

Min Je-in's Dongmong Seunseup: Educational philosophy and modern applicability of Joseon dynasty's first children's character education textbook

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Abstract: Dongmong Seunseup is a textbook authored by the Confucian scholar Min Je-in in 1543 during the mid-Joseon Dynasty period. It is the world's first systematic textbook for children's character education, notably produced 115 years before the writings of the Western modern educationist Comenius. The textbook integrates moral and historical instruction by grounding its curriculum in the core Confucian principles of filial piety and the five virtues (ruler–subject, father–son, husband–wife, elder–younger, and friend–friend), thereby fostering the development of morally upright individuals. This study re-examines Min Je-in's life and educational philosophy from a contemporary perspective, providing a detailed analysis of the role Dongmong Seunseup played as an ideal model for both home and school education amid the moral confusion and political instability of its time. Furthermore, given the current decline in character education, the study shows how the educational philosophy of Dongmong Seunseup may contribute to moral restoration and stronger community consciousness, thereby presenting a modern reinterpretation and practical applicability of this traditional educational heritage. Educational policymakers and teachers should explore the contemporary applicability of Dongmong Seunseup and develop its insights into concrete educational programs.

Keywords: Character education, Confucian values, Dongmong Seunseup, Five virtues, Min Je-in.

1. Introduction

Dongmong Seunseup is a seminal textbook on character education for children, composed in 1543 by the Neo-Confucian scholar Min Je-in during the mid-Joseon Dynasty period [1-7]. The text was designed to not only instruct young learners in the ethical principle of filial piety and practice of the Five virtues but also convey the histories of both the Joseon Dynasty and China. Dongmong Seunseup reflects the prevailing educational philosophy and moral ideals of its era and is recognized as the first systematic educational text for children [8]. Remarkably, it anticipated educational methodologies similar to those later proposed by Comenius by approximately 115 years, thereby positioning itself as a pioneering work in the realm of character education [9].

This study aims to analyze the educational philosophy inherent in Dongmong Seunseup and explore its applicability within contemporary educational contexts. Written against the backdrop of social turmoil and political instability in the mid-Joseon Dynasty, Min Je-in's work was a deliberate effort to remedy moral disarray by instilling ethical values and social responsibility in the younger generation [3]. The text goes beyond merely providing theoretical moral instruction and emphasizes the importance of forming a robust historical identity and fostering practical moral virtues, thereby nurturing well-rounded, ethically grounded individuals [4, 6].

In modern society, where issues such as moral laxity and a weakening sense of community are increasingly prevalent, Dongmong Seunseup is being revisited as a potentially significant educational alternative. This study aims to analyze the educational philosophy inherent in Dongmong Seunseup and explore its potential application in contemporary moral and character education. While previous research has primarily focused on the ideological background and historical context of Dongmong Seunseup, systematic studies examining it from a modern educational perspective remain limited. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to the text's role not only as a moral primer but also as a foundational work in practical moral education, as well as the possibility of reconstructing its educational methodology in a contemporary context.

This study seeks to fill this research gap by conducting a detailed analysis of how the ethical principles presented in Dongmong Seunseup can be utilized as a practical educational model in modern society. By doing so, it aims to provide insights into how Confucian values-based traditional education can contribute to contemporary moral and character education. Furthermore, this study endeavors to propose alternative approaches to address the ethical and social challenges faced by modern education.

1.1. Significance and Background of Dongmong Seunseup in the Joseon Dynasty Period

During the mid-Joseon Dynasty period, Confucianism served as the central governing ideology and formed the foundation of the educational system [5]. However, formal education was predominantly accessible to the aristocratic class, leaving commoners and children with minimal opportunities for systematic learning [2]. In response to these educational limitations, Min Je-in authored Dongmong Seunseup to democratize access to moral and historical knowledge [1-3].

