

Yi Hwang's and Yi I's Interpretations of the *Taijitu*: Focusing on Their Theories of Li-Qi

Hyun-sun LEE

Abstract

This paper aims to bring clarity to the different views on li and qi of Yi Hwang 李滉 and Yi I 李珥, more specifically following their respective interpretations of the Taijitu 太極圖說. While the two agreed that Zhuzixue 朱子學 should maintain its firm place as the national ideology of Joseon, they differed in their views concerning post-Zhuzixue trends in Ming China, especially concerning the thoughts of Luo Qinshun 羅欽順. Yi Hwang based his interpretation of the Taijitu on that of Zhu Xi, emphasizing the priority of li over qi. Yi Hwang inherited Zhu Xi's claim that the activity-tranquility was the taiji's function, and sought to specify what the function was in his interpretation of sheng 生. For Yi Hwang, should li be without function, it is a "dead thing" that has no capacity or role, and cannot be the foundation on which Confucian ethics are grounded. Yi I never dealt with li as the cause of qi's movement or being; his point of emphasis was that the taiji and yin-yang, or li and qi, were inseparable; and there was no chronological priority or posteriority between the two. Unlike Zhu Xi, he refused the priority of the taiji, claiming that the taiji was within the movement of qi, which was akin to Luo's view.

Keywords: Yi Hwang, Yi I, Zhu Xi, Luo Qinshun, *Taijitu*, taiji, yin-yang, activity and tranquility (*dong-jing*)

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Introduction

This paper aims to bring clarity to the different views on the interpretations of the *Taijituishuo* 太極圖說 between Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501–1570) and Yi I 李珥 (1536–1584)—the two representative Confucian scholars of the Joseon dynasty—based on their respective theories of *li-qi*. As is well known, Yi Hwang and Yi I are the pinnacles of the two rival philosophical schools of Korean Neo-Confucianism. It would be no exaggeration to state that the subsequent development of Korean Neo-Confucianist thought is a history of the debates on the theoretical differences between these two figures. In the 16th century, Neo-Confucianism was in the process of being established as the official state ideology of Joseon, at the cost of many lives lost through the literati purges (*sahwa* 士禍). The doctrinal disputes between these two scholars emerged in the context of this process.

There are two aspects worth noting in the backdrop of their debate. First, it is safe to say that the proper interpretation of Zhuzixue 朱子學 (philosophy of Zhu Xi) in Joseon begins only with Yi Hwang. Even though Joseon had declared itself a Confucian nation from its inception, and was always respectful of Zhu Xi's philosophy, it is accurate to say that before Yi Hwang in the 16th century, the understanding of Zhu's philosophy in Joseon remained only rudimentary.¹

Second, by the 16th century, when Yi Hwang and Yi I were active, the scholarly paradigm of Ming 明 China had already shifted from that of government-protected, indoctrinated Zhuzixue to newer philosophical trends. Confucian scholars in Joseon were feeling the influence of these new Ming trends, both directly and indirectly.² Adhering to their resolution to

1. The Sarimpa 士林派 only respected Zhuzixue in practice. Rather than the literature on Zhuzixue theory such as the *Xinglidaquan* 性理大全, they tended to focus more on books on culture or systems, such as *Xiaoxue* 小學 or *Zhuzi jiali* 朱子家禮.

2. The post-Zhuzixue trend in Ming Confucianism from the end of 15th to early 16th centuries is well represented by figures such as Chen Xianzhang 陳獻章 (1428–1500), Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水 (1466–1560), and Wang Shouren 王守仁 (1472–1528). Luo Qinshun 羅欽順 (1465–1547) also strays from orthodox Zhuzixue. Joseon Confucian scholars of the time, especially Seo Gyeong-deok 徐敬德 (1489–1546) and his followers, responded sensitively to the new trend. Specifically, Noh Su-sin 盧守愼 (1515–1590) cites Luo's *Kunzhiji* 困知記 as a major influence on his academic thought.

adopt Zhuzixue as the state ideology, it became the dual agenda of Yi Hwang and other Confucian scholars of Joseon to stabilize Zhuzixue theoretically, while thwarting any post-Zhuzixue influences emanating from Ming China.³

The following evaluation of Yi Hwang in the *Joseon wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄 (Annals of the Joseon Dynasty) briefly mentions his work and its aims:

[Yi Hwang] took to heart that China lost its tradition of *dohak* 道學 [authentic Neo-Confucianism], leading to the flourishing of Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 and Wang Shouren 王守仁, and he did not hesitate to castigate and censure them to fight their failings. Recently in Joseon, the theories of Seo Gyeong-deok 徐敬德 mistook *qi* for *li*, and a number of scholars promulgated these, so Yi Hwang composed works critiquing them.⁴

Such a cultural environment helps explain the tendency among Joseon literati—and not only Yi Hwang and Yi I—to take Zhu Xi as the doctrinal standard. For them, the establishment of Zhuzixue meant more than simply paying homage to the prominent Chinese scholar; it held a deeper significance as the realization of the state ideology of Joseon, which prided itself as a Confucian nation.

On the other hand, the fact that post-Zhuzixue trends began to appear in China by the 16th century indicates that theories of Zhu Xi were losing their pragmatic significance among Ming scholars. This was another challenge facing Joseon Confucians. For them, a thorough understanding of Zhu's philosophy had to include a contemplation of China's critiques of that same school. Also, any self-respecting Confucian scholar of Joseon had to supplement his reverence for Zhu Xi with a chastisement of Ming post-Zhuzixue trends.

3. According to Kim (2017, 25), the term “time lag” refers to the maturity of thought resulting from the temporal differences in the philosophical trends transmitted from China to Korea.

4 *Seonjo sujeong sillok* 宣祖修正實錄 (Revised Veritable Records of King Seonjo), gwon 4, 1st day of the 12th lunar month of the 3rd year of King Seonjo's reign.

