

Reading the Classics Till Death: Yulgok Yi I and the Curriculum of Chosŏn Literati

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In our studies of the world of Chosŏn literati we often face doubts whether our modern methodology offers the best tools for an analysis of their words and views. One of the possible solutions for the problem of a relevant exegesis concerning texts from a certain period is, of course, the employment of methods valid in that period; proper reading of works written by Chosŏn scholars thus requires the answer of what was their method of reading and for which kind of reader these texts were composed. Fortunately for the Chosŏn period (朝鮮, 1392–1910), we have plenty of texts devoted to the method of reading (or simply ‘method of study’ *toksŏpŏp* 讀書法) which offer crucial insight into how Confucian scholars engaged in a written word.

An often quoted saying of Pak Chiwŏn 朴趾源 (1737–1805) »one who reads books is called a scholar [*sa*]«¹ (讀書曰士) shows that reading and literati were inseparable and intellectual activity based on texts was an essential occupation of every Confucian scholar. Yi Tŏng’mu 李德懋 (1741–1793), famous author of many

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1 *Yŏnamjip* 燕岩集 [Collected Works of Yŏnam], 8: 11b. A similar definition is offered by Yŏhŏn 旅軒 Chang Hyŏngwan 張顯光 (1554–1637) who speaks about »scholars whose occupation is reading of books« (讀書業士, *Yŏhŏn sŏnsaeng munjip* 旅軒先生文集 [Collected Texts of Mister Yŏhŏn], 8:24a).

texts devoted to the problems of reading,² describes the place of reading in the life of Confucian scholar as follows:

Somebody asked me: What are the duties of a scholar? I said: Broadly speaking, there are only four; to be filial when entering [a household], to be polite when leaving [a household], to plough during the day, and to read during the night.³

In the light of the fact that in the most of cases ‘ploughing’ was a matter of literati’s hands and feet—slaves,⁴ we can see that reading was the basic occupation of any Confucian scholar and he was supposed to devote to books not only time specified for study, but every single moment when he was free for further reading. Hō Kyun 許筠 (1569–1618) thus speaks about »three surplus times for reading« (讀書三餘) and urges scholars to read during the night, winter time and on rainy days,⁵ and a frequent epithet in biographies of Confucian scholars was that they did not put a book out of their hand. Reading activity was automatically understood as a long lasting effort terminated only by death and in traditional Confucian *Weltanschauung* it acquired nearly hierophantic features, as we can see in Yulgok Yi I’s 栗谷李珥 (1536–1584) categorical statement:

One who studies always preserves his mind in order not to be enticed by affairs and matters that could overcome him. He must investigate principle to the utmost and have clear understanding of what is good and only after that the way of practice is in proper order. When he understands what lies before him, he can make progress. Therefore in entering the Way nothing is more important than investigation of principles to the utmost and in the investigation of principles to the utmost nothing is more important than reading books because traces of how sages and worthies used their minds, what we should imitate and admonish ourselves concerning the good and the bad are all contained in books.⁶

2 Besides his famous *Sasojōl* 士小節 [Small Manners for Scholar], another very interesting text is also *Imokkusimsō* 耳目口心書 [Guide for Ears, Eyes and Mouth]. A good overview of his works on *toksōpōp* is offered by Kim Yunhūi 金尹姬, *Yi Tongmu’i toksōpōp yōngu* 李德懋□讀書□研究 [Studies on Yi Tongmu’s *toksōpōp*], (Seoul: Hanguk kyowōn taehakkyo taehakwon, 2004).

3 或問士之本分凡幾何矣 余曰 其大略曰 入孝出恭晝耕夜讀 只四事而已。 *Sasojōl*, 3: 1b.

4 Kim Kichung shows many examples of (a nearly pathological) dependence of literati on slave work in his »Unheard Voices: The Life of the *Nobi* in O Hwi-mun’s *Swaemirok*«, *Korea Studies* 27 (2004), 108–137.

5 *Hanjōngnok* 閑情錄, Chōngōp 靜業 [Record of Stilling the Passions]. This concept was first recorded in *Sanguozhi* 三國志 [Records of the Three Kingdoms] (*Weisbu* 魏書 [Book of Wei] 13).

6 學者常存此心。不被事物所勝。而必須窮理明善。然後當行之道。曉然在前。可以進步。故入道莫先於窮理。窮理莫先乎讀書。以聖賢用心之迹及善惡之可效可戒者。皆在於書故也。 *Yulgok chōnsō* [Complete Works of Yulgok; hereafter YGCS], 27: 8a.

