The King’s Reason: Yi Sŏng-gye and the Centralization of Power in early Chosŏn

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Abstract

This paper examines the founder of Chosŏn, Yi Sŏng-gye. Contrary to the usual depiction of him as a Confucian revolutionary, the author’s research has uncovered a leader that, though deeply committed to Buddhism on a personal level, possessed a realistic outlook that lead to the establishment of Neo-Confucianism as the official ideology of his new dynasty. This paper discusses the political expediency of Neo-Confucianism for centralizing power under Yi Sŏng-gye’s new government. It concludes that the founder’s support of Neo-Confucian stemmed from practical rather than ideological considerations, thus shedding new light on the conventional conception of Yi Sŏng-gye.

I. Introduction

Yi Sŏng-gye (Chinese: Lĭ Chéngguì 李成桂) was born on 5 November 1335 and died 27 June 1408. Yet he had an indelible impact on Korean society which persists to this day, for it was he who declared Neo-Confucianism (Korean: Chu-ja-hak 朱子學; Chinese: Lĭxué 理學) the state ideology of the peninsular kingdom. This momentous event altered the course of Korean history. English-language research into the establishment of Chosŏn (Chinese: Cháoxiān 朝鮮) has dealt almost exclusively with Neo-Confucian ideology and the scholar-officials (Korean: sadaebu 士大夫; Chinese: shídàifū 士大夫) who espoused it. Yi Sŏng-gye himself has been relegated to a minor position in the story of the origins of his own dynasty, allotted at most a few pages per work in the major literature. This article attempts to redress that imbalance, to focus attention on the dynastic founder whose pragmatic motivation diverged from that of the Neo-Confucian
This paper discusses the reasons behind Yi Sŏng-gye’s decision to revoke state patronage from Buddhism and instead endorse Confucianism, particularly the sort of thought advanced by Zhu Xi (Zhū Xī; Korean: Chu Hŭi) and others in China in the twelfth century. It further argues this decision was a wise one, guided by Yi’s understanding of Realpolitik, of the domestic situation in Korea, and of Ming (Míng; Korean: Myŏng) China. Far from being an anti-Buddhist zealot or a benevolent sage-king, the founder of Chosŏn was a skilled general and politician who decided to base his new state on Neo-Confucian principles in order to solve the economic and political problems that plagued the failing Koryŏ (Chinese: Gāolì 高麗) and, thus, to secure his own position. After all, Yi himself had risen to power and subsequently been driven to revolt by these very problems. Though it might have been possible to solve some of them within the existing political order, he astutely adopted a more radical policy to ensure the necessary reforms could be implemented. Neo-Confucianism, with its dedication to orthodoxy, loyalty to the ruler above local or clerical leaders, and power flowing from the center provided a perfect ideology to ensure both stability in the land and the continuation of the new dynasty. Ming China provided a familiar and attractive model. The Ming had expelled the hated Mongols, who had exploited Korea for nearly a century. The Hongwu Emperor (Chinese: Hóngwǔdì; Korean: Hong-mu-je 洪武帝), the founder of Ming, had reformed the decaying Yuan (Yuán; Korean: Wŏn 元) government, brought relative stability to China after the collapse of Yuan, and seemed to have secured his dynasty’s hold on the throne.

In the scholarship surrounding the Koryŏ-Chosŏn transition, there are two main viewpoints regarding the sectors of society from which Yi Sŏng-gye sought and received support. The traditional “internal development” view argues that support came from a rising, disaffected class of Neo-Confucian scholar-officials who sought to recast the corrupt and failing Koryŏ kingdom into the mould of an orthodox Neo-Confucian state. An opposing view, recently argued by John Duncan, claims support came from the traditional aristocratic families who—having lost their regional power bases and depending entirely on central-based office-holding for their power by Yi Sŏng-gye’s time—sought to replace the outdated Koryŏ regime with a more centre-oriented government. This paper seeks to show that, whichever theory is closer to the truth, the essential pragmatism and wisdom of Yi Sŏng-gye’s decision for Neo-Confucianism remains. First, however, it is important to discuss briefly the state of affairs in Korea just prior to Yi’s seizure of power.

