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The Moral and Religious Thought of Yi Hwang (Toegye)

A Study of Korean Neo-Confucian
Ethics and Spirituality

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Edward Y. J. Chung

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The Moral and Religious Thought of Yi Hwang (Toegye)

A Study of Korean Neo-Confucian Ethics
and Spirituality

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*Dedicated to
scholars and students
in Confucian studies, Korean thought, and comparative
philosophy and religion*

PREFACE

This book presents the moral and religious thought of Yi Hwang (Toegye [literary name], 1501–1570; hereafter referred to as “Toegye”),¹ who was arguably the most eminent thinker and scholar of Korean Neo-Confucianism in the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). It is a thought-provoking discussion of this particularly important topic. With its subtitle, *A Study of Korean Neo-Confucian Ethics and Spirituality*, the book consists of ten chapters and offers original quotations, annotated notes, cross-referenced citations, interpretive comments (textual, historical, philosophical, and comparative), a full glossary, and an updated, extensive bibliography.

Toegye’s philosophy and scholarly reputation are a close representation of the so-called Seongnihak (School of human nature and principle) in Joseon Korea, which was also commonly known as the Jeongjuhak (Cheng-Zhu school) or Jujahak (Master Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism). This orthodox school of Neo-Confucianism is directly identified with Song Chinese thinkers such as Cheng Yi (Master Yichuan, 1033–1107) and Zhu Xi (Hui’an [literary name], 1130–1200).² In Korea it had a huge number of followers and dominated many aspects of Korean philosophy,

¹Yi’s given and courtesy names are “Hwang” and “Gyeongho,” respectively. Throughout this book, I refer to him as “Toegye” or “Yi Toegye” because this is how he has been best known traditionally, nationally, and internationally.

²See Chap. 1 (Introduction), n. 2 for more relevant points on the flexible names of this school of thought.

education, ethics, religion, politics, social norms and systems, and family values from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries.³

The inner spiritual and religious dimension of Toegye's philosophy deserves the close attention of Western and East Asian scholarship. Although we have a good list of modern scholars' works on Korean Neo-Confucianism,⁴ the current Western literature on this particular topic is limited. In fact, I have published preliminary articles in English on Toegye's ethics and spirituality (Chung 1992b, 2004, 2010a, 2010b, 2019c).⁵ However, a full-length, in-depth study of these topics is needed in order to deepen and enrich our modern understanding of Confucianism in general and the Korean tradition in particular.

This inspired me to choose Toegye's moral and religious thought as the theme for my study of Korean Neo-Confucianism. I address this in the book that follows by examining Toegye's biographies, his philosophical and personal letters, and his most famous writings, including *Seonghak sipdo* (Ten diagrams on sage learning) and *Jaseongnok* (Record of self-reflection).⁶

This book consists of ten chapters, each of which begins with a brief abstract and ends with a concluding section as well as numerous notes, some of which are detailed for further commentary or discussion. Chapter 1 is a historical and textual introduction to Toegye's life and scholarship, and Chap. 10 concludes the book with a discussion of the modern meaning, relevance, and significance of Toegye's moral-religious philosophy. Each of the other eight chapters focuses on a particular aspect of the topic although each may also relate to special features of the other chapters apropos key doctrines and ideas from the Four Books of classical Confucianism,⁷ Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, and Korean Seongnihak.

³For my historical and philosophical discussion of this topic, see Chap. 1 or Chung (1995 (Introduction), 2015, 2019c). See also de Bary and Haboush (1985), Deuchler (1992), Duncan (2002), Haboush (1991), Keum (1998). For details of these modern studies, see the references list of Chap. 1.

⁴See Chap. 1, n. 9 and references and Chap. 2, nn. 2–4 and references for citation details of these modern translations and studies of Toegye's life and thought.

⁵For these works, see Chap. 1, references.

⁶See Kalton 1988 for his translation of *Seonghak sipdo* with annotations and commentary. Chung 2016 is a fully annotated translation of *Jaseongnok* with commentary and a comprehensive introduction. For details of these works and other modern studies of Toegye and Korean Neo-Confucianism, see Chap. 2, nn. 2–4 and references.

