

Uncovering the Confucian Foundation of Public Sector Welfare in Joseon*

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Abstract

Through a case study on Korea's Joseon dynasty, the primary purpose of this article is to uncover the Confucian foundation of public sector welfare in the kingdom era of East Asia's history and to discuss the unlikelihood of realizing Confucian idealism in a pre-industrial country that was experiencing cycles of poverty and natural disasters. To this end, this article answers the following research questions: What are the central philosophical and political ideas of Confucianism? In what ways are the Confucian concepts of wangdao politics and datong society related to public sector welfare? How did Joseon's minbon (minben in Chinese) ideology influence the establishment of its public welfare system? What were the main attributes and programs of Joseon's welfare institutions? Finally, why did Confucian idealism fail to materialize in Joseon?

Keywords: Confucianism, Joseon dynasty, public sector welfare, *minbon* politics

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Introduction

Korea's Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) (hereinafter Joseon) introduced various welfare institutions to realize a society based on Confucian idealism, which placed an emphasis on the well-being of the people. Although Joseon rulers enjoyed far-reaching autonomy, they were obliged to maintain stability in the people's economic lives including caring for the needy. Confucianism even tolerated the replacement of rulers (kings or emperors) by their subjects when they failed to uphold a minimum economic standard (McLean 1996). A harmonious Confucian society could be realized through the fair distribution of wealth and the protection of the needy. In Joseon, helping the needy was not only about providing them with assistance but also about the ruler's heavenly mandate.

However, the mere existence of welfare institutions did not necessarily equal effective outcomes. The country's economic capability and social and political stability are necessary conditions for the realization of its welfare institutions. In addition, an adequate administrative system must be established to properly deliver welfare services. When the people actively make demands, the government may provide welfare services with sincerity. But, when taking into account the economy, politics, society, and public administration of Joseon, it is questionable whether Joseon was able to develop welfare institutions as was intended.¹

Against this backdrop, the principal purpose of this article is to uncover the Confucian foundation of public sector welfare in Joseon, and to discuss the unlikelihood of realizing Confucian idealism in a country that was experiencing cycles of poverty and natural disasters.

1. It is widely recognized that Joseon enjoyed political stability for ages, compared to China and Western nations at the time. However, approaching the latter half of its rule, Joseon's politics became turbulent, due largely to corruption, a rampant oligarchy, and disorder within society. It was from the mid-Joseon era that public sector welfare was confronted with the discrepancy between normativism and practice. This paper mainly explores the reality of the latter half of Joseon dynasty by stating the unlikelihood of accomplishing Confucian idealism.

In this effort, this article begins with a theoretical review of Confucianism and its relationship with the development of the welfare system in Joseon. The concept of a *datong* (“great harmony”) society, one of the ultimate political goals of Confucianism, is particularly important in explaining public sector welfare in Joseon. The next section explores the Confucian foundation of Joseon and its emphasis on Confucian *minbon* 民本 (“people as the basis”; *minben* in Chinese)² ideology. This is followed by a discussion on the relationship between *minbon* ideology and social welfare. This paper aims to provide a better understanding of public sector welfare in Joseon by employing the works of Confucian scholar-bureaucrats and statute books of Joseon. Finally, this article discusses how Joseon’s weak economy and corrupt bureaucracy began limiting its public sector welfare beginning in the middle of the dynasty.³ This study is motivated by the following research questions: (1) What are the central philosophical and political ideas of Confucianism?; (2) In what ways are the Confucian concepts of *wangdao* 王道 (“kingly way” or “rule of right”) politics and *datong* society related to public sector welfare?; (3) How did Joseon’s *minbon* ideology influence the establishment of its public welfare system?; (4) What were the main attributes and programs of Joseon’s welfare institutions?; and (5) Why did Confucian idealism fail to materialize in Joseon?

Confucianism and Social Welfare in East Asia’s Kingdom Period

Confucianism as a Philosophical Thought

Although Confucianism has changed over time, its core concepts have

2. The Chinese word *minben* 民本, is romanized as *minbon* according to its Korean pronunciation when it is used in Korean context throughout this article.

3. This study does not intend to evaluate whether Joseon’s public welfare failed or succeeded because it is irrelevant to evaluate the public welfare of premodern times by current standards. Instead, the purpose of this study is to narrate the reality that constrained the enforcement of the numerous welfare institutions established under Confucian idealism.

long been preserved in East Asia since its emergence in ancient China. Witnessing the political turmoil and societal disorder of China's Warring States Period (481-221 BC), Confucius (551-479 BC) systemized his thought on politics, society, and humanity to stabilize society by restoring the innate goodness of humans (B. Lee 2010). Later, his students arranged the doctrines of Confucius as Confucianism, and supported by China's dominance in the region, Confucianism became widely disseminated to neighboring countries (Borchert 2006). Until the nineteenth century, Confucianism had considerable influence on social and political institutions as well as on the general way of life in East Asia. Confucianism was a comprehensive entity of thought, ranging from the nature and behavior of humans to society, politics, and education. It even included ideas about music and military matters (M. Kim 1997). Meanwhile, although Korea's Joseon dynasty acknowledged Zhu Xi's neo-Confucianism, which placed a greater emphasis on metaphysical reasoning and self-cultivation, as the only authentic aspect of Confucian teaching, neo-Confucianism did not deviate so much from the early teachings of Confucianism. Thus, it is necessary to understand that the original teachings of Confucianism later became the foundation of the public sector welfare practices of Confucian Joseon because each strand of Confucianism shares key concepts on social welfare, such as *datong*, *wangdao*, and *minben*, respectively.

The core idea of Confucianism is to realize *ren* 仁 (*in* in Korean; meaning "humaneness" or "benevolence") in governing oneself and one's relationship with others. *Ren* is to love people and to have sympathy for others (Lou 1997). According to Confucianism, people are born with four good attributes—*ren* (humaneness), *yi* 義 (righteousness), *li* 禮 (propriety), and *zhi* 智 (wisdom)—but cannot make proper use of them. Mencius, considered one of the most prominent Confucian philosophers, states that:

If we seek the natural goodness of humans, we get it. But if we throw it away, we lose it. . . . All individuals feel sympathy, shame, reserve, and respect and have the ability to know the difference between right and wrong. Sympathy refers to *ren*; being ashamed

of oneself to *yi*; reserve and respect to *li*; the ability to distinguish right from wrong to *zhi* (as cited in Yu et al. 2002).

Confucianism underscores “returning to *yi* by overcoming selfishness” and tries to integrate *yi* with *ren* by regarding *yi* as the social moral to materialize *ren* in society. *Yi* is a standing rule guiding human behavior as well as a promise guaranteeing the relationship between humans in society to embody *ren* (Im 1983). However, the innate goodness of humans is hidden in the real world because of the ignorance of humans and the actions of evil institutions. Accordingly, it is imperative to uncover this innate goodness of humans through self-discipline and education (Yang 2002).

