

## Progressive Idealist: North Korean Views on Yulgok Yi I\*

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### ABSTRACT

The strategies of DPRK academia toward the Confucian heritage of the Chosŏn period have undergone several transformations during the long life of the regime and require a systematic diachronic analysis. The case of Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584) demonstrates the multiplicity of possible views on Confucian thinkers within North Korean academic discourse. Previous research in the DPRK on Yulgok has produced a number of texts related to his person and thought. An analysis of the passages concerning Yulgok in the earliest and the most recent authoritative publications within the sphere of the history of philosophy, *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa 1* (The History of Korean Philosophy 1, 1960) and *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa* (The Complete History of Korean Philosophy, 2010), reveals that within DPRK academia there currently exist two diverse approaches toward this scholar. The traditional approach focuses on his class limitations and the essentially idealistic nature of his philosophy, while a more recent approach places more stress on the so-called progressive nature of his thought. Both of them present valuable material for further studies of ideology, scholarly practices, and the discursive techniques of North Korean academia.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Yulgok, DPRK, Marxism, North Korea, history of philosophy, *juche* (*chuch'e*)

This article offers an analysis of some of the major academic works of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) dealing with the thought and philosophical legacy of Yulgok Yi I (1536–1584) and has two primary purposes: focusing on reflections on Yulgok's work as such and outlining some general strategies of DPRK scholarship toward the Confucian heritage of the Chosŏn period (1392-1910). The North Korean stance toward the historical past has been, from the very beginning, shaped by the dialectical paradoxes of Marxism-Leninism and later on, by *chuch'e* (*juche*) ideology. With a focus upon the class struggle of the oppressed classes within feudal society, it is clear that the ideological superstructures of traditional Korean society considered as ideologies of the ruling classes were perceived and commented upon in a mostly negative fashion. In the case of Confucianism, DPRK scholars shared a common prejudice of early modern intellectuals who blamed it for its inability to preserve Korean independence following its encounter with modern powers. Starting with liberation in 1945, a radical process commenced in North Korea of the liquidation of the traditional social order, including the destruction of most of the historical relics connected

with Confucian thought and culture, and the repression of those connected with feudal-bourgeois ideology. The radical break with the past did not include to any large degree historical heritage as such: this was now supposed to belong to the workers and peasants and serve their cultural needs. In particular, after the divergence from an internationalist position and the consequent focus on the chauvinistic stance of *chuch'e* ideology, the DPRK increasingly began to glorify the Korean past. The excavation of the grave of Tan'gun in 1993 and the massive rebuilding of the burial sites of Wang Kōn (877-943) and Tongmyōng during the same decade are symbols of this change. On the other hand, the destruction of all Pyongyang historical relics connected with Kija (or Jizi in Chinese, who was traditionally credited with the introduction of elements of Chinese culture to Korea), and the complete silence surrounding this crucial figure of Korean history,<sup>1</sup> are vivid reminders of the selective nature of North Korean perspectives on historical relics, both material and intellectual. A similar treatment was accorded to the representatives of Korean Confucianism, including Yulgok. North Korean scholars developed various strategies in terms of including certain thinkers into the revolutionary discourse concerning the past, or, on the other hand, excluding them. This interpretative framework underwent several transformations during the long existence of the regime, and requires a systematic diachronic analysis. Given the practical obstacles and the relatively long time period covered, the present paper focuses on an analysis of the relevant passages concerning Yulgok in the earliest and the most recent authoritative publications within the sphere of the history of philosophy in the DPRK: *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa 1* (The History of Korean Philosophy 1, 1960), and *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa* (The Complete History of Korean Philosophy, 2010). Combined with other resources, these publications enable us to detect and describe the major trends and shifts in DPRK discourse concerning Yulgok's legacy within the specific philosophical and ideological framework of North Korean academic discourse.

### DPRK Sources Concerning Yulgok

The previous decades of research in the DPRK on Yulgok have produced a substantial number of texts related to his person and his thought and the idea of a systematic analysis of this field is certainly not new.<sup>2</sup> Most North Korean publications have focused on Yulgok on a philosophical level, analysing his legacy

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<sup>1</sup> Kija was seen by the DPRK regime as a representative of the feudal values and servility to Chinese culture. Excavations of his Pyongyang tomb in the 1960s yielded no physical remains and he was declared to have been a merely legendary figure.

<sup>2</sup> Probably the most widely known work in this genre is the short section in the overview of Yulgok studies "Present State of Studies in North Korea" in *Yi I* (2002, 60-62). Another very good overview can be found in Yu Inhŭi (1994).

primarily within the framework of comprehensive works describing the history of Korean philosophy; as of the present day, unfortunately, no DPRK monograph dedicated specifically to Yulgok exists.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the academic works on the history of Korean philosophy, we should therefore also focus on a wide range of other publications that examine Yulgok from different perspectives and in various forms. A basic overview of these sources is important not only in order to introduce the entire range of available materials, but also to highlight the multiplicity of views on Yulgok within North Korean academic discourse, as the context and medium often determine the nature of the judgement concerning his role in Korean thought and history. Certainly the most significant source for this topic are the scholarly journals<sup>4</sup> that have published a number of articles on the topic of Yulgok: beginning (in the 1950s and 1960s) with the journal *Ryöksa kwahak* (Historical Science),<sup>5</sup> which often included philosophical topics, as well as the more specialised *Ch'ŏrhak ronmunjip* (Collected Papers on Philosophy), both published by the Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences (Kwahagwŏn ch'ulp'ansa). Later the journal *Ch'ŏrhak yŏn'gu* (Philosophy Research) and certain issues of *Kim Ilsŏng chonghap taehak hakpo* (Journal of Kim Il Sung University), focusing on the humanities and philosophy, assumed their role. The main feature of these studies across the decades is their high level of erudition and academic enthusiasm, often distinguishing them from more official and dry histories of philosophy. Unlike the usual organization of comprehensive books dealing with the history of philosophy (by a philosopher or thinker), these academic journals treat many topics on a broader philosophical level, offering a more synthetic approach when treating questions of what is called medieval philosophy (*chungse ch'ŏrhak*).<sup>6</sup> A very interesting additional source from the academic sphere are the few DPRK dictionaries of philosophy, which contain entries on Yulgok and sometimes also definitions of basic concepts of his thought such as “principle *li* and [vital energy] *qi* dualism” (*rigi iwŏllon*) (*Ch'ŏrhak sajŏn* 1985, 210) or “*li* penetrates and *qi* delimits” (*rit'ong kiguk*) (*Ch'ŏrhak sajŏn* 1970, 217-18), to cite just two examples. Given their condensed nature, these dictionaries

<sup>3</sup> This absence, however, is caused by economic reasons and other priorities rather than by Yulgok's position in the eyes of the regime. Many other thinkers, much more valued than Yulgok, have not yet been made the subjects of exclusive monographs or scholarly editions.

<sup>4</sup> A very good analysis of DPRK academic institutions and journals focusing on research on philosophy is offered by Chŏn Miyŏng (2006).

<sup>5</sup> The studies of Yulgok have probably been seriously hindered by the absence of modern editions of his works. In fact, the only one of the three crucial 16<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers whose *munjip* was published is Hwadam (see *Hwadamjip*, 1965). *Ch'ŏrhak yŏn'gu* at least tried to supply readers with samples of texts of the most famous thinkers of the past (in both the original, i.e. *hanmun* version, and translation). In 1962, it published Yulgok's letter to Ugye Sŏng Hon (*Yulgok chŏnsŏ* 10:24b-30a; this letter is Yulgok's sixth letter to Ugye in the course of their Four-Seven Debate) under the title “Several documents concerning the philosophical thought of Ryulgok Ri I” (*Ch'ŏrhak yŏn'gu* 1962, 3:80-85).

