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**“AN INSIGHT INTO THE CONFUCIAN DILEMMA:
YULGOK YI I’S ‘REFUSAL LETTERS TO THE THRONE’ (사직서 ; 辭)
AND HIS PERSONAL CORRESPONDENCE”**

Introduction:

As many other Confucian scholar-officials in North-East Asia, Yulgok Yi I 李珣 (1536-1584), the famous *sònbi* of mid-Chosòn period, was always torn between serving the king and the country and retirement for self-cultivation. Indeed, this very Confucian dilemma – designed in Korean by the expression “進退” – is

- 1) in one hand, a consequence of the specificity of the Confucian thought that do not separate socio-political action from individual moral self-cultivation and,
- 2) on the other hand, a consequence of the inescapable conflict between an ideal conception of politics and deceptive reality.

If this dilemma is generally well-known by specialists of Korea and Confucianism, it has not yet been studied in details.

The survey that I want to present to you today is an insight into the reasons why Yulgok did not want to serve, through a brief comparison between the reasons he gives for retiring in his letters to the king Sònjo (宣祖 ; 1567-1608) and in his personal correspondence. All these texts are in the Complete Works of Yulgok, the *Yulgok Chònsò*. So, this survey aims at having a better understanding of the Confucian dilemma of serving or retiring for the Chosòn scholars-officials.

1. Results on the 사직서 (辭): the reasons that Yulgok gives to the king for retirement

First I will present the results of the chronological classification I have made of Yulgok's refusal texts and also of the study of their content (please see synoptic table).

Yulgok gives 5 main reasons for retiring or refusing an appointment in his letters to the king, which are, in order of importance, as follow:

1. He lacks talents and is not able to serve ; he feels that he failed in his attempts to fulfil his duties as a civil official and he feels useless for the king and the country (40 texts)
2. He is ill or he is physically and psychologically speaking incapable of serving (31 texts)
3. He considers his times as decadent or he is not in the same wavelength with his contemporaries (24 texts)
4. He is criticized by other officials at court and he has no support from his colleagues (14 texts)
5. He wish to devote himself to Confucian self-cultivation or he laments not to have time or energy for self-cultivation (12 texts)

So, we can make three general comments on this result:

1. The first reason for retirement is the lack of talents and the feeling of failure and uselessness, and the last reason is the desire for self-cultivation. So, contrary to what we could have thought at first sight, the Confucian priority of self-cultivation is not Yulgok's main reason for retiring. For instance, he only says in 2 texts, in 1578 and 1583 that he wants to dedicate to teaching in Confucian academies.

2. We have to stress that in 24 texts, almost the half of his letters to the king, he asserts his devotion to the service of the king and the community. It is a matter of Rightness (義). In fact, in many cases and in particular at the end of his life, he just wants to have an appointment that is commensurate with his actual abilities and he is not seeking definitive retirement.

Indeed, if we compare this with the third reason, which is the decadence of the times, we can understand that the main reason Yulgok gives to the king Sònjo is that he cannot serve in a

period of decadence and he is quite discouraged by serving. In many texts Yulgok calls for reforms and king's own self-cultivation and it is important to precise that in 9 texts, Yulgok denounces the fact that Confucian values are completely obsolete at his time. It means that Yulgok cannot stand the gap lying between reality and Confucian political ideal and furthermore, that his sense of Rightness commend him to retire.

More precisely, he often denounces the bad functioning of the administration. He criticizes the too frequent transfers that do not permit to civil officials to fulfil their duties and that do not necessarily match their individual abilities. For example, at the end of his life, from 1581 to 1583, he is notably appointed to the Cabinet of Writers (*Hongmungwan yemungwan daejehak* 弘文館藝文館大提學) and to the Ministry of Army (*Pyòngjo p'ansò* 兵曹判書) but, since he was a young man, he says he is not good at literary composition and that a civil official is not able to discuss and decide military matters. The consequence is that common people do not benefit from the system and it means also that the actual Chosòn administration does not realize Confucian ideals.