The notion of *ren* has widely been adapted to both family and social lives. Individuals should first love and respect their family members and friends, bestow favor on others, and respect the elderly. Because Confucianism accentuates the realization of *ren* in one’s social life, it emphasizes the spirit of moderation as seen in important Confucian texts, such as *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Doctrine of the Mean). Confucianism values harmonious coexistence among people, as well as between people and nature (Borchert 2006).

Confucianism as a Political Thought

Confucianism is an idealistic political thought as well as a reference for real-world politics. As a political thought, Confucianism is based on the notions of *ren* and *li* (Borchert 2006). Rulers should govern the country and its people through *renzheng* 仁政 (*ren*-based politics). In particular, Confucianism values politics governed by *de* 德 (virtue) and *dao* 道 (the way), which are based on *ren*, and refers to a style of politics called *wangdao* 王道 (kingly way or rule of right) politics (M. Kim 1997). Capable and generous rulers govern the country with *de* and *dao* and enlighten the people with a sense of rightness and ethics (B. Lee 2010). Confucianism looks down on politics that governs the people through force and laws such as *badao* 霸道 (rule of might). Capable rulers should illuminate the innate goodness of humans through edu-

cation and good governance, and preserving this kind of goodness and morality should be fundamental in governing the country (Kihl 2005).

Mencius, in particular, was an advocate of *wangdao* politics. To Mencius, a virtuous ruler is not merely one who holds power but one who understands their obligation to practice good politics (Ahn and Lee 1985). When rulers govern the people through *ren* and *de*, the people will in turn serve them of their own accord. *Wangdao* politics is to practice virtuous politics through *ren* and *yi*, and practicing *ren* is the starting point in politics (Borchert 2006). The “Weizheng 爲政” (On Government) chapter of *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects of Confucius) emphasizes *wangdao* politics in the following way:

A ruler should govern his land and people by virtue and rightness. A ruler should accumulate virtue through self-learning and self-awareness and practice politics for the people. A virtuous ruler shares pleasure and pain with the people and should realize the politics of *ren* to win the confidence of the people (as cited in Yang 2002).

Confucian *wangdao* politics is materialized in the form of *minben* politics in reality, one that respects and loves people in the real world. According to the “Xiashu 夏書” (Book of the Xia Dynasty) chapter of *Shujing* 書經 (Book of Documents), the concept *minben* means that “the people are the only root of the country and of rulers,” and Confucius emphasizes *minben* politics by stating, “I consider people to be precious.” As a means of *minben*, Confucius recommended reducing penalties and taxes, prohibiting the mobilization of people for forced labor during farming season, and reducing poverty.

Mencius developed the *minben* idea as a form of politics that focused on loving and respecting the people in order to realize the *wangdao* political ideology. By quoting *Shujing*’s expression, “share joys and sorrows with the people,” Mencius argues that “rulers should share joy and sadness with the people to make *minben* politics real” (Ahn and Lee 1985, 70-72). To Mencius, the will of heaven can be realized through people, and thus the people’s mind is that of heav-

en's (Bae 2003). Based on *minben* ideology, Mencius underscores the "politics for the people" (*weimin* 爲民) as the political obligation of rulers. Furthermore, Mencius justified the ostracism of indulgent rulers, because he considered protecting the people from the arbitrary actions of unworthy rulers as the will of heaven (Song 1999). Mencius states that "the people are high and noble, while a king is insignificant and trivial" (Yu et al. 2002). While the people are the basic root of the country, the ruler is their guide. A virtuous ruler is not a person who subordinates his people but one who cooperates with them to govern the country righteously (Ahn and Lee 1985).

Social Welfare in Confucianism

In Korea, *wangdao* politics functioned as the ideological foundation of welfare until the Joseon dynasty. Securing economic stability was a basic condition of practicing *wangdao* politics (Park 2004). According to the "Jilu 子路" chapter of *Lunyu*, Confucius envisioned a peaceful world in which all humans could enjoy a decent life and suggested that politics should pursue common good, in the areas of economic wealth, capable defense, and social trust. During a time when feudal lords exploited the people to mobilize military resources, Confucius demanded that kings and lords do their best to address the people's needs and distribute wealth justly.

Rulers should not worry about the scarcity of materials but worry about the unjust distribution of them, and should not worry about the poverty of the people but worry about their inconvenience. Rulers should pay attention to the confusion of society derived from the unjust distribution of wealth and materials . . . ("Jishi 季氏," *Lunyu*).

Mencius regarded stabilizing people's lives as a basic tenet of *wangdao* political ideology and linked *wangdao* politics to social and economic policies (Ahn and Lee 1985). He believed that people would exhibit good and courteous behavior if they were financially secure. Mencius argued that when people's lives are stable, they are able to

show their good nature—*ren* and *yi*:

If a sage makes the people possess abundant grains and beans, why aren't they virtuous and righteous? If the people cannot make their livelihood, they cannot have an honorable and steady mind. If the economic condition of the people is aggravated, they can lose their morality . . . (“Jinxin zhangju 盡心章句,” *Mengzi*).

To Mencius, an important obligation of rulers is to stabilize the people's livelihood. Therefore, he advocated the reform of the land system. He believed that the just distribution of land could serve as an economic basis for *wangdao* politics. However, in Confucianism, making people economically affluent is not an end in itself but a means for putting *ren* and *yi* into practice (Song 1999).

The ideal state of Confucian social welfare can be seen in the model of the *datong* society, a Confucian utopia recognizing the equal status of people, the just distribution of resources, and the embodiment of ethics and morality (Ahn 1986). *Datong* society values people's autonomy and economic stability and provides capable individuals with work while protecting those who are unable to work. In this society, people assist the poor and do favors for all individuals, much like they love their children and respect their parents (Yang 2002). In particular, Confucianism emphasizes the sustenance of four categories of the needy:

The following are the most distressed persons among the people: men who don't have a wife in their old age (*guan* 鰥); women who don't have a husband in their old age (*gua* 寡); children who don't have their parents (*gu* 孤); and the elderly who don't have sons in their old age (*du* 獨). They should receive special favor and help from society. Society should also enable the disabled, such as mutes, deaf persons, cripples, and dwarfs, to work and eat (“Wangzhi 王制,” *Liji* 禮記).

In sum, as shown in Figure 1, the philosophical, political, and social ideals of Confucianism were intertwined with one another and influ-

enced the institutionalization of public welfare. Maintaining economic stability for the people, distributing wealth and resources justly, and assisting the needy were all necessary for realizing the ideals of Confucianism. For this, virtuous rulers paid attention to establishing welfare institutions and facilities in their territories (B. Lee 2000), and in this way, Confucianism became the fundamental basis for public sector welfare in East Asia.

