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**How about the Classics in Neo-Confucianism?
Canon, exegesis and scholars in the first half of Chosŏn.**

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Confucius said « 溫故而知新，可以為師矣 », « Reviving the old to know the new may be taken as a model » (Lunyu, II.11). Confucianism might indeed be defined as an exegetical tradition, “reheating” (literally) and constantly reviving old texts and old ideas in order to find new flavours and new arrangements for the present. Studying today this exegetical tradition in Korea leads however to face two major problems: the lack of comprehensive compilations of Korean sources on the one hand; and some well-established historiographical presuppositions about the history of Korean Confucianism on the other hand.

Firstly, contrary to Ming and Qing China that published several comprehensive compilations of Chinese commentaries on the Classics, both official and private (as for example: *Sishu wujing daquan* 四書五經大全; *Xingli daquan* 性理大全; *Sishu quanshu* 四庫全書, « 經部 »; *Huangqing jingjie* 皇清經解; *Tongzhitang jingjie* 通志堂經解), the rarity of Chosŏn Korea’s compilation of specifically Korean commentaries is striking. The first one can be traced back to the 17th century. It is the 海東文獻總錄, 經書類 (1637) of Kim Hyu 金恹 (1597-1640), which compiles some Korean commentaries from the end of Koryŏ to Yulgok, Yi I 李珣 (1536-1584). In the Yŏngnam school, the *Tongyu sasŏ haejipp’yŏng* 東儒四書解集評 of Yu Kŏnhyu 柳健休 (1768-1834) could also be cited, in spite of his slight bias in favour of T’oegye’s school. The first official compilation, which consists only in a bibliographical listing of titles, is the *Tongguk munhŏn pigo* 東國文獻備考 from the reign of Yŏngjo 英祖 (1694-1776), written on the model of the *Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考 of the Song scholar Ma Duanlin 馬端臨. It has been successively revised and extended under Chŏngjo’s reign and, after that, in 1903, and was finally renamed *chŭngbo munhŏn pigo* 增補文獻備考 in the final 1908’s edition. To compensate this lack of a comprehensive compilation of Korean commentaries, the Tong’asia haksulwŏn of the University of Sŏnggyungwan has been compiling for ten years and finally published in

1998 the *Hanguk kyŏnghak charyo* 韓國經學資料, available online at the 한국경학자료시스템 since 2006. However, this “Collection of the Korean Study of Confucian Classics” is not comprehensive either, as Korean scholars pointed out recently. For example, most of the texts or passages commenting the Classics in personal correspondence, poems or biographies are not taken into account and not listed. So this lack has led to study the history of Korean *kyŏnghak* 經學 mainly through a few great figures as well as a few well-known texts. Moreover, in spite of a few recent studies in the history of texts and printings, *kukŏhak* 국어학 or general socio-political history, the Confucian scholars have mainly been studied for their philosophical systems. They have been classified according to the general trends or schools – often rival schools or political factions – that they are supposed to embody. So *kyŏnghak* has mainly been regarded as a sub-genre of Neo-Confucian thought taken as a philosophy. Research that would only focus on the very history of Korean commentaries, by themselves and not as erudite illustrations – or even symptoms – of larger philosophical systems, is still to be done.

The second problem is the well spread idea that the history of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism can be analysed through the opposition “*Zhujahak chŏk* scholars” versus “*t’al Zhujahak chŏk* scholars”, that is to say according to the different attitudes adopted by scholars toward the so-called Zhu Xi orthodox school. Such a vision tends however to draw the following general picture of the history of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism, which is not really satisfying: from the 14th to the 16th century, reception of Neo-Confucianism and faithful – even blind – reverence for Zhu Xi’s orthodox school → from the 17th century, reactions to this orthodoxy (with a special interest given to the so-called *sirhak* scholars, whose autonomy of thought is highly praised) → and finally, the 18th and 19th centuries as the golden age of Korean scholarship on the Classics, embodied by prominent figures like Tasan Chŏng Yagyong. This later period has therefore massively attracted contemporary scholars, and Korean *kyŏnghak* is then generally thought as synonymous with *sirhak*, *kojŏnghak* 考證學, 18th century philological “rediscovery” of the Classics, and finally with the criticisms against orthodoxy, Zhu Xi, official learning and *kwanhak* 官學.

These two problems have led to neglect, or even simply forget some interesting connate problems in political and socio-cultural history when dealing with the use and

role of the Confucian canon in the course of Korean history. I would like to present here some very general reflections about the first Korean Neo-Confucianism, the orthodox one, going from the 14th century to the late 16th century. Yet, in order to narrow my presentation, I have chosen to focus on two possible aspects of the features, role and use of this orthodox corpus by both Chosŏn kings and scholars: 1) what I would tentatively call the distance taken *vis-à-vis* the texts, 2) the purposes of reading and commenting these texts.

