

Korean Neo-Confucian

Perspectives

on

Laozi and Zhuangzi

by

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List of Abbreviations

- DDJ *Laozi Daodejing*
- DZJ *Daode zhenjing jiji*, by Dong Sijing
- DZL *Daode zhenjing lun*, by Sima Guang
- DZSH *Daode zhenjing jieyi*, by Song Huizong
- ECYS *Er Cheng yishu*, by Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi
- LJ *Laozi jie*, by Su Che
- ZZ *Zhuangzi*
- ZZQS *Zhuzi quanshu*, by Zhu Xi

Dedicated

to

Shim Soon Ok

Acknowledgments

Looking back, it is truly a strange thing. Ever since—over twenty years ago—I entered graduate school, made a vow to live as a professional scholar, and received my doctorate, the books I have read and studied most passionately, embracing with all my heart as guiding principles for my life, have been the Daoist classics *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. And yet, why did I never wonder what my ancestors—those who lived on the very land where I was born and raised—thought about these texts? I have read many commentaries, scholarly monographs, and academic papers on the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* but never once tried to find out what my grandfathers' grandfathers had written about my most beloved books. Nor had I ever thought that I needed to read them, study them, and reflect on them, just as I have done with the writings of many scholars from China, Japan, the United States, and Europe.

While teaching at several universities in the United States, I was often asked, as a Korean scholar trained in the study of premodern China, to cover a wide range of topics in premodern East Asia, with particular emphasis on Korean thought and culture. It was in this pedagogical context that my sustained scholarly interest in premodern Korean perspectives first took shape. Because my formal training lay in the intellectual history of premodern China, my courses on Korean thought and religion were necessarily framed through their profound historical, textual, and institutional entanglements with China.

Through this work, I came to appreciate a crucial insight: when studying thought, religion, and literature before the formation of modern nation states, we must move across regions now labeled China, Korea, Japan, Manchu, Mongol, and Tibet. This perspective reveals a world in which centers and peripheries were dynamically interconnected through political authority, textual transmission, ritual practice, and scholarly exchange, while also developing localized forms shaped by specific geographic, historical, racial, and political conditions.

One day, while teaching a course on the history of Daoism in Korea, I was introducing to my students the religious ideas, ritual practices, and state institutions in Korean history that may be identified as Daoist, situating them in comparative relation to their counterparts in premodern China. In the midst of that discussion, a question suddenly struck me with the force of a jolt of electricity: just as Chosŏn-era Neo-Confucianism unfolded along distinctive trajectories within its own historical and intellectual context, in what ways did premodern Korean scholars read, interpret, and rearticulate the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* on their own terms?

The thought thrilled me, and at the same time, it deeply embarrassed me. How had I never once wondered what those who lived long ago in the land of

my birth thought about these texts? Though I had accumulated scattered knowledge about Daoism in Korea, I knew almost nothing about how premodern Korean intellectuals actually engaged with Lao-Zhuang thought. The realization left me ashamed.

After this realization, I began collecting and studying premodern Korean texts related to foundational Daoist thought. It was during this process that I first encountered, from the perspective of a twenty first century, American trained academic, the commentaries on Lao Zhuang texts written by Chosŏn scholars of the Zhu Xi Neo-Confucian school. The sense of surprise I experienced while reading these works—the tension and excitement that brought a smile to my face, the intellectual fascination they inspired, and the deep respect they evoked—remains beyond the reach of words.

When I first read Yi I's 李珥 (1536–1584) *Sunŏn* 醇言 (Purified Words) and Han Wŏnjin's 韓元震 (1682–1751) *Changja pyŏnhae* 莊子辨解 (Analytic Interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*), both of which are closely examined and translated in this study, the intellectual shock and emotional exhilaration I experienced were unforgettable. Whether they set out to criticize or to defend Lao Zhuang thought, what impressed me most was the scholarly seriousness, sincerity, and intellectual honesty with which Yi I and Han Wŏnjin confronted the ideas articulated in these foundational texts. Their awe-inspiring intellectual posture compelled me to return to their writings repeatedly, reading them to the end again and again with the utmost care.

From that point on, I resolved to translate and introduce the works of Yi I and Han Wŏnjin to the English-speaking world. This book is the proud outcome of that resolution—proud not only because I was able to complete the project in book form, but also because it allows these important works to reach readers Yi I and Han Wŏnjin likely never imagined addressing when they first wrote them.

Yi I's *Sunŏn* is the earliest surviving Korean commentary on the *Laozi* and served as a conceptual model for later Chosŏn commentaries. More importantly, it reveals the remarkable integrity of Yi I, a leading Neo-Confucian thinker who, in an age when Zhu Xi's orthodoxy was unquestioned and Lao-Zhuang thought was condemned as heresy, boldly treated the *Laozi* as a sage's text. By reorganizing the traditional eighty-one chapters into forty sections, Yi presented a mature vision of philosophical integration between Confucianism and Daoism within the ideal of cultivating oneself and governing others (*sugi ch'uin* 修己治人). *Sunŏn* thus stands as a landmark work that invites us to move beyond viewing Chosŏn thought exclusively through the narrowly defined monolith of Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism and to approach it instead through more dynamic and plural perspectives that emerge from within Neo-Confucianism itself.

The other work presented in this book, Han Wŏnjin's *Changja pyŏnhae*, has never been fully translated into any modern language, including contemporary Korean, despite its historical and intellectual significance. Little known in Western scholarship, Han was nonetheless a leading late Chosŏn Neo-Confucian

thinker and a key figure in the eighteenth-century development of a distinctly Chosŏn articulation of Zhu Xi learning.

The *Changja pyŏnbae* is Han's commentary on the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, written amid profound social and political upheaval. It reflects the pressures confronting conservative scholars of the time, namely the need to defend Zhu Xi orthodoxy while responding to Zhuangzian views that were gaining currency despite their long-standing status as heterodox. By engaging critically with the *Zhuangzi*, Han also sought to clarify his position in the Horak debate, one of the most consequential controversies in Chosŏn, particularly concerning the sameness and difference between human and non-human nature.

Unlike Yi P's commentary on the *Laozzi*, which seeks synthesis, Han's *Pyŏnbae* treats the *Zhuangzi* as a heterodox work. It defends the Neo-Confucian view of human nature and the moral cosmos against both the *Zhuangzi*'s *qi*-based vision of undifferentiated oneness and those Neo-Confucians who, influenced by Daoism, argued for the essential unity of all beings. Han sought instead to affirm and justify the moral and ontological boundaries between humans and things, and between the Sage and the ordinary person.

Through this multifaceted work where complex intellectual tensions and personal convictions intersect readers encounter the critical gaze that Chosŏn Neo-Confucians cast upon the *Zhuangzi*, along with the challenges they faced in confronting and seeking to overcome its thought. Within this commentary on the Inner Chapters, a text on which even Zhu Xi left no systematic commentary, readers witness a rare and rigorous intellectual encounter between *Zhuangzi* and Zhu Xi thought in the history of East Asian philosophy.

In writing this book, I have incurred many debts of gratitude. Above all, I thank my parents, Kim Chŭnghoe and Yun Yŏngnam, who have been unwavering pillars of strength throughout the years. I am deeply grateful to my sister, Kim Soo Hyun, for her insight and wisdom, and to her three beloved companions, Super, Mimi, and Pori, who never fail to bring warmth and joy. I also thank my brother, Kim Taemun, and his wife, Pak Yŏngsun, whose companionship and wonderful meals have been a constant source of happiness. My deepest gratitude goes to my dearest friend, Shim Soon Ok, whose compassion and humanity sustained me through some of life's darkest passages. Finally, I extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Livia Kohn for her kindness, generosity, and support in bringing this book to publication.

—Tae Hyun Kim,
At Haegwangjae, Tongt'an, 2025

Notes on Translation

Unless otherwise noted, all premodern Chinese and Korean primary sources I cite in this book are based on digital versions provided on the web. For Chinese texts, I use materials available on the *Chinese Text Project* (ctext.org), created and maintained by Dr. Donald Sturgeon. To make sure of their accuracy, I have compared this version with images scanned on the site from original collections such as the *Siku quanshu*, *Sibu congkan*, and *Zhengtong daoqiang*, in each case making sure my version matches the original. For early Chinese texts whose scanned images of the originals are not available online, I have relied on reputable printed editions, such as the *Shisan jing zhushu*.

For Korean texts, I use digitized versions and their original images provided by *A Comprehensive Database of Korean Classics* (db.itkc.or.kr), maintained by the Institute for the Translation of Korean Classics (ITKC). Here, too, I have applied the same approach as to the Chinese documents, carefully comparing the online texts with scanned or printed originals. Since the full-text versions provided on the Korean Classics database are not divided into sections, citations of these works refer to the traditional pagination found in the scanned images of the classical texts labeled as “original images” on the same webpage.

Except for texts available through CTEXT and ITKC, I list in the bibliography at the end of the book the URLs of the digital versions of premodern texts used in this study.

The citation format for digital versions of texts works with the chapter or volume, followed by the section or page. When it is difficult to render consistently the relationships among composite volumes and individual works, as in the case of early Chinese classics, I cite sources by first giving the title of the text and the chapter, hexagram, or poem, followed by the relevant section or stanza.

