Korean Civilizations Response Paper 1

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For the first time, the aristocratic rule of Koryŏ fell to the hands of experienced military leaders, who fought Khitan, Jurchen, and Chinese forces tirelessly to expand Koryŏ, only to be given measly rewards by the civil officials in charge. During the *Musin Jeonggwon,* or *Koryŏ military regime* (1170-1270), military officials, commanders, and soldiers revolted against officials with great success, to where lineage did not matter, but rather, "how much force-in-being one could muster."[1] Through the power struggle between military officials, aristocrats, and the royal family during Musin Jŏnggwŏn, it is evident that the development of the Neo-Confucian literati class (*yangban*) that emerged in early Chosŏn society was a direct response from the impact that military rule had on Koryŏ society.

The emergence of a prominent literati class in early Chosŏn is a direct result of a heightened interest in the study of Confucian classics and literature. From generation to generation, Confucianism secured itself as the dominant government-supported religion due to *filial piety*, a "virtue and primary duty of respect [and] obedience for one's parents and elderly family members,"[2] which allowed governments to justify existence of laws as well as unspoken submissiveness to the government. What could have caused a heightened interest in Confucian classics nearing the end of the military rule?

Early Koryŏ was devoutly Buddhist, coined a 'Buddhist country',[3] characterized by a plethora of wealthy Buddhist aristocrats, over 3,000 newly-built Buddhist temples, and abundant large-scale rituals all throughout the capital and country. Buddhism and Confucianism existed in the same sphere, where "Confucianism [was] an instrument to govern the country while Buddhism [was] a doctrine for personal salvation".[4] The landscapes of religion came into tension

following the onset of military rule, however, when Buddhist aristocrats began to lose their power.

Buddhist monks at the time were close to aristocrats and held economic, political, and social benefits, but their power was quickly dismantled by military rule. As centers of economic wealth and influence, Buddhist monasteries and temples gradually lost control, especially after two major rebellion attempts in 1174 and 1271 by thousands of armed monks to reclaim the Koryŏ capital of Kaesong and stop the military rule.[5] The Buddhist monks suffered crushing defeats from the well-seasoned Choi Chung-hon and his veteran army, who ruled Koryŏ at the time and most likely felt alienated by the Buddhist threats. Buddhists faced their first strike to power through loss of aristocratic power at the hands of the military regime. Thus, as the strongest proponents of Buddhism began crumbling in influence, the growing interest of Neo-Confucianist ideology became more attractive to the late-Koryŏ literati class.

In addition to weakened power of aristocratic Buddhists in the military rule of Koryŏ, perhaps the most harmful to Buddhism's decline in the military rule of Koryŏ is Buddhism's widespread corruption in late Koryŏ, where secular tendencies as "fortune-telling and offering of prayers and rituals for success in secular endeavors" took place, causing many to question the motivations of Buddhist monks of the time.[6] Despite attempts to revise Buddhism such as *Hwaom* and *Popsang,*[7] it is conceivable that the revitalization movements did not gain immediate traction, because the philosophies were incredibly complex and required several decades of study in rigorous Buddhist schools for a comprehensive understanding.

Lastly, Buddhism suffered from the destruction of historical property. The Mongol invasion that ended military rule in Koryŏ brought the destruction of important Buddhist

structures as the *Hwangyngyosa,* as well as the first Buddhist canon *Tripitaka* written by wooden block.[8] Though it might be argued that such acts of vandalism only further *impassioned* Buddhists to resist Mongol invasion rather than deter them (for example, the re-scripting of *Tripitaka* as a national project), as a whole, much economic and structural damage was done to Buddhist temples, structures, and property that only lessened the presence of Buddhism in Koryŏ society as a whole.

As such, following the end of the military rule of Koryŏ, the image of Koryŏ as a 'Buddhist country' was no more. The transformation of the religious landscape of Koryŏ sparked national interest in Neo-Confucianism and other religions found embedded in Chinese literature, leading to the formation of a Neo-Confucian literati class. But as Confucianism became more prominent, older practices of Koryŏ motivated by Confucian ethics translated into the late Koryŏ scene, shaping and impacting social and political aspects of Koryŏ as well.

