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Are Humans Inherently Good
or Do They Favor it?
A Debate between King Jeongjo
and Jeong Yakyong

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Introduction

King Jeongjo engaged in numerous debates with scholar-officials on Confucian classics and history, one notable instance being his debate with Jeong Yakyong. Accordingly, this article will examine King Jeongjo's debate with Jeong Yakyong on Mencius's claim that humans inherently are good. This is because, until now, previous researchers (Song 2001; Ham 2012; Baek 2012; S. Chung 2009; J. Lee 2011) have primarily focused on Jeong Yakyong's idea that human nature is appetite (*seong ja giho* 性者嗜好)¹ (Y. Jeong 2002, 346c). However, they overlooked Jeong Yakyong had mentioned that humans inherently possess good in his response to King Jeongjo's inquiry. Furthermore, after King Jeongjo's death, Jeong Yakyong revised that same response. Why did Jeong Yakyong revise it? This is the topic in this article. In contrast, King Jeongjo adhered to Mencius' theory of human nature as inherently good, interpreting it through Zhu Xi's concept of *li* 理 and *ki* 氣. He gave a critique on Mencius's argument as lacking the detailed elaboration found in Zhu Xi's interpretation. Thus, I also briefly address the theories of Mencius and Zhu Xi in this article.

Human Nature Inherently is Good

The debate over whether humans are inherently good or not has existed for a long time. In Mencius's 孟子 (BC 372–BC 289) debate with Gaozi 告子, Mencius (1970, 666–67) criticized Gaozi's argument that human nature is neither good nor evil but merely instinct, asserting instead that human nature is inherently good.² Later, Xunzi 荀子 (BC 313–BC 238) (1984, 17) criticized Mencius' argument, claiming that humans are inherently evil.³ On Mencius' argument, Zhu Xi (1970, 452) respected Mencius as a great sage,⁴ which became the tradition of Confucian philosophy.

Regarding this theory of human nature being good, King Jeongjo and

1 Jeong Yakyong 丁若鏞, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 與猶堂全書 1, "Jachan myojimyeong" (Self-written Epigraph 自撰墓誌銘).

2 “告子曰：性無善無不善也...今日：性善，然則彼皆非與？孟子曰：乃若其情則可以為善矣，乃所謂善也。”

3 “人之性惡，其善者偽也...孟子曰：人之學者，其性善。曰：是不然！是不及知人之性，而不察乎人之性偽之分者也。”

4 “孟子性善養氣之論 皆前聖所未發...孟子大賢。”

Jeong Yakyong had a debate. Both agreed with Mencius's theory of human nature being good. However, King Jeongjo was critical of Mencius's, saying that he did not mention material force (*ki* 氣) when he talked about human nature being good.⁵ This is because he thought that human nature was formed when humans were born, that humans were born through the movement of material force, that the principle of the movement of material force is principle (*li* 理), and that the principle is good as the original nature.⁶ But he thought that material force is the physical nature that is mixed with good and evil and hence human nature being good is the original nature.⁷ Therefore, King Jeongjo thought that Mencius should have explained the theory of human nature being good in more detail when refuting Gaozi's claim that human nature is neither good nor evil (Mencius 1970, 666). Thus, King Jeongjo praised Physical Nature, mixed *li* and *ki*, mentioned by Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), a Neo-Confucian scholar in the Song dynasty (960–1279) of China.⁸ Mencius, in his haste to criticize Gaozi's claim that enjoying food and sex is human nature, did not address the physical nature of humans. However, according to King Jeongjo's analysis, Cheng Yi's later mention of physical nature enabled a proper refutation of Gaozi's claim.⁹ In response to this inquiry, Jeong Yakyong noted that Mencius's natural goodness was based on the mandate of heaven, so he did not mention material force. For this reason, Jeong Yakyong thought that Mencius did not need to explain it in such detail.

5 King Jeongjo, *Hongjae jeonso* (*The Complete Works of King Jeongjo* 弘齋全書) 65, Gyeongsa gangui (Debate on Confucian Classics and History Books 經史講義) 17, "On Zhongyong" (Debate on the Doctrine of Mean 中庸). Available at: <https://db.itkc.or.kr>. 268c, "In this way, in addition to discussing Confucianism with Jeong Yakyong, King Jeongjo also engaged in debates on Confucian classics and history. Furthermore, he assigned tasks to Sungkyunkwan Confucian students and scholar-officials whom he personally invited, requiring them to submit their responses" 天命之性, 朱子釋之曰: 天以陰陽五行, 化生萬物, 氣以成形, 理亦賦焉。既曰: 氣以成形, 理亦賦焉。此性字當兼氣質看耶?

