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Confucianism and the Aristocratic/Bureaucratic Balance in Korea

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BETWEEN the fifteenth and twentieth centuries a unique and distinctive balance between aristocratic and bureaucratic forces was achieved in Korea, unmatched anywhere else in East Asia in terms of its nature and longevity. The ruling class of this society was neither thoroughly aristocratic nor thoroughly bureaucratic because government officials were selected by means of a Chinese-style civil service examination based on impersonal testing of one's knowledge of the Confucian classics and Chinese history and literature. At the same time, most of the successful examination candidates and high officials came from clans and even families with records of degree and officeholding that went back for hundreds of years. The hereditary aspects of the Korean ruling class had only been weakened by the examination system, not destroyed as it had been in China after the fall of the T'ang in the tenth century.

One reason why the Koreans were able to create a ruling class of this mixed aristocratic/bureaucratic nature and preserve it for so long was because their country was sheltered from the destructive

I wish to acknowledge the valuable assistance and criticism afforded by a number of my colleagues. Jack Dull, in particular, has unselfishly contributed his time and knowledge in the attempt to rectify my misperceptions of Chinese history. My debt to him is great. I would also like to thank Bruce Cumings, Edward Wagner, Gari Ledyard, Hok Lam Chan, Donald Treadgold, Daniel Chirot, Don Baker, and Kent Guy for many useful suggestions.

and disruptive forces of foreign invasion and major economic change during most of the Chosŏn 朝鮮 (Yi 李) dynasty (1392–1910). The long period of peace ensured by the Ming and Ch'ing hegemony over the East Asian continental area allowed Koreans to live on their own terms. Even though peace was occasionally shattered by the anti-Mongol Red Turban rebels in the fourteenth century, Wakō pirate raids in the fifteenth century, Hideyoshi's invasions in the late sixteenth, and two short Manchu attacks in the seventeenth, Korea's tributary relationship with China and her own seclusion policy buffered these shocks and prevented any serious destruction of the ruling class.

This protective barrier also kept economic change to a minimum, limiting foreign and domestic trade and postponing the rise of commercial activity until the late seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, and even then confining it to rather modest proportions until after the opening of Korea to foreign commerce in 1876. The dampening of commercial activity meant that Korea remained primarily an agricultural economy for most of this period, providing a stable basis for the mixed aristocratic/bureaucratic ruling class.

The balance achieved between aristocratic and bureaucratic tendencies in the Chosŏn ruling class was not just the product of economic and political forces; it was also the result of the influence of Confucianism on Korean society. Korea's elite culture had been dominated by Buddhism from about the late fourth century until the Neo-Confucian revival began to affect the Koreans in a serious way in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. At the end of the fourteenth century, Neo-Confucian ethics and reformist political thought played major roles in the movement that led to the overthrow of the Koryŏ dynasty and the establishment of the Chosŏn dynasty. While Buddhism died hard, by the sixteenth century almost all the elite were Confucians, and a good many had a thorough grasp of Chu Hsi's 朱熹 metaphysics as well. This was truly Korea's Confucian age, which meant that not only were educated Koreans affected by Confucian ideas in their behavior, but also that Korean society was somehow subtly influenced by Confucianism as well. This subtle influence manifested itself in the emergence of a balance between aristocratic and bureaucratic forces and in the creation of a ruling class that was semi-aristocratic and semi-bureaucratic in nature.

By aristocracy I mean a ruling class determined by birth or heredity, and by bureaucracy I refer to functionaries recruited by impersonal standards of merit, talent or achievement. The Chosŏn ruling class could not be described exclusively in terms of either of these two alternatives, because birth itself was not enough to guarantee either officeholding or high office, merit was never defined exclusively in terms of impersonal or rational standards (moral criteria were always subsumed in the definition of talent), and officeholding was always strongly correlated with inherited family status.

This type of ruling class could be regarded simply as a Weberian patrimonial bureaucracy except that our interest here is not confined to irrational or personal criteria of recruitment and bureaucratic membership exclusively, but extends as well to the perpetuation of such personal criteria in families or clans over generations. This does not rule the aristocratic bureaucrat out of the Weberian patrimonial model; it simply makes a distinction between patrimonial bureaucrats who cannot perpetuate their positions in their families over time and those who can, and insists that the distinction between the two is significant.¹

While the Koreans attained a stage of development in which the aristocratic/bureaucratic type was created and preserved virtually intact until the twentieth century, the type was not preserved past the Sung dynasty in China. In both countries, the formation of the aristocratic/bureaucratic hybrid was achieved after a period of aristocratic rule as a result of the growth of central, imperial and bureaucratic influence and the corresponding decline of aristocratic power and autonomy. There were important differences in the two countries that will be described later, but the important point to note here is the role played by Confucianism in relation to this type of ruling elite.

The T'ang dynasty had an aristocratic/bureaucratic elite of the

¹ On the non-rational aspects of patrimonialism, see Max Weber, *The Religion of China* (New York: The Free Press, 1951), pp. 33–52, 103, 148–49; Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds., 2 vols. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1978), 2: 956, 1006–51 et passim; Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977, paperback ed.), pp. 115–16.

type described above and Confucian thought was important in the T'ang, but the dominant faiths of that period were Buddhism and Taoism. The age could be described as a period of syncretism or one in which Confucianism played a secondary role to Buddhism and Taoism. The destruction of hereditary aristocracy (or to be more exact, the aristocratic/bureaucratic type) by the disruption of the late T'ang and Five Dynasties period was followed by the rapid growth in the influence of Confucianism in Chinese thought and culture in the Sung. The spread not only of Neo-Confucian metaphysics, but of Confucian ideas and ethics in general, certainly accompanied and was correlated with the decline of the aristocratic principle in society, contributing to the replacement of aristocratic bureaucrats by bureaucrats (albeit Weberian patrimonial bureaucrats) in the government and aristocrats by gentry in society. This trend was accompanied by increased emphasis on knowledge, writing, and the civil arts through the use of the examination system for recruitment, and a decrease in inherited status. One could argue that this was coincidence rather than cause, but only if willing to denigrate the importance of ideas in social and political life.

What is striking by comparison with this Chinese experience is that the rise of Confucian thought in Korea with all its institutional accoutrements, such as the examination system, the public and private schools, the adoption of Confucian canons of taste and prose, poetry, and painting, and the use of Confucian rites in the sacraments of daily life, was not accompanied by the obliteration of the aristocratic bureaucrat, but rather by his preservation. One might conclude that if the influence of Confucianism in these two societies was rather different, the reasons for the differences have to be attributed to factors other than Confucian thought. While more than ready to acknowledge the clear logic of such a proposition, I am still prepared to defend the notion that, all other things being equal, Confucianism should have had a certain effect on an agrarian society into which the bureaucratic mode of government organization had already been introduced.

Of course, things were not equal, and that is why there was a difference; that is why the aristocratic bureaucrat as a type disappeared from the Chinese scene and why he was preserved in Korea. In China the growth in state power resulted in weakening of the

aristocracy and an overturning of the aristocratic/bureaucratic balance, but this was aided by two phenomena that were less important in Korea. Foreign invasion, in particular the ability of non-Chinese to take over the state apparatus and the necessity to build up state power to resist foreign enemies, had a serious effect on the independent power of the aristocrats. The expansion of commercial activity and markets with its dilution of inherited landed wealth by movable property was a second cause in the destruction of the aristocracy. In Korea the integrity of private property in land was better preserved because of the absence of these two factors, even though profligacy, division of property among heirs, and failure to renew bureaucratic status did result in downward mobility and shifts in the composition of the elite.

To explain the destruction of the Chinese aristocracy and its diminution into a gentry class (or even a class made up of weak and isolated bureaucrats), I refer to the factors of foreign invasion and commercial development because of the relative absence of these factors during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) in Korea. As mentioned before, there was no need for a permanent standing army of any significance throughout the Chosŏn period (beyond what was needed to suppress domestic rebellions) because Korea was protected by unified Chinese dynasties. The military atrophied in this hothouse environment. The military reorganization that occurred in the seventeenth century was soon neglected once Manchu military superiority was reluctantly acknowledged. Furthermore, the establishment of legal restrictions on contact and trade with the Japanese after Hideyoshi's invasions and the Manchus after 1636 reduced the stimulative effects of foreign trade. Although domestic trade grew, it could not expand very far beyond the limits set by local landlordism (the economic prop of the capital aristocratic bureaucrat or his rural relatives) and state regulation.

Protection of the domestic environment from foreign invasion and commercial disruption meant that Confucianism could exert its influence on a bureaucratic government ensconced in an agrarian economy. In this context Confucianism then contributed not to the preservation of the social and political systems of the previous dynasty, but to the transformation of those systems into the balanced aristocratic/bureaucratic type. In order to sustain this argument, it

will be necessary to show that the social and political settlement of the Chosŏn period was not a continuation of an earlier mode that reaches back to Korean antiquity, but the product of a relatively slow process of evolution which, despite apparent setbacks, proceeded in remarkably straightforward fashion.

In the following sections of this article it will be shown how an aristocratic society emerged in Korea in the Silla period, and was then subjected to restraints by the introduction of bureaucratic institutions by the kings of Koryŏ, who sought to increase their power at the expense of the aristocrats. Although Confucianism played a role in these developments, it did not emerge as a major force for centralized bureaucratic power until the transition from Koryŏ to Chosŏn in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The reforms carried out at the time of the transition, however, did not eliminate the aristocracy altogether or complete the process of bureaucratization and centralization of power. The denouement of reform then raises the question of whether the failure to achieve centralized power was because the aristocracy was simply too powerful, or whether that failure resulted from Confucianism itself—the implications of its doctrines and their influence on society. The answer to this question and the main point of the analysis is that Confucianism contained contradictory emphases and influences, one conducive to bureaucratic centralization, and the other to inherited status and aristocratic society. The emergence of a social elite marked by a balance of bureaucratic and aristocratic elements may have been the product of unique socioeconomic forces, but it was also compatible with the social implications of Confucian thought.

In order to support this hypothesis, the argument will then shift to a treatment of China from the late Han through the Sung. The purpose will be to show that even though aristocracy developed in China in a pattern quite different from the Korean experience, Confucianism in China also had a dual and contradictory influence on Chinese society, producing by the T'ang dynasty a balance between bureaucratic and aristocratic elements similar to what occurred in Korea about eight centuries later. By the late T'ang or early Sung, however, this balance was destroyed in favor of central and imperial power.

In the last section of this study, the focus of the argument will return to Korea in the period after the fifteenth century for the purpose of showing how and why the balance of bureaucratic and aristocratic forces remained intact through the late nineteenth century instead of repeating the experience of the Chinese in the period after the T'ang dynasty.

Before proceeding to the historical argument, it is first necessary to justify the use of the term "Confucianism" in the limited sense of a body of moral and philosophical ideas and social practices that could produce contradictory and conflicting influences on society—the aristocratic and the bureaucratic effects. One main theme in the interpretation of Confucian thought and its effects on society was that it emerged in the context of a Chou feudal milieu and was designed to impose or restore a feudal moral order in the face of disorder and confusion. After the feudal order was destroyed by the Ch'in state organized in bureaucratic fashion and inspired by Legalist philosophy, however, Confucianism proved adaptable to the new centralized bureaucratic order and became state-sponsored philosophy or ideology. Men like Tung Chung-shu 董仲舒 of the Former Han introduced new elements to justify and reinforce the imperial institution and Confucian moral precepts were inserted into the legal code and backed up by the force of law and punishment. It could therefore be argued that the centralizing, legalistic, and bureaucratic aspects of Han and post-Han Confucianism came from outside Confucian thought itself, representing a new fusion of Legalistic and Confucian ideas.