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II. The Fall of Koryŏ

During the last decades of Koryŏ, the Wang dynasty limped along, often unwilling and always unable to take action to remedy numerous political and economic difficulties in late medieval Korea. Questionable succession practices sapped the strength and damaged the legitimacy of the last Koryŏ kings.3 John Duncan sums up the latter period of the Wang dynasty this way: “The late Koryŏ suffered from a weak kingship, erosion of state control over material and human resources, and powerful aristocratic elements fighting with the throne and with each other over resources and political power.”4

Regarding the weakness of Koryŏ kingship, Duncan believes it was inevitable given the foundational origins of that kingship: “[The] institutional difficulties of the late Koryŏ were not simply manifestations of the declining phase of a dynastic cycle. Rather, they were deeply rooted in the nature of early Koryŏ political settlement.”5 Adding to this was the loss of royal prestige due to nearly a century of Mongol domination. In addition to the damage to the royal image caused by defeat at the hands of “barbarians”, the Mongols had also forced each successive Koryŏ crown prince to marry a Mongol princess and to reside in their capital until his accession. Han Woo-keun asserts that within “a few generations the Koryŏ royal family was so thoroughly Mongolized that the Yuan Emperors had little to fear from [Korea]”. Strife among various royal family members and between them and the foreign princesses served to weaken Koryŏ rulers even further.6

Koryŏ society was hierarchically-dominated and stratified, with a close relationship between aristocratic status and office-holding.7 The Koryŏ upper class generally had blood ties to the royal clan and were powerful local magnates. They were “families which had been raised to affluence” as a reward for helping the ruling Wang dynasty rise to power in the 930s.8 Confucianism was not unknown in Korea; in fact it had been influential for centuries.9 The influence of China, promoted by the ruling class, superimposed a Confucian idea of social ethics among aristocrats and a gradual shift towards patrilineage over the existing Korean dual-lineage.10 Yet Martina Deuchler notes Confucian notions had only barely penetrated aristocratic life by end of Koryŏ.11

The Confucian government service examination system likewise had been present in Koryŏ for several centuries. Yet the examinations were far from the meritocratic method of choosing “good men” they were intended to be. In China, government service examinations dispersed power effectively over a varied group, including those who

3 Deuchler. The Confucian Transformation of Korea, 90.
4 Duncan. The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty, 7.
5 Ibid., 8.
6 Han. The History of Korea, 170-173.
7 Deuchler. The Confucian Transformation of Korea, 39.
8 Han. The History of Korea, 87.
9 Ibid., 193.
10 Ibid., 145.
11 Deuchler. The Confucian Transformation of Korea, 87.
were less powerful, less well-connected, and from wider regional origins.\textsuperscript{12} In Koryŏ, this did not happen. Instead, as early as 1055, registering for the examinations required proof of descent in a recognized descent group, i.e., a descent group with an ancestor who had previously served in office.\textsuperscript{13} The most powerful families further had a “protection privilege”, meaning at least one member in each generation was guaranteed access to office without proceeding through the normal examination system.\textsuperscript{14} These were the aristocrats’ keys to elevated political and judicial status in Koryŏ society, and they jealously guarded them.

Thus, due to aristocratic dominance, the examination system did not bring into the Koryŏ government “men of intelligence and ability, regardless of social origin”,\textsuperscript{15} as it did in China. Rather than providing opportunities for gifted young men to prove their worth, “[g]overnment office was monopolized by this [aristocratic] class by means of the discriminatory education system.”\textsuperscript{16} According to Duncan, by the late eleventh century, powerful descent groups dominated the dynastic bureaucracy, “producing generation after generation of officials.”\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, King Kongmin (Chinese: Gōngmínwáng 恭愍王) was assassinated in 1374 by powerful Koryŏ aristocrats because his efforts (perhaps more properly the efforts of his agent, the monk Sin Ton (Chinese: Xīn Dùn 辛韜)) to reform the examination system threatened their influence. His reforms died with him, at least for the remainder of the Wang dynasty. The importance of examination system reform cannot be overestimated in light of this sort of aristocratic dominance, and Yi Sŏng-gye undoubtedly knew this; immediately upon his accession to the throne in 1392, he issued an edict enforcing the reforms which had led to King Kongmin's murder.\textsuperscript{18}