In terms of post-Zhuzixue trends, Luo Qinchun greatly influenced Korean Neo-Confucianism. His theory of “*li* and *qi* are originally one” (*liqi yiwu* 理氣一物) would be harshly criticized by Yi Hwang.⁵ Yi I, who followers of Yi Hwang regarded as having philosophical similarities to Luo, was also skeptical of this particular phrase for its disregard of the “non-intermixability” of *li* and *qi*.⁶ The followers of Yi I, who assumed the mainstream philosophical position from the 17th century, were more adamant in their criticism of Luo.⁷

Such an effort by these two scholars inevitably called at times for a point of view outside Zhu Xi’s mold, despite attempts to maintain orthodoxy. Thus, if we are to inquire which of the two scholars, Yi Hwang and Yi I, remained more faithful to Zhu’s original philosophy, we need to focus on which of the two inherited his spirit philosophically, rather than mimicked his language.

Zhu Xi’s philosophical stance—pervasive throughout his theories of the universe, the human mind, or self-cultivation—can be observed through his theory of *li-qi*, and can be best read in his interpretation of the *Taijitushuo*. It goes without saying that examining the conflicting readings of this text by Yi Hwang and Yi I is crucial in ascertaining their respective comprehension of Zhuzixue. Furthermore, their differences of opinion concerning the *Taijitushuo* provides a more direct way of approaching their respective theories on *li-qi* compared to prior analysis on their theories of the Four Beginnings and Seven Emotions (*sadan chiljeong* 四端七情), and allows us to contrast their philosophies in a different light.

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5. Yi Hwang criticized Gi Dae-seung’s 奇大升 (1527–1572) theory that the Seven Emotions encompass the Four Beginnings for its similarity to Luo’s theory, and authored the *Btrigiwii mulbyeonjeung* 非理氣爲一物辯證 to further censure it.
 6. Yi I claims as follows: “Even though Luo has outstanding opinions, he has the fault of regarding *li* and *qi* as one” (*Yulgok jeonseo* 栗谷全書, *gwon* 12, 8b; hereafter rendered 12:8b).
 7. Yi I’s criticism of Luo’s identity of *li* and *qi* focuses on Luo’s overlooking the fact that *li* is the basis (*soi* 所以) for *qi*. Han Won-jin 韓元震 and Kim Chang-heup 金昌翕, two representative scholars of the Yulgok school in the 17th century, further emphasize this point in their criticisms of Luo. See *Namdangjip* 南塘集, *gwon* 27, and *Samyeonjip* 三淵集, *gwon* 31.

The Focal Points of Zhu Xi's Interpretation of the *Taijitu*

While the *Taijitu* is originally the work of Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073), it was Zhu Xi who catapulted it into the philosophical limelight by incorporating the text into his *li*-oriented philosophy and confirming it as the metaphysical starting point of thought. Zhu Xi's reinterpretation of the *Taijitu* does not stop at clarifying the thoughts of Zhou Dunyi, but is in fact a cover for establishing his own theories on the relationship between *li* and *qi*, and from there, ratifying his own philosophy, from cosmology to theories of self-cultivation. Concerning its content, Zhu Xi claims that the *taiji* 太極 is solely *li*. This theory attracted controversy not only from his contemporaries (e.g. Lu Jiuyuan and Zhang Shi 張拭 [1133–1180]) but from his pupils as well. Scholars of later generations, especially post-Zhuzixue scholars such as Luo Qinshun, were also quick to criticize him on this point.

Against such a philosophical backdrop, the debate concerning the *Taijitu* between Yi Hwang and Yi I arose out of two necessities; on the one hand, to better explain the thought of Zhu Xi, and on the other, to differentiate their respective understandings of that thought from those of their Chinese post-Zhuzixue contemporaries. Though the two philosophers concur on their stance against the Ming trend, they also show theoretical differences between themselves. The differing thoughts of Yi Hwang and Yi I on *li-qi* can be ascertained by their theories on Substance (*ti* 體) and Function (*yong* 用), or “what is above form” (*xing er shangzhe* 形而上者) and “what is below form” (*xing er xiazhe* 形而下者).

The major debating points concerning the *Taijitu* in Korean Neo-Confucianism center on the interpretation of the first two phrases, “nonpolar and yet Supreme Polarity” (*wuji er taiji* 無極而太極) and “the Supreme Polarity in activity generates (*sheng* 生) *yang*, in tranquility generates *yin*” (*taiji er sheng yang, jing er sheng yin* 太極動而生陽, 靜而生陰).⁸

Controversies concern how to interpret Zhu Xi's contention that the *taiji* is itself *li*, and how activity-tranquility (*dong-jing* 動靜) and *yin-yang* 陰

8. Passages from the *Taijitu* derive from the translation by Adler (2014, ch. 6), with modifications.

陽 should be defined from such a point of view. There is also debate on how to comprehend the expression that the *taiji* “generates” (*sheng*) *yin-yang*. The theoretical relationship or status of the *taiji*, activity-tranquility and *yin-yang* are also debated. Also related to this issue is the question of how to interpret the following phrase in the *Appended Remarks of the Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi xicizhuan* 周易繫辭傳), “There is *taiji* in the Change; this generates the Two Modes” (*Yi you taiji, shi sheng liangyi* 易有太極, 是生兩儀). In order to approach such interpretive issues, I shall first discuss Zhu Xi’s own interpretation of the *Taijituoshuo*, and then compare Yi Hwang and Yi I’s views of that work with a consideration of Luo Qinshun.

Relationship between Taiji and Activity-Tranquility

Regarding the *Taijituoshuo*, which begins with the famous phrase “*Wuji er taiji*,” Zhu Xi claims that the *wuji* and the *taiji* are not separate things. He interprets the above phrase as “formless but with *li*” (*wuxing er youli* 無形而有理),⁹ and describes it as the substance, “what is above form.” Zhu Xi, in his interpretation of the *Taijituoshuo*, illustrates his theory of the substance as follows:

It is clear that there are no two *li* in the *yin-yang* or the *taiji*. Nevertheless, the *taiji* is formless, and the *yin-yang* have *qi*, so how could there not be a difference between “above form” and “below form?” That is why it should be differentiated as *dao* 道 and vessel (*qi* 器).¹⁰

Whereas the *wuji* and the *taiji* practically mean the same thing, the *taiji* and *yin-yang* are to be clearly distinguished; in other words, they are explained as belonging respectively to *li* and *qi*. Zhu contends that the *taiji* and *yin-yang* are in a contrasting relationship of “what is above form” and “what is below form,” or substance and function, and are to be clearly distinguished. Although in his theory of *li-qi* the two are described as inseparable, at least

9. *Zhuziyulei* 朱子語類, *juan* 1, 2 (hereafter, *Yulei* 1:2).

