



Neo-Confucianism and the individual's suffering seen through Yulgok Yi I's life and thought

Isabelle Sancho

► To cite this version:

Isabelle Sancho. Neo-Confucianism and the individual's suffering seen through Yulgok Yi I's life and thought. ()× () [Acting and Suffered Human Beings, and Propriety-Politics], The Institute of Classical Studies of Korea, Jeonju University, Dec 2022, Jeonju, South Korea. hal-03929873

HAL Id: hal-03929873

<https://hal.science/hal-03929873>

Submitted on 9 Jan 2023

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.

This paper was presented on-line at the International Conference, "Acting and Suffered Human Beings, and Propriety-Politics [행동하고 고통받는 인간 그리고 예(禮) · 치(治)]," organized by the The Institute of Classical Studies of Korea, Jeonju University, on December 8, 2022.

Isabelle Sancho
CNRS
Center for Korean studies, EHESS

**“Neo-Confucianism and the individual's suffering seen through
Yulgok Yi I's life and thought”**

율곡 이이의 삶과 사상을 통해 본 성리학과 인간의 고통

Suffering might be generally described as the way in which each individual feels, senses, visualises, understands, and reacts to physical or moral pain. Suffering is not a synonymous for pain. Suffering is not so much related to –and it is often not proportionate to– the nature and intensity of the pain itself, since the intensity of suffering varies, precisely, according to the feeling of each individual who undergoes pain. This is a common observation in medical practice, be it physical or mental, where tolerance to the same pain is different from one patient to another, but this is also true in the emotional management of painful experiences in everyday life. Depending on the intensity of an individual's feeling about a certain form of pain, the state of suffering is named and characterized by different words. Suffering can be qualified as misery, distress, agony, torment, or affliction, and all these terms reflect the subjective and negative way in which each of us reacts to the state of suffering. But pain does not necessarily carry negative emotions, since pain can also be felt as a pleasant experience. One might enjoy and seek physical pain, for instance. One might also view and feel pain as an integral part of a broader experience that is regarded as desirable. Giving birth to a child, physical training and sport performance, or even getting a tattoo are, for many people, instances when feeling pain is not only accepted but appears as enhancing strong and positive feelings. Suffering, in those instances, is part of a process aiming at gaining something for oneself, achieving a goal, and living an exceptional experience, which in turn brings satisfaction, happiness, and a sense of self-realization. Suffering thus makes happiness or joy more intense and valuable. One might even say that suffering enriches the

experience and increase the intensity of the euphoric effect of achieving something that is both difficult and, precisely, painful. So a decisive element of how suffering is felt by an individual is the reason why pain has to be undergone in the first place, why pain came to be accepted, sought after, or even provoked, and, conversely, why it can also be felt as unbearable, unacceptable, or agonizing. Usually, experiencing an unwanted or unaccepted pain brings a feeling of suffering that harms, causes damage and brings devastation to body but also to mind and soul. So, acceptance of pain determines whether suffering will be regarded as a positive or a negative experience at the end of the process of undergoing pain.

Suffering and Confucian ethical training

Generally speaking, the Confucian philosophical tradition does not see the question of suffering as crucial and does not address this issue directly, which stands in sharp contrast with Buddhism. Buddhism is grounded on the idea that human existence is suffering (*dukkha/ko* 苦 in sino-korean). The first teaching preached by the Buddha consists in stating the Four Noble Truths (*Aryasatya, sasŏngje* 四聖諦) and this core teaching in Buddhism focuses exclusively on the question of suffering : the follower must acknowledge that life is suffering, understand the causes of suffering and, ultimately, learn to overcome it to simply get rid of it. So, fundamentally, Buddhism aims at liberating and freeing oneself from suffering. It is a religion that preaches salvation and offers a solace against the suffering of human condition. As for Confucianism, it can be defined as an ethical teaching that is mostly concerned with what is called Learning (*hak* 學), which might be summarized in the following set of questions : how do human beings become truly humans ? How can humankind achieve a properly human society in this world, *hic et nunc* ? What should we be all doing, both individually and collectively, to achieve this common goal ? Confucianism is grounded on the belief –or, rather, the certainty– that achieving a properly human society is a reachable goal and what matters most is to understand this goal and, then, work (and work hard) for achieving it. Confucianism does not offer salvation, it offers satisfaction –a moral satisfaction. Confucianism calls for transformation, improvement, perfection, and it fundamentally demands individual effort. Pain is certainly not absent in this effort. The efforts needed to attain Confucian moral proficiency and excellence are difficult and can be painful, both emotionally and mentally. But, according to canonical texts, these efforts must be accepted as an integral part of the progressive and repeated work of self-improvement. Pain is worth