6 King Jeongjo, *Hongjae jeonso* 69, Gyeongsa gangui 6, "On Daxue" (Debate on Great Learning 大學): "猶言本然之性, 然性即理之墮在氣質者, 故猶可以剔出其不雜乎氣者, 而指其本然之體。"

7 Ibid.: "惟中庸天命之性, 孟子道性善, 直指其本然。"

8 King Jeongjo, *Hongjae jeonso* 65, Gyeongsa gangui 2, "On Gensarok" (Debate on Reflections on Things at Hand 近思錄): "生之謂性一章, 孟子道性善之後, 一以純善論性, 而未嘗言及於氣質之性矣。至此章而程子始發之, 非程子則孰敢說到於氣質上乎? 可見明道幾至於聖人地位。"

9 Ibid.: "若無程子此言, 無以辨告子之言矣。且孟子急於闢異端, 但說性善, 後學不復知有氣質之性矣。自有程子此說, 始乃曉然知本然之善。又能知才說性則已帶氣之義焉, 此可謂闡發孟夫子所未道之言, 可謂大有功於斯文。"

King Jeongjo's inquiry: Wouldn't it be problematic for Mencius to only assert human nature as inherently good without mentioning material force (*ki* 氣)?
 Jeong Yakyong's response: I think that Mencius' theory of human nature being good is based on Heavenly Mandate (*cheonmyeong* 天命), and since it does not speak of physical nature, I dare not consider Mencius's argument problematic. (Y. Jeong 2002, 175c-d)¹⁰

In this way, Jeong Yakyong explained that Mencius's assertion about human nature being inherently good refers to the Heavenly Mandate, which aligns with the idea in *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) that states, "What heaven decrees is called the nature" 天命之謂性 (Gardner 2007, 1373). King Jeongjo interpreted Mencius's claim that humans are innately good as referring to the heavenly mandate inherent in human nature in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, similar to Jeong Yakyong. However, King Jeongjo differed from Jeong Yakyong by identifying it as Original Nature.¹¹ Jeong Yakyong avoided using the term Original Nature because it was a Buddhist concept rather than a Confucian one (Y. Jeong 2002, 346c), and he considered it heresy (Y. Jeong 2002, 346c).¹² Judging from this, if Jeong Yakyong had known that King Jeongjo regarded Mencius's concept of good nature as Original Nature (*bonyeon ji seong* 本然之性), he might have deemed King Jeongjo's interpretation heretical. Conversely, King Jeongjo considered Original Nature as a Neo-Confucian concept rather than a Buddhist one.¹³

10 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 1, Simun jip (The Works of Literature 詩文集) 8, "Maengja chaek" (Debate on the *Mencius* 孟子策): "This inquiry from King Jeongjo is also included in his book, *Hongjae jeonseo*. It is an inquiry that King Jeongjo posed to the Confucian scholars of Sungkyunkwan, as well as to other scholars he invited for debate" 王若曰...只道性善,得無論氣不備之嫌歟?...臣對曰...只道性善者,臣以爲孟子言性,主於天命,故固未嘗兼包氣質,而氣質之說,亦有窒礙,臣未敢以孟子爲未備也; King Jeongjo, *Hongjae jeonseo* 78, Gyeongsang gangue 15, "On Mengzi" (Debate on Mencius 孟子): "善養浩氣,誠有發前聖未發之功,而只道性善,得無不論氣不備之嫌歟?"

11 King Jeongjo, *Hongjae jeonseo* 69, Gyeongsang gangui 6, "On Daxue": "惟中庸天命之性,孟子道性善,直指其本然."

12 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 與猶堂全書 1, "Jachan myojimyeong": "日本然之性,原出佛書.與吾儒天命之性,相爲氷炭,不可道也."

13 King Jeongjo, *Hongjae jeonseo* 69, Gyeongsang gangui 6, "On Daxue": "此云與之以仁義禮智之性,此性字,先儒皆作本然之性."

Do Humans Inherently Favor Goodness or Are They Good? Jeong Yakyong's Revision and King Jeongjo

In Jeong Yakyong's response to King Jeongjo's inquiry, he regarded human nature as inherently good. However, after King Jeongjo's death, he revised his view, stating that human nature inclines toward good and feels ashamed of evil (*nakseon chiak* 樂善恥惡), meaning the nature of appetite (*giho ji seong* 嗜好之性). This was a reinterpretation of Mencius's concept of the goodness of human nature (Y. Jeong 2002, 38c–39c).¹⁴ Jeong Yakyong's view was interpretation of the Nature of Heavenly Mandate (*cheonmyeong ji seong* 天命之性) in *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) (1970, 769),¹⁵ as well as Mencius's concept:

Human nature has both physical and intellectual appetites. Physical appetites refer to the desires of the ears, eyes, mouth, and body. Intellectual appetites, on the other hand, pertain to the Nature of the Heavenly Mandate, Original Nature, the Heavenly Way, the inherent goodness of human nature, and the full development of human nature. (Y. Jeong 2002, 346c)¹⁶

However, both the Nature of Heavenly Mandate in *Zhongyong* and Mencius's concept differ from Jeong Yakyong's view, which regards human nature as an appetite for good. In contrast, King Jeongjo, like Mencius, regarded human nature as inherently good.

Jeong Yakyong's concept—that humans have an innate inclination toward goodness and feel ashamed of evil—implies that they possess an inherent ability to distinguish between good and evil, called *yeongmyeong* (intellect 靈明):

14 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonso* 2, Gyeong jip (On Confucian Classics 經集), "Simgyeong milheom" (Experience for the Classic of Mind 心經密驗): "言乎其性則樂善而恥惡, 此孟子所謂性善也." This sentence originally appears in *Simgyeong milheom* (*Self-Experience for the Classic of Mind* 心經密驗), a single work written by Jeong Yakyong in Gangjin 康津, the southwestern tip of the Korean peninsula, where he was exiled in the spring 1815, following King Jeongjo's death in 1800 (I. Lee 1977).

