Yu Hyŏngwŏn in the Perspective of Early-Modern European Intellectuals

Boudewijn Walraven
Leiden University
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Introduction

During his lifetime Pan'gye Yu Hyŏngwŏn (1622-1673) could not have imagined that three centuries later he would turn into a key figure in Korean historiography, the focus of academic conferences devoted to him up to the present day. As a *yangban* scholar affiliated with academic factions that were out of favor, he gave up the thought of qualifying for government office and spent his days studying in the countryside of Chŏlla Province, writing about a variety of topics, and particularly about the best way to govern the country in his *magnum opus* called *Pan'gye surok* ("Pan'gye's Random Records," a rather misleading title for a work based on nineteen years of zealous study and deep reflection). Initially his writings to a certain extent circulated in manuscript form and only in the second half of the eighteenth century *Pan'gye surok* was finally printed, with support from the court.[1] At that time, Pan'gye's ideas were taken as relevant to the actual tasks of government. Nearly two hundred years later, in the 1930s, Pan'gye was seen in a different light. Proponents of *kukhak*, "national studies," or *Chosŏnhak*, "Korean studies," who aimed to assert Korean identity positively, saw Pan'gye in a new light. Chŏng Inbo (1893-1950?) called him the "first ancestor of Shirhak [Practical Studies]," a movement discerned in the late Chosŏn period that showed there was progress, against the Japanese colonial view that Korean history was characterized by stagnation. Similarly, An Chaehong (1891-1965) referred to Pan'gye as "the originator of *Chosŏnhak*."[2] When following liberation in 1945, Shirhak became more prominent in Korean historiography, the reputation of Pan'gye as a champion of early modernity grew correspondingly. In spite of the fact that this prompted James Palais to relativize the modernity of Pan'gye in his massive study *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*: *Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty*, in the first quarter of the twenty–first century academic interest in Pan'gye, expressed in a succession of conferences devoted to his thought, has lasted.

In an earlier paper I speculated on the question what Pan'gye might have learned about Western civilization from the Dutchmen he briefly met when they roamed the countryside of Chŏlla-do.[3] At the time I focused on the nature of the organization that employed the Dutch sailors, the United East-India Company (widely known by its Dutch acronym as VOC). The purport of my speculations was that the kind of European civilization this company and its supposed modernity (one of the first joint-stock companies!) represented might not have been very attractive to Pan'gye, had he known more about it. This paper is also speculative, but changes the perspective 180 degrees. Instead of imagining what Pan'gye might have thought of the achievements of the West if his rather poorly educated interlocutors would have been able to furnish him with a fuller, and unadorned, picture, I will attempt to suggest what some European intel-

[1] James B. Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*: *Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seattle, 1996), pp. 7-8.

[2] Im Hyŏngt'aek, "Shin palgul chŏsŏ rŭl t'onghae pon Pan'gye Yu Hyŏngwŏn ŭi hangmun kwa sasang," *Kukchejŏk shigak esŏ pon Pan'gye Yu Hyŏngwŏn ŭi Shirhak sasang* (Puan-gun. 2016), p. 1.

[3] For the reference to his Western visitors, see Yu Hyŏngwŏn, *Pan'gye surok, kw.* 8:6a. For the earlier paper, see Boudewijn Walraven, "Yu Hyŏngwŏn kwa Tongindo hoesa (VOC): kŭndaesŏng ŭi kaenyŏm e taehan tansang," *Han'guk shirhak yŏn'gu*, vol. 40 (2020), 181-196.

lectuals of roughly the same era might have thought of Pan'gye's ideas in the entirely unrealistic case that Pan'gye would have had the opportunity to discuss his ideas with them. I fully realize that this is not only a fanciful but also a somewhat foolhardy enterprise. The thought of the European thinkers of this period shows considerable variation, includes discussions of widely different topics, and is often highly complex and abstract. Nevertheless, I am tempted by the subject, as I believe it may provide us with a somewhat different perspective on the question whether Pan'gye was in any sense a modern thinker, the question that has preoccupied both Korean scholars and James Palais (and prompted them of course to provide quite different answers). What was Pan'gye's thought like if seen from a seventeenth-century or eighteenth-century European perspective rather than a nineteenth- or twenty–century perspective, which in my view has too frequently been applied to it? And might this perhaps change our perception of the usefulness of the concept of modernity? In order to simplify my task a little, I will concentrate attention on a number of intellectuals who were active in northwestern Europe and particularly in The Netherlands, France and Germany.

It should be clear from the outset that this paper does not claim to be a systematic comparison of the thought of these European intellectuals and Pan'gye's philosophy and practical proposals. The aim is merely to suggest a reappreciation of Pan'gye by inquiring if he and a limited number of European thinkers shared interests and perspectives to a degree that might with some ease have allowed a measure of mutual understanding and appreciation, a *Horizontverschmelzung* as conceived by Gadamer, thus suggesting the possibility that they could engage in meaningful conversations in spite of obvious crucial differences.

