

## Article

# Self-Cultivation and Inwardness: How to Establish the Confucian Identity in Korean Neo-Confucianism

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**Abstract:** The main goals of this essay are to describe and make clear the philosophical implications of self-cultivation concerning the concept of inwardness and examine how it contributes to the formation of the Confucian identity. In two representative Korean Neo-Confucian debates, the Debate on Supreme Polarity between Yi Ŏnjök and Cho Hanbo and one of the issues in the *Horak* Debate about the original substance of the tranquil state (*mibal*) of the mind, we can see that self-cultivation plays a crucial role in establishing the Confucian identity. For example, the debate between Yi and Cho shows how to teach people to achieve an ideal Confucian character by interpreting “learning human affairs below (*hahag-insa*)” and “reaching the heavenly principle above (*sangdal-chöllli*)” differently. The concept of inwardness is significant as well as problematic in understanding the sense of rivalry against Buddhism earlier and the Yangming School later in the intellectual history of Korean neo-Confucianism. Those who think of themselves as true followers of Confucius and Zhu Xi criticize that a subjective way of experiencing inwardness is close to Buddhism and misleads one in the pursuit of some lofty metaphysical entity without any practical concerns. Despite such a criticism, some Neo-Confucian scholars have emphasized that the original substance of the mind is the tranquility of inwardness. In this vein, we will investigate what kind of philosophical identity most Korean Neo-Confucians have embraced as their own. Their consistent argument for keeping the balance between honoring the virtues and inquiring about learning leads to the claim that the achievement of self-cultivation should contribute to making the world peaceful. Thus, the matter of inwardness often described as deliberate solitude is not so much a subjective realm like religious confession, but vivid experiences of daily life that have never been separated from the manifestation of the Way (*dao*). In conclusion, the core issue of the Neo-Confucian identity having a sense of rivalry against heresy aims at the matter of practice, i.e., how actively and properly one participates in transforming the world.

**Keywords:** self-cultivation; inwardness; Confucian identity; pure goodness of the mind; Cheng-Zhu Confucianism; Buddhism; Yangming Confucianism; *Mibal* (having yet to arise); virtuous disposition; knowledge and action



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## 1. Prologue: Topology of Self-Cultivation

The main goals of this essay are to clearly describe the philosophical implications of self-cultivation in relation to the concept of inwardness and examine how it contributes to the formation of the Confucian identity. Self-cultivation is a substantial framework for understanding various intellectual traditions such as Greek, Chinese, and Indian thoughts, which emphasize the development and transformation of the self through embodying practical wisdom rather than theoretical wisdom. For example, most Confucian philosophical projects include their own discourse on self-cultivation. Thus, it has been taken for granted that self-cultivation represents a unique perspective in understanding Confucianism. In order to compare the Chinese ethical tradition with the Western one, for instance, Philip Ivanhoe notes that “Western philosophers have been much more concerned with trying to define what the good is. [while] Chinese thinkers have focused instead on the problem of

how to become good” (Ivanhoe 1993, p. 1). This remark suggests that “how to become good” seems to involve practical modes of moral development. If so, self-cultivation plays an instrumental role in improving moral capacity or moral virtues.

However, I am particularly interested in the Neo-Confucian identity of self-cultivation that emerged from a sense of rivalry against Buddhism and Yangming Confucianism. Those who consider themselves true followers of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) have criticized Buddhist and Yangming’s ways of cultivating the Mind as heretical. Korean Neo-Confucian scholars in particular have been absorbed in a rigorous interpretation of Zhu’s works and dialogues, trying to clarify ambiguous parts in the ontological issues of the Nature and the Mind. In this process, they have developed their own discourse on human nature called the *Horak* 湖洛 Controversy to answer key questions as follows: (1) Is human nature the same as that of other creatures? (2) Is a tranquil state of the mind either good or bad? (3) Are the (Confucian) sages the same as common persons? One of the main drivers of these debates was the ethical deliberations on which ways of understanding are appropriate for moral actions. However, it is difficult to deny that another key agenda in the *Horak* Controversy is the philosophical review of whether their arguments are in accord with Zhu’s main ideas.

In this paper, I will first examine the philosophical implication of self-cultivation and introduce the debate between Yi Ŏnjök 李彦迪 (1491–1553) and Cho Hanbo 曹漢輔 (unknown) on how to teach people to achieve an ideal Confucian character. One of the key issues in their debate is how to balance nurturing a virtuous disposition and refining classical learning. Yi criticizes that Cho’s stance seems to resemble the Buddhist or Daoist way of becoming a sage. I will briefly examine their debate in terms of the intellectual history of Chosŏn Korea.

Next, I will discuss key issues of the *Horak* Controversy that focused on the ontological characteristics of the human mind and nature in late Chosŏn Korea. The Controversy illustrates how these ontological issues shape the ways of self-cultivation and why the ways should be required in understanding the Neo-Confucian identity. In particular, the concept Korean Neo-Confucianists grappled with is the term of *mibal* (*weifa* in Chinese 未發), which is translated as “having yet to arise (emotions).” One of the main topics in the *Horak* Controversy of the late-Chosŏn Korea was whether the *mibal* state as the inherent reality of the human mind is innately good. The ontology of natural goodness is determined by understanding the relationship between *li* (理) and *qi* (氣), which are rendered as the universal principle and particular varieties, respectively. Furthermore, the claim that natural goodness is innately given to us is based on the metaphysical view that the unitary principle of Heaven and Earth gives us goodness as a natural tendency. Therefore, the focal point of this topic is linked to the never-ending question of Confucian cultivation: how can we fully embody human natural goodness? Thus, whether an accurate understanding of the relationship between *li* and *qi* is necessary for the perfect manifestation of natural goodness through moral actions will lead to different conclusions about the way of self-cultivation and the attitude towards life.

