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**“Encapsulating Neo-Confucianism and the *Great Learning* in Sixteenth-century Korea:  
Yi Yulgok’s *Outline of the Sagely Learning*, *Sŏnghak chibyŏ* 聖學輯要 (1575)”**

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The reception of Neo-Confucianism in the late Koryŏ 高麗 (918-1392) and early Chosŏn (1392-1897) was without doubt a major event, deeply affecting Korean society, mindsets and culture through a long-lasting process which, ever since the work of Martina Deuchler,<sup>1</sup> is commonly called in Korean studies the Confucianization of Korea. This process took several centuries to reach all of society, roughly towards the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, and was primarily driven by the socio-political elite in order to rule the country. One striking feature of this reception is the unfailing interest of Chosŏn kings and scholar-officials alike for the *Great Learning*, *Daxue*/*Taehak* 大學, which was recurrently regarded and promoted as the paradigmatic text for state ideology. In a comparative perspective of East Asia as a whole, the *Great Learning* also provides us with an interesting study case. It reveals notable differences between Chinese and Korean trajectories, rooted in a common Neo-Confucian theoretical framework. Korean uses of the *Great Learning* particularly illustrate a crucial problem underlying Korean history over a period of almost a millennium: the balance of power between the monarchy and the bureaucratic aristocracy. Contrary to Chinese emperors, Korean kings were not symbolically bestowed with a heavenly mandate. They had to constantly struggle in order to acquire and maintain their legitimacy over an omnipresent and influential aristocratic body to which they consubstantially belonged and which in practice ruled the country.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to introduce an emblematic exegesis of the *Great Learning* which exerted an indisputable influence over Chosŏn political and intellectual history and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. especially DEUCHLER Martina, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea. A Study of Society and Ideology*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 36, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. KIM HABOUSH JaHyun, *The Confucian Kingship in Korea. Yŏngjo and the Politics of Sagacity*, Columbia U.P., New York, 1988, reed. 2001, p.1-2: « The Yi monarchy shared with China the concept and rhetoric of the sage king, but it employed it in a very different situation. Neither was the Korean king the Son of Heaven as the Chinese emperor was nor did he rule a huge country known and seen as the central kingdom. The institutional structure in which he ruled sharply impinged upon his freedom of action. The bureaucracy was rather small and was dominated by aristocratic bureaucrats who vied with the throne in their use of the rhetoric of moral rule. Thus, a Yi king who wished to establish monarchical authority and power using the ideal of the sage king [...] had to submit to the rigors this ideal demanded. »; and p.19-20: « The almost oligarchic nature of the Korean government probably made it far more difficult for a Korean king to resist bureaucratic pressure. »

which still stands as a noteworthy achievement of the Korean reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism: the *Outline of the Sagely Learning*, *Sōnghak chibyō* 聖學輯要, written and presented to king Sōnjo 宣祖 (1568-1608) in 1575 by Yulgok 栗谷, Yi I 李珥 (1536-1584), a major icon of Korean Neo-Confucianism and national history.<sup>3</sup> It was later used as the reference for Classics Mat lectures (*kyōngyōn* 經筵) in the Chosōn court as from 1680, and before the modern era was officially reprinted in 1744, 1749 and 1759. This renowned text, considered as being a genuine Korean Classic,<sup>4</sup> might nowadays also be regarded as encapsulating many characteristics of the Korean reception of Neo-Confucianism.

### **Which Neo-Confucianism? Which *Great Learning*?**

Popular Korean scholarship generally argues that the Neo-Confucianism introduced into Korea was Song-China orthodox Cheng/Zhu Learning, mainly referred to in Korea as *xinglixue/sōngnihak* 性理學 or *Daoxue/Tohak* 道學. Such a position is certainly not wrong as far as the course of Chosōn history as a whole is concerned, but should nevertheless be strongly nuanced when considering the first half of Chosōn – as has been done by John Duncan for example.<sup>5</sup> It is in fact rather biased and tends to overlook the importance of the Yuan dynasty in both Chinese and Korean history. From a historical standpoint, the reception of Neo-Confucianism in Korea is much indebted to what might tentatively be called the Yuan version of Song Neo-Confucianism, and which has been studied extensively by William Theodore de Bary.<sup>6</sup> Generally speaking, Yuan Neo-Confucianism could be summed up as having been created by Xu Heng 許衡 (1209-1281), Kubilai's teacher, while its main feature is a strong form of didacticism meant to 'sinicize' the Mongol dynasty. Xu Heng was the spiritual heir of Zhen Dexiu 真德秀 (1178-1235) of the Southern Song period, who had formalized the so-called Learning of the Sovereign (*dixue/chehak* 帝學), centered on one text, the *Great Learning*, and one notion, 'straightening one's heart' (*zhengxin/chōngsim* 正心). Zhen's most famous work is certainly his exegesis of the *Great Learning*, the *Extended*

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<sup>3</sup> His official portrait is printed on the 5,000 KRW bank notes in contemporary South Korea. This imaginary portrait was made in 1965 on the presidential order of Pak Chōnghūi (1917-1979). The model was a 14<sup>th</sup> generation descendant of Yulgok, Yi Chaenūng from the Tōksu Yissi 德水李氏.

<sup>4</sup> The *Sōnghak chibyō* is among the '100 Classics' that have been selected and will be translated into English in the few years to come through the project led by the UCLA and the AKS (Academy of Korean Studies).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. DUNCAN John B., *The Origins of Chosōn Dynasty*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. de BARY Wm.Theodore, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1981, and *The Message of the Mind in Neo-Confucianism*, Columbia U.P., New York, 1989.

*Meaning of the Great Learning (Daxue yanyi 大學衍義)*. This work was one of the most important texts read, in Mongol translations, by Mongol emperors, their counselors and part of the bureaucracy, from the 1320's onwards in Yuan China. It thus enjoyed the status of a canonical text, without however being part of the orthodox curriculum.

