

## GOODNESS AND *QI*: THE LATE CHOSŎN DEBATE ON HUMAN NATURE

By VLADIMIR GLOMB

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In the course of the great disputes of Korean Confucianism, the Four-Seven and Horak Debates, multiple perspectives came to be formulated on the problem of human nature; these were later taken up as orthodox stances by competing lineages of Korean scholars. Thinkers active during the late eighteenth century often sought to replace this authoritative corpus by means of alternative approaches represented by reformist *sirhak* currents or inspired by so-called ‘Western Learning’; nonetheless, the vast majority of scholars continued to explore the basic questions of Confucian discourse within the limits of previous tradition. A leading example of a scholar faithful to orthodox legacy, yet formulating radical and new perspectives on the basic questions of Confucian doctrine and the problems of human nature, can be found in the personage of Nongmun Im Sŏngju (1711–1788) and his work *Nongnyŏ chapchi* (Miscellaneous records of the Deer Hut). The focus of this study is to present the strategies and arguments Nongmun used to defend the concept of goodness of human nature in relation to both the Chinese and Korean authorities of previous tradition.

Keywords: Nongmun Im Sŏngju, late Chosŏn Confucianism, *qi*, human nature, Horak Debate, Yulgok Yi I, Hwadam, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk

In perusing the first modern history of Korean philosophy, *Chosŏn yugyo yŏmwŏn* 朝鮮儒教淵源 (The origin of Korean Confucianism), for the entry on Nongmun Im Sŏngju 鹿門 任聖周 (1711–1788) we find only a short paragraph stating that he was a disciple of Toam Yi Chae 陶菴 李穡 (1680–1746), and the brother of

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the famous female scholar Im Yunjidang 任允摯堂 (1721–1793).<sup>1</sup> Nobody would have supposed in 1922, when Chang Chiyŏn’s 張志淵 (1864–1921) work was published, that a relatively unknown scholar with only a modest bureaucratic career would end up, over the course of some decades,<sup>2</sup> being recognized as one of the most original thinkers of the second half of the eighteenth century—indeed, being taken as a leading example of Korean scholars active after the Horak debate.

An eminently original spirit in his own right, Nongmun left an extensive scholarly work devoted to almost all the features of the Confucian curriculum, ranging from commentaries on the classics, to hundreds of letters to his colleagues and friends, to treatises expounding his views on essential questions of human nature and principle. As was the case for every scholar of his time, Nongmun, during his early years, followed the teaching of his master and thus nominally belonged to an intellectual tradition closer to the lineage of Oeam Yi

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<sup>1</sup> Chang Chiyŏn, *Chosŏn yugyo yŏmwŏn* (The origin of Korean Confucianism) (Samsŏng munhwa chaedan 1979), 587.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the development of research and methodology concerning Nongmun and his work, see the excerpts from all three monographs on his thought: Kim Hyŏn, *Im Sŏngju ūi saeng ūi ch’ŏrhak* (Im Sŏngju’s philosophy of creative vitality) (Han’gilsa, 1995), 15–24; Son Hŭngch’ŏl, *Nongmun Im Sŏngju ūi sam kwa ch’ŏrhak* (Im Sŏngju’s life and philosophy) (Chisik sanŏpsa, 2004), 31–45; Hong Chŏnggŭn, *Horak nonjaeng ūi ponjil kwa Im Sŏngju ūi ch’ŏrhak sasang* (The essence of the Horak debate and Im Sŏngju’s philosophical thought) (Hanguk yŏn’guwŏn, 2007), 1–13. These works, however, survey discourse in the Republic of Korea, only briefly mentioning works from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). There is as yet no comprehensive study on Nongmun’s reception within North Korean academic discourse, where, beginning with the early decades of the regime, he was hailed as one of the most important materialist thinkers of Korean history. There are several articles on Nongmun, one of the oldest being written by the patriarch of studies of Korean Confucianism in the DPRK, Chŏng Sŏngch’ŏl, on Nongmun’s 250th anniversary: “Im Sŏngju ūi ch’ŏrhak sasang” (Im Sŏngju’s philosophical thought), *Ryŏksa kwabak* 6 (1961): 13–22. See also the more recent work of Ri Subŏm, “Im Sŏngju ūi yumullon ch’ŏrhak” (Im Sŏngju’s materialist philosophy), *Sahoe kwabak hakpo* 4 (2002): 28–31. No monograph originating from the DPRK dedicated specifically to Nongmun exists, and there is no edition of his works, but the journal *Ch’ŏrhak yŏn’gu* tried at least to supply readers with samples of his texts in both the original, i.e. *hanmun* version, and Korean translation. In 1962, it published short sections from *Nongnyŏ chapchi*, his treatises on *Zhongyong* and *Daxue* and a letter to Kim Paekko 金伯高, followed in 1966 by another selection from *Nongnyŏ chapchi*. See “Im Sŏngju ūi ch’ŏrhak sasang chung esŏ” (From the philosophical thought of Im Sŏngju), *Ch’ŏrhak yŏn’gu* 4 (1962): 81–82; and “Rongmun Im Sŏngju ūi Rongnyŏ chapchi chung esŏ” (From *Nongnyŏ chapchi* of Nongmun Im Sŏngju) in *Ch’ŏrhak yŏn’gu* 2 (1966): 46. For a short bibliography of general works on the history of philosophy in North Korea (usually containing at least a section or chapter on Nongmun), see Vladimir Glomb, “Progressive Idealist: North Korean views on Yulgok Yi I,” *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 2 (2015): 173–197.

Kan 巍巖 李柬 (1677–1727).<sup>3</sup> In later times, though, his thought evolved into new forms, and he started to be critical of both sides of the Horak debate. Although we can trace parallels or analogies between Nongmun's thought and the legacy of the Horak debate,<sup>4</sup> his ambition was to formulate truly fundamental concepts, as opposed to just taking a stance on one of the disputes of the day. Nongmun's insights developed slowly into a coherent system, which he fully introduced in his major work *Nongnyŏ chapchi* 鹿廬雜識 (Miscellaneous records of the Deer Hut), composed in 1759–1760 during a temporary retirement from service in the government. This short treatise covers all the fundamental questions of Confucian philosophy and offers Nongmun's theory of both human nature and the relation between principle *li* 理 (K. *yi*) and *qi* 氣 (K. *ki*). *Nongnyŏ chapchi* is a rhetorically well-formed vivid dispute with the contemporary theories illustrated by colorful metaphors, which draw upon the whole tradition of Confucianism. Instead of appending a commentary to the already well-formulated ideas of the great Four-Seven or Horak debates, the treatise in question formulates new concepts taking inspiration from a variety of scholars, including the Song masters, Luo Qinshun 羅欽順 (1465–1547), Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk 花潭 徐敬德 (1489–1546), Nongmun's teacher Toam, and various contemporaries; Nongmun leads a dialogue with the whole of the standing Korean Confucian tradition going back to the sixteenth century, the foundational times of the first polemics and debates, and sometimes even later periods.<sup>5</sup> A brief review reveals that many of his ideas were developed as a polemic not with the most recent and actual authorities, Namdang and Oeam, but instead they took the form of a dialogue with older scholars, in particular Yulgok Yi I 栗谷 李珥 (1536–1584). The present study will try to analyze both the rhetorical strategies and methods of argumentation used in the text of *Nongnyŏ chapchi* in order to detect the limits and inventions of Nongmun's thought on the background of Korean Confucian tradition. Special focus will be placed on the role of Yulgok, since it is clear that he—as the highest of Korean authorities—is the real partner in the dispute conducted by Nongmun, indeed much more so than other scholars. The specific

