

## The Taiwanese Perspective in Investigating Korean Confucianism: Lee Ming-huei's Interpretation of Han Wonjin (1682–1750)

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### Abstract

Numerous representatives of the contemporary Confucian revival from Taiwan are increasingly demonstrating the fact that the development of Confucian philosophy has to be viewed in a broader cultural context, especially in the context of different East Asian regions. While the development of the Japanese Confucian studies has been elaborated to a great extent during the last decades, studies in Korean Confucianism are still rare. Hence, the present article aims to offer a report on a pioneer contribution in this regard. It introduces Lee Ming-huei's investigation into the work of one of the most influential Korean Confucians of the Joseon period; on the basis of Huang Chun-chieh's methodology which exposes the contextualization paradigm, the article explains the main hypotheses and offers a theoretical reflection of the main issues discussed in this research work.

**Keywords:** Han Wonjin 韓元震, Lee Ming-huei 李明輝, East Asian Confucianism, Korean Confucianism

### Izvešček

Številni predstavniki sodobnega konfucijanskega preporoda na Tajvanu izpostavljajo dejstvo, da je razvoj konfucijanske filozofije potrebno obravnavati iz širšega kulturnega konteksta, zlasti ko govorimo o različnih regijah Vzhodne Azije. Medtem ko je bil razvoj japonskih konfucijanskih študij v veliki meri izdelan v zadnjih desetletjih, so študije korejskega konfucianizma še vedno maloštevilne. Zato je cilj tega članka predstaviti pionirsko raziskavo iz tega področja. Članek predstavi raziskavo profesorja Lee Ming-hueija s področja del enega izmed najbolj vplivnih korejskih konfucijancev obdobja Joseon. Na podlagi Huang Chun-chieh-jeve metodologije, ki izpostavi kontekstualno paradigmo,

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razloži poglavitne hipoteze in ponudi kritičen razmislek o poglavitnih vprašanjih obravnavanih v tem raziskovalnem delu.

**Ključne besede:** Han Wonjin, Lee Ming-huei, konfucianizem vzhodne Azije, korejski konfucianizem

## The Importance of Investigating Korean Confucianism

As Huang Chun-chieh writes in his work *East Asian Confucianism, Texts in Contexts*, over the long span of history, Confucian texts travelled across every country and region in East Asia. Their vitality and openness inspired the curiosity of readers in many East Asian areas and invited those readers to engage in creative dialogue with them.

Through the continuing intellectual and spiritual conversation among Confucian scholars, a Confucian community was created. This volume tells the story of the importance of the Confucian traditions and why and how Confucian texts were reinterpreted within the different ambiances and contexts of East Asia. Therefore, we will discover that “East Asian Confucianisms” is an intellectual community that is transnational and multi-lingual. It evolved in interaction between Confucian “universal values” and the local conditions present in each East Asian country (Huang 2014, 3).

This by no means implies that the contemporary Confucian scholars should repeat the cliché that Confucianism is the *sine qua non* of East Asian civilization. In his numerous works, Huang Chun-chieh rather seems to suggest that the paradigm of “East Asian Confucianisms” can open up a brand new vista for the study of Confucian traditions in general. He argues that Chinese Confucian scholars are finally to leave the ghetto of their “national learning,” with its practice of holding state-centrism as the basis of Confucianism (Huang 2014, 5). Hence, we must reconsider the development of Confucianism in a broader East Asian perspective. According to Huang, by contextualizing Confucianism in East Asian cultures and societies, we find ourselves in a better position to appreciate the diversity and variety of East Asian Confucian traditions.

