



HAL
open science

Between ideological norms and literary motives: modes and expression of interreligious contacts in the writings of Yulgok, Yi I (1536-1584)

Isabelle Sancho

► To cite this version:

Isabelle Sancho. Between ideological norms and literary motives: modes and expression of interreligious contacts in the writings of Yulgok, Yi I (1536-1584). Between dialogue, polemic and apologetic: modes of interreligious contact in pre modern Korea seen in the regional context of Far East Asia, University of Ruhr-Bochum, Apr 2011, Bochum, Germany. hal-02905258

HAL Id: hal-02905258

<https://hal.science/hal-02905258>

Submitted on 23 Jul 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

“Between ideological norms and literary motives: modes and expression of interreligious contacts in the writings of Yulgok, Yi I (1536-1584).”

The beginnings of the Yi dynasty in Korea is often regarded as synonymous with a very special moment in Korean history: the progressive “triumph” of Neo-Confucianism over Buddhism as the state ideology, a process leading to what has been called the Confucianization of Chosŏn Korea. Besides, the 16th century is commonly seen as a turning point in intellectual history, notably because of the blossoming of two major icons of Korean Neo-Confucianism, T'oegye 退溪 Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501-1570) and Yulgok 栗谷 Yi I 李珥 (1536-1584). These scholars-officials, whose portraits are printed on today's South Korean bank notes, are the paragons of an idealized national spirit, which main flavor is undeniably Confucian. These two scholars are also regarded as having given birth to the two main philosophical schools coming from the Korean reappraisal of Chinese Neo-Confucianism. In this workshop, I will present some tentative remarks resulting from my on-going research on Yulgok Yi I. It is hoped that Yulgok will provide an interesting case-study, for he raises a few stimulating questions about the historiography of Neo-Confucianism, past and present. In spite of his apparent embodiment of the orthodox Neo-Confucianism, Yulgok indeed appears as a problematic figure for two reasons that could be summarized in two very simple but rather disturbing questions. Did he become a true Buddhist when he made a one-year retreat in the Mounts Kŭmgang 金剛 in the Kangwŏn province in his early twenties? Is his philosophy influenced by Buddhism, that is by heterodoxy?

Previous scholarship

The dominant academic discourse in South Korea argues that Yulgok was an orthodox and thus exemplary Neo-Confucian thinker. This viewpoint has however been slightly questioned since a few decades by a few researchers, like Yi Pyŏngdo, Song Sŏkku or Kim Kilhwan, who suggested that some elements in Yulgok's writings show that he must have been influenced

by Buddhism and even Taoism. Even though his open-mindedness towards the two other teachings has always been a consensual matter, the characteristics of his philosophical thought are still subject to debate – and sometimes hot debates. To sum up, the majority of the research done so far about his thought and life predominantly falls within the province of a solely philosophical analysis, which uses sometimes a pretty loose conglomeration of notions like influences or similarities. Concerning Buddhist borrowings or influences, these works generally fail at convincing because of the lack of clear evidences. Research has mostly been carried out on the possible similarities between a few notions, often randomly chosen, in Yulgok's collected works (一心, 定心, 正心, 立志, 三不, 涵養, 省察, etc.) and various important Buddhist ideas (心卽是佛, 色卽是空空卽是色, 三要, etc.) and scriptures (*The Heart Sūtra* 心經, *The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* 六祖壇經, *the Nirvāṇa Sūtra* 大槃涅槃經, *The Avataṃsaka Sūtra* 華嚴經, etc...), with a special focus on the *hwaōm* 華嚴 school.

I don't mean to criticize those studies as a whole, for they certainly did have paved the way to a more balanced view on Yulgok's orthodoxy as well as the so-called Neo-Confucian orthodoxy of the first half of Chosŏn that has often been taken as a monolithic phenomenon. I am also aware that, because of the scarcity of the available sources for this period compared to the second half of Chosŏn, it would be hard to give a comprehensive and precise description of the texts Yulgok has been actually reading, his reading practices, the detailed circulation of knowledge between China and Korea, and his relationships with the Buddhist world of his time – even though such a work could be experimented. This said, I would just like to argue that the two problems raised by Yulgok's relationships with Buddhism (his biography and his thought) are deeply connected to another large and delicate topic: his reception from his own time until nowadays, a study that has not been done yet systematically.