In this investigation, it is important to consider the theoretical aspects of the ontological problems, but also the ways in which self-cultivation can be achieved. A key question that arises is: which way of self-cultivation can effectively produce the Neo-Confucian mode of life in this ontological argument? Many mainstream Neo-Confucians, including Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501–1570) and Han Wŏnjin 韓元震 (1682–1751), have expressed concern about the Yangming Confucian approach to understanding the Mind, as it can lead to confusion over the distinction between practices and investigating the principle (K: *kungni*; C: *qiongli* 窮理). In short, the inwardness of self-cultivation is crucial for establishing the Neo-Confucian identity, but, according to them, it should not be based on the method suggested by Buddhism or Yangming Confucianism. Therefore, the question arises: what kind of inwardness is necessary for forming the Neo-Confucian identity and why do Neo-Confucian philosophers view Yangming Confucianism as heretical?

## 2. Inwardness of Self-Cultivation

### 2.1. The Meaning of Reflexivity

Self-cultivation employs the botanical analogy of human growth mainly to explain a qualitative change in moral agents. Such a change presupposes that the present self is immature and that the self should be fully completed into a full-fledged state of what one wants.<sup>1</sup> This is close to the matter of virtue ethics rather than any other ethical issues because it literally focuses on the consummation of the self. In a sense, it cannot help but be different from other modern moral philosophies that focus on dealing with the normative relationship with others. In short, ethics is mainly concerned with what is morally good in making a relationship with others while the matter of cultivation leads to focusing more on the self than others. For example, this is the reason why Confucius makes remarks on “learning for oneself (K: *wigijihak*; C: *weijizhixue* 爲己之學).” Thus, one of the foremost features of self-cultivation is, I think, the fact that its meaning itself has inevitably religious characteristics of completion of the self.

The concept of cultivation implies bipolarity, i.e., perfection and imperfection or infinity and finiteness. To engage in cultivation means recognizing that there is something that needs to be improved upon within oneself. It entails that there is an ideal state or entity that one truly desires and has not yet achieved. In other words, cultivation implies that there is ultimate perfection and that human beings have the will to reach it. When one says, “I want to be a better person”, it implies that the present self has certain aspects that need to be completed in order to reach desired states. It shows that self-cultivation begins with an awareness of one’s limitation. Therefore, it should be accompanied by a precise understanding of the self. In order to achieve this understanding, one must know how to reflect on oneself and understand what the present self is. In this vein, reflection is one of the proper ways to do so. Furthermore, it should involve gazing inward at the self. In fact, such an idea of a self is similar to Charles Taylor’s argument that “the very idea that we have or are ‘a self’, that human agency is essentially defined as ‘the self’, is a linguistic reflection of our modern understanding and the radical reflexivity it involves” (Taylor 1989, p. 177). We must also consider if there is a more fundamental cause for the formation of the self and what that may be. For example, how and when do we realize ourselves? The moment one looks at oneself in a mirror, one can suddenly realize that the one in the mirror is not a true self, but one’s image. This sudden awareness of discrepancy leads not only to thinking about what the true self is, but also to a guide towards radical reflexivity. In other words, radical reflexivity begins with a chasm between what one expected and what one failed to achieve.<sup>2</sup>

The reason why early Confucian texts like *Zhongyong* and *Mencius* introduce archery as the way of “looking for a reason within oneself (K: *pan’gujösün*; C: *fanqiuzhushen* 反求諸身)” is because it is the most obvious example of an activity meant to reflect on oneself when failing to hit the bullseye.<sup>3</sup> This is self-inspection for reducing mistakes or enhancing one’s capacities, rather than ethical deliberation. The metaphor of reflexivity has been extended to doing normatively proper actions by rectifying the self. Furthermore, such reflexivity allows us to realize for ourselves what one ought to do. It implies that we can recover, discover, or complete our natural goodness as an internal reason to do moral actions. The contemplation of the inner source goes toward the ontological quest of the self: human nature and mind.

### 2.2. Correlative Experience: The Cornerstone of the Confucian Identity

In terms of reflexivity, the self can be defined as a relational self<sup>4</sup> in daily life, meaning that humans encounter a variety of experiences both expected and unexpected. These experiences allow us to grasp various things from concrete objects to cultural symbols such as rituals, laws, and languages as well as project our own ways of life onto the interactive space of experience, which I refer to as “the common field of daily life”. This idea is similar to a phenomenological way of thinking wherein “intersubjective experience plays a fundamental role in the constitution of both ourselves as objectively existing subjects, other expe-

riencing subjects, and the objective spatio-temporal world,” as stated by Edmund Husserl (Beyer 2022). This idea can also be paraphrased as the Confucian sense of considerations (K: *sǒ*; C: *shu* 恕) wherein one should be able to put oneself in the place of others by drawing an analogy from what one desires. This idea stems not only from the belief that humans are correlatively connected, but also from the idea that humans are located in a common field wherein they share experiences of daily life, which is based on certain ontological ways of thinking that all entities are organically correlative and interactive with each other. They are spontaneously engaging in a continuous process of constructing total world unity. Therefore, the way we become ourselves is situated in relational interaction with others. Additionally, the realization that the self can also be the others as the object of interaction is the beginning of self-reflexivity and the way of making a relationship with oneself.

The relationship between correlative experiences of daily life and the ways of self-cultivation can be seen in the Confucian text of *Zhongyong*.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese title of the text, *zhong* and *yong*, translates to “centrality” or “equilibrium” (K: *chung*; C: *zhong* 中) and “normality” or “ordinariness of daily life” (K: *yong*; C: *yong* 庸), respectively. As Irene Bloom succinctly summarizes in *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (de Bary and Bloom 1999, p. 333), the title suggests the fundamental idea of a harmonious balance between focusing on daily life and pursuing the highest points. This balance allows for understanding that the ordinary affairs of everyday life are no different from the ongoing process of the cosmic order. In other words, the main theme of the text is to explore how to fully manifest the pure goodness of human nature given by heaven while focusing on daily life. In conclusion, the basic way of self-cultivation through reflexivity and inwardness is intertwined with the dynamics of correlative experiences in daily life.

