

## Hyegang's *Sin-gi*: Emphasis on *Chucheuk*

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### Abstract

This paper concerns Hyegang's theory of *sin-gi* (literally, spiritual *gi*) in his book, *Sin-gitong* (The Comprehension of *Sin-gi*). *Sin-gi* was created to support *chucheuk* (investigating and inferring). Hyegang could not deduce the human mental/spiritual faculty from mere material *gi*. He needed to insert the human spiritual part into it. This seems to have made Hyegang add *sin* (spiritual) to *gi*. As a result, Hyegang found *chucheuk* as the human spiritual/mental faculty and divorced it from material *gi*; then he allotted it to *sin*. This is the beginning of *sin-gi*. However, Hyegang extended the concept of *sin-gi* to the cosmological level and thereby caused a problem. The concept of *sin* was created for supporting the human mental/spiritual faculty, but it was not enough to explain the universe. Therefore Hyegang tried to solve this problem using *unhwagi* (circulating and changing *gi*) in his book, *Gihak*.

*chucheuk*, *gi* monism, *hwaldong unхва*, mind-and-heart, *sin-gi*, *unhwagi*, universal and particular

## Introduction

Hyegang Choe Han-gi (1803-1877)<sup>1</sup> is one of the figures of the late Joseon Korea who reflected the intellectual climate of the time. While he is usually mentioned briefly in the broad surveys of the Silhak (Practical Learning) school, few of his works have received detailed and critical analysis to date, let alone been translated into vernacular Korean or any other language.

Hyegang's philosophy has been characterized as "gi monism" (*gi ironnon*) by scholars. He adopted the European scientific method, with special attention given to astronomy, in order to solve his philosophical questions about human beings and the external world. He established an epistemological theory centering on how and what we know called *chucheuk*<sup>2</sup> (investigating and inferring).<sup>3</sup> For this reason, Hyegang's philosophical system has been

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<sup>1</sup> Hyegang was one of Choe Han-gi's pen names and I will use it in reference to him throughout this paper.

<sup>2</sup> *Chucheuk* (推測, investigating and inferring) is the way of creating and extending the cognitive framework and, at the same time, the method of recognizing an external world, which also can be said a learning system. For Hyegang, *chucheuk* is the loftiest faculty of a human being.

*Chu* (推, investigating) is the first step of Hyegang's *chucheuk* theory, which means that it is the basic process towards making contact with the external world. The scope of *chu* includes all possible states of a human beings and the external world. This is mainly because *chu* is a method to deal with the function or property of external objects. The function of *chu* is to extend the range of the human cognitive framework. In other words, we need a certain framework to recognize a new fact and *chu* enables us to extend its parameters. Furthermore *chu* requires accuracy. Hyegang was conscious of this problem and criticized other theories by saying that if there was no basis, it was not practical. When we say that we are *investigating* a thing, the function of *investigating* should have a target as its basis. If there is no basis, *chu* has no meaning and accordingly cannot play any role in the second cognitive step, *cheuk*. Accordingly *chu* entails the process of verification (*jeungheom*, 證驗) for another round of *chucheuk*.

*Cheuk* (測, inferring) is the function of the mind that searches for a certain general principle of things and facts. Specifically, it means that we can *infer* "how to" face things and facts. If we have enough data for decision-making, we can *infer* how we should act in dealing with the external world. This is the first important meaning of *cheuk*. However, *inferring* is in itself liable to error, so we should *infer* our actions according to the norms of each case. Because each case respectively shows "what it should be," we should, following them, decide upon our subsequent actions. These two characters of *cheuk*, according to Hyegang, are described as "to *infer* how to accord the principle of Heaven."

*Chucheuk* has five important meanings in Hyegang's system. Firstly, Hyegang has a profound confidence in the human ability to think, namely, *chucheuk*. Secondly, *chucheuk* is able to cleanse prejudices and make people more humble. Thirdly, *chucheuk* extends our cognitive framework. Fourthly, *chucheuk* is future-oriented. Finally, Hyegang asserts rationality through *chucheuk*.

<sup>3</sup> I translated *chucheuk* as "to investigate and to infer," which I maintain throughout this paper in italics so as to differentiate it from the ordinary use of these two verbs. Heo Nam-jin, in his article, "A Study on the Modernity of Choe Han-gi's Philosophical Thought," translated *chu* and *cheuk* into "to infer" and "to fathom," respectively (1999, 149-162). Park Chong-hong, in his article, "The Empiricism of Ch'oe Han-gi," translated *chu* and *cheuk* into "hypothesizing" and "measuring." However, according to Hyegang's own usage, the concept of *chu* includes all human mental/spiritual processes in terms of dealing with information. The concept of *cheuk* basically means "to predict, to extrapolate, to formulate

called “a scientific philosophy.”<sup>4</sup>

At the age of 33, Hyegang finished his book *Sin-gitong* (Comprehension of Spiritual *Gi*), in which he discussed how human beings interact with the external world. In this book, he introduced the concept of *sin-gi* (spiritual *gi*), a pivotal concept in his system which was the basis for his *chucheuk* theory. However, the concept of *sin-gi* was developed into *unhwagi* (circulating and changing *gi*) based on *gi*'s nature *hwaldong unhwa* (living, moving, circulating and changing),<sup>5</sup> in his later book *Gihak* (The Learning of *Gi*) because he tried to construct a *gi* system to encompass both the human and cosmic realms.