However, reading was not only considered as compulsory, but also as very pleasant. Indeed we could not find a more appealing proximity between our modern lives and old Confucians than their passionate bibliomania. Hō Kyun wholeheartedly agrees that »reading is the head of all delights«,⁷ Yi Tōng'mu stresses that reading the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects) transforms the mind as well as our whole body,⁸ and T'oegye confessed that when he read Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) writings in hot Seoul summer, he felt so refreshed that he forgot about the heat.⁹

Under such circumstances it is not surprising that we have a substantial number of texts devoted to reading, its purpose, methods and content scattered over the whole period of the dynasty. Especially in the Golden period of Korean Learning of the Way (*daoxue* 道學) in the latter half of 16th century a number of texts were produced on this topic which can serve as model examples of this genre. Almost every scholar from this period left a record of his views on books and reading them either in the form of remarks in diaries, such as for example Yu Hüich'un's 柳希春 (1513–1577) in *Miam ilgi* 眉巖日記 (Miam's Diary), in systematic treatises like for example Ugye Sōng Hon's 牛溪成渾 (1535–1598) *Sōsirūi* 書室儀 (Regulations for the Study Room) in the form of dialogues with disciples, as can be seen in T'oegye's 退溪 *Ōnhaengnok* 言行錄 (Records of Sayings and Deeds) or in records of readers' impressions and excerpts of texts (*ch'orok* 抄錄). There are also many records available that describe discussions on this topic on a more official level of discourse, such as royal lectures, records in dynastic annals, descriptions in encyclopedias or official compilations of documents, prescribed curriculums for education in schools etc.

Among these texts, the work of Yulgok Yi I and his views on reading and its methodology deserves special attention. Yulgok's texts concerning the issue of reading are well preserved and create a complex corpus in which we can see the development of his experience with reading from the first steps,¹⁰ through his early studies,¹¹ to mature scholarly activities, teaching of disciples etc. However, such complexity can be seen in works of other writers of the same or later period. What makes Yulgok's work unique in relation to the theory of reading in

7 *Hanjōngnok* 閑情錄 [Record of Stilling the Passions], »Myōnghun« 明訓 [Clear Instructions].

8 *Ch'ōngjanggwan chōnsō* 靑莊館全書 [Complete Works of Ch'ōngjanggwan], 48: 15.

9 *Toegye chōnsō* 退溪全書 [Complete Works of T'oegye], »Ōnhaengnok« 言行錄, 1.

10 His slightly hagiographic *yōnbo* 年譜 [Biographical Chronology] states that he was able to read at the age of three. See *YGCS* 33: 11a.

11 The first of his texts mentioning the issue of *toksōpōp* is *Chagyōngmun* 自警文 [Written to Alert Myself]. See full translation by Lukas Pokorny, *SOS* 10,1 (2011), 145–149.

Chosŏn period is neither its scope nor style (and indeed for example Yi Tŏng'mu offers a much broader and colorful view on subtle problems of reading techniques) but the fact that his texts are both *descriptive* and *prescriptive*. Yulgok's crucial works containing his version of *toksŏpŏp*, *Sŏngbak chibyŏ* 聖學輯要 (Collected Essentials of Learning to be a Sage) and *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl* 擊蒙要訣 (Essential Principles for Expelling Youthful Ignorance) later achieved a semi-canonical status and became an integral part of Korean Confucian education. Yulgok's works were thus read both by ordinary students and Korean kings and princes,¹² and considered as the official version of reading methodology. The extraordinary place of these two works is highlighted by Yi Tŏng'mu's recommendation to read them together with *Xiaoxue* 小學 and *Jinsbilu* 近事錄, which elevates Yulgok close to the author of these compendia, Zhu Xi himself.¹³

In this study, I would like to focus on the basic aspect of *toksŏpŏp*, the question of which books to read and when and to analyze the assumed goal of the educational process based on reading of classical texts. One of the preconditions for this task is also to ask the relevance of *toksŏpŏp* text to the daily lives of Korean literati and detect ideal and practical results of their methodology and strategies.