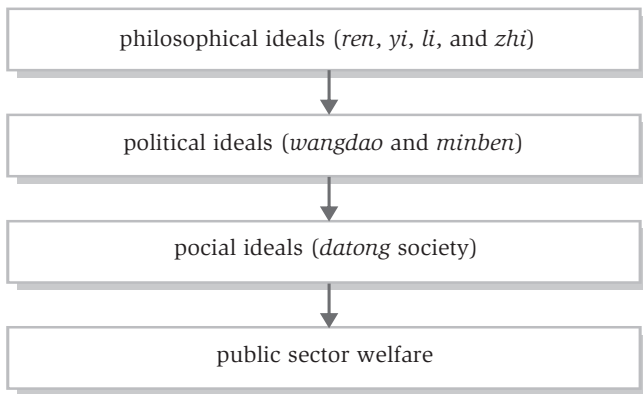


Figure 1. Confucian Foundation of Public Sector Welfare

Confucian Characteristics of Social Welfare in the Joseon Dynasty

Ruling elites of Joseon argued for Confucianism as the governing ideology for the new nation, criticizing what they considered the evil practices of Buddhism, such as loan-sharking, in the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392) (Breen 1998). Among Confucian scholar-bureaucrats, Jeong Do-jeon, a meritorious retainer at the founding of Joseon, played a pivotal role (Peterson 2010). According to Jeong, rulers should be responsible for the people, as parents are for their children (Han 2000). In *Joseon gyeonggukjeon* (Administrative Code of Joseon), a code of administration prescribing the founding spirit of Joseon (Deuchler 1992), Jeong

underlined the importance of stabilizing the people's economic lives as a precondition for good governance:

Farming and raising silkworms are preconditions for *minbon* politics because they are the basis of food and clothing Virtuous kings strengthen this basis by prioritizing the farming and raising of silkworms. The people will have a sense of honor when they are affluent in food and clothing, and the people's courtesy and politeness are elevated when there is grain in their warehouses (*Joseon gyeonggukjeon*; as cited in Han 2000).

Confucian *minben* ideology was strongly related to the stabilization of the people's livelihood in Joseon. In *Joseon gyeonggukjeon*, Jeong Do-jeon writes:

Rulers should acknowledge the protection of the people's livelihood as an urgent task. Rulers should make the people manage their livelihood by governing them wisely. If men store a sufficient amount of food and women possess a sufficient amount of clothing materials, then they may better serve their parents and raise their children. If so, the people will come to know courtesy and politeness, and customs come to possess a sense of honor (*Joseon gyeonggukjeon*; as cited in B. Park 2000).

In accordance with Confucius' teachings, the rulers of Joseon identified the mind of the people with that of heaven, and they felt obligated to take care of the people with sincerity and affection (Borchert 2006). In this regard, King Sejo states:

A ruler should not disregard the people's pain. The people are heaven. When the people become peaceful and calm, then heaven is also comfortable. Thus, in governing the nation, a priority should be given to making the people comfortable . . . (*Sejo sillok*, vol. 4).

Following the *minbon* ideology, the rulers of Joseon saw the relief of the poor and those suffering from natural disasters as an obligation.

Confucianism regarded natural calamities as heaven's reprimand for rulers' misgovernment. Accordingly, if rulers do not respond to natural disasters properly, then the mind of the people will leave them (Han 2000). This concept of welfare lasted throughout Joseon. The Silhak 實學 (Practical Learning) School of Confucianism, which paid attention to the practical application of Confucianism and the improvement of people's livelihood (K. Lee 1984), placed an emphasis on helping the needy and preventing poverty through the establishment of welfare institutions and the increase of national wealth. Jeong Yak-yong, a leading scholar of Silhak, emphasizes the relief of the needy in his *Mongmin simseo* 牧民心書 (Admonitions on Governing the People):

Governors should respect the elderly, raise orphans, support the poor, look after bereaved people, take good care of the sick, and save people from disasters. Governors should provide those incapable of standing by themselves with a proper means of livelihood and persuade their relatives to take care of them. Governors should entrust the disabled and those with no relatives to respected persons in villages and make government offices shoulder the burden for relevant expenses. . . (Article 6 of "Aemin 愛民," ch. 4 of *Mongmin simseo*).

Meanwhile, Article 6 of the "Jinhwang 賑荒" (Relief) chapter suggests policies for the needy: assisting the poor by saving resources in preparation for emergency; sharing food during periods of famine; moderating the scale in assisting the poor; establishing relief facilities; empowering the people; and providing helpers of the poor with material comfort.

The Confucian emphasis on *minbon* continued throughout the Joseon dynasty. In the nineteenth century, Bak Yeong-hyo, an enlightened scholar-bureaucrat, insisted that the government's primary goal should be to protect the people and therefore public expenditure should focus on this purpose. To him, it was necessary to eliminate poverty and secure food and clothing for the people in order to make Joseon a civilized nation. Moreover, he suggested the invitation of talented physicians to national hospitals, the prohibition of child aban-

donment, and the cleaning of public spaces, as means to promote healthcare welfare (H. Kim 1999).

Furthermore, Confucianism was strongly linked to familism and communitarianism in Joseon, where the family is “a group that pursues common welfare on the basis of consanguinity, such as marriage and blood relationships” (Bae 1999, 18). Although familism sometimes produced negative outcomes such as nepotism, it also had produced positive outcomes, such as the strengthening of family members’ responsibility and harmony, particularly in times of economic hardship. In addition, familism contributed to the development of a tradition of mutual aid and solidarity at the community level. Yi Hwang writes in *Seonghak sipdo* (Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning) that:

When we consider them as our parents, brothers, and sisters, it is a matter of course that we take care of and worry about the needy, such as orphans, the elderly who are alone, and old widows and widowers . . . (“Seoro 西路,” *Seonghak sipdo*).

Confucianism-Based Welfare Institutions of the Joseon Dynasty

Even before Confucianism was introduced to Korea, one of the key obligations of rulers was to protect the needy. In East Asian agricultural societies, it was believed that the suffering of the people from droughts or floods was due to misgovernment by rulers, and thus, all rulers tried to rescue the people from poverty and hardship. A good example was the Jindaebeop 賑貸法 (Relief Loan Law), created during the Goguryeo dynasty (37 BC–AD 668), which provided poor people with grains in the spring and required that they pay their debt after the harvest in autumn (W. Han 1970). Goryeo established welfare institutions, such as Uichang 義倉 (Righteous Granaries) and Sangpyeongchang 常平倉 (Ever-normal Granaries), to assist the poor and those suffering from natural disasters (Palais 1991). However, before Joseon, public sector welfare was poorly institutionalized or was

extemporaneous. Beginning with the Joseon period, public sector welfare based on Confucian *minbon* ideology was emphasized in earnest. Since its establishment in 1392, Joseon adopted Confucianism as its national ideology and devised new welfare institutions or reinforced existing ones (Hoare and Pares 2000). This paper classifies public sector welfare in Joseon into the following three categories: (1) public assistance for the poor; (2) healthcare and disease prevention; and (3) welfare services for the disadvantaged.