In order to achieve the balance, the text of *Zhongyong* proposes the key polarity for self-cultivation: “(the noble man) honors one’s virtuous disposition and follows inquiry and study.” The question of which aspect should be prioritized is a key issue that differentiates the approaches to learning and teaching the way of Confucianism between Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1192). Both are deemed equally important, however, the questions of how to maintain a balance between them and which one should take priority have significant influence on the ways of self-cultivation. For example, Zhu Xi places greater emphasis on “following inquiry and study” while Lu Jiuyuan gives relatively less importance to it. Instead, Lu emphasizes that honoring the virtuous disposition is a primary condition for attaining an ideal Confucian character. The difference in their approaches is rooted in the understanding of the relationship of the self with the world. In Zhu Xi’s view, placing a prior emphasis on the virtuous disposition can be misinterpreted as a heretical teaching akin to Buddhism, as it is seen as being trapped in an inner subjective realm of human nature. Additionally, Zhu Xi criticizes the Chan Buddhist understanding of the Nature, which emphasizes “seeing the Nature (K: *kyōnsōng*; C: *jianxing* 見性),<sup>6</sup>” as only highlighting the sudden completion of enlightenment and neglecting the gradual efforts needed for improving the self. He instead advocates that “knowing the Nature (K: *chisōng*; C: *zhixing* 知性)” helps to reach the ultimate dimension of the self through gradual efforts.

Similar criticisms have also been raised in the context of Neo-Confucianism in Korea. The debate between Yi Ŏnjōk and Cho Hanbo is a breakthrough moment in the intellectual history of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism. According to Yi’s letter,<sup>7</sup> Cho’s ideas are based on the belief that one should first reach the heavenly principle above without any learning down below by simply focusing on preserving the Mind. Cho’s understanding of Supreme Polarity (K: *t’aegŭk*; C: *taiji* 太極) is that it is originally “Annihilation (K: *chōngmyōl*; C: *jimie* 寂滅)” and there is no difference between Infinite Polarity (K: *mugŭk*; C: *wuji* 無極) and Supreme Polarity and between being and nothingness.<sup>8</sup> The term Annihilation he here uses indicates a perfect nothingness that should not allow anything there. Yi argues that the substance of Supreme Polarity cannot be annihilated because it is the universal principle that myriad things have inside. Instead, the term Annihilation should be paraphrased as the tranquil state of the substance embracing all things of the Nature rather than nothingness like a full vacuum. Cho seems to defend himself by explaining that the reason



for using the term Annihilation is because he wants to enlighten people who fallaciously consider hallucination as something real. However, Yi refutes this claim, arguing that it falls into a sort of Buddhist fallacy that everything is nihilistic and misleads us in the pursuit of a lofty metaphysical entity without any practical human affairs. Yi suggests that to avoid this, there should be four characters, “learning human affairs below (K: *ha-haginsa*; C: *xiaxue-renshi* 下學人事)” in front of “reaching the heavenly principle above (K: *sangdalch’ölly*; C: *shangda-tianli* 上達天理)” because the heavenly principle cannot go out of human affairs.<sup>9</sup>

Yi Ŏnjök’s criticism implies that major Neo-Confucianists in Korea have a sense of rivalry against the Buddhist view of the world. While both Cho and Yi are Confucian scholars, Yi argues Cho’s perspectives are based on a Buddhist understanding of lofty metaphysical substance. It is important to note that this criticism is not necessarily a reflection of Buddhism itself, but rather the way in which Neo-Confucianists perceive and critique Buddhism. In short, we need here to bear in mind that it has nothing to do with the issue of whether Buddhism, especially *Chan* (K: *sŏn* 禪) Buddhism, truly pursues what Neo-Confucianists criticize. The point we have at least to take is the fact that those who consider themselves as sincere followers of Confucius understand and criticize Buddhism in such a way. This critical perspective regards Buddhism as the pursuit of individual freedom, which is called nirvana, out of the real world. In other words, they have been considered as shirking responsibility while misleading people. In contrast, Confucianists believe that self-cultivation is closely tied to making the world peaceful. Thus, they see Cho’s emphasis on preserving the Mind without studying classical texts, which have been considered the teachings of Confucian sages such as Yao and Shun, as heresy. When claiming that beginners should start their training from “learning below” to “reaching above” while leading scholars having natural talent must directly enter the advanced level of reaching above, Cho presupposes that there is a dualistic distinction between “learning below” and “reaching above”, which would mean a stepwise execution depending on a learner’s capacity. It implies that one can skip a lower stage of studying if one is gifted. However, Yi argues that the two steps of cultivation are mutually dependent and that one cannot reach the heavenly principle without learning below. He also claims that this approach is similar to the Buddhist way of Sudden Enlightenment (K: *tono*; C: *dunwu* 頓悟).

Why do Zhu and Yi make efforts to differ from Buddhism? Yi’s criticism aims to show that the Confucian way of self-cultivation should be different from Buddhism and Daoism, which have been considered heretical teachings. The reason is that he sees these ideologies as heretical teachings that try to neglect human affairs by either sinking individuals into an inner realm or encouraging them to escape into a transcendental otherworld. Interestingly, one could argue that Buddhism still holds a greater appeal for common people than Confucianism. Yi’s criticism that the pursuit of inwardness without “learning below” is incompatible with Confucianism shows the Confucian commitment to making the world better, which can be summarized by Fan Zhongyan’s maxim “to be first in worrying about the world’s worries and last in enjoying its pleasures.”<sup>10</sup> This tendency can be observed in the *Horak* Debate of the eighteenth century in Korea.

### 3. The Concept of *Mibal*: How Should One Cultivate It?

#### 3.1. Zhu Xi’s Transition from the Old to the New

Not only Confucian scholars but also Buddhist monks in the northern Song period studied and wrote commentaries on the *Zhongyong* because it has been recognized as a text containing insightful stories that reflect on human nature and mind. The *Daonan* 道南 School, a lineage of Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) from Yang Shi to Li Tong, also paid special attention to the discourse on *mibal* (未發) and *ibal* (已發) (yifa in Chinese 已發). When the term *mibal* appears in the *Zhongyong*, it is used not as a sophisticated philosophical term at all, but as an ordinary descriptive expression of the movement of emotions: “the moment at which joy and anger, grief, and pleasure, have yet to arise (*mibal* 未發)<sup>11</sup> is called a nascent

‘Equilibrium (*zhong* 中)’; once the emotions have arisen (*ibal* 已發), that they are all brought into proper focus is called ‘Harmony (K: *hwa*; C: *he* 和)’” (Ames and Hall 2001, p. 89).