Historical context

A quick glimpse at the mid and late 16th century might enable to say that, generally speaking, it was no more times for a good-hearted dialogue between Buddhists and Confucians (taken in the broad sense of the scholars-officials holding important social and political positions). Besides the opposition to Buddhism has always been part of the identity of Neo-Confucians in both China and Korea, as can be seen for instance in reference textbooks like the *Reflections*

on things at hand (*Jinsilu* 近思錄), the *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained* (*Beixi ziyi* 北溪字義), but also in Yulgok's *Essentials of the Studies of the Sages* (*Sŏnghak chipyo* 聖學輯要). It could even be said that without Buddhism, there would have never been Neo-Confucianism, which built up its identity in opposition to *chan* Buddhism. To say it in a provocative way, Neo-Confucianism is, in its very essence, a fighting and needs therefore an enemy. The goal of the fighting was, of course, power and hegemony to rule society. It is worth reminding that Neo-Confucianism was basically the ideology and culture of a specific social group: the social, political and administrative elites. At the end of the 16th century, these elites felt somewhat vulnerable and were in search for self-definition and security, after the traumatic series of literati purges (*sahwa* 士禍: 1498, 1504, 1519, 1545, 1547) of evil memory, in a context marked by constant and recurring struggles with royal authority and kingship at large.

So it might be said that the ideological and normative framework of Neo-Confucianism, taken as a state ideology, was mostly set up in Yulgok's time. The ideological norms meant 1) normative measures trying to regulate ritual and religious practices on the institutional level (the code of the dynasty has been fixed in late 15th century), 2) normative discourses centered on Confucian values and ideas that were expected from and spread by officials and country side elites (the Five bonds 五倫), and 3) normative practices intended to change mores and culture, a process undertaken by scholars like Yulgok and T'oegye in local arenas in structures like Confucian academies (*sŏwŏn* 書院) or community compacts (*hyangyak* 鄉約).

Approach, limits, methodology and sources of the work in progress

When considering the relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism in such a context, the interest naturally goes first to the possible and often unquestionable discrepancies in real life, the gap between discourses and actual practices. Cataloging these contradictions is then a tempting approach. But when it comes to case studies focusing on individual scholars, such a cataloging is sometimes difficult and even impossible to do satisfactorily, especially for the early Chosŏn period. Besides, by doing so, one might wonder whether this is not simply leading to a soft relativism that doesn't say much in the end. One of the reason concerns the sources. Depending on the period and the scholar, the available sources are not numerous, for they have been either lost, or selected in a conscious (or unconscious) strategy by disciples or descendants, or both, in the often hectic process of transmission and compilation of the

remaining works of one scholar. A second reason is that those sources are mainly texts and thus discourses. This implies to define a careful methodology, for the approach should ideally stand at the crossroad between philology, history, philosophy and literary criticism. To say it simply, one has to face a handful of texts that are in a gray zone between collective norms (social, ideological and literary norms) and individual expression.

Aware of these limits and in order to overcome them, I have attempted to focus on one case study and to study in details a broad range of texts that seem to be relevant to the analysis of Yulgok's attitude and discourse about Buddhism. I have tried to keep in mind the nature, the expected audience, the goal and the sense of each type of text, namely: exam essays, petitions to the throne, officially ordered philosophical treatises and poetry. As for his biography, I have studied some extracts taken from 1) his official correspondence, 2) the official history (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄), 3) the biographical account (*haengjang* 行狀) written after his death by his most prominent disciple Kim Changsaeng 金長生 (1548-1631) and the official biography ("biography year by year" *yŏnbo* 年譜) written by the famous scholar and statesman Song Siyŏl 宋時烈 (1607-1689) that have been both compiled in the reference edition of his collected works, the *Yulgok chŏnsŏ* 栗谷全書, 4) two short accounts of his retreat at the Mounts Kŭmgang by Pak Sech'ae 朴世采 (1631-1695; "南溪集", 記栗谷先生入山時事) and Song Siyŏl (宋子大全 19, 進文元公遺橋槁仍辨師友之誣).

