

ภาวะผู้นำเชิงสร้างสรรค์กับวิวัฒนาการของลัทธิขงจื๊อใหม่: การศึกษาทฤษฎีของ Toynbee ผ่านกรณีของชองโดจองและพระเจ้าเซจง

ยงซู คิม¹ และ เนติมา บุรพาศิริวัฒน์²

¹ คณะวิทยาศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตภูเก็ต อีเมล youngsu.k@phuket.psu.ac.th

² คณะวิทยาศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตภูเก็ต อีเมล netima.b@phuket.psu.ac.th

Creative Leadership and the Evolution of Neo-Confucianism: A Study of Toynbee's Theory with Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong

Yongsu Kim ¹ and Netima Burapasiriwat ²

¹ Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus, E-mail: youngsu.k@phuket.psu.ac.th

² Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus, E-mail: netima.b@phuket.psu.ac.th

Article Info

Article Type: Research Article

Article History:

Received May 19, 2025

Revised October 18, 2025

Accepted October 27, 2025

คำสำคัญ

ประวัติศาสตร์เกาหลี, ลัทธิขงจื๊อใหม่, ผู้นำเชิงสร้างสรรค์, ชองโดจอง, พระเจ้าเซจง

Keywords:

Korean history, Neo-Confucianism, Creative leadership, Jeong Do-jeon, King Sejong

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้สำรวจการเปลี่ยนผ่านสู่ลัทธิขงจื๊อใหม่ของเกาหลีในช่วงปลายราชวงศ์โครยอ ถึงต้นราชวงศ์โชซอน โดยใช้กรอบแนวคิดจากทฤษฎีการเปลี่ยนแปลงของอารยธรรมของอาร์โนลด์ ทอยน์บี (Arnold Toynbee) และแนวคิดเรื่อง "ภาวะผู้นำเชิงสร้างสรรค์" (Creative Leadership) โดยอาศัยวิธีการเชิงคุณภาพที่มุ่งวิเคราะห์ "น้ำเสียง" จากเอกสารประวัติศาสตร์ต้นฉบับ การศึกษานี้วิเคราะห์ว่า ชองโดจอง (정도전: Jeong Do-jeon) และพระเจ้าเซจง (King Sejong) ตอบสนองต่อวิกฤตประวัติศาสตร์อย่างไร ไม่ใช่เพียงด้วยการปฏิรูปทางการเมือง แต่ด้วยนวัตกรรมที่ตั้งอยู่บนหลักจริยธรรมซึ่งนำไปสู่การหล่อหลอมปรัชญาแห่งรัฐและบทบาทของรัฐบาลในสังคมใหม่ของโดจองได้ ปรับโครงสร้างสถาบันของรัฐใหม่ตามหลักเหตุผลแบบขงจื๊อและการปฏิรูปที่ยืดความสามารถเป็นหลัก ในขณะที่พระเจ้าเซจงได้ส่งเสริมนโยบายที่ครอบคลุมและเปิดกว้าง เช่นการสร้างฮุนมินเจองึม (훈민정음: Hunminjeongeum) เพื่อให้ประชาชนทั่วไปสามารถเข้าถึงการรู้หนังสือได้ ภาวะผู้นำของทั้งสองสะท้อนให้เห็นวิสัยทัศน์ทางศีลธรรมที่ลึกซึ้งและจิตสำนึกทางพลเมือง โดยแสดงออกผ่านค่านิยมที่ยังคงอยู่มาจนถึงปัจจุบัน เช่น สวัสดิการประชาชน การมีส่วนร่วมของประชาชน และการปกครองที่เน้นมนุษย์เป็นศูนย์กลางค่านิยมเหล่านี้ยังคงสะท้อนอยู่ในประชาธิปไตยร่วมสมัยของเกาหลีใต้ และมีบทบาทสำคัญต่อภาพลักษณ์ของเกาหลีในระดับนานาชาติในปัจจุบัน สำหรับนักเรียนต่างชาติที่สนใจประเทศเกาหลีจากกระแส Korean Wave งานวิจัยนี้นำเสนอแนวทางใหม่ในการทำให้ประวัติศาสตร์เกาหลีน่าสนใจและมีความหมายยิ่งขึ้น โดยการนำเสนอผู้นำทางประวัติศาสตร์ในฐานะผู้แก้ปัญหาที่มีคุณธรรมและความคิดสร้างสรรค์ ซึ่งช่วยให้นักเรียนสามารถเชื่อมโยงอดีตเข้ากับคุณค่าร่วมสมัย เช่น ความยืดหยุ่น ความเสมอภาค และความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคม งานวิจัยนี้ไม่เพียงแต่นำเสนอมุมมองใหม่ต่อการตีความพัฒนาการทางประวัติศาสตร์ของเกาหลีเท่านั้น แต่ยังเสนอแนวทางการสอนที่สามารถประยุกต์ใช้ได้จริงในการเรียนการสอนประวัติศาสตร์เกาหลีในห้องเรียนนานาชาติอีกด้วย

