Special Feature

Narrating Dissent in Joseon Literati Discourse*

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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 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 李瀷 (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, often concerning intricate intellectual issues even while being definitely political in nature, as well as the philosophical

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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-evading 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 Julllien. 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.

disputes that 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 of 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 origin[4]) *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:

> 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]

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

3. I am grateful to Vladimír 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 Sinic textual tradition. The phrase can be found in Chinese fictional literature, but does not appear a single time in the whole of *Siku quanshu*.
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.

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]

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

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").

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]

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:

> When you say in your letter that in his late years, our teacher is following Yang [Zhu 楊朱] in his basic approach, your words are extremely badly chosen. If the teacher is actually at fault as you are submitting, then the Way of revering one's teachers and elders is certainly to put one's doubts into questions and make innuendos with soft words, but it is not appropriate to openly blame him of being wrong and expose this to the world. In case the viewpoint of the Elder is not complete nonsense, and future generations will not agree with today's theories, how much will you then regret your reckless comments and your overstepping of your position? Also, in explaining what is right and even while revering the authority of one's seniors, one should not be partial, but things concerning one's teacher are different from normal discussions, and today is different from the past.… [In the light of the evils of factionalism,] the courage of "standing by one's convictions" (*dang in bul yang*) should also be subjected to good judgment. I wonder whether you have already regretted your mistaken words.[9]

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. 己便去說夜底道理. 見人說陰. 己便去說陽底道理. 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. 勿以爲道理當如是也."
9. Ibid. 1a-b: "第惟來諭以函丈晩年大本. 謂從楊氏. 則語殊欠擇. 函丈大本之誤. 設有如盛諭. 在後生尊師敬長之道. 固當以疑辭請問. 微言諷諭. 而不宜顯斥其非. 翹過於世. 倘或長者之見. 未全出於無稽. 而百世之論. 不盡同於今日. 則其輕議僭越之罪. 當如何追悔也. 況且講明義理. 尊畏前輩. 不可偏倚. 而師事殊於尙論. 今時異於他日. 懷尼之變出. 而尊師之道掃盡. 偏黨之習成. 而傍伺之譁環立. 任世道師門之責者. 不可不深爲之慮. 則當仁不讓之勇. 亦宜有所或裁也. 不識高明旋已知悔於斯言之玷乎否耶."

Even while berating Yi Gan for arguing with their teacher, Han Wonjin cannot avoid phrasing that evokes—time and again—images of the righteous Confucian man who is not afraid of upholding his moral-philosophical persuasion in the face of authority. His criticism of Yi Gan thus illustrates both the contemporaneous social pressures for compliance *and* the cultural resources for resisting it that were available to Confucian literati. On the basis of the quotes above, it could be argued that Han's ideal of the gentleman was a combination of soft-spoken, obliging behavior and moral-intellectual integrity. And indeed, this is the image that emerges, for example, from his annalistic biography of Yun Hon 尹焜 (1676-1725) whom he describes as fearless in confronting the king[10] but amiable in character:

> He was naturally endowed with a magnanimous character and harmonious demeanor…but he held fast to his own and was firm in distinguishing between the common good and private profit, in a way that others could not compete with.[11]

Disdain for Yi Gan's behavior obviously was in no conflict with validating a principled style of conducting discourse. Such a style was what Han Wonjin claimed for himself, very probably in light of criticism that he himself had to swallow in the context of his extended contestation with Yi Gan. In a comparatively inconspicuous context, in an entry (dated 1726) within the outer chapters (*woepyeon*) of a miscellany just titled "Japji" 雜識, Han Wonjin discusses the reasons for "teachers and friends" (*sau* 師友) falling out with each other and finds it in the lack of serious, thoroughgoing moral discussion and character-probing at the beginning of the relationship.

> "Otherwise, discussing learning will be nothing but mimicking the words on paper, just reciting and explaining them, without any real questioning and analysis of the difficult points. Dealings with each other will consist

10. "Jipyeong Yun-gong haengjang," *Namdangjip*, *gwon* 34, 31b-32a.
11. Ibid. 36b: "公天資寬厚. 容儀和粹.…而執守之堅確. 義 利之辨別. 亦有人所不能奪者."