<sup>3</sup> The Nongmun scholarly lineage is usually reconstructed in the following way: Yulgok Yi I 栗谷 李珥 (1536–1584) → Sagye Kim Changsaeng 沙溪 金長生 (1548–1632) → Uam Song Siyŏl 尤庵 宋時烈 (1607–1689) → Nong'am Kim Ch'anghyŏp 農巖 金昌協 (1651–1708) → Toam Yi Chae 陶菴 李穡 (1680–1746). See Son Hŭngch'ŏl, *ibid.*, 70 and Hong, *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> The most comprehensive work on this topic is probably Hong Chŏnggŭn's work. Please see Hong, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Nongmun's thought is based on Zhu Xi's legacy, but he was well aware of alternative currents in Chinese thought. The opening passage of *Nongnyŏ chapchi* is conspicuous for pointing at the remarkable absence of the character *li* 理 (K. *yi*) in the ancient texts, and the later overuse of the concept of principle *li*; it echoes a spirit very close to that of Qing philology.

themes of the *Nongnyŏ chapchi* which we will survey are Nongmun's views on the problematics of the primordial *qi* (the so-called deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*, *tamil ch'ŏngbŏ chi ki* 湛一清虛之氣;<sup>6</sup> the question of the turbidity of originally clear *qi*; and, finally, the attitude toward Yulgok's essential theory stating that "principle is penetrating and *qi* is delimited" *it'ong kiguk* 理通氣局. Concerning the background of these three topics, we will be able to detect the strategies and motivations behind the formulations of new questions within this field, seemingly so severely limited by previous tradition. Nongmun's work, which functions as a subtle and refined scholarly example of the richness and originality of the late period of Chosŏn Confucianism also shows that not all eighteenth-century scholars were tempted by Western learning or a radical departure from the orthodox authorities, but rather sought to develop their own directions within the borders of the existing canon. Nongmun's views on human nature comprise one part of contemporary witness to the development of late Chosŏn Confucianism; they also document the shift from a focus on principle to a more diversified discourse on *qi* and its role in Cheng-Zhu's theory on the goodness of human nature. Nongmun's impetus in reevaluating prevalent Korean tradition was motivated by his strong conviction that virtually all Korean thinkers from the sixteenth century onward neglected to properly understand the role of *qi* in its relation to principle and thus neglected the normative role of *qi*. In other words, the universalist approach to principle, and subsequently human nature, must be accompanied by an acknowledgment of the universal features of *qi*. Nongmun strongly opposed the tendency to see the goodness of human nature as based solely on the notion that it is principle that defines the ideal properties of human nature, and that the role of *qi* should be relegated to nothing more than an entity enabling a concrete manifestation of principle, sometimes in a harmonic manner, but more often than not as a blocking element, obstructing the clear manifestation of human nature. Nongmun's search for deep, all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* was an attempt to overcome this notion of the passive role of *qi* and thus uncover its universal and normative character, described in the works of the Song masters and going as far back as Mencius and his concept of "flood-like *qi*." The

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<sup>6</sup> For discussion on the translation of this term see Isabelle Sancho, *Prose Writings of Hwadam, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk* (1489–1546), forthcoming. Nongmun is consistent in the way he writes the phrase, but it is necessary to note that the term itself has several variants both in characters and wording. Saam Pak Sun, in his debate with Yulgok, used the combination *tamil hŏjŏng* 澹一虛靜 (*Saamjip* 4:11b) or *tamil bomyŏng* 澹一虛明 (*Saamjip* 4:10b), Yulgok quotes Saam using the form *tamil chŏgyŏn* 澹一寂然. Please note that the first character is occasionally written or rather miswritten as *tam* 淡. For example see Hwaljae Yi Ku 活齋 李栴 (1613–1654) and his glosses to Hwadam (*Hwaljaejip* 4:28a). The translation of the term is complicated by the fact that the crucial part of the phrase, 湛一 *tamil il*, is occasionally used as a noun. In such cases I translate it as "all-penetrating deep One."

importance of this focus on *qi* for a proper understanding of the theory of human nature cannot be underestimated: the recovery of the original goodness of human nature is enabled only by the cultivation of individual *qi*. Nongmun tried to demonstrate that just as in the case of principle, the cultivation of our *qi* does not create anything new; it is merely a process of recovery of the primordial pure state of *qi* inherent in every being.

### YULGOK, HWADAM, AND SAAM

The two centuries which divided Nongmun and Yulgok certainly did not diminish the fame of the sixteenth-century thinker; Yulgok was (at least for adherents to his school) the unsurpassed authority, venerated in the Confucius Shrine (*Munmyo* 文廟), and the only patriarch of the Learning of the Way in Korea. Many scholars took various stances in the Horak debate, disagreeing on many questions, but they all belonged to Yulgok's scholarly lineage. Nongmun was no exception. His deep respect for Yulgok is seen in his own statement:

When I was sixteen, I read the works of the venerable Yulgok, which led me to reflect upon the mystery of the unity of Heaven, Earth, and human beings and establish my aspiration<sup>7</sup> to study.<sup>8</sup>

His respectful attitude is still visible also in his later writings, including *Nongnyō chapchi*. Nongmun strived to amend or correct Yulgok's theories so they would be congruent with his insights, and certainly he did not wish to refute them (as did many scholars of the T'oegye school). It is not a coincidence that the first Korean scholar mentioned in the text is Yulgok, and that the genealogy of the crucial term of the treatise is traced to Yulgok as well. Nongmun was not the first Korean thinker to use the term "deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*", and from the very beginning of his treatise, he strived to construct the genealogy of this term in relation to both Chinese and Korean scholarly authorities. His attempt to find precise analogies to the concept was motivated both by the wish to provide a comprehensible depiction of the term, and at the same time to distance himself from alternative notions and past interpretations.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Analects* 2.4.

