

Korean Confucianism and Women's Subjectivity in the Twenty-first Century

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This article is to explore ways to revitalize Confucian ideals and values in order to provide the Confucian tradition as a source of inspiration in developing women's subjectivity in the 21st century. It is also to examine what implications Confucianism has for human lives in the twenty-first century, considering the current situation in which neo-liberal utilitarianism and competitionism sweep through the world and public spheres are collapsing. It first pays attention to the current phenomenon of *Hallyu* (Korean Wave, or the craze for Korean pop culture) in the world, and asks what characters of Korean culture draw such an universal response from people of the world. This article finds an answer in Korean women's saeng-mul(生物life-giving and caring) spirituality which has been nurtured in the long process of their households-making experiences in the Confucian tradition. Their virtues can be summarized into the practice of "giving up one's own way to follow that of others" and "seeking humanity and accomplishing sagehood". This article recognizes that these virtues aren't simply non-subjective, rather as the essence of Confucian spirituality or religiosity they have a good meaning in our postmodern world as an alternative postmodern spirituality which is "least religious and yet richly spiritual". As a very action of subjectivity it suggests a good possibility today to heal the decline of public spheres that seems a result of an excessive applying of the modern principle of subjectivity.

Key word: Korean Confucianism, Women's Subjectivity, Hallyu(Korean Wave), Korean Women's Life-giving-and-caring Spirituality, Women's Leadership, To become a sage(聖人之道), humanity and justice(仁義), The Great Shun, Mencius, Toegye, Yulgok

I. *Hallyu* (Korean Wave), Confucian Tradition, and Korean Women's Spirituality of Life-giving(生物)

This paper explores ways to revitalize the Confucian ideals and values in order to provide and prepare the Confucian tradition as a source of inspiration in developing women's subjectivity in the 21st century. Confucianism has most effectively influenced Korean culture, and it is still prominent in everyday life. Its level of influence is greater in Korea than in other Asian countries. I think Korea's recent achievements in many areas

are remarkable, as we can see it, for example, in Hallyu, the Korean Wave, current craze for Korean pop culture. There are several different reasons for such remarkable achievements to have been possible, but, first, I would like to give a good account of them by saying that Korean women have played a very important role in the achievements. Last year, the South Korean Prime Minister, Hwang Kyung-sik, who came back from his official visit to Bulgaria, expressed in a TV interview his great feelings of amazement and excitement at the current craze for Korean pop culture even in an Eastern European country like Bulgaria. As the prime minister, he was deeply moved by seeing young people in the countries he visited singing the songs of Korean pop music stars, learning Korean language, and listing Korea as the most wanted country to travel to. Along with Prime Minister Hwang, most Koreans would have the same feelings about the current Korean wave sweeping through many countries in the world.¹ Especially, the old generation of Koreans who went through the Korean war.

In this phenomenon of craze for Korean culture, I want to pay attention to the fact that Korean women are playing a prominent role as the main figures. Last year, it was also reconfirmed in the affair that Shin Kyung-sook, a Korean female novelist, has excited the American readership with her novel *Please Look after Mom*. The author as a woman showed how it was possible for women's universal experience of "mom" to become sincere enough to the utmost degree in Korean women's experience. She once expressed her deep feelings of this event as she compared the publication of her novel to

¹ Originally, this article is written in the last year's December before the current worldwide success of Korean singer Psy's Gangnam Style(the dance of horse). At that time, Korean Wave didn't experience that great success, so I now bring Psy's case as a good addition to my assertion of Korean Wave.

“the first snow falling in America for both herself and Korean literature.”² This comparison sounds very symbolic to me in the sense that it makes me think of Korean women’s nature, Korean motherhood, and their spirit of life, like the first snow warmly covering the American society.

Then, what will be the body of this *Hallyu* (Korean Wave or Trend) we are observing in many areas of the world? What characters of Korean culture and pathos are able to make such a universal appeal to people over the world today? How can we understand Korean women’s outstanding roles and activities in this trend? The dynamics of world civilizations in the twenty first century can be described in general as the encounter between the United States representing Christian civilization and China representing the Confucian one. More and more, we see people getting interested in Confucian values, and the ‘revival of Confucianism’ is taking place even in the communist mainland China. However, we do not see much communication going on between Confucianism and feminism. It is still a remote area to attend to. As it is well known, this is because Confucianism has been notorious for its doctrine of *namjon-yobi* (男尊女卑, men are honored, women are abased) and its founding principle of ‘respecting *Yang* and repressing *Yin*’. Nevertheless, Confucian women in many places of the world have wrestled with the question of how to reconstruct Confucian tradition in front of the challenge of twentieth century feminism. The dialogue between them has also

² MBN News, April 7, 2011.

been carried on in Korea, the land which has maintained most vividly even today its Confucian tradition.³

In this article, I will search for an answer to the question of what kind of lessons Korean Confucianism can give us for building up our healthy subjectivity in the twenty-first century. It is an undeniable fact that Christian civilization had made a great impact on the liberation of Korean women, and that Western feminism brought a big change into the lives of Korean women in the late twentieth century. But today on the one hand Christian Gospel is criticized for not playing any further constructive role for Korean society. On the other hand, contemporary feminism is not free from the harsh criticism that its direction and goal should be reexamined in the current circumstance in which human communal lives including family life are in great danger. In this context, I will discuss from a Korean feminist perspective what and in what sense we can learn from Confucian tradition, and how we can have a constructive dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity.

