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Literary Representation of a Proxy-Test Taker: Focusing on “The Tale of Yu Kwangök”

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the literary representation of proxy-test takers, focusing on “The tale of Yu Kwangök” by Yi Ok 李鉉 (1760–1815). This tale sympathetically portrays Yu Kwangök as a talented but impoverished scholar who made a living drafting answers for rich civil service examination applicants. It therefore reveals that poverty and insignificant political background drove poor *yangban* to facilitate cheating as proxy examination takers. The tale also criticizes the corruption of the examination system, which failed to serve as a reliable ladder to success for poor *yangban* from politically insignificant families. Minimizing Yu’s ethical responsibility and emphasizing his social vulnerability, the tale carefully presents Yu as a victim of the corrupt examination system and evokes readers’ sympathy for him. Through this depiction of a proxy examination taker as a symptom of a corrupt system, utilizing and expanding biographical practices, the writer, himself a politically isolated *yangban*, expressed his personal anxieties and his critique of society.

Keywords: politically isolated *yangban*, civil service examination, Yi Ok, Yu Kwangök, proxy civil examination writer

Introduction

A *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* (Veritable records of the Chosŏn dynasty) entry from 1705 contains a fascinating account of how an underground tube, created for the express purpose of cheating on the civil service examination, was discovered at an examination site called Pansudang 泮水堂.

A few days ago, a woman who was gathering wild greens at Pansudang, which remains empty when the examinations are not being held, found a straw rope buried in the ground. She tugged at it and saw that the rope led to the outside of the wall surrounding the building. The matter was brought to the attention of a guard and some servants of the Royal Confucian Academy, who then excavated the area. They found a pipeline made of bamboo buried there . . . This bamboo pipeline with the rope inside it was intended for an examinee to receive an examination answer from a person outside. Some parts of the conduit were rotten and broken while others parts were well-maintained. The condition of the tube suggested that it was not of recent construction. Such cunning tricks had long been practiced. (*Sukchong sillok*, 2/18/1705)¹

How this contraption was used to cheat on the civil service examination is easy

enough to guess. Once the examination question was revealed, an applicant sitting for the exam inside Pansudang wrote out the question on a small paper scroll, and then attached it to a rope secretly buried near his seat. When the applicant signalled to the people waiting outside that the question was ready, the hired writer pulled the rope, received the question, wrote the answer, and returned it to the applicant inside. The bamboo tube protected the completed answer sheet from the dirt, allowing it to pass underground undamaged. This entry in the *Veritable Records* ends with King Sukchong (r. 1674–1720) ordering the officials to guard the hall more closely to prevent further cheating.

The elaborate nature of this cheating scheme—the level of preparation required not only to physically lay the bamboo pipeline but to determine ahead of time where the examinee would sit during the exam—and the fact that the pipeline had been there for some time and the indication that such a trick had long been used, suggest that cheating was not a rare event in late Chosŏn. Diverse ways of cheating were practiced in the eighteenth century, and indeed, records of corruption regarding the civil examination from the Chosŏn dynasty—including cheating and misconduct—are abundant. *The Veritable Records* alone describe hundreds of incidents of cheating on the civil service examination; the frequency of such incidents increased dramatically beginning in the seventeenth century. Pak Sagi's 朴思機 (b. 1734) memorial to King Chŏngjo (r. 1776–1800) pointed out that cheating could involve the hiring of proxy examination takers: “When an examinee from a powerful house takes an examination, he brings numerous servants and calligraphers. How could this practice not cause disorder?” (*Chŏngjo sillok*, 3/27/1789). Typically referred to as *ch'asul* 借述 (lit. “using others in writing”) or *taesul* 代述 (lit. “writing for others”), this type of cheating was possible in Chosŏn because examinees were allowed to bring one or two servants with them when they took the exams. This was different from China, where examinees' personal belongings, including books and servants, were strictly prohibited from the examination hall. *Ch'asul* or *taesul* was performed in two ways. An examinee brought a proxy examinee (or several) into the examination hall, pretending the writer was only his servant. Or an examinee could secretly obtain completed answers written by hired writers from outside by bribing guards or using techniques like Pansudang's bamboo tube.

Who were these proxy examination writers? Ch'a Mihŭi's studies (1992, 64; 2004, 158) have identified ruined *yangban*² from poor and politically marginal families as the group from which proxy examination writers hailed. Often referred to as *chanban* 殘班 (ruined yangban) or *mollak yangban* 沒落兩班 (politically/socially fallen yangban), impoverished and politically weak yangban led lives little better than those of poor commoners. Historical records present a number of

¹ All translations of Korean sources in this paper are mine unless otherwise specified.

² *Yangban* originally means civil and military officials. According to James Palais's study, by the late fourteenth century, yangban was used to denote the families, relatives, ancestors, and descendants of prestigious officials, though the term also retained its narrower meaning (1996, 34). Also, in the late Chosŏn, the term yangban was used primarily as an indicator of social descent, not a marker of erudition or learning.

proxy examination taking cases, but few literary works³ depict the lives of proxy examinees. Yi Ok's 李錕 (1760–1815) “Yu Kwangök chön” 柳子光傳 (The tale of Yu Kwangök)⁴ describes the life of the proxy examination taker Yu Kwangök in biography form with selected anecdotes and commentary by the author. A talented but poor writer from Yöngnam Province in the southeast, Yu made a living writing examination answers for rich examinees who lacked the erudition to succeed as candidates. When an examiner from Seoul came to Yöngnam to proctor the examination, the local magistrate told him that Yu was the best writer of his province. Hearing this, the examiner bet that he could identify Yu's answers without seeing the applicant names on the answer sheets. However, when the list of successful candidates' names was disclosed to the examiner, Yu Kwangök was not on the list. After a secret investigation, the examiner found that Yu wrote answers on behalf of the successful candidates, but did not take the exam himself. When the examiner charged Yu with cheating, Yu, fearing punishment, drank a lot of wine and then drowned himself in a river. The writer comments that the individuals who purchased Yu's services and the society that enabled these damning bargains bore responsibility for Yu's death.

