
Yi T'oegye on the Ideal Human Image : A Modern Confucian and Global Perspective

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I. T'oegye's Reputation: A Brief Introduction

T'oegye is arguably the most eminent thinker and scholar in the Korean tradition of Confucianism known as Sōngnihak 性理學 (school of human nature and principle).¹ He also represents a leading legacy of Confucian education, ethics, and spirituality in entire East Asia. In modern Western scholarship as well, T'oegye is highly regarded as “the commanding figure in Zhu Xi orthodoxy in Korea” (de Bary 1981, 197) and “a major source of inspiration for creative scholarship on Confucian philosophy and its modern scholarship” (Tu 1978, 467). In my published works, I also pointed out that T'oegye left behind a superb model of original thinking and writing, for which reason Western scholarship on Korean Neo-Confucianism has grown significantly especially since the late 1980s.²

T'oegye's greatest scholarly reputation was accomplished during his fifties and sixties after retirement.³ Through his major writings and biography (*Ōnhaengnok* 言行錄) and his letters to his disciples and colleagues, we can discover T'oegye's character, integrity and intellect.

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1. The famous Song Chinese thinker Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) is closely identified with the so-called Zhu Xi school of Neo-Confucianism in East Asia. This tradition is also known as the Sōngnihak school in Korean because it emphasized the “learning” (*hak/xue*) of *sōng/xing* 性 (human nature) and *i/li* 理 (principle), two of the most important ideas in the Neo-Confucian literature.
 2. Current literature on T'oegye and Korean Neo-Confucianism in English includes the following: de Bary and Haboush 1985; Kalton et al. 1994; Kalton 1988; Ro 1989; Chung 1995, 2004, 2010a, 2010b, 2011b, 2016; and various articles by Tu, Ching, de Bary, Youn, etc. Korean-language works include those by Kūm Changt'ae, Yun Sasun, Pae Chongho, Yi Sangūn, and others. Japanese works are Abe Yoshio 1965; Abe Yoshio et al. 1977; Takahashi Susumu 1986; and others. For details, see the bibliography.
 3. Except as otherwise noted, most of the biographical information that follows is drawn from his *Chasōngnok* 自省錄 (Record of self-reflection), in *T'oegye chōnsō* (Complete works of Yi T'oegye) (hereafter abbreviated as *TC*), vol. 3, 151-190; *Yōnbo* 年譜 (T'oegye's chronological biography), *TC* vol. 3, 576-620; and *Ōnhaengnok* 言行錄 (Record of T'oegye's words and acts) 1:1a-6:35a in *TC* vol. 4, 9-261. For my annotated translation of the *Chasōngnok* with a comprehensive introduction, see Chung 2016. For T'oegye's life and scholarship, see also Kalton 1988 and Chung 1995.

II. Self-Cultivation: A Holistic Way

T'oege frequently discussed self-cultivation as a central topic in his famous writings such as the *Chasöngnok* 自省錄 (Record of self-reflection)⁴ (hereafter abbreviated as *CSN*) and *Sönghak sipto* 聖學十敦 (Ten diagrams of sage learning).⁵ This topic is also mentioned in his biography and his correspondence with his disciples and colleagues. T'oege emphasized it as a way of cultivating true humanity.

In 1559, T'oege advised his leading junior colleague, Ki Kobong 奇高峯 (1527–72)⁶ that basic conditions for pursuing a public career has become corrupt because of selfish obsession with gaining personal fame or political power. “What is lacking is...great effort at the practice of self-cultivation” (*CSN* 17; Chung 2016, 120). For T'oege, this should be done both internally and externally in daily life.

1. Internal and External Efforts:

In a letter to his disciple (Nam, Sibö 南時甫), T'oege said: “The principle of the Dao (Way) is to be cultivated in daily life. What a wonderful teaching, indeed!” (*CSN* 2; Chung 2016, 54). “Continuous efforts” are required over “a long period of time,” so that one’s mind becomes “pure and masterful” (*CSN* 13 [letter to Kim, Tönsö 金敦敍]; Chung 2016, 90).

