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## INTRODUCTION

This work is designed to provide substantial, accurate, and philosophically astute translations of representative works from the writings of eight of the most important and influential Korean Confucian thinkers in the premodern period. This Introduction offers brief sketches of each thinker, his place within the tradition, and his most important contributions; every selection is preceded by a short introduction describing its general content. A comprehensive Bibliography, containing works consulted and suggested further readings in English, is also included. The volume is intended to be used to teach at the undergraduate or graduate level or as a resource for those interested in researching or simply gaining a better understanding of Korean Confucian philosophy. This is not a survey or sourcebook;<sup>1</sup> it does not aim to provide a general survey of Korean philosophy's entire history, range, or depth: it is focused on Confucianism and is selective in the thinkers it presents. Unlike most surveys or sourcebooks, all the translations included in this volume are complete works<sup>2</sup> and all are annotated, with the aim of making them intelligible and accessible to nonspecialist readers who seek to grasp them as freestanding compositions.

We have chosen to present the writings of eight authors, arranged into four groups of two each. The first three groups represent three different stages or phases in the development of the Korean Confucian tradition, defined roughly by chronology but also, and even more importantly, by theme; each of these pairs of thinkers explored sets of issues that naturally constitute clusters or collections and that subsequently had profound and enduring influences on the later tradition. The philosophers in the first three groups played different roles in establishing, solidifying, and settling the core tenets, aims, and approaches of what became orthodox Korean Confucianism. Our selection of works for each thinker in these first three groups aims, on the one hand, to identify and represent the most critical issues they explored and, on the other, to provide readers with a sense of each author's overall philosophy and style. In some cases, we have not

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1. For a sourcebook on Korean thought, see Peter H. Lee and Wm. Theodore de Bary, eds., *Sources of Korean Tradition*, vol. 1: *From Early Times Through the Sixteenth Century* (Columbia University Press, 1997); and Yongho Ch'oe, Peter H. Lee, and Wm. Theodore de Bary, eds., *Sources of Korean Tradition*, vol. 2: *From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Columbia University Press, 2000).

2. The only qualified exception is that we have translated only parts of Jeong Yakyong's *Essential Meaning of the Mencius* (*Maengja youi* 孟子要義), which is found within the *Complete Works of Yeoyudang* (定本) 與猶堂全書 Database of the Korean Classics (Hanguk Gojeon Jonghap 韓國古典綜合 DB), <http://db.itkc.or.kr/>. In making our selections, we focused on those passages that concern many of his central philosophical claims. We believe this to be warranted in light of both the aims of this volume and Jeong's own example; he too was selective and only commented on a subset of the passages found in the *Mencius*. Though selective in the passages chosen, we offer complete translations of each passage included so that readers can gain an accurate, clear, and vivid sense of Jeong's views on these critical parts of the *Mencius*.

included particular works either because the work in question was too long for our chosen format or because there are excellent English translations already available. In such cases, we note such important works, and where there are already existing translations, we direct readers to them. The fourth group of two thinkers contains philosophers who, in very different ways, challenged the dominant, orthodox view of Confucianism that had been forged in the previous three-hundred-odd years that are covered by the six thinkers in the first three groups. Not only does the work of these final two thinkers represent sophisticated and powerful alternatives, which are interesting in their own right, to the reigning Jeong-Ju (C. Cheng-Zhu) 程朱 orthodoxy, but this also marks the first time that Korean Confucian thinkers began to draw upon alternative sources—both from China and the West—to craft distinctive, competing philosophical visions. In so doing, this also presages the dawning of the modern period of Korean Confucian philosophy—a stage in the tradition that remains vital and continues to develop in our own time. We have assigned titles to each of the four groups discussed above that aim to convey the general themes and tenor of each pair of thinkers.

Neo-Confucianism came to Korea with the introduction of the writings of Ju Hui (C. Zhu Xi) 朱熹 (1130–1200 CE). An Hyang 安珦 (1243–1306 CE) made and brought back to Korea a handwritten copy of *The Complete Works of Master Ju* (*Juja jeonseo*; C. *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書), along with portraits of Gongja (C. Kongzi) 孔子 and Ju Hui, after he read Ju's works while serving at the (Mongol) court of the Won (C. Yuan 元) dynasty (1271–1368 CE), as a member of the Goryeo 高麗 (918–1392 CE) embassy. An was “a transmitter and not a maker”;<sup>3</sup> he served as an avid and effective advocate of Ju's ideas and of neo-Confucianism more generally but did not develop what he passed on nor contribute new ideas of his own. The work of disseminating, promoting, and developing Confucianism philosophically was carried forth by later scholars such as “Poemun” Jeong Mongju 圃隱 鄭夢周 (1337–1392 CE), who, we are told, did contribute novel insights regarding neo-Confucian metaphysics. Unfortunately, his works are now lost and all we have are reports about his philosophical ideas. The two first and most influential thinkers who not only advocated and promoted but also developed and extended the Korean Confucian tradition and who are widely recognized as pioneers in this effort make up our first group, *Establishing the Foundation*: “Sambong” Jeong Dojeon 三峰 鄭道傳 (1337–1398 CE) and “Yangchon” Gwon Geun 陽村 權近 (1352–1409 CE).<sup>4</sup> Jeong Dojeon's life spanned the Goryeo and Joseon 朝鮮 (1392–1910 CE) dynasties.<sup>5</sup> When King

3. See *Analects* (*Noneo*; C. *Lunyu* 論語) (Ctext.org) 7.1.

4. In this Introduction, we sketch some of the main features of the thought of the philosophers whose works are included in this volume. The short introductions that precede each translation at times augment what is said here, but readers are encouraged to rely on their own careful reading of the translations in order to get the best possible understanding of the works of these philosophers.

5. For a selective translation and study of Jeong Dojeon's works, see David M. Robinson, *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age: The Writings of Chŏng Tojŏn, a Korean Neo-Confucian* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

Taejo 太祖 Yi Seonggye 李成桂 (1335–1408; r. 1392–1398 CE) overthrew Goryeo and founded the Joseon dynasty, he appointed Jeong as Chief State Counselor (*Yeonguijeong* 領議政) of the new dynasty, a position that granted Jeong supreme civilian and military power. Jeong Dojeon used this position to build the ideological, institutional, and legal foundations of the Joseon dynasty, a base that would serve the dynasty well for some five centuries.

Jeong Dojeon instituted a wave of reforms that changed Korea's form of government from feudalism to a highly centralized bureaucracy, based upon a code of ritual practices and legal norms that, from a functional point of view, set forth a constitution for the new state: a source that both established offices and endowed powers while at the same time limiting their extent and exercise. He moved the capital south, from Gaeseong 開城 to Hanyang 漢陽 (present-day Seoul); he also helped design the primary royal palace, Gyeongbokgung 景福宮, and decided the names of all the major structures within it. His "Naming Gyeongbok Palace,"<sup>6</sup> included in this volume, testifies to the vital role he played in such essential and foundational decisions. Of all his many activities, among the most important for our purposes is his work as a fierce critic of Buddhism and a major advocate of the Jeong-Ju school of Confucianism. These two, connected roles—as critic and advocate—largely defined his most important contributions to the developing tradition. As we shall see, these are activities he shared with the second member of the *Establishing the Foundation* group, which is the decisive reason for thinking of the two as natural partners who share a common cause.

Jeong Dojeon wrote a number of essays accusing Buddhism of being corrupt, decadent, self-centered, and lacking in worldly concern. The most famous of these is his "Various Refutations of the Buddha" (*Bulssi Japbyeon* 佛氏雜辨).<sup>7</sup> Jeong also played a critical role in establishing Confucianism as the official ideology of the Joseon dynasty and helped to found and then taught at the royal Confucian academy, Sungkyunkwan 成均館, which continued as a leading educational institution throughout the imperial period and, in the present day, as Sungkyunkwan University.