There is no denying that from the Han on Confucian thought was always located in the midst of the centralized bureaucratic context and differed in significant ways in thought and practice from Chou times. The transition could not have been made, however, had it not contained elements compatible with the centralized state. At the same time it retained other elements carried over from the Chou feudal context that could function to reinforce centrifugal or aristocratic elements in society. At the risk of gross oversimplification, I would list the contradictory potentialities of Confucianism in the following way.

The moral emphasis on filial piety and loyalty could be used to subordinate the individual or the family to the ruler, but it might

also function to encapsulate the family and protect it from the intrusion of state power. The insistence on the recruitment of ministers and officials on the basis of virtuous thought and behavior might, in the form of the examination system, lead to an increase in the power of the throne over the scholar/bureaucrats as a class, or it might lead to a delegation of authority in personnel matters to the bureaucracy at the expense of imperial despotism. The definition of the ruling class as an elite of virtue that had to be afforded status and privilege might solidify the loyalty of that class to the throne, or it might justify the inheritance of status, privilege, wealth, and tax exemption to the detriment of imperial power. The portrayal of rulers as virtuous paragons could be used to rationalize or embellish what was in fact the naked power of the militaristic despot, or by insistence on the right of remonstrance check and limit the exercise of despotic authority. The assignment of responsibility to local elders, scholars, and men of virtue might force otherwise rebellious localities into conformity with imperial dictates and subordinate the village to the hierarchy of centralized administration, or it could institutionalize the semi-autonomy of the village and insulate it against centralized control. The belief in the supremacy of the public good and the ideal of the Mencian well-field system might lead to the assertion of the state's interest as opposed to private or familial interest in the control of land and wealth, or the emphasis on family solidarity as the basis of a moral social order might strengthen private property in land and reduce the state's ability to control resources.

This long list of contrary tendencies indicates the wide range of possible political and social consequences of Confucian influence, but it does not mean that Confucianism could result in an infinite number of consequences, which would in effect eliminate it as an independent variable. Social influences might depend in some part on the effects of changes in Confucian philosophy and learning, such as the development from Neo-Confucianism to Wang Yang-ming to the Ch'ing dynasty tradition of Han learning and empirical research, but I doubt that these changes invalidate the above formulation of contrary tendencies. In certain circumstances and certain periods the contradictory impulses of Confucian social influences were both present such that the structure of state and

society or the nature of the social elite can best be explained as a balance between bureaucratic and aristocratic forces. A brief description of historical trends is necessary to sustain this argument.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARISTOCRACY IN KOREA:
FOURTH TO FOURTEENTH CENTURIES

Aristocracy was, of course, not ordered suddenly into existence by the mythical Tan'gun 檀君. It took centuries of development for it to emerge from earlier forms, and even when it did, it was not the ideal type that everyone imagines. It had its progenitors in the tribal mode of political and social organization and the military aristocrats of the early Three Kingdoms period (in the late third and fourth centuries, A.D.) and was always balanced by some mixture of bureaucratic organization, no matter how skeletal. It reached its full development in Silla society, in the southeastern corner of Korea with the creation of the bone rank (*kolp'um* 骨品) system.

There is much debate over the origins of the Silla bone ranks—some holding for its origins in the third and fourth centuries, and others insisting that it did not flower fully until the addition of the head ranks (*tup'um* 頭品) to the bone ranks in the ninth century, barely one hundred years prior to its abolition. Under the mature form of the system, society was divided into hereditary ranks which set the standards of eligibility not only of kingship and officeholding, but also of all the aspects of social and material life from one's house to one's socks. For our purposes it is immaterial whether this system evolved slowly from pre-unification Silla in the fourth century or was created belatedly in the unified Silla kingdom in the ninth; for if the latter, we might merely argue that it was after all the product of an evolving Silla society, and not of any direct borrowing from China.²

² There is an extensive literature on the bone-rank system, far too abundant to cite in full here. The pioneering study was by Imanishi Ryū 今西龍, "Shiragi koppin-kō" (A Study of the Bone-ranks), in *Shiragishi kenkyū* (Studies in Silla history), (Keijō: 1933), pp. 189–238. See also Ikeuchi Hiroshi 池内宏, "Shiragi no koppinsei to dō" (the bone-rank system and the royal line in Silla), *Tōyō gakuhō* 28.3 (1941): 1–34; Suematsu Yasukazu 未松保和, "Shiragi sandai-kō" (A study of the three ages of Silla), *Shiragishi no shomondai* (Problems in Silla history), (Tokyo: Tōyō bunko, 1954), pp. 4–47; Mishina Shōei 三品彰英, "Koppinsei shakai" (The society of the bone-rank system), *Kodaishi*

Silla was predominantly a Buddhist country with an important component of Confucian learning. It was a bureaucratic kingdom, but its kings were relatively weak, their bureaucratic apparatus did not extend too far into the countryside or too far down to the villages, and both court and village were dominated by aristocrats, the former cultured and refined, the latter rustic and crude—and this despite the influence of T'ang China for three hundred years. Certainly by comparison to Silla, the T'ang, or at least the first half of the T'ang, was a period when China was a country of codified law, ramified and articulated bureaucratic organization, huge state armies, and state control over a significant (but yet unknown) percentage of land and peasant cultivators. The power of the Silla kings and central government paled by comparison in large part because of the grander power of her aristocrats. This was the most aristocratic age in Korean history, where the hereditary factor in ruling class membership far outweighed the bureaucratic.

Where the effect of Confucianism is seen in this society, if at all, is in the drive by Confucian-educated men of lower rank to break through the restrictions of inherited status. Those few like Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn 崔致遠 who went to T'ang China, passed the exams, and served in the T'ang bureaucracy, returned home only to find their talents disdained. And according to the argument of Yi Kibaek

kōza 7 (1963): 174–209. For more recent studies see Takeda Yukio 武田幸男, “Shiragi no koppin taisei shakai” (The society of the Silla bone-rank system), *Rekishigaku kenkyū* 299 (April 1975): 1–13; Takeda Yukio, “Shiragi Koppinsei no saikentō” (A reinvestigation of the Silla bone-rank system), *Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo kiyō* 67 (March 1975): 21–36; Inoue Hideo 井上秀雄, “Shiragi no koppin seido” (The bone-rank system of Silla), *Rekishigaku kenkyū* 304 (September 1965): 40–51; Kimura Makoto 木村誠, “Rokuseiki Shiragi ni okeru koppinsei no seiritsu” (The establishment of the bone-rank system in sixth century Silla), *Rekishigaku kenkyū* (January 1976), pp. 19–32; Kim Ch'ŏlchun 金哲埜, “Silla sidae ūi ch'injok chiptan” (Kin groups in the Silla period), *Han'guk kodae sahoe yŏn'gu* (Studies in ancient Korean society), (Seoul: Chisik San'ŏpsa, 1975), pp. 157–80; Sin Tongha, 申東河 “Silla kolp'umje ūi hyŏngsŏng kwajŏng” (The formation process of the Silla bone-rank system), *Han'guk saron* 5 (October 1979): 4–63; Yi Chonguk, 李鍾旭 “Silla kolp'umje ūi kiwŏn” (The origins of the Silla bone-rank system), *Tongbang hakchi* 30 (March 1982): 143–66; Yi Kidong 李基東, “Silla ūi kolp'um chedo wa Ilbon ūi ssisŏng chedo” (The Silla bone-rank system and the Japanese kabane system), *Yŏksa hakpo* 94–95 (September 1982): 13–360. For a recent study in English, see Kim Chongsun, “The Kolp'um System: Basis for Sillan Stratification,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 1.2 (January–June 1971): 43–70 (not to be confused with *The Journal of Korean Studies* that began publication in 1979).

李基白, it was the members of the sixth head rank, just below the highest ranks of aristocratic ministers, who sought liberation from the system by joining forces with the rebels against Silla and wanted to rise to power and influence in the new Koryŏ 高麗 regime, much like lower samurai were supposed to have done during the destruction of the Tokugawa.³ In other words, Confucianism played a dynamic, progressive role in the destruction of aristocratic society, but we should pause before concluding that its ultimate objective was pure rationality, meritocracy, or egalitarianism.

The gradual and protracted weakening of hereditary aristocracy is illustrated by the limited way in which the early Koryŏ government adopted T'ang institutions of centralized power, bureaucratic organization and egalitarian distribution. The founding of Koryŏ had been based on Wang Kŏn's 王建 skillful compromises with a number of warlords, the lords of walled towns (*songju* 城主), and military commanders (*changgun* 將軍) of the local regions. He made no attempt to impose central, bureaucratic rule on localities, adopt a highly complex bureaucratic system, eliminate ethnic and regional diversity in the formation of a national army, confiscate land from the regional lords and redistribute it to peasants, or manumit slaves and incorporate them into the taxable commoner population. These tasks were only begun in the middle of the tenth century, and then in piecemeal fashion. The civil service examination system was adopted for the first time in 958, but was responsible for recruiting only a small fraction of the government's officials.⁴ Limited attempts were made to limit land and slaveholding, as early Koryŏ kings sought to consolidate power at the capital at Kaegyŏng 開京. A national army had to be forged because of the serious threats of invasion from the Khitan, but the command of capital guards and regional forces remained fragmented because of political struggles as consort families and aristocrats vied with princes and noblemen to seize control over the throne. The bone ranks had disappeared, but there were still prominent aristocratic families identified by the place

³ Yi Kibaek, 李基白 "Silla yuktup'um yŏn'gu" (A study of the sixth head rank of Silla), *Silla chŏngchi'i sahoesa yŏn'gu* (Studies in the political and social history of Silla), (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1974), pp. 34–65.

⁴ Hugh W. Kang, "Institutional borrowing: The Case of the Chinese Civil Service Examination in Early Koryŏ," *JAS* 24.1 (November 1974): 109–26.

names (*pon'gwan* 本貫) associated with the residences of clan progenitors, much in the same fashion as the Northern and Southern dynasties' aristocrats of China.⁵ And finally a state-sponsored land system, called the *chonsikwa* 田柴科 allotments, was established as a symbol of increased central power. This land system, however, was a far cry from the equal field *chün-t'ien* 均田 system of the period from the Northern Wei (485) to the mid-T'ang (mid-eighth century) because it did not provide for regular land grants to commoner peasants based on sex and age.⁶ Military service was required of the general commoner population, but only a fraction served on duty, and service (whether military or ordinary corvée) was not regarded as a reciprocal obligation due from all peasants in return for subsistence land grants from the state. The *chonsikwa* system provided for two types of individuals: those granted rank and privilege by the state and those who performed some function or service for the state. Grants to men of rank and office probably took the form of prebendal tax allocations, rather than outright land grants, and some scholars have concluded that the state was merely confirming land already held by such individuals.⁷ This kind of system marked a partial intrusion of state power into the domain of the hereditary aristocratic landlord and slaveowner, not a full assertion of state power. It was an open admission that the state did not have the power to confront the aristocracy of land and prestige directly, a symbol of a weakly bureaucratized and centralized state.

