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► **To cite this version:**

Isabelle Sancho. The "Confucianization" seen with the eyes of its initiators.: The words of Yulgok Yi I.. 2007 AKSE Conference, AKSE, Centre de recherches sur la Corée (EHESS), Apr 2007, Dourdan, France. hal-02904126

HAL Id: hal-02904126

<https://hal.science/hal-02904126>

Submitted on 21 Jul 2020

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The “Confucianization” seen with the eyes of its initiators.

The words of Yulgok Yi I

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In the panel entitled the “Confucianization of Korean society”, I have chosen to take a restrictive approach to this complex and multi-faced problem. I first proposed to examine what we could call the “confucianization of the elite”, or the confucianization of the scholar-officials. There were many reasons for this preliminary choice. First, a difference has to be made between the Confucianization of the whole society, which is a long-lasting process extending over the entire Chosŏn period, and what pr. Kim Haboush used to call the “Confucianization of the court”, that is to say the Confucianization of the elite or of the scholar-officials. This Confucianization of the scholar-officials is in some extent the first stage of the Confucianization of Korean society, because this particular social class is considered as the main dynamic force that introduce, develop and maintain Confucian institutions, values and practices at court first, and then in local areas. A second difference has to be made between the Confucianization taken as an impersonal process which features could be factually, objectively described, and the Confucianization taken as a deliberate project led by the supposedly “confucianized” elite. But, many questions could then arise: was there really a conscious project of confucianization, and if it was so, what was the motivation of these men who try to “confucianize” Korea?

Besides, generally speaking, the 16th century can be seen as a turning-point in the process of Confucianization. While the Confucianization of the court is generally considered as achieved, the growing power of the Censorate - and especially the *samsa* - endangers royal effective power. Factional strives are emerging, and they create a sort of breakdown in the balance of power at court. In a very short period of time, these strives spread to local areas and they divide the whole world of *literati*. And, finally, the scholars start to lead by themselves the Confucianization of the country. They are creating *sŏwŏn* and *hyangyak* and they develop their educational and social activities independently of the State. To sum up and to have a very general picture, the 16th century is the scene of a crisis in the history of Chosŏn political functioning, and also the scene of the beginning of an active Confucianization of the society not only led by the State but primarily by the scholars-officials who also tend to create a new identity for themselves.

That is why I have entitled my presentation the “Confucianization seen through the eyes of its initiators”. And for this purpose, I have chosen a case study much more suitable for a short speech: the case of Yulgok Yi I, taken as an example. The main reasons for this choice are that Yulgok was undoubtedly a Confucian. He was a high official and he faced the beginning of the factional strives and experienced the problems caused by this phenomenon at the very heart of the court. He also participated in the creation or the redefinition of the rules of the *sŏwŏn* and the *hyangyak*. And he left many writings which give us the opportunity to confront and compare different kinds of sources.

The aim of my study is then to draw a general picture of the mental representations of that period through a study of the terminology used by Yulgok in his various writings: mainly his dissertations, his personal and official correspondence. Such a picture of the mental representations could be interesting in order to better know what it means to be a Confucian scholar-official at the end of the 16th century, and to what problems the Confucianization is connected with when we try to think about this phenomenon from the “inside”, or from the scholars’ viewpoint.

For a start, we can notice that there are very few explicit mentions made to what we call nowadays “confucianization” in Yulgok’s writing. The “confucianization”, or in other words the Confucian mission of the scholars-officials to civilize their country could correspond to the well-known idea of *p’ung* (the wind), which comes in the following variety of compounds: *munp’ung* (related to *yusŭp*), *yup’ung* (related to the civilization, *mun*), *sap’ung*. These three terms are used equally by Yulgok, just as if they were synonymous. However, in the case of *sap’ung*, we can notice that this term is linked in the texts with three main ideas. First, it is the idea of officialdom that mainly expresses the fundamental unity between the *sap’ung* and the activity of the central government at court. The second idea is the educative and civilizer mission of the elite. And, the last idea is the spread of Confucian education. Besides, when Yulgok is speaking about this “mission”, this *p’ung*, he is stressing the deficiency of contemporary *yusŭp*, the habits and attitudes of the Confucians. For him, to improve the *sap’ung* needs to “cultivate the scholars, the *sa*” (*yangsa*). And, *yangsa* needs in turn to transform radically the *yusŭp* or *sasŭp* through a beforehand reformed educational process. This preliminary remark shows that for Yulgok, the Confucianization is led by the scholarly trained Confucian officials (*yu* or *sa*), and his major concern is the education of this specific social group that shares the power with the king. So, the Confucianization of the

society starts with the confucianization of the scholar-officials, and these men are the main focus of interest for Confucians like Yulgok.

Deceived by this first research on the “Confucianization seen from the inside”, I have made another research on the terms used by Yulgok which leads to much more interesting conclusions. Indeed, I have studied the terms designating what we call in Western languages the “scholars-officials”, in order to know much about the self-awareness of this social group. Indeed, if the “mission of confucianization”, considered as an educational project based on Confucian values, is commonly and explicitly shared by all the scholar-officials of the same aristocratic class, how does this elite actually picture herself?