T'oege taught another leading disciple (Chöng, Chajung 鄭子中),

“‘Be orderly and dignified’ and ‘be solemn and austere.’⁷ In this way, the mind- and heart becomes one and naturally will not go wrong or [become] one-sided.” (*CSN* 7; Chung 2016, 68)

In other words, one’s entire self is united. This confirms the basic Confucian teaching of body

4. The *Chasöngnok* is one of T'oege’s greatest works. Its philosophical merit certainly rivals his two other monumental works: the *Sönghak sipto* 聖學十圖 (Ten diagrams on sage learning) (see Kalton 1988 for its full translation) and “Four-Seven Debate Letters” (see Chung 1995 and Kalton et al. 1994). However, as a written testament of T'oege’s character, teaching, and moral-spiritual practice, the *Chasöngnok* is of greater interest. It consists of 22 letters and 4 attached essays T'oege wrote to his six close disciples and three junior colleagues during his fifties. These letters were carefully selected by T'oege himself after practicing “self- reflection” (*chasöng/zixing* 自省). His goal in compiling the *Chasöngnok* volume was to inspire his disciples and colleagues in following the true Confucian way. T'oege also used it for guiding his own daily self- cultivation during his sixties (years of his retirement)..

5. For the famous *Sönghak sipto*, see *TC* 7:4b-35a (vol. 1, 195-211). It is one of his most celebrated works: a great systematization of learning, self-cultivation and socio-political ethics, together with ten diagrammatic essays and commentaries that are based on the integrated framework of metaphysics, ethics, and spirituality. A full English translation of the *Sönghak sipto* is Kalton 1988. I also discussed it in Chung 1995.

6. Kobong is Ki’s literary name, whereas his given and courtesy names are Taesöng 大升 and Myöngöñ 明彦, respectively. Ki is best known by his literary name. For his biography, see Chung 2016, n. 336.

7. The *locus classicus* of this frequently quoted teaching in the Confucian literature is the *Book of Rites* (one of the Five Classics), “Meaning of Sacrifices”; see Legge’s translation (1970), *Li Ki*, vol. 2, 216.

control and mind cultivation.

T'oegye also recommended “single-minded concentration” for self-cultivation as follows:

“Effort at single-minded concentration penetrates both action and tranquility.... So neither one should be ignored, but nourishing the internal by means of controlling the external is essential and urgent....This therefore means daily self- cultivation.” (CSN 17 [letter to Ki Kobong]; Chung 2016, 123).

What I find important here is its modern meaning for controlling the internal and external sides of one's life human nature physically, emotionally, intellectually and ethically.

In this regard, T'oegye loved to discuss *simhak/xinxue* 心學 (mind cultivation or the learning of the mind).⁸ According to him,

“Confucius said, ‘Hold onto it [the mind] and it will remain, let go of it and it will disappear’ [Mencius, 6A:8]⁹...” (CSN 7).

T'oegye therefore emphasized: “The mind is the master of the self” that “firmly remains at the center of numerous phenomena” (CSN 13 [letter to Kim Tonsö]; Chung 2016, 88). The *simhak* is an essential way to realize our original, pure mind as true humanity.¹⁰

T'oegye also liked self-reflection (*chasöng/zixing* 自省), so he often practiced contemplation after reading, which worked out well for his self-cultivation.¹¹ His goal was to unify the self internally and externally, which inspired him to seek a deeper meaning of ideal humanity.

2. *Kyöng* and Holistic Self-cultivation:

T'oegye's major writings emphasize self-cultivation in terms of *kyöng/jing* 敬 as the most important idea in his entire thought. According to the *Book of Rites*, one of the Five Classics, “The self-cultivated person never lacks *kyöng/jing*.”¹² Confucius said: “Be reverent (*kyöng/jing*) in handling affairs” (*Analects*, 13:19). Zhu Xi taught it as an attitude of “reverence” toward heaven

8. In Song China, Zhu Xi and his leading follower Zhen Dexiu discussed the idea of *simhak*; see de Bary 1981.

9. Lau's translation 1970, 165. Zhu Xi's discussion of “holding onto it and preserving it” also appears in the *Jinsi lu* 近思錄 (Reflections on things on hand), 4:6 (Chan 1967, 143).

10. T'oegye emphasized this point also in his *Sönghak sipto*, esp. *Simhak to* 心學圖 (Diagrammatic treatise on mind cultivation), TC 7:29a (vol.1, 208), and *Sim t'ong söngjöng tosöl* 心統性情圖說 (Diagrammatic treatise on the saying that “the mind commends human nature and feelings”), TC 7:a23a (vol.1, 205). For these essays in English, see Kalton 1988, 160-164 and 120-127 or Chung 1995, 62-64, 128-132, 168-172.