<sup>8</sup> Purok 附錄 (*Haengjang* 行狀) 2, in *Nongmunjip*: 年十六時。因看栗翁語。有省知天人合一之妙。而大志立。

What is called “original *qi*” is what Zhang Zai called the “great void” or “great harmony” and what Mengzi called “the flood-like *qi*.” It fills up the space between Heaven and Earth and circulates and flows between past and present. It is in the *yin* and *yang* and fills up the *yin* and *yang*. It is in the five phases and fills up the five phases. It is in human beings and other creatures and fills up human beings and other creatures. It is like a fish in water; the belly of the fish is filled up with this same water.<sup>9</sup> Master Yulgok once said that in many cases the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* is not present. I am afraid this is not so, because while there are cases of imbalanced, blocked, bad, and muddy *qi*, there is nowhere this *qi* does not penetrate; it is only constrained and blocked by *qi* that has taken form, and so is unable to be manifested and clearly circulate.<sup>10</sup>

Comparing the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* or simply primordial *qi* with the concepts of Mencius’ flood-like *qi* and Zhang Zai’s concept of the Great Void was certainly a valid and authoritative method of delineating the basic semantic field of the term, but it was far from sufficient. The vast interpretive possibilities hailing from both expressions, flood-like *qi* and the Great Void, called for a stricter definition; all Korean Confucian scholars would agree that the primordial universal state of *qi* filling all under Heaven exists, but the precise contours of the concept differed significantly. The crucial question was the precise moment of transformation of the primordial state of *qi* into concrete manifestations, as well as the destiny of the primordial *qi* after the birth of the ten thousand things. To explicate the meaning of his idea, Nongmun decided to engage in a polemic with the most authoritative Korean source of the problem of deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*, Yulgok. The statement “There

<sup>9</sup> This passage is a reference to Cheng Yi and his alternative theory of primary *qi* or “primary ether.” See Angus Graham’s translation: “The primary ether is the source from which ether is produced: it is not mixed with ether from outside, but merely nourished by it. It is like the case of a fish in water; the life of the fish is not made by water it is only that it cannot live unless it is nourished by the water.” *Er Cheng yishu* 二程遺書 (Surviving works of the two Cheng brothers) 15:37b in *Qinding Siku quanshu* 欽定四庫全書: 真元之氣氣之所由生不與外氣相雜但以外氣涵養而已若魚在水魚之性命非是水為之但必以水涵養魚乃得生爾. Cheng Yi argued that: “the alternation of *yang* and *yin* is not simply the expansion and contraction of persisting ether, but there is a continuous generation of new and annihilation of old ether.” Please see Angus Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers* (La Salle: Open Court), 42. It is important to note (as an anonymous reviewer generously reminded me) that Cheng Yi “rejected the idea, embraced by his brother and other early Neo-Confucians, that *qi* is recirculated. For him, such a view implied that *qi* played a normative role and Cheng Yi wanted to reserve such a role for pattern or principle alone.”

<sup>10</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:4a: 所謂元氣者。即張子所謂太虛太和。孟子所謂浩然之氣。充塞天地。流行古今。在陰陽滿陰陽。在五行滿五行。在人物滿人物。譬如魚在水中而肚裏皆這水也。栗谷先生嘗云湛一清虛之氣。多有不在。竊恐未然。蓋雖偏塞惡濁處。此氣則無不透。特被形氣所局塞。不能呈露而顯行焉爾。

are many cases when the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* is not present” is the starting point of the delineation of Nongmun’s own theory, as it directly addresses the question of the status and existence of primordial *qi*. The textual history of Yulgok’s statement is connected with his famous comparison of T’oegyē, Hwadam and Luo Qinshun in his letter to Ugye Sōng Hon 牛溪 成渾 (1535–1598) Yulgok provided in his letter (in addition to many other theories) a brief evaluation of Hwadam, commenting on his qualities and deficiencies in relation to basic questions of *daoxue* philosophy. Yulgok’s criticism of Hwadam’s understanding of primordial *qi* is a small but important argument defining the difference between key concepts of both thinkers. Yulgok polemic with Hwadam is thus essential for our understanding of the context of Nongmun’s theory: the latter employed it in his treatise as a direct theoretical precursor. In the line of arguments contained in *Nongnyō chapchi*, we see, in addition to the polemic with Yulgok’s notion of deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*, indirect hints concerning Hwadam’s general theory on the topic. Another layer of the text resides in the interpretation of the Kaesōng master as voiced by Hwadam’s disciple Saam Pak Sun 思庵 朴淳 (1523–1589), who engaged in the polemic with Yulgok on his own. Nongmun employed all of these three sixteenth-century thinkers to discuss his theory, spanning a gap of two centuries, in order to highlight alternative and false theories of primordial *qi*. The first line of the debate could be directly linked to Yulgok’s statement that Hwadam did not understand that there are “many cases when deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* is not present.” Yulgok’s argument is based on the premise that the diversification of *qi* necessarily replaces or changes primordial *qi*, which subsequently might be present or absent in certain concrete forms or objects.

[Hwadam] believed there was nothing that lacked the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* and that [in seeing this] he had [grasped] a mystery not wholly transmitted by the thousand sages [before him], but he really did not understand the point mentioned above about how “principle is penetrating but *qi* is delimited.” There is nothing that lacks the principle or pattern of “that which continues it is goodness; that which completes it is the nature,”<sup>11</sup> but there are many things that lack the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*. Principle does not change, but *qi* does change. The original *qi* “generates and generates without cease. What passes away has gone; what comes continues it.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Book of Changes, Great Appendix (Xici 繫辭)*, Section I.

<sup>12</sup> These lines combine some related ideas found in important classics or commentaries. The primary source is the Great Appendix (Xici 繫辭), Section I, which says, “To generate and generate; this is called the changes” (生生之謂易). In his commentary on *Analects* 16.9,

The *qi* that has passed away no longer exists anywhere, and yet Hwadam believed there was a kind of *qi* that continues to exist, that what has passed away has not gone and that what comes does not continue it. This is how Hwadam came to mistakenly believe that *qi* was principle.<sup>13</sup>

Yulgok described the reasons why the *qi* of the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* is at times not present is contained in one of his previous letters to Ugye, traditionally designated as the reply to Ugye's Sixth Letter. His explanation on the transformations of primordial *qi* was a part of his exposé of the formula that "principle is penetrating and *qi* is delimited."