Since Zhu Xi, the terms *mibal* and *ibal* have been understood as conceptual words used to describe a state of the mind. For example, the school Zhu Xi learned from his teacher, Li Tong 李侗 (1093–1163), focused on experiencing the state of “having yet to arise (*mibal*)”. According to Zhu, Li Tong attempted to embody the mood of “having yet to arise” by quiet sitting (K: *chǒngjwa*; C: *jìngzuò* 靜坐).<sup>12</sup> Initially, Zhu had doubts that Li Tong’s teaching were similar to Chan Buddhism, which emphasizes internal enlightenment through meditation.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, however, Li Tong’s teaching led Zhu to recognize something essential that makes us *human*. After Li Tong’s passing, Zhu further developed his idea of “Equilibrium and Harmony” through his exchanges with Zhang Shi, a representative in the Huxiang 湖湘 School. Unlike Li Tong, Zhang did not place as much emphasis on meditation and instead encouraged contemplating the rise of emotions and actions. He believed that the Nature (K: *sǒng*; C: *xìng* 性) is something transcendent that cannot be attained through meditation. Thus, he urged Zhu Xi to study the mind as an inchoate stirring of human experience, which Zhu Xi understood as the *ibal* state of the mind.

After struggling with Zhang for a long time, Zhu Xi tentatively concluded that the relationship between the Mind and the Nature is understood as the structure of the Substance (K: *ch’è*; C: *tǐ* 體) and Function (K: *yong*; C: *yòng* 用). This means that the Nature as *mibal* is the Substance, the Mind as *ibal*, the Function. Thus, he attempted to capture the moment at which all kinds of mental activities start to emerge, as he believed it was not possible to experience a state where nothing has happened. Zhu’s thought, referred to as “the Old Discourse on Equilibrium and Harmony (K: *chunghwagūsŏl*; C: *zhonghejiushuo* 中和舊說; hereafter, ODEH)”, can be organized as follows: All mental activities we can perceive are attributed to the Mind. Therefore, we should focus on the delicate movements of the Mind, which include all kinds of mental activities such as emotions, thoughts, sentiments, and contemplation.

What then does it mean to experience the *mibal* state? According to Chen Lai 陳來 (1952–), “to experience *mibal* is to reach a special mental experience by transcending all thoughts and sentiments” (Chen 1988, p. 147). Furthermore, Chen suggests that an intuitive meditation of calming conscious activities is the basic way of reaching the *mibal* state. What makes it possible to experience the *mibal* state? Can such an experience be a universal normativity that can be shared to fit into various realities harmoniously? It is ultimately a subjective and intuitive experience that an individual can personally have, even if they can reach the *mibal* state. However, the question remains, how can one recognize it if there are no movements or signs at all? This is the main question that Zhu Xi asked in the Daonan 道南 School.

In 1169, Zhu Xi revised his stance on *mibal* and *ibal* as his understanding of the Mind, the Nature, and Emotions changed. Through conversations with Cai Yuanding 蔡元定 (1135–1198),<sup>14</sup> and examination of Cheng Yi’s works, he realized that *mibal* and *ibal* belong to the same entity, the Mind, rather than to the Nature and the Mind, respectively.<sup>15</sup> As modal predicates, they describe different modes of one entity, the Mind. He understood the Nature as a sort of built-in frame or pattern in the Mind that, when *activated*, becomes *qing* (情), which can be understood as all kinds of mental activities such as perceiving, thinking, feeling, and memorizing, etc. In short, the Nature and the Emotions are certain states of the Mind within which they are seamlessly unified with one another.<sup>16</sup> This is the New Discourse on Equilibrium and Harmony (K: *chunghwasinsŏl*; C: *zhonghexinshuo* 中和新說; hereafter, NDEH). Thus, Zhu Xi explains that “the Mind goes through a cycle between *ibal* and *mibal*, and is the whole entity of endless change from one movement to one stillness.”<sup>17</sup> He reorganizes the relationship between the Mind, the Nature, and the Emotions as follows: the Mind unifies the substance of the Nature with the function of the Emotions, meaning that the Mind can exist in both the *mibal* and *ibal* states depending on whether it is playing a substantial or functional role.

In Zhu's transition from the Old to the New, what we must pay attention to is the change in viewpoint on the Nature, which is not seen as something transcendent, but rather as something immanent within the Mind. After failing to experience the transcendent stage of *mibal* that Li Tong instructed, Zhu tried initially to take the approach of keenly observing the moment of *ibal* to reach the original reality of the Nature, which had been considered as the equilibrium of tranquility. However, he realized that the keen observation of the movements of the Mind would also lead to a hyper mood rather than its original state. Therefore, Zhu returned to the matter of how to preserve the tranquility of human nature through the way of Gradual Fostering (K: *hamyang*; C: *hanyang* 涵養) in everyday life by maintaining Attentiveness (K: *kyōng*; C: *jīng* 敬).

### 3.2. Korean Neo-Confucian Issues of *mibal*

#### (1) The Ontological State of Consciousness

Regarding the concept of *mibal*, Korean Neo-Confucianists focus on three main questions: First, whether consciousness exists in the *mibal* state? Second, how to make efforts to preserve the original reality of the Mind in the *mibal* state? Last, is *mibal* truly the state of the pure goodness? These questions demonstrate that understanding the ontological characteristics of human beings will lead to the right way of manifesting the pure goodness as the normative foundation of socio-political practices.