undergoing, since suffering to achieve a highest goal is not harmful in the end ; it is not a “bad suffering,” since it is suffering for the best. Moral cultivation and excellence are gained through studying books but, most importantly, through ethical training. To understand what ethical training means, the best comparison can be drawn with the difficult –and often painful– physical training that is needed to achieve an outstanding sport performance. Confucian moral proficiency is believed to be gained through the repeated practice of ritualized behaviors and social interactions. This practice is regarded as both easy and difficult, since it implies exerting constant efforts and, most importantly, constraining oneself and, even, getting frustrated. This idea is encapsulated in the well known Confucian motto taken from the *Analects* of Confucius : “Restrain oneself and return to ritual” *kǔkǐ pǒngni* 克己復禮.¹ What is expected to be achieved through this process of Confucian Learning is tranquility of mind (*kyōng* 靜) and joy (*nak* 樂), an important notion also coming from the *Analects*.² If Buddhism seeks the cessation of suffering and delusion, Confucianism seeks the cessation of misunderstanding and misbehavior. The moral discipline of self-cultivation is not seen as a comforting or reassuring path, it is rather envisioned as a heroic journey, which must be undertaken not only without fear but with extreme bravery.

Suffering and Confucian heroism

Broadly speaking, in most reference Confucian texts, the idea of suffering, taken in the sense of a painful and negative experience, is expressed as encountering material hardships. It basically means suffering from cold and hunger. But it also often means being ill, being physically ill, or, metaphorically, morally ill. The state of physical illness is often used as a metaphor illustrating what is felt in emotional and mental suffering. The suffering of the mind-and-heart is, in most cases, described with the exact same words as the suffering of the body. However, it is worth underlining that suffering is expressed through a variety of words carrying different connotations. The most basic word for suffering is *ko* 苦. But more than often, the passages expressing the idea of suffering display terms that are derived from

¹ Cf. *Lunyu* XII.1 : 顏淵問仁. 子曰：克己復禮，為仁. 一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉. 為仁由己，而由仁乎哉？顏淵曰：請問其目？子曰：非禮勿視，非禮勿聽，非禮勿言，非禮勿動。顏淵曰：回雖不敏，請事斯語矣！

² See, for examples, *Lunyu* VI. 20 : 子曰：知之者不如好之者，好之者不如樂之者, and *Lunyu* VI.23 : 子曰：知者樂水，仁者樂山；知者動，仁者靜；知者樂，仁者壽.