<sup>6</sup> Yulgok is mentioned in various studies but concerning articles dealing specifically with him, we may name some of the most recent: Ri Sangch'ŏl (1997); Pyŏn Chŏng'am (2006, 35-38, 47); Ro Hakhŭi (2002). The older works are represented by Ri Ch'anghwa (1961, 1962) and Ri Hyŏnggil (1956). Note that the authors of the journal papers are usually not the same people as the compilers of the academic histories of philosophy.

offer rather concise and straightforward definitions of Yulgok's thought. In 1970, Yulgok was introduced as a "politician and feudal Confucian scholar" (*Ch'ŏrhak sajŏn* 1970, 218) and in 1985 he emerged as a "representative scholar of *li* and *qi* dualism who emphasized the role of *qi* (*chugironja*)" (*Ch'ŏrhak sajŏn* 1985, 210). The same description is valid for numerous DPRK encyclopaedias or historical dictionaries, which usually contain an entry on Yulgok and his thought. He is frequently mentioned (sometimes at significant length) in many textbooks and historical works,<sup>7</sup> and is treated in some detail in other specialised academic areas, such as the history of Korean economy or social history (Kim Kwangjin et al. 1963). It is important to note that the picture of Yulgok differs within various areas and genres in both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions.

The best example of the multiplicity of possible interpretations within DPRK discourse could be the popular depictions of Yulgok; regardless of the academic discussions concerning the backwardness or progressiveness of Yulgok's thought, he has, since the very beginning, been considered a truly important historical figure, and has appeared in more or less popular historical books. In 1962, he (together with his mother) was included in a book-length overview of famous personalities of the Korean past together with heroes such as admiral Yi Sunsin (1545-1598), the patriot An Chunggŭn (1879-1910), and even the Buddhist master Sŏsan Taesa (1520-1604) (*Chosŏn ūi myŏngin* 1962, 356-67).<sup>8</sup> The fact that this honour was not automatically granted to all the important figures of the past is illustrated by the fact that the publication does not mention T'oegye and other figures considered to be too reactionary or problematic (as, for example, King Sejong). With the growing recognition of historical figures in the last two decades, Yulgok was, due to his personal qualities, also included in a popular book for children, where he serves as a model of virtue described in traditional stories such as "Three-year-old Yulgok," "Advice to the king," "The foreign envoy who was fascinated by *Ch'ŏndoch'aek*,"<sup>9</sup> and "Meeting with a woman in Hwangju" (*Chosŏn ūi irŭmnan chakka wa irhwa* 2009, 27-38). It is quite natural that these sources employ a rhetoric distinct from that of academic books and are more suited to a popular audience, therefore offering a significantly different evaluation of Yulgok as a representative of traditional thought. In contrast with this positive picture of him as a model for children, we can also find, in historical scholarship, a description of the same person as a typical supporter of the reactionary feudal order and propagator of regressive ideas. These evaluations do not contradict but rather complement each other in terms of the structure of public and academic discourse and the supposed

<sup>7</sup> The comprehensive *Chosŏn chŏnsa* treats Yulgok in relative length in the section on medieval philosophy; see *Chosŏn chŏnsa* IX (1980, 346-51). The most recent work in the field devotes two pages to Yulgok (*Chosŏn tандаesa-Rijosa* VIII 2011, 98-99).

<sup>8</sup> The author of the entry is Chŏng Chinsŏk. The book was compiled by the Institute of History (Ryŏksa yŏnguso) of Kim Il Sung University.

<sup>9</sup> *Ch'ŏndoch'aek* (A Treatise on the Way of Heaven) was an essay submitted by Yulgok during the highest state examinations in 1558. In 1582 it was highly praised by Ming envoys visiting Korea. See *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* 16, 10/11/1-1.

reception of such statements; the popular picture of the personality of Yulgok aimed at children is not identical with the role of his thought in relation to revolutionary ideas for adults.

While acknowledging the different North Korean sources that contain information on Yulgok, the present article will examine the perception of the philosopher on the academic level in journals and books focused on the history of Korean philosophy published by DPRK scholars. This study analyses two of the most representative publications of this field: *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa 1* from 1960 and *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa 4*, which was published in 2010. Through a comparative analysis, my aim is to detect the main features of DPRK discourse on Yulgok and to understand the basic dynamics within North Korean Yulgok studies over the last fifty years. These two books are only two ends of a continuous sequence of publications on the history of Korean thought and Yulgok, including *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak sasang yŏn'gu* (Research on Korean Philosophical Thought) published in 1975, *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa kaeyo* (The Outline of the History of Korean Philosophy) published in 1986, *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa 2* (1987), and *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa* (2007). In spite of their different titles, *Chosŏn yulli sasangsa 2* (The History of Korean Ethical Thought, volume 2) from 1993 and *Ch'ŏrhak chisik* (Philosophical Knowledge), published in 2009, also belong to the category of the history of philosophy, and thus contain chapters on Yulgok. These publications<sup>10</sup> represent a relatively stable model of interpretation focused on pre-modern Korean thought and do not essentially diverge from the basic methodological structure defined in 1960. What does differentiate them, however, is essentially the nature and rhetorical discourse of the evaluation of certain thinkers and schools. The history of Korean traditional thought is understood, in this context, as the history of a struggle between materialism and idealism from the very beginning to the present time. What is variable is the application of the values and criteria connected with this model as applied to individual thinkers and their thought. From the relatively critical black-and-white stance in the first publications, judgments were transformed into a more positive picture of traditional Korean thought, employing a more subtle scale of assessment. This change, however, is best evidenced by juxtaposing the earliest and the latest works in order to delineate the points of divergence concerning the reception of the Confucian thinker within the changing ideological framework of the DPRK.

Due to the difficulties inherent in studying North Korean sources, institutions, ideology, and scholarly practices, it is very hard to construct a precise picture of the field of Korean philosophical studies in the DPRK. Especially regrettable is the logistical impossibility of obtaining even basic information as to the most important source: the North Korean scholars who authored these studies. Their biographical trajectories, educational backgrounds, professional profiles and above all, their honest personal opinion would be particularly helpful; the restricted possibilities of academic dialogue in the DPRK, however, create obstacles

<sup>10</sup> For a comparative study regarding books about the history of Korean philosophy before the publication of *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa kaeyo*, see Yi Namyŏng 1988.

which are very difficult to overcome. During my stay at Kim Il Sung University in 2012 I attempted to discuss this topic with many colleagues in the DPRK, but the sensitivity of political issues connected to Korean Confucianism and the historical past meant that I simply could not obtain first-hand opinions and views on the many questions posed in this study. The library of Kim Il Sung University provided most of the sources used in this article, followed by the library of the Korean Studies Department of Charles University in Prague, which holds many materials from the decades of cooperation with academic institutions in the DPRK.

### ***The History of Korean Philosophy, 1960***

The first and probably the most fundamental text for understanding the views on Confucianism and traditional thought in the DPRK is *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa* (The History of Korean Philosophy) published by Chŏng Chinsŏk, Chŏng Sŏngch'ŏl, and Kim Ch'angwŏn in 1960. The institution supporting their effort was the Historical Department of the Academy of Sciences and this book achieved huge success and became the model for nearly all subsequent volumes dealing with the history of Korean philosophy for decades to come. The importance of the book lay in the fact that it was compiled as a model publication intended to incorporate traditional philosophy into Marxist-Leninist discourse and provide a class-conscious examination of the development of Korean thought. The situation was urgent because fifteen years after liberation academia in the DPRK still lacked a comprehensive book on the topic. In the foreword, the purpose of this undertaking is well described:

One of the urgent tasks these days for scholars in the field of Korean philosophy is the scientific organization of the history of our philosophy. It has great significance not only in the continual development of the outstanding philosophical heritage left to us by our ancestors, but is also absolutely necessary for the liquidation of and struggle with the remaining old ways of thinking. But studies of the history of Korean philosophy are still in their infancy and many areas remain untouched virgin territory. The present publication was compiled under the circumstances of the complete lack of a publication systematically treating the history of philosophical thought in our country that could assist workers in their studies of the history of Korean philosophy. The present *History of Korean Philosophy* (I) treats the history of Korean philosophy until the advent of Marx-Leninist philosophy in our country. (Chŏng Chinsŏk et al. 1962, I)

