The Reading of the *Mencius* by Korean Confucian Scholars: Rhetorical Exegesis and the *Dao*

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**Abstract:** When Joseon Korea scholars were interpreting the *Mencius* (孟子: K. Maengja or Mengzi), they were focusing on its content and on its rhetorical elements at the same time. For a given commentator, selecting various rhetorical features (such as grammatical and lexical specificities) meant to read the *dao* 道 (K. *do*) of the *Mencius* in a fashion different from the one expounded by other scholars. In this article, I examine the relationship these commentators were establishing between the textual patterns of the *Mencius* and the encompassing reality, *dao*, as understood by this latter work. Specifically, I focus upon the works of two Joseon scholars—Yi Hwang 李滉’s *Maengja seogui* 孟子釋義 and Wi Baekgyu 魏伯珪’s *Maengja chaui* 孟子箚義. Through their reading, I notably attempt to (a) describe how rhetorically oriented exegeses had been maturing throughout this era; and to (b) elucidate how Korean commentators, through their rhetorical commentaries, put forward interpretations that differed from the ones propounded by the orthodox tradition as exemplified by Zhu Xi.

**Keywords:** *Mencius*; rhetorical exegesis; *dao*; Confucianism; Joseon Korea; Yi Hwang; Wi Baekgyu

1. **Introduction**

Just as the Christian Bible in the West was both a sacred scriptural body and a model for literary inspiration and patterns, in pre-modern East Asia the reading of the Confucian Classics focused on their spiritual truths as well as on their stylistic elements (Jiang and Jiang 2011, p. 213). To an even greater extent than the other Classics, the *Mencius* (孟子: K. Maengja or Mengzi) was read not only as a sacred text containing various metaphysical arguments, but also as narrative prose consisting of dynamic persuasive techniques and diverse literary ornamentations: Mencius was regarded as having been not only a Sage but also a *vir bonus dicendi peritus* (a good man skilled in the art of speaking).

Since the canonical *Mencius* may prove to be artfully composed, with coherent passages designed to convey particular messages to the reader, the stylistic elements of the text serve to uncover the Sage’s plot hidden in the text. Readers can easily notice what appear to be conflicting truths within the same sentence, often rendering the text highly obscure. This difficulty has led interpreters to attempt to elucidate the text’s teachings of the *dao* 道 (K. *do*) through explaining Mengzi’s art of argumentation.

A rhetorically oriented exegesis is a reading that interprets the Classics based on their “fundamental textual features” (K. *munu* 文義; literally, the textual meaning). It approaches a piece of writing through its literary style—the oratory, sentence usage, structure of sections, etc., or it examines their *topoi* or *loci* through the art of embellishment and/or persuasion. Such rhetorically oriented exegeses are found throughout the exegetical traditions of East Asia, just as literary criticism has existed as a hermeneutic methodology for the Bible in those of the West. Although terminological differences exist in the recent scholarship, recognizing “rhetoric” as a hermeneutic methodology for interpreting the Classics in the Sinographic Cosmopolis, including Joseon Korea, has gradually gained
more scholarly attention both in the East and the West (Denecke 2010; Dong 1997; Gong 2008; Li 2011; Rusk 2012; You 2019; Zhang 2017).

In the Sinographic sphere, the three parts of rhetoric are: (1) K. eose 語勢, the term referring to both an aesthetic element and to the “mood” of the text; (2) K. eobeop 語法, a structuring element of the text; (3) K. eoui 語義, the intention, emotion, and perception of the writer (You 2018, p. 513). Reading the Mencius, the scholars of Joseon Korea paid more attention to the third, eoui, than scholars of Qing China and Edo Japan. They had a greater tendency to interpret the spiritual and ideological implications of the text though its rhetorical elements, etc., rather than just providing the appreciation of its expressions or analysis of its structural aspects.

This hermeneutic feature can be viewed as a result of the fact that “the Joseon dynasty is the first and only East Asian regime to be established under exclusive neo-Confucian auspices (Kalton et al. 1994, p. xix)”. Neo-Confucians tend to read the Classics from a moral and philosophical perspective; “Neo-Confucians were not greatly interested in history or literature, except to the extent that they could put them in service of their own program of moral cultivation (Bol 2018, p. 2)”. That is to say, the Neo-Confucians of Joseon, by and large, looked at the stylistic elements of the text insofar as they were revelatory of the author’s thought and spiritual outlook.

Rhetoric and philosophy are clearly interconnected, but there are no a priori answers to the question of which of them comes first. The purpose of this article is to evaluate the intertwining of these two disciplines within the exegetical tradition of pre-modern Korea.

For that purpose, I will firstly investigate how Joseon scholars found in the ancient expression susaibgiseong 修辭立其誠 (“Refining one’s word/establishing one’s sincerity”—see below) the ground upon which to develop a Korean concept of rhetoric (Part 2). Next, I will examine the rhetorically oriented exegeses of the Mencius propounded by the two Joseon scholars—Yi Hwang 李滉 (1502–1571)’s Maengja seogui 孟子釋義 and Wi Baekgyu 魏伯珪 (1727–1798)’s Maengja chaui 孟子箚義. I will notably scrutinize how they read the dao of Confucianism via the unearthing of stylistic elements of the text. Yi Hwang is a representative Confucian scholar of the early Joseon dynasty. His thoughts on Confucianism greatly influenced contemporary scholars, throughout the Joseon period. His Maengja seogui is considered the first Korean midrash on the Mencius, and includes a uniquely Korean-style gloss, the so-called K. gugyeol 口諭 (literally, oral edicts). Wi Baekgyu is a Confucian scholar of the late Joseon dynasty. His interpretation of the Classics was centering on the rhetorical features of the text to a greater extent than other scholars of Joseon had been doing. His Maengja chaui is regarded as the most comprehensive rhetorically oriented exegesis of the Mencius in the exegetical tradition of Korea (Part 3). Last but not least, I will uncover how rhetorical interpretations took distance from the “orthodox” tradition, comparing Wi Baekgyu and Zhu Xi’s commentaries (Part 4). By describing how rhetorically oriented exegeses of the Joseon matured, how differences in the thinking of the commentators made them emphasize contrasted rhetorical strategies, this article contextualizes rhetorically oriented exegesis within the interplay between rhetoric and thought: it highlights how the two dimensions were mutually shaping each other in the exegetical tradition proper to the Joseon period.

