

Book Review:

Emotions in Korean Philosophy and Religion: Confucian, Comparative, and Contemporary Perspectives

Emotions in Korean Philosophy and Religion: Confucian, Comparative, and Contemporary Perspectives, edited by Edward Y. J. Chung and Jea Sophia Oh. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 373 pages. € 49.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 9783030947460.

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I. Introduction

Emotions in Korean Philosophy and Religion brings together many valuable chapters that focus on—as the subtitle of the volume states—Korean Confucian, comparative, and contemporary perspectives on *jeong/qing* 情 (“emotions”). The book sheds light on the scope of Korean perspectives on the emotions and their relevance to existing East and West studies. I cannot possibly do full justice to what the editors, Edward Y. J. Chung and Jea Sophia Oh, have achieved in this impressive volume. Instead, I will endeavor to give the reader a sense of the scope and importance of this book as a source for Korean thought on the emotions not only for specialists but also anyone interested in East Asian thought.

The editors have arranged the book into three parts. These parts are framed by a lengthy introduction that provides important philosophical, religious, and textual background for all three parts of the book and a conclusion that discusses the distinctiveness of Korean *jeong* 情. Part I (Chaps. 2–5) is organized around important debates on the emotions that were initiated by early Korean Neo-Confucian

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philosophers and lasted from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Part II (Chaps. 6–8) is focused on Korean Confucian views of the emotions from comparative ethical, social, and political perspectives. Part III (Chaps. 9–11) begins with a focus on Buddhist understandings of *jeong* and finishes with a contemporary Korean Confucian perspective on *jeong* and Korean women (Chap. 12).

A challenge when reviewing such an edited volume is providing a brief overview of each chapter without being too tiresome or sacrificing too much of the book's scope and depth. The same challenge is true of the comments I will offer in the conclusion.

II. A Crash Course on the Emotions

Chung and Oh begin the volume with a multipart introduction that canvases several ambiguities and issues in the contemporary Western philosophical understanding of the emotions, opening the door to an alternative approach. To that end, roughly the first half of the 80-page introduction is a crash course on the emotions in the classical Chinese and Buddhist traditions. This whirlwind tour through the classical philosophical perspectives on the emotions is instructive because it illustrates several important differences between Western and East Asian perspectives. It also provides the necessary background for understanding the Korean Neo-Confucian, Korean Buddhist, comparative, and contemporary understandings of the emotions that are the focus of the book. A key takeaway from the introduction, we learn, is that Korean Neo-Confucian philosophers did not merely follow in the footsteps of the classical Chinese texts that influenced their ideas and beliefs on the emotions. Instead, these philosophers revealed overlooked ambiguities and limitations of the very texts that shaped their views while also developing and extending their own philosophical interpretations, forming the heart of the famous Four-Seven debate that lasted three centuries.

Roughly the last 40 pages of the introduction contain a detailed synopsis of each contributing chapter. In what follows, I will briefly introduce each chapter of the volume. However, for the benefit of

those readers with little or no familiarity with on the emotions, I must preface my comments with a little background. I invite those readers already familiar with the topic of this excellent volume skip the next section.

III. Some Background on the Emotions

In Western philosophy, the emotions have generally been understood as subjective feelings together with their concomitant physical manifestations and internal psychological states that motivate action or draw out certain judgements. On this view, the emotions are not cognitive states or mental processes, such as calculating the volume of a cylinder, and do not by themselves give rise to any feelings, motivate particular actions, or elicit specific evaluations. The Western philosophical tradition has presupposed the existence of an ontological chasm between emotions and reason. Moreover, the emotions have generally been considered the kind of things that often conflict or interfere with rational thinking and reflection and need to be controlled.

Early Chinese philosophers took a different approach to understanding the emotions. While the emotions (K. *jeong*/C. *qing* 情) refer to subjective feelings or mental states, they also refer to the external inputs of one's interaction with and reaction to the world or nature, essence, the facts, or reality, which seem to have nothing to do with internal mental states or feelings. This holistic view of the emotions does not set emotions apart from or opposed to rationality or the external material objects of the world. *Qing* represents both internal and subjective affective states and external and objective states of affairs. The emotions on an East Asian understanding form the very origin of an agent's capacity for self-cultivation and function as the basis of her interdependent and communal moral and spiritual life as she navigates her way through the world with others.

Among the most prominent figures in the East Asian philosophical tradition were Korean Neo-Confucians responsible for shaping the Four-Seven debate (*sachil nonjaeng/siqi lunzheng* 사칠논쟁 四七論爭). The

“four” in the Four-Seven debate refers to the Four Sprouts (*sadan/siduan* 四端): four inherently good emotions deep in the moral mind that Mencius (372–289 BCE) argued are present in all human beings. On this Mencian view, human nature is universally good, which means all human beings are equipped to manifest the four cardinal moral virtues: compassion, shame, deference, and approval and disapproval. When the four fragile sprouts are nurtured, they develop into the virtues of benevolence (from compassion), rightness (from shame), ritual propriety (from deference), and wisdom (from approval and disapproval). The “seven” in the Four-Seven debate refers to the “seven emotions” (*chiljeong/qiqing* 七情) that come from the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記): joy, anger, sorrow, hate, desire, fear, and love. These are innate emotions that no one needs to be taught.

