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“*Saga toksǒ*: a royal patronage of Sage Learning in Chosǒn?”

One striking feature of the early careers of the prominent scholars-officials in early to mid-Chosǒn is the system of *saga toksǒ*, which lasted roughly 340 years, from the 15th to the 18th century. The expression *saga toksǒ* 賜暇讀書 literally means “to be bestowed leave to read books.” In modern terms, it might be explained as a sabbatical leave, an ongoing training or even an induction program. The system had no equivalent in China or Japan, where such a practice had neither an institutionalised form nor a specific name like in Korea. It can be seen as one of the most salient Korean kings’ attempts to put into practice all together the ideals of Confucian kingship, officialdom and Learning.

The system is generally said to have been created in 1426 by king Sejong (r. 1418-1450), advised on this matter by Pyǒn Kyeryang 卞季良 (1369-1430), then Academician at the Yemunwan (Office of Royal Decrees). It is deeply related to two features of Sejong’s reign. Firstly, it is probably an extension of the restoration in 1420 of the Chip’yǒnjǒn 集賢殿 (Hall of Worthies). Later renamed Hongmungwan 弘文館 (Office of Compositors) or Oktang 玉堂 (the Jade Hall), the Chip’yǒnjǒn was in charge of the preservation of books and archives, as well as the composition of official texts and notes ordered by the king. This important organ was part of the Samsa (the Three Ministries), that is to say the heart of the central government, with the Sahǒnbu (Office of Inspector-General) and the Saganwǒn (Office of Special Counselors). The *saga toksǒ* was meant by king Sejong and his advisors to palliate the failures of the Chip’yǒnjǒn, where appointed officials were often too busy composing texts to study for themselves. The second feature related to Sejong’s reign is the growth of the *kyǒngyǒn* 經筵 (Classics Mat lectures). These royal lectures, primarily intended to inculcate the Classics and historical texts to the king, were one of the means of checking the knowledge of government officials on a regular basis. Most of the Royal lecturers in charge of these lectures were appointed at the same time at the Chip’yǒnjǒn/Hongmungwan, and the leading ones were even members of the Sǔngjǒngwǒn 承政院 (Royal Secretariat) or the Ŭijǒngbu 議

政府 (State Council). Therefore, the main issue raised by the *saga toksǒ* at the time of king Sejong was, in a Confucian perspective, the management of “talented men” who should be recruited through examinations and not by recommendation, and appointed at the core organs of the bureaucracy. This exceptional sabbatical leave was expected to embody the ideal Confucian kingship and express the royal patronage over the source of all legitimacy: Learning.

Applied from Sejong’s reign to the 18th century, the system reached its peak at the end of the 16th century. The total number of the recipients of the *saga toksǒ* during the three and a half centuries of its existence might have been about 250 to 300 according to remaining sources, among which two thirds (i.e. 200) were granted sabbatical leave before the end of the 16th century. There were many interruptions of the system for various reasons, among which the lack of interest from autocratic kings such as Sejo (r. 1455-1468), Yōnsangun (r. 1469-1506) and Kwanghaegun (r. 1608-1623), the lack of interest of scholars-officials themselves, literati purges and factional strives, and foreign invasions.

The system of *saga toksǒ* had many intriguing characteristics. First and foremost, there were no specific selection criteria defined in any official record. The exact number of recipients per selection, their ages and skills, the number of selections per reign, and the duration of the leave are still pretty much unclear. Yet, we can be sure about one thing: when the system began in the 15th century, all the recipients, who were aged between 20 and 30 for the vast majority of them, passed with flying colors the *mungwa* examination and none of them passed the military examinations. One major aim of the *saga toksǒ* was to reduce the influence of master-disciple bonds as well as the number of recruitments by recommendation, in order to create a strong sense of loyalty towards the king. But, these selected scholars were all placed under the supervision of the *taejaehak* (Director of the Yemungwan), whose personality and personal choices were crucial. The *taejaehak* often short-listed a few candidates and convinced the king to select his favourites. The goal of a more objective selection of talents was not met in practice.

The second characteristic is that there were no compulsory curriculum for the *saga toksǒ*. But in a charged diplomatic context, the stress was put on literary and poetical compositions, for excellent literary skills were necessary for successful diplomatic exchanges. Between the 15th and the 17th centuries, 16 out of 18 high-ranking officials in charge of dealing with Chinese emissaries had been in *saga toksǒ*.