Any names or terms in Korean use the McCune–Reischauer system, while those in Chinese use Pinyin. However, for classical Chinese terms and phrases as cited by the Korean authors, I apply Korean romanization because the commentaries translated here read them in this manner and in a Korean context. For certain important concepts mentioned in the main text, I provide both Korean and Chinese romanizations, with Korean appearing first, followed by Chinese.

If an author cited has provided an English rendering of their own name, work, or publication that differs from the McCune–Reischauer or Pinyin systems, I respect that usage. Even when an author’s English rendering appears awkward or inaccurate, I have retained it without modification.

Part One

Yi I's *Sunǒn*

Translator's Introduction

Anti-Daoism in Chosŏn

The new class of Neo-Confucian scholar-officials (*sinjin sadaebu* 新進士大夫; lit. “newly promoted scholar-officials”), who founded the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1897), regarded the fall of Koryŏ (918–1392) as the consequence of the mistaken understanding of humanity and the world instilled in the soteriological doctrines of Buddhism, which had been the state religion of Koryŏ. Naturally, with the founding of Chosŏn, the intellectual landscape of the country gradually reorganized itself around a new environment in which Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130-1200) Neo-Confucianism became the state-sponsored orthodox academic tradition. As it increasingly grew into the sole legitimate form of learning, both politically and intellectually, along with the systemic stabilization of Chosŏn, other traditional teachings, such as Buddhism and Daoism, that Zhu Xi had explicitly rejected were intensely criticized by Chosŏn Neo-Confucian scholars as heretical doctrines that needed to be defeated, overcome, and replaced with Zhu Xi’s views on humanity and the world based on his radical reinterpretation of early Confucian texts .

This new trend was already clearly evident among the scholar official class that led the political revolution in the early founding period of Chosŏn. Most notably, the revolutionary figure Chŏng Tojŏn 鄭道傳 (1342–1398) understood the ideological confrontation, namely the effort to overcome Buddhism and Daoism through Neo-Confucianism, as a central intellectual task. Grounded in a Neo-Confucian worldview rooted in Zhu Xi learning, Chŏng articulated a vision of Chosŏn as a new Confucian ideal state. In doing so, he established the basic framework of Chosŏn’s intellectual order, in which Neo-Confucianism functioned as the sole orthodoxy and all other teachings were relegated to the status of heresy.

One of the works that most clearly expresses this line of thought is Chŏng’s *Sim Ki Ri P’yŏn* 心氣理篇 (Book on Mind, *Qi*, and Principle), written two years after the founding of Chosŏn (see *Sambong-jip* 10.1a-11b). In this work, Chŏng characterizes Buddhism as a teaching focused on the mind, Daoism as oriented toward the vital energy of *qi*, and Confucianism as grounded in principle (Korean *ri*; Chinese *li* 理). From the standpoint of a Neo-Confucian scholar, he seeks to demonstrate how Buddhism and Daoism, through their mutual theoretical contradictions, reveal their own internal inconsistencies and limitations, and ultimately why they are inferior to Confucian teachings.

In his critique of Daoism, Chŏng identifies *qi* as the core of its doctrine, treating the *Laozi Daodejing* 老子道德經 (hereafter DDJ) as the central text of Daoist theory and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 ZZ) as a secondary reference. According to

Chǒng Tojǒn, the world of primordial *qi* described by Laozi and Zhuangzi, a realm of absolute indifference where there is neither good nor evil, neither right nor wrong, fails to recognize the existence of the fundamental ontological principle that determines why the world exists as a world and why humans exist as humans, the principle that lies beyond the perceptible, sub-phenomenal realm of *qi*. Chǒng also contends that Daoist teachings, which prioritize the pursuit of personal purity and longevity, are ultimately selfish. Because of this, he argues, the theories of Laozi and Zhuangzi offer a view of humanity no different from that of beasts, making their doctrine fundamentally unfit for human society.

The teachings of Śākyamuni and Laozi revere purity and quiescence, and therefore, even the most significant moral principles of human relationships and the greatness of ritual and music, they seek to discard and utterly extinguish. Though those who harbor no desires in their hearts may seem different from those who chase after profit, they still do not understand how to uphold the impartiality of the heavenly principle and restrain the selfishness of human desire.

Therefore, their daily words and actions constantly fall into the realm of self-interest without their realizing it. Furthermore, there is nothing people desire more than life, and nothing they fear more than death. Yet, when we examine the doctrines of these two schools, we see that the Buddhists seek to transcend life and death; this is nothing but a fear of death; and that the Daoists pursue longevity; this is nothing but a craving for life. If this is not self-interest, then what is? (*Sambong-jip* 10.6b-7a)¹

According to Chǒng Tojǒn, Buddhism and Daoism, though they appear to promote purity and detachment, ultimately reject essential moral principles and the civilizing functions of ritual and music. While they may differ outwardly from those who pursue profit, they fail to uphold the impartiality of the heavenly principle or restrain selfish human desire, causing their actions to remain self-centered. Their doctrines, such as the Buddhist quest to transcend life and death and the Daoist pursuit of longevity, are driven by fear of death and desire for life, revealing, at their core, nothing but self-interest.

Although Chǒng Tojǒn's argument does not significantly differ from the typical anti-Daoist stance of orthodox Zhu Xi school scholars, his position as the intellectual architect of Chosǒn and his historical significance ensured that

¹ 若夫釋老之學。以清淨寂滅爲尚。雖彝倫之大。禮樂之懿。亦必欲屏除而滅絕之。是其胸中無欲。與趨於利害者。疑若不同矣。然不知主天理之公。以裁制人欲之私。故其日用云爲。每陷於利害而不自知也。且人之所欲無甚於生。所惡無甚於死。今以兩家之說觀之。釋氏必欲免死生。是畏死也。老氏必欲求長生。是貪生也。非利害而何哉。又其中無義理之主。則惘然無得。冥然不知。是軀殼所存。亦不過血肉而止耳。此四句雖泛指衆人而言。切中二家之實病。讀者詳之。 An alternative translation of this passage can be found in Muller 2015, 50-52.

his critique became the core rationale by which orthodox Confucian scholars throughout the Chosŏn period came to regard the Daoist thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi as heretical.

Kwŏn Kŭn 權近 (1352–1409), a founding contributor to the establishment of Chosŏn alongside Chŏng Tojŏn and a leading figure in promoting Zhu Xi’s thought within the Chosŏn intellectual world, likewise explicitly denounced Daoist thought, particularly that of Laozi, as something that ought to be rejected. In the preface he wrote for Chŏng Tojŏn’s *Sim Ki Ri P’yŏn* (*Sambong-jip* 10.9a-11a), Kwŏn Kŭn characterized the fundamental aim of Laozi’s teaching as “nurturing life” (*yangsaeng*, *yangsheng* 養生), condemning it as a selfish doctrine that, without any discernment between right and wrong, focuses solely on protecting and preserving one’s own life. He declared it a heretical teaching that abolishes human ethics and plunges society into disorder.

Confucians take principle as the foundation, by which the mind and *qi* are governed; thus, with principle as the root, the other two are cultivated. Laozi, [on the other hand,] takes *qi* as central, regarding the cultivation of life as the Way (*dao* 道). Śākyamuni takes the mind as central, making non-moving (*pu dong*; *bu dong* 不動) its essential doctrine. Each holds firmly to one element while discarding the other two. Laozi, desiring non-action (*muwei*; *wuwei* 無爲), avoids discerning right from wrong in affairs and seeks to eliminate all of them. He fears that the toil of action may harm his *qi*. But if *qi* is properly cultivated, the spirit becomes concentrated and stabilized, and even when one engages in activities, they will not harm one’s life. ...

The teachings of these two schools, if they do not fall into withered emptiness and quiescent extinction, inevitably drift toward indulgence and unchecked permissiveness. In either case, they are the same in undermining benevolence and righteousness, destroying moral order and human relations, and becoming guilty of opposing the teaching of the sagely tradition, the great balance (*taejung*; *dazhong* 大中). (*Sambong-jip* 10.10a-10b)²

Whereas Chŏng Tojŏn emphasized the theoretical inferiority of the *qi*-centered worldview of Laozi and Zhuangzi in comparison to the *li*-centered worldview of Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism, Kwŏn Kŭn focused his critique on the ethical dimension of Daoist practice, specifically, on how Daoist obsession with preserving life and pursuing longevity reflected a narrow and self-centered understanding of humanity and the world, one that would lead to harmful consequences in the real world.

² 儒主乎理而治心氣。本其一而養其二。老主乎氣。以養生爲道。釋主乎心。以不動爲宗。各守其一而遺其二者也。老欲無爲。不計事之是非而皆去之。恐勞其身以弊其氣也。氣苟得養則精神凝定。雖有所事。而不害吾之生。... 是二家之學。不陷於枯槁寂滅則必流於放肆縱恣。其賊仁害義。滅倫敗理。得罪於聖門大中之教則一也。 See also Muller 2015, 52-53.