According to Chi Tuhwan<sup>7</sup> the *Daxue yanyi* most probably reached Korea in the fourteenth century. It particularly caught the attention of the reformist scholars of late Koryŏ. Two allusions to the text can be found in the main primary sources concerning Koryŏ – written and compiled in early Chosŏn. The *Koryŏsa* 高麗史 and the *Koryŏsa chŏryo* 高麗史節要 both record that Yun T'aek 尹澤 (1289-1370) urged king Kongmin 恭愍 (r.1352-1374) to read the *Daxue yanyi* during a Classics Mat lecture in 1357.<sup>8</sup> The *Koryŏsa* also states that Yun Sojong 尹紹宗 (1345-1393) exhorted king Kongyang 恭讓 (r. 1389-1392) to give priority to the study of the *Daxue yanyi* instead of the *Zhenguan zhengyao* 貞觀政要.<sup>9</sup> What's more, evidence suggests that the future king T'aejo 太祖 (r.1392-1398) and his son T'aejong 太宗 (r.1400-1418) used to read the text in their youth.<sup>10</sup> It can therefore be reasonably argued that, just like in the Mongol court, Zhen Dexiu's work was considered during the transition from Koryŏ to Chosŏn as a major reference for the education of Korean monarchs.

### **The *Great Learning* in early Chosŏn**

After the new dynasty was founded, the Yi kings continued to use the *Daxue yanyi* as an unchallenged model. Detailed research of the study of the *Great Learning* during the Classics Mat lectures mentioned in the *Annals of Chosŏn*, for the period going from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, clearly shows that Zhen Dexiu's work was considered the unchallenged reference work on *Great Learning* philosophy in the early Chosŏn court.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. CHI Tuhwan 지두환, *Chosŏn chŏngi taehak yŏnŭi yihae kwajŏng* « 朝鮮前期 “大學衍義” 이해 과정 » (« The Process of Assimilation of the *Extended Meaning of the Great Learning* at the Beginning of Chosŏn »), *taedong kojŏn yŏngu* 泰東古典硏究, vol.10 (1993), *Hallim taehakkyo taedong kojŏn yŏnguso* 翰林大學校東古典硏究所, p.341.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Koryŏsa, kwŏn* 106, *yŏlchŏn* 列傳 19, *yunhae yunt'aek* 尹諧尹澤, and *Koryŏsa chŏryo, kwŏn* 26, Kongmin wang 1 恭愍王一, the 6th year of the reign (1357).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Koryŏsa, kwŏn* 120, *yŏlchŏn* 列傳 33, quoted in Chi Tuhwan, *op.cit.*, note 4 p.340.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. their respective biographies in the *Annals of Chosŏn*, the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王祖實錄.

<sup>11</sup> This research was carried out in an unpublished doctoral dissertation: Isabelle SANCHO, *Chŏngsim* 正心 (“rendre droit son coeur”), *une notion cardinale de l'interprétation coréenne du néo-confucianisme. Étude centrée sur Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584)*, Inalco, Paris, 2006.

<b>Kings</b>	<b>Length of reign</b>	<i>Daxue</i> 大學	<i>Daxue zhangju</i> 大學章句	<i>Daxue huowen</i> 大學或問	<i>Daxue yanyi</i> 大學衍義	<i>Daxue yanyibu</i> 大學衍義補	<b>Total of occurrences</b>
T'aejo 太祖	6 years and 2 months				11		<b>11</b>
Chǒngjong 定宗	2 years and 2 months				3		<b>3</b>
T'aejong 太宗	17 years and 10 months			2	7		<b>9</b>
Sejong 世宗	31 years and 6 months	3			13		<b>17</b>
Munjong 文宗	2 years and 3 months	2			7		<b>9</b>
Tanjong 端宗	3 years and 2 months						<b>0</b>
Sejo 世祖	13 years and 3 months	1					<b>1</b>
Yejong 睿宗	1 year and 2 months	1			1		<b>1</b>
Sǒngjong 成宗	25 years and 1 month	6		1	14		<b>21</b>
Yōnsan kun 燕山君	12 years and 6 months				7		<b>7</b>
Chungjong 中宗	38 years and 2 months	11	1 (preface only)		23	12	<b>47</b>
Injong 仁宗	9 months						<b>0</b>
Myōngjong 明宗	22 years	3			5		<b>8</b>
Sōnjo 宣祖	40 years and 7 months	5		4	12		<b>21</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>216 years</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>Percentage</b>		<b>20,65%</b>	<b>0,65%</b>	<b>4,52%</b>	<b>66,45%</b>	<b>7,74%</b>	<b>100%</b>

The above table also shows that the *Daxue zhangju* 大學章句 (which, because of its inclusion in the Four Books, is still the orthodox version of the *Great Learning*) was never studied, with the noteworthy exception of the preface by Zhu Xi studied once during Chungjong's reign. Generally speaking, the two above-mentioned texts by Zhu Xi (*Daxue zhangju* and *Daxue huowen*) were seldom ever read. Moreover, the founder of the new dynasty, T'aejo, studied the *Daxue yanyi* a great deal. In fact, he seems to have only studied this text about the *Great Learning*. Related to this point, one can notice that it was only starting from Sejong's reign that the *Great Learning* itself had been studied during Classics Mat lectures at court. Chungjong was, proportionally, the king who most studied all texts related to the *Great Learning* and its exegeses. He was notably the only one who read, for a number of years, the *Daxue yanyibu*. As for Tanjong and Injong, they never studied any text concerning the *Great Learning*. Lastly, in spite of a rather long reign, Sejo read the *Great Learning* only once, without studying the *Daxue yanyi* at all.