So let us first have a look at the distance – short or long – that kings and scholars have taken from the canonical texts and Neo-Confucian literature at large, when reading or using them. The scale is pretty wide, but three general standpoints can be distinguished.

Firstly, there is a very close distance, a close attitude, which consists in fixing a unified version of texts. This attitude has mainly been illustrated by kings, who wanted to perform their duty of *kyohwa* 教化, that is to say the duty of being Sage rulers in a Confucian worldview. An official policy has been carried out by three different kings in the 15th and 16th centuries to achieve a unified version of the Four Books, the Three Classics but also a few other texts that were not, namely, canonical – like the *Xiaoxue* 小學 of Zhu Xi's school. This policy has started with several royal editions of *ŏnhae* 諺解 and *kukyŏl* 口訣, the annotations in either Classical Chinese or Korean to help basic understanding as well as recitation in Korean pronunciation. Sejong 世宗 (1418-1450) is the first king to have started this process. He is recorded in the *Annals* as having ordered the Korean translation of the Four Books. Besides it is noteworthy that Sejong also created the *Chiphyŏnjŏn* 集賢殿 and promoted the system of *saga toksŏ* 賜暇讀書 (a kind of paid sabbatical leave for studying) that allowed many scholars to study, comment and write texts under royal patronage. The second king, Sejo 世祖 (r. 1455-1468), not only ordered a systematic annotation and explanation in Korean of Confucian texts – as well as Buddhist canonical texts; this is worth reminding, since the practice of *kukyŏl* started in Korea with Buddhist texts –, but he also made himself the *kukyŏl* of the *Xiaoxue* 小學 and the *Yijing* 周易. The third and maybe the most important king is Sŏnjo 宣祖 (r. 1568-1608), who created the *Kyojŏng ch'ŏng* 教正廳 in 1585 for a new annotation of the Classics (*kyŏngsŏ ŏnhae*). The result of this long-lasting work, which

has been interrupted by the *imjin* Japanese invasion, was finally completed and published in 1628, producing the orthodox, official version of the Korean *ǒnhae* of the Four Books, the Three Classics (周易, 書經, 詩經), the *Sohak* 小學 and the *Book of Filial Piety* 孝經 : the *kwanbon ǒnhae* 官本諺解. Other examples of royal patronage over the canonical texts can also be later found in the printing of official editions reproducing royal family's handwritings (example of the *Mengja ǒnhae* 孟子諺解 printed in 1693 and based on the calligraphy of Injo's father, Wǒnjong), or in the addition of royal autograph or preface to outstanding works related to Classics (example of Chǒngjo's preface to Yulgok's *Kyǒkmong yogyǒl* 擊蒙要訣).

After this first, close distance *vis-à-vis* the text, a second attitude can be noticed, which consists in commenting texts, in a both philological and philosophical thought process. This attitude is better illustrated at the 15th and 16th centuries by Confucian scholars, rather than kings. Indeed, even if most of the kings were taking good care of participating in the reading discussions on the Classics during the Royal Lectures (*kyǒngyǒn* 經筵), they were not as involved as the elites in the deep study of texts, since the elites of the beginning of Chosǒn were socially and morally bound to be *literati*, scholars, exegetes. They were legitimising their social status precisely by the mastery of Confucian texts. These commentaries of canonical and neo-confucian texts by successive scholars are revealing a huge diversity in the reading practices of that time, ranging from compiling canonical quotations and their Neo-Confucian commentaries, achieving an overall synthesis of various texts, writing erudite linear commentaries, or providing systematic and personal understandings of the Neo-Confucian thought. Four outstanding examples of such erudite commentaries and/or compilations from the 14th to the 16th centuries are the *ogyǒng ch'ǒngyǒllok* 五經淺見錄 of Kwǒn Kǔn 權近 (1352-1409), the *Chungyong kukyǒng yǒnǔi* 中庸九經衍義 of Yi Ōnjǒk 李彥迪 (1491-1553), T'oegye Yi Hwang's *Samgyǒng sǒkǔi* 三經釋義, *Sasǒ chil ũi* 四書質疑 and *Sasǒ sǒkǔi* 四書釋義, and finally Yulgok Yi I's *Sǒnghak chipyo* 聖學輯要. All these examples are telling two important things that are noteworthy here, even if they might sound like truisms. Firstly, commenting texts mainly means commenting commentaries, rather than commenting the Classics by themselves in order to find a supposed philological or textual truth. Reading is reinventing; texts are "open". Secondly,

priority is given to the building of a unified understanding of the canonical texts that could be coherent with the Neo-Confucian educative and didactic project. Reading is finding new ways of behaviour; texts are pretexts.

