

# Aging, Cultivation, and Transcendence in Confucianism

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**This study aims to investigate the spiritual model to be pursued in old age, focusing on the spiritual cultivation and the moral transcendence in Confucianism. For this purpose, it adopts a comparative methodology to compare the theory of gerotranscendence with Neo-Confucian texts in three steps. First, it investigates how the gerotranscendence theory can be interconnected with Confucianism, which entails distinctive spiritual characteristics. Second, it examines how Confucianists immerse themselves in self-cultivation and gain emancipated innocence. Here it clarifies two ways of cultivation: keeping reverence in tranquility to return to one's essential state and embodying the truth to transform into a cosmic Self. And finally, it considers the metaphysics of life and the cosmic unity in Confucianism, and a decent death in the state of moral transcendence. In sum, the study claims that old age is to be understood as a significant period of gaining infinite growth and achieving the completion of spirituality, not just as a period of senescence, and Confucian spiritual cultivation may have a beneficial effect on the lives of seniors today.**

## 1 Introduction

According to the 2018 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) statistics, the average percentage of the elderly population in OECD countries reached 17.4%. The average proportion of the elderly population is increasing across OECD countries and is projected to continue increasing in the coming decades, rising to 27.1% by 2050. In five OECD countries (Italy, Portugal, Greece, Japan, and Korea), the share of the population aged 65 and over will exceed one-third by 2050 (OECD 2019). Humanity is in a *gray dawn* situation today (Peterson 2000, 33–36) and is expected to face even darker grey noon ahead.

What should we prepare for the aging society of the future? First, it is necessary to strengthen socio-economic welfare policies for the elderly such as improving the design of public pensions, incentivizing private savings, enhancing the efficiency of health care provision, and promoting employability, etc. (OECD 2019). Economic welfare is an indispensable foundation for human survival, so it must be guaranteed to elderly people who lose economic productivity. However, it can never meet all the needs of the elderly because it is only a necessary condition for happiness, not a sufficient condition.

To provide welfare sufficient for the elderly, it is crucial to understand the meaning of old age in the cycle of a lifetime. What is old age? At least it is clear that old age is the last period in life followed by no other life-period (Lieberman and Tobin 1983, 203). It means that, on the negative side, old age can be nothing more than a period of passive waiting for impending death. But on the positive side, it is a period when one can deeply understand the meaning of the entire life and complete one's existence, a special period that cannot be experienced or understood in the earlier period. What are, then, the needs of the elderly? Erikson (Erikson and Erikson 1997, 102) claims in this regard:

*The last ritualization built into the style of old age is philosophical: for in maintaining some order and meaning in the disintegration of body and mind, it can also advocate a durable hope in wisdom.*

Wisdom can help the elderly understand the fundamental meaning of life and bring kind of fulfillment to their lives, even though minds and bodies disintegrated. Also, it can contribute to dispelling all psychological factors that make the



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lives of the elderly miserable, for example, aging, alienation, and incapacity. The elderly can not only transform their present lives through philosophical wisdom but also affirm the value of their existence without falling into fear and futility even in the face of death. In this regard, what should be provided to the elderly is probably *spiritual welfare* (Jeong 2001, 15).

Religion can play an important role in the spiritual welfare of the elderly today. The elderly need religion to fulfill their spiritual needs, and the spiritual function of religion will be a meaningful contribution to them. It will contribute encouraging them to discover the meaning of their existence and enhance their spirituality in the existential world. Simply put, *spirituality in life* is required [1]. In this respect, it is worth

## 2 The Meaning of Aging

noting Confucianism. Because Confucianism is a practical religion that enhances spirituality in one's own experience and promotes the completion of the Self in the existential life. Confucianism can provide essential guidelines for spiritual well-being and self-cultivation to those who have reached old age in terms of spirituality. And it is expected to function as a religion that encourages them to discover the meaning of their existence and the purpose of life to become elevated human beings [2].

The purpose of this study is to elucidate these religious and spiritual functions of Confucianism, further it will suggest the spiritual model to be pursued in old age from Confucianism and reveal that the Confucian cultivation theory can give meaningful help to the lives of the elderly. For this, first, this study is aimed at redefining the meaning of old age based on Confucianism. That is, it defines old age as a significant period of gaining infinite growth and achieving the completion of spirituality but not just as a period of bodily decrepitude. Second, the study focuses on the issues of spirituality and transcendence of the elderly in relation to Confucian metaphysics of life and clarifies the ultimate concern of old age in Confucianism. Third, the study is expected to be meaningful in that it can introduce the spiritual cultivation theory of Confucianism, which is still unfamiliar to the West. But more than that, this study hopes to contribute to facilitating dialogue and cooperation between various religious traditions to create better conditions for human life. In other words, it aims to contribute to the *dialogue of spiritual experience* between various religions (Dojčár 2019, 36; Gálik 2021, 2).

