The Core of the Neo-Confucian Movement:

The Concept of *Li* and its Implications

The Neo-Confucians’ unique understanding of the cosmos penetrated their entire way of life. Not only did it affect their intellectual beliefs, but it also influenced their relationships, their politics, and their day-to-day lives. Their cosmology dictated their stances on issues like orthodoxy and education and gave the movement characteristics such as a historical focus. This new way of thinking about the universe was centered around the term “*li*”, meaning principle or coherence. In the development of the Neo-Confucian position, the early Masters of the Northern Song made three crucial distinctions about *li* that would come to define it: that all things and affairs had their own *li*, that it is possible for the mind to see the *li* of something absolutely and with total certainty, and that all *li* are one *li*. These three attributes of *li* constituted the core of the Neo-Confucian movement; their entire belief structure can be derived from their ways of thinking about these perceived laws of nature and the universe. To prove this, I will analyze several aspects of the movement that appear across East Asia, namely their theories on learning and orthodoxy, their practice of using history as a model, and their way of ordering relationships. I will show that these are all manifestations of the cosmological understandings of *li*, whether it be in China, Korea, or Japan.

*Li and its Neo-Confucian Definition*

Neo-Confucian philosophers at the outset of the movement created the metaphysical foundation of the Neo-Confucian position. The most important part of their cosmology is the
concept of *li*. The term was already an important part of earlier Confucian doctrine, in this instance meaning “ritual” or “protocol”\(^1\). However, Neo-Confucians altered the term to become the basis of their metaphysical platform by redefining it as “principle” or “coherence”\(^2\). Their beliefs were as follows: all things are made up of varying states of *qi* (often defined as “material force”; that is, the combination of matter and its energy). The underlying force that gives order to this *qi is li*. In other words, all things have an “ordering principle... that shapes the vital matter, *qi.*”\(^3\) *Li* was in essence a “unified field theory” of Neo-Confucian metaphysics: it explained that there was one force that ordered all things and could explain how or why they function in a particular manner. *Li* at the same time meant “how something worked...the pattern or system of relationships that held parts together”\(^4\) and also was used as a standard of how something is supposed to operate. Important to the Neo-Confucian definition is that *li* is a concept that the mind understands—it is not something physical.

The Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi complicated the idea of *li* in three critical ways that made the concept one of the hallmarks of Neo-Confucian thought. Firstly, they argued that all things and “affairs” (i.e. relationships) have their own *li*, in this case meaning standard of how something should work\(^5\). This claim is an important metaphysical justification for the system of the Five Relationships, which I will return to later. This distinction is also deployed to explain why antiquity was the golden era of civilization and why Neo-Confucians used history as a model. Secondly, they claim that “it is possible for the mind to see the *li* of something absolutely,

---


\(^2\) Peter Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 162-3

\(^3\) Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism*, 18

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 163
with total certainty\(^6\)’. In other words, with the right training, the mind could attain a state where one could recognize the coherence and relationships of all things. This idea was the basis of the establishment of new goals of education and learning. Finally, the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi claimed that “all li are one li\(^7\)”. Though li could manifest itself differently, all li were the same and were unified. This aspect of li is also important in that it establishes the basis of Neo-Confucian belief in the unity of all things, to the point that unity becomes a sacred precept of the movement. This belief in unity led to the development of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and to the destruction of heterodox teachings. These three aspects of li are the closest one can come to distilling the essence of the Neo-Confucian position. One can derive the justifications behind major doctrinal positions and intellectual and philosophical beliefs from this metaphysical foundation. The first belief system I will analyze in this light is the Neo-Confucian way of ordering relationships.