Public Assistance for the Poor

In Confucian Joseon, assisting the poor and those suffering from natural disasters was one of the top priorities of government affairs. However, in terms of beneficiaries, not all poor people were included, that is, public assistance was available only for the qualified poor by age and work ability. Thus, public sector welfare in Joseon was based on selectivism and key beneficiaries included the following four needy groups (*sagung* 四窮): old widows, old widowers, old people without any children, and orphans (*Taejo sillok*, ch. 1). The disabled and individuals suffering from natural disasters were also important recipients. Among the disabled, mutes, deaf individuals, cripples, and dwarfs received special protection, and those suffering from natural disasters were provided free meals and loans, following the Confucian notion of natural disasters as being an outcome of misgovernment (Ahn and Lee 1985).⁴

Although there was no strict and scientific investigation into the individual situation of potential recipients, the selection of welfare recipients still followed certain criteria. For example, in assisting any

4. As an example, the number of starving people from natural disaster amounted to 198,000 in 1419. Thus, the government released 15,272 *seok* (1 *seok* = approximately 144 kg) of grains for relief. Although the official record of natural disasters numbered 390 throughout Joseon, the number was much higher when minor calamities were counted. Officially recorded disasters included damages from flood (103 times), earthquake (96), starvation (59), drought (49), frost (23), wind (20), snow (19), etc. (M. Lee 2000).

of the aforementioned four groups, selection criteria was based on one's age, whether or not they had relatives, and the possession of property. Those who were in their teens to sixties, had capable relatives, and had their own property were not eligible. Although the Joseon government underscored the protection of the poor, family members or relatives (or even local communities) were first expected to provide assistance. According to "Jinhwang," chapter 11 of *Mong-min simseo*, the government was responsible for protecting only the extremely poor facing crises, without someone to provide them with protection. In the case of no family members or relatives, local governments recruited virtuous individuals within local communities to assist the disadvantaged, and provided them with incentives by reducing their compulsory labor requirement and subsidizing their costs (B. Park 2000). In this way, the informal sector, such as family or benevolent individuals, met the majority of the welfare needs in Joseon.

In terms of welfare administration and delivery systems, ultimate responsibility for assisting the poor fell on the ruler and the central government, and the timeliness and speed of assistance were emphasized. Local governors were responsible for providing front-line protection. When necessary, the central government dispatched *jinjesa* 賑濟使 (secret investigators) to inspect the relief affairs of local governments. Such relief efforts were funded mainly by the public budget or interest from *hwangok* 還穀 (grain loans). However, regardless of the existence of a public relief system, the private sector—mainly the informal sector—played a critical role in protecting the needy throughout Joseon (Ham et al. 1996).

Joseon introduced a wide range of relief institutions, although some were inherited from its predecessors. Among them, the *hwangok* system, involving the management of Uichang, Sangpyeongchang, and Sachang 社倉 (Village Granaries), was representative of Joseon's welfare institutions. Among these, Uichang was an institution for lending grain to poor peasants to encourage agricultural production. Uichang lent public grain and seeds during the lean season of spring and collected the principal and interest after the harvest in the fall (Palais 1991). There was no interest in its early years, but gradually

the annual interest rate reached 20 percent. Although this interest was to be used to assist the needy, that was often not the case (Ham et al. 1996). Jeong Do-jeon states:

The government should establish Uichang and lend grain from Uichang to the poor who cannot prepare food and seeds during the sowing season. The government should provide the grain without interest and save the grain in Uichang to prepare for the next sowing season. If people have a bad harvest, then the government should assist the poor by lending all the grain in Uichang without interest . . . (as cited in Yu et al. 2002, 87).

However, despite the good intentions of Uichang, it encountered several problems from mid-Joseon, including administrative red tape, government corruption, and the irregular collection of principal. Some local magistrates lent Uichang grain to ordinary people to receive higher interest, and Uichang was transformed into usury capital, arousing the ire of the people in late Joseon (K. Lee 1984). Sangpyeongchang was established in 993 as a price-regulating institution. In Joseon, the government bought grain at a price higher than market price in good harvest years and sold it at a lower price in bad ones. However, beginning in the mid-Joseon period, its main function changed from a price-regulating institution to an alternative to Uichang, and the institution became a usury agency corrupting the governance system (Rhee et al. 2005). Meanwhile, Sachang operated at community and village levels to prepare for natural disasters and bad harvests. Although its adequacy and promptness as a relief institution were relatively high because it was managed autonomously by villagers (C. Park 1999), Sachang was not widely used because of insufficient funds.

The rulers and scholar-bureaucrats who founded Confucian Joseon resolved to assist the poor by activating *hwangok*. The government established warehouses on a nation-wide basis, particularly along rivers and seashores, to facilitate the storage and transport of grain. However, beginning in the mid-Joseon period, the early success of *hwangok* was becoming tarnished by government corruption. Relief institutions drew the people's ire by forcibly lending grain without

need assessment in order to increase government revenues and by the late Joseon period, they had turned into usury agencies, which exploited the people (Han 2000). Specifically, the interest rate of *hwangok* was originally only 10 percent, but eventually grew to 20 percent in practice by charging additional interest under the pretext of supplementing the rice for quality testing and feeding related officials. In addition, government officials used irregular measures to increase the collection of interest. In *Mongmin simseo*, Jeong Yak-yong, criticized the misappropriation of *hwangok*, classifying the corruption of chief administrators and petty officials into six and twelve types, respectively:

The reason why our ancestors established *hwangok* was to help the poor and to solidify national finances However, presently, only ten percent of the interest and unfair profits of *hwangok* are allocated for national finances, whereas twenty percent is appropriated for local expenditure and seventy percent is misappropriated by local bureaucrats . . . (“Hojeon,” *Mongmin simseo*).

Meanwhile, Yi Jeong-bu memorializes the throne in 1860:

The pains of poor people are bigger in the bumper crop year than in the lean year because government officials collect unpaid grains immediately in the bumper year. For most poor people, their food supplies are depleted after only a month . . . (as cited in U. Kim 1981).

A number of other measures to provide assistance to the poor were taken. First, Guhwangcheong 救荒廳 (Relief Agency) was established by King Sejong to assist starving people on a nation-wide basis by discharging grain relief. It was funded through interest from *hwangok* (Yu et al. 2002). Second, the *sisik* 施食 system was launched to provide the poor with free meals in bad harvest years, and for this, offices named *Sisikso* 施食所 were established throughout the country to serve free meals. Third, *jojeok* 組積 was enacted to stabilize grain prices. *Jo* refers to the policy of releasing government grain at a low price in bad

harvest years, whereas *jeok* refers to the policy to buy and stock grain in good years. Fourth, the government subsidized wedding or funeral expenses of poor noble families. According to *Gyeongguk daejeon*, a national code of Joseon, the government paid for wedding expenses of individuals thirty years old or above if they were members of noble families, and provided funeral expenses for those who could not pay for funeral services. Fifth, the government reduced taxes and compulsory labor requirements and exempted the repayment of grain loans for those suffering from natural disasters. Finally, *wonnap* 願納 (voluntary contributions) offered government posts to those donating large amounts of grain to make up for any shortfalls in public grain stock (Palais 1991). However, *wonnap* became a corrupt agency in the late Joseon period because of its questionable practice of soliciting donations and trafficking government posts (Ham et al. 1996).

