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"Yulgok's vision of China: Finding a Korean Confucian Way"

Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584) is well known as one most outstanding scholar-officials who initiated a Korean reappraisal of Chinese Neo-Confucianism. He is also admired for his commitment to various aspects of state administration, including diplomatic exchanges with Ming China. His famous *Kija silgi* 箕子實記 (1580) is especially regarded as having paved the way for the building of a radically new Confucian worldview in which Chosŏn Korea could free itself from the intellectual and cultural superiority of Ming and, above all, Qing China. I would like to focus my talk today on some aspects of Yulgok's protean vision of China, and show how this prominent Neo-Confucian scholar has progressively built a complex vision, for this vision of China might have precisely allowed him to define and legitimize a Korean Confucian Way.

In the Korean scholars' vision, China has mainly three faces. There is an imaginary, literary and poetical China that can be investigated through poems, official and diplomatic correspondence. There is also a philosophical and canonical China to which references are made in scholarly writings. Lastly, there is the real, contemporary China that is either an annoying and threatening neighbour or, conversely, a trustful and powerful ally. These visions of China are grounded on cultural and intellectual interests, but also on strategic, diplomatic, economic and military necessities. This complexity is notably expressed in the very variety of the terms used to designate China, which stress one feature or another. For example, here is the terminology used by Yulgok in various types of texts: 1) *chungguk* 中國, *chunghwa* 中華, *chungjo* 中朝 (China as the Middle in the sinocentric worldview); 2) *ch'ŏnjo* 天朝, *hwanghwa* 皇華, *chunghwa* 中華 (China as the source of civilization and as the model State); 3) *haewoe* 海外 and *isŏng* 異城 (the

territory of China, in contrast to Korea). Many different adjectives are also used to name the Chinese emissaries: *hansa* 漢使 and *chungjosa* 中朝使 (ethnic and geographical stress); *hwasa* 華使, *ch'ŏnsa* 天使 and *okchŏl* 玉節 (laudatory terms). Contrary to this varying terminology for China and its emissaries that deserve respect, Yulgok only uses the simple and neutral word *chungguk'in* 中國人 for the Chinese people, as a generic term. As for the Chinese emperor, he is notably impersonally named "august", *hwang* 皇, when contrasted with the Korean king, who is called "Prince" *kun* 君, for Yulgok is tied to him in the ritual and privileged relationship of prince/minister *kun/sin* 君/臣.

In order to study more precisely Yulgok's shifting and protean vision of China, a few texts selected from the Yulgok's *Collected writings* (*Yulgok chŏnsŏ* 栗谷全書) are of the highest interest. As an example, let's look at the poems that Yulgok wrote during his diplomatic mission to Ming China in 1568, but also several pieces that he sent or offered from 1564 to 1583 to friends and colleagues leaving for China. These poems reflect a common literary practice of that time, and thereby convey many literary *topoi*. Indeed, for many skilled Korean scholar-officials, China implied and equaled first the long journey over six months to Yanjing. When they look West, Korean scholar-officials are looking at the road to the Chinese capital. Some recurrent images and metaphors depict the pain and solitude of such a long journey: the ten thousand *li*'s road, the ceaselessly revolving wheel of the chariot, the horses heading to the horizon, the loneliness and anxiety of the emissaries who are in charge of a great responsibility. Some specific places and sites in China are also recurrently cited in the poems, and play the role of the symbolic legs in the diplomatic journey: the Liaoning province just after the border, the Yongtong bridge in Hebei just before entering Beijing (*yongtongqiao* 永通橋), the trees around the Gate of Ji (薊門, 薊門樹, 薊樹) in the Shuntianfu 順天府 area in Beijing, and the Jade river (*yuhe* 玉河) passing by the residence where the Korean emissaries stayed in the imperial capital (*Yuheguan* 玉河館). Inside the Korean peninsula, the important sites are: the mount Paektu and the Yalu river, which traditionally symbolize the border; and just next to it, the city of Ŭiju 義州 and the residence built for the departing emissaries