To this end, this study will deal with Korean Confucian texts containing various statements about aging and transcendence and adopt the theory of gerotranscendence as a comparative method. For this, I will explore how the gerotranscendence theory can be interlinked and differentiated with Confucianism that entails spiritual characteristics. Second, I will investigate how Korean Neo-Confucianists attain emancipated innocence and immerse themselves in self-cultivation after retirement. It will shed a light on the two ways of self-cultivation, keeping reverence in tranquility to return to one's essence and discover the cosmic meaning of the Self, and embodying the truth in the sage's classics based on the numerous life experiences and transforming into a cosmic Self. And finally, it will consider the metaphysics of life in Confucianism, and how Confucians have reached cosmic unity and faced a decent death in the state of moral transcendence.

Some studies of gerontology even seem to regard old age as having no particular significance. For instance, disengagement theory argues that as people age, they withdraw from previous roles or activities. Disengagement theory argues that stimulating older adults with activities and social interactions would go against the natural development and result in dissatisfaction with life (Bruyneel, Marcoen and Soenens 2005, 2). In opposition to this argument, however, the activity theory regards a successful old life as participating in social production youthfully and claims that the elderly should continue to work the same as they did in middle age (Bengtson, Burgess and Parrott 1997, 576). Two theories seem to be arguing against each other, but in fact they both are based on the same perception. Because neither theory has a distinct meaning or value of old age, nor does it have a particular role to play in old age.

But is there really nothing that one can do in old age? The theory of gerotranscendence proposed by Tornstam disagrees with them. He challenges the performance orientation of Western societies, with its associated contempt for weakness, inefficiency, and dependency. His gerotranscendence theory highlights continued change and development in old life, including a re-definition of reality (Yount 2009, 82). That is, the gerotranscendence theory implies that human development does not end in middle-age but is a process that continues into old age (Tornstam 1996, 144).

The characteristic of the theory of gerotranscendence is, in a nutshell, a shift in meta-perspective, materialistic and rational vision to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally followed by an increase in life satisfaction (Tornstam 1989, 60). According to Tornstam, gerotranscendence is regarded as the final stage in a possible natural progression towards maturation and wisdom and describes a development involving new understandings of the Self, relationships to others, and fundamental existential questions. (Tornstam 1997a, 118). The theoretical concept of gerotranscendence has three levels of age-related ontological change: the cosmic level, the level of Self, and the level of social and individual relationships.

The cosmic level is, first, about the feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, and a redefinition of time, space, life, and death. It is possible that seniors can perceive themselves as a part of a cosmic flow of energy (Tornstam 1989, 60). At this stage, seniors understand newly what life and death mean and reduce concerns with one's impend-

ing physical death because there is an increasing sense of continuity with the universe (Tornstam 1989, 60). The level of Self, second, includes a decrease in self-centeredness and an increase self-transcendence. A decrease in self-centeredness means that the individual experiences a new awareness of the fact that he or she is not the center of the universe (Tornstam 2011, 171). And self-transcendence implies that the focus on one's own needs is gradually transcended and replaced with a focus on the needs of others. Thus, egoism is overshadowed by altruism (Tornstam 2011, 172). The level of social and individual relationships, third, means that older adults appear to become less interested in superficial relationships and have an increasing need for solitude. This need for positive solitude is not same with passive withdrawal. Seniors feel an urge to abandon and transcend roles in order to come closer to the genuine Self, and transcend needless conventions, norms and rules. Person can reach *emancipated innocence*, which is a maturity-enhancing innocence that is defined by the ability to transcend nonsensical social norms (Tornstam 1997b, 152).

Tornstam has regarded gerotranscendence as a possible natural aging progression. Recent research, however, has suggested that old age is not the strongest variable. When it comes to the development of certain dimensions of gerotranscendence, spirituality and religiosity in the elderly population has been found to be more important than age (Bruyneel, Marcoen and Soenens 2005, 7). Especially, the relationship between spirituality and gerotranscendence has been found to be the most notable among the cosmic transcendence dimension (Braam *et al.* 2006, 126). A gerotranscended individual, who transcends physical life in order to pursue spiritual life, represents the transformation into a religious human rather than a human being bound by secular life. In this respect, it is convincing enough to assume that gerotranscendence is not a causal consequence arising from natural aging, but an acquired result of efforts based on spiritual training or educational learning.

