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# King Chǒngjo's (r. 1776-1800) Reading of the *Great Learning* and his Political Perspective : Powerful Monarchy and Active Government

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## Chǒngjo and his time

One might say that all intellectual effort and ideological struggle in the political history of the Chosŏn 朝鮮 period was due to the ambiguity regarding dynastic sovereignty that existed between the monarch and literati groups. Ever since the 17th century and its invasions and wars, literati factions had consolidated their position both in the provinces and the central government. From the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century (1680-1727), relations between literati factions were characterized by sectarian and intolerant attitudes towards each other. One-party autocracy lasting for about half a century saw tragic conflicts, several reversals and crises between the principal groups at the center of power and beyond. Such a situation revealed the weakness of party politics and infringed upon royal power. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the political climate led to the “impartiality policy” proclaimed by King Yǒngjo 英祖 (r. 1724-1776) who intended to abolish the factions and reinforce the king's political authority. While he still had to make an effort to be acknowledged by the literati as a “sage king”, Chǒngjo 正祖 (r. 1776-1800), Yǒngjo's grandson and successor on the throne, whose authority was more consolidated thanks to his grandfather, could problematize and reinterpret certain Neo-Confucian notions. His reading of the *Great Learning* differs to a considerable extent from the political orientation of Zhu Xi and may be construed as an ideological stratagem to reinforce royal authority. Zhu Xi separated the transmission of Confucian doctrine *tot'ong* 道統 from that of kingship *wangt'ong* 王統, expanded the notion that every learned man was capable of realizing the political ideal, placed politics *ch'i* 治 under the control of learning *hak* 學, and finally strove to prevent the king's absolute authority and centralized power. King Chǒngjo's interpretation, however, removed the boundary between the two types of transmission and the order between governing *ch'i* 治 and teaching *kyo* 教. It underlined disparities in human nature, as well as in

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terms of social status, and linked it to personal differences in governing, thus highlighting the king's political uniqueness.

### **Chǒngjo's works on the *Great Learning***

Like his grandfather, King Chǒngjo took a special interest in the *Great Learning*.<sup>2</sup> The most important work he left regarding it is the *Taehak yuüi* 大學類義 or *Classification and (re)connection of the Explanations on the Great Learning* (published in 1805). It is an anthological work compiled from Zhen Dexiu's (眞德秀, 1178-1235) *Taehak yǒnüi* (*Daxue yanyi* in Chinese) 大學衍義 or *Extended Explanations on the Great Learning* and Qiu Jun's (丘濬, 1420-95) *Taehak yǒnüi po* (*Daxue yanyi bu* in Chinese) 大學衍義補 or *Complements to the Extended Explanations on the Great Learning*. Apparently the king intended to return to the original idea of the *Great Learning* and recover its holism. According to him, both the *Extended Explanations* and the *Complements to the Extended Explanations* highlighted its own system of Sage-Learning : the first put emphasis on the ruler's "learning" and "self-perfection", while the latter supported more the monarch's practical rule by complementing the parts on "ordering the state" and "making the world peaceful".<sup>3</sup> This is also related to the king's assessment of Yi I's (李珥, 1536-84) *Sǒnghak chibyō* 聖學輯要 or *Essentials of Sage-Learning*, which had been read in royal lectures since 1680 and had acquired authority at the Chosǒn court as a teaching material for Sage-Learning. The fact that the king personally developed instruction materials suggests that he was not satisfied with earlier textbooks and was looking for an alternative worldview that would correspond to the new situation.<sup>4</sup>

His views on the *Great Learning* can be read in the relevant parts (recorded in 1781, 1783, 1784, 1786 and 1787) of the *Kyǒngsa kangüi* 經史講義 or *Lectures on the Classics and Histories*, a collection of questions raised by the king and answers provided by his literati high officials, during lectures on the Confucian Classics and some canonical texts on history and administration.<sup>5</sup> His questions were not simple interrogations, but were almost always preceded by some definitions or remarks in which he analyzed, deconstructed or challenged Neo-Confucian commentaries of the Classics

<sup>2</sup> YI T'aejin 이태진, "Chǒngjo üi Taehak t'amgu wa saeroun kunjuron" 정조의 대학 탐구와 새로운 군주론, in *Yi Hoejae üi sasang kwa kü segye* 이회재의 사상과 그 세계, Daedong Institute for Korean Studies 성균관대학교 대동문화연구원, 1992, p. 265.