⁷The Four Books of Confucianism are the *Analects*; *Great Learning*; *Doctrine of the Mean*; and *Mencius*, all of which were frequently cited by Toegye.

Furthermore, the last four chapters (Chaps. 7–10) in particular consider comparative philosophical or interreligious perspectives even though a comparative analysis is not the primary focus of this book.

Overall, I hope the reader will find this book a groundbreaking discussion of Toegye's thought vis-à-vis his *holistic* experience, interpretation, and insights. I focus on Toegye's ethics and spirituality, which we can consider the heart of his philosophy and thereby directing his life experience as a scholar, mentor, thinker, and spiritual practitioner. In my view, the scholarly merit of this approach equals that of other existing full-length studies in English of Korean Neo-Confucianism.⁸ It is my hope, therefore, that readers will be satisfied with the originality, quantity, and quality of this monograph. For specialists in the field, this volume offers new or engaging insights into both Toegye's Neo-Confucianism and his vital contribution to the development of Asian religious thought.

By shedding fresh light on the breadth and depth of Toegye's moral-religious thought, I hope to have provided not only a pioneering, introductory monograph on this topic but also an important source for Korean studies, Confucian studies, and comparative philosophy and religion and, at the same time, to have made a worthwhile contribution to the new Palgrave Studies in Comparative East-West Philosophy.

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⁸ Especially Chung (1995, 2016, 2020), Kalton (1988), Kalton et al. (1994), Hongkyung Kim (2016–2018), Hyoungchan Kim (2018), Ro (1989, 2019); Sa-soon Yun (1991). For details of these works, see Chap. 1, references.

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I wish to express my gratitude to the institutions and people who have enabled, facilitated, or inspired me during the research and writing of this book. Foremost, I am pleased to acknowledge that this work was partly supported by a Korean Studies Seed Program grant (AKS-2017-INC-2230001) through the Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea and Korean Studies Promotion Service (KSPS), Academy of Korean Studies (AKS).

I am grateful for this special grant, which included funding for research travel to Seoul, Korea and to the University of Toronto. This provided me with a good deal of research and scholarly consultation. For Korean scholarly advice, I wish to thank my senior colleagues at the Department of Religious Studies at Seoul National University, especially Professor Emeritus Geum Jangtae, an eminent scholar in the philosophy and history of Korean Confucianism.

My warm thanks go to Philip Getz, senior acquisitions editor for Palgrave Macmillan and his office staff, especially Amy Invernizzi, acquisitions assistant editor, for soliciting my book proposal and then looking after the review, publication, and marketing of this book. I also wish to thank series editors Professor Michael A. Slote (University of Miami) and Professor Chienkuo Mi (Soochow University, Taiwan) for agreeing to include this book in the new Palgrave Studies in Comparative East-West Philosophy.

I am also grateful to my institution, the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI; Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada), for facilitating this project over the past several years by enabling me to complete

a good deal of the research, writing, and editing. This book was also assisted by my previous scholarly works on Korean Confucianism and comparative thought and religion, many of which were funded by research and conference travel grants I received from the university from 2000 to 2013 without which my work would have been a more difficult task. My sincere thanks go to UPEI president Dr. Alaa Abd-El-Aziz, UPEI vice-president of academics and research Dr. Robert Gilmour and then Dr. Katherine Gottschall-Pass, UPEI dean of arts Dr. Neb Kujundzic, and my Asian Studies Program for its continuous academic and administrative support during the composition and publication of this book.

I wish to thank as well UPEI staff members in Research Services and the Accounting Department and the Korean staff of the AKS-KSPS such as program coordinators Yeawon Kim and Yuna Kwak and department manager Dr. Byoungchul Ko for their continuous efforts on behalf of the Korean Studies Seed Program in terms of project management and administrative support.

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My thanks also go to my professional copyeditor John Shanabrook and the publisher's book project coordinator Tikoji Rao Mega Rao for their excellent services in finalizing the manuscript for production.