(Yongmangwan 龍灣館); and finally, also in the Northern P'yŏng'an province, the site of the past capital of Koryŏ, Kaesŏng, where the residence built to first welcome officially the Chinese emissaries (*T'aep'yŏnggwan* 太平館) was located, as well as the two mountains surrounding this site, the Song'aksan 松嶽山 and the Ch'ŏnmasan 天摩山. Along with this both symbolic and realistic topography of the journey back and forth from China, Yulgok's circumstantial poems offer an insight into the concerns and mindsets of the Korean scholar-officials of the late 16th century concerning China and diplomacy. One main topic since 1577 is the problem of correcting the errors concerning the genealogy of the Chosŏn founder, king T'aejo, in the official records of the Ming dynasty (*chonggye pyŏnmu* 宗系辨誣). This error is regarded as an insult by Yulgok, for which Chosŏn is now an old and highly civilized state that fully deserves respect. A second important concern is the defense of the Northern border, and the definition of who must hold the "key of the Northern gate" (*pukmunyak* 北門鑰) to secure and protect the kingdom from the Northern invasions and attacks. Yulgok then considers that it is mainly the task of China, whose military force and Sino-centric diplomatic system are the best tools that the Koreans can also use to protect themselves. These two concerns are expressing recurring topics in the Sino Korean history of diplomacy. What is much more interesting here is Yulgok's description of his own journey to China. Indeed, he never refers to any meeting with Chinese scholars, or intellectual exchange. Contrary to the image of China as the source of inspiration or culture, what Yulgok is depicting is desolated cities surrounded, and even haunted, by the noise of Buddhist chanting (목탁 소리) and barbarian banquets around gigantic pyres after hunting. The Barbarians, that is to say the Xiongnu, Xianyun of North-West Shanxi, and other nomadic people from the Gobi region, are named either according to the ancient Chinese terminology or by depreciative terms (*tanu* 單于, *kyŏnyung* 犬戎, *ŭmsan kyŏnsi kun* 陰山犬豕羣). This theme of the Barbarians appears in three poems out of seven. Moreover, whereas P'yŏng'ando's Korea is described by Yulgok as a peaceful and cultivated country, on the other side of the Yalu river, Liaoning and Hebei's China tends to be described as the realm of a disproportioned nature, insecurity, heterogeneity and even heterodoxy.

This point leads us to tackle with Yulgok's vision of China as *Chunghwa* 中華, or center of culture and civilization. What is important to remember first is that China at Yulgok's time means also the success and even the predominance of the so-called Lu-Wang school in official scholarship and Neo-Confucianism. In 1582, Yulgok is appointed *wŏnjŏpsa*, in charge of welcoming the Chinese emissaries. At this occasion, he is notably asked by Huang Hongxian 黃洪憲 and Wang Jingmin 王敬民 to write a short commentary on one core sentence of Confucius, on the strict condition to avoid the Cheng/Zhu school's interpretation and use instead the Lu-Wang school's understanding of it. In his response, the famous *Kŭkki poknye sŏl* 克己復禮說, Yulgok refuses to follow this condition. He argues, in both reverent and highly ironical terms, that he is not aware of the latest, trendy developments of the Chinese scholarship and does not know that there were any outstanding Chinese Neo-Confucian scholars after Zhu Xi. This Korean attitude and pride of revering the orthodox tradition is well-known, and partly explains the later pretension of Korean scholars of being the guardians of the true Confucian school. However, one important detail must be noticed concerning Yulgok's specific case. For him, China's heterodox tendencies are not necessarily an error. More precisely, Yulgok is using China as an argument to criticize the Korean contemporary practices. In the postface he wrote for one work of the contemporary Chinese scholar Chen Jian 陳建, the *Hakpu t'ongbyŏn pal* 學蔀通辨跋 (1581), he severely denounces the self-pride of some Korean scholars that is not grounded on sincere and true scholarship, but rather on laziness and lack of knowledge. In such a context, studying heterodox doctrines like the Chinese is better than settling for superficial learning. In fact, Yulgok is aware that a competition has started between China and Chosŏn Korea, and he is absolutely confident in the Korean potential and legitimacy. He is using China as an embossing tool as well as a challenging stimulus for his peers. However, it is worth noting that he is less interested in grasping or following the contemporary Chinese scholarship than in developing and further perfecting a proper Korean tradition. So his vision of China mainly shapes his vision of Korea.

This pride and self-confidence of the 16th century Korean scholars is the key to understanding the progressive shift in their Confucian worldview and their position *vis-à-vis* the Chinese supposed superiority and cultural advancement. The analysis of Yulgok's shifting and protean vision of China provides an interesting insight into the intellectual mechanisms that have been at work in this progressive change. Especially, his writings on Kija show a solid argumentation in favor of the autonomy, the equality, and even the superiority of Korea regarding civilization and Confucian ideals. As a Neo-Confucian scholar, Yulgok shared the common idea that the Confucian Way, the Daotong/Tot'ong 道通, designates the civilizing process of the proper mankind. The main references to this process are commonly made to Chinese history and, more precisely, Chinese Antiquity. The striking feature of Yulgok's representation of this canonical China is his specific use of history and temporality. In his *Kija silgi*, that he wrote to condense the *Kija chi* 箕子志 written by Yun Tusu 尹斗壽 (1533-1601) between 1577 and 1580, Yulgok explains that Korean emissaries are often asked by Chinese scholars about the history of Kija/Qizi in Korea – Yulgok himself is offered two years later to add a poem to the *fu* that the Chinese emissary, Wang Jingmin, composed on Kija. But they are not able to answer since they lack knowledge and proper compilation on the topic. The purpose of his *Kija silgi* is then to define and clarify the history of this master, in order to build a common and unique Korean memory about the beginnings of the civilization and the Confucian Way in Korea, which is independent and cut from the Chinese developments. Kija is notably called by Yulgok *inhyŏn* 仁賢 and *insŏng* 仁聖; these terms underline his holding the master-key moral quality stressed since Confucius: the *ren/in* 仁. Besides, the terms *insŏng* 仁聖, *sŏngsa* 聖師, *asŏng* 我聖, and *wŏnsŏng* 元聖 are all compound with the character *sheng/sŏng* 聖 that refers to moral quality as well, but above all to one very important idea in Yulgok reasoning: the ahistorical times of humanity, when Sage Sovereigns were appointed by Heaven. In Yulgok's texts, the core figures of this sacred and ahistorical time of humanity are Yao, Shun and Yu the Great. As for Kija, he is the last sage sovereign of that kind, since he was also endowed with specific skills by Heaven. Moreover, he is the only link between Old Antiquity, and especially Yu the Great, and the beginning of the historical period of humanity in Yulgok's perspective: the transition