Yulgok's retreat in the Mounts Kŭmgang

The first problem with Yulgok's case in the history of the orthodox Neo-Confucianism is the episode of his retreat in the Mounts Kŭmgang for one year, in 1554, when he was nineteen years old. The five available sources all agree on two points: 1) His beloved mother's sudden death when he was sixteen left him numb with grief and, after the ritual mourning period of three years, he went to the mountains and had a "Buddhist" or wandering experience; 2) He only stayed one year in the mountains, went back home, got married and passed civil service examinations with flying colors. But sources also disagree on a few details that could be turned on two main questions: 1) When did Yulgok start reading Buddhist scriptures? How did he get interested in Buddhist texts and how long has he been studying Buddhism? 2) Why did he decide to go to the Mounts Kŭmgang? What were his motives?

Most of the versions (three out of five) agree that he started reading Buddhist scriptures randomly, when he was in search for answers about life and death and about how to deal with his deep sorrow after his mother's death. One source specifies that he randomly came across Buddhist texts when he went to the Pongŭnsa temple (cf. *Haengjang* by Kim Changsaeng), and another one explains that he has been "seduced" by the consolatory words of a Buddhist monk (cf. *Annals of the Chosŏn dynasty*, 1566, Myŏngjong 21, 3rd month, 24th day). The latter one, taken from the official history, adds that his father was fond of sūtras, which seems to be echoed by Song Siyŏl's claim that Yulgok actually started studying Buddhism at age ten, a few years before the trauma of his mother's death (cf. 進文元公遺橋稿仍辨師友之誣).

As I said, the sources all seem to agree that he has had a Buddhist experience in the mountains, exchanging ideas with Buddhist monks (especially through poems) and practicing Buddhist methods of meditation or questioning (like *hwadu* 話頭) in order to "find the Way". He is even said to have had an ascetic experience, made of intense meditation and deprivation of food according to Kim Changsaeng, just before getting all of a sudden "enlightened" (*tae o* 大悟), in a sort of Confucian enlightenment. He then realized that he has been deeply mistaken and was on the wrong track. However one source, the account by Pak Sech'ae, doesn't mention at all his learning Buddhist texts or his interest for Buddhism. Pak indeed explains that, after his mother's death, Yulgok have had a very bad relationship with his father's concubine. So after the end of the three-year mourning and the capping ceremony, he finally decided to leave home. On the pretext to pay a visit to his maternal grand-mother in the Kangwŏn province, he just escape human world and wander into the wild. The disagreement in his family is also mentioned in the *Annals of Chosŏn dynasty*.

To sum up, the main bone of contention concerns Yulgok's motives for studying Buddhism and his retreat in the mountains. The question is to determine what drove a great scholar and statesman of great stature into taking such an extreme action as cutting himself from society and experiment what was regarded as a nonsensical or shameful experience for a Neo-Confucian. It is not hard to believe that the dominant version, written down and transmitted by his close disciples, is that Yulgok went been through very hard time in his teenage years and had briefly lost his way and his mind. But this orthodox version of the facts actually squares with the explanation that Yulgok himself has provided many times during his lifetime.

What is at stakes?

I would like to wonder now about what was really at stakes in this problem of Yulgok's retreat in the mountains and his interest in Buddhism. Why did he have to constantly explain himself? Why his disciples tried to express their opinion on this matter and further explain it after his death? And why scholars are still wondering about his motives nowadays?

Let me briefly remind a few interesting episodes of Yulgok's life. When he first met in 1558 To'ogyee Yi Hwang, who was then at the height of his fame, the twenty-three years old Yulgok was teased for his past infatuation with Buddhism as well as frivolous literary composition. With a rather paternalistic tone, To'ogyee acknowledged that even great Song Neo-Confucian masters have been seduced at some point by Buddhism but he urged Yulgok to keep making efforts, since he seemed to be a promising young man. Six years later, in 1564, Yulgok started his official career in the bureaucracy after making a name as an exceptional scholar who placed first nine times in civil service examinations. In the course of these successive palace examinations, a few students from the Royal Academy tried once to stop him entering the examination place, on the pretext that he has been a Buddhist monk and was thus unworthy of passing examinations. Hopefully, Yulgok could finally enter and placed first. He even had three hits in a row after this incident. In 1568, four years later, some of his colleagues petitioned against his appointment at the Hongmungwan, arguing that, because of his Buddhist background, he shouldn't be a Special Counselor.