15 天命之謂性

16 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonso* 1, "Jachan myojimyeong": "曰性者嗜好也。有形軀之嗜; 有靈知之嗜...又以耳目口體之嗜爲性, 此形軀之嗜好也。天命之性, 性與天道, 性善盡性之性, 此靈知之嗜好也." Jeong Yakyong's concept of human nature's appetite for goodness (*giho ji seong* 嗜好之性) is derived from Mencius's (1970, 672) saying that humans inherently delight in righteousness just as they delight in eating meat 理義之悅我心, 猶芻豢之悅我口.

“Humans are endowed with intellect (*yeongmyeong* 靈明) by Heaven, which can develop into *ren* (humanity 仁), *yi* (righteousness 義), *li* (propriety 禮), and *zhi* (wisdom 智)” (Y. Jeong 2002, 63d).¹⁷

As humans inherently possess the ability to distinguish between good and evil, they can favor good and feel ashamed of evil. This idea was influenced by Matteo Ricci’s concepts of *siai* 司愛, which refers to liking good and disliking evil, and *lingcai* 靈才 or *siming* 司明, which denotes the capacity to discern right from wrong and differentiate truth from falsehood, including the ability to distinguish between good and evil.

“Of all things which mark off all men as being different from animals, none is greater than the intellect. The intellect (*lingcai* 靈才) can distinguish between right and wrong and between that which is true and that which is false” (Ricci 1923, 2; Lancashire and Fu 1985, 69).¹⁸

“If they are good, my affections *siai* 司愛 will delight in them; but if they are bad, my affections will loathe and hate them, for my reason (*siming* 司明) can thoroughly understand what is right and what is wrong, and my affections cause me either to delight in what is good, or to hate what is evil (Ricci 1923, 122; Lancashire and Fu 1985, 365).¹⁹

This claim of Matteo Ricci, based on the concept of reason as argued by Thomas Aquinas (2018, 1339), which in turn was influenced by Aristotle’s (2009, 40) notion of rational choice. While Matteo Ricci (1923, 117) viewed evil as the absence of good,²⁰ Jeong Yakyong considered it a real entity. However, Matteo Ricci’s (1923, 14) claim—human nature is good because it is bestowed by the Lord of Heaven²¹—differs from Jeong Yakyong’s. However, Jeong Yakyong (2002a, 346c) himself stated that his arguments were grounded in a passage from Mencius (1970, 672). In contrast to my interpretation of Jeong Yakyong’s claims, Kim Dong-il (2003, 48) argues that Jeong Yakyong’s claims were

17 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonso* 2, Gyeong jip 4, “Jungyong gangui bo” (Supplement to Debate on the *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸講義補), 63d: “人之受天, 只此靈明, 可仁可義可禮可智則有之矣.”

18 “凡人之所以異於禽獸, 無大乎靈才也. 靈才者, 能辯是非, 別真偽.”

19 “其善也, 吾以司愛者愛之, 欲之; 其惡也, 吾以司愛者惡之, 恨之. 蓋司明者, 達是又達非, 司愛者, 司善又司惡惡者也.”

20 “惡非實物, 乃無善之謂.”

21 “夫乾坤之內, 善性, 善行, 無不從天主稟之.”

influenced by *On Soul* (靈言蠡勺), a work by Francesco Sambiasi 畢方齊 (1582–1649), a Catholic missionary dispatched to China. Similarly, Chung Injae (2006, 182–98) also considered Jeong Yakyong’s arguments to be influenced by Matteo Ricci’s (1923, 85) concept of human nature, Francesco Sambiasi’s *On Soul*, and *Description of Humans* 性學彙述 by Giulio Aleni 艾儒略 (1582–1649), another Catholic missionary sent to China. Kim Borum (2024, 252–56) interpreted Jeong Yakyong’s concept of *yeongmyeong jiche* (靈明之體), implying reason, as being influenced by Emericus de Chavagnac’s 沙守信 (?–1717) *Zhen dao zizheng* (*The Truth Will Prove Itself* 真道自證), a work by a missionary dispatched to China.²² However, unquestionably, Jeong Yakyong’s concept had already been influenced by Matteo Ricci.

Tsai Chenfeng, on the other hand, believed that Jeong Yakyong’s claim was more aligned with the views of Dai Zhen 戴震 (1723–1777), a Qing 清 Dynasty (1616–1912) Confucian scholar, than influenced by Catholic missionary books. Tsai Chenfeng (2008, argued that Jeong Yakyong’s claim was grounded in Mencian ideas (Tsai 2008, 194–211). Nevertheless, Tsai overlooked the fact that Jeong Yakyong’s claim was not solely influenced by Dai Zhen but was also influenced by Catholic missionary books.

