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ARTICLE

Plurality Within Singularity: Chosŏn Korea's Neo-Confucian Framework

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This paper argues that while there was no singular cohesive “national identity” in the modern sense in Chosŏn Korea, the elitist Neo-Confucian framework served as a basis for establishing an overarching identity on the Korean Peninsula. Every other entity defined itself through its relationship to the prominent Neo-Confucian framework. Two marginalized groups – Buddhist institutions and the Catholic Church—defined themselves and developed identities based around the Neo-Confucian framework; this paper analyzes this. By demonstrating that these two marginalized groups had no choice but to define themselves in terms of the Neo-Confucian framework, it is clear this framework also created an elitist identity built around its intellectual culture.

Keywords: Neo-Confucianism; Buddhism; Catholicism; identity; marginalized groups; Neo-Confucian framework

During the Chosŏn dynasty, Korean society was characterized by the interaction of many different religious traditions and ideologies. However, Neo-Confucianism was the prominent ideology of the time. This, combined with the inherently elitist culture built around social status and education, allowed for the emergence of a highly stratified and hierarchical social structure. This Neo-Confucian framework also resulted in a common identity among the elite *yangban* class, illustrated by the fact that after the fall of the Ming dynasty, Chosŏn Korea began to think of itself as “the last bastion of Confucian civilization.” However, applying the term “nationalism” to this pre-modern, non-Western society creates multiple issues. “Nationalism,” as it is known today, is a modern phenomenon—it is only in the 19th century that the term was created and defined. In addition, because the term was created in a western context, it is especially difficult to apply to pre-modern Korea. Thus, it cannot be said that any sort of “national identity” was felt by the general population of the Chosŏn dynasty. However, different communities existing in the Chosŏn dynasty likely experienced a collective sense of identity. The most prominent of these communities was the one tied to the Neo-Confucian framework. Due to the Neo-Confucian hegemony, all other communities were forced to define themselves within this framework. This is particularly true in conversation with marginalized religious traditions, such as Buddhism and Catholicism. While there was no cohesive, “national identity,” the elitist Neo-Confucian identity served as a basis for any sort of overarching identity on the Korean Peninsula because every other identity had to define itself in relationship to the Neo-Confucian framework.

To shed light on the discourse of national identity in pre-modern societies, this article is broken into three main sections. The first is the historical context in terms of the prominence of Neo-Confucianism, Buddhist institutions, and the Catholic Church. Next is a discussion of Benedict Anderson’s book *Imagined Communities*, which will serve as the main definition of *nationalism* for the purpose of this work, and how it relates to the Chosŏn context. Finally, this paper explores the different responses to the dominant Neo-Confucian identity and how imagined communities were created within that framework.

Since the Koryŏ dynasty, Confucianism had served as an important tool in the political realm (Yi 1985, 125). However, the founders of the Chosŏn dynasty took this to a new level and not only adopted Neo-Confucianism for the purpose of governance, but installed it as the prominent ideology, replacing Buddhism (Yi 1985, 135). The main purpose of this change was to legitimize the dynastic change, but it had far-reaching social effects, particularly in terms of education and book culture. To disseminate Neo-Confucian teachings in a new generation of scholars, officials of the Chosŏn dynasty established many public schools to train students in the classics and to prepare them to take the civil service examinations (Yi 1985, 135). The first Prime Minister of Chosŏn, Chŏng Tojŏn, alluded that one reason for the decline of the Koryŏ dynasty was that there were shortcomings in the educational system. He stated:

Schools are the center of teaching and transformation, where the cardinal principles of human relations are further illustrated and men of talent receive training.... Since the Ch'in and Han dynasties...there have been few who did not see that schooling was important and that the vigor or decline of the schools was the key to the success or failure of the government. (Lee and de Bary 1997, 1: 297)

This illustrates the extent to which the legitimization of the Chosŏn dynasty relied on education and schools, and how this would lead the way for an educationally based elitist culture to develop. Moreover, emphasis on education and the civil service examinations reflects the intellectual culture of Chosŏn society.

