

Introducing Daesoon Philosophy to the West

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Abstract

Daesoon philosophy has been described as a quintessential Korean philosophy. Given the great difference between traditional Western and East Asian ways of thinking, how can such a quintessential Korean philosophy be explained to people who have no background in traditional East Asian thought? After all, the Daesoon Jinrihoe way of approaching such core problems as how to make this world a better place is not only very different from the way the West has traditionally approached such problems, Daesoon Jinrihoe uses terminology which most Westerners are not very familiar with. Translation into Western languages such as English helps, but a conceptual gap remains because of the differences in the way key Daesoon Jinrihoe terms are understood in the West.

As a first step toward overcoming that gap, I discuss three key teachings of Daesoon philosophy and how their translations into English need to be amplified so that people in the West who are not well versed in East Asian philosophy can gain a more accurate understanding of what those terms and phrases mean in their original language. The three items discussed here are the tenet “virtuous concordance of yin and yang,” the Essential Attitude of sincerity, and the precept “do not deceive yourself.”

Keywords: yin; yang; concordance; virtue; tenet; Five Phases;
sincerity; self-deception

Introduction

A few years ago, I contributed a chapter to a book on the teachings of Daeseon Jinrihoe in which I argued that Daeseon philosophy is a quintessential Korean philosophy (Baker 2016). Though I have learned a lot more about Daeseon thought since I wrote that chapter, I have not seen anything to make me change that evaluation. However, I now realize that my chapter was incomplete. I did not address how such a quintessential Korean philosophy can be explained to people in the West who have no background in traditional East Asian thought.

After all, the Daeseon Jinrihoe way of approaching such core problems as how to make this world a better place is not only very different from the way the West has traditionally approached such problems, Daeseon Jinrihoe uses terminology which most Westerners are not very familiar with. Translation into Western languages such as English helps, but there still remains a conceptual gap because of the differences in the way key Daeseon Jinrihoe terms are usually understood in the West.

Daeseon Jinrihoe members do not, of course, face such a large conceptual gap in disseminating its teachings to fellow Koreans, who, so far, have been their primary concern. Though Koreans may not immediately grasp the full weight of Daeseon Jinrihoe terms when they are first exposed to how they are used in Daeseon Jinrihoe publications, most of that terminology will nevertheless look familiar. The majority of those terms has been part of East Asian religious and philosophical culture for millennia. That makes it somewhat easier for members of Daeseon Jinrihoe to explain its teachings to their fellow Koreans, and for those fellow Koreans to understand them. That may be one reason why, unlike some other religions which dispatch missionaries to foreign countries in an effort to convert people from different cultures to their way of thinking, Daeseon Jinrihoe members have tended to focus on their relatives, friends and neighbors. Rather than proselytizing strangers, Daeseon Jinrihoe members rely more on word-of-mouth transmission of their beliefs and values to relatives and friends, as well as the example of their own behavior and the activities of Daeseon Jinrihoe as an organization, to convince others to join them in the Daeseon Jinrihoe project to build a better world. (Chryssides 2022)

Even though Daeseon Jinrihoe does not send believers overseas to recruit new members, it nevertheless sees its message as a message for all humanity, not just for Koreans. It therefore wants to make that message available to peoples around the world, including people in the West, who do not know Korean. To do that, however, requires translation of Daeseon philosophy from Korean into English and other languages in wide-spread use outside of the Korean peninsula.

Translation is always a difficult task. But that task is made more difficult when the language being translated represents a very different culture from the culture

of the language, such as English, it is being translated into. Relying on a Korean-English dictionary to come up with a word-for-word literal translation will often lead readers of that translation astray. First of all, many Korean vocabulary items, especially philosophical and religious terminology, do not have an exact equivalent in English. Though there will be overlap between the way a term is used in a Korean linguistic and cultural concept and the way its closest equivalent is used in an English linguistic and cultural concept, the remaining differences, differences around the edges in the totality of what those different terms refer to, can lead to misunderstandings.

More important, languages do not exist apart from culture. Value-laden terms in particular are expressions of cultural assumptions which may not be shared across cultures. I do not mean only differences in how cultures evaluate behavior as ethical or unethical. Value-laden language is also found in how human beings, the natural world, and even the universe in its entirety are understood. Different cultures have different assumptions about how human beings are best defined, how human beings should understand and interact with the natural world, and even how the truly real and not fully real should be distinguished. Those assumptions, especially when they are not clearly articulated, can lead to people from different cultures understanding the same sentence in different ways.

