Let me first apologize for some possible shortcomings in my discussion of Eun-jeung Lee’s highly interesting paper. I have made some contributions to Chinese studies, and even more specifically, to the Jesuit mission in China, but I am far from being a specialist in Korean Studies. However, it is precisely this lacuna that might make me somewhat more sensitive to the innovative ideas in Eun-jeung’s contribution. Many scholars have made inquiries into the texts written by the Jesuits in China (including all types of publications, the ones written directly for a Chinese audience, the translations for the Chinese audience, as well as the treatises, reports, and translations for a European audience), and in recent years, numerous studies have shed new light on the religious practices of the Jesuits and the question of inculturation of Christian religion in large parts of the Chinese population. In contrast to the claim Jacques Gernet made in his pioneer study “Chine et Christianisme”, that being Chinese on the one side and being Christian on the other was mutually exclusive, we now know much more about the specific responses to Christianity in different social strata of Chinese society. In addition, research works on European responses to the Jesuits’ reports on China also have a long tradition. But, as far as I know, a comparison between a specific kind of European reception of these reports on the one hand, and a Korean Confucianist’s reaction to the ideas promulgated by the Jesuit missionaries in China has not been undertaken so far. By introducing the 18th century Korean literatus Chŏng Yag-yong into the complex game of religious, political and cultural interaction that took place with the Jesuit mission, Professor Lee has indeed added a new dimension, quite in the vein of the “tertium comparationis” Professor Krech and his International Research consortium are looking for. Christian Wolff and Chŏng Yag-yong represent a kind of meeting of minds far away from the scene of the actual encounter.

Professor Lee’s approach is inspired by the idea that the Jesuits were precursors of the Enlightenment. Notwithstanding the fact that
they count among the first victims of Enlightenment once it came to political power, the Jesuits no doubt had laid the foundations for the perception of Reason (with a capital R) as the guiding principle of the Chinese Empire and thus, a possible alternative to contemporaneous Western ways of governance. Christian Wolff sees Reason embodied by the Chinese meritocracy, which in turn is brought upon by a secular view of the Law of Nature. Meritocracy was based on the Civil Service Examinations system, and gave no priority to the right of birth and descent. We now know that this perception was reflecting more an ideal than a reality, since it was the Manchus who had reintroduced aristocratic principles into the society of the Empire, moreover, venality of offices was an ever increasing practice in late imperial China; but we may also add that, as early as in 1583, in his description of India, Japan, and China, Alessandro Valignano, the Jesuit Superior of the Indian Provinces had drawn a comparison between the meritocratic principles of organisation of the Jesuit order and the government of the Chinese Empire. In Valignano’s view, what the Chinese lacked was not Reason but the final touch of Christianity; on the other hand, the Europeans to some extent still lacked reason, which only the Jesuits would be able to bring upon. Wolff’s basic innovation consists in depriving the Law of Nature of its religious – or perhaps better: transcendent – foundations. (Wolff’s China is a paradise of egalitarianism.)

In a similar vein, Chŏng Yag-yong makes use of the subversive egalitarian potential of Christianity. In a rather pessimistic statement, Montesquieu had once remarked that Christianity would never succeed in China, because in China, no man was another man’s equal. It is very characteristic for an East Asian thinker to choose the field of ritual for his interpretation of Christianity. In China as well as in Korea, rituals were the mirror of political and social hierarchies which they were meant to enact. To state that each human being is equal in the face of God and that, consequently, the ritual devotional performance for the Supreme Being cannot be restricted to the ruler, is indeed a revolutionary message in this context. Early in 1616, the first anti-Christian persecution instigated by Shen Que had been legitimized by the suspicion that the Christians, as a heterodox subversive movement, were preaching and practicing an egalitarianism akin to the teachings of universal love represented by the philosopher Mozi. Given the orthodox interpretation of the so-called Neo-Confucian teachings prevailing in his time, it is no wonder that Chŏng Yag-yong also rejects theories of a different endowment – conferred by Heaven – that distinguishes...