11. T'oegye liked Neo-Confucian “quiet-sitting” (*chöngjwaljingzuo* 靜坐) as a helpful component of self-cultivation. He said: “After practising quiet-sitting, you will be able to unify yourself by re-collecting your dispersed body and mind” (*Önhaengnok*, 1:16b, 6:6b, 6:7b in TC vol. 4, 176, 246 and 247). Chung 2004 and 2010a present T'oegye's *simhak* and contemplation in relation to Neo-Confucian ethics and spirituality.

12. See the *Book of Rites*, “Summary of Ceremonies,” *SBBY* 1:1a.

and earth, as well as moral respect and “seriousness” in handling things and human relationships. The classical and Neo-Confucian doctrine of *kyōng* has other related renderings: “solemnity,” “attentiveness,” “awareness,” “mindfulness,” and so on.

In his *Chasōngnok* and *Sōnghak sipto*, T'oebye repeatedly mentioned that self-cultivation requires a dedicated life of *kyōng*. As he advised his leading disciple, Kim Tonsō,

“For entering the Way (Dao), there is nothing more important than *kyōng*....”¹³ “Never let it out of your mind; make no selfish effort....This is the sagely method of mind cultivation.” (CSN 13; Chung 2016, 91)

T'oebye instructed his disciples how to practice *kyōng*:

“Be correct in movement and appearance and be orderly in thinking and deliberating” (CSN 7 [letter to Chōng Chajung]; Chung 2016, 68).¹⁴

He also said:

“Do not lose *kyōng* while being active or tranquil...dealing with daily affairs” (CSN 13; Chung 2016, 87).

This is the key theme that frequently appears in T'oebye's leading works.¹⁵

In a letter to his junior colleague Kobong, T'oebye stated: “Be reverent and serious (*kyōng*) to rectify the self internally” (CSN 17).¹⁶ This will make one's mind to “remain truly self-aware and calm (solemn).” True self-cultivation therefore requires the cultivation and practice of *kyōng* consistently. This must include controlling and transcending one's “selfish cravings”:

“When you are tranquil, cultivate the original essence of Heaven's principle (moral principles; *ch'ōllit'ianli* 天理)¹⁷ daily; when you are active, remove the emerging sprouts of selfish cravings....” (CSN 13 [letter to Kim Tonsō]; Chung 2016, 90)

13. This saying is attributed to the Cheng brothers: *Yishu* 遺書 (Surviving works), 18:5b and 18:6b (and 15:9a). It is also quoted in Zhu Xi's *Jinsi lu*, ch. 4, secs. 14-16, 36, 38, 47-49; see ZZWJ 4:29a (Chan 1963, 601).

14. Likely citing the Cheng brothers' *Yishu* 15:5a and 18:3a. According to Chan, these two sentences are quoted by Zhu Xi's ZZQS 2:22a-b (see Chan 1963a, 607).

15. For example, see the *Simhak to* in the *Sōnghak sipto*, TC 7:29a (vol. 1, 208) and 7:23a (vol. 1, 205); consult Kalton 1988, 160-64 and 120-127, respectively. I discussed this in Chung 1995, 128-132, 168-172; see also TC 16:8a-17:6b (vol. 1, 402-430) for T'oebye's Four-Seven letters.

16. T'oebye is likely quoting the Cheng masters in the *Yishu*, 15:1a (see Chan 1963, 552). See also the *Jinsi lu* 4:48 (Chan 1967, 144), where Zhu Xi said, “Make real effort.... ‘Rectifying the internal life’ and ‘concentrating on one thing’ will naturally need no manipulation. The body and mind will be reverent (*kyōng/jing*), and the internal and external will be united” (ZZQS 2:22a-b).

17. The key idea of Heaven's principle (moral principles) frequently appears in T'oebye's works, including the *Sōnghak sipto* (TC 7:29a; vol. 1, 208), *Ch'ōnmyōng tosōl* 天命圖說 (Diagrammatic explanation of the mandate of Heaven) (TC, vol. 3, 144), and his Four-Seven debate letters.