In this context, the Korean Confucianism is no exception:

During the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), the Japanese school of Confucianism based on the work of Zhu Xi (朱熹, Huian 晦庵, 1130–1200) began to take shape. This was largely due to the great influence of Zhu Xi studies in Joseon (1391–1910) Korea, especially in the writings of the Korean scholar Yi Hwang 李滉 (or Yi Toegye 李退溪, 1501–1570), most of whose works were also published in Japan. A later Ming (1368–1644) scholar Luo

Qinshun (羅欽順, 1466–1547) revised Zhu Xi's philosophy in his *Kunzhiji* (困知記 *Knowledge Acquired through Adversity*). This book had a profound impact on the Tokugawa world of thought. Luo's book was printed in Japan on the basis of the Korean version (Huang 2014, 7).

Thus, the Chinese—and especially Taiwanese Confucian scholars are increasingly paying attention to the Korean intellectual history and to the role of Confucian studies within Korean history.

### Lee Ming-huei's Investigation

Lee Ming-huei from the Academia Sinica in Taipei belongs to the community of contemporary Confucian scholars who have been, due to the above mentioned reasons, investigating Korean Confucianism for several years.

In his long-term studies on Korean Confucianism, he firmly believes that a competent researcher has to move deliberately into the tension between contextualization and de-contextualization (Huang 2014, 90) in order to uncover the multiple dimensions of his research object. Hence, he especially lays stress upon the contexts of canonical texts. In contrast to historical and social contexts, the contexts of canonical texts have their own relative independence, which is the research object of conceptual history. In addition, in studies either on historical and social contexts or on conceptual history, de-contextualization can not be avoided, since all of them concern a comparative perspective. Comparison is namely tightly linked to abstraction, in turn means de-contextualization. Even the very formation of any concept originates from abstraction and hence from de-contextualization. Hence, all research approaches include aspects of both contextualization and de-contextualization at the same time, but with different focusses.

In his article “Korean Confucian Han Wonjin's 韓元震 Critique of Wang Yangming's 王陽明 Thought” (Lee 2013), Lee Ming-huei discusses the marginal position of Wang Yangming's teaching in Korean Confucianism. The article analyzes Korean Confucian Han Wonjin's critique of Wang Yanming's three main concepts: “extension of original knowing” (*zhiliangzhi* 致良知), “mind is principle” (*xinjili* 心即理) and “unity of knowledge and action” (*zhixingheyi* 知行合一), and at the same time reveals the complex relationship between Korean successors of Zhu Xi's teaching and Wang Yangming's thought in Korea.

Although Lee's investigation is focused upon Han Wonjin's interpretation, we have—as a random, but relevant background—to consider the fact that this Korean scholar was by no means the only Korean representative of critical reflections on Chinese Neo-Confucian synthesis between Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist thought. In other words, we have to take into consideration slightly earlier developments in early Qing Period. Already before Han Wonjin's interpretation, we can witness certain critical tendencies among scholars belonging to the Han Learning scholarship, who also highlighted and strongly rejected the Buddhist-Confucian syncretism in Wang Yangming's thought. In fact, Korean scholars such as Han Wonjin (who was loyal to Zhu Xi's thought) did not go nearly as far as 17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese Confucian scholars did in identifying, and rejecting, the Buddhist-Confucian syncretism in Neo-Confucian thought as a whole.

The present article introduces Lee Ming-huei's main hypotheses and offers a critical reflection of the main issues discussed in them.

The essays mainly investigate five central questions, connected to the Korean Confucianism, beginning with a short introduction of its historical background and then proceeding to the analyses of various critiques directed against The Chinese School of the Heart-Mind (*xin xue* 心學) that were written by one of the most influential Korean Confucianists, Han Wonjin, focusing, among others, especially upon his critiques of the following concepts and hypotheses respectively, that were developed by Wang Yangming:

1. The extension of original knowledge
2. The heart-mind is the structural principle
3. The unity of knowledge and action

Here, one cannot avoid the question, why the so-called School of the Heart-Mind, which was established by the prominent Chinese neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529), was so severely criticized and actually more or less completely neglected in Korean Confucian ideologies. Lee's article offers a very reasonable explanation, which will be discussed below, but is, however, still open to debates and invites East Asian scholars to carry out further research on the issue.

