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Introduction

Concerning the intellectual role and social treatment of dissent, two diverging images tend to frame our understanding of literati culture of Joseon times. On the one hand, there is a strong tendency to identify this culture with Confucianism, and Confucianism is again habitually identified with the search for “harmony” in terms of a consensus culture; this combines to a strong expectation of Joseon literati culture to disdain expressions of dissent. On the other hand, dissent in the form of factional disputes has been one of the most-described features of Joseon political history and fills much of the *Joseon wangjo sillok*; and philosophical or inter-religious debates have structured the intellectual history of the period.¹ The contradiction is usually resolved by regarding the factional disputes as pure power struggle and differences of opinion between the contenders as nothing but pretexts for conducting the former; and by understanding the philosophical disputes as revolving around orthodoxy and thus in fact attesting to the Confucian abhorrence of intellectual deviations.

This paper starts from the assumption that both Confucianism as an intellectual tradition and the social conventions of Joseon literati culture are more complex than either of these explanations would suggest, and that it is not very useful to sort cultures into a simple grid marked by “consensus culture” and “pluralism” or “collectivism” and “individualism,” as a rather unfortunate tradition of dichotomizing “East” and “West” would have it.² More helpful, I would submit, are attempts to describe the mechanisms and procedures through which two

¹ Numerous publications on Korean intellectual traditions therefore carry “debate” in their title, e.g., *Korean Philosophy Seen through Debates* (Hanguk cheolhak sasangsa yeonguhoe 1995), *Traditional Korean Philosophy: Problems and Debates* (Ivanhoe and Back 2017), and *Debates between Seon Buddhists and Neo-Confucianists during Late Joseon* (Ha 2012).

² This dichotomous view and arguments about the “harmonious,” conflict-avoiding society have been brought forward more often in regard to China and Japan than to Korea; however, they inform a generalized image of “East Asian mentality” under which Korea is usually subsumed. While scholars in most fields of East Asian Studies may be less prone to subscribe to these views in recent times, influential scholars of (especially Chinese) philosophy, intent on constructing a distinct, inscrutable Other in order to make themselves indispensable as its interpreters, maintain them up to this day. An obvious case in point is the much-cited French Sino-philosopher Francois Jullien. For strong arguments against this line of thinking in Chinese Studies see Roetz 2016, 2019. These works also provide good overviews over the tradition of denying the Confucian tradition an acknowledgement of individual moral autonomy in the sense of standing one’s ground against majority consensus.

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메모 포함[고4]: Please use not single quotation marks but double ones in order to emphasize the words or phrases.

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2. Romanized foreign words should be italicized unless they are proper nouns or can be found in an English-language dictionary.

3. The first letter of the first word only should be capitalized.

메모 포함[고6]: For additional explanations or clarifying the sources of the premodern-type publications, use footnotes.

opposing requirements, namely the need to tap the creative potential of diverging opinions and the need for consensus as the basis for cooperation—both universal preconditions for the functioning of complex societies—are being balanced out in a given culture.

The paper aims at contributing to an endeavor to study Late Joseon elite culture along these lines by looking at ways in which literati talked about dissent, dispute, and discord; how they navigated the tensions between diverging societal demands and ideals, and what kind of resources for intellectual autonomy the Confucian tradition itself provided. I do this with an emphasis on narrations *of* and self-reflexive utterances *about* such events and through three small case studies: the meta-debate about dissent conducted by the originators of the Horak debate, Han Wonjin 韓元震 (1682-1751) and Yi Gan 李柬 (1677-1727); Sin Hudam's 愼後聃 (1702-1761) record of his dispute with Yi Ik 李穡 (1681-1763) on Catholicism as an illustration of *intellectual* autonomy; and Sim Nosung's 沈魯崇 (1762-1837) autobiographical *Jajeo silgi* 自著實記, a work in miscellany form celebrating headstrong individuality which can serve as an illustration of *moral* autonomy

The source texts (especially for the first two cases) were written for circulation within the same scholarly group, and while often discussing the issues at hand in rather sharp tones and in many cases probably with the forging or fostering of alliances in mind, they were not meant to demarcate new in- and out-groups but rather to clarify philosophical points and create or renew consensus within the author's own intellectual community. In analyzing the texts, attention is directed not (or only to the necessary degree) towards the objects of dissent (the points of contention) themselves, but rather to the ways in which the fact of dissent is verbalized, narrated, and evaluated.

