The Confucian Transformation of Korea. By: Martina Deuchler
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THE TRANSMISSION OF CONFUCIANISM TO KOREA. As a part of Chinese culture, Confucianism reached the Korean peninsula at various stages of its development. Initial knowledge of Confucian tenets may have been transmitted through the Chinese commanderies that dominated the northern part of Korea during the first three centuries A.D. In 372, a Confucian academy reportedly was established in the native kingdom of Koguryŏ. With the rise of Paekche and Silla, Confucianism began to penetrate the southern half of the peninsula; and in 682, a Confucian academy was built in Kyŏngju, Silla's capital. Because the spiritual milieu in both kingdoms was dominated by Buddhism, the role of Confucianism was limited to some state functions, most notably the education of officials. This didactic duty gained importance during United Silla when in 788, in imitation of the T'ang, a kind of examination system was instituted, and the Confucian classics became the basic study materials of examination aspirants. But presumably more important for deepening and expanding the knowledge of Confucianism in Korea were the Korean students who returned home after spending some time in T'ang China. An outstanding example is Ch'oe Ch'i-wŏn (857–?), who sojourned seventeen years in T'ang China, passed the civil service examination in 874, and after his return propagated Confucian values as reasonable criteria for conducting state affairs. At that time, Confucian studies were principally pursued by men who belonged to the middle echelon, head-rank six *(yuktup'um),* of the general Silla aristocracy—men who, on the basis of their birth, were denied access to the top decision-making positions in government. Confucianism was then and later intimately connected with the search for rational standards that would weaken, if not sever, the indigenous link between the prerogatives of birth and political participation and would condition advancement to high office on achievement.[28]

T'ang influence remained decisive in Koryŏ. The dynastic founder, Wang Kŏn (877–943), surrounded himself with Confucian advisers and acknowledged Confucianism as the ideology of a centrally organized state, although at that time Koryŏ was anything but centralized. In 958, an examination system was established with Chinese assistance.[29] The basic Confucian literature was studied with the commentaries by K'ung Ying-ta (574–648), and this training generally served the purpose of providing the state with capable officials. More important than the government-sponsored school system for the development of Confucianism were the private schools which flourished from the second half of the eleventh century. These contributed significantly to the deepening of Confucian learning when the government-operated schools showed signs of decline. The most famous private school was that of Ch'oe Ch'ung (984–1068), who was later celebrated as the "Confucius of the Land East of the Sea." Ch'oe seems to have been preoccupied with such texts as the *Chung-yung* (Doctrine of the Mean), but it is uncertain whether he had knowledge of the revival of Confucianism in late T'ang and early Sung.[30]

There are various reasons why Korea was initially cut off from the intellectual developments in China known as Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism was principally a phenomenon of Southern Sung (1127–1279). Therefore, when the Jurchen overran and occupied North China in the early twelfth century, Korea's direct contacts with South China were severed. Moreover, the establishment of military regimes in Korea from 1170 negatively affected the development of Confucianism. While some Confucian-trained bureaucrats continued to serve the military rulers, other Confucians fled from the center of power. They retreated into the mountains and, in symbiotic existence with the Buddhists, continued their studies. As refugees in Buddhist monasteries, they lived in inner and outer isolation, a circumstance that put a lasting imprint on Koryŏ Confucianism.

With the rise of the Mongol empire in the middle of the thirteenth century, an entirely new chapter in Korea's intellectual history was opened. Subjected to Mongol rule, Korea became part of a vast multinational system, and manifold human and material connections tied Korea to Peking. Although this integration imposed great sacrifices upon Korea, for the Korean Confucians it meant the opening of new intellectual horizons. Yüan China (1271–1368) provided an efficient network that facilitated the exchange of ideas, books, and men.