What is meant by "*qi* is delimited"? *Qi* already is within the realm of phenomenal things and so it has roots and branches, what comes prior and what follows later. The origin of *qi* is the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*; how could the *qi* of dregs, ashes, manure, or filth exist [at the beginning]! It is only because [the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*] unceasingly ascends, descends, and soars all about that it becomes disorderly and unequal, which then generates the myriad changes. As this *qi* flows and circulates, some of it does not lose its original state, while some does. As for the *qi* that loses its original state, this original *qi* no longer exists. What is imbalanced is imbalanced *qi*; it is not complete and perfect *qi*. What is pure is pure *qi*; it is not muddy *qi*. What is dregs and ashes is dregs and ashes *qi*; it is not that deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*. It is not like how pattern and principle is within the myriad things and there is nowhere its fundamental mystery cannot be found. This is what is meant by "*qi* is delimited."<sup>14</sup>

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Zhu Xi draws and elaborates upon this idea, "In the transformations of Heaven and Earth, what passes away has gone and what comes continues it. There is never a moment in which hit ceases. This is simply what the Way itself is like." (天地之化，往者過，來者續，無一息之停，乃道體之本然也。) See *Sisbu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Collected commentaries on the Four Books by paragraphs and phrases), Analects 16.9.

<sup>13</sup> *Yulgok chönsö* 10:36b-38a: 以爲湛一清虛之氣。無物不在。自以爲得千聖不盡傳之妙。而殊不知向上更有理通氣局一節。繼善成性之理。則無物不在。而湛一清虛之氣。則多有不在者也。理無變而氣有變。元氣生生不息。往者過來者續。而已往之氣。已無所在。而花潭則以爲一氣長存。往者不過。來者不續。此花潭所以有認氣爲理之病也。

<sup>14</sup> *Yulgok chönsö* 10:26a-b: 氣局者。何謂也。氣已涉形迹。故有本末也。有先後也。氣之本則湛一清虛而已。曷嘗有糟粕煨燼。糞壤污穢之氣哉。惟其升降飛揚。未嘗止息。故參差不齊而萬變生焉。於是氣之流行也。有不失其本然者。有失其本然者。既失其本然。則氣之本然者。已無所在。偏者。偏氣也。非全氣也。清者。清氣也。非濁氣也。糟粕煨燼。糟粕煨燼之氣也。非湛一清虛之氣也。非若理之於萬物。本然之妙。無乎不在也。此所謂氣之局也。



Any analysis of Yulgok's original statement should also state that although Nongmun did not agree with Yulgok's thesis, it does not follow that he therefore agreed with Hwadam. As seen in the arguments in *Nongnyŏ chapchi*, Nongmun not only disagreed with Yulgok's stance of the occasional disappearance of primordial *qi*, but also diverged from Hwadam's understanding of deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* as an omnipresent entity. The oldest layer of classical Korean polemic about primordial *qi* seems to be the most difficult to decode as the picture of Hwadam's theory is delineated in his extant works rather briefly, and we may presume that many of his teachings were lost or not recorded. In Nongmun's text, Hwadam's theory is indirectly described via Yulgok's critique, as well as by Yulgok's refutation of Hwadam's disciple Saam Pak Sun 思庵 朴淳 (1523–1589), who in all likelihood would have been a proponent of his teacher's stance. The very fact that Nongmun quoted the relatively unknown debate between Saam and Yulgok<sup>15</sup> demonstrates that he carefully searched for the sixteenth-century precedents of his theory, analyzing all plausible examples of the understanding of deep and all-penetrating, unified *qi* including the incorrect ones.

Pak Saam said that the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* generates *yin* and *yang* and also attributed this *qi* to *yin*. This is close to nonsense, and it was appropriate that it was refuted by the Venerable Yulgok. That which is called the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* is not the *qi* which exists beyond *yin* and *yang* and the Five Elements. It is only so that when this *qi* moves it becomes *yang*; when it is tranquil, it becomes *yin*. When it reaches the spring, it becomes [the element of] wood, when it reaches the summer it becomes fire, when it reaches the autumn it becomes metal, when it reaches the winter it becomes water. It penetrates and goes through *yin* and *yang* and the Five Elements, but it is not limited by them. It has no exterior, no beginning or end, no limits, divisions or parts: it is like this and nothing more. Hwadam inspired Saam, but I do not know whether Hwadam's ideas were like Saam's or not. Concerning his explanations, I wished to see his collected writings, but I could not verify this. That is sad."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For their debate see *Yulgok chŏnsŏ* 9:17a–20a and *Saamjip* 4: 10b-12b. See also Hwang Kwanguk, "Saam Pak Sun kwa Yulgok Yi I ūi igironbyŏn koch'al: Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk ūi igiron kwa kwallyŏn hayŏ" (Examination of Saam Pak Sun and Yulgok Yi I's discussion on principle and *qi*: in connection with Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk's views on principle and *qi*), *Inmun kwahak* 29 (1999): 21–33; Kim Kyŏngho, "Hwadam ponch'eron kwa kŭ e taehan Saam Yulgok ūi nonbyŏn" (Saam and Yulgok discussion about Hwadam's views on the substance), *Yulgok sasang yŏn'gu* 4 (2001): 37–71; Hwang Ŭidong, "Saam Pak Sunŭi sŏngnihak e taehan kŏmt'o" (Investigation of Saam Pak Sun's Learning of the nature and principle), *Hanguk sasang kwa munhwa* 27 (2005): 153–172.

<sup>16</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:7a-b: 朴思庵謂湛一清虛之氣。乃生陰陽。而又以是氣屬之陰。殆不成說話。其爲栗翁所

In Nongmun's opinion, Saam's error, or rather two errors, were easy to follow: the first one was that the "deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* generates *yin* and *yang*" and the second that "this *qi* belongs to *yin*." In the first case, it means that *yin* and *yang* are produced, i.e. they differ and are separated from the primordial state; and in the second, that this primordial *qi* would be limited by its allegiance to *yin*. In both cases, its most basic feature—its omnipresence both in temporal and spatial aspect, which Nongmun stressed as a property of the deep and all-penetrating, unified *qi*—would be negated. As Nongmun suggested in his text, it was not possible, due to the scarcity of materials, to reconstruct the original picture of Hwadam's theory of deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* and thus ascertain the degree to which Saam adhered to it. Hwadam mentions the concept of the deep and all-penetrating *qi* several times, most explicitly in his *Kwisin sasaengnon* 鬼神死生論 (Discussion about ghosts, spirits, death and life), but the brevity of these texts effectively hampers any attempt to reconstruct the precise picture of this term in his oeuvre. Hwadam's notion of primordial *qi* probably differed significantly from Nongmun's view: both authors would agree that the deep and all-penetrating, unified *qi* has neither beginning nor end,<sup>17</sup> but Nongmun would most likely have opposed relegating primordial *qi* to the sphere of "Earlier Heaven" *sŏnch'on* 先天,<sup>18</sup> i.e., separating primordial *qi* and the ten thousand things. Another point of argument similar to Saam's theory would be Hwadam's statement that concrete forms "disperse in the all-penetrating deep One of the Great Void."<sup>19</sup> This would suggest that concrete forms emerge and return into the primordial state of *qi*, which itself exists as an eternal under-current of Being. Neither concept—whether that of a separate primordial entity giving birth to concrete forms, as in the case of Saam (and probably of Hwadam as well), or that of an originally pure *qi*, possibly absent due to its having been polluted (proposed by Yulgok)—satisfied Nongmun, who eventually devised his own original concept of deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*. Although Nongmun commented in *Nongnyŏ chapchi* on all three sixteenth-century thinkers mentioned here, his inspiration for the new concept actually came from a much older source.