Thus, an elitist book culture emerged to complement the emphasis on education and civil service examinations. Not only did this book culture result in impressive technological achievements such as movable metallic type, but it resulted in the emergence of a book cult. Books, particularly Confucian classics, were revered to the point of veneration because knowledge and studying were inherently tied to civility and morality in Chosŏn society (Walraven 2007, 257). Since a great majority of books were printed in classical Chinese, this book cult was not accessible to many

outside of the elite and highly educated *yangban* class. This once again reflected the importance of education to Chosŏn society, and reaffirmed the elitist culture that was built around the prominent Neo-Confucian framework and intellectual culture.

Despite Neo-Confucianism being the dominant ideology in both the political and social realms, Chosŏn Korea was a highly pluralized state. Among various folk religions, Buddhist institutions and the Catholic Church were two of the most important, which created the plurality of the state. However, because Neo-Confucian ideology was so staunchly ingrained in all realms of society, both of these groups were marginalized, though to varying degrees. While it cannot be said that there was any mass persecution of Buddhists, their institutions were marginalized and privatized over time during the Chosŏn dynasty, and Buddhism itself became classified as a heterodox teaching. This is in staunch contrast to Buddhist institutions prior to the Chosŏn dynasty. During the Unified Silla and Koryŏ periods, Buddhism was essentially a state religion (Buswell 1999, 134). However, as Neo-Confucianism was installed as the official state ideology during the Chosŏn dynasty, Buddhist institutions lost much of their power. The decision to phase out Buddhist control of the court was not without cause—by the end of the Koryŏ dynasty, widespread corruption in the Buddhist monasteries had created great economic strain on the state. At first, Confucian scholars criticized the Buddhist establishment for this reason alone. For example, Yi Saek, a celebrated Confucian scholar, did not “...call for the wholesale rejection of Buddhism, but merely the reform of baser elements in the order and limits on the court’s financial commitments to the ecclesia” (Buswell 1999, 137). Over time, however, attacks on Buddhism began to include ideological attacks. These began with Chŏng Tojŏn, who believed that “...if the discredited social structures of the Koryŏ were to be reformed, the religious ideology that had supported that society must be corrected as well” (Buswell 1999, 137). Despite Chŏng’s harsh position, as Buddhist beliefs were still ingrained in the population, early rulers of Chosŏn supported restrictive programs against Buddhism only “halfheartedly” (Buswell 1999, 138). Over time, restrictions and regulations on Buddhist institutions became more and more severe. Ultimately, thousands of monasteries were disestablished, the

eleven active schools of Buddhist thought were reduced to two, and Buddhist monks were systematically isolated from both the state and society (Buswell 1999, 139). Although it is true that Buddhist institutions were marginalized during the Chosŏn dynasty, this must be qualified when compared with the persecution of Catholicism, which will be discussed below.

Despite the common perception that Buddhism was persecuted and stagnant during the Chosŏn dynasty, this is not entirely true. Monks were systematically removed from society, but not killed by the state simply for being Buddhist (Baker 2014, 153). Rather than characterizing the marginalization of Buddhist institutions during the Chosŏn dynasty as “persecution,” what transpired was more akin to a general withdrawal of state support. Furthermore, Buddhism still penetrated the private spiritual lives of many in the general population, despite its designation as a heterodox teaching. In fact, many Chosŏn royals privately sought supernatural assistance from Buddhist monks (Baker 2014, 157). Therefore, although Buddhist institutions were privatized and marginalized during the Chosŏn dynasty, it is a misinterpretation to label this as any sort of persecution or mass suppression of the religion. Buddhism simply moved from the public realm into the private realm.

On the other hand, the marginalization of the Catholic Church was far more violent than that of Buddhist institutions. Knowledge of Catholicism first came to Korea in the early seventeenth century when some Korean scholars encountered Catholicism during their travels in China (Baker 2012, 2). In this early history of Catholicism in Korea, there were not yet any Korean converts. In fact, Catholicism was met with a sense of intellectual curiosity from many scholars, and some even argued that Catholicism could serve as a supplement to Neo-Confucianism. For example, Sŏngho and Tasan were both dedicated Neo-Confucian scholars who believed that certain Catholic ideas could be used to cultivate virtue (Baker 1999, 211). However, still others viewed Catholicism as a dangerous heterodox teaching. Not only did Neo-Confucian scholars consider the teaching to be inferior to Neo-Confucianism because it came from the West, but in many ways, Catholicism and Neo-Confucianism were ideological opposites. In Catholicism, God and religion

determined what was and was not moral; in Confucianism, the emphasis was on the state and interpersonal relationships. In addition, Catholicism was critiqued because of its similarity to Buddhism (Baker 1999, 222). This clash in ideology resulted in Catholicism being classified as a heterodox teaching.

