

A THEORY OF FEMALE SAGEHOOD  
OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: FOCUSING  
ON THE THEORETICAL CHALLENGE OF A FEMALE  
NEO-CONFUCIANIST OF THE CHOSŎN DYNASTY

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Im Yunjitang provides the philosophical foundation for relieving the existing tension between the social suppression of women and Confucian philosophical tradition. In Neo-Confucianism, differences in gender relationships are among the most fundamentally and ontologically constitutive of a human being. As a result, the rituals taught to and demanded of women are different from those demanded of men. Despite the difference in ethical requirements arising from gender differences, Yunjitang was able to realize her virtue by imagining a set of social and ethical practices. Confronted with this gender-based differentiation, Yunjitang's theory of sameness should be recognized as an important step toward a more adequate theory of sagehood.

**Key words:** Im Yunjitang, Neo-Confucianism, female sagehood, eighteenth century, sagehood, self-cultivation, composure

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Is it possible for a woman to become a sage in Neo-Confucianism of the Chosŏn朝鮮 Dynasty? By the eighteenth-century, development of agriculture and rapid economic growth strengthened the power of *Chung'in*中人.<sup>2</sup> At the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an improvement over its draft paper presented at the 9th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women Worldwide Organization of Women's Studies (2005). The convention in academic writing is that the McCune-Reischauer method of translation is adopted for Korean terms. For Chinese terms, the Pinyin method is adopted. Korean thinkers and other historical persons are initially referred to by the family name and the private name and in many instances their honorific names precede their family and private names. Considering this widely received convention, the

time, orthodox Neo-Confucianism became more entrenched and, at the same time, there was an academic shift that resulted in the new rise of “*Sirhak*實學(Practical Learning)”. During this transition, folk literature of the time also developed further. In addition, around this time, the literati became deeply interested in literary collections of family lineage, and Collected works of literati women began to find publication.<sup>3</sup>

Female consciousness which began to be revealed in the first half of the seventeenth century grew stronger. Writings of females were not limited to literary works; they were extended to include not only philosophical debates but also encyclopedic writings. Female authors wrote many forms of writings that required expertise, including individual collected works, primers on prenatal care, travelogues, and encyclopedia-like works that demand expertise.<sup>4</sup> These expanded works show that female consciousness was no longer limited to its past area, but rather broke loose from its past trajectory. Further, what is notable is that the inner consciousness of authors mirrored other female’s self-images and expanded to assert self-confidence in the general abilities of women overall.<sup>5</sup>

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Koreans are often referred to only by their honorific names. (e.g. Yulgok). In light of this naming convention, the Korean and Chinese names are addressed by the order of family name first followed by private name. In other respects, I am solely responsible for all the translations of Im Yunjitang’s original text and articles into their English counterparts. I also want to mention here that all the academic articles or works of Im Yunjitang are originally in the Korean language. In this article, the name “Im Yunjitang” shall be hereinafter referred to as “Yunjitang”.

<sup>2</sup> The name “*Chung’in*” literally means “people in the middle” of the Chosŏn Dynasty of Korea. This privileged class of commoners consisted of a small group of petty bureaucrats and other skilled workers whose technical and administrative skills enabled *Yangban* 兩班(the aristocratic officials) and the royal family to rule the lower classes. YI, H. *Chosŏnjo huki yŏsŏng chisŏngsa* [A History of Female Intellectuals in the Late Chosŏn Dynasty], p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> YI, P. *Women in Korean History*, pp. 33 – 38; IM, Y. *Kuk’yŏk Yunjitang Yuko* 國譯允摯堂遺稿 [Yunjitang Posthumous Work in Korean Translation], pp. 4 – 14.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Kim Hoyŏnjae 金浩然齋 (1681 – 1722) authored ‘*Cha’kyŏng* 自警 [Self-vigilance]’, whereas Yi Sachutang 李師朱堂 authored ‘*Taekyo Sin’gi* 胎教新記 [New guide lines for prenatal care]’ that is the first book of its kind in Korean history. YI, P. *Women in Korean History*, p. 270. Yi Paeyong said that at that time, two prominent female scholar earned fame in the field of *Sirhak* (practical Learning): Sŏ Yŏngsuhap 徐令壽閣 (1753 – 1823) and Yi Pinghŏkak 李憑虛閣 (1759 – 1824). Sŏ Yŏngsuhap wrote hundreds of poems published in an anthology. Yi Pinghŏkak wrote a ‘*Kyuhap Ch’ongsŏ* 閨閣叢書 [Women’s Encyclopedia]’ in 1809. YI, H. *Chosŏnjo huki yŏsŏng chisŏngsa* [A History of Female Intellectuals in the Late Chosŏn Dynasty], p.271.

<sup>5</sup> KIM, M. Chosŏn huki yŏ’ryu munhak ūi sirhak chŏk t’ŭksaek [The Characteristics of *Sirhak* in female literature in late Chosŏn: Special focus is on the eighteenth century], pp. 179 – 211; YI, H. *Hankuk kochŏn yosŏng munh’ak ūi se’kye – Sanmun pyon* [A world of Korean classical women literature – collected works of prose], pp. 14 – 55.

The consciousness of the literati women, as revealed in their collected works, formed the theory of female sagehood. Rather than provide key themes of Im Yunjitang 任允摯堂's theory<sup>6</sup> of self-cultivation only, this essay offers Yunjitang's theory as compared to the then-prevailing Neo-Confucian theory of self-cultivation.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is important to consider the following specific questions, which can illuminate some key issues pertaining to the historical backdrop in connection with the creation of Yunjitang's theory. These questions will help elucidate the then-extant theories of moral cultivation in general and Yunjitang's theory in particular: How could theories of a female-sage emerge in the eighteenth century during the reign of the Chosŏn Dynasty? Is it possible to demonstrate that man and woman could be viewed equally under Confucian notion in the late Chosŏn Dynasty? What kind of ontology and ethics did Yunjitang develop in order to articulate this possibility? In this light, I will further discuss the second and third question.

First, one must isolate the correct historical perspective to articulate Yunjitang's actions and philosophy. Between the two most historically important perspectives – the Mencian perspective and Xunzian perspective Yunjitang's theories of moral cultivation can be construed as taking the Mencian perspective; the Mencian perspective suggests that all humans are born with innate germinations of goodness. Consequently, anyone who strives to become a sage is capable of becoming one.<sup>8</sup> The question then becomes

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<sup>6</sup> Im Yunjitang (1721 – 1793) is the foremost woman Neo-Confucianist in the eighteenth century in Chosŏn dynasty. Im is her surname, Yunjitang is her honorific name. She was the fifth child among five sons and two daughters of Im Chŏk 任適(1685 – 1728). She could be absorbed in the world of learning from childhood through the support of families including the second elder brother Nongmun Im Sŏngju 鹿門 任聖周 (1711 – 1788) who was a great master of Neo-Confucianism of Chosŏn. Im Yunjitang wrote many theoretical articles in connection with the idea of human nature and Confucian doctrine and her posthumous manuscript published three years after her death. In this article, the name “Im Yunjitang” shall be hereinafter referred to as “Yunjitang”.