Furthermore, I sincerely thank the *Acta Koreana* Editorial Committee for giving me permission to publish Chap. 7 of this book as an expanded and updated revision of my article "Yi T'oegye on Reverence (*Kyöng*) for Nature: A Modern Neo-Confucian Ecological Vision" (*Acta Koreana* 14.2 [December 2011]: 93–111). I am also very grateful to the same journal for permitting me to publish Chap. 8 as a thoroughly updated and revised version of my article "Yi T'oegye on Transcending the Problem of Evil: A Neo-Confucian and Interreligious Perspective" (*Acta Koreana* 22.2 [December 2019]: 249–266).

Thank you very much everyone!

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION, TRANSLATION, AND CITATION STYLE

Korean names, terms, and titles are transliterated according to the updated Revised Romanization of Korean System (National Academy of the Korean Language, Ministry of Education), which I prefer over the conventional but outdated McCune-Reischauer system. Chinese counterparts are according to the standard Pinyin system. In romanizing Korean given names and literary (pen) names, I follow the accepted style of dropping the hyphen between two characters (syllables); for example, “Toegye” not “Toe-gye.” In traditional East Asia, T’oegye and other scholars often referred to each other by given name (abbreviated here g.n.), literary name (abbreviated here l.n.), or courtesy name (abbreviated here c.n.) interchangeably. Unless otherwise noted, the standard format I use is family name first and then other names.

More importantly, I use the literary or courtesy name if either is better known nationally and internationally; for example, “Toegye” [l.n.] for Yi Hwang, and “Yulgok” [l.n.] for Yi I (1536–1584), Toegye’s junior colleague and another leading Korean Neo-Confucian. Regarding the famous Song Chinese thinker Zhu Xi who is frequently quoted by Toegye and so is cited or discussed in many chapters and appended notes of this book, I will refer to him as “Zhu Xi,” “Zhu” (family name), or “Master Zhu” and I will refer to his philosophy or school of thought flexibly as “Zhu Xi’s philosophy,” “Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism,” or “the Zhu Xi school” insofar as this is the accepted standard in East Asian as well as North American scholarship.

For the primary and secondary Korean sources cited, I provide only the Korean titles as is the standard style; for example, Toegye’s “*Seonghak*

sipdo” and “*Jaseongnok*.” To avoid confusion, I indicate the titles of Chinese sources such as Neo-Confucian writings in Chinese only; for example, Zhu Xi’s *Zhuzi daquan* and *Zhongyong zhangju*. With some exceptions, the romanized philosophical terms are provided in both languages with an English translation in parentheses. The Korean pronunciation appears first followed by the Chinese with a slash between them; for example, “*i/li*” (principle; ground of being); “*gi/qi*” (vital energy or material force); “*sim/xin*” (heart, mind, or heart-mind); and “*simhak/xinxue*” (mind cultivation or the learning of the heart-mind).

I see myself as not only a translator and interpreter but also a scholar in philosophy and religious studies. When any of Toegye’s letters or essays is cited, I therefore translate it in such a way that each sentence or word is rendered as literally and as meaningfully as Toegye himself originally intended it to be. On the other hand, however, it is the style of my translation that must make clear to the reader why Toegye’s works are interesting or worth reading both philosophically and religiously. Accordingly, I take occasional liberties with the translation in order to enhance textual clarity and enrich readability and rhetorical flow.

The literary genres and philosophical concepts as well as their moral meanings and spiritual implications embodied within Toegye’s major works motivated me to present a good deal of commentary and interpretation both in various chapters and the footnotes appended to each chapter. I made this effort to explain the way in which Toegye, an original thinker, writer, and moral-spiritual practitioner, persuasively defended and creatively articulated the basic doctrines and ideas of Confucius, Mencius, and Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism while at the same time developing an inspiring holistic system of ethics and spirituality according to his own experience, ideas, and insights.

Whenever suitable I include textual, historical, philosophical, or religious comments and cross-referenced citations in the chapters as well as the notes. Furthermore, I discuss similarities and differences among Toegye, Zhu Xi, and other Chinese Neo-Confucians. In some chapters as well, especially Chap. 10, I develop comparative points on the compatibility, convergence, or differences that define Toegye, other Asian spiritual traditions, and Western philosophers or religionists.