When Yulgok is talking about the scholars-officials as a social class, in contrast to common people or the rest of the country, he uses the following terms: *yu* (identified with *munban*), *sega chi ye* (the men who have an “aristocratic” ascendancy, that is to say a high officials’ lineage), *nongmin* (in the sense of gentleman farmer or land owner), *sasŏ chi ka* and *hakcha*. As regards the case of *hakcha*, Yulgok contrasts it with the *sok’in* (common people), and the *ya’in* – a term referring to the idea of the decay of a scholar-official. *Sok’in* and *ya’in* imply moral and social connotations. So, the main terms designating the scholars-officials (*yu*, *ka*, *min*, *sa*, *hak*), when compared to what Yulgok is explicitly saying, tend to show that this social class is anxious to be thought honourable and defines itself as a *ka* (or *kamun*) identified as a high-officials’ lineage. The specificity, and also the legitimacy of this class lie in an expertise (the scholarly expertise, *hak* and *yu*) and the corresponding attitudes and habits (ritual practices for example). So, the group seems to be homogenous and unitary, compared to the “lower classes” which are not at all discussed in detail.

When Yulgok talks about the people, or the nation, in contrast to the king, he does not care either about lower classes called by a generic term: *min*. But he does make a difference between the *sin* (ministers/officials) and the *sa*, or between *sa* and *cho* (the “court”, an equivalent of *sin*/officials). Moreover, he makes a difference between the *sa* and the *cho* on the one hand, and the *chija* (the “capable men”, the true Confucians) on the other hand. He is contrasting the scholars-officials taken as a group, to the true Confucians who are regarded as outstanding individuals. So we can notice that, depending on the viewpoint, differences are made among the unitary social group of scholar-officials.

Let us continue the investigation by a deeper analysis of the terminology used for the scholar-officials in Yulgok’s writings. We will examine successively the following four major

groups of terms: 1) *sa* (designating a social group in relation to specific skills and practices), 2) *sin* (taken in the *sin/kun* relationship, or related to officialdom), 3) *yu* (related to Confucianism and scholarly expertise) and 4) several terms formed from the notion of *hak/Learning*, also related to Confucianism.

The terminology based on the term *sa* is certainly the most complex and difficult to define. These numerous terms designates a general and homogenous social group (*sa, saja, wuisaja, sasŏ, saryu*), but also a group that can be divided in different categories (*hakmun chi sa, sarim, sallim* or *sallim chi sa, ch'usa*). Besides, the moral value of the distinctive *sa* is often underlined by qualifying adjectives: *chisa, chiksa, hyŏnsa, ũisa* just as if being a *sa* does not necessarily match moral qualities. But, on the contrary, *sa* is also used to designate specific features, or specific skills inherent to the *sa's* status or identity: *sasŭp, sagi, sasim, sap'ung, sap'ip, saron*.

The terminology based on the term *sin* (taken in contrast to the king, *kun/wang*) is at first sight easier to characterize. First, there are generic terms designating some specific officials at court: *taesin* (high officials of the *samsa*), *myŏngsin* (high officials of the Ming court), *nansin* (the bad officials who are responsible for the *sahwa*). But, the most important term is certainly *sega chi sin* and its abbreviation, *sesin*. These terms designate a *sa* who became an official because of, or thanks to his high officials' ascendancy. So, the expression is linked to the problem of the legitimacy of the high social status. The antonym of *sega chi sin* is *sallim chi sa*, or even *pulsu sallim chi sa* (the scholars who refuse to be sold as common goods, who refuse to prostitute their ethical and scholarly life to the administration). We can notice that the expression *ch'oya chŏksin* refers to the retired scholars who have been officials and have deliberately chosen to retire for moral and/or vital safety.

The terminology based on the term *yu*, usually translated "Confucian", reveals an interesting polysemic use. *Yu* designates a social class, that of the *munban* in contrast to the *muban*. It designates also the school of the Confucians (*yuja, sŏnyu, kuyuja*). But, some terms refer to specific contemporary Korean scholars: *yusaeng* (official students in state schools or in *Sŏnggyungwan*), and *noyu sŏnsaeng* (local scholars who teach basic knowledge for the *kwagŏ* examinations but are ignorant of the real Confucian learning). Just like in the case of the term *sa*, a *yu* is not necessarily synonymous with inborn moral skills and true abilities for officialdom. The examples of *t'ongyu, uyu, puyu* or *paekmyŏn puyu* reveals that qualifying adjectives are often used. But, just like *sa*, *yu* can on the contrary express specific and remarkable qualities: *i yu myŏng se* (to gain fame thanks to one's *yu* skills, or *yu* qualities) and

yuhaeng (acting as a true *yu*). Lastly, *yup'ung*, related to *yusŭp*, refers to the Confucianization, or the educative mission of the Confucians, and their ability to improve civilization.

