

World Knowledge Forum 2012

Dr. Oaksook Chun Kim: "Honest to Humanity: T'oegyehak and Creative Leadership"

The afternoon session of the opening day of the 13th World Knowledge Forum in Seoul began with a talk on the life of Korean Confucian scholar Yi T'oegye and the relevance of T'oegye's scholarship and values to the challenges facing the world today. The talk was delivered by Dr. Oaksook Chun Kim, an accomplished scholar in Confucian philosophy and former Bunting Institute Fellow at Harvard University, and mother of World Bank president Jim Yong Kim.

Dr. Kim began by saying that T'oegye's life and scholarship showed that "honest intellectual inquiry can make the ultimate difference in determining the welfare of entire societies."

After briefly outlining T'oegye's early life and meteoric rise as a preeminent scholar in the royal court, Dr. Kim focused on the 1,500-plus letters written by T'oegye, which provide an authentic account of Confucian studies and thus comprise an essential part of the literature in the field.

"The reason that these letters are so important is that T'oegye was not interested in writing any kind of philosophical theory; instead, the letters convey a compelling sense of moral urgency. According to T'oegye, intellectual veracity in Confucian scholarship signifies moral implications beyond the individual scholars' questions or philosophy," said Dr. Kim.

Dr. Kim explained that unlike Western philosophers who dwell on metaphysical or ontological questions such as the extent, limit, and nature of knowledge itself, T'oegye does not question whether man can know. She said, "Can man really know? Those questions do not occur in Confucian philosophy. In Confucian tradition, knowing activity is natural as well as innate to man and his humanity. To be human is to have the capacity and desire to inquire." In other words, Dr. Kim continued, humanity is defined as the intellectual inquiries and cognitive activities humans use to grasp one's daily encounters.

"T'oegye reaffirmed the Confucian maxim which predicates that humanity consists of the inherent goodness and virtue seen in every human being. In Confucian philosophy, the original endowment of human nature and the human mind is defined in terms of the Four Cardinal Virtues [prudence, justice, temperance/restraint, and fortitude/courage]. T'oegye's moral philosophy challenges present-day intellectuals who must embrace humanity and social justice in the world as their own moral responsibility," said Dr. Kim.

Noting that Confucian scholars who fell out of favor with the government were often exiled or put to death, T'oegye's decision to resign from all government posts reflects his moral convictions as well as his intellectual persuasions.

Dr. Kim noted that many histories, as far as we know, continue to be taught in a way that promotes all human aspects through the narrative of privileged elites, disregarding all those who are isolated. Claiming that questions of moral justice are essential to the understanding of the philosophy of Yi T'oegye, she ended her talk with a single thought. "When a person doesn't do anything about the misery of others," she said, "everyone is dehumanized."