



**HAL**  
open science

## Yulgok's view on Kija

Isabelle Sancho

► **To cite this version:**

Isabelle Sancho. Yulgok's view on Kija . Yulgok Studies and Korean Culture , 2016 International Workshop on Yulgok Studies, SungKyunKwan University, Yulgok Society, INALCO, Sep 2016, Paris, France. hal-02905299

**HAL Id: hal-02905299**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02905299>**

Submitted on 23 Jul 2020

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

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

Friday, September 9

2016

2016 International Workshop on Yulgok Studies

Yulgok Studies and Korean Culture 율곡학과 한국 문화

**Isabelle SANCHO**

CNRS-EHESS

### **Yulgok's view on Kija 箕子**

Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584) wrote in 1580, in his early forties, the *Veritable Records on Kija* (*Kija silgi* 箕子實記). This short text is quite famous, for it has been commonly cited as an illustration of the special emphasis put on the figure of Kija 箕子 (Jizi in Chinese) in Chosŏn Korea by the State as well as the Neo-Confucian literati. The legend of Kija, taken as a bridge linking China and Korea since Antiquity, was often taken as a means to secure Chosŏn's political and philosophical legitimacy and to claim its privileged position within the Sino-centric world order.

The Vicount of Ji, personal name Xu Yu 胥余, was an uncle of King Zhou 紂, the bad last ruler of the Shang dynasty (7th to 11th cent. BCE). He is known as one of the "three wise men" (*samhyŏn* 三賢) of Shang, along with Weizi 微子 and Bigan 比干. He occupied the position of Grand Preceptor (*taesa* 太師) before being imprisoned after remonstrating against the misrule of the corrupt king (or, according to one variant, after pretending to be a madman when King Zhou tortured to death Bigan). After the fall of the Shang dynasty that he had predicted, he transmitted to King Wu of Zhou (11th. cent.-221 BCE), who overthrew the evil king of Shang, the forgotten secret of Yu the Great, the *Hongfan/Hongbŏm* 洪範 later recorded in the *Book of Documents*. But he refused to serve the new ruler and decided to take the road of exile. Some Chinese sources (all post-Qin dynasty documents providing no historical evidences) added that he went eastwards to the Korean peninsula with no less than 5000 people, among whom many craftsmen. He would then have been enfeoffed by King Wu in P'yŏngyang area, where he founded a state known as Chosŏn (Kija Chosŏn). During his rule, he transformed and "civilized" the primitive people (*i* 夷) living in the peninsula. As for

Korean sources, such as the *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk yusa* 三國遺事, late 13<sup>th</sup> century) and the *Songs of Emperors and kings* (*Chewang un'gi* 帝王韻紀, 1287), a rhymed chronology of Chinese and Korean rulers written by Yi Sŏnghyu 李承休 (1214–1259), they took for granted that Kija succeeded to the mythical progenitor of Korean people, Tangun 檀君, who had previously ruled over a territory called Old Chosŏn (Ko Chosŏn).

So based on a few historical and apocryphical documents, Kija has been regarded as the cultural hero who brought proper civilization in the Korean peninsula, by introducing basic laws (the *Hongbŏm kujū* 洪範九疇), morals, agricultural techniques, rituals, music, and administrative structure. An official worship was rendered to him in Koguryŏ and then in Koryŏ, but also in China. Indeed, from commentary to commentary, the fief and gravesite of Kija happened to be located in various places in China as well (going from Henan, Hebei, Shanxi, to Liaoning). In Korea, king Sukchong 肅宗 of Koryŏ (r. 1095–1105) identified a mound at the village of Kirim (*Kirimni* 箕林里) near P'yŏngyang as Kija's gravesite and built a mausoleum to enshrine him in 1102 (*Kija chŏn* 箕子殿 / *Sungin chŏn* 崇仁殿).