II. Confucian Religiosity as the Way of Sanctifying Everyday Human Lives

Most people in the world today, including South Koreans who have accomplished their modern industrialization in such an unprecedentedly condensed manner, are suffering from the collapse of *public realms*, while being busy working for the benefit of their own private lives without concern for the common world and public sectors. By contrast, Confucianism has been much more consistently stressing the

³ Un-sunn Lee, "Confucianism and Christianity in Korean Women's Leadership in the Twenty-first Century," I and II, *Study of Eastern Philosophy*, Vol. 62 (May, 2010), Vol. 63 (August, 2010); Seoseria Kim, "Korean Women's Subjectivity Seen through the characters of *Sil-hak* of *Gang-hwa-hak*," *Study of Yang-ming* (July, 2008), p. 221f.

importance of the public world and the work of togetherness in it, as it had shown in the *Book of Rites* saying, “All affairs are pursued for the realization of the public (天下爲公).”⁴ Even though it did not actually do so much in its concrete history of practice, the core of Confucius’ idea lies in his saying, “Overcoming one’s self and returning to propriety is the true humanity (克己復禮爲仁).” Mencius also repeatedly said, “When you see profits, think first of what is right (見利思義).” As these lessons show, Confucian tradition has considered the acknowledgement of human plurality and the harmonious integration of such individual desires as the most important thesis in order to maintain human lives. Confucian lessons such as “inwardly sagehood and outwardly kingship (內聖外王)” and “learning from the bottom and thereby reaching the top (下學而上達)” are the expressions of efforts to harmonize in very practical and this-worldly way the divisions or conflicts of the public and the private, of spiritual life and material life, and of one’s self and the other, from which people of the world including women are now suffering. Therefore, I think people of the world today can learn a good lesson as a way of harmonizing such opposite elements in their lives most practically and concretely.

However, I will go further than this to pay attention to Korean women’s unique experiences within Confucian tradition. In spite of the hostile conditions of life given by the doctrines of respecting *Yang* and repressing *Yin*, Korean women have made all their practical efforts to give birth to lives, and take care of them. I think Korean women’s life experiences as such contain the wisdom to resolve the conflicts of those opposite elements. Korean women’s lives in the ages of the *Chosen* dynasty have been often characterized to be passive and miserable. I think this characterization is very one-sided, and the fundamental reason for such one-sidedness is that the religiosity of Confucian tradition has been neglected. Confucianism is mostly known as a socio-political system or as a purely ethical learning. This popular view overlooks the profound

⁴ Sang-jun Kim, *Mencius’ Sweat and King Sheng’s Blood: Multiple Layers of Modernity and East Asian Confucian Civilization*, Acanet, 2011, p. 270.

religious aspect of Confucianism, failing to notice the unique Confucian way of learning to become a sage, an authentic person(聖人之道). I think this way of learning to become a sage is important for understanding not only the lives and historical achievements of Chosen men, but also of women. Unlike Buddhism which sharply distinguishes the sacred from the profane, Confucianism does not make such distinction. Instead, Confucianism attempts to realize the sacred in this profane world and carry out this project according to the doctrine of *li-i fen-shu* (The principle is one, but its manifestations are many).

Confucianism aims at making the whole world a sacred one. To accomplish this goal, however, it must have a starting point. In the past, the patriarch played such a starting role in the family. So the patriarch's or the eldest son's role can be regarded as the same one that a priest takes in other religious traditions. Although Confucian doctrine of *li-i fen-shu* considers every person and everything in the world as equally qualified for the sagehood, it requires a starting point to reserve the sacred core. Confucianism that intends to sanctify the whole world could not abandon the area of women's lives and thus tried to regulate every corner of ordinary family lives by its particular orders and arts (家禮). This process of Confucian transformation of *Chosun* society has been already pointed out as "a civilizing process."⁵ I think that Korean Confucian women's lives also went through the process of refining life-manners more fully than we used to think, and that they were able to cultivate the capacities of *self-control*, *literacy*, and *sense of time*

⁵ Boudewijn Walraven, "the Confucianization of Korea as a Civilizing Process", Proceedings of the International conference on Korean Studies, The Academy of Korean Studies 1994, pp.535-556.

to a more advanced degree than in other periods. It was really a ritualizing process of their life (禮化).⁶

However, I want to go further in interpreting this process. In my view, it is not just a secular process of civilization (ritualization) but also a spiritual sanctifying process of sagehood (sanctification, 聖化). I think that the real religiosity of Korean Confucian women was expressed well in these efforts to make their whole lives sanctified by propriety, and it is the very religiosity of Korean women's *sal-lim* (life-giving) actions. In the later period of the *Chosen* dynasty, there were many vivid examples showing how Korean women lived their lives with the clear self-consciousness of sagehood. Their lives are a fine example of unifying self-cultivation and housekeeping, personal learning and social service, and so forth. They had a strong sense of awareness of sexual equality in the pursuit of the way of sagehood. Two women's lives stand out of several examples, which I call "woman *Seon-bi*" (woman scholar or learned woman): Yim Yun-ji-dang (1721-1793) and Gang Jeong-il-dang (1772-1832). They were very conscious of the way of sagehood in their jobs of ancestral service, sincere hospitality, child caring, and every miscellaneous thing for a housewife to do. Although they were restricted in their familial life, they performed all these obligations with a strong sense of public responsibility and a sense of justice.⁷

⁶ Un-sunn Lee, *Confucianism, Christianity and Feminism*, Intellectual Industry Publishing Co., Seoul, 2003.