the vocabulary of either physical illness, as mentionned before (ex : *chil* 疾, *t'ong* 痛), but also sadness (ex : *pi* 悲, *ae* 哀), fear (ex : *sin* 慎), or hard labor (ex : *no* 勞, *kon* 困). An interesting word for suffering is *in* 忍, meaning “to endure.” In a Confucian context, this term is almost always used in a moral sense and in a negative turn of phrase : “to do not endure,” “to do not bear,” “to do not tolerate” (*purin* 不忍). A couple of years ago, the influential sinologist Tu Wei-ming has already discussed about pain and suffering in Confucianism.³ In his paper, he elaborated on a couple of quotes from the *Mengzi*, where this expression, “to do not tolerate,” is used, notably the one where Mencius explains why human nature is “good” (in the sense of potentially “perfectible”)⁴ and the one discussing about the sage ruler’s human sensitivity.⁵ In the first case, Mencius’ point is that no grown up person can suffer to watch a child falling into a well without trying to do something to rescue them. In the second one, he is trying to persuade king Xuan of Qi, who has shown that he could not suffer to watch an ox led for sacrifice, to extend this natural sensitivity to other’s suffering to the point where he would no longer “suffer” to watch its own people enduring suffering. This natural feeling of “not bearing,” “not suffering” to see the suffering of a vulnerable living being precisely enables a moral gesture, which, being natural, involves neither hard thinking nor conscious effort. In any case, the famous passages about the child and the ox in the *Mengzi* shows that, in Confucianism, suffering, or, more exactly, “refusing to suffer other’s suffering,” has also been regarded as a powerful and innate moral trigger in the human mind-and-heart (*insim* 人心). Since morality takes root in the mind-and-heart, both thinking and feelings (or emotions) are subject to the Confucian ethical cultivation that has been, for this reason, mostly understood as the cultivation of the mind-and-heart (*simhak* 心學) after the orthodox, Mencian, tradition. Tu Weiming might have chosen to cite the *Mengzi*, for this text certainly gives the clearest picture of how the orthodox Confucian tradition has been understanding suffering, within the framework of its moral and prescriptive agenda. As mentionned above,

³ Tu Wei-ming, “Pain and Suffering in Confucian Self-Cultivation,” *Philosophy East and West*, oct. 1984, Vol.34, No.4, University of Hawai’i Press, pp.379-388.

⁴ Cf. *Mengzi* II.A.6 : 孟子曰：人皆有不忍人之心。先王有不忍人之心，斯有不忍人之政矣。以不忍人之心，行不忍人之政，治天下可運之掌上。所以謂人皆有不忍人之心者，今人乍見孺子將入於井，皆有怵惕惻隱之心。非所以內交於孺子之父母也，非所以要譽於鄉黨朋友也，非惡其聲而然也。

⁵ Cf. *Mengzi* I.A.7 : 曰：臣聞之胡齋曰，王坐於堂上，有牽牛而過堂下者，王見之，曰：牛何之？對曰：將以鬻鐘。王曰：舍之！吾不忍其觳觫，若無罪而就死地。對曰：然則廢鬻鐘與？曰：何可廢也？以羊易之！不識有諸？曰：有之。曰：是心足以王矣。百姓皆以王為愛也，臣固知王之不忍也。

suffering and pain are frequently depicted in Confucian texts as facing difficulties, obstacles, and hardships of all sorts. Human condition is determined by a burden endowed by Heaven or destiny : realizing one's nature through struggle and pain. As Tu has summarized, “ What Mencius perceives as the human condition [...] is a paradox : ontologically we are irreducibly human, and existentially we must struggle to remain human. ”⁶ Most importantly, suffering is a crucial element in the making of Confucian cultural heroes. Indeed, the greatest Confucian cultural heroes became heroes, because they had to overcome hardships to attain self-realization. Their suffering was first an experiment of self-awareness (the awareness of the heavenly burden), which led them, in turn, to achieve moral self-realization through strenuous and heroic efforts. It is hence believed that suffering is required to become a true Confucian Saint worthy of emulation.

The great Confucian ordeal : mourning

Another striking aspect of the question of suffering in Confucianism, which has not examined in Tu's article since it is not the main question in the *Mengzi* or the *Analects*, is the overwhelming Confucian concern for a specific form of human suffering : the suffering coming from sadness, and, more precisely, from mourning. Mourning is a universal experience that everyone has to live in a lifetime ; it also affects many living beings. Massive statements and an extremely prolific literature have been dedicated to mourning, which lies at the core of the Confucian ritualist thinking. The greatest struggle in life, according to Confucianism, is certainly handling death and mourning. One reason might be that the pain of grief and bereavement is regarded as the greatest test of moral strength and stands for the biggest challenge in the handling of emotions. In Confucianism, it is considered that there are “seven emotions” (*ch'iljŏng* 七情) : joy (*hŭi* 喜), anger (*no* 怒), sadness (*ae* 哀), fear (*ku* 懼), love (*ae* 愛), hate (*o* 惡) and desire (*yok* 欲). These seven emotions were listed first in the *Book of Rites*⁷ and have, later, been extensively discussed in Neo-Confucianism, especially in Korean Neo-Confucianism, in relation to the “Four sprouts” of morality (*sadan* 四端) stated in the *Mengzi* in the very same passage dealing with the case of a kid falling into a well. But it

⁶ Cf. Tu Wei-ming, *op.cit.*, p. 381.

