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The Advantages of Acceptance of Neo-Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty: South Korea History

Hee-Joong Hwang¹

1. First & Corresponding Author Professor, Department of International Trade, Korea National Open University, South Korea. Email: ygodson@knou.ac.kr

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Abstract

Neo-Confucianism fettered the society and the individuals regulating such aspects as roles and relationships within a family, rites, and ceremonies. The mandated practice of filiality challenged the Confucian paradigm of gender relations, exposing women to men and the notion of following elders' instructions, which preserved authoritarian power relations within an ancestral line. This ideological base was beneficial for preserving social stability and integrity and aimed to create a set of ideals and norms that would apply to everyone, thus keeping people together. This conceptual investigation aims to identify the benefits of accepting Neo-Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty and how it emerged as the foundation for the nation's and society's governance. Neo-Confucianism was not an immobile value system but an active factor contributing to the success, development, and positive changes in Joseon Korea; it is the aim of this study to provide a comprehensive account and exegesis of the role and impact of Neo-Confucianism in the Korean historical process. The study will examine the lessons that can be drawn from these historical facts of South Korean history in the modern state, particularly in the areas of governance, education, and social integration.

Keywords: Neo-Confucianism, Joseon Dynasty, Korea History.

Major classifications: Ethics History

1. Introduction

The Joseon Dynasty, which spans from 1392 and was only terminated in 1897, marks one of the relevant periods and is culturally fruitful and diverse in the Korean Peninsula. It was founded by General Yi Seong-gye, who rose to the throne as Taejo; in turn, the Joseon Dynasty ushered in an age of extensive alterations in politics, culture, and society (Deuchler, 2021).

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These were followed by the great socio-political formation of a centralized bureaucratic state, the spread of rich Korean culture, and the formulation of laws and social ethics that played immense roles in Korean Society. One of the most significant decisions that defined Joseon's political and social system is the acceptance and assimilation of Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism was developed in China during the Song Dynasty and transmitted to Korea as a positively evolved ideological system of Confucianism that incorporated comprehensive metaphysical and cosmological theories (Kim, 2023). Neo-Confucianism was more than just replacing one philosophy with another; it was a process that involved a radical change of worldview and embraced different activities in Joseon, Korea.

The advancement of Neo-Confucianism in Korea resumed with the introduction of Joseon scholars who had been educated in China and adopted the thought of Zhu Xi as an important figure of Neo-Confucianism. King Taejo and his successors admired these teachings as the proper promotion that must be addressed to establish a moral and social order. This change of ideology was anchored through several other reforms, which entailed founding Confucian schools, civil service examinations known as *wages*, and advocacy for Confucianism, such as rites and rituals (Deuchler, 2021). Neo-Confucianism played a significant role in the shaping of Joseon political culture. It offered the rationale for the practical organization of the state, with its stress on Confucian staples such as loyalty to the ruler, ethics, proper conduct, and reverence to parents and ancestors (Kim, 2023). These principles were instilled in education, where emphasis was placed on Confucian writings. The Chinese empire was dominated by Confucianism and Taoism, the premier state ideologies from the Ming to the mid-Qing dynasty. This led to the establishment of a society that was recognized as being grounded on meritocracy; officials populated the posts of authority in the society, and their appointment was based on their intelligence and ethical standings and not their nobility statuses.

Neo-Confucianism fettered the society and the individuals regulating such aspects as roles and relationships within a family, rites, and ceremonies. The mandated practice of filiality challenged the Confucian paradigm of gender relations, exposing women to men and the notion of following elders' instructions, which preserved authoritarian power relations within an ancestral line. This ideological base was beneficial for preserving social stability and integrity and aimed to create a set of ideals and norms that would apply to everyone, thus keeping people together (Manek, 2023). This conceptual investigation aims to identify the benefits of accepting Neo-Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty and how it emerged as the foundation for the nation's and society's governance. Neo-Confucianism was not an immobile value system but an active factor contributing to the success, development, and positive changes in Joseon Korea; it is the aim of this study to provide a comprehensive account and exegesis of the role and impact of Neo-Confucianism in the Korean historical process. The study will examine the lessons that can be drawn from these historical facts of South Korean history in the modern state, particularly in the areas of governance, education, and social integration.