As seen throughout the selections in this volume, Jeong's writings advocate a number of core ethical doctrines characteristic of the orthodox tradition, such as the goodness of human nature, the need for self-cultivation, and a distinctive approach to learning, consisting of classical study, reflection, and ritual practice. Such views are connected, in a systematic way, with the political ideas, going back to Maengja (C. Mengzi) 孟子, that the ruler exists to serve the people and that his legitimacy is grounded in his ability to cultivate himself and institute "humane government" (*in jeong*; C. *ren zheng* 仁政) throughout his realm. Indeed, Jeong Dojeon justified the overthrow of the previous, Goryeo dynasty by arguing that its rulers had failed

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6. The original version of this work does not have an independent title; we have provided a title that reflects its overall theme and content.

7. For a translation and study of this work in its historical context, see Charles A. Muller, *Korea's Great Buddhist-Confucian Debate: The Treatises of Chōng Tojōn (Sambong) and Hamhō Tūkt'ōng (Kihwa)* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

to cultivate themselves and provide the people with a humane government, echoing arguments that hark back to the earliest stages of the Confucian tradition and the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven (*cheon myeong*; *C. tian ming* 天命).

Jeong Dojeon's institution-building work, including providing the intellectual foundations for the administrative changes that he implemented, was closely wedded to his articulation of the need for self-cultivation and the role of the king. Partly as a result of these overlapping endeavors but largely as a principled part of his philosophy, Jeong fought to make clear that the ruler was not an absolute monarch but part of a larger, rule-and-precedent-governed bureaucracy. This not only greatly curtailed imperial prerogatives but made explicit the supporting and guiding role of officials in the work of governing. Later in life, Jeong's commitment to this ideal was tested when he came into conflict with Yi Bangwon 李芳遠 (1367–1422 CE), the fifth son of King Taejo from the late first queen, Queen Sinui 神懿 (1337–1391 CE), who played a key role in helping his father establish the new dynasty. The conflict became irreconcilable when Jeong supported the appointment of Yi Bangseok 李芳碩 (1382–1398 CE), the youngest son born to Queen Sindeok 神德 (1356–1396 CE), the second queen, as the crown prince, bypassing age and merit. The controversy culminated in a coup d'état led by Yi to depose the two sons of the late Queen Sindeok—including the crown prince and the designated heir—in which Jeong Dojeon and his supporters were killed. Aghast at the fratricide and larger slaughter he had witnessed, King Taejo then abdicated. Yi Bangwon yielded the heirship to Yi Banggan 李芳果 (1357–1419 CE), the second son and the surviving eldest son of King Taejo, in accordance with primogeniture, who became the second king of Joseon, Jeongjong 定宗 (r. 1388–1340 CE). Yi Bangwon was appointed as the crown prince of Jeongjong who did not have a son with his queen, and eventually ascended the throne as King Taejong 太宗 (r. 1400–1418 CE), the third king of Joseon. In the aftermath of these unsavory events, Jeong Dojeon was posthumously vilified as a traitor to Goryeo, an official who had craved power, and a usurper of royal authority; nevertheless, his intellectual and institutional accomplishments established a foundation that remained strong and continued to support the Joseon dynasty throughout its long and glorious history, and his legacy eventually won him recognition and praise as one of Korea's greatest Confucian scholars.

The second thinker in our first group, “Yangchon” Gwon Geun 陽村 權近 (1352–1409 CE), also helped build the foundations of Korean Confucianism.<sup>8</sup> Like his contemporary Jeong Dojeon, Gwon's life and work spanned the end of the Goryeo and beginning of the Joseon dynasty, and he played a critical role in moving both the government and society away from the Buddhism that had dominated the prior dynasty and toward the Confucianism that grew to characterize the latter.

8. For an introduction to Gwon Geun's life and thought, see Michael C. Kalton, “The Writings of Kwon Kun: The Context and Shape of Early Yi Dynasty Neo-Confucianism,” in *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush (Columbia University Press, 1985).

Gwon Geun had a deep and direct appreciation of Chinese culture; he spent six years studying in China during the Won dynasty and passed the second and third levels of the Civil Service Examination (*gwageo*; C. *keju* 科舉) during his stay in China. After returning to Korea, he became embroiled in factional struggles, which in 1389 led to his banishment. He was soon acquitted, however, and returned from exile to his home village of Yangchon, the place that provided him with his pen name. Following the establishment of the new dynasty, its founder, King Taejo, sought talented men to staff his administration and succeeded in persuading Gwon Geun to return to government service. Initially, Gwon Geun faced opposition from members of a faction loyal to Jeong Dojeon, but when Jeong and many of his supporters were purged in the struggle over the role of the ruler and the issue of succession noted above, Gwon Geun rose to become the most powerful and influential scholar-official of his time.

Gwon Geun wrote a number of anti-Buddhist tracts, including a preface introducing and praising Jeong Dojeon's "Various Refutations of the Buddha." He also wrote an "Encomium to Master Sambong's Portrait," which acknowledges Jeong's great contributions to the effort to suppress Buddhism and promote Confucianism at the start of the Joseon and expresses Gwon Geun's admiration for his contemporary Jeong, with whom he shared so many goals and aspirations. The latter work is included in this volume.

Among Gwon Geun's greatest and most enduring achievements was the work he did introducing Ju Hui, and several of his writings became seminal texts for future Korean students and scholars. His most influential work in this regard is "Explanation of the Diagram of Entering into Learning" (*Iphak doseol* 入學圖說), which is included in this volume. This work began to take shape during his early exile; he wrote it in 1390, as a collective response to questions brought to him by a number of students. The clear structure, lucid exposition, and diagrammatic presentation of this work led to it quickly becoming an enduring and classic source for those beginning to study the tradition. Gwon Geun was a prolific writer and wrote commentaries on a range of classical texts. Unfortunately, many of these are now lost. However, his *Commentary on the "Book of Rites"* (*Yegi cheongyennok* 禮記淺見錄) is still extant and reveals his sophisticated approach to and understanding of ritual, emphasizing its role in establishing and maintaining social order. Through this work and his other writings, he helped to initiate an interest in ritual that was to become a hallmark of Korean Confucian thought and practice.

Our second group, *Solidifying the Base*, consists of two thinkers who lived soon after Confucianism was first established as the new ideological foundation of the Joseon dynasty and had risen to become the primary, though by no means exclusive, focus of intellectual reflection and innovation. In the years following the ascent of Confucianism, a number of philosophers sought to enhance and refine the initial understanding not only of the intellectual content of the tradition but also of what it meant to be a Confucian. At the heart of the intellectual question was the pressing need to determine how to respond to and manage the different schools of Confucian learning that had developed in China. In particular, how were Korean Confucians

to view and react to the philosophy of “Sangsan” Yuk Gyeon (C. “Xiangshan” Lu Jiuyuan) 象山 陸九淵 (1139–1193 CE) and, later, “Yangmyeong” Wang Suin (C. “Yangming” Wang Shouren) 陽明 王守仁 (1472–1529 CE); to Daoist thought and practice; and to Buddhism, a tradition that had been the dominant tradition of thought throughout the previous (Goryeo) dynasty and clearly had profoundly influenced neo-Confucianism, and one that neo-Confucians in both China and Korea felt a continuing need to criticize as their most powerful, respected, and yet in some ways also most familiar and attractive rival?