This is a problem translators have faced for centuries. A few centuries ago, in China, one man facing the problem of explaining his Christian faith to those steeped in Confucianism threw up his hands in despair at the difficult of doing so with words alone. Yang Tingyun (1557-1627) lamented, “As for subtle principles and abstract ideas, even though books on them abound, it is impossible to rely on gestures and words alone to explain them thoroughly” (Cheung 2017, 63). He was writing about transmitting Western ideas to China, but the same thing can be said about transmitting Daeseon philosophy to the West.

Unlike Yang, I am not quite ready to give up on words. Instead, I suggest more words, words which provide explanations of what difficult translated passages mean.

Virtuous Concordance of Yin and Yang

Let me give an example of what I mean. Let's look at the first of the Four Tenets of Daeseon Jinrihoe. That tenet is translated in English as “Virtuous Concordance of Yin and Yang.” That is an accurate literal translation of the original four-syllable phrase *eumyang hapdeok* (陰陽合德, 음양합덕). However, I doubt that many native speakers of English who are not well acquainted with East Asian ways of things will understand what that phrase is actually saying. The problem is not yin and yang per se. Yin and yang are widely enough known in the West that they are usually not translated but instead are written in a rough approximation of the way they are read in Chinese. The problem is the assumptions underlying this four-syllable phrase.

Though I pronounced the phrase the Korean way, it is actually a Chinese character phrase, written according to the grammar of classical Chinese. If we were to translate it word by word, we would say “yin and yang unite/harmonize their virtues.” That is Chinese grammar. Korean grammar puts a verb like “work together/harmonize” at the end of a sentence, with an object like “virtues” preceding it. But this grammatical difference between Chinese and Korean in the placement of the verb is not the major conceptual barrier to a correct understanding of this tenet when it is translated into English as “virtuous concordance of yin and yang.” The problem is that this English translation lacks any verb at all.

Sino-Korean phrases, which this phrase is an example of, reflect the implications of their use in a Chinese context. Chinese is not only a member of a totally different language family from English, it is rooted in a totally different world view than the world view reflected in English grammar and vocabulary. Chinese is more process-based than substance-based, focused more on becoming than on being. To put it simply, if English can be said to be a language emphasizing nouns, Chinese is a language putting more stress on verbs. Therefore, to leave out the verb in translating a Sino-Korean phrase strips it of much of what gives it its rhetorical power.

The original Sino-Korean formulation makes yin and yang appear more active than they are in the standard English translation. That is the nature of the Sino-Korean language—action is more important than mere existence. The grammar tells us that. In the Sino-Korean formulation we have yin and yang as the active subject, followed by a verb “to work together, to harmonize,” followed by a noun which tells us what is acted upon. In English we have adjective modifying a noun, and then we have “of” followed by yin and yang as nouns. Not only are there no verbs in the English translation, yin and yang, though they are the subject of the Sino-Korean phrase, appear at the end of the English translation, robbing them of much of the active status they enjoy as the subject appearing at the beginning of the original phrase.

Moreover, to comprehend the full import of this tenet, it is necessary to understand that yin and yang are not things. Instead, they are aspects of things or, more accurately, of how things behave. To be properly understood, yin and yang must be perceived in contrast to other elements in their immediate environment. In fact, yin and yang are defined by their opposites: yang is yang because it is not yin, and yin is yin because it is not yang. This is very different from what was traditionally the dominant way of thinking in the West, which has focused on things as they are more in themselves than on what they do and how they interact with, and compare to, other things around them. There are exceptions in Western thought, of course. Hegel, for example, argued that a slave was not a slave unless he had an owner, and a slave owner could not be a slave owner unless he owned a slave. Moreover, a person cannot be a husband unless he has a spouse, and woman cannot be a wife unless she has a spouse. So even among Western philosophers there have been those who recognized that nothing exists in isolation but

can only be defined by contrasting it with what it is not. Nevertheless, this was a minor current in the ocean of Western thought, whereas it has been dominant in East Asian ways of thinking.