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駁也宜矣。夫所謂湛一清虛者。非於陰陽五氣之外。別有是氣也。只是此氣動則爲陽靜則爲陰。行到于春則爲木。行到于夏則爲火。行到于秋則爲金。行到于冬則爲水。通貫乎陰陽五行之中。而不爲陰陽五行所局。無內外無始終無邊際無分段。如斯而已。思庵說出於花潭。未知花潭之意亦只如思庵否。其說想見文集而不得考。可憐。

<sup>17</sup> *Hwadamjip* 2:16a: 氣之湛一清虛者。既無其始。又無其終。

<sup>18</sup> See Hwadam's discussion in his text "Wŏn igi" 原理氣 (Back to the source of Principle and Qi), in *Hwadamjip* 2:11a–14b.

<sup>19</sup> *Hwadamjip* 2:15b: 散於太虛湛一之中。

### BUILDING THE NEW CONCEPT

The concept of the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* was (mostly thanks to Yulgok's writings) widely known among the circle of Horak scholars, but it certainly had not achieved the status of theoretical eminence. The patriarch of the debate Suam Kwōn Sangha 遂庵 權尙夏 (1641–1721), only briefly commented on Yulgok's statement in his correspondence.<sup>20</sup> The main protagonists of the debate, Oeam and Namdang both followed the model established by Yulgok, and although it can be stated that Namdang discussed the topic with more interest, they both agree that *qi*, in its original, non-aroused *mibal* 未發 state, is deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void; once manifested, it is either clear or turbid, i.e. there are cases when it is not present (in its original state). Nongmun's teacher Toam discussed the problem several times in connection to the problem of mind,<sup>21</sup> but if among Nongmun's predecessors and senior scholars there was anyone devoting special attention to the definition and meaning of the term, it has not come to our attention. This of course does not mean that the problem of primordial *qi* and its cultivation or its relation to principle were not an integral part of the debate and related discourses, but the fact remains that Nongmun was the only thinker who set about building his own theory of human nature from the starting point of deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*, considered by his contemporaries to be a rather collateral problem already well defined by Yulgok. The inspiration for his epistemic turn is described well by Nongmun himself.

Fortunately, after my middle age had passed, I relied on the wondrous intelligence of Heaven, and gained experience with the teaching of Master Zhang concerning the all-penetrating deep One, and understood that although the so-called *qi* and its qualities are clear or turbid, excellent or mixed, and have ten thousand irregularities, its substance is just the all-penetrating deep One.”<sup>22</sup>

Zhang Zai was among the Korean literati commonly understood as the founding figure of the discourse on primordial *qi*, but it is necessary to note that his theories were open to a broad range of interpretations. Even Hwadam, considered to be the staunchest proponent of Zhang Zai's teachings, allegedly had

<sup>20</sup> *Hansujaejip* 20:37a–41a.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, *Toamjip* 10:12a–13b.

<sup>22</sup> *Nongmunjip* 16:2b: 幸於中歲以後。賴天之靈。有味乎張子湛一之訓。而知所謂氣質者。雖清濁粹駁有萬不齊。而其本體則只湛一而已矣。

to expound upon Zhang Zai's statements which were not complete, i.e. clearly comprehensible.<sup>23</sup> The Song master's works, however, were an integral part of the classical Confucian curriculum and were regularly studied by Korean scholars. Nongmun's new understanding of the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*, was thus based on classical texts well-known to this group of literati, which were brought again to their attention. His interpretation of Zhang Zai's theory was based on the conviction that the only plausible interpretation of the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* is that it functions both as substance and as an integral part of all things and processes. In other words, it is not present only before the beginning of concrete existence (as in Saam's line of reasoning), but is present as well in all objects (and not, as Yulgok argued, often missing). It was only under these circumstances that the theory of human nature could be salvaged—otherwise human nature would, according to the old theories (those of both Yulgok and Saam), at times reside in turbid and impure *qi*. The argument is at the beginning targeted directly against Yulgok's older (and still prevalent) theory, but it ultimately traces its roots back to Mencius' authoritative theory of human nature.

The deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* is nothing but Heaven and is there any place where Heaven is not present? Yulgok's explanations should be ultimately understood as dubious. Man's nature of 'being good' is nothing more than his *qi* and its qualities are good. It is not the case that there would be some other nature of good beyond *qi* and its qualities, and therefore it is said that man has nothing that is not good, just as all water flows downwards.<sup>24</sup> It is also said: "to injure man in order to fashion from him benevolence and righteousness."<sup>25</sup> This speaks only about the words "man" and "water," and does not mention the term human nature. His intention may be clearly seen, because when Mencius speaks about the goodness of human nature, he subsequently speaks about flood-like *qi*, and after that the meaning is clear. Mingdao said: Mencius went further and expounded the doctrine of flood-like *qi*.<sup>26</sup> That is exactly so. Nowadays, people frequently divide man and nature into two, and think that although *qi* and its qualities are evil, nature is good in itself. This splits *li* and *qi* into two things, as well as the fact that nature is good is not enough to become truly good. When somebody is confused like this, how can he distinguish cases when *qi* is turbid and has a mixed quality? I say:

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<sup>23</sup> *Saamjip* 4:11a: 花潭又推張子之未盡言者。極言竭論。可謂極高明也。

<sup>24</sup> *Mencius* VIA:2.

<sup>25</sup> *Mencius* VIA:1.

<sup>26</sup> *Jinsilu* 1:19.

Although *qi* and its qualities are turbid and of mixed quality, there is no difference in the basic substance of the all-penetrating deep One.<sup>27</sup>

Good human nature has to be attached to a good *qi*, and the only kind of *qi* which meets the requirements of the principle or nature (i.e. to be universal, good and eternal) is the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*. This *qi* is (or at least should be) contained everywhere and in everything. Yulgok's stance that there are cases where the clear *qi* is missing would mean that the goodness of human nature is sometimes completely sunk in turbid and mixed *qi*, i.e. principle and *qi* would thus not be corresponding. Nongmun's bold rejection of the traditional distinction between original nature and physical nature is an elegant solution to the question as to what kind of *qi* is coupled with the principle of our good nature when our body and mind are trapped in turbidity. But Nongmun was at the same time a humble scholar who wanted to improve the standing of Confucian theory and not tear it down; above all, he respected authorities, including Yulgok and the generation of his teachers. According to Nongmun, Yulgok's error lay only in the fact that he was not able to see the clearly wondrous functioning of the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*, which lies behind all phenomena. Nongmun stresses that although original *qi* is always present, it may not be always visible. Nongmun employs Cheng Mingdao's metaphor and explains why Yulgok believed that "there are many cases when this *qi* is not present".