The textbook systematically instructs children on the principles of filial piety by teaching the five virtues—ruler–subject, parent–child, husband–wife, elder sibling–younger sibling, and friend–friend—and provides an account of Korean and Chinese histories [5]. Its purpose extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge; it is aimed at cultivating moral character and fostering a sense of historical identity among its young audience [2]. The creation of Dongmong Seunseup was deeply influenced by the socio-political challenges of the time, marked by societal disarray and political uncertainty [1]. In this context, the work served as an instrument to restore social order by ensuring that future generations were raised with a strong ethical foundation.

By examining the convergence of Confucian values and historical education in Dongmong Seunseup, this study underscores its enduring relevance as an educational resource [10]. It argues that the text's integrated approach not only mirrors the educational aspirations of the Joseon-Dynasty period but also offers a viable framework for addressing the challenges of moral education in the modern era [11].

1.2. The Absence of Character Education Today and its Associated Social Issues

Modern society has achieved remarkable progress through advancements in science, technology, and economic prosperity. However, this progress has been accompanied by various social challenges stemming from the erosion of moral values and a deficiency in character education. The competitive societal structure and prevalent materialism encourage individualism and selfishness, which in turn weakens communal bonds. Often, these issues can be traced back to the lack of systematic education in ethical judgment and moral values during adolescence [8].

A particularly pressing concern is the inadequate emphasis on character education both at home and in educational institutions. Many parents tend to prioritize their children's academic success, while schools concentrate predominantly on exam-oriented curricula, thereby neglecting the development of moral values and character. Consequently, adolescents frequently transition into adulthood without a deep understanding of life's fundamental values and ethical standards.

In this context, Dongmong Seunseup has emerged as a significant alternative for addressing the moral crisis in contemporary society. Rooted in traditional Confucian values, Dongmong Seunseup presents a framework for character education that promotes both individual ethical growth and the

attainment of social harmony [7].

2. Research Methodology

This study conducts an in-depth analysis of the educational philosophy and structure presented in Dongmong Seunseup by examining both the original text and its various commentaries. The analysis aims to uncover Min Je-in's underlying intentions and discuss the potential applicability of Dongmong Seunseup in contemporary educational settings. Furthermore, the study investigates how the educational content of Dongmong Seunseup might contribute to resolving ethical issues prevalent in modern society.

Through a systematic literature review, the study identifies the core elements of Confucian moral education embedded within Dongmong Seunseup and offers a re-interpretation of these elements from a modern perspective [9]. In particular, the study outlines specific proposals for how Min Je-in's educational philosophy—centered on filial piety and the five virtues—can be practically implemented within both family and school environments today. This approach ultimately seeks to explore the significance and potential impact of Dongmong Seunseup in the context of modern education [7].

2.1. Analysis of the Educational Philosophy and Structure of Dongmong Seunseup through a Literature Review

The text in Dongmong Seunseup systematically imparts lessons on interpersonal relationships and social ethics by centering on the principles of filial piety and the five virtues [10]. The initial section of the work is dedicated to the discussion of Confucian moral norms, wherein the author elucidates the moral duties inherent in human interactions and clearly delineates the ethical standards that ought to be observed in various relational contexts. In contrast, the latter section offers a condensed narration of the histories of the Joseon Dynasty and China, thereby fulfilling a dual role as both a moral and historical educational text [3, 7, 9].

Through the narrative of historical events and significant figures, the latter part of the text is designed to foster a sense of historical identity and pride among young readers. Notably, Min Je-in, the author, sought not merely to transmit abstract moral guidelines but to anchor these ideals in practical, actionable behavior. For example, filial piety is portrayed not simply as the unthinking obedience of children toward their parents but as a fundamental moral principle that underpins and sustains both the family unit and the broader community. This educational philosophy was instrumental in overcoming the limitations of the contemporary educational system, thereby contributing substantively to the moral development of its young audience.

2.2. Modern Implications of Min Je-in's Life and Literary Intentions

Min je-in, a Confucian scholar and politician of the mid-Joseon Dynasty, exemplified the motivations behind the composition of Dongmong Seunseup [4, 7]. Educated from an early age under the tutelage of the Confucian scholar *Kim Gwangpil*, he developed a practical approach to learning. His academic foundation was not merely an accumulation of knowledge; rather, it was oriented toward applying that knowledge in everyday life. Min je-in believed that education should contribute to not only individual cultivation but also the establishment of social order and formation of a moral community. This conviction ultimately led to the creation of Dongmong Seunseup.