⁷ Un-sunn Lee, *To Acquire the Lost Transcendence: Reflections on the religiosity of Korean Confucianism and Feminism*, Hosting People Publishing Co., Seoul, 2009.

I think that the lives of Confucian women were not simply non-subjective or lowly as they are usually understood, but rather connected with their consistent efforts of practicing the Confucian way of *giving up one's own way to follow that of others* (舍己從人) and *cultivating oneself to give peace to others* (修己安人). In the middle of their household, they made all the efforts to organize the whole household, take care of it, and make it beautiful. These efforts can be understood as the very example of practicing to the utmost degree the Confucian way of *pursuing the highest and yet following the middle way of everyday life* (極高明而道中庸) suggested in *The Doctrine of the Mean*. I think that the increasingly prominent roles that Korean women play in the current trend of *Hallyu* are related to this Confucian spirituality and leadership that they have nurtured in the process of their making households for a long period of time.

III. Korean Confucian Spirituality of ‘Giving up One’s Own Way to Follow that of Others’ and the Twenty-first Century Women’s Subjectivity

Although Korean women have practiced the Confucian spirituality of life-giving and caring for a long time, the most difficult way of Confucianism to follow for them would be the way of *giving up one's own way to follow that of others* (舍己從人). According to Mencius, who is considered to represent the mentality of Koreans well, it is the way indicating the essence of the great sage-king *Shun*'s personality of beauty, goodness, and piety. Mencius said, “When any one told *Tsze-lû* that he had a fault, he rejoiced. When *Yü* heard good words, he bowed to the speaker. The great *Shun* had a still greater delight in what was good. He regarded virtue as the common property of himself

and others, giving up his own way to follow that of others, and delighting to learn from others to practice what was good.”⁸

Seeing from the perspective of modern feminism with its emphasis on women’s subjectivity, the lesson of ‘giving up one’s own way to follow that of others’ is liable to the criticism that it would drive women again into the ghetto of non-subjectivity, passive life, and non-self. We also know that Confucianism has a history of such practices. Therefore, when Confucianism retells the story in the name of tradition, it is very likely to be suspected as such. But, first of all, I want to pay attention to Mencius’ explanation of the reason why the great *Shun* was willing to give up his own way to follow that of others. Mencius explains that the great *Shun* did so in order to “practice goodness together with others(善與人同).” It means that he was primarily trying to build up the communal life rather than focusing on his own purposes. According to this explanation, the great *Shun* went beyond his own good life and tried to help other people practice goodness; when they did not care about practicing goodness but about themselves, the great *Shun* realized that he should sacrifice himself first and follow their way, in order to help them care about virtuous life. The way that the great *Shun* took here seems to be very passive, but Mencius’ interpretation is that it is the case of a great person’s way of transcending the level of self or subjectivity in a narrow sense and living the life of authentic self. Interpreting here the greatness of *Shun* as such, Mencius once again confirms that the Confucian way is to focus on the job of building the public world, just

⁸ 孟子曰 子路，人告之以有過則喜。禹聞善言則拜。大舜有大焉，善與人同。舍己從人，樂取於人以爲善。 Chapter 8 of the First part of Gong Sun Chou 公孫丑, *Mencius*; I basically rely on James Legge’s translation of Confucian Scriptures.

like the saying in the *Book of Rites* that I mentioned earlier, “All affairs are pursued for the realization of the public.”

In this sense, I present the leadership of “Role Dedication” that Dr. Hesung Chun Koh of East Rock Institute in New Haven, Connecticut, U. S., pointed out as a meaningful leadership out of Korean tradition as a contemporary expression of the Confucian leadership of *giving up one’s own way to follow that of others*. She had immigrated earlier to the United States, and in my view, she did an excellent job of harmonizing Western Christian spirituality and a Confucian one in her own life and work. Explaining “the Role dedication as an excellent value that stands out of the tradition of Korean culture,” she suggested it as Korean women’s leadership for the future generation, and said, “Whereas self-growth or self-development is considered important in the West, in Korea one comes to succeed in self-accomplishment while performing one’s role even though one does not necessarily pursue her own self-growth.”⁹ I think the leadership of “Role Dedication” that Dr. Hesung Chun Koh suggested as a Korean particularity can be understood as a result of having come from the embodiment of the long practiced Korean women’s virtue of *giving up one’s own way to follow that of others*. It brings a good possibility today of how to heal the decline of public spheres that is a result of applying the excessively modern principle of subjectivity and the diseases of *wordlessness* or *world-alienation* that makes people increasingly alienated from each other to become isolated islands so that there remains nothing but selves.

⁹ Hesung Chun Koh, *Dictionary of Women’s Ambitions*, Seoul: Jung-ang Books, 2007, p. 124-125.