## A Short Historical and Philosophical Background

Lee Ming-huei opens his investigation with a short, but nevertheless detailed discussion of the historical and ideological background of the Confucian history of thought in Korea. He focusses especially upon the question of why Korean Confucian scholars did not generally accept Wang Yangming's teaching. In this framework, Lee also offers an explanation to which Korean stream of thought Han Wonjin actually belonged.

The political situation in the Joseon dynasty Korea was conditioned by the struggle between different schools of thought, which started in the middle of 16<sup>th</sup> century. There were two main Confucian schools of thought, one represented by Yi Hwang (Master Toegye, 1501–1570) and the other by Yi Yulgok (1536–1584).

These two schools were disputing with each other concerning several main issues belonging to the Neo-Confucian philosophy. The most famous among them was the debate about the “four virtues and seven emotions” (*siduan qiqing* 四端七情). Each of the two schools persisted on different viewpoints concerning the relation among the four virtues (that were, according to Mencian interpretations, mostly innate), and the seven emotions, (which were mostly seen as rooted in specific actual circumstances in which individuals were living).

In general, Yi Yulgok closely guarded the rules and measures of Zhu Xi's teachings, and persisted that the structure of the Neo-Confucian doctrines had to be based on two concepts:

1. on the duality of the structural principle and creative vitality (*li qi erfen* 理氣二分) and
2. on the trinity of the heart-mind, nature and feelings (*xin xing qing sanfen* 心性情三分).

Yi Huang, on the other hand, acknowledged his loyalty to Zhu Xi's thought, but made through his own ire-interpretations some important modifications in his doctrines.

Different political fractions intertwined with the debates between these two schools of thought. At that time, two political factions were formed, namely the Western and the Eastern faction. As for the connection of the political factions to schools of thought, the Eastern faction belonged to disciples of Yi Toegye and Jo Nammyeong (Yo Sik, 1501–1570) and the Western faction belonged to the system of Seong Ugye 成牛溪 and Yi Yulgok. In 1592, short before the Imjin War, the

Eastern faction again split into two further political factions: the Northern and the Southern faction. After the middle of 17<sup>th</sup> century the Northern faction's power declined, and the political struggle continued only between the Southern and the Western faction. As for the teaching system, the Western faction in general carried on Yi Yulgok's school of thought while the Southern faction, in general carried on Yi Hwang's philosophy. In the Western faction later appeared two additional groups named *Noron* and *Soron*. The central figure of *Noron* group was Song Siyeol (1607–1689). He viewed Ki Sagye (1548–1631) as his teacher, while Kim was Yi Yulgok's official disciple. Song Siyeol's official disciple was Gwon Suam (1641–1721), while Han Wonjin (1682–1751) was the official disciple of Gwon Suam. Therefore, Han Wonjin succeeded Yi Yulgok's school of thought which remained loyal to the rules and measures of Zhu Xi's teachings, and insisted that the structure of Doctrine of meaning and principle be based on the two aforementioned paradigms, namely on the “duality of the structural principle and vital creativity” (*li qi erfen* 理氣二分) and on the “trinity of heart, nature and emotions” (*xin xing qing sanfen* 心性情三分).

## The Relation between the Heart-Mind and the Structural Principle

In this regard, it is important to consider the fact that, according to Han Wonjin, Wang Yangming's supposition that the “innate knowledge was identical with the structure of nature” (*liangzhi ji tianli* 良知即天理) had to be equated with the Buddhist concept of the “true heart-mind” (*zhenxin* 真心). In this way, he tried to show that Wang Yangming's thought was, in its essence, thoroughly influenced by the Buddhist philosophy.