In contrast, Chung So-Yi (2009, 22–24) argued that Jeong Yakyong’s ideas represented a continuation of the intellectual traditions of scholar-officials from the Southern faction in Gyeonggi Province, specifically Chae Jegong 蔡濟恭 (1720–1799) (1999, 575a) and An Jeongbok 安鼎福 (1712–1791) (1999, 180c–d). However, although Chae Jegong (1999, 575a) and An Jeongbok (1999, 180d) referred to the “appetite of heaven,”²³ this concept differs significantly from Jeong Yakyong’s understanding of human nature as “appetite,” because Jeong Yakyong’s notion of “appetite” was grounded in intellect (*yeongmyeong* 靈明). Unlike Chung So-Yi, Baek Min-Jeong (2012, 230–32) argued that Jeong Yakyong’s ideas were influenced by Matteo Ricci’s *The True*

22 Unlike Kim Borum’s interpretation, Lee Hyang-man (2008) argued that Jeong Yakyong was influenced by Matteo Ricci’s concept of *yeongmyeong* and thus created his own concept, *yeongmyeong jiche*, by referencing Zhu Xi’s concept of *beoryeong bulmae* (Park 2022). Unlike Lee, other researchers (S. Kim 2009; C. Kim 2004; Choi 2020) claimed that Jeong Yakyong’s concept was influenced by *Xingxue cushu* 性學彙述 written by Giulio Aleni 艾儒略 (1582–1649), *Lingyan lishao* 靈言蠡勺 by Francesco Sambiasi 畢方齊 (1582–1649), and *Linghun daotishuo* 靈魂道體說 by Nicolo Longobardo 龍華民 (1565–1655).

23 Chae Jegong, *Beonam jip* 58, 575a: “天之性，本嗜善而厭惡。”; An Jeongbok, *Sunam jip*, 180c–d: “今俗之怨天者，猶曰老天無知。性情好惡，與少壯殊。”

Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (*Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義), as well as by the works of Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682), and Yi Ik 李瀾 (1681–1763). However, Baek did not fully consider the influence of Mencius on Jeong Yakyong's arguments alongside Matteo Ricci's ideas. In contrast, Setton (1997, 77) claimed that Jeong Yakyong's arguments were fundamentally rooted in Mencius. However, Setton also failed to acknowledge the simultaneous influence of Matteo Ricci on Jeong Yakyong's thought.

In contrast to Jeong Yakyong, King Jeongjo regarded *ren* (humanity 仁), *yi* (righteousness 義), *li* (propriety 禮), and *zhi* (wisdom 智) as innate moral qualities within human nature. His view was influenced by the Horak 湖洛 Debate,²⁴ which was based on Zhu Xi's annotations of Mencius's concept of human nature being good and the Nature of the Heavenly Mandate in *Zhongyong*.

Ren 仁: A Moral Act or Innate Human Nature? Jeong Yakyong's Revision and King Jeongjo

After King Jeongjo's death, Jeong Yakyong revised his response to the king's inquiry about *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) which became *The Supplement for Debate on the Doctrine of the Mean* (*Jungyong gangui bo* 中庸講義補). This book, originally written as *The Debate on the Doctrine of the Mean* (*Jungyong chaek* 中庸策) in 1784 in response to King Jeongjo's inquiry, was revised during Jeong Yakyong's exile to Gangjin 康津, the southeastern tip of the Korean peninsula, in 1814 (Y. Jeong 2002, 63a).²⁵ In this book, Jeong

24 Han Wonjin 韓元震 (1682–1751) lived near the Hogang River, now known as the Geumgang River, which gave rise to the term “Ho Learning,” 湖學 while Yi Jae 李穡 (1680–1746) lived near the Rakkang River, now the Hangang River, leading to the term “Rak Learning” 洛學. Although Yi Gan 李柬 (1677–1727) lived near the Hogang River, his views were similar to those of Yi Jae, and he was therefore referred to as a “Rak scholar.” Their debates came to be known as the “Horak 湖洛 Debate,” as noted in *Jeongjo sillok*: “元震嘗著‘未發兼氣質，人物五常不同’之說，與金昌翁、李穡、李柬之說不同，門徒互相詆毀。有湖學，洛學之名，蓋李穡居洛，元震居湖故云” (King Jeongjo, Year 23 [1799], Lunar Month 10, Day 15).

25 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 2, Gyeong jip 4, “Jungyong gangui bo”: “乾隆癸卯春，余以經義升太學，厥明年甲辰夏，余年二十三...嘉慶辛酉冬，余謫康津，越十有四年甲戌夏，臺啓始停。而赦書中滯，時余在茶山，著中庸自箴二卷，始取甲辰舊稿，再加刪潤，其或有違於本旨者追改之，其或，聖問之所不及而義有當辨者，按節增補，共六卷。”