3. We can make a third statement: the second reason for retiring is bad health or disease. Indeed, we know that since his teenage years, Yulgok was often ill and through many texts, we can also see that he was seemingly a bit hypochondriac. Yulgok is all the time exhausted, ill and sad when he has an office and in particular after he was Chònju *moksa* and Hwanghaedo *kwanch'alsa* when he was so disappointed by his useless efforts. By the way, it is interesting to note that in a letter to Sònjo dating from 1572 – the king was ill then –, Yulgok explains that there are psychosomatic reasons in disease and he gives some advices to the king. If we apply this statement to Yulgok himself, we can perhaps better understand his recurrent illness. Indeed, he often says that he is physically and mentally incapable of serving and we can see that the fourth reason why he wants to retire is that he is criticized by colleagues. So, just as he feels useless, Yulgok is particularly sensible to the fact that he is neither able to gather people nor to be supported or understood by the king and also by other officials: he is a very emotional person and in situation of crisis, he is altogether ill and desperate.

To sum up the brief study of these letters to the throne, we can say that Yulgok, although he has a clear and high sense of duty to serve, was above all a fragile man who

wants regularly to retire because he thinks he lacks talents, energy and support in order to try to rescue the decadence of his times.

2. Comparison of these reasons with the content of his personal correspondence

But, one can ask, why is he so eager to serve? Why does he not want to simply retire and dedicate to self-cultivation, like some other Confucians, like one of his best friends, Ugye Sòng Hon (午溪 成渾 ; 1535-1598)?

In order to answer to the question and start with the second part of the survey, we are now going to make a comparison of the result of the analysis of his refusal official texts with that of his personal correspondence. In order to know Yulgok's real motivations, it is important to check whether or not he says the same thing to the king and to his friends.

In his personal letters, Yulgok expresses 5 main feelings toward retiring or refusing an appointment, which are as follow:

1. He lacks talents (12 texts)
2. He does not want to serve or he had bad opinion on serving (10 texts)
3. He is criticized or misunderstood, both by his colleagues and by his friends (8 texts)
4. He desires to devote himself to self-cultivation (8 texts)
5. He deliberately plans to pretext disease to obtain retirement or dismissal (3 texts)

At first sight, we can notice several differences with the content of his letters to the king:

1. there is no explicit mention to the decadence of times
2. the first reason is, as for the refusal texts, his lacking of talents
3. the desire for self-cultivation is proportionately more often mentioned

So we can say that the argument of the lack of talents is not just a formal one but it expresses Yulgok's real feelings. Furthermore, if we add to this the fact that he is often complaining that he has no time or no energy for self-cultivation, it appears that Yulgok has a

really bad opinion of himself as a Confucian : he is neither capable to serve nor to achieve self-cultivation. In several letters to the king too, he is speaking of himself as a mediocre and useless Confucian (迂儒, 腐儒).

But there are especially two main striking features in these letters:

1. The second recurrent theme is his bad opinion of serving and his desire of retirement. As far back as 1554, he says in a letter to Sòng Hon that he decided to pass civil service examinations only because his family is poor and he has no other choice. He also says that he is aware of the fact that the Way of examinations is completely different from the real Confucian Way. In some letters to the king he also says by 5 times that he is serving for bad reason: that is, he needs a salary to feed his large family. We have to notice here that many *yangban* were not rich at all and although Yulgok held several important offices, he was poor during his whole life. In fact, Yulgok is ambiguous toward serving for a salary, which is ethically unacceptable for him. Indeed, he is altogether lamenting and accepting this situation. At the end of his life, he even decides to take an appointment in order to help his friend Song Ik'p'il.

Fundamentally, Yulgok is paradoxical toward the problem of serving and retiring. Indeed, as we can see in the synoptic table, he is sometimes critical at serving, because it takes him away from the right way of self-cultivation, and sometimes he says exactly the contrary by asserting to his friend his firm intention to serve, because that is a duty connected to the sense of Rightness. We have to precise here that Yulgok was constantly opposed to Sòng Hon on that matter and, at the end of his life when he seems to resign himself to serve at all costs, he even tries to convince Sòng Hon to serve because the country is in real danger of collapse.

