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Isabelle Sancho

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Isabelle SANCHO  
CNRS-EHESS

« Hwadam's cosmology of the *Changes* and the definition of the orthodox  
Confucian tradition in Chosŏn Korea »

Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk 徐敬德 (1489-1546) is a well-known figure of Chosŏn Korea. He is better known as Hwadam 花潭, the "Florid pool", after the name of his life-long place of residence in Songdo 松都 (today's Kaesŏng 開城) in the northern part of the Korean peninsula. Even though he was not enshrined during the Chosŏn period (1392-1905) in the Munmyo 文廟 (the official Confucian Shrine), his intellectual legacy is highly praised in modern scholarship in both South and North Korea, which makes him a notable exception.

In modern scholarship, Hwadam has often been defined by his supposedly single focus on the notion of Vital Energy/ *Ki* 氣, also called *Ki* monism (*chugiron* 主氣論 or *kiilwŏllon* 氣一元論). The dominant historical narrative about Korean Neo-Confucianism, still heavily relying on the scholarship from the Japanese colonial period, tends to highlight a handful of debates to characterize the premodern Korean Confucian tradition. Generally speaking, these debates have been described as focusing on either the supremacy of the Vital Energy, or the Patterning Principle, or both. The most famous debate has been called the "Theories on the Four Sprouts and the Seven Emotions," *sadan ch'ilchŏngnon* 四端七情論. It opposed, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, major scholars, such as Kobong, Ki Taesŭng 奇大升 (1527-72) and T'oegyŏ, Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501-1570), but also Yulgok, Yi I 李珥 (1536–1584) and Ugye, Sŏng Hon 成渾 (1535-1598). This debate has often been pinpointed as the apex of the Korean speculations on Neo-Confucianism and has been studied ad nauseam. In this broad modern narrative of Korean Confucianism, Hwadam's cosmological reflections are believed to have influenced the big names of the 16<sup>th</sup> century who took part in this Four/Seven debate and who stand today as the icons of Korean philosophy. So many studies devoted so far to Hwadam's thoughts have been attempts to trace the genealogy of the Korean *Ki* school in the early Chosŏn period.

Moreover, Hwadam's independent stance regarding the orthodox Cheng/Zhu school (called *Chujahak* 朱子學 in Korea), which, as you know, is commonly considered the state

ideology of the Chosŏn dynasty, has been more than once extensively highlighted. The reason for this is that his free-spirited attitude was taken as a precedent explaining the later flourishing of the “non-orthodox” tendencies of the late Chosŏn period, collectively labeled, for ideological purposes, Practical Learning/*sirhak* 實學. Demonstrating the existence of a non-orthodox, or in other words a “non-Zhuxist,” intellectual thread, running from the early to the end of Chosŏn, was indeed crucial for modern Koreans at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and afterwards. By doing so, they were trying to overthrow the Japanese colonial diagnosis of the historical failure and missed modernity of Korea, epitomized by its blind adherence to Neo-Confucianism, which was easily confused with rigid orthodoxy.

In South Korea, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk has been cited in nearly all the general studies on Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism, starting with the influential studies by Takahashi Tōru 高橋亨 (1878-1967) during the colonial period and Yi Pyŏngdo 李丙燾 (1896-1989), in his wake, but also in more recent histories of Chosŏn Confucianism written by Kŭm Chang'tae, Hwang Ŭidong, Yun Sasun, and Ch'oe Yŏngjin, for example. In North Korea, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk has been described as a progressive materialist thinker, notably in the seminal *History of Chosŏn philosophy* (*Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa* 조선철학사) written in the early 1960's by Chŏng Chinsŏk 정진석, Chŏng Sŏngch'ŏl 정성철, and Kim Ch'angwŏn 김창원. Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk's writings are the only ones, among those of the many 16<sup>th</sup> century scholars, to have been published in a complete modern edition in North Korea. Neither T'oegye Yi Hwang nor Yulgok Yi I, for example, received this privilege, despite their caliber as major Confucian thinkers.