2. Literature Review

Based on its pervasive role in shaping the Joseon Korean Dynasty, neo-Confucianism has been the focus of various studies in various disciplines by scholars. In the early stage of the study, the focus was placed on defining the process of dissemination and transformation of neo-Confucianism from China to Korea and the work of the pioneers of Korean neo-Confucianism (Deuchler, 2021). Further studies built on how these philosophical principles were bureaucratized as a part of the state educational syllabus of Joseon and civil service, extending into the routine life of the Korean people. For instance, in a study by Gao and Chung (2023), the authors found that neo-Confucianism played a pivotal role in shaping governance and societal structures during the Joseon Dynasty. On the political level, Neo-Confucianism served as an authoritative belief system to advance the bureaucratic system of the state. The civil service examination system was founded on principles of moral integrity, meritocracy, and ethical governance in selecting and appointing officials through the production examination administration and control principally based on the knowledge of the Confucian text and moral virtues (Gao & Chung, 2023). The authors found that the system made it possible for anyone in government positions to be intellectually and morally capable of governing the country and expected to be straightforward in their actions.

In a study by Deuchler (2021), the author indicated that neo-Confucianism had a great social impact as it shaped social principles and interactions. It stressed conformity to status and respect for elders and supported the system whereby fathers dominated the home, and children had proper places and duties within the household (Deuchler, 2021). The author also found that crucial values were taught in school and supported by various activities, including feasts and other ceremonies, thus fostering unity and order in the community. The Confucian schools and academies turned into educational institutions and paved the way to the fountain of moral education by enforcing the principles of Neo-Confucianism in various societal spheres.

Also, with the introduction of Neo-Confucianism, the Chinese started to experience cultural integration and, as such, the formation of a cultural identity. According to a study by Seo-Reich (2022), the author also found that Neo-Confucianism aided in social conformity and integrating societal organizations with ethical standards to enact Confucianism, reducing conflict and promoting conformity throughout the occupied kingdom's settlements. This cultural unity helped preserve the country's institutions and society's unity during the Joseon Dynasty period.

The existing literature on Neo-Confucianism in the Joseon Dynasty highlights several advantages that contributed to the stability and prosperity of the period. The activity of this council can greatly benefit from moral governance. Martina (2020) stated that Neo-Confucianism stressed self-cultivation and virtuous morals led by the ruler, and it encouraged ethical values over selfish self-interest for growth or profit. They found that this principle played a crucial role in the organization of the bureaucracy, to guarantee that only competent and moral individuals were appointed to offices. Developed from the Confucian classic, the civil service examination system sustained this meritocratic culture, which selected and cultivated well-educated and honest governmental officers (Martina, 2020). This focus on ethics helped foster responsibility and an ethical culture within the administration to minimize corruption and a positive governance culture.

Moreover, according to Lee (2023), another significant advantage was the contribution of neo-Confucianism to social order. Neo-Confucianism fostered order in society, which was expected to be rewarded through valuing, filiality, respecting the elderly, authority, and hierarchy. These values were therefore promoted in the population via education and then exercised throughout other aspects, such as rituals and other social activities. For instance, everyone was allocated a specific rank, which ensured that people comprehended their position within this society, cutting down on rivalry and fostering order (Lee, 2023). This social stability was important as it helped to lengthen the years of the Joseon Dynasty with a sound base for economics and deposition for culture. However, the emphasis on education and learning under Neo-Confucianism also had its merits. For instance, Kim et al. (2022) found that Confucianism has set up many educational centers and advocates for education and learning, whereas Neo-Confucian ethics have influenced the beneficiaries directly. These educational reforms ensured adequate personnel were expected of the imperial administration, who had been imparted knowledge in Confucianism and other ideals (Kim et al., 2022). This intellectual culture created through Neo-Confucianism also played a crucial role in developing the Joseon period's arts, literature, and sciences, providing the country with a richly developed intellectual and cultural lift.