2. The second remark is that, although he is constantly speaking of his health to his friends – and we understand that he is really often ill –, he confesses in 3 texts that he is deliberately planning to pretext disease in order to retire. By the way, it is important to remember that demands of retirement or dismissal are not necessarily followed by real retirement: the king can refuse to let an official retire. So, in many cases, illness could be the last argument.

But we cannot attach too much importance to these few cases and hastily conclude that disease is only a conventional excuse for retiring. In many texts, Yulgok says to his friends

that it is wrong, it is contrary to the sense of Rightness to resort to disease in order to retire. He is convinced that only a complete sincerity to the king is the right solution.

Conclusion

So we can conclude that according to the situation, the appointment he is holding, the critics of which he is the subject, his physical and psychological condition, Yulgok is changing his mind. When he is in office, he is disappointed and discouraged and when he is retired, he is missing the commitment in political action. As he says to the king and to his friends: “(he) cannot forget Yao and Shun”.

That is because Yulgok considers himself basically as a ‘scholar-official’ (世士) and not as a *sanrin* (山林), a retired and cultivated scholar and although he was literally agonizing and completely discouraged, he always feels obliged to try to do something for the sake of the country. So during his whole life, he continuously serves and retires, write memoranda for the king and also philosophical books. Despite a few incontestable episodes of pessimism, he was persuaded that it was possible to change things and to improve men through Confucian principles.

And, it is precisely because of his hesitations, his contradictions and his intimate dilemma that Yulgok was a real Confucian. Indeed, he always tries to live according to what he had learned from Confucianism.

We can add here that the dilemma of serving or retiring is one of the most representative features of Confucianism because it is essentially a matter of Rightness (義).

Synoptic table

Precisions on the personal references used:

Correspondence:

1. L (I/II/III/IV) = Letters/書

2. L.S or L.H = 書上 or 書下

→ *Yulgok Chònsò*, 卷 9, 10, 11 and 拾遺, 卷 2, 3

Refusal texts:

1. S (I/II/III/IV/V) = 疏筭

2. K = 啓

3. Suppl. = 拾遺

→ *Yulgok Chònsò*, 卷 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 拾遺, 卷 2

* = refusal text

× = personal letter

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Year, Yulgok's age and reference of the text in the <i>Yulgok Chònsò</i>	Lack of talents, feeling of failure, of uselessness	Decadence of times, Reforms needed, lessons to king	Disease/ Lack of energy	Desire for Self- cultivation/ Lack of self- cultivation	Yulgok criticized	Yulgok desires to serve/ Ideal of serving	Yulgok does not want to serve/Bad opinion of serving
1567 丁卯 (32 years old) (3 year after the beginning of his official career + accession to the throne of king Sònjo)							
To Ch'oe Un'U L.IV.23				×			
To Ki Daesung L.I.6	×				×		
1568 戊辰 (33) retirement: 1							
To Song Ikp'il L.S.7				×			
To Chong Ch'òl L.IV.1			× (pretext)			Hesitation	
1569 己巳 (34) retirement: 2							
S.I.7	*		*			*	
S.I.8			*	*		*	
1570 庚午 (35) retirement: 1							
To Ch'oe Sijung L.H.24				×			×
To Chong Ch'òl L.H.10			× (pretext)				×