In this regard, it is necessary to pay attention to Confucianism. Confucianism also agrees with the necessity of retirement in old age. In traditional Confucian society, however, retirement does not imply that productive forces have been exhausted and become unnecessary, or that the elderly be-

come socially marginalized. On the contrary, retiring involves enjoying welfare from the state and receiving preferential treatment from society. Filial piety and respect for the elderly were regarded as the first ethical virtue and national policy in Confucian society [3].

Additionally, seniors have regarded it as an essential virtue in old age to acquire wisdom about life and complete the virtue by enhancing spirituality. Confucius' famous quote (Chan 1969, 22): "*At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard; at seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing moral principles,*" describes the maturity stage in old age. Confucius' words have become an essential standard of living in old age, and the elderly have consistently made effort to engrave on their minds and cultivated spiritualities. Confucianism encourages older people to reach their goal of enhancing spirituality and unifying themselves with the universe.

For this aim, self-cultivation is regarded as the most fundamental to the entire system of Confucianism. Self-cultivation is considered to be the result of lifelong cultivation, not the natural process of aging. The epitome of endless self-cultivation is Confucius, and Tu Weiming (1993, chap. 3) claims: "*The consensus among Confucian followers is that if Confucius had lived longer [Note: than 70 years] he would have continued his unceasing efforts to learn and improve himself so that he could provide further richness and nuances to his life.*" Gerotranscendence is also found in Confucianism, but it is the result of lifelong cultivation, not the natural process of aging, but not obtained naturally by getting older as Tornstam thought.

Self-transformation to become a sage is rarely achieved through short-term efforts and is only the result of scrupulous and honest cultivation that accumulates over a long period of time. Therefore, old age is not only the result of a lifetime of diligently accumulated cultivation but also the last time one can achieve one's inner completion. A Korean Confucian and politician Yi Minbo (1720–1799) (1995, vol. 232, 410) wrote: "*A scholar values longevity in the process of learning. Because if you do not live long, you cannot achieve learning.*" Self-cultivation is necessitated to continue constantly in old age. Old age is a special period to achieve the substantial assignment to become the sage.

### 3 Confucian Cultivation of Spirituality

A Korean Confucianist Yecheon Jang Hyeon-gwang (1554–1637) assured us that not only should we be engaged in such cultivation in old age, but that we could also achieve these tasks only by becoming elderly. He called it “*an old man’s assignment*” (Ko. *noin saup*). Through analyzing his writings, we will investigate the methods and the achievement of Confucian cultivation in detail (Jang 1986, vol. 60, 131).

[Note: 1] *Externally carrying out the Way becomes weaker as the body ages, but internally preserving the Way is a task that I cannot renounce as I am getting old. The body’s decrepitude cannot be strengthened again, but the task that cannot be stopped remains the same. Just sit quietly in the room and stop all the work, stop the management, cut off coming in and out, cut off shuttling, and make less reception. Do not force pore, do not force look, and listen, do not force speak, and do not force act.*

[Note: 2] *However, there is something that should never quit. I must peruse with great care the meaning of the sage’s classics I recited in the past and savor its intrinsic and authentic purport in-depth, thereby nourish nature and emotions comfortably and elevate my mind.*

[Note: 3] *If this practice continues for a long time, and if this process of self-cultivation is expanded to the utmost limits and towed so far, the true consequences of self-cultivation will gradually accumulate, eventually reaching the ultimate stage of communicating with the creative productions of Heaven and Earth. And further, understand the mystery of the Ultimate of Non-Being [Note: Ko. *Mugeuk*] and the Great Ultimate [Note: Ko. *Taegeuk*] in the universe. Wouldn’t it be great to spend the rest of my life cultivating myself like this?*

The above quotation can be divided into three phases. Phase one indicates retirement and reverence in tranquility. Phase two denotes reading the classics. Phase three expresses the ultimate state as a result of cultivation. In the phase one, Yecheon first longs for withdrawal to a secluded place, and ceases all worldly work and immerses himself in keeping reverence in tranquility. Yecheon’s transition from externally carrying out the Way to internally preserving the Way in his old age represents the transition from participation in society to voluntary solitude. This is the transition from the phenomenal world and the material realm to the existential source and spiritual realm.