Healthcare and Disease Prevention

The level of healthcare was generally low in Joseon and the social status of physicians was considered middle or lower class. Thus, it was not easy to recruit talented persons, despite the importance of medicine. The following mention of King Sejong's crown prince illustrates the reality of the time:

Although people disparage medicine, the treatment of diseases is a very important task. Thus, I selected bright and smart boys from the gentry class in order to educate them as physicians. However, they are contemptuous of the medical profession and try to evade medical jobs . . . (as cited in M. Lee 2000, 170).

Until the introduction of Western medicine in the late nineteenth century, Korea relied exclusively on herbal medicine. Unlike the case of relief institutions, Joseon lacked qualified institutions for promoting healthcare and preventing diseases. People during the Joseon period often suffered from diseases because of poor nutrition, inattentive management of infectious diseases, and lack of medical and pharmaceutical technologies. It is widely believed that Joseon experienced a

high infant mortality rate and a short life expectancy. According to M. Lee (2000), the estimated death toll by disease and illness was over 1,400,000 throughout Joseon. In 1699, the death toll by infectious disease amounted to approximately 250,000, while the death toll by starvation was about 600,000 in Gyeongsang-do province alone. About 400,000 died from infectious diseases in 1750.

However, despite the generally poor healthcare system, the rulers of Joseon attempted to promote healthcare and prevent disease to sustain healthy lives, maintain a strong workforce, and facilitate military conscription. Immediately after the establishment of Joseon, Jeong Do-jeon mapped out the formation of the Hyeminjeon Yakguk 惠民典藥局 as a national institution for drug sales and medical treatment for the poor. The institution purchased diverse drugs with government funds and sold them to poor patients at lower prices. King Taejo established the Hyeminguk 惠民局 in the capital city of Hanseong to care for patients and educate female physicians (Kwon 2000).

King Taejo also established a public clinic named Hwarinseo 活人署 in the capital to care for the poor. It was renamed Dongseo Hwarinwon 東西活人院 (East-West Infirmary) in 1414 (14th year of King Taejong's reign) and was used for treating infectious diseases. In addition, King Taejong established Jesaengwon 濟生院 (Public Dispensary), whose main goals were to study medicine, publish medical books, collect and examine potential drugs, and educate medical doctors. Jeonuigam 典醫監 (Palace Medical Office) was established in 1392 (1st year of King Taejo's reign) as a competent authority for healthcare administration and medical education and was charged with the following tasks: managing medical examinations, providing the royal family with medical treatment; developing new drugs and medical technologies, publishing medical books, and cultivating raw materials for drugs. Moreover, Maechiwon 埋置院 (Special Burial Office) facilitated the burial and cremation of those without relatives (Deuchler 1992). At the time, the fatality rate was extremely high (U. Kim 1981). Therefore, the timely disposal of corpses was necessary to prevent an epidemic.

In 1888, Bak Yeong-hyo suggested inviting experienced medical

doctors to national hospitals and establishing professional medical institutions to prevent disease and treat patients more effectively. He also proposed the removal of feces in the streets for cleaner public spaces and the prevention of infectious disease (H. Kim 1999).

Welfare Services for the Socially Disadvantaged

In Confucianism, family is not only a unit of production but also a unit of mutual aid and interdependence. Thus, family was a fundamental unit of social welfare for the elderly and children, and communities under the consanguineous village system functioned as an extended family promoting solidarity among community members (Choi 1996). Like family members, community members helped one another in times of need, and diverse private welfare institutions, including *gye* 契 (mutual-aid society) and *hyangyak* 鄉約 (village code), facilitated this process (P. Kim 1999). Accordingly, family members, relatives, and communities were expected to be the first to shoulder the burden of providing assistance to the elderly, children, and the disabled.

The government also contributed to the provision of welfare services, following Confucian teachings that emphasized the importance of respecting the elderly and protecting orphans. In Joseon, the main recipients of public sector welfare were the elderly, children, and the disabled. Among the four main categories of social welfare, women's welfare was largely ignored in the male-centric Confucian society of Joseon (Hoare and Pares 2000).

Since the hierarchical age system is one of the main factors maintaining Confucian social order, the government particularly paid considerable attention to serving the elderly. Diverse welfare institutions for the elderly were established. Public officials who had to care for their aged parents were exempted from being appointed as local governors in remote areas, and those caring for parents aged eighty or above were appointed to areas where their parents resided. Rulers gave biannual appreciation banquets for public officials in their seventies and above. In addition, they regularly granted grain, alcohol, and

meat to the elderly and ordered local governors to give them banquets. Further, the government pardoned those criminals whose parents had no caretakers. Mourners were exempted from compulsory labor, and the government subsidized funeral expenses for the poor. Moreover, Giroseo 耆老署 was established in 1394 (3rd year of King Taejo's reign) to provide those in their seventies and above with banquets and entertainment, whereas Guryoso 救療所 provided them housing (Ham et al. 1996).

The receipt of welfare services for the elderly was unconditional, whereas the receipt of welfare services for children was conditional. Unlike contemporary regulations, child welfare in Joseon focused only on poor children and orphans. There were a large number of orphans and abandoned children, necessitating the government to pay attention to child welfare. However, the private sector was expected to be the first to assist them, and the government encouraged their relatives to become foster or adoptive parents. Government agencies, as secondary providers of welfare, accommodated the homeless, who were excluded from community protection. *Jahyul jeonchik* 字恤典則 (Code for Famine Relief), a child welfare code, was legislated in 1873 (7th year of King Jeongjo's reign) to provide protection for vagrants, disabled children, and orphans. It consisted of nine sections that focused on: a child's age and the relief period, the responsibility of relatives, relief methods, report procedures, nanny institutions, adoption, supervision, clothing and medical care, and finance. *Jahyul jeonchik* prioritized the obligation of relatives or masters in protecting needy children, and private adoption was permitted only when relatives could not provide protection (Yu et al. 2002). In addition, punishment was postponed for pregnant women, whereas reception facilities were established to accommodate children abandoned during winter. Furthermore, the 1895 Cabinet Instruction mandated related laws to assist orphans and prohibit child abandonment (*Gojong sillok*, vol. 33).