Consistency in the translation of Confucian terms can be difficult because they are often both subtle and flexible in meaning, involving different implications according to their literal, philosophical, or spiritual

context. I therefore maintain the standard English rendering of most terms as often as possible. Whenever appropriate in the relevant notes I give the standard and flexible English renderings of these key terms according to their different contexts.

For example, the term *sim/xin*, one of the most important terms in Confucianism and Toegye's thought, is translated sometimes as "mind" or as "heart" or even better as "heart-mind" (or "mind-heart") thereby using the three terms interchangeably. This in itself begins to capture the Confucian belief in the intellectual, ethical, psychological, and spiritual interaction of the heart-mind as a whole.

The term *seong/xing* is rendered most frequently as "human nature," which Toegye considered to be full of truth and goodness though the term can also mean "humanity" or "human goodness." Toegye, as do other leading Neo-Confucians such as Zhu Xi, discusses *seong/xing* in relation to *sim/xin* (mind or heart-mind), *jeong/qing* (emotions and feelings), *i/li* (principle or the metaphysical ground of being), and *gi/qi* (vital energy or material/physical force).

The key term *jeong/qing* is translated "emotion(s)," "feeling(s)," or more inclusively "emotions and feelings."¹ This Confucian and Neo-Confucian idea generally refers here to "emotions" as well as "feelings" so I use both English words interchangeably. Overall the term *jeong* means both feeling and emotion, an engagement of both the body and the heart-mind. Emotion, as in the case of Toegye's Four-Seven philosophy and moral psychology,² therefore refers to an aroused physical or psychological state, often the result of a stimulation of the mind.

Another term Toegye uses is *che/ti*. I offer flexible renderings when reasonable or appropriate according to this term's different contexts. For example, it is translated "substance" or "essence" in referring to the essence of human nature. It should be noted here that Neo-Confucian

¹The term "emotion" refers to "a moving, stirring, agitation and perturbation" whereas the term "feeling" means "the sense of touch in the looser acceptance of the term in which it includes all physical sensibility not referable to the special senses of sight, hearing, taste, and smell" (cf. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* 1971, s.v. "emotion").

²For my discussion of the idea and role of *jeong/qing* (emotions/feelings), see Chap. 4 regarding Toegye's Four-Seven debate on emotions. See Chap. 2, n. 4 for current scholarship on this famous topic, including Kalton et al. (1994), Chung (1995, 2019b, 2020: 46–52 (Introduction, sec. II-2c)). For details of these works, see Chap. 1 or Chap. 2, references.

metaphysics and ethics basically emphasize the fundamental truth and goodness of human nature (see especially Chaps. 4 and 8).

Toegye—like other leading Neo-Confucians such as Zhu Xi in China—often mentions two interrelated concepts: *i/li* and *gi/qi*. As is commonly done, I translate the term *i/li* as “principle” (“metaphysical principle”) or as “the ground of being” (as that which underlies all concrete phenomena). The term can also be taken to mean the reason for existence, an omnipresent governing pattern, or the moral order of all phenomena in full goodness. In relation to human nature and emotions it represents the ideal moral essence of human nature that is purely good, thereby emphasizing self-cultivation. The term *gi/qi* is translated as “vital energy” or “material force”—its standard rendering in English. In contrast to *i/li*, *gi/qi* brings each phenomenon or being into concrete existence³ and also determines its transformation, which may lead to either good or evil.⁴ Regarding human nature and emotions, *gi/qi* also represents physical dispositions and psychological feelings and desires.

References and cross-references to primary sources such as Toegye’s biographies, letters, essays, and texts are cited in the notes. I try to enrich my interpretation in these footnotes by providing annotated comments in various chapters. Some of these notes are necessarily lengthy because they include important comments or quotations, all of which are provided for further textual description or interpretive discussion. We use a footnote format.

In some cases Toegye’s writing is somewhat unclear or subtle either because his wording is abbreviated or because he expects his reader (his colleagues) to know the basic textual or historical context of his discussion. I have sought to document or clarify these sayings, titles, or unidentified references by providing explanatory comments and cross-referenced quotations, all of which appear in the notes.