In addition to these more explicitly philosophical and doctrinal concerns was the emerging challenge of defining and fulfilling a personal, practical ideal of what it was to be a Confucian scholar. A characteristic feature of true Confucians is that they are committed most immediately to social and political well-being and, ultimately, to bringing peace and harmony to all under heaven. This means, among other things, that one prepares oneself to serve within the government and works to enact the ancient ideal of humane rule, mentioned above. And yet, one must do this without succumbing to the temptation of seeking political office as a means to enhance one’s own personal wealth, power, and prestige. More generally, true Confucians must in one way or another seek to engage in what Peter Bol refers to as “literati voluntarism”;<sup>9</sup> they must work in more local and direct ways to better the lives of the people around them through various forms of local activism, policy implementation, and reform. This engaged social and political commitment, which is intimately connected with the moral aspirations of Confucians, became a defining part of their self-conception and a way for them to explicitly and often vigorously distinguish themselves from their Daoist and Buddhist rivals. Nevertheless, while they often depicted their rivals as self-centered seekers of otherworldly personal fulfillment, Confucians too at times withdrew from the world; but for them, the reason for this withdrawal was, at least purportedly, moral, undertaken when the world proved too corrupt and corrupting—an ideal recommended in the earliest classics of the tradition.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Confucians also shared a desire, though in a different form and to a less comprehensive extent than their Daoist counterparts, to commune and harmonize with nature as an expression of their grand cosmic vision of universal harmony.<sup>11</sup> This idea is clearly and elegantly expressed in many of the poems included in this volume. Finally, Confucians emphasized personal moral virtue as a necessary feature of any true follower of the Way and often contrasted their behavior with unflattering

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9. Peter Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Harvard University Press, 2008). This issue is analyzed, in the Chinese context, with great care and insight in this volume.

10. See for example *Mencius* 7A9 (*Maegnja*; C. *Mengzi* 孟子) (Ctext.org), which describes how those who fail to find a proper opportunity to serve should withdraw from the world and cultivate their character.

11. Confucianism has always expressed the idea that the Way connects human beings with a greater cosmic scheme and that those who are sensitive and observant can recognize respects in which the natural world manifests moral lessons. See for example *Analects* 2.1 and 9.17 and *Mencius* 2A2 and 2A6.

accounts of their rivals. We see all of these issues—philosophical and doctrinal controversies, the tension between social and political engagement and withdrawal, and personal displays of moral character—in the thought and lives of the two thinkers who represent our second group.

“Hwadam” Seo Gyeongdeok 花潭 徐敬德 (1489–1546 CE) was a controversial figure in his own time, for reasons connected to several of the themes described above. He explicitly embraced parts of Yuk Gyeon’s philosophy and advanced the idea that not only were Yuk’s views and those of the orthodox Jeong-Ju school not in fundamental disagreement but that they actually complemented one another. Moreover, he incorporated Daoist elements into his philosophy; distinctively Daoist ideas and themes are prominently on display throughout his writings, particularly in his poetry. In terms of his personal life, while he had the opportunity to serve in the government, he chose not to, and it seems that he made that choice not because the times were corrupt, which as noted above was the standard Confucian explanation for such behavior, but because he preferred to live a quiet life nestled in the bosom of nature, a characteristically Daoist ideal. These aspects of his life and writings elicited criticism in his own time, even the accusation that he had strayed from the fold of orthodox Confucianism; indeed, several of his later followers appear to have worked hard to respond to these criticisms by highlighting different aspects of his philosophy and putting a more orthodox Confucian frame around and spin upon others.<sup>12</sup>

Seo Gyeongdeok’s poetry clearly does express a view that embraces elements of Yuk Gyeon’s “Learning of the Heart-Mind” (*simhak*; C. *xinxue* 心學) and a Daoist appreciation of a life of solitude in the midst of the natural world. Nevertheless, the four primary essays translated here, which form the core of his philosophical writings, clearly aim to synthesize such elements into something that resonates with and represents the orthodox Jeong-Ju view.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, his *Chronological Biography* (*yeonbo*; C. *nianpu* 年譜) and other writings about him describe things like his withdrawal from the world not as a retreat from responsibility but as a manifestation of his intense desire to attain a personal understanding of moral Pattern. This idea, which traces its origins back to the *Mencius*, became a critical issue for neo-Confucians, who worried about those who studied either to promote their own self-interest, by passing the Civil Service Examinations and gaining political office, or who engaged in sterile forms of memorization and recitation that were not aimed at and did not realize

12. Isabelle Sancho, “What Master Hwadam Loved to Learn: The *Hwadam jip* and Seo Gyeongdeok’s Place in the Intellectual History of Joseon,” *The Review of Korean Studies* 23, no. 1 (2020): 55–88. Sancho’s compelling argument includes an account of how Hwadam’s later disciples carefully crafted his collected works in ways that bolstered his intellectual and personal bona fides as a true Confucian.

13. Several entries in Seo Gyeongdeok’s biography also depict him as intimately familiar with and concerned about ritual propriety. For example, see the entries for the years 1544 and 1545, when he was fifty-six and fifty-seven years old, respectively, in his *Chronological Biography* in the *Collected Works of Hwadam* (*Hwadam jip* 花潭集), Database of the Korean Classics (*Hanguk Gojeon Jonghap* DB), <http://db.itkc.or.kr/>.

any improvement in one's moral character. When cast in contrast to such concerns, Seo's unorthodox lifestyle and method of learning were presented as offering important and attractive alternatives. He gave voice to a widely held but rarely expressed dissatisfaction with book learning and showed great insight into the need to gain a personal and sincere understanding<sup>14</sup> of the Way, even at the tender age of fourteen (see C. *sui* 歲). For example, his *Chronological Biography* tells us that

When the Master was fourteen years old, there was a person in Songgyeong [another name of Gaeseong, the capital of Goryeo] who taught how to read texts. The Master went to study with him. When he was being taught the *Book of History* and reached the passage, "A round year consists of three hundred [days],"<sup>15</sup> the man was unable to explain it adequately, and said, "Throughout the world, this line is rarely understood." The Master thought this strange; he retired and focused all his thought for fifteen days; after which he comprehended it. He then understood that one could understand books by thinking about them for oneself.<sup>16</sup>

Other entries describe a developing idiosyncratic style of learning, which nevertheless manifested a critical sense of authenticity and devotion to the Confucian Way.

When the Master was eighteen years old, he read in the *Great Learning* about how extending knowledge lies in the investigation of things. Greatly moved, he sighed and said, "If one applies oneself to study without first investigating things, what is the use of reading books?" Thereupon, he wrote out the names of all the myriad things in heaven and earth, pasted them upon the wall of his room, and took it as his task to each day thoroughly investigate each of them.<sup>17</sup>

Yet other entries in Seo's *Chronological Biography* highlight his moral integrity and contrast it favorably with that of some of his contemporaries. These themes are evidently on display in popular stories about his relationship with the famous courtesan (*gisaeng* 妓生) Hwang Jini 黃真伊 (1506–1560 CE).<sup>18</sup> Seo Gyeongdeok regarded Hwang as one of his students, and they had a long and very close relationship, but one that did not allow even the slightest moral impropriety—in sharp contrast to many of her other acquaintances. Such displays of personal moral integrity, especially in regard to the fundamentally important relationship between a man and a woman, not only elevated his reputation—a fact made evident by the continuing popularity

14. This feature of his life and work, including the contrast with those who engaged in sterile forms of learning, was highlighted by Yi I in his praise of Seo Gyeongdeok (see below).

15. Section 2 of the "Canon of Yo" (*Yo Jeon*; C. *Yao Dian* 堯典) in the *Book of History* (*Sangseo*; C. *Shangshu* 尚書) (Ctext.org).

16. See his *Chronological Biography* for the year 1502 in the *Collected Works of Hwadam* 3.2a.

17. See his *Chronological Biography* for the year 1506 in the *Collected Works of Hwadam* 3.2a. Cf. the entries for 1508 and 1509 in the *Collected Works of Hwadam* 3.2b.

18. Hwang's life is depicted in a number of contemporary novels, films, and television adaptations.

of stories about their relationship among contemporary Koreans—but also helped to craft a personal ideal for the Confucian noble person (*gunja*; C. *junzi* 君子), casting such a person as much more capable of self-control than others and unwaveringly focused on properly fulfilling human relationships. Seo's place in the pantheon of orthodox Confucianism was assured when “Yulgok” Yi I 栗谷 李耳 (1536–1584 CE)—the second figure in our third group of thinkers, to whom we shall return below—defended his method of learning and praised him and his work, recommending him to the king for posthumous honors.