Nonetheless the system of prebendal allotments to functionaries

⁵ David G. Johnson, *The Medieval Chinese Oligarchy* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1977).

⁶ On the land system in the Six Dynasties and T'ang, see Hori Toshikazu 堀敏一, *Kindensei no kenkyū* (A study of the equal field system), (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1975); Sogabe Shizuo 曾我部静雄, *Chūgoku ritsuryōshi no kenkyū* (Studies in the history of the *lü-ling* system of China), (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbankan, 1971), pp. 119–232; Etienne Balazs, *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 101–128; Yang Lien-sheng, "Notes on the Economic History of the Chin Dynasty," *HJAS* 9.2 (1946): 107–85; rpt. in *Studies in Chinese Institutional History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 102–85.

⁷ The most recent survey of the early Koryō land system is Kang Chinch'ol 姜晋哲, *Koryō t'oji chedosa yōn'gu: Chōnsikwa ch'eje-p'yōn* (A study of the Koryō land system: The *Chōnsikwa* system), (Seoul: Koryō Taehakkyo Ch'ulp'anbu, 1980). This book contains a complete bibliography, to be found at the end of each major section. See James B. Palais, "Land Tenure in Korea: Tenth Through Twelfth Centuries," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 4 (1982–83): 73–205.

coupled with the recruitment of some officials from the examination system constituted a direct challenge to the predominance of the aristocratic and military elites that had dominated Korean society during the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla periods. The central state was attempting to distribute prestige, office, and economic support to its functionaries at the expense of independent military power.

Although the Confucians did not necessarily take the lead in these measures—they were after all supporting initiatives taken by kings who wanted to maximize their power at the expense of their political rivals—nonetheless, Confucians played an important progressive role in the creation of the monarchical, bureaucratic, and centralized state. It would appear, however, that the power of the kings and the influence of some Confucians bent on centralization were too weak to complete the process and thus destroy the domination of hereditary aristocrats and the strong traditions of an ascriptive society with its roots in the tribalism of early Korean history and the bone-ranks of Silla. What was created was a compromise between the rigid status demarcations of Silla and the more bureaucratized system of the Chosŏn dynasty. Korea was on the move toward the establishment of a society on the model of the T'ang where a centralized bureaucracy was staffed by members of aristocratic families, but one last struggle against the military had to be won before this process could be completed.

When the Confucian supporters of the king at the capital at Kaegyŏng (modern Kaesŏng 開城) suppressed the rebellion of the monk, Myoch'ŏng 妙清, that would-be Rasputin of the Koryŏ period, and wiped out his military and regional supporters in the Western Capital at P'yŏngyang 平壤 in 1136, it should have marked the ultimate victory of civil, bureaucratic rule over the military. It became, however, the turning point toward the resurgence of the military, the recreation of private estates, the resubjugation of the peasantry, and social disintegration in general. When the military realized that they were the key to the political struggles at court, they seized power by brute force. As opposed to the T'ang, however, where the frontier commanders established their bases of power in the periphery and directed it against the center, the Koryŏ military were thoroughly ensconced in the capital and launched a series of

Praetorian coups-d'état against the government.⁸ After Chǒng Chungbu's 鄭仲夫 coup of 1170, the social order was disrupted by military officers some of whom worked their way up the ranks, peasant, and even slave rebels.

The period of military dictatorship that extended from the late twelfth through the mid-thirteenth century (in the midst of the Mongol invasions) was only an apparent reversion to a simpler and more primitive mode of political rule. Society had been turned upside down for a generation but the aftermath revealed important continuities. The *bakufu* 幕府-type government of the Ch'oe 崔 family, who controlled puppet kings from behind the scenes much like the Kamakura *kampaku*, used civil bureaucrats and paid respects to Confucian learning.⁹ They did not attempt to create a system of infeudation or decentralized military rule. The military usurpers had merely taken over the central government and central army, and when finally subdued by the Mongols after 1259, the Confucian bureaucrats were in a solid position to establish a firmer base for their social position and political power.

The effects of Mongol rule on Korean state and society are complex and contradictory, but it is possible to discern some very important trends. Mongol rule did not introduce the practices of imperial despotism into the Koryŏ royal house because kings and princes were powerless figureheads who often spent their time at court in China imbibing culture. For that matter, some Korean officials were calling openly for annexation of the Korean peninsula by the Yüan empire. The members of the Ki 奇 family and their political supporters, for example, obviously hoped to benefit by their connection with the Korean empress (née Ki) of the last Yüan emperor, whose son might well have become the emperor of all China. These men were willing to countenance not only the destruction of Korean kings but the extinction of the Korean nation in the hopes of gaining a wider area for the exercise of family and

⁸ For a recent account in English, see Edward J. Shultz, "The Military-Civilian Conflict of the Koryŏ Dynasty," in McCann, Middleton, Shultz, eds., *Studies on Korean in Transition*, Occasional Papers No. 9 of the Center for Korean Studies (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 1979), pp. 5-16.

⁹ Edward J. Shultz, "Literati Supporters of the Ch'oe House Rule in Koryŏ: 1196-1258," paper presented at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, April 4, 1982.

individual political power, but fortunately for the Korean people, their hopes were dashed with the fall of the Yüan.

The Mongol victory had also precluded whatever possibility for feudalism may have existed in the thirteenth century, and Yüan rule allowed not only for the reestablishment of civilian, bureaucratic government, but also the permanent weakening of the military elite, and the Korean discovery of Neo-Confucian thought. In the fourteenth century Mongol rule preserved a role for the Confucian bureaucrat but did not yet create a society in which the bureaucrat controlled both state and society from a secure roost. This was the age of private power and tax-exempt private estates, leaving the king and his court officials with barely a pittance for salaries and emoluments.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the Mongol regime sowed the seeds of the Neo-Confucian revival in Korean soil, an intellectual movement which, in China, was already undergoing a shift toward the introspective and activist wing of Lü Xiangshan 陸象山 and a minor revival of Buddhism. Just as the intellectuals of the Yüan were canonizing the Four Books of Chu Hsi 朱熹 into the civil service examination curriculum, they were introducing Sung thought to the Korean scholarly community.¹¹

Even as early as the late tenth through the late twelfth centuries, there had been an active interest among some Koryŏ Confucians in philosophic developments in Sung China, such as the study of texts like the *Book of Changes* and the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the emphasis on principle and human nature. Korean Confucians of this era

¹⁰ On late Koryŏ estates, see Sudō Yoshiyuki 周藤吉之, "Raimatsu Sensho ni okeru nōshō ni tsuite," (The estates of the Late Koryŏ and Early Chosŏn), *Seikyū gakusō* 17 (August 1934): 1–80; Hatada Takashi 旗田巍, "Kōrai jidai no ōshitsu no shōen: shō/sho" (The estates of the royal house of the Koryŏ period: *chang* and *ch'ŏ*), *Chōsen chūsei shakaishi no kenkyū* (Studies in the history of medieval Korea), (Tokyo: Hōsei daigaku shuppankyoku, 1972), pp. 75–105; originally published in *Rekishigaku kenkyū* 246 (October 1960); Song Pyŏnggi 宋炳基, "Koryŏ sidae ūi nongjang: sibi segi ihu rŭl chungsim ūro" (The estates of Koryŏ, from the Twelfth century on), *Han'guksa yŏn'gu* 3 (March 1969), 1–38; Arii Tomonori 有井智徳, "Kōraicho ni okeru tochi dassen ni tsuite" (The illegal seizure of land in the Koryŏ dynasty), *Rekishū kyōiku* 17.8 (December 1969): 17–27; Kang Chinch'ŏl, "Kōrai no nōshō ni tsuite no mondai ishiki" (The nature of the problem of estates in Koryŏ), *Chōsen gakuhō* 74 (January 1975): 141–46.

¹¹ Mun Ch'ŏnyŏng 文喆永, "Yŏmal sinhŭng sadaebudŭl ūi sinyuhak suyong kwa kŭ tŭkching" (The reception of new Confucianism by the rising *sadaebu* [scholar officials] of Late Koryŏ and its special features), *Han'guk munhwa* 3 (November 1982): 97–109.

were at least keeping pace with the new trends, but this promising intellectual development was cut short in the aftermath of military coups of the post-1170 period. The scholars of the new Confucianism were driven out of court to the countryside, preserving the new ideas in reclusive study and self-cultivation. This reaction against the Confucians was not just due to the anti-intellectualism of the military men; it was a response of Spartan and even moralistic soldiers to what Yi Chehyŏn 李齊賢, himself an advocate of Neo-Confucian learning in the early to mid-fourteenth century, had acknowledged was the loss of proper spirit among Confucians amidst the dissipation, frivolousness and hedonism that dominated the rule of King Ŭijong after 1145. King Ŭijong 毅宗 was undoubtedly the butt of fifteenth century didactic historians, but there were in fact repeated tendencies for literary culture in China and Korea to become inbred, rarefied, precious and cut off from the real life concerns of the state and people. This no doubt occurred in the mid-twelfth century, a precarious period for the cultured man who had not yet won full victory over the military in Korean life.¹²

Confucianism lived on in the nurturing and protective hands of the syncretists, whether Buddhists like Chinul 知訥 or Confucianists like Yi Chehyŏn or Yi Saek (李穡), but for it to succeed and dominate thought in the midst of an inhospitable environment, it had to become more militant. Up to the mid-fourteenth century, Korean exposure to early Sung Neo-Confucianism had not been accompanied by the same virulent attack on Buddhism that had begun with Han Yü 韓愈 in the ninth century T'ang and continued into the Sung. It was not until the adoption of the emphasis on the practical ethics of daily life as advocated by the Lu-chai 魯齋 school of Hsü Heng 許衡 that Korean Confucianism became polemical, breaking its harmonious ties with Buddhist thought.¹³

CONFUCIANISM AND REFORM: THE KORYŎ/CHOSŎN
TRANSITION, FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES

From the mid-fourteenth century Confucian thinkers became partners in an enterprise that had all the earmarks of a major

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 97–109.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 113–20.

transformation in ideas, social practice, government organization, social structure, and land tenure. It was the time when the seeds were sown for irreversible shifts in Korean history: from weak bureaucratic monarchy to full institutionalized bureaucracy in the Chinese pattern, and from Buddhism and syncretism to Neo-Confucian orthodoxy in thought and religious practice. The Neo-Confucian anti-Buddhist polemicists were in the forefront of these movements, striving for a more powerful monarchy, recruitment by examination, limitation of land and slave ownership, and even redistribution of land and universal military service according to the well-field model of classical antiquity (particularly in the *Chou li* 周禮).