Yakyong argued that goodness—defined as *ren* (humanity 仁), *yi* (righteousness 義), *li* (propriety 禮), and *zhi* (wisdom 智)—is not an innate aspect of human nature but rather the outcome of moral action (Y. Jeong 2002, 81c).²⁶ Jeong Yakyong regarded its basis as Confucius’s (2003, 288) response²⁷ to Yan Yuan’s inquiry into *ren* 仁: “Do not look unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not listen unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual; and do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual” (Y. Jeong 2002, 405a).²⁸ This view differs from Matteo Ricci’s (1923, 117) claim that humans inherently possess goodness 本性自善. Jeong Yakyong’s claim differs from Mencius’ (1970, 667) assertion that human nature is inherently good due to the Four Virtues—benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom—being innate in the human mind.²⁹ If that is the case, did Jeong Yakyong criticize Mencius’ view? Jeong Yakyong did not refute Mencius’ claim about the Four Beginnings (the mind’s feeling of pity and compassion; the mind’s feeling of shame and aversion; the mind’s feeling of modest and compliance; and the mind’s sense of right and wrong). Instead, he interpreted them as not moral acts but rather moral thinkings (Y. Jeong 2002, 405a).³⁰ However, the interpretation of Mencius by Jeong Yakyong is different from Mencius’s claim because Mencius (1970, 668) emphasizes that humans inherently possess the Four Beginnings as well as the Four Virtues.³¹ Jeong Yakyong’s claim that the Four Virtues are moral actions, inherently absent in human nature, was based on the idea that humans inherently possess reason, written in *The Supplement to Debate on Doctrine of the Mean* (*Jungyong gangui bo* 中庸講義補) (Y. Jeong 2002, 63d).³² Jeong Yakyong (2002a, 45a) criticized Zhu Xi’s claim that benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom were inherently part of human nature, because Jeong

26 Ibid.: “臣對曰: 仁義禮智之名, 成於行事之後, 此是人德, 不是人性。”

27 “子曰: 非禮勿視, 非禮勿聽, 非禮勿言, 非禮勿動。”

28 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 1, Simun jip 18, “Sang gamwon seo” (Letter to Gamwon 上翁園書): “仁義禮智是見於行事, 已爲仁爲義爲禮爲智者也。而乃以仁義禮智, 認爲在內之性, 反以惻隱羞惡辭讓是非, 爲發於仁義禮智者, 此皆看心性太重, 與孔子以四勿答顏淵問仁之義不同矣。”

29 “仁義禮智, 非由外鑠我也, 我固有之也, 弗思耳矣。”

30 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 1, Simun jip 18, “Sang gamwon seo”: “孟子惻隱羞惡辭讓是非, 是動於內而未及於行爲, 只爲仁義禮智之端緒而已。”

31 “惻隱之心, 人皆有之; 羞惡之心, 人皆有之; 恭敬之心, 人皆有之; 是非之心, 人皆有之。惻隱之心, 仁也; 羞惡之心, 義也; 恭敬之心, 禮也; 是非之心, 智也。仁義禮智, 非由外鑠我也。我固有之也, 弗思耳矣。”

32 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 2, Gyeong jip 4, “Jungyong gangui bo”: “仁義禮智之名, 本起於吾人行事, 並非在心之玄理, 人之受天, 只此靈明, 可仁可義可禮可智則有之矣。”

Yakyong regarded them not as innate endowments but as moral actions based on Confucius's response to Yan Yuan's 顏淵 inquiry into *ren* 仁: "Restraining yourself and returning to the rites" (*keji fuli* 克己復禮).

When *ren, yi, li, zhi* 仁義禮智 (morals) are expressed through action, they can be called *ren, yi, li, zhi*. However, *ren, yi, li, zhi* were known the innate nature of humans, and conversely, the Four Beginnings (the mind's feeling of pity and compassion 惻隱之心; the mind's feeling of shame and aversion 羞惡之心; the mind's feeling of modest and compliance 辭讓之心; and the mind's sense of right and wrong 是非之心) arise from *ren, yi, li, zhi*. These concepts differs from *siwu* (four don'ts: do not look unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not listen unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual; and do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual 四勿—非禮勿視·非禮勿聽·非禮勿言·非禮勿動), which was Confucius's response to Yan Yuan's inquiry about *ren*, because the human mind and nature was considered very important. This is why Guishan 龜山, the pen name of Yang Shi 楊時, a disciple of the Cheng brothers and the scholars who followed him regarded experiencing a state before the arising of feelings through *jeongjwa* (meditation 靜坐) as the goal of Sage Learning. Consequently, it is likely that, later on, none of the Cheng brothers' disciples avoided the mistake of falling into Zen 禪 due to this.³³ (Y. Jeong 2002, 405a)

In this way, Jeong Yakyong's (2002a, 405a³⁴; 2002b, 379d³⁵) argument that *ren* is not something innate in humans but rather refers to moral action is based not

