The Diagram of the Heavenly Mandate: How Early Chosŏn Confucians Understood Heaven and Human Beings

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Abstract

This talk explores how Chosŏn Neo-Confucians understood the relationship between Heaven and human beings by focusing on the Diagram of the Heavenly Mandate (tianmingtu 天命圖), a conceptual schema of the Confucian moral universe. In the 16th century, Chosŏn Neo-Confucians paid special attention to the concept of the Heavenly Mandate (tianming 天命), such as the Great Ultimate (taiji 太極), yin-yang (陰陽), and coherence/principle (li 理), leading to a renewal of the orthodox interpretation of the Doctrine of the Mean provided by Zhu Xi and its formalization in the Diagram of the Heavenly Mandate. This talk thoroughly examines three diagrams created by three prominent Korean Confucian scholars—namely, Chŏng Chiun (1509-1561), Kim Inhu (1510-1560), and Yi Hwang (1501-1570). Based on their distinctive readings of the Doctrine, they crafted different versions of the Diagram and thereby laid the normative foundation for Neo-Confucianism, at the heart of which lay a direct link between Heaven and human beings. The Diagram highlights the creative, distinct character of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism, which expounds on and further develops Zhu Xi’s philosophy.

About the Speaker

Kyung-hyun Kang is Assistant Professor of Korean Philosophy at the College of Confucians and Eastern Philosophy at Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea. He earned his doctoral degree from Yonsei University with a dissertation titled “A Study on T’oeogye Yi Hwang’s Philosophy of ‘Li.’” His primary research area includes early Chosŏn philosophy and Neo-Confucianism and he has published many research articles on these topics. His first monograph, 퇴계 이황의 리 철학 [T’oeogye Yi Hwang’s Philosophy of Li] (Hyean 2022), received the 30th Yong Jae Academic Award for Early Career Researchers, a prestigious award conferred for outstanding academic work in Korean studies.