A century or two from now, when future historians look back on our time, they might notice two important opposing strands weaving a woof and a warp through the fabric that is the twentieth century. This has been a century of global cultural convergence, of new technologies of communication and transportation bringing the nations of the world closer together and making possible an exchange of goods and ideas on a scale never before imaginable in human history. It has also been a century of increasing nationalism, of subject peoples demanding and winning the right to both political and cultural self-determination, of a multitude of communities each asserting pride in its own unique history and heritage.

Korea is no exception. In the twentieth century the Korean people have rejected the sadae juŭi (subservience to China) of the past and now stand tall, masters of their own destiny and proud of their distinctive Korean alphabet, Korean literature, and Korean art. Yet, along with nationalism, the Korean people have also adopted internationalization. The urban architecture of modern Korea is a blend of the traditional and the imported. Korea's industrial technology has much more in common with the industrial technology of other countries than it does with the technology of Korea's past. And the modern universities on the peninsula resemble the universities of other nations more than they resemble the National Confucian Academy of the Chosŏn dynasty.

Korean views of their own past are similarly composed of both native and imported elements. Modern Korean scholars write histories of Korean philosophy, yet in traditional Korea neither the discipline of philosophy nor its Sino-Korean name, chŏrhak, existed. Moreover, most discussions of pre-modern Korean thought focus on metaphysical issues. For example, the sixteenth-century “Four-Seven Debate” over the relationship of li and ki to the four fonts of virtue and the seven emotions is usually portrayed as a debate on the ontological relationship between li and ki. Contemporary Korean philosophers and historians have seized upon this dispute as evidence that their ancestors debated abstract metaphysical issues, just as Western philosophers did. Unfortunately, shining a spotlight on strands of commonality with the West can obscure the more distinctive Korean predilection for the practical, for the behavioral implications of ideas more than for ideas themselves. A closer examination of what Korean thinkers were actually saying in the Chosŏn dynasty reveals that their primary concern was morality, to which metaphysics was merely a handmaiden. It is this moral concern, not

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1 This paper was originally presented at a conference on Korea's changing identity, held at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, in May, 1989. In the years since, I have benefited from comments and suggestions from several fellow explorers of Korean intellectual tradition (too numerous to name here) and have taken their comments and suggestions to heart in revising this paper for publication.
metaphysical quibbling, which makes Korean philosophy distinctively Korean and a defining component of Korean cultural identity.

The key issue in that famous "Four-Seven Debate" was how best to be virtuous, not where virtue came from. It was more about self-control than about the nature of the self. That argument reflected different approaches to the struggle to live an ethical life in an often unethical world. The same ethical focus is central to the related arguments over whether man shared a common nature with animals and over the acceptability of Catholicism.

Chosŏn dynasty Neo-Confucians were practical men, searching for tools to help them live moral lives. They wanted to know how far they could trust their own feelings and how wary they should be of the world around them. They believed such knowledge would help them choose the most effective methods of self-discipline and moral self-cultivation. The debate over the four fonts and the seven emotions, as well as the later debates over human and animal nature and over Catholicism, were attempts to answer such questions and define key Confucian concepts in order to clarify the process by which men could eliminate selfish thoughts, eradicate immoral actions and foster their inborn tendency to do what was right.  

The divergent approaches to explaining the relationship between the four fonts of virtue and the seven emotions which arose in the sixteenth century shaped the currents and contours of Korean Neo-Confucian thought and practice for the remaining three centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty. Both the questions Korean Neo-Confucians raised and the answers they proposed for those questions in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries were often variants of and elaborations on the questions and answers first introduced in the sixteenth. Many of the differences in philosophical orientation as well as in spirituality among Korea’s Neo-Confucian yangban elite in the second half of the Chosŏn dynasty had their origins in the dynamic generated by the original Four-Seven Debate late in the first half. When they made the decision to pursue sagehood, to cultivate the moral character to which all Confucians were supposed to aspire, Chosŏn dynasty Neo-Confucians after 1600 often had to first decide which stance they would adopt toward the relationship of li and ki to the four fonts of virtue and the seven emotions. In other words, they had to decide whether they were followers of T’oege Yi Hwang (1501-70) or of Yulgok Yi I (1536-84).

This split between pro-T’oegye and pro-Yulgok camps lasted as long as it did partially because both sides could draw on textual support from ambiguities in the Neo-Confucianism imported from China in which they both were rooted. More significant, however, was the relevance of the Four-Seven debate and the issues it addressed to Korean Confucian moral concerns. As early as the sixteenth century, those moral concerns had developed in two contrasting directions, one manifested in T’oegye’s moral pessimism and analytical approach and the other in Yulgok’s ethical optimism and preference for synthesis.

T’oegye’s philosophical pessimism and Yulgok’s philosophical optimism generated differences in the ways those two Neo-Confucian scholars understood and explained the concepts of li and ki and how they believed those two Neo-Confucian building blocks of the cosmos were related to each other and to the human quest for moral perfection. Li, sometimes translated as “principle,” and ki, sometimes translated as “material force,” have a much wider range of reference than any single English translation can encompass and therefore leave themselves open to a wide variety of readings and interpretations.

When li first appeared in ancient Chinese writings, for example, it referred more to patterns than to metaphysical principles. By the time the Sung philosopher Chu Hsi (1130-1200) wove his Neo-Confucian synthesis in the twelfth century, li had become the fundamental normative force in the cosmos, serving as both those moral principles by which human beings should guide their lives and as those invisible directive patterns of interaction which defined, generated and sustained all appropriate activity within the human community and within the natural world. Ki underwent a similar transformation. At first more a medical than a philosophical concept, ki originally meant the air that sustains life and gives it energy. The term ki gradually expanded in meaning until, in the hands of the Sung founders of Neo-Confucianism in the 12th century, it became the fundamental stuff out of which everything which existed, including both the mind and the body and all material and immaterial phenomena, were formed into distinct entities and processes by li.

The Neo-Confucianism that gave li and ki such philosophical import represented more than an attempt to merely understand the cosmos and the place of human beings within it in terms of the interaction of li and ki. Neo-Confucianism was a philosophical response to the centuries-long Buddhist challenge to China’s traditional values and ethical standards. As such, it represented an attempt to provide a moral metaphysics, a philosophical grounding for morality in which the Buddhist claim that the world of human experience was unreal was countered by the claim that it was the world of human relationships, formed and governed by moral obligations, which constituted ultimate reality. In a philosophy thus focused on morality and ethics as Neo-Confucianism was, li and ki could never be merely abstract metaphysical or ontological concepts but

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3 See, for example, the 3rd century B.C.E. use of the term by Han Fei Tzu (d. 233 B.C.E.), cited in Wing-tsit Chan, A Sourcebook of Chinese Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 260-61.