The first problem begins with one of Zhu Xi's puzzling statements that "Consciousness is not benighted (K: *chigakpulmae*; C: *zhijuebumei* 知覺不昧), and Thought has not yet sprouted (K: *saryōmimaeng*; C: *silüweimeng* 思慮未萌)." We need first to clarify the difference between Consciousness and Thought. Zhu Xi seems to imply that Consciousness is a natural faculty of the Mind while Thought is an intentional disposition of mental activities that arise through the activity of Consciousness. When saying that "it is not benighted", it implies that the natural state or property of Consciousness itself is always and naturally awakened. Thus, the *mibal* state is to indicate that such an awakened state remains still without any subtle movements while *ibal* is all emergences of emotions, thought, consideration, and even discriminative senses.

However, not only Zhu's students but also some Korean Neo-Confucianists seemed to misunderstand the meaning of the *mibal* state as a pause or cessation of Consciousness. For example, Yi Hwang criticized their misunderstanding that the *mibal* state is one of serenity without conscious thought and that it is considered as a pitch-dark annihilation.<sup>18</sup> He believed that this way of pausing Consciousness was similar to the meditative state of profound stillness in Buddhism. Yi also warned Kim Donseo that if he tried to cut off all his thoughts, he would be either oblivious or impetuous.<sup>19</sup> The stillness of the *mibal* state does not imply a pause of Consciousness, but an unmoved activation of it. In short, the stillness of Consciousness cannot be the Annihilation that Buddhism claims. Based on Zhu's account of *mibal*,<sup>20</sup> for example, Han Wōnjin explains the state of the unmoved activation by dividing it into two aspects of Consciousness: activities of Consciousness (K: *nūngjigak*; C: *nengzhijue* 能知覺) and objects being perceived (K: *sojigak*; C: *suozhijue* 所知覺). The activity of Consciousness is the state being equipped with only the principle that activates Consciousness. This approach stems from the question of how Consciousness can be preserved in its purest form. This is because the existence of Consciousness involves the element of *qi* that could lead to something evil. Therefore, Korean Neo-Confucianists try to find a proper way to accept both the existence of Consciousness and the exclusion of *qi* at the same time. The subtle distinction between *mibal* and *ibal* consists in whether it has intentionality.<sup>21</sup>

#### (2) Cultivation of *mibal*

Self-cultivation is intertwined with the ontological understanding of the Mind in relation to *mibal*. As Zhu Xi argues, this is the unity of the Nature with the Emotions, defined as *li* and *qi* that are neither mixed nor separated. The problem is that *qi* is also the default condition that makes up the Mind. Because *qi* has the possibility of evil, the main goal of self-cultivation is to find and train the best way to manifest the Nature as pure goodness,

which is internalized in the Mind, without any interference of *qi*. As previously discussed, Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianists strive to maintain both aspects: the preservation of the innate principle given by the heaven mandate and the control of vital energy. In this vein, there are only two main ways of self-cultivation: a positive way of highlighting the Nature or a negative way of supervising the Emotions. After failing to fully embody the original reality of *mibal*, the fact that Zhu takes the way of watching out for the moment of arising Emotions indicates that he decides to control *qi* activity that could lead to selfish desires. Zhu later moved towards the method of Gradual Fostering in the *mibal* state when establishing his NDEH. Attentiveness is also suggested as a practical way to make the effort to achieve this. The focus of Gradual Fostering is not on disciplining vital energy, but on fully manifesting the Nature.

Korean Neo-Confucianists' methods of self-cultivation for *mibal* state do not differ significantly from these main trends as well. One crucial aspect is understanding the true reality of the *mibal* state. For example, Han Wŏnjin posits that the state of "having yet to arise" should be interpreted as a peaceful balance maintained between the unity of pure goodness and vital energy. In contrast, Yi Kan 李柬 (1677–1727) holds that it should be understood as referring solely to the serene state of pure goodness rather than emphasizing the role of *qi*.

In the ontology of Neo-Confucianism, the material nature is the theoretical apparatus used to explain the diversity of things, including the possibility of evil. According to Han Wŏnjin, everything including humans cannot escape a particular material condition that is innately given to each individual. In his view, there should be a material nature, which can be a latent source of desires, even in the *mibal* state.<sup>22</sup> As we cannot live everyday life without the backup of material nature, we can be disturbed by it even if we let our guard down a little. Therefore, his way of self-cultivation tries to bring about a change in material nature by moving towards restraining or eliminating the possibility of evil thoroughly.

On the other hand, Yi Kan pays significant attention to the bright substance of the Mind without rejecting the existence of material nature. He argues that the prime issue is how to entirely preserve the original reality of the Nature and that the matter of material nature is secondary in perfectly manifesting the pure goodness of human beings. He argues that the pure goodness of the Nature can only be contained in a clean vessel of the Mind. In his argument, the good energy of the Mind (K: *simgi*; C: *xinqi* 心氣) should be identified with the goodness of the Principle of the Nature (K: *sŏngnijijsŏn*; C: *xinglizhishan* 性理之善).<sup>23</sup> Yi's way of identifying the Mind with the Nature aims at a direct realization of the Nature by emphasizing the original aspect of the Mind unbounded by any vital energy of *qi*. No matter how pure the Mind is, however, it is just the vital energy of *qi* that can give rise to something ignoble or turbid. Thus, his argument can paradoxically argue that vital energy plays a leading role in realizing pure goodness over the principle of the Nature. His emphasis on the original Mind would lead to the other argument that there must be a unique and independent realm of the Mind that is different from the *qi*-property. If so, it means that the Mind must be dualistically divided into two parts.

### (3) Pure Goodness of the Mind

Yi Kan's initial plan is to establish the moral mind through the way of Gradual Fostering in order to consummate the pure goodness of the Nature. He attempts to identify the original Mind with the Nature, believing that the original substance of the Mind in the *mibal* state is purely good. Both Han Wŏnjin and Yi Kan agree that the Mind has two aspects: the original and the temperamental, which are viewed as pure goodness and the mixed, respectively. However, their radical difference lies in how they define the true Mind. Han sees the substance of the Mind as the unity of the pure principle with the coarse energy of *qi* while Yi sees it as the unity between the pure principle and the highly purified energy of *qi*. In summary, their positions diverge in their understanding of the property of *qi* that constitutes the original substance of the Mind. Yi seems to believe that the coarse property of *qi* can influence the Mind from the outside, but not form it. Unlike other general states of *qi*, the component of the Mind is the purest and most quintessential energy of it.