It was a gradual and rather precarious process through which Neo-Confucianism was transmitted from the south to North China—a process that began only after Khubilai (r. 1260–1294; after 1279 as Shih-tsu) had become convinced that it was more advantageous to recruit the Confucians of the occupied territories into government service than to kill them. The captive Neo-Confucian scholar, Chao Fu (c. 1206–c. 1299), in person brought the Neo-Confucian works north and started a successful teaching career at the Mongol court. His most prominent disciple was Hsü Heng (1209–1281) who with the zeal of a convert absorbed the teachings of the Ch'eng-Chu school and made them the basis of Confucianism in Yüan China.[31]

For Korea, first contact with this new world of thought was facilitated by the close marital relationships that existed between the Mongol imperial house and the royal family of Koryŏ. King Ch'ungnyŏl (r. 1274–1308) married one of Khubilai's daughters; and their son, the later King Ch'ungsŏn (r. 1308–1313), felt more at home in Peking than in Kaesŏng. One of his frequent trips

between the two capitals became particularly momentous for Koryŏ Confucianism. When he returned to Peking in 1289, An Hyang (1243–1306) was a member of his retinue. Having passed the higher civil service examinations in 1260, An held some minor posts before he devoted himself to educational tasks in Kaesŏng. In 1289, he was appointed to the newly established Koryŏguk yuhak chegŏsa (Office for the Promotion of Confucian Studies in Korea), which was a subdivision of the Chŏngdong haengsŏng (Eastern Expedition Field Headquarters), an instrument of Mongol interference in Korean affairs.[32] It must have been because he was recognized as a mature Confucian scholar that An was selected to go to Peking. And this trip turned out to be a revelatory experience. His biography notes, "At that time the works of Master Chu [Chu Hsi] were newly circulating in Peking. When An first got to see them, he absorbed himself in them and respected them greatly. He recognized that they represented the true tradition of Confucius and Mencius, whereupon he copied them by hand, drew [Chu Hsi's] likeness, and brought everything back home."[33] After his return to Korea, An Hyang reportedly advanced to high office, but his main concern was the desolate state of scholarship. Therefore, in 1304, he established a scholarship fund and also sent a certain Kim Munjŏng to southern China to purchase portraits of Confucius and his disciples, some ritual implements, the classics, works by Confucian scholars, and the "new books" by Chu Hsi (1130–1200). An himself is said to have built behind his house a kind of memorial shrine in which he venerated the portraits of Confucius and Chu Hsi. In his words: "Chu Hsi's merits equal those of Confucius. If one wants to study Confucius, one ought to study Chu Hsi first!" Out of respect for his newly found master, An included in his pen name *(ho),* Hoehŏn, one character (Chin. *hui;* Kor. *hoe*) of Chu Hsi's pen name, Hui-an. When An went to Peking for a second time, he visited the Shrine of Confucius and was asked by some officials whether there was such a shrine in Korea. An reportedly answered promptly, "Our country's culture and rituals completely follow those of China. Why should there be no Shrine of Confucius?" His discussions of Neo-Confucian thought, moreover, agreed so closely with Chu Hsi's views that his Chinese interlocuteurs exclaimed in admiration, "This is the Chu Hsi of the East!"[34]

Although such stories undoubtedly are apocryphal embellishment, they nevertheless underline the momentousness of An Hyang's first encounter with Neo-Confucianism. An's recognition of the Ch'eng-Chu school's unique contribution to Confucianism was the vital spark that set off new interest in Confucian studies at a time when the Korean Confucians were enthralled by Buddhist ideas. An's first concern, therefore, was the revitalization of the decayed school system. With the reconstruction of the Confucian Academy and the recruitment of some able teachers, "the Confucian atmosphere greatly improved, and those who wanted to study flocked together like clouds, for everyone realized for the first time that there was [something like] Neo-Confucianism *(tohak)*."[35] Among An's disciples were all those who contributed to the Confucian revival in the first half of the fourteenth century: Kwŏn Pu (1262–1346), U T'ak (1263–1342), Yi Chin (1244–1321), Yi Cho-nyŏn (1269–1343), Paek I-jŏng (n.d.), and Sin Ch'ŏn (?–1339).[36]

While An Hyang's efforts as an initiator and teacher were certainly important, continued stimulation received from firsthand contacts with Chinese scholars in Peking must have been crucial to sustain the initial enthusiasm. Especially Paek I-jŏng is credited with devoting himself with special fervor to Neo-Confucian studies. After spending some ten years in Peking, Paek reportedly returned home with many books and spurred widespread interest by demonstrating that Confucianism meant more than merely polishing literary styles.[37] To satisfy the demand for reading materials, in 1314 two officers of the Confucian Academy were dispatched to South China to purchase books. In the same year, the Mongol ruler himself sent a large gift of books, which apparently had belonged to the former imperial library of the Sung, to Kaesŏng. They were catalogued by Kwŏn Pu, Yi Chin, and others.[38] The following passage from U T'ak's biography may reflect the scholarly excitement of that time: "When the Neo-Confucian literature [lit., the commentaries of the Ch'eng] first arrived in the East, there was nobody who could understand it. [U] T'ak closed his door and studied it for over a month. When he comprehended it, he taught it to students, whereby Neo-Confucianism began to flourish."[39]