The writer Yi Ok himself studied for the civil service examination at the highest national institution of learning, the Royal Confucian Academy (Sönggyungwan 成均館). However, his life changed dramatically in 1792 when he was exiled in his 20s for using elements of Vernacular Sinitic writing style considered indecent in an essay presented to King Chöngjo.⁵ Exiled for more than ten years, Yi lived as a writer of short fictional narratives with no chance of joining officialdom. In his travels to different urban and rural areas during his exile he witnessed the lives of politically marginalized yangban, commoners, and lower class people in markets, inns, and on the streets. Witnessing the lives of commoners and members of the lower class who were less bound by Confucian moral principles and who openly enjoyed life's pleasures gradually led Yi to believe it was better to fulfill his private desires than to live in isolation and despair as an unsuccessful yangban (Kim Youme, 121). He also wrote several works on the

³ Some unofficial stories (*yadam* 野談) describe the practice of proxy examination taking. For example, “P'yön hyangyu paksaeng tūnggwa” 騙鄉儒朴生登科 (Pak Munsu passed the civil service examination with the help of local yangban members [proxy examination takers]) is a story in which Pak Munsu (朴文秀 1691–1756) hires local proxy examination takers and passes the examination. However, this story is a fiction.

⁴ The term *chön* 傳 is usually translated as ‘biography,’ but is also frequently translated as ‘tale.’ The Korean *chön* genre, especially in the pre-modern period, encompasses historical biographies and fictional narratives. The distinction between historical and fictional narratives is unclear; thus scholars may use various terms such as ‘biographical fiction,’ ‘fictional biography,’ or just ‘fiction’ to identify the same work. Also, the “fictional elements” that make biographies into works of fiction are unclear. To avoid confusion, I translate the term *chön* as ‘tale.’

⁵ The essay Yi wrote that upset King Chöngjo is no longer extant. However, based on the king's criticism of Yi's work, it can be assumed that Yi's writing contained indecent expressions, such as the colloquial diction found in works of vernacular fiction. As a student at the Royal Confucian Academy, Yi was known for his wide reading of late Ming and Qing works of popular fiction written in *baihua* Vernacular Sinitic (Kim Youme, 59–60). More references about the literary culture of King Chöngjo's reign year can be found in An Taehoe's *Chosön hugi sop'ummun üi silch'e* and in Yi Ok *chönjip*.

lives of yangban who acted with loyalty but received poor treatment from the government and other people because of their lack of political influence. “Ch’a Ch’oe iüsa chön” 車崔二義士傳 (The tale of two righteous gentlemen, Ch’a and Ch’oe), for example, deals with Ch’oe Hyoil 崔孝一 (d. 1639) and Ch’a Yerang 車禮亮 (d. 1639), who fought against the Manchus during their invasion of Korea in the seventeenth century and also planned to attack Qing by allying with Ming generals. However, their plan was leaked and Ch’a, who received no help from the Chosön government, was executed in Beijing. Soon after Ch’a’s execution, Ch’oe, who also received no support from the Chosön state, died from grief and loneliness. In writing this story, Yi Ok expressed his regret, saying the government and the people wrongly undervalued the virtuous deeds rendered by Ch’oe and Ch’a because they were not from politically influential families. Some of Yi’s other writings deal with yangban whose lives were ruined during political struggles. These works demonstrate that the writer paid keen attention to the lives of yangban who were politically weak. Though Yi Ok did not utilize his writing talents at court, his writing provides valuable evidence that among politically insignificant yangban—the majority of the yangban population who, for the most part, did not leave a mark on the historical record—some contributed to the dynamic literary culture of late Chosön.

Yi Ok’s writings in general paint sympathetic portraits of politically fallen or unfortunate yangban who commit crimes or embark on a path that leads to their ultimate self-destruction. His work highlights the struggle between the drive toward indulgence and reckless abandon on the one hand, and the moral imperative to promote temperance and self-restraint on the other. By depicting Yu Kwangök’s poverty, loneliness, wavering spirit, and the social circumstances that prevented him from making a decent living as a Chosön yangban, Yi criticizes the corrupt eighteenth-century civil service examination system and evokes readers’ sympathy for the main character. Though the tales alone do not comprehensively reflect the examination system of late Chosön society, Yi’s works taken as a whole serve as a valuable literary dramatization of a yangban writer’s view of the examination system of his time.⁶

Yu Kwangök and the Proxy Examination Takers of Late Chosön

The opening of “The tale of Yu Kwangök” invites readers to relate to Yu’s dishonorable career, poverty, and politically insignificant family background.

Yu Kwangök was well-known in southern areas for his poetry. He was especially famous for poems for the civil examination. However, he was poor, and came from a family of low social status. In rural areas, many yangban made a living selling their civil service examination answers, and Yu did this as well. (Yi Ok, 2: 351)

⁶ Yi Ok expressed his frustration in his essay “Ch’ilchöl” 七絶 (Seven Things to be Avoided), criticizing officials who only pursued private interests and failed to recognize talented individuals in the examinations. Yi Ok’s other essay, “Che munsin mun” 祭文神文 (Funeral oration for the god of literature), reveals the frustration he felt when he learned that the fame of several renowned examination passers came from their wealth, social connections, or influential patrons rather than their literary talents.

The writer does not suggest that Yu's misconduct stems from a weak moral character. Rather, Yu was simply one of the many yangban who made a living selling examination answers. According to the tale, poverty was the primary reason that Yu could not take the examination himself.

A brief overview of the form of the civil service examination adopted by the Chosŏn government sheds light on Yu's activity as a proxy examination taker. The civil service examination was divided into *sogwa* 小科 (the lower-level civil examination) and *taegwa* 大科 (the higher-level civil examination). The *sogwa* included two examinations, one testing applicants' knowledge of Confucian classics (*saengwŏnsi* 生員試) and the other their writing skills (*chinsasi* 進士試)—Yu Kwangŏk's specialty. The lower-level civil examination consisted of two stages: *ch'osi* 初試, administered throughout the country, and *poksi* 複試, administered in Seoul. "The tale of Yu Kwangŏk" explains that Yu passed the first stage of the *chinsasi* and then went to Seoul for the final stage of the examination:

On his way to Seoul, a person greeted him on the road from a woman's sedan chair [which had a thick curtain so people could not see inside]. Following that person, Yu entered a household, which was decorated with several red [lacquer-ware] gates and contained dozens of luxurious buildings. Yu saw several people with white faces and beards there. They were competing for selection by the rich family, writing on paper with all their strength. Yu was lodged in the house's inner chamber. Excellent meals were served five times a day. The master of the house visited him three times and treated him like a son serving his parents. Yu took the civil service examination in place of the rich master's son, and the son passed the examination, acquiring the *chinsa* degree. Yu was sent home with a horse and a servant who carried twenty thousand *yang* [a monetary unit in Chosŏn] for him. Moreover, after he arrived, he found that this grain loan from the local office had already been paid off. (Yi Ok, 2: 351)