Abstract

This study explores Korea's Neo-Confucian transformation from the late Goryeo to the early Joseon Dynasty through the lens of Arnold Toynbee's theory of civilizational change and the concept of "Creative Leadership." Using a qualitative, voice-centered approach to original historical documents, the study analyzes how Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong responded to historical crises not only with political reforms but also with ethically grounded innovations that reshaped state philosophy and the role of government in society. Jeong Do-jeon restructured state institutions based on Confucian rationalism and meritocratic reform, while King Sejong advanced inclusive policies such as the creation of *Hunminjeongeum* (the Korean writing system) to empower common people. Their leadership demonstrated a deep moral vision and

civic consciousness, reflecting enduring values such as public welfare, civic participation, and human-centered governance. These values continue to resonate in contemporary South Korean democracy and significantly contribute to Korea's current global image. For international students drawn to Korea by the Korean Wave, this study offers a new approach to make Korean history more interesting and meaningful by presenting historical leaders as moral and creative problem-solvers. This helps learners connect the past with contemporary values such as resilience, equality, and social responsibility. The research not only provides a fresh perspective on interpreting Korea's historical development but also offers a practical pedagogical approach for teaching Korean history in international classrooms

* Corresponding author: Youngsu Kim

E-mail address: youngsu.k@phuket.psu.ac.th

1. Introduction

The transition from the late Goryeo to the early Joseon Dynasty in the 14th and 15th centuries marked one of the most profound transformations in Korean history. This period witnessed the collapse of the Buddhist-influenced aristocracy that had dominated Goryeo politics and society for centuries, and the subsequent rise of a new Neo-Confucian order that redefined the structure and spirit of governance (Deuchler, 1992; Lee, 1984).

By the late Goryeo period, the Buddhist establishment had grown immensely powerful, controlling vast temple lands exempt from taxation and exerting strong political influence through alliances with the ruling elite. Many temples accumulated wealth and privilege, while moral corruption, favoritism, and excessive spending weakened royal authority and deepened social inequality. This combination of economic burden and moral decay eroded public trust and produced an ideological vacuum that called for reform. The collapse of this system opened the way for Neo-Confucian scholars to propose a new, rational, and ethically grounded model of government that emphasized merit, discipline, and moral order over hereditary privilege and spiritual indulgence.

Within this historical context, two key figures—Jeong Do-jeon (1342–1398) and King Sejong the Great (1397–1450)—played crucial roles in shaping Korea's ideological and institutional transformation. Jeong Do-jeon, a scholar and political strategist, led the intellectual and structural reform efforts that established the foundation of the Joseon Dynasty. His writings, including *Joseon Gyeonggukjeon* and *Gyeongje Mundap*, outlined a new political philosophy grounded in Confucian ethics and administrative rationality. In contrast, King Sejong, the fourth ruler of Joseon, governed during a time of peace and stability, expanding Jeong's moral vision through practical reforms. He is remembered for his inclusive leadership and his creation of 훈민정음 (Hunminjeongeum, 1446/1998)—the Korean writing system designed to promote literacy and equality among common people—as well as his initiatives in science, law, and public welfare.