Today, most of South and North Koreans do not know who Kija is and what importance he used to have in pre-modern Korea. Tangun stole the spotlight from Kija as the founder of the Korean nation and culture, when the modern historiography that was struggling with challenging theories of colonialism, imperialism and nationalism started to reshuffle the cards. It has been decades now that Kija disappeared from history textbooks. The main reason is that, according to some scholars from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the legend of Kija gave birth to the so-called theory of "Kija's Easterly Migration" (箕子東來說), notably illustrated by Chang Chiyŏn 張志淵 (1864-1921) in his seminal 朝鮮儒教淵源. Later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this theory has been commonly associated with several "hot potatoes" in Korean historiography, such as the Sino–barbarian dichotomy (or the distinction between Hua 華 and Yi 夷/華夷論) and the theory of the "Small China" (小中華 also called "little Sino-Centrism" or "little Central Efflorescence"). These two controversial issues, both closely related to Korea's positioning in relation to China and the hegemony of Chinese culture (中華), are still the focus of most of the studies dedicated today in academia to Kija and especially Yulgok's *Kija silgi*.

However this approach of the *Kija silgi* emerged in fact rather lately even in pre-modern time. It emerged during the second half of the Chosŏn dynasty when scholars (especially the Noron faction stemming from Yulgok's followers) attempted from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards to reject the political and cultural supremacy of Qing China –that is to say the Manchu dynasty–. This paper will briefly analyze the *Kija silgi* taken as itself but also as compared with several other texts written by Yulgok on Kija and collected in the *Yulgok chŏnsŏ*. The aim is to better understand what the *Kija silgi* means within Yulgok's work and thus to try to shed a new light on Yulgok's view on Kija.

The *Kija silgi* raises interesting questions about its content but also its form, an aspect that has been repeatedly neglected in previous studies. The genre to which it belongs is rather unclear. As explained by Yulgok himself, it was written to summarize the *Kija chi* 箕子志 ("Records on Kija") published by Yun Tusu 尹斗壽 (1533-1601) when the latter came back from a diplomatic mission to China in 1577. Yun Tusu had been asked about what Kija became when he settled in Korea at the Chinese court and failed to answer properly. He thus decided to compile all available information related to Kija in the Classics and various historical writings. But Yulgok found his text not well organized and was afraid that the reader may be lost about the essentials. Hence he wrote his own account of Kija in the interests of clarity and called it *silgi* 實記 in which *ki* 記 may be translated by "notes" or "records." By its form and content, the text reminds of the "random jottings" or "brush notes" (the Chinese *biji* 筆記) and, within the polymorphous genre of *biji*, the *zhiren* 志人 ("Accounts/Records of famous personalities"). Mixing prose narrative with rhymed passages, it can be roughly divided into 3 parts: a summary of Kija's life and deeds –with an equal attention paid to what he did in China and in Korea–, followed by a rather long and vibrant song of praise, and wrapped up by Yulgok's personal opinion. So the *Kija silgi* is not a work of a historian investigating into source materials, even though Yulgok is careful with historical evidences as shown by his statement about the uncertainty surrounding Tangun's historical testimony. It is not either a political or philosophical treatise with a clear ideological agenda. The *Kija silgi* is basically a personal and circumstantial account of Yun Tusu's compilation made by Yulgok who has reached important political recognition and achieved a certain intellectual maturity in 1580. It is also a concise summary primarily meant to be circulated informally/unofficially to inculcate more people with the history of Kija.

As for the content of the *Kija silgi*, it can be summed up as follows. Kija was the founder of the Kingly Way (*wangdo* 王道) in Korea, or Korea was the land where the Kingly Way was achieved "for real" by Kija (*wangdo silhyön* 王道實現). But a closer look at the text shows that Kija is in fact more than that. Labelled as the "first Sage" (*wönsöng* 元聖), he represents the starting point of the two civilized states under heaven: China and Korea. These original states are characterized by Yulgok by their happening at the very beginning of the "historical time," that is to say the time of the Three kings (*samwang* 三王: Yu the great, Tang, and kings Wen and Wu taken as one). These kings succeeded to the Five emperors (*oje* 五帝: Fu Xi, Shennong, Huangdi, Yao, and Shun) from "mythical time" and were hence the last practitioners of the Kingly Way under heaven. The reason why Kija was the common ancestor of the two *historical* cases where the Kingly Way was truly put into practice before disappearing (in China and Korea), is that Kija gave to king Wu the Great Plan before leaving deliberately for the Korean peninsula where he applied himself the principles of that Plan.