Socially, the military rule of Koryŏ bridged the gap for the lower-class by offering social mobility to anyone who proved themselves through military strength. Slaves and peasants sought to mitigate harsh conditions of their lives for the first time in Koryŏ's history, through large-scale uprisings of thousands of people.[9] Manjŏk, leader of a slave uprising in Koryŏ's capital, exclaimed that "when the time is right, anyone at all can hold [high official positions]".[10] Manjŏk's pro-aggressive attitude was characteristic of the eagerness of the lower class to move up in social hierarchy through means other than heritage. Koryŏ's social order was shaken by the demand for revamping of the hereditary status system in place since Silla's "bone-rank" system, which awarded the Silla aristocracy with prestigious office positions through bloodline alone.

The new attitude of achievement based on merit was born, and it influenced the popularity of the civil service exam.

Examinations for career and status advancement began to rise to prominence following the social and political impacts of military rule. King Kwangjong's introduction of civil service exams in early Koryŏ honored prospective civil officials through merit, but they only tested knowledge of Confucian classics. Early Koryŏ civil officials recognized both the utility and danger of the military prior to the military rule, so social mobility within the military was severely limited. In fact, there was *no legitimate military exam equivalent* until the Chosŏn era.[11] *Musin Jeonggwon* was then driven by a collective narrative of military men, peasants, and slaves who sought rights to hold office given their *raw talents and hard work*. Following the desire for social mobility by the low-class during the military rule of Koryŏ, there emerged new examinations as military exams, miscellaneous exams, and even tiers of civil service exams such as *taekwa* (higher level) and *sokwa* (lower level),[12] which influenced even lesser-qualified students to study Confucian classics for the exam. Despite the military exam's profound impact in rewarding soldiers and commanders for their military knowledge, the civil service exam gained even *more* competition and reputation in early Chosŏn society, propelling the literati class' prominence in politics.[13] In tandem with Buddhism's decline came a rapid development and study of Neo-Confucianism ideology that quickly found its way into the social and political spheres of everyday Chosŏn life.

As a result, the literati class' development to prominence in early Chosŏn is inseparable from the lasting social, political, and religious impacts that military rule had on Koryŏ society. The literati class in early Chosŏn encompassed both civil officials (*munban*) and military

officials (*muban*)[14]. As such, the prominence of the literati class heightened the importance of military officials and the military as a whole, and posed to be a check to royal and aristocratic power, as well as other civil official power within the literati class. Although the military gradually lost its importance in Chosŏn society due to lack of foreign invasions until the Japanese invasions in 1592, the literati class and the military developed symbiotically, hand-in-hand, from *Musin Jeonggwon* to the early Chosŏn era, in order to establish prominence all throughout Koryŏ and Chosŏn history.

Notes

1. Eckert, Carter J. *Korea old and new: a history*, (Seoul, Ilchokak, 1990), 87.
2. "Filial piety." Dictionary.com. Accessed February 21, 2018. http://www.dictionary.com/browse/filial-piety.
3. Kim, Seung Uk. "Koryŏ 1." Lecture, Columbia University, New York, January 29, 2018.
4. Ibid.
5. Eckert, *Korea.* 88.
6. "Korean Buddhism." Korean Buddhism - New World Encyclopedia. Accessed February 21, 2018. http://web.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Korean_Buddhism.
7. Kim, Seung Uk. "Koryŏ 1." Lecture, Columbia University, New York, January 31, 2018.
8. Ibid.
9. Eckert, *Korea.* 88.
10. Lee, Peter H., and Wm. Theodore De Bary. *Manjŏk's Slave Rebellion: Sources of Korean tradition*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997), 200.
11. Kim, Seung Uk. "Koryŏ 1." Lecture, Columbia University, New York, February 5, 2018.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Kim, Seung Uk. "Koryŏ 1." Lecture, Columbia University, New York, February 12, 2018.