This study adopts Arnold Toynbee's theory of civilizational change as its main analytical framework. In *A Study of History* (1934–1961), Toynbee argues that the growth or decline of civilizations depends on how societies respond to internal and external crises. He identifies three interrelated concepts: *challenge*, referring to social, moral, or environmental pressures; *response*, the creative and ethical solutions to those pressures; and the *creative minority*, the visionary individuals or groups whose leadership guides civilization toward renewal (Toynbee, 1947). When such leadership is strong and innovative, civilizations evolve; when it fails, they stagnate or collapse.

Applying Toynbee's framework, this paper examines how Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong functioned as members of a creative minority who guided Korea's response to ideological and structural crises during the Goryeo–Joseon transition. To extend Toynbee's model, the study incorporates the concept of Creative Leadership, defined as the capacity to lead change through ethical vision, intellectual innovation, and social responsibility. This approach does not treat historical figures merely as products of their time but as active moral agents who creatively responded to challenges and reshaped their civilization.

The study employs a voice-centered interpretive approach to highlight how the voices of Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong—found in their writings, policies, and historical legacies—reflect ethical reasoning and creative response to crisis. By integrating Toynbee's global theory of challenge and response with Korea's Neo-Confucian transformation, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Korean leadership in a comparative civilizational context. It also offers pedagogical value for teaching Korean political thought and cultural heritage to international learners in ways that connect past values with present democratic ideals.

Accordingly, this study pursues three objectives:

1. To apply Toynbee's concepts to analyze Jeong Do-jeon's role in institutionalizing Neo-Confucianism amid the collapse of Goryeo's Buddhist establishment.
2. To examine King Sejong's Creative Leadership in consolidating a stable Neo-Confucian state, with emphasis on his inclusive reforms such as the creation of Hunminjeongeum in 1446.
3. To explore how these cases of creative and ethical leadership can inform modern understandings of Korean political values and support global Korean Studies education.

To address these objectives, the study poses the following research questions:

1. How can Toynbee's concepts of challenge, response, and creative minority be used to interpret Neo-Confucian leadership during the Goryeo–Joseon transition?
2. In what ways did King Sejong demonstrate Creative Leadership through his reforms, and what insights does this offer for leadership studies and pedagogy?
3. What are the implications of this analysis for understanding the connection between historical leadership values and Korea's modern democratic identity?

Through this integrated theoretical and interpretive approach, the study seeks to illuminate how moral vision, ethical reform, and creative leadership shaped the trajectory of Korean civilization and continue to influence its democratic ethos today.

2. Literature Review

The shift from the Goryeo to the Joseon dynasty and the rise of Neo-Confucianism have been widely studied by historians and scholars. Foundational works by Lee (1984) and Deuchler (1992) examine how political instability, elite power struggles, and cultural change led to the decline of Goryeo and the emergence of a new Confucian-based government. These studies focus on large-scale structural and ideological changes, including land reforms and the building of centralized institutions.

More recent scholarship has further examined how Neo-Confucianism shaped governance, social institutions, and education in early Joseon (Deuchler, 1992; Haboush, 2001). These studies demonstrate that Neo-Confucianism functioned not only as a philosophical system but also as a moral and political framework that influenced state institutions and social order throughout the Joseon Dynasty.

However, many of these studies treat figures like Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong as symbols of broader historical trends rather than as individuals who exercised creative agency in responding to societal challenges. Existing scholarship has extensively examined Jeong Do-jeon's role in establishing the ideological and institutional foundations of the Joseon state. His major works—including *Joseon Gyeonggukjeon* (조선경국전: Administrative Code of the Joseon Dynasty), *Gyeongje Mundap* (경제문답: Dialogues on Statecraft), and *Sambongjip* (삼봉집: Collected Works of Sambong)—demonstrate a consistent commitment to Confucian rationalism, institutional reform, and state-centered governance. Yet these studies rarely focus on his personal motivations or rhetorical voice. Likewise, Sejong's accomplishments in science, language, and administration are well documented (Shin, 2006), particularly in sources such as the *Hunminjeongeum Haerye* (훈민정음 해례: Explanatory Commentary on the Proper Sounds for the Instruction of the People) and the *Joseon Wangjo Sillok* (조선왕조실록: Annals of the Joseon Dynasty), but less attention has been paid to how his actions reflected ethical choices in response to the needs of his time.