10. *Taijituoshuojie* 太極圖說解 77 (*Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書 13 ce 冊).

at the theoretical level the distinction between the two must be strictly kept. He states the following concerning the question of order between the substance and function:

It is from the aspect of the most hidden *li* that it is said “the substance and function come from the one source” (*ti yong yi yuan* 體用一源); this means that it is empty and tranquil without any sign and yet all figures are already luxuriantly present. ... Even though there is only one source, how could there be no discernment between minuteness and roughness, or what comes before or after? All the more, since it is said “the function takes place after the substance is established,” it would not be a problem to say that this comes first, then the other comes afterwards.¹¹

On the other hand, Zhu illustrates the relationship between the *taiji* and activity-tranquility as follows:

It is the operation of the heavenly mandate that there is activity and tranquility in the *taiji*. That is what is meant by the phrase “circulating alternation between *yin* and *yang* is called the *dao*.” ... Mostly, the *taiji* is the original subtleness; the alternating activity-tranquility is the machinery on which they ride. The *taiji* is the *dao* of what is above form, and the *yin-yang* is the vessel of what is below form.¹²

Worth noting in the above quote is the phrase, “There is activity and tranquility in the *taiji*” (太極之有動靜). Had the expression been “the activity and tranquility of the *taiji*” (太極之動靜)—a phrase Zhu Xi is careful to avoid—it might have been possible to interpret the *taiji* itself as alternately becoming active and tranquil. This subtle difference in expression results in no small difference in significance. On other occasions Zhu denies that “the *taiji* refers to what combines (*jian* 兼) activity and tranquility,” and retorts that “activity and tranquility are not combined, but activity and tranquility

11. *Taijituohuo* 77.

12. *Taijituohuo* 72.

are both in the *taiji*.”¹³ *Jian* in general means “to have both.” It might be understood to mean that although the *taiji* is *li*, activity and tranquility—movements of the *qi*—are also in the *taiji*, so it “has them both.” A more detailed annotation comes as follows:

It is acceptable to say that “the *taiji* implies activity and tranquility” [from the point of view of the substance]; it is also acceptable to say that “there is activity and tranquility in the *taiji*” [from the point of view of the operation]. Nonetheless, to say that “the *taiji* is itself activity and tranquility” is to muddle the discerning line between what is above and below form, so even the phrase “there is *taiji* in the Change (*yi* 易)” is rendered useless.¹⁴

For Zhu Xi, the relationship between the *taiji* and activity-tranquility has two aspects. From the aspect of the substance, “*Taiji* implies activity-tranquility” (太極含動靜): the substance of *taiji* or *li* is without any form or image, but implies a capability to move on its own. On the other hand, in the operational aspect, Zhu claims that “there is activity-tranquility in the *taiji*” (太極有動靜), meaning that the *taiji* is implicit in the movement of the *qi* that is manifested as activity and tranquility, or *yin-yang*.¹⁵ In short, in the aspect of the substance, the *li* implies the capability of activity-tranquility (movement of *qi*), and in the aspect of operation, the *li* is manifested or realized as activity-tranquility. An important factor here is that Zhu Xi, while conceding that the *taiji* is implicit in the activity-tranquility as phenomenon, refuses to accept that “the *taiji* is active and tranquil” or “the *taiji* is activity-tranquility.” According to him, those are faulty conclusions resulting from a confusion between substance and function, or what is above and below form. Let us examine his argument further. For Zhu, “there is activity-tranquility in the *taiji*” does not differ much from saying, “there is activity-tranquility in *li*” (理有動靜). He states the following:

13. *Yulei* 94:2372.

14. *Huiianxiansheng Zhuwengong wenji* 晦庵先生朱文公文集, *juan* 45, 2072 (*Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書 20–25 ce. Hereafter, *Wenji* 45:2072).

15. *Wenji* 45:2071.

The activity of *yang* and tranquility of *yin* are not the *taiji* that is active or tranquil, but result from there being activity-tranquility in *li*. *Li* is not visible, therefore it is acknowledged through *yin-yang*. *Li* riding on *yin-yang* can be compared to a man riding a horse.¹⁶

Zhu Xi never explicitly concedes that the *taiji* or *li* move. Nevertheless, the movement of the *qi*, alternation of *yin-yang*, or in other words activity-tranquility, is possible because of the *li* which makes *qi* move. Thus, *taiji* or *li* is the agent that makes movement possible. He uses the following simile:

The *taiji* is *li*, activity-tranquility is *qi*. When *qi* moves, so does *li*. They are always interdependent and are never separate. The *taiji* is like man, activity-tranquility is like the horse. The horse carries the man, the man rides the horse. If the horse comes and goes the man comes and goes with it. Stopping or going, the wondrousness of the *taiji* is never without. That is what is called “the mechanism that is being ridden.”¹⁷

From this simile, there is no reason to read the horse as an independently moving being with a will of its own. The horse makes the actual movement, but is only significant as the passive thing “that is being ridden.” On the other hand, even though the rider is not the one that is doing the actual running, he rides the horse and makes its movement possible.

Thus, we might draw the following conclusion about Zhu's opinion on the relationship between the *taiji* and activity-tranquility. The *taiji*, which is *li*, does not move but makes active functions, or has activity.¹⁸ On the other hand, activity-tranquility, which is *qi*, moves passively but does not make active functions. Thus, it might be said that because there is activity and tranquility in *li*, the *qi* moves and stills.¹⁹ The movement of *qi* is caused by *li*, it is not that *qi* moves itself. Accordingly, the movement of *qi* might be said to be the manifestation or realization of *li*.

16. *Yulei* 94:2372.

17. *Yulei* 94:2376.

18. This is what the term *Zhuzai* 主宰 means in the *Zhuzixue*. *Zhuzai* does not mean a direct cause of physical movement, but something that makes movement possible, or allows it.

19. *Wenji* 56:2687.

How to Interpret the Concept of Sheng 生?