Furthermore, Neo-Confucianism doctrine cultivates a strong emphasis on cultural belonging and identity. In a study by Napoli (2020), the results revealed that Confucianism was practiced extensively, and the people of Korea embraced the systems put forth by Confucianism, creating a coherent culture that fostered unity among all Koreans. This unity of culture was crucial in their pursuit of sustaining national identity and independence from interference by other countries, which allowed Korea to uphold its own distinct identity and culture (Napoli, 2020). This element also helped maintain a steady cultural practice and values within the state, making it easy to organize order and control. There are, however, a few disadvantages anyone who is inclined to Neo-Confucianism needs to know. A major weakness that was evident was that it reiterated the happy and fixed social order that was recognized, thus coming up with restricted mobility. Beneath the covering of Confucianism, bureaucracy maintained a strict, undemocratic, and anti-democratic hierarchy where lower classes and women were sequestered as inferior, and as such, social inequalities continued to prevail. This rigid structure at times hindered creativity and the independence of one's spirit since there was social pressure on women to continue being submissive, as determined by early biblical teachings.

Another drawback was the inherent rigid structure of Neo-Confucianism; it often proved to be obstructive to innovations. As indicated by Kim and Connolly (2021), the authors revealed that the prejudice towards tradition meant that effective change or the adoption of innovations, which could be helpful, could not occur, slowing down growth in these areas of life (Kim and Connolly, 2021). Furthermore, as a result of Neo-Confucianism emphasizing moral override in the bureaucracy, it did not entirely curb corruption within the bureaucracy. The principals and other officials in the education sector worked against the best ethics of their office by enriching themselves through their perspectives. Even though vast works have focused on Neo-Confucianism, a lack of scholarly work can be noticed, systematically examining the benefits that would serve Korea's Joseon Dynasty in governance and social structure. While literary work has concentrated on Confucianism's philosophical implications and historical merits as a system of belief and education, more attention must be paid to understanding the principles' direct utility and their role in contemporary South Korea. To fill the research gap, this study provides a guarded investigation of the benefits of Neo-Confucianism to appreciate how these enrich the development and preservation of the Chinese Song Dynasty. It also aims to derive some implications from the current South Korea and examine how Neo-Confucianism principles should be applied to today's modern world affairs, politics, education system, and social relations. It will, therefore, contribute fresh perspectives on the relevance of historical thought paradigms for the contemporary world and emphasize the continued significance of Neo-Confucian values.

3. Data Collection

The research employs the PRISMA approach to evaluate the merits of Neo-Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty. PRISMA is utilized because it is a well-structured and openly informative method for electing relevant materials and assessing their relevance, making the review exhaustive and accurate (Ramasamy, 2022). The selection criteria for peer-reviewed journals and relevant articles include the relevance where the applicable research must focus on Neo-Confucianism within reference to the Joseon Dynasty relative to the domains of governance, society, and culture (Seo-Reich, 2022). The other aspect includes credibility, where only academic peer-reviewed articles and reputable academic journals and publishers are considered and used to provide high quality and reliability. The third perspective is recency, where recent historical studies are prioritized because they possess earlier interpretations. The fourth aspect is language, whereby English and Korean papers are relevant in this case since they will help readers easily understand the results (Ramasamy, 2022). The last perspective is scope, whereby only peer-reviewed and empirical studies are incorporated to ensure a clear and proficient understanding of the topic (Kim & Kang, 2022).

Applying the PRISMA approach to exhaustively review the existing literature systematically and bias-free to provide a highly reliable outcome is a fit. This access is achieved through the clear identification and synthesis of the relevant studies, which guarantees a representative and massive viewpoint concerning the analysis of the advantages of neo-Confucianism (Manek, 2023). For the same reason, the PRISMA framework makes the study's process transparent for independent scrutiny should it be required to replicate, validate, or expand upon the results to enhance its accuracy levels and efficiency patterns in yielding the best results (Ramasamy, 2022). This extensive methodological framework is commensurate with the study's goal to present a comprehensive and reliable evaluation of the legacy of Confucianism on governance and civil society in the Joseon Dynasty (Woo & Kang, 2021).

