

Book Review

Charles A. Muller: *Korea's Great Buddhist-Confucian Debate – The Treatises of Chŏng Tojŏn (Sambong) and Hamhŏ Tŭkt'ong (Kihwa)*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 2015. 192pp. ISBN 9780824840976

Charles Muller's text introduces readers to important treatises written by the great Neo-Confucian scholar Chŏng Tojŏn 鄭道傳 (1342-1398) and the important Sŏn Buddhist scholar, Kihwa 己和 (1376-1433), composed during the very early part of the Chosŏn dynasty 朝鮮 (1392-1910). By this point, Buddhism was well on its way to being supplanted by Neo-Confucianism which had been brought to Korea towards the end of the Koryŏ dynasty 高麗 (918-1392) by Koreans themselves. These treatises are important as they reflect how Neo-Confucians at that time sought to undermine the religious doctrine of Buddhism while at the same time emphasising the secular benefits of their own ideas bolstered by sophisticated metaphysics. Those ideas had in fact benefitted from important Buddhist ideas, especially the centrifugal point of their own metaphysics which revolved around the idea of Principle (理: pronounced *li* in Chinese, *i* in Korean). Muller has drawn together texts from these two interesting figures who both studied at the Confucian academy in Seoul, the Sŏngyun'gwan 成均館, at the same time. Their paths, he suggests, must definitely have crossed. Interestingly, Kihwa, despite having received an elite Confucian education, would eventually turn to Buddhism. His Confucian education would provide him with a great intellectual advantage when the time came to retort against the Neo-Confucian polemic lambasted against Buddhism by Chŏng – enabling him to critique it 'inside-out', so to speak.

The first part of the text provides readers with a comprehensive 'Translator's Introduction' to the period in which the treatises were written, as well as a good overview of the interactions in this transcultural intellectual milieu in East Asia between Buddhism and Confucianism, as well as Daoism, and the eventual emergence of Neo-Confucianism. Next, Muller introduces the texts he has translated. There are two critiques by Chŏng Tojŏn: *Simgiri p'yŏn* 心氣理篇 (On Mind, Material Force and Principle) and *Pulssi chappyŏn* 佛氏雜辨 (Array of Critiques of Buddhism). The first is a criticism of Buddhist and Daoist metaphysics, while the latter presents nineteen rather blunt critiques of Buddhism castigating central ideas such as karma and transmigration, while also trying to besmirch and disparage Buddhism simply for being a 'foreign' religion (i.e. of non-Chinese origin). These Neo-Confucian attacks are followed by a Buddhist response by Kihwa titled *Hyŏnjŏng non* 顯正論 (Exposition of Orthodoxy), which reflects a much more inclusivistic approach, which Muller notes to be "markedly conciliatory in tone compared to the *Pulssi Chappyŏn*" (p.24). Muller moves on to discuss some of the intellectual particularities of these texts which he describes as sharing the principle of 'Essence-Function' 體用 (*ti-yong* in Chinese, *ch'e-yong* in Korean, "a characteristic traditional East Asian way of interpreting the world, society, events, phenomena and the human being" (p.29), reflecting an interpenetrating non-dichotomous unity in things, such as roots and branches, or the internal and external aspects which ultimately unify things/human beings and so on.

The text then provides Muller's smooth translations of the three treatises mentioned above, accompanied by very clear and useful explanatory notes. Finally, he also provides the original treatises in *Hanmun* 漢文 in the appendixes making it accessible not only to students starting out on their studies of East Asian thought, but to advanced scholars who can engage with the original texts. Muller has been scrupulous in his translations, a skill he has honed for many years, earning him great praise from leading academics working on East Asian intellectual thought. There is only one noticeable error in Appendix 2 (p. 117) when the *Hanmun* characters for the title *Pulssi Chappyŏn* actually correspond to those of *Simgiri p'yŏn*, undoubtedly an editing error. Overall, this book would make an engaging read for anyone interested in East Asia's intellectual traditions, and is a must for anyone who wants an insight into those traditions and their place in Korea through this thought-provoking encounter between two great minds from Korea's past.

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