<sup>3</sup> YUN Chǒng 윤정, "Chǒngjo üi Taekak ryuüi p'yǒnch'an kwa Sǒnghak chibyō" 정조의 대학류의 편찬과 성학집요, *Nammyǒnghak yǒn'gu* 남명학연구, n° 23 (2007), p. 360-371.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>5</sup> *Kyǒngsa kangüi* 經史講義, in *Hongjae chǒnsǒ* 弘齋全書 (published in 1814, 184 parts 卷, 100 volumes 冊, edition of Kyujanggak (奎 572) and <http://www.itkc.or.kr>., hereafter *HJCS*), vols. 67-70.

Other documents in which we can get an idea of his views about the *Great Learning* are the *Kosik* 故寔 or *Practical Lessons from the Ancient Histories* (1794) and the *Chŭngjŏn ch'urok* 曾傳秋錄 or *Autumn Writings about the Transmitted Texts from Zengzi* (1799), both of which are records of discussions on the text that the king exchanged with his subjects. Here the king answered his subjects' questions.<sup>6</sup>

### **Inquiries and interpretations of the *Great Learning***

In the *Lectures*, Chŏngjo seems to be interested mainly in what a particular term corresponds to in reality. Hereafter we will examine several major terms from the *Great Learning* that show his understanding of the political way.

*Sŏng* 性 or “Nature” and *myŏngdŏk* 明德 or “illustrious virtue” are different one from the other

With regard to what “illustrious virtue” is, he tries to understand it in terms of the dichotomy between *li* 理 or “principle” and *ki* 氣 or “vital force” or between *sŏng* 性 or “nature” and *sim* 心 or “heart-mind”. In Zhu Xi’s explanation that “illustrious virtue” is “*ku chungni i ũng mansa cha*” 具衆理而應萬事者 or “endowed with every principle and meets all affairs”, he sees a problem in that the first part of the phrase refers to “principle” and the second part to “vital force”: how can “illustrious virtue” be two radically different things at the same time? Actually, Zhu Xi left open the possibility to interpret “illustrious virtue” as “heart-mind”<sup>7</sup> and to depict it as being action and capability limited by personal disposition.<sup>8</sup> Within these terms, it is impossible to firmly consider “illustrious virtue” as a capability equally attributed to every human being. His explanations on “illustrious virtue” finally left room for some Neo-Confucian ideas to be re-interpreted in a political direction other than that which he supported.

At the beginning of his royal lectures on the Classics and the Histories, in 1781, Chŏngjo seems to refer to the oneness of “illustrious virtue” in everybody.<sup>9</sup> However, in his later writings, his words can be understood as meaning that everybody possesses it, and that the brightness of one can thus brighten that of another. In other texts, however, he consistently argues that human beings do not have the same “illustrious virtue”. It depends on each

<sup>6</sup> "Taehak" 大學, in *Kosik* 故寔, in *HJCS*, vol. 129 ; *Chŭngjŏn ch'urok* 曾傳秋錄, in *HJCS*, vol. 126.

<sup>7</sup> *Daxue zhangju* 大學章句 : *Daxue* 大學, in *Kanbun taikēi* 漢文大系, vol.1, revised edition in 1972, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Daxue huwen* 大學或問 , in *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書, vol. 6, Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2002, p. 508.

<sup>9</sup> *Kyŏngsa kangŭi*, 4, in *HJCS* vol. 67.

person's make-up and disposition. Even if "illustrious virtue" is the same thing in every human being, it depends on one's personal capability and social standing to shine forth and put it into practice.<sup>10</sup>

In 1786, by showing some cases where Cheng Hao and Zhu Xi described "nature" as being "vital force", Chŏngjo argues that "nature" can be seen as being "vital force".<sup>11</sup> According to the dualistic theory of human nature, "nature" combines *ponyŏn chi sŏng* 本然之性 or "original nature", which is pure and universal, and *kijil chi sŏng* 氣質之性 or "derived nature", which is generated by material force and endowed in each individual being. While preserving these two expressions, the king's reinterpretation of the notion redefines these terms, releasing the tension inherent in this dualistic theory: "original nature" stands for the ultimate goal of "nature" and "derived nature" indicates its substance/property. Defined as such, we can refer to the "nature" of each one with its personal attributes.

