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Isabelle Sancho

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**Daoism, Neo-Confucianism, or Numerology?**  
**Remarks about Hwadam's Place in Korean Intellectual History.**

Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk, whose pen name is Hwadam after the toponym of his life-long place of residence (Hwadam, i.e. the "Hwa pond"), was a native of Songdo, today's Kaesŏng. He is a well-known figure of the Korean Confucian pantheon, to the extent that his *Collected works* have been selected by the AKS among the 100 Korean Classics to be translated into English, under the categories of "Philosophy" and "Confucianism." Despite his modern fame, Hwadam had never been enshrined during the Chosŏn period in the Munmyo, the official Confucian Shrine –even though his mother, Lady Han of Poan, is said to have dreamt of entering the gates of the shrine herself the very night he was conceived.

Hwadam has a special place in Korean intellectual history for two main reasons. Firstly, his thought and intellectual legacy have been highly praised in modern scholarship in both South and North Korea, which makes him a notable exception among the vast majority of Chosŏn Neo-Confucian scholars. On both sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, Hwadam has been generally characterized by his supposedly exclusive emphasis on the notion of *Ki* (Vital Energy), also called sometimes *Ki* monism (*chugiron* or *kiilwŏllon*). He is hence believed to have paved the way for other iconic figures such as Yulgok Yi I. Hwadam has been commonly associated with Yulgok, in an attempt made by late Chosŏn scholars and modern specialists of philosophy as well to trace the intellectual genealogy of the so-called *Ki* school within the dominant historiography of Korean Neo-Confucianism. This historiography tends to highlight a few scholarly debates and controversies, mainly centered around the supremacy of the Vital Energy, the Principle (*Ri* or *li*), or both. The most famous debate is the "Theories on the Four Sprouts and the Seven Emotions," *sadan ch'iljŏngnon*, that you may have all heard about (for better or for worse) and in which major scholars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century such as Yi I, Ki Taesŭng, and Yi Hwang were involved. Hwadam's reflections on Vital Energy and Principle are believed to have influenced the successive scholars who got involved in this debate in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover his apparent independent stance towards the so-called orthodox Cheng/Zhu school (also commonly called in Korea "the school of master Zhu

[Xi]," *Zhujahak*), has been also taken in recent years as a remarkable precedent that may explain the later flourishing of the polymorphous intellectual tendencies collectively labeled as the *sirhak* school of the late Chosŏn period.

The second reason why Hwadam's place in Korean history and memory is remarkable is because he is a true popular hero who has continued to play a significant role in the collective imagination in Korea over the centuries. Hwadam may qualify as an embodiment of the *sallim*, the rusticated scholar who voluntarily remains hidden in –literally– the "mountains and forests," far from the turmoil of a complicated political life at court or within the Chosŏn administration. Although he passed the Classics Licentiate Examination to please his mother, his stubborn refusal to serve in the bureaucracy portrays the image of an independent spirit, seduced by eremitism and erudite seclusion. This attitude has been often attributed by historians to the troubled times following the first three "literati purges" (*sahwa*) of Chosŏn history that were targetting Neo-Confucian scholar-officials in 1498, 1504, and 1519. Because of this attitude of deliberate withdrawal and the testimony of a life dedicated to learning far from the circles of power, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk progressively appeared as a mythical character. For instance, in the *Sŏ Hwadam chŏn (Story of Sŏ Hwadam)*, and the *Chŏn Uch'i chŏn (Story of Chŏn Uch'i*, who was a famous magician), he is depicted as a Daoist master with magical powers or even as an immortal. In the *yadam*, the unofficial stories orally transmitted by the people written in Classical Chinese by literati in literary compilations, he is also frequently featured in magic tales where he is gifted with the talent of prophecy and cast as the saviour of the common people. In the *Popular History of the Great East (Taedong yasŭng)* dating from the mid-Chosŏn period as well as in the texts collected in the modern edition of the *Complete compilation of Korean oral tales documents (Han'guk munhŏn sŏrhwa chŏnjip)*, he is repeatedly cast as an exceptional sage unmasking either a Japanese spy who took the appearance of a fox or, conversely, a fox that took the appearance of a venerable Buddhist monk to harm people. He is even said to have unmasked a fox that took the appearance of his half-brother, born to the second wife of his father after his mother's death. In all these stories, Hwadam's extraordinary powers are attributed to his knowledge of Confucian Classics (but also Buddhist sutras), his expertise of the *Book of Changes* and numerology, and his mastery of occult sciences, especially Daoist techniques of immortality. Yet Hwadam is often described as being reluctant to make use of these exceptional powers, which suggests that the authors of these tales wanted to portray him as a Confucian master who has knowledge of occult sciences but does not use them unless it becomes absolutely necessary to save people.