An early product of such teaching efforts was Yi Che-hyŏn (1287–1367). Belonging to a family of scholars—his father, Yi Chin, was a classics scholar and his father-in-law, Kwŏn Pu, reportedly was the first who urged the printing of the Four Books in Korea[40]—Yi enjoyed a thoroughly "modern" education. His principal teacher apparently was Paek I-jŏng. He thus was well-versed in Neo-Confucian studies when he went to Peking in 1314 at the age of twenty-eight. There he was closely associated with King Ch'ungsŏn, who a year earlier had abdicated in favor of his son, King Ch'ungsuk (r. 1313–1329; 1332–1339). Ch'ungsŏn retired to the Mongol capital, where he founded the famous library, "Hall of the Ten Thousand Scrolls" (Man'gwŏndang). This library became an ideal meeting place for Chinese and Korean scholars to discuss Neo-Confucianism.[41]

The Chinese personalities with whom Yi Che-hyŏn had frequent contact in the Man'gwŏndang were all well-known scholars of their time.[42] Perhaps the most conspicuous name was that of Yao Sui (1238–1313), who was the nephew of the eminent Yao Shu (1203–1280), the man responsible for persuading Chao Fu to go north and introduce Neo-Confucianism to the Mongol court.[43] Yao Sui was one of Hsü Heng's most promising disciples and was close to Yüan Ming-shan (1269–1322), who in turn was a disciple of famous Wu Ch'eng (1249–1333). Educated in a southern academy that was connected with some of Chu Hsi's direct successors, Wu became a respected representative of the Ch'eng-Chu tradition in the north. Another of Wu Ch'eng's disciples, Yü Chi (1272–1348), a great literatus, was also an often-seen visitor in the Man'gwŏndang. From this brief list of names—it could easily be extended—it is clear that the men with whom Yi Che-hyŏn associated in the Man'gwŏndang belonged to the intellectual elite of the Mongol capital. All of them were directly connected with the Ch'eng-Chu school of thought and were instrumental in elevating Neo-Confucianism to the position of state doctrine of the Yüan and in propagating Chu Hsi's works as the basic study canon for the civil service examinations revitalized in 1313.[44]

During the early fourteenth century, then, many personal contacts between Korean and Chinese scholars stimulated the growth of Neo-Confucian studies in Korea. The effect of this early dissemination may be reflected in the increasing number of Korean students who passed the higher civil service examinations in Peking.[45] One of the first passers was An Chin (?–1360), who after his success in 1318 had an active literary and historiographical career.[46] He was followed in 1321 by Ch'oe Hae (1287–1340), one of Yi Che-hyŏn's friends, who came from a scholarly milieu where Confucian studies were pursued with particular fervor.[47] One of Yi Che-hyŏn's most prominent disciples, Yi Kok (1298–1351), successfully passed the examinations in 1333 and subsequently was given various posts at the Mongol court. His son, Yi Saek (1328–1396), gained top honors in the examinations of 1354 and became the influential teacher of all those who helped build the intellectual foundation of the Chosŏn dynasty. Examination success in Peking not only honored scholarly excellence but also inspired a kind of professionalism which became the hallmark of the newly rising Confucian elite.