Yin and yang represent concepts so different from what we are accustomed to in the West that they cannot be translated. Instead, they are transliterated and then explained. Unfortunately, the usual explanations are misleading. We are told that yin and yang are dark and light, female and male, soft and hard, passive and active, respectively. However, that explanation fails to point out explicitly that actually, since yin and yang are terms implying comparison with the other, they should be explained as darker and lighter, more feminine and more masculine, softer and harder, more passive and more active, etc.

Another term we have to think more deeply about is “virtuous.” The sinograph translated here as “virtuous” (德) is a sinograph which, when read as a noun rather than as an adjective, can be translated not only as virtue but also as “power” and as “virtuosity.” This sinograph can be translated, depending on context, as either virtue or power because there has been a widespread assumption in traditional East Asian thought that if you interact appropriately (virtuously) with the world around you, then you will influence those people and things you interact with to in turn interact with you appropriately. Since you are influencing the way other peoples and things behave, you are exerting power!

The phrase *eumyang hapdeok* has ancient roots. It appears in the line 陰陽合德而剛柔有體 in the Chinese Classic known as the *Book of Changes*, which was written over two thousand years ago. There have been numerous translations of that text into Western languages. The best English translators of the *Book of Changes*, trying to render it as it was originally understood, have interpreted that line as a reference to the hexagrams, the fortune-telling combinations of six broken and unbroken lines which are the core of the *Book of Changes*, also known in Chinese as the *Yi Jing* (周易, in Korean it is called *Juyeok* 주역). For example, the nineteenth-century translation by James Legge of the line in which this phrase appears reads “These two unite according to their qualities, and there comes the embodiment of the result by the strong and weak (lines)” (Legge 1963, 395). A more recent translation by Richard Lynn translates that same line as “The hard and soft exist as hexagrams only after yin and yang have combined their virtues” (Lynn 1994, 86). Gyungwon Lee correctly goes beyond those narrow hexagram-centered readings of that line to tell us that over the centuries it came to be read as explaining the origin of all things in the universe in a constant process of ever-changing interactions (Lee 2013, 82-84). I doubt that the average person in the West, unless he or she has studied East Asian philosophy, would realize that is how a Korean would understand this line.

Moreover, a Westerner encountering Daeseon thought might have trouble even understanding what “virtuous” means in “the virtuous concordance of yin and yang.”

English speakers normally understand virtue as a term applied to appropriate human behavior. We don't normally talk of things or even animals as being virtuous. However, Lee correctly explains that *eumyang hapdeok* applies to both the natural world and the human community (Lee 2013, 102). That being the case, we need elaboration on what “virtuous” in this short phrase implies.

In doing that, we have to take into account that calling this phrase one of Daesoon Jinrihoe's Four Tenets may also confuse people in the West. Tenet implies in English a belief in a specific fact. However, the four tenets of Daesoon thought refer to the belief that four changes are in the process of emerging in the world in which we live and have been doing so since Kang Jeungsan initiated *cheonji gongsa* (the work of reordering heaven and earth) in the early twentieth century. Moreover, Daesoon Jinrihoe tells us that those changes will not occur automatically but need human beings to continue to work toward making sure that happens. One of those changes is that yin and yang, which have been acting contrary to each other rather than cooperating as they should, should now begin to interact appropriately and complement each other. The way this tenet is understood in Daesoon philosophy is much more active than is implied in the English translation. It means that the work of reordering of heaven and earth is bringing yin and yang into harmonious interaction, which is what the English translation means by “virtuous concordance” (Lee 2013, 86). Tenet here, therefore, refers to a belief about what will emerge thanks to the efforts of Kang Jeungsan and his followers rather than a belief about what is a settled fact now.

Furthermore, this tenet can only be understood against the background of the assumption that yin and yang have been out of balance, causing all sorts of problems by creating disharmony in this world, and it is necessary to restore their proper harmonious cooperation to restore order to the universe. The Daesoon Jinrihoe term for the era in which that imbalance led to men treating women unfairly, and the rich and the powerful oppressing the poor and the weak, is *sanggeuk*, translated as “mutual contention.”