<sup>7</sup> I insist that Yunjitang refined and further developed Kim Hoyŏnjae (1681 – 1722)'s theory of female sagehood in theoretical terms. Kang Chŏng'iltang 姜靜一堂, who was also influenced by Im Yunjitang, developed her own theory of moral cultivation. This article does not examine the intellectual lineage of theories of female sagehood, since a further investigation of this intellectual lineage may take a full article and also this is not the focus of this article, so in light of the length of the article, this rather brief summarization will suffice as an introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Ogawa Haruhisan, a Japanese philosopher, posited the Xunzian perspective of Confucianism, which offers a male-dominant ideology in which the predominance of men over women is conspicuously present. This ideology is outmoded, and consequently it is time to develop a Mencian perspective on gender. CH'OE, Y. Yu'kyŏ

whether Neo-Confucianism can be used to formulate a theory of cultivation in which sagehood is gender-neutral, so that a woman is capable of attaining it. Indeed, one of the goals in this article is to review and assess Yunjitang's Mencian ethical perspective on women. Yunjitang's theory among many extant works proves most sophisticated and comprehensive and so justifies this article's primary focus on her approach.

Many argue that the ethics of Confucianism, especially theories of self-cultivation that had historically been practiced in the context of male dominance, have been applied to females without any appreciation of historically constructed and reinforced gender differences.<sup>9</sup> So what they argue is that these theories engendered other theories that in turn are deemed incapable of being applied to females.

Yunjitang attempted to offer her own gender-neutral theory of moral cultivation, according to which men and women enjoyed equal footing in terms of attaining sagehood. In her *Nonsöl* 論說 (philosophical essay), Yunjitang proposed a philosophical foundation for male-female equality. Indeed, Yunjitang's life-long philosophical work was to arduously strive to attain the ontological and metaphysical truth that all humans are born capable of attaining sagehood.

Against this backdrop, Yunjitang provides the philosophical foundation for relieving the existing tension between the social suppression of women and Confucian philosophical tradition. Based on the eighteenth century philosophical debate, known as *Horak* 湖洛 debate,<sup>10</sup> in constructing her own

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wa p'eminichūm [A Study of The Interface between Confucianism and Feminism], p. 70.

<sup>9</sup> See KIM, S. Yuka ch'orak ūi in'gan ponsōngron e taehan yōsōngjuūi yihae [The feminist understanding on the discourse of human nature in Confucianism], pp. 1 – 30; HŌ, R. Yu'kyo ūi yewa yōsōng [Confucianism's Ritual and Women], pp. 123 – 152; YI, S. (1999a). Yu'kyo ūi kwan'gye yulli e taehan yōsōngjuūi chōk haesōk [A feminist Interpretation of Relational Ethics in Confucianism], pp. 33 – 69; YI, S. (1999b). Ch'ayi haesōk ūi yu'kyo chōk t'ūksaek [Confucian Distinctions in Interpretation of Differentiation], pp. 21 – 44.

<sup>10</sup> In the term “*Ho'ra*k 湖洛,” “*Ho* 湖” denotes the *Ch'ungch'ōng* region and “*Ra*k 洛” denotes Seoul, reflecting literally the nature of the debate, which was a dispute between scholars residing in *Ch'ungch'ōng* region versus those living in Seoul. The *Kiho* School 畿湖學派 (*Kyōnggi* and *Ch'ungch'ōng* provinces), which succeeded Yi I's academic lineage, was divided in 1683 into *Noron* (the Old Doctrine) faction, headed by Song Siyōl, and *Soron* (the Young Doctrine) faction, centered around Yun Chūng. Later, Song Siyōl's teachings were inherited by Kim Ch'anghyōp in Seoul and Kwōn Sangha in *Ch'ungch'ōng*, who developed *Nakron/Rakron* 洛論 (*Sōul* theory) and *Ho'ron* 湖論 (*Ch'ungch'ōng* theory), respectively. This philosophical discourse is related to the philosophical tradition of the past century. “The ontological and psychological problems surrounding human nature became a major theme of the

theory, Im Yunjitang attempted to offer her own gender-neutral theory of moral cultivation, according to which men and women share equal ability to attain sagehood. Yunjitang proposed a philosophical foundation for male-female equality. Yunjitang's entire life-long philosophical work was to arduously strive to attain the ontological and metaphysical truth that all humans are born capable of attaining sagehood.

This equality should be proven by the theory of the existence of "equality" that shows that females are the same as males. By way of Neo-Confucianism, Yunjitang attempts to prove that females are equivalent of males. However, how could a female Neo-Confucianist emerge in the eighteenth century?

As demonstrated by traditional *Yin*陰-*Yang*陽 dualism, Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism is said to have preserved and even strengthened gender discrimination. Yunjitang's theory of female sagehood historical predecessor and then later served itself as a historical predecessor for the following generations of female intellectuals.<sup>11</sup> I will first analyze Yunjitang's theory of existence of Neo-Confucianism through the lens of sameness and then analyze Yunjitang's theory of ethics through the lens of ethics of sameness.

### **Yunjitang's theory of sameness**

In order to evaluate theories of female sagehood of the eighteenth-century Chosŏn period in modern terms, Carol Tavris' three-pronged categorization proves valuable and useful. According to Tavris, there are three types of perspectives that most often explain gender differences: "First, Men are normal; women, being 'opposite,' are deficient. Second, Men are normal; women are or

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explorations of Korean philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." DEUHLER, M. *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A study of society and ideology*, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Kang Chŏng'iltang (1772 – 1832) appears to have read '*Yunjitang Yuko*[*Yunjitang's Posthumous Work*]' published in 1796. This substantively affords credibility to the presupposition that Yunjitang's scholarship must have influenced later generations of female intellectuals. PAK, H. *Yunjitang kwa Kang Chŏng'iltang munhak ūi sasangchŏk kiban* [Thought Foundation of Literary Works of Both Im Yunjitang and Kang Chong'iltang], pp. 25 – 54. Kang is her surname, Chŏng'iltang is her honorific name. Kang Chŏng'iltang is a woman classical scholar and poet. She was a devoted follower of Confucianism which was extensively reflected in her poetic world. Kang Chŏng'iltang studied many Confucian classics. Throughout her life, she suffered from poverty and diseases. One of the striking aspects of her works involves a strong determination and tenacity in pursuing Confucian ideals and achieving scholarship in spite of severe poverty. Her posthumous manuscript was published after four years since her death.

should be like them. Third, Men are normal, and women are opposite from men, but superior to them.”<sup>12</sup>

The first perspective involves the traditional male-female relationship, which follows from the dualistic perspective grounded in male chauvinism. One may determine that the female intellectuals who proposed their own theories of female sagehood opposed this type of gender difference and thus asserted that females are equal to males. The pivotal issue is whether females are identical to males, or whether females and males are different but maintain equality.

To begin, this study necessitates an examination of the origin of female Neo-Confucianism. One theory suggests that female Neo-Confucianism derived from decreased gender-based and social-status discrimination during the development of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism’s *I /Li -Ki* dualism 理氣二元論 serves as the fundamental principle that governs the existence of nature. However, this dualism only reflects the projection of humans’ ideal aspirations onto the objective world.

Neo-Confucianists consider this projection the Ultimate Principle that governs the universe and thus vested with supreme authority. According to Neo-Confucianists, the Ultimate Principle embodies all things in the universe; indeed, all of nature is created by this Principle. Thus, human beings are obliged to attain perfection through cultivation and possession of the ideal moral character via the Ultimate Principle. Consequently, the Ultimate Principle endows humanity with clues as to how the ideal, perfect state might be achieved. However, since failure to achieve this perfect state is universal itself, exploration of how Neo-Confucianists deal with this contradiction becomes necessary.