Now let us examine the meaning of *sin-gi* according to Hyegang's own explanations. He states:

*Gi* (氣) is the fundamental material (質)<sup>6</sup> whereby Heaven and Earth work; *sin* (神) is the power (德) of *gi*. What is filled in the Great Vessel (*daegi*) is called the *sin-gi* of Heaven and Earth (*cheonjiji sin-gi*); what is filled up in the human body is called the *sin-gi* of the bodily form (*hyeongcheji sin-gi*).<sup>7</sup>

According to his definition of *sin-gi*, *gi* is the fundamental material of the world and *sin* (神) is described as a certain power or faculty of *gi*. Again, he states:

*Gi* is a living thing and its matter is clear and transparent. Although it changes itself according to sound, color, smell, and taste, its original nature does not change. And we generally call *sin* (神) this whole limitless power (德) of *gi*.<sup>8</sup>

It becomes quite clear that *sin* (神) is what makes *gi* work as it does. This is a general explanation of *sin-gi*. Basically he maintains the traditional concept of *gi* in defining his *sin-gi*.<sup>9</sup> Here though, it is important to focus on the definition of *sin*. What did *sin* (神) mean to

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and to guess,” which, however, is far from the meaning of “to fathom” or “to measure.” Instead, its meaning is much closer to “to infer” in Hyegang's context.

<sup>4</sup> See Park (1974). This article was translated into English in 1975. See Park (2004).

<sup>5</sup> In *Gihak* (the Learning of *Gi*), Hyegang theorized that the nature of *gi* is able to explain both the human realms and cosmic realms. Finally, he defined it as *hwal*, *dong*, *un*, and *hwa* (活動運化). First, the term *hwal*, which literally means “animating or living,” implies the vitality of *gi*. This is a primary attribute of *gi* (or *sin-gi*), that Hyegang asserts throughout his works. Secondly, *dong*, which means “motion or movement,” can be understood as mobility, which, in Hyegang's system, is based on *gi*'s vitality. Thirdly, *un* literally means “circulating or revolving.” The core of Hyegang's explanation of *un* is the fact that *gi* is rotating, circulating and all encompassing without hindrance. *Hwa* means “changing,” which implies an improvement or transformation, and at the same time, when something new is created, it is also called *hwa*.

<sup>6</sup> In this case, *jil* and *sin* (神) are a pair. That is to say, *gi* possesses a material component as well as a spiritual or vital one.

<sup>7</sup> *Sin-gitong* 神氣通 (Comprehension of Spiritual *Gi*) 1:5a.

<sup>8</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:1b.

<sup>9</sup> Maebayashi, in *Kino higaku bunka* (Comparative Cultural Studies on *Gi*), comparing the concept of *gi* in China, Japan, and Korea, concludes that *gi* traditionally has three meanings: “first, the vapor that

Hyegang? Starting from the understanding that everything was composed of *gi*,<sup>10</sup> Hyegang observed the world around him and saw the earth orbiting around the sun, the moon orbiting around the earth, and human beings thinking, feeling, and acting. In short, everything must have appeared to be animated. Now Hyegang asked, “What makes everything act in this way?” and *sin* (神) was the answer at which he arrived. Hyegang posited that *sin* was the limitless power of *gi*. *Sin* (神) meant the mysterious or spiritual power of *gi*. Also, *sin* was not an independent entity separate from *gi*. However, the concept of *sin* does seem to have a special function in completing Hyegang’s *gi* system.

Hyegang obtained lots of information about various fields of knowledge originating in both East Asia and Europe. In light of this deluge of information, he introduced a new cognitive system with which to comprehend all this various information: *chucheuk*. Hyegang explained *chucheuk* as the function (*yong*) of *gi*. Then he needed to clarify the substance (*che* 體) of *gi*, which was the reason that he created the concept of *sin-gi*.<sup>11</sup> *Chucheuk* signifies the human cognitive process in general. The concept of *sin-gi* was developed and used principally to explain human mental/spiritual power (the *chucheuk* faculty). However, as he extended the concept *sin-gi* to include the cosmological sphere, he seems to have had difficulty in answering the question: does the universe possess *chucheuk*?

### ***Sin-gi: What and Why?***

Many scholars have claimed that Hyegang’s concept of *sin-gi* was influenced by the *Huangdi neijing* (The Internal Cannon of the Yellow Emperor/Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Medicine). According to Sin Won-bong, firstly, Hyegang was quite knowledgeable about the *Huangdi neijing*; and secondly, some passages describing *sin-gi* are similar to ones found in the *Huangdi neijing*. For these two reasons, he presumes that Hyegang assimilated the concept of *sinki* from the *Huangdi neijing*.<sup>12</sup> His point helps to understand Hyegang’s *sin-gi*. Hyegang states:

Blood becomes the fundamental matter of *sin-gi*; the internal organs and flesh become the fundamental matter of the blood; bones, muscles, and skin maintain the internal organs and flesh. The bodily organs, interrelating altogether, cultivate *sin-gi*.<sup>13</sup>

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we can see as a cloud; secondly, a vital energy that might be presumed comes from respiration; and finally, the material element that fills the universe and forms a myriad of things.” See Maebayashi (2000, 7).

<sup>10</sup> Scholars have characterized Hyegang’s philosophical system as *gi* monism. He did not admit *li* (理) as independent. *Li* (理) is a sequential pattern which we can infer from the dynamic *gi*’s actions.

