

Two Criticisms of Wang Yangming (王陽明) Commentaries on the notion of Gewu (格物) by Toegye (退溪) and Soko (素行)

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Abstract

There is a lot of controversy on the rising of Song-Ming-li-xue (宋明理学) in East-Asia, particularly on the government school of Zhuzi-xue (朱子学). Some of the disputants are in line with Zhuzi-xue, but others object to him more actively.

A typical example of rejecting Zhuzi-xue in China is Yangming-xue. In fact, we can also see various objections in other countries of East-Asia which did adopt Zhuzi-xue as a government school. For example, LEE Toegye (李退溪, 1501–1570) and YAMAGA Soko (山鹿素行, 1622–1685).

Generally, Toegye in Chosôn (朝鮮) had been known as an orthodox researcher of Zhuzi-xue, and his criticism on Yangming-xue is known as one component of his orthodoxy. But his standpoint on Zhuzi-xue is not adherence to it. This moderate dispute is the result of deepening the theory of Zhuzi on the arguments on Ri-Ki (理氣).

YAMAGA Soko was a leader of the Japanese Kogaku school (古学派). He had some sympathy for Zhuzi-xue, however, he criticized him from the viewpoint of Kogaku. His objection is more active than that of Toegye, and it is based on a concept of Identity.

Both of these thinkers reject Yangming-xue in the same light. What makes them criticize him and appreciate Zhuzi-xue despite the fact that he exhibits the same problems as Yangming? What is the aim of their criticisms? This presentation is going to reflect on the two thinkers: ideas, their understanding of the notion of “approach (格),” and about the final goal of their theories.

Introduction

There is a lot of controversy on the rising of Song-Ming-li-xue (宋明理学) in East-Asia, particularly on the government school of Zhu Xi known as 朱子学 in Japan and Korea. Some of the disputants are in line with Zhu Xi’s commentaries, but others object to him more actively. A typical example of rejecting Zhu Xi in China is Wang Yangming. But in fact, we can also find various objections to Zhu Xi in other East-Asian countries which *did* adopt Zhu Xi as a government school. For example, Lee Toegye (李退溪, 1501–1570) and Yamaga Soko (山鹿素行, 1622–1685).

Generally, the Chosôn (朝鮮) scholar Toegye is considered an orthodox researcher of Zhu

Xi, and his criticism on Wang Yangming is seen as one component of his orthodoxy. However, his standpoint on Zhu Xi does not amount to adherence to it. This moderate dispute is the result of deepening Zhu Xi's argument on Ri-Ki (理氣). Yamaga Soko was a leader of the Japanese Kogaku school (古学派). He had some sympathy for Zhu Xi, and yet he criticized him from the viewpoint of Kogaku. His objection is more active than that of Toegye, and it is based on a concept of national identity.

Both of these thinkers reject Wang Yangming in the same light. What makes them criticize him and appreciate Zhu Xi? What is the aim of their criticisms? This presentation is going to reflect on the two thinkers: on their ideas, their understanding of the notion of “approach” or “investigation (格),” and on the final goal of their theories.

1 Soko's commentary: Mono(物) is not the same as Koto(事)

Yamaga Soko's *Shisho-kuto-taizen-Daigaku* (四書句讀大全大学) was written in about one year (1666.11.10–1667.12.29.), while he was in exile in Ako (赤穂). He was a famous person who objected to Zhu Xi's ideas. His crime was a line that objected to Zhu Xi in his book *Seikyo-yoroku* (聖教要録). We can find the same anti-Zhu Xi line in his book *Daigaku*. The simplest and most important thing in that work is a definition of the concepts of Mono and Koto. Soko writes:

Mono is not the same as Koto. It is said that Mono has the basis and triviality, and Koto has the beginning and the end. This is a point of difference between Mono and Koto. Koto is given birth by Mono.¹

Until that time, traditional East-Asian readings of the two words saw a similarity between Mono and Koto. Soko's definition was aimed at this tradition, namely at theories based on Zhu Xi. His commentary mainly objected to Zhu Xi's world of *Li* (理). Bito Masahide (尾藤正英) explained the main feature of Soko's commentary as an objection to Zhu Xi's theory of Qiong-li (窮理). Bito writes:

[According to Zhu Xi's theory of Qiong-li] the principle of morality should be looked for in the human mind. Yet [Soko] criticized this view, and argued that it was not the original purpose of *Keisho* (經書).²

In addition, Bito points out the meaning of Soko's viewpoint.

