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Suffering, Evil, and the Emotions

—A Joseon Debate between Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism—

Eric Nelson

홍콩과기대학

1. Introduction

This essay will offer a reassessment of the moral psychological and ethical implications of the debates between Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism that occurred during the decisive period of the end of the Goryeo (高麗) dynasty and formation of the early Joseon (朝鮮) dynasty.¹ The debates and decisions of this epoch resulted in the hegemonic dominance of Neo-Confucianism and the marginalization of Buddhism that had previously been a state religion in Korea.²

1 I would like to thank Halla Kim and Jin Y. Park for their encouragement and opportunity to present this work in public. Note that in this essay, I rely on Charles Muller's online versions of his forthcoming edition and translation of the two texts under discussion. They are available online at: <http://www.acmuller.net/index.html>. They are published in: A. Charles Muller, *Korea's Great Buddhist-Confucian Debate: The Treatises of Chong Tojon (Sambong) and Hamho Tuktong (Kihwa)* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015).

2 On the decline of Korean Buddhism, see James Huntley Grayson, *Korea: A Religious History* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 184. Buddhism was marginalized among the political and scholarly elites during the Joseon period, and has seen a remarkable revival since its demise. On the modern renewal of Korean Buddhism, see the essays in Jin Y.

I examine in this paper how texts such as the *Array of Critiques against Buddhism* (*Bulssi Japbyeon* 佛氏雜辨) of the politician and Confucian thinker Jeong Dojeon (鄭道傳, penname Sambong 삼봉, 三峰; 1342- 1398) and *The Exposition of the Correct* (*Hyeonjeong non* 顯正論) by the Sŏn (C. Chan 禪) Buddhist monk Gihwa (기화, 己和; Hamheo Deuktong 涵虛得通; 1376-1433) offer different interpretations of the project of self-cultivation in relation to established forms of social relationships, the moral psychology of the emotions, and the problems of evil and suffering.³

Drawing on earlier Neo-Confucian critiques of Buddhism, Jeong argued that Buddhism is an intrinsically flawed way of life insofar as it undermines proper social relationships and their hierarchies, ignores natural human emotions and their appropriate cultivation in achieving the ethical personhood of the exemplary person (C. *junzi*, K. *kunja* 君子), and relies on superstitious and speculative ideas such as the ideas of rebirth and karma to explain human suffering and install fear among the masses. Buddhism appears in both its vulgar karmic and elite antinomian manifestations to be contrary to the natural tendencies of things and humans, as Jeong envisioned—based on the Sino-Korean interpretation of Mengzi (孟子) and the *Yijing* (易經)—the cosmos to be a natural-ethical whole that is enacted and reenacted in cultivated forms of ritual life that

Park, *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

3 Despite English-language translations being available online, there has been surprisingly little discussion of these important texts. Previous English-language accounts of the debate include: Yeon-sik Choi, "To survive as a Buddhist Monk in a Confucian State: Gihwa's Response to Jeong Do-jeon's Critique of Buddhism," *Korea Journal* 47 (2007): 104-133; Charles Muller, "The Centerpiece of the Goryeo-Joseon Buddhist-Confucian Confrontation: A Comparison of the Positions of the Bulssi japbyeon and the Hyeonjeong non," *韓國佛教學* 9 (2003): 23-46.

personally and socially follow, cultivate, and perfect the natural rhythms, seasonality, and temporality (C. *shi*, K. *si* 時) of life.

Gihwa belonged to the Imje Sŏn (臨齋禪) lineage that promoted *hwadu* (“critical phrase” 話頭) *kong’an* (公安) meditation. Gihwa’s response to Neo-Confucian critiques of Buddhism does not reject or polemicize against Confucianism as such. Confucianism is encompassed as a valuable moral perspective within a broader more comprehensive Buddhist whole. Gihwa articulated how Buddhism is capable of developing and incorporating multiple and diverse practices, methods, and forms of thought and feeling through “skillful means” (C. *fangbian*, K. *pangp’yŏn* 方便) that differentiate and address various levels and ways of understanding in order to promote awakening in diverse settings. The two authors’ divergent understandings of “moral psychology” and models of self-cultivation inform how they evaluate the respective merits and failures of Confucian and Buddhist projects as socially embodied practices that presuppose and rework the emotions in improving or perfecting the self.