33 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 1, Simun jip 18, "Sang gamwon seo": "仁義禮智是見於行事，已爲仁爲義爲禮爲智者也。而乃以仁義禮智，認爲在內之性，反以惻隱羞惡辭讓是非，爲發於仁義禮智者。此皆看心性太重，與孔子以四勿答顏淵問仁之義不同矣。此所以龜山以下諸子以靜坐看未發前氣像，爲聖學宗旨，而程門諸人晚來無一人得免涉禪之失者。" *Siwu* is an example of the practice of "restraining yourself and returning to the rites" (*keji fuli* 克己復禮), which embodies the practice of *ren* 仁: "顏淵問仁，子曰：克己復禮爲仁，一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉。爲仁由己，而由人乎哉。顏淵曰：請問其目，子曰：非禮勿視，非禮勿聽，非禮勿言，非禮勿動" (Confucius 1970, 287–88). In Jeong Yakyong's works, *ren* is not an innate morality in humans but rather a form of moral action: "爲仁由己，克己復禮，此孔門之正旨也 Jeong 2002, 41d); 蓋仁者人也，人與人盡分也，父與子二人也，君與臣二人也。凡父子君臣之間，所行禮節，孰非所以爲仁之方乎？兄弟賓主夫婦長幼，凡其禮節，皆人與人相與之法也，復禮爲仁，非謂是乎？" (Y. Jeong 2002, 347b); "非禮不動則克己爲仁；2002h, 107c, 顏淵問仁，子曰：克己復禮爲仁，明仁之爲物，成於人功，非賦生之初，天造一顆仁塊，插入人心也，克己復禮之時，豈不費許多人力乎？" (Y. Jeong 2002, 57a); "黼案仁非天理，乃是人德。孔子曰：克己復禮爲仁，明人慾既克，然後爲仁" (Y. Jeong 2002, 142d).

34 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 1, Simun jip 18, "Sang gamwon seo."

35 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 2, Gyeong jip 12, "Noneo gogum ju" (Past and Present Annotations of the *Analects* 論語古今註): "孔子之道，孝弟而已，以此成德，斯謂之仁。"

only on Confucius's response to Yan Yuan's inquiry about *ren* in the *Analects*, but also on Youzi's 有子 statement in the *Analects* that filial piety and brotherly affection form the foundation of *ren* (Confucius 1970, 57).³⁶ Judging from the fact that Jeong Yakyong (2002a, 379d)³⁷ referred to the practice of filial piety and brotherly affection mentioned by Youzi as the Way of Confucius, it can be inferred that Jeong Yakyong's concept of *ren* (moral action 仁) was based on Confucius's teachings, as he regarded Youzi's *ren* as being derived from Confucius. Therefore, Jeong Yakyong criticized the disciples of the Cheng brothers 程子, particularly Yang Shi 楊時 (1053–1135), for falling into *jeongjwa* (meditation 靜坐) in a manner similar to Zen Buddhism 禪, as they regarded *ren* as an inherent aspect of human nature rather than a moral action. Zhu Xi also interpreted *ren* as innate morality, asserting that moral action is practiced because of this innate morality, whereas Jeong Yakyong argued that *ren* is not innate morality but solely a moral action.³⁸ Zhu Xi's view influenced the Horak scholars. Scholars of "Ho Learning" and "Rak Learning" share the belief that *ren* is innate in human nature.³⁹

According to "Ho Learning" scholar, Han Wonjin 韓元震 (1682–1751), *li* 禮 in *keji fuli* 克己復禮 refers to the Heavenly Principle within human nature. The concept of *siwu* 四勿—非禮勿視·非禮勿聽·非禮勿言·非禮勿動 represents

36 “有子曰...孝弟也者，其爲仁之本與！”

37 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 1, Simun jip 17, “Wi Bansan Jeong Suchil jeungeon” (Letter to Jeong Suchil 爲盤山丁修七贈言).

38 “[質疑]集注曰仁者本心之全德。案仁者人也，二人爲仁，父子而盡其分則仁也，父與子二人。君臣而盡其分則仁也，君與臣二人。夫婦而盡其分則仁也，夫與婦二人。仁之名，必生於二人之間，只一己則仁之名無所立。近而五教，遠而至於天下萬姓，凡人與人盡其分，斯謂之仁，即所云仁民。故有子曰：孝弟也者，其爲仁之本，孝弟爲仁民之本。仁字訓詁，本宜如是，於是顏淵問仁，孔子却不把二人爲仁之義，以答其問，另就自己心上修治，使之爲仁，令克己以爲仁術。看來孔子此答，新奇出凡，殆若問東而答西，使之警發，非平平地順下說話也，有若反論然。故下段敷說其所以然曰：我若自修，即克己復禮。人皆歸順，天下歸仁焉，父子兄弟夫婦君臣，以至天下萬民，無一人不歸於仁人之所感化，於是乎仁成矣。” This contrasts Zhu Xi's annotation of Confucius's response, “restraining yourself and returning to the rites” (*keji fuli* 克己復禮), to Yan Yuan's inquiry about *ren*, as Zhu Xi interpreted *ren* as the complete virtue of the original mind rather than moral action.