One should transcend one's selfish ideas and desires by "holding fast to *kyǒng*" (*chigyǒng/qijing* 持敬), so that there are no more "disorderly and perplexed thoughts" and no more "worry or anxiety." Overall, T'oegye emphasized *kyǒng* as "the master of the self" (CSN 14; Chung 2016, 101) internally and externally in daily life.

In regard to our WHF conference theme, I suggest that T'oegye's message points to a way of wisdom in seeking the intellectual, moral and spiritual ideal of human existence.

3. Poetic and Aesthetic: An Engaging Life

T'oegye is also famous for composing over two thousand poems of various types, including those about self-cultivation and nature.¹⁸ In 1550 shortly after retiring to his hometown, he composed a four-line poem entitled "T'oegye," after the name of his hometown.¹⁹ This and other related poems express his deep pleasure with "retirement" (*t'oe* 退), study, writing, and self-cultivation, while appreciating the natural scenery such as "foothills and rocks" and "flowing streams" (*gye* 溪). This love of nature inspired his philosophic, spiritual and aesthetic orientation.²⁰

Regarding an engaging life of wisdom, T'oegye advised his disciple, Nam Sibō as follows:

In your daily life you should...empty the mind by controlling its fondness and cravings; live a pleasant life with spare time; appreciate landscape painting, calligraphy, or flowers; and take pleasure in watching stream fish and mountain birds. In this way, you can truly think congenially and not always dislike dealing with things so that your mind's vital energy (*ki/qi* 氣) may always remain pure and steady. Let it not deviate or become disorderly so that you do not resent or get angry. This is the essential method. (CSN 1; Chung 2016, 52)

This and some other related passages certainly indicate that during his retirement years [50s and 60s] T'oegye enjoyed reading, writing, teaching, contemplation, landscape painting, calligraphy, and watching the beauties of nature.

He pursued not just a scholarly life but also artistic and spiritual activities. So it would be worthwhile to consider this in our global consideration of discussing "the ideal human image."

18. Most of T'oegye's poems are collected in *TC* 1:1a-5:43a (vol. 1, 47-162). A well-researched topic among Korean scholars in Korea. Two kinds of his poems are called "nature poems" and "self-reflection poems."

19. This famous poem reads as follows:

Being foolish yet comfortable after retiring (*t'oe*),
Also worried about my last years because my study is lagging behind.
After deciding my shelter at a place over this stream (*gye*),
I practice self-reflection every day like this flowing water. (*T'oegye sōnsaeng munjip* 1:47)

20. As I pointed out elsewhere (Chung 2011a, 2011c), T'oegye's nature poetry and his deep appreciation of natural creativity seem to resonate with the modern discussion of religious ethics and ecological issues.

III. Concluding Remarks

T'oebye is not only a superb legacy of Korean Confucianism but also a highly engaging archetype of learning, ethics, and spirituality, which emphasizes the unifying integration of self-cultivation, virtuous life, and public ethics. As a scholar, public servant, educator, and thinker, T'oebye affirms that it is important to regulate and harmonize the inner and outer pillars of daily human life. This is a way of wisdom that extends self-reflective, attentive and reverential *kyöng* toward the human and natural world.

Confucianism has been “the learning to be human”: a *humanistic* way to “cultivate (or perfect) the self” and “transform the world.” It is a form of “humanism,”²¹ which continues to support our shared concern for universal order, harmony, and prosperity. It addresses the issue of how to be human in the most genuine sense of its meaning. However, since everyone is conditioned by certain factors – material, psychological, social, political, or whatever – the possibility of dehumanization cannot be ruled out. This seems to be embedded in our “existential dilemma.”

A century ago, Max Weber (1864-1920), an eminent German social and religious thinker, eloquently pointed out: Confucianism is an “ethic of adjustment to the world,” which will continue influencing East Asia in interaction with the modern West (Weber 1964). I agree with Weber’s insight. Confucianism assimilates itself with changing social, economic and ethical dynamics in today’s Korea, for instance.²² Globally, it is adjusting itself to the pluralistic world of ideas, beliefs, values, identities, and institutions, as discussed in currently growing scholarship on the “global relevance (or significance) of Confucianism.”²³

21. Julia Ching (1993, 2000) interpreted Confucianism as an “ethical humanism as religion” or “lay spirituality.” Tu Weiming (1985) also called it a form of “humanism” with its own “religiousness” (see also Tu et al. 1992).