Yu received warm treatment, including a stay in a well-decorated room, good meals, servants, and a rich payment from his wealthy patron, which contrasted markedly with his poverty. The desirability of the social status that came with passing the examination helps explain the considerable rewards that Yu received. Examinees who passed the *sogwa* could solidify their yangban status, receive exemptions from military service, and qualify to enter the Royal Confucian Academy (Sŏnggyun'gwan) to prepare for the *taegwa*.⁷

The civil service examinations became more competitive over the centuries, which raised the economic and social stakes of participation. As the population recovered from losses suffered during the sixteenth-century Japanese invasions and the strict limits on yangban status were eased, the number of civil examination applicants increased rapidly. Records show that the examinee numbers reached 130,000 for the *sogwa* examination in 1840 while only 200 examinees were selected from those who took the *sogwa* and of these only the 33 most successful candidates

⁷ As John B. Duncan, Jahyun Kim Haboush, and Pak Hyŏnsuk have shown, *sogwa* degrees were not necessarily required to take the *taegwa* examination, especially in the late Chosŏn period. A detailed analysis of the social status of the *taegwa* examination passers can be found in Han Yŏng'u's 2013 study.

were finally assigned official positions (Song 2014, 156). Because competition for the *taegwa* was intense, the more realistic goal for many yangban became the *sogwa* degree rather than the *taegwa*, as the latter required several additional years of preparation and competition.

Increased competition incentivized cheating. Historical records of the period show that civil service examinations were frequently delayed or cancelled due to the leaking of examination questions. Sometimes examination inspectors and committees themselves leaked confidential test information to applicants in their own political factions. For example, *Yöllyösil kisul* 燃藜室記述 (Records of Yöllyösil) by Yi Kūngik 李肯翊 (1736–1806), which describes the major events and stories of significant individuals during the Chosŏn dynasty, includes the story of Yi Ich'öm 李爾瞻 (1560–1623), an official who leaked examination questions to help students in his political faction pass and strengthen its position at court:

Prior to a civil service examination, Yi Ich'öm secretly allowed his faction members to choose the examination topic and write answers in advance. Yi intended to increase the number of his political supporters. Later at the examination site, Yi announced the topic. However, the topic was known to others as well because many answers were prepared in advance. During the lower-level civil examination in 1618, some students said that today's examination topic would be such-and-such. Indeed, they were right. Other students raised their voices three times to change the topic. They said that students who did not prepare the answers in advance could not do well on the examination. They disrupted the examination site and left. The examination committee members were frightened. Pointing at the sun, they promised the students, "If you return and take the examination, we will grade the answers fairly." However, the students were not satisfied with their promise. (Yi Kūngik, 21: 678–79)

Under these circumstances, candidates from politically powerful factions had higher chances of success and more advantages in acquiring official positions compared to those from weaker factions. Palais' study shows that "perhaps as many as 80 percent of the passers had another degree-holding relative within a span of eight generations, and yet some families could not produce a passer even after ten generations" (Palais 1996, 39).⁸ The domination of official positions by a small number of clans meant that some successful candidates from politically powerless factions failed to receive government positions or struggled to advance to higher ranks. This suggests why some talented yangban in late Chosŏn gave up their political ambitions and worked as proxy examinees.

The tale of Yu depicts the corruption of the examination officers. The officials in the tale were the local magistrate from Yu's hometown and the examiner from Seoul, a national authority. The local magistrate himself took part in the cheating: "When Yu returned home, he found that the local magistrate had paid

⁸ The well-known *sirhak* 實學 (practical learning) scholar Yu Hyōngwŏn 柳馨遠 (1622–1673) criticized the failure of the examination system in Chosŏn: "Yu Hyōngwŏn believed that the examination system in Korea had not only failed to inculcate proper Confucian moral standards among the men preparing for the examinations, but became one of the major tools used by the semi-hereditary *yangban* to perpetuate their own power" (Palais 1996, 149).

off all of Yu's debt" (Yi Ok 2: 351). This suggests that a secret deal had been struck between the magistrate and the rich master. Moreover, by betting that he could distinguish Yu's answers from the others, the examiner had merely aimed to prove he had the ability to appreciate poetry. The local magistrate lacked the will to help Yu pass the examination even though he knew that Yu was the most talented writer in his province. The section below describes the detection of Yu's crime.

An examiner from Seoul went to Yöngnam Province to assist the local magistrate.

When he met him he asked, "Who is the most talented person in Yöngnam?"

The magistrate answered, "I would say Yu Kwangök."

The examiner replied, "I will find his answer and give it first place."

The magistrate replied, "Are you sure that you can find his answer?"

The examiner said, "It will be easy for me."

The two made a bet about whether the examiner could find Yu's answer from among the other applicants' answers. . . . Soon after [the examiner announced the examination question], one answer was submitted. . . . The examiner read the answer and said, "This is surely Yu Kwangök's answer." He then marked the answer with red ink heavily and gave it first place. He found two other answers that roughly followed the rules of composition and gave them second and third place, respectively. When the seals of the answers were opened, however, Yu Kwangök's name was not among the three. The examiner investigated secretly and found out that Yu had written all three answers. It turned out that Yu had written the three answers at three different levels of completion, based on the payments he had received from the clients. Though the examiner knew the situation, he worried that the magistrate doubted his judgment in grading the examination answers [and the examiner lost the bet]. Thus he sent an official document to the government to issue an arrest warrant for Yu so that he could acquire Yu's statement as proof [to win the bet]. However, the examiner had not intended to put Yu in jail. . . . When the examiner heard the news that Yu had committed suicide later, he felt sorry for Yu. (Yi Ok, 2: 351)

To ensure fair grading, the rules for grading examination answers prohibited examiners from seeing the personal information of applicants. When an applicant submitted an answer, an official sealed the right-hand side of the answer sheet containing the applicant's name, age, ancestral seat, address, and ancestors' names. Thus, to distinguish Yu's answers from others, the examiner must have had a keen appreciation of literature. However, though the examiner should have taken the grading seriously, the tale depicts him as frivolous. The examiner prioritized winning the bet over grading fairly. Thus, he graded answers submitted early rather than waiting to collect all the answers,⁹ graded other answers carelessly after selecting the first one he believed to be written by Yu, and prosecuted Yu to acquire the proof

⁹ A few officials, such as Pak Sagi (b. 1734), criticized examiners' wrong practice of grading answers that were submitted early. The problem was that examiners often could not read all the answers because the number of examinees far exceeded the examiners' capabilities. Examiners therefore tended to grade only the answers that were submitted early. This meant that students who took longer to write the answers were less likely to succeed as candidates. Competition among students to submit answers faster than others was intense. Some rich applicants brought proxy examination takers to submit their answers faster than other examinees.

that would enable him to win his bet with the local magistrate. If the examiner had not wagered that he could find Yu's answers, all three clients would have passed the examination without being caught. Similarly, if the examiner had identified only one of the three answers as Yu's, the two other clients would have passed the examination. The examiner's indictment of Yu cannot be understood as an official act of justice because he was motivated by his desire to win the bet, as Yi himself indicates. The examiner's lax discipline and lack of seriousness were what occasioned Yu's indictment. Under incompetent officials who lacked devotion to their work, poor yangban could not expect their answers to be fairly graded. Yu committed suicide out of fear when he learned his crime had been discovered. However, the situation that drove him to suicide did not awaken any guilt in the examiners.