Over time, some Koreans did convert to Catholicism. The first of these converts was Yi Sünghun, who was baptized in China in 1784 (Baker 1999, 217). After Yi returned to Korea, several others began to convert to Catholicism. Despite its being a heterodox teaching, Catholicism was not persecuted simply for being a heterodox tradition. As stated above, Chosŏn was a pluralistic society. Although Neo-Confucianism was the prominent teaching, several other heterodox ideologies and religions were practiced. As was the case with Shamanism and Buddhism, as long as these heterodox teachings did not interfere with the Neo-Confucian framework, followers of these traditions were able to coexist. In this way, the Catholic case was unique. Catholicism was severely persecuted because of specific actions by Catholic converts that posed a direct threat to the legitimacy of the Neo-Confucian state. The first of these actions was the burning of family ancestral tablets in 1791 by Paul Yun. This action was not just contrary to Neo-Confucian ideology, but it directly violated the government regulations of the Confucian mourning ritual (Baker 1999, 217). For this crime, Yun was sentenced to death and became a martyr among Korean Catholics.

Outside of individual cases of martyrdom, there were four mass persecutions of Catholicism during the 19th century, in which thousands were killed (Rausch 2012, 44). Each persecution was justified based on its specific context, but all of these justifications tended to follow a pattern. In each case, violent rhetoric was used by the state in order to justify the killings. As Franklin Rausch argues, "Catholics were primarily portrayed as rebels and animals, rhetorically transforming them from subjects deserving protection into dangerous beasts needing to be slaughtered." (Rausch 2012, 44) In this way, the state rhetoric justified the persecutions.

However, outside of rhetoric, the law was also used to justify persecutions. According to Pierre-Emmanuel Roux, the Chosŏn state implemented the *Great*

Ming Code in order to legally justify persecutions (Roux 2012, 76). For example, in the case of Paul Yun and his burning of the ancestor tablets, the burning not only ideologically contradicted Neo-Confucian thought, but it was clearly stated in the *Great Ming Code*, Article 299 that, "People destroying their ancestral tablets should be punished by analogy to the article entitled *Destroying Dead Bodies*," which called for immediate decapitation (as quoted in Roux 2012, 80). Nevertheless, while the actions of certain Catholic converts posed a legitimate threat to the Neo-Confucian framework of the state and the persecutions were entirely legal, this is not an attempt to justify the violence. Rather, it is important in the following discussion to understand that persecution of the Catholic Church did not stem from the fact that it was a heterodox teaching, but because it was understood that certain actions of the Catholics posed a legitimate threat to the state.

Moreover, marginalization of the Catholic Church and Buddhist institutions were quite different. This distinction is important to make in terms of the following discussion about identity. At the root, the differences in marginalization occurred because Buddhist institutions accommodated the Neo-Confucian framework, but the Catholic Church was nonconformist within this same framework. Buddhist institutions accommodated themselves to the Neo-Confucian framework because they did not assert themselves as superior to Neo-Confucianism. Conversely, the Catholic Church was nonconformist, and by acting contrary to the laws of the Neo-Confucian state, Korean Catholics essentially asserted that Catholicism was superior to Neo-Confucianism. In fact, early converts who testified in court for their crimes often argued just this (Baker 1999, 222). These testimonies will be discussed subsequently.

To tie this context into a discussion of identity, the term "nationalism" must be defined. The very concept of nationalism presents a confluence of competing ideologies. Nationalism is inherently a Western term, extended into the East through education and missionary action. There have been many conversations about this complex definition of nationalism when applied to a non-Western society, the most notable by Benedict Anderson in his book, *Imagined Communities*. In his writing, Anderson argues that a nation is an "imagined community" that is built around

a common history and experience to make citizens feel a connection to other citizens, even if they have never met. In Anderson's opinion, this is what creates the phenomenon of "nationalism" (Anderson 2006).