Gyeongdeok's purposeful activity (*gongbu*; C. *gongfu* 功夫) most certainly is not something beginners in learning should take as their model; his tradition of learning comes from “Hoenggeo” Jang Jae (C. “Hengqu” Zhang Zai) 橫渠 張載 (1020–1077 CE). As for the books that he has written, I do not know whether they fully accord with the teachings of the sages and worthies. But what the world today calls scholars are those who craft their teachings simply by imitating what earlier Confucians said; within their heart-minds they have not grasped anything. In contrast, many of Gyeongdeok's profound thoughts and far-reaching attainments display the mysterious quality of getting it oneself;<sup>19</sup> truly this is not the type of learning that can be found in words or writings.<sup>20</sup>

Yulgok makes clear that Hwadam's approach to learning is unorthodox and not something to recommend to those first setting out upon the Way, but he securely links him to the orthodox tradition by tracing the origins of his method to Jang Jae and, more remotely, to Maengja. Moreover, Yulgok praises his attainment of a sincere and personal grasp of the Way in language that unambiguously assures “Hwadam” Seo Gyeongdeok a place in the pantheon of orthodox Confucian learning.

Like Seo Gyeongdeok before him, the second figure in this second group of seminal Korean Confucians, “Hoejae” Yi Eonjeok 晦齋 李彦迪 (1491–1553 CE), was an influential mid-Joseon dynasty thinker who significantly shaped the course and consolidated many of the fundamental features of the emerging Confucian tradition, but did so more from the periphery than from the center of political and social power. He was born, led most of his life, and died in and around the city of Gyeongju 慶州, which is located in the southeast corner of the Korean peninsula, far from the capital, Seoul. Hoejae passed the literary section of the Civil Service Examination in 1514 and soon afterward entered government service. As a result of the ongoing and

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19. “Getting it oneself” (*jadeuk*; C. *zide* 自得), first seen in *Mencius* 3A4 and 4B14, refers to attaining a personal understanding of some teaching. It was a highly valued ideal among neo-Confucians.

20. See Hwadam's *Chronological Biography* for the year 1572. The last phrase, about a learning that does not reside in words or writings, echoes Seon (C. Chan) 禪 Buddhist teachings about a mind-to-mind transmission of the Dharma. This is an idea that neo-Confucians, led by Ju Hui, took up and developed into their own version of the orthodox transmission of the Way (*dotong*; C. *datong* 道統).

intensifying political factionalism of the time, which is discussed below, he was twice expelled from office and then rehired by the government. When he was first expelled in 1531, he built a study hall, the Hall of Solitary Joy (Dongnakdang 獨樂堂) along the Violet Stream (Jagye 紫溪) in Gyeongju and spent much of the following period studying and teaching. In 1547, he was expelled to Ganggye 江界, in the northwest of the Korean peninsula and died there in 1553. Throughout his time of exile and after retirement, he followed the ideal, discussed above, of moving away from the center of political power (i.e., the capital) when one deems it corrupt and corrupting and retreating to a more isolated and pure environment, where one can cultivate oneself and await the proper time to return.

After Hoejae's death, the Jade Mountain Academy (Oksan Seowon 玉山書院) was founded southeast of the Hall of Solitary Joy to venerate his memory and continue his work. It still stands today in the town of An-gang township (An-gang-eup 安康邑), within the larger city of Gyeongju.<sup>21</sup> Such local academies represented a new and increasingly important feature of Korean neo-Confucianism: the academies offered a place where scholars who were out of favor at the court could cultivate themselves, develop their ideas, and teach a cohort of disciples who would take up and later represent their views. Hoejae was a member of the Scholars of the Forest (*Sarim* 士林) faction, a group of thinkers who exerted an enduring influence on politics, society, and thought throughout this period and who would come to epitomize the ways in which local academies profoundly affected Joseon culture and became a characteristic feature of this period of Confucianism. The course of his life and thought established a trajectory that many subsequent thinkers would follow or respond to, marking a new expression and stage of the Korean Confucian tradition.

The philosophical lineage of the Sarim scholars originated from the neo-Confucian school of "Yaeun" Gil Jae 冶隱 吉再 (1353–1419 CE), a Goryeo dynasty scholar-official. After the fall of the Goryeo, Yaeun retreated to his home village and refused to serve the Joseon dynasty, despite King Taejong's invitation to him to join the newly established government. Instead of simply withdrawing and working on his own moral self-cultivation, Yaeun followed the Scholars of the Forest paradigm discussed above and, like Hoejae, developed this stance and strategy by teaching at a local academy. He also assiduously worked to cultivate a new generation of neo-Confucian scholars, including Kim Sukja 金叔滋 (1389–1456 CE) who then also passed the baton to his son Kim Jongjik 金宗直 (1431–1492 CE), with the explicit aim of having them carry forth his work when times became more favorable.

The world did not have to wait too long. When King Seongjong 成宗 (r. 1469–1494 CE) ascended the throne to become the ninth king of Joseon, he invited Kim Jongjik and several of his disciples, who at that time were identified as Sarim scholars, to

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21. For a brief description and some images of this academy, see World Heritage Integrated Management Center for Korean Seowon, "Oksanseowon," UNESCO World Heritage: Seowon, Korean Neo-Confucian Academies, accessed June 2, 2025, [https://en.k-seowon.or.kr/?act=info.page&cpcode=sub3\\_3](https://en.k-seowon.or.kr/?act=info.page&cpcode=sub3_3).

his court and supported their political growth as a counterbalance to the officials who were then dominant in the government. Over time, the Sarim developed from a critical opposition group far from the seat of power into an active political faction, and this initiated a period of sometimes fierce factional struggle. Eventually, the Sarim philosophy coalesced around the teachings of the two thinkers who constitute our third group of thinkers: “Toegye” Yi Hwang 退溪 李滉 (1501–1570 CE) and “Yulgok” Yi I. From that point onward, the Sarim faction maintained political power for much of the Joseon dynasty, and the thought of Toegye and Yulgok became the orthodox and most influential expressions of Joseon neo-Confucianism.

In addition to his contributions to the development of local academies and their role in intellectual and political life and his influence upon the emerging Sarim faction and its subsequent role in Korean society, politics, and philosophy, Hoejae contributed in substantial ways to a debate that would reverberate, spread, and cascade down through the Korean Confucian tradition for many years to come, concerning a paired set of concepts with a venerable history and prominent place in Song (C. Song) 宋 dynasty (960–1279 CE) neo-Confucianism: the ideas of the Ultimateless (*mugeuk*; C. *wuji* 無極) and the Supreme Ultimate (*taegeuk*; C. *taiji* 太極).<sup>22</sup> Ju Doni (C. Zhou Dunyi) 周敦頤 (1017–1073 CE) developed a powerful metaphysical philosophy with explicit ethical implications around these two terms in his highly influential work “Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate” (*Taegukdo seol*; C. *Taijitu shuo* 太極圖說),<sup>23</sup> which had a tremendous influence on the subsequent Confucian tradition. Hoejae was the first Korean Confucian to focus sustained attention on the Ultimateless and the Supreme Ultimate, and two works included in this volume offer the most detailed and focused presentation of his views on these concepts: “First Response to Manggidang’s Letter” and “Afterword to Mangjae and Manggidang’s Explanations of the Ultimateless and Supreme Ultimate.” In these writings, he presents a clear and concise account of Ju Doni’s philosophy, beginning with the idea, seen in the opening line of the “Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate,” that the Ultimateless permeates the Supreme Ultimate. Given the ineffable nature of the former, this might seem to carry little significance, but it explains Ju’s claim about the intimate relationship between the Ultimateless and the Supreme Ultimate and reinforces the idea that the original, infinite, and mysterious origin of the universe is present everywhere. Hoejae also defended widely recognized aspects of Ju Doni’s general theory, for example that the Supreme Ultimate is the Way in and of itself (*do ji bonche*; C. *dao zhi benti* 道之本體), that the Supreme Ultimate

22. These two terms of art are translated in a variety of ways by contemporary scholars, and the translation offered here is chosen because it may be the most literal and uncontroversial rendering available. For a sustained and revealing study of these terms and their place within the Chinese neo-Confucian tradition, see Joseph Alan Adler, *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao: Zhu Xi’s Appropriation of Zhou Dunyi* (State University of New York Press, 2014).