THE EARLY FORMATION OF KOREAN NEO-CONFUCIANISM. What was the nature of Yüan Neo-Confucianism that the Koreans absorbed in Peking and later disseminated in Korea? Unfortunately, only very few sources are left to tell the Korean side of this story, and therefore it is useful to approach the question first from the Chinese side. Yüan Neo-Confucianism was firmly grounded in the teachings of Chu Hsi and the Ch'eng brothers, Ch'eng Hao (1032–1085) and Ch'eng I (1033–1107), and took the Four Books as its scriptural foundation. Chu Hsi had grouped the Four Books —*Lun-yü* (Analects of Confucius), *Meng-tzu* (Works of Mencius), *Ta-hsüeh* (Great Learning), and *Chung-yung*—together for the first time and had elucidated them with extensive commentaries. Yüan Confucians chiefly occupied themselves with practical matters and shunned metaphysical speculations. Hsü Heng who came to dominate the philosophical scene particularly emphasized that "in ancient times, the rise of order and peace necessarily depended on elementary education and great learning."[48] Teaching in an essentially non-Chinese milieu, Hsü Heng stressed moral education and therefore made the *Hsiao-hsüeh* (Elementary Learning), a primer compiled by Chu Hsi in 1189, his basic text. It contained the elementary rules of personal conduct and interpersonal relationships. Being a simple text, it served as an introduction to the Four Books, especially the *Ta-hsüeh,* which took the moral issues up to the higher level of society, state, and world. The *Ta-hsüeh* was read mainly in the edition prepared by Chen Te-hsiu (1178–1235), the *Ta-hsüeh yen-i* (Extended Meaning of the Great Learning).[49] The Four Books were held in such high esteem that in 1313 they were decreed to become, with the Five Classics,[50] the core materials required for the civil service examinations. While Hsü Heng was concerned with extending Confucian learning beyond the elite, his foremost task was the education of the ruler. The ruler, Hsü believed, had first, in conformity with the precepts laid out in the *Ta-hsüeh,* to rectify his own mind and then become an example in the process of renovating the conduct of those below, leading them to moral lives. Hsü's teachings were pragmatic and action-oriented. His aim was to build a solid Confucian foundation upon which state and society could rest.[51]

Some major themes addressed by Hsü Heng and others are clearly reflected in the thinking of early Korean students of Neo-Confucianism. Yi Che-hyŏn characterized the new creed as "concrete (or solid) learning" *(sirhak),* and practicality was the tenor of his advice to Ch'ungsŏn. The king once pondered the reason why in Korea, long familiar with Chinese culture, the scholars were all adhering to Buddhism and occupied themselves with trivialities of writing style. Where were the learned men who understood the classics and polished their conduct? For this desolate state of scholarship Yi squarely held the king responsible. If he had extended the educational facilities, paid due respect to the Six Classics, and illuminated the Way of former kings, Yi preached, nobody would turn his back on "pure Confucianism" *(chinyu)* and follow the Buddhists; nobody would abandon "concrete learning" *(sirhak)* for trivialities of writing style. Yi's message was clear: a king's first task was education.[52] In a memorial submitted on the occasion of Ch'ungmok's (r. 1344–1348) accession to the throne in 1344, Yi Che-hyŏn became more specific. Unmistakably referring to two key concepts of the *Ta-hsüeh*, Yi made the realization of "reverence" *(kyŏng)* and "watchfulness" *(sin)*—preconditions of kingly rule—dependent on the king's polishing his own virtue first. For doing so, the best method was instruction, and Yi recommended as study materials the *Hsiao-ching* (Classic of Filial Piety) and the Four Books. The aim was to practice the way of the "investigation of things" and the "perfection of knowledge," the "sincerity of the will" and the "rectification of the mind"—the four basic steps of self-cultivation. Once the Four Books were mastered, the next stage of instruction was the Six Classics.[53] Yi Che-hyŏn's pedagogical philosophy clearly rested on Yüan concepts and became the basis of all educational programs in late Koryŏ.

Yi Che-hyŏn's disciple, Yi Saek, articulated similar concerns. He called Confucianism "the source of the civilizatory process" and connected it with the workings of government. Human qualities form the foundation of government. If they are not cultivated, he said, the foundation is not firm. If they are not enlightened, the source is not clear. This was the state of things he observed in his own time and attributed it to the decay of the school system. "Of old, the scholars strove to become sages. Nowadays, remuneration is all the scholars are after." He sharply censured what he thought was meaningless scholarship and pleaded for the reconstruction of schools, both in the capital and in the provinces. Yi Saek became instrumental for the revival of the Confucian Academy (Sŏnggyun'gwan) in 1367, where he became one of the most inspiring teachers of Neo-Confucianism.[54]

At the center of early Korean Neo-Confucianism, thus, stood the revitalization of the education system, a precondition for spreading the teachings of the Ch'eng-Chu school in Korea. The curriculum was modelled after the precepts received from the Yüan teachers, and the whole educational venture rested on the optimistic assumption that if the "learning of the sages" *(sŏnghak)* was sufficiently absorbed by the ruler and his officials, state and society would regain their vitality and harmony. There also was the notion that those called to assist this revitalization process should be recruited on the basis of their talents rather than their family backgrounds.[55]