To Sòng Hon L.I.15	×		× (pretext)	×	×		×
1571 辛未 (36) ill; retirement: 1 ; Chôngju moksa							
1572 壬申 (37) ill; retirement: 5							
To Chông Ch'òl L.IV.7 (between 1572 and 1576)	×						
To Chông Ch'òl L.IV.9 (between 1572 and 1576)							×
To Chông Ch'òl L.H.10 (after 1572)							×
To Chông Ch'òl L.H.11 (after 1572)					×		
To Chông Ch'òl L.H.12 (after 1572)					×		×
To Chông Ch'òl L.H.14 (after 1572)					×		
To Chông Ch'òl L.H.15 (after 1572)							×
S.II.7	*		*			*	
1573 癸酉 (38) ill; retirement: 2							
To Sim Yegyòm L.IV.19						×	
To Sòng Hon L.III.1	×					Yulgok feels ill at ease in retirement: hesitation	
S.III.1	*		*			*	
S.III.2	*			*			
S.III.3	*	*				*	
S.III.4	*	*				*	
1574 甲戌 (39) retirement: 2; Hwanghaedo kwanch'alsa							
To Sòng Hon L.S.4	×				×		
To Sòng Hon L.S.5	×						
Suppl.K.17	*	*	*				
Suppl.K.18	*	*					
Suppl.K.19		*					

1575 乙亥 (40) ill; retirement: 1							
To Ch'oe Sijung (between 1575 and 1583)							×
To Sòng Hon L.III.3							×
K.4	*	*	*				
Suppl.K.29	*	*			*	*	
1576 丙子 (41) ill; retirement: 2							
To Song Ikp'il L.III.12					×	×	
To Song Ikp'il L.III.13						Hesitation	
To Chòng Ch'òl L.IV.10					×		
Suppl.S.6	*		*		*		
1577 丁丑 (42) no appointment							
To Song Ikp'il L.III.14	×						
To Song Ikp'il L.III.16	×			×			
To Song Ikp'il L.III.19				×			
1578 戊寅 (43) ill; retirement: 2							
To Song Ikp'il L.III.22				×		×	
To Song Ikp'il L.S.8	×						×
To Song Ikp'il L.S.9				×			
Suppl.K.31	*	*		*	*		
S.IV.4	*	*					
S.IV.6	*	*	*	*			
S.IV.7	*	*	*	*	*		
1579 己卯 (44) retirement: 1							
To Song Ikp'il L.III.13						×	
To Song Ikp'il L.III.27						×	
S.V.1		*	*			*	

1580 庚辰 (45) ill; no retirement							
S.V.5	*	*	*			*	
Suppl.K.32	*	*					
1581 辛巳 (46) no retirement							
To Song Ikp'il LS14						×	
Suppl.K.40	*		*			*	
S.V.6	*	*	*				
K.7	*		*			*	
K.8	*	*	*			*	
K.9	*	*	*			*	
K.10	*		*			*	
1582 壬午 (47) no retirement							
K.11	*		*		*	*	
K.12	*		*			*	
K.13	*	*				*	
K.14			*			*	
K.15			*			*	
K.16	*		*			*	
K.18	*		*			*	
1583 癸未 (48) ill; retirement: 1							
To Sòng Hon L.III.8							
To Sòng Hon L.III.9	×					×	
To Song Ikp'il L.III.39	×						
To Song Ikp'il L.S.16	×						
S.V.8	*	*	*	*	*		
S.V.10	*		*		*		
S.V.11	*			*	*		
S.V.12	*				*		
S.V.13	*	*			*		
S.V.14	*	*		*	*	*	
S.V.15	*	*		*	*		

K.20	*	*	*		*		
K.45			*			*	
K.46	*		*			*	
K.47			*			*	
S.V.16	*		*	*			
S.V.17	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Suppl. S.7	*			*			
1584 申甲 (49) First lunar month : Yulgok's death							
Total	Lack of talents/ Feeling of failure, of uselessness	Decadence of times, Reforms needed, lessons to king	Disease/ Lack of energy	Desire for Self- cultivation/ lack of self- cultivation	Yulgok is criticized	Yulgok desires to serve/ Ideal of serving	Yulgok does not want to serve/Bad opinion of serving
Total for 48 refusal texts	40 texts	24 texts	31 texts	12 texts	14 texts	24 texts	0 text
Total for letters	12 texts	0 text	3 texts (pretext)	8 texts	8 texts	6 texts	10 texts
Total	52 texts	24 text	34 texts	20 texts	8 texts	30 texts	10 texts