Orthodox Perspective

Although the traditional notion of *toksŏpŏp* covers a waste area of topics related to reading ranging from proper etiquette of reading to the question of how many times one should read a text in order to understand it, it is important to understand that Yulgok and other authors do not primarily speak about reading in general but rather from the point of Confucian pedagogy. In this sense, what Yulgok means by 'books' are Confucian classics and related texts and the whole methodology he proposes is targeted to reach proper understanding of the message of Sages hidden in these texts rather than amusing reading of *belles lettres*. Such perspective resulted in the methods and strategies which are focused on 'Learning of the Way' and omit or ignore many aspects and works of literary discourse which we would naturally expect to be included. Good examples of

12 For the role of *Sŏngbak chibyŏ* in royal lectures see Chi Duhwan 池斗煥, »Chosŏn hugi Yŏngjotae kyŏnggyŏng pyŏnhwan« 朝鮮後期 英祖代 經筵科目 變遷 [Late Chosŏn Changes in Subjects of Royal Lectures during the Reign of King Yŏngjo], *Chindan hakpo* 81 (1996), 135-156.

13 *Sasŏjŏl*, 3: 6.

genres excluded from the *toksŏpŏp* could be poetry, writings in Korean script and contemporary Ming dynasty (and Korean) works.

The basic paradigm for such analysis is postulated by the aim of *Kŏngmong yogyŏl* and *Sŏngbak chibyo*: to create a model curriculum and methodology of reading for both young and advanced Confucian scholars that should be universal and orthodox. The universal point of view is well demonstrated by the fact that the whole discourse is devoted to Confucian texts written in Classical Chinese and completely ignores the role of the Korean script. We know that the Korean script *ŏnmun* ('vernacular' or 'vulgar' script) played an important role in the education not only of children—in bilingual primers like *Hunmong chaboe* 訓蒙字會 (Collection of Characters for Instructing the Ignorant Youth)—but also on higher (or even the highest) levels, as we can see in case of T'oegye's vernacular annotations to the Four Books *Sasŏ sŏgŭi* 四書釋義 (Explained Meaning of the Four Books) or their translation as *Sasŏ ŏnhae* 四書諺解 (Vernacular Explanations to the Four Books) by Yulgok. These literary works were, however, never included in the official anthologies of these authors. Although part of the blame could be hypothetically put on compilers of these anthologies, it is quite obvious that Yulgok, for instance, did not consider *ŏnmun* worth mentioning not only in his writings on *toksŏpŏp* but in his whole work, and the (probably not very easy) translation of the Four Books is only briefly mentioned in his biography.¹⁴ In this sense, the traditional literary canon is represented not only by classical works, but also requires a certain language register—Classical Chinese.

A more puzzling problem is the apparent absence of genres which are frequently mentioned in Yulgok's work, but are completely missing in the prescribed curriculum. This fact reminds us that with regard to the issue of reading, Yulgok talked about which books scholars *should* read, and they were, obviously, not necessarily congruent with the books actually read.

As an example of this stance we can use Yulgok's treatment of three big groups of texts: poetry, unorthodox heretic writings, and contemporary or post-Song (i.e. after 1279) Confucian book production.

The problem of poetry or, more precisely, the problem of Yulgok's silence on this topic in his *toksŏpŏp* can be easily explained by typical Confucian hypocrisy when literati kept distance from this genre officially and rhetorically stressed its 'licentiousness', but privately turned into zealous poets. Yulgok thus does not feel the necessity to mention poetry in his *toksŏpŏp* (of course with the exception of the Book of Songs, the *Shijing* 詩經), because it is not necessary for an immediate understanding of the Way contained in the classics, but treats it

14 YGCS, 33: 52b-53a.

elsewhere at considerable length. The same applies to popular literature that was also not worth to be mentioned in the curriculum of Confucian education.

A completely different approach is found in the case of unorthodox or even heretic writings where Yulgok explicitly states that »concerning unorthodox books of false learning and dubious categories, students should not browse them for even a single moment.«¹⁵ In spite of this categorical warning, Yulgok himself shows a very good command of unorthodox texts ranging from pre-Qin (up to 221 BCE) Hundred Schools (including the *Daodejing* 道德經 on which he even wrote a commentary) to the more contemporary Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 (1139–1192) and Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) and, of course, Buddhism which he encountered in his turbulent youth. Such discrepancy between prescribed and actual state of things is part of a broader and more complex relation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, treated in other parts of Yulgok's work. We should keep in mind, however, that in some aspects the texts of *toksöpöp* represent a ideal model rather than a description of daily praxis of literati.

