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“Yulgok and the Neo-Confucian Civilizing Process: Old Wine in a New Bottle?”

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The active participation of Yulgok, Yi I (1536-1584) in the implementation of Neo-Confucianism in the second half of the 16th century is a commonly agreed historical assumption, notably because of his well-known involvement in 1) Confucian academies, 2) community compacts, 3) collective granary, 4) private school, not to mention his administrative writings and private initiatives within his own family. Detailing his practical involvement in social programs will not be the topic of my talk. Continuing a reflection started at the 2007 AKSE Conference in a panel also focused on the Confucianization of Korea, my aim is rather to try to understand this civilizing project and process from the inside, that is to say, by trying to understand Yulgok’s mental and intellectual framework. I will limit my talk today to a few theoretical questions that are deeply linked to the very notion of ‘civilizing process’ (*kyohwa* 教化 or *hwa* 化) in Neo-Confucianism and in Yulgok’s texts as well, in order to shed a new light on this problem in the context of 16th century Korea.

Historical context

For most of the 16th century scholars-officials, their times were that of crisis and degeneration, synonymous with the end of a cycle started with the new dynasty. Especially, the successive and bloody literati purges of the 15th and 16th centuries have been a traumatic experience that left the elites puzzled about their own identity and social role. They have revealed that something went wrong in the exercise of power and the conduct of state affairs. So most of the Confucian scholars, holding a position or not, were calling for reforms. As for Yulgok, he made a straightforward and simple statement of fact on several occasions (civil service examinations’ dissertations, *Tongho mundap* 東湖問答, *Sŏnghak chipyo* 聖學輯要, memoranda): that the State is ailing (*pyŏng* 病) and need to be ‘cured’ properly (*ch’i* 治; which also mean ‘to govern’). The treatment to the illness is

Confucianism. More precisely, Confucian civilizing influence (*yup'ung* 儒風) and Confucian behaviors and practices (*yusŭp* 儒習 or *sasŭp* 士習) must be restored among scholars as well as at court. So, although the civilizing process ideally concerns the whole society, it must be beforehand prepared by the proper cultivation of the two poles of political power: the king and the elites. Civilizing common people is of course on the agenda, as the normative measures taken in various fields in the 16th century clearly show, but this is not the top priority for Yulgok and his peers.

A specific conception of time and history in Neo-Confucianism

To better understand this, let us remind the conception of time and history in Neo-Confucianism. As it is well-known, one core notion in Neo-Confucianism is the *Tot'ong* 道通, the 'Transmission of the Way'. The ideal government and society are believed to have existed in old antiquity, although this antiquity is so remote that it seems almost ahistorical. This model of sagely kingship (called *sŏnwang chi to* 先王之道, *chewang chi ch'i* 帝王之治, *wangdo chi hak* 王道之學, *ingun chi hak* 人君之學) sets a precedent in human history, which reasserts confidence in the potentiality of mankind. Besides, it is worth noticing that this precedent has been set by men, such as the sagacious emperors Yao and Shun. In Neo-Confucian theory, the course of history should be driven by outstanding men, called 'Sages' (*sŏngin* 聖人), whose hallmark is their having fully achieved their human potentiality in perfect accordance with the cosmic order. The most important element in the Transmission of the Way is less the Way itself than those providential men who are able to embody, transmit and bring up to date the ideal of civilization. However, according to the Neo-Confucian cosmology, an unavoidable degeneration is also part of the natural cosmic order as time goes by, mainly because of the evolution and deterioration of the Material force (Ki 氣). This means that the civilizing process can hardly be achieved definitely. The *kyohwa* could then be defined as a permanent work in progress, and it turns out to be a recurring project that calls for constant and repeated efforts. To put it in a nutshell, the ethical practice that is at the heart of the Neo-Confucian notion of civilization is basically inscribed in a complex temporality, related to both the cosmic and human orders. There is indeed the temporality of one single individual's ethical practice, which is in turn intimately linked to the temporality of the historical trajectory of the whole society.