The task was urgent in the light of contemporary political developments: the transformation of the regime of the DPRK toward more direct control under the leadership of Kim Il Sung. A vivid memento of the fundamental changes during this period is the second preface for the new edition, written only eighteen months after the first one. Unlike the original preface, which does not mention Kim Il Sung at all, this text urges the implementation of the ideas of the beloved leader and extensively quotes Kim Il Sung's address to social scientists from his speech at the Fourth Congress of the Workers' Party in 1961. Seen from a historical perspective, the book presents a watershed between two stages of the regime's development;

it retains certain features of the publications of the post-liberation period, but also, for the first time, establishes the prescribed interpretations that were to be authoritative in the following decades. The book marks the end of the early stages of philosophical studies in the DPRK in a twofold manner: although its ideological framework is innovative, the format of the book is rather traditional. Political developments in the 1960s brought many lasting changes which are not yet evident in this publication, including the simple fact that it does not display the quotations of the beloved leader in an enlarged type size, as was to be the case later on, for example. The main scholarly difference lays in the standard format of footnotes, in which the original quotes in Chinese characters are inserted, as well as the extensive use of Chinese characters in the text. This aspect is most conspicuous in contrast with the next publication in the field of Korean philosophy, *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak sasang yŏn'gu*, published in 1975, where, due to the policy of language purification, Chinese characters are completely missing, even in personal names and book titles.

The unified model for a description of Korean philosophy was necessary in order to gain control<sup>11</sup> over varying voices not willing to accept simplistic interpretations of the philosophical past. An illustrative example of the remnants of free discussion within North Korean academia is provided by the two articles on Yulgok and Tasan<sup>12</sup> by Ri Hyŏngil published in 1955-1956 in a prominent journal (at the time) for historical and philosophical research, *Ryŏksa kwahak*. In a brilliant analysis of Yulgok's thought, Ri Hyŏngil proposed many essentially new interpretations, but at the same time expressed a direct critique of the materialist interpretation of *qi*, thus touching upon the basic dualistic structure (idealism-materialism, progressive-reactionary) of the Marxist-Leninist ideological interpretative framework, as well as that of later *chuch'e* ideology. The refutation of the simplistic definition of *qi* as matter in the Western sense would mean that the entire history of Korean philosophy would lack the domestic materialistic origins of progressive revolutionary thought as preached by the regime. The colleagues of Ri Hyŏngil quickly registered the potential danger and added a final statement to the article, saying that although it touched upon important questions of the development of Korean thought, the editors could not agree with its content (Ri Hyŏngil 1956: 53). It is no wonder that Ri Hyŏngil never again appeared in any

<sup>11</sup> The implementation of Marxist-Leninist views was a difficult theoretical task, and in the post-liberation period, it was still not clear to many people how to evaluate various thinkers of the past according to the new criteria. A certain picture of how the discussion looked like outside of the circles of professional philosophical specialists is given by the description of 16<sup>th</sup>-century thought in the textbook *Chōsŏnsa* (The History of Korea) for use by instructors of history published by the People's University of Economy (Inmin kyŏngje taehak) in 1955. Hwadam is here depicted as a dualist in agreement with Zhu Xi (in a mere three lines of text); the eight lines devoted to Toegye are a relatively positive acknowledgement of his important place in the history of Korean philosophy, and the twelve lines concerning Yulgok credit him with establishing Zhu Xi's orthodoxy in the educational institutions of his day. All of these interpretations were to become unpublishable just a mere five years later; Hwadam became the greatest materialist thinker, Toegye was declared a reactionary element, and one of the main virtues of Yulgok, saving him from Toegye's fate, was that he criticized Zhu Xi. See *Chōsŏnsa* 1955, 493.

<sup>12</sup> The problems of the North Korean interpretation of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Korean discourse on *qi* are described well in Chang Wŏnmok 2002.

publications concerning Korean philosophy. At the same time, however, this incident illustrated the urgent necessity for concise and authoritative publications on such questions. In addition to its important domestic role, the book became representative of North Korean views on philosophy for the international audience as well, and for many years it served as one of the few available sources on the subject.<sup>13</sup>

The whole structure of the book is based on the basic dichotomy of materialism and idealism, beginning with the first chapter titled “The fight of materialistic philosophy against religion and idealism during the Old Chosŏn and Three Kingdoms periods.” Yulgok’s thought is treated in the chapter describing the fight for materialism in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries against various currents of idealism, entitled: “The 16<sup>th</sup>-century formation of schools emphasizing principle *li* (*churi*) and *qi* (*chugi*) and their representatives.” Apart from the interesting question of how the much debated terminology (*churi*, *chugi*), originally coined by the Japanese colonial scholar Takahashi Tōru (1878-1967), came to be employed within a Marxist-Leninist framework, it is important to understand the basic delimitation of the content of this chapter. The classification of certain thinkers bears immediate judgement concerning their role and importance; materialist and progressive tendencies are to be valued, idealist and reactionary ones to be condemned. These judgements are to be observed on a relative scale and compared with other evaluations. In the case of Yulgok, it means that his academic evaluation must be understood within the context of the most important thinkers of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Korean Confucianism: Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk (1489-1546) and T’oegye Yi Hwang (1501-1570). In this triad, Hwadam represents the materialist stance, T’oegye occupies the positions of objective idealism (i.e., Zhu Xi orthodoxy), and Yulgok is seen as postulating a middle way integrating both positions. To fully grasp the nuances of this assessment of Yulgok’s thought, we have to see it in contrast to his two senior colleagues. Yulgok does not often attract the level of praise usually reserved for Hwadam, who is described as having made “an epoch-making contribution to the development of materialist philosophy” (Chŏng Chinsŏk et al. 1962, 124) and as a scholar who “received the love and respect of the people” (Chŏng Chinsŏk et al. 1962, 125). On the other hand, he was spared much of the criticisms targeted at T’oegye and his interpretation of the Confucian canon, which to a certain degree was not only aimed at T’oegye, but also at all of Confucianism.

Such [T’oegye’s] conservative and reactionary theories served for the next 300 years as a governing ideology for the ruling class of the Yi dynasty. When the Japanese imperialists occupied Korea, in order to ideologically subjugate the Korean people, they wanted to indoctrinate them with reactionary feudal and bourgeois ideas, including religious superstitions and all kinds of idealism. Therefore Japanese reactionary “scholars” took Yi Hwang’s ideas, including both philosophical and moral/ethical concepts, and elevated

<sup>13</sup> A Japanese edition, translated by Song Chihak/Shigaku Sō 宋枝學, followed quickly in 1962. The Russian translation by A.M. Ushkov was published as *Istoriia koreiskoi filosofii*, vol. 1 in 1966. In South Korea, the edition appeared as *Chosŏn ch’ŏrhaksa* in 1988.



him to the place of the foremost figure in the history of Korean philosophy. The American imperialists and their instruments nestling in South Korea replaced the Japanese Empire and also wanted to paralyze and enslave the consciousness of struggle of the South Korean people, not only through indoctrination into their corrupt and degenerated “American lifestyle,” but also by openly advocating feudalistic morality and ethics based on the Three Moral Bonds and Five Human Relations (*samgang oryun*) in their books and speeches. Here again, Yi Hwang and his reactionary thought were employed and reactivated in South Korea. (Chông Chinsök et al. 1962, 148-49)

The consideration of the value of both the positive and negative definitions of Yulgok’s thought or person must be compared with the other currents and personalities of Korean Confucianism in order to create a relevant picture of the scale of values that was employed. From the quantitative point of view, Yulgok’s entry in the book consists of twenty-four pages, and thus is the longest one among all the thinkers of Chosŏn period, compared with eighteen pages devoted to T’oegyŏ, twenty-one to Hwadam, and twenty-two to Tasan Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836). In later publications Yulgok is slightly overshadowed by the *sirhak* scholars, most notably Tasan, Yŏnam Pak Chiwŏn (1737-1805), and Ch’oe Han’gi (1803-1879), who were much more in favour with the regime, but within the context of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Yulgok’s position remained unchanged. From the point of view of this quantitative analysis we may observe a relatively consistent attention to Yulgok in all works within the field: in most cases, he is the most commented-upon thinker of the pre-modern period.