The context that gave rise to the Four-Seven debate was the conjunction of questions concerning the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions and the metaphysical commitments of the Korean Neo-Confucian scholars. They believed that the metaphysical structure of the cosmos was principle-pattern (*i/li* 理): a guiding principle that is the inner nature of all things. *Li* is our original nature, and it is good. They also believed that material or physical energy (*gi/qi* 氣) was the lively “stuff” that produced and sustained all psychic or physical phenomena of the cosmos. *Qi* is our physical nature. *Li* is inherent in everything manifest by *qi*. The world, and everything in it, is interconnected because everything shares the same original nature, *li*. When the Korean Neo-Confucians brought this *li-qi* metaphysical picture to bear on the emotions, it generated the many difficult and urgent questions that shaped the Four-Seven debate.

The main point of contention between the two philosophers who initiated the Four-Seven debate, Toegye 退溪 (1501–1570) and Gobong 高峰 (1527–1572) was the nature of the difference between the Four Sprouts and the Seven Emotions. What is the relationship between *li*, our original nature, and the emotions we experience in the material realm of *qi*? Are the Four Sprouts expressions of *li* or *qi*? If they are *li*, which is pure principle, then how can the Four Sprouts have any causal effects in the actual world? Are the Seven Emotions expressions of *li* or *qi*? If *li* inheres in all *qi*, would the Seven Emotions not be expressions

of both *li* and *qi*? And if *qi*, as these scholars believed, is a distorting energy because it manifests *li* in the physical world, which is subject to limits, how is sagehood possible? Can we trust the emotions to guide our actions? Are the Four emotions different kinds of emotions from the Seven? And so on. These questions and their implications for the moral cultivation of the self and society are just an illustration of the possibilities and by no means fully represent the tremendous contribution of the Four-Seven debate to our understanding of the emotions and its influence on past and present Korean thought, society, and culture. With the above sketch on the emotions as background, let us now turn to the contributions of each chapter.

IV. Part I: Confucian Perspectives

Part 1 begins our journey into the Korean Neo-Confucian understanding of the emotions. In Chapter 2, “Moral Psychology of Emotion (*Jeong/Qing* 情) in Korean Neo-Confucianism and Its Philosophical Debates on the Affective Nature of the Mind,” Bongrae Seok seeks to deepen our understanding of the moral psychology of the emotions in Korean Neo-Confucianism by focusing on the philosophical differences between the major figures of the Four-Seven debate, Toegye and Ugye 牛溪 (1535–1598) and Gobong and Yulgok 栗谷 (1536–1584), and the Horak debate 湖洛論爭, Yi Gan 李柬 (1677–1727) and Han Wonjin 韓元震 (1682–1751). Seok argues that, despite their differences, these scholars advanced a unique Korean view of the emotions: they are not just personal felt states, whether in the mind or body, but “the profound reflection or representation of the morally devotional, psychologically transformational, and metaphysically reverential nature of human beings” (p. 115).

In Chapter 3, “The Idea of *Gyeong/Jing* 敬 in Yi Toegye’s Korean Neo-Confucianism and Its Availability in Contemporary Ethical Debate,” Suk Gabriel Choi examines the implications of *gyeong* 敬 (C. *jing* 敬) in Toegye’s Neo-Confucianism and considers some important implications for contemporary Western virtue ethics. Choi argues that, according to Toegye, *gyeong* is understood as “one’s respect

for one's goodness as human nature and effort for maintaining it" (p. 130). For Toegye, *gyeong* plays a crucial role in practicing the virtues that emanate from the Four Sprouts. As such, Toegye's system of ethics presents a unique alternative to traditional Western virtue ethics.

In Chapter 4, "Yi Yulgok on the Role of Emotions in Self-cultivation and Ethics: A Modern Korean Neo-Confucian Interpretation," Edward Y. J. Chung offers a penetrating look into Yulgok's ethics of the emotions and the role of the emotions in self-cultivation. The chapter is truly innovative because it links Yulgok's theory of the emotions to philosophers in the Western philosophical tradition, including the father of modern Western psychology, William James. Chung also convincingly draws out the connection between Yulgok's theory of the emotions and its application to his views on political reform and the modern spirit of democracy as "of the people," "by the people," and "for the people."