In Korea in 2008, there was a heated controversy among women about which person should be selected as the first female figure on the face of a new Korean bill. The controversy was resolved through much discussion with the selection of *Shin Sa-im-dang*(申師任堂,1504-1551), who was the mother of *Yi Yulgok*(李栗谷,1536-1584) the renowned Confucian scholar in the period of the *Chosun* dynasty. Korean feminists strongly opposed the selection of her, arguing that she was not the right person for the first female figure on the face of a Korean bill because she was mentioned primarily as the mother or wife of someone in Confucian tradition. However, as for me, there is no reason for devaluing the motherhood or being a wife in the name of women's subjectivity, when we consider that contemporary uprootedness of people and anonymous molecularization are going on even further. It is because of the reason that it makes possible to build up a family or next generations beyond the limits of selves and individuals. Of course, gender roles today are much freer from biological determinism than before. People accordingly talk about motherhood as a *general human experience* or *womb of mind* rather than womb of body. And furthermore, we see today the possibility of surrogate motherhood. However, no matter what kind of motherhood we are talking about, we cannot deny that the act of giving up one's self in her role to build up her family and next generations is always necessary to sustain human lives and the public world. We all know that today's world including Korean society is suffering from the ongoing deconstruction of familial communities; that is to say, the original foundation of human communal lives is collapsing. It is not simply a matter of numbers of population but rather a serious question of whether we can sustain the fundamental ground of human beings' lives, in which *jen* or humanity is nurtured as *ability to relate*. This ability to

relate is essential for making it possible for any human community to exist in the first place and for maintaining it. Since humanity's ability to relate cannot grow without the very communal life, but is acquired through consistent long lasting relationships in intimate circles, the contemporary deconstruction of familial communities is even more troubling. Modern feminists have up to now criticized Confucian tradition for making women just enclosed within their private realm. I think, however, that contemporary women working outside in the public world in the name of subjectivity are more enclosed within their private world, because the interests in their labor are mostly related to acquiring their own private profits.¹⁰

In the chapter on politics of *The Essentials for the Study of Sagehood*, Yi Yulgok, the son of *Shin Sa-im-dang*, stressed the importance of “practicing goodness together with others (善與人同)”, and repeatedly mentioned Mencius’ sayings that practicing goodness together with others is “learning from others to practice what was good” and “there is no other greater attribute of the superior man than this of helping men to practice goodness.”¹¹ What is made clear here again, is that, in order to build the public world, which is essential for the maintenance of human communal lives, someone should give up one’s self, and yet this act of giving up one’s self is “the great act of sagehood.”

In this moment, it comes to my mind that, very similar to Yi Yulgok, Hannah Arendt as a Western philosopher of politics stressed the importance of building and taking care of the public realm in human lives. She argued that the authentic work of

¹⁰ Un-sunn Lee, *To Acquire the Lost Transcendence: Reflections on the religiosity of Korean Confucianism and Feminism*, p. 194ff.

¹¹ 善與人同, 取諸人以爲善. 是與人爲善者也. 故君子莫大乎與人爲善 Yulgok Yi, “Practice of Goodness,” the Third Chapter on Politics II, *The Essentials for the Study of Sagehood*, vol. 7.

human subjectivity is related to throwing oneself into the public realm. On the concept of *freedom* as the symbol of human subjectivity, she pointed out that human freedom is not a matter of 'will' within persons but rather related to their political *acting* and *doing* in their public lives of plurality. According to her, freedom does not come up except in the area of the public sphere that requires the existence of others. But as time went by in history, the Western thoughts have radically reduced freedom to the matter of the inner world of human beings, identifying it with sovereignty and bringing about the Western individualism that "perfect freedom can never be compatible with society."¹² Arendt seems to be in mind that women's subjectivity of modern feminism is subject to a similar error. In spite of severe criticisms from feminists at the time, she expressed in her story of the life of Rosa Luxemburg her intimate point of view with the words, "*Vive la petite difference!*" (Viva the small difference!). It would be her point of view that the equality and subjectivity of women is not simply attained by removing the *difference* between women and men, but it is rather performed in freedom as action and doing publicly.¹³ In this sense, we can understand Korean Confucian women's acts of giving up themselves to follow that of others as the action of subjectivity that they performed on their own in order to give life to the public world of family and next generations going beyond themselves.¹⁴

As I mentioned above, familial life and motherhood are collapsing today unlimitedly, and yet these are such an indispensable element for human lives that there

¹² Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" *Between Past and Future*, New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, A Harvard Book, 1983, p. 44.

¹⁴ Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters," Anne Phillips, ed., *Feminism and Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 363-367.

must be acts of sacrifice and responsibility like the act of *giving up one's own way to follow that of others*. Nevertheless, it might be an almost 'impossible' thing to do in our age of subjectivity. But in the sense of making the impossible possible to practice, I understand the Korean women's act and practice of giving up one's own way to follow that of others as a work of an alternative religion in our age, for example in the meaning of what John D. Caputo has already suggested.¹⁵ It is fair to say in the same context that Korean Confucian women's religiosity of this action is none other than "postmodern religiosity" that we need today in the twenty-first century, that is, "least religious and yet fully spiritual," "secular religiosity," or "postsecular religiosity."¹⁶ Unlike traditional Christianity or Buddhism, Confucian religiosity of trying to reach the Ultimate through work in the very secular world seems to be an example of "minimal religion"¹⁷ in our post secular age. It can be understood as an utmost expression of subjectivity in the sense of sincere devotion, making the public world possible to exist by genuinely giving birth and life to and taking care of lives. I think Korean women's life-giving spirituality is a good example of it.