<sup>11</sup> *Gicheuk cheui seo* 氣測體義序 (Preface to the Embodiment of the Meaning of *Sin-gi* and *Chucheuk*).

<sup>12</sup> Sin Won-bong (1993, 87-88).

Kwon O-yeong also quoted the above passage and asserted that Hyegang's description about the relationship between *sin-gi* and other bodily parts is the same as that found in the *Huangdi neijing*. Nevertheless Kwon continues to say that, because *sin-gi* is the core concept in Chinese medicine, it appears in the writing of many Joseon scholars.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, Kwon concludes that Hyegang used *sin-gi* in the same way as the *Huangdi neijing*, which was very popular during his time. There is, however, another problem in asserting that Hyegang was influenced by the *Huangdi neijing*. For example, if someone says, "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44), do we simply say that he was influenced by the Bible? In a similar manner, we can interpret Hyegang's use of *sin-gi*. Hyegang used a term that was prevalent during his time, in a particular way. The *Huangdi neijing*'s system was based on the theory of *eumyang ohaeng* (*yin-yang* and the five primary elements).<sup>15</sup> However, Hyegang criticized the five elements as useless.<sup>16</sup> We can presume that Hyegang ignored the five elements aspect of the *Huangdi neijing* and possibly only accepted *sin-gi*. In this case, it seems hard to accept that Hyegang was significantly influenced by *Huangdi neijing*. As Kwon stated, Hyegang selected the well-known term *sin-gi*, but it should be understood that he used it in a novel way.

The next question that arises is why Hyegang needed *sin-gi*. Following the reasoning of other *gi* scholars, he could have used the term *gi* only, and not *sin-gi*. To answer this question, it is necessary to begin with Neo-Confucianism's *li-gi* theory.

According to Song Neo-Confucian *li-gi* theory, *li* is an existential pattern of *gi* and is the primary element of the universe. *Li* and *gi* are two different concepts employed to explain the universe, but they were not independent entities from a cosmogonic point of view. Without *li*, things cannot come into being as they are. Joseon Neo-Confucians applied *li-gi* theory to human feelings, which prompted them to overwhelmingly grant *li* an autonomous dynamism,<sup>17</sup> which was an interpretation not found in Song Neo-Confucian interpretations of *li* and *gi*. The impetus for invoking such a re-interpretation was to establish a morality that could control human feelings. The consequence of this was that they asserted that *li* manifests itself (*ibal*), a proposition that markedly contrasts Zhu Xi's general conception of *li*. This is the natural conclusion for the question of what defines the origin of morality. According to this argument, bad feelings are the manifestation of *gi* and good feelings are the manifestation of *li*. The origin of good feelings is justified by the manifestation of *li*. As a result, Toegye (Yi Hwang, 1501-1570) regarded *li* as independent not only from a conceptual viewpoint, but also from a cosmogonic one as well.

Hyegang did not admit to the existence of an independent and dynamic *li*; rather, *li* was

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<sup>13</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:37b.

<sup>14</sup> Kwon O-yeong (1999, 132).

<sup>15</sup> Chuan Weikang (2000, 88).

<sup>16</sup> Hyegang states, "In terms of the five elements—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, these five elements are the most common ones that circulate in people's everyday life. So they picked and named them; there is nothing more." *Unhwa cheukheom* 運化測驗, 29:b

<sup>17</sup> Generally speaking, Toegye (Yi Hwang, 1501-1570) played a pivotal role in this tendency, which has been regarded as characteristic of Joseon Neo-Confucianism.

a certain law or sequential pattern from which to *infer*<sup>18</sup> *gi*'s dynamic actions. Hyegang only accepts *gi* as “what-is-so-of-itself” (*jayeon*; *ziran* in Chinese) and there is no substance except autonomic *gi*. Hyegang stood out of the **ethical** debate of Joseon Neo-Confucian tradition. He tried to delve into the external world and into how a human being recognizes or learns that world through his *chucheuk* theory. Naturally, Hyegang emphasized the material characteristic of *gi* in his cosmology; however, this viewpoint does not easily explain the human *chucheuk* faculty.

One of the most important philosophical concepts in Hyegang's system is *chucheuk*. Hyegang identified *chucheuk* as the loftiest attribute of a human being and he tried to reinterpret all the philosophical systems in circulation in his period by means of *chucheuk*. According to *gi* monism, *chucheuk* should also logically originate from *gi*. However, *chucheuk* is a human mental/spiritual faculty, one that is active and volitional. It can hardly maintain a constant state, as the earth and other planets do in their orbits, a fact that he ceaselessly emphasized throughout all his works. Furthermore, the act of *cheuk* (inferring), according to its own attributes, is a reasoning process that is liable to error. Here Hyegang seems to have needed a new concept in order to support the human faculty of *chucheuk*.

In Hyegang's philosophical system, the material aspect of *gi* is strongly emphasized above other traditional characteristics.<sup>19</sup> However, *chucheuk* is hardly regarded as possessing purely material characteristics. Moreover, Hyegang could not escape his own philosophical premise that “a human being is composed of *gi*.” He finally employed the concept *sin-gi* (spiritual *gi*) in order to emphasize the spiritual/mental aspect of the human *gi*. Then he could clarify the function of *gi* (*chucheuk*) and simultaneously specify its origins. Hence we find Hyegang adding *sin* (神) to *gi*. In this way, Hyegang established *chucheuk* as the human mental/spiritual faculty, then allotted it to *sin* (神) and created the concept of *sin-gi* to encompass the spiritual and material aspects of human existence. Such was the beginning of Hyegang's *sin-gi*, a philosophical assumption that extended to all natural phenomena.

