



**HAL**  
open science

# Chosŏn Confucian Scholar's attitudes toward the Laozi

Daeyeol Kim

► **To cite this version:**

Daeyeol Kim. Chosŏn Confucian Scholar's attitudes toward the Laozi. *Sungkyun Journal for Asian Studies*, 2007, 7 (2), pp.17-22. halshs-00349749

**HAL Id: halshs-00349749**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00349749>**

Submitted on 20 May 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## **PANEL: CONFUCIANISM (pre-modern history)**

### **Chosŏn Confucian scholars' attitudes toward the *Laozi***

KIM Daeyeol (INaLCO, Paris)

Is it shocking to hear that the Chosŏn literati were radically or rigidly Neo-Confucian? Probably not, at least for the general public. This idea is so surreptitiously inculcated in the mind of most of us. On the contrary, it might be relatively surprising to hear that Korean Confucian literati of this time widely read, wrote about and even accepted intellectual, ideological, religious or cosmological traditions other than Confucianism. It seems to me that the cultural plurality in Chosŏn society has been often passed over, though it is also known that different cultural traditions coexisted and even functioned in mutual complementary.

Confucianism, as a whole system of culture, was incontestably one of the dominant currents in Korean society and provided models in “almost” every field of culture for Chosŏn period. However, its cultural landscape was more complex and Confucian religious or ideological community membership — the determination of which often depended on circumstances — was, in a sense, rather “soft”. As a way to understand the cultural plurality, we can focus on and interpret people’s more ultimate concerns and consider different traditions as cultural models or means given to realize them, insofar as 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 have to keep in mind that a model is useful for something and not always the final or sole destination. This sort of reflexion 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 more ultimate. This point of view also demands to take into account the ways in which a dominant tradition is imposed in relation to other cultural factors and contents. 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 certain ideas from the *Laozi* can be in accordance with Confucianism on the level of fundamental thought. Their central interests focused on principles and moral values to which Confucian literati adhered.

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* 無爲) into governing the people according to the ‘decree of Heaven’ (*ch’õnmyõng* 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* 嗇) 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 exposed 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 Sõ Myõng’ũng. Considered as one of the pioneers of ‘Northern school’ (*pukhakp’a* 北學派), Sõ Myõng’ũng even introduces in his interpretation of the *Laozi* some proper Daoist cosmological notions (as *chõng* 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’ (*ũi* 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’ (*hyõnsõng* 玄聖).

Hong Sõkchu is one of the central figures of the history of Confucian ideas in 19<sup>th</sup> century Korea. While being widely interested in diverse intellectual traditions out of

Confucianism, he tried to replace the perspective of ‘ordering the world’ (*kyōngse* 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 individual 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 its 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 could agree 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 (author of the *Laozi*) 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.

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 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 fade 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 inside of Confucian literati group itself. After all, beyond these misty and instable boundaries between Confucianism and the other intellectual or spiritual traditions of Chosŏn society, it may be also useful 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**

	Name	Date	One of the highest official posts/ grades occupied by person	School	Commentaries
1	李珥	1536-1584	判書 (正二品)	西人	醇言

2	朴世堂	1629-1703	判書 (正二品)	少論	新註道德經
3	徐命膺	1716-1787	判書, 大提學 (正二品)	北學派	道德指歸
4	李忠翊	1744-1816	X	江華學派	談老
5	洪奭周	1774-1842	左議政 (正一品)	老論	訂老

**Table 2: others texts**

	Name	Date	One of the highest official posts/grades occupied by person	School	Texts
1	李苻	1478-1534	左議政 (正一品)	X	讀老子
2	申欽	1556-1628	判書 (正二品)	西人?	老子吟
					讀道德經
					書道德經後
3	許筠	1569-1618	參議 (正三品)	大北?	老子
4	鄭忠信	1576-1636	兵馬節度使 (從二品武官)	X	讀老子有感
5	張維	1587-1638	右議政 (正一品)	?	老子見道體
6	尹鑄	1617-1680	判書 (正二品)	X	老子道德經序
7	朴世堂	1629-1703	判書 (正二品)	少論	讀老子
8	任相元	1638-1697	判書 (正二品)	X	讀老子
9	李德壽	1673-1744	判書, 大提學 (正二品)	X	老子要解序
10	鄭來僑	1681-1759	僉知中樞府事 (正三品武官, 中人出身)	X	讀老子
11	林象德	1683-1719	牧使 (正三品)	少論?	老子論
12	姜再恒	1689-1756	縣監 (正六品)	少論	問禮於老子
13	趙龜命	1693-1737	佐郎 (正六品)	老論?	讀老子
14	徐命膺	1716-1787	判書, 大提學 (正二品)	北學派	讀老子
15	李匡呂	1720-1783	參奉 (從九品)	?	讀老子
16	尹愔	1741-1826	參議 (正三品)	星浩	書蘇子由老子論後
17	申綽	1760-1828	X	江華學派	老子旨略序
18	李圭景	1788-?	X	X	老子道德經辨證說

### Selected bibliography

KEUM Jangtae 금장태. 2006. *Han'guk yuhak ūi Noja ihae* 한국유학의 『노자』 이해 (Interpretations and Commentaries of *Lao Tzu* in the History of Korean Confucianism). Seoul National University

Press.

KIM Hak Mok 김학목. 2002. “Chosŏn yuhakchadŭl ūi *Todŏkkyŏng* chusŏk kwa kŭ sidae sanghwang – *Sunŏn*, *Sinju Todŏkkyŏng*, *Chŏngno rŭl chungsim ūro* –” 조선 유학자들의 『道德經』 주석과 그 시대 상황 – 『순언』 『신주도덕경』 『정노』 를 중심으로 –, *Tongsŏ ch'ŏlhak yŏn'gu* 동서철학연구, n° 24, p. 115-134.

KIM Hak Mok. 2003. “Yŏnch'ŏn Hong Sŏkchu ka *Todŏkkyŏng* ūl chusŏkhan mokchŏk” 淵泉 洪奭周가 道德經을 주석한 목적, *Ch'ŏlhak yŏn'gu* 철학연구, n° 60, p. 5-24.

KIM Hak Mok. 2004. “Kanghwa hakh'a ūi *Todŏkkyŏng* chusŏk e kwanhan koch'al – Ch'owŏn Yi Ch'ungik ūi *Ch'owŏn tamno rŭl chungsim ūro*” 江華學派의 『道德經』 주석에 관한 고찰 – 椒園 李忠翊의 『椒園談老』 를 중심으로 –, *Tongsŏ ch'ŏlhak yŏn'gu* 동서철학연구, n° 34, p. 277-299.