The quantitative perspective has nonetheless only a limited value; most important is clearly not the number of pages devoted to a scholar, but rather his ideological evaluation. The most favoured thinker of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is Hwadam, but the brevity of his works does not allow the evaluators to give him more space.<sup>14</sup>

**Table 1.** Relative Quantitative Ranking of Korean Confucian Scholars

Year	1962	1975	1986	1987	1993	2007	2010
Hwadam	B <sup>15</sup> /20	D/6	D/6	F/12		D/6,5	E/37
T’oegyŏ	D/17	E/5	E/5	E/15	C/16	F/5,5	B/54
Yulgok	A/24	A/14	A/13,5	D/23	B/22	E/6	A/76
Yŏnam	F/12	F/4,5	E/5	C/29	D/11	C/9	E/37
Tasan	C/21	C/9	C/9	B/48	A/25	B/14	D/44
Ch’oe Han’gi	E/4,5	B/11,5	B/10	A/56	B/22	A/15	C/46

<sup>14</sup> This is also the reason why Hwadam was omitted in the *Chosŏn yulli sasangsa*. His short *munjip* contains almost no texts that could be described as moral-ethical or socio-political.

<sup>15</sup> Capital letters signify the relative ranking of various thinkers. Yulgok is in many publications the most commented upon thinker, gaining the first place (A) with the proportionally highest number of pages.

In spite of this, he is assessed much more positively than Yulgok. Probably the only case in which the quantitative and qualitative aspects correspond is that of T'oegyē, who is always something of a pariah compared to the other thinkers (with some minor improvement only in the most recent years).

*Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa* treats Yulgok in a systematic manner starting with his abstract philosophical ideas and ending with concrete economic and political proposals and opinions. The whole structure of the chapter devoted to him is divided into several parts treating his life (as well as his class background), his philosophical stances (basic attitudes, relations to other thinkers, epistemology, etc.), and his social and political thought. This distinction serves not only to categorize his ideas, but predominantly to diversify possible interpretations; various aspects of the same thinker may essentially differ according to what was being assessed. In regard to his philosophical achievements, Yulgok was praised because the “independent character and rational elements of his philosophical thought are even more clearly visible in his epistemology ... which contains materialistic elements” (Chŏng Chinsŏk et al. 1962, 158). On the other hand, we find judgments such as these: “Yi I's opinions on moral and ethics advocated for and served the feudal order based on class discrimination” (Chŏng Chinsŏk et al. 1962, 164). Every traditional scholar, including Yulgok, was judged within the framework of an elementary progressive-reactionary dichotomy and this evaluation differed from category to category. Yulgok was thus seen in certain areas as a progressive scholar attentive to the needs of the masses, and in others as a stereotypical *yangban* supporting the traditional social order. The elaborate classification of the various parts of Yulgok's work is connected with the basic theory of both individual and historical social background. In the play between class consciousness and historical conditions, Yulgok is frequently depicted as a person whose progressive ideas were not sufficient to enable him to overcome his basic determination as a Confucian literatus belonging to the *yangban* class. In these evaluations, we may detect a commentary on his epistemological and social reformist thought.

Yi I's epistemological views contain many materialistic and dialectical elements. Despite that, his philosophical system was not capable of escaping its limitations due to its idealistic nature, the historical conditions, and his class determination. (Chŏng Chinsŏk et al. 1962, 162)

In spite of the fact that Yi I's “reform” thought in many cases reflects an understanding of the people, he could not remain free of the limits imposed by the contemporary social-historical environment and his own class position. He vehemently criticised the evils and contradictions of feudal society, but could not understand them as contradictions of the feudal society system as such, or as contradictions based on class antagonisms. Therefore, he was unable to change it. (Chŏng Chinsŏk et al. 1962, 169)

These texts should be read within the broader context of constructing the legacy of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Confucianism, and it is important to understand the inherently dialectical nature of such an evaluation. In the world of dialectical materialism

with its continual replacement of thesis and anti-thesis, along with synthesis in the eternal process of overcoming historical stages, purely negative judgements are never presented, because after all even reactionary objective idealism (for example, T'oegy'e's thought) played a positive role in the fight against subjective idealism (Buddhism) and a negative role in relation to progressive materialistic thinking (Hwadam, for example). The fact that Yulgok was not able to "escape his limitations" does not deny the positive aspects in the critique of his role. An example could be the evaluation of his epistemology stating that "the positive content of Yi I's epistemological views was later continued by the *sirhak* scholars and became the basis of their epistemological thought" (Chöng Chinsök et al. 1962, 162). The linear model of historical development provides here a simple scale of progressive and reactionary categories and all ideas are to be understood within the framework of a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary teleology.

### **Progressive and Reactionary Aspects**

A brief historical introduction to the chapter dedicated to Yulgok from *Chosön ch'örhaksa* describes the basic features of his life and times; he is characterised as a philosophical representative of the *sarim* faction of literati representing the middle and small landholders. After a short list of Yulgok's main works, his basic philosophy is introduced. This is to be found in his letters to Ugye Söng Hon (1535-1598) (which form the basis of the Four-Seven Debate as well; Chöng Chinsök et al. 1962, 150). The focus of analysis is twofold: to explain the basic features of Yulgok's philosophical stance and to describe it within the categories of materialism and idealism. The very beginning of the passage broaches the crucial question of his relationship to the authority of Zhu Xi. Yulgok's informal remarks in a letter<sup>16</sup> seemingly critical of Zhu Xi serve as proof of his opposition to that philosophy of objective idealism, which was the ideology of the feudal classes. It is repeatedly stressed that this critique, or even just the possibility of admitting that Zhu Xi could be wrong, was clear proof of Yulgok's independent and critical spirit.

This distinguishes him from T'oegy'e, who was allegedly a blind and uncritical follower of the orthodox canon (Chöng Chinsök et al. 1962, 132, 151). On the other hand, it is clear that in spite of certain innovations, Yulgok stood firmly on the position of objective idealism and his views were far from the materialist position of Hwadam.

Yi I, on the one hand, assumed a critical stance toward the traditional Zhu Xi school (*chujahak*), but on the other, he opposed the materialist opinion of *qi* monism (*kiirwöllon*) and developed his own independent compromise. Although his philosophical thought contains many elements of naive dialectical materialism, he did not cross the borders of objective idealism. (Chöng Chinsök et al. 1962, 150-51)

<sup>16</sup> The authors deliberately ignore the fact that in spite of a few critical remarks, Yulgok deeply admired and respected Zhu Xi.