### ***Sin-gi: Life Energy***

Since *sin-gi* is a concept that supports *chucheuk*, it would be beneficial to discuss it in relation to the human sphere. How does Hyegang define a human being? Are we spiritual beings or merely machines?

According to Mencius, a human being possesses innate goodness.<sup>20</sup> The aim of human

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<sup>18</sup> The italicized *investigate*, *infer* and *comprehend* respectively indicate the translations of *chu*, *cheuk*, and *tong* (通).

<sup>19</sup> Refer to the footnote 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Mencius*, 7:1:4. Mencius said, “All things are already complete in us. There is no greater delight than to be conscious of sincerity on self-examination. If one acts with a vigorous effort at the law of reciprocity, when searching for the realization of perfect virtue, nothing can be closer than his

beings is that of becoming a sage which is defined by humans becoming unified with Heaven. Human beings can achieve this goal by means of cultivating their moral nature.<sup>21</sup> Briefly summarized, a human being is a moral entity, and it is for this reason that Mou Zongsan claimed Neo-Confucianism to be a moral metaphysics.<sup>22</sup> However, Hyegang's understanding of a human being is quite different. He says:

What a human being is bestowed with is a mass of *sin-gi*, all the orifices (sensory organs) on the body, and the limbs, through which *gi* comes in and out. These are merely apparatuses that function properly; thus, there is nothing else to be gained from external things.<sup>23</sup>

In the passage above, human beings seem to be described as machines. We have our sensory organs whereby we can contact the external world and all functions are possible owing to *sin-gi*'s power. If we ascribe *sin-gi* to the mind or spirit, the concept might appear to be similar to the Cartesian theory of mind and body.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, although one cannot directly compare Hyegang's theory with Descartes's theory, we can find a similar *problematik*.<sup>25</sup> Descartes claimed the act of thinking to be a self-evident proof of existence, and he consequently divided the whole of reality into the mind and body. Accordingly, a human being is composed of a combination of both mental and material substances. However, this theory causes problems regarding the relationship between mental substance and the material substance of the human body. For example, how can a mental substance move the physical body? How can a mental substance know material objects? All these questions arise because of a postulated separation of the mental sphere and material spheres. That is to say, the two spheres are independent.

In the same manner as Descartes, Hyegang was also concerned with the human ability to think, but he did not accept the mind as an independent entity separate from the body. Hyegang asserted the human mental faculty and physical body to be composed of the same *gi*.

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approximation to it." See Legge (1935, 450-451).

<sup>21</sup> *Mencius*, 7:1:1. Mencius said, "He who has exhausted his entire mental constitution knows his nature. In knowing his nature, he knows Heaven. To preserve one's mental constitution, and nourish one's nature, is the way to serve Heaven. When neither a premature death nor life causes a man any double-mindedness, but he waits for the cultivation of this personal character *for whatever issue*—this is the way in which he establishes his *Heaven—ordained being*." See Legge (1935, 448-449).

<sup>22</sup> Mou Zongsan (1997, 8).

<sup>23</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:4a.

<sup>24</sup> Rene Descartes (1596-1650) rejected the method of Scholasticism, which was entirely based on comparing and contrasting the views of recognized authorities in his era and was determined to hold nothing true until he had established grounds for believing it true. He expressed the single sure fact from which his investigation began in the famous words "*Cogito, ergo sum*. I think, therefore I am." From this postulate—that a clear consciousness of his thinking proved his own experience—he argued the existence of God. God, according to Descartes's philosophy, created two classes of substance that make up the whole of reality. One class was thinking substance, or minds, and the other was extended substance, or bodies.

<sup>25</sup> However, we cannot say that Hyegang admits the human mind or mental/spiritual faculty as an independent substance. It is a function of human *gi*.



At this point, a further discussion of the meaning of *sin-gi* becomes necessary. Although Hyegang does not separate *sin-gi* from the physical body, its function is definitely different from those of physical organs. He says:

The human body, which comes from Heaven and has all functions, is a mechanism through which *sin-gi* completely permeates. An eye is a mirror that reflects colors; an ear, a pipe through which to hear sound; a nose is a pipe that smells; a mouth is a door for things to come in and out; a hand is an apparatus to hold; and a foot is a wheel for moving. All of these inhere in the human body, with *sin-gi* presiding over them all.<sup>26</sup>

With the exception of the last sentence, the above quotation reads like a manual describing a machine. However, human beings differ from machines in that they are autonomous and alive. It is *sin-gi* that moves the material body and makes it alive. This position is sharply different from that of the Cartesian mind, or any other mental entity. Since *gi* is traditionally defined as a vital energy, *sin-gi* also possesses the same character; furthermore, it does not permit a bifurcation between the agent<sup>27</sup> and the external object. Hyegang says:

*Sin-gi* is the controller of the body. We can see this in the consumption of alcohol. By drinking alcohol, we can feel our body becoming drunk. The function of *sin-gi* is similar to that of alcohol. And if we commit our body to *gi* of Heaven, we can swim in the water of *gi* as a fish does.<sup>28</sup>

This might be one of the best parables with which to explain the function of *sin-gi*. The above parable at first appears a little mysterious, but Hyegang's point is to explain how *sin-gi* works in the human body. *Sin-gi*, as life energy, works like alcohol in that it affects the body. Hyegang seems to describe a certain flow of *gi* or *sin-gi*.