Yulgok's viewpoint on the history of civilization in Korea and China

As for Korea, Yulgok provides an interesting viewpoint on the beginnings of civilization, focusing on one single man: Kija/Qizi 箕子, revered in both Chinese Henan and Korean P'yŏng'ando. According to Yulgok, Kija was the common ancestor of Chinese and Korean historical civilized states (*wŏnsŏng* 元聖), for he had given the forgotten secret of the mythical emperor Yu the Great, the Hongfan/Hongbŏm 洪範, to Wu of Zhou before leaving for the Korean peninsula. Kija is said to have deliberately fled China, for he was opposed to the new dynasty founded by brutal force. His descendants then created in Korea an independent state (*kuk* 國), shaped with affection and benevolence, and civilization started to flourish in Korea. The main feature of Kija's civilizing influence stressed by Yulgok is his governing by rites and ethics, in a time far before Confucius. In his long description of the history of the Ki family's rule in Korea, Yulgok contrasts the peacefulness and the ethical practices and mindsets of Korean people with the instability, violence and guile of contemporary Chinese people of the period beginning with the Warring States. The hazards and the final collapse of the Ki family's successive kingdoms of Kija Chosŏn and Mahan, after more than a thousand years of sagely rule, are mainly due to the chaos generated by the troubled Chinese history. To sum up, from 1568 when he first wrote a text on Kija (*Kijachŏn* 箕子殿), Yulgok developed little by little a specific discourse on civilization and the Confucian Way in various texts (*Sŏnghak chipyo*, *Kija silgi*, *Ch'a Wangch'ŏnsa Kija myo buun*). He notably used the figure of Kija to demonstrate the coincident beginnings of the Confucian Way in China and Korea, and he even suggests that Kija's Korea was far better than China.

Yulgok's diagnosis of late 16th century Korea

Besides, in his famous *Tongho mundap*, a royal command written during his sabbatical leave at the Toksŏdang, Yulgok presented some ideas that are emblematic of his diagnosis of the contemporary situation. As I said, Yulgok considered that the country was sick because of the general lack of concern for a correct practice of Confucianism. But his most important argument is related to his deep belief in one *locus classicus* characterizing the Korean reception of Neo-Confucianism in the first half of Chosŏn: *chŏngsim* 正心, the rectification of mind. In its Korean understanding, this notion underlines the necessary interaction between kings and ministers. In his *Tongho mundap*, Yulgok notably explains

that Kija's family founded for the first time a civilized state in Tangun's ancient territory. As for Koryŏ, the state failed to rule the country, for it was misled by Buddhism. After that, the new Yi dynasty was founded by men claiming to be the heirs of Kija Chosŏn and who thus wanted to use the right ideology: Confucianism. But in spite of their good will, Chosŏn kings and administrative elites have always failed, because of their misunderstanding and lack of sincere interaction. Rectifying the king's mind, which enables to rectify the court's mind and civilize the country is basically the task of the Confucian scholars-officials. Even though the civilizing process is theoretically in the hands of the king, the real driving forces and leaders are believed to be the Confucian elites, who must care for the implementation of the correct kingship as well as for the happiness of the whole society. By arguing that Confucian kingship is the cornerstone of an ideal state and society, Korean scholars-officials have paradoxically developed a very specific rhetoric about the balance of power where they are portrayed as equal to kings. For instance, Yulgok explains that king Sejong didn't succeed in practicing the Way in spite of his outstanding abilities, for he had lacked good ministers to help him. So the civilizing process can't be launched without this human encounter between a good prince and good minister. But this encounter is basically a matter of chance and can't be controlled. Thus, the civilizing process is tributary to the complexity of human interplays and it is a dynamics based on changing human relationships but also emotions.

The cosmology of the Book of Changes

One might wonder how it could be possible to perpetuate and deal with something that is subject to constant shifts. This question precisely points to the very heart of the Neo-Confucian *Weltanschauung*: the problematic of the *Changes*. When tackling with the problem of the civilizing process, one cannot escape thinking about the meaning and impact of the cosmology of the *Book of Changes*. As aforementioned, the civilizing process follows a dual sense of temporality, which raises also the question of the dialectics of duration (*ku* 久) and moment (*si* 時). The Neo-Confucian questioning is mainly preoccupied with how to bring and maintain constancy in a world regarded as ceaseless changes. This idea is conveyed for instance in a constellation of key concepts such as *sang* 常, *yung* 庸, *t'ong* 通, but also *chŏng* 定 and *chi* 止 that appear especially in the *Doctrine of the mean* or the *Great Learning*, the foundational texts for the Neo-Confucian

