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“Self-Narration and Epistolarity in *The Complete Works of Yulgok*.”

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Paradoxes of epistolarity

When trying to grasp what it could have meant to be a Confucian in Chosŏn Korea, epistolary texts taken in a broad sense are a valuable yet bewildering corpus for the historian. At the crossroads between historical sources and literary achievements, they raise critical methodological questions, for they are related to the problematic of the self, or subjectivity. This issue, linked to the questioning about structures and agency, or collective norms and individual freedom, is also fundamentally related to the debatable opposition between the supposed authenticity expected from testimonies of the self and the inescapable ‘artificiality’ of the self-fashioned ‘self’ reflected in these self-narratives. Besides epistolarity has fuzzy contours and studies generally point at the paradox of a genre that may ultimately be characterized by the negation of its own characteristics. Some scholars have thus proposed to define it as a mode, rather than a genre. To illustrate this point, let me remind you of a few genetic and most significant markers of any text that might be labeled as ‘epistolary’: 1) a communicative purpose, 2) the materiality and written nature of the communication, 3) three essential functions (informative, expressive, argumentative), 4) strong stylistic features such as opening and closing with a signature, set phrases, dialogic form, hyperbolic writing style giving the impression of an unmediated expression of thoughts and feelings (*ethos* of sentimental transparency), 5) self-referentiality (letters frequently make reference to themselves as material objects), 6) indications about the context of enunciation 6) *topoi* like health, good wishes, friendship or love, physical separation, and longing for the absent addressee, but also confession. But all the above-mentioned features often happened to be blurred, or they simply become irrelevant, depending on the state of preservation as well as the formal presentation of the epistolary documents, whether they are incomplete or damaged manuscripts or, conversely, in carefully edited miscellanies.

Ensuing problems are generally twofold. The frequent absence of answers and the loss of parts of a thorough correspondence lead to a fragmented and disconnected reading of the

communication originally at stake. Dialogue then becomes monologue, and epistolary writings –which are always circumstantial– are severed of their contexts and fall within the realm of biography or even autobiography. The second difficulty results from editorial decisions that had deliberately altered the original texts (including rewriting and drastic cuts) and rearranged heterogeneous writings on a basis of arbitrary criteria. Epistolary writings are divided into sub-genres identified by different names and classified under different stylistic categories (prose, poetry, divers, etc.). It is then difficult to find them out in large compilations and identify them as ‘epistolary.’ But the most significant reason why epistolary writings tend to lose their epistolarity, basically understood as a communicative mode, is certainly the self-fashioning that is consubstantial with any self-narration process. Because of its very nature of *written* expression (the solemnity of writing is often backed up with rewriting and editing) as well as the author’s self-awareness, epistolary writings stand for the most sophisticated form of ego-documents or self-narratives, calling for even more cautious interpretation than other types of testimonies of the self.

Another characteristic of epistolarity that makes it a paradoxical communicative mode is the complex triangle formed by the writer, the addressee and the reader. Correspondence is commonly divided into public or open letters and personal or private ones to be read only by the addressee. However these ‘personal’ letters were circulated, read by large circles, copied, compiled, and published. So instead of resorting to such a porous dichotomy, it should rather be stressed that letters (and epistolary writings in general), as messages ‘sent out,’ are basically to *be opened*, that is to say to be read. Behind the couple formed by the writer and the addressee, who are bound by implicit agreement of confidentiality and authenticity, stand many faceless shadows, the readers who are not the addressees. Yet these shadows play a crucial role in the implementation of a specific reading practice (habit) of epistolary writings, which in turn affects the original epistolary –communicative, dialogic– nature of the documents.

The *munjip* as a synecdoche of the Confucian master: the *Yulgokchönsö*

Most of the epistolary writings available today from Chosŏn Korea were consciously transmitted in the collected works of scholars-officials and, more broadly, any worthy (or wealthy) people. The production of these compilations had been increasing exponentially throughout the dynasty, especially from the 17th and 18th centuries onwards, and *munjip* making was certainly one strong characteristic of the Chosŏn period. Considered as the

material testimony and legacy of important figures, they were erected as real monuments whose very existence testified to the glory of the people to whom they were dedicated. To say it figuratively, the *munjip* is a synecdoche of the Confucian master or the *munjip* is the man himself. Traditional theories of literature certainly back up this statement, when one considers that it is in the writings (both in their content and visible –notably calligraphic– form) that the heart/mind of a man was thought to be reached.