Continuing with the examination of the body, Hyegang was faced trying to explain how the external sense organs and internal organs work. In a similar manner to the alcohol parable, he placed *sin-gi* as that which governs and regulates all organs. Hyegang finally concludes:

Our internal organs and all bones have their own tangible matter (*hyeongjil*) and they are all interrelated. Blood, water, pulse and breathing circulates all over, and *sin-gi* controls all of these.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Sin-gitong seo* (Preface to the Comprehension of Spiritual Gi)

<sup>27</sup> I avoid using "subject" because it presupposes a relation between subject and object. *Sin-gi* is not just a counter-concept of the object in this context. Instead, I use "agent," which indicates what causes all mental and physical actions.

<sup>28</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:13a.

<sup>29</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:12b-13a.



Hyegang's *sin-gi* for the most part follows the traditional concept of *gi*. In positing a mechanical view of the universe, it becomes very difficult to answer questions such as how an organism can be defined as alive. Hyegang's point of view *vis-à-vis* human beings seems to be very close to regarding them as mechanical systems. It should be noted, however, that Hyegang's view had more meanings than that defining it as a mechanical system because his was founded on the life energy of *sin-gi*, an attribute of *gi*.

### ***Sin-gi: the Agent of Human Mental/Spiritual Phenomena (Chucheuk)***

When analyzing Hyegang's *sin-gi*, it is important to always relate it to *chucheuk* because *sin-gi* is used to support *chucheuk*. Here we can find the role of *sin* (神, spirit) in his system. Hyegang says:

*Sin* (神) is the essence (*jeonghwa*) of *gi*; *gi* is the fundamental matter of *sin*. Knowledge (*jigak*)<sup>30</sup> comes from the experiences of bright *sin*; [we] move along the flow of *gi* energy. [Therefore] we can react to situations based on knowledge; this knowledge can be simultaneously verified by our reactions. All of these are nothing more than *sin-gi*'s function.<sup>31</sup>

In this passage, we find Hyegang continues to define the relation of power and material in terms of the relation between *sin* and *gi*. *Sin* (神) operates as human mental/spiritual power, according to this quotation. We have a physical body, which is activated by *gi*'s energy. Following this we react to our circumstances using knowledge. The knowledge in the quotation indicates the proven result of *sin*'s experiences. Overall the key word in the passage is *sin* (神). In fact, in this passage we can find Hyegang's intent behind conceptualizing *sin-gi*. Acts such as recognizing situations or memorizing things are surely indicative of human mental/spiritual acts. That is to say, such acts show that *sin*'s experiences are related to human mental/spiritual acts, which are the functions of human mental/spiritual faculty. Besides Hyegang does not separate the human mental/spiritual faculty from the human body; instead, he recognizes it as the power of a very clear *gi*, or essence of the human body's *gi*.

If this is the case, can we identify *sin-gi* with the mind-and-heart (*sim* 心), which is the concept that caused the most debate during the Joseon dynasty? If not, what is the difference between the mind and *sin-gi*? Attempting to fathom the nature of the mind was the biggest issue that preoccupied Joseon Neo-Confucians. They tried to examine the mind-and-heart in order to justify the innate morality of human beings. According to Zhu Xi, *li* adheres to *gi* in

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<sup>30</sup> The word, *jigak* (知覺) indicates "knowledge," "perception," "awakening," and "understanding," but in this context, I use "knowledge."

<sup>31</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:37b.

the mind-and-heart. Consequently, Toegye asserted “*li* manifestation,” whereby a human being can do good. Toegye’s theory was attacked by scholars who advocated the primacy of *gi* (for example, Yulgok, 1536-1584) mainly because *li* was originally an inactive pattern and manifests itself in traditional Song Neo-Confucianism.

Hyegang, however, dramatically departed from this discussion. According to Hyegang, the functions of the sensory organs are the mind-and-hearts (*sim*) of each organ. He also stated that the mind-and-heart is the pure part of the bodily *gi* and further that *sin-gi* is what had been called the constitution of the mind-and-heart (*simche*).<sup>32</sup> Hyegang states:

The function of hearing belongs to the ears; [however,] what can hear is *sin-gi*. The function of seeing belongs to the eyes; [however,] what can see is *sin-gi*. The root of hearing and seeing is different, but *sin-gi* [of hearing and seeing] is the same. If we verify what is seen according to what is heard, what is seen becomes much clearer. If we verify what is heard according to what is seen, what is heard becomes much clearer. [However,] it is not the eyes and ears that become clearer, but it is *sin-gi* that becomes clearer.<sup>33</sup>

*Sin-gi* plays a subjective role in human mental/spiritual functions. All of the information from the sensory organs is synthesized and made ready for further processing by *sin-gi*. Hyegang might have said that the mind-and-heart carries out these processes, but he did not grant this role to the mind-and-heart, as seen in the quotation above.<sup>34</sup> This is mainly because Hyegang needed to emphasize both the internal and external spheres.<sup>35</sup> The mind-and-heart can only be located in the internal sphere, whereas *sin-gi* can straddle both realms. He says, “Those from the Learning of Mind-and-Heart (心學) keep internal things and discard the external; those who are concerned with technical works overemphasize external things and lose the internal.”<sup>36</sup> Hyegang wanted to discuss the human mental/spiritual process (*chucheuk*) in order to recognize the external world. In this case, if he uses the term mind-and-heart, his theory might have been regarded as the same as the Learning of Mind-and-Heart,<sup>37</sup> which he heavily criticized. Instead Hyegang wanted to discuss *chucheuk* as the human mental/spiritual faculty or process under the assumption that it was composed of the same *gi* and that it was not separated from the material objects of the external world. As a result, *sin-gi* was employed

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<sup>32</sup> *Injeong* (Personnel Administration), 9:2a.