To understand Yecheon’s writings in detail, let’s look at the Confucian cultivation theory. The Confucian methods of self-cultivation are divided into two main ways: Keeping reverence in mind (Ko. *geogyong*) and investigation of things (Ko. *geokmul*). Keeping reverence is an inner mind discipline, which is to preside over the mind not to be swayed by external objects and to be aware of the moral obligation (Ching 1986, 280–284). This is the foundation for all the cultivation. And investigation of things is an extroverted cognitive discipline, which is to focus on the search for comprehension of the essence of all things including subjective and objective world of the mind [4].

A Chinese Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi explained it into three levels. That is, *approaching concrete objects* (Zh. *jiwu*), *exploring the principles of the objects* (Zh. *qiongli*) and *exploring to the limits* (Zh. *zhiji*) (Chen 2000, 284–293).

Phase one is about keeping reverence, which is an introverted mental discipline to preserve the mind not to be swayed by external desires and to maintain self-awareness reverently all the time (Ching 1986, 282–284). Zhu Xi, however, more highlighted that the reverence in a tranquil state is more fundamental even though one should always keep reverence both in the state of tranquility and activity (Zhu 1997, 1403). Because keeping reverence in a tranquil state is the way to return to the essence of self-existence. *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Zh. *Zhongyong*) states in the first chapter that one can unite Heaven and Earth and achieve the cosmic completion of nurturing all things through the cultivation of the mind (Chan 1969, 98).

*Before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused it is called equilibrium [Note: Zh. *zhong*]. When these feelings are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony [Note: Zh. *he*]. Equilibrium is the great foundation of the world, and harmony is universal path. When equilibrium and harmony are realized to the highest degree, Heaven and Earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish.*

According to *Zhongyong*, equilibrium is a tranquil state of mind without any emotions arisen, but in the Neo-Confucian context, it is not just an emotionless state, but a state of human nature being revealed in the mind without any imbalances. That is, equilibrium is the essential state of human being (Zhu 1997, 3383; Chan 1969, 601). Keeping reverence

in tranquility refers to the way of realizing equilibrium, which is the return to one's essential state. Thus, Zhu Xi devoted himself to nourishing in the unaroused state. In this sense, Yeoheon's reverence in tranquility after retirement was also intended to return to this essential human state.

More importantly, however, returning to the essential state has deeper metaphysical implications. According to Neo-Confucian metaphysics, equilibrium does not refer only to the state of human nature but is regarded as equivalent to the great foundation of the world. *Zhongyong* says, "What Heaven imparts to man is called human nature" (Chan 1969, 98), this implies that Heaven's mandate is equally inherent in the human mind. Therefore, Mou Zongsan (1974, 26) pointed out: "The Way of Heaven [Note: Zh. *Tiandao*] is so elevated that it has a transcendent implication. However, when Heaven enters the human body and becomes immanent in it, it becomes human nature. At this point the Way of Heaven is immanent. The Way of Heaven, therefore, is transcendent on the one hand, and immanent on the other." Neo-Confucianists believed that transcendence could be obtained from the human inner mind, not from something beyond the world. When realizing equilibrium, one can become the subject of the universe, and further achieve the unity of the Self and the universe. At this stage, the universe can be completed while Heaven and human interact without any ontological gap between them. In this sense, in Confucianism, quiet-sitting meditation (Zh. *Jingzuo*) was regarded as an important method of cultivation. Because it is a mysterious experience of becoming one with the entire universe [5].

In the phase two, he emphasizes that it is necessitated to peruse the classics of sages relentlessly, since reading of the classics is not only the most important way in investigations of things but also a spiritual exercise in Confucian tradition (Ching 2003, 91). He thought reading the classics was an important discipline for self-transformation. Zhu Xi's thoughts on reading the classics confirm these thoughts. Zhu Xi (1986, 161) refers to the need for reading as follows.

*Reading the classics is secondary. The truth of life is all in ourselves. The reason we should read the classics is that we have not experienced much of the world, but the sages experienced many things, wrote them in books, and showed them to us. As we read the classics now, we should only know those many truths. And when we understand them all, they are all our own, not added suddenly from outside.*

According to Zhu Xi, the study of the sage's classics is not an end. The truth is already in us, but the classics contain only the experiences of sages who have realized the truth. Thus, it is essential to discover and realize the truth in ourselves by means of the many experiences of the sages in the scriptures. In short, it can be said that the purpose of reading is not to acquire knowledge, but to understand human nature and enhance spirituality. In this respect, Jang said that he appreciated the meaning of the classics, thereby cultivated human nature.