This strict Confucian stance by both Chǒng Tojŏn and Kwŏn Kŭn, the architects of early Chōson politics and intellectual culture, rejected all non-Confucian teachings as heretical and laid the groundwork for a political and social climate in which Buddhism and Daoism could no longer be studied or debated as respected intellectual and cultural traditions, as they had been prior to Chōson. As the Chōson's Zhu Xi Neo-Confucian scholar-official class successfully consolidated political power, this stance gets increasingly institutionalized. Throughout the Chōson period, scholars aspiring to pass the civil service examinations and participate in public office found themselves in a structural environment where the public and open study, writing, or publication of Buddhist or Daoist thought and texts was collectively repressed in the intellectual society.

Daoist Commentaries in Chosŏn

Despite the implicit, and at times explicit, ideological suppression and persecution of non-Confucian thought, the circulation, reading, and study of Daoist texts were not entirely prohibited in Chosŏn. In terms of textual transmission, Daoist works continued to be widely read and studied among both Confucian official literati and Daoist practitioners throughout the Chosŏn period. According to the research of Lee Sangyong, who examined bibliographic catalogues from both private individuals and public institutions circulated among Chosŏn intellectuals, the scholar-official class of Chosŏn read not only the DDJ and ZZ, but also other foundational texts such as the *Liezǐ* 列子, *Baopuzǐ* 抱樸子, *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契, *Huangting neijing jing* 黃庭內景經, and *Yinfu jing* 陰符經 (Lee 2013).

Nevertheless, the Daoist texts circulated in Chosŏn appeared to be limited in both number and variety, and largely confined to the basic writings of Daoist thought. This can be attributed to two main factors. First, in a social climate where the reading and study of Daoist texts was not welcomed, there were likely few scholars who seriously engaged with Daoist literature. This would have hindered the importation of a wider range of texts from China. Such a social context likely contributed to the narrow scope of Daoist works available in Chosŏn intellectual circles. Second, it is also possible that a greater variety of texts were actually in circulation, but the prevailing social atmosphere made it difficult to publicly disclose ownership or study of such works, resulting in their exclusion from official bibliographic records of individuals and institutions. As will be discussed later, the case of Yi I 李珥 (1536-1584) demonstrates this point. Yi based his study on the *Daode zhenjing jijie* 道德真經集解 (hereafter DZJ), a Northern Song (960-1127) commentary by the Daoist monk Dong Sijing 董思靖 (fl. 1246-1260), and consulted various other commentaries on the *Laozi* by figures such as Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086), Su Che 蘇轍 (1039-1112), and Emperor Hui-zong (r. 1100-1125). This suggests, indirectly but compellingly, that Chosŏn intellectuals may have engaged with a far broader range of Daoist literature than the extant records alone would indicate.

Beyond merely reading Daoist texts, there were also—albeit rarely—cases in which specialized works such as commentaries were published. Based on extant texts, a total of five commentaries on the DDJ were produced by five different scholars throughout the Chosŏn period, and four scholars authored commentaries on the ZZ.

With regard to the *Laozi*, the earliest surviving commentary is by Yi P's *Sunŏn* 醇言 (Purified Words), discussed and translated in here. Following this, four additional commentaries are known to have been written: *Sinju Todŏkkyŏng* 新註道德經 (A New Commentary on the DDJ), also known as *Noja chubae* 老子註解 (Commentary and Explanation of the DDJ) by Pak Sedang 朴世堂 (1629–1703); *Todŏk chigwi* 道德指歸 (A Corollary of the DDJ) by Sŏ Myŏng'ŭng 徐命膺 (1716–1787); *Ch'owŏn tamno* 椒園談老 (Chowŏn's Discourses on the DDJ) by Yi Ch'ung'ik 李忠翊 (1744–1816); and *Chŏngno* 訂老 (Rectifying with the DDJ) by Hong Sŏkju 洪奭周 (1774–1842).

As for the ZZ, a total of four commentaries are known to survive to this day: *Nambwagyŏng chubae sanbo* 南華經註解刪補 (A Commentary and Editing of the *Nanhua Scripture*) by Pak Sedang; *Ch'ilwŏn ch'aegi* 漆園采奇 (Selections of Wonders from the Lacquer Garden) by Kwŏn Hae 權璿 (1639–1704); *Changja pyŏnhae* 莊子辨解 (Analytic Interpretation of the ZZ) by Han Wŏnjin 韓元震 (1682–1751), which is introduced in this book; and *Munjang chunch'ik Changja sŏn* 文章準則莊子選 (Selected Writings from the ZZ as a Model of Composition) by Sin Kyŏngjun 申景濬 (1712–1781), a work newly discovered by Kim Namhyŏng in 2014.

Commentaries on the *Laozi*

Yi P's *Sunŏn* is a re-edited compilation of phrases and chapters from the DDJ, reorganized into forty new chapters. A prominent Neo-Confucian scholar and reform-minded statesman of mid-Chosŏn, the author chose passages that he believed either aligned with original Confucian ideals or faithfully reflected the true intent of the DDJ. This is the earliest extant Korean-authored commentary on the DDJ. In this work, Yi boldly breaks with nearly two hundred years of Neo-Confucian position, first institutionalized by Chŏng Tojŏn and Kwŏn Kŭn, that had branded *Laozi* as heretical.

Instead, he seeks the core meaning of the DDJ in the Confucian ideal of “cultivating the self and ordering others” (*sugi ch'ŭn; xinji zhiren* 修己治人), presenting a striking and, at the time, radical interpretation that compares the spirit of the DDJ to the vision of a Confucian sage. In many cases, Yi's interpretation closely aligns with the perspective of DZJ, a commentary by the Northern Song Daoist master Dong Sijing, which Yi used as his base text and was likely much influenced by. Yet, considering the originality and clarity with which Yi articulates his vision in his own language, it is reasonable to conclude that Yi's interpretation was not merely derivative from Dong but a product of his independent thought. Yi's bold declaration that the DDJ is not a heretical work preaching

nihilism, but a sage's text sharing in the Confucian Way, became a powerful source of intellectual inspiration and encouragement for later scholars.³

However, Yi I's commentary was limited by the fact that it did not cover the entirety of the DDJ, but only less than 40% of the original text—those passages he selected and edited based on his conviction that they aligned with Confucian teachings. The first complete commentary on the DDJ by a Chosŏn scholar was Pak Sedang's *Sinju*. Like Yi I, Pak was a reform-minded scholar-official, but he was more explicitly critical of the Zhu Xi-centered orthodoxy that dominated Chosŏn intellectual life. He advocated a return to the original spirit of Confucianism as found in Confucius and Mengzi, rather than in Zhu Xi's metaphysics. Pak Sedang's commentary on the DDJ reflects a distinctive interpretive approach shaped by his Confucian background while simultaneously embracing the practical value of Daoist thought. As a Confucian scholar, he fundamentally upheld Confucian values and ethics, and thus his reading of the DDJ does not depart from a Confucian framework.

Instead, he explores how Daoist ideas can be meaningfully integrated into it. He sought to go beyond a merely critical stance toward the DDJ, actively engaging with those aspects of Daoist philosophy, such as non-action and natural spontaneity (*chayŏn*, *ziran* 自然), that could serve the Confucian aim of self-cultivation and ordering others. For Pak, the ultimate goal of his commentary was to investigate how Daoist thought might be harnessed to support moral self-cultivation and the governance of society. He believed that the teachings of the DDJ could contribute to the enhancement of individual morality and the maintenance of social order. Importantly, Pak did not blindly follow Zhu Xi's interpretations; instead, he adopted a critical stance, arguing that Zhu Xi's readings were overly rigid and that the classics should be open to diverse interpretations. In sum, Pak Sedang's interpretation of the DDJ remains grounded in a Confucian worldview, but it also recognizes the value of Daoist philosophy as a means of achieving the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation and social order (Kim 1999).

Unlike Yi I and Pak Sedang, who emphasized the practical aspects of Laozi's thought and discovered in them the spirit of self-cultivation and ordering others in continuity with Confucius, Sŏ Myŏng'ŭng took a more systematic approach by examining Laozi's metaphysical worldview through the lens of a Zhu Xi style cosmology.⁴ In doing so, he explored their points of convergence and sought to overcome the longstanding Neo-Confucian prejudice dating back to Chŏng Tojŏn that “the Way of Lao-Zhuang is merely *qi*,” by advancing the proposition that “the Way of Laozi is the Supreme Ultimate (*t'aegŭk*; *taiji* 太極).” Through this reinterpretation, he not only defended the philosophical legitimacy

³ Yi I's *Sunŏn* was first translated into Korean by Yi Chuhang in 1993, and has since been rendered into Korean by several scholars such as Kim 2001; Yu 2002; Cho 2022; and Sŏ 2023, listed the “Translations” section of the Bibliography below.

⁴ Sŏ Myŏng'ŭng's *Todŏk chigwi* has been translated into Korean twice by two different scholars: Cho 2008; Kim 2023.

of Laozi and Daoist thought but also enabled a more grounded and immediate understanding of self-cultivation, not as an abstract or hollow ideal buried in the complexities of Neo-Confucian metaphysics, but as a concrete and realizable practice of becoming a Sage (Kim 2003; 2006).