To account for failure to achieve perfect states, Neo-Confucianists introduced and continue to espouse the concept of *Ki*, or material force. *Ki* is the source of energy required to give a physical being its form. Unlike the *I/Li* 理 (principle), *Ki/Qi* 氣 (energy) is limited, imperfect, and possesses unnumbered variations. Thus, all things in the universe created via the union of *Li* and *Ki* assume distinct forms and temperaments. By extension, even those considered to embody relatively pure *Ki* reflect differences in moral virtue. Central to the Neo-Confucian theory of human nature includes the assumption that, although humans are originally imbued with purity and harmony, differences in their respective levels of *Ki* induce proportionate moral virtues. However, Neo-Confucianists emphasize that while impure *Ki* restricts human nature’s purity, *Ki* itself is not static forever. Thus, *Ki*’s unstable nature necessitates humanity’s

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<sup>12</sup> TAVRIS, C. *The Mismeasure Of Women: Why Women Are Not The Better Sex, The Inferior Sex, Or The Opposite Sex*, p. 20.

moral education to attain purity.<sup>13</sup>

Dualism in Zhu Xi朱熹's Neo-Confucianism includes a clear distinction between *Li* and *Ki*, and this dualism contributed significantly to the justification for social discrimination; however, during the latter half of the Chosŏn Dynasty, the prevailing scholarly outlook among Neo-Confucians changes significantly. Indeed, a monistic tendency to unify *Li* and *Ki* into one entity developed; simultaneously, the distinction between both concepts blurred. *Ki*, the counterpart of *Li*, was itself originally considered to embody its own duality – indeed, in this view, *Ki* worked with and obstructed realization of the ideal *Li*. However, in late-Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism, the former aspect of *Ki*, i.e., the harmonious relationship shared with *Li*, gained predominance over the idea that it conflicted with *Li*. During this period, *Ki* was construed as pure, capable of unification with *Li*. Such a change in this theoretical framework engendered the steadfast belief that all humans are capable of cultivating moral virtues through their own voluntary efforts, despite the differences in talents. The concept of purified *Ki* enables moral capabilities of the *Sim*心(human heart/mind) and distances itself from the outmoded, idealized theory of human nature.

This new theory of purified *Ki* was developed by the school of *Nakron*(*Rakron*),<sup>14</sup> where the scholar Im Sŏngju, the elder brother of Yunjitang, clarified this theoretical change. Yunjitang further developed her brother's moral philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Her approach rested on the presumption of the universality of purified *Ki*; that is, her beliefs centered on the idea that all of humanity is equally capable of ultimate morality and thus can communicate with the purity of nature. This new aspect of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism, which emphasized universality and acceptance among humans as opposed to distinction and discrimination, led to the emergence of an egalitarian theory of morality between men and women.

Yunjitang, in her *Nonsŏl*(philosophical Essay), proposed a philosophical foundation for male-female equality. The crux of her argument suggests that gender is irrelevant to obtainment of sagehood through self-cultivation. To understand how she reached this conclusion, the metaphysical relationship between *Li-Ki* and the ethical theory of self-cultivation must be elucidated.

Part of this elucidation relies on drawing distinctions between Yunjitang's theory and orthodox Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism clearly establishes the distinction between *Sim*(heart/mind) and *Sŏng*性(nature), whereas Yunjitang's position favors equivalence between *Sim*(heart/mind) and *Sŏng* 性

<sup>13</sup> KIM, H. Sŏnglihak chŏk kach'i ũi hwaksan kwa yosŏng [Proliferation of Neo-Confucian Value System and Woman], pp. 479 – 480.

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>15</sup> KIM, H. Hyŏnsil chŏk totŏk chuch'esŏng ũi hwangnip: Nongmun Hakpa [Establishment of Realistic Moral Subjectivity: Nongmun school], pp. 420 – 421.

(nature). The Neo-Confucian intention gleaned from its effort in embodying *Li* can be construed as affording a pride of place to *Li* rather than to *Ki* which permeates the cosmos and is the deeply entrenched basis forming the world. According to these Neo-Confucianists, the four elements of morality, “benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom,” are the governing principles of the cosmos in the name of *Li*, sent down to humanity as the Mandate of Heaven.

Conversely, Yunjitang’s focus is to what degree humanity can conform to its innate morality; in other words, the primary concern in Yunjitang’s constructs of morality consists of the human mind and its sole ability to become the standard for virtue and value without mediation of any substance to shape this morality. Yunjitang also argues that the *Ki* that unifies heaven, earth, and humanity into inseparable oneness is innately good-natured. Moreover, *Ki* does not impede the realization of *Li*; rather, *Ki* helps manifest the realization of *Li*.

In this respect, Yunjitang’s perception of the nature of things is that they are endowed with and infused with *Li*. For example, when one considers a mountain’s nature and does not consider its imposing magnificence, or if one considers water’s nature through elimination of the nature of water’s movement, these perceptual techniques equate to exploration of human nature devoid of key attributes: humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Indeed, this analogy conveys that the natural world itself is the embodiment of *Li*, the principle. Yunjitang hypothesizes that each thing in the natural world is endowed with *Taegŭk* 太極, or the Great Ultimate.<sup>16</sup>

Yunjitang disputes the theory that suggests it is differences in the clarity and cloudiness of *Ki* that determines the functioning of myriad things of nature and also posits the perfectibility of *Li*, conceived as the true essence of what things are:

All things of the universe share portions of *Taegŭk* (the Great Ultimate), respectively. When Heaven creates these things, such creation should conform to a certain set of principles. It is imperative that propensities of bodies should vary; the inherent principles should also adapt themselves accordingly. When proper bodies of myriad things exist and function well, how can the functions of such bodies remain unchanged?<sup>17</sup>

To explain *Sŏng* 性 (human nature) as the governing principle of human behavior and *Sim* as that which unifies all that makes us human, Yunjitang explained the *Li-Ki* relationship in monistic rather than dualistic terms. Yet somehow she had to reconcile her *Li-Ki* monism with the essential purity of *Sim*,

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<sup>16</sup> IM, Y. *Yi-Ki Simsŏnsŏl* [*Li-Ki* theory of human heart/mind], pp. 27, 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31 – 33.



since such purity is normally associated with *Li* alone, not with *Li* and *Ki* together. If *Sim* should be endowed with transformative power, then *Sim* should consist of *Ki* material force, a plausible explanation given that *Ki* exists as something almost tangible to realize the governing principle, or *Li*.

However, *Li*'s universality entails universal recognition of the attributes of stable and all-pervasive *Ki* on which *Li* rests. Based on this total pervasiveness of *Ki*, actual purity of the heart/mind, and nature can be realized. *Ki* should not be misconstrued as a differentiated being; rather it should contain a universal purity corresponding to the universality of *Li*. Thus, although manifested in various shapes and forms, *Ki* should be pure.