The case of Yulgok, Yi I's *munjip* is particularly interesting for our discussion. First, the history of its compilation gives an enlightening insight into the mechanisms, strategies and problems through which descendants and/or disciples had been going while compiling and publishing epistolary documents. To make a long story short, there had been several editions of Yulgok's collected writings. The first edition of his *munjip*, entitled *Yulgoksönsaeng munjip*, in 11 *kwön*, was printed with woodblocks at Sohyönsöwön in Haeju in 1611, 27 years after Yulgok's death. It is based on the unfinished compilation work started by Söng Hon, with the help of Yulgok's disciples among whom Kim Changsaeng, and completed by Pak Yöryong. It is divided into two volumes, respectively containing prose and poetry. Its specificity is that memorials to the throne had been highlighted and placed at the beginning of the compilation, and poetic pieces classified according to their stylistic features, not in chronological order. But this modest edition was not satisfying for Yulgok's disciples. So Pak Sech'ae has been preparing diverse addenda from 1672 to 1681, travelling from Haeju to Kangnüng and painstakingly gathering together all the remaining writings or copies attributed to Yulgok as well as various testimonies and fragments in other scholars' *munjip*, diaries, and literary collections. The *sokchip* 續集 in 8 *kwön* and *woejip* 外集 in 8 *kwön* were then printed in 1682 in Chönju by governor Sin Iksang, and the *pyöljip* 別集 in 6 *kwön* in 1686 in Pyöngyang. These additional volumes contained unpublished documents such as letters and writings related to the Haeju community compact, but not the two masterpieces of Yulgok, the *Sönghak chibyo* 聖學輯要 and *Kyöngmong yogyöl* 擊蒙要訣 which had been already printed separately and had circulated widely since the reigns of Sönjo and Injo. But the printing of these three supplements provoked a scandal without precedent. Song Siyöl, who had been corresponding with Pak Sech'ae about the project of compiling and publishing more of Yulgok's writings, rose up against them, considering that Pak Sech'ae had deliberately betrayed him. So he even tried to forbid their circulation and started compiling another extensive *munjip*, called *Yulgok chönsö*. This new version of Yulgok's *munjip* was actually achieved by Song Siyöl's disciple Yi Chae 李緯 in 1744 in 38 *kwön* and it was finally

supplemented and printed with movable types in 1749 in 44 *kwŏn*. The revised and slightly augmented edition of this work, a woodblock printing based on the previous edition in order to meet the increasing demand rapidly, came into being in 1814 in Haeju. It is the reference edition of Yulgok's collected works, still commonly used and quoted today. In it, Song Siyŏl had gathered all the texts from the three supplements of Pak Sech'ae under the title '*chŏnsŏ*' adding however the *Sŏnghak chibyŏ* and *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl*, but, putting forward doubts about authorial authenticity, he left aside a few texts, like the *T'aegŭk mundap* 太極問答 and some civil service examination papers. Of course, texts like the *Sun'ŏn* 醇言 (the commentary of the *Daodejing* attributed today to Yulgok), the love letter given to the kisaeng Yuji 柳枝 in 1583, and the *ŏnhae* of the Four books had not been included. As for the *Tonggŏ kyesa* 同居戒辭 and *Kosan kugokka* 高山九曲歌, originally written in vernacular Korean by Yulgok, they had been translated into Classical Chinese by Song Siyŏl for this edition.

The second reason why Yulgok's reference *munjip* is significant here is its very special status in the history of Chosŏn Confucianism. As can be easily noticed, the name of the compilation is not *chip* 集 but *chŏnsŏ* 全書. This name was deliberately taken after the *ErCheng quanshu*, the complete writings of the Cheng brothers. Song Siyŏl wanted by this means to set Yulgok up as the founding father of the orthodox tradition to which himself claimed to belong. One should also add that Song personally wrote a chronological biography (*yŏnbo* 年譜) of Yulgok, coupled with that of Sŏng Hon. Just like Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, become one double-voiced person through the use of a convenient buzz-word ('the-two-Cheng') by Zhu Xi, Song Siyŏl wanted to pair Yulgok with Ugye and set them both up as the founders of his own philosophical school and political faction, the Noron. An interesting historical footnote is that the *munjip* of Song Siyŏl himself, by far the largest and most impressive compilation of any Confucian scholar-official from the Chosŏn period (Tasan's works were not compiled in a printed edition before the 20th century), was named 'Songja taejŏn,' just after the *Zhuzi daquan* compiling the complete works of Zhu Xi. So Yulgok, caught up in the wake of Song Siyŏl's enthronement as the Korean Zhu Xi – a process officially sanctioned by kings Yŏngjo and Chŏngjo –, became from the late Chosŏn period an icon of Korean Confucianism. His *munjip* thus became not only a *monumentum* keeping the memory of the great man he was supposed to have been, but also a true *exemplum* demonstrating and testifying to his moral stature as a true Confucian 'master.'