The third characteristic is that there were no strict rules to assess the work in progress. This was a constant and rather serious problem, for it raised the question of how relevant and efficient the whole system was in the long term. Generally speaking, it seems that a report had to be submitted three times a month and the recipients were expected to accept monthly assessments (*wǒlgwa*) with the officials appointed at the Yemungwan (Office of Royal decrees). The results of these assessments mainly consisted in circumstantial poetry, of which only a few traces still remain.

The fourth characteristic was that the *saga toksǒ* was located and moved in several places. At the beginning, the selected officials stayed at home and their leave was called *chaega toksǒ* 在家讀書 (studying at home). Then, the decision was made to make them study in Buddhist temples high in the mountains, outside of the capital. That was the *sansa toksǒ* 山寺讀書 (studying in the mountain temples). Under Sǒnjong's reign (1469-1494) the *saga toksǒ* gained for the first time a specific place in Yongsan and, under Chungjong's reign, in today's Chongno area. The construction of a building, solely dedicated to the *saga toksǒ*, was achieved only in the 16th century. This Tongho Toksǒdang 東湖讀書堂 (the Reading House at the Eastern Lake) was erected in Oksu, but was destroyed by fire during the *imjin* war. In the 17th century, decisions were made to relocate the ghostly Reading House in different buildings, first in Yongsan and, then in Oksu. But soon the scholars were allowed to study from home and the system fall apart.

The last characteristic of the *saga toksǒ*, when considering the periods when the recipients were hosted in a specific building, was that material and human resources were provided by the palace supplies office. All of the recipients, who kept the emoluments of their posts while on *saga toksǒ*, were fed and housed at the Toksǒdang. According to the account of Yi Chik 李植 (1584-1647), chosen for sabbatical leave in 1626, they were given rice and beans, alcohol, vegetables, soy sauce and fuel, and were authorized to exchange any left overs for money to buy more food, alcohol or any other personal needs. A saddled horse was at their disposal in case they needed to go out, boats were prepared for outings and banquets. They were supplied with servants and maids, and slaves cultivated the land specially allocated for the Toksǒdang. But life in the Toksǒdang was not always that comfortable and things changed drastically from the reign of Kwanghaegun (1608-1623).

To sum up, the system of the *saga toksǒ* was fairly flexible and unsettled. It mainly depended on the men in power and the good will of successive kings. This feature was both its strength and its weakness. On the one hand, the *saga toksǒ* paved the way to distinguished careers. In the 16th century in particular, it was part of the *cursus honorum* of many important scholars-officials. Most of them were close to decision-making power and kings. But on the other hand, starting from the 17th century, the *saga toksǒ* became a pointless sinecure and even a secondary reward for services rendered during factional strife. So over the centuries, it tended to be reduced to an empty name without any tangible reality or specific set location. The whole system ended up being suppressed in the 18th century.

However the *saga toksǒ* was replaced, in a certain extent, by a new system under Chǒngjo's reign (1776-1800): the *chogye munsin* 抄啓文臣 (the selecting and leading of civil officials). Just after ascending to the throne, Chǒngjo created the Kyujanggak 奎章閣 and ordered the State Council to select 20 talented men among the officials under age 37. The curriculum was strictly set (the Four books, the Five Classics and the *Records of the Great historian*) and tests were held twice a month. Selected officials were either rewarded or punished, depending on their rankings at these tests. The main differences of this system, compared to the *saga toksǒ* were that: 1) it was located within the palace; 2) the rules were clearly defined in an official text, the *Munsin kangje chǒlmok* 文臣講製節目; 3) the selected officials had to quit their positions and attendance was compulsory; 4) these men were given holidays twice a year, at fixed dates at the Yuhajǒng, within the Kyujanggak, where they were entertained by royal order with courtesans and banquets. From Chǒngjo's viewpoint, the aim of the *chogye munsin* was to improve the *saga toksǒ* then already fallen into disuse. But this new system could not outlive Chǒngjo. So one might say that the *chogye munsin* was the swan song of the idea of *saga toksǒ*, born with the first "sage king" of Chosǒn, Sejong, and that idea was to die with the second "sage king" of Chosǒn, Chǒngjo.

