

## Reinforced Hetero-Normativity: Gender Constructs in Chosŏn (朝鮮) Korea

Kevin N. Cawley

### Abstract

During Korea's Chosŏn dynasty (朝鮮; 1392-1910), strictly codified hetero-normalising gender constructs emerged, which for all intents and purposes undermined the possibility of homosexuality to exist in either private or public spaces. By drawing on contemporary critical theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, this paper critiques the socio-historical constructs of gender identity in Korea shaped during this period. Such critiques expose the inherent inequalities of hierarchical 'gender traditions' that are reinforced through patriarchies, which in the case of Chosŏn, commemorated the patrilineal genealogies of (supposedly) heterosexual men from the past. I will begin by dismantling notions of gender during this period, which was manipulated and rigidly constructed by (mis)using Neo-Confucian texts and metaphysics, inherited from the Chinese philosopher Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200). Zhu's *Reflections on Things at Hand*, sought to regulate the family, while his *Lesser Learning*, reiterated rules that facilitated the suppression of women as daughters, wives, and even mothers. While commemorating 'great men' and emphasising ideals of 'good women', a gender ideology was implanted within the social matrix and recorded from one generation to the next in genealogical records known as *chokpo* (族譜). This hetero-normative way-of-being was enforced in legal texts and through literature by men, which yoked women into artificially orchestrated modes of behaviour that would also be transmitted by women themselves via texts that they themselves sometimes wrote and distributed. These ideas continue to influence modern Korean society, where women still struggle to dismantle out-dated modes of social expectations, and where the LGBTQ community is only starting to assert themselves and reject 'compulsive' hetero-normativity.

**Keywords:** hetero-normativity, Chosŏn, gender traditions, genealogy, *artificial* nature

---

**Kevin N. Cawley** is the Director of the Irish Institute of Korean Studies, and Head of the Department of Asian Studies at University College Cork (UCC), Ireland. He established Korean Studies as a new discipline in Ireland, and has been awarded multiple fellowships and awards from leading research institutes in Korea and Asia. He has researched and published extensively on Korea's intellectual history. He is the author of *The Religious and Philosophical Traditions of Korea* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

## Introduction

During Korea's Chosŏn dynasty (朝鮮; 1392-1910), painstakingly contrived and constructed gender ideals meant that one's greatest goal in life was to produce a male heir, who would assure the genealogical continuation of one's lineage. This also helped to reinforce the ideals of marriage and of procreation, and thereby undermined the possibility of any existence that might detract one from the hetero-normative trajectory that shaped one's identity in both the public and private sphere. Such ideas reflect the teachings and texts of Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200), whose ideas were virtually considered sacrosanct in Chosŏn among leading (all-male) philosophers. This paper examines the gender roles and obligations forced on women (but also on men), which were encoded into the actual legal system by the mid-Chosŏn period. It draws on the ideas of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who both show how women are discriminated against in patriarchal systems, and these ideas can help us to further deconstruct the 'gender traditions' that women found themselves thrust into. These inherited 'gender traditions' were shaped and contorted by the assured indisputable superiority of men who constructed them, even manipulating Neo-Confucian metaphysics to do so, outlined in this article. Meticulously maintained and coveted genealogies, known as *chokpo* (族譜) in Korean, remembered and commemorated men, while all but excluding the mention of women, who were supposed to follow and obey fathers, husbands, and, eventually (all going well), sons. The Confucianisation of the Chosŏn period implanted the agnatic principle into the social matrix, now even pitting men as bitter rivals to their own brothers: the eldest (legal) brother inherited the ritual prestige which linked him to the ancestors – as well as their wealth and social capital, which he inherited. This paper examines in detail the importance and influence of key texts by Zhu Xi, whose ideas contributed greatly to how both genders were forced into a cycle of hetero-normativity, via texts and a reworking of the dynamics of the metaphysics of yin (陰) and yang (陽). Such ideas, inculcating a veritable system of female inferiority, were spread by men and even women themselves. Men were also expected to imitate and maintain highly precise rules of *hetero-masculine* propriety, delimiting the possibility for homosexuality, reinforced in the writings of Korea's neo-Confucian scholars, even in the *magnum opus* of Yi Hwang (李滉, 1501-1570), known by his pen name T'oegye (退溪), outlined below.

### Zhu Xi's Legacy: *Regulating the Family*

The influence of Zhu Xi's ideas in Korea cannot be overemphasised, in particular in relation to one of Korea's most well-renowned philosophers, T'oegye, shaping his chef-d'oeuvre *Sŏnghak sipto* (聖學十圖) [Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning], composed in 1568.<sup>1</sup> T'oegye's

---

<sup>1</sup> For an English translation of this text see Kalton, Michael C. (trans.), *To Become a Sage*, translated and edited, (Columbia University Press: New York, 1988). For a modern Korean translation with original classical Chinese, see Yi Hwang (T'oegye), *Sŏnghak sipto* (聖學十圖) [Ten Diagrams of Sage Learning], translated by Lee Kwangho with original Chinese (Seoul: Hongik Books, 2005). T'oegye's text was particularly influential for Yi I (李珥, 1536-1584), known by his pen name Yulgok (栗谷), the other renowned Neo-Confucian master of the late sixteenth century. For a modern Korean translation of Yulgok's treatise on sagehood, see Yi I, *Sŏnghak chipyo* (聖學輯要) [Essentials of the Learning of the Sages], translated by Ch'oe Yong-gap (Seoul: Pulbit Publishing, 2006). For a French translation, see Yi I, *Anthologie de la sagesse extreme-orientale*, translated by Philippe Thiébault (Gémenos: Éditions Autres Temps, 2009).

text drew on the *Four Books* (四書, C. *Sishu*, K. *Sasō*),<sup>2</sup> which Zhu himself had selected and made central to his reconceptualization of the Confucian ‘Way’ (道, C. *Dao*, K. *Do*), replacing the previous importance and study of the *Five Classics* (五經, C. *Wujing*, K. *Ogyōng*).<sup>3</sup> The *Four Books*, along with Zhu’s commentaries on them, became central to the study of Confucianism during the Chosŏn dynasty, and became regarded as orthodoxy. Zhu gave the *Great Learning* a central place in his reinvigorated Confucian discourse, which emphasised the role of the family as a sort of microcosm of the state, requiring strict regulation and manipulation, especially where women were concerned.