**Neo-Confucian Relationships and Their Li**

The Confucian code governing the proper relationships between individuals is one of the most easily recognizable aspects of the belief system to a Western audience. It is also one of the most tangible parts of the movement, as it affected daily life for people of all walks of life, from scholarly officials to toiling peasants. More commonly known as “filial piety”, the position was formally stated in the “Three Bonds” and the “Five Relationships”. This system categorizes the type of relation between two people and prescribes proper norms for how the two are to conduct the manner of their relationship. These norms made up the basis of the Confucian ordering of society. The “Three Bonds” determined the overall flow of authority: the ruler had authority over

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid.
his ministers, the father had authority over his son, and a husband had authority over his wife.\(^8\)

On the other hand, the “Five Relationships” posited an ideal norm for the relations between individuals. Fathers and sons must have mutual affection for each other rather than “one-way obedience” (father-son). Rulers must not reign with profit in mind; they must rule with the interests of the people at heart (ruler-subject). Husbands should not outright dominate their wives, but there should be a division of labor, with the wife being the homemaker (husband-wife). One should treat his elders with respect, be they your kin or not (Old-Young). Friends should be faithful and treat each other with a spirit of mutualism and commitment (friend-friend). This system organized the day-to-day conduct of individuals within Confucian society.

While the Five Relationships and the Three Bonds existed in earlier manifestations of Confucianism, Neo-Confucians used their new interpretations of \(li\) to explain why cultivating proper relations was essential to the metaphysical well-being of society and of the cosmos. Of the three aspects of \(li\) mentioned above, what is important here is that all things and affairs have \(li\), meaning the standard by which something is supposed to operate\(^9\). Though \(li\) is unified, it can manifest itself in different ways. These different forms of manifestation lead to the different ideal norms in the relationship between two people. In other words, though the \(li\) in the relationship between father and son is the same \(li\) as that in the relationship between husband and wife, it manifests itself differently, leading to a different ideal norm. Realizing or bringing about the \(li\) (in this case meaning standard) of a relationship was critical to the creation of a moral and harmonious society. For example, if a son defies his father, the \(li\) of the relationship will not be

---


\(^9\) Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*,163
realized, and the “moral fabric of society will be damaged”\textsuperscript{10}. Thus, maintaining proper relationships was imperative to the creation of a cosmological state that would allow individuals and society to flourish.

In Korea, one can see that the realization of the \textit{li} of the Five Relationships was not something to be taken lightly in Queen Dowager Inmok’s 1623 document declaring the dethroning of Kwanghae and the enthronement of Injo. Inmok was the legal wife and widow of the late King Sonjo, and Kwanghae was a son of a secondary wife\textsuperscript{11}. When Kwanghae ascended to the throne, he was threatened by the legitimacy of Inmok’s young son, Yongch’ang, and put him to death, along with imprisoning Inmok. She claims he also murdered her parents and harmed an older brother. These actions violated several of the Five Relationships. First of all, as his father’s widow, Kwanghae was supposed to treat Inmok as his own mother. Instead, he killed her parents and imprisoned her\textsuperscript{12}. Secondly, he harmed an older brother. This is against the proper relationship of elder brother-younger brother, whereby the younger brother is supposed to revere the elder brother. Thirdly, he violated the ideal relationship between ruler and subject by demanding more taxes and corvee labor, initiating purges and harming innocent people. Finally, by befriending the Manchus and imprisoning a Chinese emissary, he disrespected the Chinese court. By doing this, he violated the proper relationship between lord and vassal, which was similar to that between father and son\textsuperscript{13}. For this impropriety, Kwanghae must be dethroned. In Queen Dowager Inmok’s eyes, if the ruler of the kingdom did not practice proper relationships, the \textit{li} of the society could not be realized. Thus, the people would suffer. In order to restore the

\textsuperscript{10} Slote and DeVos, \textit{Confucianism and the Family}, 123
\textsuperscript{12} Haboush, \textit{Epistolary Korea}, 35
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
proper *li* to Korea, a new, worthy king must be enthroned. Injo’s merit in this area is shown by his proper treatment of Queen Inmok, whom he released from imprisonment\textsuperscript{14}. By placing a king on the throne who brought about the proper *li* of his relationships, the dynasty would create the ideal metaphysical condition for the flourishing of society.