22. Confucianism continues to influence Korean society through its moral-spiritual teaching and practice (including ancestral rites); accordingly, there are certain cultural patterns of interaction between Confucian values and other traditions in Korea. See Chung 2015 for my discussion of the Korean case in term of “tradition and modernity.” The Confucian role is still significant in shaping cultural identity and tradition in East Asia; see Tu 1996 and Tu et al. 1992 for the entire East Asian case.

23. Since the late 1980s Confucianism in modern East Asia has been a major subject of study in terms of modernization, education, social hierarchy, economic development, political economy, democracy, etc. Several examples of interpretations include such common phrases as “industrial Confucianism” and “Confucian capitalism” in Japan and the so-called Four Little Dragons (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore). Vogel’s *The Four Little Dragons...*(1991) explained East Asia’s “industrial Neo- Confucianism,” referring to Confucian contribution to education and economic success. Tai’s *Confucianism and Economic Development...*(1989) is another relevant work on a similar topic. Berger’s edited *An East Asian Development Model* (1988) articulated the Confucian culture of political economy and capitalism. Rozman’s edited *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation* (1991) is a comparative study of modernization in China, Japan, and Korea. Smith edited *The Confucian Continuum: Educational Modernization in Taiwan* (1991). Tu’s edited *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity* (1996) presented several ethical, social and economic currents of Confucian influence in East Asia. For my study of the Korean case, see Chung 1993, 1994, 2015. Most recently, Hon and Stapleton’s edited *Confucianism for the Contemporary World* (2017) discusses Confucian relevance to the 21st-century’s “social and political issues” such as capitalism, political plurality, and civil society. Ames and Hershock edited a new book (2017) to present Confucianism as “an international resource for an emerging world cultural order” in relation to “new global” migration, wealth, and democracy. Lee and Jones 2017 focuses on the “global significance” of Confucianism in terms of ethics and politics. Liu and Ma 2018 considers “the relevance of Confucianism to American and Chinese education” and Confucianism

In my academic role as a Confucian scholar in the twenty-first century, I am trying to articulate the modern implication of T'oegye's thought for our World Humanities Forum. Why?: to seek an *ideal human image* from a Confucian and global perspective.

T'oegye's scholarship is dedicated to seeking the ultimate truth and goodness of human nature. I continue to find this significant in Confucian dialogue with other philosophical and spiritual traditions of the world because of their shared commitment to the moral and transcendent ideal of human existence.²⁴ Its basic message is about the holistic experience of true humanity in transcending (removing) selfishness and thereby extending reverential wisdom and compassion to all living beings.

Isn't this about self-transformation and the transformation of the world?²⁵ At the heart of T'oegye's thought is this profound faith in human character, dignity, intellect and potential, embodying the harmonious unity of our natural, ethical and spiritual realities. I say so, despite the growing influence of technology, globalization, economy, and politics in our 21st century.

As we know, the notion of the ideal "human image" varies according to language, history, philosophy, religion, culture, and so on. Nonetheless, what we discover through T'oegye's 16th-century life and thought is not only a healthy philosophy or an engaging role model for what I call a life of wisdom and wellbeing, but also inspires our interdisciplinary humanistic understanding of "the human image in a changing world," the general theme of our 5th World Humanities Forum in Busan.

To conclude, T'oegye's Confucian experience and insights – which I have presented today – have a worthwhile modern implication for our global discussion and promotion of the ideal human image in today's Korea and around the world.

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Abbreviated Titles:

- CSN *Chasöngnok* (see Yi T'oegye below).
 TC *T'oegye chönsö* (see Yi T'oegye below).
 ZZQS *Zhuzi quanshu* (see Zhu Xi below).
 ZZWJ *Zhuzi wenji* (see Zhu Xi...).

for "moral education in an era of advanced technology."

24. In this context, I discussed further comparative perspectives in Chung 2011b, 2004 (sec. 3), and 2016 (Introduction, especially pp. 43-45).

25. I discussed this topic elsewhere in terms of Confucianism and interreligious dialogue (Chung 2004, 2010a, 2011b). The current literature on the comparative study of Confucian religiosity regarding the Chinese tradition includes: Neville 2000; Ching 1993, 2000; Tu 1985, 1989; Taylor 1991; Berthrong 1994.

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