The West-European Intellectual Climate of the Seventeenth Century

If one looks at the European material innovations of the seventeenth century, it is relatively easy to paint a picture that stands in sharp contrast to Korea in that age. In Europe this was a time of fundamental scientific discoveries and inventions that made scientific advancement possible: it was the age of the barometer and the thermometer, of the microscope, and of telescopes and binoculars, while it was also the century in which the pendulum clock was invented, which allowed more exact time measurement. All this stimulated the flourishing of empirical studies and the development of the sciences.[4] This went hand-in-hand with a widespread interest in mathematics, which was used as the basis for investigations in a variety of fields, including philosophy. One of the most notable achievements in this regard was the development of infinitesimal calculus by Isaac Newton (1643–1727) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). This interest in mathematics was not limited to pure scholars but common among intellectuals in general. Johan de Witt (1625-1672), one of the most prominent Dutch statesmen of his age, was also a superb mathematician and is regarded as one of the founders of actuarial mathematics, the mathematics that insurance companies need to calculate how much premium should be paid. A serious interest in mathematics was also pronounced among the greatest philosophers of the age, such as René Descartes (1596-1650) and Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677). In this age ancient theories, such as those of Aristotle which had been authoritative until then, were increasingly challenged on the basis of new empirical data, although paradoxically for modern thinkers Greek and Roman antiquity continued to be a source of inspiration.[5] The latter is something to keep in mind when considering the thought of Pan'gye, who also proposed new policies

[4]Catherine Wilson, *The Invisible World: Early Modern Philosophy and the Invention of the Microscope* (Princeton, 1995); H. Floris Cohen, *The Scientific Revolution: A Historiographical Inquiry* (Chicago, 1994), and from the same author, *How Modern Science Came into the World* (Amsterdam, 2010), particularly Chapter XI.

[5]Thomas Chaimowicz, *Antiquity as the Source of Modernity: Freedom and Balance in the Thought of Montesquieu and Burke* (New York, 2008).

but at the same time took ancient examples seriously.[6]

The development of new instruments and advances in the way they could be used also facilitated navigation, which allowed European seafarers to travel further and further, circumnavigating the globe. This made Europeans learn of various previously unknown or only very imperfectly known cultures, which in due course facilitated European mercantile expansionism and imperialism. But it also had some consequences of a very different, and less nefarious, nature.

Seventeenth-century European Interest in China

Thanks to the activities in China of Catholic missionaries like Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), and their mastery of the Chinese language, from the sixteenth-century onward Europeans became much better informed about the country than in the days of early travelers to China such as Marco Polo (1254–1324) and Odoric de Pordenone (1286-1331). This information also provided a potential framework for the understanding of other civilizations from the Sinitic sphere like Korea. An early example was *Historia de las cosas mas notables, ritos y costumbres del Gran Reyno de la China* by Gonzáles de Mendoça, which was published in Rome in 1585.[7] By the middle of the seventeenth century, substantial publications started to appear with information on China of superior quality, such as *Novus Atlas Sinensis* ("New Atlas of China," published in Cologne and Amsterdam, which included an account of the war of the Ming dynasty with the Manchus) and *Sinicae Historiae* (Chinese Histories), both by the Jesuit Martino Martini.[8] The latter was printed in München in 1658. Such publications, although the by-product of Catholic missionary work, were avidly read all over Europe, also in Protestant regions. Not a few were published in the Calvinist Dutch Republic, which could boast of a tradition of freedom of expression that made someone like Descartes (1596-1650), live there for more than twenty years. This intellectual climate drew some unexpected visitors. While the Jesuit Philippe Couplet, together with the Chinese convert Shen Fuzong 沈福宗, prepared the introduction to his translation into Latin of the *Analecta* 論語of Confucius (published in 1687 under the title *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*),[9] he spent two years in the Netherlands.

Many European intellectuals were favorably impressed by what they learned about China and particularly by the knowledge they acquired of Confucianism. Georg Horn (or Hornius, the Latinized form of his name), a professor of the history of philosophy of the no longer extant university of Harderwijk in the east of the Netherlands, claimed in 1655 that "the entire Chinese Empire is ruled by philosophers" and praised Confucians as "surpassing many of the pagans in morals and judgements."[10] He concluded that only in China Plato's ideal of a state governed by philosophers had been realized.

The Leiden-born polymath Isaac Vossius (1618-1689), a friend of Spinoza, Descartes and Grotius, who

[6]To a certain extent this may have been what Ineke Sluiter has called "anchoring innovation in the past," a maneuver to make innovation acceptable; Sluiter, "Anchoring Innovation: a classical research agenda," *European Review*, 25/1 (2017), p. 23.

[7]Harriet T. Zurndorfer, *China Bibliography* (Leiden, 1991), p. 6.

[8]Federico Masini, "Martino Martini: China in Europe," in L.M. Paternicó ed., *The Generations of Giants: Jesuit missionaries and scientists in China in the footsteps of Matteo Ricci* (Trento, 2011), pp. 39–44. Martini's account of the Manchu invasion of China, *De bello Tartarico historia*, appeared in no less than twenty-eight editions in eight languages between 1654 and 1666; Zurndorfer, *China Bibliography*, p. 7.