As for the scholarship of the beginnings of Chosŏn, a quick glimpse at various *Collected writings* of literati (*munjip* 文集) from the same period allows us to make two important statements. Firstly, Koreans exhaustively studied Zhen Dexiu's *Daxue yanyi* rather than the canonical text, as formalized in the Four Books. In fact, they seldom ever wrote philosophical commentaries on it. A few works on the *Great Learning* and its various Chinese exegeses were, however, written by some scholars, as for example: the *Taehak samgang p'almokcham* 大學三綱八目箴 by Yu Sungjo 柳崇祖 (1452-1512),<sup>12</sup> the *Taehak changgu poyu* 大學章句補遺 by Yi Ŏnjök 李彦迪 (1491-1553),<sup>13</sup> the *Taehakto* 大學圖 and *Taehakkyöng iljangyönnüi* 大學經一腸演義 by Pak Yöng 朴英 (1471-1540),<sup>14</sup> the *Taehak*

<sup>12</sup> Also sometimes called *Taehakkangmokcham* 大學綱目箴, this work was printed in 1511 on the order of king Chungjong 中宗 (r. 1506-1544). It consists of a compilation of prescriptions based on the Three Principles (*san gangling/sam kangnyöng* 三綱領) and Eight Stages (*ba tiaomu/p'al chomok* 八條目) drawn from the *Great Learning* by Zhu Xi. At the end of the book, there is a text with the title *Söngniyönnwönoch'waryo* 庄理淵源撮要, explaining the viewpoints of Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi on the *Book of Changes*. The whole work aims at showing the essential principles of the correct behavior expected of a sage king.

<sup>13</sup> This text is said to have been printed for the first time at a rather late moment, in 1794. In the oldest remaining edition, one can in fact find a preface written by king Chöngjo 正祖 (r. 1777-1800), as well as a sixteenth-century postface attributed to No Susin 盧守愼 (1515-1590). Yi Ŏnjök is supposed to have written this commentary to correct Zhu Xi's exegesis on the *Great Learning* in order to go back to the original meaning of the text. In Yi Ŏnjök's commentary, the *Great Learning* is divided into one canonical part and nine commentaries (and not ten, like in Zhu Xi's reading), and a few changes appear in the interpretation of some of these commentaries. At the end of the book, one can find a summary, called *Soktaehakhongmun* 續大學或問, explaining the six main differences opposing Yi Ŏnjök to Zhu Xi.

<sup>14</sup> The main characteristic of the diagram called *Taehakto* 大學圖, located in *kwön* 2 of the collected works of Pak Yöng (*Songdang chip* 松堂集), is that the author distinguishes the basic principles of the *Great Learning* according to what he calls 'practice by inference' (*ch'uhaeng* 推行) on the one hand, and 'practice by knowledge'

*chirŭi* 大學質疑 by Yi Tŏkhong 李德弘 (1541-1596),<sup>15</sup> the *Taehak tongja mundap* 大學童子問答 by Cho Hoik 曹好益 (1546-1609),<sup>16</sup> and the *Taehak chilsŏ* 大學疾書 by Yi Ik 李穡 (1579-1624).<sup>17</sup> Yet one cannot know precisely to what extent these works were read and circulated. What's more, with the noteworthy exception of Yi Ŏnjŏk's revision of Zhu Xi's exegesis, they were either rather general didactic materials for beginners, or free personal commentaries on the Neo-Confucian corpus or the Confucian Classics taken as a whole. Secondly, because of this strong bias towards Zhen Dexiu's work, Korean scholars, who were in majority high officials, mainly used the *Great Learning* during Classics Mat lectures or when they were discussing political matters. For them, the *Great Learning* dealt with statecraft and kingship. To sum up, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, the *Great Learning* was basically read at court in Zhen Dexiu's version, which was used as the reference book for a state ideology patterned on Yuan Neo-Confucian orthodoxy.

### What was at stake?

We can therefore say that the *Daxue yanyi* and the *Daxue*'s paradigm were part of repeated efforts to build up a strong state under the new Yi dynasty.<sup>18</sup> It is thus not surprising that the main use of the *Daxue yanyi* in Korea intended first and foremost to strengthen royal authority inside and outside the peninsula, in a context marked by diplomatic struggles with the concomitantly founded Ming dynasty. It is worth noticing that Zhen Dexiu's work – and

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(*chihaeng* 知行) on the other. As for the *Taehakkyŏng iljangyŏnŭi* 大學經一腸演義, it is an explanation following the diagram which deals only with the first paragraph of the *Great Learning*. Pak Yŏng quotes and discusses a few commentaries by Zhu Xi, Zhen Dexiu, Yang Shi, Shao Yong and a few other Chinese scholars, before expounding his own ideas.

<sup>15</sup> This text was written by Yi Tŏkhong, one of the disciples of To'egye 退溪, Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501-1570), within the context of a large exegetical work on the Four Books, the *Book of Changes*, the *Classic of the Mind* (*Xinjing* 心經) by Zhen Dexiu, known as *Simkyŏng chirŭi* 心經質疑. Part of the collected works of Yi Tŏkhong, the *Kanjaejip* 艮齋集, it was printed for the first time in 1766 and was later supplemented, in a 1829 edition, by a series of questions and answers between Yi Tŏkhong and Yi Hwang.

<sup>16</sup> In 1609 a certain Kim Hyŏn 金鉉 is said to have paid a visit to Cho Ho'ik, asking for a commentary on the *Great Learning*. Cho Ho'ik then started writing down what he used to teach his pupils, but passed away that very same year, before completing the work. The first printed edition of the text is unknown. In this work, Cho Hoik remains faithful to Zhu Xi's commentaries.

<sup>17</sup> In this text, which is part of the *Sŏnhojilsŏ* 星湖疾書, a compilation of Yi Ik's commentaries on the Three Classics and the Four Books, one can see the author's political reflections based upon the *Great Learning*. It is worth noting that the *Taehak chilsŏ* was not included in the 1922 edition of the complete works of Yi Ik, the *Sŏngho chŏnjip* 星湖全集.