⁷ Cf. *Liji*, 9.18 : 故聖人耐以天下為一家，以中國為一人者，非意之也，必知其情，辟於其義，明於其利，達於其患，然後能為之。何謂人情？喜怒哀懼愛惡欲七者，弗學而能。何謂人義？父慈、子孝、兄良、弟弟、夫義、婦聽、長惠、幼順、君仁、臣忠十者，謂之人義。講信修睦，謂之人利。爭奪相殺，謂之人患。故聖人所以治人七情，修十義，講信修睦，尚辭讓，去爭奪，舍禮何以治之？

is also worth noting that in other texts, like the *Doctrine of the Mean* for example, emotions are more commonly listed as being four : *hŭiroaerak* 喜怒哀樂. These four emotions are in fact two pairs of opposite and complementary emotions : joy and anger on the one hand, and sadness and joy on the other hand. Among the emotions, be they seven or four, sadness seems to be the most prone to trigger excessive behaviors, which is what rituals are precisely meant to counter, according to the canonical tradition coming from the *Book of Rites*. Sadness is the opposite of joy, which, as we have seen above, enables true Learning. More importantly, sadness is what can harm and even annihilate the life force as well as the will to live. One does not die of anger but one can surely die of sorrow. In that sense, the pain caused by grief must be overpowered by taking a concrete action. The mourner must practice mourning rituals in order to ease their suffering but mainly to exercise and cultivate their sincerity or authenticity (*sŏng* 誠). In Confucianism, the aim of practicing rituals (*ye* 禮), and mourning rituals especially, is to cultivate and attain true sincerity, meaning that one must be capable to put his emotions in adequation with what human destiny or fate (*myŏng*) commands. This sincerity of the heart-and-mind, understood as being fully dedicated –in body and soul– into the practice of ritual, is what enables rituals to take a grip and, ultimately, to seize control over the most intense form of suffering, which could potentially damage the heart-and-mind irrevocably. This does not mean that suffering must be suppressed in mourning. On the contrary, it means that, as a first step, suffering must be given full expression, but this has to be done in a ritualized manner, following strict and elaborate rules. The intensity of sadness must be expressed, it must indeed be vocal and visible for all according to texts, but this must be done in compliance with rules, in order to extinguish its potential violence. Excessive sadness must be domesticated and somehow aestheticized thanks to the sincerity of ritual practice, for it must be ultimately overcome in the end of the process of mourning.⁸ So, suffering from grief is natural and must be accepted. But it is the form of suffering that must be addressed and handled with the utmost care in Confucianism. Other forms of suffering can either be helpful to enhance the self-cultivation process or be managed and worked on through both ethical training and extensive studying, which means that they pose a much smaller risk for the

⁸ Read, for example, *Liji*, 38.2 : 創鉅者其日久，痛甚者其愈遲，三年者，稱情而立文，所以為至痛極也。斬衰苴杖，居倚廬，食粥，寢苦枕塊，所以為至痛飾也。三年之喪，二十五月而畢；哀痛未盡，思慕未忘，然而服以是斷之者，豈不送死者有已，復生有節哉？

Confucian Learning. Only the suffering from grief constitute a moment of truth, when someone's moral strength of endurance to suffering is tested at its highest degree, showing whether or not a certain individual is capable of engaging in true Confucian self-cultivation.

After this rapid overview of what suffering generally means in Confucianism, let's move onto a specific case, that of Yulgok, Yi I (1536-1584), in order to inquire further into the topic by examining some more detailed textual materials.