More boldly, Yi Ch'ung'ik's *Tamno* steps outside the interpretive framework imposed by the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy of his time. Instead, it offers a commentary on the DDJ grounded in the interpretive perspectives of Yangming thought and Hwaŏm (Huayan 華嚴) Buddhism. Rejecting the dualistic worldview of *li* and *qi*, and of the metaphysical and the phenomenal, as found in Neo-Confucianism, Yi approached the DDJ from a perspective that emphasized the unity of all things under a single root of unity (*i*; *yi* 一). He appreciated the profundity of the DDJ's worldview for its holistic orientation and argued for an alternative vision of the cosmos and self-cultivation, one that was more unified and integrated than that offered by Zhu Xi's teachings (Kim 2013; Kim 2014).

Like Pak Sedang, Hong Sŏkju also composed his commentary on the DDJ with the aim of returning to the original spirit of Confucianism. Following in the footsteps of Yi I and Pak Sedang, Hong firmly maintained that Laozi was by no means a heretic. He believed that the core message of the DDJ, much like that of Confucius, lay in the ideal of self-cultivation and ordering others (Kim 2001).⁵

Commentaries on the *Zhuangzi*

Although relatively fewer in number, commentaries on the ZZ were written and read by Chosŏn Neo-Confucian scholars, too. The earliest extant commentary on the ZZ by a Chosŏn scholar is *Nambwagyŏng chubae sanbo* 南華經註解刪補 (A Commentary and Editing of the *Nanbua Scripture*) by Pak Sedang.⁶ This work is not only the earliest known commentary on the ZZ in Chosŏn but also the only one that covers the entire text of the ZZ in full. He frequently cited and referenced the interpretations of Guo Xiang 郭象 (252-312) and Lin Xiyi 林希逸 (1193-1271). Like his commentary on the DDJ, this work was written from a Confucian perspective, aiming to supplement Confucianism with the strengths of Lao-Zhuang thought. He believed that although the teachings of Lao-Zhuang differed from the great method of the sage, they still contained aspects worth adopting, and that it was a mistake to reject them without discerning their value.

The second ZZ commentary written by a Chosŏn Confucian scholar is *Ch'ilyŏn ch'aegi*, authored by Kwŏn Hae (Im 2014). As the title suggests, this work is a unique form of commentary that selectively annotates only key allegories and discourses from the ZZ. It uses *Nanbua zhenjing fumo* 南華真經副墨 (Supplementary Notes on the *Nanbua zhenjing* (i.e., *Zhuangzi*)) by Lu Xixing 陸西星 (1520–

⁵ Kŭm Chang'ae provides a valuable overview of Chosŏn Neo-Confucian scholars' interpretations of the DDJ. See Kŭm 2006.

⁶ Pak Sedang's *Nambwagyŏng chubae sanbo* has not yet been fully translated. To date, only the Inner Chapters have been translated into Korean twice by two scholars: Chŏn 2012; Pak 2012.

1606) as its base text. Although Kwŏn Hae was a Neo-Confucian scholar, he held a much more favorable view, both philosophically and practically, toward internal alchemy (*naedan*; *neidan* 內丹) and life-nurturing practices (*yangsaeng sul*; *yangsheng shu* 養生術) as methods of sage-like self-cultivation than most other ZZ commentators in Chosŏn. Philosophically, he also maintained a remarkably open view, holding that Zhuangzi’s ultimate vision could, in essence, be compatible with the Confucian understanding of humanity and the cosmos. Thus, alongside Pak Sedang’s commentary, Kwŏn Hae’s *Cb’ihwŏn cb’aegi* stands as one of the rare Chosŏn works that approaches Zhuangzi’s thought from a receptive and Confucian-informed perspective.

The third commentary, and the one translated and examined in this book, is Han Wŏnjin’s *Changja pyŏnhae*.⁷ This work is a commentary on only the Inner Chapters from the original ZZ, and it stands apart from the other Chosŏn commentaries in both content and purpose. This work was composed specifically to critique Zhuangzi’s thought from a Neo-Confucian perspective. With the clear aim of overcoming Zhuangzi’s *qi*-centered cosmology through a Zhu Xi-style *li-qi* dualistic worldview, the commentary exhibits a far more explicit philosophical confrontation between Zhuangzi’s ideas and Neo-Confucian thought than is found in other Chosŏn commentaries.

The final commentary is *Munjang chunch’ik Changja sŏn*, a work newly discovered in 2014 by Kim Namhyŏng and attributed to Sin Kyŏngjun (Kim 2014). As the title suggests, this is not a general commentary that broadly engages with Zhuangzi’s philosophy, but rather a more specialized work that focuses on a particular topic—namely, Zhuangzi’s elegant yet difficult prose style and diction, from the perspective of literary theory. Like several other commentaries, it does not annotate the entire ZZ text; instead, it offers commentary only on selected chapters: Chapter 1, “Free and Easy Wandering” (*Xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊); Chapter 2, “On Treating All Things Equally” (*Qinwulun* 齊物論) and Chapter 3, “The Foundation of Nurturing Life” (*Yangshengzhu* 養生主) from the Inner Chapters; and Chapter 17, “Autumn Floods” (*Qinshui* 秋水) from the Outer Chapters. The composition of such a specialized commentary appears to reflect Sin’s intellectual desire and ambition to challenge the speculative dogmatism of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy in Chosŏn and to advocate for the coexistence of diverse worldviews and values, an impulse shaped by and in tension with the dominant Zhu Xi-centered scholarly environment of the time. Sin Kyŏngjun stands out clearly from the orthodox Zhu Xi scholars of his era by, for instance, using Buddhist theory to explain Zhuangzi, affirming the excellence of Zhuangzi’s philosophy, and repeatedly noting parallels between Zhuangzi and Confucian thought.

⁷ Han Wŏnjin’s *Changja pyŏnhae* has not yet been translated into any modern language. To explore the relationship between the works of Pak Sedang and Han Wŏnjin, see Kim Hangmok 2024. Here, Kim argues that Han’s *Pyŏnhae* was written as a Neo-Confucian rebuttal to Pak Sedang’s *Sanbo*, which was widely read among Chosŏn Neo-Confucian scholars at the time.

All these DDJ and ZZ commentaries produced in Chosŏn were written by Confucian scholars trained within the intellectual framework of Zhu Xi learning. Except for Han Wŏnjin's case, all the Chosŏn commentators on DDJ and ZZ used their commentaries to criticize, either directly or indirectly, the oppressive intellectual climate of the time that regarded only Zhu Xi learning as the sole truth and expressed the necessity for its reform. As exemplified by scholars such as Yi I, Pak Sedang, Kwŏn Hae, and Sin Kyŏngjun, most Confucian commentators on DDJ and ZZ sought through a more receptive understanding of these texts to restore the original spirit of Confucianism, centered on self-cultivation and practical governance, which had been lost under the repressive dogmatism of Zhu Xi learning in Chosŏn. Among them was even a more radical thinker like Yi Ch'ung'ik, who, through the marginal thought of DDJ, envisioned a new intellectual order beyond Zhu Xi learning. Ultimately, the commentary works on DDJ and ZZ in Chosŏn can be understood as an intellectual effort aimed at the renewal and reform of Chosŏn, much like the Buddhist critiques carried out by the newly rising Neo-Confucian literati at the end of the Koryŏ period.

From here on, the following sections will briefly examine, in order, the works of Yi I and Han Wŏnjin introduced in this book.

Yulgok Yi I: Life and Thought

Yi I is regarded as one of the most representative philosophers and educators of Zhu Xi learning in Chosŏn. He also served as a statesman during the reigns of King Myŏngjong (r. 1545–1567) and King Sŏnjo (r. 1567–1608). Born in 1536 in Kangnŭng to the famed mother Sin Saimdang 申師任堂 (1504–1551), he was said to have amazed people as a prodigy who learned to speak and write by age three and was composing poetry by age eight.⁸ At age sixteen, Yi I lost his mother and, after three years of mourning at her grave, entered Pong'ŭn Temple, where he devoted himself to studying Buddhist scriptures. He later retreated to Mt. Kŭmgang for further Sŏn 禪 Buddhist practice, where he is said to have gained thorough insight into Buddhist doctrine. These formative experiences, occurring before his formal establishment as a Confucian scholar and political figure grounded in Zhu Xi learning, appear to have laid the foundation for his intellectually open mindset, one that allowed him to compose a commentary on DDJ and to engage in broader inquiry across rigid school boundaries.

Beginning at the age of thirteen, Yi I passed first place in the local preliminary civil examination for *chimsa* 進士 (State Examination Graduate) status, and over the course of his life, he would go on to place first in various levels of the state examinations a total of nine times. At the age of twenty-nine, he began his central government career as Assistant Director at the Ministry of Revenue and subsequently held numerous high-ranking posts, including Royal Secretary, Vice

⁸ One of the poems he composed at age eight, titled “Hwasŏkjŏng” 花石亭 (Hwasŏk Pavilion) appears in *Yulgok sŏnsaeng chŏnsŏ* 栗谷先生全書 (Complete Works of Master Yulgok Yi I) 1.1b.

Director of the Royal Academy, and Minister of Personnel, Revenue, Military Affairs, and Justice.