In the educational context of the Joseon-Dynasty period, both Confucian morality and historical education were highly valued. The Joseon Dynasty adopted Neo-Confucianism as its state ideology, emphasizing ethics grounded in filial piety. In this milieu, systematic and practical education was deemed essential to harmonize the family and society and maintain social stability. Dongmong Seunseup was crafted to fulfill these needs by promoting family and social order through the values of filial piety and the five virtues. Its content was especially tailored for children who had completed their initial literacy education, thereby aiding them in internalizing Confucian values.

The educational structure of Dongmong Seunseup is divided into two parts [7, 8]. The first part elucidates Confucian morals regarding interpersonal relationships and social ethics, emphasizing the

practical values of the five virtues (including the relationships between ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, elder and younger, and friends). For instance, the parent–child relationship is portrayed as one of mutual respect and love, while the ruler–subject relationship is depicted as being based on trust and responsibility—relations that form the foundation of a moral society. The second part provides a concise narrative of the histories of the Joseon Dynasty and China, designed to enable children to derive moral lessons from historical events. Notably, the historical account begins with the myth of Dangun and proceeds to the founding of the Joseon Dynasty, thereby instilling a sense of national identity and pride in young readers.

Min Hyun-gu [10] educational philosophy emphasizes the formation of moral individuals through the principles of filial piety and the five virtues. He regarded filial piety as the fundamental principle of human relationships, believing that it could foster social stability and communal harmony [3]. In *Dongmong Seunseup*, filial piety is stressed not merely as an ethical teaching but as a practical virtue. The instances in which his grandchildren and descendants were commended for their filial conduct serve as evidence of the work's educational impact. Moreover, as a caring and gentle educator, Min Je-in was dedicated to helping children understand and internalize moral values—a commitment clearly reflected in the warm lessons embedded in *Dongmong Seunseup*.

During the Joseon Dynasty, his writings did not limit themselves to simple moral instruction; they represented a new attempt to combine historical education with ethical training. *Dongmong Seunseup* taught children about their roots and identity through a historical narrative that spans from the Dangun myth to the founding of the Joseon Dynasty. This approach was not merely about learning about the past; it also aimed to provide moral and historical guidance for the present and future. In particular, the narrative style—crafted to be easily and clearly understood by children—maximized the effectiveness of *Dongmong Seunseup* as an educational text.

In modern times, *Dongmong Seunseup* still holds significant value as a resource for character education. Today's education system, being overly focused on knowledge, has led to a weakening of character education. This imbalance can result in moral laxity and a diminished sense of community, which in turn exacerbates social conflicts. *Dongmong Seunseup* offers an important resource for addressing these issues by linking traditional values with modern needs and teaching both morality and historical identity. It can be used at home as a tool for communication and moral instruction between parents and children and in schools to effectively integrate traditional ethics into modern curricula.

Notably, the potential for utilizing *Dongmong Seunseup* in both home and school settings underscores the importance of character education. At home, parents and children can practice the values of filial piety and five virtues together, thereby achieving intergenerational harmony and mutual respect. In schools, the text can serve as a tool to help students understand traditional ethics and apply them to solving contemporary problems. For example, project-based learning centered on *Dongmong Seunseup* can cultivate historical thinking and moral judgment in students. Additionally, this textbook can contribute to re-interpreting traditional values within a modern context, particularly in a multicultural society [4, 7].

In conclusion, *Dongmong Seunseup* not only met the educational needs of the Joseon-Dynasty era but also continues to offer meaningful lessons today. It plays a vital role in fostering moral development and social responsibility, acting as a bridge between tradition and modernity in both home and school education. Beyond its historical significance, *Dongmong Seunseup* continues to shine as an educational resource for the moral rejuvenation of contemporary society.