[9]This was not the first published translation into a European language. In 1675 a partial Dutch translation, in verse, had appeared in the unlikely place of Batavia (Jakarta), the site of the headquarters of the mercilessly avaricious Dutch East India Company, under the title: *Eenige voorname eygenschappen van de ware deugdt, voorsichtigheydt, wysheydt en volmaecktheydt* (Some principal characteristics of true virtue, prudence, wisdom, and perfection); Trude Dijkstra and Thijs Weststeijn, "Constructing Confucius in the Low Countries," *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 32 (2016) no. 2, pp. 146-154. It is assumed that this partial translation was based on the manuscript of Philippe Couplet's Latin translation. On his way from China to Europe Couplet had spent some time in Batavia.

[10]Quoted in Thijs Weststeijn, "Vossius' Chinese Utopia," in *Isaac Vossius (1618–1689), Between Science and Scholarship*, ed. by E. Jorink and D. van Miert (Leiden, 2012), p. 209.

during his lifetime was regarded as one of the foremost scholars in a variety of fields, went so far as to describe China as a kind of utopia in the chapter "De artibus and scientiis Sinarum" (About the arts and science of the Chinese) which is included in a collection of his writings.[11] This was literally a utopia, a realm that did not actually exist (although Vossius firmly believed it did), but it quite accurately reflected characteristics of the *ideal* Confucian order, in which the ruling elite were selected purely on the basis of merit through the examination system, and the literati who had been promoted to office were supposed not to hesitate to express their opinion when they felt the monarch was pursuing improper policies.

Leibniz

In Germany it was no one less than Gottfried Leibniz who joined the chorus of scholars who praised China. In the introductory part of his *Novissima Sinica, historiam nostri temporis illustratura* ("The latest news from China, to illuminate the history of our time,"' published in 1697[12]) Leibniz judged that the two most developed civilizations in the history of the world were those of China and Europe. About the Chinese he said: "Who would have believed in the past that there exist on this globe people who even surpass us —us who in our own opinion are in all respects so polished in our manners-- in their rules for an even more civilized life?"'[13] Leibniz particularly appreciated what he called the "practical philosophy" of the Chinese, their ethics aiming for social harmony and social order. In this respect he judged the Chinese to be vastly superior to the West. These ethics, he averred, did not only promote mutual respect among equals, but also guaranteed that people would obey their social superiors. These superiors from the emperor down earned respect from the hoi polloi by their education in virtue and knowledge.[14] This last point we should keep in mind, because it shows that Leibniz did not have an ideal society in mind where everyone was completely equal; he accepted a hierarchy based on knowledge, and was even ready to accept a society that might accommodate hereditary rulers.

Leibniz's admiration for Chinese social life and customs was balanced by a more negative view of other matters, in particular their logic, metaphysics, and the knowledge of immaterial things (*cognitio rerum incorporearum*). He noted that the Chinese would make use of mathematics to solve practical problems, but not for an understanding of more abstract matters such as metaphysics.[15] Yet, although he aimed to apply mathematical logic to metaphysics, Bertrand Russell dismissed his philosophical hypotheses as fantastic, although precisely expressed.[16] In any case, in the final analysis the importance he assigned to mathematics in his thinking did not stand in the way of his admiration for important aspects of Chinese culture.

Spinoza

Increased knowledge of the countries of the Far East also played a part in the appreciation by other Europeans of the man whom Bertrand Russell called the "noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers,"'[17] Benedictus de Spinoza (1632–1677). Spinoza, whose lifespan largely overlapped with that of Pan'gye (1622-1673), was born in Amsterdam, but, as is well-known, was excommunicated by the Jewish community to which he belonged because of his unorthodox theories. He believed that all phenomena in

[11] Weststeijn, "Vossius' Chinese Utopia," pp. 207–242.

[12] For the complete text and the Latin original see Georg [sic] Wilhelm Leibniz, *Das Neueste von China (1697)*; *Novissima Sinica, mit ergänzende Dokumenten herausgegeben, übersetzt, erläutert von Nesselrath und Reinbothe* (Köln, 1997). For an English translation of the introductory part, see Donald F. Lach, *The Preface to Leibniz' Novissima Sinica, Commentary, Translation, Text* (Honolulu, 1957).

[13] Leibniz, *Novissima Sinica*, pp. 10, 11.

[14] Leibniz, *Novissima Sinica*, pp. 12, 13.

[15] Leibniz, *Novissima Sinica*, pp. 8, 9.

[16] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*. London, 1967, p. 576.