All these stories shows that wondering whether Yulgok has been a Buddhist or not is basically a Confucian debate, which involves no Buddhist counterpart, no testimony from the "other side". One might even go a step further: this problem seems to go beyond the orthodoxy *versus* heterodoxy debate. Regularly bringing back Yulgok's Buddhist wandering was part of petty jealousies, obstructive moves and, to sum up, power struggles. These struggles concerned the relationships between exam passers or high officials, but also the relationships between a senior scholar and a junior scholar in the small network of talented and influential Confucians. Even today's debates on Yulgok's retreat in the mountains and his undeniable interest in Buddhism don't really escape the pitfalls of power struggles: academic power struggles, if I may say so. So I am wondering whether taxing someone with Buddhism was not, at Yulgok's time, like what Lucien Febvre said about Rabelais who was accused of being atheistic in 16th century France (*The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*). I can't help wondering whether Yulgok's Buddhist experience was not,

simply, a pretext and a means to insult and discredit him, without any real concern about the possible impact or meaning of the interreligious contact itself. Of course, for his disciples from the 17th century onwards, the constellation of things was certainly different. They had to preserve his legacy and, by doing so, find their own niche in the midst of intense and factional strives at court that were both political and philosophical.

Yulgok's discourse on Buddhism, as a statesman and as a Confucian master

After what Yulgok describes as a youthful mistake from his immature years, his discourse on Buddhism and heterodoxies of all kind has been rather “orthodox”. Even though it is impossible to determine what he was really thinking, he did have played the role of the exemplary high official and Neo-Confucian master.

One interesting body of texts is his exam dissertations, partly compiled in his collected writings (死生鬼神策, 神仙策, 祈禱策, 壽夭策, 醫藥策, 天道人事策, 化策, etc.). The interest is twofold. Firstly, one can see that at the end of the 16th century, many exam topics dealt with topics that call for a certain knowledge of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and religious life in general: life and death, reincarnation, longevity, immortality, cases of extreme filial piety, ancestor worship, spiritual beings, the efficiency and meaning of prayers, the vital process, the march of Heaven, etc. Of course, in the very way questions are formulated, one can easily understand that the expected answers must be Confucian. So the candidates and future high officials are expected to develop the correct rhetoric, in a well-argued speech and not indulging in easy criticisms. Secondly, Yulgok's answers are demonstrating both his erudition and originality, and one strong characteristic is that he not only answers in details, but he also adds ideas that were not really expected. These are personal comments, deeply rooted in a very specific Neo-Confucian rhetoric: that of the “learning of the Sovereign”.

This trend is the result of the Yuan reception and reappraisal of Song Neo-Confucianism in China. So it differs slightly from the so-called Song “orthodox” Neo-Confucianism of the Cheng brothers or Zhu Xi. This Neo-Confucianism is didactical and mainly preoccupied with kingship, the balance of power between kings and the elites and the implementation of an ideal State. As a candidate and, later, as a high official, Yulgok has always followed this line. For example, 1) he refused to preside over improper cults and even asked for being dismissed from his post, 2) he stood vehemently against the king's clemency during the trial of the

Buddhist monk Po'u 普雨 (1509-1565) and presented several collective petitions to the throne, 3) he beg to prohibit Buddhist examinations, 4) he warn the king against extravagant expenses that might be related to Buddhist practices, etc. So in his public life as a high official, Yulgok is showing a great concern for the regulation of cults, the standardization of religious practices (mainly funerary services and state ceremonies) and he is in favor of sumptuary laws. He is acting as a faithful minister, the wise counselor whose very *raison d'être* is to advise and even teach the king. Besides, a careful look at his writings shows that he is not a Confucian fundamentalist. He is of course neither accommodating nor lenient towards Buddhism and other cults and religious practices, but he has his feet on the ground. He acknowledges that changing society and implementing an ideal State will take some time and can't be done overnight. So his viewpoint is often pragmatic regarding state affairs, with a touch of Neo-Confucian idealism though.