23. For a more complete discussion of the history of the two terms and their development by Song neo-Confucians, see the introductory section to the two essays by Hoejae mentioned below and included in this volume.

is Pattern, and that while Pattern exists prior to *gi*-material (C. *qi* 氣), these two can never be separated in the world of actual things. The last claim clearly implies that Pattern can only take on phenomenal form when wedded to *gi*-material. Hoejae also emphasized that the Way consists of human affairs and so one must seek the Way within human affairs; if one leaves the realm of human affairs to seek the Way, one will fall into emptiness and vacuity. This point clearly highlights the this-worldly nature of the Way and distinguishes the Confucian tradition from its Daoist and Buddhist rivals. It also makes clear that even the most esoteric metaphysical aspects of neo-Confucianism must be understood in practical terms; this expresses a theme seen throughout the later Korean Confucian tradition. Finally, it sets the tone for the development of the movement that came to be known as “practical learning” (*Silhak* 實學), which was further developed by thinkers such as Yulgok and “Dasan” Jeong Yak-yong 茶山 丁若鏞 (1762–1836 CE), whose works are included in this volume in our third and fourth groups, respectively.<sup>24</sup>

Our third group, *Settling Controversies*, consists of two philosophers, “Toegye” Yi Hwang and “Yulgok” Yi I, whose life and work helped to sort out and settle a range of issues that had been debated in previous years, many of which are seen in various forms in the works of the earlier thinkers presented in this volume.<sup>25</sup> Of course, definitive answers to core philosophical controversies rarely are settled, but consensus is often reached during certain periods about what the most important questions facing a tradition are and what kinds of answers fall within the acceptable range of the tradition, and these then come to define the central features of the orthodox tradition. It is in this sense that Toegye and Yulgok can be regarded as establishing a new and profoundly important stage in the Korean Confucian tradition.

Toegye was recognized as a child prodigy and from an early age showed impressive talent as a poet. When he was eighteen, he wrote a poem entitled “Pond in the Wilds” (*yaji* 野池), a representative work that is still widely read and appreciated today. This composition, along with several other examples of his poetry, is included in this volume (see selection 5 of Chapter 5). Toegye’s greatest contributions to Korean neo-Confucianism concern his synthesis, advocacy, and defense of a range of core teachings characteristic of the orthodox Jeong-Ju school.<sup>26</sup> Toegye advocated the nuanced dualism of this school, which teaches that the universe is composed of a combination of Pattern (*i*; C. *li* 理) and *gi*-material. The former is conceptually prior to the latter; nevertheless, since any actual phenomenal thing requires both Pattern and *gi*-material, neither can be said to exist temporally prior to the other.

24. For an introduction to practical learning, see Michael Kalton, “An Introduction to Silhak,” *Korea Journal* 15, no. 5 (1975): 29–46.

25. For a study of the philosophies of Toegye and Yulgok, focused on their exchanges in the famous Four-Seven Debate, see Edward Y. J. Chung, *The Korean Neo-Confucianism of Yi T’oegye and Yi Yulgok: A Reappraisal of the “Four-Seven Thesis” and Its Practical Implications for Self-Cultivation* (State University of New York Press, 1995).

26. For a study of Toegye’s philosophical views, see Sa-sun Yun, *Critical Issues in Neo-Confucian Thought: The Philosophy of Yi T’oegye*, trans. Michael Kalton (Korea University Press, © 1990).

Pattern, though, is regarded as being morally more foundational and pedagogically more important, since it is through a grasp of Pattern that one understands the nature of the actual things and events in the world and how they all hang together in the unified system that is the Way. This approach to understanding these core concepts closely aligns with what one finds in the Jeong-Ju school, which is why Toegye is considered the foremost advocate of the orthodox school in Korea. As we shall see, Yulgok taught that Pattern and *gi*-material are less distinctly separated from one another and, in contrast to Toegye, that *gi*-material is morally more foundational and pedagogically more important, since it is through a grasp of actual things and events that one understands the Pattern that constitutes the Way and underlies the nature of the world around us.

While Toegye and Yulgok did disagree about a range of issues concerning metaphysics, and especially in regard to how Maengja's Four Sprouts relate to the Seven Emotions,<sup>27</sup> in many ways their disagreements are more directly connected to, more clearly manifested, and more easily understood in their quite different approaches to learning. Following Jeong-Ju's teachings, Toegye taught that one must engage in the investigation of things, and while such investigation included grasping Pattern in the affairs and events of one's life, it was primarily focused on gaining an understanding of Pattern through the sustained and careful study of the classics and histories. The thought was that as one's theoretical understanding of Pattern grew, it would lead one to an understanding of other things and their complex interrelationships and, eventually, to their underlying unity or oneness. Throughout this process and running parallel to it, one was also to work at investing one's understanding with the appropriate affective responses to things and events, through practices such as "quiet sitting" (*jeong jwa*; C. *jing zuo* 靜坐), "reverential attention" (*gyeong*; C. *jing* 敬), and the exercise of "sympathetic concern" (*seo*; C. *shu* 恕), so that one would not only understand but also appreciate the value of the various, individual phenomena of the actual world and the greater scheme of which they are parts. This process too would eventually culminate in a deep and caring embrace of the entire universe. This approach to learning is a consequence of Toegye's metaphysical views, which, as noted above, represent a rather strong form of dualism between Pattern and *gi*-material and see Pattern as morally more foundational and pedagogically more important. Below, we shall see how Yulgok's less stringent dualism led him to advocate a different and distinctive approach to learning, which left him less at odds with the approach

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27. The Four-Seven Debate is a sophisticated and sustained discussion of these issues, carried out through a series of letters, first between Toegye and "Gobong" Gi Daeseung 高峰 奇大升 (1527–1572 CE) and later between Yulgok and "Ugye" Seong Hon 牛溪 成渾 (1535–1598 CE). For a study and translation that present this debate in its richness and historical context, see Michael Kalton et al., *The Four-Seven Debate: An Annotated Translation of the Most Famous Controversy in Korean Neo-Confucian Thought* (State University of New York Press, 1994). For the philosophical meaning in a comparative context, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, "The Four-Seven Debate," in *Three Streams: Confucian Reflections on Learning and the Moral Heart-Mind in China, Korea, and Japan* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 78–89.

of thinkers such as Yuk Sangsan and Wang Yangmyeong. It is, though, important to note that their different approaches to learning actually define something more like ideal types and that both Toegye and Yulgok at times partook of both approaches; nevertheless, each of them definitely does place greater emphasis on one model rather than the other, and often a difference of degree can constitute what amounts to a difference in kind or, in this case, a difference in one's approach to and style of learning.

Toegye is known for playing a critical role in drawing a clear, bright line between the orthodox Jeong-Ju stream of neo-Confucianism, known as the "Learning of Pattern" (*ihak*; C. *lixue* 理學), and the thought of thinkers such as Yuk Sangsan and Wang Yangmyeong, who represent the "Learning of the Heart-Mind." Unlike some prior Korean Confucian thinkers, Toegye saw little to nothing of value in the philosophy of Yuk and Wang and condemned them and their thought as active threats against the orthodox tradition. This is clear throughout his writings but explicitly addressed by his "Refutation of [Wang Yangmyeong's] *A Record for Practice*," which is included in this volume. Toegye's clear, concise, and forceful criticism of Wang Yangmyeong and his philosophy threw down a gauntlet that very few dared to pick up.<sup>28</sup> From this time onward, for the most part, the Yuk-Wang School became a relatively minor chord within the Korean Confucian tradition, which distinguishes it quite dramatically not only from the case of China but also Japan as well.