As mentioned, Yunjitang defines *Li* as universal and *Ki* as differentiated. Thus, to Yunjitang, to consider *Li* as a governing principle, *Li-Ki* dualism appears to render *Ki* as an obstacle; she objects to this dualism. Instead, she understands *Li* and *Ki* as both universally operative and inseparably intertwined and thus she sees the *Ki* of Humanity's *Sim* (heart/mind) as essentially undifferentiated and omnipresent, thereby arguing that the *Sim* (heart/mind) of humans are innately pure since *Li* is present within them as well. Humanity's *Sim* (heart/mind) is presumed here as spontaneous and constituted by an all-pervasive and unadulterated *Ki* to allow consideration of inherent morality. Yunjitang developed a monism in which the *Li* is identified with the *Ki*. This monism shows how humans are capable of carrying out their moral obligation by combining the morality of *Li* with the dynamics of *Ki*. Yunjitang's view is that the *Sim* (heart/mind) of humans is moral and is capable of practicing moral conduct. Neither of the two, *Li* and *Ki*, is capable of explaining human moral capability to the fullest. On this point, observed that Yunjitang extracted this from theories of the nature of the *Sim* (heart/mind) put forth by the *Kiho* School<sup>18</sup> of thought running from Yulgok Yi I 栗谷李珥<sup>19</sup> to Nongmun Im Sŏngju.<sup>20</sup>

Yunjitang establishes *Simsŏnsŏl* 心善說 (the theory of innate goodness of human heart/mind) in itself as capable of pursuing ideals of morality and so she denies that *Li* is an independent entity. Namely, to infuse the praxis capability into *Ki* which is constitutive of the heart/mind of humans, *Li*'s separation is ontologically denied. In addition, the heart/mind's centrality and its presiding

<sup>18</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>19</sup> Yulgok Yi I (1536 – 1584) criticized T'oegye Yi Hwang 退溪 李滉's four-seven thesis, he emphasized the status and role of *Ki* with respect to both learning and self-cultivation. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Yulgok's Neo-Confucianism was maintained by his disciples and *Kiho* school. According to T'oegye's followers, Yulgok emphasized the priority of *Ki* in metaphysics and Ethics. CHUNG, E. *The Korean Neo-Confucianism of Yi T'oegye and Yi Yulgok*, pp. 31 – 32.

<sup>20</sup> KIM, H. Hyŏnsil chŏk totŏk chuch'esŏng ũi hwangnip: Nongmun Hakpa [Establishment of Realistic Moral Subjectivity: Nongmun school], pp. 422 – 425.

authority should be established. This is to idealize the morality of the heart/mind and so establish the moral subjectivity in Neo-Confucianism. This theoretical framework is an attempt to synthesize *Sōng*性 (human nature) as an abstract governing principle of humanity with *Sim* (heart/mind) as a mental phenomenon and to present a “unified” exploration of the two. This proves significant, as these two concepts are otherwise separately analyzed and rarely treated as an inseparable, unified whole.<sup>21</sup> This version of the theory of mind thus lends itself to the equivalence proposition: that the underlying human nature of many is identical, whether commoners or sages, men or women.

To summarize Yunjitang’s theory of *Li-Ki*, according to Neo-Confucianism, each person is constituted by *Ki* and human nature is founded upon the profound oneness of *Ki*. This profound oneness is the base of the universe and becomes *Haoranzhiqi* 浩然之氣 (the moral vigor) of moral virtue for humans. Therefore, regardless of who receives this profound *Ki*, sages or ordinary persons, all humans are innately constituted by this *Ki*’s profound oneness. However, there are, among qualities of ordinary people, purity and turbidity, and plainness and honesty. Because of differing levels of these qualities, each person may fail to fully manifest the profound oneness of *Ki*. Note that each and every person could recover fully the profound oneness of *Ki*, even though s/he once turned turbid and became imbued with variegated mixes. Through moral self-cultivation, if s/he increases strenuous efforts to cultivate innate nature, s/he will recover fully her/his own pure and limpid nature.

As summarized above, through moral self-cultivation, each person can become a sage; there is no gender difference. Yunjitang believes that since each and every human is innately pure and moral in nature, once this nature is restored, she can become a sage. But each and every person cannot automatically become a sage because there exists some difference in temperamental qualities, and each is subject to different level of temptation in conformity with differently situated environments. Thus, education proves necessary.

### **Feminist Critique of Neo-Confucian Theory of Moral-Cultivation: The Ethics of Sameness Versus the Ethics of Difference**

I believe that Yunjitang’s conviction that all humans can be perfected such as sage through education is attributable to the Mencian tradition of Confucianism. However, does Neo-Confucianism of the eighteenth century in Chosŏn dynasty

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<sup>21</sup> KIM, H. Hyŏnsil chŏk totŏk chuch’esŏng ūi hwangnip: Nongmun Hakpa [Establishment of Realistic Moral Subjectivity: Nongmun school], pp. 422 – 425.

provide a reality-based ideology and education whereby females could become sages just as males could?

Some argue that the ethics of Confucianism, especially theories of self-cultivation have been applied to females with no due attention to male dominance as a cultural context.<sup>22</sup> They also assert that theories of self-cultivation in fact gave birth to some other theories that are incapable of being applied to females.

Sagehood can be attained only through a process of self-cultivation. Thus, an understanding of the Neo-Confucian theory of cultivation is needed to understand attainment of sagehood. However, before this can be accomplished, the criticisms of Yunjitang's theory by other feminists<sup>23</sup> need to be examined in order to understand the uniqueness of her philosophy. According to the oft-quoted passage of '*Daxue*大學[The Great Learning]', "the strength of a nation derives from the integrity of the home". Consequently, sagehood can be attained only through political engagement and realization of rites. What does self-cultivation stand for, and what does "realization of the rites" signify? Students of texts and rituals learn directly from a teacher who has already achieved understanding and knowledge of Confucian tradition. Rituals are important guides in organizing society and in the process of moral cultivation.

In Confucianism, when engaged in one's moral self-cultivation, the body is meant to refer to something more than the physical body. The perfection of the body consists of a metaphorical and expansive application and includes the realms of household, nation, and heaven. The perfection of such a broadly expanded body shall be realized only when it establishes an inseparable identification between the individual and other social constructs, such as a group or nation. Indeed, the nation and the world are the ultimate ends toward which any metaphorical and expansive application of the physical body should be directed. By the same token, if the body should fail to cultivate itself to be in

<sup>22</sup> See KIM, S. Yuka ch'orak ūi in'gan ponsōngron e taehan yōsōngjuūi yihae [The feminist understanding on the discourse of human nature in Confucianism], pp. 1 – 30; HŌ, R. Yu'kyo ūi ye wa yōsōng [Confucianism's Ritual and Women], pp. 123 – 152; YI, S. (1999a). Yu'kyo ūi kwan'gye yulli e taehan yōsōngjuūi chōk haesōk [A feminist interpretation of Relational ethics in Confucianism], pp. 33 – 69; YI, S. (1999b). Ch'ayi haesōk ūi yu'kyo chōk t'ūksaek [Confucian Distinctions in Interpretation of Differentiation], pp. 21 – 44; YI, S. The exemplar wife: the life of lady Chang on Andong in Historical Context, pp. 29 – 48.

<sup>23</sup> KIM, M. Sōnglihak esō taetu'toen 'gongjōk yōng'yōk e taehan yōsōngjuūi chōk chōpk'ūn: ImYunjitang ūi hangmun hyōngsōng kwachung ūl t'onghayō [A Feminism Approach to The Public Realm in Neo-Confucianism: Through Im Yunjitang's Study Formation], pp. 389 – 415; YI, S. Chosōn sitae yōsōng chisik ūi songgyōk kwa ku'sōng wōlli [Female Intellectuals' Character in Chosōn Dynasty and It's Configuration Theory: Focusing On Im Yunjitang and Kang Chong'iltang], p. 77 – 103.

the service of the realm of the nation or the world, then that physical body would fall short of perfection.