[17] Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, p. 552.

the universe are manifestations or modes of one primal and omnipresent substance, which he called God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*). In his thinking, this God was immanent in everything, and not a personalized deity with particular intentions with regard to humankind, unlike the traditional god of the Jews and Christians. Quite a few critics ferociously attacked Spinoza, accusing him of atheism, but to Spinoza God was not merely nature as we usually think of it nowadays; it was the ultimate and exclusive substance of our universe, which mankind should strive to know as much as possible, to become one with Deus as much as possible, thanks to this knowledge. In its striving for union with the Godhead Spinozism may be regarded as a kind of mysticism. Spinoza in any case rejected materialism and is often characterized as a pantheist. In his *Ethica*: *Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (Ethics: demonstrated in geometrical order)[18] Spinoza grounded his ethics in the metaphysics of his philosophy. Moreover, he framed his arguments logically, following mathematical procedures, first stating definitions and axioms, then formulating propositions, and finally presenting proof. It has to be added that although the form was reminiscent of the way Euclid had explained geometry, the mathematics are not really essential to his ethics, which still have the power to inspire even when the supposedly mathematical proof he presented is no longer convincing.[19]

Contemporaries and later commentators remarked that Spinoza's views were very similar to certain East-Asian teachings, in spite of the mathematical framework he used. Thijs Weststeijn has noted that in the entry ''Japan'' in Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam, 1702), Spinoza is linked to the philosophy and religion of certain Japanese religious groups.

> "... those [Japanese sects] that seek internal and insensible reality, reject paradise and hell, and teach things that are very similar to the philosophy of Spinoza . . . they say . . . that knowledge is no different from ignorance; that good and bad are not two entities, but that the one is not separated from the other. . . It is very certain that [Spinoza] has taught together with these Japanese Preachers that the first principle of all things, and all beings that constitute the Universe, are nothing else but one and the same substance."[20]

Bayle clearly links Spinoza's thought to that of Japanese Buddhists, although there is no reason to believe that he was in any way influenced by them. This is not the place to discuss in detail to what extent Spinoza's views actually happened to resemble East-Asian Buddhist teachings,[21] but for the purposes of this paper it is more relevant to consider whether they might in some way be similar to the Confucian convictions of Pan'gye.

In the Confucian debate about the question of what is the ultimate source of all phenomena, Pan'gye eventually chose to follow those who asserted that this was *i* 理, "principle"' or as it is often translated today "pattern."'[22] While Spinoza's philosophy was a one-substance monism, Pan'gye may be said to have subscribed to *i* monism. Heaven with its principle was his metaphysical point of departure. He also thought that for mankind it was imperative to strive to realize the heavenly principle through the human way of the cultivation of virtue. Thus, he grounded his ethics in his metaphysics, just like Spinoza. If that was all, it would be rather commonplace and not be really worth

[18]For an English translation, see Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. and introduced by Clare Carlisle, transl. by George Eliot (Princeton 2020); the original edition of this translation dates back to 1856.

[19]Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, p. 554.

[20]Quoted from Thijs Weststeijn, "Spinoza Sinicus: An Asian Paragraph in the History of the Radical Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* vol. 68, no. 4 (October 2007), pp. 538–561.

[21]In some ways it is similar to *Huayan* thought. There is, however, no evidence at all that Spinoza was really influenced by any East-Asian thinkers.

[22]What follows is based on Im Hyŏngt'aek, "Pan'gye Yu Hyŏngwŏn ŭi hangmun kwa sasang," in *Pan'gye yugo* (P'aju, 2017), pp. 700–718.

remarking, because it is common to most religions. But the fact that for both Pan'gye and Spinoza the fundamental element in their metaphysics was not a personalized deity and was a single entity makes it more significant. And Spinoza also distinguished different grades of human perfection based on the degree of knowledge of a person, as Confucians would do.

Spinoza shared more than this with Confucians. Although he lived a calm and rather secluded life of contemplation and study, he was not content to merely achieve an understanding of the way the universe was constituted; he definitely wanted to contribute to a better society. Hence his interest in social morality, manifested in his *Ethica*, and in the title and contents of two of his other works: *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), with its combined focus on theology and politics, and the unfinished *Tractatus Politicus* (TP).[23] With his earnest desire to create the conditions for a better society he would have found a kindred soul in Pan'gye.

For Spinoza, the supreme values needed to realize a harmonious community were justice and charity (justitia & charitas): "The worship of God and obedience to him consist only in Justice and Loving- kindness [= charitas], or in love toward one's neighbor."[24] Or, "God's Kingdom [*regnum Dei*] exists wherever justice and loving-kindness have the force of law and of a command. [25] Pan'gye and Spinoza might very well have discussed to what extent the latter's justice and loving-kindness equaled the equally cardinal Confucian social virtues of *ŭi* 義 (righteousness) and *in* 仁 (benevolence/humaneness).

Spinoza can also be said to have been a pragmatic thinker when considering the best ways to organize polities in a manner that would maximize social harmony. "So when I applied my mind to Politics, I didn't intend to advance anything new or unheard of, but only to demonstrate the things which agree best with practices in a certain and indubitable way, and to deduce them from the condition of nature"[26] and "I am fully persuaded that experience has shown all the kinds of State which might conceivably enable men to live in harmony…"[27] One may compare this with Pan'gye's scouring of the past to discover better, more equitable and more practical ways of allotting land to the peasants, going back to a precedent from the Chinese Zhou dynasty.

Spinoza would also have sympathized with Pan'gye's decision to "spend the rest of his life [after some attempts to engage on an official career] in scholarly contemplation and writing.'"[28] Spinoza himself chose not to accept a professorship in Heidelberg, in order to be free to develop his thought, earning his keep as a humble manual worker, as a grinder of optical lenses. Yet, for both Pan'gye and Spinoza their contemplation and writing was not an escape from social concerns, but a way to concentrate on the problem of creating a just society.

