Late Choson Discourse on Yulgok Yi I and his Thought: the case of Nongmun Im Songju

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The work of Nongmun Im Sŏngju 鹿門 任聖周 (1711-1788) gives us a unique opportunity to analyze continuity and changes within the Confucian discourse during the late Chosŏn period with a special focus on the intellectual heritance left by Yugok Yi I (1536-1584). Although we may read many Nongmun’s ideas as a direct or indirect polemic with the results of Horak debate, the paper presented attempts to trace the sources of his thought back to a more fundamental basis, i.e. to the theories of Yulgok Yi I and Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk and the founding period of the Korean daoxue 道學 school. Nongmun’s direct dialogue with authors whose works were up to his time commented and explained in innumerable ways shows that late Sŏngnihak was more than just hair splitting scholasticism and is to be seen as a very serious attempt to understand the crucial terms of the Four Seven debate and the respective arguments. As a locus classicus could serve Nongmun’s use of a concept of “deep, whole, clear and empty qi” 渚一淸虛之氣 which plays a fundamental role in the formulation of his essential theories of “qi is one and its manifestation are many” 氣一分殊, “li and qi are of the same reality” 理氣同實 and others. Nongmun formulates his concept of this term in a direct polemic with Yulgok’s statement that “there are many cases where deep, whole, clear and empty qi is not present” 渚一淸虛之氣 多有不在 and in his critique employs the whole context of Yulgok’s analysis of the problem in the debate with Pak Sun 朴淳 (1523-1589). The crucial outcome of the polemic is the argument that qi could always maintain its original clear state regardless of the disturbances caused by “dregs” 渣滓 which bring occasional turbidity into the originally clear qi. In this sense, Nongmun offers a new interpretation of the paradox contained in Yulgok’s opinion presented in the Four Seven debate that human nature is always
good regardless of qi which influences its manifestations and the related theory of “li penetrates and qi delimits” 理通氣局, which by Nongmun’s opinion presents an impermissible dividing of li and qi into two separate entities.