During his illustrious political career, he became known for his efforts to mediate factional strife and for advocating national defense against potential Japanese invasions, including his proposal to raise a standing army of 100,000 troops. He also championed key policy reforms such as the *Taedong* Law 大同法 that was a tax reform that simplified the collection of state tribute by converting various miscellaneous goods into a single grain tax, and the *Sach'ang* 社會 System that was a community-based grain loan system in which stored grain was lent to people in need, all in pursuit of improving the livelihood of the populace.

Yi I was also a major scholar of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism who offered a new interpretation of the relationship between principle and *qi* as well as between nature (*sŏng; xing* 性) and emotion (*chŏng; qing* 情) which Zhu Xi had left somewhat ambiguous. Departing from his predecessor Yi Hwang's 李滉 (1501-1570) formulation, where principle and *qi* were strictly distinguished as mutually exclusive (*pulsangjap; buxiangza* 不相雜) in a dualistic and austere manner, Yi I preferred the notion that principle and *qi* are in a subtle and inseparable relationship (*pulsangni; buxiangli* 不相離). According to Yi I, principle and *qi* may be logically distinguished, but cannot be actually separated.

For Yi I, *qi* was not merely, as it had been for Yi Hwang, the “vital force of blood and energy” (*byŏlgi-ji-gi* 血氣之氣) that conceals original nature and causes human corruption. Rather, he regarded *qi* in a more active and positive sense as something that can not only express but also help restore original nature. In this view, *qi* is not limited to the material or emotional realm but extends to the more spiritual domain, encompassing even the faculties of the soul and reason.

Thus, whereas for Yi Hwang, concepts such as the heavenly principle (*ch'ŏlli* 天理) and human desires (*inyok* 人慾),⁹ the human mind (*insim* 人心) and the mind of the Way (*tosim* 道心), the Four Beginnings (*sadan* 四端) and the seven emotions (*ch'iljŏng* 七情), and original nature (*ponyŏn-ji-sŏng* 本然之性) and material endowment nature (*kejil-ji-sŏng* 氣質之性) were fundamentally opposed and reflected the actual conditions of human life and the world, Yi I saw them as intricately interwoven and inseparable. For Yi I, self-cultivation did not lie in eliminating human desires to pursue heavenly principle, as Yi Hwang maintained, but rather in seeking and securing the heavenly principle within those desires.

⁹ The heavenly principle is the supreme and all-encompassing form of *li*, the underlying moral and ontological pattern that orders the cosmos and human life. While *li* denotes the inherent structure or normative principle present in all things, *ch'ŏlli* emphasizes its source in heaven and its role as the ultimate moral standard that governs rightness and harmony. In relation to human desires, the heavenly principle stands as their moral and rational counterpoint: it represents the objective order that should guide human conduct, whereas human desires arise from the sensory and self-seeking tendencies of embodied existence. The cultivation of virtue lies in preserving the heavenly principle within oneself by regulating the desires, ensuring that the cosmic order of *li* manifests in moral life.

Even sages, Yi I held, cannot avoid human emotions and desires. They are themselves an expression of the heavenly principle. According to Yi I, even what is called the “human mind,” if properly regulated, “becomes the mind of the Way.” In this light, he did not regard the seven emotions as merely belonging to the realm of the form-generating *qi* (*hyōnggi* 形氣), nor did he believe that original nature exists completely apart from material endowment nature.¹⁰

The Four Beginnings and the seven emotions are just like original nature and the nature of material endowment. The original nature is spoken of without reference to material endowment, whereas the nature of material endowment includes the original nature within it. Thus, the Four Beginnings cannot encompass the seven emotions, but the seven emotions do include the Four Beginnings. What Master Zhu called “arising from principle” and “arising from material force” was merely a general way of speaking—who would have thought later scholars would divide them too severely? Students should approach this issue with flexibility.

Moreover, since Master T’oegye attributed goodness to the Four Beginnings, and also said that none of the seven emotions are devoid of goodness, then it follows that outside of the Four Beginnings, there must also be good emotions. From where do these emotions arise? Mengzi presented only the broad outline and so mentioned only compassion, shame and dislike, modesty and yielding, and a sense of right and wrong. As for other good emotions that may constitute the Four Beginnings, students must infer them by analogy. How could any human emotion that is truly good not be rooted in benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, and wisdom? This passage ought to be thoroughly investigated and deeply contemplated.

If there are Four Beginnings that are good emotions, and there are also good emotions outside the Four Beginnings, then it would imply that the human mind has two roots. Can such a view be acceptable? (*Yulgok sōnsaeng chōnsō* 9.35a–35b)¹¹

Yi’s more optimistic understanding of the concept of *qi* came to be referred to by later scholars as *qi*-centered theory (*chugi ron* 主氣論), in contrast to Yi

¹⁰ Interestingly, Yi I’s philosophical position, despite differences in conceptual and categorical frameworks, structurally resembles both the Buddhist *Prajñāpāramitā* logic of “form is emptiness” 色即是空 and the Laozi worldview of mutual generation and interdependence between being and non-being such as *yumu taedae* 有無對待 or *yumu sangsaeng* 有無相生.

¹¹ 四端七情。正如本然之性氣質之性。本然之性。則不兼氣質而為言也。氣質之性。則却兼本然之性。故四端不能兼七情。七情則兼四端。朱子所謂發於理發於氣者。只是大綱說。豈料後人之分開太甚乎。學者活看可也。且退溪先生既以善歸之四端。而又曰。七者之情。亦無有不善。若然則四端之外。亦有善情也。此情從何而發哉。孟子舉其大概。故只言惻隱羞惡恭敬是非。而其他善情之為四端。則學者當反三而知之。人情安有不本於仁義禮智而為善情者乎。此一段當深究精思。善情既有四端。而又於四端之外有善情。則是人心有二本也。其可乎。See also Kalton 1994, 114-15.

Hwang's *li*-centered theory (*churi ron* 主理論), which emphasized the absolute primacy of principle over *qi*. This *qi*-centric view of reality promotes a moderate and pragmatic approach that aims to address problems by confronting and correcting present conditions, rather than seeking an ideal world completely divorced from reality or attempting to radically overturn the existing order through essentialist or fundamentalist means. Many of the reformist policies Yi I proposed reflect this philosophical worldview.

Furthermore, rejecting Sō Kyōngdōk's 徐敬德 (1489–1546) *qi*-monistic theory (*ki imwŏn* 氣一元) that all things originate from *qi*, Yi I also developed another important theoretical position called “principle is all-pervasive, while *qi* is delimiting” (*rit'ong kiguk* 理通氣局), as part of his effort to systematize Zhu Xi's idea that “principle is one, and its manifestations are diverse” (*riil punsu, liyi fenshu* 理一分殊). Whereas Sō interpreted both the metaphysical and the physical realms in terms of *qi*, associating “Non-Ultimate and yet Supreme Ultimate” (*mugŭk i t'aegŭk; muji er taiji* 無極而太極) with the innate and fundamental, and “The Supreme Ultimate in motion gives rise to yang” (*t'aekŭk tong i saengyang* 太極動而生陽) with the acquired and functional, Yi I made a clear distinction: principle pertains to the metaphysical, and *qi* to the physical. For him, the Supreme Ultimate is principle itself, while yin and yang are manifestations of *qi*.

Yi I described principle as formless (*muhyōng* 無形) and non-active (*munvi* 無爲), in contrast to *qi*, which is with form (*yubyōng* 有形) and active (*yumi* 有爲). From this, he argued that when principle does not act and *qi* does, then *qi* activates itself, and principle rides upon it (*keibal risŭng* 氣發理乘); and because principle is without form and *qi* is with form, principle is all-pervasive while *qi* is delimiting. In this view, principle has no temporal priority, no shape, no function, and no movement; it is simply the inherent subtlety (*ponyŏn-ji-myŏ* 本然之妙) present in all things. This universality is what is meant by “principle is all-pervasive.” *Qi*, on the other hand, is a finite entity (*yuban-ja* 有限者): it has precedence or posteriority, root and branch, and varies by clarity and turbidity (*ch'ongt'ak* 清濁), thickness and thinness (*bubak* 厚薄), or refinement and dross (*chobak* 糟粕). It performs diverse functions such as imbalance and balance (*p'yŏnjŏng* 偏正), ascent and descent (*sŭnggang* 升降), or flight and elevation (*piyang* 飛揚). As *qi* is confined to particular individuals and cannot pervade all things, it is said to be “*qi* is delimiting.” According to Yi I, just as a square vessel and a round vessel differ while the water they contain remains the same, the water may appear different because of the vessel's shape, but its subtlety does not change, but only its appearance does.

According to Yi I, the universe is unified through principle, and at the same time, the principle governing heaven and earth (*ch'ŏnji chi ri* 天地之理), all things (*manmul chi ri* 萬物之理), and human beings (*oin chi ri* 吾人之理) are all shared in common. The reason *qi* has a single root is due to the universality (*t'ong* 通) of principle, and the reason principle manifests in myriad distinctions is because of the particularity or limitedness (*kek* 局) of *qi*. Yi I's theory of principle's

universality and *qi*'s particularity later develops into a major debate on the sameness and difference between human nature and material nature, a discussion that Han Wōnjin initiated and participated in.