Toegye quotes many classical Confucian texts and masters directly or indirectly; for example, Confucius, Mencius, *Great Learning*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean* as well as Chinese Neo-Confucians such as Zhu Xi, Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073), Cheng Hao ([Mingdao], 1032–1085), and Cheng Yi (Yichuan, 1033–1107). Therefore, my commentary in the notes

³ See Chaps. 3 and 4 for more on the interplay between *i/li* and *gi/qi* according to Zhu Xi’s and Toegye’s philosophy.

⁴ For this topic on good and evil in terms of *i/li* and *gi/qi* according to Toegye’s views, see Chaps. 4 and 8.

also provides a balanced method of description and interpretation. I have consulted the following Chinese works: the *Book of History*, the *Book of Rites*, and the *Book of Changes*—three of the Five Classics as cited by Toegye himself; the Four Books (*Analects*, *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, and *Mencius*); the standard commentaries of the Cheng-Zhu school such as *Zhouzi quanshu* (Complete works of master Zhou Dunyi); *ErCheng quanshu* (Complete works of the two Cheng brothers); *Zhuzi daquan* (Great compendium of works by master Zhu Xi, hereafter abbreviated *ZZDQ*); *Zhuzi wenji* (Collection of literary works by master Zhu Xi, hereafter abbreviated *ZZWJ*); *Zhuzi yulei* (Classified conversations of master Zhu Xi, hereafter abbreviated *ZZYL*); *Zhuzi quanshu* (Complete works of master Zhu Xi, hereafter abbreviated *ZZQS*); as well as others.⁵

When any of these primary references is quoted or paraphrased by Toegye or whenever I annotate it further in the notes, I assist the reader by indicating both the accuracy and reliability of modern East Asian sources. If the quoted passage is already available in English and if it is translated accurately and properly, I adopt it and fully document its source in the notes (e.g., Chan 1963b, 1967; Lau 1970, 1979; Legge 1970).⁶ Otherwise, I indicate that I use my own translation.

I gratefully acknowledge the pioneering translations of Chinese Neo-Confucian texts by Wing-tsit Chan (1901–1994). In citing and discussing Toegye’s quotation of Zhu Xi’s works such as *ZZDQ*, *ZZWJ*, *ZZYL*, or *ZZQS*, I occasionally adopt Chan’s excellent translations of these texts (Chan 1963b [*A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*]). In discussing Toegye’s ideas, statements, or arguments, I do so by relating them to Zhu Xi’s original doctrines and sayings and also by quoting Chan 1963b. When Zhu Xi, Cheng Yi, or another Song Chinese Neo-Confucian is cited, I consult Chan’s translation of Zhu Xi’s *Jinsi lu* (Reflections on things at hand; 1967) in some cases. This is done also for his brief, selected translations of the Four Books (*Analects*, *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, and *Mencius*) as well. I have also profited from D. C. Lau’s excellent translations of the *Analects* (1979) and the *Mencius* (1970).

Regarding the primary sources I translate, quote, or interpret in this book, I must acknowledge Toegye’s *Toegye jeonseo* (Complete collection of Yi Toegye’s works), 5 vols. (Seonggyungwan University Press, 1985;

⁵ For these primary sources indicated in this paragraph, see the abbreviations and the references lists of Chaps. 3 and 4.

⁶ See Chap. 1, references for details of these translations.

in literary Chinese, hereafter abbreviated *TJ*). This was originally printed in 1843 as *Toegye seonsaeng munjip* (Collection of literary works by master Yi Toegye). The online version *Toegye jip* (Collected works of Yi Toegye; 1843) is also readily available. Readers should consult the online edition offered by 한국고전번역원 (Institute for the Translation of Korean Classics): 한국고전종합 DB (Database for the entire collection of Korean classics) at https://db.itkc.or.kr/dir/item?itemId=MO#dir/nod e?grpId=&itemId=MO&gubun=book&depth=2&cate1=L&cate2=&dataGubun=%EC%84%9C%EC%A7%80&dataId=ITKC_MO_0144A. When necessary I have also consulted Minjok munhwa chujinhoe's *Gugyeok Toegyejip* (Collected works of Yi Toegye: Korean translation), 2 vols. (1982). Of course, this was carefully done by first checking the Korean version against the original Chinese and then considering both the accuracy and thoroughness of this modern Korean translation.⁷

My study of Toegye's life and thought has also been facilitated by the works of modern Korean scholars. Although I will occasionally cite these secondary sources in discussing Toegye's thought, I have tried to make my own work as original and scholarly as possible by not depending on any of the secondary Korean sources. This volume represents my original thinking, translation, interpretive commentary, and writing.