The late fourteenth century reform movement cannot be explained simply in terms of material forces—the yearnings of the military commanders for power, or the small landowners for land, or the sons of the *hyangni* 鄉吏 (families of the local petty officials) for membership in the regular bureaucracy. Reform was fueled by the idealism of the newly converted and the impetus for that was provided by the stress on ethical perfection. The late fourteenth century was not an age of philosophy but of ethics and no better example is provided than by Chong Tojŏn's 鄭道傳 polemics against Buddhism. He was not really thoroughly knowledgeable in Buddhist philosophy; it was his ignorance of some of its finer points that allowed him to be so intolerant.¹⁴ But the ethical focus of Con-

¹⁴ The literature on the Koryŏ/Chosŏn transition is too extensive to cite in full. For certain standard works on thought and institutions, particularly the anti-Buddhist polemics, see Han Yŏngu 韓永愚, *Chŏng Tojŏn sasang ūi yŏn'gu* (A study of the thought of Chŏng Tŏjon), (Seoul: Han'guk munhwa yŏn'guso, 1973); Han Yŏngu, *Chosŏn chŏn'gi ūi sahoe sasang* (Social thought of the early Chosŏn period 1983), (Seoul: Han'guk ilbosa); Han Woo-keun, "Yŏmal sonch'o ūi Pulgyo chŏngch'aek" (Policies toward Buddhism in the Late Koryŏ and Early Chosŏn periods), *Sŏul taehakkyo nonmunjip inmun sahoe kwahakp'yŏn* 6 (1957): 5–16; Yi Sangbaek 李相佰, *Chosŏn munhwasa yŏn'gu* (Studies in the cultural history of Korea), (Seoul: Uryu munhwasa, 1947); Yi Sŏngmu 李成茂, *Chosŏn ch'ogi yangban yŏn'gu* (A study of the yangban in the Early Chosŏn period), (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1980). Some of the arguments made in these sources are reviewed in James B. Palais, "Han Yŏng'u's Studies of Early Chosŏn Intellectual History," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 2 (1980): 199–224, and James B. Palais, Book Review of Yi Songmu, *Chosŏn ch'ogi yangban yŏn'gu*, *The Journal of Korean Studies* 3 (1981): 191–202. See also the recent multi-volume *Han'guksa* (History of Korea), (Seoul: Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, especially volumes 8 (1973) and 9 (1974). See also Martina Deuchler, "Neo-Confucianism: The Impulse for Social Action in Early Yi Korea," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 2 (1980): 71–111.

fucianism undoubtedly inspired men like him to take advantage of the opportunities provided by Yi Sönggye's 李成桂 leadership to create the Confucian millennium in the material realm by a thoroughgoing elimination of landlordism and private property and institution of egalitarian land grants to peasants in the manner of the T'ang equal field system.

The final settlement of the land question must have been a disappointment to the radicals of the 1380s. The political losers in the transition to the Chosŏn (Yi) dynasty undoubtedly were stripped of their estates, but the major beneficiaries of land reform were the men of rank and office and the merit subjects—the political supporters of Yi Sönggye. The new land system did not result in the nationalization of all land and its redistribution to peasants on the basis of equality, and it did not result in the elimination of landlord/tenant relations or slavery. It provided mainly for the allocation of prebendal tax grants on specified parcels within the confines of the province surrounding the capital, Kyönggi 京畿, and allowed the prebend recipients to dispatch their agents to collect the amounts due, as specified by the state. As in the case of the *chönsikwa* system of the eleventh century, prebend grantees were not confined to incumbent functionaries, but included all those granted rank by the state, providing even for the transmission of eligibility for prebendal grants to male heirs under the traditional Chinese type of “protection” (*üm* 蔭) privilege. By the late fifteenth century, however, even the system of state prebends broke down and it was the landlord, slaveowner, and merit subject who emerged as the replacements for the estate lords of late Koryŏ. A new state had been produced that established Confucianism as state orthodoxy, as the main subject of instruction in state schools and in the home, and as the main content of the civil service examinations, but the economic settlement remained far removed from the egalitarian model of the *Mencius* or the *Chou li*.¹⁵ Was this result not really a sign of the limited ability

¹⁵ Some of the important studies of the *kwajön* land system of the late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn are: Yi Sangbaek, *Yijo kŏn'guk ūi yŏn'gu* (Studies on the founding of the Yi dynasty), (Seoul: Uryu munhwasa, 1959); Ch'ŏn Kwanu 千寬宇, “Han'guk t'oji chedosa, ha” (History of Korean land systems, Part 2), *Han'guk munhwasa taegyŏ* 7 vols. (Outline of Korean cultural history), (Seoul: Koryŏ taehakkyo minjok munhwa yŏn'guso, 1965), 2: 1381–1516; Fukaya Toshitetsu 深谷敏鐵, “Sensho no tochi seido, ippan, jō: iwayuru kadenhō o chūshin to shite” (A glimpse of the land system of the early Chosŏn dynasty:

of Confucian thought as a practical ideology to achieve the egalitarian transformation of an agrarian society dominated by the private economic interests of landlords? Were not the Neo-Confucian ideologues and radical reformers of the late fourteenth century no more than the intellectual heirs of the Northern and Southern Sung philosophers who continued their intellectual struggle to work out an accommodation between well-field egalitarian idealism and the limitations of reality even after the failure of the practical reformer, Wang An-shih 王安石, in the eleventh century had rendered their efforts futile?¹⁶ After all, the idealism of the late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn reformers had come face to face with the overpowering concrete material interests of the landlords and politicians, and by the mid-fifteenth century, landlordism and the evasion of public service by the elite was again becoming the order of the day. The Confucian bureaucratic state was becoming routinized in patrimonial fashion as the high ministers and merit subjects sought to pass on their economic position and special privileges to their sons.¹⁷

An evaluation of the ability of Confucian ideas to transform society depends on the degree of one's expectation. If nothing less than the replication of well-field egalitarianism in the distribution of land, labor and military service, the recruitment of officials on

the so-called rank-land system), Part 1, *Shigaku zasshi* 50: 5 (1939): 47–82; Part 2, *Shigaku zasshi* 50.6 (1939): 32–78; Fukaya Toshitetsu, “Chōsen ni okeru kinseiteki tochi shoyū no seiritsu katei” (The process of the establishment of modern landownership in Korea), Part 1, *Shigaku zasshi* 55.2 (February 1944): 1–37; Part 2, *Shigaku zasshi* 55.3 (March 1944): 77–98; Hamanaka Noboru 浜中昇, “Kōrai makki no densei kaikaku ni tsuite” (On land reform in the Late Koryŏ), *Chōsenshi kenkyūkai rombunshū* 13 (1976): 29–56; Kang Chinch’ŏl, “Han’guk t’oji chedosa, sang” (History of Korean land systems, Part 1), in *Han’guk munhwasa taegyŏ* 2: 1159–1380; Pak Sihyŏng 朴時亨, *Chosŏn t’oji chedosa* (History of the Korean land system), 2 vols. (Pyongyang: Kwahagwŏn ch’ulp’ansa, 1960, 1961); Sudō Yoshiyuki, “Koraichō yori Chōsen shoki ni itaru densei no kaikaku” (Reform of the land system from the Koryŏ dynasty to the Early Chosŏn period), *Tōagaku* 3 (1940): 115–91.

¹⁶ Sudō Yoshiyuki, “Sōdai no tochi seidoron: seidenron/gendenron o chūshin to shite” (Land system proposals of the Sung period: proposals for the well-field and limited-field systems), *Tōsō shakai keizaiishi kenkyū* (Studies in the social and economic history of the T’ang and Sung), (Tokyo: Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, 1965), 233–320.

¹⁷ Yi Sŏngmu, *Chosŏn ch’ogi yangban yŏn’gu*; Edward W. Wagner, *The Literati Purges: Political Conflict in Early Yi Korea*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 58 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

the basis of virtue, and the *Chou li* ideal of political and social organization are required to admit the influence of Confucian idealist thought on society, then it is difficult to concede that Confucianism had much of an effect on Korean society throughout all its history. But if one is willing to settle for subtler changes in the constitution of state and society, then it is clear that Confucianism exerted significant influence on Korean society in the transition from the Koryŏ to the Chosŏn dynasties in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The *kwajŏn* 科田 land reform of late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn may have provided for the economic support of titled aristocrats and bureaucrats rather than the ordinary peasants, but it was nonetheless sanctioned in Confucian thought by an appeal to the dictum that it was the responsibility of an enlightened ruler to provide sustenance to the class of virtuous ministers so that they would be able to maintain superior status over the mass of subjects or common peasants.¹⁸ The Confucian bureaucracy in real life represented a mixture of merit and heredity, and not simply a rationalistic meritocracy expected to turn over completely every generation. By the middle of the fifteenth century, the expansion in the number of sons of ranked titleholders, officials and merit subjects was simply too great for the state to maintain this artificial support system without doing damage to its financial structure, so bureaucrats and aristocrats were allowed to fend for themselves in obtaining an economic base, and they did so by the private accumulation of land and cultivators.

Thus what was wrought by the transition from Koryŏ to Chosŏn was the modification of the Koryŏ ruling class. The ownership of land and slaves, the renting of land to tenants, and the acquisition of wealth from office salaries and emoluments still provided the economic base of the ruling class, but now the success in the state's civil service examinations became more important for maintaining family status. Achievement in examinations did not, however, lead to the disappearance of the hereditary principle. On the one hand it resulted in the weeding out of some families from positions of wealth and prominence in society, even branches of the dominant clans, while in other cases continued success in the examinations

¹⁸ This point is stressed by Yi Sŏngmu in *Chosŏn ch'ŏgi yangban yŏn'gu*, *passim*.

led to the perpetuation of clans if not families as bureaucratic aristocrats for the whole five hundred years of the dynasty.

As David Johnson pointed out in his study of the T'ang, even though such an elite might not be deemed a pure aristocracy because it was not based exclusively on blood or birth, the opportunity provided by the examinations for renewal of prestige had the effect of prolonging the fortunes of individual families. Johnson did not want to call this elite an aristocracy because the criterion for its existence and continuation was not exclusively blood, kinship, or male primogeniture, but I see no reason for not doing so.¹⁹ In Korea (or China) aristocracy may not have been dissociated from degree-holding or officeholding, but the opportunity to recharge one's family batteries every so often made it difficult to eliminate the aristocracy, at least in Korea. Despite the existence of downward mobility, Wagner's studies have shown that a remarkably small percentage of clans were responsible for a high percentage of examination success, that some of these clans remained prominent to the end of the dynasty, and that despite legal opportunities for upward mobility through the examination success, there were only a few newcomers into the class of examination passers (let alone high official families) throughout the dynasty.²⁰

A situation similar to the T'ang by which aristocratic clans maintained their positions by adapting to the examination system prevailed for a much longer period of time than in China and this occurred in a very different intellectual and institutional context. In the T'ang period Buddhism and Taoism overshadowed Confucianism, and the examination system was only partially responsible for the recruitment of officials. The Chosŏn period in Korea was the age of both the examination system and Confucianism as in the Sung, but this situation did not result in the elimination or leveling of the aristocracy as in the Sung. It is the point of this article that the effect of Confucian thought on Korean society was to create the hybrid form of bureaucratic aristocracy. The con-

¹⁹ David G. Johnson, *The Medieval Chinese Oligarchy*. Patricia Ebrey and most of the Japanese scholars who work on the Northern and Southern Dynasties refer to this elite as an aristocracy. Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Aristocratic Families of Early Imperial China* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

²⁰ Edward W. Wagner, "The Ladder of Success in Yi Dynasty Korea," *Occasional Papers on Korea* 1 (April 1974; original publication date, June 1972): 1-8.

tradictory egalitarian and hierarchic emphases in Confucian thought reached a natural accommodation in an aristocratic bureaucracy, a solution that might not satisfy pure logic but could be tolerated by human beings who are often quite willing to put up with some contradiction.