This point leads us to bring up the third and last attitude toward the canonical texts, which corresponds with the longest distance taken from the texts: the massive and seminal use of diagramms. Diagramms have often been used by scholars since the very reception of Neo-Confucianism in Korea to present an overall and systemic view of Neo-Confucian thought. The most famous examples are Kwŏn Kŭn's *Iphak tosŏl* 入學圖說 and T'oegye's *Sŏnghak sipto* 聖學十圖. As for the *Sŏnghak chipyo* 聖學輯要 of Yulgok, which consists in a compilation of quotations from the Classics and Neo-Confucian commentaries with some personal comments of the author about the so-called Learning of the Sovereign (*chehak* 帝學), it can be said that the very construction of the whole work is a meaningful architecture, illustrated by Yulgok himself in a diagramm. Resorting to schematical and synoptical presentation is revealing once again the didactic concern of the first Korean Neo-Confucian scholars, in quest for coherence and unity.

I would like to allude now to the topic of the goal of reading and commenting canonical texts at the beginning of Chosŏn. As has been shown just before, the different standpoints or distances taken from the texts by kings and scholars are all denoting the same concern for unity and education.

The formalisation of correct Korean versions of basic texts in the form of *ŏnhae* is indeed pointing at the royal desire to promote, control and edit an official corpus. This corpus is meant to be spread in the whole country, but also to be given as royal gifts to a few scholars-officials. This shows the royal will to edict an official *doxa* but also – and maybe above all – to head any individual exegesis, which would only credit one single scholar. This is certainly one of the reason why king Sŏnjo did not use the already existing Yulgok's *ŏnhae* of the Four Books, and gathered instead a group of scholars-officials to write a collective work to be used as official reference book.

Yet, scholars themselves were showing the same will of unification, of course for different reasons. As for example, T'oegye and Yulgok are explaining that they are writing the *Samgyŏng sasŏ sŏkŭi* and the *Sŏnghak chipyo* to put an end to the

exponential growth of Classics and commentaries, and thus to make a synthesis that could be a parapet against extrapolations. Extrapolations – they say – are evil, for they are misleading young scholars. They are useless and time-consuming, whereas scholars must only concentrate on Learning – that is to say the Confucian learning – which is so demanding that it needs a life-long commitment. There is no room for trifles and banalities when a higher mission is at stakes. Indeed, the goal of learning is to live according to it. In other words, Confucian Learning has always been stressing ethic and *praxis*, rather than solely textual knowledge.

This point is really worth reminding, for even the so-called orthodox, Zhu Xist Neo-Confucian tradition has been calling for *sirhak* 實學 (practice-oriented learning) since its very beginnings. So beyond their enabling the social reproduction of the elites, the Classics and the Neo-Confucian textual knowledge have been seen as the means to put theory into practice, or to “perform” texts and ideas (Confucianism might indeed be defined as the philosophy of the “just do it”). As Yulgok said in the *Kyökmong yogyöl*: “If the heart does not exercise and the body does not act according to what the mouth is reciting, what would be the benefit of a book remaining a book, and me remaining myself?” (若口讀而心不體身不行, 則書自書我自我. 何益之有。KMYG 4).

The major expression of this concern for education, unification and more broadly for the confucian project taken as a civilizing process can be found in the spread of textbooks dealing with the *samgang* 三綱 (父子有孝, 君臣有忠, 夫婦有烈) and the *oryun* 五倫 (長幼有序 and 朋友有信 added to the *samgang*). In the 15th and 16th centuries, many compilations on this topic have been produced under royal commands or by scholars’ personal initiatives – like Kim Anguk 金安國 (1478-1543) writing the *yiryön haengsildo* 二倫行實圖 (1518). Let’s also mention here the *Samgang haengsildo* 三綱行實圖 (1481), the *Sok samgang haengsildo* 續三綱行實圖 (1514 and 1581), the *Yiryun haengsildo* 二倫行實圖 (1579) and the *Oryun nok* 五倫錄 written under Sejo’s reign (1455-1468). These texts – that are not exactly commentaries of Classics and Neo-Confucian literature though – are aiming at incalculating basic moral values in order to implement good morals and law and order. The same is true of the handbooks and others concise guides summarizing Neo-Confucian principles and rules that the Korean Confucian scholars have been writing from the 16th century on, as educatives tools

reinforcing the creation and development of academies, *sōwŏn* 書院, as well as community compacts, *hyangyak* 鄉約.

By way of conclusion, I would like to underline the impact of the historical context of the 14th to the 16th century, which has been the stage of a permanent tension between the two poles of political power: the kings and the elites. One aspect of this tension is the control over enacting a coherent educational policy and building a unified body of knowledge. Besides, I would also like to stress the interest of considering philosophical exegeses as reflects, products or, conversely, as the driving force behind the changes in, for example, 1) the perception of the Canon taken as texts – texts that are open to commentaries but tending inevitably to get enclosed in an orthodox version –, 2) the strenghtening of Master-disciples relationships that enriched exegetical practices by providing a common life only dedicated to Learning in structures like Confucian academies, 3) the creation of the figure and the identity of the Confucian *litteratus* – the emblematic Korean *sōnbi* – understood as an “intellectual” rather than an administrator.