Although Joseon had a relatively weak social welfare system for the disabled, the government was obligated to provide the disabled with jobs or another means of livelihood, but the beneficiaries were limited only to the physically disabled (Kwon 2000). In addition, there

was no specific written code for social welfare for the disabled, despite the existence of large numbers of disabled individuals. It is well known that Joseon experienced a wide range of diseases causing physical disabilities, including infantile paralysis and leprosy.

Finally, there were few formal documents recording women's social welfare. It is clear that Joseon prioritized social welfare for male beneficiaries because of the strong influence of Confucianism and protected only old women with no caretakers (e.g., old widows) as a part of the four extremely needy groups.

The Incongruity between Confucian Idealism and Reality in the Joseon Dynasty

Whereas Goryeo relied mainly on the private sector, in particular, Buddhist organizations, for welfare provision (Buswell 2007), Joseon established a number of welfare institutions, driven by the Confucian emphasis on the ruler's responsibility to protect the people. However, despite progress in institutionalizing the public sector welfare, there was a substantial difference between Joseon's actual welfare system and theory/normativism. Many institutions and legal prescriptions for enforcing public sector welfare did not function as intended. In many respects, previous studies of public sector welfare in Joseon typically focused on the institutions themselves and ignored practice. However, the reality behind the institutional appearance of Joseon's welfare system is as follows.

First, in Confucianism, a ruler's main obligations were to make people prosperous, distribute resources justly, and protect citizens properly (B. Lee 2010). However, in reality, Joseon's poverty-stricken economy did not allow for the materialization of Confucian idealism. The country's weak economy allowed its public welfare system to protect only the extremely needy. In this regard, Joseon's public sector welfare was selective of its recipients. Despite Confucian idealism, which emphasizes economic security for all, the country's empty treasury made universal welfare provision impossible. For example, the

number of farmlands diminished to one-third of its prewar total, after the Japanese invasions in the 1590s (H. Kim 2001). Public finances were aggravated year after year, due to the increase of duty-free farmland and bureaucratic corruption. According to Table 1, taxable farmlands had shrunk since the mid-Joseon period, despite the gradual increase of total farmland, mainly due to rising tax exemption.

Table 1. Changes in Taxable Farmlands

Year	(unit: <i>gyeol</i>) ⁵	
	Total farmlands	Taxable farmlands
1591	1,515,500	1,515,500
1611	542,000	542,000
1744	895,837	854,353
1777	1,439,305	780,083
1801	1,454,154	802,857
1835	1,462,127	770,109
1850	1,456,350	770,505
1864	1,445,491	776,708
1883	1,483,633	757,018

Source: Adapted from U. Kim (1981, 412).

Second, Confucian ideas of familism and paternalism had considerable influence on public sector welfare in Joseon. Public assistance for the needy was only made available if there was no means of assistance from family members, relatives, and local communities first. This method of welfare provision reflected the Confucian idea of prioritizing self-help and solidarity within small social units, prior to public intervention. Although Confucianism emphasized the maintenance of totality and individual sacrifice for the nation-state (Englehart 2000), this totality was staged gradationally from the family to the state in Joseon.

5. *Gyeol* is a relative land unit defined by fertility. In the case of the most fertile land, one *gyeol* is approximately 10,600 m² of land while in the case of the least fertile land, it is approximately 42,970 m².

However, the more practical reason behind Joseon's decision to advocate private sector welfare was that it was economically unable to offer robust welfare services. Joseon offered public sector welfare for the extremely needy only as a last option. However, this does not necessarily mean that Joseon's welfare was underdeveloped, because other countries were in a similar situation at the time. Even the 1601 Poor Law of Britain, which is often regarded as the start of public assistance, targeted only the destitute poor (Walsh et al. 2005).⁶

Third, Confucianism compelled Joseon to establish a wide range of welfare institutions to protect the needy, and some (e.g., Uichang) were quite successful in their early stages. In terms of healthcare, medical schools, including Jeonuigam, were established to educate physicians and efforts were made to provide patients with timely healthcare. In general, however, Joseon's welfare institutions and programs lacked appropriate administrative and delivery systems for facilitating welfare provision. In particular, the lack of structural connection between the public and private sectors and between the central and local governments reduced the relevance and effectiveness of welfare provision. Joseon did not have administrative capacity to meet Confucian ideals, as is partly proved by Jeong Yak-yong's discussion on the lack of professional leadership:

While Joseon's civil servicemen are proficient in poetic writing and the military servicemen are masters of archery, they have never studied methods to treat state affairs. Thus, they do administrative work with no practical knowledge, and don't know how to rule their subjects. Local chief administrators pretend to know when they are ignorant and approve without any knowledge of affairs. In the end, they are bogged down with the cunning trickery of sly old officials . . . (as cited in U. Kim 1981, 390).

6. This study does not intend to compare the level of Joseon's public welfare with that of Western countries. The only concern of this study is to discuss the unlikelihood of realizing Confucian idealism in Joseon, a country that experienced cycles of poverty and natural disasters and that limited the beneficiaries of public welfare to small numbers of people.

Fourth, the systems for monitoring and supervising welfare institutions were inadequate and bureaucratic corruption was rampant, limiting the embodiment of Confucian idealism in practice. Although secret royal commissioners were dispatched to inspect local welfare administration, they were ineffective and corrupt. *Hwangok* became a tool for making money through high interest payments (Rhee et al. 2005). It was usual to charge 30 percent interest for grain loans. Thus, to increase tax revenues, local governments forced peasants to assume loans regardless of their need. As a result, the peasants were heavily indebted, whereas local governors and petty officials committed fraud by misstating accounting books (Choi 1998). For example, the amount of *hwangok* increased exponentially: from 410,907 *seok* in 1725 to 9,380,654 *seok* in 1797 and 9,995,599 *seok* in 1807 (Jeong 1987). In addition, there was no systematic evaluation system for assessing the performance of welfare institutions and programs, resulting in rule-of-thumb estimates of public sector welfare and a waste of government funds. In particular, towards the late Joseon period, the exploitation of local administrators became rampant, making the monitoring system of public administration useless. Between 1850 and 1862, 442 local administrators were expelled due to irregularities and corruption (U. Kim 1981).

Fifth, the virtuous and benevolent governance that Confucianism emphasized depended not on external compulsion but on the rulers' volition. Ideally, Confucian governance is realized by the rulers' voluntary love for the people (B. Lee 2000). In the same context, the people's demand had little effect on the development of welfare institutions in Joseon. Furthermore, there were no civic groups to incorporate the people's demand into the policy-making process and no political competition to force rulers to respond to the people's needs. There were few channels for the people to reflect their demands in welfare policy-making. Instead, rulers' moral obligation based on Confucian ideology was the main driving force behind Joseon's public sector welfare.