How, then, can we have an experience and recurrence of the experiences of sages as our own, thereby realizing the ultimate truth we are originally endowed with? In other words, how should the sage's classics be perused not only for the expansion of knowledge, but also for spiritual discipline and the realization of ultimate truth? For this, a reader should not understand experiences of the sage either in the literal way but re-enact them in the reader's existential situation. When sage's experience is vividly transferred to the reader's experience, the truth is connected within the reader's spirituality. To achieve this end, it is necessary for the reader to practice and experience the teaching of sage directly. That is, it is to realize it deeply through one's own experiences and self-reflection, and to internalize into one's own existential experience.

In this sense, much of the experience during life helps us to understand the profound meaning contained in the classics. An old man who has experienced numerous experiences over a long period of his life will be able to better understand the truth. Yeoheon re-explored the meaning of the classics that he recited in the past as he grew older because the accumulation of time and experience would allow them to understand the meaning of the classics more brightly and to internalize the truth contained in the classics more deeply. The important thing in the reading of the classics is to deepen and realize the true meaning of classics within oneself and make it an asset of one's spirituality and faith.

Then, let's look at the state reached as a result of the cultivation corresponding to the phase three. According to Yeoheon, one someday reaches an ultimate stage where one understands the nature of the universe in the process of continuing to cultivate. Zhu Xi called it the stage of *a wide and far-reaching penetration* (Zh. *huoranguantong*). At this stage, total substance and great functioning of the mind is completed, and the qualities of all things, whether internal or external, the refined or the coarse things, will all be appre-

## 4 Moral Transcendence and Decent Death

hended (Chan 1969, 89). At this time, we come to understand all the essences of all things and know that they are born from one root and one body with ourselves. It means that the self is transformed as cosmic Self who can embrace all things and unite with the universe. In Yeoheon's words, it is perfectly harmonized with Heaven and Earth and has a profound understanding of the mystery of the Great Ultimate and the Ultimate of Non-Being in the Universe. At this stage, a Self is not only a transcendent being in harmony with the universe, but it also breaks down the boundaries of others, and then becomes an immanent moral subject who cares for all beings as oneself.

In summary, Confucian retirements of the elderly have plenty of philosophical and transcendent meanings, which is a spiritual dimension different from the secular life of the earlier period. Because retirement means to devote oneself to self-cultivation for the enhancement of spirituality and the achievement of transcendent cosmic unity. It seems to correspond to what Erickson mentioned *deeply involved, disinvolvement*. He states (1997, 195) that "*this type of withdrawal, in which one deliberately retreats from the usual engagements of daily activity, is consciously chosen withdrawal. A 'deeply involved, disinvolvement'. This paradoxical state does seem to exhibit a transcendent quality, a shift universal and transcendent vision from a materialistic and rational vision.*" Confucian withdrawal can be defined as a state of both *deeply involved, disinvolvement*, which indicates not only *deep involvement* in tranquil stability and the mystical cosmic unity, but also *disinvolvement* from materialistic desires and the secular world.

What is the ultimate destination of Confucianism that can only be expected when one reaches old age after such a long process of cultivation? The answer to this question is not only important because it is deeply related to the ultimate concern of Confucianism, but also meaningful in what to set for old age. And more directly, it is more important for understanding the meaning of death. The Tornstam's concept of *gerotranscendence* has notable implications for the acceptance of death. He thought that the increasing feeling of cosmic communion with the universe might decrease the fear of death (Tornstam 1989, 60). Tornstam argues that we must turn to the exotic frame of reference of Eastern philosophy to find a new way of gerotranscendence (Tornstam 2005, 37).

According to Eastern philosophy, all things in the universe are only made of this monistic *Qi* – "vital force or matter". Each thing is respectively a part of *Qi* totality, and the subject and the object are homogeneous on the ontological level of *Qi*. Based on this theory, life and death are only regarded as phenomena that have arisen in process of the flow of monistic *Qi*. Death is understood as the reduction of an individual to the original state of the *Qi* substance. For example, the following famous anecdote in *Zhuangzi* illustrates that death is just a return to the original state: When his wife died, he cried at first, but after a while, he realized that his wife was lying in the vast room and resting, and sang joyfully (Chan 1969, 209). This is like the cosmic dimension in gerotranscendence theory.