IV. Korean Confucian Religiosity of 'Seeking Humanity and Accomplishing Sagehood' and Women's Leadership in the Twenty-first Century

I will name another expression of Korean spirituality of giving up one's own way to follow that of others to practice goodness together with them, as the spirituality of

¹⁵ John D. Caputo, *On Religion: Thinking in Action*, Routledge, 2001.

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University, 2007, p. 533ff.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 533-534.

“seeking the humanity and accomplishing the sagehood (求仁成聖).” In the chapters on “Western Inscription” and “Explanation of Humanity” of *The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning*, Master Toegye (李退溪, 1501–1570) explained that the job for a human being to do is the life-long work of “seeking humanity.”¹⁸ Then what is humanity? Following Chu Hsi’s answer given in the words of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, “heaven-and-earth’s mind-and-heart of giving life to things (天地生物之心),” he answered that humanity is “for heaven-and-earth, the broad and open mind-and-heart of giving life to things,” and “for humans, the warm mind-and-heart of loving other human beings and benefitting all things.”¹⁹

According to a contemporary Korean Confucian scholar Lee Ki-dong, the letter *jen*(仁) takes its form after “the shape of a mother having a baby in her womb,” “the shape of two persons hugging each other,” or “the shape of one person supporting another,” representing the nature of Koreans’ mind-and-heart well.²⁰ As these shapes indicate, *jen* represents works of such female parts of nature as *life*, *love*, and *relationship*. In his *Korean History through a Biblical Point of View*, Ham Suk-hun, too, listed the “goodness” of *jen* and “a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others” as the

¹⁸ 求仁成聖 Yi Toegye, The Second Chapter of “Western Inscription” and the Seventh Chapter of “Explanation of Humanity” in *The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning*.

¹⁹ 在天地則塊然生物之心，在人則溫然愛人利物之心。Seventh Chapter of “Explanation of Humanity” in *The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning*. In Michael C. Kalton’s translation we see the expression of “In Heaven and Earth it is inexhaustible disposition to produce and give life to creatures”, and “in en it is the warm love for others and the disposition to benefit all creatures”. *The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning by Yi T’oegye*, (Trans., Edited, and with Commentaries by Michael C. Kalton, NY 1988, p.148.

²⁰ Ki-dong Lee, *Three Elements of Confucianism and the Philosophy of Coexistence of Korean Confucianism*, Seoul, Korea: Dong-Yeon Press, 2010, p. 111.

personal quality with which Koreans could contribute to the world if they are willing to.²¹ He found a piece of the evidence for such a Korean quality in the fact that the letters “*Yin* (仁 humanity), *Eui* (義 justice), *Ye* (禮 propriety), *Ji* (智 wisdom), *Shin* (信 faith), *Sun* (順 obedience), *Sun* (淳 purity), *Hwa* (和 harmony), *Myeong* (明 brightness or clarity), *Lyang* (良 goodness), *Suk* (淑 chastity)” are used frequently by Koreans in their names which represent the ideal of them to become a good person.²² He thus stressed that this very *jen* is the essential nature of human beings, as he called *Al-maeng-yi* (kernel), *Ssi-at* (seed), or *Al-tsam* (essence) in native Korean words, and also the acting vital force within animals. He argued that it is the “hope for humanity” in the work of bringing life to the nation of Korea and the world as well.²³

The Confucian lesson of *jen* attempting to cultivate the genuine human nature and to construct a humane society in the world has made a great impact on Korea for generations. Master Toegye emphasized in his “Diagram of the Western Inscription” that “Being one with all things in the universe” as the ultimate goal of sage learning is accomplished through learning of compassion and learning of care and concern while sincerely seeking humanity. Along with these lessons, he offered an important diagnosis and a remedy, which are also relevant to our age: he pointed out that people in his time suffered from “an illness of recognizing things on their own (or as they please themselves)” and argued that the work of seeking humanity and accomplishing sagehood

²¹ Suk-hun Ham, *Korean History through the Biblical Point of View*, Seoul, Korea: Han-gil Press, 1986, p. 324.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

could cure that illness.²⁴ This illness of recognizing things on their own indicates the same phenomena as Hannah Arendt described with the words *wordlessness* or “world-alienation,” into which our age of excessive emphasis on subjectivity can easily fall. As she pointed out, the nineteenth century English imperialist Cecil J. Rhodes (1853-1902) revealed his unlimited desire for the whole earth, wishing, “I would annex the planets if I could,” it is the illness that shows the extreme self-centeredness to dispose all things in the world to the satisfaction of oneself.²⁵

In response to the illness, unlike such totalitarian subjectivism or egotism, quoting Chu Hsi’s words, Master Toegye said, “The public is the way to embody humanity; that is to say, to overcome one’s self and return to propriety is to make humanity.”²⁶ He means by this saying that, although humanity is “what we humans obtained as our mind-and-heart”, the way to realize and cultivate it is not simply to get it by oneself or to think about it in theory, but rather to acquire it in relation with others, through acknowledging the plurality of life, and thus in concrete acts of making relationships. That is to say, if we really want to cultivate our humanity, we must show ourselves in public, get into relationships with others, and continue to do the work of making relationships with others in human words and actions. Only through such a public, relational, and humane way of life, we can grow our human ability (*jen*) to give life, love, concern, and care for all things.