When one and two unite and make three, one and two disappear.<sup>28</sup> When the void coagulates and becomes things, the void disappears. When things are created, it is not possible to see the void. It would seem that we could not find the appearance of the all-penetrating deep One in bad odors and the dirt of excrement, but when we use them to fertilize fields and seeds, sprouts grow quickly and abundantly: the productive basic substance of Heaven and Earth appear again as it was before, and it is possible to see that there is no place where this *qi* would not penetrate.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:5a-b: 湛一清虛之氣非他也乃天也天豈有不在者乎栗谷說終覺可疑 人性之善。乃其氣質善耳。非氣質之外別有善底性也。故曰人無有不善。水無有不下。又曰戕賊人以爲仁義。但說人字水字。更不舉性字。其意可見。故孟子說性善。至說浩氣。其義乃明。明道所謂孟子去其中發揮出浩然之氣。可謂盡矣者。正以此也。今人多分人與性爲二。以爲氣質雖惡。性自善。是理與氣判作兩物。而性之善者。未足爲真善也。或疑如是則氣質濁駁者。當何區處。曰雖氣質之濁駁者。其本體之湛一則無不同。

<sup>28</sup> *Er Cheng cuiyan* 二程粹言 (Excellent sayings of the two Chengs) 1:115.

<sup>29</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:24b: 一二合而爲三。三見則一二亡。虛凝爲物。物成則虛不可見。然糞穢之臭惡污濁。雖若不可尋湛一之影象。而糞田種穀。禾苗驟茁。則藹然天地生生之本體。依舊呈露。此氣之無處不透。於此可見。

To make his argument simpler, Nongmun summarized his main argument against Yulgok's thesis that primordial *qi* in certain cases ceases to be present in the following elegant and logical argument:

The origin of the all-penetrating deep whole *qi* is the origin of *qi*. If there really would be a case when it is not present, it would mean that outside of *qi* there exists something else.<sup>30</sup>

Let us return to the powerful image of the wondrous presence of the primordial *qi* even in the lowest and despicable objects including excrement, dung and disgusting odors. In addition to highlighting the concept of the omnipresent clear and wondrous *qi*, Nongmun had to offer his explanation of the origins of the other aspect of mundane existence: dirt and turbidities, which at times seemingly overcome or obscure the clear and pure state of *qi*.

### DREGS

The stress placed upon human nature as positive and a certain idealization of principle can overshadow the fact that Korean scholars had a good sense for describing the negative aspects of both human existence and the ten thousand things. Kwon Kŭn's 權近 (1352–1409) *Iphak tosŏl* 入學圖說 (Diagrams for the commencement of learning) illustrates not only how to become a sage, but explicates, step by step, how a person can degrade himself to a bestial-type existence. The primer for small boys *Tongmong sŏnsŭp* 童蒙先習 (A first exercise for uneducated youth) warns small children in accordance with Mencius that “If somebody is human and does not know that he has the Five Constant [Virtues] then his distance from animals is not far.”<sup>31</sup> The presence of evil or rather improper state in man was reflected also on the level of objects or things. The existence of seemingly imperfect or frankly disgusting objects (dung or feces being the preferred examples) presented the important question of the evaluation of creative processes on the level of *qi*. Yulgok's statement “The *qi* of dross, ashes, manured soil or filth is not the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*”<sup>32</sup> addresses this problem; Nongmun devoted lengthy passages both in *Nongnyŏ chapchi* and other writings to this question as well. The general term used by Nongmun for designating the various impurities of *qi* was *sajae* 渣滓 (dregs,

<sup>30</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:24b: 湛一氣之本。氣之本。果有不在則是氣外有物。

<sup>31</sup> *Tongmong sŏnsŭp*: 人而不知有五常 則其違禽獸 不遠矣。

<sup>32</sup> *Yulgok chŏnsŏ* 10:26b: 糟粕煨燼之氣也。非湛一清虛之氣也。

dross), and just as in the case of the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* he was not the first scholar to use it. The Song masters mentioned the term in relation to the turbidity of *qi*,<sup>33</sup> and we find its usage in several Korean sources as well;<sup>34</sup> it achieved no popularity, however, and Korean thinkers used other less specific terms to describe the impurities of *qi*. A rather telling point showing its frequency or lack thereof is that neither of the three greatest thinkers of the sixteenth century, Hwadam, T'oegyē and Yulgok, used the term. The same is valid for later periods, and partly for the circle of Horak debate scholars as well; we do not find any extensive use by Kwōn Sangha, Oeam, or Toam, but there are numerous instances in the works of Namdang. At least two instances in his writings indicate that Namdang understood the term 'dregs' in two ways: as either the less numinous part of *qi*, which forms the blood and flesh of the human body;<sup>35</sup> or as impurities which must be transformed in order to enable clear and void *qi* to be manifest and correspond to goodness.<sup>36</sup> But it was only in Nongmun's work that the concept of 'dregs' gained prominence and became one of the cornerstones of his theory explaining the existence of evil as negative aspects of human emotions.

Dregs and turbidity were natural companions of the transformation processes of the substance of *qi*, but Nongmun's crucial idea was that in spite of their

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<sup>33</sup> The most notable one being a section of the famous paragraph in *Zhuǐ yulei* 1:10: [Somebody] asked: What is the first, principle or *qi*? [Master] said: Principle cannot be separated from *qi*, but principle is above forms, and *qi* is on the level of forms. Speaking from a perspective of above the forms and below the forms, how could they exist without antecedent or successor? Principle has no form, but *qi* can be coarse and can contain dregs. (問：先有理，抑先有氣。曰：理未嘗離乎氣。然理形而上者，氣形而下者。自形而上下言，豈無先後。理無形，氣便粗，有渣滓。) An illustrative list of the Song sources and quotations mentioning the term is offered by Hong Chōnggūn, *ibid.*, 190. It includes several instances in *Zhuǐ yulei* (Conversations of Master Zhu arranged topically), *Xingli daquan* 性理大全 (Great compendium on human nature and principle), and *Daxue huowen* 大學或問 (Questions on the *Great Learning*).

<sup>34</sup> Hong Chōnggūn offers a similar list for the circle of scholars related to Nongmun and his time, but we do find individual cases of the term scattered across almost the whole of the Chosŏn period including in even such diverse works such as Songdang Pak Yōng's 松堂 朴英 (1471–1540) *Paengnoktong kyuhae* 白鹿洞規解 (Explanation of White Deer Hollow Academy rules). Please refer to Hong, *ibid.*, 191.