between Shang and Zhou dynasties. In other words, according to Yulgok, the turning point from mythical Antiquity to historical time is the very beginning of the Zhou dynasty in China and Kija's Chosŏn in Korea. It is by the way worth remembering that the only site in China that Yulgok visited and to which he dedicated a poem is the temple honoring Bo Yi 伯夷 and Shu Qi 叔齊, the two Sages who preferred to retire and starve to death on the Shouyang mountain in Shanxi (首陽山), in protestation against the bloody dynastic transition from Shang to Zhou. In this poem, the *ch'ŏngjŏlsa* 清節祠, Yulgok is explaining that he can actually feel the "spiritual wind" (*p'ung* 風) of old Antiquity, and in various texts, he seems literally obsessed by Shang dynasty rather than the Zhou's, which is however the dynasty revered by Confucius himself. So, according to Yulgok, Kija is the common ancestor of Chinese and Korean historical civilized states (*wŏnsŏng* 元聖), for he gave to China the forgotten secret of Yu the Great, the Hongfan/Hongbŏm 洪範, to emperor Wu of Zhou before leaving deliberately for the Korean peninsula.

Another interesting feature of Yulgok's discourse is that Kija was a righteous man who deliberately chose to flee the new Chinese dynasty of Zhou, founded by brutal force and violence, and create his own state (*kuk* 國) in Korea. This state has been shaped with affection and benevolence, as in the ideal Confucian vision, and civilization started then to flourish in Korea. One main feature of the civilization stressed by Yulgok is rites and ethics, Confucian ethics. In the rather long and precise 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 Chinese people of the period beginning with the Warring States. The hazards and the final collapse of Ki family's successive kingdoms of Kija Chosŏn and Mahan, after 1120 years of sage rule (Yulgok is calculating minutely), are mainly due to the chaos generated by troubled Chinese history. To sum up, from 1568 when he first wrote a text on Kija (the *Kija chŏn* 箕子殿), Yulgok developed little by little a specific discourse on China, civilization, and the Confucian Way in various texts, including the famous *Sŏnghak chipyo* 聖學輯要 (1575), the *Kija silgi* 箕子實記 (1580) and the *Ch'a Wangch'ŏnsa Kija myobu un* 次王天使箕子廟賦韻 (1582). He notably used the figure of Kija, revered in Henan and

P'yŏng'ando (the ancient fiefs of Kija in China and Korea), to demonstrate the common beginnings of the history of the Confucian Way in both China and Korea. The most fascinating feature is that Kija is less a Confucian – in the sense of directly connected to the historical school of Confucius, than the last Sage sovereign of Antiquity. Besides, because Kija decided to leave China and settled down in the Korean peninsula, his descendants implemented a civilized, ethical and benevolent state, from which contemporary Chosŏn kingdom is directly linked. The supposedly Chinese civilization and culture, or in other words the Confucian ideal state and society, is then a notion cut from geographical and national contingencies. It only depends on the men who are trying to practice it in reality (*sil* 實), like Kija, whatever their country. The Confucian Way is an ideal lost from the old and ahistorical Antiquity that the two cultured states under heaven have to follow in mutual respect: China of course, but also her equal, Chosŏn Korea.

To briefly conclude, in the texts of Yulgok, one iconic figure of the Korean Neo-Confucian scholar-official of the 16th century, China is a protean and complex entity. Most of the aspects of his vision of China (literary, political, philosophical and intellectual) are revealing the priority given to self-definition, which encompasses historical thought, philosophical ideals and diplomatic concerns at large. China is the major Other that is freely used, and that is viewed through various prisms in order to envision the Korean past, present and future. Korean Neo-Confucianism, but also the shifting relationship between Ming, Qing China and Chosŏn Korea are much indebted to the visions of China built by Korean scholar-officials like Yulgok Yi I.