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Paper in the panel :

**What were the Classics used for?**

**Exploring the roles and uses of the Confucian canon in pre-modern Korea**

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**King Chǒngjo's political strategy around the royal lecture  
on the Confucian classics**

I present here some preliminary observations in a research project which aims at describing and understanding the meanings of practices from Korea of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that either claim the Confucian tradition or are closely associated with it. In the present paper, I try to look into the way a Chosŏn king made use of the Confucian tradition and its ideology for state affairs, in particular to reinforce his political power.

In the political history of religions, the exegesis of canonic texts has been used as a political mean. It constitutes one of the essential facets in the history of Confucianism which regards good government as one of the ultimate purposes of the tenet. As it is well known in the history of Korea (and also of East Asia), studying the canonic texts was not only necessary for the candidates to pass civil service examinations but also recommended or officially imposed to princes and even monarchs. Higher officers read the canonic texts with monarchs in *kyōngyōn* 經筵 or “Royal Lecture”. These lectures should have played a fundamental and intensive role in the political dynamics and human relationships of the Court, considering the well-known rivalry between monarchical and bureaucratic power in the Korean history. During the Chosŏn period, the royal lecture was intensified and its role was enlarged to a policy council. It provided occasions allowing literati officers not only to inculcate the Neo-Confucian ideal on kings but also to give them moral admonitions as well as political criticisms. It functioned in fact, in most cases, as a means for literati officers to restrain the power of the king. However, it is also known that some kings, such as Yōngjo 英祖 (r. 1724–1776) and Chǒngjo 正祖 (r. 1776–1800), utilized the royal lecture rather to reinforce their political authority.

But there are remarkable differences between these two kings in terms of practice as well as strategy. At the beginning of his reign, Yǒngjo behaved as a humble and scrupulous student by continuous striving and sincere commitment in lectures, in the quest of acquiring moral authority vis-à-vis his officers; his conquest of authority depended on their recognition of his sagacity. Nevertheless progressively King Yǒngjo turned into an arbiter, eventually compared himself to the sages even though indirectly, and at last introduced his own writings in the royal lectures. He remained however true to the Neo-Confucian ideology of Zhu Xi's school, or that of the literati. Unlike Yǒngjo or his grand-father, King Chǒngjo manifestly did not need the stage for acquiring acknowledgement and credentials from his officers. His objective as to the royal lecture was less to obtain personal moral authority — perhaps it had already been done by his grand-father — and more to restore a Confucian primitive worldview that might legitimate the monarchical authority. He tried to carry out this project through an education of officers by restoring and intensifying the study on Classics as well as through his own charisma.

Since the beginning of his reign in 1776, Chǒngjo established several institutional apparatus to this aim. During that year, with “continue to achieve the ideal of ancestors” as a slogan and “restore the order and the system by rectifying relaxed moral duty” as an explicit objective, he restored and expanded the functions of the Kyujanggak 奎章閣 institute — of which the original function had been to preserve the royal compositions and calligraphies, and which had been seen as a symbol of dynastic authority in the eyes of literati officers. However, the king's real intention was to win the talent over to his side and educate them in order to make up the base of his influence. In 1781, he set the institute in a greater place in the Ch'angdǒk Palace. He then extended the royal lecture by organizing it in Kyujanggak as well as in Hongmungwan 弘文館 where the royal lecture on the Classics used to take place. The *Annals* reports in details on the first royal lecture at Imunwǒn 摛文院 — office house of the Kyujanggak — which occurred on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> month in 1781. The article on the lecture begins by describing a solemn opening ceremonial procedure with the burning of incense, the playing of music, the entrance in procession and the salutation of the officers to the king, etc.

Moreover, a special education program for young officers, Ch'ogyē munsin 抄啓文臣 or “singled out and recommended civil officers”, was newly associated with the Kyujanggak institute. Scholars thirty-seven years old or younger, who had just passed the state examination, they would belong to the Kyujanggak and engage in scholarly activities focusing

on reading the Four Books and Three Classics and training themselves to various (about 30) literary styles of compositions. And, having turned forty, they were exempted from this program but during their engagement, they could enjoy privileges including guarantee of the person's status and exemption from affairs other than study. Examinations on reading, *kang* 講, and composing, *che* 製, were regularly held. For the *kang*, there were the *kwagang* 課講 done twice a month by the examiners approved by the king and the *ch'ingang* 親講 given once a month by the king himself. Regarding the *che*, it occurred monthly, once with the examiners (課試) and once with the king (親試). In 1781, on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> month, the first twenty Ch'ogyŏ civil officers were nominated. The program continued during twenty years, producing one hundred thirty-eight men of talent under the reign of Chŏngjo. The 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> month, the Imunwŏn of Kyujanggak was moved to a new place; the 18<sup>th</sup> day of the same month, as was mentioned above, the king inaugurated the royal lecture at Imunwŏn by reading the *Reflections on Things at Hand*; the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> month, at the Sŏngjŏnggak 誠正閣 where the crown prince studied, the king attended for the first time the examination of the Ch'ogyŏ officers.