<sup>18</sup> On this topic, see in this volume the article by Kim Daeyeol, "King Chŏngjo's (r. 1776-1800) reading of the *Great Learning* and his political perspective: powerful monarch and active government."

its so-called ‘Supplement’, the *Daxue yanyibu* 大學衍義補<sup>19</sup> – were regularly part of the cultural items circulating between Ming China and Chosŏn Korea through diplomatic missions.<sup>20</sup> In so doing, the Chosŏn and Ming courts in all likelihood asserted their common ideological grounds. In Korea, these texts were particularly studied and highlighted by strong kings who used Neo-Confucian ideology to reinforce their personal authority. For T’aejong, Sejong 世宗 (1419-1450) and Chungjong 中宗 (1506-1544) for instance, texts related to Zhen Dexiu’s version of the *Great Learning* were subject to royal patronage. They regularly ordered official printings<sup>21</sup> as well as précis or didactic commentaries on them.<sup>22</sup> They also publicly gave selected extracts to their high officials and to the royal family and in-laws.<sup>23</sup> They were thus simply acting – or even performing – like the ideal wise rulers praised by the *Great Learning*, that is to say the supreme educators of the state.

However, resorting to the *Great Learning* was also part of the strategies used by Korean scholar-officials to secure and reinforce their own position in this apparently monarch-centered political scene. By arguing that Confucian kingship was the basis for an ideal state and society, Korean scholar-officials paradoxically developed a very specific rhetoric about the balance of power, in which they portrayed themselves as being equal to kings. It is worth underlining that one main difference between Korean and Chinese exegeses

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<sup>19</sup> See below.

<sup>20</sup> In 1401 (T’aejong 1, 12/9), emissaries sent to the Ming court brought back, among other books, the *Daxue yanyi*. In 1403 and 1406 (T’aejong 3, 10/27; T’aejong 6, 12/22), Chinese emissaries who came on a diplomatic mission presented the king with an edition of the *Daxue yanyi*. In 1494 (Sŏngjong 25, 1/7), emissaries sent to China, amongst whom An Ch’im 安琛 (1445-1515), brought back an edition of the *Daxue yanyibu* by Qiu Jun.

<sup>21</sup> In 1411 (T’aejong 11, 5/20), the king gave orders to print the *Daxue yanyi*. This edition was presented to the throne a year later, in 1412 (T’aejong 12, 10/1). In 1472 (Sŏngjong 3, 4/16), the king gave orders to print the *Taehak yŏnŭi chimnyak* 大學衍義輯略 just presented by Yi Sŏkhyŏng and alii. In 1494 (Sŏngjong 25, 1/7), the king gave orders to print the *Daxue yanyibu*.

<sup>22</sup> In 1409 (T’aejong 9, 9/4), the king rebuked Kim Kwa 金科 who was in charge of writing a summary of the *Daxue yanyi* for the crown prince. In 1409 (T’aejong 9, 9/17), the king commanded a summary of the *Daxue yanyi* to be written and ordered the civil servants to learn it by heart. In 1451 (Munjong 1, 7/12), the king commanded a summary of the *Daxue yanyi* to be written in order to circulate it amongst the civil servants and the royal family.

<sup>23</sup> In 1394 (T’aejo 3, 5/23), the king ordered the civil servants to study the *Great learning*. In 1403 (T’aejong 3, 5/21), the king commanded the preface and the address to the throne of the *Daxue yanyi* to be set on a folding screen in order to display it in one of his studies. In 1408 (T’aejong 8, 10/1), the king gave the crown prince one volume of the *Daxue yanyi*. In 1409 (T’aejong 9, 3/25), the king commanded the *Daxue yanyi* to be explained to the crown prince during lessons. In 1411 (T’aejong 11, 12/15), the king commanded excerpts of the *Daxue yanyi* to be written on the palace walls for the edification of all of his ministers. In 1418 (T’aejong 18, 6/29), the king ordered the crown prince Yangnyŏng taegun 讓寧大君, then in exile in Kwangju because of his scandalous behavior, to read the *Analects* and the *Daxue yanyi*. In 1424 (Sejong 6, 2/14), the king gave orders to print and circulate about fifty copies of the *Daxue yanyi* among his ministers. In 1434 (Sejong 16, 9/5), the king gave orders to circulate the *Daxue yanyi* among his ministers and the royal family. In 1451 (Munjong 1, 7/12), the king ordered the scholars-officials as well as the royal family to study the *Daxue yanyi*. In 1516 (Chungjong 12, 8/30), the king declared that he would like to further encourage the study of both the *Elementary learning* and *Great learning* throughout the country. In 1533 (Chungjong 28, 4/13), the king commanded ten copies of the *Great Learning* to be circulated in the royal apartments.

of the *Daxue* and the *Daxue yanyi* lies in the recurring and insistent stress in Korea on ‘rectifying the king’s mind’ (*zheng junxin/chǒng kunsim* 正君心) – the core idea of the Learning of the Sovereign (*dixue/chehak* 帝學). Generally speaking, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, Korean scholars understood this idea as being deeply connected to the good-hearted interaction between kings and Confucian scholar-officials, indispensable for extricating themselves from a rather conflicting relationship.<sup>24</sup> These conflicts were notably illustrated by the infamously traumatic series of ‘literati purges,’ *sahwa* 士禍 (1498, 1504, 1519, 1545, 1547). The *locus classicus*, ‘Rectifying the king’s mind, which enables one to rectify the court’s mind and civilize the country’ taken from the *Hanshu* 漢書,<sup>25</sup> was basically understood as being the motto, and even the *raison d’être*, of Korean Neo-Confucian scholar-officials. Therefore, although according to *dixue/chehak* ideology the civilizing process (*jiaohua/kyohwa* 教化) was theoretically in the hands of the king, the scholar-officials believed the aristocracy, that is to say themselves, to be the real driving force of the project. The crème de la crème of these elites happened to sometimes fulfill that duty, guided by the very text of the *Great Learning*, seeing to the implementation of correct kingship while holding important positions at court. Some of them also tried to work for the people’s sake when they lived as retired scholars in the countryside. However, to put things in a nutshell, by hammering home the idea that only correct interplay between the king and his elites could provide Korean kingship with moral legitimacy, Chosŏn scholar-officials actually legitimated their own social status and political predominance.