4. Findings

The impact of embracing Neo-Confucianism in the Joseon Dynasty was enormous, redefining the worst aspects of national governance and social life. These advantages can be categorized into four main areas: moral governance, social stability, educational enhancement, and cultural cohesion (Back, 2021). One of the most profound advantages of Neo-Confucianism is moral governance. Some of the main tenets that Neo-Confucianism held this century were the virtues and moral standards of rulers and those who occupied governmental positions (Lee, 2023). This was in contrast to the beliefs espoused by some Neo-Confucian scholars, including Zhu Xi, who asserted that a ruler's rightful authority came from heritable rights and moral integrity. This ethical framework was made bureaucratic by passing a civil service examination conducted by the literate elite and selecting functionaries based on merit through competitive examinations based on Confucian classics (Lee, 2023). In this manner, while focusing on moral and intellectual qualifications, the Joseon Dynasty created an ideological civil official recalled to ethical governance principles (Gao & Chung, 2023). This meritocratic approach minimized bureaucracy and politically motivated allocations, bringing the administration closer to a more competent and efficient one (Kim et al., 2021). Thus, in the scope of Neo-Confucianism concepts of moral governance, it can be noted that the Joseon state was committed to selecting worthy civil servants and providing them with the necessary qualities to become efficient and ethical in governing the country.

Another significant advantage of Neo-Confucianism was the enhancement of social stability. Neo-Confucianism completed a detailed and complex system of orienting society and stressing the features of hierarchical dependence and obedience to parents (Deuchler, 2021). These principles supported the 'patriarchal family' system and placed functional, proper social order and obedience as paramount for the functioning of society, which were pivotal (Deuchler, 2021). In the cultural structure of Chinese society, "li" (ritual propriety) regulated interpersonal interactions, particularly in kinship relations and social hierarchy, by requiring proper etiquette in dealings and respect for ancestors and seniority (Manek, 2023). This family structure translated to the internal organization of family compounds and the larger societal and governmental patterns. Promoting such values fostered order and stability wherever each person knew his place and performed his roles accordingly (Kim et al., 2022). Order was maintained by bureaucratic control and the Confucian practices of rites and ceremonies that fostered societal unity and a common cultural memory (Martina, 2020). This focus on social order based on Neo-Confucianism also contributed, to a certain extent, to the internal stability of Joseon with little internal conflict leading to the smooth integration of different classes into society, thus granting the Joseon Dynasty a long span.

Neo-Confucianism also brought about a new change in the education system in Joseon, Korea. The participants especially introduced the importance of learning and scholarship, where education embraced moral reform and civil administration

(Martina, 2020). This resulted in the setup of many Confucian schools or academics and official schools and institutions where students read and interpreted Confucian books and underwent strenuous mental and intellectual training (You, 2022). The civil service examinations conducted based on these classical texts, literate the illiterate people of the imperial dynasties as the examinations paved the way towards superior official posts in the imperial dynasties (You, 2022). This fostered education produced a breed of educated scholars who worked within the bureaucratic halls of government and were also part of the cultural and enlightening realms. The focus on learning and scholars contributed to developing literature, philosophy, and artistic works while enriching the population's knowledge and skills (Lee, 2023). Through emphasizing education, Neo-Confucianism saw to it that the administrative elite possessed ethical values to make sound moral decisions for the state's benefit and were also informed to make sound decisions for healthy states.

The emergence of Neo-Confucianism also contributed to creating patriotic and harmonized culture across the country. The continuous codification of Confucianism as a civilizing code led to a convergence in defining a culture that was common and widely applied in administration, society, and even governance (Back, 2021). This encompassment assisted in unifying the Joseon Dynasty from the various regions and communities by putting cultural and ethical norms into perspective (Manek, 2023). Family rituals like ancestral religion and public customs prolonged this feeling of continuity and integration of the person in their families and society. This was a convenient process for building a society with common values, established based on Confucianism with its main presuppositions of respect, duty, and community (Back, 2021). It played a crucial role thus in preserving the social harmony of the people and the unity of the nation, especially in the context of existing threats or pressures from other nations or internal forces (Manek, 2023). Thus, Neo-Confucianism helped strengthen cultural memory, loyalty to the Joseon state, and the common purpose of the population as a whole.

The introduction of Neo-Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty had numerous benefits that defined Korea's political framework and societal relations. Bearing in mind the role of moral governance, there was a guarantee of capable and ethically minded governing elites, which reduced corruption and improper behaviors (Martina, 2020). The emphasis on social order led to the obsession with maintaining order and stability, which increased bureaucratic order and social harmony (Lee, 2023). Thus, the insistence and encouragement of cultural concord and a shared Malaysian identity managed to sustain societal harmony and national unity. These advantages helped develop the Joseon Dynasty and maintain its long-standing rule of Korea, which continues to be manifested in Korean society today.