“I am compelled to discuss”: Confucian Literati's Statements of Intellectual

Integrity

As mentioned, the history of Korean Confucianism does not necessarily invite clichés of harmonious, consensual intellectual culture. Too well known are the incessant debates conducted at court, many of which on intricate intellectual issues even while definitely political in nature, as well as the philosophical disputes, divided groups within school traditions and political factions. Also, the image of the Confucian sage encompasses the gesture of rejecting the ways and misconceptions of the world and re-commencing the transmission of the Way on the basis of one’s own readings of the earlier Sages.³ Intellectual autonomy is thus in a certain way ingrained in the Confucian tradition, and it may appear of little value to argue for its existence. Who, however, was allowed to appropriate this gesture; to what degree did independence of opinion depend on prestige accrued and followers assembled?

For a sanctioning of intellectual forwardness was definitely in place; it is easy to find evidence for a pervasive discouragement of unwelcome dispute. Testimony is present, for example, in the phrase (of definitely vernacular origin⁴) *jaju gi gyeon* (“holding fast to personal opinion” 自主己見), which is consistently used with negative connotations. The “owning” or “being master of” 主 in the compound which today signifies “autonomy” 自主 must be read in the context of this phrase in the sense of “insisting,” and the use of the phrase in absence of qualifications like “better arguments notwithstanding” creates the strong impression that what this phrase criticizes is not lack of intellectual insight but transgression of social roles. A letter by Song Byeongseon 宋秉璿 (1836-1905), dated 1897, may be especially telling since it obviously concerns a perceived change and thus illustrates the conception of reticence as now-lost traditional virtue:

³ I am grateful to Vladimir Glomb for having me alerted to this fact in several presentations.

⁴ By vernacular, I do not mean the Korean language here, but a non-classical Sinitic textual tradition. The phrase can be found in Chinese fictional literature, but does not appear a single time in the whole of *Siku quanshu*.

메모 포함[교7]: In case you write romanized words along with their supplementary information—their translations into English and Chinese characters—at the same time, the recommended order of them is as follows:

romanized words (translation into English 汉字)

메모 포함[교8]: In case two items including Chinese characters appear, Chinese characters usually follow the romanized words or the English words immediately without the use of parenthesis.

Recently, scholars often hold fast to their own opinions [自主己見]. If there are some contradictions with the interpretations of the former worthies, they bring forward evidence in crooked ways and muster all kinds of rhetorical tricks to make their point. This is not the way of respecting authority.⁵

메모 포함[교9]: Square brackets are used when supplementary information is added by the author in the quotation.

Somewhat complementary in function to the negative judgement *jaju gi gyeon* is the recourse to Mengzi's famous dictum *yeo gi ho byeon jae, yeo budeugi* ("I am not fond of disputing, I am compelled to do it" 予豈好辯哉 予不得已也) (*Teng Wen Gong* 2.14). While this phrase is used in favor of the *person* conducting the dispute, it again throws dispute itself into a negative light: it assumes the shared conviction that the use of arguments should be avoided as long as the situation allows it. In the Mengzian sense, being compelled to discuss is equivalent to the Way being in disorder. Dispute then easily becomes an intolerant defense of orthodoxy, rather than a method of reaching the best possible answer to shared questions through the power of argument.

However, "orthodoxy" was not necessarily identical to mainstream consensus. When new philosophical or ritual questions came up, answers to which were not to be found in the writings of "former worthies," individual convictions concerning the "right" solution could lead to heated in-group dissent. In these cases, the virtue of compliance came into conflict with the obligation of defending and safe-guarding "truth." Voicing dissent and standing by one's convictions was then a matter of conscience. And again, the Confucian Classics also provide the means to name such situations. The phrase *dang in bul yang* ("stand by your convictions if benevolence is at stake" 當仁不讓) from the *Analects of Confucius* means exactly this.⁶

메모 포함[교10]: The closing quotation mark, closing parenthesis, or footnote numbers come after the sentence punctuation.