### **A significant difference with China**

A consequence of this search for self-definition and empowerment by scholar-officials in the first centuries of Chosŏn may explain another significant difference with China in the use of the *Great Learning* at a later period. In Ming China, Zhen Dexiu’s work inspired Qiu Jun 丘濬 (1420-1495) to write a monumental *Supplement*, the *Daxue yanyibu* 大學衍義補. This gigantic administrative textbook, overflowing with technical details, figures and numbers, deals with public finances, military organization, transportation, hydraulic control, taxes, and so forth. The aim was to compensate for the shortcomings of Zhen Dexiu’s work, which

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. SANCHO, *op.cit.*, chapter 2.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Hanshu*, *juan* 56, biography 26, *Dong Zhongshu zhuan* 董仲舒傳: 正心以正朝廷, 正朝廷以正百官, 正百官以正萬民.

didn't discuss at all the second part of the *Great Learning*'s paradigm, 'ordering the state' (*zhiguo/ch'iguk* 治國). In the first half of Chosŏn, both the *Daxue yanyi* and the *Daxue yanyibu* were studied at court, as has been explained above. Yet a controversy took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to determine which text was to be given priority in the royal curriculum. This reminds us that scholar-officials were mainly concerned with keeping a hand on the royal curriculum and censoring kings through Classics Mat lectures.<sup>26</sup> Selecting texts for these lectures also became an important bone of contention among opposing factions at court – a phenomenon that might explain why Korean factionalism plaguing the dynasty from the late sixteenth century onwards combined political opposition with philosophical, or at least ideological, antagonism. Unlike the authoritarian Ming and Qing empires, during which the official exegesis of the Learning of the Sovereign focused on the *Great Learning*, thus giving birth to a multiplicity of rather technical administrative textbooks bearing a strong legal and formalist aspect, like the *Daxue yanyibu*,<sup>27</sup> in Chosŏn Korea officially sanctioned exegetical works on the *Daxue* tended rather to remain moral and philosophical albeit aiming at improving 'practice-oriented' political reflection.<sup>28</sup>

### **Yulgok and the *Great Learning***

The beginning of this latter phenomenon might be traced back to Yi Yulgok's masterpiece, the *Sŏnghak chibyŏ* 聖學輯要, which tended to replace Chinese works in Classics Mat lectures from the seventeenth century onwards. Before moving on to a general overview of this work, let us not forget that Yulgok's interest in the paradigm of the *Great Learning*, and especially the notion of 'rectifying the king's mind,' pervaded most of his writings throughout his life and career. It appears for example in his civil service examination essays<sup>29</sup> and numerous memoranda, among which his famous *Questions and Answers from the Eastern Lake* (*Tongho mundap* 東湖問答) written with a few colleagues during his

<sup>26</sup> On the topic of the royal curriculum and the education of Yi crown princes, see KIM HABOUSH JaHyun, "The Education of the Yi Crown Prince: A Study in Confucian Pedagogy", in Wm. Theodore de BARY and JaHyun KIM HABOUSH (eds), *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> A workshop was held on the topic at the Collège de France in June 2011. It was organized by the Chair of Modern Chinese History under the direction of Pr. Pierre-Etienne Will.

<sup>28</sup> However, in both Chinese and Korean cases, there was certainly some philosophical and philological exegesis of the *Great Learning*, especially amongst scholars of the so-called *kaozhengxue* 考證學 and *sirhak* 實學.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. 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. in *Yulgok chŏnsŏ* 栗谷全書 («The Complete Works of Yulgok»), 7 vol., *Hanguk chŏngsin munhwa yŏnguwŏn* 漢國精神文化研究院, Seoul, 1987.

‘sabbatical leave’ (*sagadoksŏ* 賜暇讀書) at the Toksŏdang 讀書堂 in 1569.<sup>30</sup> In these texts Yulgok appealed, as his predecessors had before him, to the basic ideas of the philosophy of the *Great Learning* and the Learning of the Sovereign, to discuss various political matters of the day. Besides, the formal structure of his *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl* 擊蒙要訣, a short book explaining the essentials of Confucian learning, was patterned upon the *Great Learning* scheme.<sup>31</sup> In this handbook for beginners written when he was momentarily retired in 1577, Yulgok sticks to the *Great Learning* paradigm whereby socio-political behavior is fundamentally rooted in self-cultivation,<sup>32</sup> contrary to the scheme chosen by Zhu Xi and Liu Qingzhi 劉清之 (1130-1195) for the *Elementary Learning* (*Xiaoxue/Sohak* 小學). Lastly, his biographies and official and personal correspondence<sup>33</sup> provide a number of recurrent examples of his constant attempts to put the *Great Learning*’s ideal into practice in his own family and personal life. For instance, to implement the notion of ‘regulating one’s family’ (*qi qijia/ che kiga* 齊其家) he wrote and circulated a short text in vernacular Korean for his own family, the *Tonggŏ kyesa* 同居戒辭. It would therefore not be an overstatement to say that the *Great Learning* was the cornerstone of his life and thought.

### **What’s new in the *Sŏnghak chibyo*?**

To my knowledge, nine Korean scholars wrote at least one commentary specifically dedicated to the *Great Learning* from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century.<sup>34</sup> However, only two texts pertain to our discussion: the *Taehak yŏnŭi chimnyak* 大學衍義輯略 of Yi Sŏkhyŏng<sup>35</sup> and Yulgok’s *Sŏnghak chibyo*. Contrary to other Korean commentaries or summaries, it might be said that these two works were written in the framework of the Learning of the Sovereign, in the sense that they mirror the duties expected of skilled and faithful ministers in an ideal Confucian monarchy. Furthermore, they illustrate shifts in the Korean understanding of Zhen Dexiu’s work in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for they

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Ibid*, *kwŏn* 15, 雜著 2.

<sup>31</sup> For the first bilingual translation in a Western language with an introduction and annotations, see SANCHO Isabelle, *Principes essentiels pour éduquer les jeunes gens*, Bibliothèque Chinoise, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Daxue*, canonical part : 自天子以至於庶人, 壹是皆以修身為本..