The fundamental problem of the relationship between *li* and *qi* is used here for the creation of a basic typology describing the distinctions within the field of subjective idealism, that is, the Zhu Xi school. T'oegye's emphasis on the role of principle is labelled as *li* monism (*iirwöllon*), Yulgok's thought is described as *li* and *qi* dualism (*igiwöllon*),<sup>17</sup> and Hwadam's thought is depicted as *qi* monism (*kiirwöllon*) belonging to the sphere of materialism. This raises the question of why *li* and *qi* dualism would be perceived as being closer to idealism than to materialism when it could be seen as encompassing aspects of both. The answer given to this problem within the text is simply to state that "in the history of philosophy, what is called 'dualism' is, by its nature, already confirmed as belonging to idealism" (Chöng Chinsök et al. 1962, 154). These artificial definitions are, however, accompanied by very precise scholarly work with the original sources that attempts to demonstrate the basic points of difference between T'oegye, Yulgok, and Hwadam. In addition to the polemic on T'oegye about the nature and function of *li* and *qi*, a great amount of attention is devoted to the problem of the original state of *qi*, which is considered to be the crucial difference between Yulgok and Hwadam. The main thesis of Yulgok's thought, "*li* penetrates and *qi* delimits," is also presented in close comparison with Hwadam's thought and praised as the result of Yulgok's independent spirit. The following section introduces a series of Yulgok's ideas labelled as an epistemology (*insingnon*), consisting of a wide spectrum of his views on the acquisition of knowledge, study, or the problem of the senses, cognitive abilities, and so on. As in many other aspects, Yulgok is praised for the materialist elements of his views, which include his critique of Buddhism, the general theory of the impossibility of sensory perception after death, and a certain stress on empiricism in the case of Mencius's theory of the Four Beginnings and their relation to external impetus (for instance, the classical example of the child falling into the well). The main focus is, however, devoted to his critique of bookish learning and his stress on practical knowledge, such as the famous distinction of the three levels of knowledge, described in his metaphor of the mountain. The stupid person knows the mountain only from hearsay, ordinary man sees it from below but the wise person seeks direct evidence by climbing it (Chöng Chinsök et al. 1962, 160-61; *Yulgok chönsö* 10: 34a-38b). Also subsumed under the epistemological category are Yulgok's views on human relations (which are considered to be fully in accord with feudalistic values) as well as his theory of the human mind and the mind of the Way (*insim tosim*). This locus *classicus* of Yulgok's theory of human nature and physical needs is a good example of the hermeneutical contortions employed to describe Yulgok in a light more suitable to the perspective of a "people's democracy." Yulgok's statement that even the sage has the same physical needs as an ordinary man is juxtaposed to T'oegye's warning against human desires, which are difficult to control.

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that Zhu Xi himself is in the book described as an advocate of *li-qi* dualism (Chöng Chinsök et al. 1962, 38). T'oegye's *li* monism is, in this interpretation, different from the model he was accused of blindly following.

Yi Hwang statements concerning food and clothing say that these desires are human desires and even if practiced properly, they are evil. This idea was used to suppress even the elementary physical needs of the people. But as we have seen above, Yi I's theory to a certain degree displays an interest in [the means] of production of those days. Thus it is connected with the reflection of class interest, which also has a relative concern for the reproduction of the human labour force. (Chŏng Chinsŏk et al. 1962, 164-65)

The overall evaluation of Yulgok's philosophical thought remains ambivalent; he serves as a more positive counterpart to the reactionary and idealist T'oegye, but in spite of his allegedly materialist tendencies, it is clear that Yulgok always remained within the limits of traditional Confucianism; hence it is not technically possible to ascribe revolutionary or materialist tendencies to him. Even as early as in the introductory passages it is also stressed that his thought became the ideological background of the factional fight within the Chosŏn ruling class which "became an important cause of the fall of the Yi dynasty" (Chŏng Chinsŏk et al. 1962, 149). His greatest achievement, the Four-Seven Debate and its legacy, is also judged as merely one contribution to the formation of two currents (*churi* and *chugi*) within the Zhu Xi school. These lasted up to the end of the dynasty, incapable of further development, in the form of a "scholastic debate" (Chŏng Chinsŏk et al. 1962, 152). Given this overall evaluation, we may say that the *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa* presents the most critical evaluation of Yulgok's thought compared with both previous and later publications. The value of his philosophy was judged mostly by its proximity to materialist thought, and although considered better than the other currents of *daoxue* in Korea, it was still heavily criticised for remaining in a position of objective idealism, the traditional theoretical framework of the Zhu Xi school of Confucianism.

Placed in a much more favourable light are Yulgok's ideas concerning the social and political sphere, where he is depicted as a "patriotic political activist planning the strengthening of the country," and at the same time as a person "sharing feelings with the common people." As an alleged representative of the *sarim* faction of the literati, who were classified by North Korean historiography as middle and small landowners (*chungso chiju*), Yulgok was much closer to the daily life of the oppressed classes and had therefore a much more favourable class background with which to launch a critique of feudal society than other contemporary thinkers (mostly classified as representatives of the ruling class, i.e., large landowners). His practical observations of the poor conditions of the Korean peasantry, combined with the traditional Confucian ethos of love for the people (*aemin*), are described as the main motive of his reform proposals, including the lifting of tax burdens or the punishment of corrupt officials. Another feature of Yulgok's social thought praised in North Korean historiography is the stress placed on the adjustment of the traditional order to the new circumstances generally summarised under the term "change of laws" (*pyŏnbŏp*). The highest praise is reserved for Yulgok's famous memorandum *Manŏn pongsa*, in which he advocated for the creation of an army of 100,000 men in order to repel any possible southern or northern invasions. The Imjin war (1592-1598), which started eight years after

his death, and the Manchu invasions, which quickly followed, proved the validity of his proposal and gained Yulgok fame as the only scholar who understood the needs of the country. The historical significance of his memorandum is contrasted with the court officials' complete lack of preparedness for the war: "The ignoring of Yi I's relevant patriotic national defence policy was a major crime of the ruling classes" (171). Yulgok's patriotic spirit is also discerned behind the hero of the Imjin war, the scholar Cho Hön (1544-1592) who summoned volunteer troops and died fighting the invaders, "Such ardent patriotism, as in the case of Cho Hön, was by no means accidental. It was the particular influence of the patriotic ideas of Yi I" (Chöng Chinsök et al. 1962, 171). The story of the *Manön pongsa* and Yulgok's effort to strengthen the country always formed part of the folklore surrounding his person, but the regime of the DPRK, forever building up the mentality of a nation under siege and the idea of a continual struggle against foreign invasions, adopted this motif with special enthusiasm. Such patriotic achievement overshadowed the obvious fact that many parts of Yulgok's ideas were marked by a typically "idealist nature," such as stressing loyalty to the king, or his concepts of various community compacts (*hyangyak*), which "reinforced the position of the landowning class." The critical approach toward Yulgok's social thought is on the other hand visible in the prevalent silence about Yulgok's influence on the later reformist scholars of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, who are generally placed together under the label of the *sirhak* school. This connection, already constructed or analysed in previous works dealing with Yulgok or the *sirhak* scholars, is frequently accented in later works, where it serves to demonstrate the positive contribution of Yulgok to the development of the most glorified school of Korean thought.

### ***The Complete History of Korean Philosophy, 2010***

*Chosön ch'örhak chönsa*, published 50 years after its first predecessor, fully reflects the changes within North Korean historical discourse, yet at the same time retains many features outlined already in 1960. Unlike *Chosön ch'örhaksa*, which could be seen as the basic manual for evaluating traditional Korean thought from the ideological perspective of the new regime, *Chosön ch'örhak chönsa* was consciously composed as a representative publication<sup>18</sup> intended to demonstrate the achievements of North Korean academia under the first two leaders. Its scope (15 volumes) and format, including an artificial leather hardcover with golden embossed letters and paper of unique (in North Korea) quality with clear print, makes it a publication suitable not only for the history of Korean philosophy, but also for the presentation of Kim Il Sung's philosophical thought (vols. 10-12) as well as that of his successor (vols. 13-15). The purpose of the book reflects one significant change in the perception of the past within the DPRK in recent decades: unlike *Chosön ch'örhaksa*, which analysed Korean thought within the framework of a relatively mechanical Marxist-Leninist methodology, *Chosön ch'örhak chönsa*

<sup>18</sup> It is also a part of the broader publication project *Chosön sahoe kwahak haksulchip-ch'örhakp'yön*, vols. 227-31.