Sunǒn

The extant *Sunǒn* commentary was first edited by Hong Kye-hŭi 洪啓禧 (1703–1771), who acquired a manuscript copy, wrote a postscript, and later published it in print. He notes that the manuscript already bore this title when he first obtained it, and it was believed that the title was given by Yi I himself.¹²

The character *sun* (*chun*) 醇, literally meaning “pure” or “unadulterated,” is rarely used as part of a book title. It does not appear at all in the commonly circulated Wang Bi edition of the DDJ, and in the ZZ, it only appears once in chapter 33 (“Under Heaven”; *Tianxia* 天下).¹³

First, the concept of *sun* is a phono-semantic compound character combining the radical *yu* (*you*) 酉, which denotes alcohol or wine, and the phonetic component *sun* (*chun*) 享, which means “well ripened” or “well fermented.” Its primary meaning is “well-aged, unadulterated wine” or “pure, undiluted liquor.” Accordingly, the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 explains this meaning as “wine not diluted with water” 不澆酒也 (15.9768). From this original sense, the character came to carry derived meanings such as “unadulterated,” “pure,” “simple,” and “unsophisticated.” Thus, *sun* in *Sunǒn* is used in this derived sense, and the title means “pure words.” As discussed below, Yi I considered the work “pure” because he condensed and rearranged the original eighty-one-chapter DDJ into a forty-chapter version, removing what he saw as impure or toxic words. To emphasize this editorial intervention, I use *purified* rather than *pure* in the English title, as it better conveys Yi I’s active role in reshaping the text while remaining faithful to its original sense.

One interesting point regarding the term of *sun* is that while the character does not appear in the commonly circulated version of the DDJ, it does appear in the Heshang gong 河上公 edition. This raises the possibility that Yi I may have consulted this text while composing *Sunǒn*. In the third paragraph of his commentary on Chapter 1, Yi I cites Dong Sijing’s DZJ, referring to early versions of the DDJ, one of which is the Heshang gong version. While it is Dong who directly mentions this early text, and Yi I is merely quoting him, the fact that Yi I chose to include the reference, when he could have easily omitted it, suggests that he found Dong Sijing’s interpretation reliable and helpful. Yi I, like Dong,

¹² See postscript. “Master Yulgok’s intention in editing and titling this book may perhaps have been inspired by this [i.e., Xunzi’s case]” 先生編書命名之意，或取於此耶。

¹³ “How complete the person of ancient times! They paired with the illumination of spirit, were as *pure* as heaven and earth, reared myriad things, harmonized with all-under-heaven, and extended grace to all people” 古之人其備乎！配神明，醇天地，育萬物，和天下，澤及百姓。(ZZ 33.1; emphasis added)

may also have had access to and consulted the Heshang gong version. However, apart from this single passage, there is no explicit mention of the Heshang gong version elsewhere in the *Sunŏn*, so we cannot conclusively determine whether Yi I actually consulted it himself.

In Chapter 58 of the Heshang gong text, the phrase that reads “The government is muddled; the people are simple” 其政悶悶，其民淳淳 in the received text appears instead as “The government is muddled; the people become pure” 其政悶悶，其民醇醇. Heshang gong glosses the latter as: “The government’s correction is generous, so the people become more sincere and prosperous, living in harmony with their parents and others” 政教寬大，故民醇醇富厚，相親睦也. Here, *sun* not only carries the meaning of “pure,” but also, by derivation from its original sense of “rich-tasting wine,” can imply “warm-hearted” or “deep in human feeling.”

Reception History

As a Neo-Confucian statesman and thinker who was widely respected across Chosŏn for both his political and scholarly leadership, it remains unclear why Yi I chose to write a commentary on the DDJ, a text that, at the time, was unanimously regarded as heretical from the Zhu Xi Confucian standpoint, and even went so far as to make the scandalous claim that studying this work as a sage’s book could benefit students in their moral cultivation. The precise reasons or circumstances behind this decision are not known. Yi I’s commentary on the *Laozi* is entirely absent from his collected writings, the extant *Yulgok sŏnsaeng chŏnsŏ*, and there is no single hint to indicate or suggest Yi I’s authorship of the *Sunŏn* in the *Yulgok sŏnsaeng chŏnsŏ*, and the *Sunŏn* text itself contains no direct reference or indication that identifies him as the author.¹⁴ Moreover, there is no mention in Yi I’s biography or in nearly all contemporaneous historical records that he authored or published a commentary on the DDJ.

Unlike many other renowned Neo-Confucian scholars who devoted their entire lives solely to the study and practice of Zhu Xi’s teachings, Yi I had a well-known history of engaging in heterodox thought, particularly during his formative years when he entered the mountains and immersed himself in Buddhist practice, which Neo-Confucians despised. This early deviation from orthodoxy was already widely known among his contemporaries and later generations. For his political rivals and opponents, this unorthodox past became a persistent excuse to attack and discredit him throughout his public career.

For those who supported Yi I, it became a burden to defend him against such accusations. The defense usually framed his youthful engagement with

¹⁴ While the opening page of the manuscript includes the phrase “Compiled and explained and given oral reading marks by Master Yulgok” 栗谷先生鈔解口訣, the use of the title *sŏnsaeng*, which means Master, suggests that it was not written by Yulgok himself but was likely inserted later by a copyist or editor during the process of manuscript transmission.

Buddhism as a moment of misguided wandering following the tragic loss of his mother, which later became the very reason he came to recognize the emptiness of such paths and fully dedicate himself to the study of Neo-Confucianism.¹⁵

This line of defense was, above all, a rhetorical repertoire that Yi I himself devised and repeatedly employed when he found it necessary to justify his past. For example, in 1568, at the age of thirty-three, when he was appointed associate counselor at the Royal Advisory Office, he wrote the following in his memorial requesting resignation, known as “Resignation Memorial as Associate Royal Counselor” (*sa pugyori so* 辭副校理疏):

Struck by unfortunate times, I lost my mother early and tried to soothe my grief with reckless thoughts. Eventually, I became engrossed in Buddhist texts and immersed myself in their doctrines, falling into a path of delusion. As a result, my original mind became obscured, and I fled into the deep mountains, where I engaged in Sŏn practice for nearly a year. (*Yulgok sŏnsaeng chŏnsŏ* 3.21a)¹⁶

Given that Yi I had to publicly defend his earlier life in such terms throughout his official career, it is not difficult to understand why writing a commentary on a text like the DDJ that was considered heretical in Confucian orthodoxy would have posed a significant burden not only for Yi I himself, but also for the many scholars who admired and sought to defend him. This might help explain why the fact that Yi I wrote *Sunŏn* is virtually absent from most official and personal records made in the Chosŏn dynasty.

Although we find no direct testimony from Yi I himself, compelling evidence appears in a letter written by his close friend Song Ikp’il 宋翼弼 (1534–1599), who expresses deep concern about Yi I’s work on the DDJ commentary. Although barred from government office because of his illegitimate birth (*sŏl* 庶孽), Song Ikp’il was a distinguished scholar of ritual theory (*yehak*; *lixue* 禮學) and was especially renowned for his commentary on Zhu Xi’s *Jiali* 家禮 (Family Rituals). As one of Yi I’s closest and trusted friends, Song Ikp’il did not hesitate to offer both encouragement and criticism regarding Yi I’s scholarly pursuits.

In a letter supposedly dated to around 1580, Song criticizes Yi I’s work on the DDJ commentary in strongly disapproving terms:

¹⁵ For instance, Song Siyŏl 宋時烈 (1607-1689), a major intellectual and political figure of seventeenth-century Chosŏn who was heavily influenced by Yi I’s scholarship, justified Yi I’s youthful mountain retreat as a confused choice made by a grieving young man. See *Songja taejŏn* “Purok” 宋子大全 附錄 10.18b-19a.

¹⁶ 生丁不辰，早喪慈母，以妄塞悲，遂耽釋教，膏浸水潤，反覆沈迷，因昧本心，走入深山，從事禪門，逾周一年。

The other day, I met with Howŏn (Sŏng Hon 成渾; 1535-1598) in Hyangyang-ri village, and there I saw a newly edited copy of *Sunŏn* 諄言.¹⁷ It seemed to have been driven by your talent and flair, but I must confess it gave me pause. Could it be that you have inherited the lingering intention of Zhu Hui'an (i.e., Zhu Xi) in writing the *Zhouyi Cantongqi kaoyi* (Critical Examination of the *Cantongqi*)? Again, I lament on behalf of the Way of the world. You aim to subdue those who think differently and make them conform, yet there is a risk that you have lost the original intent of DDJ and forced it into agreement with our Confucian Way. Your commentary, too, seems strained and contrived. You have committed yourself to reviving the broken lineage of learning, and you should have no time to spare for such a thing, yet you have still made time to toy with words and ink. This is not what I had hoped from you. (*Kubong sŏnsaeng-jip* 4.35b)¹⁸

This remarkable testimony, coming from one of Yi I's closest intellectual allies, strongly supports the possibility that Yi I indeed composed a DDJ commentary. At the same time, it also reflects how controversial and potentially damaging such a work could have been in the eyes of contemporaries committed to the purity and orthodoxy of the Neo-Confucian tradition in Chosŏn.