On the other hand, sincere reverence for the codes of filial piety led to honor and praise. Lady Chang of Andong was a woman in Choson Korea who was considered by many to be an example of the ideal Neo-Confucian wife\textsuperscript{15}. She took the whole belief system very seriously, from its tenets on education to the carrying out of ancestral rites. However, one of the key aspects supporting her candidacy for what an ideal wife should be is her commitment to cultivating the types of relationships important to creating the correct metaphysical climate for the success of her family. This is shown by her relationship with her husband. While the husband’s authority over his wife was established by the Three Bonds, what was more important in this case is that their relationship followed the ideal husband-wife relation set down by the Five Relationships. In this ordering, the wife’s subordination was downplayed; instead, a distinction of roles was emphasized\textsuperscript{16}. In Lady Chang’s role, she was to tend to domestic duties, including receiving honored guests, practicing ancestral rites, and maintaining the household. This allowed her husband to focus all of his energies on learning in the Confucian manner. Thus, cultivating this relationship was important on multiple levels of the Neo-Confucian beliefs in *li*: not only was Lady Chang creating the proper *li* in her relationship with her husband, but her focus on homemaking allowed her husband to study in an attempt to reach the state mind that was required to see all *li* absolutely.

\textsuperscript{14} Haboush, *Epistolary Korea*, 36
\textsuperscript{16} Kim and Pettid, *Women and Confucianism in Choson Korea: New Perspectives*, 40
With these examples in mind, one can see that the Neo-Confucian cultures of East Asia did not order their societies based on the Five Relationships out of mere tradition. They truly believed that this means of organizing society was a part of their grander attempts to realize a better world. To create this better world, every family must do their part to contribute to the overall moral fabric of society. Only then could the Way of the Sages become reality.

Learning as a Way to Reach Sagehood

Peter Bol argues that the core of Neo-Confucianism was a new theory on the ways and goals of learning\(^\text{17}\); I take this argument one step further and claim that this new theory on learning is the product of new ways of understanding the cosmos. Therefore, at the core of Neo-Confucian teachings was this new theory of metaphysics. This new learning is derived from the notion that the *li* of something could be seen absolutely and with total clarity. This led to the idea that the goal of learning was to attain a state “in which one responds to things spontaneously and correctly” and to cultivate an ability to recognize the *li* of all things. According to Neo-Confucians, this mental state was critical to acting morally. One who could see the *li* of all things would always act morally. Thus, leaders and scholars must focus on bringing about this mental state through learning, so that the country would be ruled justly.

This altered ways in which education was practiced, beginning in medieval China and spreading through the early-modern period to Korea and Japan. The new Neo-Confucians such as Zhu Xi positioned themselves in opposition to the government schools, who they claimed were merely preparing students for examinations\(^\text{18}\). Neo-Confucian academies stressed moral cultivation and an attempt to reach the state of mind mentioned above. They claimed their way of learning was what Confucius had called “learning for oneself”, which meant becoming aware of

\(^{17}\) Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 192

\(^{18}\) Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 222
“one’s innate coherence and realizing it in practice\(^\text{19}\). They contrasted this to the government schools, which were “learning for others”, meaning simply training oneself to conform to the beliefs and standards of others. Thus, Neo-Confucians argued that the choice for literati was between selfish desire (state schools and training for the examinations) and moral cultivation. With this distinction in place, Zhu Xi set out to create a unique curriculum at his White Deer Grotto Academy to further his Neo-Confucian beliefs.

The development of new curriculum at Zhu Xi’s White Deer Grotto Academy and later Neo-Confucian academies like it marked the translation of Neo-Confucian metaphysical concepts into the action of learning and teaching. The metaphysical concept most important here is the idea set forth by Zhu Xi that *li* is something that can be grasped by the mind; the action is that education should be focused on personal cultivation to develop this grasping instead of merely learning how to pass the state examinations. One manifestation of this shift comes from Zhu Xi’s textual focus. Prior to the development of Neo-Confucianism, academies focused most on the Five Classics. However, Zhu Xi shifted attention to the Four Books. This collection stressed the importance of personal cultivation much more than the Five Classics\(^\text{20}\). Another example of the shift in curriculum to focus attention on personal cultivation was a reinterpretation of history. He changed the intention of Sima Guang’s *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* from a treatise on how the state should be ordered to one teaching the ways in which to morally judge politicians and political actions\(^\text{21}\). This is related to personal cultivation in that the literati must learn to judge whether or not politicians and bureaucrats have morally cultivated themselves to the standard of Neo-Confucians. These two actions taken by Zhu Xi