was written in conformity with *chuch'e* ideology, as well as for the glorification of the Korean nation and its heroic past and present. Immediately, the foreword opens with a clear statement:

The great leader **Kim Jong Il**<sup>19</sup> stated the following: “THERE ARE MANY COUNTRIES AND NATIONS IN THE WORLD, BUT THERE IS NO SUCH NATION AS THE KOREAN NATION WHICH, AS A UNIQUE RACE, CREATED ON THE RIVER HAN A SPLENDID CULTURE WITH A LONG HISTORY.”<sup>20</sup> (*Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak ch'ŏn*sa 1, 5)

The stressing of the importance of traditional thought for the modern age does not, however, imply any “reactionary overlooking of the historical and class determination ... of Korea’s philosophical heritage” (8). We may wonder what exactly reactionary views or attempts for the restoration of the old order (*pokkujuŭi*) could imply in contemporary North Korea, but it is necessary to stress that the regime has always been cautious when it comes to boundless admiration of the past. If history is to be evaluated and possibly granted its own recognition, this must be performed from a revolutionary position and not based on the lure of feudalistic Confucian ideas. Even the most recent bibliographical study of Yulgok’s literary works warns at the end “in *Yulgok chŏnsŏ* there regularly appear unscientific texts representing feudal Confucian ideas and therefore these writings must always be treated critically” (Ri Sangch’ŏl 1997, 447). This attitude is not much different from the comment published 30 years previously on *Yulgok chŏnsŏ*, warning: “we have to be firmly aware of the problematic points of *Yulgok chŏnsŏ* and use this book critically” (*Minjok kojŏn haesŏk* 1980, 139). This source also quite openly states the basic methodological approach toward classical philosophical works, contained in Kim Il Sung’s formulation:

WE MUST INSPECT ALL OLD BOOKS IN ORDER NOT TO SHOW DECADENT PEOPLE AND BAD THINGS. EVEN THE USABLE BOOKS HAVE TO BE TREATED CRITICALLY. THE OLD BOOKS WE NEED ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH A COMMENTARY IN ORDER TO USE THEM IN COMMUNIST EDUCATION. (*Minjok kojŏn haesŏk* 1980, 1)

This approach is not only strikingly similar to the traditional Confucian approach to prevent people from being confused by dangerous knowledge,<sup>21</sup> but reminds us that even the most recent publications like *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak ch'ŏn*sa have no intention of offering an objective picture of traditional philosophy, but instead are

<sup>19</sup> The quotations from this work are presented in the following way to better reflect the original Korean text: bold letters for the names of both leaders and a larger, bold typeface for their quotations in all caps. In this sense, it is interesting to note the striking similarity to the traditional forms of honorific textual patterns such as the space in front of the name of the ruler or dynasty.

<sup>20</sup> Many quotations from Kim Jong Il are in fact examples of the oral tradition of alleged speech (“he remarked”), with no bibliographical notations.

<sup>21</sup> The locus *classicus* is to be found in the *Lunyu* 7:21: “The Master did not converse about marvels, feats of strength, political disorder, or spirits.”

intent upon using it as a tool in the education of scholars and readers according to the values of *chuch'è* ideology. The subject of the history of philosophy is part of the same class struggle as before and its theoretical superstructure remains identical to all previous cases, yet with specific amendments. We may therefore state that the main purpose of the work is to glorify the Korean past within the demands of a progressive-reactionary dichotomy. The methodological introduction of the work makes clear the relationship between *chuch'è* ideology to traditional thought through the following statement:

If we say that the development of the philosophy in the past was the history of the fight between materialism and idealism in which materialism and dialectical thought emerged victorious, we could also say the development of contemporary philosophy is the history of the fight between *chuch'è* philosophy, focusing on the human subject, and various opportunistic trends, beginning with bourgeois philosophy, in which *chuch'è* philosophy emerged victorious. Concerning the systematic history of *chuch'è* philosophy, we must write it as a history emerging from and developing within the struggles with reactionary and opportunistic thought, which have opposed *chuch'è* philosophy continuously since its instigation. (*Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa* 1, 10)

The *chuch'è* perspective is present in this book on a level that is unparalleled in previous publications; the most significant change is the extensive usage of the Great Leader's quotations and the insertion of general educative instructions addressing matters only vaguely related to the topic. In the case of the chapter on Yulgok (compiled by Pyŏn Chŏngam and Kim Suyŏng), we encounter at the beginning perhaps the first direct comment of the highest authority on the scholar:

WHEN WE LOOK AT THE THOUGHT BEQUEATHED BY RI RYULGOK, WE MAY KNOW THAT IN HIS TIME AND SOCIETY HE WAS A PERSON WHO WAS THE BEARER OF PROGRESSIVE IDEAS (*Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa* 4, 247).<sup>22</sup>

On many other pages as well we find exhortations toward patriotism or statements such as: "THE SUBJECT OF PERCEPTION IS MAN ITSELF." The task of publication is not only to give a reader the ideologically correct interpretation of Yulgok or other thinkers, but also to educate him in the broader sense. This pedagogic aim results in a number of passages in which various topics are mixed together in the expectation that the reader will thus gain some kind of instruction, often largely unrelated to Yulgok or his ideas. A frequent strategy is to combine Yulgok's thought with that of a Western or Chinese thinker in order to grasp the problem in a broader context. Combining a discussion of Yulgok with Democritus, Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes (*Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa* 4: 269) is equally part of the

<sup>22</sup> This quotation appeared earlier in Kim Suyŏng and Kim Myŏngsu 2009, 106 but it was only mentioned as an oral remark. *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa* indicates as the source Kim Jong Il 2006, 1.



broader strategy of elevating Korean thinkers to the ranks of their better-known foreign colleagues. Such a comparative method is used only in cases that are complimentary to the Korean situation. One-fifth of the entry concerning T'oegye is devoted to his influence on Japanese thinkers ranging from Fujiwara Seika (1561-1619) to Motoda Nagasane (1818-1891); Yulgok's opinions on knowledge and action (*chihaeng*) are likewise compared positively with those of Wang Yangming. On the other hand, in order to underline the uniqueness of Korean thinkers, there is almost no mention of Zhu Xi in relation to Yulgok, while the Ming thinker Luo Qinshun (1465-1547) and his role in the development of Yulgok's thought are both completely ignored. This silence is by no means accidental: Yulgok himself, in a widely known passage (*Yulgok ch'önsö* 10: 37a-b), cited Luo Qinshun as one of the three most important thinkers influencing him (together with Hwadam and T'oegye). In 1960, *Chosön ch'örhaksa*, along with other older sources, openly stressed the importance of this connection (in part also because Luo Qinshun was considered to be a materialist). The main reason for the change is the tendency not to credit any foreign thinker with influence on this important Korean philosopher. A propensity to glorify Yulgok is fully in accord with the overall tone, stressing Yulgok's achievements without much mention of his "class determination" and his allegiance to "objective idealism." The basic framework of the interpretation of his thought, however, remains largely the same:

Yi I deeply studied Yi Hwang's idealist philosophy and Sö Kyöngdök's materialist theories, and then, integrating both of them, developed his independent philosophical thought of *li* and *qi* dualism, proposing as well his radical social reform thought representing the interests of the progressive stratum of the *yangban* class. His philosophical and socio-political thought could not overcome the scope of *söngnihak* idealism but there are within it elements of materialism and a practical perspective, which demonstrate tendencies of advancement. The rational parts of his philosophy were in later times further developed by progressive scholars and became the foundation of the emergence and development of *sirhak*, the representative current of progressive thought during the end of the Chosön period. (*Chosön ch'örhak chönsa* 4, 247)