But this explanation seems far from reaching a complete understanding of life and death. This is because they do not fully expound on the axiological implications of the cosmic substance itself. In this respect, the ideal integration of individuals and the reality of the universe is also considered to be a meaningless unity, and the meaning of death does not seem to be anything more than the individual dissolving into the whole. But are our lives and deaths as meaningless and worthless as a small drop of water that flows into the wide sea? The Confucian details the significance of unity between

individual and universe from the axiological perspective. *The Western Inscription* (Zh. *Ximing*) by a Chinese Confucianist Zhang Zai (1020–1077) states the following (Chan 1969, 497–498):

*Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions... Even those who are tired, infirm, crippled, or sick; those who have no brothers or children, wives, or husbands, are all my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to. When the time comes, to keep himself from harm – this is the care of a son. To rejoice in Heaven and to have no anxiety – this is filial piety at its purest... In life I follow and serve [Note: Heaven and Earth]. In death I will be at peace.*

Zhang Zai defines the meaning of an individual based on cosmic familism and delineates the significance of life and death. According to him, the huge monistic Qi is not a meaningless mass, but rather a precious family. And all beings in the universe are necessarily interconnected members of one family. He extends the concept of Confucian familism into the cosmic sphere while bringing the concept of transcendence of *Zhuangzi* into the ethical sphere of the family. Transcendence is not about escaping the world, but embracing the world with unlimited self-expansion, and caring for all beings as my family by achieving cosmic Self, not egoistic self. When he defined Heaven and Earth as his parents, and all beings as his beloved family, his moral tasks to care for the elderly, the weak and the disabled become his holy obligations for the cosmic family, that is, practicing filial piety and fraternal love in cosmic level. Most Confucianists including Zhang Zai, regarded the universe as a place where have plenty of life and love. They thought that the essence of the universe was life and love, and that protecting and nurturing all living beings was a source of morality. For example, *The Book of Change* (Zh. *Yijing*) says: “*The Great Virtues of Heaven and Earth is the Giving and Maintaining Life.*” (Chan 1969, 268). Furthermore, Neo-Confucianists established metaphysics of life and emphasized the ethics of love. Zhang Zai not only praised Heaven and Earth’s primal vitality as parents, but

also stressed that it is a moral duty to take care of and nurture the lives of all things according to the will of heaven and earth. Cheng Hao (1032–1085) states: “*To Heaven, the Way is merely to give life. What follows from this principle of life-giving is good. Goodness involves the idea of origination, for origination is the chief quality of goodness.*” (Chan 1969, 532). His brother, Cheng Yi (1033–1107), rebuked the young emperor for breaking branches on spring days, saying: “*You can’t break branches without any reason.*” (Cheng and Cheng 2001, 342). This explanation was also due to his belief in the metaphysics of life.

From the Confucian perspective, the unity of the universe with the Self that occurs in ever-changing reality involves the union with the primitive life of the universe. The human is deeply embedded in a network of life-giving and life-sustaining relationships. Therefore, to harmonize with the creativity and changes in the universe is the task of the human in forming one body with all things (Tucker 2004, 20). In this regard, human’s moral duty means the participation in the productive life activity of the universe. That is ‘To participate and assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth’. In other words, humans ought to encourage and support life activities of Heaven and Earth so that countless lives in the universe can all live their own optimal life. When fulfilling these moral obligations and responsibilities, humans can finally reach a state of unity with the universe.

A Korean Confucianist Yulgok Yi (1536–1584) (Yi 1983, vol. 45, 550) explored the significance of life and death in relation to the moral obligations in the universe:

*I heard that Heaven and Earth, and all things naturally constitute one-body with me. If one extends his virtue unlimitedly as if the Heaven covers all things, and as if the Earth accommodates all things, one can participate and assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth and live forever with Heaven and Earth. How can we evaluate the meaning of life and death of an individual’s body only by means of dying early and living long? In our Way, eternal life and immortality are only like this.*

According to Yulgok, humans are essentially completely homogeneous with Heaven and Earth. Therefore, restoring the essential state of being is the task that humans are obligated to. For this, Yulgok asserts that human beings must continue to practice moral acts that support the will of Heaven and Earth to take care of lives of all things and expand their scope to infinity. At this time, the individual self can reach the transcendental state of being united with Heaven and Earth through being transformed into a cosmic Self from the egoistic self.

From a Confucian perspective, transcendence as the unity of Heaven and human can only be realized through moral practice. Moral practice in the secular world can be said as the only way to the transcendent world. This is the religious character of Confucianism, which is specialized as immanent transcendence. Tu Weiming asserts that transcendence must include its immanent characteristics, and the ethics of transcendence will not be completed until it reaches a metaphysical dimension. The supreme completion of ethics in Confucianism is the oneness of Heaven and man but the supreme Heaven must be embodied in the moral world (Tu 1989b, 188).

