

On This Topic*

Selflessness and “No-Self”: Renewing the Confucian–Buddhist– Daoist Dialogue

Sangmin Lee and Doil Kim**

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism have conventionally been studied as distinct intellectual traditions. Yet this division can obscure a significant point of convergence. Confucian self-overcoming (*keji* 克己) and freedom from self-centered partiality (*wuwo* 毋我), Daoist self-forgetting (*wangwo* 忘我) and fasting of the mind (*xinzhai* 心齋), and the Buddhist doctrine of no-self (*wuwo* 無我; *anātman*) all challenge egocentric orientations.

This special issue originated in the conference “Selflessness and ‘No-Self’: Borders of East Asian Philosophy and Beyond,” held on February 10, 2026, and organized by the Center for the Contemporary Study of East Asian Classics and Critical Confucianism (CCECC) at the Institute of Confucian Philosophy and Culture, Sungkyunkwan University. Bringing together specialists from several fields of East Asian philosophy, the event examined selflessness and no-self from Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist perspectives. A selection of the presentations was subsequently developed and revised for publication in this special issue.

* All research articles included in this special topic underwent the journal’s standard double-anonymized peer-review process. For articles translated from Korean into English, both the original Korean manuscript and its English translation were independently reviewed by qualified reviewers in the respective languages.

** Sangmin Lee is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Confucian Philosophy and Culture, Sungkyunkwan University. E-mail: dharmottara@skku.edu.

Doil Kim is an Professor in the Department of Confucian Studies, Eastern Philosophy and Korean Philosophy, Sungkyunkwan University. E-mail: philosokim@gmail.com.

The volume brings these three traditions into conversation through the keyword “no-self.” It neither assumes that they offer equivalent accounts of the self nor reduces them to an undifferentiated ideal of selflessness. Instead, it considers how different forms of self-negation, self-forgetting, emptiness, and release from partiality may enter into dialogue through their shared practical concerns. Such dialogue is by no means historically unprecedented. Over the long course of interaction among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, these traditions absorbed, transformed, and internalized elements of one another in complex ways. In much contemporary scholarship, however, sustained dialogue among the three traditions has become increasingly fragmented. This special issue therefore seeks to provide a renewed point of departure for such engagement. It is hoped that this initial effort will help open a broader forum for more specialized and rigorous scholarly discussion.

The three articles included in this special issue may be briefly introduced as follows. The first article addresses a central tension within Buddhist accounts of no-self. Early expressions of *anattā* frequently maintain that the five aggregates constituting experience are not the self. Rather than necessarily denying personal existence altogether, such statements reject the identification of form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness with “I” or “mine.” The teaching of no-self in early Buddhism can therefore serve as a practice of disengagement from egocentric appropriation. A further difficulty nevertheless arises: once the aggregates are excluded from identification, one may posit an unconditioned or transcendent subject beyond them. Such a move risks renewing the very attachment that the doctrine seeks to undo. Later Buddhist thinkers responded by extending the critique to subtler forms of subjectivity. The article thus clarifies the tension between no-self as release from identification and its more comprehensive interpretation as the denial of any enduring subject.

The second article examines Cheng Xuanying’s 成玄英 interpretation of emptiness (*kong* 空) and twofold mystery (*chongxuan* 重玄) in the *Daodejing yishu* 道德經義疏. Cheng characterizes the Dao as “neither being nor nonbeing” (*feiyou feiwu* 非有非無). His dialectical negation

incorporates elements of the Madhyamaka tetralemma associated with Nāgārjuna’s 龍樹 philosophy of the Middle Way. The Dao cannot be apprehended through attachment to either being or nonbeing, or even through attachment to nonattachment itself. It can be approached only through *chongxuan*, a repeated negation that prevents any conceptual position from becoming final. The concepts of emptiness and twofold mystery thus disclose an intellectual space in which Buddhist and Daoist boundaries were crossed and reconstructed. Cheng’s analysis further suggests that overcoming egocentrism requires relinquishing not only fixed positions but also the tendency to absolutize their negation.

The third article explicitly compares Confucian and Buddhist notions of no-self from the practical perspective of anti-egocentrism. Confucian *wuwo* 毋我, as interpreted through commentarial discussions of a relevant passage in the *Analects*, does not entail the ontological denial of a substantial self. It calls instead for the removal of private attachment and self-centered partiality (*si* 私). Confucian no-self can thus be understood as a process of moral self-transformation through which the individual becomes a relational and publicly oriented ethical agent. Buddhist thought, by contrast, involves an anti-substantialist analysis absent from Confucian thought, while its soteriological purpose lies in dismantling the forms of self-attachment that give rise to suffering. Confucianism and Buddhism therefore differ in their theoretical explanations of the self but converge in their efforts to transform self-centered ways of perceiving, desiring, and acting.

Taken together, these articles employ no-self not as a common doctrine that renders Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism identical, but as a critical keyword through which their differences, affinities, and historical entanglements can be reconsidered. They also extend the discussion beyond the established borders of East Asian philosophy. Egocentrism shapes not only individual conduct but also collective identities, social conflicts, and the absolutization of one’s own standpoint. Confucian freedom from private partiality, Daoist release from fixed distinctions, and Buddhist deconstruction of “I” and “mine” offer distinct but mutually illuminating resources for addressing these problems.

By bringing these perspectives into dialogue, the volume seeks to contribute to a broader ethical reflection on relational existence, social conflict, and communal life. The question of no-self thereby becomes more than a historical or doctrinal problem. It also invites contemporary reflection on how self-enclosed identities may be loosened without erasing moral agency, and how more open and coexistential forms of life might consequently emerge.