Part I concludes with Chapter 5, "Jeong Dasan on Emotions and the Pursuit of Sagehood," in which Don Baker increases our understanding of a rarely discussed text of the once exiled Dasan 茶山 (1762–1836) in which he expands the seven emotions to include other emotions, such as resentment (*won/yuan* 怨). According to Dasan, the emotions are an inescapable part of human life, but at the same time they present serious obstacles along the path to sagehood: the sages experienced strong emotions such as resentment and remorse, so they must be significant despite not being included in the usual list of Seven Emotions.

V. Part II: Comparative Perspectives

In Part II, we are invited to explore several comparative analyses that flow naturally from the Confucian perspectives examined in Part 1. In Chapter 6, "Thinking Through the Emotions with Korean Confucianism: Philosophical Translation and the Four-Seven Debate," Joseph E. Harroff makes a much-needed contribution to the issue of philosophical translation. In this chapter, Harroff argues for a post-colonial and de-Orientalizing approach to the translation of classical

non-Western texts. As he points out, previous translations of Chinese texts into Western languages have been heavily influenced by, among other things, an unacknowledged Christianization or an uncritical reliance on Western philosophical substance ontology. According to Harroff, the Four-Seven debate is one such casualty. Thus, we need to translate such a text on its own terms. To that end, Harroff uses the Four-Seven debate as a case study to show how to apply a translingual method for engaging in responsible translation. The result is a Korean Neo-Confucian philosophical vocabulary that can speak for itself.

In Chapter 7, “*Jeong* (情), Civility, and the Heart of a Pluralistic Democracy in Korea,” Hyo-Dong Lee explores whether the Mencian doctrine of the Four Sprouts could support a Confucian theory of democracy which embodies the spirit of political equality and popular sovereignty as opposed to a Confucian meritocracy which advocates government rule by those who are deemed virtuous and wise. The idea is to derive political equality from the Mencian view of the intrinsic moral equality of all humans. To that end, Lee reinterprets the Four Sprouts in terms of *jeong*, a concept at the core of Korean Neo-Confucian moral psychology. He argues that, if we think of *jeong* as a kind of social glue that holds together diverse groups of people with diverse and competing interests, we can create a space for the possibility of a Korean Neo-Confucian inspired pluralistic civil democracy.

In Chapter 8, “Korean Social Emotions: *Han* (한恨), *Heung* (흥興), and *Jeong* (정情),” Iljoon Park is motivated by the concern that an accelerated shift to a hyper digitized and networked world could lead to a loss of sensitivity and compassion in human relations. Park begins with a discussion of the emotions in the Korean Neo-Confucian tradition. This background sets the stage for Park to discuss the Korean social triad of emotions, *han* 한恨 (“resentment”), *heung* 흥興 (“excitement”), and *jeong* 정情 (“emotions”). Park argues that once *han* has been dissipated by adopting an attitude of *musim* 무심無心 (“attachment without clinging”) we can recognize that nature embraces everyone and everything equally without discrimination. This makes it possible for *jeong*, a unique social interface that enables the exchange of emotions with others, to recapture our compassion for

others and facilitate the healing of trauma caused by a world trapped in ceaseless capitalist competition and social discrimination.

VI. Part III: Contemporary Perspectives

In Part III, we come to present day Korea and consider emotions from a Korean Buddhist perspective. We can begin with a question: What is *jeong* and how do Korean Buddhists share *jeong*? In Chapter 9, “*Hanmaeum*, One Heart-mind: A Korean Buddhist Philosophical Basis of *Jeong* (情)”, Lucy Hyekyung Jee argues that the Buddhist philosophical concept of “interconnectedness” is best understood through a merger of Wonhyo’s 元曉 (617–686) *ilsim* 일심一心 (“one heart-mind”) and Daehaeng’s 大行 (1927–2012) indigenous Korean notion of *hanmaeum* 한마음 (“one heart-mind”), and the latter’s view is the Korean Buddhist foundation of *jeong*, a moral, social, cultural emotion. Jee achieves this merger by arguing that *jeong* is closely connected to the Korean Confucian notion of *uri* 우리 (“we/us”). This Confucian we-ness is then derived from the Korean Buddhist notion of the “one heart-mind,” which is said to be the support structure for the Korean culture of *jeong* that can promote the well-being of Koreans and our increasingly globalized communities.

In Chapter 10, “Resentment and Gratitude in Won Buddhism,” Chung Nam Ha points out that Won Buddhist ethical teaching was heavily influenced by Sotaesan’s 少太山 (1891–1943) melding of the Confucian cardinal virtue of benevolence and Buddhism’s doctrine of the “three poisonous minds” (greed, anger, delusion) and “two hindrances” (craving and resentment). Ha then shows how resentment (*wonmang* 원망 怨望) is the cause of all human suffering and Won Buddhism, through the doctrine of “gratitude,” can extricate us from this condition.