2. The Intertwining of Rhetoric and Philosophy—Joseon Scholars’ Reading of Susaibgiseong 修辭立其誠

The English word rhetoric derives from ancient Greek and is defined in various ways. Lu (1998, p. 2) writes that the term most commonly refers to the artistic use of oral and written expressions; in 21st century East Asia, it generally only applies to the art of textual ornamentation. However, in the Sinographic sphere, the traditional meaning of rhetoric encompasses both persuasive skills and techniques of embellishment.

The first occurrence of a Sinographic term roughly conterminous with “rhetoric”, namely K. susa 修辭 (Ch. xiuci; literally, “refined words”) can be found in the Book of Changes (Yijing 易經).
The superior man (K. gunja, Ch. junzi 君子) advances in virtue, and cultivates everything within the sphere of his duty. His whole-heartedness and good faith are the way by which he advances in virtue. He refines his words (K. susa, Ch. xiuci 修辭) and establishes his sincerity (K. ibgiseong, Ch. liqicheng 立其誠), and thus dwells in the sphere of his duty.5

The connection between rhetoric and philosophy has been discussed since ancient times both in the East and the West. In the case of the West, starting with Cicero (B.C.106–B.C.43) and down to the recent work of Paul de Man (1919–1983) and beyond, scholars have argued that rhetorical patterns and ideas are inextricably linked. In the case of the East, it is unlikely that there is a systematic account on the relation between rhetoric and philosophy. As the Confucian teachings, however, place a greater emphasis on the moral impact of speech, the aforementioned passage “K. susaibgiseong 修辭立其誠” of the Book of Changes has provided thinkers with a basis for theorizing the connection between these two dimensions.

Broadly speaking, the interpretations of the expression susaibgiseong, can be divided into two lines. Line (1): the section “refining words (susa 修辭)” and the one “establishing his sincerity (ibgiseong 立其誠)” are in a parallel relationship. Line (2): the section “refining words” and the one “establishing his sincerity” are in a causal relationship. That is to say, perceptions differ as to the relationship between artfulness and thought depending on whether the passage is read as “refining words and establishing his sincerity” or as “after establishing his sincerity, he is able to refine his words”.

In a sense, both the former and the latter readings are similar in that “establishing one’s sincerity” is interconnected with “refining words”. Line (1), however, suggests that the purpose of refining words is to establish one’s sincerity, indicating that “refining words” is useless if such operation does not illuminate the dao of Confucianism. On the other hand, Line (2) considers that establishing one’s sincerity is a prerequisite for refining words, meaning that the one who cultivates his heart-mind will naturally improve his compositional skills. In this view, even though the writers do not focus on stylistic techniques, as long as they understand and practice the dao of Confucianism they will be able to convey to the reader what they do intend to convey. In the latter interpretation, philosophy influences rhetoric to a greater extent than it is the case in the former.

In pre-modern China, the latter interpretation—understanding the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric as causal—prevailed over the former (Zhou 2014, pp. 3–21). A clear representative of this tendency is Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200-K. Ju Hui-, a Chinese scholar who eventually defined orthodox Neo-Confucian thought in East Asia). Zhu Xi notably said that “if you fully understand things and affairs and have a peaceful mind, you can be good at speech”.6 In Joseon Korea, reading philosophy and rhetoric as a causal relationship was also dominant. For example, Gwon Geun 權近 (1352–1409) interprets the phrase susaibgiseong in the following way:

“Guarding against depravity, he preserves his sincerity” expresses things in terms of the heart-mind; “By attention to one’s words, one establishes one’s sincerity” expresses things in terms of [external] realities and affairs. In doing so, the inner and the outer mutually cultivate each other. If someone expresses things in terms of the heart-mind, real patterned-principle will be securely retained. And so, the original text, thus says “chon 存” (preserve). If someone expresses things in terms of [external] realities and affairs, real virtue will be applied in the right place. And so, the original text, thus says “lip 立” (establish). One who ‘preserves’ follows [his] inherent nature (bonyeon 本然) and maintains it; One who ‘establishes’ achieves what is appropriate (dangyeon 當然) and extends it. (Gwon 1995, vol. 87, p. 12)7

Gwon Geun contributed to the embedding of Neo-Confucianism in Joseon, and his interpretation of the Classics was widely referred to by many scholars of that period. Among the existing sources, his work Juyeok cheongyeollok 周易淺見錄 is the oldest midrash
on the *Book of Changes* in Korea (Yim 2021, p. 46). In his annotations on *susaebgiseong*, we find Gwon Geun’s understanding of the two traditional concepts of “rhetoric”. First, Gwon Geun sheds light on “establishing sincerity” rather than on “refining words”, which means that the main purpose of writing is not to display artfulness but rather to deliver the Confucian truth. Second, Gwon Geun argues that stylistic techniques are closely related to self-cultivation. This means that writing is an expression of what is in one’s mind, so once one has achieved spiritual maturity one’s compositional skills will naturally be advanced. Through these two dimensions, Gwon Geun stresses the centrality of conveying the omnipresent Confucian truth (in other words, the *dao*) in writing rather than perusing the colorful ornaments of the text. In his commentary on the *Book of Changes*, Yi Seeung (1473–1528; a scholar of the early Joseon) also argues that establishing sincerity is a prerequisite for stylistic techniques (Yi 1995, vol. 87, p. 572).

When the English word *rhetoric* was translated into the Sinographic term *susa*, Yi Taejun 李泰俊 (1904–?; a novelist of Joseon) described the traditional concept of rhetoric as follows:

> There have already been compositional techniques from the ancient times. Originally, both Eastern and Western concepts of rhetoric are derived from persuasive skills, not techniques of embellishment. Since language came before writing and eloquence was developed before the invention of a printing machine, both the Sinographic term *susa* and the English term rhetoric started with the meaning of persuasive skills. (Yi 1998, p. 23)

Yi Taejun stressed the fact that rhetoric began in ancient East Asia as a set of “persuasive skills” rather than of “techniques of embellishment”. Yi’s point was that rhetoric fundamentally started from logical, persuasive ideas, not artful ornamentations. In a similar vein, during the late 19th and early 20th century, Sinographic terms such as *susa nonbyeon* 修辭論辯 and *byeollon* 辯論 were also applied as translations of the English term *rhetoric* in Joseon Korea. That is to say, the traditional Korean concept of rhetoric contains the idea that the author’s plot/concerns are indwelling in a specific pattern of rhetoric, indicating that rhetoric and philosophy are closely interconnected.