Yu was frightened because the magistrate would soon arrive to arrest him. He thought he would ultimately be executed because he had violated examination laws and that avoiding a trial in advance would be better than being arrested. He drank a lot of wine with his relatives and drowned himself in the river that night. Hearing the news of Yu's suicide, the examiner felt only a bit of regret about Yu's death. (Yi Ok, 2: 253)

Though the examiner regretted Yu's death, his regret did not extend to reforming his own lax discipline or the problems in the civil service examination system itself.

Yi Ok thus criticizes Chosŏn society for allowing literary knowledge to become a commodity that could be sold to make a living. His social criticism can be seen in his description of Seoul as a market where profit-oriented bargaining reached its extreme.

The world is bustling, and people come and go trying to make a profit. The world has long respected profits. Still, the person who lives for profits alone necessarily dies because of those profits. Thus, while gentlemen do not become involved in making profit, petty men sacrifice their lives for it. Seoul is the place where artisans and merchants gather. . . . Some sell their hands and fingers. . . . Here, the act of bargaining reaches its extreme. (Yi Ok 2: 350)

Studies indicate that, beginning in the seventeenth century, late Chosŏn witnessed the growth of commerce and agricultural skills and the number of rich commoners increased (*Han'guksa* 34, 108–17). Student Yu and proxy-writer candidates for the rich sold their “hands and fingers.” For Yi Ok, society was a profit-oriented market in which even yangban leveraged knowledge of the Confucian canon and their writing talents for material gain. The rich master selected Yu and treated him well because he was the best available writer; he felt no shame about hiring a proxy examination taker because Yu's excellent writing was merely a means to an end. If a client found a better proxy-writer, Yu would be one of the “less proficient, aged calligraphers and answer writers” who appear in the tale, waiting outside the rich patron's room, desperately hoping to be hired.

Considering the financial cost of giving bribes and hiring people to write answers, it is likely that applicants from rich and powerful factions cheated the

most. Hiring a proxy examinee was, of course, an illegal act and the buyers and sellers who were caught were punished under the applicable laws—they were prohibited from taking the examination a second time and some of them were forced to join the army (Pak Hyönsun 2012, 24). Though the government constantly exerted its authority to address cheating and dysfunction in the examinations, corruption grew increasingly rampant. The tale criticizes the corruption of the examination system, which failed to work as a reliable meritocratic ladder of success for poor yangban from politically insignificant families.

The Utilization and Expansion of Biographical Practices in “The Tale of Yu Kwangök”

Yi Ok utilized and expanded biographical practices to express his social criticism focusing on proxy examination taking as a symptom of social ills. While following the traditional biography format, the tale extends the genre’s traditional purpose of upholding the social order by describing the experiences of morally non-exemplary characters sympathetically.

A brief review of the biography genre is necessary to contextualize Yi Ok’s works within late Chosön literary tradition. East Asian biography generally refers the reader to a particular system of moral, political, and intellectual values (Lee 2003, 127). The genre of biography has a long history as a mode of historical writing. The exemplary format of biography in the Chinese tradition is that of Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (135–86 BC) *Shiji* 史記 (Historical records). The subjects of the seventy-chapter biographical section are identified based on their personality types and roles, and each account involves a series of anecdotes chosen according to the historiographical principle of “praise and blame” (Lee 2003, 128). The introduction identifies the main character(s) and provides details about each character’s background and occupation. The main body narrates the sequence of events. In the epilogue, usually marked by a heading such as “I say” or “in appraisal, we say,” the writer offers personal comments on the biography or explains his sources. The biographer’s comments often fulfill a didactic purpose—imparting an authoritative interpretation of the story to readers.

The *Historical Records* serves as the model of form and style for traditional Korean biography. The genre of biography in Korea was first established as a mode of official historiographical writing. Examples of early biography in Korea can be found in the *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (Historical records of the Three Kingdoms) by Kim Pusik 金富軾 (1074–1151) and the *Koryö sa* 高麗史 (History of Koryö) by early Chosön compilers. Largely influenced by the *Shiji*, *Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms* also includes annals, chronological tables, treatises, and biographies. In particular, the biography section focuses on exemplary figures, including generals, scholars, filial sons and daughters, faithful women, and rebels. The *History of Koryö* also contains biographies of 949 people, including faithful civil and military officials, evil subjects and traitors, filial sons and daughters, and faithful women.¹⁰

¹⁰ Fictional elements are found in the biographies in historical records, including the *Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*. Contemporary scholars, including Peter Lee and Sin Haejin, have written that

Biography served as a national tool for encouraging Confucian morality. At the founding of the dynasty, King T'aejo (1335–1408, r. 1392–1398) issued an edict that individuals who followed Confucian morals should be commemorated, thus demonstrating that the Chosŏn government expected people to adhere to them.

Because of the importance of morals and customs, we should encourage loyal ministers, filial sons, righteous husbands, and virtuous wives. Let local officials seek out such people and recommend them for preferential treatment and further advancement and for memorial arches to commemorate their virtuous deeds. (Lee and De Bary 2001, 274)

In accordance with this royal edict, a number of biographical works honoring filial piety, loyalty, and chastity were produced. These works aimed to stabilize society following the dynasty's founding by offering people ideal social models they could emulate. King Chŏngjo also recommended that his officials write biographies about those who devoted themselves to the country's prosperity and who had received special honors from the government. Such works emphasized that society was effectively governed by a morally healthy ruling class and gave evidence of the king's generosity and benevolence. Examples include "Chungjangsŏl Pak Yŏngsŏ chŏn" 忠壯公朴永緒傳 (The tale of loyal General Pak Yŏngsŏ) by Ch'ae Chegong 蔡濟恭 (1720–1799), which depicted Pak Yŏngsŏ 朴永緒 (d. 1624) who fought against Yi Kwal 李适 (1587–1624), a rebel against King Injo (r. 1623–1649).

