**Confucianization and the Role of Women in Early Choson Korea Primary Source Analysis**

Confucianism has been an integral part of political and religious life in East Asia ever since its adoption by the Han Dynasty in the second century BCE. However, despite Confucianism’s undeniable influence on the Sinosphere, it is far from the only religious or philosophical movement to gain widespread adherence in the region. In Korea, especially during the Goryeo dynasty, Buddhism was by far the more prominent faith, and its institutions became intertwined with the state. Upon Choson Taejo’s overthrow of the Goryeo in 1392, his new dynasty sought to diminish the power of Buddhism in Korea and instead promote Neo-Confucianism, a development which would mark a clear ideological break between the two dynasties. A key part of this religious change was compelling the Korean upper classes to live their lives in accordance with Confucian principles, even when such principles ran against long standing tradition. In *Source of Korean Tradition*, several primary sources are given that illustrate the changing role of women during this transition to a Confucian society and the causes and effects of Confucianization in the early Choson period.

Perhaps the most central tenet of Confucianism is the maintenance of proper conduct in the five constant relationships. The correct fulfillment of roles in all of the relationships was seen as integral to the living of a noble life, but in early Choson Korea the customary relationship between husband and wife was seen as in need of correction along Confucian lines. The taking of concubines by upper-class men has a long history in East Asia and was sanctioned by Confucianism, though with the caveat that there had to be a firm distinction between the status of main wife and concubine. However, as shown in “On Differentiating Between Main Wife and Concubine,” the lines between these statuses had evidently blurred as of the Goryeo period, and Choson officials sought to rectify the situation. The author of the document invokes both the Ming code and the legendary past of Korea to show that the acquisition of a second wife as well as the elevation of a concubine to main wife status were recent deviations of a degenerate fallen dynasty and must be corrected. Choson Taejo’s clarification of the rights of the main wife as opposed to those of a concubine are presented as a restoration of traditional and more honorable values, rather than a new reform. By doing this, Taejo linked the promotion of a Confucian practice, that of honoring the relationship between one man and one woman, with the morality of ancient Korea, indigenizing it and giving his reforms the appearance of a restoration of true Korean values in opposition to the moral decay of the Goryeo, rather than that of the imposition of a new ideology. This move legitimized both his rule by portraying it as more moral than his predecessor and Confucianism by aligning it with what were perceived to be the ancient customs of Korea.[[1]](#footnote-0)

Another key aspect of Confucianism is the importance of social roles. In almost every relationship, there is one person subordinate to another. For example, in the relationship between ruler and subject, the subject must obey the ruler, and in the relationship between father and son, the son must heed his father’s commands. Similarly, a wife must be subordinate to her husband and a concubine must be subordinate to both. In “On Treating the Main Wife,” Minister of Personnel Ho Cho condemns men who allow their concubines to become “mistresses of the household,” and Royal Secretary Kwawk Chonjung suggests the brutal punishment of men who allow their concubines to become their main wives, as such a move resulted in the transfer of property from the main wife to the concubine, often impoverishing the main wife.[[2]](#footnote-1) This was seen as denigrating the sanctity of the relationship between husband and wife, something that Confucianism strongly discouraged. In addition, the sons of concubines would acquire the lower status of their mothers and not be a part of their father’s house. They were also prohibited from taking the civil service examinations, greatly limiting their social mobility. These men, regardless of their skills or talents, were unable to join the bureaucratic class, a situation lamented by O Sukkwon in “Critique of Discrimination Against Second Sons.” This practice was justified by Confucianism, as the sons of a concubine could not be on equal footing as those of a main wife, lest she be relegated to an equal status as the concubine, and only came about during the Choson dynasty. O, the son of a concubine himself, notes that this practice was not in line with Korean tradition and deprived the regime of many capable men.[[3]](#footnote-2) This great exception to the meritocratic civil service system so treasured by the Choson dynasty shows the lengths to which the state would go to align upper-class society with Confucian values.

The imposition of Confucian morality onto marital relations was not limited to the restriction of rights for concubines or their sons. In “On Remedying the Wedding Rite,” Ch’oe Hang writes that the traditional Korean practice of a man moving into his wife’s household after their marriage violated the Confucian principles of subordinate relationships as it was seen as a form of female dominance over a man. Ch’oe claims that such a tradition violates natural law and represents the moral decay of the Goryeo, necessitating King Sejong’s correction of the practice.[[4]](#footnote-3) The linking of Goryeo practices with degenerate anti-Confucianism is a consistent theme in these sources, and is used as a rhetorical device by Neo-Confucican scholars to convince Choson rulers that Confucianization was not only a societal imperative but also a way to improve their legitimacy by combatting the perceived moral decline of the late Goryeo period.

The final set of documents regarding the Confucianization of family life presented in *Sources of Korean Tradition* deal with the remarriage of women. Ironically, though upper-class men were allowed to take concubines, the status of widows who remarried was highly controversial. While there were no major calls for thrice-married women to be allowed into polite society, some Choson elites considered a first-time remarriage acceptable due to the risk of poverty for a young woman with no husband. However, King Songjong intervened on the matter in 1477 to prohibit the sons of remarried women from joining the upper classes or taking the civil service exam. This decision was justified by the perceived threat of women seeking out their own husbands, which would be in direct violation of the Confucian ideal relationship between man and wife.[[5]](#footnote-4) As with the ban on the sons of concubines from taking the civil service exam, this practice limited social mobility and deprived the Choson state of many talented young men, but was seen as necessary to maintain a Confucian society. A clear sign of an ideology’s dominance is when a state harms its own interests in order to fulfill the dogma of that ideology, a phenomenon clearly displayed here. The ostracization of the children of remarried women and concubines despite their potential usefulness to the state highlights the centrality of Confucianism to the Choson dynasty and extent to which it had come to influence the lives of its upper class.

Throughout world history, it is not unusual for a new regime to mark a clear ideological break with the one that preceded it. For example, following the collapse of the Russian Empire and ascension of the Soviet Union, communist officials persecuted the Russian Orthodox Church as a symbol of reaction and promoted an atheist worldview. This development radically shifted Russian religious life and was not universally popular, but was seen as an important way to legitimize the new regime and combat the influence of the old one. Similarly, though the Confucianization of Choson Korea challenged Korean traditions surrounding the status of concubines and their sons as well as the offspring of remarried women, it served to distinguish the Choson from the Goryeo and paint the latter as emblematic of moral decline. Choson officials also tried to link Confucian beliefs to those of distant past rulers of Korea, claiming that deviations were the product of a morally degenerate deposed regime. By initiating these widespread changes, Choson rulers painted themselves as a more truly Korean and moral dynasty than the Goryeo, and therefore more worthy to rule, regardless of the upheaval such changes brought to the daily lives of the upper classes.

1. Theodore de Bary and Peter Lee, *Sources of Korean Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Ibid., 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ibid., 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Ibid., 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Ibid., 320. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)