Artful expression is derived from the intention of conveying and establishing belief; logical expression stems from one’s true belief. Additionally, one’s true belief leads to establish one’s sincerity through continuous effort. Rhetoric and true belief, thus, are not separated but closely intertwined. This conviction was even firmer in pre-modern Joseon Korea, where the Neo-Confucian literary idea that the aim of literature is to transmit the *dao* (K. *Muni jaedo*, Ch. *Wenyi zaidao* 文以載道) was more predominant than in other East Asian countries.

For Joseon Confucians, the *dao* is indwelling in the rhetorical patterns of the Classics. They believe that achieving the Confucian truth is more important than enhancing artful writing skills. Influenced by this view, many scholars of the Joseon period have attempted to define Sagehood through an analysis of the stylistic elements of the *Mencius*.

### 3. Explaining the *Dao of Mencius* with a Rhetorical Perspective—The Cases of Yi Hwang and Wi Baekgyu

In the previous section, we uncovered the traditional Korean concept of rhetoric, which encompasses both persuasive skills and techniques of embellishment, indicating that this concept closely intertwines rhetoric and philosophy. Influenced by this view, the Joseon scholars tried to read the *dao* of the Classics from their stylistic patterns. In this section, we will further examine the connections and the tension between rhetoric and philosophy through the prism of the rhetorical annotations on the *Mencius* made by two scholars—Yi Hwang and Wi Baekgyu. In this way, we will be able to perceive how the rhetorically oriented exegeses of the Joseon progressively matured.
3.1. Yi Hwang’s Maengja Seogui

Among the existing sources, Yi Hwang’s Maengja seogui is the oldest midrash on the Mencius in Korea (Ham 2017, pp. 119–20). The Maengja seogui played a pivotal role in the publication of “the Vernacularized Classics—Maengja (K. Maengja onhaebon 孟子諺解本, translation by Park 2019)”. This work is one of the state-created Korean editions of the Confucian Classics. These editions mightily contributed to the fact that Confucianism became the state religious ideology of the dynasty, as they were supplying definitive vernacularized Korean annotations (called “vernacularization” by Kornicki (2018) and Pollock (2006)).

In the Maengja seogui, Yi Hwang internalizes the existing Korean vernacular readings and annotations of his predecessors, including Zhu Xi, and suggests his own interpretations of the Mencius. The Maengja seogui consists of two parts:

1. The original text with Korean gloss—so-called K. “gugyeol”: Gugyeol is a hangul grammatical glossing that provides a vernacular paraphrase of the Sinitic original. This part shows the existing vernacular readings of phrases in the Mencius.

2. Yi Hwang’s annotations written in literary Sinitic: Yi Hwang first presents how he understands the gugyeol of that time and sketches textual meaning of the passage. He then explains Mencius’s spiritual thought as connoted in the original text and provides his extratextual interpretations in order to deepen the comprehension of his readers.

As Park (2019, p. 145) has noted, gugyeol is one of the unique tools for vernacular reading of Sinitic texts in pre-modern Korea: “The term gugyeol refers both to a system of vernacular reading by gloss and also to the glosses themselves (the term is sometimes used interchangeably with to). As a system of vernacular reading, gugyeol uses a grammatical transcoding algorithm that shows the reader how to parse a literary Sinitic text in the Korean language. It is comparable to Old English interlinear glossing that helps readers rearrange the word order of a Latin text into English”.

Gugyeol, for the most part, hinges on grammatical analysis of the Sinitic sentence. The cultural and linguistic habitus of the time was reflected in this Korean-gloss reading of literary Sinitic: quite naturally, Korean scholars were making use of self-effecting language in order to recontextualize Sinitic texts through their vernacular language. Accordingly, Yi Hwang’s analysis on the gugyeol of that time unravels the structural elements of the original sentences and decipher Mencius’s purpose and the teaching of Confucianism.

His commentary work on the Mencius consists of 195 sections. Among them, twenty sections include his rhetorically oriented exegeses—there are ten sections on [K] eose (i.e., on the aesthetic elements or the mood of the text); four sections on eobeop (the structuring element of the text); and six sections on eoui (the intentions, emotions and perceptions of Mencius). In fact, Yi Hwang was giving the term eose a meaning similar to the one of the term eoui. On the whole, one may estimate that most of his exegeses interprets the Mencius though its stylistic elements. In this section, we will examine three representative examples to unveil how Yi Hwang evaluates Zhu Xi’s commentary as well as the existing gugyeol of the Joseon period on the basis of the emphasis he puts upon the “mood” of the text. 11

First, in Mencius 2A2, which explains how to nourish the “vast, flowing qi” (K. høyeonjigi 浩然之氣), Mencius says: “[Such qi] is born from the accumulation of righteousness; incidental acts aren’t enough. [Author’s translation]” (是集義所生者, 非義襲而取之也 K. siijipuisoisaengji, biueseubichwija The gugyeol of the time interprets “siijipui is集義” of this passage as “it is <produced by> the accumulated righteousness. 論而積之” 12 Yi Hwang goes against this gugyeol by developing the following argument:

Now looking at the text, we should change the existing gugyeol into a new gugyeol “義者集氣 -이” (accumulating righteousness). It is impossible that those who nourish qi 氣 (vital energy) firstly have the accumulation of this ui (righteousness) and naturally emanate the heart-mind of the vast, flowing qi (høyeonjigi 浩然之氣). The two words “jipui 集義” truly refer to the state of the accumulation of
purposeful practice. How can righteousness be naturally accumulated on its own without any effort? Without looking back on the stylistic features and the intended meanings of the original text, many scholars of the day are so afraid of being entangled with the selfishness of comparisons and expectations that they insist on the above aforementioned gugyeol. (Yi 1989, vol. 35, p. 6)\(^3\)

In Yi Hwang’s time, the existing gugyeol interprets the word “jip 嘉” as a past tense “accumulated (moyeo 모이)”. Yi Hwang criticizes this gugyeol for not looking carefully at the “mood” of the writing. He argues that, if we follow this reading, it will mislead readers into thinking that righteousness (ui 義) can be accumulated without any individual effort and then naturally move on to the next or final stage, achieving vast, flowing qi. Yi Hwang suggests that the word “jip” refers to a present-progressive tense “accumulating (moa 모아)”, and “jipui 集義” should be interpreted as “accumulating righteousness”. His reading indicates that righteousness is not achieved suddenly or spontaneously but is the result of constant full-fledged effort.