For example, Yi argues as follows:

The luminous virtue (the Mind) is the heavenly lord while impulsive energy (K: *hyŏlgi*; C: *xueqi* 血氣) is temperamental. When the heavenly lord presides, then the impulsive energy steps back to obey within us and the Mind is bright as well as empty. This is the space in which the great root exists and the *mibal* state Zisi mentioned. However, when the heavenly lord cannot preside, impulsive energy arises in the mind, and so that the clean and the muddy are unevenly messed up. This is the *mibal* state Han Wŏnjin defined as something mixed with the good and the evil together.<sup>24</sup>

The figurative expression of the heavenly lord captures the active role of the Mind that fully governs bodily faculties. Regardless of how ontologically material the Mind is taken to be, it must be impeccably pure and completely equal to the heavenly principle. When explaining the original substance of the Mind, Yi seemed to keep “the equilibrium of the *mibal* (K: *mibaljijung*; C: *weifazhizhong* 未發之中)” in his mind rather than the *mibal* itself. At that time, the equilibrium represented the optimal state that perfectly controls selfish desires through the spirit of moral rightness, and the term *mibal* is taken to describe the thorough tranquility of the state. The reason he argues that the Mind is identified with the Nature and that the principle truly shares the same substantiality with the vital energy is to strengthen the activity of the Mind. This enhances the power of moral practices, rather than recognizing moral reason precisely. The claim that the Mind is only full of pure goodness leads agents to become the true subjects of moral judgments and actions.

#### 4. The Korean Neo-Confucian Identity of Inwardness

The ontological inquiry into the concept of *mibal* is an example of inwardness, which Charles Taylor defines as a significant feature of modern identity.<sup>25</sup> In the sentence “the moment at which joy and anger, grief, and pleasure, ‘have yet to arise(*mibal*)’ is called Equilibrium,” (Ames and Hall 2001, p. 89) the word we must pay attention to regarding inwardness is “*jung* (中)”, which literally means “center”, “middle”, or “inside”; it often implies an inner space of humans. The use of this metaphor for space allows us to imagine that the answers we seek can be found within ourselves. What are we then looking for? As we can see from the analogy of archery, whether it is the pursuit of absolute truth or solutions to problems, the process of finding it comes from a process of self-reflection, which reviews why projects we planned failed, and being aware of the gap between our plans and the reality of the world. That is, radical reflexivity makes its own inward space by being aware of the dissonance between the plans of the mind and the results of the real world.

This dissonance is connected to the problem of how to control the vital energy of *qi* in the Neo-Confucian ontology of the Mind. For example, Zhu Xi defines the Mind as follows: “Luminous virtue is what humans acquire from the Heaven; it is emptily numinous and lucidly not-benighted (K: *hŏryŏngbulmae*; C: *xulingbumei* 虛靈不昧) and thereby fully embodies all principles and responds to the myriad affairs” (Zhu 2002b, p. 16). Here, the reason I must take heed of the figurative expression of “emptily numinous and lucidly not-benighted” is because it captures the most lucid and finest state of the vital energy of *qi* to delineate the cognitive capacity of the human mind.<sup>26</sup> This is why most Neo-Confucianists encourage themselves to clean the Mind, as it is composed of *qi* and can easily become muddy if not properly maintained. The Mind as metaphor for a mirror can only perceive things as they are when it remains spotless. The efforts to maintain this state can be seen as a form of metaphysical contemplation, preserving the heavenly principle within us.

If our focus is solely on establishing inwardness, the pursuit of the original substance of human nature, and keeping it clear and transparent, it could lead us to pursue “metaphysical *noumena*” even beyond the distinction between good and evil. This could push us to isolate ourselves from all other things. To make the Mind perfectly clean is, in a sense, to urge us to remove ourselves from all forms of normative judgments, which can be viewed as a preoccupation. This approach to the Mind has been criticized as heretical by Yi Ŏnjŏk and Yi Hwang. For example, Yi Ŏnjŏk criticized Cho Hanbo’s teaching as Buddhism,

and Yi Hwang also criticized the Yangming School as heretical Buddhism (Chung 2021, pp. 14–17). To Yi Hwang, the excessive emphasis on the pure goodness of the Mind can be interpreted as the Mind-Principle theory (K: *simjŏngni*; C: *xinjili* 心即理) rather than the Nature-Principle theory (K: *sŏngjŏngni*; C: *xingjili* 性即理), which is considered the authentic understanding of human beings in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism (Kim 2020, p. 46). For those who follow Cheng-Zhu's theory, this perspective is seen as dangerous and problematic because it would beguile us into a lofty realm of esoteric metaphysics, which is nothing but nihilistic annihilation like a dead tree or cold ashes.<sup>27</sup>

To Yi Hwang and Han Wŏnjin, inwardness should not be an isolated and subjective place to seclude oneself, but rather a balance weight to correspond harmoniously with various things in the world. Both Yi and Han aim to establish the principle of moral subjectivity within us. Although the establishment of inwardness per se is similar to what the Yangming School does, they claim that a detailed method of self-cultivation makes a significant difference in active participation in the socio-political affairs of the state. For example, Yangming's approach to inwardness seeks active power in moral practices by establishing the principle of subjectivity formed through a dynamic process of self-realization through real experiences.<sup>28</sup> To achieve this, Yangming Confucianism teaches us to embody the original substance of the Mind *directly* rather than emphasizing the systematic learning of things. In contrast, the Cheng-Zhu Confucian's practical way of radical reflexivity to intensify inwardness is through the investigation of things (格物) and the thorough inquiry into the principle. To Korean Neo-Confucianists, these are the ways of achieving an optimal equilibrium between internal tranquility and socio-political participation in order to achieve the sagely way, which never departs from the human world.