From Yin and Yang to the Five Phases

Sanggeuk (相克, 상극), like *eumyang hapdeok* is an ancient term. It is often used in the context of the Five Phases (五行, 오행, also translated as the Five Processes or the Five Movements), which are believed to have evolved out of yin and yang and which, in turn, gave rise to the many different things, processes, and events we see in the world today. The Five Phases are described as wood, soil, water, fire, and metal. They are seen as sometimes caught up in a circular relationship of “mutual contention.” This is a circular destructive series of relationships and interactions in which wood, by growing out of the ground, breaks up the soil; soil blocks the flow of water; water puts out fire, fire melts metal, and metal cuts wood, and then it starts up again with wood breaking

up the soil. The Five Phases, by the way, are not actual wood, soil water, fire, and metal, but instead are terms applied to five different ways processes occur and influence each other in an endless cycle of interactive changes. They should be understood as meaning five types of processes which are wood-like, soil-like, water-like, fire-like, and metal-like, respectively. Wood is the beginning of growth or slowly picking up speed, soil is stability, water is decline or slowing down, fire is fast growth or rapidly speeding up, and metal is the beginning of decline or slowing down. The Five Phases are a reference all the processes of change which constitute the universe, not just to what those five material entities do.

The relationship of “mutual contention” is sometimes referred to as a relationship of mutual destruction. Fortunately, however, those Five Phases also have a more productive relationship, which is called *sangsaeng* (相生, 상생), translated by Daeseon Jinrihoe as “mutual beneficence.” This is another circular series of relationships and interactions. However, in the *sangsaeng* cycle, wood fuels fires, fires then produce soil (ash), metal then forms in that soil, water (dew) forms on that metal, that water then ensures that wood can grow, which then leads to fires (Graham 1986, 47-66).

Sangsaeng does not, of course, refer only to productive interactions among the Five Phases. It also refers to human beings working together in fruitful harmony in order to create better lives for everyone (Šorytė 2022, 104-05). In a *sangsaeng* world, human beings will stop harming each other by putting their own selfish interests ahead of the common good. Instead, they will act in such a way as to ensure that those around them benefit and, as a result, they will also create a better world for themselves. Nevertheless, the philosophical foundation for the distinction between *sangsaeng* and *sanggeuk* lies in the assumption that there are two fundamental impersonal forces operating in the world in which we live, and those forces can be broadly characterized as yin and yang.

Daeseon Jinrihoe teaches that, thanks to the reordering of heaven and earth, we are now entering an era of *sangsaeng* and leaving *sanggeuk* behind. When yin and yang begin working together harmoniously rather than acting at cross purposes, today's world, with its wars, its racial discrimination, its anti-feminine patriarchy, its economic inequality, and, of course, its different ideologies, will all become a thing of the past. Those *sanggeuk* conflicts and contradictions, which are caused by the failure of yin and yang, and their Five Phases, to work together harmoniously as they should, will be replaced by the *sangsaeng* of harmonious cooperation. This more productive set of interactions will also bring the material and the cultural realms together, so that humanity is not governed by machines and technology but instead will use advances in technology to create a better world for human beings. The end result, brought about by the work of reordering heaven and earth which will bring yin and yang into proper balance so that yang doesn't dominate yin as it has been doing, will be a paradise on this earth (Lee 2013, 102).

Here again Daesoon Jinrihoe is building on a legacy of the East Asian past. The ancient Chinese text *Daodejing* (道德經, 도덕경) has a line 萬物負陰而抱陽沖氣以為和 which promises that it is possible for yin and yang (which it calls the two *ki* 氣 C. *qi*, the primal vital energies of the cosmos) to join forces and makes our lives better. Richard Lynn translates that line as “the Myriad things, bearing yin and embracing yang, form a unified harmony through the fusing of these two vital forms” (Lynn 1999, 135). Another modern scholar of traditional East Asian thought, Roger Ames, provides a slightly different translation of that line: “Everything carries yin on its shoulders and yang in its arms and blends these two vital energies together (*qi*) to make them harmonious” (Ames 2011, 64).

The fact that two outstanding scholars of East Asian traditional thought translate those passages differently is evidence that translation is an art, not an exact science, and that no one translation can render totally transparent in the target language the deeper meaning of a passage as it is expressed in the original language. Each translator has to decide what to leave out of their translation as well as what to include. Ames, for example, give a more active spin on that line with his “make them harmonious: than Lynn does with his “form a unified harmony.”