In Chapter 11, we are treated to a fascinating account of a film in which we follow Sun Nyeo, a former Buddhist nun, and Jin Seong, a practicing ascetic, both on the bodhisattva’s path to no self and interdependence. According to Mahāyāna Buddhism, *nirvāna* (“freedom from suffering”) is not achieved through escape from *saṃsāra* (“the

continual suffering-cycle of life”). Rather, one must embrace *saṃsāra* to achieve nirvāna. In “*Jeong* and the Interrelationality of Self and Other in Korean Buddhist Cinema,” Sharon A. Suh uses Kwon-taek’s film *Aje Aje Bara Aje* *아제 아제 바라 아제* (“Come, Come, Come Upward”) as a case study to show how *jeong* was the vehicle through which Sun Nyeo becomes an earthly bodhisattva and learns to embrace the abject. Meanwhile Jin Seong, the monastic ascetic in her staunch refusal to give up on her attempt to escape *saṃsāra*, fails to obtain enlightenment.

Part III concludes with Jea Sophia Oh bringing us full circle to exploring *jeong* in the context of Korean Confucianism and the family. In Chapter 12, “Emotions (*Jeong* 情) in Korean Confucianism and Family Experience: An Ecofeminist Perspective,” Oh deconstructs a persistent view of Korean women as obedient housewives and sex objects under the traditional Confucian patriarchal system. To that end, Oh first examines traditional Korean women’s gender roles from the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) to the present. Then, Oh brings *jeong* into the purview of *han* and *uri* and argues that, although Korean women have traditionally been icons of *han* and *uri*, it is *jeong* that should be placed at the center of family experience and caring for the community. *Jeong* is the crucial sticky adhesive that binds human relations and is obviously not restricted or limited to one’s biology. The ecofeminist implications of Oh’s view, just like the entire book, are far-reaching.

The above should give curious readers a clear sense of the content of each chapter. I will conclude with some brief comments on the book as a whole.

VII. Conclusion

Emotions in Korean Philosophy and Religion is a boon for specialists and students interested in the emotions from an East Asian, and particularly Korean, perspective. The book is accessible to anyone unfamiliar with Chinese or Korean Philosophy. It would be an excellent addition to any post-secondary introductory or survey course as it complements existing East-West literature and debates on the

emotions. And on the point of accessibility, we are very fortunate that the editors have been able to offer this book as an open access (OA) publication. So, cost is no excuse for not considering reading this book or incorporating relevant chapters into a course syllabus.

Limitations of space often compel editors to make difficult decisions. One such decision was to forgo a section on Daoism in the introduction. The reason Daoism was not included, the editors tell us, is that “Daoism did not directly shape or influence the Korean moral philosophy and social ethics of *jeong*” (p. 5). Fair enough. But there is no question that many elements of Daoist thought were incorporated into and tolerated by Korean Buddhist and Confucian thought and social practices. Daoism’s roots in Korea are so deep that it even managed to survive under Confucian hegemony during the Joseon dynasty. And Daoist thought continues to influence Korean culture, society, folk religion (shamanism), and well-being practices today in part because it indirectly influenced Buddhist, Confucian, and Neo-Confucian thought on the emotions in the past.

Given that Daoism is very much a part of the Korean story, readers would greatly benefit if the introduction offered a crash course on Daoism as it did on Confucianism and Buddhism. After all, Daoism was written about and discussed by great Korean Neo-Confucian scholars such as Yulgok and Han Wonjin, whose views are the subject of inquiry in various parts of the book. Moreover, Daoist perspectives are explicitly discussed, as the editors tell us, in Chapters 8, 11, and 12. Finally, a general reference by the editors to Daoist thought on the emotions almost always accompanies a general reference to Buddhism and Confucianism. Readers would have benefitted from a section on Daoism in the introduction even at the expense of having a detailed synopsis of each of the contributing chapters. Indeed, an extra part on Daoism similar to those on Korean Neo-Confucianism and contemporary Buddhism would have rounded off the volume very nicely.

There is one other thing to mention, but this should not be taken as criticism. Part III of the book focuses on contemporary Korean views of *jeong* in Buddhist and Confucian contexts. The understanding of *jeong* that is operative in these chapters is very different from the Neo-Confucian understanding that dominates in Parts I and II. That is, there

seems to be a gap between Parts I/II and III that needs to be bridged. A chapter offering an explanation of the shift in the understanding of *jeong* could have served as such a bridge. Of course, even a volume as ground-breaking as this one cannot be expected to do everything.

All in all, this collection is a welcome and much-needed addition to the very limited literature on the topic of the emotions in Korean philosophy and religion. No doubt specialists will find different chapters relevant to their research, but there is something for everyone in this remarkable volume. Individually, the chapters offer us valuable insight, and collectively, they remind us that there is still much exciting work to be done to understand the scope, influence, and importance of Korean perspectives on our understanding of the emotions.