<sup>33</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:18b.

<sup>34</sup> Hyegang used the term, “mind-and-heart” (心, *sim*), in order to criticize unverifiable theories. However he maintained that “mind-and-heart” was *sin-gi*. The mind-and-heart is a relative term, or according to him, just a name.

<sup>35</sup> It is hard to directly apply the Cartesian mind and body to Hyegang’s theory. The internal sphere means the mental/spiritual phenomena (*chucheuk*), and the external sphere indicates the natural phenomena that we can directly experience. However, both the spheres originate from *gi*.

<sup>36</sup> *Sin-gitong* 1:5a.

<sup>37</sup> In Hyegang’s sense, the Learning of Mind-and-Heart (心學) includes not only the Yangming school but also the school of the Primacy of *Li* because both schools discarded the external realm.

to explain not only the subjective mental/spiritual aspect of human beings epistemologically, but also at the same time used to maintain the material element ontologically. In other words, *sin-gi* synthesized the external and internal spheres in Hyegang's *gi* monism, and had a broader scope and usage than the mere concept of mind-and-heart (心).

In the final sentences of the above quotation, Hyegang states that *sin-gi* becomes clearer. This does not mean that *sin-gi* becomes empty. Instead it means that the more we see and hear, the clearer *sin-gi* becomes.<sup>38</sup> This shows that *sin-gi* is directly connected to *chucheuk*. What this also reveals is that Hyegang employs *sin-gi* to justify that a human being possesses *chucheuk* as mental/spiritual faculty to recognize the external world. That *sin-gi* becomes clearer means that the faculty of *chucheuk* becomes increasingly refined. We find further evidence of this in Hyegang's subsequent statement:

*Sin-gi* in me possesses the principle of *chucheuk*; the physical endowment of things possesses the principle of flux. And the power (力) of the eyes and ears can penetrate<sup>39</sup> between them. Then it is the function of *sin-gi* that makes [us] investigate and infer [what my eyes and ears have perceived (通)].<sup>40</sup>

We perceive external objects through our sensory organs, so based on perception, *sin-gi* can perform *chucheuk*. In turn *chucheuk* becomes bright. He also states that “*Sin-gi* is originally a dynamic thing. It is difficult to remain tranquil but easy to become illusory.”<sup>41</sup> This statement consolidates the relation between *sin-gi* and *chucheuk* because it directly concerns the function of *cheuk* (inferring).

*Sin-gi* is the agent of the human cognitive process, *chucheuk*. Hyegang comprehensively states this in the following manner:

*Sin-gi* does not have any special functions. [Nevertheless] its brightness (明) comes from *sin*; its energy (力) comes from *gi*. Only the brightness and energy are the origin from which limitless mysterious functions [of *sin-gi*] come out. When a human being is born, he moves and cries. All of these come from this energy. As his body becomes strong, his energy grows. As he eats and drinks, his energy becomes strong. By means of brightness, he can investigate and infer [things]. The more he experiences, the more brilliant the brightness becomes. And as he sees and hears broadly, he can observe [things] clearly.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Park Chong-hong compared this with today's audio-visual education methodology. For details, see Park (2004, 381).

<sup>39</sup> This is another translation of *tong*.

<sup>40</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:16b.

<sup>41</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:41a.

<sup>42</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:36b.

Although *sin-gi* cannot be divided into *sin* (神) and *gi*, the function of each component is different. When we see something or think of something, we need energy. That is to say, the acts of seeing or thinking belong to our physical movements. This part is allotted to the function of *gi*. However, in terms of the function of *sin*, Hyegang used another term, *myeong* (brightness, in Chinese, *ming*). By means of *myeong*, a human being can perform *chucheuk*. The character *myeong* means “bright,” “clear,” “light,” “intelligent,” or “understanding,” “illustrating,” and so forth. In Hyegang’s context, *myeong* was used as “understanding clearly or bright understanding.” This is to say, it indicated the faculty of understanding in general. Now we can reinterpret this part of *sin* from the above quotation. By means of our faculty of understanding we can perform mental/spiritual acts (*chucheuk*). The more we perform *chucheuk*, the broader our understanding becomes. At last, we can understand everything much more correctly and clearly. In the end, we can conclude that *sin*’s (神) role in *sin-gi* is directly related to the faculty of human understanding.