²⁴ 認物爲己之病. Yi Toegye, The Second Chapter of “Western Inscription” in *The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning*.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1973, p.121.

²⁶ 公者，所以體仁，猶言克己復禮爲仁. Yi Toegye, The Seventh Chapter of “Explanation of Humanity” in *The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning*.

Hannah Arendt is once again for me a good conversation partner here. According to her criticism of totalitarianism and her faith in “the promise of politics,” human freedom and capacity for action are nurtured only by “acting in concert” in recognition of the plurality of life. Freedom as the meaning of politics is “the great capacity of men to start something new” in spaces which are made by the plurality of human beings and of reality. Reminding us of Montesquieu who pointed out “love of equality” as the political principle of the republican government, and expressed it as “virtue,” Arendt sums up the meaning of virtue with this statement: “Virtue is happy to pay the price of limited power for the blessing of being together with other men.”²⁷ We can notice that freedom and virtue described here by Montesquieu and Arendt are very similar to the virtue in Confucian tradition, especially to the virtue of *jen*, which includes all four virtues of humanity, justice, propriety, and wisdom. *Jen* is “the essence of human uniqueness”²⁸ and “the nature of giving life and the principle of love,”²⁹ and pleasant recognition and consideration of the existence of others as Confucius meant by saying, “To overcome one’s self and return to propriety is to make humanity.” Arendt said in her criticism of totalitarianism, “... people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought.”³⁰

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994, p. 337.

²⁸ 仁者人也 Chapter 20, *The Doctrine of the Mean*.

²⁹ 所謂生之性，愛之理，仁之體也。Yi Toegye, The Seventh Chapter of “Explanation of Humanity” in *The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning*.

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p.474.

Yi Yulgok said about the great *Shun*'s virtue of *giving up one's own way to follow that of others* like this: "If I take all eyes in the world as my eyes, there would be nothing I could not see clearly; If I take all ears in the world as my ears, there would be nothing I could not hear clearly; If I take all minds in the world as my mind, there would be nothing I could not think of wisely; That is why the sage emperors and the wise kings encourage the world without making efforts or concerning in their minds."³¹ According to this explanation, the fundamental reason why Emperor *Shun* could become the great one is that he did not boast himself to have all wisdom but relied upon the plurality of life and his neighbors while acknowledging them, trusting and encouraging them, and thereby sought help from them and received a variety of wisdom as his wisdom so that he could "make impartial judgments." I think the leadership of *giving up one's own way to follow that of others* described here has the same implication for today as the leadership of *seeking humanity and accomplishing the sagehood* acknowledging the plurality and relationality of life: it is being newly practiced through social media such as Twitter. Today's creative leaders of the world live their lives as of one of *multiple intelligences* or *collective intelligence* while connecting with the wisdom of the multitude through such social media as email, Facebook, Twitter, and so on. We can even call those people who are connected with me my *external brains* which are in action outside of me as other brains of mine. I consider this phenomenon as today's version of the Confucian way of *seeking humanity and accomplishing the sagehood* reenacted in the twenty-first century. In this context, I believe, it is not a coincidence that South Korea has emerged as

³¹ 蓋以天下之目爲目，則明無不見。以天下之耳爲耳，則聰無不聞。以天下之心爲心，則睿無不思。此聖帝明王所以鼓舞天下，而不勞心力者也。 Yi Yulgok, "Practice of Goodness," the Third Chapter on Politics II, *The Essentials for the Study of Sagehood*, vol. 7.

one of the powerhouses of IT (Information Technology): In my view, it is internally connected with Korean tradition of humanity. I also find lots of postmodern wisdom in Yi Yulgok's explanation that humanity is to take plurality as its premise, that is, to know that all the people in the world have wisdom on their own, and thus to go together with them while encouraging and connecting with them.

There is a saying of wisdom in *Mencius*, "There are instances of individuals without humanity, who have got possession of a single state, but there has been no instance of the whole world's being got by one without humanity."³² The message for us in this saying is that human leadership should be grounded upon a sensitively nurtured human mind-and-heart, and the very power of this mind-and-heart should be the starting point of "the leadership for the world" (the leadership of CEOs) that many people today are talking about. In a recent survey asking foreigners living in Seoul, Korea the question of what elements make Seoul attractive to them, the top answer was Korean food, especially a wide variety of side dishes which are more generously provided than the main entrees on the table. The kindness and warm-heartedness of Seoul citizens also were listed as one of the main reasons why the city is a good place to live. I think these attractions, still very much alive today, are closely related to Korean Confucian tradition of the virtue of humanity, especially Korean women's virtue of life-giving hospitality to guests. In what country in the world can we enjoy such a well-prepared meal with healthy food with a small amount of money? I think the meal is filled with Korean women's work of *giving up one's own way to follow that of others* and their sincere efforts of *seeking the*

³² 不仁而得國者有之矣；不仁而得天下未之有也。The Second Part of *Tsin Sin* (盡心), the Seventh Book of *Mencius*.

humanity and accomplishing the sagehood. Their leadership has been cultivated for an extended period of sincere practice. For example, there is a story about a Confucian wife giving hospitality to a guest to her house: she measured in advance the size of the guest's feet by her eyes through a small hole on the door of the building and later offered a pair of socks fitting exactly the feet of the guest when he left her house. This is an example showing how delicately those women of Confucian tradition practiced the virtue of benevolence toward their guests.³³ In his visit to Korea to develop the project to introduce Korean dance to Europe, Bertram Müller, the director of Tanzhaus Düsseldorf said that the traditional ritual dance of Korea has the delicacy that "Europe doesn't have," and so he hoped for Korea to have more chances to communicate with Europe.³⁴ All these examples suggest that the spirituality and leadership of seeking the humanity and accomplishing the sagehood can play an important role of revitalizing human delicacy and patterns of humanity, the more of which today's human culture are losing.