We have not included one of Toegye's most famous works, his "Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning" (*Seonhak sipdo* 聖學十圖), because there is an excellent translation and study of this work that is widely available to English speakers.<sup>29</sup> The "Ten Diagrams" was Toegye's final masterpiece, written in 1568, just two years before he passed away; it offers a magisterial overview of his thought. It was written for and presented to King Seonjo 宣祖 (r. 1567–1608 CE) and composed as a series of lectures; drawing upon the examples of past sages, it was designed to guide rulers to cultivate themselves, attain sagehood, and thereby realize the ultimate goal of humane governance. Toegye began each chapter with a diagram; each chapter is also accompanied by supporting texts drawn from Ju Hui and other leading luminaries of the Confucian tradition and concluded with a brief commentary and summary of Toegye's own. The first chapter presents a grand vision of the universe and in the course of the succeeding chapters, readers are led to see how to apply and realize this grand vision in the course of their everyday lives. Toegye originally intended the "Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning" to be inscribed upon a ten-paneled standing screen, with each panel dedicated to one of its diagrams. He also wanted it to be made into a short companion volume, and one can find modern versions crafted into ten folding

28. A notable exception is "Hagok" Jeong Jedu 霞谷 鄭齊斗 (1649–1736 CE), whose work is included in the final group of thinkers included in this collection, but as noted above, Yulgok saw value in aspects of the Learning of the Heart-Mind, and this is consistent with his much less stringent metaphysical position on the relationship of Pattern and *gi*-material. See below.

29. Michael Kalton, *To Become a Sage: The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning* (Columbia University Press, 1988).

sections, each dedicated to one of the work's diagrams, today.<sup>30</sup> Toegye's motivating intention was to engage his readers, both visually and through the written word, so that their minds would constantly rest upon the lessons of the "Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning" until these were drawn into and thoroughly embodied in their heart-minds and everyday lives.

Yi I, who is often referred to by his pen name, Yulgok, was born in the city of Gangneung 江陵 in Gangwon 江原 province in 1536.<sup>31</sup> His father was a high official and his mother the noted artist, writer, calligrapher, and poet Sin "Saimdang" 申師任堂 (1504–1551 CE), who is revered as a model of Confucian ideals and often referred to by the honorary title "Wise Mother" (*hyeonmo* 賢母).<sup>32</sup> Yulgok was another child prodigy, and it is said that he completed his study of the Confucian classics by the age of seven and passed the first level of the Civil Service Examination by the age of thirteen. Tragedy struck the young scholar at the age of sixteen, when his beloved mother passed away unexpectedly; in response, he secluded himself in Diamond Mountain (Geumgang-san 金剛山) after completing the traditional three-year mourning period. It is said that during this time, he broadly studied not only Confucianism but Daoism and Buddhism as well. He spent at least one year not only studying but devoutly practicing Buddhism. However, when he reached the age of twenty, he left the mountains and devoted himself to Confucianism.<sup>33</sup> While he defended the orthodox tradition, he was much more open to incorporating ideas from Buddhism and from thinkers like Wang Yangmyeong than were many of his contemporaries, for reasons noted above and explored below. Yulgok married when he was twenty-two years old and in the following year went to visit Toegye in his residence at Peach Mountain (Do-san 桃山). The two later exchanged several rounds of letters, and when Toegye passed away, soon after completing his "Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning," Yulgok wrote a moving tribute to his renowned contemporary, "Funeral Oration for Master Yi Toegye," which is included in this volume. Later

30. For images of and an introduction to Toegye's masterpiece, see X-Media Center, "Sunghaksipdo VR: Creating Experiential Space-Time based on the Concept of Eastern Philosophy," accessed June 3, 2025, <http://visionguider.com/en/project/>.

31. For accounts of Yulgok's life and thought, see Chung, *Korean Neo-Confucianism*; and Philippe Thiebault, "Yi I, Yulgok (1536–1584), A Path to Maturation and Fulfillment: Poetry, Philosophy, and Wisdom," *Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, Transactions* 74 (1999): 59–85.

32. On the basis of this fame, Saimdang became the first woman whose image appeared on Korean currency: the fifty-thousand-won note bears her likeness. Recent scholarship challenges her reputation, proposing that it is nothing but a popular myth constructed by later generations of the Patriarch's Faction (*Noron* 老論). See, for example, Sook-in Lee, "Geureon Sin Saimdang eun eopseotda: Gwollyeok gwa jendeo ui byeonju" 그런 신사임당은 없었다: 권력과 젠더의 변주 [There was no such Sin Saimdang; a variation of power and gender], in *Cheorak gwa Heyonsil 철학과 현실* 81 (2009): 136–49.

33. See his *Chronological Biography* for the years 1551, 1554, and 1555 in Yi I 李珥, *The Complete Works of Yulgok* (*Yulgok jeonso* 栗谷全書), Database of the Korean Classics (*Hanguk Gojeon Jonghap* DB), <http://db.itkc.or.kr/>, 33.13a and 33.13b–14b.

that year, he passed the special examinations with top honors, submitting a widely admired work entitled “Examination Essay on the Way of Heaven” (*Cheondochoaek* 天道策), which is also included in this volume.

Yulgok went on to serve in various positions in government beginning at around the age of twenty-nine, and in 1568, he visited China, serving as a Document Officer (*Seojanggwwan* 書狀官) of the Joseon court. In light of his outstanding performance on the Civil Service Examination and his rich and growing experience as an official, his reputation grew and he gained the trust and support of the king. Nevertheless, he became frustrated with the impediments presented by ongoing factional struggles within the court and in 1576, he returned home and devoted his time to teaching and learning. He again took up an official position at the age of forty-five and then held a series of different offices. In 1583, while serving as Minister of Defense, Yulgok proposed to draft an army of a hundred thousand men to prepare for an anticipated Japanese attack, but his plan was rejected by the central government. That year, he left office for the final time, and he died the following year at the age of forty-nine. His concern about a Japanese attack, though, proved prophetic when, in 1592, Hideyoshi Toyotomi invaded Korea, marking the first phase of what came to be known as the Imjin War (1592–1596 CE).

As already noted, Yulgok surely did disagree with Toegye about a number of subtle though important points concerning metaphysics, and especially in regard to how Maengja’s Four Sprouts relate to the Seven Emotions. These disagreements underlie and inform their famous exchanges in what came to be known as the Four-Seven Debate. But, as noted above, we believe that these disagreements are more directly connected to, clearly manifested in, and can be more readily understood in terms of the two scholars’ quite different approaches to learning. In contrast to the orthodox Jeong-Ju approach embraced and advocated by Toegye, Yulgok did not see as strong a distinction between Pattern and *gi*-material. This metaphysical and ontological stance, along with its ethical and pedagogical implications, distinguished his position; it can be seen throughout his writings but is especially clear in his “Examination Essay on the Numbers of the *Changes*,” which is included in this volume. Much of the disagreement between Toegye and Yulgok regarding the status and significance of the Four Sprouts versus the Seven Emotions reflects this general but essential point. For Toegye, the former represent a pure realm of moral Pattern that serves as the origin and standard for every emotional expression. For Yulgok, the Four Sprouts are simply emotions that are, in origin and expression, more often closer to the ideal but not for that reason essentially different in kind from other emotions. As he noted, sometimes the Four Sprouts deviate from the moral norm and sometimes the Seven Emotions perfectly express the moral ideal. This being the case, we should not organize our learning around a theoretical understanding of Pattern in the abstract but rather discern it wherever we can find it in the world of *gi*-material. The Seven Emotions and by implication the affairs and events of everyday life all present critical opportunities to engage in learning and to encounter and experience Pattern. Yulgok’s belief in the inextricable interpenetration of Pattern and *gi*-material led him to place greater

emphasis on the actual world, which left less of a gap between his approach and that of the Learning of the Heart-Mind.<sup>34</sup> This had important implications for his views about politics and guided his own lifelong involvement in government administration. Unlike Toegye, Yulgok was active as an official throughout his life; he sought to discover the Way through the practical pursuits appropriate for a Confucian, and these included governmental service as well as philosophical speculation or, as Wang Yangmyeong would have put it, philosophical speculation in the course of the practical events and affairs of human life.