Another major point of contention concerning the *Taijitu* is how to understand the term “generate” (*sheng* 生) in the phrase, “The *taiji* in activity generates *yang*, in tranquility generates *yin*.” What is problematic here is that the following phrase in the *Appended Remarks of the Book of Changes*, “There is *taiji* in the Changes; this generates the Two Modes; Two Modes generate the Four Forms” (易有太極, 是生兩儀, 兩儀生四象) may be understood as implying that the *taiji* generates the two modes of *yin* and *yang*.

Before going further, it is necessary to take a look at the phrase, “There is the *taiji* in the Changes” (易有太極) in the *Appended Remarks*. Grammatically, it takes the same format as the aforementioned “太極有動靜” or “理有動靜.” What is worth noting here is that Zhu discusses the Changes in the aspect of function as in activity and tranquility; and never in the aspect of the movement of *qi* in the *yin-yang*. To quote,

The significance of ‘*yi*’ designates the shape of operation and change. The shape of this infinite productivity (*sheng sheng* 生生) has no intermission, but in between only takes activity and tranquility as each other’s beginning and end.²⁰

Zhu Xi comprehends *yi* as change itself, or an infinite productivity. “Activity and tranquility” refers to the process of endless productivity and change. In this context, infinite productivity and alternating activity-tranquility point to the same thing, which is the aspect of function expressed as “operation and change.” Thus, for him, “there is the *taiji* in the Changes” is understandable as that in the function (activity) of *li*, there is the *taiji*. From a theoretical level, this is an aspect that precedes any infiltration by the movement of *qi*. Any division of *qi*, such as *yin-yang* or the Four Forms, are affected through the process of productivity or the functions of activity-tranquility, and they may not be identified with *yi* or activity-tranquility itself. Any division or movement of the *qi* cannot be identified with *yi* itself, and may

20. *Wenji* 45:2070.

only be driven by *taiji* or *li* that are implicit in the changes itself. This is reconfirmation of the fact that the driving force of the change is the *taiji* or *li*. Zhu offers the following explanation:

When Master Zhou said, “The *taiji* in activity generates *yang*, in tranquility generates *yin*,” it was the same as saying “the movement of the *taiji* is *yang*, when its movement reaches its peak it becomes tranquil, and tranquility is *yin*.” When [the *taiji*] moves it is the *taiji* of *yang* (*taiji* manifest as *yang*), when it is tranquil, it is *taiji* of *yin* (*taiji* manifest as *yin*). This is how the *taiji* is always in the *yin-yang*.²¹

Zhu believes that the function of activity-tranquility belongs to the *taiji*, and explicitly states that the productivity of the *yin-yang* results from the *taiji*. In this context, *yin* and *yang* are the functions of the *taiji* expressed through *qi*, and there is *taiji* inherent in *qi*'s appearance as *yin* and *yang*.

In the phenomenal world, what is caught by our sensory organs is the manifestation from the movement and division of *qi*, which is *taiji* (or *li*) encompassed in the *yin-yang* (or *qi*). But such movement or division of *qi* arises from the *li* that makes it all possible. Thus “generating” here signifies that *yin-yang* is generated from the *taiji*, for it originally has the functions of activity-tranquility; not that the *taiji* encompasses and discharges *yin-yang*. Zhu reprimands one of his colleagues who identifies the term “generate” (*sheng*) with “encompass” (*bao* 包), as follows:

To “encompass” is to be pregnant with child, so the fetus is within the mother's womb. To “generate” is to give birth, so that baby is outside of the mother.²²

Should the two modes and such be “encompassed” by the *taiji*, and so come to be, it would mean the *yin-yang* is already present within the *taiji*. Such an understanding comes from a lack of discernment between what is above and below form. For Zhu, “generating” means that beings, which

21. Yulei 75:1929.

22. Wenji 71:3407.

can be differentiated from the *taiji*—such as *yin* and *yang*—are generated, according to the prerequisite functions of the *taiji*. Functions of the *taiji* such as operation and change, infinite production, or activity-tranquility do not mean a revelation of something that is already within the *taiji* itself. Should that be the case, because phenomenal beings are innumerable, but in the end finite, the *taiji* would also be finite. The infinity of the *taiji* is something that is qualitatively separate from the finite phenomenal beings; it is only the “potential” of generating all beings of the phenomenal world. Nonetheless, the *taiji* cannot be said to actually encompass all phenomenal beings.²³

Yi Hwang’s Interpretation: The Function of *Li*

Yi Hwang bases his interpretation of the *Taijitu* on that of Zhu Xi, putting emphasis on the priority of *li* as opposed to *qi*. He makes a point of segregating the *taiji* as *li* and *yin-yang* as *qi*, much like Zhu. Furthermore, he is quite assertive in his claims that the *li* “generates” *qi*, by way of stressing its priority.

Yi Hwang makes an aggressive criticism of Luo Qinshun’s claim that “*li* and *qi* are originally one,” clarifying that Luo’s interpretation of the relationship between the *taiji* and *yin-yang* is quite different from that of Zhu Xi’s. First, let us examine Luo’s variant reading of the *Taijitu*:

There can be no question about Master Zhu’s interpretation of the term “*wuji*,” which appears in the opening line of Master Zhou’s *Taijitu*. But I can only be skeptical when it comes to the statement that “The reality (*zhen* 眞) of *wuji* and the essence (*jing* 精) of the Two [Modes] and the Five [Agents] (*er wu* 二五) wondrously unite and consolidate.” Things must be two before they can be said to come into union. Are the *taiji* and

23. Chen Lai offers the following explanation: “Regarding the function of *li*, *li* itself does not produce *yin-yang* like a mother gives birth to a child; but the production of *yin-yang* refers to the function and expression of *li*. Therefore, if *yin* and *yang* is produced by the function of *li*, and the production of *yin-yang* is spoken of in terms of embodiment or expression, it might be said that ‘*li* can produce *qi*’” (Chen 2004, 314).

yin-yang really two things? If they are really two things, where was each one prior to their integration? Throughout his life Master Zhu regarded *li* and *qi* as two separate things, and this was the source of the idea.²⁴

For Luo, the problem with Zhu's comprehension of *wuji* is his equating it with the *taiji* and *li*. Zhu Xi claims that "'reality' is spoken of from the aspect of *li*, and 'essence' from the aspect of *qi*."²⁵ He believes that the *wuji* belongs to *li* and the *yin-yang* and the Five Agents belong to *qi*, and "wondrously unite" is the sum of both. In Luo's opinion, however, this is a result of Zhu's understanding that *li* and *qi* are two separate things. Luo, who believes that *li* and *qi* are one, is averse to Zhu's opinion.