4 See, for example Veith, Ilza, trans. The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine (Berkeley: Univesity of California Press, 1973) passim.

5 For a small sample of what the terms li and ki meant in Chu Hsi’s Neo-Confucian philosophy, see A Sourcebook of Chinese Philosophy, pp. 634-638.
necessarily carried moral import as well. It is this moral import of *li* and *ki* which generated the divisions between the T’oegeye school and the Yulgok school in the Four-Seven debate. Both T’oegeye and Yulgok, and their followers, read into *li* and *ki* their particular assumptions about the moral character of the universe and of the human beings who lived within it.

**The Moral Rationale for T'oegeye's Analytical Approach**

T’oegeye and his followers had a strong sense of man's moral weakness, of how difficult it was to consistently adhere to the high Confucian standards of selflessness and self-control. They tended to emphasize the gap between *li*, seen as the normative pattern governing humane relationships among themselves and with the world around them, and *ki*, seen as the physical world that sometimes hinders the smooth operation of *li*. This *li-ki* gap led to corresponding gaps between the four fonts and the seven emotions, between man's moral mind and man's human mind, between human nature and physical nature, and between the mind in the preactivated state and the engaged mind. In each case, the second half of each paired term represented the greater influence of *ki*, and therefore greater potential moral danger.

Consequently, followers of T'oegeye stressed quiet sitting, “abiding in reverence” (*chugyŏng*), as a way to steel the *li* of the mind for the encounter with the world of *ki* outside. Over the centuries, their ethical principles came more and more to resemble a form of asceticism, with a strong stress on the control of desire. They are sometimes known as the *churip’*a, since they emphasized the priority of *li* over *ki*, a priority often expressed in practical terms as the need for the moral mind to rule the physical body.

T’oegeye couched his moral vision in cosmic and metaphysical terms because his cosmos was a moral cosmos and his metaphysics was a moral metaphysics. Appropriate interrelationships (*li*) were for him the ultimate reality. Human beings existed only in interactions with the people and the world around them. To be fully human, they had to ensure that in those interactions they put thoughts of personal interest aside and instead played their proper roles in the overall social and natural order. Ironically, T’oegeye and many of his followers limited their participation in government, though that was usually considered the proper role of a Confucian scholar. However, their distrust of factions and other manifestations of the influence of *ki* over politics led them to prefer withdrawal from public life in order to cultivate their moral character in the piece and quiet of their home villages instead.

T’oegeye discovered that, even for those who withdraw from the *ki*-dominated political arena, moral cultivation was no easy task, since human beings always and everywhere were ensnared in a material web (*ki*) which countered the universalizing tendency of *li* by separating one human being from another and human beings from nature. If the cosmic moral pattern T’oegeye envisioned is seen as a checkerboard of dynamic alternating black and red squares, T’oegeye could be said to emphasize how the color of a black square separated it from its red neighbors. The material structure of the pattern thus contained the seeds of individualism and selfishness.

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6 For an excellent translation and commentary on T’oegeye's guide to achieving sagehood, see Michael C. Kalton, *To Become a Sage* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1988.
Yulgok and his followers, on the other hand, focused on ki's role in providing both the arena and the tools for moral struggle. If they, too, had seen the moral cosmic pattern as a checkerboard, they would have stressed the interdependency of both red and black squares in creating that pattern. They insisted that li without ki was empty, just as ki without li was shapeless. Emphasizing li's functions within ki rather than the differences between li and ki, they were less inclined to see ki as the root of all evil and more inclined to play an active role in the ki-filled world of politics and government. For this reason, they are often known as the “chugip’a.” In their eyes, “fathoming principle” (kungni), discerning moral patterns in order to act in accordance with them, was more important than abiding in reverence.

Yulgok and his followers de-emphasized the divisions within the mind which T’oebye's followers had highlighted. Though they too saw the need to keep selfish desires under control, they recognized that human beings had to operate within the moral arena ki provided. They downplayed differences between the four fonts and the seven emotions, between the moral mind and the human mind, between human nature and physical nature, and between the quiescent mind and the activated mind, differences that tended to stress the dangers inherent in the physical and social environment in which people lived, acted, and interacted. Yulgok and his followers feared that T’oebye's drawing too sharp a line between morality and reality would create an over-emphasis on quiet sitting and ascetic practices that would lead to withdrawal from society and an abdication of moral responsibility.

Despite differences of emphasis, both approaches shared a common language and common assumptions. Both agreed with Chu Hsi and other orthodox Chinese Neo-Confucians that li and ki were the fundamental forces creating and sustaining the universe. Both agreed that li in man represented a universalizing tendency, a disposition to work within the normative cosmic pattern, and that ki represented its opposite, an individualizing tendency to work against and outside of that pattern. Both associated li with impartiality, cooperation, and unity. Both associated ki with bias, selfishness, and differentiation. And both agreed that debates over the relationship between li and ki, and over human nature, were essentially debates over how to be moral, to be decided on ethical rather than logical grounds.

The moral concern at the heart of both T'oebye's and Yulgok's philosophies is reflected in their respective formulations of the relationship between li and the four fonts of virtue with ki and the seven emotions. The four fonts of virtue (sadan) are those instinctive human tendencies to commiseration, shame, modesty, and moral judgment that Mencius pointed to as evidence of man's innate goodness. The seven emotions (chiljŏng) are those fundamental human feelings ascribed to human beings in the Book of Rites: joy, anger, sadness, fear, love, hatred, and desire.

8 Mencius, 6A:6
T’oegye drew a sharp line between the four fonts and the seven emotions in order to distinguish between those sentiments which can be trusted and those feelings which can lead people astray. In a famous letter to Ki Taesŏng (1527-72), T’oegye penned the often quoted and often debated lines, “In the case of the Four Fonts of virtue, li issues them and ki follows it, while in the case of the Seven Emotions, ki issues them and li mounts it.”

This standard translation of those lines obscures the implications for moral cultivation of that formula. Only those who know that T’oegye is talking about li as the dynamic normative force which directs men away from the pursuit of individual self-interest into their proper roles in society can understand why he insists that it is li rather than ki which generates the Four Fonts of Virtue. Only those who know that he is talking about ki in terms of its individualizing impact which separates men from one another and encourages them to pursue their own selfish self-interest can understand why he insists that it is ki rather than li that generates the more self-centered Seven Emotions.

A paraphrase of T’oegye’s formula might make clearer what he was trying to say: The four fonts of virtue are generated by the human tendency to act in accordance with the cosmic pattern of appropriate interrelationships [li] but, when those instinctive feelings are generated, the tendency to act for oneself rather than as part of the whole [ki] follows behind. The seven emotions are generated by the individualizing tendency to pursue one’s self-interest apart from that cosmic pattern [ki] but the universalizing tendency to act in accordance with that pattern [li] rides along.