Biographies worked as a political tool as well. In early Chosŏn, writers produced a considerable number of biographies of the political figures who had been killed by the government in the literati purges. Their works aimed to highlight the righteousness of individuals who shared their political views. Nam Hyo'on 南孝溫 (1454–1492), for example, wrote "Yuksin chŏn" 六臣傳 (The tale of six officials), a biography of six men who opposed King Sejo (1417–1468), the usurper of King Tanjong's throne. Intense political struggles and literati purges in the seventeenth century also prompted those involved to produce biographies demonstrating the righteousness of their factions (Pak Hübyŏng 1992, 126–27). Early Chosŏn biographies imbue individuals with historical significance and make them public figures. Thus, biographers chose subjects cautiously and composed their tales to effectively teach people how to live.

The genre of biography shows the shift of context from the person as perfect moral example in official historiography to alternative modes of framing individual lives and imparting social judgment.¹¹ Dominated early on by moral

these fictional elements in early historical writings should be distinguished from the biographies of late Chosŏn, which represent consciously crafted fictional biographies (Lee 2003, 265; Sin 2003, 20–22). See Sin Haejin's *Chosŏnjo chŏn'gye sosŏl* (Biographical fiction of Chosŏn) for a discussion of historiographical features and fictionalization in the biography genre.

¹¹ Sheldon Lu argues for the case of a transition from history to fiction in Chinese narrative, writing that Chinese biography is situated between history and fiction: "A noticeable generic intersection between history and fiction at this point is the Chinese biography, a literary form first established in official historiography. It later becomes an important genre of fiction. . . . Fiction writers often take pains to imitate the rhetoric of the historian and to adopt narrative devices that evoke an aura of historicity and factuality in a biography. The Tang fiction biography often describes the transgression of identities and prescribed roles, mixes the natural and the

solemnity, beginning in the seventeenth century, Korean biography became more dynamic and diverse under the influence of ‘fictionalization’ as it confronted the serious social problems of late Chosŏn (Lee 2003, 266–7). Well-known examples of biography’s gradual evolution into fiction in the Chosŏn period include “Hōsaeng chŏn” 許生傳 (The tale of Master Hō) by Pak Chiwŏn 朴趾源 (1737–1805). “The tale of Master Hō” describes an invented character, a poor literatus, whose poverty drove him to stop studying the Confucian classics and adopt an alternative way of life. Pak Chiwŏn, an advocate of the school of Northern (Qing) Learning, known as *pukhak* 北學, told stories of diligent and honest lower class people to criticize the incompetent and corrupt yangban in his writings. Pak Chiwŏn’s tales satirize the hypocrisy and incompetence of Confucian scholars; his characters include a Confucian scholar who had secret affairs with widows, a nightsoil collector whose noble mind distinguished him from incompetent and arrogant yangban, and a poor yangban who had to sell his yangban title to a rich commoner.

Yi Ok’s tale of Yu depicts the vulnerability of the yangban—particularly, their mental fragility and the ease with which they succumbed to difficulties. Generally, historical records and narratives depict proxy exam writing as the shameful behavior of corrupt individuals rather than as a product of the societal environment at large. The Office of Inspector-General’s report to King Injo (r. 1623–1649) records the stories of two famous seventeenth-century *taesul* writers.

Yi Chin 李進 (b. 1582), who recently passed the examination, originally made a living by writing answers for other examinees. Yi Chin and Yi Chaeyŏng 李再榮 (1553–1623), who did the same thing under the previous king, were widely known for their corrupt careers. Yi Chin helped several non-qualified examinees pass the examination. People regretted that these two were never punished, and they found it even worse that those who brought ignominy to the noble civil office career of Confucian scholars had passed the examination this time. Thus, we ask you to delete their names from the successful candidate list and punish their crimes to guard against the abuses of today. (*Injo sillok*, 5/19/1638)

Yi Chin and Yi Chaeyŏng worked as proxy examinees while preparing for their own examinations. According to the *Kukcho pangmok* 國朝榜目 (Roster of civil examination graduates), Yi Chin first passed the civil examination in 1638 at the age of fifty-six. Yi Chin was likely aware of the punishment for being caught, but he continued working as a proxy examination taker. The official report records the abhorrence people felt toward proxy examinees. Comparing Yu’s tale with works of biography that deal with morally dubious characters makes it clear that Yi Ok does not describe his protagonist in explicitly condemnatory terms. Generally speaking, to emphasize a character’s reprehensible characteristics, biographers directly describe those characteristics. Biographies of morally corrupt characters are relatively few in Korea, but “Yu Chagwang chŏn” 柳子光傳 (The tale of Yu Chagwang) exemplifies the typical method of depicting non-exemplary characters.

supernatural, and depicts the individual in crisis, at the threshold of two orders of reality” (Lu 1994, 7–8).

Yu Chagwang (1438–1512) was the secondary son of Yu Kyu 柳規 (1401–1473). Yu Chagwang was agile, strong, and skilled at climbing in dangerously high places like a monkey. From a young age, he was a troublemaker. He gambled, wandered around all night, and enjoyed raping women he encountered on the streets. Yu's father disliked his son's low-birth status and his crazy behavior and severely punished him several times. His father eventually did not regard him as his son. . . . Yu's nature was sly and manipulative and he was good only at harming others. (Hö Bong 1982, 648–50)

Yu Chagwang's biographer tells readers that Yu—a morally dubious character who misbehaved throughout his life—does not deserve their sympathy. The writer reinforces the impression of Yu's malicious character by describing how his father repudiated him, his bad reputation with his colleagues, and how other people feared him. By beginning the tale with the revelation of Yu's identity as a secondary son (*sööl* 庶孽), meaning his social status was lower than that of a yangban, and comparing him to a monkey, an animal despised for its crafty behavior, the writer further expresses his negative view of the character. The anecdotes about Yu Chagwang's life that follow this opening are all about his wicked plots to harm innocent people. In "The tale of the Saböl State," a biography of Kim Kwangjun 金光準 (d. 1553), the writer Yi Önjök 李彦迪 (1491–1553) takes a similar approach. The opening describes Kim Kwangjun negatively:

Now I hear that all government officials conduct themselves with benevolence and generosity. They work to govern peacefully by serving the king sincerely and releasing those who have been wrongly accused. However, two officials insist on taking the wrong path. Chief among such officials is a high minister whose ancestral seat is the area that was the Saböl State [Kim Kwangjun's ancestor was from North Kyöngsang]. This is why he tries so hard to slander officials and scholars. (Yi Önjök, 11: 8a3–9b2)

Yi Önjök clearly emphasizes that, lacking benevolence and generosity, Kim Kwangjun tried to disrupt the just operation of government from the beginning. Though Yi Ok does not defend his protagonist openly, he does not attribute Yu Kwangök's misconduct to an intrinsically despicable personality, but to his poverty.