We have thus far traced the evolution of Korean society to the point where a balance between aristocratic and bureaucratic elements was achieved with the aid and influence of Confucian thought. Before turning to the question of how and why that balance of forces in Korean society was perpetuated to the end of the Chosŏn dynasty, we must turn our attention to China to see whether Confucianism could have played a similar dual and contradictory role first in the creation of an aristocratic society, and then in modifying it with the recreation of bureaucratic institutions. It will be argued that despite differences of time, place, and circumstance, Confucianism did play such a role in China. If the effects of Confucianism on two different societies were similar, this should lend support to the view that to some extent Confucianism could act on society in a way independent of socioeconomic forces alone. Furthermore, in order to contrast the Chinese experience with the Korean, the factors involved in the transition from the aristocratic/bureaucratic balance in China to despotism and the emergence of the gentry will be explored. We will then return to a discussion of the later Chosŏn dynasty to explain the persistence of this balance in contradistinction to the Chinese historical experience.

CONFUCIANISM, ARISTOCRACY AND BUREAUCRACY IN CHINA:
LATE HAN TO SUNG

Even though the responsibility for the creation of centralized bureaucratic despotism in China is usually laid at the feet of the Legalists of the Ch'in state, the fact remains that in China Confucianism was supported by the state during the two Han dynasties and Confucians courteously reciprocated by providing ideological support for imperial rule. Society was not aristocratic in the Han era, and aristocracy did not emerge until the collapse of both the Han empire and the dominant position of Confucian thought in the late second century. Aristocracy arose in the subsequent age of

Buddhism and Taoism when governments were relatively weak and unstable.

The adoption of the examination system based on Confucian learning in the Sui and T'ang began a gradual reduction of aristocratic autonomy by introducing the meritocratic principle into the system of bureaucratic recruitment. The reconstitution of complex bureaucracy throughout a unified China, along with the use of the equal-field system of land distribution and reciprocal tax and military service obligations inspired by the ancient Confucian well-field model of political economy (although limited in scope) also reduced the autonomy of the former aristocratic families. They continued to dominate society but mainly as bureaucrats, as explained earlier.

In the transition to the Sung and after, the increased reliance on the examination system augmented the dependence of the salaried bureaucrat on the state and the vulnerability of the official vis-à-vis the emperor. When the power of the early aristocratic clans was eventually broken, a new elite, the gentry, emerged as the dominant class in Chinese society.²¹ The twin supports of gentry power were private land ownership and degree-holding, a pattern which remained until the end of the Ch'ing dynasty. In the Sung, the most powerful families were also estate owners who relied on either serf or commoner tenant labor. But by the Ming and Ch'ing, semi-feudal serfdom disappeared and was replaced by landlord/tenant relations, hired labor and the small peasant proprietorship.²² After

²¹ Robert M. Hartwell has recently argued that the role of the examination system in eliminating the hereditary aristocracy in Sung times has been greatly exaggerated. By taking uncles and other collateral relatives into account, Hartwell was able to show that certain prominent lineages were much more successful in perpetuating their membership in the elite than previously assumed by Kracke and Ho Ping-ti. He also remarked that the examination system was the chief method used by the local gentry in Sung times to secure their political position. See his "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750-1500," *HJAS* 42.2 (December 1982): 16-20.

Even if Hartwell's interpretation is accepted, it does not weaken my argument because I do not hold that the examination system by itself destroyed hereditary aristocracy in China. It did not do so in Chosŏn Korea, so that the Northern Sung at least (until the late eleventh or early twelfth century as Hartwell pointed out) appears to have maintained an aristocratic/bureaucratic balance like the Chosŏn period in Korea. As I maintain later in this article, it was the socioeconomic changes that took place in China, which were relatively weak in Korea, that better explain the demise of aristocracy or the transition to a gentry elite.

²² Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

the social, political, and economic leveling of the old aristocracy had taken place, the gentry of the later dynasties found themselves more dependent on degree holding and officeholding for their prestige, wealth, and status, and these factors were controlled by the emperors.²³ After Mongol rule, the increase in the arbitrary and despotic behavior of the Ming emperors toward their now humbled officials appeared to transcend the bounds of normality and propriety. Since these trends were accompanied by the Neo-Confucian revival in the Sung and the attainment of a dominant position in intellectual life by Confucian (if not exclusively Neo-Confucian) ideas up to the early twentieth century, it would appear possible to attribute centralization, bureaucratization and despotism, in large part, to Confucian thought and influence.

Some scholars, however, have argued forcefully that despotism was to be explained by other factors. Mote argued that the despotism of the Ming emperors could be explained in terms of individual personality and the institutions established to control potential rivals and rebels.²⁴ De Bary insisted that it was the Confucian critics of Ming despotism such as Huang Tsung-hsi 黃宗羲 who best represented the Confucian tradition.²⁵ Even if we were to regard the despotism of the period from Mongol rule on as antithetical to the Confucian spirit or ideal of government, hence not a product of Confucianism, it still could be argued that Confucianism had certainly contributed to the increased centralization of the Sung by helping to shift power from hereditary aristocrats to the state bureaucracy. Of course, there were other factors beside Confucian thought that contributed to this shift, such as the conscious attempt of Sung emperors to prevent the rise of regional military commanders

1973), p. 69ff *et passim*. Elvin, following Sudō Yoshiyuki, *Chūgoku tochi seidoshi kenkyū* (Studies in the history of the Chinese land system), (Tokyo: Tōyō bunka kenkyūjō, 1954), and others have chosen to emphasize serfdom in the Sung, but Sudō's studies indicate a mixture of tenants and bound-tenants.

²³ Ping-ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368–1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962). Ho's interpretation of the gentry emphasized the dependence on degree-holding and the relatively short term of success of gentry families in the Ming and Ch'ing.

²⁴ F. W. Mote, "The Growth of Chinese Despotism," *OE* 8.1 (August 1961): 1–41.

²⁵ Wm. T. de Bary, "Chinese Despotism and the Confucian Ideal: A Seventeenth Century View," in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 163–203.

and the fragmentation of imperial power that had accompanied the fall of the T'ang, the rise of commerce and industry, education, and urbanization, and shifts in population that created a more diversified society and weakened the power of a landed aristocracy, and the constant threat of invasion from foreign enemies that created a sustained need for concentrated political power.²⁶

Obviously there are difficulties in attempting to support the view that Confucian thought was the main factor either in the creation of despotic imperialism or in the replacement of aristocratic bureaucracy. It could just as easily be argued that Confucianism contributed to the limiting of monarchical power by its emphasis on the moral basis of government and the need for remonstrance against despotic behavior.²⁷ Furthermore, Confucianism could and was also used at times to justify hereditary status, support local control by elders and established families, and modify rational meritocracy by personal consideration of kinship, friendship, patron/client relations, and reciprocity in the dispensation of favors. The reason why Max Weber coined the term patrimonial bureaucracy was undoubtedly because of what appeared to him to be these non-rational features of the Chinese bureaucratic system inspired in large part by Confucian thought.²⁸ If, then, Confucianism contained these patrimonial elements, might we not be justified in assessing the contribution of Confucianism to the formation of aristocracy in Chinese history?

Aristocracy, of course, did not emerge in Chinese society out of

²⁶ Hartwell attributed the replacement of the Sung founding families and the subsequent decline of a hereditary professional elite to economic growth, new techniques in agriculture, improved transportation, population expansion from core to peripheral areas and from north to south, specialization of bureaucratic function, and a shift in the locus of local administration from the prefecture to the district. See "Demographic Transformations," pp. 365-442.

²⁷ Charles O. Hucker, "Confucianism and the Chinese Censorial System," in David S. Nivinson and Arthur F. Wright, eds., *Confucianism in Action*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), pp. 182-208; Charles O. Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966); Edward W. Wagner, *The Literati Purges*; Pow-key Sohn, "Social History of the Early Yi Dynasty, 1392-1592" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1963).

²⁸ Max Weber, *The Religion of China* (New York: The Free Press, 1951), pp. 33-52, 103, 148-49; Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977, paperback edition), pp. 115-16.

some primordial tendency to assign hereditary status according to an earlier inner-Asian tribal tradition, as may have been the case with the bone-rank system of Silla. Hereditary aristocracy and the creation of fairly rigid status categories for commoners, base persons, and slaves was more a product of late Han and early third century Chinese society than it was an alien feature of nomadic and tribal conquerors. In fact, the aristocratic and hereditary principles of social organization reached their heights in the Chinese Southern Dynasties rather than in the non-Chinese regimes that dominated north China after A.D. 304.²⁹ There is some doubt whether the centralizing trends that were brought to fruition in the T'ang could have been achieved by the Chinese themselves, without the hybrid context or dual aspects of alien Chinese society in the northern dynasties. The Northern Wei rulers, for example, were establishing the equal-field system and the three chiefs system of centralized local control at the same time they were trying to reestablish rules of status and aristocracy devised by the Chinese under the nine-rank (*ch'iu-p'in* 九品) system of A.D. 220 and after.³⁰

According to a number of scholars, Confucian thought and mores had much to do with the origin of aristocratic society. Most agree that the great families of the Later Han (the *hao-tsu* 豪族) played a major role in the constitution of the Northern and Southern Dynasties aristocracy, but the *hao-tsu* were not simply large landowners or slaveowners. Some have emphasized that they constituted family units based on Confucian ethical concepts of filial piety, respect, and cooperation rather than simply microcosms of the authoritarian state.³¹ Kawakatsu Yoshio has stressed the role of the Confucian moralist opponents of eunuch and consort domination of the Later Han court in the mid-second century A.D. in the formation of the third century aristocrats. That is, after the purge of the

²⁹ Ochi Shigeaki 越智重明, "Nanchō no kokka to shakai" (State and society in the Southern Dynasties), *Iwanami kōza Sekai rekishi*, 5, *kodai* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1970), 5: 157-97.

³⁰ Tanigawa Michio 谷川道雄, "Takubatsu kokka no tenkai to kizokusei no saihei" (The development of the T'o-pa state and the reformation of the aristocratic system), *ibid.*, pp. 199-243.

³¹ Utsunomiya Kiyoyoshi 宇都宮清吉, *Chūgoku chūseiishi kenkyū* (Studies in the history of medieval China), (Tokyo: Tōkai daigaku shuppankai, 1970), cited in Tanigawa Michio, *Chūgoku chūsei shakai to kyōdōtai* (Society and community in medieval China), (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1976), pp. 72ff.

Clear Stream Faction (*Ch'ing-liu*) 清流 from the court, many returned home to the countryside and became leaders of local communities, some of which were organized for defensive purposes against predatory warlords of the period.³² Even though the recommendation system of the Han, used for recruiting men into the bureaucracy, was implemented by local officials, it was still based on the theory of face-to-face evaluation of local worthies by village elders according to Confucian criteria of ethical reputation and behavior. The spirit of the recommendation system was carried over to the nine-rank system of the Wei dynasty in the early third century. Local rank (*hsiang-p'in* 鄉品) was assigned to local families by special investigatory officials (*chung-cheng* 中正) from the capital who also assessed individuals for rank on the basis of Confucian moral criteria and the consultation of the opinion of local elders.³³ These ethical criteria of status were converted before long into inherited marks of family status which stamped Chinese society at least through the end of the T'ang as aristocratic, despite advances made at the center in imperial power and bureaucratic organization.³⁴

There are others who argue that aristocrats were nothing more than parasitic bureaucrats, that aristocrats were created by free riders who only too willingly abandoned their loyalties to the defunct Han dynasty to benefit from service in the governments of a rapid succession of usurpers, military commanders, or alien invaders, from Ts'ao Ts'ao 曹操 on.³⁵ I would argue against this proposition because an elite of parasitic bureaucrats need not result in an hereditary aristocracy at all, and also because the institutional origin of aristocracy in the nine-rank system was explicitly based on a very Confucian idea—the evaluation of talent and capability by the local or village elders on the basis of Confucian standards of behavior. Even though the conversion of a Confucian recommendation system

³² Kawakatsu Yoshio 川勝義雄, "Kizokusei shakai no seiritsu" (The establishment of aristocratic society), *Iwanami kōza Sekai rekishi*, 5, *kodai* 5: 85–121.