This cosmic unity of humans can be thought of in connection with the decent acceptance of death. Yulgok explains that when we participate in the nourishing of Heaven and Earth through moral practice, we can transcend individual extinction and become one with the eternal life of Heaven and Earth. However, his account on eternity does not mean that we become immortal. The intrinsic meaning of his accounts is to become indifferent to individual death in virtue of understanding death as a part of the vast cosmic life activity through a change of perspective. From the viewpoint of the cosmic dimension, the death of an individual is no longer an event to be feared or distressed. Since the cosmic Self is in harmony with the holistic life of the universe, the physical death does not lead to the loss of its existential significance from the ontological perspective. To reach this epistemic level of death, it is necessary to meet the moral responsibilities for all things in the world with a sincere attitude rather than pursuing mystical experience. In other words, the relentless endeavor to the practice of moral obligations is the most reliable and proper way of dealing with death. This is like

Zhang Zai's view that death is just to rest in peace in the arms of the cosmic family after fulfilling such love and obligation them.

Then, what was the actual death of a Confucian man really like? Perhaps the most representative example is Zengzi's behavior of *changing the mat*. On his deathbed, he discovered that his mat was too much for him, and told his disciples to change it: "*I want for nothing but to die in the correct way.*" They then raised him up and changed the mat. When he was replaced on the new one, before he could compose himself, he expired (*Liji* 3:18). Zengzi's death is later praised by Confucians as a noble example of a decent death. Instead of showing any fear, pain, or sadness about his death, he sought only moral satisfaction. That is, what he feared was not death per se, but moral dishonesty. The Confucians thought that if an individual's behaviors all attain due measure and degree to holistic order in the universe, then the community could be harmonized, and all things could flourish. That's why Zengzi regarded compliance with social moral norms, while not being careless under any circumstances, as ultimately the way to harmonize and integrate with the universe. This was the way he transcended death.

A Korean Confucianist Toegye Yi Hwang (1501–1570) explained the phrase, "*in death, I will be at peace*", which appears at the end of Zhang Zai's *The Western Inscription*, and especially portrayed Zengzi's death as an example. Toegye regards Zengzi's way of dying as ideal, which means that Toegye defined moral satisfaction as the most essential basic condition for death in Confucianism (Yi 1975, vol. 29, 220). The peaceful acceptance of death is also found in the theory of gerotranscendence and *Zhuangzi*, but Confucianism takes a completely different approach from them. According to the Confucian view, moral satisfaction is necessary and sufficient conditions for fearless and comfortable acceptance of death.

Another representative example is the death of Toegye, who is a most renowned Korean Confucian master. In Korean Confucianism, it was important to record the deathbed of Confucian masters, which is called *Gojonggi* (Ko. *The Record of Decent Death*). Korean Confucianists believed that they could find a life-long process of self-cultivation in the dying moments of a master, so they wanted to record the moments of

death in detail and study them as ideal models for life. *The Record of Decent Death* of Toegye provides the following description (Hong and Yi 2007, 268):

*On November 15, 1570, the master's [Note: Toegye] condition became more serious. At this time, Gi Daeseung, who had been having an academic discussion with for eight years, sent a letter to ask after the master. The master was lying down but wanted to write back. He asked his student to write a reply to Gi and acknowledged that his claim about the theory of Investigation of things was wrong. On the morning of December 8, the master asked a student to water the plum pot. The weather was clear, but clouds suddenly gathered around 5 p.m. and snow fell and piled up about an inch on the roof. A little later, the master asked a student to organize his seat and let him sit down. When a student helped him to a seat, he passed away in a sitting position. The clouds dispersed and the snow stopped.*

This story gives a truthful account of the death of a great master without any exaggeration. Toegye participated in political affairs until middle age, but in old age, he resigned from all government posts and moved to his hometown and concentrated on self-cultivation and education. His character and scholarship were praised by all, and the kings respected him. He never spoke rudely to anyone younger than thirty, and never ignored a servant girl. His daily affairs were always modest and reverent. He never neglected his studies and discipline until the end of his life, and continued his academic discussions as usual, even though his health was so deteriorated that he was about to die, and he willingly acknowledged the mistakes in his argument. And he loved a trifling life like a plum flowerpot as he usually did until the moment of his death. He continued his ordinary daily affairs with moral reverence and died decently. His death was a very quiet, ordinary, and peaceful event without surprise. He did not accept death painfully, nor did he feel sad about leaving. The reason he was able to maintain his daily routine in the face of death was because of his long self-cultivation and moral self-satisfaction. This attitude toward death was achievable because he only followed heaven's mandate and was not afraid of death. This is called *decent death* (Ko. *jeongjong*).