Chŏngjo believes that the understanding of one's lot, in particular one's social standing, is a question that has to be settled prior to understanding one's *myŏngmyŏng* 明命 or "illustrious decree from Heaven".<sup>12</sup> According to his view, for one's "illustrious virtue" to be put into practice, it cannot be inferred from *li* principle but can be approached through understanding one's individual disposition. The expression *myŏng myŏngdŏk* 明明德 or "illustrate illustrious virtue" means bringing to light the ultimate meaning inherent in one's existence and conditions.<sup>13</sup>

### The position of the monarch is unique and proper to governing

Everyone can thus participate in politics in accordance with his own limits and means. Each person has a role to play. However, only the king can integrate all parts, establish criteria and accomplish politics.<sup>14</sup> As for his subjects, they have to keep to their place and fulfill their duty.<sup>15</sup> Arguing that the king is in a position to make decisions concerning all matters of state governance, Chŏngjo understands the monarch as a unique individual endowed with ultimate universality and equity, who represents the common interests of all,

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<sup>10</sup> *Kyŏngsa kangŭi*, 5, in *HJCS*, vol. 68.

<sup>11</sup> *Kyŏngsa kangŭi*, 7, in *HJCS*, vol. 70.

<sup>12</sup> *Kyŏngsa kangŭi*, 5, in *HJCS*, vol. 68.

<sup>13</sup> SO Chinyŏng 소진형, "Chŏngjo ŭi myŏngdŏk haesŏk kwa wanggwŏn kanghwa noll'i" 정조의 명덕(明德) 해석과 왕권강화 논리, *Han'guk sahoe kwahak* 한국사학회학, n° 31 (2009), p. 185.

<sup>14</sup> *Chŏngjŏn ch'urok*, in *HJCS*, vol. 126. *Chŏngjo sillok* 正祖實錄, in *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄 (Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwonhoe 국사편찬위원회, 2005, <http://sillok.history.go.kr>), 24th year, 6th month, 16th day.

<sup>15</sup> *Chŏngjo sillok*, *op.cit.*, 23th year, 11th month, 2nd day.

while the others pursue only their particular interests. Here again learning through experience has precedence over understanding through thinking.

In Neo-Confucianism, the imagery of *li il pun su* 理一分殊 or “one principle and many manifestations” usually has a moral and cosmogonical dimension. Chŏngjo applies it to his idea of the socio-political order and compares his monarchical position to the *li il* 理一 or “one principle” or the *t’aegŭk* 太極 or “supreme ultimate”, and his people to “many manifestations”. In 1798, he even called himself *manch’ŏn myŏngwŏl chuin ong* 萬川明月主人翁 or “Esteemed Master of the Moon in all Rivers”.<sup>16</sup> This imagery of the unitary moon being reflected in all bodies of water is used to define his own being and standing as a monarch; it is closely connected with his notion of “illustrious virtue” (see *supra*).<sup>17</sup> The unity of the people’s practice of virtue is assured by the king – the origin of politics and order. From a Neo-Confucian perspective, political legitimacy is drawn from the worthiness of the literati group and reflected in the monarch, who is regarded as their symbolic delegate. For Chŏngjo, however, political justification and motivation derive from the signification of the king’s being and are mirrored in his people. He thus seeks to recover the ancient monarchical authority that existed prior to the acceptance of Neo-Confucian ideology, by reinterpreting the latter’s cosmogony.

We notice also that his interpretation conceals an “unspoken” aspect, a deliberately omitted element between “one principle” and “many manifestations”; an “other” to be controlled or excluded between him and his people, revealing that the king’s discourse is developed with a view of gaining political hegemony and excluding the literati.<sup>18</sup> As in his “impartiality policy” in which he employs literati-officials only according to their personal talents and does not question their political affiliation, he silences the claims of the literati class on intellectual and thereby political hegemony by excluding them from his “cosmogony.”