Gaozi 告子 (ca. 420–ca. 350 BCE, K. Goja, a controversial thinker who debated with Mencius) argues that righteousness exists in the external world. Yi Hwang, however, emphasizes that righteousness exists not in the external but is imbedded in our inner nature, and that the original intention of Mencius is to encourage us to cultivate this disposition through constant practice. He argues that righteousness is not acquired through social learning; rather, our innate nature guides us along the way.

The second example derives from the debate about the lines of Mencius 4A1 (上無道揆也, 下無法守也, K. sangmu dogonya, hamujeopsuya), interpreted by the gugyeol of that time as meaning: “If the upper [level] [i.e., the prince] has no principles by which he examines [his administration], then the lower [level] [i.e., the ministers] has no laws by which they keep themselves [in order]. (Yi 1989, vol. 35, p. 11)\(^4\)

Now looking at the text, if we are grounded in the textual mood of the Collected Commentaries on the Mencius (K. Maengja jipju 孟子集註), we will follow the interpretation of this gugyeol. Reading such a passage, however, we should not adhere to the Collected Commentaries. We should smoothly follow the stylistic features of the original text and interpret it as meaning: “the upper has no principles by which he examines, and the lower has no laws by which they keep themselves. (Yi 1989, vol. 35, p. 11)\(^4\)

The existing gugyeol regards the section “the upper has no principles by which he examines 上無道揆也” and the section “the lower has no laws by which they keep themselves 下無法守也” as describing a cause-and-effect relation, interpreting it as a “If (…) then (…) 上이도로CodeAt이나omentum 下으로운타이니컵아야” Challenging this annotation, Yi Hwang points out that this gugyeol is born from Zhu Xi’s interpretation: “Since there are no principles by which the upper examines, there are no laws by which the lower keep themselves. (Zhu 1983, vol. 7, p. 276)”, rather than from the original.\(^5\)

Following the hints that the stylistic elements of the original text provide us with, Yi Hwang argues that the phrase “the upper has no principles by which he examines” and the phrase “the lower has no laws by which they keep themselves” are separate events and describe a “parallel relationship”. That is to say, since there is no grammatical connection between these two phrases, there is no ground to regard these two events in terms of “causality”. Yi Hwang’s viewpoint recognizes that the lower is an independent subject in the practice of the dao, while Zhu Xi’s causal view indicates that the lower is just an object influenced by the moral behavior of the upper level. Zhu Xi’s interpretation expressed the socio-political belief that the moral competence of an individual is determined by his/her social status. Conversely, Yi Hwang’s understanding of the Confucian truth implies that everyone possesses equal moral capacity regardless of his/her social status.
As a third example, let us consider the lines of Mencius 4B19 (Byun Yi, 1989, vol. 35, p. 12–13) which the existing gugyeol was interpreting as meaning: “[Shun] walked along the path of benevolence and righteousness, he did not pursue and practice benevolence and righteousness. 仁義根於心 which means that the heart-mind of the Sage is benevolent and righteous by nature. It also says that all actions emanate from this. 所行皆由此出 The word “this (cha 此)” in the expression “from this (yucha 由此) refers to benevolence and righteousness. Since benevolence and righteousness are in our heart-mind by nature, all actions are pursued and come from benevolence and righteousness. Just as our body has ears and eyes by nature, so after the ears and eyes come in contact with all the things and affairs, we can see and hear them. Thus, if someone says “yuinuihaeng 聽目而視聽“, we should interpret it as “through/owing to the ears and eyes, we see and hear. 耳目으로말년아마서“ which means that the ears and eyes pursue it,仁義為之 This means that the ears and eyes pursue it,仁義為之 Which means that there is something other than the ears and eyes, through which someone sees and hears. In a similar vein, if someone says “benevolence and righteousness pursue it,仁義為之“ it means that there is something other than benevolence and righteousness, through which someone practices. The initial intention of the existing gugyeol was to prevent [the readers] from being averse to having a mind turned towards purposeful practice, but conversely, it dismisses the existence of benevolence and righteousness and says these are [just] what the Sage does. Is this permissible? All those of the present age who wish to clarify their teachings are like this; so, we must look at it carefully. (Yi 1989, vol. 35, p. 12–13)16

Saying it otherwise: the gugyeol of that time was understanding the syntax of the sentence “yuinuihaeng 聽目而視聽” in Mencius 4B19 by positing that the doublet “benevolence and righteousness” is the subject of the sentence and that there is no object in it. Such gugyeol, is likely to lead to misunderstandings, as the object—i.e., what benevolence and righteousness pursue and practice—is obscure. Pointing out that the existing gugyeol misjudges the mood of the original text, Yi Hwang says, that the two words “benevolence and righteousness” serve as objects, not as subject, and thus the phrase “yuinuihaeng 聽目而視聽” should be interpreted as “he pursued benevolence and righteousness and took action. 仁義為之 In addition, working from the textual features of the sentence, Yi Hwang preaches the Confucian doctrine that benevolence and righteousness are inherent in our heart-mind, and that human beings are the subject who practice these two virtues. That is to say (and as was stressed already by the preceding example), benevolence and righteousness are not obtained by social learning; rather, we are born with them, and we continuously cultivate our original nature by ourselves.