Studies on Neo-Confucianism often focus on how Korean scholars adapted ideas from Chinese thinkers such as Zhu Xi to suit Korean political and social conditions. Research has shown that Neo-Confucian ideas were reinterpreted and institutionalized within the political and social context of Joseon (Deuchler, 1992). These studies highlight the intellectual adaptability of Korean scholars but stop short of connecting their innovations to leadership theory or broader models of civilizational transformation.

This gap is especially clear when it comes to applying theoretical models that link ethical leadership with civilizational development. Although Arnold Toynbee's theory of challenge and response has been widely discussed in studies of historical change and civilizational development, it has rarely been applied to Korean historical figures. Toynbee (1947) argues that civilizations grow when a "creative minority"—a small group of visionary leaders—responds to serious challenges with innovative ideas and reforms. Despite its relevance, this theoretical framework has seldom been used to analyze Korean leaders such as Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong.

Moreover, most historiographical approaches in Korean studies prioritize event chronology, institutional shifts, or ideological codification, leaving room for more nuanced examinations of rhetorical voice and ethical intentionality. This study addresses this by employing a voice-centered interpretive methodology, which views historical texts as rhetorical acts and expressions of individual thought and moral orientation. Rather than treating primary sources solely as evidence of historical events, this approach examines how historical actors articulated their perceptions of challenges, justified their actions, and envisioned social transformation. By focusing on voice, intention, and ethics, this study adds a personal and human perspective to broader historical narratives.

This study builds on previous research by using Toynbee's theory to analyze the leadership of Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong, presenting them not just as followers of Confucian ideas, but as ethical leaders who made creative choices to solve national problems. This approach complements existing structural and philosophical accounts with an analysis of ethical agency and moral leadership, which is relevant for scholars and educators interested in the intersection of history, values, and leadership. In conclusion, this literature review identifies a need for more research that connects leadership theory and civilizational development with individual historical figures in Korea, highlighting the value of interpretive approaches that uncover how past leaders framed their responsibilities and navigated ethical dilemmas within historical constraints.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Arnold Toynbee's theory of civilizational change as its primary lens. In his multi-volume work *A Study of History* (1934–1961), Toynbee argues that civilizations progress or decline based on how they respond to existential challenges. Successful responses are often initiated by what he calls a "creative minority"—a group or individual that introduces new ideas and moral frameworks that reshape society (Toynbee, 1947, p. 303). This paper applies Toynbee's concepts to understand how Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong led civilizational responses through ethically motivated leadership.

The study further refines Toynbee's idea of the creative minority by framing it within the concept of Creative Leadership. Here, Creative Leadership refers to individual agency expressed through ethical conviction, intellectual innovation, and structural reform. By interpreting historical actors not merely as representatives of ideology, but as visionaries responding to crisis, the study foregrounds leadership as a human-centered force for civilizational transformation.

3.2 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive approach that integrates Toynbee's theory of civilizational change with a voice-centered analytical framework. Rather than viewing historical texts as neutral records, it interprets them as rhetorical and ethical expressions of leadership—instances in which historical actors construct meaning and respond creatively to social challenges. In this framework, Toynbee's concepts of *challenge*, *response*, and *creative minority* provide the macro-historical lens, while the voice-centered approach offers a micro-level focus on how Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong articulated their moral and intellectual agency within that historical process. By examining the language, arguments, and ethical reasoning expressed in primary sources, this approach seeks to illuminate how historical actors perceived challenges, justified their actions, and articulated visions of social transformation. Rather than viewing leaders merely as participants in historical events, the voice-centered perspective highlights their role as active agents in shaping ideas, institutions, and historical change.

3.2.1 Primary Sources

Primary materials include *Joseon Gyeonggukjeon* (조선경국전: *Administrative Code of the Joseon Dynasty*), *Gyeongje Mundap* (경제문답: *Dialogues on Statecraft*) (Jeong, 1971), and *Sambongjip* (삼봉집: *Collected Writings of Sambong*) (Jeong, 2002); the *Joseon Wangjo Sillok* (조선왕조실록: *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*), especially the Taejo

and Sejong volumes (National Institute of Korean History, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c); and royal proclamations such as the preface to the *Hunminjeongeum Haerye* (훈민정음 해례: *Explanations and Examples of the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People*) (Hunminjeongeum, 1446/1998). These texts were selected to reveal how Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong perceived moral and institutional challenges and articulated creative and ethical responses within their historical context.

