In 1392, Korea saw the Goryeo dynasty fall to the hands of the powerful general Yi Seonggye, who created a new dynasty that ruled over Korea for over four centuries. Named after a Chinese phrase for an ancient Korean state, the Joseon dynasty followed the ideas of Confucianism to create their system of government. Government office was mainly comprised of the elite Yangban class, who were best able to afford the education required for passing these exams (Ebrey 247). In order to learn about the past civilizations, one of the things examined are primary sources. Primary sources give a direct link to the time period in question and are the closest historians can get to the past without being there. The *Sourcebook for Korean Civilization* contains Joseon primary source documents from King Sejong, Chong Inji, and Ch’oe Malli. These texts show us that the society of Joseon Korea valued education and shared similarities with China in its adoption of Confucian philosophy while the yangban elite used the ideas of Confucianism and education to maintain their power.

The society of Joseon Korea had deep respect for the China and shared many similarities with Chinese culture. In Chong Inji’s passage, “Postscript to Hunmin chongun,” he mentions that the Joseon people share many cultural similarities with China; which can be seen in their rituals, music, and literature; even though their language is different (517). Joseon Korea also implicated the Chinese system of government into its own. In Ch’oe Malli’s passage, “Opposition to the Korean Alphabet,” he talks about how the Joseon dynasty closely followed
the Chinese system of government and he even referred to China as the “Senior State” (519). This can be seen in many things such as requiring exams for government positions and the central government choosing magistrates for all local districts (Ebrey 250).

The Joseon dynasty’s similarities with the Chinese stemmed from Confucianism. They considered Confucianism as the only way to be civilized and considered ancient China as a true representation of Confucian civilization. In Chong Malli’s passage, he said “It has been said that the barbarians are transformed only by means of adopting the Chinese ways; we have never heard of the Chinese ways being transformed by the barbarians” (519). In this passage, Ch’oe Malli said that he feared moving away from the Chinese script could distance Joseon society from Confucianism. Ancient China was considered a model Confucian society and he claimed that furthering Joseon Korea from its Chinese ties would be like voluntarily “being reduced to the status of barbarians” (520). Although Joseon society had many similarities to the Chinese, many Joseon Confucians considered themselves to be a better representation of Confucianism than Ming China during this time. They believed that they followed a better representation of Confucianism that better adhered to the classics (Ebrey 250).

The primary source documents also show how the Joseon state of Korea highly valued education. In 1446, the fourth king of the Joseon dynasty created the Korean alphabet, known today as hangul. Before this, Korea used a system of Chinese graphs for writing. Since the Korean language was different than Chinese, this created many problems (516). This new Korean script was simple and easy to learn. Chong Inji, a government scholar who helped create the new language said “With these twenty-eight letters, infinite turns and changes may be explained; they are simple yet contain all the essence; they are refined yet communicable. Therefore, a clever man can learn them in one morning while a dull man may take ten days to
study them.” King Sejong created this alphabet for the purpose of spreading knowledge and making education more accessible. When he created the new script, he wrote a preface explaining his motivation for why he created it. In this preface he said “The sounds of our language differ from those of Chinee and are not easily communicated using Chinese graphs. Many among the ignorant, therefore, thought they wish to express their sentiments in writing, have been unable to communicate. Considering this situation with compassion, I have newly devised twenty-eight letters” (516).

This idea of spreading education is related to the Joseon dynasty’s promotion of Confucianism. In order to be civilized, one must be highly knowledgeable in Confucian values. This could only be achieved through education (521). The Joseon dynasty created local schools in each county and created a National academy in the capital of Seoul for the purpose of promoting education (521). These schools became a place that trained future government officials. One of the dynasty’s most notable achievements in education came from King Sejong. He created the “Hall of Worthies” which was where scholars collected literary documents and books (Ebrey 248). Although the Joseon dynasty promoted education and Confucianism, the yangban elite used Confucian values and education to hold maintain their power.

The Joseon dynasty created a system of government officials who were well versed in Confucian ideology and Confucian classics. Government officials gained office by taking exams, testing their knowledge on Confucian classics and history. The purpose of these exams was to abolish the hereditary system of government officials and create a government of scholars, well educated in the Confucian way. These scholars were supposed to guide the king to moral perfection (Ebrey 250). Most of these scholars, however, came from the elite yangban families. These yangban families were well established and had a lot of prestige. Even though government
positions weren’t exclusive to this class of people, these yangban families had the financial means to best afford education (Ebrey 250). This gave the yangban elite an exclusive hold on knowledge which helped them maintain their power. These government officials played an important role in checking the power of the king. According to the Confucian idea of filial piety, government officials were supposed to be loyal to their monarch; however, these Confucian scholars made many government decisions in the name of morally guiding the king, even though they often acted in their self-interest (Ebrey 250).

When King Sejong created the Korean alphabet, the elite yangban class realized that this could potentially weaken their power and almost exclusive access to knowledge; therefore, yangban officials opposed this new script. Ch’oe Malli was the leader of a group of scholar officials who were against the creation of this new alphabet (519). On the behalf of the group of scholars, he wrote a rational explaining the reasoning behind their opposition. In the document, he talked about how the creation of the new script disrespected the Chinese and would lead to the decline of Confucianism (519-520). Although the points he made do have some validity, his opposition to this language is clearly guided by self-interest. His role as the leader of a group of scholars reduces the legitimacy of his argument. The creation of a new script would make access to education easier; therefore, it could reduce the power of the people he is representing. These yangban officials were accustomed to their monopoly in government and they feared that the new script could break it.

In conclusion, the society of Joseon Korea was one that highly valued education and followed Confucian philosophy. It also had many similarities with China, seen in the adoption of Confucianism in their government and culture. Even though Joseon Korea highly valued education and Confucianism, the yangban class, which made up most of the government
officials, used these ideas to maintain their power in government. With the use of primary source
documents written by a Joseon king and government officials, we were able learn a lot about the
society of Joseon Korea. These documents, however, were all written by government officials
which gives a single view into Joseon society. By examining more primary sources through the
perspective of different people during this time period, we can get a better look at the way the
people of Joseon Korea lived.
Works Cited