Yulgok's more *gi*-material-focused and practically oriented philosophy generated a philosophy equal in subtlety to Toegye's more intellectualist system but quite distinct from it. Comparing the two, one cannot but be struck by how much neater and more reassuring Toegye's is. For him, Pattern provides the norms that securely anchor order and right, while the world of *gi*-material is the realm of the application of these norms. The former is pure, unified, and serene; the latter is unavoidably adulterated, disjointed, and to some degree unsettling. Pattern provides a ground and a refuge from the vicissitudes of life. Yulgok, meanwhile, presents a messier and more challenging account of the world. Pattern and *gi*-material are inextricably entangled; we cannot seek to dwell in the realm of Pattern; our task is to search out the norms governing the universe in the challenges encountered in the course of our daily lives and work to instantiate its underlying unity in an unruly and resistant world. One can discern the difference between these two philosophical giants in a number of their writings but perhaps most often in their poetry. Toegye often expresses feelings of joy and peace in his experience of the oneness he finds in Pattern, whereas Yulgok more often expresses his aspiration for such. The one realm in which both men found tranquil delight was nature, but here too for Toegye it provided a serene and reassuring confirmation of his general view of the nature of the world, whereas for Yulgok it offered a contrast and ideal that human beings could, on occasion, glimpse but that they seemed almost tragically incapable of attaining.

Our fourth and final group is called *Posing Challenges*, and it consists of two very different philosophers: "Hagok" Jeong Jedu and "Dasan" Jeong Yakyong. As noted in footnote 28 above, Hagok stood out among Joseon dynasty neo-Confucians as the most important representative of the Yangmyeonghak 陽明學 School, the tradition and approach that derived from the teachings of Yuk Sangsan and Wang Yangmyeong. While earlier Korean thinkers were quite familiar with this stream of the Confucian tradition—some, such as Seo Gyeongdeok, explicitly drew upon and valued aspects of this school, and others, such as Yulgok, appreciated certain of its teachings, methods, and aims—after Toegye's pointed criticism, this branch of neo-Confucianism was widely regarded as a heretical third rail that was not to be touched, much less

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34. This should not be taken as implying that Yulgok embraced every tenet of the Learning of the Heart-Mind. While he shared their more practical, this-worldly orientation to learning and greater trust in the moral value of emotions and intuitions, he clearly did not embrace their views about the primacy of Pattern.

embraced or studied. Korean philosophers came to see themselves as inheritors and defenders of the orthodox Jeong-Ju stream, and part of that self-conception was to avoid being tempted by the heretical Learning of the Heart-Mind.

Toegye was instrumental in making Wang Yangmyeong, in particular, persona non grata among Korean Confucians, but the objections to the Learning of the Heart-Mind were not purely philosophical. Joseon-dynasty thinkers embraced an idea first seen among early Cheong (C. Qing) 清 dynasty (1644–1911 CE) Confucians, who blamed Wang and his school for the decline and eventual collapse of the Myeong (C. Ming) 明 dynasty (1368–1644 CE). The thought was that Yuk and Wang had taught and propagated an enervated, Daoist- and Buddhist-corrupted form of Confucianism that led to weakness, disunity, and eventually the fall of the dynasty to the foreign Manchu empire. Korean Confucians were determined to keep their country safe and free of such contamination and to continue a pure and unadulterated form of the tradition. Indeed, this idea contributed greatly to the belief, still held by many in Korea today, that Korea became and remains the inheritor and defender of the orthodox tradition that had tragically withered and died off in China, its original homeland.

In stark contrast to such attitudes and efforts, Hagok explicitly defended Wang Yangmyeong's philosophy, often indirectly but unambiguously engaging Toegye and other Korean critics of Wang. This is clearly the case in the first selection in Chapter 7, "Explanation of the 'Letter on Stabilizing the Nature,'" which is Hagok's commentary on and exploration of Jeong Ho's (C. Cheng Hao) 程顥 (1032–1085 CE) famous "Letter on Stabilizing the Nature" (*Jeongseong seo*; C. *Dingxing shu* 定性書), sent to Jang Jae. In this work, Jeong Ho describes the ideal state of the heart-mind as "stability" (*jeong*; C. *ding* 定). According to Hagok's interpretation, which closely follows many of the characteristic beliefs of the Yuk-Wang School, stability is something that one is to attain and maintain not only in times of stillness but also in times of activity. It is not a state that one can directly seek by trying to cut oneself off from the outside world and retreat into stillness, nor one that one can create through sheer determination or will. All such efforts are, in fact, fundamentally self-centered and work to prevent one from attaining stability. Since it is based on the natural and spontaneous functioning of one's innate bright consciousness, stability will arise on its own only and whenever there are no self-centered desires that interfere with and block it. When one wholeheartedly realizes that there is no duality between the Pattern of one's heart-mind and that of the world, one will find stability in both activity and stillness, and the heart-mind will function freely and simply respond to things as they come.

Hagok's defense of Wang against the criticisms of Toegye and others continues in a later selection, Hagok's long essay "An Analysis of Learning" (*hakbyeon* 學辯), in which he presents Wang's philosophy in a more attractive and, Hagok would insist, more accurate light, showing, through extensive quotation and reference, how it agrees with a broad range of core teachings found in the full range of the classics. In particular, Hagok insists that Wang rightly sees that the moral heart-mind is the core and key of Confucian ethical theory and that the orthodox, Jeong-Ju tradition

at times talks as if Pattern can only be found in things outside the heart-mind, which leads people to ignore the proper cultivation of the heart-mind and instead pursue a fragmented and futile course of study directed at grasping Pattern in a set of canonical texts, as well as in the things and events of the external world. Hagok carefully explains that for Wang, “things” are not outside the heart-mind, in the sense that their Patterns are found within the heart-mind and indeed their Patterns *are* the heart-mind in and of itself. The heart-mind’s responses to things and events are the nexus for moral action and must be the focus of self-cultivation. One must unceasingly work to rid the heart-mind of self-centered desires, which are foreign to its original state and greatly obscure and warp its operation, and to preserve the heavenly Pattern, which is the heart-mind in itself. These are the core lessons taught by Wang Yangmyeong and the Learning of the Heart-Mind, and Hagok insists not only that they do not fundamentally conflict with the central teachings of the orthodox school, but also that they achieve its ends in a more coherent and consistent manner.

