

The Reflection of Renaissance Humanism in East Asian Philosophy from an Artistic,
Medical, and Musical Perspective of Korea

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I. Introduction

The word Renaissance, in its most commonly used form, is capitalized and used in the form of a proper noun; rather than what the origin of the word signifies—a rebirth of ideas—it is used as a descriptor of a specific part of history from a particular place in Europe, where the fall of the Byzantine empire stimulated a dramatic resurgence of ancient philosophies, art, and music combined to form a paradigm shift, whose core ideas still found the modern society we live in today. The ideas of Humanism, beginning of scientific thought, the mathematical or philosophical exploration of music and medicine, and the soon to follow Scientific Revolution, irreversibly and dramatically brought our world to where we are now. It seems as if the modern medicine, educational institutes, opportunistic equality in capitalism, the rise of secularism and the trust in science has been eternal—yet we must remind ourselves that such benefits we enjoy have only been available to those born in the few centuries following this Renaissance, only accounting for a small fraction of the whole of human history.

On the other hand, in an opposite part of the world a Medieval dynasty was, quite coincidentally, undergoing a similar shift of thought. In 16th century Korea, the dominating dynasty of Joseun had undergone an invasion from the clan of Toyotomi Hideyoshi from Japan, and while the attack was successfully fended off, it dramatically altered the course of history for the nation—and prepared it for a new cultural change. While the sociological makeup and dominating ideas of the era were completely irrelevant to those of Europe, and especially considering there were no major trade routes established between medieval Korea and any parts of European nations, it is remarkable to see the extent of resemblance in these two locations during the same period. Although, due to the lack of international political power in medieval Korea—mostly overshadowed by China—the influence of such ideas were practically limited and its records unremarkable; without a focal point of change and discussion—a role served by Venice and Florence in Europe—the changes were dispersed and remained regional. While such limitations limit the Korean Renaissance in its influence and historical significance, it is nevertheless a core, influential part in Korean history, influencing, in a manner distinct from Europe, the future society of Korea, while the similarities with it and the European Renaissance might reveal the necessity of such paradigm shifts in any society.

This paper will thus focus on a comparison between the societies of 14th to 17th century Europe and Korea, and attempt to shed a coherent light on the changes in social structure, ideology and art in the later half of the Joseun dynasty based on the study of the European Renaissance. An introduction to the ancient ideas of Confucianism and Taoism will follow a brief introduction into the history of Joseun and the Korean writing system, which will together form a foundation for an understanding of Korean culture and the revolution. Topics following will then analyze the change in three aspects of culture: visual arts, music, and medicine, comparing the novelty of ideas and social change they brought about with the European Renaissance. It is the aim of this paper to analyze this part of Korean history in the lens we often focus only on the European Renaissance, understanding the significance of this cultural shift, and ultimately glimpse at the universal commonality of the ideologies present in the periods shared by the two regions of the world.

A Note on translation of Chinese or Korean words, texts, and pronouns

Due to the Korean focus of the paper all readings of Chinese characters will be done in the accepted standard pronunciation in the Korean alphabetical system of Hangeul unless otherwise specified. Names of dynasties, peoples, and ideologies will use the most widely accepted English translation, and if no such translation exists a most direct and contextual translation will be attempted based on the author's fluency in Korean.

II. Background

1. Ancient Chinese Philosophies

Significantly influential philosophies throughout the history of East Asian nations were predominantly imported and interpreted from China, including Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, all of which were foundations of the Korean renaissance. While Buddhism was left behind in the establishment of the Joseun dynasty,¹ its ideals, combined

¹ Yeong-jin Ko, "Neo-Confucianism as the Dominant Ideology in Joseon," *Korea Journal* Vol.43. No.4 Winter, 2003 pp.59~86. https://www.ekoreajournal.net/issue/view_pop.htm?Idx=3271. sect. 2 para. 1

with confucianism, recede into Korean culture; Confucianism is treated in reverence as the founding ideal of the nation, while Daoism takes on a more recessed role in culture, often appearing in folklore and myths.² Thus the exploration of the schools of thought, as we may do with those from Plato and Aristotle, is necessary to understand the ideology in the later, medieval ages.