Hwadam's wisdom and Confucian sagehood are particularly highlighted in several stories related to his relationship with women and especially Hwang Chini, the most famous *kisaeng* of Korean history who was a native of Kaesŏng. Legend had it that he had remained immune to the charm of Hwang Chini who tried to seduce him in order to test his reputation of being a wise man. Some of these stories specifically contrast the attitude of Hwadam who remained impassive and controlled his sexual desire while spending several nights in the same room with Hwang Chini and the attitude of a famous Buddhist monk who could not control himself after 3 nights spent in similar circumstances in spite of 30 years of practicing Buddhist meditation in the mountains. After the famous Confucian master and Buddhist monk were put to the test, Hwang Chini is known to have said that Hwadam, herself, and the *Panyŏn* waterfall (sometimes replaced by the Kaesŏng ginseng) were the three prodigies of Songdo (*Songdo samjŏl*). Because of this long lasting tradition of casting him as an exceptional sage, Hwadam has been regularly featured in the same way in some successful South Korean movies and historical *drama* from the late 2000's, most of them being focused on the life of Hwang Chini.

Although Hwadam was a real historical and literary figure, his case presents a certain paradox for the intellectual historian who would like to study him in a more detailed manner, for there are in fact few reliable testimonies of his life and thought. Most of these testimonies are to be found in his *munjip*, that is to say in the transmitted compilation of his writings, the *Hwadam chip*.

There have been five editions of the *Hwadam chip* from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The most complete edition is the latest one and dates from 1786. It is the version that was used for the digital library of the Institute for the Translation of Korean Classics (한국고전번역원). This edition contains many addenda that gathered various testimonies related to Hwadam or the Hwagok academy in Kaesŏng where he had been worshipped during the Chosŏn dynasty, and most of them are located in *kwŏn* 3 and 4. But none of these texts were written by Hwadam himself. The heart of the *Hwadam chip* is located in 2 main sections: the poetry section in *kwŏn* 1 and the prose section in *kwŏn* 2. Hwadam's poetical writings account for more than 70 pieces. Except for 1 long rhymed prose (*pu*) listed apart, all these poems (*si*) are short circumstantial pieces written during trips (to Kŭmgangsan, Songnisan, or Chirisan) or gifts to friends. However several pieces resemble philosophical exercises and echo some of the themes found in his prose writings. In terms of prose, he has

21 texts of different lengths and of different styles. This prose is further divided into 5 categories according to its stylistic features and regardless of chronological order: memorials (*sŏ*), letters (*sŏ*), miscellanies (*chapchŏ*), gift-letter (*sŏ*), and inscriptions (*myŏng*). The *Hwadam chip* also contains 2 prefaces, 5 postfaces, a long tombstone inscription, and a chronological biography. These peritexts, added in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to the *munjip*, are of considerable interest to understand not only the history of the *Hwadam chip* but also the progressive and difficult steps taken by successive scholars to make of Hwadam an important figure of Korean intellectual history.