An interesting feature of Yulgok's discourse is that Kija was a man of *in* 仁 who chose to "flee" the new dynasty founded by brutal force and create his own state (*kuk* 國) eastwards. This state was shaped with affection and benevolence, and the Korean land has been progressively infused with the civilizing effects of the Kingly Way. The main features stressed by Yulgok are rites and ethics –"Confucian" rites and ethics before the advent of Confucius himself, so to speak. In the rather long and precise description of the history of the Ki family's rule in Korea, Yulgok contrasts the peacefulness and ethical practices of Korean people with the instability, violence and guile of Chinese people of the period beginning with the Warring States. Moreover the hazards and final collapse of Ki family's successive kingdoms (Kija Chosön and Mahan 馬韓) were all due to the chaos generated repeatedly by the troubled Chinese history. To sum up, China had put an end to the sage rule of the House of Ki in Korea that lasted for about 1120 years. The *Kija silgi* not only gives a precise starting point to the first state ever applying the Kingly Way under heaven (Kija Chosön) but it also inscribes it in a precise –and rather lengthy– period of time. According to Yulgok who follows Yun Tusu on this matter, Kija descendants amounted for 41 generations, which goes against Mencius' statement about the "5 generations" (i.e. both the exemplary person and the petty person wane after 5 generations).

All this can easily explain why Yulgok's *Kija silgi* used to be considered as the perfect illustration of the "Small China" theory adopted by some late Chosön scholars-officials.

However when the *Kija silgi* is compared with other texts written by Yulgok at different ages and under different circumstances, this conclusion is somehow blurred.

Yulgok have discussed about the "Kingly Way" in several texts, among which the well-known *Outline of the Sagely Learning/ Sŏnghak chipyo* 聖學輯要 (1575) and the *Questions and Answers from the Eastern Lake/ Tongho mundap* 東湖問答 (1569). This text in particular, written during a monthly assessment and submitted to the young king Sŏnjo by Yulgok when he was on sabbatical leave (*saga toksŏ* 賜暇讀書) at the Reading House at the Eastern Lake (*Tongho Toksŏdang* 東湖讀書堂), is particularly interesting. The reason is that 11 years before writing the *Kija silgi*, Yulgok gave a much more pessimistic view on Korean ancient history. The text does say as well that Kija has transformed the barbaric people living in the peninsula and has duly transmitted the special teaching he received from Yu the great directly inspired by Heaven. But the text further says that the Learning of the Way (道學) had never been practiced by any ruler and had never been properly understood by any scholar after Kija in Korea (*tongbang chi to pul haeng* 東方道學不行). This pessimistic diagnosis was also applied to Chinese history by Yulgok, in a slightly different way: after the Three dynasties (Xia, Shang, Zhou), the Kingly Way was no longer practiced (*wangdo pul haeng* 王道不行), because the Learning of the Way was no longer shining (*tohak pul myŏng* 道學不明). To sum up, nothing positive related to the Kingly Way happened in China after the death of the Duke of Zhou (周公), revered by Confucius. But contrary to Korea, there were real scholars in China who transmitted the Learning of the Way (the Neo-Confucians). So in the *Tongho mundap*, Kija does not seem to stand out particularly at first sight. But he is characterized as setting the single *historical* precedent of the practise of the Kingly Way in Korean history. As for Tangun, he is cautiously dismissed because of the lack of relevant historical materials.