One may question what would have been the extent of mutual understanding between Pan'gye and Spinoza in light of the fact that Spinoza these days is considered to be a pivotal figure in the development of what Jonathan Israel has characterized as the Radical Enlightenment.[29] It is important, however, not to ascribe to Spinoza all the values of modernity, such as egalitarianism, democracy, and tolerance, as they eventually took form in the twentieth century. He believed, for instance, that everyone was equal only when free men were concerned, not including women and slaves. In a book review of Jonathan Israel's *Spinoza: Life and Legacy*, entitled "Was Spinoza's Enlightenment so radical after all?," Carlos Fraenkel went as far as to conclude: "Pluralism and tolerance

[23]English translation of both works in Spinoza, *Collected Works*. Volume 2. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton, 2016).

[24]TTP, Chapter 14, *Collected Works*, Volume 2, p. 269

[25]TTP, Chapter 19, *Collected Works*, Volume 2, p. 333.

[26]TP, Chapter 1, *Collected Works*, Volume 2, p. 505.

[27]TP, Chapter 1, *Collected Works*, Volume 2, p. 504.

[28]Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, pp. 4–5.

[29]Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2001), *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752*, Oxford, 2006, and *Spinoza: Life and Legacy*, Oxford, 2023.

are grudging concessions in Spinoza's republic, which, frankly, looks less like a blueprint of modernity than something midway between France and Iran."'[30]

Of course, it will not be difficult to find certain points of divergence between Spinoza and Pan'gye, related to the very different social conditions in which they lived, but if the two would have been able to have a conversation, it is quite likely that Spinoza would have looked quite favorably on Pan'gye's basic convictions and intentions. For his part, Pan'gye certainly would not have joined the chorus of those Europeans who denounced Spinoza as an abominable atheist (provided that someone would have managed to explain the concept to him).

The Persistence of European Sinophilia in the Eighteenth Century

The idea that in certain respects Chinese civilization and Confucianism might be a model for Europe persisted well into the eighteenth century. A prime example is furnished by the *Lettres chinoises* (Chinese letters) by Jean-Baptiste Boyer, marquis d'Argens (1704–1771), published in several editions between 1739 and 1756.[31] It is a fictive exchange of letters by some Chinese intellectuals, based (implausibly) in Paris, Beijing, Isfahan, and Nagasaki, who comment on various aspects of Western civilization and compare these with Chinese civilization. This epistolary form was also chosen by other European writers to comment on their own culture from a novel point of view. The most famous example is of course *Lettres persanes* published in 1721 by Montesquieu (1689–1755). But d'Argens not only used the form as a way to comment on European culture, but also to express admiration for Chinese thought, in particular for the original practical philosophy of Confucius, which he held to be an ethical model for all nations. To one edition of the book he added a dedication to the spirit of Confucius from the supposed "translator" of the letters, the author of which, of course, was no one else than d'Argens himself. In this he addressed Confucius as "the greatest man the universe has produced," to whom the Chinese owed their virtue, their integrity, and their love of good ethics. In spite of his aristocratic origins, d'Argens was quite radical in his ideas, so much so that at a certain moment he thought it wiser to seek voluntary exile in the Dutch Republic, as other Frenchmen with radical ideas, such as Descartes (1596–1650) and Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), had done before him.

In connection with this paper, it is relevant that *Lettres chinoises* explicitly discusses the similarities between Spinozism and Chinese thought, and particularly Neo-Confucianism. In letter no. 14, a fictive Chinese scholar who is named Sioeu-Tcheou counters the arguments of his addressee, a fellow-intellectual named Yn-Che-Chan, that Neo-Confucian views would be unacceptable to Europeans. It is of course important to keep in mind that this is not really written by a Chinese, but by d'Argens, who for the content related to China relied on information supplied by the Jesuit missionaries in China. "Sioeu-Tcheou" writes (in my translation, BW):

> "You claim that the opinions of the new [that is the Neo-Confucian] commentators would appear monstrous to all Europeans, who cannot understand that there are persons so blinded that they recognize no other prime principle than a celestial power, blind and material, that commands the universe; that grants life to all beings, and that always acts in a regular manner, without recognizing that it acts.... I will disabuse you of a misunderstanding of the beliefs of the Europeans. There are many among them who follow a system that is very similar to that of the new Chinese commentators [the Neo-Confucians]. Spinoza, a Dutch scholar, is the inventor of it... Spinoza supposes, like the Chinese, that there is but a single and unique substance, which

[30] *Times Literary Supplement*, March 15, 2024.

[31] Boyer d'Argens, *Lettres chinoises: choisies et présentées par Lu Wan Fen* (Paris, 2011).

> he calls God, of which all other beings are but modifications.… Mankind, plants, the stars etc., in short, all the creatures, whatever they are, …, are only modes of the unique and universal substance, to which it has pleased Spinoza to give the name of God: one only needs to put in its place *li* 理 [principle/pattern], and all the European Spinoza followers think exactly like partisans of the new Chinese interpreters [of the Classics]."'[32]

Therefore, in the eyes of the European thinkers who followed the system elaborated by Spinoza the Neo-Confucian philosophy that was the foundation of Pan'gye's reform plans would have seemed quite plausible.