³³ Miyazaki Ichisada 宮崎市定, *Kyūhin kanjinhō kenkyū* (A study of the nine-rank system of officials), (Kyōto: Tōyōshi kenkyūkai, 1958).

³⁴ See also Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Aristocratic Families of Early Imperial China*; David G. Johnson, *The Medieval Chinese Oligarchy*, and Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*.

³⁵ Yano Chikara 矢野主税, *Mombatsu shakai seiritsushi* (A history of the establishment of aristocratic society), (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1976).

to one of hereditary aristocracy can be regarded as a perversion of Confucian ideals, much as despotism could be regarded as a perversion of the Confucian ethic of loyalty, it still appears to me that the aristocratic perversion was more compatible with real life Confucianism than the despotic perversion.

Confucian political philosophy after all condoned separation and distinction between fathers and sons, princes and subjects, and rulers and ruled. Even the ideal well-field land and tax system of the *Mencius*, *Chou li* and other early texts presupposed a kind of bureaucratic feudalism in which the feudal king maintained his capital administration with a full staff of functionally differentiated officials, while the feudal lords had their own domains in the outer regions of the empire. The ideal state of the ancient tradition was not really the totally leveled or egalitarian society; it was one in which wealth was to be a reflection of moral worth. This ideal was not aristocratic because the hierarchies of wealth and status in society were not supposed to be inherited automatically, and for that reason some Confucians tended to regard hereditary aristocracy as a distortion of the true Confucian message. Nevertheless Confucians helped produce aristocracy in the Northern and Southern Dynasties period in China despite the contradiction with pure ethical theory, and in terms of ideal structure aristocracy was not that far from the idealized Chou model.

Chinese Confucianism clearly contributed to the formation of aristocracy in the southern Chinese dynasties during the Six Dynasties period. The southern regimes were not capable of creating either the equal-field system or the fully centralized and bureaucratic state. In the north, however, Confucian thought contributed more to centralized bureaucratic developments. There the Confucian-educated local elite preserved their ideas in the context of village society, while the state was run by non-Chinese invaders, and they sought to use impersonal means of achievement and recruitment to challenge the monopoly over government by aliens.³⁶ They also reached back to the fundamental texts of Confucianism such as the *Mencius* and the *Chou li* to promote the increase of state power and the liberation of the peasants from private control by

³⁶ Kawakatsu Yoshio, "Kizokusei shakai no seiritsu."

schemes of land limitation or state ownership and distribution.³⁷ These trends resulted in the sinification of the Northern Dynasties, the adoption of the equal-field system, the establishment of the examination system, the weakening of the hereditary aristocracy, and the growth of imperial power by the Sui and T'ang dynasties. While it is true that it took alien rule to recreate the well-field ideal in the Northern Wei's equal-field system, Confucian thought provided inspiration for recentralization. The point is not to attribute all things to Confucian influence on society, but to illustrate that Confucianism contained contradictory elements—aristocratic and bureaucratic, hierarchical and egalitarian—that might result in a society in which a balance was achieved between opposites. This balance occurred in the T'ang and also in Chosŏn Korea when Confucian thought achieved unchallenged domination.

CONFUCIANISM IN THE AGE OF ARISTOCRATIC BUREAUCRACY IN KOREA:
FIFTEENTH THROUGH SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

The aristocratic tradition, or more accurately the merging of aristocratic and bureaucratic traditions, in the T'ang was destroyed after the Sung, but it was created belatedly in Korea in the fifteenth century and remained in operation until the twentieth century. This does not mean that there were no changes in the political and social system of Chosŏn Korea or that there were no tensions between social reality and Confucian idealism. Remember that the balance between ascriptive and inherited status on the one hand and achievement and bureaucratic merit on the other was a compromise resulting from contradictory tendencies inherent in Confucian thought, and not the achievement of an ideal Confucian social order of perfect harmony. Whereas the Chinese in the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties had to fight against absolute, arbitrary and despotic authority in the form of the imperial institution, as well as struggle against the routinization of institutionalized procedures such as the eight-legged essay, idealistic Korean Confucians took issue with the adverse effects of hereditary status in politics and society. Korean Confucians also had to struggle against arbitrary despotism, but it

³⁷ Hori Toshikazu, *Kindensei no kenkyū*; Sogabe Shizuo, *Chūgoku ritsuryōshi no kenkyū*, pp. 119–232. See note 6.

appears that they won a victory with the deposing of Yōnsan'gun in 1506.³⁸ Otherwise, the main political problems were the so-called merit subjects (*kongsin* 功臣) of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century (bureaucratic politicians rewarded for their political loyalty), the hereditary factions of the late sixteenth through early nineteenth century, and the power of the consort aristocratic families of the nineteenth century. The main social problems were the entrenched economic power and tax-exempt privileges of the yangban 兩班 aristocrats, and discrimination against slaves, commoner peasants, clerks and specialist officials, and even the illegitimate sons of the aristocrats.

The effects of Confucian-inspired institutional reforms at the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty were not one-dimensional. The examination system had introduced an element of achievement and merit into the recruitment process but time proved that family status, marriage relations, inherited status and wealth tipped the scales in favor of established yangban clans. The sense of clan identity and family continuity was reinforced by the Confucian emphasis on patrilinearity and the patriarchal family so by the sixteenth century the leading symbol of the age became the *chokpo* 族譜, the clan genealogy that constituted tangible proof of an individual's membership in a class of superior men. A limited number of yangban clans, identified as in the Northern and Southern Dynasties period in China by the place name of the progenitor's residence (what Johnson dubbed choronyms), produced the majority of examination passers in the dynasty right through to the end of the nineteenth century.³⁹ Whether in or out of office, these families increased their family fortunes by agriculture, landownership or landlordism.

Furthermore, no sooner had the Confucianized, bureaucratic state been established in the late fourteenth century than it adopted

³⁸ Edward W. Wagner, *The Literati Purges*.

³⁹ Edward W. Wagner, "The Korean Chokpo as a Historical Source," in Spencer J. Palmer, ed., *Studies in Asian Genealogy*, (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1972), pp. 141–42; Edward W. Wagner, "The Ladder of Success in Yi Dynasty Korea"; David G. Johnson, *The Medieval Oligarchy*, p. 29 and n. 46, p. 165. Fujiya Kawashima's study of the Munhwa Yu clan stresses the dual aristocratic and Confucian nature of the clan. When the degree of their success in the examinations fell off in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, other lineages rose to prominence. See "Lineage Elite and Bureaucracy in Early Yi to Mid-Yi Dynasty Korea," *Occasional Papers on Korea* 5 (March 1977): 8–19. See also note 48.

a set of more restrictive rules than had been used in Koryŏ to limit opportunities for office to the lower classes. Not only were slaves, artisans, merchants, shamans and entertainers prohibited from access to examinations and office, but chances for upward mobility for local *hyangni* families were closed off and their status and support was reduced. Technical specialists in the bureaucracy were also converted into hereditary class of minor officials (*chung'in* 中人), and discriminatory prohibitions were instituted against illegitimate sons of yangban.⁴⁰ Slavery was left intact; there was no attempt at all in early Chosŏn to eliminate the most debasing form of status discrimination. In Korea's truly Confucian age Confucianism had become the ideological tool of the aristocratic bureaucrat, the rational justification of a class of yangban officials and landlords, and not the means for leveling society and destroying discriminatory status barriers. Men like Yang Sŏngji 梁誠之 in the mid-fifteenth century defended social discrimination on moral grounds, and there were many others like him throughout the dynasty.⁴¹

If such men misconstrued the true message of Confucian social thought, why were Confucian ideas so susceptible to this kind of distortion? If the bureaucratization of monarchical power, and the creation of a more egalitarian distribution of wealth are taken as the expected results of Confucianization, then the accomplishments of Confucianism in the transition to the Chosŏn dynasty were discouraging. What was produced in that age—the compromise between ascription and merit, discrimination and opportunity, rigidity and mobility—was in fact a product of the contradictory emphases found within Confucian thought.

Once all educated men had become Confucians sometime by the middle or end of the fifteenth century, Confucianism had divided into its practical and idealistic components. Practical Confucianism was the property of all those who sought service in the state bureaucracy or increased their family fortunes by agriculture, landownership or landlordism. These bureaucratic aristocrats succeeded in

⁴⁰ Yi Sŏngmu, *Chosŏn ch'ogi yangban yŏn'gu*.

⁴¹ Han Yŏngu, "Nulchae Yang Sŏngji ūi sahoe chŏngchi'i sasang" (The Social and Political Thought of Yang Sŏngji), *Yŏksa kyoyuk* 17 (May 1975); 67–134. See Yang's statements about the necessity of supporting a class of hereditary-salaried men and the propriety of a hierarchical society in *Nulchaejip* (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1973), pp. 205–07.

maintaining themselves, at least as a class if not always in individual cases, at the expense of the power and authority of the kings and the state, so that by the end of the nineteenth century when Korea faced extinction, the state had few resources with which to defend the nation against the foreign threat. And when the end came in 1910, many of the hereditary elite protected themselves against destruction by accepting titles from the Japanese or maintaining their landed possessions under the new regime.

The other component of Confucianism was the idealistic or contemplative and philosophic branch of Confucian thought and practice. As early as the fifteenth century, those Confucian scholars and intellectuals disappointed by the real-life compromise between Confucian ideals and political reality rusticated themselves and turned to the study of Neo-Confucian metaphysics and sought to perpetuate their high ideals through education and instruction. As in the Sung, the idealists deplored the routinization of the examination system, the domination of the government by political hacks, and the destruction of royal virtue by the usurpation of King Sejo 世祖 or the despotism of Yönsan'gun 燕山君. These rusticated idealists were as much opposed to the excesses of hereditary aristocracy as to despotic royal authority. They obtained a brief chance to implement their theories under the leadership of Cho Kwangjo 趙光祖 after Yönsan'gun had been deposed but when Cho and his supporters were purged in 1519, it appeared to mark a setback for the forces of idealistic Confucianism, those who wanted to create a state of virtue and an aristocracy of sages. It did not mean the defeat of Neo-Confucianism in the area of general education, philosophy, or even politics, and some historians think that the rusticated idealists of the late fifteenth century (the so-called *sarimp'a* 士林派 or forest of scholars) emerged victorious in the political realm in the mid-sixteenth century because the greatest of the age's Neo-Confucian scholars, Yi Hwang 李滉 (pen name, T'oegye 退溪) and Yi I 李珥 (pen name Yulgok 栗谷) took their places as regular officials at court.⁴²

⁴² Edward W. Wagner, "The Recommendation Examination of 1519: Its place in Early Yi Dynasty History," *Chösen gakuho* 15 (1969): 1-80; Yi Sugön 李健樹, *Yöngnam sarimp'a üi hyöngsöng* (Formation of the Sarim faction of Kyöngsang province), (Taegu: Yöngnam taehakkyo minjok munhwa yön'guso, 1979).