Beside the *Tongho mundap*, which is a polemical essay and a true exercise in style, one should note that Yulgok wrote over a period of 14 years (from 1568 to 1582) several poetic pieces where he alluded to Kija: four poems about Kija's tomb and mausoleum (*Kija chŏn* 箕子殿, *Kija myo isu* 箕子廟二首, *al Kija myo pu* 謁箕子廟賦), and one additional poem to

the rhapsody on Kija composed by vice-emissary Wang Jingmin 王敬民 (fl. 1584) (*ch'a Wang ch'önsa [Mingyöng] Kija myo puun* 次王天使民敬箕子廟賦韻). These poems remind us of one very common feature of the early Chosön diplomatic relationships between Korea and China: the poetry contests between Chinese and Korean emissaries that were an integral part of the diplomatic practices through which each party could expose their political views in veiled terms. Among the literary *topoi* of these poems compiled in the successive anthologies of "Envoy poetry" called *Anthology of Brilliant Flowers* (*hwanghwa chip* 皇華集) from China that circulated in Korea, there are the two former capitals laid on the diplomatic road connecting Beijing and Hanyang: Kaesöng, where the residence welcoming the Chinese emissaries (*T'aep'yönggwan* 太平館) was located; and P'yöngyang, where Kija's mausoleum and temple were located. One poem recorded in this anthology is that of Sö Kjöng 徐居正 (1410-1488) who wrote about Kija's mausoleum at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. So it is no surprise that Kija was a common literary theme for diplomatic exchanges and, in that sense, Yulgok was not an exception while composing poems on that important figure.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude this brief survey that I would like to deepen in the future, I would like to make a couple of tentative remarks.

- Taken as a single text isolated from other Yulgok's writings, the *Kija silgi* lends itself easily to the common reading saying that it is a vivid example of the Korean claim to be equal to China in terms of civilization and Confucianism. In that sense, it can be considered as a writing among so many others from the early Chosön period that highlighted the importance of Kija in Korean history (examples: texts written by big names like Chöng Tojön, Kwön Kün, Sö Kjöng, but also Yi Hwang, etc.). In such a standpoint, the originality and fame of the *Kija silgi* would solely lie in its formal –i.e. synthetical and didactical– aspect and its rather "handy" format.
- However, when the *Kija silgi* is put into perspective with other types of writings within the *Yulgok chönsö*, it turns out that it illustrates the breaks and continuities in Yulgok's perception of Kija. Written quite lately by Yulgok under specific circumstances (Yun Tusu just wrote his *Kija chi* and Chinese emissaries were repeatedly inquiring about Kija), the *Kija silgi* stands

for instance in sharp contrast with the *Tongho mundap*. In the *Kija silgi*, Kija's royal House is inscribed in the long run (*longue durée*) of Korean history. On the contrary, in the *Tongho mundap* written by the young Yulgok eager to teach and remonstrate the king, Kija is synonymous with one single episode of real practising of the Kingly Way in Korea in remote antiquity that was unfortunately never repeated again (he is an *événement*). As for the commonality of Yulgok's writings about Kija, it lies in the complex mixing of a strong "historicity" associated with Kija on the one hand (the story of Kija is *true*), and the literary and intellectual nostalgia for a world that seems lost for ever on the other hand.

- So one should try to see beyond the problematic of the Small China when reflecting on Yulgok's view on Kija. In Yulgok's writings taken as a whole, Kija can indeed be considered as a true philosophical impetus (a difficult but precious incentive) addressed to Korean kings and scholars-officials in order to pursue the Kingly Way and the Transmission of the Way in Korea. In that sense, Kija is more than a convenient "tool" used for political, ideological, and diplomatical purposes; it rather stands for a glimmer of hope in the dark picture usually drawn by Yulgok about his own time.

- Moreover, instead of applying a teleological view on the historical significance and role of the *Kija silgi*, it could be fruitful to study further the very theme of Kija within Yulgok's various writings. In order to do so, more attention could be also paid to the literary, stylistic, and formal aspects of his texts when analyzing their philosophical and historical meanings.