> only in small talk and everyday conversation, discussion of politics and tales of domestic issues. By failing to exchange in depth on each other's moral achievements and failures, by being only tactful and covering up the other's mistakes, the disciple deceives his teacher, and the teacher does not get to know his disciple.…If this is the case between teacher and disciple, it is obvious how it is between friends."[12]

An uncompromising style of intellectual exchange, at the danger of temporary conflict, is propagated here for the sake of smooth social relations in the long term. Self-serving as this passage may be, it definitely points to the value that could be attached in literati culture to the open voicing of both moral and intellectual disagreement.

Of course, Yi Gan has even more to say about this, since the disagreement with his teacher's words had become his signature trait. At the end of a central one among the essays he contributed to the Horak debate he discusses this matter with "someone" who takes him to task:

> [Someone said]"…People of old have said that one cannot believe oneself, one has to believe one's teacher. Now you are not at an age where you could believe yourself; how can you so hastily and determinedly disbelieve your teacher's theory?" I answered: "No, no. You are really superficial in the understanding of this saying. Not being able to believe myself and about to believe my teacher, I have pondered [this issue] night and day, and have dared to come forward in spite of the teacher's authority to inquire and discuss with him incessantly. While my stupidity is deplorable, this does show my intentions. To not check in the light of earlier theories, to not get to the bottom of the matter, to not understand their main purport and just take the words [uttered by the teacher] at face value—this is not the Way of believing one's teacher."[13]

12. Part 2 of "Japji woepyeon," *Namdangjip*, *gwon* 38, 10a-b: "不然而講學則只是依倣紙上言語. 誦說一過而已. 無甚質疑辨難之實. 往還則只是叙寒暄道情素. 或論時事語家私而已. 無甚責善規過之實. 周旋人情. 掩護周遮. 弟子而欺其師. 爲師而不知其弟子. 滾同枉過一生. 及其做出來大段狼狽然後. 方始欲絶之. 則弟子旣陷於背師之惡. 而師亦不免於不知人之譏矣. 師生而猶如此. 則其爲友者可知矣. 一不謹於其始. 而其終至於師友道喪. 彝倫有傷. 可勝歎哉."
13. "I tong gi guk byeon" 理通氣局辨, *Woeam yugo* 12, 14b: "或者曰.…古人曰. 不能自信. 信其師. 子非自信之時也. 何遽不信師說如 是之固歟. 曰否否. 子誠淺之爲知言矣束不能自信. 將以信師. 故中夜以思之. 平朝以念之. 干冒威尊. 問辨而不已. 其愚誠可憫. 而其志亦可見矣. 不稽前言. 不 究事實. 不得其旨. 而惟言之是信. 豈信師之道哉." This essay is dated 1713, i.e., after Gwon Sangha had decided to unilaterally terminate the discussion. See Hwang et al. 2009, 13.

The necessity to stand up to one's teacher is also the main gist of his essay "Explaining the Teacher" (dated 1721). Discussing the famous *Liji* passage "In serving one's parents, one should, if the occasion arises, conceal their faults and not stand up to them....In serving one's ruler, one should, if the occasion arises, stand up to him and not conceal his faults....In serving one's teacher, one should, if the occasion arises, not stand up to him, but also not conceal his faults,"[14] Yi Gan states that the option not to stand up to the teacher is preconditioned by the teacher's faultlessness, which cannot be assumed for any but the sages of whom Zhu Xi was the last. If teachers can be at fault, to fail to stand up to them would be derelict and contrary to the nature of the teacher-disciple-relationship:

> For what one is asking from one's teacher in taking up his learning is nothing else but true understanding [義理]. Is it preferable that the teacher's way prospers, while his followers do not attain the true meaning of the words [of the sages]? Ah! The moral relationship between teacher and disciple is established for the sake of the right understanding of the Way.… What people nowadays call "not stand up to" is something else than "not stand up to," it is "flattering."…The doctrine of "not standing up to" is thus becoming a great obstacle to the students' attainment of the Way.[15]

While Yi Gan's personal history qualifies him as a crown witness for intellectual defiance of authority, the moral issues of (individual) *integrity* versus (social) *integration*[16] with which he grapples are not restricted to conspicuous cases like his. I will restrict myself to a final example by an author less known for conducting controversies that returns to the phrase *yeo gi ho pyeon* 予豈好辯. When Bak Jigye 朴知誡 (1573-1635) defends a memorial of his own to the king that was obviously contentious, he—not surprisingly—takes recourse to this standard Mencian phrase. But the main point of his argument is based on the ensuing words from the same *Mengzi* passage:

14. *Liji* 3, "Tangong shang": "事親有隱而無犯…事君有犯而無隱…事師無犯無隱." Legge's translations were used for this passage.
15. "Saseol ha," *Woeam yugo* 13, 17a: "然則承學之所欲請者. 不過義理耳. 寧有師道隆. 而其徒不得於盡言之理哉. 噫. 師生之倫. 本爲道義而設....今之所謂無犯. 非無犯也. 乃諛也.…無犯一義. 不免爲後學求道之一大魔障."
16. I owe this appealing phrasing to Heiner Roetz, whom I would like to thank at this occasion for sharing with me his extensive knowledge of resources of dissent in the Chinese classical tradition.

> Mengzi also said: "Whoever is able to oppose Yang and Mo is a disciple of the sages."[17] Zhu Xi's commentary says: "Everyone is qualified to attack false teachings that can do harm; one does not have to be a sage or worthy."… In the light of these words, one does not have to be a sage or worthy like Mengzi in order to argue for this; even the most uneducated and low person can discuss and argue it. That a man in power speaks, "believing himself to be right, and an ordinary literatus does not dare to correct his mistakes"—would that do?[18]

The right to voice dissent, especially in the face of power, was not a matter of course; it needed to be defended against social conventions of deference. However, for those who had the courage to speak up against power and authority, the cultural resources to legitimate their behavior were ready at hand, and they were regularly made use of.

Community of Dissent: The Controversy about Western Learning between Yi Ik and Sin Hudam

While the events of dispute between scholars were mostly documented in the fragmentary ways seen above—through letters and essays that mostly with the contents of the contention, or in pieces of writing defending one's own attitude in moral terms—a more uncommon source that tells the story of such an event in a more comprehensive manner is Sin Hudam's (1702-1761) *Gimunpyeon* 紀聞編. If Han Wonjin and Yi Gan are somewhat apologetic about their dispute, this source seems to have been compiled in order to proudly document the dispute: it is devoted to relating Sin's controversy with Seongho Yi Ik (1681-1763) about the latter's interest in and tolerant stance towards "Western Learning."[19] Sin Hudam became witness to this at one of his first visits at Yi Ik's

17. The whole passage in *Teng Wen Gong* reads: "昔者禹抑洪水而天下平, 周公兼夷狄驅猛獸而百姓寧, 孔子成《春秋》而亂臣賊子懼.《詩》云 :『戎狄是膺, 荊舒是懲, 則莫我敢承.』無父無君, 是周公所膺也. 我亦欲正人心, 息邪說, 距詖行, 放淫辭, 以承三聖者 ; 豈好辯哉 ? 予不得已也. 能言距楊墨者, 聖人之徒也."
18. "Dangcha byeonseol," *Jamyajip* 6, 16a: "堂箚辨說: '孟子又曰. 能言距楊, 墨者. 聖人之徒也. 朱註曰. 邪說害正. 人人得以攻之. 不必聖賢. 如春秋之法. 亂臣賊子. 人人得以誅之. 不必士師. 若以此意言之. 則不必孟子之賢聖然後辨此. 雖至愚賤. 皆可論辨. 卿大夫出言. 自以爲是. 而士庶人莫敢矯其非者. 豈可乎哉. 聖賢立法之意. 所以若此者. 蓋冀或有忠信質美之善人. 聞而能改之也.'"
19. On the relationship between Sin Hudam and Yi Ik concerning Western Learning, see also Baker and Rausch 2017, 40-44.

house in 1724 where he found him discussing *seohak* 西學 with other scholars. Sin who was still quite young at that time and had the zeal of a convert—he had been fascinated by writings outside the Confucian fold and styled himself as a Daoist master until restrained by his father in 1718, whence he gave up his most unorthodox leanings, and had decided to focus on *seongnihak* 性理學 after taking his *jinsa* exam in 1723[20]—seems to have been taken aback by Yi Ik's intellectual openness towards something that immediately struck Sin as "depraved learning" (*sahak* 邪學). *Gimunpyeon*, authored in 1729,[21] recounts four visits with Yi Ik between 1724 and 1726, as well as two further visits by Sin Hudam with the Namin elders Yi Sik 李栻 (1659-1729) in 1728 and Yi Manbu 李萬敷 (1664-1732) in 1729, during which *seohak* was discussed. While this text is an interesting source for the reception of Jesuit writings in early 18th century Korea,[22] Sin Hudam's early encounters with Yi Ik also offer some unexpected insights into the role of discussion and dissent in a Joseon teacher-disciple-relationship, and into the high importance attached to intellectual autonomy at least in this branch of the Namin faction.