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Ibid*, *kwŏn* as well as *Haengjang* 行狀 by Kim Changsaeng 金長生 (1548-1631) and *Yŏnbo* 年譜 by Song Siyŏl 宋時烈 (1607-1689).

<sup>34</sup> Some of them have been listed above.

<sup>35</sup> On this text, see in this volume the article by John B. Duncan, “The *Taehakyŏnŭichimnyak* and the Politics of Confucian Learning in the Early Chosŏn.”

display different strategies at work in the philosophical exegeses of high officials addressing themselves to kings who were also their younger pupils.<sup>36</sup> Yi Sŏkhyŏng and Yulgok's works are circumstantial texts, designed for strong didactic use and not necessarily meant to be transmitted to posterity. They stem from the actual practice of counseling and educating kings in daily audiences and Classics Mat lectures, illustrating the very close relationship between the kings and their Neo-Confucian advisors. So it can be reasonably argued that these two texts reflect a strong particularity of the Korean reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism: the focus on a collegial power as well as the close relationship between kings and ministers. However, the *Taehak yŏnŭi chimnyak*, the purpose of which was to revise and adapt Zhen Dexiu's work to the Korean context, was quickly criticized and considered as being outdated. On the contrary, the *Sŏnghak chibyŏ* is still regarded nowadays as one of the most important works of Korean Neo-Confucianism. One reason is certainly that, beyond differences related to their respective historical contexts, these two works had radically different scopes and goals. In the peritexts of the *Sŏnghak chibyŏ*, Yulgok is rather explicit about his aim. He notably gives in his preface a negative definition of his project by criticizing Zhen Dexiu himself. According to him, the *Daxue yanyi* is too wordy and one loses sight of the essentials:

According to Your humble servant, the Way is subtle and shapeless; it takes a visible shape thanks to written works. The Four Books and the Six Classics have completely brought it to light. If one relied on these writings to search for the Way, nothing concerning the Principle would be concealed anymore. Yet one cannot help feeling concerned that the whole amount of these texts represents a vast ocean spread out as far as the eye can see where the guiding principles are difficult to find. Previous upright men have extolled the virtues of the *Great Learning* to establish rules and principles. The hundreds of thousands of lessons and recommendations by the Sages and Worthies don't go beyond this text that expounds the method of finding guiding principles. Sir Zhen, Xishan, has extended and enlarged it in his *Extended Meaning [of the Great Learning]*. He selected many quotations from the Classics and their commentaries and he compiled excerpts from diverse historical books. He has clearly shown that, concerning the 'root of Learning' as well as the 'order of governance,' there are steps to follow, and that full importance should be accorded to he who

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<sup>36</sup> In 1472 when king Sŏngjong was presented the *Taehak yŏnŭi chimnyak*, he was only fifteen years old, and Yi Sŏkhyŏng used to be his preceptor from 1466 to 1468. As for king Sŏnjo, he was twenty-one years old when Yulgok presented the *Sŏnghak chibyŏ* in 1575.

embodies the royal function. These are most certainly the guidelines left by emperors and kings for entering the path to Learning. However his work is divided into so many rolls and his phraseology makes one drip with such heavy sweat that it finally looks like a tedious list of facts, which is contrary to the very principle of practice-oriented Learning. The work is indubitably appealing but it fails at attaining perfection.<sup>37</sup>

### **The main characteristics of Yi Yulgok's *Outline of the Sagely Learning***

Contrary to Zhen Dexiu and Yi Sŏkhyŏng who both focused on historical examples to discuss and explain the *Great Learning* (thus giving equal importance to the study of history and that of the Classics), Yulgok used in his *Outline of the Sagely learning* quotations taken from the Classics and the Confucian corpus. He only alludes to history when discussing the general aim of his work in the final and most important chapter, “The Transmission of the Way by the Sages and Worthies” (*Sŏnghyŏn Tot'ong* 聖賢道統). Therefore, whereas the *Daxue yanyi* and the *Taehak yŏnŭi chimnyak* were basically summaries of the Learning of the Sovereign and may be regarded as being teaching materials used by scholar-officials to inculcate monarchs with a set of very detailed prescriptive rules, the *Sŏnghak chibyŏ* is rather a systematic outline of ‘Sagely Learning’, *shengxue/sŏnghak* 聖學, understood as being ‘practice-oriented Learning’ (*sirhak* 實學). Learning which was close to Yulgok’s heart was that of ‘the Sages and Worthies,’ Yao and Shun. In that sense, Yulgok was different from the majority of the scholar-officials of his time, as has been underlined by JaHyun Kim Haboush.<sup>38</sup> In the late sixteenth century, the majority of the most influential scholar-officials tended to reinforce their own positions vis-à-vis the ruler. Yulgok emphasized on the contrary the role of the sovereign, who had to be the only person actually ‘transmitting the Way’.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, for him the Way had no longer been transmitted since Zhu Xi in China (Zhen Dexiu is not part of that transmission) and the torch could be handed on to a Korean ruler, provided that he showed himself capable of ‘Sagely learning.’ In this both demanding and noble path, the ruler had to be ably assisted by good ministers – that is to say, by true