For Neo-Confucianists of the Chosŏn Dynasty, the realization of their own philosophical ideals and the materialization of their own existence were found only in their participation in public spaces. This political nature of Neo-Confucianism transformed scholar-bureaucrats' or literatis' political activities or participation in public spaces into an overt commitment to a moral society, both in theory and practice. The public spaces referred to all public-minded activities occurring in the public spaces of an ideal Confucian society in which internal sage-like personalities were cultivated and, as a result, Confucian principles were followed. Yunjitang, though incapable of realizing her inner moral virtues in actual public spaces, vigorously and affirmatively accepted and successfully internalized Neo-Confucianism. For this reason, however, a skeptic could maintain that, in her view, a female Neo-Confucian is like a round square, self-contradictory.

In Confucianism, however, the metaphorical extension of the female body is revealed more generally within a household and more specifically in the relationship between husband and wife. The prescribed categories of female moral self-cultivation are developed against the backdrop of these prescribed constructs. In Confucianism, the moral images of a female are diverse, ranging from a female who founds a new household through the formalized ritual of marriage, to a mother, a wife, and a daughter-in-law depicted as sacrificing all for her children and for the family. The question becomes whether there is a relationship between the vicarious self-actualization as described and the self-realization of a person whose scope of achievement is expected to expand to the level of the nation or the world.

Previous research demonstrates that the lives of ancient Northeastern Asian women in areas from Korea to China to Japan, had long-standing relationship with codes of clan regulations and Patriarchal family paradigm in Northeast Asian nations.<sup>24</sup> Maintenance of these clan regulations was not just for the maintenance of order between family members, but rather for their broad symbolic role, emblematic of social and national significance. Hence, there were specific and strenuous efforts at keeping this institution functioning.

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<sup>24</sup> For further information, see the following: YANG, H. Ōtōke 'yōsōng' ūl ye'ro kyuchōnghal kōsin'ga: Yōsōng kyōyuk ūl chungsim ū'ro [How to Define 'Womenhood' Through 'Ritual': Focusing on Educational Books for Women], pp. 91 – 112; DEUHLER, M. *The Confucian transformation of Korea: A study of society and ideology*; DEUHLER, M. *Korean Women: View from the inner room*; DUNCAN, J. The Naehun and the politics of gender in fifteenth century Korea, pp. 26 – 57; KO, D. , KIM, J. and PIGGOTT, J.R. (Ed.) *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, Japan*, pp. 5 – 6; DEUHLER, M. Propagating Female Virtues in Chosŏn Korea, pp. 142 – 165.

Under the patriarchal family paradigm code, the emphasis on the rights and honor of the first-born child was unparalleled. According to the code, the primogeniture system was most essential for sustaining the social order. The rituals performed in the memorial services as an embodiment of the social order were strictly assigned to those meriting the services. Hence, a strict distinction between the first-born child and other children was established. Respectfulness toward ancestors meant nothing but the acceptance of an order dominated by paternalistic lines. In order to preserve and guarantee the purity of the bloodlines through generations, emphasis was placed on the importance of sons over daughters, which was thus translated into a suppression of the female body.

A suppressive law prohibiting remarriage of widows after the death of their husbands was promulgated. This oppressiveness was later inherited as the dominant ideology of the Chosŏn Dynasty in Korea. Women's fidelity was meant to preserve the household, which in turn reinforced the existing order. Although women's fidelity to their husbands after death was scaled down or concealed by more tangible issues, such as husband and family, the fidelity of women was often likened to the allegiance of civil servants to the throne so that the faithfulness of wives toward their husbands was the common theme of innumerable literary works. The running themes of many literary works were not limited to having a wife maintain a faithful and loving relationship with her husband or to just keeping one's own face or authority.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, this emphasis on conjugal faithfulness closely correlated with gender-based and discriminatory types of ethical consciousness. In other words, there was an asymmetrical relationship between husband and wife. A husband's conjugal faithfulness toward his wife was downplayed, whereas the fidelity of a wife toward her husband was disproportionately overemphasized. Rituals in Neo-Confucianism were an expression of the overcoming of one's own desires, as well as a manifestation of moral self-cultivation.

To illustrate this gender-based and discriminatory type of ethical consciousness, the way in which a man showed his fidelity to principle and honor differed from how a woman showed the same. This difference illuminates a set of discrete criteria at work in Neo-Confucianism, all of which were used in evaluating the bodies of men and women, respectively. In light of this, in the Chosŏn Dynasty, a code of law prohibited women from remarrying but allowed men to remarry or even to take a concubine in the name of preserving family lineage.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> YANG, H. Ōtōke 'yōsōng ūl ye'ro kyuchōnghal kōsin'ga: Yōsōng kyōyuk ūl chungsim ūro [How To Define Womenhood' Through 'Ritual'], pp. 91 – 120; KIM, S. Yuka ch'orak ūi in'gan pōnsōngron e taehan yōsōngchūi yihae [The feminist understanding on the discourse of human nature in Confucianism], pp. 16 – 21.

<sup>26</sup> KIM, S. Yuka ch'orak ūi in'gan pōnsōngron e taehan yōsōngjuui yihae [The feminist understanding on the discourse of human nature in Confucianism], pp. 1 – 30; DEUHLER, M. *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A study of society*

Under the existing regulations of lines of descent and Neo-Confucianism, how was it possible for females to attain the ideal of internal sagehood and external kingship just as males did? In circumstances in which it was impossible to participate in public deliberation and public spaces and in which improving their own learning through the reading of the classics was almost inaccessible to most women, how was it possible for females to attain the ideal of internal sagehood and external kinship just as males did?

Furthermore, in Confucianism, in which a gender-based, disparate relationship was ontologically one of the most fundamental relationships constitutive of human identity, the question of how women were positioned as social beings can be unequivocally verified in some examples of women presented in *Sohak* 小學 [Elementary Learning] and *Zhuzijiali* 朱子家禮 [Zhuxi's Family Rituals].<sup>27</sup>

As shown in the relevant parts,<sup>28</sup> the education rituals demanded of a woman are different from those demanded of a man. Under these different educational practices, through which one constructs and fashions one's own sense of identity, the meaning of virtue is distinct for a woman. The essential content of the educational rituals for a woman and the overall object of such education are comprised of several stages. In the pre-marital stage, a woman is expected to receive an education at home, making her a marriageable woman under the direction of her parents. In the post-marital stage, a woman is expected to serve her husband wholeheartedly, keeping her faithfulness toward him, serving the parents-in-law with devotion, and mothering good children while rearing them into respectful citizens. The enlightenment acquired through this entire

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*and ideology*, pp. 16 – 21. Deuchler said that “Other reasons then may have been a particular woman's attractiveness as an entertainer and sexual partner and the social prestige the possession of several wives gave to a man of high political office and good economic standing.” In DEUCHLER, M. *The Confucian transformation of Korea: A study of society and ideology*, p. 268. These facts mean that gender-based and discriminatory type of ethical consciousness originates from the patriarchal ideology.