The spiritual milieu in which the Neo-Confucians began to assert themselves was molded by Buddhism. Although a man like An Hyang had deplored that grass was growing in the Confucius Shrine, while everywhere else incense was burned in reverence for Buddha,[56] anti-Buddhist feelings at first were not strong. After all, Buddhist temples had protected the Confucians during the Military Period (1170–1270). The Koreans who studied in Peking under the Yüan also were not exposed to radical anti-Buddhism. On the contrary, the co-existence of the "Three Teachings" (Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism) had a long tradition in China.[57] It is understandable therefore that scholars like Yi Che-hyŏn or Yi Saek did not make their commitment to Neo-Confucianism contingent on a critical attitude toward Buddhism. Paek Mun-bo (1303–1374) must thus have been one of the first to write a memorial entitled "In Rejection of Buddhism" *(Ch'ŏkpulso)*. But he, too, did not use doctrinal grounds for contrasting Confucianism with Buddhism. Rather, quoting Shao Yung's (1011–1077) complex cosmological chronology,[58] he pointed out that in Korea the age had come "to revere Yao and Shun and the Six Classics and to discontinue the [Buddhist] theories of merit and fate." If this were done, Paek maintained, the fate of the country would be secure for a long time as Heaven would be pure and protective and yin and yang in harmony with the time.[59]

The tone of the Confucians changed, however, under King Kongmin (r. 1351–1374). With waning Mongol domination and interference, an opportunity for national reassertion seemed to have arrived, and the Confucians began to clamor for a reform program far beyond the reconstruction of the school system. Lingering domination of pro-Mongol forces and the meteoric rise of a Buddhist monk, Sin Ton (?–1371), to the pinnacle of decision-making power radicalized the Confucians' demands for renovation. Their laxity toward the Buddhists ended, and they began to envisage a new age in which Confucian norms and values would shape state and society.

NEO-CONFUCIANISM AS AN IDEOLOGY OF CHANGE. The transmission of Neo-Confucianism to Korea poses various important questions. How did the Koreans see themselves as inheritors of the Confucian heritage? What drew them to Neo-Confucianism? What were the elements within Neo-Confucianism that they could adopt as a sociopolitical ideology? Here some general aspects of these questions will be outlined, while the discussion of their practical application in early Chosŏn will form the subject of Chapter Two.

The Koreans seem never to have doubted their belonging to the civilized, that is, Confucian world. As Pyŏn Kye-ryang (1369–1430) put it: "Since antiquity Korea has revered rites *(ye)* and etiquette *(ŭi)* and submitted to Kija's teachings."[60] Having in the person of the legendary Kija a presumed direct link to Chinese antiquity, Korea had a natural claim to the heritage of "the Way" *(sado)* and was proud of it. "Was this not Heaven's special favor vis-à-vis Chosŏn?" Although the Koreans at times invoked the Mencian formula of "using Chinese doctrines to transform the barbarians" *(yung-Hsia pien-i)*[61] to justify and enforce the adoption of Chinese institutions, they were convinced of their natural propensity to become Confucians. This was the optimistic spirit of the Confucian scholars that prevailed throughout late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn.

What elements in Neo-Confucianism justified this optimism not only for a small elite but also for society at large? At the center of an answer to this question undoubtedly stands the Confucian conviction that human nature can be perfected from without, regardless of whether this nature is originally good or bad. Although the early Korean Neo-Confucians have left no clear pronouncements about this problem, circumstantial evidence suggests that they were aware of its overwhelming importance. How, for example, does one go about transforming corrupt Buddhist habits? Does one start from the feelings, that is, from within, or from the ritual details, that is, from without? For Chŏng To-jŏn (?1337–1398), false ritual practices could lead a son's feelings toward his parents astray, and therefore he insisted that reforms had to start with giving people suitable models for correcting their feelings.[62] Chŏng was not alone with this insight. At the beginning of Chosŏn, the opinion prevailed that, through stimulation from without, men's human properties not only could be guided but also profoundly changed. This belief in the perfectability of man demanded the creation of an appropriate environment in which human nature would be realized to its fullest. Such an environment could be achieved only through legislation that took the vagaries of human nature into account, that is, through Confucian legislation.[63]

A key role in this transformatory process was accorded to rites and rituals. Rites are "correct" acts in the outer realm that exert a profound impact on the inner disposition of man. In ancestor worship, for example, they not only demonstrate how things have to be done correctly but also are a crucial method for creating harmony among the participants. Rites thus address, beyond the individual, the collectivity of kin and, in a wider sense, society at large. They are principles that grow out of human relationships and form part of the entire normative sociopolitical order.[64] The Neo-Confucians of early Chosŏn clearly recognized the significance of rites as devices for ordering society; and for formulating their social policies, they heavily relied on the ritual literature of ancient China transmitted by the Sung Neo-Confucians.