From such a point of view, wherein there is no differentiation between *li* and *qi*, or the *taiji* and *yin-yang*, Luo defines activity-tranquility as the process of movement of *qi*, without referring to the aspect of *li*'s function as Zhu does. For Luo, the movement and change within *yin-yang* (*qi*) is not a result of *li*'s function, but is a voluntary movement on *qi*'s part. According to such a theory, *li* no longer has any practical function or role in cosmic movement and change. What Luo is referring to by Yi in "There is the *taiji* in the Changes [Yi]" is the changes of *yin* and *yang*, or the *motio automatic* (autonomous movement) of the *qi*, and the *taiji* or *li* is included in such movement. He says,

The phrase, "There is the *taiji* in the Changes" has led some to suspect that there is a single entity that acts as a presiding force (*zhuzai* 主宰) amid the alternations of *yin* and *yang*. But this is not the case. ... To say that "there is the *taiji* in the Changes" means that manifold diversity takes its origin from a single root. This is then extended to the process of "production and reproduction," making it clear that the dispersal of the single root generates manifold diversity. This is truly the mechanism of what is so of itself, the presider that does not preside (*buzai zhi zai* 不宰之宰), so how could there be a tangible trace that can be sought?²⁶

24. *Kunzhiji* 困知記 19. Translation here adapted from Bloom (1987).

25. *Taijitu* 77.

26. *Kunzhiji* 11.

Luo does not agree with Zhu's concept of *li*, which includes the significance of presiding force. In contrast to Zhu Xi, Luo does not consider *taiji* to have any "function" or to serve as a presider in the changes of *yin-yang*. It is only the unified root of the myriad divisions. This is because, for Luo, *Yi* is a generic term for the movement and division process of *qi* and is identical to the movement of *qi*, while *taiji* or *li* is the set of orderings or patterns that is achieved in such movement and division of *qi*.

On the other hand, Yi Hwang, while maintaining the position of Zhu Xi, directly refutes the above discussion of Luo. Consider the following:

I think thus: Confucius and Master Zhou have clearly stated that the *yin* and *yang* are what is generated from the *taiji*. If one is to claim that "*li* and *qi* are originally one," then the *taiji* is itself the Two Modes, so could there be anything that is generated? There is mention of the reality and the essence, because they are two separate entities. They "wondrously unite and consolidate," so if they are one, how can they unite and consolidate?²⁷

Concerning the relationship between the *taiji* and the *yin-yang*, Yi Hwang believes that the fact that Confucius and Zhou Dunyi describing them as acting to "generate" and "unite and consolidate" is proof they explicitly consider the two to be classified entities. Such a stance is similar to that of Zhu Xi. Nonetheless, Yi Hwang goes a step further and reads a more aggressive connotation into "generate" relative to Zhu's understanding that the *taiji* implies the capacity or possibility of *yin-yang* or activity-tranquility. Let us take a look at the following oft-quoted lines of Yi Hwang:

Yanping 延平 answered Master Zhu thus: "[In the *Book of Changes*] it is said that the mind of Heaven and Earth can be glimpsed from the trigram *fu* 復; that is the *li* 'that generates *yang* in movement.'" Also, Master Zhu once said, "*Li* has activity and tranquility, and therefore *qi* has activity and tranquility; if *li* does not have activity and tranquility, how can *qi* by itself have activity and tranquility?" For *li* acts and subsequently *qi* is generated; *qi* acts and subsequently *li* is manifested.²⁸

27. *Toegyejip*, *gwon* 41, 20b-21a (hereafter rendered 41:20b-21a).

28. *Toegyejip* 25:34b-35a.

Following the above quotation, Yi Hwang categorizes the phrase “*Taiji* in activity generates *yang*” as the action of *li*; and the phrase, “The mind of Heaven and Earth can be glimpsed from the trigram *fu*” as the action of *qi*. Yi Hwang’s stance on the “activity of *qi*” is itself quite notable, but in this discussion of the “generation” of the *taiji* or *li*, the focus should stay on the “activity of *li*.” Yi Hwang states, “*li* acts and subsequently *qi* is generated” (理動則氣隨而生) then rephrases it as “*li* acts and then *qi* is generated” (理動而氣生). The phrasing suggests that the “generation” should not be interpreted as *li* “gives birth” to *qi*, as if giving birth to a baby; the indication is that through *li*’s active function it “gives rise to” *qi*. It is equivalent to how the aspect of “activity of *qi*” is interpreted as “*qi* acts and then accordingly *li* is manifested” in the above quote. To recapitulate, Yi Hwang claims that “generation” here is not used in the sense of produce or give birth to, but in the sense that the *qi* is generated from the activities of *li*—which means the activities of *li* are the cause or basis (*soi* 所以) of the movements of *qi*.²⁹ Nonetheless, *li* and *qi* are not independent, but should be comprehended within the chain of cause and effect. The activity of *li* leads to the movement of *qi*; the movement of *qi* leads to the manifestation of *li*. In his view, even though the one cannot include the other and become one, the two are necessarily tied up in a cause and effect relation indicating that the movement of *qi*—the cyclic alternation of *yin* and *yang*—is already potentially implied in *li*.³⁰

Meanwhile, there is a phrase in Zhu’s work that seems to oppose such an interpretation: “*Qi* condenses and operates, while *li* does not have feelings or intent and does not operate.”³¹ Commentators have understood this passage as indication of the non-doing (*wuwei* 無爲) of *li*, and such an interpretation caused Yi Hwang to be hesitant about his claims on the activity of *li*. He provides the following discussion with his pupil, who

29. *Toegyeyip* 25:36a. Yi Hwang never uses the expression “*li* generates *qi*” (理生氣). But he believes it is possible to say “*li* is capable of generating *qi*” (理能生氣).

30. This explanation quite resembles that by Zhu Xi where he distinguishes *sheng* and *bao* with the analogy of mother and child. The point is that *sheng* does not signify that the mother encompasses the child, but that the *sheng* is the causal link between the two separate entities of mother and child.