I use both in-text and footnote citations in all the chapters where I quote and discuss the primary or secondary sources. This blended citation style allows me convenience and consistency in citing and cross-referencing and when quoting Toegye's texts, modern Korean and other East Asian scholars (e.g., Geum Jangtae, Abe Yoshio, and Takahashi Susumu), and relevant Western translations and studies (e.g., Chan, Ching, Chung, de Bary, Kalton, Lau, Legge, and Tu). In certain cases when appropriate, my detailed comments are treated separately in the appended notes for further information or discussion.

Supplementary information is fully provided in the glossary and bibliography. The glossary at the end of the book offers a full list of the key philosophical terms, personal names, and textual titles that are mentioned in Toegye's own writings, the annotated notes, and my commentary and discussion. The reader will also find Chinese Korean characters in this glossary. I believe that this is a better format for both reading and composition.

⁷ See Chap. 1, references for details of these primary sources in Chinese and Korean.

The bibliography offers both specialists and generalists an updated and expanded catalog of numerous primary sources and modern secondary works in Korean, Chinese, and Japanese in addition to a good number of existing English works including translations, general studies, comparative studies, and journal articles. Although I personally preferred to give a single, comprehensive bibliography for the entire book immediately following the glossary, we follow the publisher's recommended format by presenting a shorter and more focused list of references for each chapter at the end of the chapter, which will facilitate readers in quickly finding any sources quoted or discussed in that particular chapter.

Finally, I note that for my research, writing, and manuscript preparation and editing I conducted research at the National Central Library, Seoul National University, and the Toegye Central Library, Dankook University. Four annual trips were necessary for this purpose since 2015. And of course, I have also consulted with leading Confucian scholars in Korea. Furthermore, I had the benefit of repeated research trips to the University of Toronto for my library work at the University of Toronto's East Asian Studies Library, which holds one of the world's leading collections of primary and secondary Korean and other East Asian sources. I am grateful at the end of these many research endeavors to offer this book to both scholars and the general reader alike.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- Jaseongnok*: Yi Toegye 李退溪. 1985. *Jaseongnok* 自省錄 (Record of self-reflection), 1:1a–76a. In Yi Toegye, *Toegye jeonso* (Complete works of Yi Toegye), vol. 3, 151–190.
- SBBY*: *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要 (Complete essentials of the four categories). 1920–1936. Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju.
- TJ*: Yi Toegye 李退溪. 1985. *Toegye jeonso* 退溪全書 (Complete works of Yi Toegye), enlarged edition. 5 vols. Seoul: Seonggyungwan University Press. This was originally printed in 1843 as the *Toegye seonsaeng munjip* 退溪先生文集 (Collection of literary works by Master Yi Toegye).
- YJ*: Yulgok 李栗谷. 1985. *Yulgok jeonso* 栗谷全書 (Complete works of Yi Yulgok), 3 vols. Seoul: Seonggyungwan University Press.
- ZZDQ*: Zhu Xi 朱熹. 1930. *Zhuzi daquan* 朱子大全 (Great compendium of works by Master Zhu Xi). In *SBBY*.
- ZZQS*: Zhu Xi 朱熹. 1714. *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書 (Complete works of Master Zhu Xi). 1714 edition.
- ZZWJ*: Zhu Xi 朱熹. 1930. *Zhuzi wenji* 朱子文集 (Collection of literary works by Master Zhu Xi). In *ZZDQ*.
- ZZYL*: Zhu Xi 朱熹. 1880. *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (Classified conversations of Master Zhu Xi).
Compiled by Li Jingde (fl. 1263). 1880 edition