3.2. Wi Baekgyu’s Maengja Chaui

Wi Baekgyu’s Maengja Chaui is a work representative of the thought and method of the author. It interprets Confucian truths through textual rhetorical features—such as dictions, sentence structures, and the mood of the original text: reading the Mencius, Wi recontextualizes the author’s intention through the structural elements and/or mood of the text. Yi Hwang was already displaying a similar approach in his commentary of
Mencius, Wi, however, shows a greater awareness of the literary aspects of the Mencius and he elucidates the intertwining of the rhetorical patterns and of the author’s argument to a much greater extent than his predecessor was doing. This will now be shown by looking at three examples.

First, Wi Baekgyu uncovers the intertwining between the notions of familial affection (K. chinchin 親親) and the idea that benevolence is innate through the study of the rhetorical patterns of the original text.

What King [Xuan] of Qi needed to do was simply to extend [the realm of] the benevolence (in 仁) that our heart-minds innately possess. Earlier, Mencius followed up by a saying, “How does one do this...?” (hayeo 何與) so as to move the King to question thoroughly [his purported inability to act benevolently toward his people]; he then talks about extending benevolence (chuin 推仁). Since nothing is closer to benevolence than revering one’s family members and loving one’s children, he could not but use this [propensity] as a way to guide the king towards understanding. Mencius could have chosen many other metaphors about the relative ease or difficulty to complement the one he uses (“holding a mountain under one’s arm and leaping over the sea”挾山超海) but his choice of “bowing to an elder” (or “breaking kindling for an elder”) 長者折枝 is truly a surprise. The level of reverence needed in order to easily bow to an elder is something that our heart-minds innately possess (…) After saying “[I] treat [my] elders as elders should be treated [in order to extend this to the elders of others]” 老老 and “[I] treat [my] child as the children should be treated [in order to extend this to the [treatment of] children outside one’s family]” 幼幼 he goes on to say that “[King Wen’s] example set an example for his wife” 刑妻 to fully illustrate in which way he was able to enlighten those living nearby him—and yet the root of bringing peace and order [to the entire world] is nothing more than this. (Wi 2000, vol. 9, p. 185b)\footnote{18}

Here, Wi Baekgyu comments on the opening and closing lines of one of Mencius’s arguments in Mencius 1A7: “Your kindness is sufficient to reach animals, and yet no benefits are extended to the people. How is this permissible? (…) Now, your kindness is sufficient to reach animals, and yet no benefits are extended to the people. How is this permissible?”\footnote{19}

Wi Baekgyu interprets the mood of the original text in relationship with various types of rhetorical devices—such as questions, illustrative examples, rhetorical metaphors, and quotations—and he insists on the fact that the devices used in this paragraph indicate Mencius’ intention: to explain to the king of Qi the notions of inherent benevolence and familial affection. These notions, as discussed by Wi, had been elaborated by Neo-Confucian thinkers.

Wi Baekgyu pays attention to the words “hayeo 何與 (How is this?)”. Since benevolence is inherent in human nature, Wi argues that Mencius induces the king of Qi to be aware of his innate benevolence by repeatedly asking “How is this?”. “How is this” is a rhetorical question that makes a point instead of eliciting a direct answer; it leads the listener to examine her/his true mind. Additionally, Wi Baekgyu claims that Mencius employs these rhetorical devices in order to inspire the king to better understand Confucian teachings. That is to say, the example provided by the sentence “to treat [my] elders as elders should be treated and to treat [my] child as children should be treated”, the metaphor of “breaking kindling for an elder”, and the quotation of the Book of Song (Shijing 詩經), all are drawn from the intention of Mencius to teach the king of Qi the Confucian belief that practicing benevolence begins and expands from the “nearest family”.

Second, Wi Baekgyu explains the notions of inherent heavenly pattern-principle (K. cheolli 天理) and the naturalness of human desire (K. inyok 人慾) through the stress he puts over the tone of the writing:

After saying the word “chu 推 (extending), Mencius elucidates the method of extending. The word “gwon 權 (weighing) and the word “tak 度 (measuring)
are key for extending. Mencius asks the king of Qi to consider this, but how would the benighted king notice it in a flash? So, Mencius subsequently coolly and calmly explains; in particular, he uses the word “eok 抑” (perhaps) as his auxiliary word to continue. Prior to the phrase “I beg your Majesty to measure it 王請度之”, Mencius proves that the heavenly pattern-principle is inherent in the king’s heart-mind; below the phrase “Perhaps your Majesty 抑王”, Mencius identifies and rejects the human desires that are covering and blocking the king’s heart-mind. He employs the words “heung 興” (raging), “wi 危” (endangering), and “gu 構” (exciting) to frighten the king; he uses the word “kwae 快” (pleasant) in order to encourage and arouse the king and to ignite his original feelings. This is how a judge interrogates bandits. (Wi 2000, vol. 9, p. 186a)

In this passage, Wi Baekgyu comments on the following lines of Mencius 1A7: “By weighing, we know what things are light and which ones are heavy. By measuring, we know what things are long and which ones are short. This is true of all things, and especially so with the heart-mind. I beg your Majesty to measure your own heart-mind. Or perhaps your heart would be filled with delight only after you raise armies, endanger your subjects, and excite the resentment of the other princes?”

Wi Baekgyu claims that the oratory of Mencius not only exhorts but also excites the mind of the king of Qi. First of all, Wi asserts that Mencius uses a smooth tone to encourage the king of Qi to recognize the heavenly pattern-principle in his heart-mind. Second, like an arrow shooting a tiger, Mencius utilizes a succinct tone to stimulates the listener, the king of Qi, to recognize his initial feelings, the original human desire in his heart-mind. In other words, the two phrases “I beg your Majesty to measure it” and “Perhaps your Majesty” includes the writer’s plot to uncover the natures of heavenly pattern-principle and human desire. To sum up, through his stress on stylistic patterns, Wi Baekgyu illuminates the Neo-Confucian belief that the heavenly pattern-principle is inherent in human beings and human desire is a natural feeling.