The task of Hwadam's supporters seems to have been rather difficult starting from the mid-Chosŏn period, since he was not held in high regard by the leading Neo-Confucian scholars of the time. It also seems that his writings and ideas were not well known. Contrary to the positive appraisal that Hwadam enjoys today, the historical and philosophical judgment made about him by the big names of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is rather lukewarm, because of his taste for numbers and numerology. According to the latest preface, his teaching seems to have been dismissed as mere divination techniques, and Hwadam was not considered a true follower of the Cheng/Zhu school that was then orthodox. This feature constitutes a serious criticism and certainly explains why the admirers of Hwadam made significant efforts to restore his shattered image, claiming that he was in fact perfectly in tune with the Cheng/Zhu school. For that, the official biography cites in an extensive quotation the credit given to the exemplary scholarly attitude of Hwadam by T'oegye and Yulgok during the discussions at court in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, when a proposal was made to bestow him with a new posthumous title. However Yulgok's well-intended comparison of Hwadam's thought with Zhang Zai's during these discussions had a long lasting effect on how Hwadam's thought had been received until now. This comparison has been repeatedly stressed by the majority of modern commentators who hence tended to conceal the primary importance of Shao Yong's works in the *Hwadam chip*.

Despite the relative diversity of the texts gathered in the *Hwadam chip*, it is indeed striking that most of the studies of Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk's thought have focused exclusively on the miscellanies, without much attention paid to the rest of the prose writings. Moreover although the miscellanies amount to 13 texts, only 4 texts at the opening of the miscellanies section are quoted ad nauseam: "Back to the Principle and Vital Energy" (*Wŏnyigi*), "Explanation on Principle and Vital Energy" (*Igisŏl*), "Explanation on the Supreme Emptiness" (*T'aehŏsŏl*), "Discussions about positive and negative spirits, death and life" (*Kwisinsasaengnon*). According to the tombstone inscription written by Pak Minhŏn and the

biography, these 4 texts had been dictated in a hurry in 1544 by Sō Kyōngdōk before his passing to his disciple Hō Yōp. These texts mainly refer to cosmology and are taken as authoritative evidences to illustrate the primacy given by Hwadam to the notion of Vital energy in the wake of Zhang Zai (notions of *t'aehō* and reflection on *Ki*), and Zhou Dunyi (notion of Supreme Ultimate, *t'aegŭk*). The texts also put forward strong criticisms against Buddhism, Daoism, and techniques of alchemy, which suggests that the compilers of the *munjip* tried to prevent any criticism that would accuse Hwadam of heterodox tendencies.

But when one takes a look at the other miscellanies texts, which clearly outnumber these 4 ante-mortem texts, this viewpoint is not fully convincing. Contrary to what Yulgok said (and I am really sorry to say this), Hwadam's thought is less indebted to Zhang Zai than it is to Shao Yong, the eclectic thinker of the Northern Song whose teachings and arithmology has always been regarded as a curiosity and an exception even within Chinese intellectual history. This feature was clearly pointed out by the Chinese compilers of the *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries* (*Siku quanshu*) compiled in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Qing China in the notice about the *Hwadam chip*. Indeed, almost half of the miscellanies texts of the *Hwadam chip* consist in curt commentaries on, mostly, Shao Yong's *August Ultimate going through the ages* (also translated in English as *Supreme Principles governing the World*), the *Huangji jingshi* (or *Huangji jinghi shu*): "Explanation on seeing in The Return the mind of heaven and earth" (*Pok. Kigyōn ch'ōnji chi sim sōl*), "On the distinctive characteristics of hot springs" (*onch'ōn pyōn*), "Analysis of finals and initials" (*sōngŭmhae*), "Postscript about the details left unexplained in the preceding analysis of finals and initials" (*pal chōn sōngŭmhae mijinch'ō*), "Analysis of the numbers of the *August Ultimate going through the ages*" (*hwanggŭk kyōngse suhae*), "Analysis of the Chart of the directional positions of the sixty-four hexagrams" (*yuksipsagwa pangwōn chi tohae*), "Analysis of hexagram changes" (*kwabyōnhae*). All these texts refer to the *Huangji jingshi*, and to a lesser extent to the *Yixue qimeng* ("Instructing the young in the studies of the Changes"), the divination book written by Zhu Xi and Cai Yuanding. Hwadam's commentaries are given without any introduction or contextual elements. They resemble random notes taken by disciples during classes and they cannot be understood without the diagrams, tables, and commentaries of the Chinese texts.