Sin Hudam seems to have sensed, quite correctly, the unsettling potential of open-minded engagement with a culturally foreign system of knowledge, and to have feared for the integrity of neo-Confucian teaching. According to his record,[23] his very first reaction on listening to Yi Ik's praise for "Li Xitai"[24] was to

20. These two points of time are described as turning points of Sin Hudam's intellectual life in his annalistic biography, *Habin seonsaeng yeonbo* (hereafter, *Yeonbo*), which was probably composed by his secondary son Sin Sin 愼信 and is reproduced in *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip* 9. See S. Sin 2006, 9 for 1718 and ibid. 14 for 1723. For the conjecture that Sin Sin is *Yeonbo*'s author, see Yang 2006, 15. In his grave inscription for Sin Hudam, Yi Ik mentions only the second turning point, although pointing out Sin's earlier wide readings 博觀古書. See "Seonggyun jinsa Sin-gong myojimyeong" 成均進士愼公墓誌銘 幷序, *Seongho seonsaeng jeonjip* 星湖先生全集, *gwon* 64.
21. According to Sin Sin (2006, 24), unfortunately the biography says nothing about the further fate of this text (whether it was circulated or just kept for personal memory).
22. In regard to the understanding of Jesuit writings, it has been analyzed by Seo Jongtae (2001), among others. I have earlier on used the source in order to gain a better understanding of the social mechanisms by which knowledge about *seohak* spread in late Joseon Korea (Eggert 2014). Parts of the explanations of the text below are adapted from this article.
23. This paragraph is based on the first entry of *Gimunpyeon* (contained in vol. 8 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*) (Ganhaeng wiwonhoe 2006, 3-5).
24. Xitai was the name of honour (*ho*) of Matteo Ricci. The text sometimes gives the impression that it is used not for Ricci in person but for Jesuit writings in general, even more so since the name is made up of the characters for *taixi* (the far West) in interchanged order.

inquire: "What is the main message of their teaching?" When Yi Ik answers—probably somewhat evasively—by recounting Aristotelian psychology, Sin Hudam insists on thematizing the Christian teachings on "the heavenly spirit" (*cheonsin* 天神, "god") and heaven and hell—those aspects that made "Western Learning" conspicuously similar to Buddhism and clearly characterized it as a heterodox teaching unworthy of the attention of a Confucian gentleman. Yi Ik admits to this flaw in Western Learning, yet emphasizes the "utility" of the Western teachings. On this, Sin Hudam responds, somewhat sarcastically: "If there is utility in [their teachings], they surely extend to governing the people and safeguarding the state, and there must have been great leaders among their forebears like Yao and Shun?" Thus challenged, Yi Ik answers somewhat vaguely that "their books also contain discussions of the Way of Ruling," but has to admit that the usefulness he had claimed for the new knowledge from the West is restricted to astronomy and mathematics—fields of little import for seekers of the Way like Sin Hudam. Although the record of Sin's first visit ends with Yi Ik having the last word, the overall impression of the exchange between the two is that of Yi Ik getting slightly cornered by the inquisitive questions of his new disciple.

According to *Gimunpyeon*, not only did Sin Hudam hold up his own against the eminent elder scholar during this and the next visits until they finally reached a kind of agreement to disagree during the fourth debate, but he also talked about this issue with other persons—other followers of Yi Ik, and as mentioned, even Yi Ik's elders—thus greatly publicizing the controversy. *Gimunpyeon* itself was certainly written to demonstrate to posterity the author's own persistence in sticking to his standpoint towards Western Learning (and the at least partial victory he believed to have taken over Yi Ik in the debate). Obviously, fierce disagreement with a teacher was nothing Sin Hudam felt he had better conceal.