Zhu delineated his quite misogynistic rhetoric in the great compendium of Neo-Confucian thought, *Reflections on Things at Hand* (近思錄, C. *Jinsilu*), which he composed along with Lu Zuqian (呂祖謙, 1137-1181).<sup>4</sup> In particular, chapter six, ‘The Way to Regulate The Family’, articulates (in twenty two sections) the ways in which men were considered to be the maintainer and mainstay of the family (considering the eldest male as its head), while women were considered as inferior to men, and expected at all times to follow and obey them, developing ideas from the *Liji* (禮記) [Records of Rites]. This particular idea of female subservience to men, reflected in the “Three Obediences” (三從之道, C. *Sancong zhidao*, K. *Samjong chido*) depicts how: “The woman follows (and obeys) the man: - in her youth, she follows her father and elder brother; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her son”.<sup>5</sup> These ‘obediences’ take for granted that a woman will produce a male heir, something that Zhu Xi himself expects, writing, “In dealing with his mother, the son should help her with mildness and gentleness so she will be in accord with righteousness [...] how can he get into her heart and change her [...] so that her personal life will be correct and matters well managed”.<sup>6</sup> Women in this context are supposed to rely on men, even their sons, to refine their own characters, and to guide them towards righteousness, while men are able to rely on their own ‘self-cultivation’ (修己, C. *xiuji*, K. *sugi*) guided by the teachings of all male sages, who were highlighted in the Confucian literature, embodied in the teachings of male philosophers and ‘great men’ such as Confucius himself and Mencius.

Again in Zhu’s sixth chapter, relating to the regulation of the family, women are described as lesser, inferior beings to men, whose feelings and minds are often described as dark and difficult to understand, contrasted with men who are described in positive terms. Zhu maligns the fact that “Most people today are careful in choosing sons-in-law but careless in selecting daughters-in-law. Actually the character of sons-in-law is easy to see but that of daughters-in-law is difficult to know”.<sup>7</sup> Men and women, male and female are characterised in terms of sharply delineated oppositional pairs. Hélène Cixous, the French philosopher and feminist, has written on this very subject: the organisation of women in society through the manipulation (or regulation, to draw on the language of Zhu himself) of “dual, hierarchized

<sup>2</sup> *The Four Books*: the *Lunyu* (論語) [The Analects], the *Daxue* (大學) [Great Learning], the *Zhongyong* (中庸) [Doctrine of the Mean], and the *Mengzi* (孟子) [The Mencius]. Both The Great Learning and Doctrine of the mean had been chapters in the *Record of Rites* (禮記).

<sup>3</sup> *The Five Classics*: the *Yijing* (易經) [Book of Changes], the *Shujing* (書經) [Book of Documents], the *Shijing* (詩經) [Book of Poetry], the *Liji* (禮記) [Records of Rites], and the *Chunqiu* (春秋) [Spring and Autumn Annals].

<sup>4</sup> Zhu Xi and Lu Zuqian, *Reflections on Things at Hand*, translated by Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> James Legge (trans.), *The Li Ki, I-X*, In *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xxvii, edited by F. M. Müller, (Clarendon Press: Oxford. 1885), 441.

<sup>6</sup> Zhu and Lu, *Reflections*, 171-172.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

oppositions”, whereby male/female are characterised as active/passive, shaping traditions of how women and men are to be understood. These traditions reinforce hetero-normativity as these oppositional pairs are then used to create a façade of ‘harmony’, which assures hetero-male dominance over all ‘other’ modes-of-being, rendering homosexual relations as null and void, because of empty procreational possibilities (blame Mencius), thereby defining such relations as bereft of any useful social functions, especially in regards to continuing genealogies, assuring that the ancestors will be revered and rituals to them maintained.<sup>8</sup> Men and women had clearly defined heterosexual roles and goals, and if men were to be active, this was usually related to their ‘public’ personae, whereas women were to remain (mostly) confined within the ‘inner’ part of their own homes, providing us with another set of hierarchical roles. Zhu writes that:

Male persons are usually outside the home. Their character can easily be seen in their speech and their dealings with others. Female persons confine themselves to their own private quarters. It is difficult to know their character. Furthermore, taking a daughter-in-law in marriage is to continue the family line [...]. The matter is of utmost importance.<sup>9</sup>