A certain distance from the real picture of a scholar's library is also visible in the treatment of authors of Confucian tradition. One of the most regrettable limits of Yulgok's version of the prescribed curriculum is its focus on texts of *undisputable* orthodox tradition that creates an interesting chronological lacuna. Both Yulgok's versions of *toksöpöp* deal not only with classical texts but also with other texts necessary for their interpretation. This 'secondary' literature is, however, limited to orthodox texts of Song *daoxue* and especially to Zhu Xi's writings. The absence of material from Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang times (618–907) times is not surprising, because Yulgok (following the example of Zhu Xi) considered these dynasties a symbol of a dark period when the Way was not transmitted, and simply excluded them from the Genealogy of the Way. A more important problem is the absence of remarks about texts produced *after* Song masters because Zhu Xi is the last recommended author. With the exception of Zhen Dexiu 真德守 (1178–1235) and his *Xinjing* 心經 (The Book of the Mind), Yuan or Ming Confucian authors are not mentioned. This is in a sharp contrast with Yulgok's frequent references to these authors, beginning with Zhen Dexiu's *Daxue yanyi* 大學衍義 (Extended Meaning of the Great Learning) which served as a model for the *Songhak chibyō*, and ending with Luo Qinshun's 羅欽順 (1465–1547) *Kunzhiji* 困知記 (Knowledge Painfully Acquired) which Yulgok specified as the most important inspiration for his own ideas.¹⁶ Is his silence about certain authors motivated by his effort to hide heterodox temptations from students, or

15 若異端雜類不正之書。則不可頃刻披閱也。YGCS, 27: 9b.

16 YGCS, 12: 37a.

by the desire to formulate his recommendation within the limits of commonly accepted orthodoxy?

The answer to this question can be found at the end of the *Sŏngbak chibyo* charter dealing with the transmission of the Way where Yulgok explicitly states: »After Master Zhu, there is nobody whom we could identify as the one who received true and orthodox line of *daotong*.«¹⁷ That does not mean that there were no orthodox scholars who kept the lineage of the orthodox transmission, but simply that Zhu Xi was the last universally accepted orthodox authority. After him the orthodox succession of *daoxue* scholars was open to discussion, and acceptance of later works was a matter of personal preference and not of guaranteed tradition. In some cases scholars even agreed that a particular thinker is part of the orthodox tradition (e.g. Zhen Dexiu who was acknowledged by both T'oegye and Yulgok), but there was no higher authority to officially sanction such opinions. The selection of authors and texts in *toksŏpŏp* thus exactly corresponds to the list of sages and wise men included in *daotong*. A brief comparison of chapters dedicated to these topics in *Sŏngbak chibyo* also reveals that scholars or works of Korean Confucian tradition are not included in both categories. The reason is the same as in the case of Chinese scholars after Zhu Xi. Although on many occasions Yulgok expressed his opinion on who were orthodox Korean scholars and whose works he preferred within the Eastern country tradition, he did not include them into the official version of the curriculum because he knew that these were his personal preferences and not the commonly accepted view.

Kyŏngmong yogyŏl and Sŏngbak chibyo

Two basic texts containing Yulgok's versions of a reading curriculum, *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl* and *Sŏngbak chibyo*, are complementary yet diverse works treating a common topic, *toksŏpŏp*, on a rather different level. As has been said, *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl* (and also *Hakkyo mobŏm* 學校模範; Models for Schools) were designed for young students who began serious studies of the Confucian Way, and *Sŏngbak chibyo* was composed for higher levels of discussion about classics and their message. In this sense, the former is the primer for students before they start to study classics, while the latter is for those who already possess elementary knowledge. This difference is mirrored both in scale and the method used.

Kyŏngmong yogyŏl is a fascinating textbook the basic purpose of which is to

17 朱子之後。得道統正脈者。無可的指之人。YGCS, 26: 34a.

supply young students with essential knowledge necessary for any Confucian literate. The ten chapters of the book thus cover every important area from advices of how to get rid of bad personal habits, to the proper management of a funeral, from the treating of slaves to admonitions against corruption. The fourth chapter concerning our topic is called simply »Toksŏ« 讀書 (Reading) and Yulgok made it to be a marker separating the first three chapters devoted to the problems of self-cultivation and the rest of the book dealing with social interactions. This classical distinction between inner and outer aspects of the Way adhering to the traditional saying ‘cultivate oneself and govern others’ (*sugi ch’iin* 修己治人) accentuates Yulgok’s intention to explain the role of books and reading as being the first mediator between ourselves and the world.