Of course, it might be argued that Sin Hudam could and did pose as defender of the Way and that orthodoxy was what legitimated his lack of deference towards his teacher. Concerning this point, it is illustrative to look at Yi Ik's arguments in favor of taking note of the Western scholars' writings. In his first remarks on Ricci—according to Sin Hudam's record—which set the controversy in motion, he stated: "Having read his writings like *Tianzhu shiyi*…I cannot say whether his Way is in line with our Confucianism, but when letting oneself in with his Way and analyzing where it leads him, one finds that he can be called a holy man" (*Gapjin chun* 3). And after introducing

Aristotelian psychology, he adds: "Although this is different from our Confucian teachings about the mind and human nature, how could one be sure that it is not true?" (ibid.). Having explained in detail Western astronomical knowledge and the reasons why he finds it trustworthy, he submits: "Since their words are so plausible (*dang i* 當理), why should one refrain from taking them up (*chui ji* 取之) only because they are different from the texts of (Chinese) antiquity?" ("Eulsa chu" 10).

Yi Ik did not regard conformity with received knowledge as a truth argument; the valid criterion of accepted here is individual judgment according to reason or logic, without guidance by tradition. And Sin Hudam, who recorded his words, did not take any exception to them; rather, this shared attitude seems to have formed the basis of the teacher-disciple relationship between Yi Ik and himself. Further evidence for this is seen in a record found in *Yeonbo* about another discussion not related to Christianity—a record doubtlessly also based on Sin Hudam's own notes.

Sin Hudam became a disciple of Yi Ik's early in 1724. It seems that his very first visit to Yi Ik took place during the first month of that year (while the date given for the visit during which the *seohak* controversy started is the 3rd month).[25] At this first meeting, Sin asked Yi Ik which of the "Classics and commentaries" he regarded as the right book for commencing one's (serious) studies. Yi Ik's answer is recorded as follows:

> "If we speak about introductory works by former scholars, *Jinsilu* expounds the basics and shows one the path to learning; engaging with this book, one can forge an opinion [立主見] and make some progress." Father retorted: "*Jinsilu* is certainly fine, but I think it is less useful for everyday demeanor than *Xiaoxue*; what is your opinion?" The Master said: "Indeed one can start from *Xiaoxue* and then slowly proceed, but then one will not conceive an opinion and easily ends up just following [instructions], so it would indeed be better to first study *Jinsilu*, grasp the fundamentals of its meaning, and

25. *Yeonbo* first recounts the 3rd month's visit (S. Sin 2006, 15) and only then turns to the first month's visit (ibid. 16). This might be easily explained by a sequence according to importance rather than chronology within each year's entry. What is confusing, however, is the fact that the record of the former debate starts with the words "When Father [Sin Hudam] first met Seongho, Seongho discussed learning and his speech touched upon Matteo Ricci's learning…" I assume that the exact sequence of the dialogues was of no great importance to Sin Sin.

> first establish a view-point for oneself [先立乎主見]." They also discussed a new compilation of arguments in the Four-Seven Debate and questions about *Xiaoxue* and *Daxue*.…In winter that year, [Father] started to compose *Sohak chaeui*. He finished it in the following spring. (S. Sin 2006, 16)

According to the record, even this very first scholarly interlocution between the scholar and his would-be disciple took the form of a debate—a debate in which the main point made by the elder scholar was the necessity to form an independent view-point as the basis of all further learning, and in which the disciple demonstrated that he was indeed capable of fostering and maintaining such an independent opinion. As if to give further proof that the point about intellectual independence which the teacher had repeated three times was well taken by the disciple, the record of that year's encounters ends, just two lines later, by noting that Sin Hudam had indeed put his efforts that year into studying the book of his *own* choice, *Xiaoxue* (*Sohak chaeui* being a commentary on this book). The community (*mun* 門) formed between teacher and disciple clearly was brought about by the engagement of independent minds who shared the value of intellectual autonomy.

The Resistant Individual: Sim Nosung's *Jajeo silgi*

If we can state the existence, within some sort of Confucian self-understanding, of a community based on the acceptance of mutual intellectual independence, this might beg the question of the moral constraints put on the individual by Confucianism. Is not the pressure to conform to certain standards of *behavior* a much stronger, and much more fundamental force restricting individual self-expression (including the arts with their always intimate connection to ethics) than what pertains to the purely intellectual realm, orthopraxy more relevant than orthodoxy?