3.2.2 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded through three stages.

1. **Contextual identification:** Each excerpt was situated within the socio-political circumstances of late Goryeo and early Joseon to clarify the structural pressures shaping each leader's response.
2. **Interpretive analysis:** Passages were then examined for authorial perspective, rhetorical strategy, and ethical reasoning, linking personal "voice" to Toynbee's notions of challenge and response.
3. **Comparative synthesis:** Findings were integrated into thematic patterns highlighting how Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong functioned as members of a creative minority—leaders who bridged moral vision with pragmatic reform.

This integrated framework thus connects civilizational dynamics with individual moral agency, revealing how ethical voice and creative leadership interacted to drive Korea's Neo-Confucian transformation within its broader historical, social, and political realities.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Creative Leadership in Response to Societal Challenges

Through the lens of Toynbee's civilizational theory, this section analyzes how Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong responded to institutional and ideological crises with transformative initiatives. Their approaches illustrate distinct models of Creative Leadership that both reshaped Joseon society and continue to resonate in Korea's modern democratic identity.

4.1.1 Jeong Do-jeon: Designing a Meritocratic State "By the People" and "For the People"

Jeong Do-jeon restructured a collapsing regime with a Confucian political philosophy that emphasized public service, meritocracy, and reasoned deliberation. His political thought consistently advocated collective consultation, the moral responsibility of officials, and institutional mechanisms to restrain arbitrary rule (Jeong, 1971; Jeong, 2002). In Toynbee's framework, such ideas may be interpreted as a creative response to the moral and structural challenges of late Goryeo, transforming crisis into reform through intellectual leadership rather than coercive power.

In *Bulseol Japbyeon*, Jeong criticized the prevailing religious establishment:

"When erroneous teachings overflow and destroy human ethics,
the righteous must rise to correct them." (Jeong, 2006)

Here Jeong identified corruption within the Buddhist elite as a civilizational challenge undermining social ethics. His call for moral correction reflects Toynbee's notion of the *creative minority*—leaders who respond to decay not by retreat but by proposing ethical renewal.

He also rejected hereditary privilege, stating:

"The talents of a man cannot be judged by his lineage, only by his conduct." (Jeong, 2002.)

This principle of meritocracy directly addressed the entrenched aristocratic privilege of Goryeo society, representing Jeong's ethical response to systemic inequality. His vision anticipated modern concepts of public accountability and civic virtue.

4.1.2 King Sejong: Serving and Including the People “Of the People” and “For the People”

King Sejong expanded Neo-Confucian principles through practical and inclusive reforms. In the preface to the Hunminjeongeum Haerye, he explained the rationale for creating a new writing system:

“The language of our people is different from Chinese, and Chinese characters do not suit Korean sounds. The people, being unlearned, cannot express their thoughts. Out of compassion, I have created 28 letters that anyone may learn and use with ease” (Korean Language Society, 1998).

In Toynbee's terms, this initiative represents a creative response to a significant social challenge. By providing an accessible writing system for ordinary people, Sejong transformed a structural barrier into an opportunity for cultural and intellectual development.

During periods of natural disaster and economic hardship, Sejong repeatedly emphasized the ruler's responsibility to protect public welfare and maintain moral accountability (National Institute of Korean History, n.d.-b). These records suggest that he viewed royal legitimacy as inseparable from the well-being of the people. From a Toynbeean perspective, such attitudes exemplify Creative Leadership grounded in ethical responsibility and public service.

Together, Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong illustrate Toynbee's concept of the creative minority: leaders whose moral vision and innovative responses transformed historical challenges into opportunities for institutional and societal renewal.

4.2 Discussion: Creative Leadership and the Roots of Korean Democratic Values

This study examined the Neo-Confucian leadership of Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong through an integrated Toynbee–voice-centered framework, demonstrating how their moral reasoning, rhetorical expression, and institutional innovations laid enduring foundations for Korea's political culture. Both leaders viewed governance as a moral mission centered on public welfare, meritocratic leadership, and inclusive participation. These values resonate with democratic ideals later expressed in the principle of government “of the people, by the people, for the people” (Lincoln, 1863).