A proper order of reading is introduced by few admonitions regarding both physical (»to kneel upright and respectfully with clasped hands«¹⁸) and mental (»deliberate in detail and become absorbed, deeply explain the meaning and its lesson«¹⁹) requirements for proper reading, ending with a traditional note repeated later in the text many times, stressing that the crucial goal is to overcome the distinction between the theoretical and the practical, and to transform ourselves and the world according to the message of Sages contained in books.

If we only read out loud, our mind does not absorb what we read and we do not put it into practice, the book remains the book and we remain the same as we were before.

What do we gain from that?²⁰

But which books and in which order should be read to achieve basic knowledge of the Confucian canon in the most effective way?

A literary work nowadays largely neglected and rarely read—*Xiaoxue* 小學 (Lesser Learning)—serves as a gate to other classical books. Lesser Learning or *Sobak* was for Chosŏn Confucians more than a simple book for young boys, but achieved a status unsurpassed by many classical works. In the turbulent 15th and 16th centuries it served as literati’s manifesto and battle flag, and during bloody literati purges it became a symbol of devotion to Confucian ideals.²¹ In 1884, when the old times were ending, devout Confucians composed a tribute to its

18 必端拱危坐。YGCS 27: 8a.

19 精思涵泳。深解義趣。YGCS 27: 8a.

20 若口讀而心不體身不行。則書自書我自我。何益之有。YGCS 27: 8a-b.

21 A good illustration of *Sobak*’s role for Chosŏn literati could be the fact that Confucian martyr Kim Koengp’il 金宏弼 (1454–1504) was nicknamed ‘*Sobak* boy’ 小學童子 for his attachment to this book, while his disciple Cho Kwangjo showed similar traits. See Yi Sangsŏng \$\$\$characters, *Chŏngam Cho Kwangjoŭi tohak sasang* [Cho Kwangjo’s Thought Concerning the Learning of the Way] (Seoul: Simsan, 2003), 101–102, 263.

noble message, *Haedong Sobak* 海東小學 (Lesser Learning in the Eastern Country) to demonstrate that in the Eastern country the Way had not yet disappeared. This primer designed for 8–9 years old boys illustrates the ambiguity of Zhu Xi's scholarship on the classical canon, much more than his notorious *Daxue* 大學 (Great Learning) edition; *Daxue* is merely rewritten while *Xiaoxue* is a complete fabrication. *Xiaoxue* is a classical book which existed only allegedly, and Zhu Xi decided to personally solve this dilemma, as he explained in the foreword to this work:

Today we do not have the whole book but a lot of its parts incorporated and scattered in commentaries and records [...]. I have collected them and created this book.²²

Through the eyes of today's skeptics it is hard to believe that no Korean scholar questioned Zhu Xi's creative reconstruction. But for Yulgok *Xiaoxue* served as an excellent book which could teach young boys how to »serve parents, be respectful to older brothers, loyal to the ruler, obey elders, elevate master, and be kind to friends.«²³

Automatic adherence to Zhu Xi's authority is also mirrored in the acceptance of his version of the Confucian canon both in the selection of works and the order of books, i.e. the Four Books (*Daxue*, *Lunyu*, *Mencius* 孟子, *Zhongyong* 中庸) followed by the Five Classics (*Shijing*, *Liji* 禮記, *Shujing* 書經, *Zhouyi* 周易 and *Chunqiu* 春秋). Korean scholars (including Yulgok) did not hesitate to disagree with Master Zhu's interpretation of certain terms or ideas, and some of their interpretations were in an open conflict with his theories (like Pak Sedang's 朴世堂, 1629–1703, in his reading of *Daxue*), but they unanimously agreed on his selection and arrangement of books in the canon which seemed natural and best suitable to them for didactic purposes.

Kyōngmong yogyōl lists the Four Books and the Five Classics in a prescribed order, and to each book adds a short comment on its importance and goals. Students should read *Daxue* because it provides the method of how to »investigate the Principle to the utmost, correct our mind, cultivate ourselves and govern people«,²⁴ *Lunyu* is about »achievements in seeking the Good, learning for one's own sake and cultivation of original source«,²⁵ *Mencius* offers »explanations of how to distinguish clearly between righteousness and profit, how to

22 今其全書。雖不可見。而雜出於傳記者亦多。〔…〕今頗蒐輯。以爲其書。Foreword to *Xiaoxue*.