\[^{20}\] Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 227
prove that his intention was to drastically alter the goals of education. These actions were based on his understanding of the cosmos; specifically, his belief that the mind’s recognition of the *li* of all things is the most important step towards moral purity.

This type of learning spread to Korea in the 13th century. Before this time, Korean scholars who had considered themselves “Confucian” had been heavily influenced by Buddhist ideas. An Hyang (1243-1306), or “the Zhu Xi of the East”, is recognized as one of the first Korean Neo-Confucians. After becoming a court scholar, An recognized that the key to the Neo-Confucian transformation of society lay in this new way of learning. To further his goal of revitalizing Korean scholarship, he established a scholastic fund that would purchase old Confucian artifacts and, more importantly, the “new works” of Zhu Xi. These new works were the new curriculum established by Zhu Xi mentioned above, works that emphasized the importance of personal cultivation. He then focused on the revitalization of the Confucian Academy, hiring new teachers and creating an atmosphere of renewed discovery. This model for an academy spread throughout the countryside throughout the 13th century.

With these new academies and curriculum in place, the Neo-Confucian transformation of Korea began. One can see this transformation in the beliefs of the scholars of the time period. Yi Che-hyon called the new beliefs “concrete learning” (*sirhak*), showing that he identified Zhu Xi’s style of learning as the core of the movement. He blamed the prevalence of Buddhism among scholars on the king; for him, a king’s primary duty was education. Yi redefined scholarly conceptions about what was important in a Korean king. In this new visualization, a

---

23 Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 17
24 Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 21
25 Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 22
king must focus on “polishing his own virtue first” before he could attain “reverence” and “watchfulness”, the already-established two most important traits for a ruler.26 To accomplish this, one must study the Four Books and the curriculum established by Zhu Xi.

This new way of conceptualizing an ideal ruler shows the Neo-Confucian beliefs of li penetrating Korean society. This notion of personally cultivating oneself through education to the point of being able to recognize the coherence of things was now the chief goal of academies throughout the peninsula. Scholars now expected their rulers to undergo the same education. This education of the ruler and the bureaucracy was critical to revitalizing the kingdom. Early Korean Neo-Confucians believed that if the “‘learning of the sages’ (songhak) was sufficiently absorbed by the ruler and his officials, state and society would regain their vitality and harmony.”27 This belief is important because it shows the Korean adoption of Neo-Confucian ways of understanding the cosmos and society. They believed that only when a ruler could attain the mental state required to recognize the li in all things could their society once again attain moral rectitude. Thus, developing the means to learn in this way was not simply theoretical and ephemeral, it was timeless and practical (thus the term sirhak), and essential to the well-being of the kingdom and its people.

Another example of Korean society’s absorption of Neo-Confucian ideas on learning comes from an 18th century letter written by Hwang Chongjongdang in which she encourages her sons to take the issue of education by personal cultivation seriously. She makes clear the distinction made by Zhu Xi that the goal of education is not merely gaining the ability to pass examinations and gain official titles; rather, it is to develop the ability to see the interconnectedness of all things. She claims some people only regard education as “tools for

26 Ibid.
27 Deuchler, The Confucian Transformation of Korea, 23
composition”\textsuperscript{28}. She herself restates that “the distinction between learning for rightful principle and learning for the civil service examination is that between learning for oneself and learning for show to others”\textsuperscript{29}. Finally, she says that “the way of learning is to set your mind and, through ceaseless effort, to recover the true nature...”\textsuperscript{30} This “true nature” she is speaking of is \textit{li}: one must work to “recover” and recognize the “true nature” (\textit{li}) of the cosmos. This letter shows that the parents of the \textit{yangban} in Choson Korea fervently believed in the Neo-Confucian form of education. It also shows that they took to heart Neo-Confucian beliefs about the universe, specifically, that \textit{li} was something that could be comprehended absolutely through rigorous personal cultivation.