III. A New Class of Confucian Scholar-Officials

During his ten years in power, Yi Sŏng-gye “provided the dynasty with a foundation of support based on the establishment of tributary relations with the Chinese Ming dynasty, land reform that weakened the late Koryŏ landed aristocracy and provided a stable revenue base for the new regime...[and] a revised structure of central administration.”\textsuperscript{19} The strengthening of kingly power did not stem from the personal

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] Ibid., 46-47.
\item[15] Han. The History of Korea, 132.
\item[16] Ibid., 136.
\item[17] Duncan. The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty, 49.
\end{footnotes}
force of character of Yi Sŏng-gye, as he was not particularly charismatic. Rather, it was an increase in the authority of the kingship itself that would make Chosŏn monarchs on average more powerful than their Koryŏ or Silla (Chinese: Xinluó 新羅) predecessors.20 Yi Sŏng-gye was able to accomplish all these great achievements through the instrument of Neo-Confucianism.

By establishing Neo-Confucianism, the new king could revitalize the Korean view of kingship. Neo-Confucianism exalts the position of the ruler and focuses attention on the centre. The founding of Chosŏn facilitated the concentration of power in the capital,21 and “[t]he literati-officials found in the principles of Neo-Confucianism a compelling and well-reasoned system of thought that could be used to reshape Korean society.”22 Thus, JaHyun Kim Haboush declares the founding of the Yi dynasty “thus more than anything else a Confucian revolution”. According to Haboush, Yi’s 1392 coronation marked a new beginning for Korea…the old Koryŏ regime had been compromised by long years of subjugation to the Yuan dynasty, [and] the Korean dynastic founding differed from its Chinese counterpart…[T]he Yi Neo-Confucian founders, with no past failures to contend with, were driven by a commitment to forge a new Confucian social order which would be a complete break from the old Buddhist Koryŏ society.23

Han calls the new regime “no mere military dictatorship but a truly reformed, viable government”,24 and Edward Adams points to the corruption of the Wang dynasty as Yi’s primary motivation to rebel and overthrow it.25 Deuchler asserts that with “the advent of Neo-Confucianism in Korea, an ideology emerged that was addressing itself in a comprehensive and compelling way to solve social problems.”26 Deuchler later describes the founding of Chosŏn as “[t]he triumph of the alliance between Yi Sŏng-gye, the military hero, and the Neo-Confucian scholar-officials…”27 and points to its emergence from the new ruler’s reforms: “[The reform] program pitted the reform-minded against the guardians of vested interest…this polarization of the political forces over economic issues eventually provided a major impulse to found a new dynasty.”28 Yet land reform could not begin until it was “backed by Yi Sŏng-gye”;29 in fact, none of the necessary reforms could “be successfully implemented until the literati-officials established an alliance with the newly risen military leaders” who “to-

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21 Deuchler. The Confucian Transformation of Korea, 90.
23 Haboush. The Confucian Kingship in Korea, 11-12.
24 Han. The History of Korea, 189.
26 Deuchler The Confucian Transformation of Korea, 27.
27 Ibid., 90.
28 Ibid., 92.
29 Ibid., 91.
gether stood against the Koryŏ aristocracy that still dominated the central government and possessed large landholdings."30 Deuchler goes on to say that the dynastic founding “signified a felicitous conjunction between the ideological orientation of progressive reforms on the one hand, and the pragmatic aims of the military on the other.”31 The pragmatism was Yi Sŏng-gye’s; the ideology belonged to the literati.

The Neo-Confucian scholar-officials who supported Yi’s rise to power maintained that the new ruler was simply claiming the Mandate of Heaven (seen as being derived from China in the Sino-centric world view), just as the Zhou (Zhōu; Korean: Chu周) dynasty of ancient China had claimed the mandate from the decaying Shang. Scholar-official Chŏng To-jŏn (Chinese: Zhēng Dàochuán 鄭道傳) used this idea to legitimize Yi Sŏng-gye’s coup and to gain support for it, a formidable task. He went so far as to draw a parallel between the Ming emperor's endorsement of Yi Sŏng-gye and King Wu of Zhou’s (Zhōuwǔwáng; Korean: Chu-mu-wáng 周武王) enfeoffment of Kija (Chinese: Jīzǐ 箕子), the ancient ruler of Kija Chosŏn (Chinese: Jīzǐ Cháoxiān 箕子朝鮮), which was seen as “modeled on the glorious age of Zhou” and for which the new kingdom was named.32 Wm. Theodore de Bary credits Chŏng with “substantially engineering the Yi dynasty's rise to power”,33 and Michael Kalton asserts that Yi Sŏng-gye was supported by young Neo-Confucians in bringing the “decrepit” Wang dynasty to its close. He even goes so far as to call these scholar-officials the “architects of his rise to power”.34