Jeong Do-jeon's political thought emphasized ministerial deliberation, ethical governance, and institutional accountability. In works such as Joseon Gyeonggukjeon and Gyeongje Mundap, he argued that effective statecraft should be grounded in moral cultivation and public responsibility rather than arbitrary personal authority. From a Toynbeean perspective, this vision constituted a creative response to the political and institutional crises of late Goryeo. By placing virtue and collective deliberation at the center of governance, Jeong sought to transform Confucian moral philosophy into a practical framework for state administration.

King Sejong expanded these Neo-Confucian foundations through reforms designed to improve public welfare and broaden social participation. His creation of Hunminjeongeum in 1446 addressed the widespread barriers to literacy faced by ordinary people and reflected his commitment to inclusive governance (Hunminjeongeum, 1446/1998). More broadly, records from his reign consistently demonstrate his concern for the well-being of the people and his belief that royal authority carried moral obligations toward society (National Institute of Korean History, n.d.-b).

Although neither Jeong Do-jeon nor King Sejong advocated democracy in the modern sense, both articulated ethical principles of accountability, public service, and inclusion. Through the lens of Toynbee's theory, their leadership

may be understood as examples of creative responses to historical challenges, helping to shape a political culture that continues to influence Korean society today.

This ethical legacy continues in modern Korean political discourse, as seen in the speeches of President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), who declared:

“A government that is not for the people is not a government. It must be by the people, and it must be of the people. This is the true meaning of democracy.” (*Roh Moo-hyun Foundation*, 2007)

Such reflections illustrate the continuity of moral voice from Neo-Confucian reformers to modern democratic leaders—a phenomenon best understood through a voice-centered interpretation within Toynbee’s broader theory of civilizational response.

Pedagogically, these findings affirm the power of combining moral philosophy with historical analysis. By foregrounding the ethical dimension of leadership, educators can engage international learners more deeply with Korean history, linking the moral creativity of early Joseon leaders to the democratic values that continue to guide Korea’s global identity today. Lastly, there is considerable potential in evaluating the use of digital tools and AI technologies—such as AI-assisted translation, text annotation, and interactive storytelling—to enhance access to Korean historical texts for global learners. These innovations can bridge linguistic barriers while supporting deeper understanding of the ethical and philosophical foundations of Korean leadership.

5. Research Implications

This study presents significant implications for both academic scholarship and pedagogical practice—particularly in the context of international Korean Studies and Korean history education.

First, by applying Arnold Toynbee’s theory of civilizational change and the concept of Creative Leadership, this research contributes a novel interpretive framework to Korean historiography. It demonstrates that the Neo-Confucian transformation of Korea was not merely a philosophical or institutional transition but a moral and civilizational response led by ethically driven individuals. The study thus reinforces the importance of individual agency and ethical vision in historical change, complementing structural and macro-level analyses that dominate conventional Korean historical scholarship.

Second, the voice-centered methodology employed here offers a valuable contribution to historical interpretation. By treating historical texts as rhetorical expressions of moral intention and civic responsibility, rather than as passive records of events, the study reveals deeper insights into how historical actors conceptualized their roles and responsibilities. This approach humanizes figures like Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong, enabling students and scholars alike to engage with them not as distant icons but as active agents confronting real-world crises with creativity and moral clarity.

Pedagogically, these insights are particularly valuable in international education contexts. Many foreign students initially engage with Korea through the Korean Wave (Hallyu)—drawn by pop culture, entertainment, and media. However, this surface-level engagement often fails to connect learners to Korea’s deeper civilizational history and political values. This study addresses that gap by proposing a values-based approach to teaching Korean history—one that emphasizes civic ethics, creative problem-solving, and inclusive governance. By reframing historical figures as models of ethical leadership, educators can foster critical thinking, historical empathy, and cultural literacy in diverse classrooms.

Furthermore, this approach aligns with broader goals of global citizenship education. Presenting Korea's past as a series of value-driven responses to civilizational challenges encourages learners to reflect on their own societal issues—such as equity, governance, and public responsibility—and see history as a relevant tool for ethical reasoning and social engagement. The cases of Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong, in particular, can serve as cross-cultural examples of leadership grounded in moral accountability and inclusive vision.