31. *Yulei* 1:3.

questions the claim that the *taiji* or *yin-yang* “is capable of generating” based on this certain passage:

Q: Master Zhu said, “*Li* does not have feelings or intent and does not operate.” If it does not have feelings or intent and operate, I am afraid it is not capable of generating *yin-yang*. If it is said to “be capable of generating” (能生), then there was no *qi* at the very beginning, and only after the *taiji* generated *yin-yang*, the *qi* existed. Is it not so?

A: The phrase “*li* does not have feeling and so on” refers to the original substance. What is capable of manifesting and generating refers to the extremely wondrous functions. ... *Li* itself has the functions, and thus it spontaneously generates *yang* and generates *yin*.³²

Yi Hwang suggests that defining *li* by such terms as “not having feelings” is to refer to its aspect of substance, while “capability of manifesting and generating” is to refer to its aspect of function. In the aspect of function, *li* is explicitly named “mysterious function” (神用) or “extremely wondrous function” (至妙之用). What this signifies is that the *taiji* cannot directly generate *yin* and *yang*, but the *taiji* makes it possible for activity and tranquility to generate *yin-yang*. The focal point of his argument is “activity of *li*,” *li* does not exist merely as substance of what is above form, but may have of itself the function of causing the movement of *qi*, what is below form. It is through this function that the *qi* of *yin-yang* is generated. Based on Zhu’s passage that “the *li* necessarily has function,”³³ Yi Hwang writes:

[Through this] it can be understood that the phrase “*li* does not have feelings or intent and does not operate” refers to the original substance of *li*, while it is the extremely wondrous function of *li* to be manifest wherever it encounters so there is none that is not realized. Heretofore I only had knowledge of the non-doing of the original substance, and was ignorant of the fact that the wondrous function of *li* is capable of manifesting and acting. Accordingly, I almost considered *li* a “dead thing.” Is that not so very far from the truth?³⁴

32. *Toegyejip* 39:28b.

33. *Yulei* 18:416.

34. *Toegyejip* 18:31b.

For Yi Hwang, should *li* be without function, it is a “dead thing” that has no capacity or role, and cannot be the foundation of any Confucian ethics. This passage implies the reason behind his emphasis of *li*; if *li* is no more than the substance of “non-doing” and cannot make its influence on the movement of *qi* in the phenomenal world, the system of Confucian values may amount to nothing but an empty shell. In other words, if *li* is confined within the reality of the changing *qi*, the moral values within may become nothing more than what is temporary, or arbitrary. That is why *li* should be established as the foundation and ideology that transcends the ever-changing movement of *qi*, enabling it to function actively as moral standard in real life.

Yi I's Interpretation: “One yet Two, Two yet One”

It is the general consensus that the philosophy of Yi I is in opposition to that of Yi Hwang, while remaining loyal to the legacy of Zhu Xi. Some researchers claim that Yi I provides a more orthodox explanation than Yi Hwang to Zhu's thoughts (Kim 2017, 36). Nonetheless, Yi I, like Yi Hwang, was pessimistic about the Chinese post-Zhuzixue trends, if only in part. Although critical of Yi Hwang's philosophy, Yi I still strove to keep the general framework of Zhuzixue; he could not be completely free himself from the peer pressure to chastise thoughts that were labeled heretical by Yi Hwang—i.e., those thoughts that opposed the doctrines of Zhuzixue and/or resembled Zen Buddhism.³⁵ Yi I needed to provide a philosophical vision different from such condemned thinkers as Luo or Seo Gyeong-deok. Against such a backdrop, Yi I's theory of *li*-*qi* functions as the theoretical framework opposing both Yi Hwang's “mutual manifestation of *li* and *qi*” (理氣互發) and Luo's “*li* and *qi* are one” (理氣一物):

Li is what presides over *qi*. *Qi* is what *li* rides upon. Without *li*, *qi* has nothing to be based on; without *qi*, *li* has nothing to rely on. They are

35. See *Jeonhubyeonmujangso* 前後辨誣章疏 (*Yulgok jeonso* 栗谷全書, *gwon* 38, 52b-56a, hereafter, 38:52b-56a).

not two things, yet neither are they one thing. Not one thing; therefore, they are “one yet two.” Not two things; therefore, they are “two yet one.” What does it mean to say “not one thing?” Although *li* and *qi* cannot be separated from each other, in [their] subtle combination *li* is just *li*, and *qi* is just *qi*, and [they] do not contaminate each other. Therefore, they are not one thing. What does it mean to say “not two things?” Although it is said that “*li* is just *li* and *qi* is just *qi*,” they are mixed together without a gap between them. There is no [distinction of] prior and posterior, or no separation and combination.³⁶

Such criticism of the two thinkers, Yi Hwang and Luo Qinshun, led to Yi I's philosophy that *li* and *qi* are “one yet two, two yet one,” in other words, “the wondrousness of the *li* and *qi*” (理氣之妙).³⁷ This theory is ostensibly quite loyal to Zhu's doctrine that *li* and *qi* are inseparable yet non-intermixable. But as we have discussed above, Zhu's doctrine merely refers to the inseparability of *li* and *qi* as phenomenal beings, while *li* as what is above form and *qi* as what is below form are clearly segregated, so that the priority that *li* holds over *qi* is unshakable. Therefore, this compromise on Yi I's part was not an indication of loyalty towards Zhu, but in fact compliance towards Luo's opinions.

Yi I's interpretation of the *Taijitu* is founded on his theory of *li-qi*. His point of emphasis is that the *taiji* and *yin-yang*, or *li* and *qi*, are inseparable; and there is no chronological priority or posteriority between the two. Unlike Zhu Xi and Yi Hwang, he refuses the priority of the *taiji*, claiming that the *li* is within the movement of *qi*, or the infinite cyclic alternation of *yin-yang*.

There is nothing that forces the mechanism of activity-tranquility. *Li* and *qi* cannot be said to precede one or the other. Only, *li* is the basis (根柢) of *qi*'s activity-tranquility. Thus, it is said that “*taiji* in movement generates *yang*; in tranquility generates *yin*.” If one is to fixate on this phrase, claiming that *taiji* exists independently prior to *yin-yang*, then it would

36. *Yulgok jeonse* 10:2a-b.