The victory of Neo-Confucianism at court was marred by the concurrent appearance of pernicious bureaucratic factionalism in the late sixteenth century. Factionalism was not new to Korea or China, and there were several varieties of it. The Confucian purists of the end of the Later Han, the Tung-lin 東林 Party of the late Ming, and the opponents of He-shen 和珅 in the Ch'ing fought against the illicit power of the eunuchs, consort relatives, or imperial favorites as did their counterparts among the Yi Sōnggye group in the late fourteenth century and the Cho Kwangjo group in the early sixteenth century in Korea.⁴³ Korean factionalism after 1575, however, was closer to the Sung variety, with two differences of degree. The Sung factions were divided as much by different points of view on the best methods of carrying out institutional reform as by personal conflicts, and the policies of Wang An-shih often became the focus of political division.⁴⁴ However, in the period after 1575 in Korea, factions became hereditary organizations with their own separate labels. Inheritance of factional affiliation was not absolute since schism occurred frequently, but in many cases the opprobrium of the seventeenth century continued to haunt the descendants of these men to the nineteenth century. Factional animosity became

⁴³ On Later Han factionalism see, Kawakatsu Yoshio, "Kizokusei shakai no seiritsu"; on the Ming, see Charles O. Hucker, "The Tung-lin movement of the Late Ming Period," in Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, pp. 132–63; David S. Nivison, "Ho-shen and His Accusers," in Nivison and Wright, eds., *Confucianism in Action*, pp. 209–43; Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Wash. D. C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943), pp. 288–90.

⁴⁴ Saeki Tomi 佐伯富 listed the causes of factionalism as the patron/client relations between examination officials and those who passed the examinations under them, higher official guarantors of younger, aspiring officials, the weakening of imperial authority, and the increased importance of factions in the scramble for office and power given the large excess of candidates over posts, and the debate over reform between Wang An-shih and his opponents. Examiner/examinee and patron/client relations were more a feature of the Koryō than the Chosōn dynasty in Korea, and the guarantor system was not a major feature of the Chosōn appointment policies. Saeki Tomi, "Sōchō shūken kanryōsei no seiritsu" (The Establishment of the Centralized Bureaucratic System of the Sung), *Iwanami kōza, Sekai rekishi*, 9, *Chūsei* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1970), 3: 184–188. See also James T. C. Liu, *Reform in Sung China: Wang An-shih (1021–1086) and His New Policies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); E. A. Kracke, Jr., *Civil Service in Early Sung China, 960–1067* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953); Saeki Tomi, *Ō An-seki* (Tokyo: Fuzanbō, 1941); Higashi Ichio 東一夫, *Ō An-seki shinpō no kenkyū* (A Study of the new laws of Wang An-shih) (Tokyo: Kazama shobo, 1970); John Thomas Meskill, *Wang An-shih, Practical Reformer* (Boston: Heath, 1963).

particularly intense in the century after 1660 as several major purges were carried out.⁴⁵

Confucianism was both directly and indirectly involved in the development of political factionalism. The controversy over mourning rites that spawned the conflict between the Westerner Faction (*Sōin* 西人) of Song Siyōl 宋時烈 and his Southerner (*Namin* 南人) opponents in the mid-seventeenth century was a product of an orthodox environment of thought and practice in which the rules of ritual performance were no longer means to the end of social harmony and decorum, but a reflection of right understanding of a fixed code of belief.⁴⁶ The private academies became centers of factional organization and viewpoint identified as much by their position on metaphysical questions as by their hereditary affiliations with scholars and officials. Factionalism in scholarly circles was in part a product of Korean Confucian metaphysics because the giants of the sixteenth century Neo-Confucian philosophy had spent much of their time attempting to assess the relative importance of principle (*i* 理) and material force (*ki* 氣) in the composition of the universe and all its parts. The fundamental, interpenetrating, and holistic aspects of these two elements were recognized in the sixteenth century, but the debate over which took priority led eventually to two separate schools, one that stressed principle and the other material force.⁴⁷ This tendency had also existed in China, but it was never so strong nor so intimately tied to politics as in Korea. This dominant trend in intellectual life in Korea was hardly a progressive force, for it did not lead to any new formulation of fundamental Confucian views, let alone a transcending of or departure from Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, despite the appearance

⁴⁵ Sōng Nakhun 成樂熏, "Han'guk tangjaengsa" (History of factionalism in Korea), in *Han'guk munhwasa taegyē* 2: 221-390; Kang Chujin 姜周鎭, *Yijo tangjaengsa yōn'gu* (A study of factionalism in the Yi dynasty), (Seoul: Sōul taehakkyo, ch'ulp'anbu, 1971).

⁴⁶ JaHyun Kim Haboush, "A Heritage of Kings: One Man's Monarchy in the Confucian World" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1978). This dissertation has an excellent discussion of the mourning rites controversy and subsequent developments in eighteenth century factionalism.

⁴⁷ The metaphysical debates of Korean Confucianism are discussed in Pae Chongho 裴宗鎭, *Han'guk yuhaksa* (A history of Korean confucianism), (Seoul: Yōnse taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1974). See also Seoh Munsang, "The Ultimate Concern of Yi Korean Confucians: An Analysis of the *i-ki* Debates," *Occasional Papers on Korea* 5 (March 1977): 20-66.

of a few critics. It probably did not cause bureaucratic factionalism, but it reinforced it and helped perpetuate it into the nineteenth century. The main effect of hereditary factionalism on the aristocratic elite was to introduce another line of discrimination into the aristocracy as a whole, relegating descendants of stigmatized factions either to minor posts in the bureaucracy or to lives of rusticated hardship.

The dominance of Chu Hsi's Confucian thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries contributed to the rather rigid distinctions of social and political life of that time. Or if the forced association of ideas with personalities, labels, families, and academies was rather the offshoot of a society with atavistic tendencies toward ascription and discrimination, then it is obvious that Confucianism was unable, despite its monopoly over intellectual life, to overcome the endemic preference for kinship, status, and personal patron/client relations in Korea. The inheritance of political affiliations and philosophical positions was as contradictory to idealistic Confucianism as pure despotism or aristocracy, and yet it persisted in the real world of Korean Confucian society.

SOCIOECONOMIC CHANGE AND THE SOCIETY OF THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

In the last twenty years there has been an important trend among some Korean historians who have argued that significant changes were occurring in economy and society after the Hideyoshi and Manchu invasions, changes that signified a major transition to capitalistic economic relations. The advocates of this thesis hold that the expansion of domestic commerce broke the bonds of the licensed monopolies and resulted in more unlicensed merchants in rice and other commodities. Surplus production created a demand for a better medium of exchange than bags of grain or bolts of cloth, and the government was forced to mint coin and put it into circulation. Peasants became managerial in their outlook (i.e., profit-maximizing) and sought to increase their production and profits with the result that the rigid, hereditary social stratification of the past broke down and produced more upward (and downward) mobility in terms of both wealth and status. And hired wage

labor began to replace feudal tenancy arrangements. In other words, as some historians have been arguing recently for China from the late Ming on, the sprouts of capitalism emerged spontaneously within Korean society even prior to the impact of the world market or Western imperialism in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸

These trends have been exaggerated. While it is true that some of the economic changes outlined above did occur, the degree of change was much less than some claim because even by the end of the nineteenth century the urban and commercial population was minuscule compared to the rural population engaged in agriculture, industrial production was not particularly advanced either in terms of technology or quantity of production, transportation remained woefully backward, and foreign trade was severely limited.⁴⁹

By the nineteenth century the degree of urbanization, non-agricultural production, and domestic and foreign trade was far below levels reached by China in the Sung dynasty. What had taken place was a minor increase in production for the market, the relaxation of the licensed monopoly system, some increase in the use of copper money and possibly some increase in agricultural production beyond population growth. Nevertheless, despite the quantitative limitations, qualitative changes were taking place. The important questions from our perspective are whether these changes had any effect on the structure of society, particularly on the balance between aristocratic and bureaucratic elements, and what role Confucian thought had to play in the new developments.

I take it as undeniable that the expansion of production and the role of the market in the economy along with an increase in the

⁴⁸ The most representative works in this school of thought are Yu Wōndong 劉元東, *Han'guk kūndae kyōngjesa yōn'gu* (Study of the recent economic history of Korea), (Seoul: Ilchisa, 1979); Kim Yongsōp 金容燮, *Chosōn hugi nongōpsa yōn'gu* (Studies in the Agricultural history of Late Chosōn), 2 vols., (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1970, 1971); Kang Man'gil 姜萬吉, *Chosōn hugi sangop chabon ū paltal* (The development of commercial capital in Late Chosōn), (Seoul: Koryō taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1973); Wōn Yuhan 元裕漢, *Chosōn hugi hwap'yesa yōn'gu* (A study of currency in the Late Chosōn period), (Seoul: Han'guk yōn'guwōn, 1975); Kuksa p'yōnch'an wiwōnhoe, ed., *Han'guksa*, vol. 13 (Seoul: Kuksa p'yōnch'an wiwōnhoe, 1978), section 3, "Sahoe kujo ūi pyōnhwa" (Changes in social structure), pp. 279-594.

⁴⁹ Edward S. Mason, Mahn Je Kim et al., *The Economic and Social Modernization of the Republic of Korea*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 92 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1980), pp. 58-86.

non-agricultural sector will result in the growth of cities, merchant, industrial and service classes, and the gradual weakening of the agrarian landed base of hereditary aristocracy. No matter how strong the power of traditional Confucian biases against private profit and the merchant class, Confucianism would have been swept away or more likely modified to accommodate economic growth if that economic development had been of sufficient strength. Economic growth did in fact begin to weaken the old status and class structure and did also cause certain Confucian scholars to give thought to the benefits of commercial activity. Because the government restricted foreign trade through its defensive seclusion policy, and because the class of bureaucrats and aristocrats were so well served by agriculture and landlordism, the majority of the elite were not disposed to encourage the economic and social liberalization of Korean society. The social results of limited economic change were thus a weakening of status and class barriers among the lower orders of society—the slaves, tenants and commoner peasant proprietors—and even some blurring of the status lines between hereditary yangban and commoners as some of the old yangban families fell below the poverty line and some commoners became wealthy peasants or landlords. However, there is no evidence of any major influx of new blood from the lower orders into the ruling class. Even after the abolition of the examination system in 1894, the members of the new style bureaucracy were still drawn from the old elite families.⁵⁰

The economic changes of the last two hundred years of the Chosŏn dynasty were not of sufficient magnitude to break down the balance between aristocratic pedigree and recruitment by civil service examination. On the contrary, one could argue that by the nineteenth century, the opportunity for office had been reduced because of the discriminatory effects of hereditary factionalism and because of the domination of high ministerial positions by the relatives of consort clans like the Andong Kim 安東金, P'ungyang Cho 豐壤趙, and Yŏhŭng Min 驪興閔.