From Zhu Xi through Yi Ŏnjŏk and Yi Hwang to Han Wŏnjin, they were cautious about the interpretation of the original state of *mibal*, as it could be seen as either Buddhist or Yangming Confucianism. This sense of rivalry is tied to the perennial question of balancing knowledge and action. For Yangming Confucianism, acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the underlying principles of all things is not only a tedious task, but also requires a constant connection between knowledge and action. It is even more crucial that we are able to apply knowledge to real-world situations. According to Yi Hwang, Yangming Confucianism's focus on this can lead to confusion between the universal principle and specific actions, detachment from everyday life, and lapse into excessively subjective experiences (Kim 2020, p. 60). This idea of inwardness presented by Yi Hwang and Han should not be an isolated space emphasizing the arbitrary power of only actions but construed as a source of spontaneity unifying the realization of the principle as the ultimate truth and its active fulfillment of what one realizes.

It is important to note that both Han Wŏnjin and Yi Kan share the same goal that each person cultivating virtues must make efforts to construct the ideal order of the Confucian world. The Confucian way of inwardness should paradoxically be open to the external world and maintain a balance between subjective and objective experiences, the inner and outer realms, and even the transcendent and immanent substances. This approach, which I refer to as the Confucian way of inwardness, involves perceiving the world as it is, embodying morally pure goodness, and incorporating spirituality into daily life to purify oneself. Han's efforts to resist the subtle temptation of desires and Yi Kan's gradual cultivation of the original mind do not solely involve deep meditation through quiet sitting. The way of Gradual Fostering both Zhu and Yi suggested emphasizes the importance of observing changes in daily life and becoming aware of the delicate movements of the human spirits in order to maintain the original reality of the Mind. Attentiveness should be practiced not only when staying alone in a calm place, but also in daily activities such as sweeping, mopping, and dishwashing. A life infused with reverence can be seen as a personal experience of divine reality. Yi Hwang's concept of reverence or Attentiveness can be interpreted as a religious attitude towards the divine existence of heaven.<sup>29</sup> However, we need to keep in mind that most Korean Neo-Confucianists take it for granted that the Confucian way of in-

wardness as religiosity cannot be separated from the order of daily life, but rather actively strive to make life better politically and socially.

### 5. Epilogue: Beyond Moral Discourse

The debate between Yi Kan and Han Wŏnjin in the history of thought is situated at the end of the Chinese problem of universals, which was ignited by the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian discourse on the principle and vital energy. The issue of whether the original reality of the Mind is morally good is important, but the question of its ontological “purity” holds greater significance in understanding their perspectives. The deliberation of moral goodness is only part, or the default point, of their concerns. For instance, their debate on *mibal* does not delve into ethical considerations of virtue cultivation or address moral dilemmas in practical situations.

What should be paid heed to here is the point that their debate always focuses on the path of self-cultivation, which involves aligning the particular and real individual with the universal principle. This expands the possibility of human beings to its fullest. As a result, self-cultivation goes beyond the realm of moral philosophy. Moral philosophy aims to achieve morally good goals we have through what we must do while the Confucian way of cultivation makes us either recover our existence to be purified or discover that it is originally pure.

Some Neo-Confucian literati have viewed inwardness as a form of esoteric meditation aimed at transforming human nature. It reinforces self-discipline and helps one handle expected and unexpected events. However, it is very significant to see the Confucian way of inwardness in a sense in which one should not only grasp the original nature of human beings but should also have an axiological connection to other things. It is rather that the importance of inwardness does not necessarily imply an element of first-personal concerns, even though it emphasizes the meaning of “learning for oneself.” As seen in chapter 22 of *Zhongyong*, all Confucianists have a strong desire to actively contribute to the betterment of the world. What should be noted is that the will to participate in improving the world is not separate from “attentive watchfulness when one is alone (K: *sindok*; C: *shendu* 慎獨)”. Han’s criticism of Yi’s ideas as heretical like Buddhism or the Yangming way is puzzling despite Yi’s focus on actively practicing moral actions. In ethical deliberations, Korean Neo-Confucians are concerned with *how* to participate in making the world better rather than with the participation in itself led by the Mind. In short, this means that the reflective question of whether our moral actions have the right direction should be prior to the active practices of goodness. Needless to say, these two sides are not exclusive to each other at all.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The present self and future self can be conceptually switched out for, for example, Chung-ying Cheng’s concepts of the active self and the reflective self, or Ames’s ones of the focus/field self. See (Cheng 2004, pp. 125–28, 145n5) and (Hall and Ames 1998, p. 40).
- <sup>2</sup> Some people may reflect on themselves when their achievements are greater than what they expected, but in that case, they are most likely going to be overconfident in their capacities rather than reflecting on themselves.
- <sup>3</sup> See *Zhongyong* 中庸 ch.14; *Mencius* 孟子 2A7.
- <sup>4</sup> In fact, the relational self here could be termed the “relational person” because the self has nothing to do with its Western conception, which stems from an isolated and individual self-focusing on an invariant identity.
- <sup>5</sup> *Zhongyong* is often translated as the *Doctrine of the Mean*.

