

Neo-Confucian Principle(s) in the Thought of Sun Myung Moon

Thomas Selover
May 18, 2015



Reverend Moon was arguably one of the most influential of modern Koreans, and certainly one of the most controversial. In order to better understand his thought, it is natural and helpful to pay attention to Korean cultural influences, including Confucian and Neo-Confucian content, which have helped to shape the patterns of his thinking.

In his autobiography, *As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen*, Rev. Moon recounts his early childhood in an environment where fervent Christian revivalism was spreading in a society deeply imbued with Confucian patterns of life and thought. He noted,

When I turned ten, my father had me attend a traditional school in our village, where an old man taught Chinese classics... At school, we read the *Analecets* of Confucius and the works of Mencius, and we were taught Chinese characters.



Thomas Selover

Through this education, he developed a life-long love of Chinese characters, and he delighted in expounding new insights from the form of the characters. This article explores some family resemblances between Neo-Confucian thought and Unification thought in four areas, hoping to shed some intriguing light in both directions.

Li 理 as “Principle”

The first evidence of Neo-Confucian content is in the phrase “Divine Principle” or “The Principle,” used in ordinary Unification parlance as shorthand for Rev. Moon’s teachings, particularly insofar as those teachings are understood to be revelatory. Because the *Divine Principle* (DP) text relies on biblical quotations to advance its philosophical and theological points, it has generally been viewed in relation to Christian theology. However, the background for many of the ideas contained in the DP book, including the title itself, can be traced to Confucian and Neo-Confucian themes instead.

In Neo-Confucian thought, *li* (principle) signifies the inherent principles of the natural world, as well as our human ability to understand those principles (intelligibility). For Neo-Confucian thought, *li* are immanent in the world of experience, rather than being primarily conceptual or formulaic.

Recognizing the Neo-Confucian background to the concept of *li* (principle) helps us to understand that “the Principle” is not a book, but rather the book called *Divine Principle* (DP) is an account of the Principle. Recalling this Neo-Confucian insight on the nature of *li* may help Unificationists avoid the kind of disputations over verbal formulas that have plagued the history of Christianity in the West.

Yin and Yang

Another site of Confucian influence is in the first major section of *Exposition of Divine Principle*, “The Principle of Creation.” This section builds up a basic theory of how the characteristic patterns of the myriad things manifest the character of their Source or Creator. In the course of this exposition, there is a direct reference to Confucian and Neo-Confucian sources. The text mentions the *Yijing* (Book of Change) as the basis of East Asian philosophy and continues:

There, the origin of the universe is the Great Ultimate (Ultimate Void). From the Great Ultimate arose yang and yin, and from yang and yin came forth the Five Agents — metal, wood, water, fire and earth — and from the Five Agents all things came into existence.

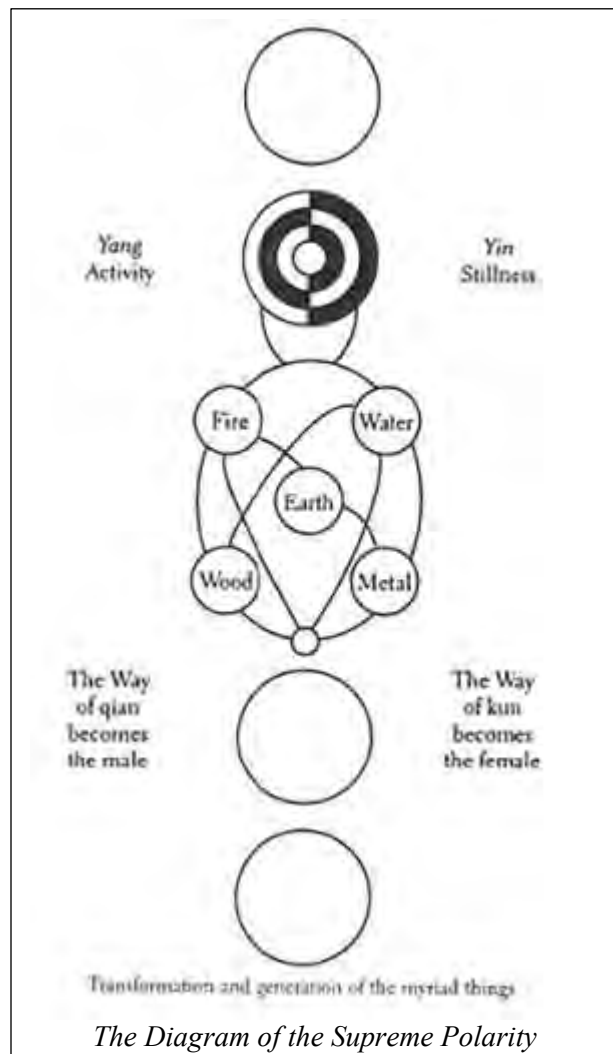
This turns out to be a paraphrase of the opening lines of a key Neo-Confucian text called “Explaining the Diagram of the Great Ultimate (*T'ai-chi-t'u shuo*)” by Chou Tun-i. This text then proceeds to trace the interaction of yin and yang in the unfolding of the cosmos. *Exposition of Divine Principle* specifically affirms the polarity of yin and yang as a principle that is found throughout all things.