Methodologically, the study also suggests pathways for future research. The voice-centered analysis used here could be extended to other transformative periods in Korean history—such as the modernization efforts of the 19th century, the colonial resistance movements, or the democratization struggles of the late 20th century. Such applications could further illuminate how Korean leaders across time have framed their actions within ethical and civilizational narratives.

Lastly, there is great potential in integrating digital tools—such as AI-supported reading aids, translation engines, and interactive annotations—to make Korean historical texts more accessible to international learners. These tools can bridge linguistic and cultural barriers, enabling students to engage more deeply with primary sources while simultaneously supporting Korean language acquisition and historical literacy.

In summary, this study affirms that Korean history—when interpreted through a values-based, voice-centered lens—offers more than a national narrative; it becomes a global resource for exploring ethical leadership, democratic development, and intercultural understanding.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

6.1 Conclusion

This study offered an interpretive analysis of Korea's Neo-Confucian transformation during the transition from the late Goryeo to the early Joseon Dynasty, guided by Arnold Toynbee's theory of civilizational change and the concept of Creative Leadership. By applying Toynbee's framework of "challenge and response" and the notion of the "creative minority," the research explored how two visionary leaders—Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong—responded not simply with political solutions but with morally grounded innovations that redefined governance, language, and social inclusion.

The study pursued three primary objectives:

- 1) To examine how Jeong Do-jeon institutionalized Neo-Confucianism as a civilizational response during a period of dynastic upheaval.
- 2) To analyze King Sejong's inclusive policies—especially the creation of Hunminjeongeum—as exemplary cases of creative leadership within a stabilized ideological framework.
- 3) To explore how the leadership philosophies of these figures continue to inform Korea's modern democratic values and offer pedagogical relevance for international learners.

Findings from the voice-centered analysis revealed that both leaders articulated a vision of governance rooted in ethical responsibility, merit-based leadership, and the welfare of the people. Jeong Do-jeon envisioned a meritocratic and deliberative state, grounded in rational Confucian principles, while King Sejong extended that vision through inclusive reforms that democratized knowledge and emphasized moral empathy. Their leadership philosophies reflected a consistent concern for civic participation and human dignity—principles that align closely with democratic ideals such as equity, representation, and public accountability.

Methodologically, the adoption of a voice-centered approach enabled a deeper reading of historical intent and ethical framing. Rather than viewing historical texts as static records, this method allowed for an interpretive understanding of how these leaders made meaning of their actions and responsibilities. Their voices—captured in royal edicts, philosophical treatises, and administrative records—offer enduring guidance for ethical leadership in both historical and contemporary contexts.

While the study contributes a fresh lens to Korean civilizational history, it is not without limitations. Its scope was intentionally narrow, focusing on two figures within a specific transitional period. Moreover, the application of a Western theoretical model to Korean history, while productive, requires careful contextualization to avoid reductionism. These limitations point to the need for further comparative and interdisciplinary studies that broaden the analysis to other figures, periods, and cultural frameworks.

Ultimately, this research reaffirms the relevance of Korea's past for understanding its present. By framing Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong as creative ethical leaders who responded to historical crises with vision and integrity, the study provides a meaningful bridge between historical scholarship, leadership theory, and global education.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, several avenues for future research are recommended—particularly in the intersecting fields of Korean history, leadership studies, and international education.

First, future research could expand the framework of Creative Leadership to include other pivotal figures in Korean history. While this study focused on Jeong Do-jeon and King Sejong during the Neo-Confucian transition, the model could be applied to later periods such as the reform movements of the late Joseon Dynasty, Korea's colonial resistance leaders, or architects of modern democratic development. Examining how these individuals responded ethically and creatively to historical challenges could yield broader insights into Korea's civilizational continuity and transformation.

Second, further exploration of values-based and voice-centered pedagogies in history education is encouraged. By highlighting the personal voices and ethical perspectives of historical figures, educators can move beyond event-based teaching toward a more reflective, humanistic approach. Future studies might investigate the effectiveness of this method in various educational settings, including Korean language programs, Korean Studies curricula, and international schools.