<sup>27</sup> “At the age of ten, boys ought to go out to study under a school master and should stay in the outer quarters or away from home. They should study the commentaries to *the Classic of Poetry* 詩經 and *the Record of Rites* 禮經, which will be explained to them by their teacher. They should also be taught the essence of benevolence, moral duty, etiquette, wisdom, and faithfulness. From this time on, they can study Mencius, Xunzi, and Yangzi, and read widely in other works. The essential ones, however, should be recited. . . . For girls, at this age instruction in compliance and obedience and the principal household tasks should begin. Household tasks such as breeding silkworms, weaving, sewing and cooking are the proper duties of a woman. In addition, instruction in them lets a girl learn the hardships through which food and clothing are obtained so that she will not dare to be extravagant. Concerning delicate craft, however, no instruction is needed.” CHU, H. (1991) *Zhuzijiali* [Chu Hsi's “Family Rituals”], p. 33. For further information, see pp. 32 – 34. Here, Chu Hsi refers to Zhuxi.

<sup>28</sup> See footnote 27.

sequence is what the woman must experience throughout her lifetime. However, this enlightenment differs from the enlightenment of a man, whose sole goal is to attain “internal sagehood and external kingship”.<sup>29</sup>

Much research shows<sup>30</sup> that self-cultivation requisite of females is different from that demanded of males.<sup>31</sup> The self-cultivation for males begins with each practitioner’s personal dimension and harmonious ordering of family relationships. As this personal level of self-cultivation deepens and becomes more sophisticated, such personal moral sophistication will later become applicable to such public spheres as governing the state or even the world under heaven. However, the self-cultivation requisite of females does not entail this expanded application of what is morally achieved at the personal level to such public spheres. Instead, what is inordinately emphasized for a woman is to practice dutiful obedience, which means limiting her within her scope of family relationships and indoctrinating her to form a character of respectfulness toward significant men in her life. From this view, the requisite self-cultivation for females is equivalent to prescribed, cultivated virtues of womanhood fashioned

<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed explanation, refer to HŎ, R. *Yu’kyo ũi ye wa yŏsŏng* [Confucianism’s Ritual and Women], pp. 130 – 137.

<sup>30</sup> For further information, see the following: DEUCHLER, M. *Korean Women: View from the inner room*; DEUCHLER, M. *The Confucian transformation of Korea: A study of society and ideology*; HŎ, R. *Yu’kyo ũiye wa yŏsŏng* [Confucianism’s Ritual and Women], pp. 123 – 152; YANG, H. Ŏtŏke ‘yŏsŏng’ ũl ye’ro kyuchŏnghal kŏsin’ga: Yŏsŏnggyŏyuk ũl chungsim ũro[How to Define ‘Womenhood’ Through ‘Ritual’: Focusing on Educational Books for Women], pp. 91 – 112; KIM, M. *Sŏnglihak esŏ taetutoen ‘gongjŏk yŏng’yŏk e taehan yŏsŏngjuũi chŏk chŏpk’un: ImYunjitang ũi hangmun hyŏngsŏng kwachŏng ũl t’onghayŏ* [A Feminism Approach To The Public Realm in Neo-Confucianism: Through ImYunjitang’s Study Formation], pp. 389 – 415; KIM, S. *Yuka ch’orak ũi in’gan ponsŏngron e taehan yŏsŏngjuũi yihae* [The feminist understanding on the discourse of human nature in Confucianism], pp. 1 – 30; DEUCHLER, M. *Propagating Female Virtues in Chosŏn Korea*, pp. 142 – 165; YI, B. *Women in Korean History*, pp. 29 – 48.

<sup>31</sup> “Education for woman was indoctrination. Its purpose was to instill in woman, through the weight of China’s classic literature, the ideals of a male-oriented society and to motivate them for the tasks of married life. . . . Before marriage, girls were not only instructed in Confucian ideology, but also experienced its practical consequences. . . . They were more and more confined to the inner quarters of the house where they received instruction in domestic duties from their mothers and grandmothers. They learned embroidery and the cultivation of silkworms, and were initiated into the intricacies of sacrificial food preparation. Girls’ cultural training was focused entirely on filling the role of married women. Training in ideology and in practical duties was based on the Confucian dictum that moral human being was molded by the teaching of the sages. The successful application of these teachings was reflected in customs and manners. It was important to prepare girls for their future functions as moral guardians of the domestic sphere and providers for the physical needs of their families.” DEUCHLER, M. *The Confucian transformation of Korea: A study of society and ideology*, p. 258.

out of extended periods of annealing and tempering through dutiful fulfilling of ideals of obedience and female virtues. In other words, whereas the females within a household are charged with domestic duties, such as cooking, clothing, and housekeeping, the male head of the household still takes the high command of the entire family. Following the “three obediences”,<sup>32</sup> females have to run the household while relegated to ancillary, supportive roles, requiring them to subordinate themselves to the prescribed womanly ideals and goals set by and for the benefit of the patriarch of the family.

Under these two separate gender-based paths of self-cultivation, how did the females of the eighteenth-century of Chosŏn Dynasty fulfill their full potential and purpose in life? A sage is a public figure, as an agent of bringing harmony to and building virtue in a public sphere. This public-spiritedness of a sage was not extended to women since women at the time were denied a role in the public sphere. Given this, women could not be a sage in the traditional sense. This said, for women, a new-fangled definition of sagehood should be conjured.

### **Yunjitang’s Theory of Sagehood and the Rationale for a Feminist Reading of Her Theory**

Kim Miyŏng maintained that Yunjitang was not a feminist because she did not provide a space for protest against the male-dominated order embodied in traditional Neo-Confucianism.<sup>33</sup> Rather, according to Kim Miyŏng, Yunjitang’s scholarly achievement was a reflection on the virtues of fulfilling household tasks and chores from a female perspective. This may be substantiated by her brother, Im Chŏngju, who, together with her brother-in-law, Sin Kwang’u, played a pivotal role in publishing a collection of her literary and philosophical works. In their shared memory of Yunjitang, the brothers emphasized her virtuous and conscientious fulfillment of all household tasks and responsibilities as a woman. Indeed, Yunjitang herself seemed to stress the familial order based on gender-based differentiation and separate male and female functionalities. Second, she considered familial lineage significant.

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<sup>32</sup> “A woman must obey her father before marriage, she must obey her husband after marriage and she should also obey her sons after the death of her husband.” The Three obediences were a set of basic moral principles specifically for women in Confucianism.

<sup>33</sup> Kim Miyŏng argues that Yunjitang’s theoretical direction is not directed toward feminist awakening. See Kim, M. Sŏnglihak esŏ taetutoen kongjŏk yŏng’yŏk e taehan yŏsŏngjuŭi chŏk chŏpk’ŭn: ImYunjitang ŭi hangmun hyŏngsŏng kwachŏng ŭl t’onghayŏ [A Feminism Approach to The Public Realm in Neo-Confucianism: Through Im Yunjitang’s Study Formation], pp. 389 – 415.



Contrary to what Kim Miyōng, Yi Yōngch'un, and Kim Yōngmin<sup>34</sup> have argued, however, Yunjitang did not emphasize a limited moral self-cultivation for women distinguishable from a self-cultivation appropriate to men, nor did she accept the Neo-Confucianist theory of differentiation and separation based on gender roles that underscore the view that there were disparate, separated paths to sagehood for men and women:

The Dao (Way) of males(Kōndo乾道) is strong and potent. The Dao(Way) of females (Kondo坤道) is submissive. Each Dao having its own governing law. What Taisi太妣 and King Wen文王 did differently arises from their differences in capability and means. However, the commonality undergirding this disparate manifestation is the unity of the governing principle. Even if their disparate original endowment and subsequent discrete manifestation are transposed, the outcome remains the same. Hence, even if a person is born as a married wife, if that person chooses not to further strive for embodying Tairen太任 or Taisi太妣; she is considered to have abandoned herself to despair.<sup>35</sup>

Yunjitang is said to have uttered the above statements; however, their authenticity is questionable, because many historical documents and records<sup>36</sup> intend to limit the role of women: namely to the gender role of traditional women as revealed in the ideal images of mother and wife. As a result, Yunjitang is taken to have affirmed the Neo Confucianist theory of differentiation based on gender. However convincing these records might appear, one should not forget that these records have been controlled and passed down by males.