Such binary oppositional pairs in society, have been set up to form two groups of people, ‘muted’ and ‘dominant’.<sup>10</sup> The group that is not represented publicly is the ‘muted’ group, which in the context of Chosŏn Korea refers to women, who were expected to be seen, but not heard and confined inside the home, enforced by the *naewaebŏp* (内外法), the inner/outer law, which Han Hee-sook describes as “based on the notion of rigid gender roles, in which men were considered to be the ‘*woe*’ while women were the ‘*nae*’ [resulting in] the imposition of behavioural codes that restricted men’s sphere to matters outside of the house, and conversely, women’s to internal family matters”.<sup>11</sup> This delimiting system also emphasises chastity as the female virtue *par-excellence*, prohibiting inter-gender contact outside of marriage for women (while men could frequent prostitutes, or ‘female entertainers’).<sup>12</sup> Women were to be virtuous, chaste and selfless, a theme often reflected in Korea’s folk literature. In such patriarchal societies, ‘masculine’ was interpreted by men to signify something positive pertaining to the ‘male’, and ‘feminine’ was (mis)interpreted and manipulated to insinuate ‘weaker’ attributes of the ‘female’, playing off each other in binary opposition. In fact, the components of the ‘patriarchal couple’ (straight man/straight woman) are opposed to each other. The rules to regulate the society, and in this case the family, are decided by men, but applied to both sexes, while they assure the indisputable superiority of heterosexual men alone. Women are constructed within this system as polar opposites, hence, while men are considered rational exponents of *logos*, women are portrayed as being (un)governed by unruly *pathos*.<sup>13</sup> This construction means that women, therefore, required the supervision of men – including their own sons, whom they are obliged and expected to produce. The male arranges himself hierarchically in this carefully crafted system, and by doing so has obliged the woman to figure as subservient, passive, docile and ‘muted’.

<sup>8</sup> Helene Cixous, “Sorties”, in *Modern Literary Theory*, edited by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Hodder Arnold, 2001):229-236.

<sup>9</sup> Zhu and Lu, *Reflections*, 173-174.

<sup>10</sup> See Sue Spall, “Gynocriticism”, in *Feminist Readings – Feminists Reading* (Virginia: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 92.

<sup>11</sup> Han Hee-sook, “Women’s Life during the Chosŏn Dynasty”. *International Journal of Korean History* 6 (2004), 114-116, 115.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-116.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Sellers, “The Newly Born woman”, in *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (New York-London: Routledge, 1984), 35-47.

Marriage was considered a quasi-sacred duty, embodied in the *Four Books*, reflecting one's filial obligations to create new 'male' offspring (particularly emphasised by Mencius),<sup>14</sup> which assured the genealogical success of one's family across generations, whereby male descendants and their achievements were recounted in the *chokpo* (族譜).<sup>15</sup> The family created by marriage was considered the basis of social life. Cornelius Osgood notes that "Marriage under the old Korea system was almost as certain as death", adding that one of the few ways to 'escape' it was by becoming a monk, and that males were only considered to be "a boy in the community until he does so", and as a result marriage was generally arranged during one's early teens.<sup>16</sup> This was also stipulated in the *Zhuxi Jiali* (朱熹家禮) [Zhu Xi's Family Rites], which was very important in Korea during the Chosŏn dynasty, advocating the development of four specific rituals: capping (or coming-of-age ceremony), wedding, mourning and most importantly, ancestral rites. In regards to women, Osgood further highlights that marriage was arranged between families, not between individuals, something that resonates in contemporary society (often depicted in Korean TV dramas)<sup>17</sup>:

The role of wife and mother is, if anything, even more inevitable for the daughter in the family. Affection or love as a preliminary relationship has nothing to do with the choice of a spouse. In fact, the young couple has little or nothing to say in the matter as it is arranged by their parents.<sup>18</sup>

### Male Genealogies: Female Cultural and Social Injustice

The main purpose of marriage was to produce offspring who would in turn assure the survival of the lineage and commemorate the ancestors. This idea is idealised by Mencius (4A:26): "There are three ways you can fail to honour your parents, and the worst is to have no heir."<sup>19</sup> This would inevitably place undue stress on women who were always blamed if they did not conceive, thereby protecting the 'procreational' masculinity of the male who was always deemed virile and resplendent with 'yanggi' (陽氣) – yang (masculine) energy. During the early part of the Chosŏn dynasty, as women could also perform the ancestral rites, matrilineal lineages were also important, but this importance would soon be diminished. Female access to this important ritual role and its symbolic power would effectively be outlawed in the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* (經國大典, National Code of Law) promulgated towards the end of the fifteenth century, which "stipulated that the only person who could perform ancestral rites was the oldest male-heir – such as sons or grandsons".<sup>20</sup> From this point forward, male genealogies were laboriously constructed and maintained to further inscribe and validate the male domination of society starting within the family. This male-centred genealogical domination also curbed the previous inheritance rights that women had benefited from during the previous Koryŏ (高麗) dynasty (918-1392), when "women enjoyed great deal of social and economic freedom", even "sharing the ancestral patrimony

<sup>14</sup> For a translation of *Mencius*, see Hinton, David (trans.), *Mencius* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999)

<sup>15</sup> *Chokpo* is also the name of a Korean movie from 1979, situated during the colonisation of Korea by Japan, when Koreans were forced to take Japanese names. The main male protagonist in the movie refuses to take a Japanese name, highlighting the historico-cultural importance of one's name and one's genealogy (*chokpo*), which could be traced back for generations.

<sup>16</sup> Osgood, Cornelius, *The Koreans and Their Culture* (New York: Ronald Press, 1951), 103.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see 우리가 결혼할 수 있을까? (Can we get married?).

<sup>18</sup> Osgood, *The Koreans*, 103-104.

<sup>19</sup> Hinton (trans.), *Mencius*, 137.