Thus, in this view, Yi’s primary supporters were agitating Neo-Confucian scholar-officials who had long believed the kingdom was faltering due to the ruler’s failure to institute Neo-Confucian principles and rule according to them. Scholar-official Yi Che-hyŏn (Chinese: Lǐ Qíxián 李齊賢) expressed the concerns of these emerging Neo-Confucians forty years before Yi Sŏng-gye seized the throne. “[T]he scholars were all adhering to Buddhism and occupied themselves with trivialities of writing style. Where were the learned men who understood the classics and polished their conduct? For this desolate state of scholarship Yi [Che-hyŏn] squarely held the king responsible.”35 Yi Sŏng-gye could scarcely expect these scholar-officials’ continued support unless he addressed these matters, and this he adroitly did by proclaiming Neo-Confucianism as the new dynasty’s official ideology. The scholars-officials, their power based on Confucian knowledge and success in the government examinations, supported Yi Sŏng-gye against a largely hostile and powerful aristocracy, composed of a fusion of military officials and pro-Yuan civil officials36 who desired to maintain the status quo which had so benefited them. The ruling class viewed the coup with alarm,

31 Ibid., 92.
35 Deuchler The Confucian Transformation of Korea, 21.
and hence Yi was wise to promote Neo-Confucianism in order to please his supporters
and prevent himself from being overthrown in turn or murdered like the unfortunate
King Kongmin.

Yet Yi Sŏng-gye knew he had to do more than simply declare a new ideology
and proclaims his assumption of the Mandate of Heaven. Systemic problems called for
reform, and the influential descent groups that had grown wealthy under the Wang were
resistant to change. Thus, he thoroughly reorganized the government with the help of
the scholar-officials, “whose support Yi Sŏng-gye had wisely sought.”37 By replacing
Buddhism with Neo-Confucianism as the “principal spiritual and intellectual force in
this society”, the new ruler was able to harness the energy of these crusading scholar-
officials. Han articulates the feeling of these men as Koryŏ drew to a close:

Neo-Confucianism inspired the scholar-officials of late Koryŏ times with
reforming zeal. In the government and society of which they were a part
they saw violations of Confucian principles on every hand. Land prop-
erty belonging to the state was in the hands of private individuals. The
leading offices of government, which, for the good of the nation ought to
be filled by those best qualified, were awarded on the basis of wealth and
position alone. Above all, the state was dominated by a religion which in
many ways ran contrary to the Confucian principles of social relations.38

Yi Sŏng-gye proceeded to deal with all these problems in short order, seizing
lands from wealthy Buddhist temples for the state, putting huge, tax-free aristocratic
estates back on the government’s tax rolls, taking control of strategically-vital areas,
reforming the examination system to make it closer to that of the Ming, and revoking
Buddhism’s official patronage. As noted earlier, he implemented the reform of the ex-
amination system that had led to the murder of King Kongmin, who had attempted ma-
jor reform using the existing system and in partnership with Buddhism. Where Kong-
min failed, Yi Sŏng-gye was, by and large, successful; though hindered by aristocratic
power (as were all attempts at strengthening the Korean throne), the examination system
did become the primary route to high office and did force the yangban (Chinese: liáng-
bān 兩班) to educate their sons in a Confucian way.39 In this way the new ruler as-
sured himself of the scholar-officials’ allegiance in any struggle for power—overt or
subtle—which might be waged by the powerful families, and the Chosŏn dynasty truly
“represented a restoration of real power to kings”.40

37 Han. *The History of Korea*, 203.
39 James Palais. ‘Political Leadership and the Yangban in the Chosŏn Dynasty.’ *La societe civile face a l'East
dans les traditions chinoise, japonaise, coreenne et vietnamienne* 3. Paris: Ecole Francaise Extreme-
40 Palais. ‘Bureaucratic Monarchy in the Chosŏn Dynasty’, 12.
IV. Rise of the Yangban