V. Implications of Korean Confucian Women's Spirituality and Leadership for the Twenty-first Century

A Korean scholar of politics pointed out in his criticism of Western thought of natural law that Western tradition has some limitations in that, the law functions as the

³³ Sun-hyeong Lee, *The Renowned Head Families of Korea*, Seoul, Korea: Seoul National University Press, 2000, p. 105; Un-sunn Lee, *To Acquire the Lost Transcendence: Reflections on the religiosity of Korean Confucianism and Feminism*, p. 185.

³⁴ *Hangyeore Newspaper*, October 12, 2011.

outer power to regulate the politics.³⁵ It sounds like much heard Confucian criticism of Legalism (literally, School of Law), but only recently did people start to take the criticism seriously. It sounds convincing again as we observe today that the whole civilization is suffering too much from the greed of modern financial capitalism, ordinary people participate in demonstrations against Wall Street in the United States. The United States was once the richest country but now has become a malfunctioning one in which the top 1% of the population possesses 23 % of the national income, producing a lot of homeless and unemployed people, thus its status being equal to that of Ghana or Nicaragua in terms of the gap between the rich and the poor.³⁶ The ongoing financial crisis coming from the West clearly shows that, no matter what external law is well set up, the very law can easily turn out to be of no use in places where the inner law of humanity is not operating.

The situation today in Korea is not much different from that in the United States. However, I want to ask: what is the operating mechanism of life by which uprooted people in such harsh realities of either Korea or the United States feel that their lives are still worth enduring and thus stay in their lives? Is it the power of a familial life, in which motherhood and relational concern are still alive, or the legal system such as unemployment allowance etc.? I think Confucian leadership of *seeking humanity and accomplishing sagehood* based upon the belief in the inner natural law of human beings has a lot to offer human society in taking care of those two realms. In opposition to the ideas of Yang Chu and Mo Tzu that were very popular in the period of Warring States,

³⁵ Dong-su Lee, "Law and Politics in Korean Society --- Seen in Terms of Republic Democracy," *Today's Eastern Thought*, vol. 17 (Fall and Winter 2007), p. 194.

³⁶ "'I am scared, when I'll be unemployed.' --- The Fear of American Middle Class," *Hangyeore Newspaper*, October 18, 2011.

Mencius presented the way of humanity and justice (仁義) as his alternative. He warned people that both Yang Chu's idea of *self-preservation*(爲我) saying "I would not pluck a hair from my body to benefit the world," and Mo Tzu's idea of *universal love*(兼愛) without any differentiation between one's parents and relatives and the others, could eventually bring about a world of wild beasts in which human beings would eat each other for survival.³⁷ Mencius called Yang Chu's idea of self-preservation "kingless"(無君), that is, not recognizing the sovereign (state). In our words of today, it is the position of not recognizing the *public realm*, or the attitude of reducing the whole aspects of human life into private affairs, that we find even in the lives of high officials of a state who take their public offices as opportunities to make a private profit. Mo Tzu's idea of *universal love* that Mencius called "fatherless"(無父) has been recognized as the one transcending the narrow Confucian familism and often compared to the Christian idea of universal love, but I think human lives in the East as well as in the West are confronting now this common crisis of parentlessness. As long as an alternative form of communal life is not given in place of the familial life of intimacy and responsibility, where can human beings acquire their consciousness of humanity and justice that is essential to sustaining our human lives? We now have many instances witnessing our age of people eating each other, as Mencius predicted before. We are now living in the society where the 1% of the richest people devours the other 99 %, a middle school student has killed his mother who cruelly enforced education on him for his financial success in the future, and a father sexually violates his own daughter. I see behind all

³⁷ Chapter 9 of the Second Part of *Tang Wan Kung* (滕文公), the Third Book of *Mencius*.

these scenes of people devouring each other in the world the father/motherlessness, that is, the deconstruction of family

The Doctrine of the Mean repeatedly talks about *sincerity* (誠) with which one accomplishes not only the completion of one's self but also the completion of others and all other things. It means that one should not stop at self-completion but continue the work of sincere concern and life-giving to be extended to all things. The book says, "Not ceasing, such an effort continues long; continuing long, it makes real change.... That is why long-lastingness of sincerity accomplishes the completion of all things."³⁸ I think Korean women of Confucian tradition have continued to practice sincerely this principle of giving life to things and completing them in their lives. It was the role of a mother, a daughter, a wife, or that of someone else imposed upon them that made them remain in their lives in spite of all the difficulties and suffering. In other words, the action of completing one's role on the basis of *giving up one's own way to follow that of others* was the transcendental grounds of making them as they were.³⁹ In this sense, the Ultimate for them was not a figure of either a transcendent being in heaven (Christianity) or an internal god within one's self (Buddhism) but rather *the other* who existed in the beings of their child, husband, ancestor, guest, poor neighbor, or nation. Because of these others existing as plural beings, they also were able to not lose their hope and faith in the world. Transcendence for them was *life* which existed nakedly as it was in front of them asking for their help, care, and love. As they spent countless days and nights giving up

³⁸ 故至誠 無息, 不息則久, 久則徵, ... 悠久, 所以成物也. Chapter 26, *The Doctrine of the Mean*.