Suffering in Yi Yulgok's life

Yulgok, Yi I, presents, in several aspects, an interesting case to reflect in a more detailed manner about suffering in Confucianism, especially Neo-Confucianism. Anybody interested in Korea or Chosŏn Confucianism has heard about Yulgok, who is one of the few big names of Korean intellectual history, with T'oegye, Yi Hwang, or Tasan, Chŏng Yagyong, for examples. Their fame as philosophers has indeed succeeded in transcending national boundaries and the three of them have been renowned and studied extensively outside of the Korean peninsula since decades. Also, portrayed on South Korean bank notes, with the great king Sejong and, again, T'oegye, Yulgok is undoubtedly taking part in the South-Korean national discourse on Korean identity. His iconic status has, however, overshadowed the historical details of his life and thought, which are simply believed to illustrate the usual characteristics of a great man (*wiin* 偉人 or *inmul* 人物) in public imagination. According to this public imagination, Yulgok is a cultural hero and an exceptional Confucian sage. Two specific aspects of his life and thought have become common knowledge. The first fixed view –or, rather, myth– is that Yulgok was a faithful minister who was wise enough to foresee the advent of the Great Asian War, i.e. the *imjin woeran*, but he had not been, unfortunately, heard by king Sŏnjo. The second fixed idea is that, born as the son of Sin Saimdang (1504-1551), regarded since the early 20th century as the paragon of female virtues in Korean history, Yulgok has been able to become a great scholar thanks to this exceptional and remarkable maternal supervision. A third common idea might be added here, which is somehow related to the two previous ones : Yulgok was gifted with an exceptionnally bright mind that enabled him to engage and illustrate himself in the most difficult –not to say the most esoterical and abstruse– philosophical debates of Korean Confucianism that nobody, except specialists, would like to remember in details nowadays.

Beyond these two or three myths, there is, in general, little knowledge about him as a historical figure. But looking beyond the fixed ideas might be interesting in many ways.

Yulgok has encountered several types of suffering in his life. But, it should be made clear from the start that he has never encountered the worst difficulties and trials that many of his fellow Confucian scholars-officials had to endure during the Chosŏn dynasty, such as punishment, exile, trial, death sentence, posthumous beheading. Seen in broad outlines, his life has been on the contrary a linear sequence of successes (he placed first nine times in civil service examinations and was nicknamed *kudo jangwŏngong* 九度壯元公) and his career has been both quick and meteoric starting from his late twenties. His life was short, since he died just after turning forty-nine, but it was more than successful on paper, in terms of C.V. in modern terms. Minister a number of times, he died receiving due honor by the king for his service as an exceptional high official and, later, he has been inducted in the official Korean Confucian pantheon, the Munmyo, which is the highest form of consecration for any scholar and his disciples. But, this extremely polished public image, which fuels modern praise and pride, is easily blurred and muddled, when historical sources and Yulgok's own writings are examined. Three key factors must indeed be taken into account when considering his life and, to some extent, his thought : difficult mourning, chronic illness, and constant anxiety. All these factors are related to the existential problem of suffering.

Firstly, Yulgok had to face an initial trauma in life : the sudden and unexpected death of his mother, Sin Saimdang, at age forty-eight, when he himself was only sixteen years old. This death has been described as a founding episode in Yulgok's life in most biographies and studies. The main issue surrounding Saimdang's death and Yulgok's mourning his mother concerns his possible conversion to Buddhism in his youth, which became an issue on his own time and is still debated. According to written testimonies, several mentions in the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn dynasty*, and his chronological biography included in the *Complete works of Yulgok*, the bereaved Yulgok demonstrated an extremely filial piety while mourning his mother for three years, scrupulously following the rules prescribed in the *Family Rituals* of Zhu Xi. But, soon after the mourning period, he left home without notice and led a wandering life into mountains Kŭmgang in Kangwŏn province, during which he stayed for months in several Buddhist temples. Rumours then began to circulate that he had shaved his head and become a monk. Yulgok's ambiguous attitude toward Buddhism generated distrust, suspicion, and even animosity from Confucian students and scholars when Yulgok came back from this stay in mountains Kŭmgang. One way premodern and modern biographers as well as historians have interpreted this Buddhist episode in Yulgok's life has been to

consider that grief made him lose his way, the Confucian Way to which he seems to have been prepared since birth. To sum up, suffering troubled his mind and he mistakingly believed that he could find solace in Buddhism. But this juvenile mistake was quickly corrected by Yulgok himself and, when he had to grieve two other significant deaths, that is to say when his father died when he was twenty-six and his maternal grand-mother died when he was thirty-three, he was able to demonstrate extreme Confucian filial piety while keeping correct measure and a better self-control. In that sense, it is believed that overcoming an extremely difficult experience of bereavement at the beginning of adulthood enabled Yulgok to fortify his Confucian determination.