⁵ Song Byeongseon, "Yeo Sin Deukku, Jeongyu parwol paril," *Yeonjaejip* 15 (a-329), 252d: "近世學者. 往往有自主己見. 其於先賢之說. 有所未契者. 則曲爲援證. 張皇說去. 恐非尊畏之道也." In this manuscript, most of the primary sources are quoted according to their electronic editions in Hanguk gojeon chonghap Database (<http://db.itkc.or.kr>) as long as they are accessible there, otherwise according to the reprinted editions.

⁶ In its original context, the phrase speaks specifically of teachers to whom one should not give in against better moral knowledge, but it could be applied to any kind of authority: "子曰 當仁不讓於師" (*Lunyu*, "Wei Ling Gong").

The two originators of the Horak debate, Namdang Han Wonjin and Woeam Yi Gan can serve as good examples. Both being disciples of the same master, Gwon Sangha (1641-1721), they were under pressure to harmonize their differing views on whether the all-pervasiveness of “principle” (*i* 理) or the individual constraints of *gi* 氣 were the decisive factor in determining sameness and difference of the nature of humans and other beings. Indeed, a meeting between the two (who had not met up that point but discussed through letters) was convened by Choe Jinghu 崔徵厚 (?-1715), a third discussant in that matter, in the expectation of the two finding a compromise, to no avail (Hwang et al. 2009). Both seem to have been headstrong characters. Others were involved in the controversy as well, but Namdang and Woeam were those who conducted it with the most fervor. In the writings of both scholars, we therefore find traces of the need to defend themselves for their unrelenting attitudes.

Among the two, Han Wonjin certainly had the more comfortable position, since he found himself to be in consensus with (and backed up by) their joint teacher, Gwon Sangha. Therefore, in his *imjin* (1722) letter to Yi Gan—a major essay that comprises a full fascicle of his collected works—he criticizes Woeam acidly for what he perceives as the latter’s argumentativeness:

Ah! To see that the other speaks about daytime and at once bring forward arguments for the night; to see that the other speaks about the dark and at once bring forward arguments for brightness;⁷ to run away from each other and to base oneself on a single opinion—this is just a childish hide-and-seek game, and totally different from the gentleman’s attitude of arguing only if compelled to [好辯不得已之心]. If your present argumentation is only a little like this, I beg you sincerely to mend your ways, rather than maintaining that reason is on your side.⁸

⁷ This phrasing seems to come from Song neo-Confucian discourse, given the language (*baihua*), and seeing that Han Wonjin uses almost the same wording in a critique of Wang Yangming.

⁸ “Tap Yi Gonggeo, imjin parweol.” *Namdangjip* 10.39a: “噫. 見人說晝. 已便去說夜底道理. 見人說陰. 已便去說陽底道理. 互相逃閃. 一意枝拄. 此正是小兒迷藏之戲. 豈君子好辯不得已之心乎. 高明今日之辨. 或有一毫近似於此者. 則伏乞痛加檢改. 勿以為道理當如是也.”

메모 포함[고11]: For clarifying the source in the main text, use in-text citation in the format of parenthetical references which contain the author’s last name, publication year, and page numbers (if necessary) in the end of the sentence.

The author-date system of Chicago Manuals is recommended for in-text citation in the journal.

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What is more, the fact that Yi Gan dared to deviate from the teacher's doctrine is used in the very beginning of the long letter as the starting point of Han's criticism:

.....omitted.....

