

The Korean Neo-Confucian Ideal of Pluralism and Han

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Abstract : This paper will investigate the Korean concept of han and suggest that the feeling of han is essentially inseparable from the central project of the Korean neo-Confucian philosophical tradition. Han is a complex sentiment, but one may characterize it as an internally directed complex of sentiments of frustration, sadness, and anger. In particular, this paper aims to demonstrate that the Korean neo-Confucian project's ultimate objective was to build a pluralistic world - where different people can coexist together in harmony and participate in building the ideal world. Nevertheless, the confrontation between the neo-Confucian idea - that every person has the intrinsic potential to be moral - and the bleakness of reality that made their objective virtually impossible to achieve led to the formation and development of the feeling of han. The paper will first examine the concept of han and what it entails and then investigate the core elements of Korean neo-Confucianism, examining the works of Korean neo-Confucians, including Toegye, Yulgok, and Jeong Dojeon. Furthermore, the concept of plurality will be drawn from the political theory of Hannah Arendt. While the Arendtian and Korean neo-Confucian philosophies are ultimately different, this paper will contend that the two philosophies' broader aims share many resonating points. Specifically, within both philosophies, the human plurality - that all humans are equal but not the same - underlies the foundation of an ideal political realm. From there, an argument that the difficulty faced by the neo-Confucians in Korea in constructing a polity based on the ideal of respect and human moral capacity ultimately contributed to the emergence of the sentiment han will be presented. In conclusion, this paper will demonstrate that the ultimate objectives of Korean Confucianism lie in closing the gap between the ideal and reality in moral cultivation as well as its political project of building an ideal, pluralistic world, and han emerges from the realization of the difficulty of achieving that goal. Finally, this paper will contest that han needs not be perceived negatively, and han can be a driving force for political participation in the contemporary democratic, pluralistic society.

Keywords : Korea, Confucianism, neo-Confucianism, philosophy, han, Korean philosophy

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