The new form of academy stressing personal cultivation did not seriously reach Japan until the 17th century. During this time, the Tokugawa \textit{bakufu} established a Neo-Confucian academy of the new style in 1630\textsuperscript{31}. At its head was Hayashi Razan. While the \textit{bakufu} was not nearly as successful as the Choson court at creating an ideal Neo-Confucian society, the new academy does mark the transition to this new form of Confucian learning. Razan’s primary focus of the new institution was to encourage the \textit{samurai} to cultivate themselves. Once again, we find a Neo-Confucian teacher stressing that the path to a moral life lay through education. This education was designed not to simply force students to memorize classics and regurgitate information. It was more about learning to cultivate a state of mind that was able to recognize the underlying principle unifying all things.

\textsuperscript{28} Haboush, \textit{Epistolary Korea}, 292
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Peter Nosco, \textit{Confucianism and Tokugawa Culture} (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 34
In all three countries of East Asia, one can see that Neo-Confucian ideas about how and why one should be educated took root in each society. Peter Bol’s argument that the core of the Neo-Confucian movement is their new theory on learning is supported by the extensiveness by which this new style changed the educational practices of the region. If one looks a little deeper about why Neo-Confucians believed this new learning was so important, one sees that their cosmology, and specifically their beliefs about li, were the root cause of this belief. Therefore, this belief in li is the foundational precept of the movement.

**Unity of Doctrine**

Another important development stemming from the Neo-Confucian understanding of li is their belief in unity. Bol argues that a belief in “unity” represents one of the fundamental and overarching precepts of the Neo-Confucian movement. This belief manifests itself in many ways, but gains its basis in their understanding of the cosmos. As mentioned previously, the third characteristic of li put forth by the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi states that “all li are one li”. To expand on this notion, they believed that “all creation, ‘heaven-and-earth and the myriad things,’ is a coherent, unified whole with a unitary origin and unitary process.” Li unified the human world with the natural; it unified all people and all relations into an inclusive framework of the universe. This belief in unity transcended their cosmology; it worked its way into their beliefs about the mind, government, and doctrine.

Neo-Confucian belief that their doctrine should be unified and that there is only one correct way of learning led to the development of orthodoxy and an attempt by scholars to reconcile contradictions made by major Neo-Confucian authors. This orthodoxy originates from

---

32 Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 197
33 Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 163
34 Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 200
an important term, the “Succession of the Way” coined by Zhu Xi in his preface to the *Doctrine of the Mean*. It means “the lineage of those who understood the Way correctly and thus had authority over values.”\(^35\) This idea that there is one “Way” that is passed down through the ages is very important to the development of an official Neo-Confucian orthodoxy.

One can find examples of the development of a Neo-Confucian orthodoxy from the beginning of the movement. Zhu Xi himself attempted to smooth over the philosophical differences between himself and other early Neo-Confucians, especially Lu Jiuyuan. In his attempts to transform Neo-Confucian thought from a series of discrete teachings into a unified and coherent doctrine, Zhu Xi produced his own internal history of the group, edited others’ works and argued against interpretations that did not fit with the developing orthodoxy.\(^36\) Not only was Zhu acting out of his belief in the unity of the cosmos and that he had inherited the “Succession of the Way”, he was also attempting to strengthen the legitimacy of the Neo-Confucian creed by presenting a united front. A movement that is more nebulous in its defining characteristics appears less authoritative than one in which all of its practitioners agree.

Later Chinese Neo-Confucians continued to try to reconcile the differences of the Song philosophers. Cheng Minzheng (1445-1500) was so distraught over the disagreements and contradictions between Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan that he created a work called “*The Way is One Collection*” in which he annotated letters between the two to show that they had eventually reconciled their differences.\(^37\) His title clearly shows his metaphysical belief that there can only be one Way. Once competing belief systems arise within Neo-Confucianism, its authority as sole

\(^{35}\) Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 204

\(^{36}\) Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 210

inheritor of the Way is thrown into question, along with the literati’s understanding of existence itself. Thus, scholars sought to assert the unity of their doctrine.