Another French exponent of admiration for China in the eighteenth century was François Quesnay (1694–1774), whose ideas we will discuss below when we investigate whether Pan'gye's proposals for the economy should be considered to be progressive or conservative. At this point we will just conclude that there are good grounds to assume that European intellectuals might have had a positive appreciation of the intellectual foundation of Pan'gye's ideas, while they also would have applauded his concern for a just society.

Seventeenth-Century European Intellectuals' Views with Regard to Palais' Objections

In the "Epilogue" to his magnum opus, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty*, James Palais discussed the institutional changes Pan'gye proposed in the areas of military service, slavery, land distribution, and the economy, and also addressed the basis for his institutional proposals. He found not a few things to praise, but also noted the limitations which, in his view, Pan'gye's plans for a better society suffered from. Here I will just speculate what these plans might have looked like in the eyes of the seventeenth-century or eighteenth-century West-European intellectuals who have been briefly discussed above.

Military service

Conditions in Europe showed considerable differences according to the country, and might be so different from the situation in Chosŏn that in particular cases Europeans would have had difficulty forming an informed opinion on the way Pan'gye proposed to solve certain problems. This applies most clearly in the case of the military system. Before the French Revolution no European country had a system of military duty for a sizable part of its male population, such as Chosŏn possessed. Of course, states did maintain armies or assembled them in times of need, but the soldiers were mostly mercenaries, not a few of them of foreign extraction. In the Dutch Republic their officers were often foreign noblemen, frequently but not only from German-speaking areas. Compulsory military service for conscripts was a consequence of the French Revolution and introduced in France only in 1793 and in The Netherlands in 1810. In this respect, Chosŏn was definitely ahead of the curve.

I surmise that most of the intellectuals mentioned earlier in this paper would have welcomed military duty for all able-bodied males, rather than relying on an army of professional soldiers, many of whom were of foreign origin with a doubtful allegiance to the state they were serving, but that is just guesswork. Except for the case of Spinoza. Spinoza stated without the slightest ambiguity in his *Tractatus Politicus*: "The army must be formed only from the citizens without exception, and not from any others."[33] The reasoning behind this is spelled out in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: "… it's certain that Leaders can oppress the people only with an army to whom they pay a salary, and that they fear nothing more than the freedom of soldiers who are their fellow citizens, who

[32] Boyer d'Argens, *Lettres chinoises*, pp. 121–122.

[33] TP, Chapter VI, *Complete Works*, Vol. 2, p. 535.

by their excellence, hard work, and readiness to shed their own blood, bring about the freedom and glory of the state."[34] This is related to Spinoza's readiness to accept the overthrowing of tyrants, which Pan'gye perhaps would not have shared, although in a discussion of this he might have been reminded of Mencius's view that the ruler's Mandate of Heaven depends on the will of the people. What might have facilitated mutual understanding of the two in this respect is the fact that Spinoza did not really propagate the overthrowing of tyrants –he viewed it rather as a natural consequence of misrule—and generally advocated that people should obey the laws of their government.

Slavery

Slavery was not institutionalized in Europe itself the way it was in Chosŏn, but in the seventeenth European countries in their expansion to the Americas, Africa, and Asia became heavily involved in the slave trade, while making use of slaves for the exploitation of overseas plantations. The Dutch Republic was no exception. Within the country enslaved persons in principle were emancipated as soon as they set foot on Dutch soil, but in practice this rule was often breached when Dutch citizens brought their black enslaved servants from the colonies. Opinions regarding slavery were mixed. It was fiercely condemned by some Christian spokesmen, such as the Leiden professor of theology Festus Hommius (1576–1642)[35] and a Protestant minister from the Dutch region of Zeeland, Bernardus Smytegelt (1665–1739).[36] Hugo de Groot (1583–1645), better known by the Latinized version of his name as Grotius, and famous as the founder of international law,[37] in his *De iure belli ac pacis* (About the law of war and peace) of 1625 was of the opinion that no man is a slave by nature, thus recognizing the basic humanity of slaves (as Pan'gye did). But he recognized that persons might become enslaved as prisoners of war, because of serious crimes worthy of the death penalty, and because they were the offspring of an enslaved woman.[38] He argued that people in the first two categories might otherwise be killed, and that the children of enslaved women would have no chance of survival if they were not made slaves as well. To his credit he insisted that slavery did not justify maltreatment of the enslaved. Stronger defenses of the institution of slavery were quite common. Elie Luzac (1721–1796), a lawyer, philosopher, and book seller from Leiden, who is generally regarded as an Enlightenment thinker, judged that the Dutch economy could not sustain the abolishing of slavery on the plantations of the colony Surinam and that its abolition thus should be avoided.[39] Jacobus Capitein, a black ex-slave, born in Ghana, who took a degree in theology at Leiden University, even wrote a thesis arguing that slavery was not contrary to Christian principles.[40] In short, it would be difficult to argue that a radical rejection of slavery was characteristic of European thinking in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Ambiguous attitudes toward it were seen even among proponents of the Enlightenment.