Third, scholars should explore how to make Korean history more accessible and engaging for international learners. While many students are introduced to Korea through soft power (e.g., K-pop, dramas), they often lack exposure to Korea's intellectual and political traditions. Research could examine how linking ethical leadership in history to contemporary global values—such as social justice, civic responsibility, and innovation—can foster deeper intercultural engagement and historical empathy.

Fourth, there is considerable potential in evaluating the use of digital tools and AI technologies to enhance the teaching of Korean history. Tools such as AI-assisted translation, text annotation, voice narration, and interactive storytelling can help non-native learners engage directly with primary texts, improving both language acquisition and cultural literacy. Empirical studies are needed to assess the impact of such technologies on student comprehension, motivation, and critical thinking.

Lastly, future research should consider the inclusion of diverse perspectives within Korean historical narratives. Incorporating voices across gender, region, and class—alongside the elite male thinkers traditionally emphasized—will

enrich both academic inquiry and classroom practice. This inclusive approach aligns with broader global trends in historical scholarship and supports the cultivation of analytical reasoning and cosmopolitan citizenship.

In sum, future research inspired by this study can advance Korean historiography, refine cross-cultural pedagogy, and deepen the relevance of historical inquiry in addressing contemporary global challenges. By continuing to explore leadership, ethics, and civic values across time and context, scholars and educators can ensure that Korean history remains a vital resource for reflection and transformation.

References

- Deuchler, M. (1992). *The Confucian transformation of Korea: A study of society and ideology*. Harvard University Asia Center.
- Kim, J.-H. (2005, March 2). *Roh promises respect for different opinions*. *The Dong-A Ilbo*.
<https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20050302/240053/1>
- Haboush, J. K. (2001). *The Confucian Kingship in Korea: Yongjo and the politics of sagacity*. Columbia University Press.
- Jeong, D. J. (1971). *Gyeongje Mundap* [Dialogues on Statecraft] (Reprint ed.). Academy of Korean Studies.
- Jeong, D. J. (2002). *Sambongjip* [Collected writings of Sambong] (Y. G. Kim, Ed.). Institute for the Translation of Korean Classics. (Original work published 14th century)
- Jeong, D. J. (2006). *Bulssi japbyeon* (G.-H. Lee, Trans.). Keimyung University Press.
- Hunminjeongeum*. (1998). Korean Language Society. Haeseongsa. (Original work published 1446)
- Lee, K. (1984). *A new history of Korea*. Harvard University Press.
- Lincoln, A. (1953). *Gettysburg address*. In R. P. Basler (Ed.), *The collected works of Abraham Lincoln* (Vol. 7, pp. 19–21). Rutgers University Press. (Original work published 1863)
- National Institute of Korean History. (n.d.-a). *Joseon Wangjo Sillok [Annals of the Joseon Dynasty]*: Sejong Sillok, Vol. 82 (1438). Retrieved May 18, 2025, from <http://sillok.history.go.kr>
- National Institute of Korean History. (n.d.-b). *Joseon Wangjo Sillok [Annals of the Joseon Dynasty]*: Sejong Sillok, Vol. 103 (1444). Retrieved May 18, 2025, from <http://sillok.history.go.kr>
- National Institute of Korean History. (n.d.-c). *Joseon Wangjo Sillok [Annals of the Joseon Dynasty]*: Sejong Sillok, Vol. 113 (1446). Retrieved May 18, 2025, from <http://sillok.history.go.kr>
- National Institute of Korean History. (n.d.-d). *Joseon Wangjo Sillok [Annals of the Joseon Dynasty]*: Taejo Sillok, Vol. 1 (1392). Retrieved May 18, 2025, from <http://sillok.history.go.kr>
- Roh Moo-hyun Foundation. (2007, June 8). Lecture at Wonkwang University (honorary doctorate ceremony) [Speech transcript]. In *Roh Moo-hyun Archive*. Retrieved May 18, 2025, from <https://www.knowhow.or.kr/>
- Shin, Y. (2006). King Sejong and governance through science. In J. H. Lee (Ed.), *Science and culture in the Joseon Dynasty* (pp. 105–128). Seoul National University Press.
- Toynbee, A. J. (1947). *A study of history* (Vols. 1–6). Oxford University Press.