<sup>20</sup> Han, "Women's Life", 128.

equally with her brothers”. Martina Deuchler has examined the agnatic implications of the Chosŏn dynasty in great detail in *The Confucian Transformation of Korea. A Study of Society and Ideology* (1992).<sup>21</sup> In her earlier article, “Neo-Confucianism in Action: Agnation and Ancestor Worship in Early Yi Korea” (1987), Deuchler outlines how this Confucian transformation took place over time, noting that women were still quite linked to their natal group, with society functionally and uxori locally arranged quite equally between men and women.<sup>22</sup> She then highlights how the transition became integrated into the social matrix to the detriment of women and their rights:

From roughly 1600, the elite of Yi society was organised on the basis of the highly structured patrilineal descent groups. These patrilineages had a well-defined top, the apical ancestor (*sijo*), and were ideally perpetuated by primogeniture. Each lineage was identified by a surname (*sŏng*) and an ancestral seat (*pon’gwan*). Lineage structure was manifest in detailed genealogies (*chokpo*), and lineage membership, when properly certified, was the key to political, social and economic success.<sup>23</sup>

The source of this lineal agnatic principle was, as Deuchler points out, Zhu Xi.<sup>24</sup> In chapter nine (on “Systems and Institutions”) of *Reflections of Things at Hand*, Zhu elaborates on his ideal vision for governance, writing that, “To govern people there must be a system”, and a system led my men, starting with the male members of a family who should also be aware of their patrilineal descent groups.<sup>25</sup> Zhu saw the obligations to the ancestors as a way to unite, but also to control the individual members of the family:

*In order to control the minds of people*, unify one’s kin, and enrich social customs so that people will not forget their [patrilineal] origin, it is necessary to clarify [male] genealogy, group members of the clan together, and institute a system of [male] heads of descent. [...] If the system of heads of descent were destroyed, people would not know their origin. [...] In addition, ancestral property must not be divided but must be put in charge of one [male] person.<sup>26</sup>

Such a restrictive patrilineal ‘system’ reinforced inequality at all levels, and the resulting *hetero-compulsive* value system, which became ingrained in Korean society, was considered ‘normal’, supposedly even universal, with an unfortunate lingering legacy today. Luce Irigaray, in her important work *Je, Tu, Nous*, draws attention to “the establishment of different values which are supposedly universal but turn out to entail *one part of humanity having a hold over the other*, here the world of men over that of women”.<sup>27</sup> She also highlights that “we live in accordance with exclusively male genealogical systems”, while exposing *another* reality:

<sup>21</sup> Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea. A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Martina Deuchler, “Neo-Confucianism in Action: Agnation and Ancestor Worship in Early Yi Korea”, in *Religion and Ritual in Korean Society*, edited by Laurell Kendall and Griffin Dix (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1987), 27.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>25</sup> Zhu and Lu, *Reflections*, 227.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 227-229 (emphasis added).

<sup>27</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, translated by Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 2007), 8 (original emphasis).

Our societies, made up half by men, half by women, stem from two genealogies and not one: mothers → daughters and fathers → sons (not to mention crossed genealogies: mothers → sons, fathers → daughters). Patriarchal society is organised by submitting one genealogy to the other. Thus, what is now termed the oedipal structure as access to the cultural order is already structured within a single, masculine line of filiation which doesn't symbolise the woman's relation to her mother. Mother daughter relationships in patrilinear societies are subordinated to relations between men.<sup>28</sup>

The most important set of relationships from a Confucian point of view always place a male in a senior position of power and domination, and generally ignore women altogether. These relationships are collectively known as 'The Five Relationships' (五倫; C. *wulun*, K. *oryun*) and appear in the *Mencius* (3A:4): "between father and son there should be affection; between ruler and minister there should be righteousness; between husband and wife there should be attention to their separate functions; between old and young there should be proper order; and between friends there should be faithfulness".<sup>29</sup> These relationships privilege the father → son relationship, while ignoring completely the mother → daughter, or father → daughter relationships. In this regards, Irigaray draws attention to the fact that "what is now termed the oedipal structure as access to the cultural order is already structured within a single, masculine line of filiation which doesn't symbolise the woman's relation to her mother".<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, she underscores that, "mother-daughter relationships in patrilinear societies are subordinated to relations between men".<sup>31</sup> This disregard for women and their relationships with other women is accompanied by an overvaluing of marriage, which works to separate women from their mothers (and sisters), while emphasising the new role of the woman vis-à-vis her husband (and his parents). The "separate functions" of the husband → wife relationship would later be wielded to reinforce the subordination of the wife to the husband, and subsequently to her in-laws after marriage. Meanwhile, the 'Three Bonds' (三綱, C. *sangang*, K. *samgang*), also reinforce what I consider the hierarchical 'artificial nature' of the relationships in terms of obedience, which is clearly not *natural*. These 'bonds' originate in the writings of Han Feizi (韓非子, c.280-233 BCE), the notorious Legalist philosopher who influenced Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇, 259- 210 BCE), the first emperor of Qin (also known as the first emperor of China). In Chapter 51 of the *Han Feizi* one reads: "Minister serving ruler, son serving father and wife serving husband, if these three *relationships* run in harmony, All-under-Heaven will have order".<sup>32</sup> Hsü Dau-Lin highlights that this text refers to the three 'relationships', and that the term 'bonds' appears later in the writings of Dong Zhongzhu (董仲舒, 179-104 BCE), whose creatively synthesised Confucian ideas with the metaphysics of the Yin-Yang school, whereby the senior/superior figure in the relations is linked with yang, the junior/inferior is linked with yin.<sup>33</sup> This is then

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

<sup>29</sup> Wing Tsit Chan (trans.), *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1973), 69-70. The Five Relationships are also to be found in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (chapter 20): *ibid.*, 105. Interestingly, these relationships are not referred to in the *Analects* of Confucius at all.