5. Implications

In their present times, numerous aspects of Neo-Confucianism influenced governance and society during the Joseon Dynasty, which makes it possible for present-day leadership in South Korea to adopt political leadership, societal order, educational transformation, and cultural integration, obtain guidance from Neo-Confucianism. Among the most significant consequences of the currently politically influential discourse for the leaders of modern states, one may identify Neo-Confucian moral governance principles (Gao & Chung, 2023). Promoting ethics in leadership and personal morality can bring responsibility to political parties. In this way, the current political leaders should consider virtues such as honesty, humility, and responsibility in their quest to steer the political systems toward realizing the political good (Napoli, 2020). This approach reduces corruption and increases transparency for improved work performance and accountability to the nation by officials. Therefore, modern political leaders, politicians, policymakers, and educators must adopt ethical training and bi-annual checkups of moral standings into the political leadership staff development curricula or processes to build an ethical governance culture within the governance hierarchy (Lee, 2023). It is crucial to consider neo-Confucianist premises and findings in order to devise measures that would help the members of contemporary society maintain proper social order as perceived by neo-Confucianism. As society continues to evolve in our contemporary world, there is a need for a more flexible social structure and so-called 'equality'; the basic concepts of obedience to one's elders, ancestors, and fellow community members cannot be as easily dismissed (Manek, 2023). The policies that can cement family relationships, as well as the cohesion brought about by binding community relationships, are capable of helping to blur social isolation. For example, those that aim to improve the condition, status, and well-being of families, enabling effective communication between the young and the elderly, or encouraging people to participate in community-related activities are all likely to foster social integration (Napoli, 2020). In addition, it is possible to promote and enforce respect and responsibility in the frame of social organization using advertising campaigns in mass media and the presentation of popularized educational systems reflecting the urgency of these values.

Educational reforms inspired by Neo-Confucian values can significantly enhance education systems' quality and moral grounding. Neo-Confucian ideas such as education as the foundation of civilization and the Big Ontario as a comprehensive

learning system that strengthens scholarly and moral faculties support the ideal education. Current educational systems and changes could incorporate character education along with the traditional school subjects and styles of teaching and promote respect, integrity, and diligence. Some measures that can be taken regarding ethical decision-making are education, where programs that foster critical thinking skills and moral reasoning should be introduced to enable the students to deal with different issues (Manek, 2023). Furthermore, concepts of perpetual learning and the belief in the continual enhancement of an individual's character that neo-Confucianism advocates can be manifested by establishing policies that encourage further adult education and career advancement. Neo-Confucianism as a form of cultural evolution and maintenance of synthesis as a form of cultural integration can be of immense value in helping to prevent the erosion of cultural standards within the global village today (Napoli, 2020). It is argued that preservations of cultural heritage and adherence to traditional/ cultural norms foster nationhood and unity associated with national identity. This can be through support for education in culture, promoting the history of culture, and creating awareness of national culture and festivals. Promoting and implementing the traditional arts, literature, and philosophy in the education system can contribute to future generations' continuity and preserve their ancestors' heritage (Deuchler, 2021). Also, promoting platforms for intercultural communication and tolerance can create a sense of national unity and identity, together with accepting and incorporating diversity. These policies help to reduce cultural decay since people are more inclined to the established cultural standards of their country and, thus, create a stable national identity.

In conclusion, the introduction of Neo-Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty presented alerting benefits that fundamentally impacted the imperial administration, social hierarchy, educational system, and individual Korea's cultural legacy. They included moral governance, which increased administrative, ethical standards and accountability; social order, which called for clear roles and rank order; education through emphasizing moral and scholarly features; and cultural unity and consistency. These principles helped establish and sustain the Joseon Dynasty, and the ideals are still implemented in modern South Korea to the largest extent. Ethical leadership, social harmony, comprehensive education, and cultural unity were important values introduced back then, all useful for pursuing contemporary development. Applying all these Neo-Confucian principles in contemporary society's political, social, and educational realms will improve policies governing administrations, stabilize society, and maintain humanity's culture. Future work may further elucidate the specifics of the variety of Neo-Confucian practices and their application to the modern world setting and examine the related effects relevant to today's governance structures, education systems, or social unity cohesiveness. More comparative analysis of Neo-Confucian values with those of other cultures and philosophies may provide even more light on how much it still means to be civilized, which still means today.

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