As an early Qing China translator, Wei Xiangqian (魏象乾, dates unknown) pointed out,

The Dao of translation is most obvious, yet it manifests itself in the minutest details: it is simple and straightforward, but it involves a vast number of contexts. It changes constantly and has numerous permutations, and is mysterious beyond imagination. Precisely because it is capable of infinite changes, the translated work may differ from, or lose, the meaning of the original. Scholars should be very careful! To be ‘accurate’, one has to understand thoroughly the meaning of the original text, to have a grasp of its rhetoric and style, to catch its tone, to capture its nuances, not to add or omit anything, nor to invert or to translate only the idea (Cheung 2017, 139-40).

My suggestion that translating *eumyang hapdeok* as “virtuous concordance of yin and yang” is misleading should not be misunderstood as a criticism of the translator. The problem is not the translator but the language into which the tenets are being translated and the numerous mysterious permutations this entails.

We could add “will” when explaining this tenet and the other three tenets to Westerners, since those tenets are expressions of belief that we can, through hard work and devotion, bring those tenets to realization rather than simply describing what has been going on up to now. That would mean that we would translate *eumyang hapdeok* as “yin and yang will be brought into appropriate (virtuous) and powerful harmonious cooperation (concordance).” That would also more accurately represent the importance

of the verb in this phrase, signaling the dynamic nature of the process it is describing. However, such a formulation would destroy the distinctive succinctness of the original phrase which gives it its rhetorical power.

Moreover, not only is this slightly revised formulation not as concise as it is in Sino-Korean, it also fails to clarify the assumptions behind, and the implications of, this phrase. In order for people in the West who are not already familiar with East Asian philosophy to understand the full import of this short phrase, they will need an explanation of the unarticulated assumptions behind it. They need to understand that yin and yang are not things but processes; that yin and yang, and their manifestations as the Five Phases, can interact in both productive and destructive ways; and that when they interact appropriately (virtuously), they then will be powerful enough to bring everything else into harmonious cooperation. Only with such a clarification can Westerners then understand that this phrase is promising that the previously existing destructive types of interactions, evidence of which is right before our eyes today, are being replaced by constructive interactions of mutual beneficence rather than mutual contention. Translation of passages with such broad scope and multi-layered implications as “virtuous concordance of yin and yang” requires elucidation. Otherwise, the ideas the translation is meant to convey will fail to reach their intended audience with the depth and breadth they deserve.

Sincerity

The same need for elucidations to accompany translations is true of some other key features of Daeseon thought, even when a lack of clarity isn't caused by grammatical differences between the Chinese/Korean source language and the English language it is being translated into. For example, one of the Three Essential Attitudes is translated as “sincerity.” That English translation is a noun, just as the original is. Moreover, sincerity is the standard translation into English of *seong* (誠). Nevertheless, I doubt most native speakers of English who are not already familiar with East Asian ways of thinking will understand exactly what “sincerity” as one of the Three Essential Attitudes means.

To a native speaker of English, sincerity has a limited meaning of honesty. You are sincere if you do what you say you are going to do, and you say what you really think. That is close to a literal reading of the two components of the sinograph *seong*: “to speak (言)” and “to accomplish (成)” However, “sincerity” has come to mean much more than that in an East Asian context, as is clear in the English-language explanation of sincerity in *Essentials of Daeseon Jinriboe*. There it is explained that “being sincere means having a mind that is endlessly attentive, weary of cracks or slack, and fearful of its own insufficiency.” (DIRC 2020, 30)

That explication helps readers understand that sincerity means much more in Daeseon Jinrihoe writings than it does in ordinary English. Nevertheless, it appears to me that readers unfamiliar with East Asian philosophies will, even after reading this explication, nevertheless still find it difficult to understand why sincerity is given such importance in Daeseon thought. To grasp the full import of this one word, it is necessary to go back far in time and examine how the word translated here as “sincerity” has been used over the centuries.