- Hereafter, the word started with a capital letter indicates translated concepts from Chinese terms like *xing*, *xin*, and *li*, etc.
- Unfortunately, only letters sent by Yi to Cho remain, and there are no letters sent by Cho to Yi. This means that what we know about the debate biased. Nevertheless, we can draw the entire picture of the debate through the letters sent by Yi.
- Yi Ŏnjök, “Postscript to letters between Son Jungdon(Mangjae) and Cho Hanbo(Mangkidang)” *The Collected Works of Hoejae*. Vol. 5. See (Ŏ. Yi n.d.).
- Yi Ŏnjök, “The second letter to Cho” *The Collected Works of Hoejae*. Vol. 5. See (Ŏ. Yi n.d.).
- Fan Zhongyan, “Yueyangluji” (The Record of the Yueyang Pavilion). The source of this maxim is the Mencius 1B4. See Fan (2007, p. 194).
- As you see the translations of “have yet to arise” and “have arisen” in *Zhongyong*, you may recognize that *mibal* and *ibal* have been used as verb phrases to describe these states of emotions, respectively. Hereafter, depending on the context of my paper, they will be written in Korean pronunciation.
- Zhu Xi, “Yanping Lixiansheng xingzhuang” (The Record of the late Master Li) See (Zhu 2002a, p. 4516).
- Zhu Xi, “Da Luo Canyi” (Reply to Luo Canyi) See (Zhu 2002a, p. 4746).
- Zhu Xi, “zhonghe jiushuo xu” (Prologue to Old Discourse on Equilibrium and Harmony), See (Zhu 2002a, p. 3634).
- Zhu Xi, “yu hunan zhugong lun zhonghe di yi shu” (The First Letter of Discussions on Equilibrium and Harmony with Scholars of Hunan province), See (Zhu 2002a, p. 3130).
- Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei* (Conversations of Master Zhu Arranged Topically), See (Zhu 1986, p. 86).
- Zhu Xi, “Da Lin Zezhi” (Reply to Lin Zezhi), See (Zhu 2002a, p. 1963).
- Yi Hwang, “tapYisukhön” (Reply to Yi Sukhön), See (H. Yi n.d., vol. 14, [https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/node?grpId=&itemId=MO&gubun=book&depth=5&cate1=L&cate2=&dataGubun=%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85%EC%A0%95%EB%B3%B4&dataId=ITKC\\_MO\\_0144A\\_0140\\_010\\_0110](https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/node?grpId=&itemId=MO&gubun=book&depth=5&cate1=L&cate2=&dataGubun=%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85%EC%A0%95%EB%B3%B4&dataId=ITKC_MO_0144A_0140_010_0110) accessed on 1 November 2022).
- Yi Hwang, “tapKimdonsö” (Reply to Kim Donsö), See (H. Yi n.d., vol. 28, [https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/node?grpId=&itemId=MO&gubun=book&depth=5&cate1=L&cate2=&dataGubun=%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85%EC%A0%95%EB%B3%B4&dataId=ITKC\\_MO\\_0144A\\_0280\\_010\\_0070](https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/node?grpId=&itemId=MO&gubun=book&depth=5&cate1=L&cate2=&dataGubun=%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85%EC%A0%95%EB%B3%B4&dataId=ITKC_MO_0144A_0280_010_0070) accessed on 1 November 2022).
- In order to describe subtle differences between the two steps, “consciousness is not benighted and thought has not yet sprouted,” Zhu Xi draws the analogies from two hexagrams of the *Yijing*: *kun* and *fu*. For this, See (Yi 2004, pp. 80–81).
- Suppose there is a lighted lamp moving on its own accord. The light of the lamp diffuses regardless of its movement. This can be called activity of consciousness (*mibal*). If the lamp were to move with an intentional tendency to illuminate a given object, then it would be called *ibal*. Just as the colors and intensity of the lamp can vary in accordance with its uses, the activity of consciousness can be changed into various modes of consciousness such as thought, intention, will, and emotions. Including movements, colors, and intensity, all varieties of the lamp are emotional as well as intentional modes. That is, all these modes of the mind can share one thing: the propositional attitude of intentionality.
- Han Wönjin, “ponyönjisönggijiljisöngsöl” (Discourse on Original Nature and Material Nature), See (Han n.d., [https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/node?dataId=ITKC\\_MO\\_0491A\\_0300\\_010\\_0020](https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/node?dataId=ITKC_MO_0491A_0300_010_0020) accessed on 1 November 2022).
- Yi Kan, “mibaryusönakpyön” (A Debate on the *mibal* state having both good and evil), See (K. Yi n.d., vol. 12, [https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/node?grpId=&itemId=MO&gubun=book&depth=5&cate1=H&cate2=&dataGubun=%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85%EC%A0%95%EB%B3%B4&dataId=ITKC\\_MO\\_0477A\\_0120\\_010\\_0030](https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/node?grpId=&itemId=MO&gubun=book&depth=5&cate1=H&cate2=&dataGubun=%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85%EC%A0%95%EB%B3%B4&dataId=ITKC_MO_0477A_0120_010_0030) accessed on 1 November 2022).
- Yi Kan, “mibalbyön” (A Debate on the *mibal* state), See (K. Yi n.d., vol. 12, [https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/node?grpId=&itemId=MO&gubun=book&depth=5&cate1=H&cate2=&dataGubun=%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85%EC%A0%95%EB%B3%B4&dataId=ITKC\\_MO\\_0477A\\_0120\\_010\\_0040](https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/node?grpId=&itemId=MO&gubun=book&depth=5&cate1=H&cate2=&dataGubun=%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85%EC%A0%95%EB%B3%B4&dataId=ITKC_MO_0477A_0120_010_0040) accessed on 1 November 2022).
- Charles Taylor explains that inwardness is one of the key core features, which is considered the source of the self, in making the modern identity. See Charles Taylor, *Source of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*.
- The term luminous virtue *per se* already implies something intellectual. This is because the Chinese character *ming* indicates an intellectual astuteness that is achieved by visual perception, but also because the character implies light or brightness, which is a classical symbol for insightful wisdom. In addition, we may find such clichés in some Latin phrases, which have been used as the mottos of many universities, such as Lux et Veritas (Yale University and Indiana University), Lux at Veritas Flouereant (Winnipeg University), and Veritas Lux Mea (Seoul National University), etc.
- I will leave aside my comments on whether two of Yi’s criticisms make sense or not because they might lead me far from my main theme. The issue of the criticism of Yangming Confucianism would be a straw man fallacy because the Cheng-Zhu Confucian understanding of human nature is totally different from what the Yangming school intends. According to Tu Weiming, at least, it can be said that Yi Hwang would misunderstand Wang Yangming’s true intention. See (Tu 1976, p. 176).
- For the principle of subjectivity, See (Tu 1976, pp. 167–72).
- Chung quotes representative figures arguing that Confucian thought is interpreted as a religious and spiritual way of thinking. See (Chung 2021, pp. 154–55).



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