While Jeong focused on the incommensurability of Buddhism and Confucianism, Gihwa denied that Buddhism is a position vis-à-vis Confucianism. It is a transformative way that can incorporate and transcend positions, including its own position. In eclectically or pluralistically recognizing the unity of the three teachings (C. *sanjiao*, K. *samkyo* 三教) of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, Buddhism reveals itself to be more than one teaching or perspective. It can both recognize the natural moral sensibilities presupposed in Confucianism and provide ways of realizing Confucianism’s own project of becoming a sage (C. *shengren*, K. *sŏngin* 聖人) as a spontaneous and responsive ethical condition.

2. Intercultural and Interasian Philosophy

Intercultural philosophy is increasingly perceived as a necessary task for philosophy.

This task is typically interpreted to broaden and open philosophy in a way that still presupposes Western philosophy to set the standard of what counts as philosophy. It is the normative model according to which other philosophies are judged and evaluated.

The word “philosophy” has a Greek origin and a “Western”—and often underemphasized Middle Eastern—history, only being introduced into East Asia through its encounter with the west. Still, the matter to be thought that it names has a broader intention than Western intellectual history or the Western history of metaphysics. The history of Buddhist thought in East Asia, for instance, provides multiple examples of the prospects and risks of philosophizing across cultural differences.

It is sometimes argued that the west is transcultural and multicultural in a way that other cultures and civilizations are not. We might ask: has there and can there be transcultural thinking in East Asia? For example, we might consider the encounters, confrontations, and adaptations between Buddhist and Confucian philosophies that have taken place since the introduction of Buddhism into East Asian cultures.

Confucian thinkers often regarded Buddhism with suspicion as an alien tradition introduced from South and Central Asia. Buddhists in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam—but especially in China and Korea where Neo-Confucianism became a dominant ideological force—were forced to justify or excuse the legitimacy of taking up a form of life and thought adopted from the “West”: South and Central Asia. One strategy was to Sinicize the Buddha into a Chinese sage by claiming he was Laozi after

he left China.

Other Buddhist thinkers decentering the center: Another strategy was to deemphasize notions of “center,” “East” and “West”, barbarian and non-barbarian. This strategy, along with the argument for the inner harmony of the three teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism occurs in *The Exposition of the Correct* (*Hyeonjeong non* 顯正論) of the Sŏn Buddhist monk Gihwa (己和, 1376-1433) whose personal name was Hamheo Deuktong (涵虛得通).

Jeong Dojeon 鄭道傳 was a leading Confucian intellectual and political figure of the late Goryeo (고려, 高麗) and early Joseon (朝鮮) period. As the author of *Array of Critiques against Buddhism* (Bulssi Japbyeon 佛氏雜辨), he is considered a merely ideological, political, and repressive figure by his Buddhist critics. Yet he remains popular in Confucian and Korean historically-oriented popular traditions, after being vilified for a long time by the Joseon dynasty that he helped found, even appearing on Korean TV in a historical drama series devoted to his life.

Gihwa did not have a television series made about his life, though there is one about his teacher Muhak Jacho (無學自超; 1327-1405). In the context of critiques such as his *Array of Critiques against Buddhism*, Gihwa remarked:

“‘East’ and ‘West’ are nothing more than names that are applied to this or that place according to the situation. There is no such thing as occupying the center and determining East and West” (Gihwa, HBJ 7.223b15). East, West, and Center are conditional orientations rather than absolute positions. Merleau-Ponty said of philosophy: “Its center is everywhere, its circumference nowhere.”⁴

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 128.