Third and last examples: Wi Baekgyu carefully discloses the structural elements of the text, such as diction, explaining that feelings have a tendency toward goodness, the so-called K. jeonggyeonghyang seol 情傾向說:

Mencius says that “From the feelings [he can experience], a man is capable of becoming good. 其情則可以善” This is an apt remark. Even the tyrants Jie and Zhou 桀紂 know how to love when their sons are born, how to feel pain when they cut their skin, and how to feel sorrow when someone dies. If they sincerely extend this heart-mind, they will be able to fully achieve benevolence. This is the meaning of “the feelings can be good”. Mencius does not say “the human nature is good (seongseon 性善)”, but says “the feelings (gijeong 其情);” he does not say “the feelings are good (gijeongseon 其情善)”, but firmly says “the feelings then (jeongjeuk 情則)” and “can (gai 可以)” [become good]. Mencius speaks in a euphemism and quotes roundly to awaken everyone to the fact that there is a thread of goodness of the heaven-conferred nature (cheonseong 天性) within us. Mencius’ initial intention is not to strongly argue that the nature of the two tyrants is good. (Wi 2000, vol. 16, p. 353a)

Wi Baekgyu is commenting here on the following lines of Mencius 6A6: “From the feelings [he can experience], a man is capable of becoming good. This is what I mean in saying that human nature is good”. In Zhu Xi’s view, the passage “From the feelings [he can experience], a man is capable of becoming good (乃若其情則可以善) grounds the theory of the goodness of human nature (seongseon 性善說). Zhu asserts that “feelings are the movements of human nature (seong 性). Such human feelings can only be good and cannot be malicious, and from this we can see that human nature is originally good. (Zhu 1983, vol. 11, p. 328) What we need to keep in mind is that this opinion is derived from Zhu Xi’s metaphysical beliefs, not from the stylistic patterns of the original text.
On the other hand, Wi Baekgyu argues that this passage expounds the theory of a tendency towards goodness deduced by the observation of human feelings, not the theory of the goodness of human nature. The ground of his claim is in the “diction”, the oratory of the original text. What Wi argues is that the words “gijeong 其情” (one’s feelings) and “gai 可以” (can) imply that feelings have a tendency toward goodness. He points out, in detail, that if Mencius wanted to insist that “human nature is good”, he would have said “human nature (giseong 其性)” instead of “the feelings (gijeong 其情)”; if Mencius wanted to express a definitive meaning rather than an inconclusive meaning, he would have said “the feelings are good (gijeongsan 其情善)”. This is how Wi suggests a view opposite to the one propounded by Zhu Xi through the textual elements of Mencius.

4. One Eternal Text, Two Contradictory Truths

In the previous section, we examined Yi and Wi’s rhetorical commentaries, depicting how these interpreters decipher the stylistic features of the original text in order to explain Confucian truths. Through this, we observed how, from Yi of the early Joseon to Wi of the late Joseon, the rhetorically oriented exegeses had intensified and matured.

As mentioned in the preface of his work (Wi 2000, vol. 9, p. 186b), it is likely that his relentless focus upon the fundamental textual features, so-called, munui, led Wi Baekgyu to illuminate the principle of morally proper conduct, so-called uiri, through its rhetorical elements more than any other Joseon scholars: “I shed light on the textual reading of the text to unravel the encompassing reality, the dao.”

Though there are slight differences in the text from one version to another, the canonized Mencius is treated as the original, eternal text. It is intriguing that rhetorical commentaries capture different stylistic elements from the same sentence for extracting from the text contradictory truths. Likely, rhetorical patterns affect the reading of the interpreter; however, at the same time, the interpreter’s own plotting devices also affect the decoding of the rhetorical patterns as he expounds his own beliefs about the truth he means to unveil.

In this section, we will have a look at the rhetorical commentaries of Wi Baekgyu and Zhu Xi to see how their spiritual thought is engaged in their reading of the rhetorical patterns of the Mencius. Wi suggests views on the Confucian truth that differ from the orthodox interpretation of Zhu Xi by analyzing the stylistic patterns of the text:

Because in the beginning of the passage the king mentioned profit (yi 利), at the end of this passage, Mencius holds up benevolence and righteousness (inui 仁義). He then repeats the phrase “Why must your Majesty speak of profit?” Again, Mencius’s excellent eloquence surprisingly enlightens the listener (…) Mencius’s main achievement is making clear [the nature of] righteousness and profit, thereby bringing salvation of the Warring State period. To do this, Mencius mentions, in the first chapter, “Why must your Majesty speak of ‘profit?’ My only topics are benevolence and righteousness”. (Wi 2000, vol. 9, p. 183a)

Wi Baekgyu is here commenting on the following lines of Mencius 1A1: “Why must your Majesty speak of ‘profit?’ My only topics are benevolence and righteousness (…) Let your Majesty also say, ‘Benevolence and righteousness, and let these be your only themes.’ Why must your Majesty speak of ‘profit?’” He sheds light on why Mencius mentions the keywords “benevolence and righteousness”. Over the same lines, Zhu Xi highlights a different rhetorical pattern as to why Mencius asks the king not to speak of “profit”. (Zhu 1983, vol. 1, p. 202)

Wi Baekgyu and Zhu Xi highlight different grammatical and lexical aspects of the same sentence, and their respective views about profit and human desire inspire their different rhetorical annotations.

Wi Baekgyu positively evaluates profits as follows:

The distinction between a gentleman, a petty person, and a hegemon is only a distinction between righteousness and profit; nevertheless, “profit” is not something external to the heavenly pattern-principle. The scent and flavor of ear, eye, mouth, and nose, the comfort of body, the wealth of goods, the prestige of
the position, and the longevity of the descendants all belong to profit, which is the nature of the heavenly pattern-principle. (Wi 2000, vol. 9, p. 182b)\(^{29}\)

Wi Baekgyu claims that human desires belong to the heavenly pattern-principle so that seeking profit is part of the nature of human beings. In contrast, Zhu Xi warns that it is harmful to seek profit since it goes against the heavenly pattern-principle (Zhu 1983, vol. 1, p. 202).\(^{30}\) Additionally, Wi Baekgyu says that the core content of Mencius is about illuminating the meaning of benevolence, righteousness, and profit (Wi 2000, vol. 9, p. 183a–83b),\(^{31}\) while Zhu Xi asserts that the main content of Mencius is about preserving the heavenly pattern-principle and eliminating human desire. Wi Baekgyu has a relatively neutral perspective on profit, which departs from the orthodox Neo-Confucian notion that seeking profit should be avoided since it is harmful to human beings.