In Japan, Neo-Confucian orthodoxy is best evidenced by Matsudaira Sadanobu’s 1790 “Kansei Prohibition on Heterodox Studies”\(^{38}\). In this edict, Matsudaira ordered the Bakufu college to reassert the primacy of orthodox Neo-Confucian teachings and ban perceived heterodox interpretations. He believed that the college had lost “the Way”, and by re-establishing orthodox teachings, he was reconnecting with a powerful and ancient tradition. This shows his belief in the idea of the “Succession of the Way” mentioned by Zhu Xi. If the college continued teaching heterodox ideas, this succession would be lost, and with it humanity would lose the ability to recognize the coherence of the universe. With this ability lost, gone also would be the ability to attain the mental state critical to always acting morally. This idea of restorationism not only shows the Neo-Confucian metaphysical belief in the unity of the cosmos and of doctrine, but also shows the idealization of history- Matsudaira wanted to revert the Bakufu college to a time when its teachings were “pure”.

A Korean example of the development of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy come from a circular letter by the scholars of Tosan Academy sent to the literati at Oskan Academy. Jointly written by the yangban at Tosan in 1767, the letter established their position on an issue of ongoing debate in the scholarly community\(^{39}\). The conflict was between the descendants of the legitimate sons and descendants of the secondary sons of Hoejae Yi Onjok, a famous Neo-Confucian scholar of the 16th century. To bolster their claim, the descendants of Yi Chonin (a secondary son) argued that T’ogye Yi Hwang (the most revered Korean Neo-Confucian philosopher) had given Chonin

---

\(^{38}\) Nosco, *Confucianism and Tokugawa Culture*, 20  
\(^{39}\) Haboush, *Epistolary Korea*, 102
a pen name as a sign of his appreciation, and that the two had worked together\textsuperscript{40}. This claim was contentious as Chonin was seen as a purveyor of heterodox ideas. To claim that T’oegye favored Chonin is to imply that T’oegye agreed with his teachings. According to the scholars at Tosan, Chonin’s faction’s “way of arguing gives addressees the impression that Master Hojae tried to stand foremost among scholars by forming an academic doctrine severed from Zhu Xi’s tradition, because he had a different academic understanding from that of Zhu Xi.”\textsuperscript{41} By implying that there were contradictions between T’oegye, Hojae and Zhu Xi, Chonin’s faction was not only taking a position that the scholars at Tosan disagreed with, they were threatening the metaphysical foundation of the yangban belief structure and justifications for rule. Their logic is as follows: if there were indeed contradictions between the teachings of Zhu Xi and those of Korea’s preeminent scholars, then the “Succession of the Way” in Korea would have been lost. In their eyes, Zhu Xi had transmitted this knowledge to the Korean yangban, who carried on this “succession” through the teachings of T’oegye and Hojae. Thus, the Way of achieving the “moral mind” would be lost, and society would become immoral. The yangban also rested their justification for their high social standing and exploitation of the commoners on their status as guardians of the Way and their ability to attain the correct mental state for acting morally. By implying that their Way was no longer the one correct Way was to threaten their way of life. Thus, the scholars of Tosan recommend destroying these heterodox teachings, along with the woodblocks making their publication possible.

With these examples in mind, one can see that the adherence to orthodox Neo-Confucian interpretations was very important to elites across East Asia. In all three countries, we can see instances of scholars fearful that the manner in which the Way is being taught is not in line with

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{41} Haboush, \textit{Epistolary Korea}, 108
how it “should” be. The idea that heterodoxy not only threatens their intellectual position, but also their understanding of what it takes to become a moral person is evident in their fervor in quashing heretical teachings. Heterodox writings must not simply be ignored- they must be destroyed. Furthermore, Neo-Confucian scholars saw a need to reconcile the contradictions between the lessons of their most revered philosophers. With their understanding of the cosmos, especially their belief in the unity of all things, scholars saw the need to maintain unity in their teachings. Thus, the development of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy in all three countries of East Asia shows scholars’ commitment to the metaphysical foundations of the philosophy. It is another example of cosmological beliefs manifested to action, and also gives evidence to the notion that these beliefs are what make up the core of Neo-Confucianism. It is from this understanding of cosmology that gives rise to most, if not all of the social, political, and intellectual precepts of the movement.