37. See *Yulgok jeonse* 10:17b-18a.

mean that *yin-yang* came to be out of nothingness. That would oppose Cheng Yi's statement that "there is no beginning to *yin-yang*" (陰陽無始).³⁸

For Yi I, the agent of activity and tranquility is *yin-yang* itself. Because the movement of *qi* has a mechanism of its own, activity and tranquility is caused by *yin* and *yang*, and there are no other "presiding forces" behind the movement, such as *li*. Yi I opposes Yi Hwang's interpretation that the "functions of *li*" cause the movement and changes of *qi*; he claims that the cyclic movement of the *yin-yang* is of its own accord, and *li* only rides upon such movement. This reading clearly resembles that of Luo's, which claims that the movement and change is "a mechanism that is so of itself" and "the presider that does not preside." Unlike Zhu Xi, Yi I insists that the *taiji* does not indicate any independence or priority on the *li*'s side. He writes,

Indeed there are imperfections in the theories of the Sages. [Confucius] only states "the *taiji* gives rise to the Two modes" and does not go on to say "*yin* and *yang* have always been so, and there is no beginning for them." Thus, those who interpret meaning only from words themselves claim "before there was *qi* there was only *li*," but that is a grave error.³⁹

Yi I's point of view as described in the above quote is that one cannot picture the substance outside the movement of *qi*. For Yi I, the so called "substance" is what moves of its own accord, making the concept of substance without *qi* paradoxical. To support his ideas, which differ from those of Zhu Xi, he takes the quote from Cheng Yi—"there is no end to activity-tranquility, and there is no beginning to *yin-yang*"—as his main proof. He takes this passage to assert that the *taiji* does not precede *yin-yang*; *li* is not something that comes prior to *qi*, but is the basis for the movement of *qi*, and is always inherent in it. He claims,

Ah! As there is no beginning, no end, no outside to the *yin-yang*, there is no moment it is not in activity-tranquility. It alternates between activity

38. *Yulgok jeonseo* 20:39.

39. *Yulgok jeonseo* 9:18b-19a.

and tranquility, *yin* and *yang*, none without *li*. So the debates of the Sages seeking the original source always consider the *taiji* as the foundation of *yin-yang*, in actuality, there is no time when the *taiji* existed independently before *yin-yang* came to be.⁴⁰

On the other hand, Yi I uses terms such as *geun jeo* 根柢 (root or base) and *chu nyu* 樞紐 (axis of movement), indicating that *li* is the basis or pivot for *qi*'s movement, signifying that even though *taiji* or *li* is not separated from the moving substance, it is the condition that allows the multitude changes and myriad productions in the phenomenal world that stemmed from such movement. In other words, in phenomenal beings produced through the *yin-yang* movement of *qi*, there is *li* that makes such an existence possible. For Yi I as well, *li* is the cause (*soi*) that makes phenomena possible. He suggests, as Zhu, by defining *li* as *qi*'s cause that *li* and *qi* are conceptually separate things; they are non-intermixable. Furthermore, on a theoretical level, he claims that “*li* precedes, *qi* comes after” (理先氣後):

There is no beginning to *li* or *qi*; there is no priority or posteriority. Nonetheless, to pursue to the roots how it came to be, *li* is basis and pivot; so one cannot but say that *li* precedes. ... In the face of material things, it is without doubt that *li* precedes, then comes *qi*. One could not say that there was no *li* of heaven and earth before there was heaven and earth; to judge from this, so it is with all things.⁴¹

Nonetheless, it is clear that upon further inspection of Yi I's work, he never dealt with *li* as the cause of *qi*'s movement or being; when categorizing *li* and *qi*, while phenomena composed of *qi* or the movement of *qi* is prerequisite, the existence of *li* is merely implied through the theoretical inference of its occurrence. In other words, what he calls *soi* does not refer to *causa efficiens*, but the existential basis for specific phenomenon or things. For Yi I, who denies the manifestation or function of *li*, any movement that might cause phenomenal beings is entirely dependent upon *qi*. Nevertheless, the ground on

40. *Yulgok jeonseo* 9:18.

41. *Yulgok jeonseo* 10:38a.

which *qi*'s movement can form this certain thing is *li*. For example, a chair takes its form through the movement or operation of *qi*, which carves and smooths the wood into that shape. Although the chair's *li*—something on which one can sit—is surely implied in the process of making that chair, it is only ascertained in the final result of the fashioned chair.⁴² In this context, *li* and *qi*, for Yi I, cannot be separated in the substance, but only in the phenomenon.

Yi I's belief that *li* can only be grasped through the movement of *qi* is better expressed in his interpretation of the phrase, "there is *taiji* in the Changes." He disparages as inappropriate the identification of "there is *taiji* in the Changes" and "nonpolar and yet the Supreme Polarity" (*wuji er taiji*) in Cai Yuan's 蔡淵 (1156–1236) quotation of Zhu Xi from Zhu's *Reflections on Things at Hand*. Judging from this, it is apparent that Yi I does not agree with Zhu's opinion that the phrase "there is *taiji* in the Changes" may be read as the functional aspect of *li*, which is change itself or the infinite productivity. Consider the following quote:

Q: Does the "Changes" in "There is *taiji* in the Changes" indicate *qi*? Or does it indicate *li*?

A: It indicates the "changes of *qi*," so there can be no distinction between *li* and *qi* in it, either. The phrase should be interpreted as, "There is the *li* of *taiji* among the changes of *yin-yang*, which generates the Two Modes."⁴³

Yi I points out that the "Changes" specifies *yin* and *yang*, namely the changing of *qi*, and that there is no "Changes" outside of *yin-yang*. In other words, this phrase should be interpreted to mean that "the *taiji* is within the cyclic alternation of *yin* and *yang*, or the movement of *qi*." As in the case of Luo, he interprets this passage as *li* being included in *qi*. He says: "*Li* is only *li* of *qi* (氣之理), so can only be observed where *qi* is in the process of change."⁴⁴

42. To apply this analogy to Yi Hwang, one could say that it is the chair's *li* that leads the process of carving a chair. In this case, *li* is the *causa efficiens* of the chair. The process of carving wood, or the movement of *qi*, is merely the process of realizing that *li*, and has no independent significance.