This general line of argument is clearly on display in the other two essays that we have included: “Exposition of [the Idea that] Pattern Is One and the Same” (*I il seol* 理一說) and “Exposition of the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions” (*sadan chiljeong seol* 四端七情說). One of the main themes of the latter work is that there is no clear, bright line separating the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions: Both contain Pattern and *gi*-material, and the difference between them, while not insignificant, is a difference more of degree than of kind. As noted earlier, this idea is highlighted and emphasized in the philosophy of Yulgok as well. What makes one of the Four Sprouts or Seven Emotions moral or otherwise is the purity of the Pattern within it, which is but another way of saying the degree to which the heart-mind that informs it is free of self-centered desires. The former essay, “Exposition of [the Idea that] Pattern Is One and the Same,” is a short meditation on an idea that is central to every neo-Confucian philosopher: the unity of Pattern and how this underwrites the idea that the myriad things are one body (*il che*; C. *yi ti* 一體). We noted above how Toegye relied upon this idea, which is found in many of Ju Hui’s writings, as a source of joy and peace and a refuge from the vicissitudes of moral struggle. This, though, has the unintended consequence of encouraging practitioners to turn away from the challenges of the mundane world and seek solace in abstract philosophical contemplation or mystical communion with nature, practices that Confucians derisively associated with Daoism and Buddhism. Yulgok, in contrast, sought to find such oneness in the experience of engaging with the world as it is. Wang Yangmyeong’s particular presentation of oneness, as Hagok makes clear, presents it in a way that combines the virtues of these two approaches. We are to seek for oneness in our experience of caring for the people, creatures, and things of the world, and this experience reinforces the underlying metaphysical and ethical views, because the reason that one feels care and concern for all the people, creatures, and things of the world is that at bottom, one’s heart-mind is one with them.

As noted earlier, our final thinker, “Dasan” Jeong Yakyong, did not share “Hagok” Jeong Jedu’s enthusiasm for Wang Yangmyeong. Dasan did, however, argue quite strenuously against the orthodox Jeong-Ju interpretation of the Confucian Way for his own, distinctive reasons. Dasan insisted that under the influence of more than a thousand years of Daoist and Buddhist teaching and philosophical argument, neo-Confucians had unknowingly accepted a profound semantic shift in the meanings of key terms and core concepts such as Pattern, human nature, and the heart-mind, leading to their losing hold of and misconstruing the central beliefs and practices of early Confucianism. Here, his arguments align with many of the criticisms that were directed by others against the Learning of the Heart-Mind. Among the foreign and mistaken views that they had come to accept, Jeong Yakyong insisted, was the idea that human beings were perfectly good at birth: that they came into the world endowed with a complete set of Pattern, that this complete set was present in their heart-minds, and that their “original nature” was immaculately pure. Furthermore, they came to believe that it was only as a result of impure and imbalanced endowments of *gi*-material that the human beings of this world were less than perfectly good, and that such contamination was virtually inevitable for any human being because, as noted earlier, actual existence requires *gi*-material. Under such conditions, our original, perfectly good nature is blocked and stymied by impure and imbalanced *gi*-material and so cannot easily manifest itself in our lives. And so the orthodox view holds that we must engage in a concerted effort at self-cultivation in order to refine our *gi*-material through a protracted program of study, reflection, and practice that has the effect of purifying our physical endowment, eliminating self-centered desires, and “returning” us to the original pure state of our nature. Given this general set of beliefs, it is clear that physical embodiment itself and human desires in particular are morally quite problematic, as they serve as the original and primary source of moral imperfection. As a result, most neo-Confucians argued for rather dramatic constraints upon what we might call natural human emotions and tended to advocate a strict morality that often bordered on or crossed into asceticism.<sup>35</sup>

Jeong Yakyong insisted that none of the beliefs enumerated above were ever part of early Confucianism, and that they had instead slowly insinuated their way into the Confucian tradition over many years through the baleful influence of Daoism and Buddhism. Contrary to the orthodox neo-Confucian model presented above and exemplified and defended by thinkers such as Toegye, he claimed that human nature is not perfectly good but only *naturally inclined* toward the good; moreover, it initially includes many other inclinations that in their raw, uncultivated state militate against the realization of goodness. The human heart-mind is not endowed with a complete set of Patterns; instead, as part of its original constitution it possesses nascent moral inclinations: the Four Sprouts. These must be preserved, nurtured, and developed—on the analogy of horticultural cultivation—in order to yield mature and reliable

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35. Here again, one can see how such ideas were presaged, in a different form and for very different reasons, by Yulgok, against his more orthodox senior colleague, Toegye.

virtues. Jeong pointed out, correctly, that the Chinese character that neo-Confucians interpreted to mean Pattern 理 never carried anything remotely like this robust metaphysical sense in the writings of early Confucians. Instead, it simply meant “good order”; it was something that appealed to the heart-mind, but something that could be attained only after a long and protracted period of self-cultivation. In terms of the horticultural analogy that thinkers such as Maengja relied upon so often, the appeal of moral good order is like the natural appreciation we experience when we look at a well-cultivated field or manicured garden;<sup>36</sup> it is only something we can experience after a great deal of sustained and concerted effort of the right kind.

Like Dae Jin (C. Dai Zhen) 戴震 (1724–1777 CE)<sup>37</sup> in China, Jeong Yakyong believed that natural human desires not only were not anathema to morality but were the very stuff of the moral life; it is only by properly developing, ordering, and ranking our desires that we can gain a proper understanding and appreciation of what others need and want—our shared desires being the basis of humaneness (*in*; C. *ren* 仁)—and cultivate them to attain virtue and good character. Thus, human emotions and in particular the emotional capacity to feel sympathetic concern<sup>38</sup> are absolutely central to human morality and essential to the task of self-cultivation. These ideas can be found throughout the early Confucian canon, and both Jeong and Dae drew evidence for their claims from all of the early classics; nevertheless, both men saw the *Mencius* as offering the clearest, strongest, and most complete expression of their views, and so both wrote extensive commentaries on this text.<sup>39</sup> We have translated a substantial part of Jeong Yakyong’s *Essential Meaning of the “Mencius”* (*Maengja youi*

36. In support of this kind of view, a number of scholars appealed to a widely known understanding of the character 理 that notes that the right-hand element contains the character for “field” (*jeon*; C. *tian* 田), which in its earliest forms was clearly a pictograph of a cultivated field, marked out into four equal quadrants.

37. Dae Jin, who is often referred to by his pen name Dae Dongwon (C. Dai Dongyuan) 戴東原, was a polymath and one of the most highly respected scholars of his age. In regard to philosophy, he generally followed the approach of Evidential Learning (*gojeunghak*; C. *kaozhengxue* 考證學), which employed careful philological methods as the way to retrieve the original meaning of the classics. Like Jeong Yakyong, he held that the ethical philosophy of orthodox neo-Confucians was much too metaphysical and that this led them to undervalue and, in some cases, even seek to eliminate human needs and desires, which Dae took to be the very foundation of morality. For a brief introduction to Dae’s life and thought, see Justin Tiwald, “Dai Zhen (Tai Chen, 1724–1777),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://iep.utm.edu/dai-zhen-tai-chen/>.

38. For a study of this concept in Dae Jin’s ethical philosophy, see Justin Tiwald, “Dai Zhen on Sympathetic Concern,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 37, no. 1 (2010): 76–89; and Justin Tiwald, “Is Sympathy Naïve? Dai Zhen on the Use of *Shu* to Track Well-Being,” in *Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously: Contemporary Theories and Applications*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe et al. (State University of New York Press, 2010), 145–62.

39. For an English translation of Dae’s major work on *Mencius*, see Ann-ping Chin and Mansfield Freeman, *Tai Chen [Dai Zhen] on Mencius: Explorations in Words and Meanings* (Yale University Press, 1990).

## *Introduction*

孟子要義) for this volume and concentrated on presenting those passages that are most pertinent to the set of philosophical ideas discussed above.

Jeong Yakyong argued for a return to the original form of Confucianism, a view that relied more on what today we would call moral psychology, sociology, and anthropology and not at all on elaborate metaphysical beliefs. As noted above, in important respects, his objections and a good deal of his account of early Confucian philosophy bear a striking resemblance to the thought of the late-Cheong-dynasty philosopher Dae Jin, who like Jeong Yakyong sought to make his case by combining careful philological arguments about the classical meaning of key terms of arts with trenchant philosophical arguments concerning the nature, practice, and aims of moral self-cultivation. Indeed, for Dae Jin and Jeong Yakyong alike, philological and philosophical argumentation were inseparable, since the classics embodied the central and highest truths of the tradition: In order to understand those truths, one needed to understand the classics, but one could only understand the classics by grasping the philosophy that they teach.