CHAPTER 4

The Grand Tradition II: The Other Side of Orthodoxy

In the orthodox neo-Confucian scheme of things, rulers were supposed to acquire profound knowledge about relationships and about how to order them from top to bottom. Knowledge, virtue and the laws governing state and society were supposed to lead without break one to the other. In some ways we might compare the ideal Korean monarch to the Platonic ideal philosopher-king. But the specific character of the Korean ideal included two patterns for the state: one, a huge educational institution and the other, a magnified family structure. But whichever analogy operated, all was under one Dao, or Way. There was only one universal Way, therefore only one ethic. Thus family and state were ethically identical. Otherwise, it was argued, there would be two or more different ways with two or more different patterns of virtue, which amounted to a kind of cosmic-ethical perfidy, a recipe for the worst kind of chaos imaginable. It was therefore the prerogative of the Confucian scholar-officials to determine the ethos and shape of society from top to bottom.

On this basis, the scholar-officials undertook a protracted revision of the 1395 National Code, the Kyŏngguk taejŏn, from 1486 to 1636, that entailed a thoroughgoing institution of a patriarchal order beginning with the higher classes. From 1636, this order was consolidated and entrenched through the social reconstruction activities of the yangban and its tightening inflexibility was matched by an increasingly narrow party factionalism. By the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century this factional in-fighting was nurtured by a concentration on competing versions of the Confucian ‘perfect man’ (kunja in Korean, chün-tzu in Chinese), that not only sought legitimacy from shifting political interests but also entailed claims of possession of absolute truth resting on a religious kind of sanction. At a social level, the obligatory, tight moral coherence of all human relations, from individual to family, community, state and beyond, could only lead to conflicts of interests.¹ Conflicts also arose in connection with the interests of the non-yangban rural populace, the women of all classes, some literary artists and the non-Confucian religious communities that operated uneasily alongside state orthodoxy. Thus although

neo-Confucianism was the dominant cultural system during the Chosŏn dynasty, one that was imposed by the people who had all the advantages, it did not hold complete sway and did not manage to displace everything else. The scholar-officials were not able to will away the other traditions on the peninsula with a flourish of their writing-brushes nor coerce submission entirely through the wholesale revision of the law codes. Alongside the most confident expressions of orthodoxy, one hears dissenting messages. T’oege, for example, the dynasty’s finest neo-Confucian mind, typified the orthodox certitude in the following sijo poem.

The green hills—how can it be
that they are green eternally?
Flowing streams—how can it be
night and day do they never stand still?
We also, we can never stop,
we shall grow green eternally.

However, T’oege had a contemporary, Hwang Chini (c. 1506–1544), who wrote this:

Mountains are steadfast,
but waters are not so.
Since they flow day and night,
can there be old waters?
Great heroes are like waters,
once gone, they never return.²

Now although the context of Hwang’s poem is likely to be the departure of a lover, it stands nevertheless on its own terms as a logically consistent and critical alternative to the establishment dogma. Hwang Chini had been consigned the lowest social rank (though not born so) by virtue of being a kisaeng, who in the tradition of the entertainment women had undergone a classical education but saw and experienced life from the other side of orthodoxy. And certainly, even in the period of peace and of neo-Confucian supremacy following the reconstruction of state and society in the wake of the Japanese invasions, there was change and development and large areas of life that fell outside the

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