“civilizing process”. Although civilization was realized in old antiquity, such a harmonious state couldn’t last long, and although civilization might be about to be realized again, it will be difficult to make it last forever. The task seems almost impossible, for it depends on human interactions and what we would call ‘hazard’ or ‘chance’. But the cosmology of the *Book of Changes* precisely provides a solution to the problem. This philosophy is indeed grounded on the trust that the world is fundamentally understandable by the human mind, and that there is some kind of rationality going on under the surface of changes (the idea of Principle, Yi 理). Moreover, in a world regarded as a sort of huge magnetic field, human beings can resonate with and be part of the cosmic process. Rather than talking about ‘chance’ or ‘hazard’, the exegesis of the *Book of Changes* and Neo-Confucian texts use the term *myǒng* 命, ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’, which basically designates the right match (ǔi 義) with the cosmic order. In other words, the cosmology of the *Changes* provides the intellectual tools guaranteeing that human order can actually be achieved through the perfect and correct conformity with the natural order. Hence the problem only lies in the correct understanding (knowledge, *chi* 知) and the proper ethical practice (praxis, *haeng* 行) that are both needed in order to ensure this conformity with the natural order. So the civilizing process is believed as feasible through proper ethical practice.

The civilizing process: hwa 化, pyǒn 變 and Ki 氣

Let us now examine briefly a few notions taken from the *Book of Changes* and his exegesis. Changes, *yi* 易, is the generic term designating the transformation or change. But the most important notions are certainly *hwa* 化 and *pyǒn* 變. *Pyǒn* means a change in the nature of one line of a hexagram: the transformation from a *yin* line to a *yang* line, or conversely from *yang* to *yin*. *Hwa* means on the contrary the continuous and progressive transformation without any change of nature. *Hwa* is indeed related to the notion of continuity, *t’ong* 通. When talking about Kija, Yulgok says that he transformed the barbaric Koreans into civilized people: *pyǒnyi* 變夷, which means that he had changed their nature. After that, the sage kingship perpetuated by his descendants over many centuries is described as a “sage transformation”, *sǒnghwa* 聖化. Moreover, this transformation, *hwa*, is characterized by a few signs that remain and are still perceptible, although they are very thin. What is worth underlining here is this idea of something

remaining and still perceptible (*yuhun* 遺訓, *yup'ung* 遺風). So the civilizing process, started with Kija, may be reactivated thanks to those remaining signs. More precisely, because those signs are perceptible, the “mind” (*sim* 心) of the civilizing sovereigns of antiquity may be activated again through the mind of their followers, that is to say the Confucians. That is why the Transmission of the Way is understood in orthodox Neo-Confucianism as the transmission of the mind of the Sages. Besides, according to Yulgok, what enables the reactivation of this mind is the Material force, the *Ki* 氣 that pervades the world past and present, and that rules the mind of every man. Yulgok’s philosophical reflection on the *Ki* is very well-known in intellectual history, and this interest certainly illustrates his reflection on how the Confucian Way could be put into practice. Indeed, cultivating the *Ki* is part of the ethical training of Confucian scholars. Moreover, the scholars-officials are the “fundamental energy”, *wŏnki* 元氣, of the country. So it can be said that the sake of the whole society mainly depends on them as well as their correct ethical training.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to raise a few related questions. Firstly, although it is commonly argued that Yulgok’s political thought is focused on the people’s well-being (*minbon chŏngch'i* 民本政治), most certainly in order to set him up as an icon of Korean ‘national spirit’, I can’t help but wonder whether his thought is, above all, shaped by his self-interests. Of course his activism (as a high official and also as a Confucian master) in implementing Confucian values, practices and norms cannot be denied. But what is striking in his life and thought is that his perspective basically remains moral. The Confucian civilizing process is an ethical project primarily meant for himself (it is a Learning, *hak* 學) and, by extension, for his own social group. So the civilizing mission might be seen as a means mainly intended to legitimate both the social and existential *raison d’être* of the Chosŏn scholars-officials at the end of the 16th century. Secondly, I wonder whether his use of Kija could not be seen as a good illustration of this self-centered viewpoint. Indeed, Kija was not a sovereign in China and he did not establish himself a kingdom in Korea. He is rather the paragon of the loyal and exemplary ‘minister’ who, after many ups and downs in China, ended up creating a civilized society in Korea, remaining faithful to his quest for benevolence and virtue. So the model and precedent of

civilization described by Yulgok for Korean history is set by a minister, not an emperor or a king. I am thus wondering whether this is not an implicit praise of self-made Confucians, that is scholars-officials, rather than monarchs by birth. Last but not least, one cannot deny that Yulgok suffered from deep disarray—traumatic soul searching—because of his high sense of moral and social commitment to the Confucian Way. I do believe that this aspect could be fruitfully studied further in future scholarship when considering Confucian scholars' attitude towards the civilizing process.