Considering the Neo-Confucian notion that “benevolence and righteousness originate from the heavenly pattern-principle, and seeking for profit stems from human desire”, Wi Baekgyu’s attitude as to looking for profit is derived from his thoughts on human desire. Wi does not consider human desire as inherently bad since he understands “desire” in terms of “wishes”, as differentiating the word “\(\text{yok 欲} \)” from the word “\(\text{yok 慾} \)” [desire].\(^{32}\) In the same token, he regards the mouth’s love of food and the nose’s love of appealing scents not as inherently bad but as expressions of the nature of human beings. In contrast, Zhu Xi considers human desire as intrinsically evil. According to Zhu, human desires, such as the mouth’s preference for good tastes, must be regulated, since they can easily become nefarious.\(^{33}\)

Wi Baekgyu says that human desire is included in the heavenly pattern-principle, while Zhu Xi argues that human desire diverges from the heavenly pattern-principle. These contrary views of Wi and Zhu imply that the interpreter’s plot is applied to his/her rhetorical annotations. For instance, the interpreter’s view leads him to emphasize different grammatical or lexical features of the sentence from Mencius 1A1 that we have quoted above.

To be specific, both Wi and Zhu could have pondered over the word “\(\text{K. ha 何 (why)} \)”, intended to cast a doubt, or yet over the words “\(\text{K. yiyiui 而已矣 (only)} \)”, a determiner, or oxymoron, or parallel syntax, or antimetabole, etc. Such questions were touched upon by other scholars: for instance, Niu Yunzhen 牛運震 (1706–1758) of Qing China sheds light on the fact that Mencius repeats these phrases while slightly altering the grammatical order.\(^{34}\) Hirose Tansō 幡瀬淡蛻 (1782–1856) of Edō Japan, on the other hand, focuses his analysis of the same rhetorical pattern on the mere fact that the sentence is uttered twice within one section.\(^{35}\)

However, Wi illuminates a rhetorical device that emphasizes the fact that Mencius welcomes “benevolence and righteousness”, and Zhu spotlights a rhetorical pattern that makes clear that Mencius rejects “profits”. That is to say, the different perspectives on human desire steer the attention of our commentators to different stylistic features of the same sentence. It is not just a matter of syntactic ambiguity. Their beliefs about the truth are reflected in their rhetorical interpretations. This reminds us of the Book of Changes sentence according to which “refining rhetoric is derived from establishing one’s sincerity” discussed in the previous section. The rhetorical pattern seems to influence the reader’s interpretation of the Classics, but the reader’s thought also affects her/his reading of the stylistic patterns of the original text.

5. Conclusions

Aside from its complex textuality (it contains critiques, satires, and an early appropriation of ancient East Asian wisdom), the Mencius also represents a quantum leap forward in human moral and intellectual understanding. In the Sinographic sphere, there was a belief that textual rhetorical strategies reflect the core thinking of Mencius, an idea based on the ancient idea that rhetorical procedures had to be based on sincerity (K. suسابیگیسونغ). Influenced by this view, rather than appreciating Mencius as a literary text, Joseon scholars tried to read the rhetorical pattern of the text in such a way as to uncover the fundamental truths of Confucianism. This paper has examined this phenomenon through a rhetorical
reading of Mencius by two representative scholars—Yi Hwang of the early Joseon and Wi Baekgyu of the late Joseon.

As has been uncovered in this paper, their rhetorical interpretations have two significant features. First, from Yi Hwang to Wi Baekgyu, the analysis of rhetorical patterns has intensified. Yi Hwang mostly mentions the structural elements—e.g., the issues of active or passive voice and causal or parallel relationships. Wi Baekgyu, on the other hand, pays attention not only to the structural elements but also to the mood of the text. He points out more specific rhetorical features such as a rhetorical question and analyzes it in more detail than Yi had done before him.

Second, from Yi Hwang to Wi Baekgyu, the connection between the rhetorical pattern and the interpreter’s plot intensified to a greater extent, since Wi displays a full-fledged effort to recontextualize the Sage Mencius’s logic and speculation by reading the structural elements and/or mood of the text and providing detailed explanations. That is, Wi Baekgyu reflexively takes the rhetorical approach as a hermeneutic methodology.

Yi Hwang, by and large, deciphers early Confucian notions, such as the intrinsic nature of human beings and the importance of continuous efforts for enacting the Confucian dao, through the rhetorical patterns of the Mencius. On the other hand, Wi Baekgyu mainly decodes the Neo-Confucian notions, such as the heavenly pattern-principle and human desire, as well as the early Confucian ideas in his rhetorical annotations. At this stage, early Joseon scholarship had begun to recognize the Neo-Confucian notions, while late Joseon scholarship fully grasps them, takes some distance from their traditional understanding, and develops its own Neo-Confucian ideas, showcasing their fertility. In this light, Wi Baekgyu’s rhetorical interpretation not only diversifies Neo-Confucian ideas but also frames the discussions happening within the Joseon Confucian landscape.

Another implication of this study is that the stylistic pattern of the Confucian canon guides the reader’s interpretation of the text, but, vice versa, an interpreter’s plot often influences his reading of rhetorical patterns. We examined this issue by contrasting the rhetorical commentaries of Wi Baekgyu and Zhu Xi. Wi and Zhu are attentive to different rhetorical aspects of the same sentence of Mencius 1A1. They both pretend to be merely shedding light on the fundamental textual features of the text (rather than developing their own views) when reading Mencius. However, their rhetorically oriented exegeses resonate with their thought and with the context in which their writing was occurring. For instance, in the days of Wi Baekgyu, the Korean reality-focused School (the so-called silhak 實學 intellectual current) was prevailing, which made Wi more receptive to human desire in its concreteness than Zhu Xi could have been.

In a sense, rhetorical commentaries are conceived and written from within the reader’s spiritual orbit. Interpreters reflect their beliefs in their reading, and are not strictly bound by the sources. Their interpretations can always be criticized for their subjectivity, as being driven by their own beliefs about what they perceive as the ultimate truth unveiled by the text. Still, the dynamics exhibited by rhetorical interpretations was derived from a syntactic unity—the very text of the Mencius—a fact that refers to a fundamental and often debated question: Can an absolutely objective, unintended reading of a textual source ever take place? At the very least, the attentive reading of our Korean commentators has shown how subtle the interplay between a text’s rhetorical patterns and its reinterpretations can be.