Yi Ok's tale depicts Yu, a seemingly indefensible criminal, as a socially vulnerable and emotionally weak character who deserves sympathy from his readers. The tale of Yu includes anecdotes that explain the personal and social problems he faced. Yu's only skill was writing poetry for the civil service examination, and he was in a desperate economic situation: he had borrowed a large amount of grain from a local office and needed to pay off the debt soon. His family was politically insignificant, and he had no one to recommend him for a political career. Throughout the Chosön dynasty, many applicants took the civil examination multiple times in the hopes of receiving an official appointment. Studying for several years was challenging enough, but poor yangban were also burdened with the expenses of actually taking the examination. Applicants had to independently acquire high-quality and expensive paper, brushes, and money for food and lodging, and had to travel to local examination halls or sometimes make

the long journey to Seoul, which, for some, took as long as a month. Kwön Sang'il 權相一 (1679–1759), for example, took the civil service examination several times with his father and male relatives. In his diary, Kwön lamented that he and his father spent so much money to take the examinations that they had little left over for their family (Chön Kyöngmok, 2007, 295). To save money, many poor applicants chose cheap lodgings where several of them would share a single room. Still, the prices of rooms and necessary items increased around examination days, so they had to prepare in advance or were left with no choice except to pay high prices. Thus, passing the civil service examination was a significant struggle for poor yangban and the expressions of sorrow and anxiety in their writings should not be viewed as exaggerations.

Yi Ok does not describe Yu's poverty in a romantic or poetic way, as "Paekkyöl sönsaeng" 百結先生 (The tale of Master Paekkyöl), about a famous zither player of Silla, in the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* does. When Master Paekkyöl's wife complained that they have run out of rice, he consoles her by imitating the sound of rice pounding with his zither. Though the biography does not describe the wife's reaction, it suggests that wealth is not worth pursuing and that a placid mindset is sufficient to live a satisfactory life. In contrast, Yi depicts Yu's impoverishment as a pressing and potentially life-threatening issue. The economic support Yu received from his rich patron enabled him to briefly maintain the dignified lifestyle of a social elite.

While Yu's occupation exposes the fallen yangban's social vulnerability and the absence of an alternative means of making a living, his suicide shows his weakness—his failure to take responsibility for what he has done. Rather than face a trial or flee for his life, in this moment of crisis Yu chose suicide. Many yangban characters in Yi Ok's works are vulnerable and lonely figures, people who lack spirit and perseverance. Another of Yi Ok's stories, "Hyöpch'ang ki mun" 俠娼紀聞 (Tale of a righteous female entertainer), portrays a yangban whose will likewise failed in the face of adversity. This particular yangban was implicated in political struggles and exiled to a remote island. Without any hope of returning to the capital, he spent his time and energy on drink and sexual indulgence, resulting in an early death. As soon as he lost his usual privileges, he quickly collapsed and made no attempt to overcome his difficulties through self-discipline. Considering that the usual punishment for proxy examinees was to prohibit them from taking the examination again or conscription into the army, Yu Kwangök's assumption that his life was over appears to have been a panicked over-reaction. Still, the tale suggests that circumstances drove Yu to this precipice and that he had no one he could ask for help.

Yu Kwangök himself lacked close ties with family friends, officials, and neighbors; he was lonely and isolated. Diaries and tales of yangban indicate that they often borrowed money or grain from such people. Student Hō in Pak Chiwön's "The tale of Master Hō" is an illuminating example. Master Hō had a wife who made a living by sewing. Hō also had a rich and generous neighbor who appreciated his hidden talents and loaned him money unconditionally. This support enabled Hō to utilize his skills to earn significant sums of money. The rich neighbor and

General Yi Wan 李浣 respected Master Hō and sought his political counsel. In another of Pak's tales, "Yangban chōn" 兩班傳 (The tale of a yangban), the local magistrate admired the yangban's benevolence and love of Confucian classics.¹² In contrast to the characters in Pak's stories, Yu Kwangōk had to sell his poems for money. He failed to earn the respect of his neighbors and local officials. The local magistrate did not talk with Yu personally. Although Yu had some relatives with whom he drank, when he was in trouble he had no one to lend him money or provide words of comfort. None of Yu's actions—his selling of examination answers, the indictment against him, or his suicide—significantly impacted the local magistrate, the examiners, his neighbors, or society.

Biographers' comments reveal their attitudes towards and judgments of their characters (Li 1994, 379). Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721) argues in *Shi tong* 史通 (Comprehensive historiography) that "comments should elaborate ambiguities and difficulties in the preceding historical narrative" (Li, 398). Yi Ok's comments address the buyer rather than Yu the seller.

I, Mr. Ŏesa [an unofficial historian] say, "In the country of naked people, there are no silk and thread markets. In the time when people eat raw food, cooking pots are not sold. Sellers exist only when needs exist. Merchants of knives and hammers cannot advertise their products near big blacksmiths' stores, and rice merchants do not sell their rice when they pass farmers' houses. People desire something that they do not make themselves. (Yi Ok, 2: 350)

Yi Ok explains that it was demand that generated the practice of proxy-examination taking. This implies that the rich clients were just as culpable as the sellers: "According to the law, the same weight of punishment should apply to both the giver and receiver" (Yi Ok, 2: 353). The writer's focus in this tale is not limited to Yu Kwangōk; he sought to indict the society that enabled the practice of proxy examination taking.

Compared to "The tale of the Sabōl State" and "The tale of Yu Chagwang," "The tale of Yu Kwangōk" minimizes individual responsibility. Many biographers support their judgments of their characters by describing how other people reacted to them. For example, the writer of "The tale of Yu Chagwang" described how people feared and hated Yu Chagwang. Regarding Yu Kwangōk's death, Yi Ok writes: "Upon his death, other people felt regret." Interestingly, this expression was commonly used in depictions of the suffering of exemplary people. Of course, Yi Ok does not place all the blame on the clients. The tale briefly comments on Yu's misdeed: "Who knew that this vulgar bargain was made by a yangban?" (Yi Ok, 2: 353). However, this is ultimately a fairly mild indictment of Yu Kwangōk; the comment is short and superficial compared to Yi's critiques of the clients, and, more importantly, the desperate situation Yu faced in the tale has, by this point, already

¹² A detailed analysis of the Practical Learning scholars' review of the fundamental postulates of Confucian teachings can be found in Palais. Im Hyōng'aek's *Yōnam Pak Chiwōn yōn'gu* (A study of Pak Chiwōn) contains an analysis of Pak Chiwōn's writings in relation to late-Chosōn intellectual currents.

won the readers' sympathy.