It would be anachronistic to identify Gihwa's statements with current debates about multiculturalism or identity politics, yet they do indicate a kind of transcultural thinking that cannot be limited by national origin or character. Gihwa's argument concerns the judgments about the other's way based on tribal origin. He remarked:

If we do not respect the Way of the Buddha because he is a barbarian, shall we also not respect the Ways of Shun, who was born among the Eastern tribes, and King Wen, who was born among the Western tribes? Can we disparage a person's Way just on the basis of their being foreign? [It should be based on] the results of their works and the Way which governed their behavior (Gihwa, HBJ 7.223b15).

Sino-Korean debates between Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism often involved the foreignness of Buddhism and its appropriateness in China and East Asia. Jeong Dojeon cites two scholars referring to the Buddha as a barbarian. Yet his main argument does not rest on the foreignness of the Buddha. Jeong turned the Buddhist universalist claim around against itself when he claimed that the Buddha's foreignness cannot excuse the Buddha's flawed understanding of humanity and his inadequate practice of benevolence:

Although the Buddha was a foreigner, he was still a human being. So how could he alone lack this heart-mind? (Jeong, 80c).

Jeong belonged to the activist-reformist tradition of Confucianism that appealed to Mengzi's ethico-political "people-centered" (C. *minben*, K. *minbon* 民本) insights strongly rooted in an account of nurturing and activating the goodness inherent in human nature.⁵ The heart-mind that

is identified with the four sprouts of human nature by Mengzi appears to be lacking in the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha's practice of benevolence is imperfect in its disregard for our emotional connections with those who should be closest to us. Jeong's critique centers on the universality of the heart-mind (C. *xin*, K. *sim* 心) in the nature of all humans rather than the foreignness of the teaching as such, since even foreigners have the sprout of compassion articulated by Mengzi as leading to the attunement of benevolence.

The *Array* of Jeong Dojeon and *The Exposition* of Gihwa need to be interpreted in the context of early Joseon politics and the ideological consolidation of Neo-Confucianism and the declining political fortunes of Buddhism. We also see, however, genuine argumentation that should be considered philosophical in that it addresses issues of ontology, cosmology, and—in particular—ethics and moral psychology. There is intellectual content to this dispute between these different interpretations concerning human nature and the cosmos and how best to live and flourish amidst the changing phases—interpreted through the five elements or phases (C. *wuxin*, K. *ohaeng* 五行), *yinyang* (K. *ŭmyang* 陰陽) theory, the Yijing, and so forth—or interconnected interdependent karmic nexus of life.

3. Suffering, Evil, and the Emotions

Questions of the causes and conditions for evil and suffering have been posed across multiple philosophical and religious traditions. We might ask in the context of these two texts: Why do suffering and evil

5 See Süng-hwan Yi, *A Topography of Confucian Discourse: Politico-Philosophical Reflections on Confucian Discourse since Modernity* (Paramus, NJ: Homa Sekey Books, 2005), 79.

befall persons and sentient beings in the way that they do? Is it karma or the mediation of virtue and destiny described in the Sino-Korean tradition through paradigmatic works such as the *Yijing*?

The role of the emotions and “moral psychology” are key elements in cultivating an appropriate way of life in both Confucianism and Buddhism, even as they dispute their nature, role, and scope. We can consequently pose the questions: Are emotions intrinsically moral or “good” such that they need cultivation into a proper form of life that is emotionally balanced and responsive to the natural and human orders and their hierarchies? Or should the emotions be unfolded in response to karmic conditioning into unlimited compassion for all sentient beings?