As Rev. Moon put it in an oft-quoted discourse titled “In Search of the Origin of the Universe”: “If we go

deeper and deeper in our search for the origin of the universe, we arrive at God. We come to know that God possesses dual characteristics of male and female.” Although Unification piety often continues to use the male-language for God inherited from the Christian tradition, there seems to be little justification for that in light of the Principle. Indeed, at the Coronation of God ceremony, which Rev. Moon held in 2001, God was represented by a dual throne. In this respect, we can say that the One is best represented by two.

Unmanifest and Manifest

Early Neo-Confucianists debated the substantiality of the Great Ultimate. The issue was whether the “Great Ultimate” from which the substantial world derives is likewise substantial, or whether there is a separate, incorporeal, unmanifest “Ultimate Void” behind the scenes, as suggested by the Diagram:



Historically, the debate was won by those who argued that although the “unmanifest” (Ultimate Void, the top circle in the diagram) and “manifest” (Great Ultimate, the second circle) are spoken of and depicted separately, the two terms should be understood as inseparable descriptions of the One Source. This became the orthodox Neo-Confucian view, which was later used in both China and Korea as a standard for higher education and the government civil service examinations.

Later in his life, an intriguing new theme emerged in Rev. Moon’s teaching: “The God of Night and the God of Day.” Members of the Unification community have found this terminology genuinely puzzling. However, when this theme is placed in fruitful proximity with the Neo-Confucian “Diagram of the Great Ultimate,” it can be seen as likewise depicting a continuous flow from the unmanifest and mysterious to the manifest and evident, metaphorically from Night to Day. The Unmanifest, or “Night,” seems to be beyond specific characteristics or predicates, simply the unfathomable. Nevertheless, when the two aspects (“poles”) are held tightly together, there does seem to be one thing that could be predicated of the Unmanifest — namely, the creative urge or desire to manifest. As with the yin-yang polarity, the One is best represented as two.

Hoon Dok Hae and Neo-Confucian Fellowship

As Unificationists know, Rev. Moon initiated a pattern for regular study gatherings, known as *Hoon Dok Hae* (“gatherings for reading and study”). Over recent years, the recommended format and the scope of texts for this practice have been in a process of continuous change and adjustment. The practice of Hoon Dok Hae may take various forms, from communal reading to interactive discussion. This seems to be another sign of Neo-Confucian influence, and reflecting on the Neo-Confucian practice can suggest ways that Hoon Dok Hae might develop further.

One of the discoveries of the Neo-Confucian fellowship was a mutual, reflective investigation of “classical” or scriptural texts, coupled with personal practice, in a way that each could enhance the other. This practice was called “savoring the text” and “investigation of things.” It was central to the process of “savoring the text” that it be done in a hermeneutic circle of like-minded fellow students. The shared value of “reverence” indicates not only the attitude with which each individual approaches the classical texts, but also the attitude with which those engaged in Neo-Confucian learning would treat one another.

If the Unification Hoon Dok Hae is to continue and expand as a genuinely enriching practice for Unificationists, there must develop a similarly open-ended approach to the texts — coupled with “small group” dynamics of shared “investigation.” In such a circle, as in the Neo-Confucian fellowship, participants can grapple with the texts’ difficulties on several levels (literal meaning, metaphorical implications, and “precept to practice”). The practice, then, would provide an opportunity for discernment of *li* (The Principle) to take place collectively. Savoring the words and phrases of Hoon Dok Hae texts, mutually exploring the Principle in patterns of thought, and sharing the experiences of daily life in light of those texts could create a very attractive Hoon Dok Hae practice.

One of the challenging issues for the Unification community going forward is how to study Rev. Moon

and Mrs. Moon's teachings so that a creative understanding of the Principle is possible, and regularly experienced. A concern of mine is that the insights recorded in the Principle books might become rote, recited rather than reflected upon. Recalling Neo-Confucian examples may help to forestall the tendency to rely on literalistic readings of particular texts, in favor of the practice of experiential savoring. Then, Hoon Dok Hae itself would imply an invitation to investigate the Principle for oneself, in a circle of like-minded friends, as it appears in the texts and in the observable world around us.

During this period, just after the passing of Sun Myung Moon, it is an urgent matter for the Unification community to come to a new self-understanding of what it means to live by the Principle, without depending on his constant charismatic leadership. In this regard, I believe that an awareness of the resonances with Neo-Confucian thought and practice can be of much assistance.

Dr. Thomas Selover (UTS Class of 1977) is a professor at Cheongshim Graduate School of Theology in Korea. He received his doctorate from Harvard University Divinity School in comparative religion and Confucian thought, and has taught at universities and colleges in the U.S., Canada, China, and Korea.

This article is adapted from Dr. Selover's full paper, "Neo-Confucian Principle(s) in the Thought of Sun Myung Moon," Journal of Unification Studies, vol. 15, 2014. The entire 2014 issue is now available online.

Photo at top: "*Sun An Moon Yin Yang*" by Micheal John Senkiw.