To Song Ikp'il, Yi I's writing of a *Laozi* commentary resembled Zhu Xi's effort to appropriate Daoist teachings by writing a commentary on the *Cantongqi*, a text on Daoist alchemical practices. Song saw Yi I's attempt to interpret the DDJ through a Confucian lens as a distortion of its original meaning, an act of forcing coherence, and criticized it as a frivolous indulgence in literary play rather than the kind of scholarly work expected from someone of Yi I's stature. For Song, the historical task of reviving the broken lineage of Neo-Confucianism after Zhu Xi should have taken priority, and Yi I's commentary on the DDJ was an unworthy distraction from that mission. The core portion of this criticism is in fact quoted by Hong Kyehŭi in the postscript he wrote for *Sunŏn*.

Based on the information in Song's letter, it appears that Yi I completed *Sunŏn* around 1580, when he was approximately 43 years old, and that figures such as Sŏng Hon already had access to the work. Considering that Yi I passed away in 1584 at the age of 47, *Sunŏn* may be regarded as a product of his later years. Nevertheless, despite the crucial fact that *Sunŏn* had been completed and was in circulation by 1580, Yi I's precise motivation, context, or intention for composing the work remains unknown.

Even if it is true that Yi I wrote a work titled *Sunŏn*, whether the version of *Sunŏn* currently in circulation is indeed the same work that Song Ikp'il once saw

¹⁷ Here, Song Ikp'il writes the title as *Sunŏn* 諄言 instead of *Sunŏn* 醇言. It is unclear whether this deviation from the official title was simply his orthographic mistake. If not, the original title might also be interpreted as *Sincere Words* rather than *Purified Words*.

¹⁸ 日者。與浩原相會于向陽。見兄新編諄言一帙。似爲才氣所使。爲兄致疑焉。抑無乃朱晦庵參同契遺意耶。重爲世道興歎。屈異而欲同之。失老子本旨。而於吾道。亦有苟同之嫌。註又牽合。兄以繼絕爲期。宜日不暇及。而弄文墨於餘地。非吾所望於兄也。

remains uncertain. Ultimately, this question hinges on whether we can trust the postscript attached to the end of the extant *Sunŏn*. That postscript was likely written nearly 170 years after the work's composition by Hong Kye-hŭi, a prominent statesman during the reign of King Yŏngjo (r. 1724–1776). In the postscript, Hong clearly states that the work was authored by Yi I.

According to the postscript, Hong Kye-hŭi, while serving as governor of Ch'ungch'ŏng Province, happened upon a manuscript of *Sunŏn* in 1749 during an inspection tour of the southern regions of the province. He acquired it from a descendant of Sindokjae 慎獨齋 Kim Chip 金集 (1574–1656), who claimed that Kim had copied the manuscript by hand. At the time, Hong was engaged in collecting scattered writings by Yi I that had not been included in the *Yulgok sŏnsaeng chŏnsŏ*, and 1749 marked the year in which this effort bore its first fruit: the initial publication of the *Yulgok sŏnsaeng chŏnsŏ sŭbyu* 栗谷先生全書拾遺 (Supplementary Collection of Master Yulgok's Writings).¹⁹

Given this context, it seems unlikely that Hong's acquisition of *Sunŏn* from a descendant of a prestigious family in his own jurisdiction was purely coincidental. Fearing that the manuscript might be lost, Hong had the book printed the following year, in 1750, after his promotion to Minister of War and his return to Seoul. According to this account, it may be partly thanks to Hong Kye-hŭi that we are able to read and know of this book today.

As for the authenticity of the work, it appears that even Kim Chip's descendants, who had preserved the manuscript for nearly 170 years, believed it to be genuinely authored by Yi I. Although Kim Chip belonged to the next generation of scholars, he himself was a nationally respected Neo-Confucian scholar, who deeply admired Yi I. It is therefore not implausible that Kim came to possess a manuscript of Yi I's work.

One important fact to note here is that despite having directly uncovered *Sunŏn*, Hong Kye-hŭi did not, in fact, include it in the *Yulgok sŏnsaeng chŏnsŏ sŭbyu*, which he was compiling and publishing in collaboration with close colleagues. The precise reason for this exclusion remains unknown. Since the exact dates of his acquisition of the *Sunŏn* manuscript and the compilation of the *Sŭbyu* are not clearly established, it is possible that he had not yet obtained or become aware of *Sunŏn* at the time he was compiling the *Sŭbyu*. Another plausible explanation, as mentioned earlier, is the burden of justification that Yi I's overt engagement with heterodox teachings placed on both himself and the many Chosŏn Confucian scholars who respected and followed him. For those aware of Yi I's impious project, there may have been compelling reasons either to defend it or to remain silent. From this perspective, excluding *Sunŏn* from the *Sŭbyu* might have been a deliberate decision made to protect Yi I and his supporters. Seen in this light, Hong Kye-hŭi's act of publishing *Sunŏn* out of fear that the manuscript might be

¹⁹ For the publication of the *Yulgok sŏnsaeng chŏnsŏ sŭbyu* by Hong Kye-hŭi, see Kang 2024.

lost was likely motivated more by a concern for preservation than by a desire to widely disseminate the work.

Sunŏn came to be reexamined within the intellectual history of Korea through a chance occurrence. In 1974, Dr. Ryu Ch'illo, a scholar of East Asian philosophy, happened upon the book in the Kyujanggak archives at Seoul National University and introduced it to Dr. Kim Kilhwan. It was through Kim's 1976 article, "Yulgok ūi *Noja-gwan*," that the existence of the work was first made known to the academic community in Korea.

Taking this reception history into account, we cannot say that the authorship issue regarding Yi I and *Sunŏn* has been completely resolved. However, given the currently available evidence, including Song Ikp'il's letter that explicitly mentions Yi I's authorship of a *Laosŏi* commentary titled *Sunŏn*, the manuscript commentary on the DDJ bearing the same title that was acquired some 170 years later from a descendant of Kim Chip, the postscript by Hong Kyehŭi that records that event, and the broader anti-Daoist intellectual context of Yi I's time in which the work circulated, it is difficult to find compelling grounds to doubt or reject the attribution of this text to Yi I. Accordingly, this study follows the scholarly consensus in treating Yi I as the author of *Sunŏn*.

Editions and Structure

To date, *Sunŏn* survives only in manuscript form from the Chosŏn dynasty, and four extant copies have been identified. These are held respectively at the Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies at Seoul National University, the Tōyō Bunko Museum in Japan, Chŏnnam National University Library, and the C.V. Starr East Asian Library at UC Berkeley. There are no significant textual differences among the editions, and the Kyujanggak version is generally regarded as the base text. The Kyujanggak, Tōyō Bunko, and UC Berkeley editions are all accessible online. Here, I have used the Kyujanggak edition as the primary source.

One intriguing fact concerning the editions is that although Hong Kyehŭi stated he had the text printed with movable type for the sake of its preservation, all extant copies are handwritten manuscripts rather than printed editions. In other words, none of the currently surviving copies are from the edition printed by Hong. This raises the possibility that there may have been some differences between the original manuscript Hong obtained from Kim Chip's descendant and the versions that exist today. However, since Hong's original copy is now not confirmable, this possibility cannot be confirmed, either. That said, given the general textual consistency among the four extant manuscripts, it is unlikely that any major alterations occurred during the transmission of the text.

Among the various commentaries on the DDJ written by either Chinese or Chosŏn Confucian scholars, *Sunŏn* stands out for the distinctive way in which its content is organized. According to the postscript written by Hong Kyehŭi, Yi I selected only those lines and passages from DDJ that do not conflict with Confucian principles and recompiled them into a new structure consisting of 40

chapters. This indicates that Yi I did not adopt the structure of standard DDJ, which is divided into two parts, the Way (Dao) part and the Virtue (De) part, and consists of a total of 81 chapters. Instead, he eliminated approximately three-fifths of the original text and restructured the remaining two-fifths according to thematic relevance and philosophical necessity. The content he excluded from the original text will be discussed below. First, however, let us examine the content Yi I did retain and the principles on which he restructured it.

In fact, the attempt to interpret Laozi's message as being compatible with Confucian teachings was not unique to Yi I. Already during the Ming dynasty, when Yi I lived, Chinese intellectual circles were marked by a distinct trend of philosophical synthesis that sought to reconcile Daoism and Confucianism. Dong Sijing's DZJ, which Yi I used as the textual basis for his own commentary, had been written during the Northern Song dynasty, approximately four hundred years before Yi I's time. Given that Yi I frequently cited Dong's commentary in *Sunǒn* without sometimes adding much of his own interpretive input, it might be difficult to claim that his originality lies in the approach or perspective of the commentary itself.

Perhaps, instead, what makes Yi I's *Sunǒn* a truly unique contribution to the tradition of the long DDJ exegesis is not merely that he read Laozi through the lens of Neo-Confucianism or sought to harmonize Laozi's message with Confucian thinking. Rather, it is that he dismantled the textual structure of the standard DDJ, divided into two parts, the Way and the Virtue, comprising eighty-one chapters, and drastically abridged it, preserving only about 40 percent of the original content and reorganizing it into a new form. By doing so, *Sunǒn* becomes a text that is at once DDJ and yet no longer DDJ—an independent work with a distinct textual identity of its own.