The problems of “evil” and suffering play significant roles in Sino-Korean debates between Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism. We can well inquire: Is there a problem of evil in East Asian thought that has the same function or is parallel to the role of theodicy (“God’s justice”) in Western thought?⁶ There are questions in these two texts of how and why suffering happens and whether suffering is connected with moral virtue and vice, merit and fault. Each author raised the problem of suffering in response to the other tradition. According to Jeong, Buddhist karma is an inadequate explanation of suffering. Buddhism blames the victims for things outside of their control and power through the doctrine of karma, and is cruel in its understanding of karmic fate and hells.⁷ For Gihwa, however,

6 On the problem of evil outside Western philosophy, compare Franklin Perkins, *Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane: The Problem of Evil in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

7 Jeong critiques the popular understanding of karma without considering more sophisticated accounts that are precisely concerned with issues such as complicity and suffering. Compare the discussion of karma in: Eric S. Nelson, “Questioning Karma, Buddhism and the Phenomenology of the Ethical,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics: Revisioning Karma*, 2005:

Confucianism lacks an adequate sense of the suffering and interconnectedness of sentient beings. He strongly emphasizes the problem of animal suffering, which he argues is repressed in Confucianism, in describing his own conversion from Confucianism to Buddhism as a more comprehensive and fundamental teaching.

4. The Trouble with Buddhism

Drawing on earlier Sino-Korean “school of principle” (C. *lixue*, K. *lihak* 理學) Neo-Confucian critiques of Buddhism, particularly Zhu Xi 朱熹, Jeong Dojeon argued that Buddhism is an intrinsically flawed way of life insofar as it undermines proper natural and social relationships and their appropriate hierarchies, ignores natural emotions and their appropriate cultivation in achieving the ethical personhood of the exemplary person, manipulates the people through fear through its images of hells and karmic retribution, and relies on superstitious and speculative ideas in its popular forms such as rebirth, transmigration, and karma, while its elite forms are antinomian, nihilistic, and involve arbitrary personal excesses.

Jeong maintained that Buddhism is inadequate to the real problems of suffering it aims to overcome. His argument can be reconstructed using vocabulary from Western accounts of the problem of evil. In Jeong’s interpretation of Buddhism, “physical evil” is suffering and “moral evil” is due to the lack of merit producing activities and lack of faith. The consequences of this lack are karmic retribution, including numerous hell regions and rebirth. The explanation is the “metaphysical evil” of karma.

353-373; Eric S. Nelson, “The Complicity of the Ethical: Causality, Karma, and Violence in Buddhism and Levinas,” Leah Kalmanson, Frank Garrett and Sarah Mattice, *Levinas and Asian Thought* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 99-114.

The problem with karma is that it blames and punishes those who are not responsible, since they have been karmically conditioned, and it threatens excessive punishment that creates a deficient moral psychology based in fear and anxiety. Thus, he gives the example that the criminal should be cained rather than threatened with being sent to hell. Hell does not exist, and even if it does exist there is—according to Confucianism in this case—no constant self that endures past this life to go to hell. Jeong employs a Confucian notion of a relational and temporally finite self to reject the fiction of a self that continues over multiple lifetimes.

Based in the Confucian understanding of the emotions in moral life, Jeong argues that Buddhism undermines appropriate moral emotions (such as morally based disgust, contempt, disdain, etc.) while creating excessive emotions in the general population (such as fear and resentment) and in its elite practitioners (such as arbitrariness).⁸ Jeong employs an argumentative strategy similar to Western critics of religious belief, such as Hume and Nietzsche's arguments about the moral psychology of punishment in religion, and draws on his interpretation of the moral psychology of taste in Mengzi in offering the following anecdote to support his case that Buddhism distorts ethical taste and judgment by utilizing fear and anxiety rather than resolving them in the balanced heart-mind:

8 On the significance of the emotions and negative emotions in Confucian moral psychology, see Eric S. Nelson, "Resentment in Western and Confucian Philosophy," in Jeanne Riou and Mary Gallagher, ed., *Re-thinking Ressentiment: On the Limits of Criticism and the Limits of its Critics* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014); Eric S. Nelson, "Recognition and Resentment in the Confucian Analects," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 41, 2, 2013, 287-306; and Eric S. Nelson, "The Question of Resentment in Nietzsche and Confucian Ethics," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Issue 19), June 2013: 17-51.