<sup>30</sup> Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> W.K. Liao (trans.), *Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu*, vol. 2 (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1959).

<sup>33</sup> See Dau-Lin Hsü, "The Myth of the 'Five Human Relations' of Confucius". *Monumenta Serica* 29(1971): 27-37.

the earlier metaphysical justification for relinquishing women to minor roles and functions, discussed below.

The subordination of women to men was also reinforced in another text attributed to (or compiled by) Zhu Xi, the *Lesser Learning* (sometimes written, *Elementary Learning*) (小學, C. *Xiaoxue*, K. *Sohak*). It formed the introductory foundation of education for males, but it was considered one of the main primer's for female education, while male children would then continue their study with the *Great Learning* 大學 (C. *Daxue*, K. *Taehak*), one of the *Four Books*, which Zhu had identified as central to uncovering the Confucian *Dao* (道) or *Way*. The second chapter of the *Lesser Learning* clarified the role of women, which was to follow the "Three Obediences", mentioned previously.<sup>34</sup> The tumultuous cultural and social upheaval of Zhu's misogynistic Confucian discourse was even bolstered by metaphysics, whereby 'yin' (pronounced *ŭm* in Korean) became exclusively female and feminine, and was considered to be weaker and subordinate to the male 'yang' energy required to generate male heirs, leading the way for a subversive metaphysical vocabulary to emerge, giving way to expressions such as *yangchŏn ŭmbi* (陽尊陰卑) [yang high, yin low], and even worse, *namchŏn yŏbi* (男尊女卑) [men high, women low].<sup>35</sup> These ideas were propagated by Zhu in the *Lesser Learning*, a text that would also become popular in Korea, and highlighted in T'oegye's *Sŏnghak sipto*, which itself became one of the most widely reprinted texts of the entire Chosŏn dynasty, discussed below. An overarching feature of Zhu's text is that it provides metaphysical underpinnings for the different values of men and women, and as such, validates moral ideals which revolve around problematic 'hetero-sexed' identities, to slightly modify Luce Irigaray's idea of 'sexed identity'.<sup>36</sup>

The *Lesser Learning* promoted a series of rules and constraints to demarcate women's identities, starting with (五不取, C. *Wubuqu*, K. *Obulch'wi*) five reasons that excluded women from marrying: 1) If she is the daughter of a corrupt family; 2) If she is the daughter of an immoral family; 3) If she is the daughter of a family whose ancestors have been afflicted with disease over generations; 4) If she is the daughter of a family with members who have been imprisoned; 5) If she is the daughter of a family whose father has died at a young age and she did not receive proper moral instruction.<sup>37</sup> There was also a list of "Seven Evils" (七去之惡, C. *Qīqùzhīē*, K. *Ch'ilgŏjiaek*), legitimate (and legal) reasons for a man to divorce his wife:

- 1) If she did not [submissively] follow the orders of her parents-in-law
- 2) If she did not bear a son
- 3) If she was sexually immoral wife [i.e. unfaithful]
- 4) If she was jealous
- 5) If she has a serious disease
- 6) If she was excessively chatty
- 7) If she was a thief<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> The "Three Obediences" are highlighted in *The Lesser Learning*. For a modern Korean translation with *Hanmun* (漢文) see Ilbong Park (trans.), *Sohak* (小學) [The Lesser Learning] (Seoul: Yukmunsa, 1987), 71.

<sup>35</sup> See Lee Sang-wha's discussion of "Patriarchy and Confucianism", in *Women's Experiences and Feminist Practices in South Korea*, edited by Chang Pilwha and Kim Eun-shil (Seoul: Ehwa Woman's UP, 2005), 67-117.

<sup>36</sup> Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Park (trans.), *The Lesser Learning*, 73 (author's English translation).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. (author's English translation).



These reasons reflect the ridiculous subservience expected of women, who were vulnerable to the whims of their husbands, as well as *his* parents. They were supposed to be a loyal, faithful wife, while tolerating her husband's sexual indiscretions even within the married household, where men could freely relieve their sexual urges with a secondary wife or concubine, while also engaging in licentious sexual activities outside the home with prostitutes or *kisaeng*, who were hardly considered as proper human beings as they were a) not married and b) sexually active – on both counts – impure and immoral. There were however three reasons that prevented women from being divorced: 1) If she had followed the orders of her parents-in-law, and her own parents had died leaving her with no place to go; 2) If she mourned her parents-in-law for three years with her husband; 3) if her husband's family has become wealthy and noble after she came to it while it was poor and lowly when she arrived – are reasons that a woman cannot be expelled.<sup>39</sup>

As a result of such *hetero*-patriarchal ethos, virginity was the prize offered to one's husband, representing a woman's integrity, which meant that she remained immaculate and unsullied (*by a man*) until she was married – and that she would always remain faithful to her husband – even in death. In such instances, both virginity and marriage have, according to Irigaray, “been colonised by masculine culture: virginity has become the object of commerce between fathers (or brothers) and husbands, as well as a condition for the incarnation of the masculine divine”.<sup>40</sup> In Chosŏn, the loss of female virginity, post-marriage, was validated by the production of a ‘pure’ heir, validating the loss of virginity through sexual relations which were deemed ‘impure’ for women. Only sons of the first wife were considered ‘pure blood’, while those of secondary wives and concubines were considered ‘impure’, barred from ancestral rituals and from taking the *kwago* civil service exams. Again, Zhu Xi's ideas on this were transmitted and reinforced in Korea. “The Way to Regulate the Family”, also emphasised that one should *not* marry a widow: “Marriage is a match. If one takes someone who has lost her integrity to be his own match, it means that he himself has lost his integrity”.<sup>41</sup> In other words, a man loses his integrity by taking an ‘impure’ ‘non-virgin’ as his wife, considered soiled by the sexual relations she had with her legal husband. He was not considered impure if he frequented prostitutes or had concubines because those women did not have the right to bear his ‘legal’ offspring, and were merely considered as insignificant pawns in a society governed by patriarchal inequalities, which tolerated female impurity for male pleasure as long as it was removed from family affairs. Zhu demonstrates his deep-rooted misogyny when he writes in response to the following question:

In some cases the widows are all alone, poor and with no one to depend on.