39 “Ho Learning” scholar Han Wonjin (1998, 339d) criticized “Rak Learning” scholar Kim Changheup's claim that the innate Five Virtues in human and animal nature are the same. Instead, Han Wonjin argued that the innate Five Virtues of humans and animals are different: “今淵老之言曰：五常人物稟來同說，自濂溪至晦翁。又曰：五常一理，人物稟同，久矣有定說，而今有異論，不勝紛紛云云。此於孔孟論性處及濂溪晦翁之書，似未見者，可怪可怪。” Their debate arose from differing interpretations of Zhu Xi's *Annotations on the Doctrine of the Mean*: “天以陰陽五行化生萬物，氣以成形，而理亦賦焉，猶命令也。於是人物之生，因各得其所賦之理，以爲健順五常之德，所謂性也” (Zhu 1970b, 769).

the practice of *li* (Han 1998, 110a–b).⁴⁰ Han Wonjin’s interpretation was based on Zhu Xi’s (1970, 287) *Annotations on the Analects* (*Lunyu jizhu* 論語集註).⁴¹ Similarly, “Rak Learning” scholar, Kim Changheup 金昌翕 (1653–1722) regarded Chengzi’s saying *keji fuli* 克己復禮 as important, (C. Kim 1996, 126b)⁴² and the *keji fuli* means that *li* will naturally recover if humans let go of selfish desires (Chengzi 2019, 18).⁴³

Unlike Han Wonjin and Kim Cangheup, Jeong Yakyong (2002b, 41d) argued that “returning to the rites” (*fuli* 復禮) as *ren* means practicing the rites that govern relationships between ruler and subject, father and children, elder and younger brothers, host and guest, and adults and children.⁴⁴ It implies a criticism of Zhu Xi’s view that *ren* is an innate virtue in humans and that its practice is equivalent to the practice of *ren*, as well as Chengzi’s statement that if selfish desires are abandoned, one will naturally “return to the rites.”

Such claims by Horak scholars, based on the influence of Chengzi and Zhu Xi, influenced King Jeongjo. He regarded “the rites” (*li* 禮) in “restraining yourself and returning to the rites” (*keji fuli* 克己復禮) as the morality of innate human nature⁴⁵ and—influenced by Zhu Xi and Han Wonjin—interpreted *keji fuli* as the practice of *ren*.⁴⁶ King Jeongjo’s interpretation of *ren* (morality), as seen in his debate with Jeong Yakyong, aligns with the concept of *The Doctrine of Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸)—following human nature—which he understood to mean following Original Nature (Y. Jeong 2002, 64b).⁴⁷ This interpretation, based on Zhu Xi, suggests that morality is innate in humans. Jeong Yakyong argued that King Jeongjo’s interpretation of innate morality, influenced by Zhu

40 “孔子之告顏淵曰：一日克己復禮爲仁，天下歸仁...孔子所謂禮，即天理也。所謂惟精與其知禮與非禮者，窮理之事也。所謂惟一與其非禮而勿視聽言動者，力行之事也。”

41 “顏淵問仁。子曰：‘克己復禮爲仁。一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉。爲仁由己，而由人乎哉？’(朱熹註釋) 仁者，本心之全德。克，勝也。己，謂身之私欲也。復，反也。禮者，天理之節文也。爲仁者，所以全其心之德也。蓋心之全德，莫非天理，而亦不能不壞於人欲。故爲仁者必有以勝私欲而復於禮，則事皆天理，而本心之德復全於我矣。”

42 “程子書中，凡論閑邪存誠克己復禮敬義夾持之類，意味深厚，最宜玩釋。”

43 “克己則私心去，自然能復禮。”

44 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 2, Gyeong jip, “Simgyeong milheom”: “蓋仁者人也，人與人之盡分也，父與子二人也，君與臣二人也。凡父子君臣之間，所行禮節，孰非所以爲仁之方乎？兄弟賓主夫婦長幼，凡其禮節，皆人與人相與之法也，復禮爲仁，非謂是乎？”

45 King Jeongjo, *Hongjae jeonseo* 69, Gyeongjae gangui 6, “On Daxue”: “先儒以論語之克己復禮，證明復性之義，而禮者，性中之一德，復禮則性之全德，可無不復者歟？”

46 Ibid.: “論語之一日克己復禮，一日用其力於仁矣。”

47 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 2, Gyeong jip 4, “Jungyong gangui bo”: “御問曰：率性之率，朱子既以循釋之。又於或問，駁論諸家之說。”

Xi, differed from Confucius's concept of *keji fuli* (Y. Jeong 2002, 64b).⁴⁸

Despite Jeong Yakyong's respect for Yi Ik's theories, and while Yi Ik, influenced by Zhu Xi, interpreted the Four Virtues (*ren, yi, li, and zhi*) as innate to human nature and asserted that *fuli* (returning to the rites 復禮) is the practice of *ren* (I. Yi 1997, 396a),⁴⁹ his view differed from Jeong Yakyong's. Therefore, Jeong Yakyong's claim is considered creative.

Jeong Yakyong's response to King Jeongjo's inquiry was not initially influenced by Matteo Ricci's ideas. He read *Tianzhu shiyi* by Matteo Ricci when preparing his reply. In 1785 (the 9th year of King Jeongjo's reign), Jeong Yakyong debated Yi Byeok 李燦 (1754–1785) about the inquiry (Y. Jeong 2002, 340a)⁵⁰ and had received a Catholic book from Yi Byeok a year earlier, in 1784 (the 8th year of King Jeongjo's reign) (Y. Jeong 2002, 340a).⁵¹ Although Jeong Yakyong read other Catholic works (Y. Lee 1977),⁵² he either had not read Ricci's writings at the time or was not influenced by them. Thus, Ricci's ideas did not directly shape his initial response.