Ancient China saw a turbulent and violent period of upheaval in the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476BC) and Warring States Period (475-221BC)³, and such unrest provided a platform or a surge of new philosophical ideas, as thinkers during the period of the hundred schools of thought presented alternative systems of the role of the state and the individual for leading a proper life. Confucianism seated itself as the dominating school of the time with Confucius, a scholar from the Zhou dynasty, developed the rules for an ideal nation, the interaction between it and the individual, and how the individual must strive to find value in their own life.⁴

Remarkably similar to Plato's *the Republic*, the *Confucian classics* delve into the importance of individual qualities of people and how the state must interact, with *jeungmyeong* (正名), which suggests each individual must do what they must do in their place—an idea with a similar aim with Aristotle's Eudamonia. Confucianism through its later iterations also stress the importance of the strength of character through the *five virtues* of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity (仁, 義, 禮, 智, 信). These ideas find themselves throughout the history of China and, more centered on our focus, of medieval Korea, where Josuen designated it official founding philosophy on neo-confucianism.

Daoism, on the other hand, was founded by *Laozi* (老子), which, rather than lay out a political philosophy, focussed on living coherently and harmoniously with the way or *dao* (道) of nature, a core part of which was the principle of yin and yang.⁵ It proposed a secluded and recessed way of life inside of nature, and thus did not influence the political landscape as confucianism did; rather, those in medieval Korea treated Daoism as an alternative to the worldly ways of life, and, merging with folklore and myth, created stories of an ideal life of a

² Ko, "Neo-confucianism," sect. 3. para 2

³ New World Encyclopedia contributors, "Hundred Schools of Thought," *New World Encyclopedia*, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Hundred_Schools_of_Thought&oldid=1009002. Accessed 7 Dec. 2019.

⁴ New World Encyclopedia contributors, "Hundred Schools of Thought," sect. 2 para. 1

⁵ *ibid.* sect. 4 para. 1

seonbi (선비), a virtuous scholar who would give up wealth and power to serve the nation and live with nature—similar to the idea of a Renaissance-era polymath, but also with an extra emphasis on integrity of character.

2. A Brief History of Medieval Korea

The nation of *Goryeo* occupied the full of the current Modern Korean area in the peninsula from 918 - 1392. *Goryeo*'s founding ideologies was partially influenced by the government of the *Ming* dynasty in China, and contrary to the popularity and national adoption of Buddhism in *Goryeo*, *Joseun*, the following dynasty actively adopted and promoted Neo-confucianism as it's core ideas.⁶ This is in rather stark contrast to the European Renaissance in which Neo-platonism and other ancient philosophies were revived mainly through academic means, not a change of nation. However it may be considered that such changes were indeed a catalyst in the quick change in ideology amongst the generations that stimulated and culminated in the Renaissance in later years.

The *Joseun* dynasty was established through a military revolution in 1392, and established a 500-year long absolute monarchy. A explicit caste system was established and after stabilization of royal power the country experienced a long period of (in general) political stability. This was broken during the Japanese invasion in 1592 and Qing invasion 1627 and 1636, which greatly weakened the power of the aristocracy as well as the government which struggled to fend of the invasions, and is treated often as the turning point in *Joseun*'s history.⁷ While the ideas of Neo-confucianism and Daoism endured, there were changes in how they were expressed in art and the philosophies of medicine.

Neo-confucianism or Seonglihak(성리학), the founding philosophy of *Joseun*, was created by Zhu Xi, whose ideals is considered to supplement the theological aspects of confucianism that was lacking in relation to other thoughts such as Buddhism or Daoism. This transformed the system of thought into something more than a political ideology, becoming fully formed a metaphysical and ethical foundation.⁸ The ideas of the elements of *eui* (義) and *gi* (氣), respectively material and spirit, creating all things in the universe, as

⁶ Ko, "Neo-confucianism," sect. 2. para 1

⁷ New World Encyclopedia contributors, "Japan's Korea War: First Invasion (1592-1596)," *New World Encyclopedia* [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Japan%27s_Korea_War:_First_Invasion_\(1592-1596\)&oldid=1010.130](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Japan%27s_Korea_War:_First_Invasion_(1592-1596)&oldid=1010.130) Accessed 7 Dec. 2019

⁸ Ko, "Neo-confucianism," sect. 2. para 2

well as the investigation on the human mind in metaphysical forms draws a striking parallel with the reinvestigation of Plato's Theory of Forms and its medieval reiterations.