When reading carefully all the texts contained in the *Hwadam chip*, one can list the multiple references used –explicitly or implicitly– by Hwadam: the Confucian Classics (with a special focus on the *Book of Documents* and the three canonical *Rites*), the Four Books, most of the writings of the Northern and Southern Song scholars such as Zhou Dunyi, Shao Yong, Zhang Zai, the Cheng brothers, Zhu Xi, as well as Daoist texts such as the

*Zhuangzi*, *Laozi*, and *Liezi*, and lastly several cosmological texts that are more difficult to classify, such as the *Huainanzi* and Yang Xiong's *Elemental Changes (Taixuan jing)*. Yet, if one had to pinpoint the most striking feature of all of Hwadam's writings, it would certainly be the pervasive interest in the philosophy of the *Book of Changes*. Cosmology, astronomy, arithmology or numerology, phonology, sounds and tunes, onomastics, Confucian rites, and all the others fields of knowledge discussed repeatedly by Hwadam are all based on the rationality provided by the *Book of Changes*. Since the different approaches to the *Book of Changes* used to be taken as one major criterion that distinguishes between orthodox and unorthodox thinkers and intellectual lineages in Neo-Confucianism, it is not surprising that Hwadam was not easy to classify as a clear cut case. Being neither a strict follower of Cheng/Zhu Neo-Confucianism as his supporters tried to portray him by stressing his borrowings from Zhang Zai, Mencius or even Confucius, nor a fabulous Daoist master as popular literature liked to depict him, Hwadam basically remains a mystery.

Because of the silence surrounding his biography and the paucity of his remaining writings, Sō Kyōngdōk easily conjures up the image of an appealing *sarim* scholar with eclectic interests that are likely to be compared with Daoist practices or topics. But this seductive image of a self-taught hermit should not conceal the indisputable fact that Hwadam must have had very good access to Neo-Confucian literature, especially *The Great Compendium on Nature and Principle (Xingli daquan)* of the works of various thinkers from the Song and Yuan dynasties. This *Compendium*, first printed in Ming China in 1415 and given as a diplomatic present to the Korean court in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, was printed twice under Sejong's reign in the Kyōngsang province that is close to Kaesōng. Shao Yong's works in particular circulated in China in this monumental Neo-Confucian compendium as well as in the Daoist Canon (*Daozang*). Hwadam probably read them in the Confucian *Compendium* or in hand-written copies from it, since he is commenting Shao Yong in the light of other Northern and Southern Song scholars. This means that Sō Kyōngdōk, whose household was poor and who had not been taught by any teacher according to his biography, must have benefited from solid networks of wealthy disciples and friends. So one might say that Hwadam was not only a sharp mind but also an extremely erudite man whose book knowledge encompassed the immense literature of Chinese Neo-Confucianism and divination techniques related to the *Book of Changes*. His knowledge of Buddhism and Daoism turns out to be rather shallow and must certainly come from Neo-Confucian basic criticisms. Hwadam's main field of interest was undoubtedly the philosophy of Changes and, in that sense, he is an

outstanding exception in the landscape of early Korean Neo-Confucianism. His expertise on Shao Yong is also absolutely remarkable and should be studied in more details in the future. Going beyond the image made up by his supporters but also his detractors throughout the centuries, the attentive reader of the *Hwadam chip* may be able to find out some interesting and original features of the intellectual culture of the early Chosŏn period, far from the debates and themes commonly underlined to define, in a somewhat monolithic way, the Korean Confucian tradition.