This argument can also be extended into contexts outside of the modern nation. Not only can pre-modern societies with a "self-conscious group that defined itself especially in contrast to ethnically different neighbors" (Anderson 2006, 2) be considered imagined communities, but even religious institutions can serve as an imagined community. Therefore, with the pluralistic nature of Chosŏn society, it is natural that multiple groups would compete to form a common identity. This is especially true considering that the Chosŏn state was not a modern nation, so even if a sense of national identity was felt, the concept of "nationalism" is not an applicable term.

At least among the *yangban* class, the Neo-Confucian framework created a sort of imagined community. This fact is illustrated well by the reaction to the fall of the Ming dynasty. As the Ming dynasty fell to the Manchu Qing dynasty, the image of Chosŏn as the "last bastion of Confucian civilization" emerged (Haboush and Deuchler 2002, 182: 10). Although there were factional disputes over what exactly this meant, this consciousness of a collective moral superiority, duty, and identity as an ethnic region shows that a national identity to some degree did exist based on the Neo-Confucian framework. Furthermore, as this imagined community was based around a sense of superiority, it was extremely exclusive. In order to properly exclude those outside of the *yangban* class from this community, the elitist book culture was utilized. Not only did this book culture reinforce the superiority of Neo-Confucian teachings, but it served as a vehicle for this exclusion because those in the lower classes were unable to read the books printed in Classical Chinese. Because most of the books that were printed were Confucian texts, the lower classes were excluded from the intellectual culture and those in the lower classes were still forced to live within the framework that the elites created, according to the laws of Neo-Confucianism. Naturally, then, the Catholic and Buddhist communities needed to define themselves in terms of this Neo-Confucian national identity.

As discussed earlier, although Buddhist institutions were marginalized during the Chosŏn dynasty, Buddhism still penetrated deeply into the personal lives of much of the general population. However, it is difficult to gauge to what degree Buddhist institutions created any sort of imagined community because one cannot generalize about “Buddhist institutions.” The concept of Buddhism as a singular coherent religion only came to be when the religion was forced to adapt to the Western presence in East Asia. Rather, East Asian Buddhist history is filled with doctrinal disputes between different schools that formed along strict sectarian lines. Even after Korean Buddhist institutions had been marginalized to the point that there were only two active schools (the doctrine-based *Kyo* school and the meditation-based *Sŏn* school) there were still harsh arguments between these schools (Buswell 1999, 151). Although several prominent Buddhist thinkers over the course of Korean Buddhist history attempted to synchronize these differing teachings, none were particularly successful in creating one coherent school. In addition, most of these thinkers arranged the different schools into a hierarchy with one school being the superior vehicle and the other acting as a supplement. Therefore, it is difficult to say whether or not Buddhist institutions could have forged an imagined community. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is more important to realize that even if Buddhism itself did not create an imagined community, it still created an identity outside of the Neo-Confucian framework by virtue of being a marginalized community. Furthermore, we must focus on how Buddhist institutions interacted with the imagined community that the Neo-Confucian framework created.

In addition to attempting to harmonize differing teachings across sectarian lines, prominent Chosŏn monks were also faced with the task of responding to the harsh criticisms of Buddhism from Neo-Confucian scholars. Rather than attempting to assert that Buddhism was superior to Neo-Confucianism, these monks argued that Buddhism could supplement and complement Neo-Confucianism (Buswell 1999, 140). It was this tendency toward accommodation and reconciliation that characterized the relationship between the Neo-Confucian framework and Buddhist institutions during the Chosŏn dynasty. Two of the most important of these monks

were Kihwa and Hyujöng. Kihwa's seminal treatise, *Hyönjöngnon*, sought to reconcile the contradictory beliefs of Confucianism and Buddhism. To do this, Kihwa tried to respond to Confucian critiques of Buddhist doctrines while also demonstrating "that the Buddhist path to sagehood is the equal to that of Confucianism." (Buswell 1999, 142) According to Buswell (1999, 143), Kihwa's ultimate vision was that Buddhism would support "the ethical norms of the Confucian state by molding the mind to respond without premeditation to those norms." Kihwa's stance was one of accommodation in which Confucianism enjoyed a higher position than Buddhism. The monk Hyujöng held a very similar position. While arguing that Buddhists should accept accommodation within the Neo-Confucian framework, he also argued that the dichotomy between the *Kyo* and *Sön* schools was obsolete (Buswell 1999, 147). Hyujöng took the syncretic stance characteristic of past Buddhist intellectuals and essentially argued that a "single 'way,' 'consummation,' or 'thing' was the source of all the doctrines" of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism (Buswell 1999, 150).