T’oegye did not link the relationship between li and ki to the differences between the four fonts and the seven emotions merely to make a philosophical point about the ultimate nature of reality. He was offering practical advice to Ki Taesŏng, encouraging him to beware of feelings such as joy, anger, love, or hate which reflect self-interest and to cultivate instead feelings such as commiseration and shame which show a regard for others. T’oegye asserted that “when li generates the Four Fonts of Virtue, ki tags along” in order to warn his friend to beware of selfish desires even when motivated by moral impulses. At the same time T’oegye did not want Ki Taesŏng to become too pessimistic about the possibility of acting morally, adding to his warnings about selfishness being able to contaminate the noblest of motives the consolation that “li rides along even when ki generates the Seven Emotions.” In other words, even when a man was moved by less altruistic emotions, he could still direct those emotions to the common good.

Nevertheless, T’oegye's main point was that it is essential that emotions (the Four Fonts) which move us to act properly be clearly distinguished from those emotions (the Seven Emotions) which can mislead us into putting our individual interests ahead of the interests and needs of others. In that same letter, he told Ki,

*If you feel uncomfortable with such analysis and prefer to stress commonality over differences, then you will be guilty of what men of old called 'swallowing a large piece of fruit in one gulp.' This is no small error. Before you know it, you will make*

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the serious mistake of treating sŏng [‘human nature’] as though it were nothing more than ki. This will lead to a disastrous situation in which you confuse li with base human desires.\footnote{\textit{T’oege}sŏngsaeng munjip. Vol. 16: 23b. For an alternative translation of this passage, see \textit{Sourcebook of Korean Civilization}, vol. 1. p. 619.}

Since human nature to T’oegeye took the standard Neo-Confucian meaning of the natural human tendency to respond appropriately and selflessly in both social and natural environments and \textit{ki} referred to individualizing material force which encourages men to pursue their own self-interest, T’oegeye’s concluding sentences might be read as warning Ki against risking:

\begin{quote}
making the serious mistake of treating the natural human tendency to respond appropriately in both social and natural environments [human nature] as though it were the same as the individualizing tendency [\textit{ki}] which draws men away from acting properly. This could lead to a disastrous situation in which you confuse the cosmic normative pattern that encourages you to act as you should act with base human desires that have the opposite effect and instead encourage the pursuit of individual self-interest.
\end{quote}

T’oegeye used the conceptual tools of analysis and division to highlight the dangers which lurk along the road to virtue. Yet the ultimate objective of Neo-Confucians remained that of overcoming division in order to act in unison with the cosmic moral pattern of appropriate interrelationships. Yulgok feared that T’oegeye's analytical scalpel would hinder more than it helped moral progress, since once fissures are introduced, unity is difficult to restore. In Yulgok’s view, T’oegeye's focus on the dangers of the world of \textit{ki} undermined an energizing vision of underlying unity and made moral union with that world a more elusive goal.

**The Ethical Reasoning behind Yulgok’s Differences with T’oegeye**

Yulgok agreed with T’oegeye that \textit{li} was a unifying centripetal force pulling the various elements and process in the cosmos into cosmic harmony, while \textit{ki} played more of a centrifugal disjunctive role, generating separation and fragmentation. In a phrase often cited by his disciples, Yulgok wrote that \textit{li} is universal, penetrating everywhere, but \textit{ki} is limited and limiting, forming specific individual configurations.\footnote{\textit{Yulgok Chŏnsŏ}. Vol. 10:26a.} That does not necessarily mean the \textit{ki} is always the cause of disharmony and evil in this world, however. In Yulgok’s view, T’oegeye is wrong to assert all that is good is a result of movement (“generation”) by \textit{li} and all movement by \textit{ki} is dangerous.

If \textit{li} can be found in every nook and cranny of the universe without discrimination or favor, then it is incapable of movement, for movement implies movement from one place to another and \textit{li}, since it is everywhere, has no place to move. How could a universal, all-comprehensive pattern move? All movement that occurs must be movement within the pattern rather than movement of the pattern. Since that pattern is nothing other than a dynamic network of appropriate interactions, the pattern determines what moves and what direction and orientation movements should take. But the pattern itself, as pattern, is unchangeable and therefore immovable.

Consequently, Yulgok counters T’oegeye's notion that the Four Fonts are generated by the universalizing tendency (\textit{li}), with the individualizing tendency (\textit{ki}) following
behind, and the seven emotions are generated by the individualizing tendency, with the universalizing tendency going along for the ride. He writes instead that all human emotions, whether the Four Fonts of Virtue or the morally ambiguous Seven Emotions, are generated by $ki$, though every time $ki$ generates such an emotion, $li$ rides along to provide direction. In other words, all human emotional responses to the social or natural environment are generated by the individualizing tendency of matter and energy to form finite and specific configurations and interactions ($ki$), though in every such case the universalizing tendency to act in accordance with the cosmic pattern of appropriate interactions ($li$) rides along to provide direction.\(^\text{13}\)

How successful $li$ is in providing direction is what determines good and evil. Movement that is in accordance with the pattern, an emotion that resonates with the cosmic network of harmonious interactions, is good. Movement contrary to the pattern, an emotion that works against that web of selfless harmony, is evil. But, since it is $ki$ that moves in both cases, it is a mistake to declare, as T'oegye does, that good is generated by $li$ and evil by $ki$. In Yulgok's view, T'oegye's singular focus on the pattern of appropriate relationships as good forgets that it is the appropriate interaction of individual elements within that pattern, elements composed of $ki$, which make up the pattern.

Yulgok thought T'oegye made a dangerous error when he drew his sharp line between man's innate inner goodness (human nature, man's natural tendency to act in accordance with $li$) and man's physical responses to his environment (generated by his physical nature, which is composed of $ki$ and can encourage separation from, rather than integration into, the normative network of appropriate interactions). Such a separation splits not only the four fonts from the seven emotions but also severs man's moral mind from his human mind, man's human nature from his physical nature, and man's preactivated mind from his engaged mind.\(^\text{14}\)

Warned Yulgok,

*T'oegye's approach splits man in half, putting his original nature in the east and his physical nature in the west. If we accept his analysis, we would also have to separate the moral mind from the human mind, saying that the moral mind originates in the east and that the human mind originates in the west. Does that make any sense? ....Such wild talk, at odds with the way things really are, can only led to behavior equally off the mark. ...Positing such a split in human nature actually makes it much more difficult to act appropriately in our relationships with our fellow human beings.*\(^\text{15}\)

\(^\text{13}\) Yulgok Chŏnsŏ, Vol. 10:26b-27b.