This textbook is not merely a relic of the past; it can also help address the complex challenges of modern society. If home and school education collaborate to re-interpret and apply the teachings of *Dongmong Seunseup*, this will strengthen the moral foundation for new generations and contribute to social harmony. The moral principles and historical lessons presented in *Dongmong Seunseup* have the potential to transcend time and become universal values for humanity.

Min Je-in was a practical scholar in Korea during the mid-Joseon Dynasty. Amid a turbulent social landscape, he strove to realize a humane existence and a morally robust society. Beyond the mere

instruction of Confucian values, he endeavored to stabilize both family and society through his educational initiatives. His pedagogical philosophy emphasizes the cultivation of moral character and social responsibility, aiming to translate these ideals into practical action.

In contemporary education, renewed attention is being directed toward Dongmong Seunseup because it encapsulates the essential values of moral development and social harmony. Rather than being dismissed as an outdated relic, the teachings of Dongmong Seunseup should be re-interpreted as a valuable educational resource capable of addressing modern ethical challenges.

Ultimately, Dongmong Seunseup is not merely a traditional textbook but a vital resource that offers solutions to contemporary educational challenges and merits transmission to future generations [6-8].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Min Je-in's "Dongmong Sunsup": Educational Ideology and Possibilities for Modern Application

3.1.1. Educational Ideology and its Historical Context

Dongmong Seunseup is a textbook written by Min Hyun-gu [10] in 1543, emerging amid the social turmoil and political instability of the mid-Joseon Dynasty. During the Joseon Dynasty, when Confucianism was adopted as the state ideology, establishing social order based on morality and ethics was strongly emphasized. However, education at the time was primarily directed toward the aristocratic class, leaving commoners and children largely excluded from systematic learning. In response to this situation, Min Hyun-gu [10] authored a structured educational book aimed at children, focusing on the instruction of Confucian morals and history.

The work stresses the importance of moral principles and ethical behavior for children. It centers its teachings on filial piety and the five virtues, aiming to foster social stability and harmony within families. Additionally, the book outlines the histories of both the Joseon Dynasty and China, guiding children to understand their historical roots and identity so that they may grow into moral leaders in the future.

3.1.2. Educational Structure and Significance of "Dongmong Sunsup"

Dongmong Seunseup is organized around two main components: ethical/moral education and history education. The ethical/moral education portion emphasizes responsibilities and proper conduct in interpersonal relationships by detailing the practical application of the five virtues—between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger, and between friends—which were considered essential ethical principles for ensuring the stability of both the family and the state in the Joseon Dynasty society [9, 11, 12].

From the perspective of history education, the text provides a concise account of major events and figures from the myth of Dangun to the founding of the Joseon Dynasty. This approach enabled children to not only learn historical facts but also draw moral lessons from history. Thus, the structure of the work extends beyond mere knowledge transmission, linking learning to the practice of ethical behavior.

The originality of Dongmong Seunseup lies in its fusion of Confucian values with historical lessons, serving as a moral guide for Joseon-Dynasty society. This book became a standard for children's education and had a profound influence on the subsequent educational system.

3.1.3. Modern Implications and Educational Applications

In modern society, Dongmong Seunseup is attracting attention as an important alternative to address issues such as moral laxity and the weakening of community spirit. Amid advancements in science and technology and in an era of material abundance, the decline in ethical standards and character education has led to an intensification of social conflicts and individualism. In addressing these contemporary challenges, the educational philosophy of Dongmong Seunseup can serve as a valuable resource [13].

3.1.4. *The Role in Family Education*

The home is the first space where children begin their character education. Dongmong Seunseup can be used as a textbook that enables both parents and children to study together and internalize the values of filial piety and the five virtues. Through this book, parents can practice moral teachings in their interactions with their children, while children learn the values of responsibility and respect within the family. For example, lessons on how to practice filial piety or the emphasis on sibling bonds deliver educational messages that remain relevant in modern families [14].

3.1.5. *Use in School Education*

In schools, Dongmong Seunseup can be employed as a textbook for character education. Teachers can design lessons based on its content that emphasize moral judgment and ethical behavior. For instance, through PBL, students can analyze the choices and actions of historical figures, and based on this analysis, make their own moral decisions. This learning process can cultivate critical thinking and a sense of moral responsibility among students [15-17].