May they remarry?

ANSWER: This theory has come about only because people of later generations are afraid of starving to death. But to starve to death is a very small matter. To lose one's integrity, however, is a very serious matter.<sup>42</sup>

It seems that there is no way for a woman to recover her ‘integrity’ after she has lost her virginity to her husband – the man's integrity, on the other hand, remains intact, even if he should be unfaithful and even promiscuous. Such ideas would even be transmitted and taught by women to women.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> Zhu and Lu, *Reflections*, 177.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

### *Lesser Learning for Women in Chosŏn*

The position of women gradually degenerated during the Chosŏn dynasty, something that was even linguistically woven into speech forms. Wives and children always addressed their husbands and fathers using the honorific speech forms while males in the *yangban* class “almost never used the honorific to address their wives, children or servants”.<sup>43</sup> After marriage the role of the female became transformed from that of daughter to a bi-functional role of wife-cum-daughter-in-law. As time progressed, marriages became virilocal and the young bride was obliged to leave her natal home forever. Her role was “*naturally* to produce successful sons” in order to “achieve social status and power”.<sup>44</sup> Here again the hyper-valorisation of the male is exemplified, this time through the son-cum-heir. During the Chosŏn dynasty, women’s education “was carried out informally at home,” and that this education developed after the invention of *Han’gŭl*, which made books more accessible to women who were generally not taught Chinese characters, known as *Hanmun* (漢文).<sup>45</sup> These instructional texts taught women formalised “correct rules of behaviour,” or *yŏbŏm* (女範), appearing in primers on domestic affairs such as *Naehunsŏ* (內訓書) [Instructions for the Inner Quarters] written by Queen Sohye (昭惠王后; 1437-1504), but based on Chinese versions like *Yŏgyohunsŏ* (女教訓書) [Instructions for Females]. Queen Sohye’s text demonstrates how women themselves were responsible for replicating notions of their own inferiority, validating the perpetuation of mechanisms of hetero-patriarchal control. The Queen explained that:

All human beings are born with the spirit of Heaven and Earth, and all are endowed with the virtues of the *Five Relationships*. [...] The rise or fall of the political order, although connected with the husband’s character, also depends on the wife’s goodness. She must therefore be educated [...]. Generally, men let their hearts wander in passions and amuse themselves with all kinds of subtleties, [yet] because they naturally distinguish between right and wrong, they are able to keep to themselves [on the right track]. Do they need to await our instruction to behave [properly]? This is not so with women. Women only concern themselves with the quality of their embroidering skills and are ignorant of the urgency of virtuous conduct. This is what worries me daily!<sup>46</sup>

This passage demonstrates how women accepted the ‘naturalness’ of hierarchical ‘artificial norms’ and related notions of ‘harmony’, which undermined their abilities for active participation in the socio-political sphere through the (ab)normalisation of ‘Five Relationships’. This discriminatory ‘harmonisation’ of relationships and their corresponding duties and observances worked against women, completely ignoring female → female relationships, as mentioned above. By adapting texts taken from Confucian sources and translated into *Han’gŭl*, Deuchler delineates how Korean women used education as a vehicle

<sup>43</sup> Nahm, Andrew C., *Korea: Tradition and Transformation* (Seoul: Hollym, 1996), 114.

<sup>44</sup> Haejoang Cho, “Male Dominance and Mother Power: The Two Sides of Confucian Patriarchy in Korea”, in *Confucianism and the Family: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*, edited by W. Slote and G. De Vos, 187–207 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 193.

<sup>45</sup> Yŏnggho Ch’oe et al (ed.), *Sources of Korean Tradition*, vol. ii (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 34.

<sup>46</sup> Martina Deuchler, “Propagating Female Virtues in Chosŏn Korea”, in *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, edited by Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, 142-169 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 147.

for “rectifying the womanly nature and bringing it in line with the moral exigencies of a [hetero] Confucian society”.<sup>47</sup> Ironically, the script that is now used by all Koreans was at first widely used by women who were considered intellectually inferior and it was referred to as the vulgar script, *ŏnmun* (諺文). An important *Han’gŭl* text from this period was the *Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds* (三綱行實圖, K. *Samgang haengsilto*), a text that was promoted under the stewardship of King Sejong ‘the Great’ (世宗大王, 1397-1450).<sup>48</sup> Additionally, Song Siyŏl (宋時烈; 1607-1689), an influential follower of T’oegye, wrote a text titled, *Kyenyŏsŏ* 戒女書 [literally, Book of Warnings for Women], which was influential from the seventeenth century with chapters on “How to Serve Your Husband” and “How to Be Careful With Your Words”, clearly drawing on previous ‘Feminine Literature’, which was used to train women how to conform and be subservient.<sup>49</sup> Such texts highlighted the ‘feminine’ virtues women should possess and cultivate:

virtuousness (*pudŏk*), a proper talking style (*puŏn*), delicate features (*puyong*), and domestic skills (*pugong*); as well as weaving and cooking skills. The main crux of women’s education was to teach the behavioural codes needed to become the ideal Confucian woman within a patriarchal family structure, a structure which was eventually applied at a national level.<sup>50</sup>