A monk asked, “If there were no hell, what could be used to frighten people from doing evil?” I said, “the liking of goodness and the dislike of evil seen in the exemplary person, is like ‘liking an attractive color, and disliking a repugnant odor,’ —they arise from within oneself and there is no contrived intent that brings these feelings out. Once one has an evil reputation, then his/her mind is filled with shame. If one receives a public caning, why does he or she need the teaching of hell in order to not behave in an evil manner?” (Jeong, 82a).

5. On Responding to Misfortune

Buddhism is, in both its “popular” fear-based karmic and “elite” antinomian manifestations, contrary to natural ethical and moral psychological tendencies in Jeong’s naturalistically oriented critique. Jeong envisioned the cosmos instead as a natural-ethical whole that is enacted and reenacted in cultivated forms of ritual life in the individual and community. Suffering and evil are due to departing from the fabric of virtue and destiny. They are due to excess and deficiency in the changing character of things and persons, as described in the *Yijing* and traditional works on *yinyang* and the five phases.

Imbalance and suffering in life are unavoidable and call for a proper emotional response so that one remains unafflicted and ethically motivated even in the midst of misfortune. Jeong’s depiction of Confucianism on suffering can be reconstructed in the following terms: “Physical evil” is suffering and “moral evil” is the lack of virtue and appropriateness. The consequences of moral evil are personal and social imbalances that perpetuate and heighten suffering. The explanation for this cycle lies in the changing patterns of vital forces.

The virtuous tend to be more fortunate because of their moral psychology,

yet there is no underlying or absolute correlation of virtue and misfortune. The problem then cannot be resolved by advocating karma. Instead of blaming individuals for bad karma, one should adopt to the changing world. That is, the exemplary person is not excessive in fortune or misfortune. Fortune and misfortune are largely contingent beyond one's own sphere of virtue. One can only adopt oneself to the situation as one does to the changing of the seasons. Confucianism cultivates appropriate emotions and balanced emotional states that lead one to be sympathetic to others by extending from nearest to farthest. An emotionally balanced and non-excessive life is a necessary condition, if not sufficient, for virtue and well-being.

Liberation from fear and anxiety is necessary for the establishment of tranquility and benevolence. How do exemplary people deal with misfortune and fortune? They correct their own mind and nothing more. They cultivate the self, nothing else. Fortune need not be sought to be obtained, and misfortune need not be avoided for one to keep it at a distance. Jeong refers to the Confucian idea that: "The exemplary person experiences a lifetime of trouble without a moment of anxiety" (Jeong, 82b). If misfortune comes to one from the outside, one goes along with it, and that's it. It is like the cold and hot weather passing before us, which we cannot control and that have no direct relation to ourselves.

6. Gihwa's Response

Jeong argues that Buddhism fails in achieving tranquility and its tranquility is disconnected from what matters in an emotionally balanced and just social life. Gihwa maintained that the three teachings are encompassed as valuable perspectives within a broader more comprehensive

Buddhist vision. His argumentation on behalf of synthesis was based on Buddhist conceptions of “essence-function” (C. *tiyong*, K. *che-yong* 體用) and the “mutual interpenetration of phenomena” (C. *shishi wuai*, K. *sa-sa mu-ae* 事事無礙).⁹ Gihwa criticizes Confucian virtues and arguments for their partiality and limitation, reinterpreting them in a more universal perspective of essence and interdependence that he associated with the inner truth of Buddhism.