\(^\text{14}\) The locus classicus for the moral mind/ human mind distinction is the phrase in the “Counsels of Yu” section of the Book of History (II, 2:15) which is usually translated as “the mind of man is precarious: the moral mind is subtle.” The preactivated mind/engaged mind distinction refers to the mind before there are any stirrings of emotions and the mind once those emotions have stirred, as mentioned first in the Doctrine of the Mean, I, 1:4. The human nature/physical nature distinction is elaborated upon, and made an important philosophical distinction, by Chu Hsi and other early Neo-Confucians. See, for example, Wing-tsit Chan, A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, pp. 623-626, translating excerpts from Chu Tzu ch’uan-shu (Complete works of Chu Hsi), 43: 2b-18a.

\(^\text{15}\) Yulgok Chŏnsŏ, Vol. 10: 29b-30a.
Yulgok's refusal to divide either human beings or the universe into antagonistic components of li and ki led him to adopt a different approach to moral self-cultivation than that espoused by T'oegye. He was not afraid of the world of individuals and differences and disagreed with T'oegye's prescription of “abiding in reverence” (quiet sitting) as the best way to discover which moral patterns should guide man's behavior. He argued instead that the patterns that should govern a person's life, the li that should guide a person's interactions with his fellow human beings and with the world around him, are best sought in the material world outside, rather than in the mental world within. Reaching out to the world in order to cultivate sincerity (selfless interaction with the social and physical world) was Yulgok's prescription for self-control.\textsuperscript{16}

True to the moral pragmatism of his Neo-Confucian tradition, Yulgok offered concrete examples of the moral efficacy of the ki world of distinction and individuals. He pointed out that the virtue of loyalty is a response to the difference between a subject and his ruler. Likewise, filial piety is a response evoked by the distinction between a son and his parents. Without the differences between subjects and rulers and between children and parents, the virtues of loyalty and filial piety could not exist. Therefore these virtues are not generated within by the universalizing pattern, as T'oegye would have it, but are the product of differences created by the individualizing force of ki in the physical world.\textsuperscript{17}

On such ethical grounds, Yulgok rejected the li-ki moral dualism of T'oegye for a vision that placed li within ki rather than outside it. He believed that it was not by sheltering themselves from the temptations of the world but by searching that world for appropriate guidelines to moral action, and then acting in accordance with those guidelines, that people would achieve selfless and harmonious interaction. In other words, human beings could become sages only if they stayed within the world, not if they withdrew from it. Yulgok revised T'oegye Four-Seven formula in order to make this last point clear and help his disciples avoid the enhanced difficulties for moral cultivation that he believed following T'oegye’s advice would bring.

Both T'oegye and Yulgok, as well as most Chosôn Neo-Confucians who followed them, evaluated ideas primarily in terms of their ethical implications. If an idea or assertion appeared to promote selflessness and self-discipline, it merited further consideration. It was also important to determine if that idea contradicted the Classics or not, since agreement with the Classics was important, and whether it was logical or not, since irrationality was rejected. However, the most important criterion was its behavioral impact. How belief in that particular assertion affected the behavior of those who believed it was their primary concern. Moral pragmatism was the favored epistemology of Korea's Neo-Confucian scholars.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16}Pae Chongho, \textit{Han'guk yuhaks\=a} [A history of Korean Confucianism], (Seoul: Yonsei University Press), 1974, pp.99-101, 114-117.
\textsuperscript{17}Yulgok Chŏnsŏ, Vol. 10: 6a-b.
\textsuperscript{18}For more substantiation of this point, see my "A Different Thread: Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and Catholicism in a Confucian World," in Martina Deuchler and JaHyun Haboush, ed. \textit{Culture and State in Late Chosôn Korea} (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), pp. 199-230.
As a twentieth-century Korean scholar has noted, for T’oegye, truth was “basically subjective practical knowledge that is directly related to moral conduct.” The same could be said of Yulgok, as can be seen in his rejection of T’oegye’s analytical approach to moral psychology as untrue because it would make “it much more difficult to act appropriately in our relationships with out fellow human beings.” Sŏngho Yi Ik (1681-1763), one of T’oegye disciples, placed the same priority on pragmatic ethical considerations two centuries later when he wrote that, in judging the beliefs of others, it made no difference whether those people were “orthodox” or not if they did not do what they were supposed to do? Sŏngho’s disciple, An Chŏngbok (1712-1791), made a similar point, writing to a friend in 1783 that he should not rely on verbal arguments alone in deciding what to believe but should instead test the practical applicability of ideas in order to determine their acceptability.

This pragmatic ethical criterion for truth meant that philosophical positions were often interpretations of personal moral experience. In the generations following the debate between T’oegye and Yulgok over how safe immersion in the world was, Chosŏn Confucians grew increasingly frustrated with their inability to achieve the sagehood which Confucian texts told them lay within their reach. Their heightened awareness of moral frailty expressed itself philosophically in an increased sensitivity to metaphysical, psychological, and moral tension between the realm of li and the world of ki, leading to more frequent and more urgent calls for rigid control of the emotions by the mind. Within T’oegye's churip’a, there was increasing insistence on the primacy of li and the asceticism that implied. Within Yulgok's chugip’a, there was growing awareness that ki might pose more of a moral threat than Yulgok had acknowledged. As a result, there were conversions to Catholicism among followers of T’oegye and a dispute over human nature arose among followers of Yulgok.

**Tasan and the Shift From Asceticism to Theism**

Ascetic tendencies among the churip'a were particularly evident among Sŏngho and his disciples. Sŏngho was an even stronger advocate of li primacy than T’oegye had been. He rejected T’oegye’s limitation of li’s generative power to the four fonts of virtue, leaving the seven emotions to be generated by ki alone. Sŏngho insisted that the universalizing tendency to act in accordance with the cosmic pattern of appropriate interactions (li) could play a generative role in the seven emotions as well. Anger (one of the seven emotions), for example, could be anger at a deviation from the normative pattern (such as unfilial behavior) and thus would be righteous anger. Similarly, joy (another of the seven emotions) could be an expression of delight at something in accordance with the normative pattern of harmonious interaction (such as a display of loyalty by a subject to his superior) and therefore be righteous joy. Since nothing that was

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19 Sasoon Yun [Yun Sasun], *Critical Issues in Neo-Confucian Thought: The Philosophy of Yi T’oegye*, translated by Michael C. Kalton (Seoul: Korea University Press, 1990), p.31. Yun adds (p. 46),”the kind of truth that was T’oegye’s main focus is the kind of practical knowledge or truth needed for the practice of morality rather than the objective sort of truth that is ‘truth for the sake of truth.’”

20 Yi Ik,”idan” [Heterodoxy], *Sŏngho sasŏl yusŏn* [Selections from the Sŏngho sasŏl], edited by An Chŏngbok (Seoul: Myŏngmundang, 1982), p. 371-72.

