

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 heritage left by Yulgok 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*" 湛一清虛之氣 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" 湛一清虛之氣 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.