43. *Yulgok jeonseo* 31:52a.

44. *Kunzhiji* 38.

Luo's theory that "the *li* and *qi* are one" arises from his view that cosmic being and change are all the result of the operation of "a unified *qi*." He says,

That which penetrates heaven and earth and connects past and present is nothing other than "*qi*," which is unitary. This *qi*, while originally one, revolves through endless cycles of activity and tranquility, going and coming, opening and closing, rising and falling. ... And amid all of this prolific variety and phenomenal diversity there is a detailed order and an elaborate coherence which cannot ultimately be disturbed, and which is so even without our knowing why it is so. This is what is called *li*. *Li* is not a separate entity which depends on *qi* in order to exist or which attaches to *qi* in order to operate.⁴⁵

Luo's *li* is no more than a pattern (*tiaoli* 條理) that is subordinate to *qi*'s movement and change. In other words, *li* holds the movement of *qi* as prerequisite, so that there is no existence for *li* without *qi*. Even though they—*taiji* or *yin-yang* and the Five Agents—are discernible, as ideas, into *li* and *qi*, they are not separable as different beings. He says, "to speak of *yin* and *yang*, the *taiji* is within them; to speak of the *taiji*, *yin* and *yang* are within it. They are one yet two, two yet one."⁴⁶

Even when Yi I deviates from Luo and claims that *li* has an independent status, offering terms such as "basis," "pivot," and "cause" (*soi*), this is still not the same as Zhu Xi making a clear distinction between *li* and *qi* as respectively what is above and below form, thus one being prior to the other.⁴⁷ In short, while for Zhu *li* is "what is above form" that acts as an agent enabling the movement of *qi*—what is below form—and the production of the myriad things, for Yi I *li* is the inherent order or code in the phenomena that are formed as a result of the movement of *qi*. In other words, while for Zhu or Yi Hwang, *li* is the principle that forms the movement and being of the phenomenal world, for Yi I it is the pattern that lends an explanation to the finished movement and being. One could say that *li*, according to Yi I, is

45. *Kunzhiji* 11.

46. *Kunzhiji* 38.

47. *Yulei* 1:3.

the inductive pattern one finds in the movement of *qi* that is already present, *post facto*. Yi I says,

[As Cheng Yi says,] “There is no end to activity and tranquility and no beginning to yin and yang,” the fluctuation of *li* and *qi* are “already so” (已然) and have never been “what is yet to be” (未然). Thus, the cosmic balance and the manifestation of our mind are all but “*qi* moves and *li* rides upon it.”⁴⁸

This point of view does not deviate far from Luo, who claimed that “*li* is the pattern of *qi*,” stressing the non-separability of the *taiji* and *yin-yang*. Although Yi I does state that “*li* precedes *qi*” through theoretical deduction, suggesting the separating of *li* and *qi* on a conceptual level, his ultimate stance coincides with that of Luo, which maintains that “one yet two, two yet also one.” Yi I never concedes that *li* is the above-form *causa efficiens* for the movement in *qi*, and maintains only the claim “*qi* moves and *li* rides on it” (氣發理乘), which implies *li* can only be observed in the changes of *qi*, *ex post facto*.

In conclusion, Yi I's interpretation of the *Taijitu*shuo appears at a first glance to emphasize the interdependency of *li* and *qi*, as opposed to the opinion that focuses on the priority of *li*. Nevertheless, further study of its contents reveals that Yi I's focus is on the spontaneity and movement of *qi*. This is in opposition of Zhu Xi's interpretation of the *Taijitu*shuo.

Concluding Remarks

The question, “Between the thinking of Yi Hwang and Yi I, which better concurs with the philosophy of Zhu Xi?” has been asked continuously throughout the history of Korean Neo-Confucianism. To limit its meaning specifically to Korean philosophy, perhaps it would be a meaningful question to explore were we to write a book on the history of Neo-Confucianism. There is some doubt about this debate's significance for

48. *Yulgok jeonseo* 10:27a.

contemporary scholars. But this question is not merely concerned with academic differences between Yi Hwang and Yi I; the issues this question addresses had great political ramifications by fomenting debate on the orthodoxy of different political factions at the Joseon court where Zhuzixue was a governing doctrine. Even in modern-day Korea, the academic-political ramifications of this debate can still be felt. On a different note, from an academic point of view concerning the general history of Confucian thought, this question might function as a useful guide to explaining Neo-Confucian trends and characteristics, and not only those of Korea.

Concerning this, I shall conclude this paper by suggesting a certain point: the interpretation of Yi Hwang and Yi I promotes a deeper understanding of Neo-Confucian thought in general, and of Zhuzixue more specifically, and can even foster deeper reflection on past research on Neo-Confucianism. Through this present study, I have claimed that Yi Hwang's philosophy, more closely resembles that of Zhu Xi than does the philosophy of Yi I. That is because I believe Zhu Xi's emphasis on the presiding character and the priority of *li* through its activities is more clearly defined through Yi Hwang's annotation. On the contrary, emphasizing Zhu Xi's claim that *li* "only exists, and does not act" (只存有而不活動)—as with Mou Zongsan's opinion—accords better with Yi I's perspective (Mou 1987, 62).

Yi Hwang distinguishes between the activity-tranquility (*dong-jing*) of the *li* and *qi*. Mou, while interpreting the phrases related to *dong-jing* from *Tongshu* 通書,⁴⁹ illustrates that "the *dong-jing* of the *taiji* is not motion nor movement, but signifies activity." Mou strongly asserts that such an interpretation of the *dong-jing* cannot be applied to Zhu Xi's concept of *li* (Mou 1987, 386–387). But as is discussed above, Yi Hwang's interpretation proves that Mou's explanation of *dong-jing* is better suited for Zhuzixue.⁵⁰ It is also interesting that Yi I's reading may be closer to Mou's interpretation of Zhu Xi's thoughts. This is just an example, but it is my belief that research into Korean Confucianism may prove significant as a new approach to Neo-Confucian thought.

49. *Zhoudunyiji* 周敦頤集 27; *Tongshu* 16.

50. See Jeong (2012) for Mou's application of Zhou's concept of *taiji* and activity-tranquility to Zhu Xi.

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