A NEO-CONFUCIAN DEBATE IN 16TH CENTURY KOREA

*Its ethical and social implications*

BY

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The present essay aims to analyse one of earliest debates in the history of Korean Neo-Confucianism, and, through such a study, to underline the implications which it had, notwithstanding its apparent abstract style and formulation, on concrete human affairs, from morality to social status.

The debate in question does not present great originality or innovations in the doctrinary field. In fact, the gnoseological and ethical argumentations seem to repeat, with different shades and emphasis, traditional Neo-Confucian themes and theses. Within such a framework, it is thus interesting to note the emphasis it places on the nature of the “four beginnings/seeds” 四端 and the

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1 As is well known, this concept is derived from the following Mencius passage: “All men have a mind which cannot bear (to see the sufferings of) others [. . .] If to-day men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. This will not be as a way whereby to gain the favor of the child’s parents, nor whereby they may seek the praise of their neighbors and friends, nor that they are so because they dislike the reputation (of being unvirtuous). From this case we may perceive that he who lacks the feeling of commiseration (ceyin 側隱) is not a man; that he who lacks a feeling of shame and dislike (xianwu 產惡) is not a man; that he who lacks a feeling of modesty and of yielding (cirang 誼讓) is not a man; and that he who lacks a sense of right and wrong (shifei 是非) is not a man. The feeling of commiseration is the beginning [or the “seed”] of human-heartedness [“humanity”]. The feeling of shame and dislike is the beginning of righteousness [“justice”]. The feeling of modesty and yielding is the beginning of propriety. The sense of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom. Man has these four beginnings just as he has his four limbs. When, having these four beginnings, he says of himself that he is incapable (of developing them), he is injuring himself. And when he says of his sovereign that he is incapable, he is injuring his sovereign. Since all men have these four beginnings in themselves, let them know to give them their full development and completion, and the result will be like fire that begins to burn, or of a spring which has begun to find vent [. . .]” Mengzi, II, 1, 6. Fung Yu-lan, A History of Chinese Philosophy,
“seven emotions” 七情, and their interrelation, recurring themes which have characterized Korean Neo-Confucian argumentation from the 16th century onward.

Such a debate, dealing with the ontological difference between the “four beginnings” and the “seven emotions”, concurrently focuses on the relation between principle, li 理, and the psycho-physical substance or energy, qi 氣. The question thus arises why does this theoretical subject occur so frequently. The debate is not a mere scholastic contention, in which the pleasure of metaphysical ingenuity is combined with the ambition of the parties to show their own subtle and sharp power of dialectic reasoning, but, far more important, it seems concerned with fathoming the fundamental nature of basic human feelings. Within the accepted Neo-Confucian view, of the given goodness of human nature, such an approach leads to the basic problem of how to iron out the contradiction between such a view and the existence of human


2 The seven emotions are mentioned in two books included in Li ji 禮記, Li yun and Zhongyong. According to the Li yun, the emotions which characterize man and are deemed innate are: joy, anger, sorrow, fear, happiness, repulsion and desire. Cf. Legge, The Li Ki, in The Sacred Books of the East, Oxford, 1885, vol. 27, p. 379. The second book, “The Doctrine of the Mean”, contains a passage that was most celebrated in Neo-Confucianism, where four of the above mentioned emotions are singled out: “The state in which joy, anger, sorrow and happiness have not yet made their appearance is called that of equilibrium. When they have appeared, but are all in accordance with the proper measure, this is called the state of harmony”. Cf. Fung Yu-lan, op.cit., p. 374; cf. also Legge, The Five Classics, I and II, p. 384.

3 I deem useful to point out the partial inadequacy of the accepted English translation of some Neo-Confucian terms. For instance, I am convinced that the use of the terms “material force”, or “ether”, or “matter” for qi 氣 is misleading, because of the strong overtones that such a terminology has within the Western cultural framework: in China, as it is known, there is no well-established tradition of separating ideas and spirit from matter, or the supernatural from the natural. Qi therefore includes both matter and material energy, but it also denotes interior vital force (“spiritual” and “material”), temper, morality, and so on. (See for example the recent article by Kim Yung Sik. “Some Aspects of the Concept of Ch'i in Chu Hsi”. Philosophy East and West, 1984, 34, pp. 25-36). “Psycho-physical substance ” or “energy” would be the most appropriate and general term (except in cases where it clearly refers to personal mood and attitude: in these cases I translate it as “temper”), but I must agree with Prof. Gernet's objection that “substance” too has its weak points on account of its philosophical opposition to “accident” [Prof. Gernet's letter of April 24th 1986]. Anyway, in order to maintain strict adherence to the text, Chinese characters or their transcription will generally follow the translation of the main concepts.