<sup>35</sup> *Namdangjip* 21:33a-b: 智愚賢不肖之分。雖在於心。其心之如此者。實由於其身之氣稟也。稟得氣清者。清氣之渣滓凝者。爲血肉之身。而精英聚者。爲知覺之心。稟得氣濁者。濁氣之渣滓凝者。爲血肉之身。而精英聚者。爲知覺之心。渣滓清則精英亦清。渣滓濁則精英亦濁。此氣稟之性。所以必舉全身之稟而言也。

<sup>36</sup> *Namdangjip* 22:7a: 必其致戒懼慎獨之功。而氣質盡變。渣滓渾化。然後虛明之發。方無不中節矣。至於稟氣極濁。無一分清明者。亦有善情之發。乃由於性命之正。根於心而不容滅息也。於此却不當以氣之清濁論之也。蓋聖人之稟。極於清。下愚之稟。極於濁。則情之善惡。各極其全。亦宜如氣稟之相反。而聖人無惡情。下愚有善情。聖人無濁氣。而下愚有性善故也。

presence, they never fully replace the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*, which always forms the underlying substance of all Being. The existence of turbidity does not negate the original purity of the substance; despite its striking visibility, we should not be misled by it.

When it comes to so-called turbidity and the mixed quality, then these are dregs within correct *qi*, and when they are heavy, the original substance is concealed by them, and the circumstances of the principle are also necessarily like that. But how is it possible, just because of that, to go as far as to have doubts about the goodness of the original substance?<sup>37</sup>

As opposed to the case of the *qi* of the all-penetrating deep One, clear and void, there was no coherent tradition of the usage of the term ‘dregs’ or ‘dross’, and one of the first steps Nongmun took in his explanation of the concept was to link it to certain authoritative precedents. Given the connection between both concepts, he again searched for possible parallels in Zhang Zai’s work.

Master Hengqu said: “Whether people are hard or soft, slow or quick, talented or not talented is [caused] by the one-sidedness of *qi*. The harmonic production of Heaven has no one-sidedness. Foster this *qi*, return to the origin, and be impartial. Then we shall exhaust our nature, we shall be like Heaven.”<sup>38</sup> The one-sidedness of *qi* points to the dregs and dross flowing at the bottom, and speaks about it.<sup>39</sup>

But what is the difference between Nongmun’s theory of dregs and the authoritative scholarly stance claiming that imbalances or turbidity are just due to the one-sidedness of *qi*? The difference between Yulgok (or Zhu Xi, for that matter) and Nongmun lies in the focus on the dual quality of *qi*; Zhu Xi or Yulgok would argue that the *qi* of ashes is simply the *qi* of ashes, whereas Nongmun would defend the position that the *qi* of ashes is a wondrous original *qi* with the addition of pollution (giving it the appearance and properties of ashes)—it does not, however, replace the original substance. Only this model would make it possible to maintain the theory of a good human nature under all possible circumstances. The whole argument is well described in the closing paragraph of *Nongnyŏ chapchi*.

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<sup>37</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:5b: 若其所謂濁駁者。乃其正氣中渣滓耳。渣滓重則本體隱焉者。亦理勢之必然。然豈可以是以致疑於本體之善哉。

<sup>38</sup> *Zhengmeng* 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:5b-6a: 橫渠先生曰人之剛柔緩急才不才。氣之偏也。天本參和不偏。養其氣。反之本而不偏則盡性而天矣。氣之偏。指末流渣滓而言。



When it is too much and it comes to [the bandits] Zhi and [Zhuang] Jue, it seems that [their *qi*] is completely turbid and of mixed quality, and that it is impossible to see once again the original substance of the all-penetrating deep One. But when we examine the real state of things, there are just dregs within correct [*qi*]. It is as when pure water is polluted by mud and sand. There always exist certain cases, like a child falling into a well, which in a single moment excites our emotions, and empathetic good flushes out like a sprout. It immediately rushes out, and its manifestation does not ride on turbid *qi*, and it is also not produced by *li*. As before, it is the nature of the good, which by itself rides on the deep and all-penetrating, unified *qi*. It rejects and purges the dregs, and it comes out. Only then one can see the real supreme good of nature and that the turbidity and impurity of the dregs do not play a part in the deep and all-penetrating, unified *qi* of a basic substance. If somebody says he is placing emphasis on the goodness of [human] nature and that *qi* mounted [by the nature] can be at times even turbid and mixed, but does not harm the manifestation of good emotions, it means that such a person is completely giving importance to the principle and the clarity or turbidity of *qi* has no relation to it and that there is no sense in our effort to transform and cultivate our endowment of *qi*.<sup>40</sup>

Nongmun's schema of the *Nongnyŏ chapchi* culminates at the book's end; the treatise starts with the definition of deep and all-penetrating, unified *qi*, continues with the explanation of its occasional turbid forms, and ends with the application of both concepts to the essential point of Confucian teaching, human nature.

### GENERAL THEORY

Both concepts, for Nongmun, served to underline his basic conviction that “principle and *qi* are real in the same way” *igi tongsil* 理氣同實,<sup>41</sup> i.e. both principle and *qi* must mutually correspond to each other. The universal deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* was for Nongmun a logical counterpart of the universal principle, and accidental turbidity did not interfere with its basic qualities just as principle remains unchanged in its normative way of “as it should be”, *sodangyŏn* 所當然. The reinterpretation of the role of primordial *qi* had

<sup>40</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:30a-b: 多之至而至於踳蹶則似乎全是濁駁。不復可見其本體之湛一。然究其實則亦只是正通中渣滓。如清水之爲泥沙所混耳。是故一或有孺子入井之類。瞥來感觸則藹然善端。便即闢發。而其發也非乘濁氣也。亦非理之有造作也。依舊是仁義之性。自乘了本然湛一之氣。闢坼了渣滓而出來耳。如此然後方見性之真箇至善。而渣滓之濁駁。無與於本體之湛一也。今若謂性善爲主。所乘之氣雖或濁駁。無害於善情之發。則是全然歸重於理。而氣之清濁。都不關係。無事乎變化氣質之功也。又况氣之濁者。

<sup>41</sup> “Purok” 21b in *Nongmunjip* 5:23a.

consequences for the entire system of the relation between principle and *qi*, the most renowned being Nongmun's paraphrase of the classical device "principle is one, but its manifestations are many" *il punsu* 理一分殊 as "*qi* is one, but its manifestations are many" *kiil punsu* 氣一分殊.<sup>42</sup> The formula of the relationship between the two constituents of the world required as well a major revision of the previously authoritative formulation "principle is penetrating and *qi* is delimited," as articulated by Yulgok. Yulgok's statement was originally developed in close relation to the traditional expression "*qi* is one but its manifestations are many", but Nongmun felt strongly that the message of both phrases was not the same. The opinion voiced in *Nongnyŏ chapchi* attempts to pay respect to the old Korean patriarch, but at the same time it is clear that the original dispute over the statement of just a few characters "there are many cases where the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* is not present" slowly but inevitably evolved into a radical revision of all of Yulgok's philosophical legacy.