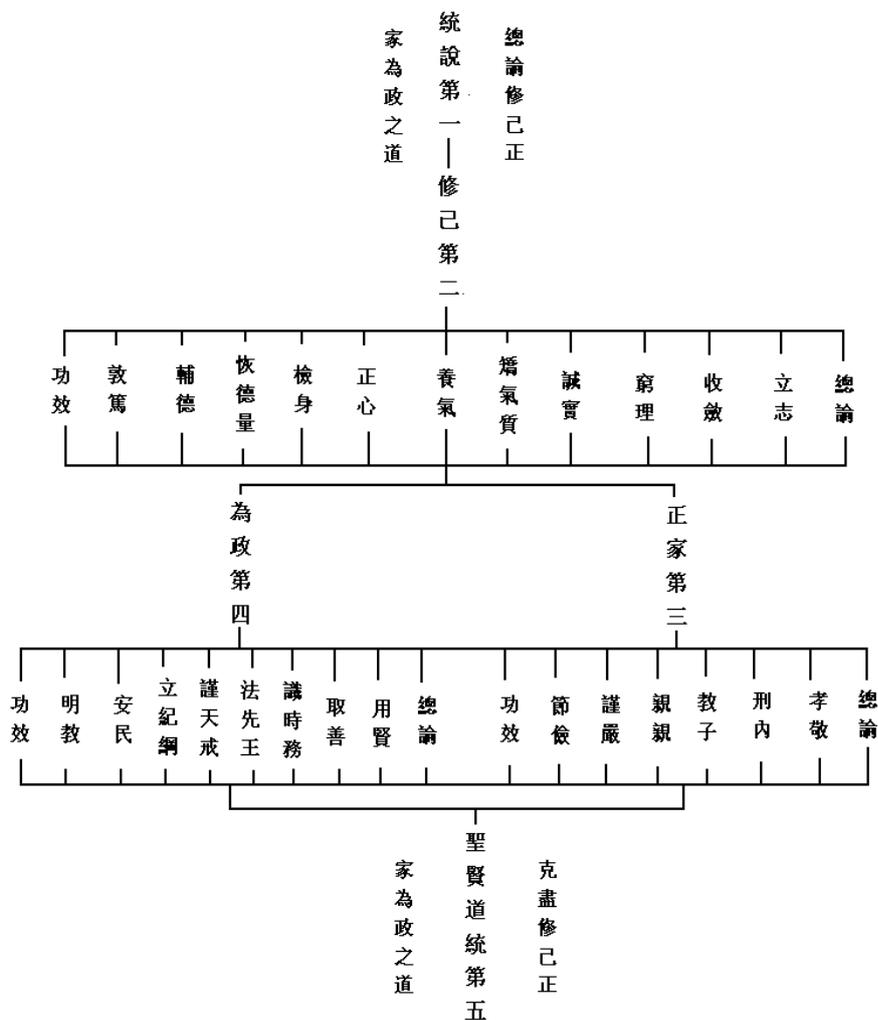
<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Preface to the Outline of Sagely Learning*: 臣按° 道妙無形° 文以形道° 四書六經° 既明且備° 因文求道° 理無不現° 第患全書浩渺° 難以領要° 先正表章大學° 以立規模° 聖賢千謨萬訓° 皆不外此° 此是領要之法° 西山真氏推廣是書° 以爲衍義° 博引經傳° 兼援史籍° 爲學之本° 爲治之序° 粲然有條° 而歸重於人主之身° 誠帝王入道之指南也° 但卷帙太多° 文辭汗漫° 似紀事之書° 非實學之體° 信美而未能盡善焉°

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Kim Haboush Ja-Hyun, *op.cit.*, p.15.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Sŏnghak chibyŏ* 5, *Sŏnghyŏn Tot'ong* 聖賢道統.

Confucian masters. Yulgok thus reasserted the core idea of the Korean reception of Neo-Confucianism: good interaction between ruler and minister in order to bring about an ideal society or, in other words, to practice the Way.

Concerning this point, let us not forget that Zhen Dexiu and Yi Sŏkhyŏng didn't elaborate upon the 'ordering the state' part of the *Great Learning's* paradigm in their respective works, considering that the proper cultivation of the self would 'naturally' expand into the correct governance of men. Another characteristic of Yulgok's *Sŏnghak chibyo* is his equally discussing both parts of the *Daxue's* paradigm: self-cultivation (*xiuji/sugi* 修己) and ordering the state (*zhiguo/ch'iguk* 治國). For Yulgok, there is no solution of continuity between these two parts that are constantly interacting in the same vital and moral process. As can be seen in the very organization of the work, Yulgok elaborated a new exegesis of the *Great Learning*, emphasizing the dynamic role of material force or vital energy, *Qi/Ki* 氣. Here is a reproduction of the diagram of the *Sŏnghak chibyo* that Yulgok added at the end of his "Introductory explanation," *pŏmnye* 凡例.



The most striking feature of this diagrammatic presentation, thought-provoking in many ways, is most certainly the axial position of the step of ‘nurturing vital energy,’ *yanggi* 養氣, in the process of self-cultivation. More precisely, this cultivation of vital energy, which must be understood as an equivalent of the very notion of heart/mind in Yulgok’s philosophy, enables a twofold goal of self-cultivation: firstly, ‘rectifying one’s household’ (*chǒngga* 正家), and secondly, ‘implementing [good] governance’ (*wuijǒng* 為政). Yulgok thus emphasizes the cultivation of the mind/heart that could be summarized in two of the eight steps of the *Great Learning*: *chengyi/sǒngǔi* 誠意 and *zhengxin/chǒngsim* 正心. This shows that he was in the same interpretative vein as his Korean predecessors influenced by Zhen Dexiu and the Yuan version of Song Neo-Confucianism. However, he suggested a more dynamic reading of the *Great Learning* pattern. Playing with words, we could say that he breathed renewed vital energy into the prescriptive scheme of the *Great Learning*, understood as the proper way of living as a true human being. Governing is then only part of that ethical path that should be followed by any man worthy of the name.