In such a mental framework, beyond the well-known socio-economical criticisms, Buddhism is problematic for it fundamentally diverts people from the core problem of life – which, in a Confucian worldview, means understanding how a society should work to fit the natural, cosmic order. This order is based on the cosmology of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) considering the world as constant changes and, to borrow a cheap metaphor, as a sort of huge magnetic field. So this cosmology differs greatly from the Buddhist worldview based on causality and completely different metaphysics. Yulgok is often defined as having developed a complex philosophy on the relationship between Material force (Qi/Ki 氣) and Principle (Li/I 理), and his emphasis on the cultivation of Qi is certainly linked to this concern with cosmology, taken as the basis and axis of ethics and politics. This is also why his thought differs from Buddhism and finally remains within the field of orthodox Neo-Confucianism where the philosophy of the *Book of Change* is so important in many ways.

As a Confucian master, Yulgok is indeed in the right line of the Neo-Confucian discourse. Although he might be the author of one of the first Korean Confucian commentary of the *Daodejing*, and although he has certainly been studying Buddhist scriptures when he was a young man, he strictly forbade reading heterodox texts in his two emblematic works: the *Essentials of the Studies of the Sages*, *Sŏnghak chipyo* 聖學輯要 (1575) dedicated to the king, and the *Core Principles to Expel Ignorance*, *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl* 擊蒙要訣 (1577) written for his students - two works that certainly encapsulate the thought of his maturity. Lastly, I would like to add that he never discussed anything related to Buddhism in his personal

correspondence. But he usually discussed openly about anything he was wondering about with his close friends. One can indeed find many exchanges about historical problems, rituals, ethics and metaphysics but no word about Buddhism or Buddhist world. In a sense, this world might have been part of his daily life, so it was not worth talking about and even not worth thinking about, except when administrative duties were at stakes.

A specific genre: poetry

Buddhism is certainly part of Yulgok's daily life and mental landscape. Buddhist people, world and buildings are familiar elements in his life and imagination. When investigating into Yulgok's relationship with Buddhism, one can't avoid tackling a very specific and delicate corpus, a genre that is semi-private, semi-public like many other writings in pre-modern Korea: poetry. His poems are full of mentions of encounters with Buddhist monks, exchanges of ideas or poems with them, and overnight stays in temples when Yulgok went hiking into the mountains. In previous scholarship, most of the scholars interested in his relationship with Buddhism have tended to read these poems only as testimonies of simple interreligious contacts. Focused on a philosophical approach, they have been interested mostly in his use of Buddhist words or Buddhist-like phraseology and themes, in order to try to demonstrate that Yulgok had a good knowledge of Buddhism. But unfortunately these studies often lack consistency, for they either quote again and again the same poems without paying any attention to Yulgok's poetry as a whole, or they only have a "utilitarian" reading of the poems, not really sensitive to their literary expression.

Poetry is a delicate genre. Like most literati's writings, they are almost always circumstantial writings. They clearly involve literary skills and an esthetical viewpoint, but they also point at sociability, good manners and a certain sense of civility. Poetry is part of a refined culture shared by literate people, Confucian scholars and Buddhist monks alike. So it is not surprising that Yulgok has given poems as gifts to Buddhist monks when he was taking his leave, or that he wrote poems to commemorate his stops during his excursions and free wanderings in the mountains and countryside. Poems often play the role of short diaries and they convey individual impressions, feelings and thoughts. Of course, the writing of poetry does obey literary rules and writing norms, but it also constitutes an interesting "literary space" allowing free expression of the self, even though this self is heavily self-staged. It is a common place to say that norms create freedom, but this is worth reminding, for poetry as well as

correspondence are the two types of texts where one scholar's inner world may be grasped and sensed.