The categories of historical materialism remain the same, but the rhetoric and general evaluation of Korean Confucianism has abruptly shifted, and not only in the case of Yulgok. A much more positive evaluation is particularly visible in the case of T'oegye, who on the one hand is criticised for his idealism yet receives the acknowledgment that "from the perspective of Zhu Xi school of *xinglixue*, which on the international level presents one of the major currents of thought, it could be said that Yi Hwang's philosophy occupies a very distinguished position." A special remark inserted into the paragraph dealing with Yulgok's and T'oegye's debate concerning human nature even assures readers that "of course it is difficult to see Yi Hwang's theory concerning the transformation of human nature completely negatively" (289). This elevation of Korean thinkers, was not selective but general; previously criticised scholars were in some way or another recognised (T'oegye), previously somewhat recognised figures became viewed almost entirely positively

(Yulgok), and the most prominent scholars of the past were exalted even further (Hwadam). An international perspective provided a useful tool to stress the qualities of Korean thinkers, such that we may encounter passages where Kim Jong Il compares Hwadam with Spinoza, or the exalted exclamation that “THINKERS LIKE KIM SISŬP AND SŎ KYŎNGDŎK, ACTIVE IN MEDIEVAL TIMES IN OUR COUNTRY, WERE MATERIALISTS OF A SORT WE COULD NOT EVEN IMAGINE IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE” (20). The language of the entire publication is highly laudatory of the positive contributions of Korean thinkers either to the development of progressive thought (Yulgok), or at least of their achievements in the terms of the evolution of Korean philosophy (T’oegyē). This flexibility of judgement was caused by the creation of new categories in addition to the traditional labels of materialism and idealism. For a more subtle differentiation within the idealist Confucian tradition, further categories were elaborated or older categories more sharply defined, such as progressive and reactionary thinking, as in the following crucial statement:

When we summarize the philosophical thought of the first half of the Yi dynasty, we can discover, in addition to materialist philosophy, *another* current as well, driving the development of progressive thought. This is the current of progressive thought within *sŏngnihak* represented by Chŏng Tojŏn, Kim Chongjik, Cho Kwangjo, and Yi I. (*Chosŏn ch’ŏrhak chŏnsa* 4, 323, emphasis added)

Scholars are no longer evaluated merely by their proximity to materialist thought but also by their reformist or moral attitudes, thus providing a certain space to make subtler judgements about their historical significance. The softening of the ideological critique in *Chosŏn ch’ŏrhak chŏnsa* is accompanied by the simplification of the content; the text no longer addresses the specialist on Korean philosophy, but strives to enlighten the lay reader. The pedagogical intent is visible in popularizing and often highly misleading attempts to define certain basic terms like *taiji* (the Great Ultimate) or the *li* principle in naive statements, for example, explaining that “*taiji* appears as the basic term of *sŏngnihak* cosmology” (*Chosŏn ch’ŏrhak chŏnsa* 4, 248), or guiding readers with rhetorical exclamations such as: “So what (*todaech’ŏ*) kind of existence is the principle *li*?” (*Chosŏn ch’ŏrhak chŏnsa* 4, 255). The overall tone of the text does not assume that the reader is familiar with the basic questions of Korean Confucianism, but compared with previous publications, the exposition is not easily comprehensible. The attempt to explain all the problems of Yulgok’s thought in plain and simple wording results in a very shallow overview, hard to understand even for the specialist. One typical example is the introduction of the crucial topic of human nature within the context of Yulgok’s thought. After a brief introduction consisting of a quotation from Kim Il Sung, eighteen lines of text follow which explain the problem of human nature from Mencius and Xunzi to T’oegyē. The text does not suppose any level of knowledge about Confucian discourse on human nature on the part of the reader, and provides no comprehensive explanation before it turns to this issue in Yulgok’s works. In the absence of the basic theoretical equipment, the inexperienced reader is lost in a sea

of shallow definitions provided for complicated problems such as the structure of human nature (the Four Beginnings and Seven Emotions), its transformations (the original state of nature and the physical state of nature, the moment of issuance, the not-yet-aroused and the aroused) and the general meaning of the concept of human nature. Especially peculiar are the comments on the Confucian theory of human nature from the perspective of modern psychology, attempting to prove its “unscientific” nature. The *Chosŏn ch’ŏrhak ch’ŏnsa* could be (in comparison with previous works in the field) characterised as a popular and rather propagandistic text with relatively minimal scholarly value in terms of a possible understanding of Yulgok’s ideas.

### **New Positive Perspectives on Yulgok**

The chapter on Yulgok is divided into two main parts, Philosophy (*ch’ŏrhak*) and Socio-Political Thought (*sahoe ch’ŏngch’i sasang*). The philosophical part is further structured into four fields: *Li* and *Qi* Dualism, Empiricist Epistemology, Ethical Theory (*yullisŏl*), and Socio-Historical Views (*sahoe ryŏksagwan*). Every entry contains several smaller paragraphs (*rit’ong kiguk*, objects of perception, a discussion on human nature, etc.). Yulgok’s views on the basic concept of *li* and *qi* are neutrally described as dualistic, without much negative connotation, and he is praised for having formed a counterweight to “the mysticism of the *li* monist philosophy” (*Chosŏn ch’ŏrhak ch’ŏnsa* 4, 260). This positive evaluation of his cosmological views which “contain materialist elements,” extends also to other areas of his thought: “This [dualistic] perspective penetrates all his theories, ranging from epistemology and ethics to socio-political thought; thus his philosophical ideas could become innovative and progressive in nature with a tendency to focus on reality” (260-61).

Such approval, though, does not mean that all his theories were accepted; his theory of human mind (*insim*) is praised as a theory of how to provide for the basic needs of people, but at the same time it is criticized for not being free of the traditional Confucian attitude toward human desires (*yok*) (291). His emphasis on the role of the sage (*sŏngin*) is seen as revealing the idealistic and metaphysical limitations of his thought. Yulgok’s philosophical legacy is analysed within a framework that is quite similar to that of previous publications, the text only occasionally expanding upon a number of topics, such as the theory of knowledge and action and a more detailed explanation of the process of the investigation of things in relation to human knowledge (*kyŏngmul ch’iji*). The treatment of Yulgok’s social thought displays the same features; although similar in structure to previous works, the rhetoric is much more positive. His ideas are described as empathetic toward the people, who are to be loved (*aemin*), apprehending them as the root (*minbon*) and object of a just government, with a realistic approach and sense for reform according to the needs of the situation, involving strong democratic elements (the theory of public opinion, *kongnon*), and also above all patriotism (Yulgok’s proposal of building an army of 100,000 men). The entries keep the traditional structure and focus, and in comparison to previous publications, only add more exalted praise. The concept of the *sirhak* scholars as the heirs of Yulgok’s

ideas is demonstrated by drawing the connection between certain reform thinkers such as Sŏngho Yi Ik (1681-1763), Pan'gye Yu Hyŏngwŏn (1622-1673), or Tamhŏn Hong Taeyong (1731-1783), quoting their favourable comments on Yulgok (322).

A distinct feature of the text is also its detailed treatment of a topic frequently omitted in South Korean publications: the problem of slavery or slaves (*nobi*). Yulgok was an important figure in the discussion concerning slavery and especially the problem of its inherited status; this meant that children of a female slave and a free father followed the social status of the mother (*chongmo pŏp*). This is a well-known fact since Yulgok presented his opinions in his famous explication of Korean society written for King Sŏnjo (1552-1608), the fictive dialogue *Tongho mundap* (Questions and Answers at Eastern Lake), which was quoted by many contemporary scholars and even by the authoritative encyclopaedia of the Yi dynasty *Chŭngbo munhŏn pigo* (Revised and Enlarged Complete Examination of Documents). The emphasis on this particular point is one of the specific focuses of historical research in the DPRK, because the slavery question belongs to the main pillars of Marxist class analysis of traditional Korean society. Yulgok's criticism of institutionalised slavery is thus accented as a clear sign of his humane and progressive attitude.