Standing in opposition to this view of a new class of Neo-Confucian scholar-officials reforming the corrupt government of a reactionary aristocracy is John Duncan. In his view, though non-aristocratic elements (i.e., Neo-Confucian reformist scholar-officials) did emerge in the late Koryŏ period, they were not accepted by the official descent groups and so were unable to implement reforms on their own. He argues that late Koryŏ reveals “no significant alteration in the structure and make-up of the central aristocratic-bureaucratic establishment”,41 which also remained largely the same during the early Chosŏn. Deuchler’s observation that the men who helped found the Chosŏn state were, “in their social and economic backgrounds, very much the sort of men who had always held power and filled government posts”42 adds some support to this view. Duncan uses the theoretical framework advanced by S.N. Eisenstadt in his classic The Political Systems of Empires. In his interpretation of Eisenstadt, rulers form a bureaucracy “to create a more centralized and unified system in which they can monopolise decision-making”. Those opposed to this centralization are “typically landed aristocrats” and so “[t]o overcome such opposition, rulers find allies among groups who oppose the old aristocrats and have something to gain from the establishment of a centralized polity”.43

Yet Duncan uses this framework merely as an alternative to the traditional, “Western” one. He does not suggest Korea fits this model; in fact he proceeds to do just the opposite. Instead, he argues that the aristocracy was both largely continuous through the Koryŏ-Chosŏn transition and largely supportive of Yi Sŏng-gye’s Neo-Confucian reforms. Hence there was a societal shift from “a strongly aristocratic system to a mixed aristocratic-bureaucratic” rather than a shift from an aristocratic to a meritocratic-bureaucratic one, and the Chosŏn break with the old order lay in the increased centralization of aristocratic power, away from the political system of the local strongman class that dated back to Silla,44 rather than with the emergence of a class of marginalized, disgruntled low-level Neo-Confucian scholars as a powerful force in Korean society.

At first glance, this seems to place the pragmatic motives behind Yi Sŏng-gye’s establishment of Neo-Confucianism in doubt. After all, if he did not institute the new ideology to overcome aristocratic resistance to reform, then what other practical reason is there? The answer lies in the very power of the old aristocracy, if Duncan’s viewpoint is closer to the truth. According to Duncan, the aristocracy became further and further alienated from their local roots and more and more concentrated on the capital and on office-holding in the central government. In the late fourteen century, the entrenched central elite began to refer to themselves as “yangban”, which literally means the two branches—civil and military—of the central bureaucracy at Kaesŏng (Chinese: Kāichéng 開城), in order to distinguish themselves from the weakening local strong-

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41 Duncan. The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty, 87.
42 Ibid., 97.
43 Ibid., 9.
44 Ibid., 12.
man aristocrats. These central-based descent groups “began to look more like medieval Chinese great clans” as they began to see their status as deriving from central office-holding rather than influence and heritage in local communities.

As the powerful aristocrats gradually metamorphosed from local-based strongmen into central-based yangban throughout the late Koryŏ, they began to see the value of a strong government oriented towards the centre rather than dispersed among localities. Since their power and prestige came to depend on positions in the central bureaucracy, they recognized their dependence “on a strong and effective central regime.” Thus politically-aware scholar-officials—in Duncan’s view not an up-and-coming minority but rather the astute among the powerful aristocrats—realized that, though the yangban would certainly get their share of the governmental pie in the new regime, “without some correction to the badly skewed balance of power between the throne and the yangban, the system that had served them and their descent groups so well simply would not continue to exist.” Again, the recurrent theme in Korean history of the balance of power between throne and yangban emerges. If the Korean elite could not abide a tyrant, neither was it in their interests to allow the throne to sink into impotence. The expansion and strengthening of the central bureaucracy had the added benefit of reducing competition for power among the yangban, which could turn violent in extreme times.

Given this situation, the practicality of Yi Sŏng-gye’s decision for Neo-Confucianism is even more apparent. If Duncan is correct and there was no agitating new class of scholar-officials to use against the aristocracy, Yi had little choice but to centralize power as the yangban wished. “Indeed, to the extent that Yi and his group needed allies in their quest for power, they had nobody to turn to but the established bureaucracy”, i.e., the yangban elite. Like many a usurper before him, Yi Sŏng-gye faced a key problem stemming from the foundation of a new dynasty: illegitimacy. As James Palais notes,

The founders of new dynasties were always illegitimate because the only way they could establish a new dynasty was by betraying the last ruler of the previous dynasty. There was always a nasty stigma attached to their action of usurpation, and it was always necessary for them to gain as many allies in society as possible, and not just the military men who helped them out during the crucial political struggle.

