

# YI Gan's Inclination Toward the Learning of the Mind-Heart in the 18th Century: A Comparison with Wang Yangming's Mind-Heart Philosophy

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The study of Joseon Neo-Confucianism has recently given some attention to an inclination toward the Learning of the Mind-Heart (*xinxue* 心學), and YI Gan 李柬 (1677–1727) is at the center of this research. He was an outstanding disciple of GWON Sang-ha 權尙夏 (1641–1721) and a successor to the philosophical spirit of the Yulgok School; he is renowned for initiating the Horak Debate through his controversies with HAN Won-jin 韓元震 (1682–1751). In “A Thesis on the Not-Yet-Aroused State,” YI asserted that the mind-heart is purely good, basing his argument on the doctrine that “*li* and *qi* are actualized as the same entity, and the mind-heart and nature are united as one.” HAN Won-jin criticized this assertion as belonging to the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism.

The latent features in YI Gan's notion of the mind-heart and nature can be found by examining his debate with HAN Won-jin on the not-yet-aroused state (*mibal/weifa* 未發). This concerned the problem of whether there existed a psychophysical nature in the mind-heart before arousal: YI contended that the mind-heart in the *mibal* state is absent from the psychophysical nature, and so is purely good, whereas HAN asserted that the mind-heart is of a psychophysical nature, and thus, has both good and evil.

YI proposed that “*li* and *qi* are actualized as the same entity and the mind-heart and nature are united as one,” his argument being as follows:

First, *mibal* has two dimensions, shallow and deep. At the shallow level, *mibal* refers to the state in which equilibrium is not established; and at the deep level, *mibal* is in a state of equilibrium, thus achieving the great foundation. The former is the ground for which HAN made his argument about the presence of good and evil in the psychophysical nature before arousal; and the latter is the basis for YI's notion of the pure goodness of the mind-heart before arousal. Of the two dimensions, the deep level is what is described in *Zhongyong*, which thus affirms its true meaning. YI therefore concludes that the mind-heart before arousal is purely good.

Second, in the *mibal* state of great foundation, nature should be in equilibrium and the mind-heart should be upright. It is important to understand that the mind-heart must be upright for nature to be in equilibrium, since no one can have a balanced nature unless their mind-heart is upright; just

as li is present apart from qi in the world of origin, but li cannot be present without qi in the world of phenomenon. YI's inference, therefore, is that in the initial of great foundation, li and qi should be actualized as the same entity and the mind-heart and nature should be united as one.

Third, regarding the distinction between li and qi, nature is li and the mind-heart is qi. However, the qi constituting the mind-heart is not qi in the general sense, but a special category of qi, the "quintessential and bright qi." This means that the mind-heart as upright and flowing qi is different from the corporeal qi. Thus, the mind-heart composed of upright and flowing qi—which epitomizes the lord of Heaven, spiritual illumination, and bright virtue—should be distinguished from the corporeal qi, the psychophysical constitution, physical matter, physical form, and the psychophysical endowment. There is no need to consider the psychophysical nature in the unaroused mind-heart, which is not affected by the corporeal qi, and such a mind-heart is therefore purely good. YI Gan thereby rejects HAN Won-jin's assertion that good and evil are present in the psychophysical nature before arousal, and this is how YI Gan justified his contention that the mind-heart before arousal is purely good.

YI Gan's arguments on the purely good mind-heart, li and qi actualized as the same entity, and the unity of the mind-heart and nature had some considerable similarities to WANG Yangming's theory of the mind-heart. Indeed, HAN Won-jin criticized YI Gan's idea of the purely good mind-heart as resembling the Lu-Wang School's theory of the mind-heart, and this was not simply a misunderstanding on his part, but an interpretation with some degree of validity.

For instance, JEONG Je-du, a representative WANG Yangming scholar of Joseon, criticized the dualistic notions that "li and qi are separated from each other" and "li and qi are two different things," which is consistent, to some extent, with YI Gan's arguments. Also, WANG Yangming's understanding that innate knowledge is endowed equally to sages and ordinary people and never disappears seems consonant with the view which YI Gan expressed in the discussion about the analogy of steel and pools: that the substance of a mirror (mind-heart) is not the steel (corporeal qi) embodying the mirror, but its reflective capability (spiritual illumination), and that sages and ordinary people have an identical mind-heart of bright virtue which never disappears.

Then should YI Gan be considered as an inadvertent convert from ZHU Xi to WANG Yangming? By no means: he was, thoroughly and unequivocally, an ardent follower of ZHU Xi's philosophy, as is generally acknowledged by earlier research.

Indeed, YI Gan himself made it clear that his notion of bright virtue was based on that of ZHU Xi. Moreover, YI's fundamental assertion—that li and qi are actualized as the same entity and the mind-heart and nature are united as one—was derived from ZHU Xi's view on the inseparability of li and qi, together with YI's idea of the "single path of activity of qi issuing and li mounting it" (gibal iseung ildoseol 氣發理乘一途說). And YI Gan's divergence from WANG Yangming's philosophy is more significant than his convergence: for example, WANG scholars believed that the mind-heart is li and talked much about jianyi 簡易 which means a simplicity, which is quite different from YI Gan's emphasis on self-cultivation. Also, the purpose of YI Gan's insistence that

sages and ordinary people have an identical mind-heart was to establish the ontological basis of the potential for ordinary people to become sages; as such, it was clearly different from WANG's ideas about action and practice, as revealed by such expressions as "the streets are full of sages."

All in all, it is difficult to deny that the inclination toward the theory of the mind-heart in YI Gan's notion of the mind-heart and nature was, essentially, a Neo-Confucian concept securely rooted in ZHU Xi's philosophy, albeit bearing some similarity to WANG Yangming's ideas. And this understanding provides some useful insights into the tradition of the Learning of the Way, which gave great importance to self-cultivation and practice, a distinct characteristic of Joseon Neo-Confucianism. Indeed, this can be glimpsed in YI's contention that li and qi should be actualized as the same entity, and the mind-heart and nature should be united as one: for ordinary people, if not for the sages, too often qi fails to follow the principle and likewise the mind-heart fails to follow nature.