21 An Chŏngbok, *Sunamjip* [The collected writings of An Chŏngbok], VIII: 28b.
righteous could, by Sŏngho's definition, be generated by the individualizing tendency to act contrary to the cosmic moral pattern (ki), in those cases joy and anger must have had their origins in li.  

If all that is good must come from li and li alone, as Sŏngho argued, then it is obvious that evil must originate in li’s antithesis, ki. Why did human beings sometimes not follow the dictates of li? What led the intrinsically good human nature astray? Distortions introduced by ki, which created physical desires for comfort and pleasure, was Sŏngho's answer.

Sŏngho's radical denial of any positive moral role for ki and his deep suspicion of the body and its temptations led him to advocate severe restraint on the exercise of even those normal human desires for food and sex which are necessary to the survival of the human race. For example, he encouraged husbands and wives to sleep in separate rooms in order to make it easier for men to resist the pull of the flesh. He also suggested that men eat less than one full bowl of rice at every meal so that they will be accustomed to leaving physical desires less than completely satisfied.

Though he was a committed Neo-Confucian, Sŏngho was open to advice on self-discipline from heterodox schools. He once compared Buddhist monks favorably to Confucian scholars because of their compassion, their respect for their teachers, and their self-control and said that Confucians would do well to imitate some Buddhist ascetic practices. Moreover, though he rejected Christian theology, he noted that Jesuit writings had their good points. He read Ch’i k’e (“Seven Victories”) by Fr. Diego de Pantoja (1571-1618), a missionary tract imported from China extolling the seven cardinal virtues of humility, charity, patience, compassion, temperance, diligence, and self-restraint, and commented afterwards that that book surpassed all Confucian writings in its use of similes to elucidate the relationship between vice and virtue. Sŏngho wrote, “this book will be a great help in our effort to restore proper behavior.”

Korea's first Catholics were disciples of Sŏngho. So were some of the first anti-Catholics. Half a century before there were converts on the peninsula, Sŏngho's disciple Sin Hudam (1702-1761) considered Catholicism enough of a threat to his Confucian ethical endeavors that he wrote a detailed critique of several Catholic missionary publications which had reached Korea from China. After a conversation with Sŏngho about European thought in 1724, Sin read several books by Jesuits in China which Sŏngho had recommended. Sin perused those books for anything that could aid him in his pursuit of moral perfection. He was disappointed.

24 Yi Ik, Sŏngho saesŏl [The classified writings of Sŏngho Yi Ik] (Seoul: Minjok munhwach’ujinhoe), 1977-78, 26: 15a-b.
26 Yi Ik, Sŏngho saesŏl , 11: 2b.
Sin took the personal pursuit of moral perfection seriously. When he was in his twenties, he posted a list of his moral faults on the wall of his room as a guide to constant self-examination. He chided himself for not being cheerful enough when serving his parents and for not being consistent in following through on resolutions previously made, among other flaws. Sin measured himself against such high standards that at one point he had worked himself into a state of physical and mental exhaustion.  

Sin found nothing in those Catholic writings to help him overcome his frustrating inability to reach sagehood. In an essay on those books, he argued that Catholicism promoted immorality rather than morality, since it encouraged selfish interest (sa) in personal salvation at the expense of the common good (kong). Though he had other objections as well, the charge of selfishness was for him sufficient grounds to reject that religion from the West. Selfishness, after all, was characteristic of the ki realm and he, as a devout Neo-Confucianist, was more interested in living in accordance with li and the selflessness it fostered.

An Chŏngbok (1712-1791), another one of Sŏngho's disciples, shared Sin's negative opinion of Catholicism. An's son-in-law, Kwŏn ilsin (?-1791), was one of Korea's first converts to Catholicism, as were several of An's own disciples. In order to bring them back to the orthodox Neo-Confucian fold, shortly before his death An wrote an imaginary dialogue in which he argued with a pro-Catholic and presented a number of objections to Catholic teachings. In that dialogue, An insisted that Catholics were immoral, irrational, illogical, anti-social, unrealistic, superstitious, and, worst of all, self-interested. In other words, Catholicism was totally unacceptable. It was idan, heresy.

At one point, An appealed to their common inheritance through Sŏngho of T'oegye's insistence of li primacy. He noted that Catholic philosophers denied both a creative and a generative role for the cosmic moral pattern (li). They taught instead that li was merely an attribute, unable to exist alone and found only in conjunction with an object to which it adhered. An complained “this is just like the theories of some latter-day Confucians who give ki primacy over li.” Interpreting Catholic missionary arguments through categories provided by Korea's li-ki dispute, An dismissed Catholics as followers of Yulgok.

Hong Yuhan (1726-1785), another of Sŏngho's disciples, had a more positive reaction. Hong discovered ideas in those Catholic writings that resonated with his own ascetic inclinations. Inspired partially by Jesuit tracts, in 1770 he vowed to dedicate the rest of his life to the mortification of the flesh. He abandoned his marriage bed to sleep alone and ate only unappetizing foods. He also spent the seventh, the fourteenth, the twenty-first, and the twenty-eighth of every month in quiet meditation in imitation of the Catholic sabbath.

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27 Ch'oe Tong-ŭi, "Sin Hu-dam Sŏhak Py'ŏn e kwanhan yŏngu" [A study of Sin Hudam’s Sŏhak Py’ŏn], ASEA YŎNGU, vol. 15, no. 2.
28 Sin Hudam, “Sŏhak Pyŏn” [On Western Learning], in Yi Manch'ae, Pyŏgwpipyŏn, [In defense of orthodoxy against heterodoxy], (Seoul: Yŏlhwadang), 1971, pp. 38-103
29 An Chŏngbok, "Ch'ŏnhak mundap " [a conversion on Heavenly Learning], Sunamjip [the collected work of Sunam An Chŏngbok] Vol. 17, 22a-b.
Hong was an extreme example of ascetic tendencies within Korean Neo-Confucianism. Others among Sŏngho's disciples who shared Hong's ideals preferred to stay within the world most of the time, taking only occasional time off for a more intensive pursuit of moral self-cultivation. One such occasion came in the winter of 1779, when a group of young men, including one of Sŏngho's grandsons, retired to a Buddhist temple in the mountains not far from Seoul. Under the direction of Kwŏn Ch'ŏlsin (1736-1801), they spent ten days polishing their virtue. Each day they arose before sunrise and washed their faces and hands in ice water. They then recited the Admonition on Rising Early and Retiring Late by the Sung Neo-Confucian Ch'en Po. When the sun came up, they recited Chu Hsi's Admonition on Seriousness. At noon they intoned the Four Things Not Done. And at sunset they chanted the Western Inscription of Chang Tsai (1020-1077). In between they read and discussed Confucian, and possibly Catholic, philosophical and moral tracts.31

Five years after that retreat, some of the participants converted to Catholicism. In 1784 Yi Sŭnghun (1756-1801) returned from a trip to Beijing, where he had been baptized by French priests with the new name of Peter Lee. He proceeded to preach his new faith to his friends. Most of his early converts were disciples of Sŏngho and fellow followers of the li-ki moral dualism interpretation of Neo-Confucianism. Among them was one of the ChosŏnKorea's most famous scholars, Tasan Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836).