Thus General Yi “had less prestige than the members of the old established families, and in the case of early Chosŏn those prestigious families were the yangban of the late Koryŏ dynasty.” Palais goes on to say that “the main factor in securing the longevity of Korean dynasties was the acceptance of the king by the social elite—the wealthi-

46 Ibid., 97.
47 Ibid., 274.
48 Ibid., 233.
49 Ibid., 274.
50 Palais. ‘Bureaucratic Monarchy in the Chosŏn Dynasty’, 17.
Yi Sŏng-gye’s new dynasty was no exception. Duncan again drives home the practical political constraints on Yi Sŏng-gye, claiming “the new rulers had virtually no alternative to the yangban in their search for a major social group to support the dynasty”, and many Yi dynasty reforms “emerge not as revolutionary changes to accommodate the needs of a new ruling class but rather as a reordering of institutions to protect the interests of the central yangban class of bureaucratic aristocrats that had been evolving over the preceding centuries.” The political system of the venerable Wang dynasty was out of date, unable to respond to the changing needs of the powerful. They made their displeasure and their desires known to Yi Sŏng-gye, who had little choice but to acquiesce to them, lest he fall victim to aristocratic infighting as his predecessors had.

Duncan makes clear the situation on the eve of Yi’s coup:

[There existed] a fundamental contradiction in the Koryŏ socio-political system: the rise of a powerful central bureaucratic aristocracy within an institutional framework that was designed in many ways to accommodate the interests of the local strongmen who had been the dominant social group in the tenth century. What was needed was a radical reshaping of the dynasty’s institutions to reflect the reality of the central yangban’s emergence as the dominant social group.

The traditional view has seen Yi Sŏng-gye’s reforms as bringing about changes in the Korean political system. Duncan’s argument turns this view on its head; the reforms were simply recognitions of the changes that had been taking place throughout the latter half of Koryŏ. Yi Sŏng-gye provided a centralized system not to oppose the established aristocracy but to augment it. In doing this, he restored glory to the throne by claiming the Mandate of Heaven and instituting the official ideology of the mighty Ming dynasty in China, the force that had shattered Mongol power in China proper and allowed Korea to free herself from Mongol domination. Duncan fittingly finishes by noting that, though “the values of the Confucian reformers of 1392 may have transcended those of the old regime, they did not transcend those of the yangban social group to which the reformers belonged.”

V. The Example of China

Now attention must be given to the Middle Kingdom, which from 1368 was once again united under a Chinese dynasty. Certainly China has been highly influential on

51 Ibid., 15.
52 Ibid., 277.
53 Ibid., 236.
54 Ibid., 202.
55 Ibid., 264.
Korea’s development throughout much of her history, and this was no less true during the Chosŏn period. Yi Sŏng-gye adopted the ruling ideology of China, reformed the Korean examination system to bring it into greater conformity with China’s, and re-established Korea’s traditional vassalage status in the face of Ming power. This last action was especially prudent given Ming suspicion of the legitimacy of the last Koryŏ king and the Chinese military occupation of a former Mongol fortress along the northern Koryŏ border.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, affirms Duncan, “[o]f great importance to the evolution of the Korean socio-political order during these centuries was the availability of an external institutional model of a centralized polity in China.”\textsuperscript{57}

Korea had suffered greatly during the Mongol period, especially due to the onerous burdens placed upon the kingdom by Khubilai Khan’s twin abortive invasions of Japan. Despite this, some elements in Kaesŏng struggled to hold Korea fast to the waning Mongols. Yi Sŏng-gye had closely observed the fall of Yuan and knew the great power of the Ming.\textsuperscript{58} He realized the days of Mongol domination of China were over, and he had no desire that Koreans should be seen by the Ming as Mongol sympathizers.\textsuperscript{59} Hence he ended the late Koryŏ policy of uneasy neutrality between the rising Ming and the defeated but still-formidable Mongols, coming down firmly on the side of the Ming. Though the Ming alliance had by late Chosŏn become “a matter of Confucian obligation”, it was originally, at the dynasty’s founding, a pragmatic policy based on the strength of the Ming relative to the Northern Yuan (Mongol) dynasty.\textsuperscript{60} Deuchler observes that “Yi Sŏng-gye’s pro-Ming stance was therefore above all informed by a timely Realpolitick.”\textsuperscript{61} Yi instituted a government modeled on that of the Ming, helping to bring Korea clearly into the Chinese orbit.

