Yi T’oegye’s Reverent Seriousness (Kyŏng) and Philosophical Therapy

Jinseok Kang

Published online: 26 February 2015
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

Abstract Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501–1570), also known as Yi T’oegye 李退溪, was a prominent Korean scholar of Confucian philosophy during the Chosŏn 朝鲜 dynasty. He reinterpreted the Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) school of neo-Confucianism, taking reverent seriousness (kyŏng 敬) as the core principle of his philosophy. He studied various symptoms observed in the human mind and suggested the notion of reverent seriousness as a primary therapeutic method. His theory of kyŏng proposed the stages of philosophical therapy, which are uniquely found in Eastern philosophy and are clearly distinct from Western theories of philosophical therapy. As the methodology for such a therapy, he examined the study of “not-yet-aroused and already-aroused” (weifa yifa 未發已發) while seeking unification with the Way of Heaven. The study of quiet-sitting (jingzuo 靜坐) and reading (dushu 讀書), which he applied to his therapy, is included in the general category of holistic therapy based on “abiding by kyŏng” (kŏkyŏng 居敬), translating into wide-ranging therapeutic effects.

Keywords Yi Hwang 李滉 · Yi T’oegye 李退溪 · Reverent seriousness · Kyŏng 敬 · Philosophical therapy

1 Introduction

Korean society is drawing close attention from around the world in two respects: one is that Korean pop culture—most widely known through its pop music scene or “K-Pop”—is being enthusiastically welcomed worldwide; the other is that, since 2010, the country has consistently remained at the top among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries in suicide rates. In stark contrast to its upbeat ambience as seen from the outside, Korean society is quickly
turning into a high-risk zone where suicide rates are increasing and depression is becoming widespread.\(^1\) Since the 2000s, depression in Korea has quickly expanded to the youth and middle-aged. Stunned by how this traditionally Confucian country now ranks no. 1 in suicide rates, academic circles have sought to identify possible causes. For this purpose, however, so-called social-scientific analysis—highlighting the phenomenon of marginalization caused by the global financial crisis, pressure from neo-liberalistic competition within society, and conflict between classes and generations—fails to provide effective sources for resolving the real problems of high suicide rates and ever-spreading depression.

It was this sense of crisis that led to the establishment of the Humanities Therapy Group (HTG) in Korea in 2007, which has sought to approach psychopathological phenomena in Korean society from the perspective of “Humanities Therapy” as opposed to pharmacotherapy or psychoanalytical treatment. A key member of HTG, RHEE Younge 李英儀, defines Humanities Therapy as “a theoretical and practical activity, aiming for the health of the mind and the happiness of life as a realization of the spirit of the humanities, applying a novel interdisciplinary method that integrates the curative contents and effects of the humanities and its related fields, and not only preventing but also healing mental and physical suffering of an individual or a group” (Rhee 2011: 740). The goal of Humanities Therapy is to address wide array of mental problems facing people today, such as anger, madness, depression, and suicidal thoughts, and bring them back to a happy, healthy life through the interdisciplinary implementation of arts and humanities content.

Among the various areas of Humanities Therapy,\(^2\) I place my focus on the domain of “philosophical counseling,” which can be found in the method of diagnosing and curing diseases of the mind (Rhee 2010: 139). Philosophical counseling may be understood as a “philosophical therapy” that constitutes one branch of Humanities Therapy, for any counseling claiming a philosophical approach must diagnose disease in a philosophical way. Also, a philosophical counselor may use a range of philosophical texts that are fit for counseling, so the method can thus be called the “medicine of Wisdom” (Rhee 2010: 140).

The theories of philosophical counseling as we know them today were further expounded by Lou Marinoff, who examined wide-ranging psychopathological symptoms suffered by modern-day people from the approach of philosophical counseling. Adopting the perspective of “dis-ease” as opposed to “disease,” he sought to realize “therapy for the sane”—not for patients having developed “diseases” (Marinoff 1999: 12; 2004: 7). The therapy that he aimed to establish is largely preventive in that the focus of treatment was placed on the patient’s condition before aggravating into a

---

\(^1\) Korea’s suicide rates have skyrocketed since the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s to reach 33.5 per 100,000 persons in 2010, the highest among OECD member states. The OECD averages 12.9 suicides per the standard population of 100,000 (S. Yi, Rho, and Yi 2012: 15). Suicide rates for men are double those for women; the number of suicide attempts by men grows bigger among the middle-aged and reaches the highest level among the elderly population in their 60s or older, leading to an increase in actual suicide rates (S. Yi, Rho, and Yi 2012: 61).

\(^2\) KIM Jongmi 金鍾美 also explains, “The Humanities Therapy as a new academic discipline interweaves academic areas of linguistics, literature, philosophy, history and arts. The Therapy is composed of the multi-disciplinary practice of Speech and Communication therapy, Literature Therapy, Philosophical Counseling and Arts Therapy, whose application is rooted in the academic disciplines belonging to the college of Arts and Humanities” (Kim 2010: 52).