### **Conflicting Evaluations**

Seen through the content of *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa*, it seems that the attitude toward Chosŏn Confucians acquired a more positive tone in comparison with the previous decades as the general opinion on them shifted from the category of "feudal thinkers" to a more positive labelling as important Korean thinkers. Favourable statements not only about Yulgok, but to certain degree about T'oegye as well, create the impression that the academic discourse of the DPRK abandoned a stark black-and-white evaluation based on materialism and idealism and established a more compromising stance toward Korean Confucianism. But does *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa* really represent a positive turn toward the philosophical heritage of the past? A possible objection to this interpretation could be based on two arguments. The first is the very design of the publication: luxurious, and consisting of fifteen volumes, it is not very well suited to massive use by readers. In addition, its practical non-availability in bookshops indicates that its status is first and foremost symbolic, serving as a "scholarly display" for DPRK academia. The fact that it is just one publication among the hundreds of other volumes of *Chosŏn sahoe kwahak haksulchip* also supports the view that the purpose of the book is more or less symbolic. The second obstacle to the interpretation of this publication as the representative voice of North Korean academia is its position in comparison with other publications and articles from the same field. Nothing of the positive tone is repeated in academic journals, or even in the other current source on Korean traditional thought, *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa* by Chŏng Haesŏp and Chi Ilsin, published in 2007. This book can be considered as more widely used than *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa*: a fact attested by the appearance of a second edition in a relatively short period of time (2010). In analysing the ideological position of this book, we may return to that traditional litmus test of the perspective on

traditional thought, T'oegye.

Yi Hwang's philosophical thought, together with his moral and social-political views, received, due to their reactionary nature, the positive support of feudal rulers of those days; later on they were widely used by the feudal government of the Yi dynasty as a means of ideological control. Also, during the Japanese occupation of Korea, these ideas were used as an ideological instrument for the support of colonial rule. Nowadays, they are used in South Korea by the puppets of American imperialism as one of their ideological tools for control of the people. (Chông Haesöp and Chi Ilsin 2010, 90)

It is quite obvious that in this case the ideological position is completely unchanged: Korean Confucianism remains the hated enemy. A similar rhetoric, echoing the stances coined in the 1960s, is encountered in the chapter dealing with Yulgok. His theories are described only as "reflecting the demands of the ruling class," his moral thought is labelled as "idealist and reactionary," and even his patriotic and reform efforts are harshly rejected, since "he wanted only to relieve the intense class contradictions of the feudal system in order to make it last forever" (Chông Haesöp and Chi Ilsin 2010: 95-96). Viewed through this evaluation, there is not too much that is seen as praiseworthy in Yulgok's philosophy, which is judged as essentially idealistic with only a few minor positive elements. Such an evaluation as this is more or less in accord with all that has been stated in academic publications since 1960. The puzzling impression, however, is that within DPRK academia there currently exist two diverse approaches toward Yulgok: the negative evaluation, with the traditional assessment of Yulgok as an idealistic reactionary scholar; and a newer assessment, evaluating him as a progressive thinker. This schizophrenic situation is further illustrated by yet another publication. Within the project of the DPRK anthology of philosophical works, in addition to the new publication of *Chosön ch'örhak chönsa*, an influential book from 1986, the conservative *Chosön ch'örhaksa kaeyo* by Ch'oe Pongik, was reprinted. Thus, in the same anthology, alongside the more moderate stance of *Chosön ch'örhak chönsa*, there appears the traditional critique of Yulgok, "[Yulgok's] philosophical and social-political views essentially provided the theory to defend the interests of the feudal ruling class and could not bring any significant change" (Ch'oe Pongik 2009, 197). Based upon these comparisons we can state that there are currently two parallel views on Yulgok, sharing the same theoretical premises, but differing in the overall evaluation of his philosophy and his place within the history of Korean thought. The traditional approach stresses his class limitations and the essentially idealistic nature of his philosophy, while the new approach, represented by *Chosön ch'örhak chönsa*, acknowledges this interpretation, but softens its critique by stressing the progressive aspects of his thought.

## Conclusion

This study has sought to detect the basic features of academic discourse in the DPRK concerning Yulgok and his role within the history of Korean philosophy. The evaluation of thinkers of Korean Confucianism was for the first time delineated by

DPRK scholars in the publication of *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhaksa* in 1960 and in the following decades has not significantly changed. Within the hermeneutics of the categories of materialism and idealism, Yulgok was both praised and criticised for his dualist position, yet always remained one of the most important Korean thinkers. Although his *yangban* class background and advocacy of Confucian values were criticised, his reform proposals and social sensitivity gained him a favourable ideological reception. The most recent publication, *Chosŏn ch'ŏrhak chŏnsa*, presents him almost in an entirely positive manner. These evaluations have been part of a prescribed ideological framework, which mechanically adjusted Yulgok and his thought to the requirements of regime values. Yulgok has always been more valued than T'oegye, but less so than Hwadam; in the era of the popularity of materialism, he was praised for his partial materialism; in the era of admiration for so-called progressive scholars, he was labelled as a progressive scholar. The ideological sterility surrounding these debates has exacted a high toll in terms of genuine scholarship: for literally decades, the same citations have been repeated and the same sources commented upon, and none of the studies, whether new or old, have raised any new questions broadening the scope of previous scholarship. The methodology of Yulgok studies in the DPRK was—and still is—to apply ideological criteria to his person and work. North Korean studies therefore reveal almost nothing of the depth of Yulgok's thought (or of Korean philosophy as such) but they present valuable material for further studies of ideology, scholarly practices, and the discursive techniques of North Korean academia.

## GLOSSARY

<i>aemin</i>	愛民	Fujiwara Seika	藤原 惺窩
An Chunggŭn	安重根	Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk	花潭 徐敬德
<i>ch'ihang</i>	知行	<i>hyangyak</i>	鄉約
Cho Hŏn	趙憲	<i>igiwŏllon</i>	理氣二元論
Ch'oe Han'gi	崔漢綺	<i>iirwŏllon</i>	理一元論
<i>chongmo pŏp</i>	從母法	<i>insim tosim</i>	人心 道
<i>Ch'ŏndoch'aek</i>	天道策	<i>insingnon</i>	認識論
<i>chugi</i>	主氣	<i>kiirwŏllon</i>	氣一元論
<i>chugironja</i>	主氣論者	Kija	箕子
<i>chujahak</i>	朱子學	<i>kongnon</i>	公論
<i>chungso chiju</i>	中小地主	<i>kyŏngmul ch'iji</i>	格物致知
<i>churi</i>	主理	Luo Qinshun	羅欽順
<i>Chŭngbo Munhŏn pigo</i>	增補文獻備考	<i>Manŏn pongsa</i>	萬言封事

<i>minbon</i>	民本	Sōsan Taesa	西山大師
Motoda Nagasane	元田永孚	Takahashi Tōru	高橋亨
<i>nobi</i>	奴婢	Tamhōn Hong Taeyong	湛軒 洪大容
Pan'gye Yu Hyōngwōn	磻溪 柳馨遠	Tan'gun	檀君
<i>pokkjuūi</i>	復舊主義	Tasan Chōng Yagyong	茶山 丁若鏞
<i>pyōnbōp</i>	變法	<i>Tongho mundap</i>	東湖問答
<i>rigi iwōllon</i>	理氣二元論	Tongmyōng	東明
<i>rit'ong kiguk</i>	理通氣局	T'oegye Yi Hwang	退溪 李滉
<i>samgang oryun</i>	三綱五倫	Ugye Sōng Hon	牛溪 成渾
<i>sarim</i>	士林	Wang Kōn	王建
<i>sirhak</i>	實學	Wang Yangming	王陽明
Sōngho Yi Ik	星湖 李瀼	Yi Sunsin	李舜臣
<i>sōngin</i>	聖人	<i>yok</i>	欲
Sōnjo	宣祖	Yōn'am Pak Chiwōn	燕岩 朴趾源
<i>Sōnjo sujōng sillok</i>	宣祖修正實錄	Yulgok Yi I	栗谷 李珥

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