However, according to *The Veritable Records of King Jeongjo's Reign* (Year 15 [1791], Lunar Month 11, Day 13),⁵³ Yi Gigeong (1756–1819) accused Jeong of giving him *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義) in the spring of 1791 and discussing it. This suggests that Jeong Yakyong had read the book by then. Therefore, while Jeong Yakyong may have read Ricci's work before responding to King Jeongjo but it did not deeply influence his views.

48 Ibid.: “又曰或以率性爲順性命之理，則却是道因人有，由是觀之，所謂率性，不過任其自然，恐與古聖人克己復禮之學，不相符合。”

49 “仁義禮知性也，仁爲全德，禮有可據，不復禮，無以爲仁。”

50 Jeong Yakyong, *Yeoyudang jeonseo* 1, “Jachan myojimyeong”: “癸卯春，爲經義進士游太學。內降中庸講義八十餘條，時鏞友李燦，以博雅名，與議條對理發氣發。”

51 Ibid.: “甲辰夏，從李燦舟下斗尾峽，始聞西教，見一卷書。” However, Jeong Yakyong responded to King Jeongjo's inquiry in 1784, according to *Jeong Yagyong yeonbo* (*Chronology of Jeong Yakyong's Life*).

52 According to *The Chronicles of Jeong Yakyong*, in 1784, Jeong Yakyong followed Yi Byeok on a boat down Dumi Gorge, where he heard stories about Catholicism and began reading related texts. He studied works such as *Qike* 七克 by Didace de Pantoja (1571–1618), *Lingyan lishao* 靈言蠡勺 by Francesco Sambiasi (1582–1649), and *Zhuzhi qunzheng* 主制群徵 by Adam Schall von Bell (1591–1666). These were Catholic missionaries dispatched to China.

53 “甲辰春承薰之還也，臣未及見承薰，而若鏞與臣，相逢於泮村，先說承薰購來西書，臣請見其書。蓋承薰非不相親，而猶不若若鏞之尤切，故若鏞或以天主實義，聖世芻蕘，等語，轉送於臣，故臣不能不寓目。自是厥後，對若鏞，未嘗不論及此書。”

Conclusion

In the debate between King Jeongjo and Jeong Yakyong, both initially agreed with Mencius's claim that humans inherently possess goodness. However, after King Jeongjo's death, Jeong Yakyong revised his stance, asserting that humans inherently favor good and feel ashamed of evil. This implies that humans possess the ability to distinguish between good and evil, known as *yeongmyeong* (intellect 靈明), a concept influenced by Matteo Ricci's concept of *lingcai* (intellect 靈才). In contrast, Jeong Yakyong's claim that humans do not innately possess goodness differs from Matteo Ricci's assertion that they do. Jeong Yakyong's idea that humans inherently favor good and feel ashamed of evil was a reinterpretation of Mencius's notion of human nature being good, yet it ultimately diverged from Mencius's. As a result of this perspective, Jeong Yakyong regarded goodness not as an inherent quality of human nature but as a moral action. It represents a critique of the abstract moral principles characteristic of Neo-Confucian thought. Consequently, it underscores the importance of moral action rather than moral thinking in everyday human life. His assertion that goodness is defined by moral action was based on Confucius's response to Yan Yuan's inquiry into *ren* (humanity 仁). This view not only differs from Matteo Ricci, Mencius, and Zhu Xi but also from the teachings of Yi Ik, whom Jeong Yakyong respected. Therefore, his perspective can be considered creative.

In contrast, King Jeongjo consistently upheld the belief that humans inherently possess goodness, aligning with Mencius's argument. However, he criticized Mencius's claim that human nature is inherently good, arguing that it lacked logical rigor. He believed that Mencius's refutation of Gaozi's concept of Physical Nature failed to adequately address the distinctions between Original Nature and Physical Nature in humans—an interpretation influenced by Zhu Xi.

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Abstract

Are humans inherently good or not? Do humans inherently possess goodness, or is goodness defined by moral action? This article examines these questions through the debate between King Jeongjo and Jeong Yakyong. Previous researchers did not recognize Jeong Yakyong's philosophical shift. In their debate, both agreed with Mencius's claim that human nature is good. However, Jeongjo interpreted Mencius's argument through Zhu Xi's concepts of *li* 理 and *ki* 氣, and his interpretation shared a common point with the Horak 湖洛 scholars. After Jeongjo's death, Jeong revised his claim, asserting that humans are not innately good but possess a nature inclined toward goodness, which causes them to feel shame when they commit evil. This perspective deviated from Jeongjo and Mencius. Jeong's assertion incorporated Matteo Ricci's ideas, thereby enabling him to develop a unique standpoint. Therefore, Jeong argued that *ren* 仁 refers to a moral action, and not to an innate morality within humans. He drew this idea from Confucius's concept of *ren*, which differed from the perspectives of Ricci, Mencius, and Jeongjo, as well as from Yi Ik he paid respect to. Thus, Jeong's ideas were newly formed through Confucian moral philosophy, while Jeongjo grounded his views within the framework of Zhu.

Keywords: Jeong Yakyong, King Jeongjo, human nature, good, Mencius, Neo-Confucianism, Matteo Ricci