Writing of Ming China, Dardess reveals that “Confucians could not handle large-scale social chaos until someone else who stood above and beyond [their] profession first laid the appropriate organizational groundwork.”\textsuperscript{62} In Korea, this someone, not himself a Confucian, was Yi Sŏng-gye. As Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism was a relatively recent development of Confucian thought in Korea at the establishment of Chosŏn, Korean scholars had not yet worked out a particularly Korean version of it. Thus they were still heavily dependent upon China as a model for Neo-Confucian government, and both Yi Sŏng-gye and the Korean scholar-officials tried to follow the Chinese example as much as possible given Korean realities. In Ming China, the Hongwu Emperor and his Neo-Confucian scholar-officials believed effective central control required that offices be “occupied by men who accepted and understood the system and were prepared to work diligently and selflessly within it.”\textsuperscript{63} Yi Sŏng-gye and his supporters also believed this, and Neo-Confucianism was considered the best way to turn out men of this charac-

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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\bibitem{Duncan} Duncan. \textit{The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty}, 280.
\bibitem{Han1} Han. \textit{The History of Korea}, 173.
\bibitem{Ibid} \textit{Ibid.}, 188.
\bibitem{Palais} Palais. ‘Political Leadership and the Yangban in the Chosŏn Dynasty’. 400.
\bibitem{Deuchler} Deuchler \textit{The Confucian Transformation of Korea}, 91.
\bibitem{Dardess} John W Dardess. \textit{Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty}. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937, 94.
\bibitem{Ibid1} \textit{Ibid.}, 204.
\end{thebibliography}
ter. For if the new dynasty collapsed due to factional infighting among the Korean aristocracy, the entire country stood to suffer. Yi Sŏng-gye proclaimed a theory of government that promised to generate dedicated and intelligent men loyally carrying out the benevolent instructions of a wise sage-king for the benefit, peace, and security of all.

Dardess also puts forth the notion that “[t]he establishment of the Ming autocracy was, in part, explicitly shaped in accordance with the thesis that a bureaucracy will...bring about social disaster unless it is kept under stringent controls.” That autocracy was no aberration but “was certainly foreshadowed in late Yuan Confucian writing, and it can surely be understood to have emerged from [the Ming founder’s] sincere efforts to put Confucian theory as he understood it into concrete effect.” This Yuan Neo-Confucianism is the version which Korean scholar-officials absorbed in the final years of Koryŏ, through the efforts of zealous Neo-Confucian converts like An Hyang (Chinese: Ān Xiāng 安珦) and Yi Che-hyŏn. Though Yi Sŏng-gye and the subsequent kings of Chosŏn never attained anything like the autocracy of the Hongwu Emperor, certainly Yi and his supporters—whether they were new men or entrenched yangban—had experienced first-hand the weakness and divisiveness of Koryŏ brought on by kings who could not control their officials. As noted above, they sought to increase royal power to protect their interests, advance their agendas, and avoid aristocratic feuding.

The Ming founder needed to ally with the Confucian intellectual class in order to transform his movement from a “mere revolt” to “establishing a kingdom”; military force alone was not sufficient. This alliance allowed the founder to create a system based upon a balance between two key groups: Confucian scholars and warriors. Denunciation of Buddhism was also part of the Hongwu Emperor’s movement to make Confucian orthodoxy the ideological basis of his power. Yi Song-gye and his supporters would emulate these policies during the early years of Chosŏn. The Hongwu Emperor also sought to eliminate a practice considered disastrous by the Neo-Confucian scholars who served him, namely, the ruler delegating too many duties to powerful and unrestrained high ministers. Yi Sŏng-gye also had good reason to avoid delegating powers to outside agents, given aristocratic and bureaucratic response to King Kongmin’s empowerment of the monk Sin Ton. Called by Allen “a Buddhist counterpart to Russia’s Rasputin...[who] dominated the Koryŏ king Kongmin”, Sin Ton became the de facto ruler of the country in May of 1365, when Kongmin handed over the reigns of government to free himself to mourn the death of his favorite consort, a Mongol princess. This upstart reformer, attempting to reassert central authority without the support of anyone—Buddhist monks becoming increasingly unpopular among influential families and Neo-Confucian scholars alike—was forced out of power and