In order not leave the orthopractic dimension of non-conformity in late Joseon society un-addressed, I will now turn to a final brief case study, the "True Record of and by Myself" (*Jajeo silgi* 自著實記) by Sim Nosung 沈魯崇 (1762-1837). Sim Nosung, a scion of a well-connected Noron *sip-a* family and part of a cosmopolitan, Seoul-based upper class which was well read in contemporary Chinese (high-brow and entertainment) literature, open-minded, and well

aware of the failings of their society, was perhaps exceptional in his literary output,[26] but not necessarily concerning his general mind-set; he can therefore serve as an example even if his ego-documents have recently gained fame for their unusual contents.[27] His self-documentary writings are numerous, the most conspicuous being an exile diary, *Namcheon illok* 南遷日錄,[28] an annalistic autobiography, *Jajeo ginyeon* 自著紀年, and *Jajeo silgi* completed in 1830.

This latter work, which interests us here, is written in miscellany form—individual, but interconnected entries rather than a single narrative flow—which is not uncommon for biographical writing. The arrangement of the entries, however, is both original and telling: they are clustered in four parts, a very brief first part on "physical appearance" (*sangmo* 像貌), a slightly longer second part on "nature and character" (*seonggi* 性氣), a somewhat more voluminous third part on "the arts" (*yesul* 藝術),[29] and an extensive main part of the word, "miscellaneous notes on my experiences" (*mungyeon japgi* 聞見雜記), of which the "inner chapter" concerns his own experiences and the "outer chapter" is culled from earlier anecdotal works. Given the enormous differences in quantity, it is obvious that the first three headings are not meant to structure the work. Rather, they serve to frame the work (which for its main part [*mungyeon japgi*] could be read as just a form of anecdotal history, *yasa* 野史) as autobiographical—or better, to establish the auctorial subject with its individuality and personality as the point of departure of the narrations that follow. Although the latter part of the "autobiography" contains rich material on social events of dissent as well, I will focus here on the first three sections with their focus on the person of the author himself.

As has been noted by others before, in these brief sketches Sim provides a rather anti-hagiographical account of himself, liberally sharing with his readers

26. He is best known as the compiler of the miscellanea collectanea *Daedong Paerim* 大東稗林 (1829), but his collected works, *Hyojeon sango* 孝田散稿, is also voluminous.
27. Research on Sim Nosung has set off only during this decade, due mostly to the work of Jeong Ubong who has authored a number of articles on him, and the translation of *Jajeo silgi* prepared by An et. al., published with the subtitle *Geulsseugi byeong e geollin eoneu seonbi ui ilsang* in 2014. No Daehwan (2007, 44-49) in his essayistic work on outsiders of the Joseon dynasty depicts Sim Nosung (whom he selected because of his unrelenting mourning for his deceased wife) as a rather unsociable character. This appears as somewhat exaggerated for the purpose of fitting him into the book.
28. An edition has been prepared by Guksa pyeonchan wiwonhoe in 2011 as part of *Hanguk saryo chongseo*.
29. The term *yesul* is rather unexpected in a 19th century work; it can be perceived as an ironic statement on the status of literati scholarship.

his deviations from norms and ideals, such as a feminine cleanliness, desires for special foods, and an insatiable sexual thirst. I do not agree, though, that he does so out of a lack of concern with these norms, or just for the sake of realism.[30] Rather, I submit, his doing so is a strong statement about the limits that are set to the validity of social norms by the potentials and leanings of the individual. In present times when the acceptance of individual hedonistic pursuits that he propagated has become the societal norm, the element of resistance and opposition that his attitude carried in his day is easily overlooked. It is with a view to unearth this "dissident" side of Sim Nosung, rather than the bohémien, that I read him in the context of this paper.

Even the short (only two entries) section on physical appearance with which *Jajeo silgi* starts is not devoid of a statement beyond the notable realism of self-description: "Between my eyes, there is a spirit (*gi*) that is hard to contain and that easily comes forward; this is what portraits cannot approach, and it is hard to grasp by evaluations of character (*pyeongpum* 評品) (Sim 2014a, 5396-97; 2014b, 630).[31] In the brief introduction to this section, Sim had mentioned that he loved being portrayed, but could never find a painter who could produce real likeness. The reason given here is a *surplus of individuality*, a spirit or energy (*gi*) that can neither be controlled by the person himself, nor be subjected to classificatory evaluations of character that work with clear-cut categories and hierarchies of moral value. Since what really makes the person is this natural endowment, beyond personal control and thus all the more beyond social control, Sim Nosung refuses to take responsibility for either his moral shortcomings or for what might appear as moral achievements. Typical examples for the former are his comment on the reproach, he records, he received for his thriftlessness: "These words are indeed true, but I am not able to take heed of them" (ibid. 5401 f.; 632), or for his failing to keep the proper distance from people lower in social hierarchy: "These words are indeed true, and yet I was unable to change my ways" (ibid. 5405; 633). The latter is most tellingly exemplified in following entry:

30. As claimed by Jeong (2014, 99; 101).
31. Individual entries are not titled in the original. In order to ease access to the source text, I add the entry titles as given by An Daehoe et.al. in Korean translation and inserted into their edition of the source text. For citations, I used both of the two modern publications on Sim's *Jajeo ilgi*, accidentally published in the same year 2014: Sim 2014a refers to the facsimile reprint, published by Hakjawon; and Sim 2014b refers to the above edition.

> When experiencing bereavement or other disasters, I seem to be able to divert myself from melancholy through reasonable thinking, much better than others can do that. People around me have said so, and I have also experienced it this way. But this is not the result of a special ability on my part to endure abuse due to self-cultivation, or of a power to keep up myself in the face of outer adversity. It is just that I am low-bending, weak, and self-indulgent, so that I cannot avoid being adaptive and comfort-seeking. That I became quite another person in the middle of my life is a proof for this. (ibid. 5401; 632)

In some other entries he had mentioned before that he lost some of his "improper" personality traits in the middle of his life; the last sentence thus again stresses that his virtues, no less than his vices, are nothing but an expression of intrinsic nature rather than result of any form of self-cultivation.

While ostensibly acknowledging many of the values and norms upheld by his class, Sim Nosung implicitly calls them into question by refusing to frame his own character traits that run counter to them as moral failures. And by describing his seeming self-composure, an important element of *yangban* habitus, as in fact resulting from a kind of indolence, he forcefully tears the mask from the rampant moral self-aggrandizement of his peers, since what is true for him may be true for others—"proper" behavior is no indicator of moral character. His self-narration thus turns into a tale about the morality of remaining true to one's inner self whether or not the result conforms to social standards. Typically, the "Seonggi" section ends with an entry about the representative pursuit of the literatus searching for a standpoint beyond society: landscape excursions, which Sim declares to be his one favorite pastime that persisted throughout his lifetime (Sim 2014a, 5413; 2014b, 637).

Of course, in order to better evaluate their significance, these observations would need to be thoroughly contextualized within late Joseon autobiographical writing,[32] and beyond that within Chinese trends of introspection and recognition of personal desires that had developed from the late Ming onwards and of which Sim was certainly aware. However, for the purposes of this paper, it may suffice to adduce one more piece of evidence that Sim Nosung's outspoken defense of individualism and autonomous personhood was not

32. For a valuable overview over autobiographical writing of Joseon times, see Sim 2009, 2010.

just the decadent attitude of a scion of a powerful family, but the self-reflective stance of a man who was willing to openly dissent.

In the *yesul* section of his "True Record" which, in spite of its title, mainly concerns his educational development and examination experiences, Sim Nosung does not represent himself as an unwilling or unconventional student. Since he studied for the *chinsa* degree, it is natural that the texts he specifically mentions as having studied mostly belong to the realm of history, literature, and court documents rather than the Classics, which do not figure at all in his memoir. That he speaks about examination studies in rather affirmative terms may carry a message of rejection of the usual denigration of this kind of learning that is mostly found in literati texts and which he may have regarded as insincere posture. Instead, he depicts himself as having embarked on his studies with the clear ambition to do his best for examination success. And yet, even during the examinations his individuality proves to be irrepressible:

> In composing the examination essays, I did not like to just adapt to the trends of the time, but strove to hold fast to my own viewpoints [*yu sa jaju gi gyeon* 惟事自主己見]. In poetry, I used the ancient style, in composing court documents I adduced examples at libitum. Rather than taking heed of the rules of the genre, I tried to thoroughly express my thoughts. Therefore, I failed a lot and succeeded rarely. And yet, I did not know how to change. This is also a bias of my character. (Sim 2014a, 5419-20; 2014b, 639)

Here, at last, the phrase *jaju gi gyeon* is used in the affirmative. The light-hearted, inconspicuous way in which he re-encodes this phrase with a new normative value is illustrative for the way in which Sim Nosung's "personality cult," his seemingly innocuous, playful reduction of the moral sphere to physical and psychological constraints is, in fact, a powerful plea for the individual's right to unencumbered self-expression.

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;[33] 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 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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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 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*

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