Brief inventory of the epistolary writings in the *Yulgokchönsö*

One might then wonder what happened to the epistolary documents, which would certainly be commonly listed among the best testimonies of the character of a person, within the particular framework of the *Yulgokchönsö*. A brief inventory shows that they are scattered throughout the *munjip* and rather difficult to identify because of the various names under which they are sometimes concealed. A first set of texts, the obvious one, is located in the sections of official correspondence (*sö* 疏筭, *kye* 啓, *üi* 議, and *soch'a* 疏筭) from *kwön* 3 to 8 but also in *kwön* 2 of the Supplements section (*sübyu* 拾遺); and also in the ‘letters’ section (*sö* 書) from *kwön* 9 to 12 and in *kwön* 2 and 3 of the Supplements. Besides, a less visible set of texts can be found, one by one, in the poetry section thanks to their titles bearing characteristic epistolary features: 送... (“sent as a gift”), 別... (“parting [with]...”), 寄... (“sent to”), ...次韻...首 (rhymed pieces composed in response to). Digging deeper into the *munjip* one can also find epistolary writings under the categories of *sö* 序 – which are words of advice given to a friend at parting (贈...序, 別...序, 送...序)–, *söl* 說 (one single occurrence), and also eulogies, *chaemun* 祭文. Lastly, bits of correspondence are recorded in the chronological biography. The first set of texts (official and personal correspondence) is the most important because of its total size. The official correspondence, sent to king Sönjo, counts 131 texts and the personal letters (*sö* 書), listed in chronological order and addressed to 24 scholars, among whom very famous names like Song Ikp’il (38 letters), Söng Hon (33 letters), Chöng Ch’öl (25 letters), Yi Hwang (5 letters), and Ki Taesüng (1 letter), totalize 139 texts. But these texts are also important because of their order of appearance within the *munjip*, in the first parts of the *Chönsö* and its Supplements. They were clearly expected to feature a personality carefully fashioned by the editors: that of an influent, respected and respectable high-official and Confucian scholar. It should be added that the few excerpts of correspondence quoted in the chronological biography massively consist in philosophical discussions, which are presented as important, remarkable steps in Yulgok’s life. Besides, it is also noteworthy that many memoirs listed in the official correspondence are in fact only given by their titles without any content. The reason is that they are parts of one of the most problematic writings of Yulgok for the successive editors (an otherwise fascinating example of ego-document): the *kyöngyön ilgi*, his memoirs of court life. Indeed, its content was potentially harmful to the families and factions

of the protagonists appearing in the episodes narrated in it, for Yulgok had been directly taking part in the birth of late Chosŏn factionalism.

All the epistolary writings contained in the *Yulgok chŏnsŏ* share most of the features that I alluded to previously, while discussing the paradoxes of epistolarity. To mention only one of them, the answers are missing and, worse, the majority of them had not even been transmitted in the existing *munjip* of the addressees. However, a few particularities should be underlined. Firstly, Yulgok's writing style is more hyperbolic and emotional than that of some of his pen-friends and contemporary fellow Confucians, especially Sŏng Hon or Yi Hwang. This characteristic also appears in his official correspondence, especially the letters refusing appointments. Secondly, three major recurring themes clearly predominate: his bad health, Confucian Learning, and friendship. These *topoi* certainly mirror his desire of cultivating the good will of his addressee (and reader), which is common practice in correspondence, but they are rendered, again, through strikingly emotional writing. One is even tempted to say that Yulgok's epistolary writing, as manifested in the *Yulgokchŏnsŏ*, is mainly consolatory, except for a few poetic pieces given as gifts to acquaintances like a Buddhist monk or some prose texts with clear didactic tone. So epistolarity in this *munjip* strongly conjures up visions usually created by autobiography and complicates interpretative work. Besides elements of contextualization are often lacking, and any attempt at broad network analysis is difficult to carry out. But, to sum up, all these remarks echo common features underlined by most of the studies about epistolarity.

So what is remarkable in Chosŏn and Yulgok? By way of conclusion, I would argue that it is the reading practice, the 'reading pact' established by the *Yulgok chŏnsŏ* and *munjip* in general. Studying the *munjip* of a few great figures, taken in the portrait gallery of the Munmyo, is certainly a prerequisite to any understanding of the history of Confucianism. Even though *munjip* are far from being the only sources available to the historian, especially the one interested in either genetic editing or social history for example, they do give privileged access to those men commonly called Confucians. But one should always keep in mind the limitations of what can be said earnestly about 'the man' behind the monumentality of the *munjip*. By sorting out epistolary writings in a certain order of priority, *munjip* affect the reading and understanding of the reader who would be heedless of the paradoxes of epistolarity. Studying epistolarity means being haunted by uncertainty, but this feature precisely makes the literary reading of and the historical inquiry into epistolary documents

deeply enjoyable; and to paraphrase Confucius, what would be better than ‘learning while enjoying’?