The last group of terms designating the scholar-officials is based on the term *hak* which refers clearly to Neo-Confucianism, and especially Cheng/Zhu Neo-Confucianism as interpreted during the Yuan dynasty. Indeed, *hakcha*, *wuihakja*, and *tongbang hakja* designate the followers of the *sirhak*, or *sŏngnihak*, or *yihak* or *sŏnghyŏn chi hak*. The latter term, *sŏnghyŏn chi hak* (the “Learning of the Sages and Worthies”), and the first one, *sirhak* (“practice-oriented Learning”) are particularly meaningful, because they indicate the political horizon of the Neo-Confucianism adopted in Korea, which was intended primarily for the governing elites. Compared to other teachings, Confucianism or *hak* is opposed to *yidan* and *yiryu* and it is named *odo* or *sado* (two terms that stress the unity of the “Confucian *hak*” or the only one *To*). There are also some expressions that clearly link the *hakja* or the Confucians with the figure of Confucius: *kongja chi to*, *pŏp kongja chi to*. But, we can notice here too that acting superficially as a follower of Confucius does not necessarily mean being in the right way, as shown in the expressions *pok kongja chi pok* (wearing the clothes of Confucius) and *song kongja chi ŏn* (reciting the speeches of Confucius). These examples are of high interest because, when using these terms, Yulgok exposes the superficial ritual attitude and the superficial knowledge of Confucian classics of the supposed or “false” Confucians who are just using Confucian practices and references as a means to gain social recognition.

Before concluding, let us see now one last terminology used by Yulgok: the typology of the retired scholars of his time, the *sa chi pulsa* (literally the “scholars who do not want to serve”). Indeed, after the beginning of the factional strives at court, Yulgok exposes in two letters to the king his own terminology to designate this particular category. The *yuhyŏn* are the ideal Confucians who must serve for the sake of the government and the whole country. The *ŭndun chi sa* are a sort of hermits who are not unconcerned about state affairs, and it is up to the king to persuade these capable men to serve in his government. The *yŏmt'ui chi sa* (the category where Yulgok classifies himself) are described as having some outstanding abilities. But, because they are also aware of their shortcomings, the king must leave them retire for self-cultivation, and summon them when they will be ready to serve with efficiency. The last category, that of the *tomyŏng (chi sa)*, refers to the unscrupulous scholars who wrongfully assume the title of *sa*.

Many conclusions could be drawn from this analysis of the terminology used by Yulgok in various types of texts, but I will just underline a few ones. Firstly, there is no

particular term to designate the scholar-officials as a social class. Indeed, there is a vagueness in the use of the terms *sa*, *yu*, *sin* and *hakja*, even if there are also many evident signs that Yulgok has a clear “class awareness”. Secondly, the terms *yu*, *sa*, *kongja chi to*, *hakja* do not refer necessarily to any moral qualities that would be inherent to the status they are designating. So, the supposed moral superiority and the scholarly expertise of the scholar-officials are the crucial problems for defining the identity and the self-awareness of this class, in search for recognition.

Generally speaking, what is striking is that, whatever the nature of the texts, Yulgok shows a great concern for the definition and the categorisation of the different types of scholar-officials. His typology of the contemporary “retired scholars” is especially interesting because it mainly reflects his attempt to make clear distinctions among the indistinct group of scholar-officials. So, the vagueness of the vocabulary, the contradictions in the terminology in his texts display on the one hand the lack of a clear representation of his class and of its specificities, duties and legitimacy, and on the other hand a great concern for a self-definition as a scholar, an official or an aristocrat. This leads us to consider the question of Confucianization. Indeed, we could maybe interpret this vagueness and this concern for a definition as signs of the feelings of insecurity and disarray.

The theoretical discourse and the philosophical exegesis of the scholar-officials, from the foundation of Chosŏn, have mainly stressed the necessity of a collegial power, a sharing of the power between the king and the “scholar-officials” taken as a group. These scholar-officials have been used to picture themselves as a unitary body, in contrast to the figure of the king. And, whatever the name we give to them (*gongsin*, *sarim*, *hungup’a*, etc), there is no doubt that they have all experienced *sahwa* and various hardships for many centuries. But, if they share a common history, they have been deeply divided since the very foundation of the new dynasty. Yulgok’s example suggests that, at the 16th century, they seem to put words on this division. Besides, we could also wonder if they are not beginning to proclaim the difference between the figure of the official (or bureaucrat) and that of the scholar, *sŏnbi*. More precisely, they could have been in search of a new identity that could relieve them from the duty of serving - a duty which has legitimated their existence as an aristocratic social class. So, the Confucianization of the whole society, led by the scholars in local areas from the end of the 16th century on – a process that I would call a “mass confucianization”, mirrors perhaps the progressive construction of new mental representations, of a new self-awareness for Chosŏn Confucians.