As Lee Ming-huei exposes, it is also important to understand the background of Han Wonjin's critique of the “extension of original knowledge” (*zhiliangzhi* 致良知). Through his analysis of Han Wonjin's commentaries from *The Collected Works of Wang Yangming*, it became obvious that Han Wonjin's critique of Wang Yangming's “extension of innate knowledge” is rooted in their different viewpoints on the origin of moral values. According to Wang Yangming, the origin of moral values is “innate knowledge” (*liangzhi* 良知), whereas Han Wonjin claims that the origin of moral values is “the object of knowledge” (*zhishi duixiang* 知識對象). Lee Ming-huei names the first perspective “moral subjectivism” (*daode zhuti zhuyi* 道德主體主義) and the second “moral realism”

(*daode shizailun* 道德實在論). At the same time he emphasizes, that in fact, Wang Yangming did not deny the importance of “the object of knowledge” as far as it consists moral coherency.

Regarding Han Wonjin’s critique of the supposition, according to which “the heart-mind is identical (or compatible) with the structural principle” (*xin ji li* 心即理), it also becomes obvious that Han Wonjin’s critique is overly simplified. Through a detailed analysis of Han Wonjin’s comments on *The Collected Works of Wang Yangming*, Lee comes to the conclusion that Han Wonjin reduced Wang Yangming’s paradigm “heart-mind is structural principle” solely to the concept of the “heart-mind”. Ultimately, this means that, according to Han, we do not need to search for structural principles in exploring external objects, but merely to abide to the heart-mind. Lee points out that Wang Yangming never claimed that the heart-mind was actually identical to the structural principle. What he meant by saying that “the heart-mind is (compatible with the) structural principle” should be understood from the metaphysical point of view, meaning that the heart-mind drafts the cosmic structural principle.

Since Han Wonjin inherited Zhu Xi’s way of thinking, which claims that the heart-mind (*xin* 心) belongs to the physical world, while the structural principle (*li* 理) belongs to the metaphysical world, and the connection between the two is of cognitive nature, therefore his way of thinking is incompatible with Wang Yangming’s. Ultimately, this has logically lead to a misinterpretation of Wang Yangming’ thought.

### **Han Wonjin’s Understanding of the “Unity of Knowledge and Action” and Some Other Critiques of Wang Yangming’s Philosophy**

This significant set of problems has been elaborated through Lee Ming-huei’s analyses of Han Wonjin’s commentaries on the relation between knowledge and action, which belongs to the crucial contributions of Wang Yangming’s philosophy to the Neo-Confucian discourses.

According to Lee, Han Wonjin made an interpretative mistake at the very beginning by exaggeratedly stressing the importance of food and journey analogy<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As Lee also points out, Wang Yangming in this analogy unfortunately uses the diction of what happens before and after while obtaining the knowledge of the good or bad taste of the food or of the

which Wang Yangming applied to illustrate the concept of “unity of knowledge and action”. The analogy itself is not as important as the message it tries to convey, namely the unity of knowledge and action. But Han Wonjin misses the point and occupies himself with the formal order within the relation between knowledge and action and focuses far too extensively upon the (actually insignificant) question of what comes first, or what has to be treated primarily, knowledge or action. In his analysis, Lee Ming-huei namely shows that Wang Yanming merely used this analogy to refute Zhu Xi’s saying “first knowledge, then action” (*zhixian xinghou* 知先行後), which complies with common knowledge (*changshi* 常識). However, Wang Yangming’s understanding of the concept of knowledge cannot be understood as common knowledge, but rather as knowledge derived from human “innate knowledge”. In addition, according to Wang Yangming, action can not be understood in the narrow sense of acting or practising, but also contains the intention (*yi* 意).

Han Wonjin’s second commentary on Wang Yangming’s concept of “unity of knowledge and action” is based on Yi Hwang’s commentary on this concept. As Lee has previously discussed in his article by noting Yi Hwang and Wang Yangming, the former made a distinction between two levels of knowledge and action: first is the organic level of *gi* 氣 and the second the moral level of *yili* 義理, where he claims that the concept “unity of knowledge and action” can be only achieved on the organic level of *gi*, whereas on the moral level of *yili* the unity of knowledge and action cannot be established.