#### The search for *sin min* 新民 or “bringing the people to a state of renewal”

The commentary on the term *sin min* 新民 cites three ancient texts including the following expressions: *il sin*, *chak sin min*, *ki myŏng yu sin* 日新, 作新民, 其命惟新. However, Chŏngjo finds in none of these terms any allusion to activity in which a king could expect to renovate the people. On his repeated interrogations, most of the officials reproduce

<sup>16</sup> “*Manch’ŏn myŏngwŏl chuin ong* 萬川明月主人翁自序” (1789), *Sŏin* 序引, in *HJCS*, vol. 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Jeremy R. CARRETTE, *Foucault and Religion — Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality*, London & New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 129.

for him the stereotyped answer that the self-cultivation of the ruler could lead everything to correctness.<sup>19</sup> Through his tenacious inquiries on this subject, he shows his dissatisfaction with the Confucian non-action doctrine for government and his belief in active state government not based on self-cultivation but on forceful monarchical authority. Doubting quietist or introspective learning, he also constantly raises questions about the nature of working on *kyōng* 敬 or “reverence” and *chon sim yang sōng* 存心養性 or “preserving the heart-mind and nourishing nature”.

The *kyōng mul ch'i chi* 格物致知 or “Investigation of things” and the “Extension of one’s knowledge”

Chōngjo is one of those scholars who consider the concepts of “investigation of things” and “extension of one’s knowledge” in the context of the original text. For him, these “things” are the same as in the expression *mul yu pon mal* 物有本末 or “things have their root and their branches” and this “knowledge” is no other than that which we find in *chi so sōn hu* 知所先後 or “to know what is first and what is last”. Therefore, according to him, the actions of “investigating” and “extending” cannot apply beyond the affairs of “illustrating illustrious virtue” and “renovating the people”. They just indicate the exploration of one’s inner depth and do not reach to the objective and exclusive learning of external realities. He therefore raises doubts about the reason why Zhu Xi added an interpretative note to the term “investigating things” to explain it as a process of approaching everything in the world and apprehending their principles. He especially wondered whether this total investigation of everything in the world was necessary for all scholars.

### **Concluding remarks**

We notice two major characteristics in Chōngjo’s reading of the *Great Learning*. The first is his theoretical construction of a vision to justify the monarch’s absolute authority. The claim for the king’s supreme position through hermeneutics from the *Great Learning* was not new and it was always challenged by the literati, who propagated collective rule by the monarch and themselves. The “impartiality policy” of King Yōngjo, justified merely by a

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<sup>19</sup> “Jinxin 盡心 shang 上”, in *Mengzi* 孟子 (*Mengzi tingben* 孟子定本, in *Kanbun taikei* 漢文大系, vol.1, revised edition in 1972, p.12).

situational logic, had a theoretical limitation. A reinterpretation of the Classics was needed to fundamentally legitimize the reestablishment of an “appropriate” relationship between sovereign and subject, and the shift to a system centered on monarchical authority. Interlinked with his effort in this respect, Chǒngjo’s reinterpretation of the *Great Learning* led to a political orientation which differed from the Neo-Confucian vision. One of the most interesting features here is that he did it while preserving Neo-Confucian language.

The second point is his effort to overcome the Neo-Confucian introspective and quietist way, with a view to establishing active, powerful and pragmatic governance. As for this point, his scholarly enterprise on the *Great Learning* should be considered as having a more extended and complex scope. His stance was consistent with the critical and pragmatic current among his contemporaries when reading the Confucian Classics, and reflected most of the debates about the issues involved. In fact, he also widely consulted ideas and commentaries emanating from outside of the hegemonic, or so-called “orthodox”, group.

The king’s reading of the Classics must be evaluated above all in the context of the period during which he lived. However, he was in a very special position, and this makes his influence worthy of our extended consideration. As a powerful monarch and ardent Confucian scholar, along with his new vision of the Classics, he also extended extraordinary efforts to, among other things, the education of his literati-officials, whom he wanted to support his new political perspective, the restoration of a “correct” Confucian literature, and the publication and diffusion of Confucian knowledge. By alternating between renovation and restoration of the Confucian tradition, he undoubtedly contributed to bringing about considerable changes to the socio-cultural landscape of the literati class and to the intellectual trends of the following generation. In fact, such a remarkable thinker and author as Chǒng Yagyong acknowledged Chǒngjo’s intellectual influence on him and, one century later, Kojong, the first emperor of the Great Han, took him as his model. In this sense, the influence Chǒngjo exerted on the intellectual and cultural world of nineteenth-century literati seems to be a relevant and interesting research topic, which has so far not sufficiently attracted our attention.