#### **A final remark on the historical context**

As has been underlined by a number of Korean specialists of Yulgok, especially Chǒng Wǒnjae, one should always keep in mind one important contextual element of Yulgok’s life when considering his philosophy: the start of factional strife in the late sixteenth century.<sup>40</sup> When Yulgok presented the *Sǒnghak chibyō* on the first day of the ninth month of 1575 after having worked on it for two years, he personally faced a rather difficult situation in his career. He had been trying to put an end to factional struggles, nascent at court ever since 1572, but ended up getting involved in them because of the decisions he had to make that very same year, 1575. As the Chief State Counselor of the Office of the Censor-General (*Hongmungwan pujehak* 弘文館副提學), he decided to send the main protagonists of those struggles away from court; namely, on the one hand, No Susin 盧守愼 (1515-1590) from the State Council (*Ŭijǒngbu* 議政府), Chǒng Chiyǒn 鄭芝衍 (1527-1583) from the Censors Office (*Saganwǒn* 司諫院) and Kim Hyowǒn 金孝元 (1532-1590), who were among the most representative members of the *Tongin* 東人 faction; and, on the other, Sim Ŭigyǒm 沈義

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<sup>40</sup> CHŎNG Wǒnjae 丁垣在, *Chigaksǒl e ipkakhān Yi I chǒrhak ũi haesǒk* 지각설(知覺說)에 입각한 이이(李珥) 철학의 해석 (“An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Yi Yi in Conformity with the Theory of Reflective Consciousness”), Ph.D dissertation, Seoul National University, Department of Philosophy, 2001.

謙 (1536-1587), the younger brother of Insun wanghu 仁順王后 (1532-1575), related to Yulgok's family on his paternal grand-mother's side and the leader of the *Sŏin* 西人 faction. The consequences of removing these important and influential men were numerous. From then on, Yulgok was irremediably considered as being involved in this phenomenon, which sullied the Chosŏn court for centuries, right up until the dawn of the modern era. Yulgok's role in the development of factional strife has been largely debated in past and present times alike, but it is generally acknowledged today that he did play a role in debates concerning this burning topic.<sup>41</sup> Besides, his premature death in his early forties might also be ascribed to the consequences of the harassment he had been continuously subjected to from 1572 to 1584. What is worth noticing here is that the many memorials and letters he sent to the throne on the topic of factionalism from 1572 onwards all called for a policy of appeasement. Moreover, his address to the throne, which opens the *Sŏnghak chibyo*, brings to the forefront his deep concerns about the situation at court, as well as in the country as a whole, in the 1570's. By presenting this *Outline of Sagely Learning*, Yulgok meant to exhort the young king Sŏnjo, who had already showed signs of distrust towards his ministers and scholar-officials in general, to trust worthy people once again. For Yulgok, embodying the royal function meant becoming a wise king capable of listening to upright ministers. Collegial power, supposed to spring from the good-hearted interplay between a king and his ministers (which, as explained above, was thought to be the main message of the Learning of the Sovereign), was the only way of appeasing the political instability caused by widespread suspicion among the elites ruling the country. As a result of this, beyond its undeniable universalistic and philosophical significance, Yulgok's masterpiece on the *Great learning* has also to be understood in the light of the historical context of late sixteenth-century Chosŏn Korea.

## Conclusion

Yi Yulgok's *Sŏnghak chibyo* might be regarded nowadays as being both the continuation of previous tendencies and the dawn of a new era in Korean intellectual history. While Neo-Confucianism became, in the late sixteenth century, a significant part of the

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. HWANG Unyong 黃雲龍, *Yulgok Yi I wa tangnon* 栗谷李珥와 黨論 (“Yulgok Yi I and the Discourse on Factional Strife”), *Tonga nonch'ong* 東亞論叢 23, Tonga University, 1986; and CHŎNG Manjo 鄭萬祚, *Chosŏn sidae chobungdangnon ūi chŏngae wa kŭ sŏnggyŏk* 朝鮮時代 朝朋黨論의 展開와 그 性格 («The Development and Characteristics of the Discourse on Court Factionalism in the Chosŏn Period.»), in KIM Sŏngmu 金成茂 (ed.), *Chosŏn hugi tangaeng ūi chonghapjŏk kŏmt'o* 朝鮮後期黨爭의 綜合的 檢討 (“A Synthetic Examination of Factional Strife at the end of the Chosŏn Period”), Hanguk chŏngsin munhwa yŏnguwŏn, 1992.

distinctive identity and culture of an elite working hard to implement its ideals at both central and local levels, textual exegesis of the *Great Learning* became paradoxically more idealistic and moral. It might tentatively be said that, maybe for the first time in Korean history, Confucianism became a holistic *Weltanschauung*, rather than just a vague reservoir of rhetorical devices used for political strategies in the balance of power between the monarchy and the aristocracy.

It is indisputable that Yulgok was an heir of the ideologues of the early Chosŏn State, who took the Yuan version of Song Neo-Confucianism as a possible model for Korea. Besides, his use of the *Great Learning* was most certainly marked by the historical context of his times, that is to say the beginning of intense factionalism in the late sixteenth century. In the midst of political turmoil, he therefore resorted (as his predecessors had) to the philosophy of the *Great Learning*, in order to find a solution for the balance of power in the Korean monarchical system. However, his *Sŏnghak chibyo* cannot be reduced to a simple continuation of certain dominant tendencies of the Korean reception of *Great Learning* philosophy, which focused on Zhen Dexiu's rigorist interpretation. Indeed, Yulgok fundamentally intended to go back to a broader Cheng/Zhu understanding of the *Great Learning*, in order to enhance the education of kings, but also Confucian learning in general. His focus on the cultivation of vital energy in self-cultivation, for example, which reminds us more of Zhang Zai's ideas than Cheng/Zhu teachings, is a good illustration of a rather cosmological approach to ethics and politics. Such a comprehensive viewpoint, systematized in a well-organized and convincing work like the *Sŏnghak chibyo*, most certainly paved the way for a more holistic approach to Confucianism in Korea.

This point might also explain the important symbolic status given to Yulgok in the national memory of contemporary Korea. In both North and South Korea, his stature as a philosopher and statesman has been widely acknowledged. His life and thought are commonly believed to be emblematic of something specific to Korean history, and even its mentality. To sum up – and maybe to use some more cautious words – his *Sŏnghak chibyo* can most probably be understood as evidence of that sincere faith in the *Great Learning*, understood as the paradigmatic text of (Neo-)Confucianism, that generations of Korean scholar-officials seem to have had, earnestly seeking to put it into practice in their own lives.

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