Soko's thought [...] conflicted with Zhu Xi on the point of mankind's life-style. As he understood it, the definite life-style is only based on one's social duty.³

1 『山鹿素行全集』第十一卷, p. 105

2 尾藤正英 (上), p. 30

3 *ibid.* p. 33

Not all problems are solved by looking into the mind. In addition, there is a contradiction between outside social rules and oneself. Therefore, to think *the public prior to the private* means only that one should adapt oneself to social demands, or efface oneself with respect to the public.⁴

In Bito's opinion, we can read the aim of Soko's thought through his definition of Mono and Koto. Soko criticized Zhu Xi in order to build up the identity of Edo-period Japan, and to maintain a proper Japanese identity independent of China. In other words, it is a theory of what is properly Japanese, of what we can call Japanese ownership. However, if it is supposed to be such a theory, then we have to examine how the difference between Mono and Koto could be used in order to build up this ownership. To answer this question, we have to go back to Zhu Xi's definitions and their meanings.

2 Zhu Xi's commentary: to Approach / Investigate the things (物)

The most important point of Zhu Xi's thought is the concept of Li (理). When he defines the notion of Ge (格) as approach (至) or investigation (窮), his definition is supported by the universal principle of Li. In other words, Zhu Xi stresses not a difference between Wu (物) and Shi (事), but rather the notion of Ge (格).

All the things had come out into the world by the Li. In addition, every person has the same quality of Li by birth, which is called Xing (性). In fact, according to Zhu Xi's commentary on Ming-de (明德),⁵ we can know the universal principle of the world, and use it as human knowledge in our approach to things (物). His definition opens up a possibility that people have from birth. It also secures the social order by this principle of Li. According to Zhu Xi, we can belong to the state with a sense of security. Certainly, his theory had secured the possibility of human development and rights in modern China.

However, Zhu Xi's theory also implies a dangerous aspect of violence, by ignoring those others who are not part of a nation or unity. His notion of a universal principle often ignores such minorities. Nakajima Takahiro (中島隆博) pointed out this danger in Zhu Xi's theory, especially in the relation between the public and the private. He writes:

Public Universality which is resorted to by Oneself with a capital O, even if it could subsume a great number of matters and human beings, will, in the end, reduce them into One. Therefore, such Universality seems ignorant of *the publicness* which is supported by our being in-plural, in a way that is irreducible to Oneness.⁶

According to Nakajima, the Universality of Li could be ignore *the publicness* that supports

4 ibid. p. 36

5 『大学章句』経一章

6 中島隆博, p.135

Japanese *Oneness*. Of course, Soko denies the possibility of being unified into the culture of China, and wants to maintain a Japanese identity. This is common features of Japanese Kogaku and Koku-gaku scholars. But how was Soko's distinction between Mono and Koto to overcome the objection of the Universality of Li? Soko writes:

Once the thing exists, there should be a principle. It is an inevitable sincerity. It is public uncovered, and unconcealed. It is the most appropriate and the most suitable. The most justified, and the most flexible. It is nothing less than Mei-toku (明德).⁷

To Jump to our conclusion, Soko's Mei-toku is also based on an abstract and subjective principle like Li. And yet, through a similar basic principle, namely by his distinction between Mono and Koto, Japanese identity was built up, and would achieve the same Universality of Li. But again, the problem is how can this theory also maintain a Japanese ownership?

3 Wang Yangming's commentary: Correct the mind

The younger Yangming followed Zhu Xi's metaphysics. His notion of Gewu (格物) also comes from Zhu Xi. However, when he was 37 years-old, in Rong-zhang (龍場), he had an enlightenment. From that time on, his commentary on Gewu changed completely. One of his students writes:

I asked what is Gewu. The teacher said that Ge is correction. Correct the incorrect and return it to the Correct.⁸

According to Wang Yangming's definition, Ge (格) is a correction of the incorrect. And Wu (物) means Shi (事), the place of the work of thought. He writes:

Where the thought works there is Wu. If thought thinks about serving parents, then taking care of parents is *one thing* (一物), likewise, [...] serving the King, [...] loving people and loving things, [...] seeing, hearing, speaking and behaving, all of these are *one thing*.⁹

Chen Lai (陳來) points out the main feature of Wang Yangming's definition. He writes:

It is a strategic conversion of the definition of Wu. As a result, the direction of Gewu was changed from outside things to intentional behavior. We need to look to the mind in order to correct the incorrect ideas.¹⁰

7 『山鹿素行全集』第十一卷, p. 81

8 『伝習録』上, 卷一

9 ibid. p. 38

10 陳來지음 『양명철학』 p. 230

Yet, in fact, Soko's definition of Mono is in line with Wang Yangming's thought. So why did he criticize Yangming's theory? I think that the reason is national identity. Soko writes:

All over the world, all the matters accounted for as things. The sky, the earth and mankind, things of whatever physical forms are things. So they say that body, mind, thinking, knowledge about the inside, and outside, the relationships between Kings and vassals, parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers, friends—all of these are called things.¹¹

In a word, Wang Yangming's unification of all things under the sun is more effective for erasing national differences than Zhu Xi's theory. Therefore, it is not useful to Yamaga Soko and the samurai class, the ruling class of Edo society. Because Wang Yangming's theory does not allow national differences, Soko could not use it to establish Japanese identity and separation from China.