The Chŏngjo's lecture was not limited to the Ch'ogyŏ officers but extended to the officers of Imunwon and Hongmungwan, to the students of Sŏnggyungwan 成均館 and even to provincial literati.

The way in which Chŏngjo attended these lectures and examinations is particularly worth our attention. Though he questioned like his ancestors did, he did that less to learn and more to problematize and to channel discussion along his desired course, or even to test or correct his officers. Frequently, after their answers, he settled different opinions or interpretations and made a conclusion. Sometimes, when unsatisfied with the answers provided, the king gave his opinions and then the officers in their turn admitted that they were not able to answer his questions or understood the subjects in question thanks to his illustrations. Indeed, it is the king who led and dominated discussion, and in this way controlled discourses. Afterwards his first lecture at Imunwon, he received a vivid reaction from the literati : some days after, an officer in charge of the royal lecture, Chŏng Ch'angsŏng 鄭昌聖 (1724~?), presented him a memorial claiming that the king should continue to ask questions even though his scholarship was so high that no one among his officers could equal him and allow the literati to state their opinion and debate freely. The literati officers could sense a crisis not only in their relationship of master-disciple with the king but also in their political status implicitly

guaranteed in the Neo-Confucian ideology. Later, Kim Chongsu 金鍾秀 (1728~1799), who was appointed ‘Scholar’ (提學) — the highest officer of Kyujanggak — and was part of the Pyōk 僻 faction, pointed out the king’s original motive for the inauguration of the institute and criticized his haughty attitude which prevented literati officers from speaking without hesitation. Even Chōng Yagyong 丁若鏞 (1762-1836), one of the ancient *ch’ogyē* officers and favorite subjects of the king, lamented the inappropriate, inefficient and excessive control practice of the *ch’ogyē* program putting literati officers into an awkward position.

The king’s questions were not simple interrogations but almost always were preceded by some definitions or remarks in which he analyzed, deconstructed or challenged the Neo-Confucian commentaries on the Classics before indicating problems. These questions, related to general or detailed problems in the reading and the understanding of the texts, they also included the king’s basic point of view. They could convey the king’s opinion under the guise of academic enquiries or encouragements. The scholarly program established by the king for his literati officers was eventually an academic way, among others, to consolidate his political position. In these lectures and examinations, Chōngjo continued to prove himself to be a genuine scholar, superior to any other literati officers and conveyed the idea that the monarch was in the very best position to govern the State. His questionings and discourses were themselves the announcement of a return to the original Confucianism in which the monarchical authority had never been challenged.

His view on classical studies can amply be found in the *Kyōngsa kangūi* 經史講義 or *Lectures on Classics and histories*, in 56 fascicles 券, occupying one third of the *Hongjae chōnsō* 弘齋全書, or *Integral Collection of the King Chōngjo’s Works*. The *Lectures* are in fact a collection of the questions raised by the king and the answers provided by his literati officers on issues concerning the Confucian Classics and some canonical texts on history and administration. Some characteristic ideas which could be related to his intention to reinforce the monarchical authority were observed through the analysis of his interrogatory discourses. At first, the king showed a constant concern about the formation of the Classics and its authenticity. This could reveal the limit of the Chosōn ‘orthodox’ tradition of Zhu Xi school which had a tendency to unquestioningly admit or corroborate received interpretations on the canonic texts. As such it could weaken the literati group’s academic authority. Secondly, in questions dealing with the notion of ‘original nature’ (性) which Zhu Xi generalized (性=衆理), the king differentiated it (性=性分) and underlined the difference in nature

between king and non-king. Thirdly, he frequently held talks evoking the Ancient sage kings. Fourthly, through the expression of ‘king-professor’ (君師), he replaced literati by monarch in the Neo-Confucian association schema of ‘government-literati’ and matched the transmission of the Confucian doctrine (道統) and that of the kingship (王統). Fifthly and lastly, as to the *Great Learning* which Neo-Confucian literati considered rather as a guide for the self-cultivation, he treated it as a text for governing.

Whether the king’s sayings on these classics could be considered or not as new commentaries, it seems certain that he intended to change the ancient discourses on the classics in order to construct new ones, and thereby to own new political and cultural hegemony.

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