**Neo-Confucian Reverence of History**

The Neo-Confucian understanding of *li* also gives rise to their own historiography and influenced the historical focus of their teachings. *Li* is a critical component of Neo-Confucianism’s own “creation” myth; that is, the foundation of civilization. Early Neo-Confucians claimed that “Civilization began when some men responded coherently to the situations humans lived in at the time...” These people were not aware of *li* or that they had acted correctly, but their “spontaneous insight into *li*” allowed them to develop agriculture, government and other foundations of civilization. Early Neo-Confucians redefined the already heavily used term “sage” to describe these individuals who could naturally and without training

---

42 Haboush, *Epistolary Korea*, 108
43 Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 169
44 Ibid.
understand the coherence of things. In other words, sages were born with the ability to see all *li* absolutely and with total certainty. It is this quality that makes sages the perfect ruler. Thus, during Confucianism’s perceived golden age, the Zhou dynasty, the realm was ruled by sage-kings who could innately recognize the *li* in all things. With these kings as their rulers, society was unified and achieved perfect social harmony. However, when rulers stopped being born sages, they became selfish and consumed with desire, leading to the downfall of their society. During this decline, Confucius was born, and became the first sage who was not a king. Neo-Confucians argued that his solution to the problem that sage-kings were no longer born was that scholars must “learn how to become sages themselves.”

While the idealization of Chinese antiquity was not new, Neo-Confucians used their unique cosmology to explain *why* antiquity was idealized. Antiquity served as an example of how society could be if the *li* of all things were realized. When speaking of *li* as a normative term about how society and the world *should* operate, this standard was set by the Zhou Dynasty and antiquity. In other words, of the three components of the Neo-Confucian definition of *li*, the most important here is the idea that all things have their own *li*, or standard of how they should work. While Neo-Confucians simply assume that antiquity was indeed ideal, their understanding of *li* is deployed to explain the means by which this society *became* ideal. It is also used to explain the downfall of Zhou. When *li* was no longer recognized and the unity of society began to crumble, selfish desire became the chief motivating reason for action, and not acting with coherence. Thus, there was a metaphysical difference between the Neo-Confucian era (late Song dynasty) and antiquity—people had lost the ability to be born a sage. However, this unity could be realized again by learning to become a sage. With their idealization of history explained in metaphysical terms, one can see that Neo-Confucian use of history as an illustration of a united and

---

harmonious society is another example of their beliefs being shaped by their understanding of cosmology.

In Korea, this idealization of history can be seen in their elites’ adoption of patrilineal descent groups. In antiquity, Confucian gentlemen belonged to well-defined families with genealogical records. This practice had fallen by the wayside by the time of Choson Korea, and in Neo-Confucian scholars’ attempts to revitalize their society, they reinstated the practice. They began keeping genealogical records that clearly defined both primary and secondary members of the descent group. The yangban imitated this model from the past because they believed in the righteousness of antiquity. By imitating the ancient ways of organizing society, the yangban might become more sagely themselves. To put this in other words, they harkened for a time when the li of all things was realized by society. To copy the ways of antiquity was to help bring about this realization of the li of all things in their own society.