This confusionist ideas fueled the Korean caste system—the ideas of the five virtues were modified to the values of *samgang-oryun* (三綱五倫) which defined the interaction between the different classes.⁹ While similar to the caste system often analyzed in India the differences reveal themselves in the theoretical foundations—religion against philosophy—and the rigidity and social mobility—there were procedures that were often used to move between social classes. The intellectual class or *yangban* formed the aristocracy, often working as government officials, and formed forming hereditary clans—similar to the aristocratic class found in mideaval Europe. The average person or *sangmin* were the merchant and farming class, and was especially pronounced during the later half of the Joseun dynasty due to the increase in wealthy merchants who “bought their way in” into *yangban*—a similar phenomenon to the increase in trade during Renaissance Europe causing class confusion. Alternatively one could take a government issued test on confusionism named *Guageo*, which upon success offered a government position and grant an official promotion to a higher class.

This type of social mobility was greatly emphasized in the later half of the Joseun dynasty as the wealthy aristocracy were deemed powerless to the general public after the losses of war, as well as the increase in international trade giving birth to a rich *sangmin* class. By the end of the nation the flooding of the aristocratic class caused a breakdown of the caste system, and gradually led to a modern notion of equality—but the hints of such social upheaval were definitely present, reflected in the shift of focus in visual and musical arts, from royal, theoretical paintings depicting ideas of Confucianism or Daoism, to the focus on the daily lives of normal citizens.

3. Invention of the Korean Writing System

Rarely is a writing system discussed in European Renaissance, due to the universality of roman-derived alphabet systems which were, despite its ancient origins, surprisingly functional—such systems rarely present themselves in other parts of the world, and is likely an unnoticed contributor of the success of the European renaissance—most pre-modern

⁹ Keith Pratt et. al., 1999. *Korea: A Historical and Cultural Dictionary*. Durham: University of Durham. pp. 88

cultures find their literacy, and thus intellectual discourse rather low, which limited the capacity for exchange of culture and ideas. Despite the existence of a printing press Joseun did not have its own alphabet but rather one borrowed from Chinese, with some characters representing sounds and others meaning, read in convoluted orders and written with even more complexity. Thus a need for a simplified and alphabetic script—something taken for granted in Europe—was high.

Hangul, the writing system used in Korea until now, was invented by King *Sejong* in 1443, with collaboration from scholars from the royal academic institute the *Hall of Worthies*, and derived its inspiration, rather curiously, from both Neo-confucianist ideals and human anatomical structure.¹⁰ The preamble of the expository book *Hunminjeongeum* (훈민정음) that delineated the system, begins with a discussion of the necessity of a distinct set of characters for public communication: “The spoken language does not match the Chinese letters. Therefore, even if the ignorant want to communicate, many of them in the end cannot state their concerns.”¹¹ The fact that this system was devised for the “convenient daily use” of “all “the people” was revolutionary—it was established tradition that only the aristocracy could participate in discussion, art, and general culture. Hangul, on the contrary, made available such culture to the general public, and allowed for publication of textbooks, stories, exchange of letters, political communication and ideologies—all of which were founded upon a coherent, general, and simple writing system.

The philosophical background of the script is both ideological and practical. The vowels are created using three elements: · (天, the sky), 一 (地, the ground), 丿 (人 the human).¹² The three foundations are also present in Korean Neo-confucianism metaphysics, and are the elements which combine to make the universe—as the three scripts combine in different ways to create all vowels. The consonants, on the other hand, are based on the anatomical structure of the mouth—each consonant takes the shape of the mouth, tongue, or throat when it is pronounced. ㄱ (/g/), for example, is a side-view of the tongue which touches the back of the palate. Stronger versions of the sound, e.g. ㅋ (/k/), add a line or dot in the base sound.