At another level, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk has played a significant role in the collective mind of Korean society, past and present. He is regarded as an embodiment of the *sallim* 山林, the rusticated scholar who remains hidden in "mountains and forests," far from political life. His repeated refusal to serve within the bureaucracy paints the picture of an independent spirit, drawn to erudite seclusion. Contemporary scholars have attributed this attitude to the context of the troubled times of early Chosŏn history, in which no less than five "literati purges" (*sahwa* 士禍) targeted Neo-Confucian scholars-officials over a short period of fifty years (1498, 1504, 1519, 1545). Because of this attitude of deliberate withdrawal and the testimony of a life dedicated to learning far from the circles of power, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk makes his appearance as a hero in popular novels from the mid-Chosŏn period, where he is depicted as a Daoist master with magical powers or even immortal. In the *yadam* 野談 (oral tales) he is given the gift of prophecy and cast as the savior of the people, thanks to his expertise in the *Book of Changes* and his mastery of occult arts. Hwadam's wisdom is highlighted in several

stories focusing on his relationship with women. Legend has it that Hwadam remained immune to the enchantment of Hwang Chini 黃眞伊 (c.1506-c.1560), the most famous *kisaeng* in Korean history who was a native of Kaesŏng and was involved in the same social scene as Hwadam. This is how Hwadam's character has regularly featured in successful South Korean movies and *dramas* focusing on the life of Hwang Chini.

If Hwadam is a famous name, known by all in today's Korea and associated with the cheerful and positive figure of a wise man, things were slightly more complex in premodern times. Hwadam's thoughts and character became a matter of interest only two decades after his death, when discussions were triggered under Sŏnjo's reign (1567–1608), at court and among Confucian circles throughout the country, about the place he should be given within the Korean Confucian tradition. The late 16<sup>th</sup> century was a pivotal time in the history of Korean Confucianism. It was a transition from a time marked by bloody purges targeting Tohak/Daoxue and *sarim* scholars (that is to say, strictly speaking, Neo-Confucians), to a long era from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century marked by massive factional struggles, launched by almost all Confucian factions against each other. These factional struggles, which involved raging intellectual and political disputes among different schools, resulted in a dire need of definition of the Korean orthodoxy, in a broader regional context in which China was no longer the center of civilization after the Imjin War that reshuffled the cards of the balance of powers in East Asia. But, to be strictly accurate, attempts to define the To'tong/Daotong in Korea had been made well before the great war. They had been mainly initiated by the two major scholars who were active in the pre-Imjin period, T'oegye, Yi Hwang and Yulgok, Yi I, who both established the main lineages of Korean orthodoxy.

The criteria used to establish those intellectual lineages of the Korean Tot'ong/Daotong were extremely complex and, of course, changed over time. But one might say that there were two major (or ideal) criteria. The first one was the philosophical orientation of a scholar's teachings. For instance, it is well known that any obvious sign of infatuation with Buddhism, Daoism, Wang Yangming or Ming scholarship was held as suspect. A second criterion was revolving around the moral teaching that may, or may not, be drawn from a scholar's life. What we call Confucians in Chosŏn period were all, with very few exceptions, members of the same elite group, whose social legitimacy strictly derived from their way of leading the proper life that was expected from a member of the elite : either studying and teaching, or serving in the bureaucracy. As members of the ruling elites, they

were banned from working with their hands or practising trading. Assessing a scholar's life basically meant assessing his commitment to practicing and propagating Confucianism.

So what happened when the late 16<sup>th</sup> century scholars started to assess Hwadam's place in Korean Confucianism? Contrary to what Hwadam liked to portray himself, he was not an obscure hermit. During his lifetime, he was an influential local personality from the Kaesŏng area, close to the capital and the royal court. He interacted with the major intellectual circles of his time, as is testified by his two appointments proposed by Kim An'guk 金安國 (1478-1543), the leader of the *sarim* scholars under Chungjong's reign (1506-1544). Hwadam met renowned scholars and poets, such as Sŏng Un 成運 (1497-1579) and Cho Sik 曹植 (1501-1572). He taught and fostered many disciples, some of whom became powerful high officials or respected scholars under Sŏnjo's reign. Many of these disciples were famous for their mastery of the *Book of Changes*, as, for instance, Pak Sun 朴淳 (1523-1589), Hŏ Yŏp 許曄 (1517-1580), Yi Chiham 李之菡 (1517-1578), Kim Hyeson 金惠孫 (dead 1585), Ma Hŭngyŏng 馬羲慶 (1525-1589), Sin Yŏk 申潁 (dates unknown), and Chang Kasun 張可順 (1493-1549). Despite this indisputable fame, surprisingly enough, Hwadam's thoughts were not known in details in that time and his writings were not widely circulated. His legacy lied in his reputation of being a knowledgeable and upright man.