Universalization is the key to Gihwa’s argument for Buddhism, as he stressed both the universality of the message and the universality of the experience of suffering, including the animal suffering that has been forgotten in conventional Confucianism:

This doubt [about Confucian humaneness] was buried within my mind for a long time without being resolved. Then, while traveling around Samgak-san in 1396, I arrived to Seungga-sa, where I had the chance to chat with an old Sŏn monk throughout the night. The monk said: “The Buddha has ten grave precepts, the first of which is to not take life.” Upon hearing this explanation, my mind was suddenly overturned, and I recognized for myself that this was indeed the behavior of the truly humane person. I was hereupon able to deeply embody the teachings of the Way of humanity. From this time forth, I was never again to be confused regarding the differences between Confucianism and Buddhism... (Gihwa, HBJ 7.220a14)

Gihwa indicates that we should examine the full range and scope of the ethical in each philosophy: Do compassion and responsiveness apply only to some select beings or all sentient beings? He claimed:

⁹ See A. Charles Muller, “The Key Operative Concepts in Korean Buddhist Syncretic Philosophy: Interpenetration (通達) and Essence-Function (體用) in Wŏnhyo, Chinul and Kihwa,” *Bulletin of Toyo Gakuen University* No. 3, March 1995: 33-48.

All creatures are like this, sharing in the same inherent spiritual awareness. Furthermore sharing in the emotion of loving life and hating to be killed, how do they differ from human beings? Hearing the sound of ripping flesh and the cutting of the knife, they are in utter fright as they approach their death. Their eyes are wild and they cry out in agony. How could they not harbor bitter and resentful sentiments? And yet people are able to turn a deaf ear. In this way human beings and the creatures of the world affect each other without awareness and compensate each other without pause. If there were a humane person present, how could he/she observe such suffering and continue to act as if nothing was wrong?"(Gihwa, HBJ 7,220b4).

What then is the relationship between karma and compassion that Confucian critics of Buddhism have placed into doubt? Gihwa's argument can be reconstructed by using the following distinctions. "Physical evil" indicates the universality of suffering. "Moral evil" is the lack of insight in our own participation in the reproduction of suffering and lack of universalized compassion. The explanation is karma as a moral-causal logic that requires a change in attitude about suffering and the liberation from karma. The evidence for karmic causality rests on stories of karmic rebirth such that hells and karmic consequences are real. The motivation for this analysis is not to frighten but to liberate. Buddhists do not wish bad karmic consequences on anyone; they wish liberation from the sources of those consequences. Misfortunes are unwanted and their suffering is real, yet they also indicate turning points for eliminating suffering by cultivating an attunement of spontaneous awareness and compassion.

7. Conclusion: Human Nature and “Moral Psychology”

Two conceptions of human nature and the emotions are at work in this debate: For Jeong, nature is ordered as a whole, but finite (one birth and death) and governed by cycles outside of human responsibility and choice. Famine is due to flux in vital forces, not previous bad deeds. One needs to control, manage, and balance personal, social, and natural life. This can be done through following a work such as the *Yijing*, which—following Zhu Xi—has a naturalistic and practical for Jeong rather than a metaphysical and supernatural character. In Gihwa’s account, by contrast, nature is ordered as a whole and in its macrocosmic and microcosmic correlations; it is knowable through traditional Sino-Korean conceptions of the five phases, *yinyang*, the *Yijing*, and so on; but more fundamentally through the Buddhist experience of dependent origination and karma.

There are two conflicting conceptions of the heart-mind as responsiveness to suffering at play in the debate between Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism. From the Neo-Confucian Perspective, Buddhism limits and undermines the heart-mind and natural moral affections that are the basis of a balanced life and a just social order. Emotions are extended outwards in greater circles into one body, but the near has priority over the far, the elder deserves more respect than the young.

From Gihwa’s Buddhist perspective, which defends both popular and Sŏn Buddhism in response to Jeong’s Neo-Confucian criticisms, he answers by arguing that limited and partial conceptions of Confucianism limit the heart-mind, and the compassion and humaneness that it valorizes, by not embracing sentient beings as a whole. Buddhism does not so much reject and repress partial and limited forms of love through

fear; it expands and encompasses the emotions in practicing unrestricted compassion, generosity, and loving kindness. Jeong's concerns were legitimate given the fallenness of actual Buddhist practices even as he failed to appropriately address core Buddhist experiences and ideas.