Early Choson Koreans also modeled some of their legislation on the ways of the ancients. In 1428, the Choson state founded the Chiphyonjon (Hall of Worthies), an official research institution devoted to Confucian and Neo-Confucian texts. One of its primary functions was to study the “ancient institutions” that allowed the society in antiquity to function so perfectly. This involved diligent investigation into Chinese classical literature. From these sources, scholars at the Chiphyonjon would compile works intended as guides for officials with legislative power, who would then create laws such as Kyongje yukchon (The Six Codes of Administration). These laws were directly based on “ancient institutions” as interpreted by the scholars at the

---

46 Deuchler, The Confucian Transformation of Korea, 119
47 Ibid.
48 Deuchler, The Confucian Transformation of Korea, 117
49 Ibid.
Korean officials followed the ways of ancient lawmakers because they believed these laws were the works of sages. These sages understood the *li* of all things, and thus their laws must have been created with this knowledge in mind. Until scholars and officials could develop the ability to recognize the *li* of the universe through education and personal cultivation, the key to the salvation of society lay in imitating the laws of those who, long ago, *did* have that ability. Mencius himself stated that “nobody ever erred by honoring the laws of the ancient kings”\(^{51}\). Thus, this use of history as a legislative model of how civilization was supposed to be executed served as a stopgap measure to restore the kingdom until society could once again develop its own sages.

In Japan, one can see the existence of several trends of Confucian historiography in the *Dai Nihonshi*. This work was an important history of Japan, sponsored by the Tokugawa bakufu and completed in 1720\(^{52}\). Key here are two issues: the use of history as a source for moral lessons and the passing of judgment on past rulers and reigns based on Neo-Confucian standards. Throughout the work, the authors added sections called *ronsan*, in which they passed “formal judgment” on the actions of previous rulers\(^{53}\). In other words, these scholars evaluated each ruler to see how well they had upheld the Way of the Sages. Based on these judgments, a current ruler could learn lessons on how to act morally by imitating those rulers with positive judgments and eschewing the practices of rulers with negative judgments. In this way, the *Dai Nihonshi* was meant to be a tool for governance. This relates to *li* in that history was to be used as a tool to help bring about the proper *li* of all things: leaders of the bakufu could use the *Dai Nihonshi* to evaluate policies that had helped reach this goal and those that had detracted from this mission.

---

\(^{50}\) Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 121

\(^{51}\) Ibid.

\(^{52}\) Nosco, *Confucianism and Tokugawa Culture*, 76

\(^{53}\) Ibid.
The Neo-Confucian fascination with history can be explained with their cosmology. They believed that all things had a standard by which they should operate, known as *li*. In antiquity, this standard was fully realized, and civilization reached a golden age. Thus, history can be used as a tool to better their contemporary societies. This belief also led to a certain historiography that emphasized the idealness of antiquity. In these ways, one can see that this belief was rationalized by their assumptions about *li*.

**Conclusion**

After analyzing four of the most important aspects of the Neo-Confucian movement, one can see that the concept of *li* was a crucial assumption of the philosophy. The early founders of the movement defined *li* in three vital ways that would give shape to the whole ideology: all things and affairs have their own *li*, it is possible for the mind to comprehend *li* concretely and absolutely, and that all *li* are one *li*. Their way of ordering relationships, their new theory on how and why one should learn, their belief in unity and in the orthodoxy of their teachings, and the historical focus of the movement all can be derived from these three qualities of *li*. Therefore, the core essence of the ideology comes from cosmological beliefs about how heaven and earth functioned. In this way Neo-Confucianism blends the distinction between philosophy and religion. It was a philosophy in that it attempted to rationally debate the path to morality, using essays and arguments to support each author’s beliefs. However, a certain amount of faith is required to fully accept their ideology—specifically, their way of ordering the cosmos. Neo-Confucians might have debated which actions were moral and which ones were not, but they never challenged the base metaphysical assumptions established at the outset of the movement. In this way, I would argue that Neo-Confucianism was indeed a religion. While the semantics of how to classify Neo-Confucianism are up for debate, I think what is important here is to
remember that the entire viewpoint operated in a completely foreign intellectual milieu to that of our own time. Studying this milieu offers one of the great advantages of studying history. By evaluating this alien mode of thought, we can better understand our own paradigms and preconceived notions about how our world and the universe works. Maybe someday a future historian will look back our society’s theories on astrophysics and think, “What a strange way of thinking.”