Deuchler draws attention to the fact that the *Lesser Learning* was, as mentioned before, an extremely important text for educating young girls [and boys], particularly from the early sixteenth century, especially after it had been translated into the vernacular, remaining “a much praised classic of moral education until the end of the dynasty”.<sup>51</sup> Yulgok, the other great Neo-Confucian scholar of the late sixteenth century, also elucidated that education should begin with the *Elementary Learning* [*Lesser Learning*], then the *Great Learning*, followed by *The Analects* and finally *The Mencius*.<sup>52</sup>

However, it is T’oegye who makes the *Lesser Learning* a central part of his guiding discourse for sagehood, placing it third in his *Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning*, and providing one of its clearest and concise expositions.<sup>53</sup> The diagram of the *Lesser Learning* presented in the text is an original diagram by T’oegye himself, which embodies Zhu Xi’s conceptual framework of the learning process, highlighting the mutual relatedness of both the *Lesser*

<sup>47</sup> Deuchler, “Propagating Female Virtues”, 148-149.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 145-146. Also see Han, “Women’s Life”, 117: For the original details in the *Chosŏn Wangjo Sillok* (朝鮮王朝實錄) [*Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty*], see *Sejong Sillok*, Vol. 56, June of the 14<sup>th</sup> year of King Sejong: 세종실록 56 권, 세종 14 년 6 월 9 일 병신 2 번째기사 1432 년 명 선덕(宣德) 7 년 (集賢殿新撰三綱行實以進); Available at: [http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kda\\_11406009\\_002](http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kda_11406009_002). (accessed on 07/12/2018).

*Sejong Sillok*, Vol.59, February of the 15<sup>th</sup> year of King Sejong, 세종실록 59 권, 세종 15 년 2 월 1 일 을유 1 번째기사 1433 년 명 선덕(宣德) 8 년 (藝文大提學鄭招承命製進《三綱行實圖》跋尾); Available at: [http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kda\\_11502024\\_002](http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kda_11502024_002). (accessed on 07/12/2018).

**Note:** The *Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty* represent daily records of the kings of the Choson dynasty for more than 470 years, a Korean national treasure, they are also listed in UNESCO’s Memory of the World registry.

<sup>49</sup> Ch’oe *et al.* (eds.), *Sources*, vol. ii, 49.

<sup>50</sup> Han, “Women’s Life”, 118.

<sup>51</sup> Deuchler, “Propagating female Virtues”, 145.

<sup>52</sup> Ch’oe *et al.* (eds.), *Sources*, vol. ii, 35.

<sup>53</sup> The texts related to ‘sage learning’ were written by men in Classical Chinese and studied by sons of the elite *yangban* class in Korea.

*Learning and the Great Learning*.<sup>54</sup> The *Lesser Learning* is presented as the first step for young [male] learners – often the final step for young girls and women. It focuses on ‘The Five Relationships’ and ‘The Three Bonds’, clarifying how these relationships should manifest themselves universally to generate order in the state via the proper ordering of the family, so that the individual can emulate this order through their harmonious (but artificially prescribed) social relationships. For young people this social ordering is interpreted through filial piety (孝, C. *xiao*, K. *hyo*). Filial piety, a central theme of *The Analects* and *The Mencius* and is considered to be the active embodiment of propriety (禮, K. *li*). It is also a central theme of the *Lesser Learning*, and a fundamental necessity to guide young students, particularly females. The initial nurturing process as illustrated in the *Diagram of Elementary [Lesser] Learning* is “Establishing Instruction, Clarifying Relationships, and Making One’s Person Mindful.”<sup>55</sup> The *Four Books* are an integral part of this process and provide the theoretical framework of the complex vision of Neo-Confucianism. The *Lesser Learning* was a prerequisite to following T’oegye’s guiding discourse and without it one would not, “have the means to recover his errant mind and heart and foster the good qualities of his nature in order to lay the foundation for the *Great Learning*” (Kalton, 1988,69). However, the *Great Learning* was taught to boys and not girls, reinforcing that females were less than men: men greater than women.

## Conclusion

This article sought to trace the development and implementation of hetero-normalising gender constructs during the Chosŏn dynasty, paying particular attention to the influential texts and ideas of Zhu Xi. His ideas, in texts such as *Reflections on Things at Hand*, and the *Lesser Learning*, ultimately led to artificially contrived gender traditions that privileged heterosexual men, transmitting inequality from one generation to the next. These hetero-compulsive gender traditions, whereby procreation was of tantamount importance, were implanted and reinforced through laws promulgated in the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn*, which privileged hetero-patriarchal descent groups originating from an apical ancestor, bolstered in comprehensive genealogies (*chokpo*), which completely undermined women. By framing the male/female dichotomy (as addressed by Cixous) with such rigid application, further contorted by privileging father → son relationships, while ignoring mother → daughter relationships (as highlighted by Irigaray), women were expected to be subordinate to all men, fathers, husbands and sons. Women’s lives, particularly married women, were circumscribed by lists of regulations and ‘bonds’, among them the particularly delimiting ‘Seven Evils’. Meanwhile, married men were free to act on their hetero-sexed masculine identities with ‘impure women’, while wives and widows were expected to remain ‘pure’ and loyal to husbands (even when they had died!).