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<sup>34</sup> Kim Yōngmin argues that Yunjitang's Neo-Confucianism is not a paradigmatic case of a female actively engaged in an intellectual discourse while not doing the domestic chores as a dutiful household keeper. Rather, her life seen as breaking the ground to live as the first female Neo-Confucian in Chosŏn dynasty may be an embodiment of compromise in male-dominant society. In other words, Yunjitang as a paragon of Neo-Confucianism survived through Chosŏn dynasty not as an independent Neo-Confucian thinker but rather as a woman intellectual who faithfully met all the requirements as a dutiful household manager and attained the traditional female virtues. KIM, Y. Hyōng'yong mosun ūl nŏm'ōsŏ [Beyond An Oxymoron: Two Female Philosophers in Chosŏn Dynasty], pp. 7 – 33.

<sup>35</sup> IM, Y. Memories: Appendix [Purok 附錄], *Yunjitang Yuko*, p.6b. Tairen was the queen in the Zhou周 Dynasty and was mother of King Wen. Taisi was the wife of King Wen. Historical sources say that Queen Tairen was honestly dignified, as her behavior upheld the virtues of civility, and above all, she was known for her fetal education. Taisi followed this practice and gave birth to King Wu 武王 and Zhougong周公.

<sup>36</sup> *Sohak* [Elementary Learning], *Hyokyōng* 孝經[Book of Filial Piety], *Yōllyōchōn* 烈女傳 [Stories of Virtuous Women], *Naehun* 內訓 [The Book of Admonition to Daughter], *Lijing* 禮經 [The Record of Rites], *Zhuzi jiali* [Zhuxi's Family Rituals].

In Yunjitang's theory of moral self-cultivation, there is no difference between man and woman. Should King Wen's position and the positions of both Tairen and Taisi be substituted for one another, it would follow that Tairen and Taisi would act as King Wen would, and vice versa, as demonstrated by Sin Kwang'u 申光祐 in the above passage.<sup>37</sup> The above the passage indeed suggests that anyone who can strive for sagehood is capable of becoming a sage. Hence, each of us should keep striving for sagehood over the entire course of our life, and even a woman can become a sage.

Between these two opposing views,<sup>38</sup> in order to grasp what Yunjitang intended in her theory, we must first understand her supposition about moral self-cultivation. For Neo-Confucianists of the Chosŏn Dynasty, public spaces were centers of discourse, deliberation, and decision-making. The public spaces afforded cultivation of sagehood and sage-like personalities, where the actualization of Neo-Confucian principles and their corresponding rules entered into society. The conference in the court or the clan, where predetermined rules were employed, exemplifies actualization of Neo-Confucian ideals. Yunjitang was not able to realize her dream in public spaces. Personally denied the opportunity to enact her inner moral virtues, she might have sought an opportunity to do so or aspired to participate in public spaces.

Yunjitang employed her theory of politics, not limited only to "admonition on frequent review," "admonition on encouraging study."<sup>39</sup> As well, her high

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<sup>37</sup> See the original text shown in footnote 35.

<sup>38</sup> These two opposing views refer to the disparity between those of other scholars such as Kim Miyŏng (2005 a), Yi Yŏngch'un (2000), Kim Yŏngmin (2005c) and Kim Chaeim (2007) and my view. See KIM, M. Sŏnglihak esŏ taetutoen kongjŏk yŏng'yŏk e taehan yŏsŏngjuŏi chŏk chŏpk'ŭn: ImYunjitang ŭi hangmun hyŏngsŏng kwachŏng ŭl t'onghayŏ [A Feminism Approach To The Public Realm in Neo-Confucianism: Through Im Yunjitang's Study Formation], pp. 389 – 415; Yi, Y. Yŏngjŏngjotae ŭi munye puhŭng kwa Im Yunjitang [Renaissance And Im Yunjitang During The Reigns Of Yŏngjo And Chŏngjo], pp. 142 – 154; KIM, Y. Hyŏng'yong mosun ŭl nŏm'ŏsŏ [Beyond An Oxymoron: Two Female Philosophers In Chosŏn Dynasty], pp. 7 – 33; KIM, C. *Im Yunjitang ŭi sŏnglihak yŏn'gu* [A Study on the Neo-Confucianism of Im Yunjitang], pp. 39–179.

<sup>39</sup> She posited her theory of politics about Wang Anshi 王安石. "After seizing power, Wang Anshi did not do anything worthwhile for 10 years. He only associated with his own cliques, dismissing and hating other cliques. He favored those in support of his new political reforms but hated and dismissed those against his reform policies. Thus, only petty persons were allowed to enter the government, and gentlemen bolted from the government. Qu Yangxiu 歐陽脩, in his "Theory of Political Critiques," stated that "noble-minded persons closely associate with the noble-hearted men, whereas the petty men associate only with the petty ones. This is a pithy truism. All the persons appointed by Wang Anshi proved to be false sycophants. How can he extricate himself from the criticism that he should be treated as a petty man?" IM, Y. Non Wang Anshi 論王安石. In *Yunjitang Yuko*, pp. 21a – 22b.

praise of Yan Hui 顏回 reveals concretely how she perceived a moral exemplar and a sage. Yan Hui reflected and demonstrated the moral ideal of all Confucianists since the times of Confucius. Yunjitang aspired to become a moral epitome, just as Yan Hui, throughout her lifetime. Yunjitang left weeds of us with the following remarks: “A dagger and a sword! Do not treat me as merely a wife. Try your best to enhance your sharpness, but your alertness-enhancing efforts should be performed as if you were sharpening yourself on a whetstone anew. Rid yourself of unsolicited muddled thoughts and shear off the your heart.”<sup>40</sup> Yunjitang stressed that moral cultivation reflects development of a human being in a universal sense, rather than only cultivation of femininity in a married woman. According to her theory of moral fostering, if humans restrain their private desires and interests and strive to attain a moral ideal, they will achieve benevolence. In this respect, just like their male counterparts, females received such varying appellations as “Learning of the way in Women’s Quarters”, the “Female Confucian Gentleman”, “Female Sage”, and the “Female Confucian Scholar”. Her theory posited that nothing is more important than focusing on and enacting a course of action to attain goals that all individual paths to moral perfection are identical, and that such paths are equally open to males and females.<sup>41</sup>

Yunjitang attempted to demonstrate a universal way of moral cultivation open to both males and females, not merely a limited way of moral cultivation for females. However, society at the time of the Chosŏn Dynasty was paternalistic, and ethics of difference ruled. Against this backdrop, Yunjitang’s progress, as reflected in her theory of sameness, should be recognized and credited for the valuable contribution it made to an understanding of females.

### **Yunjitang’s Way of Moral Cultivation: The Ethics of Sameness**

As a way of practicing her own view of sagehood, Yunjitang posited her vision of moral cultivation as follows.