¹⁰ Republic of Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation Contributors. “Memory of the World - Republic of Korea: Hunminjeongeum Manuscript” Cultural Heritage Administration. sect. 1 para 1.

¹¹ King Sejong. 1443. *Hunminjeongeum*. Hanyang: Haerye-bon (해례본) sect. preamble

¹² Sejong. *Hunminjeongeum*. sect. “Creation of Letters” (제자해)

While the simplicity and ease of use of the alphabet is remarkable, the essence of its value lies in such a amalgamation of philosophy and anatomy. Each letter in the alphabet is a combination of one vowel and up to two consonants—forming a whole only through both a theoretical and the physical concept. A distinct parallel can be drawn from *Hunminjeongeum*'s exposition and many of the books on medicine in Renaissance Europe, in which abstract philosophy was combined with the human body, and their interactions intimately described. The idea that such two distinct ideas co-founded a single set of script reveals the close connection the Joseun's scholars of the time associated between—in the words of Robert Burton—the Macrocosm and the Microcosm, the theoretical and the practical. While the use of the system itself indeed shaped post-war Joseun's intellectual discourse, the emergence of ideas combining Neo-confucianism to such humanly and supposedly profane use in daily life, cannot be found in previous literature. It would therefore be an understatement to regard the invention of this writing system as merely an antecedent to the cultural revolution—it forms the elements of the ideas of humanism and incorporates it inseparably from the forms of idea communication, and thus is at the core of the vigor and expedient change that is the Korean Renaissance.

III. Visual Arts, Music, and Medicine in Post-war Joseun

1. Visual Arts and the Refocus on Life

One of the most direct glimpses at the lives and thoughts of an era would be an investigation of prominent visual works of art. Due to most artworks in Joseun being fragile—wooden murals or thin *Hanji* papers—, not many works remain; but those that still exist are enough to visualize the society that produced such works.

The major focus of the visual arts in post-war Joseun is Humanism—previous works were mostly commissioned exclusively by the royals, and included portraiture or mythical murals painted in their halls of palaces—little art from the public sphere remain other than the vast landscape paintings or still life paintings of plants or animals, influenced clearly by Daoism. *Mongyu-dowon-do* (몽유도원도) or *Jeokbyeok-do* (적벽도), which depict the dreams of the aristocratic artists, exemplify the focus on ideal worlds, while numerous paintings of the Confucianist paintings of *Four Noble Ones* (四君子) of the *blossom*, the *orchid*, the *bamboo*, and the *chrysanthemum*, show the focus remaining in such ideals.

A dramatic shift from such utopian arts to depictions of ordinary life was spearheaded by two renowned artists: *Hong-do Kim* (김홍도) and *Yun-bok Shin* (신윤복), both royal artists who, despite their wealthy backgrounds, chose rather to draw the lives of ordinary citizens. The works in the *Book of Collected Works of Kim* (金弘道筆 風俗圖 畫帖) include *Teacher and pupils* (서당), *Dancing boy* (무동), *Way to the Market* (장터길), or *Lunch* (점심),¹³ and reveal the folksy and humanistic focus of his works. Pieces that focus on the daily lives of peasants are known as *pungsok-do* (풍속도), and is closest in style to Genre paintings or the movement to Realism in Europe; his use of perspective, realistic facial and body proportions and dynamic depictions greatly distance his works from that of the pre-war, and their resemblance to Renaissance-era realism even cause speculation that his style was influenced by European works with which he absorbed during his time in China. His role in the Korean Renaissance is similar to that of Michelangelo or Raphael—the sheer volume of his works not only include *pungsok-do* but also royalty or aristocratically commissioned art, including *The Nineteen Daoist Immortals* (군선도), *Feast for the Pyongyang Governor* (평양

¹³ Kim, Hong-do. [1500?] *Book of Collected Works of Kim* (Danwon pungsockdo cheop). [Hanyang?]

양감사향연도), or murals in the Buddhist temple of *Yonjusa* (영주사). His style, despite the wide range of his work, remained clearly consistent, focussing on realistic proportions and more humanly depictions even of the divine; such works elevate his influence in the Humanistic re-focus of art in the Korean Renaissance.