If we return to the issue of slavery in Korea and Pan'gye's ideas concerning it, James Palais evaluated Pan'gye's rejection of slavery on the one hand quite positively: "His contribution to the decline of slavery

[34]TTP, Chapter XVII, *Complete Works*, Vol. 2, p. 331.

[35]Gert Oostindie & Karwan Fatah-Black, *Sporen van de slavernij in Leiden* (Traces of slavery in Leiden). (Leiden, 2017), pp. 47–48.

[36]A.N. Paasman, "West-Indian Slavery and Dutch Enlightenment Literature," in Arnold A. James ed., *History of Literature in the Caribbean*, Vol. 2 (Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 481–489.

[37]Grotius also has been seen as a precursor of the Enlightenment; Jonathan Israel, "Grotius and the Rise of the Christian 'Radical Enlightenment,"' *Grotiana* vol. 35, 1 (2014), pp. 19–31.

[38]The description of Dutch attitudes to slavery is based on chapter 3 of Dr. A.N. Paasman, *Reinhart*: *Nederlandse Literatuur en Slavernij ten tijde van de Verlichting* (*Reinhart*: Dutch Literature and Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment). (Leiden, 1984).

[39]M. van Vliet, *Elie Luzac* (*1721–1796*): *Boekverkoper van de Verlichting* (Elie Luzac: Bookseller of the Enlightenment). (Nijmegen, 2005), pp. 324–333.

[40]C. R. Boxer. *The Dutch Seaborne Empire*: *1600–1800* (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 170–171, and Oostindie & Fatah-Black, *Sporen van Slavernij*, pp. 52-53.

[41]Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*, p. 1015.

and Korea as a slave society may be his most outstanding contribution to the improvement of Korean life."'[41] Yet, he also qualified his appreciation, remarking that Pan'gye was willing to prolong slavery to a certain extent to accommodate the needs of *yangban* who were economically dependent on slave labor, while at the same time arguing for wage labor to replace it.[42] This most likely would not have decreased the sincerity of Pan'gye's rejection of slavery in the eyes of progressive Europeans in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. A basic condemnation of slavery in Europe usually went together with practical accommodations to the interests of plantation owners in the Americas. In fact, when slavery was at last outlawed in the south-American Dutch colony of Surinam, as late as 1863, for the same reason the enslaved were obliged to continue working for their former owners as wage laborers for ten years. Such pandering to the interests of European slave holders was so common that Pan'gye's concessions to the interests of the slave-holding *yangban* class do not seem remarkable. Nor do they substantially invalidate his advocacy of the abolition of slavery. Rather they may be seen as evidence that he was not merely advocating an unworkable proposal, but had a realistic trajectory in mind for reaching his goal.

Equality

Another issue on which Palais judged Pan'gye's advocacy to fall somewhat short was his criticism of the rule of the country by the hereditary *yangban* class. Palais judged that he was not a true supporter of equality:

> "One of Yu's overarching themes was the establishment of a truly moral society ruled by moral officials. He denigrated the examination system for its failure to producing [*sic*] honest and dedicated officials, but he saw the answer in adapting ancient institutions, particularly resuscitating the moribund official school system and initiating face-to-face evaluation of candidates for office. Yu's ideal society was as hierarchical as Korean contemporary Korean society, but on an almost completely different basis –demonstrated superiority in Confucian ethical behavior."'[43]

If we remember what scholars such as Leibniz and Vossius, or even the Jesuit missionaries to China thought about the ideals of Confucian culture, and Confucianism's role in creating a governing class of literati, it will be clear that they would have sympathized with Pan'gye's plans to revert to the ancient ideals of Confucianism, rather than reproaching him for a regressive or insufficiently progressive attitude. It would certainly not have bothered them that a hierarchy would remain in social relations, as long as the superiors in these relations earned their position because of their virtue and wisdom. As we have seen earlier, Leibniz in particular was quite specific on this point. Spinoza, in basic agreement with this, did not categorically reject the systems of monarchy and aristocracy, although he preferred democracy (the rule of the largest number).

Economy and Land Policies

With regard to the economy, one of the objections Palais had against Pan'gye's view of it was that he did not have a proper understanding of the role of commerce and the market, although he recognized these were of some use. Palais:

> "[Pan'gye] found that industry and commerce were not evil, as some ideologues believed, but necessary for the production and circulation of items of utility among the population. It was just that they were secondary to agricultural production and had to be limited lest the attractiveness of profit lured too many

[42] Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*, p. 1012.
[43] Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*, p. 1012.
[44] Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*, p. 1013.

