14</sup>『東谿集』, 卷之七, 雜著.<br>
<sup>15</sup>『保晚齋集』, 卷第二, 詩.<br>
<sup>16</sup>『李參奉集卷四』, 文.<br>
<sup>17</sup>『無名子集文稿冊十』, 文.<br>
<sup>18</sup>『五洲衍文長箋散稿』, 道藏雜說, 經史篇/道藏類.