Sixth, Confucianism emphasized a harmony based on hierarchy between older individuals and younger ones and between males and

females (Borchert 2006). Unlike Western democracy, Confucianism envisioned a stable society based on a framework acknowledging the reality of unequal relationships. Confucianism was conservative in that it believed that radical changes in society would deepen chaos (MeLean 1996). With respect to social welfare, although this hierarchical and conservative nature of Confucianism facilitated social welfare for the elderly, women's welfare was largely ignored in the male-centric society of Joseon. The Confucian ideals of respect for the elderly and filial piety forced Joseon to establish diverse institutions for the elderly. Rulers devised measures to create a social atmosphere respecting the elderly, such as holding banquets for them.

Seventh, Confucianism considered rulers as human beings, not as institutions, and thus rulers were expected to check their governing power through their morality (B. Lee 2000). However, this characteristic of Confucianism made Joseon's state affairs and institutions unstable, including its social welfare system. Although Confucianism encouraged Joseon to establish a number of welfare institutions, their enforcement varied according to the rulers. Whereas enlightened rulers implemented effective welfare institutions and policies, despotic ones did not. Thus, although Confucianism had considerable influence on founding welfare institutions in Joseon, the reality differed from theory. That is, the enforcement of welfare policies depended mainly on the rulers' volition, destabilizing the overall effectiveness of the welfare system.

Eighth, although Confucianism obliged rulers to make people prosperous, it prioritized the resolution of people's complaints of injustice (Yu et al. 2002). In reality, there were severe geographical inequalities between the capital and local towns in terms of welfare accessibility. Many of welfare facilities (e.g., Hwarinseo and Giroseo) were located only in the capital, and some important healthcare services were available only to the residents of the capital. It is known that public sector welfare played an important role in legitimizing Joseon's governing power, and thus caring for the residents of the capital was critical for maintaining political regime (Yu et al. 2002).

Finally, in a *datong* society, rulers are supposed to share their people's pain and, therefore, helping those suffering from economic

hardship and disease is to realize Confucian idealism (Han 2000). Following Confucian teachings, Joseon attached importance to medical welfare and established a number of healthcare facilities and public hospitals. However, in practice, Joseon had a weak healthcare system. The beneficiaries of public healthcare services were limited either to senior officials or to the extremely poor. In addition, Joseon lacked medical professionals, and its medical technology was not sophisticated, as indicated in the short life expectancy of the people. According to M. Lee (2000), while there were 49 public physicians in the early years of Joseon, the number decreased to 19 in 1423 and remained at this level for quite a while. Ordinary individuals, who were excluded from public healthcare services, usually depended on self-diagnosis and folk therapy for their diseases.

The discussion has thus far focused on the realities of public sector welfare in Joseon and emphasized the difference between Confucian idealism and actual practice. Although Joseon established many welfare institutions based on Confucian idealism, the effectiveness and practicability of such institutions were a completely different matter. The grim realities of Joseon (particularly, during the late Joseon period)—such as economic poverty, depleted royal treasury, corrupt bureaucracy, and social disorder society—limited its ability to achieve Confucian idealism. Beneficiaries of public sector welfare were strictly limited to the extremely needy. Furthermore, although social welfare for the elderly was emphasized under the influence of Confucianism, it focused on event-oriented and non-economic aspects, such as giving banquets for the elderly and considering the positions of public officials. With respect to the governance of public welfare, Joseon had weak administrative and delivery systems and its welfare administration was not properly specialized and coordinated. It is clear that the main reason behind the discrepancy between Confucian idealism and Joseon's poor public welfare system was the grim realities of its weak economy and rampant bureaucracy. In reality, Joseon's economy deteriorated year after year, due to the periodical advent of natural disasters and infectious disease, the increase of tax-exempt farmlands, and the corrupt taxation system. Choe Gang-pil, a high-ranking official

of Gangwon-do province, submitted a memorial to the throne:

Your Highness, when I patrolled local towns, hundreds of people who had left their hometowns jammed streets and nine houses out of ten were emptied. Now, rice cooking smoke has disappeared from county districts and small villages, and ordinary citizens, unable to endure starvation, have turned into bands of thieves . . . (as cited in S. Park 1999, 291).

Thus, Sim Sang-gyu, the Minister of Taxation (Hojo Panseo 戶曹判書), reported in 1822 that “even though two years of revenue are brought together, they cannot pay for one year’s expenditure” (Choi et al. 2010, 132). Further, in the late Joseon period, bureaucratic corruption reached extremes in the process of collecting national taxes. For instance, there was the large-scale embezzlement by Baek Nak-sin, Chief Magistrate of Gyeongsang-do province, in the 1860s. He plotted with Jinju Mayor Hong Byeong-won to embezzle 52,000 *seok* of public grains, eventually causing the 1862 Jinju civilian uprising of approximately 80,000 citizens (S. Park 1999).

By all accounts, Joseon struggled with economic poverty. As of 1786 (10th year of King Jeongjo’s reign), approximately 45 percent of Joseon’s total population (7,356,786) faced starvation, prompting the government to release grain amounting to 214,962 *seok* (Jeong 1987). In general, the annual interest rate was approximately 40 percent until the nineteenth century, devastating the people’s economic lives. In addition, agricultural productivity had decreased steadily since mid-Joseon, mainly because of deforestation from changing housing patterns, frequent natural disasters, insufficient irrigation facilities, and increases in population (Rhee et al. 2005). Table 2 shows the decrease in the arable acreage and labor productivity in late Joseon.

In particular, the Japanese Invasion of 1592 (Imjin Waeran) and the Manchu Invasion of 1636 (Byeongja Horan) completely destroyed the country’s economy. According to Turnbull (2002), countless numbers of people died during the Japanese Invasion (from a minimum of 180,000 to a maximum of 1,000,000), and approximately 68 percent of arable land was destroyed, decisively limiting Joseon’s capacity to

Table 2. Joseon's Deteriorating Economy

Year	Arable acreage ^a	Land productivity (rice crop) ^b	Agricultural labor productivity index ^c
992-1301	185.9	3.4	115.7
1432	41.6	-	117.1
1543	25.7	-	100.0
The early 1600s	19.0	15.9	55.8
The early 1700s	17.8	25.3	83.0
The late 1700s	17.4	26.6	85.0
The early 1800s	17.5	30.1	97.2

Source: Adapted from Choi (1998, 27).

^a Per household.

^b Land productivity (per unit) = total yield/cultivated area.