It should also be pointed out that at the same time in Europe, women’s education was also used to construct biased hetero-patriarchal notions of women and femininity. Noémi Hepp, writing about French women in the seventeenth century, highlights how the goal of education was not to develop “smart women, but excellent wives, good mothers of families, and accomplished housewives”.<sup>56</sup> Such ideas were reinforced by religious texts, popular among them at that time, *L’Introduction à la vie devote* of St. François de Sales.<sup>57</sup> In Europe (and the West), Christianity has done its fair share of curtailing the role of women in society,

<sup>54</sup> This *Diagram of the Great Learning* should not be confused one of the *Four Books* also entitled *The Great Learning* (大學).

<sup>55</sup> Kalton (trans.), *To Become a Sage*, 67.

<sup>56</sup> Noémi Hepp, “Femme”, in *Dictionnaire du Grand Siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1990): 524.

<sup>57</sup> St. François de Sales, *L’Introduction à la vie devote* (Paris: Nelson Éditeurs, 1914).

just as Confucianism has done in East Asia, and both have regulated ‘virtues’ to further construct notions of ‘good women’, who are generally less-esteemed than ‘great men’.

In the context of Chosŏn Korea, education was aimed at men who studied and memorised Classical Chinese texts written by men. Female education consisted of ‘Lesser Learning’, while texts by women, written in *Han’gŭl*, also reinforced the inferior role/position of women in a social order dominated by men, highlighting their place in a society governed by patriarchal inequalities. These inequalities continue to shape modern Korean cross-gender relations, but growing numbers of women are no longer willing to be subservient members of their family or society. Additionally (and thankfully), a growing LGBTQ community is challenging a hetero-compulsive legacy that they are no longer willing to be forced to accept. However, these modern identities still need to detach and unshackle themselves from gender traditions shaped by Neo-Confucian ideology, and therefore they also need to dismantle its metaphysical underpinnings and reclaim yin and yang as undulating expressions of all genders, permitting the inherent fluidity that exists beyond delimiting artificially fixed boundaries of *hetero*-sexed identities.

## References

- Chan Wing-Tsit (trans.). *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1973.
- Ch’oe Yŏngho, Lee, Peter H., De Bary, Wm. Theodore (eds.). *Sources of Korean Tradition*, vol. ii. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Cho Haejoang. “Male Dominance and Mother Power: The Two Sides of Confucian Patriarchy in Korea.” In *Confucianism and the Family: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*, edited by W. Slote and G. De Vos, 187–207. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Chosŏn Wangjo Sillok* (朝鮮王朝實錄) [Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty]. Available at [www. http://sillok.history.go.kr](http://sillok.history.go.kr) [accessed on 07.12.2018].
- Cixous, Hélène. “Sorties”. In *Modern Literary Theory*, edited by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, 229–236. London: Hodder Arnold, 2001.
- De Sales, Saint François. *L’Introduction à la vie devoute* (Paris: Nelson Éditeurs, 1914).
- Deuchler, Martina. “Neo-Confucianism in Action: Agnation and Ancestor Worship in Early Yi Korea”. In *Religion and Ritual in Korean Society*, edited by Laurell Kendall and Griffin Dix. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Propagating Female Virtues in Chosŏn Korea”. In *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Habousch and Joan R. Piggott, 142–169. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2003.
- Han Hee-sook. “Women’s Life during the Chosŏn Dynasty”. *International Journal of Korean History* 6 (2004): 113–160.
- Hepp, Noémi. “Femme”. In *Le Dictionnaire du Grand Siècle*, edited by François Bluche, 524. Paris: Fayard, 1990.
- Hsü Dau-Lin 1971, “The Myth of the “Five Human Relations” of Confucius”. *Monumenta Serica* 29 (1971): 27–37.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Je, Tu, Nous*. Translated by Alison Martin. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Lee Sang-hwa. “Patriarchy and Confucianism”. In *Women’s Experiences and Feminist Practices in South Korea*, edited by. Chang Pilwha and Kim Eun-shil, 67–117. Seoul: Ehwa Woman’s UP, 2005.

- Legge, James (trans.). *The Li Ki, I-X*. In *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xxvii, edited by F. M. Müller. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885.
- Liao, W. K. (trans.). *Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu*, vol. 2. London: Arthur Probsthain. 1959.
- Nahm, Andrew C. *Korea: Tradition and Transformation*. Seoul: Hollym, 1996.
- Osgood, Cornelius. *The Koreans and Their Culture*. New York: Ronald Press, 1951.
- Park Ilpong (trans.) *Sohak* (小學) [The Lesser Learning]. Seoul: Yukmunsa, 1987.
- Sellers, Susan (ed). “The Newly Born Woman.” In *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, 35-47. New York-London: Routledge, 1984.
- Spall, Sue. “Gynocriticism.” In *Feminist Readings—Feminists Reading*, edited by Sara Mills, 83-121. Virginia: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.
- Yi Hwang (T’oegye). *To Become a Sage: The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning*. Translated and edited with commentaries by Michael C. Kalton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- . *Sŏnghak sipto* (聖學十圖) [Ten Diagrams of Sage Learning]. Translated by Lee Kwangho with original *Hanmun*. Seoul: Hongik Books, 2005.
- Yi I (Yulgok). *Sŏnghak chipyo* (聖學輯要) [Essentials of the Learning of the Sages]. Translated by Ch’oe Yong-gap. Seoul: Pulbit Publishing, 2006.
- Zhu Xi and Lu Zuqian. *Reflections on Things at Hand*. Translated by Wing-tsit Chan. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.