Secondly, Yulgok has been suffering, at times terribly, from chronic illness since his young adult age. Ultimately, he died from that disease while he was still in his forties. Sometimes, in oral tales and anecdotes, Yulgok is often compared to T'oegye and mocked for his physical weakness, especially his lack of sexual vigor. But beyond the pleasant salacious joke, his physical condition should be given serious consideration to understand his life. As early as 1554, Yulgok writes indeed to his dear friend Sŏng Hon that he has been suffering from an “enlarged spleen” (*pijŏk* 脾積).⁹ This illness seems to have evolved and aggravated throughout his life, making him constantly suffering from bowel disease, severe diarrhea, extreme fatigue and complete lack of energy, difficulty concentrating, lack of appetite and difficulty in move or trouble standing. His illness fuels the majority of his surviving letters to friends, especially his closest friends Sŏng Hon and Song Ikp'il, but also to king Sŏnjo. In the end, Yulgok died bedridden, probably suffering from severe immune deficiency and general infection. Illness has often been considered as a polite excuse to withdraw or refuse an appointment in Confucian rhetorics and practices of political withdrawal. In Yulgok's case, withdrawal was a haunting theme in his life and a constant temptation that made him suffer morally and, maybe, physically also. His pain and suffering must have been real and they certainly played a role in shaping his vision of life, but also ethics. It is worth noticing in that regard that his illness has been affecting his stomach and spleen. As the polysemy of the word “spleen” also expresses in English, in traditional Chinese medecine, spleen is the seat of temperament and character. If one takes a holistic approach to disease, it is reasonable to consider that Yulgok's illness must have affected his physical, intellectual, and emotional

⁹ Cf. *Yulgok chŏnsŏ*, Letters, I.10 : 十七歲。始有志於學。下功未幾。便得脾積之疾。自後不能讀書。但默而記之。一日忽思先儒多記損心之語。不復記誦。頗覺不費力。意甚便之。于今數歲矣。僕雖不懶。尙爲斯疾所礙。不能做功。況以懈怠之資而有斯疾耶。

condition. Hence, his physical suffering might have been combined with and echoed emotional and moral suffering. This point is testified in many places in his personal correspondence.

Indeed, the third factor that might have caused intense moral suffering in Yulgok's life is constant anxiety : anxiety about not being capable to study properly, anxiety about being criticized by friends and, later, by fellow officials, anxiety of not being able to fulfill his duties when serving, anxiety of not being understood by the king, anxiety of being a useless Confucian scholar-official unworthy of his position. Contrary to what the heroic narrative of his life seems to tell, Yulgok was not always full of determination, courage, and certainty, far from it. Two series of events played a key role in the evolution of his life and political career : the "literati purges" (*sahwa* 士禍) which painful memories were still vivid among *sarim* scholars, among whom Sŏng Hon and his father Sŏng Such'im, on the one hand, and the beginning of factional struggles at court, in which Yulgok was involved and attacked on multiple sides, one of which was his close friend Chŏng Ch'ŏl, on the other hand. All these complex and violent historical events and their consequences on individual lives and political life seem to have brought great anxiety to Yulgok on his own personal and official life. In his interaction with Sŏng Hon, he had to constantly justify himself for taking examinations and, then, accepting appointments and, in his correspondence with Song Ikp'il and Chŏng Ch'ŏl from the 1570's onwards, he had, also, to explain again and again his stance and attitude regarding the political struggles of his time. Moreover, he also had to constantly explain why he wanted to withdraw to the king, using various arguments, in his memorials from the late 1560's until his death. Thinking about how to craft these arguments was, apparently, painful as well, as can be seen in his letters to friends. Serving (*chin* 近) or retiring (*t'oe* 退) was the crucial question in his life as a scholar and as an official, since the very beginning of his career. As soon as 1567, he expressed his desire to withdraw. But, it seems that he has been always thinking that he had not been given a choice, because of his father's command to earn an income or because of the limited resources of his household. Besides, in his view, the reality of the exercise of power was deceptive, since it was not in line with the Neo-Confucian ideal of the Learning of the Sovereign (*chehak* 帝學) he was trained in, and the reality of his own process of learning and studying was a concern, since it was unfortunately, due to his sickness and weaknesses, not in line either with the Neo-Confucian ideal of the Learning of the Way (Tohak 道學) or the Learning of the Mind (*simhak* 心學). So, if what he says about