Would other biographers have depicted Yu Kwangök's life path as the inevitable result of his status as an impoverished yangban? Answering this question requires a review of Confucian prescriptions for proper gentlemanly conduct in adverse circumstances and an examination of how biographers depicted such conduct. The primary criterion for being a Confucian gentleman was to transcend materialistic pursuits and egoistic considerations (Ge 2015, 16). As members of the ruling class, Chosön yangban were expected to have the capacity to morally cultivate themselves and the public. Yi I 李珥 (1537–1584), for example, pointed out that Confucian gentlemen (*junzi* 君子) did “not lose their righteousness when facing difficulties” (Yi I, “Yonghyön” 用賢). The *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸 likewise states that: “If he (the *junzi*) is naturally in a position of poverty and low status, he acts according to the norms of poverty and low status” (Eno 2016, 41). During the late Chosön dynasty, when political struggles intensified, many yangban, voluntarily or not, gave up their political ambitions and lived politically isolated lives. Faced with political corruption, yangban were expected either to fight the immorality they encountered or seclude themselves from corrupting influences. During the late Chosön, yangban who maintained their moral rectitude and refused to join officialdom were popular characters for biographies.

An example of an upright character in a biography can be found in “Sölsaeng chön” 薛生傳 (The tale of Student Söl) by O Toil 吳道一 (1645–1703), which concerns Student Söl, who was sickened by the purges of yangban and gave up his political ambitions.

Student Söl is a righteous man with literary talents. Söl studied hard to pass the civil service examination but unfortunately failed it several times. When *Kyech'uk oksa* 癸丑獄事 (the literati purge of 1613) occurred, Söl came to hate the world and planned to live in isolation. He secretly visited his close friend and talked about the purge. He cried and said to his friend, “The three bonds and five relations have already collapsed. How can scholars live in such a world? I have decided to hide from this world. What do you think?” The friend replied, “This is my idea as well. Hearing what you say, I would like to seclude myself from society, too. Still, I am afraid I cannot do it because of my parents.” The friend said farewell and left. . . One month later, he found that Student Söl had departed. (Sin 2003, 115)

Kyech'uk oksa was a purge of the literati that took place during the reign of Prince Kwanghae 光海君 (r. 1608–1623). A political faction that supported him attempted to eradicate a rival faction that favored Prince Yöngch'ang 永昌大君 (1606–1614), the brother of Prince Kwanghae. This purge resulted in the death of Prince Yöngch'ang, the confinement of his mother Queen Dowager Inmok 仁穆王后 (1584–1632), and the death or exile of several officials from the rival faction. Söl decided to abandon his ambition of becoming an official, and his friend supported him. Henceforth, Söl lived as a hermit and, after Prince Kwanghae was dethroned, his friend achieved a high official position. The tale does not explain how Söl's friend made a living when he was not an official. However, the statement that Söl was a righteous man and that his friend had integrity suggests that neither of them

pursued egoistic paths, such as selling examination answers for money. Regarding Söl's decision, the writer Ŏ Toil remarks: "Söl believed it proper to hide himself from politics . . . He was much wiser than those who unashamedly pursued political power and fame. He was also wiser than those who did not cease engaging in criminal behavior that deserved capital punishment" (Sin 2003, 119–200).

Another example of the ideal Confucian gentlemen can be found in Chang Chiyön's 張志淵 (1865–1921), "Kim Ŏm" 金儼, which tells the tale of a student from a humble and politically marginal family. Chang Chiyön was interested in how tumultuous politics impacted the lives of upright individuals. He wrote *Ilsa yusa* 逸士遺事 (Memorabilia of unknown exemplary people), which contained the biographies of people of humble origins. In "Kim Ŏm," Kim studied Confucian classics, hoping to aid the king in establishing the ideal Confucian society. However, when he visited Seoul to take the examination he witnessed the cruelty of factional struggles and the injustice of the examinations, which ruthlessly sacrificed innocent officials and excluded politically insignificant people like him from officialdom.

When Student Kim Ŏm visited Seoul, factional struggles reached their peak at the court and one faction lost. People from the victorious faction acquired official positions, showed their gratitude to the king, and greeted visitors who were waiting with presents. Literati and officials of the defeated faction, however, were expelled from the court, exiled, or forced to leave for remote islands in a hurry. The latter were so rushed to leave that the streets were filled with the unending sounds of their wailing and lamentation. In one particularly dreadful scene, condemned people's clothes were stripped off and their untied hair covered their heads. Wearing cangues, they were taken to the State Tribunal. . . . Kim was startled and asked an innkeeper to explain. The innkeeper said, "Two factions fought for power. Their trivial struggles led to serious crimes and reached this degree. The struggle was not initially about the matter of loyal subjects or traitors. Neither was it a matter of people behaving well or badly. It was only because people gathered of one kind and rejected those of another. When one faction acquired power, it took revenge on the other. Literati who know the Confucian classics and commoners who sought profits have all engaged in it alike. They have all been shaken by this struggle and have been unable to do their jobs." Hearing these grievances Kim said, "If I can acquire a position, then I will report the situation to the king to the best of my ability and attempt to stop the factional struggles." The innkeeper sneered at him and said, "You are impossibly foolish. You are from a humble family. Even if you pass the examinations, you will not hold a position like those held by members of politically powerful families. In the beginning, you may get a position at a public school, but you will not gain a high and powerful position, no matter how much time you spend. Even if you pass the examinations, how can you possibly hope to obtain a high position and speak righteous words?" Kim replied, "You're right." He packed up and returned home. (Chang Chiyön 1982, 97–99)

By vividly depicting the suffering produced by factional strife, this tale demonstrates that the power struggles of officialdom made people blind and aggressive. The dialogue between the innkeeper and Kim suggests that government service at that time was not appropriate for righteous people and that success or

failure depended entirely on the faction to which one belonged. Political success remained the province of rich and powerful people; one's talents did not matter. Hearing the innkeeper's words, Kim recognized that poor yangban like him had no chance of attaining politically powerful positions and that the only available choice was to avoid trouble. Readers of this tale who hoped that, as an upright man, Kim would acquire an official position and help change the era's toxic politics would have come to recognize the correctness of Kim's decision by this point.