^c Year 1543 = 100.

provide public welfare. The total area of farmland decreased from 1,510,194 *gyeol* in 1591 to 683,336 *gyeol*, due to the wars. Although farmlands were recovered gradually, beginning in the eighteenth century, even the extent of farmland in 1883 (1,483,633 *gyeol*) was smaller than that of the pre-war era (U. Kim 1981). Moreover, approaching the late Joseon period, social instability and bureaucratic corruption became prevalent, incapacitating the country's ability to attend to its affairs, including social welfare. The unproductive *yangban* (nobility) class swelled with the disorder of society, greatly damaging Joseon's economic capability. According to U. Kim (1981), while the household composition of the city of Daegu in 1690 had 290 *yangban* households, 1,694 commoner households, and 1,172 slave households (a total of 3,156 households), these numbers changed to 2,099 *yangban*, 642 commoners, and 44 slaves (a total of 2,985 households) by 1860. Meanwhile, beginning in the mid-Joseon period, rampant bureaucratic corruption had devastated the country's taxation system to exacerbate Joseon's welfare delivery system. As an example, in the late Joseon period, while government revenues stagnated due to the increase of tax-exempt farmlands, the tax burden of ordinary people tripled because of bureaucratic embezzlement and the imposition of miscella-

neous taxes, such as *samsumi* 三手米 (literally, “Three-Arm Rice”; levies for the support of the three combat forces), *daedongmi* 大同米 (rice tribute), and *gyeoljak* 結作 (grain surtax) (G. Lee 2006). Bureaucratic corruption and the unscrupulous taxation system depleted the country’s coffers, limiting Joseon’s ability to implement an effective public welfare system, eventually leading to popular uprisings in the 1860s.

In addition, the proliferation of social and political disability beginning in the late Joseon period destabilized the foundation of public sector welfare. Kings degenerated into puppets of oligarchs who became powerful through marital relationships with royal families (K. Lee 1984). The only concern of indulgent oligarchs was to satisfy their own interests under the *sedo* 勢道 (government by in-laws) politics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, depleting public resources. Thus, this adverse sociopolitical situation limited Joseon’s ability to realize Confucian idealism in its social welfare efforts. Figure 2 illustrates how

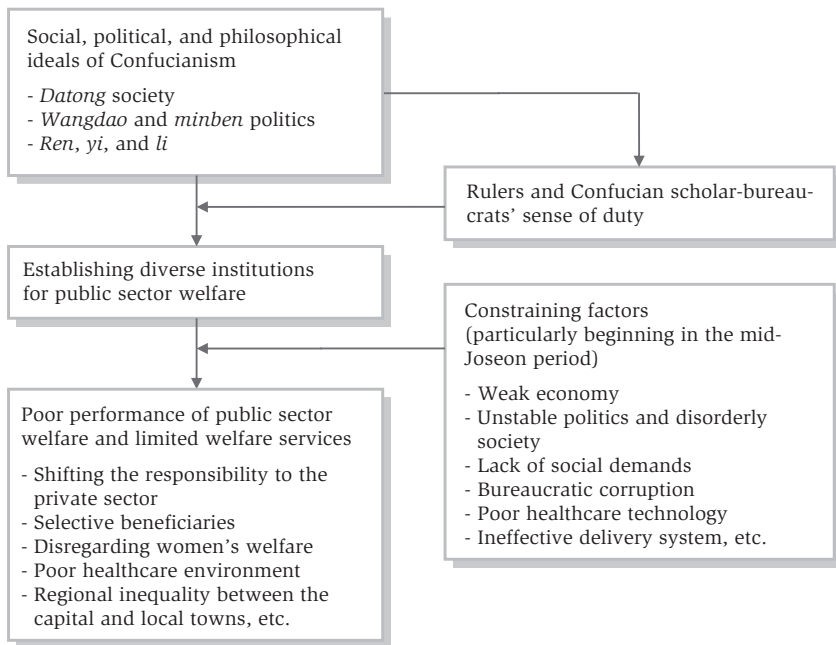


Figure 2. The Unrealizable Confucian Idealism of Joseon Dynasty

Confucianism formed the basis of public welfare in Joseon and why its idealism was stymied, particularly beginning in the mid-Joseon period.

Conclusion

Joseon's founding ideology was Confucianism, and therefore, the founders attempted to realize Confucian thought by establishing a number of welfare institutions and facilities. At the center of Confucian Joseon was the *minbon* ideology, where the people should be given priority over politics. Rulers had the moral obligation to improve the lives of their people and provide them with economic aid. Thus, caring for the poor, the sick, and the disadvantaged formed the basis of Confucian countries' very existence. Through this Confucian morality, Joseon established diverse welfare institutions to assist the needy and provide the sick with healthcare services. In this regard, public sector welfare in Joseon is consistent with "the prince's obligation theory," although "the social control perspective" may also be persuasive in that Joseon's public welfare was used as a tool for consolidating governing power.⁷

On the other hand, a sense of morality driven by Confucian idealism became intertwined with political and social necessities, resulting in the institutionalization of public sector welfare in Joseon. A muddled taxation system and rampant bureaucratic corruption beginning in the mid-Joseon period devastated the country's economy and produced large numbers of starving people, dramatically increasing the need for social welfare. In addition, the Joseon people's short life expectancy increased the need for public sector welfare for the remaining elderly and children. A high infant mortality rate and the prevalence of infec-

7. While "the prince's obligation theory" puts an emphasis on rulers' moral obligation behind the motivation of welfare provision, "the social control perspective" finds the motivation of welfare provision from the social and political factors to maintain social order and consolidate existing governing power.

tious diseases increased the people's demand for healthcare services. Frequent natural disasters, such as droughts and floods, resulted in a need for social welfare for victims. To sum it up, there was a compelling need for welfare services, given Joseon's dire economic, social, and demographic conditions. Such conditions, along with Confucian ideology, contributed to facilitating the institutionalization of public sector welfare in Joseon.

However, Joseon's weak economy limited its ability to meet the political and social need for public sector welfare. As mentioned earlier, a low level of land productivity and the increase of tax-exempt farmland, which had considerable influence on the wealth of the agriculture-based economy, limited Joseon's ability for welfare expenditures. The extortion of taxes exhausted the country's treasury and corrupt agencies misappropriated government funds. Beginning in the mid-Joseon period, tax collection and government spending was fraught with fraudulent practices. The deepening disorder of the social system further weakened the country's economic capacity to pay for welfare services. Further, Joseon had a fragmented and poorly coordinated delivery system for implementing welfare policies, which reduced the effectiveness of such policies.

In conclusion, although Confucian *minbon* ideology compelled Joseon to establish and enact a number of welfare institutions, the weak economy, disorderly social atmosphere, and taxation system of Joseon, particularly since the mid-Joseon period, limited the effective implementation of those institutions. Confucian idealism with respect to the protection of the needy was not realized as much as Joseon intended. That is, there was a large gap between Confucian idealism and its reality. The beneficiaries of public sector welfare were selectively chosen and were limited to the extremely needy.⁸ Accordingly, apart from the existence of diverse welfare institutions, the sufficiency

8. No country in the world could practice universal welfare at the time. Even Western countries accomplished welfare universalism only beginning in the mid-twentieth century. Thus, the use of the term "selective" in this article is just to describe the reality of Joseon's public welfare and is not to devalue Joseon's public welfare system.

and adequacy of public sector welfare in Joseon was unclear, and the social safety net provided by public sector welfare was most likely fragile. In some ways, Joseon's private sector, including family members and clan communities, might have played a critical role in welfare provision, along with the public sector.

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