Models for perfect ritual behavior and a sound sociopolitical order are contained in ancient China's canonical works that constituted the inexhaustible source of inspiration for generations of Confucians. In Korea, these works had been known for centuries and had served as the educational basis for examination candidates and instructional materials for kings. They gained critical relevance, however, as handbooks of change and reform through the commentaries of the Sung Neo-Confucians, especially Chu Hsi. It was these commentaries that unlocked their potential as guidebooks of social renovation. The canonical literature, in particular the *Li-chi* (Book of Rites), the *I-li* (Book of Etiquette and Ceremonies), and the *Chou-li* (The Rites of Chou), depicted in great detail an ideal society created by the sage-kings of ancient China. Through the idealization of the Sung Neo-Confucians, the institutions of this "historical" age gained normative power, and it was this power that persuasively called for a re-creation of these institutions in the contemporary situation (Chin. *fu-ku;* Kor. *pokko*). This was a creative recourse to Chinese antiquity.[65] The Korean Neo-Confucians came under the spell of this canonical literature and interpreted it in the most literal sense. They were receptive to the call for renovation and understood it as a commitment to transforming their own society into a Confucian society. Their reenactment of ancient institutions at the beginning of Chosŏn was motivated as much by their sense of responsibility toward the classics as by their will to rectify the evils of their time. Nowhere in East Asia, therefore, was the re-creation of the institutions of Chinese antiquity more compelling than in Korea.

The sheer weight of its canonical literature makes Neo-Confucianism an elitist enterprise. It addresses the moral as well as the scholarly qualifications of its practicioners, the *ju* (Kor. *yu*), vaguely to be translated as "Confucians." Often used synonymously with *shih* (Kor. *sa*)—this term contains the notion of professionalism—the *ju* were men who made the studying and teaching of the Confucian classics their profession and at times, by passing the examinations, entered the officialdom. But the *ju* were more than merely learned scholars turned bureaucrats. A group apart and above general society, the *ju* adduced their special moral qualities as justification for taking on a leadership role within and without the government. In the widest sense of the word, they were professionals who with their moral endowment, learning, and skills were indispensable functionaries of state and society.[66]

In Korea, the nature of the *yu* as a professional group in the Koryŏ-Chosŏn transition was bound to considerations of social status. Neo-Confucian learning provided an important new method for asserting elite status. To be sure, the aforementioned men of head-rank six *(yuktup'um)* at the end of Silla and perhaps even the civil administrators *(nŭngmun nŭngni)* during the Military Period formed professional groups with distinct social overtones. But at the end of Koryŏ and the beginning of Chosŏn, Neo-Confucian training became the professional ethos of a body of men who from within the established aristocratic order sought to increase their power by exploiting their special knowledge. This notion of superiority based on Neo-Confucian education thus did not transcend traditional considerations of heredity and upper-class privileges. Rather, it reinforced the social criteria of status ascription. In other words, the Neo-Confucians of early Chosŏn, in contrast to the *shih* of early Ming China, claimed social as well as professional eminence in their quest for power.

With the advent of Neo-Confucianism in Korea, an ideology[67] emerged that was addressing itself in a comprehensive and compelling way to social problems. It stimulated an unprecedented political discourse on man and society. Neo-Confucianism contained clear precepts of sociopolitical renovation and anchored the guarantee of their workability in the exemplary world of the sage-kings of Chinese antiquity. Moreover, the reformatory thrust of Neo-Confucianism turned its practitioners into activists and demanded their full commitment to its program of social change. The Neo-Confucians of early Chosŏn became infected with this call to action and strove to determine and implement a reform program that would Confucianize Korean society. After the failure of Wang An-shih's (1021–1086) reforms in eleventh-century China, their program was to become the most ambitious and creative reform experiment in the East Asian world.