³⁹ Un-sunn Lee, *To Acquire the Lost Transcendence: Reflections on the religiosity of Korean Confucianism and Feminism*, p. 194f; Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, with an Interpretive Essays by Jonna Vecciarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, University of Chicago Press, 1966; John D. Caputo, *On Religion: Thinking in Action*, Routledge, 2001.

themselves, listening carefully to the cry of life and responding to its voice, Korean women could continuously nurture their life-giving spirituality. If contemporary feminism of the world is now searching for a new feminist ethic of care, consideration, and relatedness, it can alternatively draw from these experiences of traditional Korean women.

VI. Conclusion

I have examined the principle of a life of *giving up one's own way to follow that of others* and *seeking humanity and accomplishing sagehood* as the core spirits of Confucian mind and understood that these were very well embodied in the lives of Korean women of Confucian tradition. I have attempted to present this principle of life as the alternative spirituality and leadership for our age of severe global crisis. However, I know doing such a work is as difficult as doing some miracles to make the impossible possible. Because it was so difficult, Confucius might have said the following in *The Confucian Analects*: Someone said, "What do you say concerning the principle that injury should be recompensed with virtue?" The Master said, "With what then will you recompense virtue?" "Recompense injury with justice, and recompense virtue with virtue."⁴⁰

We can notice here Confucius recognizing that human life has a level of unresolved feeling of injustice that should be recompensed with honest words and justice rather than with virtue. By saying so, I think, Confucius reminded us of how much the

⁴⁰ 或曰，以德報怨，何如。子曰，何以報德。以直報怨，以德報德。 Chapter 36 "Hsien Wen" (憲問) of *The Confucian Analects*.

practice of *giving up one's own way to follow that of others* and *seeking the humanity and accomplishing the sagehood* could be distorted in the harsh reality of the world in the twenty-first century, and how this way of virtue as the traditional way of life for women could make them caught again in the trap of self-denial, submission, and repression. Therefore, he advised us to resolve injustice and the feeling of being injured by it with frank conversation, just compensation, and correction rather than virtuous response. But in spite of all these, the reality of the world now is demanding the action of self-sacrifice from someone, and requiring us to show what is the human thing to do in its archetype. It is to rebuild our public realms and to heal human lives which have already fallen in the state of war of all against all. The human foundation such as family that makes it possible for every human culture to exist is falling down, and its harmful consequences are quickly becoming the reality of our age, just as Mencius warned. The important question here is, how we, as persons who practice the way of *giving up one's own way to follow that of others* and *seeking the humanity and accomplishing the sagehood*, are going to rebuild the virtue of humanity (仁) and the public (公). I think this work is to recover faith in human beings and the world and to find a new ground for that faith. Therefore, it is not a simple socio-political and economic matter, but rather a question of *the Ultimate*, that is, to be sought *ontologically* and *spiritually*. In other words, the issue of our age including that of feminism is about the work of a “spiritual revolution” in the postsecular age.⁴¹ Since the traditional way of division between the sacred and the profane, which was called the way of *religion*, is no longer convincing to

⁴¹ Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism,” The 13th Symposium of the International Association of Women Philosophers, IAPh 2008; “Multiculturalism and Feminism,” *Proceedings of the IAPh 2008*, Ewha Woman’s University, Korean Association of Feminist Philosophy, p. 22-76.

our age, I suggest people to take seriously the Confucian way of sagehood, that is to say, *the most this-worldly and yet other-worldly way* at the same time. The Confucian way as such is to see the *plurality* and *multiplicity*, premised in the virtue of jen and the public, as the essence of human lives, and thus gives us the message that not *independence* but *interdependence* really matters to us. I think Korean women of Confucian tradition have a lot to offer in this work, and hope to see Korean women, who were baptized by modern Christianity and feminism, reconnect to this tradition to find an answer to the question.

Finally to say that I do not think the Confucian virtue of jen belongs only to Asian or Korean women. Just as professor Robert C. Neville designated in his book on “Boston Confucianism”,⁴² I hope for Confucian tradition to become the common wisdom for all humanity to solve the problems of the world, as we know that Plato is read not just in universities of the West but worldwide, and that not only the Greek-knowing people but other people can study the Greek philosophy. I believe that, just as Asian people have spent so much time and energy in learning about the West and learning the Western languages, now the Westerners should take their turn in learning about the East or Asia and transmitting what they have learned from these traditions as the common heritage for all humanity. I do hope, as a part of this common heritage, the archetypal features of humanity that the women of Korean tradition have nurtured with their delicate care on their own will make an important contribution to the common task of men and women as the genuine subjects of life in the twenty-first century, that is, the task of giving life to all things in the world, rebuilding the public, and handing down the humane virtue of jen.

⁴² Robert Cummings Neville, *Boston Confucianism*, SUNY Press, 2000.

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