In this case why did Hyegang need *myeong* (brightness)? If Hyegang argued that energy comes from *gi* alone, he, according to his logic, should have posited that *chucheuk* came from *sin*. But we find he inserts *myeong* between *sin* and *chucheuk*. Moreover, the role of *myeong* is not completely clear. In the text, *sin* and *myeong* are used almost as synonyms. This seems to be because Hyegang tried to emphasize the *sin* part of *sin-gi*. Thus Hyegang was able to escape from juxtaposing *sin-gi* and *chucheuk*. This fact seems to have arisen from trying to distinguish *chucheuk* from *sin-gi*. *Chucheuk* indicates human cognition, and it, in reality, is different for each person. However *sin-gi* is the same in all people. Hyegang says, “We can see that *sin-gi* is not different between us and other people. . . . If the *sin-gi* of each person is different, how could I move another’s *sin-gi*? And how could others move mine?”<sup>43</sup> As a result, *sin-gi* is the same in all people, but the function of *sin-gi* is what differentiates people. This fact becomes much clearer in the following passage:

The *sin-gi* of Heaven and of human beings has already permeated and come into contact with one another from when we were born, and [it] always maintains the same condition. [However,] because human beings acquire knowledge on their own, their opinions [about *gi*] become different according to what they have seen; their *comprehension*<sup>44</sup> [of understanding about *gi*] also becomes different based on their opinions.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:20b-21a.

<sup>44</sup> *Tong* (通, comprehension) is another important concept in understanding Hyegang’s philosophy. This term was used in East Asian discourses, but Hyegang developed it to a philosophical level. The literal meaning of *tong* is “to penetrate,” but “to comprehend” is much more suitable for Hyegang’s usage. I maintain “to comprehend” as a general translation of *tong*, and I italicize it to differentiate it from the ordinary use of the verb.

<sup>45</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:5a.

Hyegang is asserting that the universe and human beings are composed of the same *sin-gi*. In reality, Hyegang could not help but admit that people's understanding was different because their *chucheuk* was also different. Even though there is no separation between human beings and the external world, according to his *gi* monism, Hyegang had to differentiate *chucheuk* from the mere material so as to account for differences in people's knowledge and understanding. Hyegang tried to solve this problem by introducing *sin* into his system. However, as long as Hyegang asserted that *sin-gi* always maintained the same condition as mentioned above, the concept of *sin-gi* became unclear because it had to maintain two different states: both the universal and the particular.

This problem was caused by Hyegang's extension of the concept of *sin-gi* into the cosmological sphere. Basically the human mental/spiritual state is not stable and uniform, unlike the universe. This very problem was encountered in the Four Seven Debate because Confucianism in general aims towards a unity of Heaven and human beings. Hyegang also seems to have encountered this problem. Later he further developed *sin-gi* into *unhwagi* (*gi* of circulating and changing), which is a much more flexible concept.

### *Sin-gi*: the Unity of Heaven and Human Beings

Many scholars have claimed that Hyegang's *gi* system was influenced by European science. In terms of *sin-gi*, they contend that it was mainly influenced by Christianity.<sup>46</sup> However, as Heo Nam-jin (Hō Nam-jin) asserts,<sup>47</sup> Hyegang strongly refuted all religious systems by saying that those theories simply dealt with intangible things. On the contrary, Hyegang's *sin-gi* must be understood within a Confucian tradition. First of all, we need to examine the various concepts of *gi*. *Gi* traditionally has meanings such as vapor, vital energy, and material substance, and those meanings often overlap. Joseph Needham also confessed to the difficulty of explaining *gi*. He said:

I need not again insist on the untranslatability of this word, which has connotations similar to the *pneuma* of the Greeks, and to our own conceptions of a vapor or a gas, but which also has something of radiant energy about it, like a radioactive emanation.<sup>48</sup>

Besides, those meanings seem difficult to unify into a single, concise definition. One of the

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<sup>46</sup> Most scholars such as Kwon O-yeong, Yi Hyeon-gu, Sin Won-bong agree that Hyegang's *sin-gi* was influenced by *Lingyan lishao* 靈言蠡勺 (*Ladling out the Words about Anima with a Calabash*) of Francesco Sambiasi (1614-49), which was published in 1624. In this book, Sambiasi discussed *anima* (human soul) from the Christian viewpoint.

<sup>47</sup> Heo Nam-jin (Hō Nam-jin) says, "We can see that the introduction to new technology was a key focus in his acceptance of Western science, along with the separation of science from theology, which had been mixed in those books written by missionaries." Heo (1999, 154).

<sup>48</sup> Needham (1991, 369).

most difficult problems lies in the fact that *gi* includes both material and spiritual elements. This plays a significant role in unifying cosmology with *morality*; on the other hand, it always preserves the potential to ignite a split into two systems.

Again, *gi* is the fundamental material of the universe possessing an original, vital energy. Now it is possible to suppose that Hyegang thought he could explain the human spiritual process solely in terms of *gi*. The proposition that “*gi* fills the universe” or that “everything is composed of *gi*” are the basic premises of the *gi* system, which entails that there is no difference between things; in other words, there is no difference between a subject (I) and an object (things). However, in reality, this is far from the case, as everything is indeed different and we experience difficulty finding a common identity. This problem was solved by Song Neo-Confucian scholars by developing the concept of psychophysical matter (*gijil*).<sup>49</sup> Hyegang also adopted the Song theory and further used the term “tangible matter” (*hyeongjil*; literally, form and matter). By introducing this concept, Hyegang was able to account for the existence of multifarious things while maintaining *gi* as the fundamental constituent of everything.

