

# Neo-Confucian Chinese Philosophy

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### Module on Korean Four-Seven Debate

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#### Module Objectives and Overview

As part of my semester-long course otherwise devoted to Chinese Neo-Confucianism, we spend two class sessions (one week) on the famous debate over issues in metaphysics and moral psychology held between the Korean Neo-Confucians Yi Hwang (T'oegye, 1500-1570) and Ki Taesung (Kobong, 1527-1572). The sophisticated, extended exchange of letters between the two has been marvelously translated by Michael Kalton and several collaborators, making possible an unusually deep examination of Neo-Confucian philosophy and reasoning. The second session ends with a half-hour debate which has been both educational and fun for all concerned.

Kalton's book has sufficient background to acquaint students with the context of Korean Neo-Confucianism, but some previous exposure to Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism is extremely helpful if students are to really grasp what is at stake. In particular, Chapters 2 and 5 of Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction* work very well with this material.

#### Materials

This module relies on Kalton, et al., trans., *The Four-Seven Debate: An Annotated Translation of the Most Famous Controversy in Korean Neo-Confucian Thought* (SUNY, 1994)

#### Readings and Discussion Questions

##### Class 1: Emotions: Four-Seven Debate I

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- Reading:
  - Kalton et al, trans., *The Four-Seven Debate*, Introduction (pp. xv – xxxv) and Chapters 1 – 4 (pp. 1 – 47)
- Topics / Questions:
  - Introduction to Korea, Korean Neo-Confucianism, and the Four-Seven Debate
  - The debate is sparked by T'oegye's statement (on a diagram of Chong Chiun):
    - “The Four Beginnings are the issuance of principle (*li*); the Seven Feelings are the issuance of material force (*ch'i*)” (p. 1).
    - NB that *ch'i* = *qi* = vital stuff
  - T'oegye then revises this to read:
    - “The issuance of the Four Beginnings is purely a matter of principle and therefore involves nothing but good; the issuance of the Seven Feelings includes material force and therefore involves both good and evil” (p. )]
    - NB that “Seven Feelings” = “seven emotions.”

- Finally, T'oegye locates a passage from Chu Hsi that is virtually the same as his original statement:
  - “The Four Beginnings, these are the issuance of principle; the Seven Feelings, these are the issuance of material force (四端是理之发，七情是气之发)” (p. 14).
  - NB that “principle” = “Pattern”
- What are the main disagreements?
- How can Kobong explain the Chu Hsi (i.e., Zhu Xi) quote?
- With whom do you agree? Can you see issues that neither one solves adequately?

## **Class 2: Emotions: Four-Seven Debate II**

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- Reading:
  - Kalton, Chapter 5 (pp. 49-79) and selections from Chapter 6 (pp. 84-7 and “On the Last Section” – pp. 93-5)
- Topics / Questions:
  - The authority of Chu Hsi (Zhu Xi)
    - T'oegye and Kobong variously appeal to Chu Hsi and explain/justify their differences from him. See pp. 15, 17-18, 21, 41-2, 76, and 93-5.
    - What are their respective views of Master's Chu's role in their debate? Are they consistent over time?
    - Do their respective positions match up with views you are familiar with from today?
  - One of Kobong's core contentions is that the Four Beginnings are a subset of the Seven Feelings, which seems to imply that they can go wrong.
    - How do they debate this issue? Contrast Kobong on p. 46 with T'oegye on pp. 65, 72, and 77.
    - Which position seems the most convincing? Is it consistent with Mencius's original statement?
  - Dueling metaphors
    - T'oegye introduces the horse-rider metaphor on pp. 65-7. What is he trying to show? Is it convincing?
    - Kobong relies a great deal on a moon-reflecting-in-water metaphor. What are its strengths and weaknesses? In particular, is there a difference between the role of “radiance” and “movement of waves” (p. 86)?
- Activity:
  - Divide students into two groups, pro-T'oegye and pro-Kobong; give them 10 minutes to prepare reasons justifying their position and criticizing their opponent's, and then hold a 20-30 minute debate.
    - It is helpful to ask students to think both of reasons that T'oegye and/or Kobong would recognize, and also reasons that might have traction today but would not have occurred to T'oegye or Kobong
    - I have found it works well to require that all students speak once before anyone can make a second contribution (and so on)