himself in his correspondence would be taken seriously, one might conclude that, throughout his life, he has been feeling that he was a loser, which clearly made him suffer.

Suffering in Yi Yulgok's teaching

What might be called provocatively the “Sorrows of the Young Yulgok” are, however, not reflected or, at least, not directly noticeable in his political writings and philosophical thinking. Indeed, the heroic vision of Yulgok as a man of will, fighting with sharp writing skills to convince, persuade, and guide his ruler and fellow officials is correct, as the vision of him dedicating his utmost efforts to teach with even more conviction and dedication to Confucian students and fellow scholars is correct as well. Yulgok was a gifted child whose memory, literary skills, and thinking capacity were so outstanding since his tender age that they turned him, in his teenage years, into a true machine to succeed civil service examinations that many mature and educated men of his time regularly failed. He was skilled and he knew how to convey his ideas. His philosophical and political writings are full of wit and energy, showing a great contrast with the pitiful image he is giving of himself in his correspondence. Socially, he must have been a man who was alternately respected, admired, envied, and hated as well for his talent, broad knowledge, sharp mind, and successes. Politically, the portrait is not so glorious, since he has been heavily criticized during his whole career and he himself suffered from these criticisms. As for his morality, his filial piety and responsible attitude of restraint have been regularly underlined in historical records, leaving the impression of someone who has tried hard to always be in control of the situation. In his memorials and in his speeches at court, one can notice that he could also be stubborn and upright, not deviating one inch from his highly moral standpoint regarding policy, politics, and ethics. In that sense, he offers the image of a true Neo-Confucian scholar, driven by passion and conviction –almost faith. His anxiety about not being up to his own expectations was matched by his fierce will to stay strong in pursuing his efforts towards the Confucian path. He was indeed obsessed with his own individual self-cultivation, spending much time studying and meditating in quiet sitting, on the one hand, and obsessed as well with his moral duty (or burden) to educate the king in the path of the Sagely Way, on the other hand.

Before concluding, let us briefly take a closer look at one of his most famous and most influential work, the *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl* 擊蒙要訣, in order to examine how suffering and pain are depicted by Yulgok when he is in his role as a Neo-Confucian master in Haeju in the

Hwanghae province. In this work, written while he was enjoying a temporary leave from office in 1577 for his students to “dispell youthfull ignorance” (*kyōngmong* 擊蒙), Yulgok explained what the basic principles (*yogyōl* 要訣) of Neo-Confucianism are in his eyes. Taking the general frame of the *Great Learning*, which goes from self-cultivation to social and political engagement (*sugi ch'iin* 修己治人), instead of reproducing the reverse order of progression outlined in the *Lesser Learning* from Zhu Xi that was the reference work for the early stage of learning at his time, Yulgok introduces to young people the core teaching of Neo-Confucian Learning process. In this process, the notion of extreme attention and constant vigilance against the self (*kyōng* 敬) is crucial. This vigilance means that the self must be constantly monitored by a properly trained heart-and-mind. In Yulgok’s *Kyōngmong yogyōl*, the emphasis is put, from the very first chapter, on the determination or the will (*chi* 志) to learn, meaning the self-awareness of the universal moral duty of human being to work on and exert constant efforts in becoming properly human. In his description of the process of learning, Yulgok uses several times the metaphor of self-inflicted pain, to describe the strength of this will power and to call for the eradication of bad habits that might hinder moral practice. In chapter 2, he writes for instance :