Here, Han Wonjin made two objections. First, he objected Yi Hwang that the concept of “unity of knowledge and action” can not be achieved neither on the organic, nor on the moral level. Furthermore, he opposes Yi Hwang’s distinction between the two levels of knowledge and action citing Mengzi 孟子, and claiming that on the moral level of *yili* it is also possible “to know yourself without studying and to be capable without making effort”. Lee Ming-huei shows that this presumption was based on insufficient understanding of Wang Yangming’s philosophy. He claims that Han Wonjin could come to understand and acknowledge the meaning of Wang’s “unity of knowledge and action” if he would have deepened and upgraded his studies on Mengzi.

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dangers of the journey, which to a non-expert of Wang Yanming’s thought gives the impression that first comes practice and second comes knowledge, instead of the unity of knowledge and practice.



In the conclusion of his essay, Lee points out some other, more random misinterpretations of Wang Yangming's work that become visible through analyzing Han Wonjin's commentaries. Most of them are also linked to Han's insistence on Zhu Xi's duality of the heart-mind and the structural principle. Thus, they mostly lead to a differentiation between the organic and the moral, or the physical and metaphysical level of onto-epistemological discourses. Besides, Han Wonjin also criticizes Wang Yangming's personal intentions and his "bad moral character" which can not serve as a matter of academic discussion. Hence, these kinds of direct ideological attacks on Wang Yangming's philosophy also illustrate how Korean Confucianism has always been intertwined with political struggle.

## Conclusion

In addition, Lee Ming-huei's analysis also clarifies an additional significant question concerning the Korean Confucianism. This question is linked to the reason for the fact that Korean Confucian scholars did not generally accept Wang Yangming's teaching, although many Chinese Modern Confucian scholars (e.g. Mou Zongsan 1975, 123) and Western sinologists (e.g. Bunnin 2002, 27) have pointed out that Wang's Confucianism can be regarded as a case of successful reinterpretations of Zhu Xi's Confucianism.

This question is quite interesting and important for most Chinese and Taiwanese scholars dealing with the relation between original Neo-Confucian philosophy on the one side, and its Korean modifications on the other. The question itself is, of course, quite complex and connected with several factors, including political struggles, differences in both languages and traditions, as well as with local historical developments of both geo-political areas.

In his essay, Lee Ming-huei added an important clarification to the scope of the respective debates. According to him, this is because throughout history of Korea Zhu Xi's teaching held the dominant and absolutely leading position. Two main figures that contributed to spreading of Zhu Xi's teachings and on the other hand the suppression of Wang Yangming's teaching in Korea were: a scholar of Zhu Xi's teaching from Ming dynasty, Luo Qinsun 羅欽順 (1465–1547), and the leading figure of Korean Confucianism, Yi Hwang (1501–1571). Luo Qinsun's work *Kunzhiji* (困知記) spread throughout Korea before Wang Yanming's works were introduced to the area. Since Luo Qinsun criticizes Wang Yanming's thought, this influenced other Korean Confucian scholars and led to their

prejudices towards Wang Yangming. In addition, Yi Hwang's critiques of Wang Yangming's thought and his moral character were equally influential in Korea. In this context, Lee clearly shows that Yi Hwang's critique of Wang Yangming's thought was based on severe misunderstandings of his work. He also shows that Yi was not familiar enough with all of Wang Yangming's works<sup>2</sup>; therefore, he failed to fully grasp Wang Yangming's thought.

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<sup>2</sup> Lee exposes that Yi Hwang only studied Volume One of Wang's *Chuanxilu* 傳習錄, without taking into consideration its second volume. Hence, most of his critiques were based on secondary sources, such as Zhu Xi's *Zhuzi wannian dinglun* 朱子晚年定論.