Furthermore, the historical educational aspects of Dongmong Seunseup can contribute to fostering identity and self-esteem in modern society. In our globalized world, understanding one's own history and culture is crucial, and this text serves as a valuable resource for that purpose.

3.1.6. *Social Ethics Education*

The teachings of Dongmong Seunseup can extend beyond the school and home and also apply to social-ethics education. For example, companies or public institutions could design educational programs based on the book to emphasize ethical leadership and a sense of responsibility. Such initiatives can promote moral leadership and ethical decision-making, thereby strengthening trust and accountability within organizations.

3.1.7. *Sustainable Values and Modern Reinterpretation*

Dongmong Seunseup embodies universal values that stress the development of ethical individuals and social harmony. However, it is necessary to re-interpret and supplement this text from a modern perspective. For instance, while the Confucian values of the time did not adequately reflect the status of women or individual freedoms, these aspects should be critically re-examined today. Thus, the teachings of Dongmong Seunseup can evolve to better reflect the diversity and equality of modern society [16, 18].

4. Conclusion

4.1. *Min Je-in's Dongmong Seunseup and its Contemporary Applicability*

4.1.1. *The Educational Philosophy and Historical Significance of Dongmong Seunseup*

Min Je-in's Dongmong Seunseup was developed as a systematic educational text for children's character formation during the turbulent mid-Joseon Dynasty period. By fusing Confucian ethics with historical education, it aimed to cultivate moral individuals and establish social order. The text not only supported children's learning but also taught the practical values of the five virtues—centered on filial piety—thereby contributing to the stable order of both family and society. Notably, its historical narrative, which spans from the myth of Dangun to the founding of Joseon Dynasty, played a significant role in instilling a sense of national identity and pride in young readers.

Dongmong Seunseup not only met the ethical and educational needs of its time but also became the standard in Joseon-Dynasty education, exerting a long-lasting influence. It is recognized as the first attempt to merge ethics and history in children's education, reflecting Min Je-in's pragmatic scholarly perspective. The integration of Confucian morality with historical education presents a new alternative for modern character development. If its teachings are applied in families, schools, and society, they can contribute to moral restoration and social cohesion.

Dongmong Seunseup is not merely a relic of the past; it is a living educational legacy capable of

addressing the complex challenges of modern society. Should families and schools collaborate to re-interpret and implement its teachings, they would reinforce the moral foundation for new generations and play a vital role in fostering social harmony. Min Je-in's work embodies universal values that transcend time by teaching ethical character formation and social responsibility—values that should be appropriately integrated into contemporary education and society.

4.1.2. Modern Applicability

Modern society faces issues such as moral laxity and a weakened sense of community owing to a lack of character education. These challenges indicate a need to redefine the fundamental goals of education and re-interpret traditional values in a modern context. Dongmong Seunseup can be applied in modern education in the following ways.

5. Final Discussion

Dongmang Seunseup is an important work that not only met the moral demands of mid-Joseon Dynasty society but also continues to be reappraised for its educational value today. This book should not be regarded merely as a relic of the past; rather, it ought to be re-interpreted as an educational resource for moral revitalization and communal harmony in modern society. If the teachings of Dongmang Seunseup are integrated into homes, schools, and society at large, they can simultaneously foster individual ethical development and a sense of social responsibility.

Moreover, educational policymakers and teachers should explore the contemporary applicability of Dongmang Seunseup and develop its insights into concrete educational programs. A modern character-education program based on this work would contribute to nurturing ethical leadership and the capacity to make moral decisions among young people.

In conclusion, Min Je-in's Dongmang Seunseup possesses a timeless, universal value in teaching the formation of ethical individuals and social responsibility. This value should be re-interpreted within the framework of modern education and society, thereby offering a sustainable moral foundation for future generations. The teachings of Dongmang Seunseup serve as a bridge connecting tradition and modernity, playing a pivotal role in addressing the ethical challenges and conflicts faced by Korean education and society.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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