> peasants from the primary occupation of agricultural production."'[44]

Of course, Pan'gye was unaware of the theories of Adam Smith (1723-1790). But there is no reason to think that Pan'gye was much lagging behind European contemporary thinking. In the seventeenth century there was as yet no science of economics to speak of. In the eighteenth century the Frenchman François Quesnay (1694-1774) with his *Tableau économique* ("Chart of the Economy,"' published in 1758) advanced ideas that put the science of economics for the first time on an academic footing, becoming the center of the movement of the Physiocrats, who asserted the primacy of agriculture. In this work Quesnay demonstrated the circulation and recreation of capital, focusing on the crucial role of agriculture. About the *Tableau économique* a fellow Physiocrat and dedicated follower of Quesnay, the successful writer Mirabeau (1715–1789), wrote:[45]

> "The *Tableau économique* is the first mathematical law that has been devised in accordance with fundamental principles and in perpetual fulfillment of God's dictum "you will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow"' and expressed through exact and precise calculations.... Calculation is to the science of economics what bones are to the human body."'

Quesnay claimed that he had discovered certain natural laws, laws that, so he argued in his *Despotisme de la Chine* ("The Despotism of China,"' a prominent example of eighteenth-century European praise of China, in spite of the title[46]), the Chinese had recognized at an early date, before other nations.[47]

The rise of economists who stressed the importance of the market or labor has eclipsed the reputation of the Physiocrats, who held that agricultural land was the crucial factor, but during his lifetime Quesnay's ideas were welcomed by many and he contributed to articles on the economy in the famous *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert, the flagship of the Enlightenment. Adam Smith turned against Quesnay's idea that agriculture is the foundation of the economy, but in other respects took his work quite seriously.[48] In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx still praised Quesnay's early understanding of the role of agricultural laborers as producers of surplus-value.[49] Generally the Physiocrats devoted great attention to the question how taxes from agricultural profits should be made to contribute to the prosperity of the state, a topic of equal interest to Pan'gye and other thinkers about Confucian statecraft. A divergence in their thinking is noticeable where the mathematical approach of Quesnay is concerned, but fundamentally they would agree on many points. The Physiocrats would, however, mainly regard the role of land owners as crucial intermediaries between the government and agricultural workers and were not interested in putting an end to private ownership of land and allotting a plot to work to actual cultivators as Pan'gye proposed. This reflected different conditions and traditions rather than being related to more or less advanced forms of the economy.

Conclusions

The limited sample of West-European thinkers I have confronted, albeit superficially, with Pan'gye's work suggests that Pan'gye was to a rather unexpected de-

[45]Liana Vardi, *The Physiocrats and the World of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge 2012), pp. 53–54; the quoted text is her translation from Mirabeau's *Philosophie rurale ou Economie générale de L'agriculture*, pp. xix–xx.

[46]This has been translated in full in Lewis A. Maverick, *China. A Model for Europe* (San Antonio, 1946), pp. 112–304. Quesnay thought that Chinese despotism was guided by "wise and irrevocable laws which the emperor enforces and which he carefully observes himself"' and therefore was to be favorably regarded; Maverick, *China*, pp. 141–42.

[47]Vardi, *The Physiocrats and the World of the Enlightenment*, p. 130.

[48]Toni Vogel Carey, "What Did Adam Smith Learn from François Quesnay?," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 18.2 (2020), pp. 175-191. This article concludes with the words "Smith was praising Quesnay's work as methodologically 'the nearest approximation to the truth that has yet been published upon the subject of political economy'."

[49]Vardi, *The Physiocrats and the World of the Enlightenment*, p. 12.

gree in tune with developments in Europe that in their totality have received the label of "Enlightenment," the trend in intellectual history that according to Jonathan Israel in its most radical form was initiated by Benedictus de Spinoza. The limitations of Pan'gye's work pointed out by James Palais seem more to be defined by norms and standards that are characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth century than by those of Pan'gye's European contemporaries and eighteenth-century thinkers. This is of course not to say that Pan'gye was in all respects in accord with the thinkers we have mentioned. For that the political and social context was too different. Enlightenment thinkers had to contend with powerful church organizations that, often in concert with authoritarian secular power, tried to constrain free thought and tended to be intolerant of criticisms of their orthodoxy. Religiously, European countries were generally divided, which often led to conflicts. Therefore, the advocacy of toleration and free speech was an import element in the thought of Enlightenment thinkers. Another characteristic of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European intellectuals was that they were not constrained by boundaries between the humanities, including theology, and the natural sciences, which hardened from the nineteenth century onward. Isaac Vossius was a philologist who besides his writing on China also wrote about biblical chronology, on winds and tides, the source of the Nile, and the origin of light, while he made observations with the microscope and telescope, the latter of which enabled him to describe the mountains on the moon.[50] For a similar breadth of learning in Korea we have to look to Tasan rather than to Pan'gye. But this does not distract from the value of Pan'gye's proposals, wide-ranging in their own way, which I have suggested, would quite likely have been regarded positively by the thinkers of the early European Enlightenment. In the final analysis, however, that fact may be thought of as of minor importance. Pan'gye's policy proposals should not be judged by any extraneous, for instance Western, yardstick (including that of "modernity"), but on their merits for improving the conditions of Chosŏn Korea, the aim he had set for himself. An aim, we might add, which Spinoza would have heartily applauded.

[50] Erik Jorink & Dirk van Miert, "Introduction. The Challenger, Isaac Vossius and the European World of Learning," in *Isaac Vossius (1618–1689), Between Science and Scholarship*, p. 2.