The structure and content of Yi I's *Sunǒn*, in which he dismantled and recompiled the original chapter divisions of the DDJ, are as follows.²⁰

<i>Sunǒn</i>	<i>Daodejing</i>	<i>Sunǒn</i>	<i>Daodejing</i>
1	42 (part), 5 (part), 42 (part)	21	45
2	51 (part)	22	56
3	37 (part)	23	55 (part)
4	11	24	50 (part)
5	12, 10 (part)	25	34 (part), 63 (part)
6	48 (part)	26	54 (part)
7	59 (part)	27	81 (part)
8	22 (part), 24, 22 (part), 24	28	27 (part)
9	33	29	49 (part)
10	44	30	29
11	47	31	57, 58 (part)
12	46	32	43 (part)

²⁰ When only part of a chapter is excerpted, this is marked with "(part)."

13	67 (part)	33	30
14	76, 78	34	31 (part)
15	9	35	60 (part)
16	39 (part)	36	64 (part), 63 (part)
17	8 (part), 66 (part)	37	73, 72 (part)
18	68	38	77 (part), 79 (part)
19	41 (part), 45, 81 (part)	39	70
20	26, 23 (part)	40	53 (part)

Noteworthy in Yi I's reordering and editing of the original DDJ is that several of the most important chapters typically regarded as representative of Laozi's philosophy are excluded. Notably, the early chapters of the Way part, which encapsulate the core and defining traits of Laozi's thought, are entirely omitted, as is Chapter 38, which marks the beginning of the so-called Virtue part. On what basis did Yi I decide which passages to include and which to exclude? Do the chapters he chose not to adopt share any common themes or patterns?

According to the postscript by Hong Kye-hŭi, the guiding principle of Yi I's editorial discretion was to discard any content that did not align with the Confucian Way. This explains why passages such as the early part of Chapter 5, as well as Chapters 18, 19, and 38, texts that explicitly deny or subvert core Confucian values like benevolence (*in; ren* 仁), righteousness (*ŭi; yi* 義), ritual propriety (*ye; li* 禮), wisdom (*chi; zhi* 智), and filial piety (*hyo; xiao* 孝), were not included in *Sumŏn*.

Moreover, the exclusion may also relate to common Neo-Confucian critiques of Daoism and Buddhism at the time, particularly their association with moral relativism, cynicism, or nihilism stemming from the idea of non-being (*mu; wu* 無) as the ultimate origin of being. In this context, chapters such as Chapter 1 and Chapter 40, which focus on non-being in metaphysical terms, would naturally have been excluded from *Sumŏn*.

However, when the notion of non-being is not presented as a cosmological origin but rather as a practice of self-cultivation, such as emptying the self (*myugong; wugong* 無功; "non-achievement") or acting in accordance with, rather than against, natural principle (*muwei; wuwei* 無為; "non-action"), then those sections could be included. For example, DDJ 11 (incorporated into Chapter 4 of *Sumŏn*) and DDJ 24 (appearing in Chapter 8) are accepted, as they reflect this more ethically compatible interpretation of *mu* (*wu*).

While examining the content of *Sumŏn*, Kim Hangmok observes that certain passages which could initially seem contrary to Confucian principles were nevertheless included, and further, that Yi I reinterpreted them in ways that aligned with Confucian teachings. As concrete examples, Kim points to DDJ 48 (*Sumŏn* Chapter 6), 50 (24), and 55 (23) (Kim 2001, 136-140). According to Kim, such examples suggest that Hong Kye-hŭi's postscript subtly implies Yi I did in fact engage with material not conventionally aligned with the Confucian Way, when Hong quotes Song Ik-pil's accusation that, through his interpretation, Yi I seems to force to harmonize those teachings with Confucian thought. This, Kim argues,

offers a concrete rebuttal to concerns, voiced by both Song Ikp'il and Hong Kyehŭi, that Yi I might have distorted the original meaning of the DDJ in order to force it into a Confucian mold.

Ironically, this raises ambiguity regarding the phrase “content incompatible with the Confucian Way,” which Hong Kyehŭi had originally presented as a guiding principle of Yi I’s editorial process. If such content could be interpreted into harmony with Confucian values, then the criteria for exclusion become far less clear. This suggests that Yi I’s editorial discretion may not have followed a consistently objective or transparent standard, and that, aside from passages that explicitly reject fundamental Confucian values or ontologies, the notion of incompatibility with the Way is more of a broad rhetorical assertion than a precise analytical framework for understanding how *Sunŏn* was composed.

Rather than assuming a definite standard of selection, it seems more reasonable to understand that Yi I selectively chose passages in a loosened manner from the original text of the DDJ that aligned with the themes and structure he envisioned for *Sunŏn*, as he himself outlines at the end of Chapter 40.

In the final section of *Sunŏn*, Yulgok not only explains the overall structure of the text but also summarizes the key points at the end of each chapter. According to this last passage, chapters 1 to 3 address the Way’s essence (*toch'e* 道體), chapter 4 the mind’s essence (*simch'e* 心體), chapters 5 to 35 deal with self-cultivation (*sugi* 修己) and governing others (*ch'ŭin* 治人), chapter 36 concerns the beginning and end (*sjong* 始終), chapters 37 to 38 the heavenly Way (*ch'ŏndo* 天道), and chapters 39 to 40 the practice of the Way (*baengdo* 行道).

Yi I first begins with the essence of the Way as taught by Laozi, then discusses the essence of the human mind that contains that Way; these two together form a general overview and constitute the fundamental premise for his central message on how to cultivate oneself and govern others. From this general overview, Yi I moves to more concrete discussion about how to live and practice the Way in individual and communal life, covering chapters 5 through 35, which can be seen as the main part of the work. This main part resembles the concentric expansion structure of “self-cultivation and governing others” or “self-cultivation and bringing peace to others” (*sugi anin* 修己安人) emphasized by Zhu Xi’s *Daxue* 大學 (Great Learning), understood as the original spirit of Confucianism. Passing through the structure of “self-cultivation and bringing peace to others,” Yi I finally concludes by recalling once again the essence of the Way that undergirds this concrete practice of life, thereby ending his discussion. Therefore, while most of *Sunŏn*’s structure proceeds deductively from the principle of the Way to concrete practice, the last five chapters adopt an inductive approach that returns to the fundamental principle.

To reorganize DDJ’s composition anew from a Confucian perspective, Yi I boldly dismantled the original chapters and sequence of the DDJ text. Through this, Yi I’s work, while containing the content of the original DDJ, was

transformed into an essentially new book fittingly named *Sunŏn*, distinct from the DDJ. Then, more specifically, how did Yi I reconcile the DDJ with Confucian ideals?

Yulgok on Laozi in *Sunŏn*

Although we do not know the specific background, motivations, or purposes that led Yi I to compose a commentary on the DDJ, we may note that around the same period he was writing *Sunŏn*, he was also producing and publishing introductory Confucian texts intended for the basic education of young students and youth, such as the *Sŏngbak chibyo* 聖學輯要 (Collected Essentials for Sage Learning; 1575), *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl* 擊蒙要訣 (Essential Secrets for Awakening the Benighted; 1577), and the *Sobak chipju* 小學集註 (Collected Annotations on the *Xiaoxue*; 1579). Taking this into account, it is possible that Yi I may have regarded the DDJ as a work that preserved the teachings of an ancient sage and thus as a valuable text for transmitting the core principles of Confucianism.

The fact that the DDJ has not been properly understood by Chosŏn Neo-Confucian scholars and is often misinterpreted is largely due to the approximately 60% of its content that Yi I deliberately excluded in the making of *Sunŏn*. Yet, Yi I was firmly convinced that the ultimate message conveyed by the DDJ is not in conflict with the Confucian tradition of practicing the Way. For Yi I, the most important message of the DDJ is that only a morally cultivated individual, someone who has undergone self-cultivation and follows the path of the sage who has realized the Way, can bring peace to the state and the world.

The governance of the sage described in DDJ, as Yi I saw it, namely governance based on non-action (*muwi-ji-ch'i*; *muwei zhi zhi* 無爲之治), was not about nourishing one's life for the sake of self-preservation, nor was it a form of nihilism or misanthropy that refrains from doing anything for others and community. Rather, it was the rule of the ideal Confucian noble person (*kunja*; *junzi* 君子), who renounces selfish desires and self-interest and devotes himself to the benefit and well-being of others. In this respect, Yi I believed there was essentially no difference between the sage's governance in Laozi and the moral rule (*tŏkch'i*; *dezhi* 德治) of the Confucian noble person or Mengzi's ideal of kingly governance (*wangdo chŏngch'i*; *wangdao zhengzhi* 王道政治). He was convinced of this, and throughout the entire text, he repeatedly emphasizes this message.

As Yi I explains in the structure of *Sunŏn*, before addressing the central theme of self-cultivation and the governance of others in the DDJ, he begins with a general discussion of the Way and the human mind as the first topic of the work. Based on the thematic structure he lays out in *Sunŏn*, we will now examine how Yi I interprets the DDJ from the perspective of Neo-Confucianism and thereby aligns it with the foundational spirit of Confucian learning.