Taken from the viewpoint of the recipients of the *saga toksǒ*, it might be said that the *saga toksǒ* left a certain imprint in Chosǒn history. Deeply related to the complex relations between the kings, the highest officials at court, and the Confucian scholars, the *saga toksǒ* was affected by the tragic history of the *sarim* literati in early Chosǒn where two significant events occurred. The first traumatic event happened right after the coup by future king Sejo, when the vast majority of the recipients of the *saga toksǒ* under Sejong were eliminated. This

meant that Sejong's efforts to cultivate talents were unsuccessful and the system itself was threatened from its very beginnings by a king. The second event was the *muo sahwa* 戊午士禍 (the literati purge of 1498), under Yönsangun's reign, during which the corpse of Kim Chongjik 金宗直 (1431-1492), the former leader of the *sarim* scholars at court, was dug up and beheaded in public. All of his disciples, who had been selected for the *saga toksö* under Söngjong (r. 1469-1494), were either imprisoned or executed. However, three of them later participated in 1506 in the *Chungjong panjöng* 中宗反正 bringing Chungjong to the throne. This common history of martyrdom among the recipients of the *saga toksö* may have greatly helped to strengthen a sense of identity and community among *sarim* scholars-officials in the 16th century, when the *saga toksö* was extensively bestowed upon them by kings. The self-awareness or self-belief of these Neo-Confucian scholars was reflected in a new genre of painting, between landscape painting and the *kyehwado* 契會圖 (literati's meeting painting), in which reading and learning were the main themes underlined. It was also vividly reflected in the only substantial text remaining from the whole system of *saga toksö* throughout the centuries. It is the *Tongho mundap* 東湖問答 (*Questions and Answers at the Eastern Lake*), submitted to the new king Sönjo (r. 1567-1608) in the early summer of 1569 by Yulgok, Yi I (1536-1584), on *saga toksö* at the Toksödang.

Contrary to what was expected from an examination at the Toksödang, Yulgok's text was not a poetry piece, showing his literary talents. It was rather a memorial to the throne (*sangso mun* 上疏文), urging the king to practice Confucian kingship and implement reforms. The text was unusual too, for it was set up as a dialogue, in a question and answer form, between a host and a visitor. The host can be understood as Yulgok, and the visitor as the king. The *Tongho mundap* stages a fictional encounter consisting in a *mise en abîme* of the situation at the Reading House, where the king pays visit to scholars upon whom he decided to bestow leaves. This setting reminds of the figure of Mencius who used to teach various kings. It also suggests a master-disciple relationship between Yulgok, the *kudo changwön kong* 九度壯元公 then aged 34, and king Sönjo, only aged 17. Contrary to the ideal of the Confucian king who must be the supreme teacher, here the teacher is the minister, whose moral task is to

advise his king rather than passively practice ornamental skills under the Taejaehak's supervision.

Yulgok started his career in 1564 at age 29 under Myōngjong's reign (1545-1567). He had already gained fame as an exceptional scholar since his childhood. One year after entering officialdom, he began to submit memorials with some of his like-minded colleagues from the Saganwōn, Sahōnbu, and Hongmungwan (the Samsa) to publicly criticize several personalities, such as the monk Pou 普雨 (1509-1565), the head abbot of Pongūnsa and protégé of Munjōng wanghu (regent: 1545-1565), Yun Wōnhyōng 尹元衡 (1503-1565), responsible of the *ūlsa sahwa* 乙巳士禍 (the literati purge of 1545), and Sim T'ongwōn 沈通源 (born 1499) from the State Council, found guilty of abuse of power and bribery. In 1568, on the first year of Sōnjo's reign, he participated in the writing of the *Veritable records of Myōngjong* and was sent on diplomatic mission to China. The next year, just before starting his *saga toksō*, Yulgok was appointed *Hongmun'gwan kyori* 弘文館校理 (fifth counselor in the Office of the Special Counselors) and, as such, was keeping lecturing at the royal lectures. So in the *Tongho mundap*, he took the opportunity to continue to address government issues and lecture the inexperienced king. Right after the *saga toksō*, he sent again, within three months, two more memorials on government issues, with some colleagues from the Hongmungwan (*simu gusa* 時務九事, *oktang jinsimuso* 玉堂陳時務疏).