64 Ibid., 105.
65 Ibid., 184.
executed in 1371, to be followed shortly by his king. This was an omen to which Yi Sŏng-gye paid special heed, and he took pains to ensure all power flowed—or at least appeared to flow—from his throne alone, in line with Neo-Confucian orthodoxy.

VI. Conclusion

“In that rainy summer of 1388, on the banks of the Yalu [River], the fateful decision was made which doomed the Koryŏ dynasty and altered the course of Korean history.” Yi Sŏng-gye crossed the Rubicon, refusing to march against the Ming as ordered by his superior, General Ch’oe Yong, and by King U himself. For General Yi knew that this resurgent Chinese dynasty was far stronger than his own exhausted, divided, weakly-lead kingdom. Therefore he turned his troops round and marched on Kaesŏng in rebellion, seizing the capital with little effort and deposing the king who had sent him on such a foolhardy endeavor. He was “a wise statesman capable of bold decisions and quick action but cautious enough never to act rashly or without due deliberation.” He did not immediately seize the throne for himself, though at that time no-one was powerful enough to stop him from doing so. Instead, he placed the deposed king’s son on the throne and set his mind to the task of how best to govern the country that was now his, even if he himself had yet to mount on the throne.

Why did Yi Sŏng-gye choose to unseat Buddhism, the official religion of the kingdom for over four hundred years, and replace it with an upstart variant of Chinese Confucianism? A devout Buddhist himself, why did he choose to install a new government scheme that became ever-more hostile to Buddhism as time progressed?

This article has attempted to show Yi Sŏng-gye as a skillful politician with a realistic understanding of the domestic and international situation in which he found himself, who adopted Neo-Confucianism as the official ideology for reasons that were imminently practical and prudent. The late Koryŏ period was plagued by weak leadership from the top and a political system oriented towards a powerful, largely independent local strongman aristocracy. After nearly a century of Mongol domination of Korea, aristocratic infighting and assassinations of monarchs, and Mongolization of the royal Wang family, the throne had degenerated into a mere chair rather than the seat of a ruler. When Yi Sŏng-gye was driven to take the throne himself, he knew he had to revitalize this view of kingship and to institute vital reforms if he were to remain in power. Neo-Confucianism gave his kingship a sound ideological basis, provided an excuse to curtail the influence of the Buddhist clergy in government and to strengthen government finances at the monks’ expense, and concentrated power in the central government, of which Yi Sŏng-gye was the head.

If support for Yi’s coup came from a rising class of disillusioned Neo-Confucian scholar-officials, he wisely enlisted their help in bringing about essential land reform to

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69 Duncan. The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty, 177-178.
70 Han. The History of Korea, 188.
71 Ibid., 189.
72 Ibid., 188.
“break the power of the landlords and create a strong central government with himself at
its head”.73 If, on the other hand, his support flowed from the yangban class of power-
ful central aristocrats, then Neo-Confucianism again served to centralize a govern-
ment with strong royal power to prevent an unrestricted bureaucracy from decimating
the aristocratic ranks with bickering and internal strife. The attention of English-language
research has been strongly fixed on the ideological implications of Neo-Confucianism
and on the scholars-officials who worked them out. The paper has dealt with an area
largely unexplored in the literature in English, focusing on the Chosŏn founder himself
and on the practical dimension of the new dynasty. Neo-Confucianism admirably served
Yi Sŏng-gye’s practical need to secure and perpetuate his power by providing a mecha-
nism for stability and legitimacy. His shrewdness and keen insight gave Korea a stable
government for five centuries to come. Rather than a Neo-Confucian scholar or a semi-
mythical sage-king, the man who established the Chosŏn state—a state which would
last into modern times—was a skilled politician who sought a vehicle to legitimate his
rule and to solve the myriad problems which had made the time ripe for his coup.

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73 Ibid., 189.