The *locus classicus* for the term “sincerity” is the short Confucian classic usually called *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸, *Chungyong*/ *C. Zhongyong*). In that text from well over 2,000 years ago, we can find, in chapter 25, the line 誠者自成也 誠者物之終始, 不誠無物. One translation of that line, by Andrew Plaks, translates *seong*, the first sinograph, as “integral wholeness” rather than “sincerity.” The rest of the line says of *seong*, “The term ‘integral wholeness’ refers to a process of becoming complete through one’s own agency. . . Integral wholeness represents the beginning and end of all things, for without this wholeness nothing in this world would truly exist.” (Plaks 2003, 45) Roger Ames and David Hall, two more well-respected contemporary translators of ancient Confucian texts, prefer to translate *seong* as “creativity,” since they believe that text is telling is that it is by being “sincere” that we are able to change the world around us for the better. They translate that same passage from chapter 25 of the *Doctrine of the Mean* as “Creativity is self-consummating. . . Creativity is a process taken from its beginning to its end, and without this creativity there are no events” (Ames and Hall 2001, 106). Others prefer to translate *seong* as integrity (Zhang 2002, 140; Nylan 2014, 130). On the other hand, James Legge, who, in the 19th century, was the first to translate the *Doctrine of the Mean* into English, at first used “sincerity” as the translation for *seong* but later changed his translation of *seong* to “perfection of nature” (Wang 2008, 153-54).

These multiple ways of translating the single sinograph *seong* shows us again that translation is an art more than it is a science. A translator has to decide which of the many meanings a term might imply in English needs to be stressed in the translation. “Sincerity” is not an incorrect translation of *seong*. However, like all the other terms used to translate it, it fails to convey the full import of what that term means in either a Confucian or a Daeseon Jinrihoe context. In my own work, I often simply transliterate that term, or I use a translation that is so long it should be considered more an explanation than a translation. In my forthcoming translation of commentaries on the *Zhongyong* by Korean Confucian philosopher Jeong Yagyong (1762-1836), when I do not transliterate, I gloss *seong* as “thinking and acting in an unselfishly cooperative and appropriately responsive manner” (Baker 2023).

Seong, as it applies to human beings, is more than just an internal attitude. It also has to be manifest in interactions with others. Gyungwon Lee points out that the

famous Korean Neo-Confucian philosopher Toegye Yi Hwang (1501-1570) explained that *seong* is a characteristic of a heart-mind manifesting through real principles only. Only a person whose heart-mind is filled with real principles (實理, *silli*) and therefore acts only in accordance with those principles can be deemed “sincere.” What does “real principles” mean in this context? It means the patterns defining and directing appropriate interactive behavior. A person who is *seong* is not only honest but also acts appropriately in whatever situation he or she finds himself or herself in. *Seong*, with the same meaning of acting appropriately, refers to the external physical realm as well. As Toegye notes, *seong*, in the physical realm, refers to real principles without any deviations from those principles (Lee 2013, 269). Regular movements by the sun, and moon, and the stars through the sky is just as much *seong* as virtuous human behavior is.

Yulgok Yi I (1536-84), another important Korean Neo-Confucian philosopher, said something similar. He wrote, “Heaven accomplishes the transforming and nurturing that produces all things in the universe by means of real *li*, the concrete all-encompassing patterns of appropriate interactions. Human beings are able to respond to as well as influence things around them by means of a real heart-and-mind. Both real *li* and a real heart-and-mind are nothing more than sincerity itself.” Yulgok adds, reinforcing the connection between cosmic *seong* and human *seong*, “A sage is someone whose thoughts and actions are aligned with the principles of Heaven and who therefore doesn’t have the slightest taint of selfishness. Such a person is completely sincere” (Yi 2022, *Seubyu* VI: 15a; Ro 2010). Yulgok is articulating the mainstream Confucian view that “sincerity” is much more than simple honesty. It means doing what you are supposed to do, whether you are a sentient human being or an insentient physical object, without any concern for personal benefit. That is very different from the usual Western understanding of sincerity as limited to being synonymous with honesty. Inanimate objects cannot be honest, since they are incapable of lying. They can, however, be “sincere” in the Confucian sense of moving through space as they should move through space.

Confucian thinkers reinforced the notion that *seong* means much more than simple honesty by contrasting *seong* with truthfulness. A thirteen-century Chinese work explains that *seong* refers to real principles operating unhindered and spontaneously. It therefore corresponds to the Dao of Heaven. Truthfulness, on the other hand, belongs to the Dao of human beings, since only human beings can be truthful and, to do so, requires effort (Chen 1986, 100).

That does not mean, of course, that human beings should not strive to be “sincere.” It is important to think and act in a *seong* manner because only by doing so can you realize your full potential. Human beings in traditional East Asian philosophy are social beings, defined as human beings by the fact that they interact with other human beings. Such a social definition of human beings implies that you only become the true human being you are meant to be if you interact appropriately, that is to say “sincerely,” with others.