Tasan was a Catholic for only a few years. At the first hint of persecution in 1791, he abandoned that faith. However, he continued to be influenced by the Catholic ideas he had absorbed in his youth. His writings both before and after his flirtation with Catholicism reveal much about the connection between li primacy and Catholicism.

Tasan shared the deep distrust of ki characteristic of the churip'a. Even more than T'oegye and Sŏngho had, he felt deeply the enormity of the gap between the potential for good and the actuality of evil. T'oegye's followers usually emphasized the pure goodness of human nature and its universalizing tendencies when it is was free from the disturbances generated by individualizing tendencies (ki). Tasan felt that was overly optimistic, since that view implied that people had only to inoculate themselves against the temptations of the world and reclaim their innate virtue in order to reach moral perfection. Such a view was based on the misconception that li possessed enough generative power of its own to offset ki. In other words, T'oegye’s followers and most other Neo-Confucians as well assumed that if only ki would not block the original human nature that they equated with li, then that li would naturally take charge and direct human behavior. That is what they meant when they claimed that human nature is innately good.

Tasan argued that, on the contrary, human beings were only potentially moral. Human nature was not pure goodness spontaneously generating appropriate human behavior. Human nature, as he defined it, could not be equated with the tendency to act in accordance with the network of appropriate interrelationships (li). Instead, in his view, human nature merely included a desire to act impartially, selflessly, and appropriately rather than a tendency to do so automatically. Water, he pointed out, had a tendency to

31 Chŏng Yagyong, Chŏng Tasan chŏnsŏ [The complete works of Tasan Chŏng Yagyong] I, 15: 35a; 39a; Dallet, pp. 14-15 is the source for the claim that they also read and discussed Catholic publications.
flow downhill, but human beings found acting virtuously more akin to climbing up a mountain. They may desire to climb that mountain but to reach the top will require quite a bit of effort. It is the same with the desire for virtue. That desire, if cultivated and pursued diligently, could lead to virtue, but virtue lay beyond, not within, human beings and had to be earned, not reclaimed.\(^{32}\)

Since desire requires more effort to realize than a tendency, becoming virtuous was no easy task, as generations of would-be Confucian sages had discovered. Tasan argued that human beings are born with a natural preference for what is good over what is not so good but, unfortunately, what human beings consider good comes in two forms: moral good and physical pleasure. If people were to stay on the Confucian path of selflessness, the desire for moral good had to control the desires for physical pleasure, which was not easy for it to do. Tasan found that human beings were entangled in an internal civil war between their moral mind, which wanted to do what was good, and their human mind, which wanted to do what felt good. For that reason, Tasan believed that it was better to side with T'oegye than with Yulgok when cultivating virtue, since T'oegye highlighted the tension between the demands of our conscience and the seductions of the physical world.\(^{33}\)

Despite his admiration for T'oegye, Tasan felt that simply focusing on \(li\) and guarding against \(ki\) was not enough to motivate men and women up the difficult path to virtue. To ensure that they took the moral rather than the selfish road, human beings needed to do more than just brush aside the temptations proffered by \(ki\) and wait for \(li\) to operate freely. After all, it was not \(ki\) itself, the tendency to act in accordance with individual whims rather than in accordance with the needs and demands of the whole, which caused evil. Rather, a decision to follow \(ki\), to act selfishly and individualistically, was responsible. Therefore, to overcome \(ki\), it was necessary to firmly resolve to follow the moral demands of \(li\) instead, no matter how difficult that might be to do.

Tasan declared that people could not abdicate their moral responsibility by saying, “\(ki\), my human mind, my physical nature, or my emotions, made me do it.” Human beings had to recognize that evil occurred because they freely chose the easy path of pleasure and selfishness rather than the difficult path of selflessness and virtue. Tasan reasoned that only if people felt that God (the Sangje of the Confucian Classics) watched their every move and knew their every thought would they be able to maintain the constant watchfulness and self-discipline essential to consistent adherence to the demands of morality. Abstract impersonal \(li\) had no power to instill righteous fear into the hearts of human beings. But awe of God's unlimited vision could keep people from relaxing their guard against selfish desire for a single moment.\(^{34}\)

Because moral frailty, in Tasan 's view, was intrinsic rather than extrinsic, he saw little merit in quiet sitting. He believed it was a waste of time to try to abide in reverence and recover the original nature, since that was not where virtue was to be found. Instead, he took an activist approach toward the real world, a stance usually associated more with followers of Yulgok. He has become as well known today for his essays on local administration, land reform, technology and even medicine as he is for his thoughts on

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\(^{32}\) Chŏng Yagyong, Ibid., II, 3:8a; 5:33a-b.

\(^{33}\) Chŏng Yagyong, Ibid., I, 12: 17a-18a, II, 6: 19a.

\(^{34}\) Chŏng Yagyong, ibid., II, 4: 22b-23b.
metaphysics and morality. He believed that a moral person was one who acted in accordance with li, the cosmic network of selfless harmony, rather than merely meditated on it. Such action required immersion in the world of ki, of individual objects and actions. A truly virtuous human being was one who was virtuous both in thought and in deed.

The path from T’oegeye to Tasan exemplifies the dialectical movement of ideas. T’oegeye’s fear of seduction by the world outside led to his advocacy of li-ki moral dualism and withdrawal from the world, which in turn led to Sŏngho’s concentration on temptations and weakness within, which then brought Tasan back into the world of li within ki in the material realm of individual objects and events. Others, lacking the dualistic perspective that characterized the T'oegeye school, never really left the real world. One such ethical optimist was Tamhŏn Hong Taeyong (1731-1783).

**Ethical Optimism and Moral Tension in the Yulgok School.**

Tamhŏn is remembered today for his accomplishments in mathematics and astronomical theory and for his demand that Confucianism address practical problems in the external world. As a Confucian, he also addressed issues of moral cultivation, arguing, as a follower of Yulgok, that the ki realm was the real moral arena. In the very first essay in his collected works, Tamhŏn agreed with Yulgok that it was nonsense to talk of the cosmic pattern of appropriate interrelationships (li) apart from the real world of material objects and events (ki).