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Notes
1. For the concept of “Sinographic Cosmopolis,” see (King 2015).
   (2) China—Baidu. Available online: https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%BF%AE%E8%BE%9E/1755917r?aladdin (archived on 7 August 2022)
   (3) Japan—W eblio. Available online: https://www.weblio.jp/content/%E3%81%97%E3%82%85%E3%81%86%E3%81%98 (archived on 7 August 2022).
3. Applying the Western concept of rhetoric to non-Western texts is a controversial issue. Indraccolo (2014) argues that it is possible to apply the concept of rhetoric only if we keep the meaning of rhetoric fluid. If so, as Weber (2014) insists, though Western scholarship has long tried to provide a clear definition of the term rhetoric, a broader and more abstract definition is needed for cross-cultural research. Moreover, we need to determine original concepts of rhetoric as developed in the Sinographic Cosmopolis, because there was no single Sinitic term that exactly matches up with the Greek (or English) word rhetoric. By analyzing the etymology and previous interpretations of susa, Jeong (2006) and Kim (2004) claim that the traditional meaning of susa encompasses both embellishment techniques and persuasive skills. Further discussion may be needed, but this is the traditional concept of rhetoric I employ in this article (You 2019, p. 505).
4. For the etymology, previous interpretations and three elements of the traditional concept susa, refer to (You 2019, pp. 36–43).
5. 君子，進德修業，信厚，所以進德也，修築立其誠，所以居業也。 Translation of Book of Changes from (Legge 1955) with modifications.
9. For more examples of Yi’s rhetorical commentaries on the Mencius, refer to (You 2019, pp. 157–81).
10. Translation of Mencius from (Legge 1960) with modifications.
11. 今按，當云“義著集於先而。義者，固不可先有集合此義，必有義心之也。然“集義”二字，實是積累工夫之處，故不願文體於義者，而為此計耳耳。
12. 今按，據《註》文，則當如是。然此等處，不可拘泥於《注》文，當平論本義文體，
   云可為“敬容有之義而。必下止而為之以爾注為之，
   而上無其注，故下無其字。
13. 今按，此亦義於工夫，故此詁於以自然之意，故不願文體於之義而義之為之，為之為之。
   當云“義著集於先而。義者，固不可先有集合此義，必有義心之也。然“集義”二字，實是積累工夫之處，故不願文體於義者，而為此計耳耳。
14. 今按，據《註》文，則當如是。然此等處，不可拘泥於《注》文，當平論本義文體，
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   而上無其注，故下無其字。
15. 今按，據《註》文，則當如是。然此等處，不可拘泥於《注》文，當平論本義文體，
   云可為“敬容有之義而。必下止而為之以爾注為之，
   而上無其注，故下無其字。
16. 今按，據《註》文，則當如是。然此等處，不可拘泥於《注》文，當平論本義文體，
   云可為“敬容有之義而。必下止而為之以爾注為之，
   而上無其注，故下無其字。
17. 今按，據《註》文，則當如是。然此等處，不可拘泥於《注》文，當平論本義文體，
   云可為“敬容有之義而。必下止而為之以爾注為之，
   而上無其注，故下無其字。
18. 今按，據《註》文，則當如是。然此等處，不可拘泥於《注》文，當平論本義文體，
   云可為“敬容有之義而。必下止而為之以爾注為之，
   而上無其注，故下無其字。
19. 今按，據《註》文，則當如是。然此等處，不可拘泥於《注》文，當平論本義文體，
   云可為“敬容有之義而。必下止而為之以爾注為之，
   而上無其注，故下無其字。
20. 今按，據《註》文，則當如是。然此等處，不可拘泥於《注》文，當平論本義文體，
   云可為“敬容有之義而。必下止而為之以爾注為之，
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   而上無其注，故下無其字。
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   云可為“敬容有之義而。必下止而為之以爾注為之，
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27. 今按，據《註》文，則當如是。然此等處，不可拘泥於《注》文，當平論本義文體，
   云可為“敬容有之義而。必下止而為之以爾注為之，
   而上無其注，故下無其字。
夫子罕言利, 常防其源也。(…). 故孟子言仁義而不言利, 所以拔本塞源而救其弊, 此聖賢之心也。

29

君子小人之分, 只是義利之分, 而利子亦非天理外事也。耳目口鼻之得臭味, 身體之得安逸, 財貨之富, 位望之尊榮, 子孫之長久, 則所謂利也, 而天理之當然也。

30

此章言, 仁義, 根於人心之固有, 天理之公也, 利心, 生於物我之相形, 人欲之私也。循天理, 則不求利而自無不利, 任人欲, 則求利未得而害已隨之。所謂毫釐之差千里之緣也。

31

明義利救國, 而之大之功, 故以何必有仁義, 爲孟子首章。此兩書記載者之深意也。

32

賢人君子讀經典而理盡性, 耻知天道, 夭於其真而大之者也。其次為文章立名立言, 欲矣世不朽者, 擱小之矣。然韓非者, 漢唐以下文士大率皆是矣。考至科第之欲, 人情性, 則遂舉世僥倖而為賢矣。讀書者初不察賢聖所欲之本旨, 但摘句字, 以爲時文而已。則其欲加之心而為恐, 雖爲身命之債, 而聖人經典, 還爲無用之物矣 (Wi 2000, vol. 5, p. 2).

33

世路無如人欲險, 端人到此誤平生 (Zhu 1781, vol. 123, p. 436); 伏願陛下自今以往, 一心之萌, 則必謹而察之, 此為天理耶? 爲人欲耶? 果天理也, 則敬以懷之, 而不使其少有壅闢 (Zhu 1781, vol. 123, p. 684). Both Wi Baekgyu and Zhu Xi acknowledge the existence of human desires, but they differ in that Wi does not think that human desire should be regulated. For a detailed analysis on Zhu Xi's view on human desire, see (Öhama 1983, pp. 222–30).

34

倒轉作結, 妙極斬截。〇突然轉關, 突然收住, 文勢盤旋飛動 (Niu 1803, vol. 1, p. 1b).

35


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