Biographies typically depict social elites as individuals who prioritize their moral principles over their livelihoods. In the introduction to "The tale of a Yangban," Pak Chiwön describes the identity of the Confucian gentlemen as follows:

The title of Confucian gentleman is endowed by heaven . . . Such a gentleman should not seek profit and should continue to pursue a gentlemen's duty even after attaining a reputation or suffering impoverishment. He [the yangban in his tale] regarded his yangban lineage as a commodity and sold it to others. He is no better than a merchant. Thus, I write "The tale of a Yangban." (Pak Chiwön, "Panggyōng kak oejön")

Judging from Pak's definition, Yu Kwangök failed in every way as a gentleman. Yu Kwangök did not study or work for the public good. He did not express a hint of guilt regarding his criminal deeds or unlawful profits. If he had not been caught, he would surely have continued selling examination answers. Yu gave little consideration to public morality and sought simply to make a living. Still, Yi does not depict Yu as an entirely negative character.

An examination of the anecdotes in "The tale of the Saböl State" and "The tale of Yu Chagwang," both of which present characters who possess morally dubious attributes, clarifies what is original in Yi Ok's writing. "The tale of the Saböl State" concerns Kim Kwangjun's accusation of his stepmother and siblings. Kim held a grudge against them because his father bequeathed a great deal more to them than to him and his mother. Summing up Kim's personality, Yi Önjök writes: "When Kim's colleague sent him an earnest letter asking that he cease making the accusation, the colleague also gently added, "I send this letter because I regard you highly." However, the reply from Kim was full of fierce rage and anger, and did not contain even a hint of self-reproach" (Yi Önjök, 11: 8a3–9b2). Yi Önjök further expressed Kim's wicked character by pointing out that some officials who "hate evil" said that Kim's actions were cruel and wrong. In a similar vein, "The tale of Yu Kwangök" makes clear that people hated Yu: "Yu Chagwang hated anyone who was more talented and more loved by others than himself, so he slandered people without fail . . . Officials in the government regarded him as a viper, no one resisted him, and the people outside the court trembled with fear at his existence" (Hö Pong 1982, 648). As these descriptions demonstrate, neither Kim Kwangjun nor Yu Chagwang understood that social elites should cultivate dignity and solemn comportment, always maintain Confucian principles, avoid the charms of women, and acquire deep respect from others through their generosity. In such stories focused on amoral characters, the writers leave no room for readers to doubt the

characters' wickedness or to sympathize with them. Non-exemplary subjects refuse to accept any good advice and go to extremes until their final moments. The characters in these biographies deserve all the blame.

In "The tale of Yu Kwangök," however, Yi Ok avoids such damning characterizations. Though many biographies largely ignore those who could or would not sacrifice worldly pleasures at the expense of yangban dignity, the tale of Yu boldly depicts the situation that politically marginalized yangban faced at that time. The tale is a rare example of a biography that depicts the real struggles of yangban whose lives were endangered by the lack of "trivial" material gains. To Yi Ok, such yangban, who made up a significant portion of that segment of the population, represented the reality of life in the eighteenth century.

Conclusion

Rather than simply criticizing the corruption of an individual, Yu's tale encourages readers to reconsider why some talented yangban became proxy exam takers. He criticizes the society in which he lived, showing that poverty and an insignificant family background impeded official success while corrupt examination officials and shameless clients encouraged the disreputable trade in examination answers. Still, the work clearly does not go beyond Confucian teaching itself. Yi highlights the failures of the Chosön examination system based on the cheating he witnessed. In addition, though his criticism of Yu is relatively weak, it is still criticism nonetheless. It suggests that, as a yangban, Yi felt a tension between self-expression and moral authority.

The Chosön government proclaimed that the writing of social elites should embody Confucian principles in order to serve the government and guide the public, following "the dictum that literature, as a vehicle of the Way, regulates the family, puts the state in order, brings peace to all under heaven, and finally brings about the way of the former kings" (Lee 2003, 321–22). The fact that Yi Ok wrote this tale in the eighteenth century during King Chôngjo's reign makes it remarkable. From the early years of his rule, King Chôngjo emphasized the importance of literature in governing, declaring that literary culture reflects the inner-self of individual writers and the governance of the country. Thus, he ordained that yangban writers should select socially exemplary characters and topics that would uphold the existing social order (*Hongjae chönsö*, 165). Following the king's orders, writers composed a number of biographies that sought to uphold the social order by presenting virtuous characters. Hong Yangho 洪良浩 (1724–1802), who served as *munhyöng* 文衡 (Academician) in 1793 and 1800, for example, compiled biographies of exemplary military men in Korea in his *Haedong myöngjang chön* 海東名將傳 (The tales of great generals of Korea). The preface to the compilation explained the writer's motivation: "I compiled this book in order to transmit the stories of great Chosön generals' heroic exploits during times of national crisis" (Chöng et al. 2003, 377). Like Pak Chiwön's works about poor yangban, Yi Ok's tale reveals the hidden aspects of the lives of yangban that were overshadowed by grand and overwhelming narratives about loyal officials and noble recluses who willingly sacrifice worldly pleasures, the comfort of their

families, and even their lives to live as exemplary Confucian models.

In the seventeenth century, Chosŏn Korea witnessed the rise of the practical learning (*sirhak*) movement, which emphasized the art of government, utility, and the development of people's livelihood. As Yu Hyŏngwŏn (1622–1673) demonstrated, the aims of such practical learning included reforms in land tenure, government organization, and the military service, grain relief, and civil service examination systems.¹³ The practical learning scholars turned their attention away from earlier concerns with Confucian ethics and metaphysics to the problems of statecraft (Palais 1996, 5). Some Chosŏn writers sought to express contemporary concerns and reality in literature. Depicting people of diverse social classes, and women as well as men, they criticized social ills and commented on everyday life. Yi Ok directly experienced cold treatment by local magistrates and the irresponsibility of officials, and he witnessed the reclusive lives of poor and politically insignificant yangban. As a talented eighteenth-century writer, Yi expressed his concerns and highlighted the need to change society to eliminate corrupt proxy-examination taking practices. Given that Yi Ok's works are products of late Chosŏn cultural currents rather than isolated phenomena, future research should undertake broader explorations of Yi Ok's narratives. Such studies would aid in the development of a more expansive characterization of Chosŏn culture.

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¹³ For details regarding *sirhak* scholars, see James Palais's *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty*.

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