Yun-bok Shin, similarly, depicted the life of everyday ordeals, but whose subjects included what was then considered profane¹⁴—his iconic piece *Lovers under the moon* (월하정인) which depict love transcending class differences or his numerous *erotic arts* (춘화), despite causing his expulsion from the royal painting institute, shows a deviance from tradition that art must depict only the idealistic and divine world, and furthered the Humanistic focus in Jeosun's latter visual arts, playing an irreplaceable role, along with *Kim*, in post-war Joseun's Renaissance.

2. Music and Public Entertainment

The history of music from pre-war Joseun era is sparse; most musical scores and textbooks are deemed lost during Japanese and Ming invasions. Parts of such sources as well as tradition, however, still remain, from which we may establish a picture of the musical instrumentation during the Joseun era. The concepts of music remain rather separate from the Confucianist ideas of other aspects of the culture of the era, and maintain its focus on the life of the general public. Music was mostly focussed on royal ceremonies, especially the ceremonial memorial music of royal ancestry known as *Munmyo-jereak* (문묘제례악), closer in theory to Korean folk religious beliefs rather than Confucianism.¹⁵ The maintenance and development of such music were sponsored by the state, reaching a complete restoration and establishment during the reign of King Sejong, musical rules strictly structured and established established through the centuries of tradition—most of the music that existed in this era were such ancient, traditional royal music, or minor folk tunes which were passed on orally. It is still the case that pre-war music was not related to human emotions or practical entertainment but rather part of a ceremonial ritual and was limited.

A dramatic resurgence of wide-spread music, however, through a proliferation of structured yet publically enjoyed musical performances increased in the post-war eras.

¹⁴ Shin, Yunbok. [1500?] Book of Collected Works of Shin (Hewon Jeonshin cheop). [Hanyang?]

¹⁵ Encyclopedia of Korean Culture. s.v. “A-Ak (아악)” <http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Contents/Item/E0034368>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2019.

Pansori (판소리), a two-person musical-like storytelling performance is a clear depiction of the Humanistic movement of the era. Enjoyed initially by the peasants but later also by the yangban class, *Pansori* included a singer and a drummer that through subtle music and dance told a widely-known folktale.¹⁶ The establishment of the *twelve stories* (열두마당) and nation-wide performances, it was the first organized, widespread form of musical entertainment for the public¹⁷, and continued throughout the later years; performances are enjoyed even in the modern era, and is treated similarly attending a Shakespearean play in modern western culture.

With the audience being the general public and the stories themselves including populace topics like love, war, or fantasy, as well as an underlying tone of class criticism, *Pansori* establishes itself as a clear deviance from the treatment of music as an unreachable, unaccessible medium and shapes it into a Humanistic tradition. Similar to the visual arts the main focus of music in post-war Korea was the life of a normal peasant, and separated itself from tradition or Confucianism, which was for the time, a surprising act of deviance from the divine.

3. Ideology and Practice of Medicine

The refocus on the human body lies always at the core of a societal ideological shift onto human life—arguably a study of the body is a iconoclastic representation of the reevaluation of the individual person and a core, representative study in humanism. Thus a clear establishment of a coherent, rigorous theory of medicine surfaces the ideas of the era regarding the role, both metaphysical and practical, in the theoretical foundations of contemporary society.

Such foundation in post-war Joseun, of course, was Neo-confucianism. An iconic textbook establishing a new theory of the human body, in a similar way to the work of Robert Burton or Marsilio Ficino, was published in this era, marking a milestone in not only the field of Korean traditional medicine but also a more practical, yet still abstract application of Neo-confucianist theories in the natural world. Such work was the role of the royal medics, and one of the most renowned of the physicians, *Heo Jun* (허준), was appointed for such a role;

¹⁶ Encyclopedia of Korean Culture. s.v. “Pansori (판소리)” <http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Contents/Item/E0059663>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2019.