The *Tongho mundap* is rather long (more than 16,000 sinographs) and is divided into 11 parts of different lengths. Each part is organized around a question put at the beginning by the visitor to the guest. The question is simple but the answer is more elaborate and didactic. At the end of each part, a short sentence reminds us what the question is and summarizes the answer. Here are the 11 parts: 1) *non kundo* 論君道 (discussing the Way of the prince), 2) *non sindo* 論臣道 (discussing the Way of the minister), 3) *non kunsin sangdŭk chi nan* 論君臣相得之難 (discussing the difficulties of prince and minister in understanding each other), 4) *non tongbang tohak purhaeng* 論東方道學不行 (discussing the fact that, in our Eastern country, the Learning of the Way is not practiced), 5) *non ajo kodo pulbok* 論我朝古道不復 (discussing the fact that, in our dynasty, the ancient Way is not restored), 6) *non tanggŭm chi*

sise 論當今之時勢 (discussing the topical issues of our day), 7) *non musil wi sugi chi yo* 論務實為修己之要 (discussing the fact that dealing with concrete issues is the key to self-cultivation), 8) *non pyŏn'gan wi yonghyŏn chi yo* 論辨姦為用賢之要 (discussing the fact that discerning who are wicked is the key to the appointment of worthy people), 9) *non anmin chi sul* 論安民之術 (discussing the ways to ease the people), 10) *non kyoin chi sul* 論教人之術 (discussing the ways to teach the people), 11) *non chŏngmyŏng wi ch'ido chi pon* 論正名為治道之本 (discussing the fact that the rectification of names is the root of the Way of government).

This very methodical and well structured presentation of the arguments is a common feature of several texts written by Yulgok, such as the *Sŏnghak chibyŏ* 聖學輯要, a monumental synthesis of Neo-Confucianism ordered by Sŏnjo written 6 years later in 1575 and the *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl* 擊蒙要訣, a Neo-Confucian primer written for his students in 1577. The content of the *Tongho mundap* is common to most of the very large number of memorials he wrote during his twenty years of career, among which the famous *manŏn pongsa* 萬言封事, a sealed lengthy memorial sent to Sŏnjo five years after the *Tongho mundap*, in 1574, when Yulgok was on leave in the countryside. Generally speaking, Yulgok's focus in all his texts written to Sŏnjo was threefold. It was to convince the king 1) to truly understand and practice the Confucian Learning, especially the Confucian kingship, 2) to deal with and find concrete solutions for the hot issues of the day, 3) to change laws and make reforms in all fronts (fiscal, social, economical, military, etc.). In his political recommendations, he knew his facts and displayed a keen sense of practicality. His political thought was influenced by Xunzi and he may even conjure up the images of Wang Anshi in China and Chŏng Tojŏn in Chosŏn Korea. His memorials and the *Tongho mundap* were all driven by the urgency of the country's situation. According to Yulgok, the country was on the brink of collapse because of serious breaches from the inside and major threats from the outside. But since Sŏnjo and other high officials did not follow his boldest reform proposals, Yulgok was not able to see his ideas put in practice in government and, thus, continuously struggled to stay in or retire from officialdom.

The *Tongho mundap* is the only remaining text composed by a scholar-official on *saga toksǒ* at the Toksǒdang. It is a major text of Neo-Confucian political thought and it bears the testimony of a great statesman's concern for his country. It became the symbol of the *saga toksǒ*. The system of *saga toksǒ* was implemented at first to display royal patronage upon scholars-officials and was related to the two towering figures among Chosǒn kings, Sejong and Chǒngjo. However it is one unique scholar's production that would be associated to the *saga toksǒ* and stands for its legacy. By taking the unexpected initiative to slightly subvert the system to perform what he thought to be his duty and lecture the king, Yulgok gave to *saga toksǒ* its letters of nobility. The lesson taught was that *saga toksǒ* was meant for Learning and Learning meant to behave according to one's own position. The minister, when he is truly a sage, advises the prince and the prince, when he is truly a sage, must rule while listening to his sage ministers. Yulgok took the *saga toksǒ* and his king seriously and he dramatically exposed what Confucian Learning meant when practiced correctly. He demonstrated what Sejong wanted as the ideal outcome of *saga toksǒ*: loyalty to king. But, by doing so, he also assumed his own moral superiority and thus affirmed his pride as a *sarim* scholar who was well aware of his own talents.