⁵⁰ Kim Yŏngmo 金泳謨, *Hanmal chibaech'ŭng yŏn'gu* (A study of the Late Chosŏn ruling class), (Seoul: Han'guk munwa yŏn'guso, 1972); Kenneth Quinones, "The Prerequisites for Power in Late Yi Korea: 1864–1894" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1975).

There was, however, a response in Confucian thought to the changes in the society wrought by invasion and commerce. Even prior to the Hideyoshi invasions (1592–1598) and Manchu invasions (1627, 1636), landlord/tenant relations and bureaucratic corruption had reduced the peasantry to poverty and even servile status. Tax exemptions for the yangban, both licit and illicit, had caused shortages in revenue for the state and shifted burdens inequitably onto the commoner peasant. Exemptions from military service for aristocrats had weakened the national defense force. After the invasions, the government had to resettle peasants on the land, rebuild agricultural production, increase the tax revenues of the central government, and reconstitute the national army. The crisis stimulated renewed interest in the practical affairs of statecraft, just as landlordism and a foreign threat had resulted in the reform movements of Wang An-shih in eleventh century China and of Yi Sŏnggye in late fourteenth century Korea. As on those occasions, some Confucians began to respond to the challenge by shifting their attention to practical problems of statecraft and social and economic affairs, apparently unaware that a similar movement was occurring in China at the same time. This movement in intellectual life has been dubbed “the school of practical learning” (*sirhak* 實學), and some scholars have recently been giving it credit not only for achieving a mid-dynasty restoration but also for beginning a new trend in Korean thought toward modern scientific rationalism and empiricism and national self-consciousness.⁵¹

⁵¹ There is a large literature on Practical Learning that cannot be cited here. See the bibliography in *Yi Urho paksu chŏngnyŏn kinyŏm, Sirhak nonch'ong* (Essays on practical learning in honor of the retirement of Dr. Yi Urho), (Kwangju: Chŏnnam taehakkyo, Honam munhwa yŏn'guso, 1965), pp. 565–75. The key article interpreting the movement in terms of modernity and nationalism is Ch'ŏn Kwan'u, “Han'guk sirhak sasangsa” (The history of practical learning thought in Korea), in vol. 6 of *Han'guk munhwasa taegye* (Seoul: Koryŏ taehakkyo minjok munhwa yŏn'guso, 1970); the most important article discussing the definition of the term *sirhak* is Han Woo-keun 韓祐勳, “Yijo sirhak ūi kaenyŏm e tachayŏ” (On the concept of *sirhak* in the Yi dynasty), in *Yijo hugi ūi sahoe wa sasang* (Society and thought in the Late Yi dynasty), (Seoul: Uryu munhwasa, 1961), pp. 353–93. Other general works of interest include Yoksa hakhoe, ed., *Sirhak yon'gu immun* (An introduction to the study of practical learning), (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1973); Kim Hansik 金漢植, *Sirhak ūi chŏngch'i sasang* (The political thought of practical learning), (Seoul: Ilchisa, 1979); Asea munje yŏn'guso, Koryŏ University, ed., *Sirhak sasang ūi t'amgu* (In search of *sirhak* thought), (Seoul: Hyŏnamsa, 1974); *Han'guk sasang taegye* (Outline of Korean Thought), vols. 2 and 3, (Seoul: Sŏnggyun'gwan taehakko, Taedong

These *sirhak* writers were responding to the crisis caused by wartime destruction, national financial shortage, peasant poverty, and the dislocations of a growing market. In so doing they took note of the obstacles to national strength and popular welfare posed by landlordism, slavery, and hereditary aristocracy. Kim Yuk 金堉 in the early seventeenth century sought to introduce metallic currency from China and he masterminded the conversion of the local product tribute levies from payments in kind to a system of government purchase from the market (the *taedongbōp* 大同法).⁵² Members of the Namin, the faction that spawned some of the greatest statecraft thinkers in the late Chosŏn dynasty, attempted a reform program during their brief stint at court between 1689 and 1694.⁵³ In the eighteenth century, scholars like Yi Ik 李穡, Yu Suwŏn 柳壽垣, and Chŏng Yagyong 丁若鏞 (pen name, Tasan (茶山)) called attention to the idle, unproductive, and privileged yangban landlords and the injustice and inequality of tenancy, slavery, and tyrannical bureaucratism.⁵⁴ Their writings had some effect on the real world as modifications were made in the rules for the inheritance of slave status by 1731 and some reforms were instituted in the military system in 1750.⁵⁵ Some Confucians like Pak Chiwŏn 朴趾源 and Pak Chega 朴齊家, members of the so-called Northern School of Learning (*Pukhak* 北學), advocated an increase in trade and commerce as a means of breaking out of economic backwardness, a

munhwa yŏn'guwŏn, 1976, 1979); Kim Yongsŏp, *Han'guk kŭndae nongŏpsa yon'gu* (Studies in the recent agricultural history of Korea), (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1975).

⁵² For a study in English of Kim Yuk, see Ching Young Choe, "Kim Yuk (1580–1658) and the Taedongbōp Reform," *JAS* 23 (November 1963): 21–35.

⁵³ Han Woo-keun (Han U'gŭn), "Paekho Yun Hyu yŏn'gu" (A study of Yun Hyu), Part 1, *Yŏksa hakpo* 15 (September 1961): 1–29; Part 2 in *ibid.*, 16 (December 1961): 63–108; Part 3, *ibid.*, 19 (December 1962): 91–120; Sŏng Kŭngsŏp 宋兢燮, "Paekho Yun Hyu chŏn: kŭ hangmunjŏk ipchang ūl chungsim hayŏ" (Yun Hyu: his scholarly position), *Yi Urho paksu chŏngnyŏn kŭnyŏm Sirhak nonch'ong* (1965), pp. 345–54.

⁵⁴ For a recent study in a Western language, see Paolo Santangelo, *La Vita e L'opera di Yu Suwon: Pensatore Coreano Del XVIII Secolo* (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1981); Han Yŏng'u, "Yu Suwŏn ūi sinbun kaehyŏk sasang" (Yu Suwŏn's ideas on social status reform), *Han'guksa yŏn'gu* 8 (Sept. 1972): 25–62.

⁵⁵ Ch'a Munsŏp, 車文燮 "Imnan ihu ūi yangyŏk kwa kyunyŏkpŏp ui sŏngnip" (Commoner service after Hideyoshi's invasions and the establishment of the equal service system), Part 1, *Sahak yŏn'gu* 10 (April 1961): 115–31; Part 2, in *ibid.*, 2 (July 1961): 83–146; Hiraki Makoto 平木實, *Chosŏn hugi nobi chedo yŏn'gu* (A study of slavery in the Late Chosŏn period), (Seoul: Chisik san'ŏpsa, 1982).

development that marked a freeing of at least some minds from the rigid parameters of archaic Confucian Physiocracy.⁵⁶

The anti-aristocratic criticisms of the Sirhak scholars represented the idealistic strain of Confucian statecraft thought. These reformers were not simply attacking the aristocracy and social discrimination because they stood in the way of economic progress or the development of commercial capitalism; they also obstructed the construction of an ideal society based on the rule of the truly virtuous. These Sirhak writers were the Korean counterparts of the late Ming and early Ch'ing opponents of imperial despotism in that neither could stand the compromise achieved between Confucianism and the predominant social and political forces in their respective countries. But the Sirhak thinkers were an intellectual minority that were unable to overcome the prevalent views of the educated majority who were not only not disturbed by hereditary status but even regarded it as a proper manifestation of Confucian principle in social life.

Unfortunately, these promising developments in the eighteenth century were blocked off by reaction. When Christianity was proscribed in 1801 (the same year that all official slaves were manumitted), the death knell was also rung on Confucian reformism because of the connections between Christianity and Western learning with members of the reform movement. The reaction against Christianity and Western learning in the early nineteenth century was accomplished by a shift away from active reform to a defensive conservatism. Solutions to the problems of bureaucratic corruption, landlordism, peasant poverty, and national financial and military weakness were ignored as Koreans hunkered down in trepidation behind the barriers of Chinese protection and a closed-border policy, hoping that the attention of the predatory Westerners would pass them by. It was then that the patrimonial proclivities of the aristocratic/bureaucratic structure came to the fore as court politics were dominated by specific yangban clans tied by marriage to the royal house. Only when the whole system was in immediate danger of collapse because of the imminent threat of foreign invasion and peasant rebellion in the early 1860s was the government spurred

⁵⁶ For a recent study in a Western language, see Dieter Eikemeier, *Elemente im politischen Denken des Yon'am Pak Chiwoon (1737-1805)* (Leiden: Brill 1970).

to undertake a reform program under the leadership of the Taewongun.

The reform program of the 1860s brought to the surface once again arguments for bureaucratic rationality and state planning at the expense of the hereditary aristocracy. But reform and the foreign threat also elicited a conservative response in defense not only of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, but also of the socioeconomic status quo. Conservatives like Yi Hangno 李恒老 and Ch'oe Ikhyŏn 崔益鉉 were defending a way of life based on a combination of inherited status and meritocratic recruitment that produced a ruling class dominated by families of eminent and longstanding pedigree.⁵⁷ Confucian moral principles and the emphasis on education in the Chosŏn period had acted as a leaven on older aristocratic traditions, but it had not leveled society. Whatever weakening of the status structure of society that had occurred had been wrought by the forces of economic growth, but these were too meager to have a major effect on the ruling class, and the Chinese defensive umbrella protected the system until 1894. For that matter, while some Confucians became protonationalists and fought against colonialism, the aristocratic/bureaucratic landlords were probably the most successful of the various social classes in making the transition to the period of colonial rule in the early twentieth century.

The longevity of this kind of ruling class—an aristocracy that had to be renewed by maintenance of Confucian learning and continued success in the examinations and officeholding—was in part a product of the importance attached to blood and kinship throughout all of Korea's recorded history. The effect of Confucian ideas on the aristocracy of blood was to weaken it by introducing additional criteria of educational merit, but not to destroy it altogether. It produced the aristocratic/bureaucratic hybrid that remained dominant to the twentieth century not only because of the ancient emphasis on kinship in Korean society, but also because of the inherent tendencies in Confucian thought that balanced notions of virtue, merit, and equality with respect for status and social

⁵⁷ James B. Palais, *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 82 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

distinction. In fact, once Confucianism was established as the dominant system of belief and philosophy, it was used to justify inherited status and the narrowing of the ruling elite by hereditary factionalism. The balance between hereditary aristocracy and centralized bureaucracy had been broken down in China after the T'ang in favor of imperial despotism, but in Korea the same balance achieved in the early Chosŏn period was threatened by a resurgence of hereditary ascription and the reemergence of aristocratic society. It was checked by the beginnings of commercial activity, the disruptive effect of foreign invasion, the threat from the West and pressure for centralization of authority to bolster national defenses, and the egalitarian tendencies in Confucian thought itself which emerged in the writings of the practical reformers. These conflicting tendencies neutralized one another and prevented a major shift either toward royal despotism or pure aristocracy. In Korea from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, the apotheosis of the bureaucratic Confucian state was achieved and preserved in its natural agrarian setting, and the essence of that society, or at least its ruling class, was a balance between rational bureaucratism and hereditary aristocracy, a reflection of contrary elements in Confucian ethical and social thought.