¹⁷ Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture. s.v. ”Twelve plays (열두마당)” <http://folkency.nfm.go.kr/kr/topic/detail/1213>

decades of work including consolidation of pre-existing Chinese medical theories, folk medicine, and the study of herbs led to a 25-volume medical textbook, the *Dongui Bogam*, outlining fully the theoretical background as well as the practical workings of the human body, ailments, and their treatments.¹⁸ This work is regarded as the pinnacle of medical theory of the century and beyond, only being superseded partly by an alternative theory of *Sasang constitutional medicine* (사상의학) suggested in the 19th century.¹⁹ While many of Dongui Bogam's methods, through the lens of modern science, were simply due to a systematic analysis of herbs, the book itself outlined a Confucianist backing of its theories based on its metaphysical theories.

The work itself reveals in great detail the confucianistic ideas embedded in its theoretical background; similar to Galen's system four-humors, Heo describes the body as a combination of through three elements: *Jeong* (精), *Gi* (氣), and *Shin* (神).²⁰ *Jeong* is a divine element and the "Foundation of the Physical Body," a gift from the divine: "A Treasured, Divine Element," and can be protected by "consumption of the 5 type of grains." *Gi* described the "air and life," the fluid elements of the body, and was what "creates and sustains liveliness." *Shin*, using the Chinese character of "god," was of utmost importance, as it was the "spirit, soul of the body" and worked to balance the seven emotions, and an imbalance of which would create ailments.

It is remarkable in that the *Dongui Bogam*'s structure and tone is analogous to Ficino's *Anatomy of Melancholy*,²¹ in which it revisits ancient theories with the human body as part of its philosophical outline, but reinterprets them for practical use. Such an approach was nonexistent in Korean history, and the *Dongui Bogam* thus was accepted as a foundational source for Korean traditional medicine. The significance of the book lies also in the spirit of presentation; it cited over 180 sources—rare for the time—and clearly outlined

¹⁸ Jun Heo, 1613, *Dongui Bogam*, (Hanyang: Naewonhyaljya Chogan-bon (내의원활자 초간본))

¹⁹ Song, Bong-Keun, Jin-Hee Won, and Sungchul Kim. 2016. "Historical Medical Value of Donguibogam." *J Pharmacopuncture* 19 (March 2016): 16–20. <https://doi.org/10.3831/KPI.2016.19.002>.

²⁰ Heo, *Dongui Bogam*. vol. 1 sect. Introduction (동의보감 서문) para. 8-10

²¹ Robert Burton, 1621. *Anatomy of Melancholy*. (London)

the line of logic to practical application from metaphysical theory.²² Despite its abstract ideas the cures presented are also practical and easily accessible, furthering its widespread use as a reference for physicians nation-wide.²³ This especially reveals a Humanistic approach of medicine—on curing ailments in the real world through accessible herbs and tools—as well as a logical, practical approach to the human body, and thus makes a mark in the change in thought to during the period of the Korean Renaissance.

IV. Conclusion

We are often forgetful about the fact that the world we live in is built atop the ones that preceded it—it is essential to notice that the social constructs we identify as intrinsic as our biology, were created, rather than innate. The era in which we live in is, unarguably, greatly shaped by the Renaissance—the thoughts of Humanism endure, realism permeate, and philosophies embed themselves, throughout in this world. But such a process is not something inherent to European culture; rather, it would be a universal step, an essential building block in history that every part of the world experience, though to varying degrees.

It was the aim of this paper to reveal such a point; that most ideas we see as groundbreaking and specialized to the European Renaissance is not necessarily unique, but rather is commonplace in this world, and through exploration of the philosophy, language, arts, and medicine, we would be able to experience that such ideas, even if emerged in unfamiliar parts of the world, are apprehensible. With societies such separate, geography distinct and histories antithetic, it may be, on first glance, remarkable that such shared phenomena of cultural shift exist in the same period of time—but a closer investigation reveals that such ideas were the indispensable, axiomatic, yet nevertheless remarkable components of all human society.

²² Song, Bong-Keun, Jin-Hee Won, and Sungchul Kim. 2016. “Historical Medical Value of Donguibogam.” *J Pharmacopuncture* 19 (March 2016): 16–20. <https://doi.org/10.3831/KPI.2016.19.002>.

²³ *ibid.* sect. 7 para. 2

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