Conclusion

This brief foray into different textual documents on dealing with dissent in late Joseon literati society has been able to touch only the tip of the iceberg. This being a first, experimental attempt at unearthing Joseon literati's culture of debate, questions must remain about the representativity of the examples presented here, which must await future research. Even so, it was possible to illustrate that Joseon literati had a tool-box at hand for legitimizing their individual convictions: not only could they feel strongly entitled to intellectual resistance against persons of authority in *defense* of tradition, but positions *countering* tradition could also be upheld in open, intellectual debate. This tool-box was provided by the Confucian Classics and their neo-Confucian interpretations themselves, which is in fact not surprising: firstly, since the founding texts of Confucianism had been composed as reactions to a world falling apart and with the aim to resist what was seen as the moral decay of the day to begin with, and therefore contain seeds of critical thinking that could always be used against the tradition itself;⁹ and secondly, in a broader perspective, since the handing on of tradition always implies its creative re-interpretation in the light of the questions of the day, whether the subjects involved in this process are aware of it or not. Any tradition which is not encompassing enough to allow for such creative reinterpretations and adaptations is doomed to fall apart; the longevity of the Confucian tradition and the stability of the Joseon dynasty which it supported could not have

⁹ This has been argued consistently and convincingly by Heiner Roetz in many of his articles on ancient Confucian philosophy.

come about without such flexibility. Thus, even a man like Sim Nosung who is not easily bracketed as a “Confucian,” given his broad readings, did not have to position himself outside this tradition. At any rate, any notion of a “Korean/Confucian tradition” will be deficient if it fails to do justice to the degree to which Joseon culture allowed for strong statements of moral and intellectual autonomy in disregard of status, power, and prestige.

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메모 포함[고13]: The primary and secondary sources are not separated but listed in alphabetical order of the author’s last name.

메모 포함[고14]: If authors are two or more, the first-listed name only is inverted with the use of comma, and others are listed with last name first.

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Jeong, Ubong. 2014. “Sim Nosung ui jajeon munhak e natanan geulsseugi bangsik gwa ja-a hyeongsang” [Sim Nosung’s Writing Style and Self-Representation in his Autobiographical Literature]. *Minjok munhwa yeongu* 62: 89-118.

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메모 포함[고19]: If you use multiple publications by the same author, you should list them in chronological order. The author’s name should appear in the first one solely.

메모 포함[고20]: For publications by the same author in the same year, they should be listed in alphabetical order by title, with a lowercase letter after the year of publication.

Sin, Hudam 慎後聘. 2006. *Gimunpyeon* 紀聞編 [Records of Things Heard]. Vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip* 河濱先生全集 [The Collected Works of Habin Sin Hudam]. 9 vols. Seoul: Asea munhwasa.

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Abstract

Confucian tradition is often described as producing a “collectivist” mentality, as lacking the resources necessary for developing a sense of individual autonomy, and thus as averse to the voicing of dissent in defiance of political authority and independent of bonds of personal loyalty. Given that Joseon Korea defined itself as Confucian state, literati culture of that period should

메모 포함[코22]: Write one-paragraph (150-200 words) along with up to 8 keywords.

be expected to disdain expressions of dissent. The well-known history of intense intellectual debates among Joseon literati runs counter to this expectation. Two arguments can serve to resolve this seeming contradiction: either that these disputes should be seen as pure power struggle; or that they revolved around orthodoxy and thus in fact attest to the Confucian abhorrence of dissenting opinions. While acknowledging the explanatory power of both arguments, this paper sets out to test a third option: that the above-mentioned assumptions about Confucian attitudes towards dissent are incomplete. Based on non-fictional texts most of which were part of a philosophical (or otherwise intellectual) controversy, it provides a sample of the ways in which Joseon literati talked about dissent, dispute, and discord. Attention is directed not to the points of contention themselves, but rather to the ways in which the fact of dissent is verbalized, narrated, and evaluated, with an emphasis on statements about the legitimacy of maintaining and defending personal convictions that run counter to group consensus. It is demonstrated that Joseon literati culture allowed for strong statements of moral and intellectual autonomy in disregard of status, power, and prestige.

Keywords: Joseon intellectuals, dissent, debate, individual autonomy, Horak debate, *Gimunpyeon*, *Jajeo silgi*