Moreover, both Hyujöng and Kihwa took a decidedly accommodationist stance to Buddhism's relationship with Confucianism. This was in part due to the fact that criticizing Neo-Confucianism could potentially have had a disastrous effect on the Buddhist institutions. After all, contradicting Neo-Confucian thought or practice was essentially an attack on the state itself. However, it also shows that Buddhist institutions made the choice to accommodate the Neo-Confucian framework and identity, rather than contradict it. This is important to point out, especially when compared with the Catholic Church.

Furthermore, outside of ideology, Buddhist institutions were also inextricably connected to the prominent Neo-Confucian framework. This is most visible in terms of the elitist book culture and by the fact that monks were conscripted for military service. As discussed earlier, there was a vibrant and elitist book culture that helped form the imagined community based around Neo-Confucianism. For a book culture to emerge, books needed to be printed, and the Buddhist monasteries played a central role in this. Many monasteries were responsible for making paper, and they played an important role in printing texts—Confucian, Buddhist, or otherwise (Walraven

2007, 248). This shows that even though Buddhist institutions accommodated themselves to the Neo-Confucian framework, the Neo-Confucian framework also relied on Buddhist institutions. Therefore, while Buddhist communities were clearly outsiders to the elitist identity, they existed within this framework while maintaining an identity separate from the Neo-Confucian elitists by virtue of being a marginalized community.

Similarly, the phenomenon of hero warrior monks helps prove this point. During the Imjin Wars (1592–1598), thousands of monks were conscripted to fight in the war. The most famous of these monks was Yujöng, who was a disciple of Hyujöng. The case of Yujöng is unique because, unlike most other Buddhists, Yujöng became completely included in the Neo-Confucian framework due to his successful negotiations with the Japanese over Korean prisoners of war (Park 2015, 51). Because of his actions, Yujöng is remembered as a heroic and meritorious subject. However, because this clashed with the perceived inferiority of Buddhist monks, texts remembering Yujöng often ignore the fact that he was a monk and only refer to him in terms of Confucian merit (Park 2015, 58). This suggests that even though Yujöng was accepted and integrated into the Neo-Confucian framework, that was not compatible with his Buddhist identity. This is further complicated by the fact that Yujöng had a Confucian shrine dedicated to him, P'yoch'ungsa (Park 2015, 59). This shrine became the subject of countless debates over whether it should be considered a Buddhist space or a Confucian space (Park 2015, 64). Ultimately, the case of Yujöng shows that even though those from marginalized communities could become part of the Neo-Confucian framework, they did so at the expense of their own identity in their marginalized community. Accommodation within the Buddhist communities to appease the Neo-Confucian state was a trend; Buddhist communities were tied to the Neo-Confucian framework while maintaining separate identities.

On the other hand, while Buddhist institutions were mostly concerned with accommodating the Neo-Confucian framework, the Catholic Church was decidedly nonconformist. As discussed earlier, the Catholic Church was persecuted harshly due to their direct clash with Confucian beliefs and doctrines. This resulted in Catholic

converts acting in a way that was seen as dangerous to the state. Arguments made by Catholic converts to legitimize their faith show the degree to which the Catholic Church was nonconformist. Although many arguments were made to appeal to Neo-Confucian principles, they often still asserted that Catholicism was ultimately superior to Neo-Confucianism. A prime example of this is Chǒng Hasang's memorial, "A Confucian Defense of Catholicism." In this memorial, Chǒng attempts to respond to Confucian criticism of Catholicism. Although he did make some good points regarding filial piety, loyalty, and morality, his arguments often ended up conveying that Catholicism was superior to Confucianism, which negated any chance of reconciliation. For example, he argued that

Catholicism is the most holy and sagely, the most fair and impartial, the most correct and orthodox, the most genuine and true, the most perfect and complete, and the most singular and unique of all teachings... (Lee and de Bary 1997, 2: 139).