I haven't yet finished studying in details the huge amount of poems left by Yulgok. But I did have read quite a lot of them. What strikes me, in relation to Buddhism, is that Buddhism is associated with a few specific literary motives: 1) nature, especially mountains, 2) eremitism, 3) immortality and/or unreality, evasion 4) peace of mind and rest.

In most cases, the poems staging an encounter with a Buddhist monk conjure up the feelings of familiarity, sympathy, sometimes irony but always kindness. It is often a meeting between two people. Even though the names of the monks are seldom specified, one can clearly feel that it is a pleasant encounter. One aspect that Korean scholars didn't highlight, to my point of view, is this little touch of humor and kind irony, which demonstrates benevolence and even affection. Besides these real meetings, Buddhist monks are also often depicted in Yulgok's poems as unreal apparitions, unexpected encounters between dream and reality. They seem to be fantastical being, recalling the Taoist figures of immortals. They are indeed described as cranes, ageless beings who are freely wandering in the mountains, living in harmony with clouds, waterfalls and venerable trees. Another poetical motive in those poems where Buddhist monks or monasteries appear is the musicality of nature. This element is closely linked with what look like enchanted parentheses, made of peaceful discussion with friends and monks, or conversely made of solitude in quiet sitting and meditation. The picture of those enchanted moments is the middle of sleepless nights, when the sounds of the universe are all the more audible. This can be the sound of the Buddhist little bell ringing in the wind, the rain drumming on the roof, or the wind gently shaking the branches of the trees.

But the main, striking element is the theme of eremitism, a free wandering and the feeling of being at one with nature, which is part of self-cultivation. One of the main characteristic of Yulgok's biography is the tension between serving or retiring, a very well-known dilemma in Confucianism. This tension, often lived or depicted as an alternative is, in fact, an alternation. It is an alternation between two exigencies for a true Confucian, that is to say between the two poles of the *Great Learning's* paradigm (*Taehak* 大學): self-cultivation and the ordering of society (*sugi* 修己 *ch'iin* 治人). Besides, this tension is basically a dynamics. To sum up, Buddhism, as part of Yulgok's poetic motives, may be considered as feeding this vital dynamics that pervades Yulgok's life and thought. It played the role of the impossible and illusionary evasion, a wishful thinking that brings rest to a sometimes tormented mind.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would like to suggest that the survey of a various range of texts mentioning Buddhism in Yulgok's writings and second-hand biographies allows us to make a few tentative statements. Yulgok has been attracted by Buddhism when he was a young man, but it seems that this interest was deeply associated with moments of existential and intellectual disarray. He then made up his mind to follow the Confucian Way and never hesitated again. There must have been different reasons explaining such a decision but we will never know them for sure. Once he made his decision, by writing a solemn declaration of intent when he came back from the Mounts Kūmgang (the famous *chagyōg mun* 自警文), he has been constantly trying to practice Confucian ideals in both his private and public life. As a high official and as a Confucian scholar, he has been exemplary and quite representative of the Neo-Confucian gentleman, *kunja* 君子. As a poet, it happened that he used Buddhism as a tempting evasion, a way out from the concerns of his life and political disillusion (I didn't have time to mention this point, but his biography of Kim Sisūp 金時習 (1582) as well as a quotation from the official history back up this analysis). But this evasion was also provided by his numerous and recurring evocations of Taoist-flavored and, above all, very Confucian eremitism expressed through common literary themes of retreat like chrysanthemum, snow, alcohol, friendship, poetry, etc.

I would like to end up this talk with a question. I am wondering whether the very fact that his biographies are contradictory is not, after all, deliberate. The topic of Yulgok's "Buddhist episode" remains and will always remain blurred, even though it is undeniable and it has actually never been denied. Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1078), Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), the "founding fathers" of the orthodox Neo-Confucianism have all experienced passing infatuations with Buddhism. These accounts not only have never been denied by orthodox tradition, but there were on the contrary carefully integrated in Neo-Confucian textbooks, in the chapter devoted to Confucian Sages. So, just like them, Yulgok might have been deliberately portrayed by his posterity as having gone through this kind of ultimate rite of passage, which is the hallmark of exceptional Neo-Confucian masters.