Tamhŏn argued, as Yulgok had done before him, that ki, not li, determined good and evil in the world. After all, li was universal and pure, the same everywhere. Whether someone was virtuous or selfish, therefore, depended solely on whether the ki he was composed of was smooth and clear enough to reflect without alteration the cosmic moral pattern, or was so lumpy and muddy that it distorted that cosmic pattern, hindering its operation. In other words, the quality of a person's physical character (ki) determined the quality of his moral character.

People could improve the quality of their particular endowment of ki by cultivating and enhancing their innate virtuous tendency to act selflessly in harmony with the world around them. Cultivating virtue meant for Tamhŏn, not the contemplation of li in isolation, as T’oegeye appeared to have advised, but the impartial and objective investigation of ki so that the universal network of appropriate interrelationships (li) operating within ki would become clearer to the mind, that portion of the human endowment of ki most in need of clarification.

Since the cosmic pattern of selfless harmonious interaction (li) was already perfect and needed no cultivation, the only way for a person to become virtuous was to concentrate on understanding and clarifying ki. Tamhŏn, therefore, focused his attention on specific individual configurations within the material world, particularly on how they reflected and affected the operation and manifestation of the cosmic pattern of appropriate interrelationships both in the human community and in the natural world in which people lived and acted, rather than on what he considered to be illusory

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36 Hong Taeyong, *Tamhŏnsŏ* [The writings of Tamhŏn Hong Taeyong], I, 1a-2b.
transcendent moral ideals. Tamhŏn's famous explorations of the heavens and of mathematics were thus motivated by traditional Confucian moral concerns.

In the world as seen by Yulgok's followers, in which universalizing (li) and individualizing (ki) tendencies intermingled on the same plane, there was a weaker sense of moral tension than in the world conceived by T'oegye, in which universalizing and selfless li stood above, apart and hopefully insulated from individualizing and selfish ki. To Yulgok's disciples, the mind, the body, and world outside were all ki, all configurations of the individualizing force of matter and energy. Yet they all were also informed by the universalizing network that governed appropriate interactions. Since li, with its directive power, was everywhere and within everything, there was no need to fear emotions or to avoid involvement in worldly affairs. To be moral, all a person had to do was to follow the patterns of unselfish appropriate interactions which he could find within his own mind and within the world around him. This optimistic approach to sagehood implied that to be virtuous was natural. While the pursuit of moral perfection required some effort, self-discipline consisted more of the mind uncovering li, recognizing the moral network and allowing its natural directive power to operate unhindered, than of the mind asserting control over a recalcitrant body in a perilous world.

Some in the Yulgok school found self-discipline not so easily attainable. Frustrated by their own inability to eliminate selfishness from their lives, they saw that moral frailty as evidence that the gap between li and ki was greater than they had been led to believe. One such pessimist, Han Wŏnjin (1682-1751), was still within Yulgok's camp, so he did not push li and ki into separate realms, as T'oegye had done. Nevertheless, Han allowed room for moral tension by focusing not on the good (li), which penetrated everywhere and permeated everything, but on the universal intermingling of li and ki which meant that no place was safe from the selfish tendencies ki could generate.

Han originated the dispute over the uniqueness of human nature that split Yulgok's followers in the eighteenth century. He asserted that human nature was unique, and not the same as the nature shared by animals and other things. While human beings are endowed with a superior ki and thus have the potential to be fully virtuous, lesser beings receive only a partial endowment of ki and can not be expected to display humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Yet Han found that only sages are born with such high quality ki that their li easily shines through. For most of us, to be virtuous is not natural. We must rise above the rest of the material world and resist the pull of our animal nature if we are to maintain self-control and live moral lives.

A moral life therefore requires great effort. Han even provided a four-point program for such an effort: 1) make a firm decision to do what is right, 2) comprehensively discern the moral pattern, 3) discipline yourself in accordance with that vision, 4) exert effort to consistently and ceaselessly maintain a reverent attitude and act without any thought of personal gain. Hence Han contended that human beings must work to control and conquer their physical desires.

37 Han Wŏnjin, Namdangjip [The collected works of Namdang Han Wŏnjin], 19: 6b-9b.
38 See, for example, the discussion quoted in Kim Kilhwan, Chosŏnjo yuhak sasang yŏngu [A study of Confucian thought during the Chosŏn dynasty], (Seoul: Iljisa, 1980), pp.196-220.
That task is made more difficult by the compound character of human nature. People are not pure good within, Han argued. Since the mind is a mixture of ki and li, of both selfish and selfless tendencies, rather than pure untainted li, it is a mistake to see the mind as free from selfishness when left undisturbed by the outside world. He disagreed with T’oegye’s followers that there is a moral mind, separate and distinct from the human mind, to which men could retreat. He did not accept the notion of a pure and untainted quiescent mental state preceding the activation of the mind. For Han Wŏnjin, there was no sanctuary from the battle against evil. Everywhere and at all times, people had to be on their guard against ki, whose tendency to break the cosmos up into individual and distinct fragments blocked the universalizing and unifying influence of li and kept people from the harmonious cooperation with their fellow human beings that was their moral duty.

Unlike Tasan, Han Wŏnjin did not believe evil arises because people choose to be selfish. Rather, he argued that evil arises because people allow the particularizing and alienating effect of ki to raise barriers to the integrating and harmonizing effect of li. Given how strong a barrier to selflessness ki can be, people had to exert constant effort to remain free from selfishness so that they could spontaneously act in accordance with li, the universal network of unselfish harmonious interrelationships. Without continual self-restraint, ki, and with it individual self-interest, would triumph.

Han’s friend Yi Kan (1677-1727), however, persisted in asserting that human nature was li and therefore was the same as the nature of animals and all other beings. He focused more on the common moral pattern of appropriate relationships that bind all existing things together than on how human beings differ from animals and other objects. He also insisted that the mind was pure and clear in its quiescent and pre-activated state and that this essential goodness carries over into the activated, engaged mind. Otherwise, he worried, without that spillover from our innate reservoir of altruism, how could our selfish tendencies be brought under control?

Yi Kan saw evil originating from selfishness due more to a failure to recognize that li’s universalizing effect touches everything than to ki’s functioning as an individualizing force. Underneath the superficial differences and divisions that separate one human being from another and human beings from nature, Yi Kan believed there was an underlying fundamental unity. This li was present wherever individual configurations of ki were found, so how could ki be inherently dangerous? More optimistic than Han, Yi Kan concluded that self-discipline required only that the li within ki be allowed to play its natural role of commander, so that commonality would overcome fragmentation. Rather than blaming ki, Yi concentrated instead on letting li function unhindered. He feared that Han's approach would limit the realm in which li reigned and would make self-control seem too difficult and unnatural.