One reason why the details of his thoughts were not known well might be that Hwadam did not write any works of synthesis, no extensive commentaries on the Classics or the Four books, nor any well-crafted treatises like some of his fellow Neo-Confucian literati. When he realized that his days were numbered, he only dictated a set of four texts to clarify his position regarding a few subjects related to cosmology that were discussed in his circles. To some extent, his surviving writings may be described as short (even dry) scholarly explanations and circumstantial pieces. Hwadam's intellectual legacy was firstly made available for proper scrutiny when his collected writings (*munjip*) were compiled by his direct disciples in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. A serious investigation into Hwadam's thoughts was made possible only starting from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when the scholars of the Kaesŏng and Hanyang areas dedicated lots of energy, human and material resources, in order to try to turn him into a true Confucian master, worthy of taking part in the Korean Daotong, by printing his *munjip*. But the task of Hwadam's supporters was rather difficult. It is true that in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century,

the Hwagok academy where sacrifices were performed for “Master Hwadam” (*Hwadam sŏnsaeng* 花潭先生), had already been granted a royal charter and a special tombstone under royal order (*sindobi* 神道碑) and Hwadam bestowed posthumous titles as well. But in the end, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk could never enter the Munmyo and he was never acknowledged as a true Confucian master.

The main reason why Hwadam did not succeed to gain the status of a major scholar during the Chosŏn period is mainly due to his cosmology based on the exegesis of the *Changes*. Hwadam was not held in high regard by the leading Neo-Confucians of the middle of the Chosŏn dynasty, for these scholars were sticking to the lukewarm assessments made by previous scholars in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These 16<sup>th</sup> century scholars, who were the forefathers of the diverse “schools” (*hakp’a/xuepai*) that were later influential and fighting one another in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, used to denigrate Hwadam as a mediocre Confucian thinker, an insignificant specialist of numerology. Reducing his thoughts as worthless divination techniques, they denied him any substantial role within early Chosŏn Confucianism. Because the texts Hwadam left behind were piecemeal, mostly painting the picture of a follower of the Northern Song scholars such as Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, and especially Shao Yong, Hwadam was not considered a true follower of the Cheng/Zhu school. Hence he was not worthy of being included into the Korean Tot’ong/Datong.

When looking at the *Hwadam chip*, it cannot be denied that Hwadam, sometimes called the Shao Yong of Korea, was explicitly relying upon Shao Yong’s approach of the *Changes*. Shao Yong was the embodiment of the school of “figures and numbers” (*xiangshu/sangsu* 象數), which was considered less orthodox than the school of “meanings and principles” (*yili/ŭiri* 義理) represented by Zhang Zai, Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi. Among the 22 texts of prose contained in the *Hwadam chip*, one can easily notice that there are 2 memorials, 5 letters, 2 inscriptions on zither, 2 short statements, and 13 miscellanies. These miscellanies mainly deal with cosmology, with the exception of the 2 statements about his disciples’ names at the very end. Moreover, 4 out of these 13 texts (in light red on the slide) are random comments on Shao Yong’s cosmochrony and phonology.

In order to tackle the problem posed by this heavy influence of Shao Yong on Hwadam, his supporters employed 2 different strategies. The first one was to show that, contrary to common knowledge, Hwadam’s cosmology was in line with the orthodoxy. When compiling Hwadam’s *munjip*, they notably placed at the very beginning of the miscellanies

part the four texts that Hwadam dictated to Hŏ Yŏp 許曄 (1517-1580) on his death bed. Even though these texts should be placed at the last place in a chronological order, they were placed first, certainly in order to be presented as the real testimony of Hwadam. The main characteristic of these texts is that they are closer to Zhang Zai' views than Shao Yong's ones. Their writing style also contrasts with that of the miscellanies texts dealing with Shao Yong's philosophy. One might even argue that they were slightly edited and improved by Hwadam's disciples in the process of the *munjip* compilation.

The second strategy employed by Hwadam's supporters was to highlight Hwadam's biography. One very striking feature of Hwadam's life is that he was a self-taught man. He had no known master and taught himself through reading books on his own. He was not the offspring of a prominent or rich noble family, but his mother is described as having great expectations for him (actually, she dreamt of entering the Munmyo herself the night Hwadam was conceived). So Hwadam must have been provided in his youth with all the books needed to prepare for the civil service examinations, among which a copy of the *Xingli Daquan*. But instead of preparing the examinations, his biography describes a rather tortured soul, spending nights and days in his room to investigate into all things between heaven and earth.