Concerning the sources and functioning of principle and *qi*, Master Yulgok advanced to his own stances, and his views were extremely clear. His penetrating explanations were clever and as nimble as they could be. After Master Zhu, there was almost no one who would reach such principles, and only in the case of the original oneness of *qi* does it seem that there were cases, at times, when his argument was not thoroughly brilliant. He stated that the source of principle is only one, and the source of *qi* is also only one; he also considered the Mind of the Way to be *qi* in its original state; it is indeed possible to state that his explanations and elucidations arrived at these points. But in his discussion on the statement that principle is penetrating and *qi* is delimited, he solely turned *qi* into manifold diversities, and moreover believed that here are many cases when deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi* is not present. When we examine this turn, at the end he could not escape the fault of considering [principle and *qi*] as two things.<sup>43</sup>

In my mind I have always harbored doubts concerning this single statement of Venerable Yulgok that principle is penetrating and *qi* is delimited. I

<sup>42</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:4a: It is necessary to treat this formulation with caution since it appears in Nongmun's explanation only once, and it is accompanied by very cautious remarks (而言則曰氣一分殊 亦無不可矣). Nevertheless, it still presents a very bold argument toward an established theory.

<sup>43</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:6b-7a: 栗谷先生於理氣源頭。深造獨得。見得極明。透說得極玲瓏。朱子以後殆未有臻斯理者也。獨於氣之本一處。猶或有未盡瑩者。其曰理之源。一而已。氣之源。亦一而已。又以道心爲本然之氣者。亦不可謂不講究到此。而乃於理通氣局之論。專以氣歸之萬殊。又以爲湛一清虛之氣。多有不在。究其歸。終未免於二物之疑。

pondered about it more whether it is not a dividing of principle and *qi* into two: one belonging to the single unified source, and one belonging to the manifold diversity.<sup>44</sup>

There is a certain irony in Yulgok being accused of dividing principle and *qi* into two things, the very same accusation he raised against T'oegye and that he himself tried to avoid. Nongmun's logical thread from primordial *qi* to the general theory of principle and *qi* shows that, in spite of all his respect, he revised the basic outline of Yulgok's doctrine. The tone of his critique, however, suggests that Yulgok just slipped into a common error of many thinkers and put too much emphasis on the distinct features of the principle and *qi* while ignoring their essential unity.<sup>45</sup> Another important point is that Nongmun refuted only certain parts of Yulgok's understanding of the Cheng-Zhu orthodox system and formulated his objections in order to provide a more precise interpretation of the classical sources. A good example is provided by Nongmun's own note to his analysis of the errors in Yulgok's theory of penetration and limitation of principle and *qi*.

[When speaking about] dividing principle and *qi* by penetration or limitation, these words are new and their meaning is not accurate. It does not match with the [old] discussion about "principle is one but its manifestations are many."<sup>46</sup>

Instead of Yulgok's definition, Nongmun politely preferred to return to the old classical statement of the Song masters, which was also much more suitable for his own interpretation.

## CONCLUSION

Nongmun's strategy in his treatise was to present his views on the fundamental problems of Confucian philosophy not by means of direct polemic with his

<sup>44</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:24a: 栗翁理通氣局一語。心常疑之。更思之。此非判理氣爲二物。一屬之一原。一屬之分殊也。

<sup>45</sup> The accusation of falsely understanding principle and *qi* as only one thing, or two discrete things, was quite common among Korean scholars. Nongmun himself was slandered by his critics in a similar way and compared to Luo Qinshun in this sense: "Zheng'an and Nongmun both state that principle and *qi* are one thing." Please refer to *Nojujip* 25:5a: 整庵，鹿門。均是爲理氣一物之論。

<sup>46</sup> *Nongmunjip* 19:7b: 以通局分理氣。語新而意滯。不若理一分殊之論。

contemporaries or immediate predecessors<sup>47</sup> but rather by recourse to dominant authorities hailing from both Korean (Yulgok) and Chinese (Zhu Xi and Zhang Zai) milieus. Nongmun in *Nongnyŏ chapchi* paired his objections to the standing interpretations traced to Yulgok with a more general and older sense of the concepts of the Song authorities. Yulgok's views on the deep and all-penetrating, unified *qi* were revised under the guise of Zhang Zai's theories, and in the case of the formula "principle is penetrating and *qi* is delimited" Nongmun preferred the traditional formulation principle is one but its manifestations are many supported by Zhu Xi and Zhang Zai as well.<sup>48</sup> In both cases, the original Song concepts were so broad that Nongmun's possibilities for modifying their meaning according to his own views were virtually unlimited. In the case of both crucial terms, the deep and all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*, and its turbidity, he was able to capitalize on the lack of coherent tradition concerning this topic and base his own theory on two crucial sources: the authoritative allusions (Zhang Zai), and the contradictions of the relevant Korean counterparts, Hwadam, Saam, and Yulgok. The existence in the Korean tradition of two different approaches to the question of primordial *qi* as represented by Hwadam and Yulgok enabled him to create a dialogue of his own in which he could reject or amend conceptions as it suited his own purpose. On the other hand, in the case of the theory of the turbidity of *qi*, he took the direction of reinterpreting the relatively unknown term of 'dregs' in order to create a fitting concept for the explanation of the transformation processes of primordial *qi*. The strategy of the reinterpretation of the Song classics as a tool against dominant Korean theory is clearly visible as well in his rejection of Yulgok's formula "principle is penetrating and *qi* is delimited" based on the old definition "principle is one but its manifestations are many." Availing himself of the authority of Zhu Xi, the Cheng brothers and Zhang Zai, Nongmun could even afford to create his own point with the version "*qi* is one, but its manifestations are many". All these subtle changes of the content of terms and concepts of long usage allowed him to formulate a new theory of human nature and its goodness that was radical yet well-grounded in orthodox tradition.

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<sup>47</sup> We should not forget that both Namdang and Oeam were the direct addressees of the last sentence of *Nongnyŏ chapchi* and many times before that as well.

<sup>48</sup> For the authorship and authorities behind the term, see Wing-tsit Chan, *Chu Hsi: New Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989), 297–300.

VLADIMIR GLOMB ([vladous2000@yahoo.com](mailto:vladous2000@yahoo.com)) is a research professor in the Institute of Korean Studies, Free University of Berlin, Germany.

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