Seat yourself in a lotus-position just the way the Buddha once did himself. When you stand on your feet, your foot should be all aligned neatly. Do not glance at any form of vices, and do not listen to jarring sounds. Do not speak as if you were senile and be cautious before your action. Climbing up to a higher elevation should begin with the ground at lower elevation. When you are to travel, it should begin from a

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<sup>40</sup> IM, Y. Sword inscription [Pikŏm myŏng 匕劍銘]. In *Yunjitang Yuko*, p.5a.

<sup>41</sup> KIM, C. *Im Yunjitang ūi sŏnglihak yŏn’gu* [A Study on the Neo-Confucianism of Im Yunjitang], pp. 111, 120.

nearby neighborhood before you start your travel to a far-off place.  
Should you put these basics into practice, these habits will become your  
own nature.<sup>42</sup>

The above is a passage from *Lunyu* [The Analects], which posits that “human nature is similar to one another, but habits keep them away from one another.” Namely, humans at the time were obliged to realize their potential of becoming a sage through learning and cultivating practices, since they were all born and endowed with the potential to achieve sagehood. What was important to understand was that there were no differences between men and women in their cultivation.<sup>43</sup>

*Sǒng* 誠(Integrity) and *Kyǒng* 敬(composure)<sup>44</sup> were most essential to cultivation. Individuals needed to carefully distinguish good from evil, cultivate goodness, and remove evilness, for then all their actions would harmonize with the laws of heaven. When seating themselves, people were expected to conduct themselves as a sage did, to stand up and align their feet evenly and neatly. They should not glance at evil things, listen to silly talk, or speak absurdly. They must mind their conduct. The way to practice *Sǒng*(Integrity) and *Kyǒng*(composure) was substantially identical with conventional Neo-Confucian practice.<sup>45</sup> The purpose of a Confucian is “not to abstain from action and still the motions of the mind, but to orientate oneself for moral action”.<sup>46</sup> “The human mind is at its peril and the moral mind is obscured, so be precise and consistent and keep the Middle Way.” This passage appears in *Shujing* 書經[the Classic of History]. In their moral cultivation, Neo-Confucianists aspired to transform the human mind – in which they believed evil was intermingled with good – into a moral mind, which was wholly good.

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<sup>42</sup> IM, Y. Exhortations and Eulogy [Sisūpcham 時·習·箴]. In *Yunjitang Yuko*, p.3a.

<sup>43</sup> KIM, C. *Im Yunjitang ūi sǒnglihak yǒn'gu* [A Study on the Neo-Confucianism of Im Yunjitang], p. 118.

<sup>44</sup> According to A.C. Graham's interpretation, “*Sǒng* 誠” will be translated as “integrity,” and “*Kyǒng*” as “composure”. Though it is generally translated “respect” or “reverence” for “*Kyǒng*”. The connection between composure and integrity is shown in the following passages; “Making unity the ruling consideration is called composure, Unity is called integrity.” In *Henan Chengshi Yishu* 河南程氏遺書[Surviving Works of the Cheng Brothers]; Reprinted from GRAHAM, A.C. *Two Chinese Philosophers*, p. 71.

<sup>45</sup> Likewise, these phrases may be given the same contextual understanding. “How despicable of you, humans, not worthier than just things themselves! The reason humans have degraded themselves like the above is humans' materialistic desires that hinder their perspective. How can we escape from this possessive desire? Cleanse your mind of all impurities and resist earthly desires and private interests. Should you resist worldly desires and private interests just for one day, then brilliant virtues will be acquired naturally.” See IM, Y. A Clear Mirror [Kyǒng myǒng 鏡銘]. In *Yunjitang Yuko*, p. 4b.

<sup>46</sup> GRAHAM, A.C. *Two Chinese Philosophers*, p. 69.

Just as Mencius advocated, all humans were capable of becoming a sage, so standing firm in one's resolution was important in the initial stages of the process of becoming a sage.<sup>47</sup> This will be possible through accumulation of *Kyöng*(composure); “composure is revealed outwardly by the measured sedateness in expression, speech and deportment of the true Confucian gentleman.”<sup>48</sup>

It is emphasized that sages and adults should not be caught up with their current; private interests but should be patient and practice keeping the Three Bonds and the Five Relationships that are the fundamentals of Confucian ethics, to overcome their own private interests. This method correlates with the theory of moral cultivation of Neo-Confucianism. Though Yunjitang accepted that Confucian notion, but extended such notion to include the position that woman can pursue the standard Neo-Confucian ways of self-cultivation to become a Sage.

How did this trend affect other female intellectuals thereafter? According to Yi Hyesun, Yunjitang's theories influenced Kang Chöng'iltang (1772 – 1832) and other female literary writers, including Kim Hoyönjae years later. Kang Chöng'iltang appears to have read “*Yunjitang Yuko*[Yunjitang's Posthumous Work]”, published in 1796. This lends credibility to the presupposition that Yunjitang's scholarship influenced later generations of female intellectuals.<sup>49</sup> Both Yunjitang and Kang Chöng'iltang strove to practice the Mencian theory of moral cultivation, which purported that any practitioner could restore her own original benevolence and pristine humanity as long as he or she succeeded in ridding dregs and impurities of her own character.

Taken together, their theories of moral cultivation that focused on the sameness between the sexes are historically significant in the sense that both included such topics as virtue and moral cultivation that had excluded women, and so had been accessible only to males, and commonly argued that these topics were in fact relevant for womanly virtues and education.

## Conclusion

The social changes regarding women of the eighteenth-century Chosön era can be illuminated by the self-consciousness and moral cultivation theories of Yunjitang.

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<sup>47</sup> KIM, C. *Im Yunjitang üi sönglihak yön'gu* [A Study on the Neo-Confucianism of Im Yunjitang], pp. 99 – 101.

<sup>48</sup> GRAHAM, A.C., *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> YI, H. *Chosönjo huki yösöng chisöngsa* [A History of Female Intellectuals in the Late Chosön Dynasty], pp. 111, 393 – 394.

Following the three gender-difference perspectives described by Tavis, each of these women developed a theory almost identical to Tavis' second perspective.<sup>50</sup> All three theories propose that females are as fundamentally capable and have the same potential as men. Thus, despite some individual differences, there is no fundamental gender difference. The gender-duality proposition is derived from the monolithic valuation framework that regards the male gender as the basis for normal gender. In Yunjitang's theory of self-cultivation, this position is reflected in the image of a sage as an ideal model of moral cultivation.

Despite the difference in ethics requirements and social obligations arising from gender difference, Yunjitang believed that a sage could be a neutral and gender-free being who displayed neither male nor female characteristics in the context of the eighteenth century. A sage would be the personified ideal, not subjugated to phallogocentrism; thus, such a sage could form the basis for a new understanding of femininity, based on the Neo-Confucianism put forth by Yunjitang, in which male standards could be equally applicable to females. Yunjitang hoped this new understanding would dismiss many aspects of gender-based differences in terms of life experiences, resources, power, and thought processes.

Yunjitang viewed the male-female existence and relationship as interdependent and complementary to each other, comparable to the *Yin-Yang* principle of the universe. Despite the different social positions and roles of males and females, particularly during their lives, Yunjitang felt there should be no difference between them in terms of human nature and value. Yunjitang posited that males and females were jointly important and significant beings in the universe and society, and society should not regard one gender as superior to the other. Though the roles assigned to males and females were inherently different, their value and duty as human beings were the same and equal, and self-cultivation way was focused on the sameness between the sexes.

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<sup>50</sup> See the original text shown in footnote 12 of this article.

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