The two above mentioned strategies employed by Hwadam supporters in the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be seen in one of the postfaces of the *Hwadam chip*, the one written by Yun Tŭkkwan 尹得觀 :

**[...] Among our Eastern scholars, both masters Chŏngam [Cho Kwangjo] and T'oegye [Yi Hwang] could be considered the best. But master Sŏ Hwadam was born between the two.** The explanations given by each of the three masters about the Patterning Principle and Vital Energy contain truths and untruths when compared one to another. This was **discussed by Yulgok [Yi I], venerable Munsŏng**, who only retained the master and Chŏngam because **they achieved understanding on their own. There is most certainly an expression of praise implied in such an opinion.**

My forefather the Marquis Wŏljŏng [Yun Kŭnsu 尹根壽 (1537-1616), the founder of the Southerners and disciple of T'oegye] was sent on a mission to the celestial court. When the scholars of the Chinese court asked him whether Kija [Qizi]'s divisions and his science of numbers, as well as Confucius and Mencius' method of the mind, had been transmitted in our country, naming the master along with Chŏngam and other sages, he answered: "A certain Sŏ has clearly explained the Learning of Nature and Principle, and he's even more well-versed in numerology." This took place at a time when the tenure of explanations conformed to T'oegye's views. But later on, T'oegye himself was very lenient with the

master, as can be seen in the views he expressed in his poetry. **So, average Confucians have sometimes accused the master's scholarship, in order to belittle it, of excessive bias towards numbers, but this is ignorance.**

**Numbers are patterning principles. To choose to learn without knowing the Patterning Principle, can this truly be called Learning? Master Confucius' commentaries provided the *Changes* with their coherence: so this is the same when dealing with numbers. Supposing that Confucius had never worked on editing the *Odes* or focusing on the *Rites*, and that only his commentaries on the *Changes* had been transmitted, would it be even thinkable to belittle the Master himself by criticizing him for studying numbers?**

Early in his life master Sŏ meditated for one full year. Afterwards he was able to immediately and naturally comprehend all things, and thereupon he became aware that **what is written in books could also be fathomed through thinking alone.** He then wrote on his walls the names of all things and beings between heaven and earth, and could not eat or sleep for thinking, until he **finally understood the unity pervading all things.** Zhu Xi used to say that whoever wants to really learn must beforehand understand the meaning of words and after that, depending on this preliminary work, one might be able to seek the underlying patterning principles. **When considering the master, this is indeed the case. The texts of the present compilation, "Upstream to the source of the Patterning Principle and Vital Energy" and so forth, are all expressions of this comprehension of his through thinking alone. [...]**

As can be seen in the first paragraph quoted above, assessing a scholar's position within the tradition in Chosŏn period consisted in situating him into a specific lineage, a specific line of chronological succession. Hwadam was a tricky case, for he was a self-taught scholar. Also, he quite unexpectedly became an influent master, thanks to his moral stature and not thanks to his political network. Moreover, his specific interest for Shao Yong was unusual and disturbing, to say the least. But, since he was an important figure in Kaesŏng, an easy way out of the problem was to affiliate him in the lineage of the other great figure of the area: Chŏng Mongju 鄭夢周 (1337-1392). Chŏng Mongju was the iconic figure of the loyal minister who remained faithful to the previous dynasty and killed at the Koryŏ/Chosŏn transition. He was praised by the *sarim* scholars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century who were persecuted during the successive literati purges. Chŏng Mongju was a disciple of U Kilsaeng 禹吉生 (dates unknown), who was himself the son of Yŏktong 易東, U T'ak 禹倬 (1263-1342), the first great Korean specialist of the *Changes* and Neo-Confucianism. So, through his geographical/Kaesŏng connexion to Chŏng Mongju, Hwadam could be artificially linked to U



T'ak and the very origins of the reception of Neo-Confucianism in Koryŏ. Claiming that he was a legitimate Neo-Confucian scholar could then become more acceptable.

But Hwadam's supporters did something even more efficient. They linked him to the major icon of the *sarim* scholars, Cho Kwangjo, the leader of the Tohak Neo-Confucians who was the main target of the 1519 purge under Chungjong's reign. That same year, Hwadam was selected for appointment but refused to take any position. Kim An'guk, who was Hwadam's supporter during his lifetime and officially recommended him for a position, was a friend of Cho Kwangjo. He studied with him under Kim Koengp'il 金宏弼 (1454-1504), the great scholar against whom the 1504 purge was launched. To sum up, through the patronage he received from Kim Ang'uk, Hwadam could be linked as well to the most prestigious lineage for any orthodox Confucians in late Chosŏn period: that of Kim Koengp'il-Cho Kwangjo.

Hwadam's case is a good place to start in understanding how the nature of the expertise of the *Changes* could have heavily impacted the credentials and legitimacy that were given to Confucian scholars within the Korean tradition in the course of the Chosŏn dynasty. It is true that, generally speaking, the line is drawn, between the Cheng/Zhu school and other streams of Song Confucianism, around the problem of self-cultivation and the so-called Learning of the mind in Neo-Confucianism. That is the reason why Korean orthodoxy has been commonly defined as stubbornly standing against Buddhism and the school of Wang Yangming. But there is another line, a much subtle one, that would deserve further attention. It is the one revolving around the different understandings of the *Changes*.