## 5 Conclusion

It seems that there is *no country for old men* in the world, but it is also undeniable that there is no country where only young people live. It cannot be denied that the society we live in is becoming an aging society, and although this forecast is a serious future facing mankind, the alternative is not yet clear. Although various efforts will be required to address this problem, it does not seem appropriate to seek a solution that only focuses on providing material well-being to the elderly. It is considered that the most important and basic need for people who have reached old age is spiritual welfare that allows them to recognize the meaning and value of old age and live with self-esteem and a sense of happiness as the subject of their own life. For the spiritual welfare of the elderly, religious and philosophical awareness, and education about the purpose of life and the whole process of life are necessary. This study attempted to clarify the contemporary meaning by investigating how traditional Korean Neo-Confucianism understood old age and how they hoped for spending their old age. To this end, this study adopted a comparative method with the theory of gerotranscendence.

This study first summarized the theory of gerotranscendence and compared it with the Confucian view of old age. Second, it examined that Confucianists gained emancipated innocence and immerse themselves in self-cultivation after retirement. It explained the two ways of cultivation, keeping reverence in tranquility and embodying the truth in the sage's classics to transform an egoistic self into the cosmic Self. And finally, it considered life metaphysics and cosmic unity, and how Confucianists stipulated a decent death in the state of moral transcendence. In conclusion, this study claims that old age is a significant period of achieving the completion of spirituality but not just as a period of bodily decrepitude, and Confucian cultivation may play an important role on the spiritual lives of seniors.

This study will have the following significance and prospects. By interpreting Confucianism as a source to be utilized for spiritual lives of seniors, it is possible to lay a cornerstone of Confucian gerontology in terms of applied religion. Also, this will open up the possibility of intercultural and interdisciplinary communication, as well as facilitate an interreligious dialogue of spiritual experiences between different religions to create better spiritual welfare for seniors.

## Notes

- [1] Heelas and Woodhead argue that the characteristic of modern religion is an experience-centered in the individual life. According to them, people today are no longer worship to authoritative absolutes or external laws, but rather to experience religiosity in their actual lives. He defines an important function of modern religion as *spirituality in life* (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 3–7). I think his view of religion will be useful in providing the spiritual welfare for the elderly, and that it is somewhat in line with the religions of East Asia that emphasize personal religious experience.
- [2] The question of whether Confucianism is a religion has long been a topic of debate. This has to do with the question of how to define religion. Some Confucian scholars define Confucianism as a humanistic religion different from Christianity. Mou Zongsan (1970, 76–77) states in this regard: “*God in Christianity is separate from the human world. The entity of worship in Confucianism, on the contrary, is not separate from the human world. While it can be down to earth to regulate and guide everyday life, it can also be as lofty as confirming a transcendent and universal moral, spiritual entity.*” I generally agree with him, and this study is therefore based on his views.
- [3] It is recognized that the culture of respect for the elderly is due to the agricultural and settlement culture of ancient East Asia. Farmers lived from generation to generation using the natural knowledge discovered by their ancestors on the land handed down by their ancestors, and this life pattern naturally formulated an ethic of reverence toward the elderly (Fung 1948, 21). Seniors have been regarded as indispensable beings in society, who possess important knowledge and wisdom through many experiences.
- [4] In Western Christian spirituality, the idea is conceptualized in terms of the *intellect* versus *will* primacy dispute (Ching 2004, 90). As for Confucianism, investigation of things emphasizes the intellect similarly to the traditional Dominican stance on the matter, while keeping reverence emphasizes will and is thus more aligned to the traditional stance of Franciscans.
- [5] Taoism and Buddhism also emphasize a quiet, sitting meditation, but the meaning is quite different from that of Confucianism. Because Taoist and Buddhist pursue an *absolute nothingness* through sitting in stillness. The most representative is probably the story of *sitting and forgetting everything* (Zh. zuowang) in *Zhuangzi*. In the fictional dialogue between Confucius and his pupil Yanhui, Yanhui is portrayed as he progresses, forgetting social values and norms one by one. At the end, he forgets everything including the body, the perceptive organs, material form, and knowledge, and finally, he becomes one with the Great Pervader (see Chan 1969, 201).

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