The problems at this point seem to have been solved. Everything is composed of *gi*, but each appearance is different because its tangible matter is different. This might be sufficient to explain the formation of the universe, but it is inadequate to explain the human cognitive process: *chucheuk*. Here we encounter one more problem in Hyegang’s *gi* theory. Song Neo-Confucian scholars succeeded in explaining the material world using the new concept of psychophysical matter (*gijil*). Joseon Neo-Confucians, adopting Song theory, scrutinized the mind-and-heart (*sim*) but did not proceed to scrutinize human mental ability or its processes. However, according to Hyegang, a human being possesses cognitive ability or its processes: *chucheuk*, which comes from *gi*. However, through extension of the *gi* theory, can we claim that the universe also possesses the same cognitive process, *chucheuk*? This is a very serious problem for Hyegang’s *gi* system. In his formulation, *chucheuk* is a special mental/spiritual phenomenon of human beings. In this case, once again, the major premise of his *gi* system might act to destabilize, resulting in the universe and human beings coming to be regarded as separate in the end. In order to solve this problem within the *gi* system, Hyegang turned to *sin-*

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<sup>49</sup> Maintaining the spiritual characteristic of *gi*, I translate *gijil* (氣質) into “psychophysical matter.” Michael Kalton in *The Four Seven Debate*, translated *gijiljiseong* (氣質之性) into “psychophysical nature” because he seems to emphasize a spiritual component along with the material characteristic of the general translation of “physical nature” in the context of Four Seven Debate (四端七情論). See Kalton (1994).

Zhu Xi used another term *hyeongjil* (*xingzhi* in Chinese), which literally means “form and matter.” For example, “It was asked whether the heavens consisted of tangible matter (*hyeongjil*). The philosopher replied, “It is like a wind blowing spirally, tenuously below but getting hard towards the top. The Taoists call it the “hard wind.” People commonly say that the heavens have nine layers (spheres), each one of which has different name. This is not right; it is more like a spiral with nine turns. Below, the *chi* is gross and dull; above, it is pure and brilliant.” *Zhuzi quanshu* (Complete Works of Zhu Xi), 49:19a-b; Needham (1991, 483). Therefore *hyeongjil* has much more material characteristics than *gijil*. Hyegang quite often uses *hyeonjil*, which I translate into “tangible matter” or “form and matter” depending on the context.

*gi*. Described briefly, he located the material element of *gi* within the *gi* component of *sin-gi*, and the spiritual element within *sin*. In doing so, Hyegang seems to achieve a complete *gi* system in which both the material and spiritual viewpoints are included. Now Hyegang is able to claim:

The *sin-gi* of Heaven is originally united with the world, but the *sin-gi* of human beings is limited to their bodily forms.<sup>50</sup>

*Sin-gi* is different even though the *gi* that comprises it is the same. In other words, the *sin-gi* of Heaven is different from that of human beings because human *sin-gi*, after all, is limited to the physical body. More specifically speaking, a human being possesses a physical body and its mental/spiritual faculty (*chucheuk*), which are called *sin-gi*. On the other hand, the universe also has a material body and its faculty, which are also named *sin-gi*; however, this is not the same as the *sin-gi* of human beings.

In Hyegang's *gi* system, it is impossible to say that there are different types of *gi*, as it is the fundamental constituent of everything. In order to explain human mental/spiritual function (*chucheuk*) in terms of his *gi* system, Hyegang introduced *sin-gi*. In doing so, he could justify human beings as having different manifestations of *gi*, even though everything is composed of the same fundamental *gi*. Now he seems to have completely subsumed the human cognitive system within his *gi* monism and at the same time, achieve the unity of Heaven and human beings. (*cheonin habil*) However, problems still remain within *sin* (神).

According to Hyegang, *sin* (神) is the power of *gi*. On the surface, this appears to present no problem in explaining both the universe and human beings; however, in examining the meaning of *sin*, we cannot but acknowledge that the concept is still unclear. *Sin* in the human sphere merely denotes the human mental/spiritual faculty, or the agency to perform *chucheuk*. But the meaning of *sin* at the cosmological level is not clear in Hyegang's *gi* system. He states only that it is merely the limitless power of *gi*. Therefore, Hyegang needed to scrutinize the meaning of *gi* at the cosmological level. This led Hyegang to focus deeply on European astronomy. As a result, in his later writings, he only uses the term *sin-gi* in reference to human beings. On the cosmological level, he started employing the concept of *unhwagi*, which is the core concept of his book *Gihak* (氣學).

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<sup>50</sup> *Sin-gitong*, 1:9b.



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## Glossary

*che* 體

*cheonin habil* 天人合一

*cheonjiji sin-gi* 天地之神氣

*cheuk* 測

*chucheuk* 推測

*daegi* 大器

*deok* 德

*eumyang* 陰陽

*gi* 氣

*gi ironnon* 氣 一元論

*Gihak* 氣學

*gijil* 氣質

*huangdi neijing*

*hwaldong unhwa* 活動運化

*hyeongcheji sin-gi* 形體之神氣

*hyeongjil* 形質

*ibal* 理發

*jayeon* 自然

*jeonghwa*

*jeonghwa* 精華

*jigak* 知覺

*jil* 質

*ming* (Ch.) ▶ *myeong*

*myeong* 明

*sim* 心

*simche* 心體

*Simhak* 心學

*sin* 神

*unhwagi* 運化氣

*wuxing* (Ch.) 五行

*yin-yang* (Ch.) 陰陽

*yong* 用

*ziran* (Ch.) ▶ *jayeon*

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