According to the viewpoint of ownership, one's nationality can also be part of one's proper identity. From this viewpoint, the idea of independent co-existence seems like a utopian ideal or even a mere ironic notion. What can we do in order to think and implement this idea of independent co-existence? In order to examine this question, I would like to consider Toegye's theory of Gyok-mul (格物).

4 Toegye's commentary: Investigate / Approach each Mul (物)

As mentioned above, Lee Toegye is considered an orthodox scholar who adopted Zhu Xi's theory. His thought and especially the notion of Gyok (格), contains two directions. One is Gyok-mul (格物), and the other is Mul-gyok (物格). Yoon Sa-soon (尹絲淳) introduces this as follows:

The character Gyok (格) means investigation (窮究) and approach (至) to things. When it is used in the combination of Gyok-mul, it mainly means to investigate. In that case we read it as *Investigating things*. On the other hand, in Mul-gyok it is mainly used to mean approach. In that case we read it as *Approach to things*.¹²

In fact, in Zhu Xi's commentary too the term Gyok (格) can be interpreted in two ways, as Chen-Lai pointed out in his works.¹³ On this point, Toegye is definitely in the line with Zhu Xi. However, he does not always adhere to him. For example, let us consider his distinction between subjective and objective beyond the logic of Li.

With respect to Li, there is definitely no distinction between objective (物) and subjective

11 『山鹿素行全集』第十一卷, p. 81

12 『退溪全書』上卷「格物物格俗說辨疑、答鄭子中」p. 627
quoted in 尹絲淳, p. 177

13 陳來之『陽明철학』p. 230

(我), outside and inside, the fine and the rough. But from the viewpoint of Sa-mul (事物), all the things in the world are outside of me. How can we say, if we rely only on the reasoning of Li, that all things are inside of me?¹⁴

This comment objects to the monism by Zhu Xi's universal theory of Li. As a result, we can see that Toegye's standpoint on Zhu Xi's theory also overcomes it. His distinction between Gyok-mul and Mul-gyok objects not only to Zhu Xi but also to Wang Yangming. His objection to Wang Yangming was mainly related to the violent aspect of his theory. This is even stronger than the violent aspect of Zhu Xi's theory, pointed out by Nakajima. Toegye summarized his commentary as follows:

Investigate or approach each thing¹⁵

According to Yoon, "this interpretation means neither an investigation of things nor an approach to things. Therefore, there are still problems with the argument."¹⁶ Indeed, if we try to follow Toegye's epistemology, this seems to be an unclear explanation. However, if we read Toegye's definition in light of an idea of Korean identity or ownership, we can find in this unclear explanation a new potential view of identity. According to this notion of identity, one can determine one's own and universal principle as a Li, and yet not undermine or reduce the identity of others. That is because all of those others are outside oneself. As Nakajima puts it, what we need the most is "an interval and respect for the interval"¹⁷ of each other. We can thus read Toegye's conclusion as a call for "mutual respect" and for "respect for the interval."

Conclusion

DAXUE (大学) is one of the best known parts of Zhu Xi's *SISHU* (四書). *Gewu* (格物) is the central concept in this text as well as in the thought and politics in East-Asia in general. However, there are many controversies regarding the interpretation of this concept.

This presentation discussed the commentaries of Yamaga Soko, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, and Lee Toegye. In addition, we argued that the ideas of national identity and the ownership of one's nation were at the background of their commentaries, especially in the case of Yamaga Soko. Nevertheless, this seems to be a common problem to thinkers of all nations.

If I may be allowed to quote something I wrote: "It was the name and language that define the identity of a group. The name and language a group has in common is the most important thing the group wants to keep."¹⁸ In other words, the identity of a group is defined by its name and language.

14 『退溪全書』上卷「格物物格俗說辨疑、答鄭子中」p. 627
quoted in 尹絲淳, p. 178

15 *ibid.*

16 *ibid.* p. 180

17 中島隆博, p. 139

18 Jacques Attali, *Au propre et au figuré: Une histoire de la propriété*

Identity is regarded as a presentation of the common property of the group.

Behind the criticism of Wang Yangming by Toegye and Soko, we can read a thinking and a working towards a national identity and ownership. We concluded that in order to think about identity in East-Asia we need to address the question of ownership. Without considering this fundamental problem, we may not realize independent co-existence in the future.

As a first step for the independent co-existence, we have to respect an interval between self and others. And keeping ours interval, we might refer to the notion of universal principle will be restrained by oneself, likewise, similar to the way Toegye argues we should investigate and approach each Mul (物).

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