When we act inappropriately, on the other hand, we not only risk harming others, we also hinder our own self-realization, keeping us from becoming the person we should become. That is why “sincerity” is so important in East Asian ethics, and in Daeseon philosophy.

Another way to understand *seong*, both in a Confucian and in a Daeseon philosophy context, is to see it as referring to aligning yourself with the way things really are, and to do so in full earnestness. That means you should be devoted to what you are supposed to do for the sake of the common good, without any reservations, since that is where “real principles” lie. You should be dedicated completely to whatever task lies before you.

Do Not Deceive Yourself

Among those tasks is being true to your true self. In traditional East Asian philosophy, the true self means your moral self, the self that tells you to cooperate harmoniously and selflessly with everyone and everything around you. That is why *seong* is related to the Daeseon Jinrihoe precept which tells you, “Do not deceive yourself.”

To someone not accustomed to traditional East Asian ways of thinking, it is hard to understand what it means to deceive yourself. That is because, in the Western tradition, each person is a unified self, though that self has both moral and immoral tendencies. Selfishness is seen as just as much a part of our true nature, if not more so, than selflessness and devotion to the common good.

That is quite different from the traditional East Asian understanding of human nature, which underlies Daeseon philosophy. According to that traditional assumption, our true human nature is aligned with heaven (the Dao of Heaven) and is therefore virtuous. However, we often mistake our selfish impulses for our true human nature. When we do that, we are deceiving ourselves and will, therefore, end up betraying our true nature. That is the reason we need to guard against such self-deception. If we succeed in avoiding self-deception, we will be sincere, in that we will act in accord with our true nature and therefore will interact with everyone and everything around us appropriately, without our thoughts and actions being distorted by any concern for selfish benefit (Lee 2013, 284-86).

As the *Essentials of Daeseon Jinrihoe* explains, “Do not deceive yourself” means to “Abandon the selfish mind and commit yourself to recovering your conscientious mind” (DIRC 2020, 37). This exhortation is based on the traditional East Asian assumption that “is” and “ought” are intertwined. What we really are, our true existence, is what we ought to be. If we instead pay attention to our selfish self, our false self (that which is contrary to what we should be), then we are deceiving ourselves. Another way to translation this exhortation is, “Guard against betraying your higher self, your true self.” Only if we do that can be “sincere.”

Daesoon thought includes all of these implications of the term “sincerity.” However, it adds to them a theistic component. “Sincerity” in Daesoon thought also means “sincere devotion” to Sangje. By including “sincerity” among the Three Essential Attitudes, Daesoon Jinrihoe is enjoining us to cultivate a strong, unceasing and selfless devotion to Sangje, the Supreme God of the Ninth Heaven (Lee 2013, 276-90). This theistic addition to the traditional understanding of *seong* is one of the features of Daesoon thought which makes it distinctive, and makes *seong* much more than the simple English translation of “sincerity” implies.

We need, therefore, to explain *seong* in a way that brings out the full import of that concept. Simply calling it “sincerity” without amplifying its many connotations will give Western readers an incomplete and even misleading understanding of what that key term means. For example, sincerity does not normally have theistic connotations in English. It can be combined with “devotion” in a reference to sincere devotion to God, but even there the implication is limited to an internal state of mind in which we are not pretending to believe something we really do not believe. “Sincerity” in English does not imply that we are being faithful to our true inner nature, nor does it imply that our sincerity is somehow connected to the orderly movement of celestial bodies.

Conclusion

Translation, as noted earlier, is always a difficult task. Translators need to be faithful not just to the literal meaning of the text they are translating but also to the text’s rhetorical structure which gives it its persuasive power. That means that short phrases should not be translated into much longer explanatory sentences or paragraphs. However, translations of religious and philosophical texts also require explication when the assumptions between the ideas in the text being translated are very different from the assumptions underlying the language into which the text is being translated. Translations such as “virtuous concordance of yin and yang,” “sincerity,” and “do not deceive yourself” do not need to be changed. However, they do need to be explained, if Daesoon philosophy is to reach a receptive audience in the Western world.

Conflict of Interest

Don Baker has been on the Editorial Board of *JDTREA* since July 2021 but had no role in the decision to publish this article. No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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