[...] Here are some examples that show how our habits, which would be difficult to enumerate in full, are harmful to the mind, the heart. Such habits make men lack determination and firmness and act with lightness and inconsistency. It is difficult to undo tomorrow what one does today and one ends up doing again in the evening what one regretted in the morning. It is therefore necessary to deploy a fierce determination which, like an axe, is capable of cutting the roots and the trunk of a tree in a single gesture. We must then wash the soil of our heart with water so that not the slightest root remains. Then we must constantly redouble our efforts in self-examination so that the heart remains free of any residue that might stain it. Only then will one be able to deal with the art of progressing in Learning.¹⁰

¹⁰ Cf. *Yulgok chōnsō*, *Kyōngmong yogyōl*, 2 : 此習使人志不堅固.行不篤實.今日所爲.明日難改.朝悔其行.暮已復然.必須大奮勇猛之志.如將一刀.快斷根株.淨洗心地.無毫髮餘脈.而時時每加猛省之功.使此心無一點舊染之汚然後.可以論進學之工夫矣

The same image of self-inflicted pain, understood as a form of voluntary amputation, is used in the following chapter :

The art of making an effort on oneself is acquired first of all in daily life. What we call the "I" is what our heart leads us to love despite any lack of conformity with natural reason. We must therefore examine our heart, our mind, in order to detect our taste for fornication, lucre, honors, titles, pleasures, parties and games, this myriad of things which, if they are not in conformity with reason, must be cut off at the root. From then on, our heart will begin to lead us to love what is right without even an I to counteract.¹¹

The path shown by Yulgok in the *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl* is a path characterized by the power of will, hard work, strenuous efforts, and a form of ablation of what is called the self. It is all about restraining oneself to go back to ritual. Yulgok does not elaborate on the suffering caused by unwanted hardships imposed from the outside and he does not pay close attention either to unwanted and unaccepted suffering. He only deals about what might appear at first sight as self-inflicted pain, for this pain is a compulsory step to shape a better self. Pain is not real suffering, pain is only a way to purge oneself from obstacles to self-realization. Yulgok, who has been keeping portraying himself as a miserable and feeble man in his private life, calls for heroism and bravery in his writings. In some ways, he also demonstrated in his various undertakings in developing confucian education, his memorials to the throne and his numerous philosophical essays and works that he truly believed in the transformative effect (*hua* 化) of Confucian Learning. Besides, one might say that he has proven to be extremely brave himself as well, since he has been juggling between a complicated official life in tumultuous historical times and a demanding life of a talented Confucian scholar, navigating between great pains and little joys, while enduring a severe illness that ended up killing him.

By way of conclusion, one might say that suffering in Yulgok's life and work might be understood as a wellspring of action, a strong incentive for the transformation of the self, beyond physical and mental limitations. Yulgok himself was neither heroic in his political

¹¹ Cf. *Yulgok chŏnsŏ*, *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl*, 3 : 克己工夫. 最切於日用. 所謂己者. 吾心所好. 不合天理之謂也. 必須檢察吾心. 好色乎. 好利乎. 好名譽乎. 好仕宦乎. 好安逸乎. 好宴樂乎. 好珍玩乎. 凡百所好. 若不合理. 則一切痛斷. 不留苗脈. 然後吾心所好. 始在於義理. 而無己可克矣.

realizations nor exceptionnaly outstanding in his moral actions. One might even say that he was an average, truely sincere, Confucian scholar-official. But, one sure thing is that he was a man of conviction, despite being limited by his own pains and fears, his own health condition, his individual history, his social and political environment, and, lastly, the historical time he was living in. He might be only one of many suffering individuals in the Korean Confucian tradition, for whom the Confucian ideal of Learning provided a higher goal to pursue as well as a valid reason to endure and, ultimately, overcome pain and suffering. The full moral commitment and unfailing dedication to Confucian Learning that Yulgok demonstrated in both his life and his thought is however outstanding, since this strong will finally turned him into a fighting individual, instead of a suffering individual.