In this way, Chǒng placed Catholicism on a pedestal above Neo-Confucianism. In a discussion about filial piety and loyalty to the king, Chǒng asserted that faith was superior to one's father and God was superior to the king.

... the reason we appear disloyal and unfilial is that we recognize that some things are more important than other things, and some positions are higher than other positions...more important than any king is God, the ruler of Heaven and Earth (Lee and de Bary 1997, 2: 139).

This illustrates the threat to the state that the Catholic Church posed because, by asserting itself above Neo-Confucianism, Chǒng essentially asserted the Catholic Church over the state itself. Thus, by defining itself as nonconformist, the Catholic Church assured that it could not coexist peacefully within the Neo-Confucian framework.

The Catholic nonconformity and clash with the Neo-Confucian identity was further exemplified by Hwang Sayǒng's *Silk Letter*. Hwang attempted to send a letter

to Qing China, urging them to send military support for the benefit of the Korean Catholic community at the expense of the Chosŏn dynasty. Some of the persuasive techniques Hwang used in the letter are quite surprising. Not only did Hwang appeal for help due to the persecution that the Catholic community faced, but he pointed out several ways in which the Chosŏn court had violated its vassal status (Lee and de Bary 1997, 2: 136). Hwang also pointed out that Korea's military was weak and even called upon China to invade with hundreds of ships and thousands of troops (Lee and de Bary 1997, 2: 137). Thus, not only was the Catholic Church excluded from the Neo-Confucian identity because it was a marginalized community, but there was also no desire in the Catholic Church to accommodate within the framework to coexist peacefully.

Hwang's letter also presented some complications for the imagined community created by the Neo-Confucian framework. First, Catholicism had undoubtedly created an imagined community on the Korean Peninsula. It is a common phenomenon that non-indigenous religious institutions create conflicting identities in non-Western contexts. A prime example of this is Pandita Ramabai, a Christian convert from India. Ramabai completely rejected her indigenous religion and culture, even going so far as to call Hinduism "morally bankrupt" (Viswanathan 1998, 120). This is very similar to what has been discussed about Catholic responses to Confucian critiques of Catholicism—not only was there the natural desire to avoid persecution, but there was also the desire to assert dominance of Catholicism over Neo-Confucianism. Hwang's letter, then, serves as concrete evidence that the Catholic Church was not only nonconformist when it came to following Neo-Confucian ideology, but it is obvious that there was no shared common identity as "Korean," and that the Catholic Church identified as Catholic, first and foremost.

This has several implications for the imagined community based around the Neo-Confucian framework. As John Duncan argues, even if certain state-organized institutions could create a sense of identification with the state, there was no sense of "nation" in the pre-modern world (Shin and Robinson 1999, 447–60). Thus, even though calling for war on one's home is extreme, it is not surprising that Hwang

would go to this extreme given the harsh persecution and identification with the Catholic Church. Moreover, what this suggests is that even though the Neo-Confucian framework posed as an overarching national identity in Chosŏn Korea, this was only because of its unique place as the prominent state ideology that dictated almost every aspect of life. At best, this framework posed a cursory sense of identity that could be meddled with and destroyed if another institution emerged that created a competing sense of identity.

Both Buddhist institutions and the Catholic Church were forced to interpret themselves in terms of the prominent Neo-Confucian framework. While Buddhist institutions took a decidedly accommodating stance in response, the Catholic Church maintained nonconformity, even in the face of violent suppression and persecution. When put into conversation with the discourse of “national identity” in premodern societies, this becomes more complicated. It cannot be said that there was any sort of national identity (in the modern sense) felt by Koreans during the Chosŏn dynasty. However, this does not mean that other communities and ideologies were unable to create imagined communities to form a sense of identity. The elitist Neo-Confucian framework, the Catholic Church, and the Buddhist institutions were all able to form identities in their own ways. Buddhist institutions and the Catholic Church needed to formulate their identities based on the prominent Neo-Confucian framework. While it is true that there was no singular cohesive “national identity” in the Chosŏn dynasty, the Neo-Confucian framework served as the basis for any overarching sense of identity on the Korean Peninsula.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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