Self-control and Self-identity

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39 Namdangiip, 30: 1a-7a.
40 Yi Kan, Woeamjip [The collected works of Woeam Yi Kan], 12: 10b-14b.
41 Yi Kan, 12:14b-25b.
The debate within the chugip'a over human nature is often interpreted as primarily concerned with metaphysical issues. Similarly, the conversions to Catholicism within the churip'a are commonly portrayed as motivated more by political than by ethical considerations. Yet both phenomenon are the result of a heightened consciousness of the difficulty of virtue and a subsequent turn toward moral pessimism. The T’oegye and Yulgok camps struggled with the same moral dilemma: If all human beings were endowed at birth with an innate ability to achieve sagehood, and their Neo-Confucian authorities said they were so endowed, why were neither they nor those around them paragons of moral perfection? Should they expect failure in their quest for moral perfection as unavoidable? Should they accept their frequent lapses into self-centeredness and impropriety as an inescapable feature of the human condition? Or had they failed to achieve sagehood because their approach was wrong? Was self-control actually possible? If it was possible to eliminate selfishness and overcome moral frailty, how could such sagehood be achieved?

When Chosón Neo-Confucians debated the relationship between li and ki or when they argued over whether human nature was the same as animal nature, they were not trying to determine what the ultimate constituent elements of the cosmos were or how human nature should be defined in the abstract. They were seeking answers to questions that arose in their daily life. They wanted to know how they could eliminate selfishness from their thoughts and act in accordance with Confucian moral principles. Some found grounds for moral optimism, others for moral pessimism.

They were asking how natural was it to be virtuous, to put the interests of neighbors and state ahead of self-interest, to do what is best for the group rather than what is best for yourself. They all agreed that on the need for self-control, for the moral mind to control selfish emotions. They disputed how easy that task was and how best it could be accomplished. Did virtuous action in the world require preliminary withdrawal from the world in order to cultivate the inner moral strength necessary to counter the world's temptations? Or did we have to go out into the world in order to discover the rules, the li, which should guide behavior? How much could the world, and the way our emotions reacted to it, be trusted? Is there nothing but wellsprings of goodness within or could selfishness ensnare us even in a mind not yet aroused by the world outside?

This concern with moral self-cultivation through self-discipline lay at the core of Chosón intellectual history and fueled its debates and its evolution, making philosophy alive and meaningful to Korean Neo-Confucians. The existence of separate T’oegye and Yulgok philosophical societies today shows that the issues behind the original “Four-Seven Debate” continue to be vital enough to provoke discussion and disputes four centuries later, though often that vitality is hidden under layers of abstract philosophical terminology. Outside of academia, Confucianism in the 1990’s is overshadowed by a robust Christianity and a resurgent Buddhism. Nonetheless, the Confucian pursuit of self-control remains, thought that quest for moral cultivation has largely shifted to non-Confucian arenas.

The dominance of the meditative Chogye branch of Korean Buddhism, the puritanism of Korean Christians who condemn smoking and drinking, the warnings of the South Korean government against excessive consumption, and even Moon Sun Myung’s exhortations to his followers to limit their sexual contact with their marriage partners are all contemporary examples of a continued Korean concern for moral cultivation through
self-restraint and self-control. For centuries Western philosophers has been preoccupied with metaphysics and epistemology. Koreans have been more practical. They have been less interested in Being than in doing. They have worried less about how far to trust logic and more about how far to trust emotions. Ethics, not ontology, was the queen of their sciences. In the quiet of their studies, they pursued self-control rather than self-understanding. Virtue, more than wisdom, was their intended goal.

Though the traditional moral standards of selflessness and emotional restraint may appear at times today to be honored as much in the breach as in the observance, Koreans continue to give special weight to self-discipline and the subordination of personal interest to the common good. Heirs of T’oegye and Yulgok, they still distrust individualism. Like their Confucian ancestors, they still believe that selfish impulses should be restrained so that men can work together harmoniously for the benefit of their families, their communities, and their nation. Moreover, just as T’oegye and Yulgok, Sōngho and Tasan, and Han Wŏnjin and Yi Kan did, they continue to debate the best approach to cultivating such self-discipline. Christians, Buddhists, politicians, student activists, businessmen and consumers each have their own interpretations of what self-restraint is and how it is to be attained. Nevertheless, all agree that self-restraint is a mark of a virtuous, and therefore admirable, man.

Whether in religion, in politics, or even in business, the preferred self-image in Korea is of a hard-working, frugal, self-disciplined member of society who thinks more of others than he thinks of himself. Even though internationalization has given contemporary Koreans clothes, homes, occupations, and even vocabulary quite different from that of their ancestors, they have preserved the ethical ideals of Korean Neo-Confucian tradition. This moral inheritance forms a significant component of the Korean self-image and helps the Korean people maintain their Korean identity in the midst of a rapidly changing world.

Glossary of Key Korean Terms
Transliteration of technical Neo-Confucian terms runs the risk of making them appear more abstract and exotic than they were to the Neo-Confucians who used them. In order to restore vitality to those terms, to show what they meant to Korean Neo-Confucians, I prefer to spell out what those terms meant rather than simply write out their pronunciation in the Roman alphabet. However, translations are also problematic, since those terms were deliberately protean and vague in order to encompass as wide a range of phenomena as possible. I have tried in this article to be as faithful as I can to the intentions of Korea’s Neo-Confucian authors, but I remain aware that no translation or transliteration can ever convey to a foreign audience the full semantic impact of the original language. Nevertheless, below are some of the ways I have tried to rely in English the key terms in the debate between and within the T’oegye and Yulgok schools which have raged on the Korean peninsula for more than four centuries.

chiljŏng 七情 the seven emotions
chŏrhak 哲學 philosophy
chugip’a 主氣派 the school which stresses ki; the Yulgok school
chugyōng 主 敬 abiding in reverence (quiet meditation, quiet sitting)

churip'a 主 理 派 the school which stresses li; the T'oegye school

idan 異 端 heresy, unacceptable teachings

ki 氣 matter-energy and its individualizing tendency, the selfish element in the cosmos; that which fragments, alienates, and creates separate entities and events in the cosmos.

Kong 公 selfless, impartial, public-minded, moral; selflessness; [dedication to] the common good

Kungni 窮 理 “plumbing principle” (grasping the fundamental patterns underlying every thing and every process.

li 理 the cosmic network of appropriate interrelationships and its universalizing tendency; the universal moral pattern of selfless harmonious interaction

sa 私 selfish, partial, biased, immoral; selfishness; [the pursuit of] private benefit

sadae juŭi 事大主義 “serve the great-ism”; subservience to China.

sadan 四 端 “the four fonts”; the four fundamental virtuous instinctive feelings.

Sangje 上帝 the god of the Confucian Classics.

sŏng 性 “human nature”; man's innate tendency to act selflessly and appropriately in accordance with li.