23 於事親敬兄忠君弟長隆師親友之道。YGCS, 27: 8b.

24 窮理正心修己治人之道。Ibid.

25 於求仁爲己。涵養本原之功。Ibid.

stop human desires and preserve the Principle of Heaven«,²⁶ and *Zhongyong* speaks about »de of nature and feelings, achievements of pursuit and subtlety of establishment and cultivation.«²⁷ The same structure is applied to the Five Classics, beginning with *Shijing* which must be read because it teaches us »what is right and wrong in human nature and feelings, praise and admonishing of the Good and the Bad«,²⁸ and ending with *Qunqiu* which is about »how a Sage rewarded the good and punished the bad, passed judgement on things and controlled them.«²⁹ As for 'non-classical' books, Yulgok recommends the following programme which marks borders of orthodox literature worth of student's attention.

When we read the Five Books and the Five Classics repeatedly and become familiar with them, our understanding of principles does not cease but instead makes meanings and principles clearer each day. Then we can read books from earlier orthodox authors of the Song dynasty like *Jinsilu*, *Jiali* 家禮 [Family Rites], *Xinjing*, *Er Cheng quanshu* [Complete Writings of Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi], *Zhuzi daquan*, [*Zhuzi*] *yulei* and other explanations of human nature and principle [...]. With the remaining energy we can also read historical books in order to understand the past and the present and achieve to change affairs and things.³⁰

This concise but brief formulation of the reading curriculum was, of course, intended for beginners and left many questions unanswered. In order to find a more detailed methodology recommendable to Confucian students and scholars we have to turn our attention to the second Yulgok's work devoted to the issue of *toksöpöp*, *Söngbak chibyö*.

This *opus magnum* composed for the needs of king Sonjo deals with the issue of reading classics in the fourth chapter »Kungni« 窮理 (Probing the Principle) and presents one of the most elaborate texts on *toksöpöp* in the whole period of Yi dynasty. The book was intended to be »the staircase and the ladder to the Four Books and the Six Classics«³¹ and the structure of the text is a combination of classical quotations and Song commentaries accompanied by Yulgok's remarks which often merely introduce and conclude specific sections. The form of

26 於明辨義利。遏人慾存天理之說。 *Ibid.*

27 於性情之德。推致之功。位育之妙。 *Ibid.*, 27: 8b.

28 於性情之邪正。善惡之褒戒。 *Ibid.*, 27: 9a.

29 於聖人賞善罰惡抑揚操縱之微辭奧義。 *Ibid.*

30 五書五經。循環熟讀。理會不已。使義理日明。而宋之先正所著之書。如近思錄，家禮，心經，二程全書，朱子大全，語類及他性理之說。〔...〕而餘力亦讀史書。通古今。達事變。以長識見。 *Ibid.*, 27: 9a-b.

31 此書乃四書六經之階梯也。 *Ibid.*, 19: 10a.

anthology enabled Yulgok to freely formulate his ideas under the shield of orthodox authorities. Although he humbly stressed that *Sŏngbak chibyŏ* are not his own words but those of sages and worthies,³² he could at the same time proudly state that «even if sages and worthies had risen again, there would not have been a word which would not have been complete.»³³

Although the reading programme discussed in *Sŏngbak chibyŏ* is far more detailed than in *Kyŏngmong yogyŏl*, its basic outline, i.e. the Four Books, the Five Classics, Song *xinglixue* 性理學 ('learning of the Human Nature and Principle') and historical books remain the same with only minor changes or rather additions, such as for example the section on reading the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historians; 1st c. BCE). The basic difference between the two books thus lies in the scope and depth of arguments, rather than in the methodological approach. Beginning students and adults or more advanced scholars were supposed to read the same books using the same methods in the same sequence and, naturally, with the same goal. This demonstrates that the whole curriculum was intended to be studied repeatedly and the completion of the first level was simply the entrance to the next level. Young student memorized the texts and absorbed the basic outlines and ideas, adult scholars discussed more elaborate questions and arguments, experienced literati spread Confucian messages in the world, elderly patriarchs read them to teach the meaning of classics to their disciples. In this sense, a certain type of reading the eternal and unchangeable curriculum belonged to every season of a scholar's life, bringing about deeper and broader understanding of the meaning of the Way.

Commentaries

One of the most important clues in trying to understand traditional perception of a text in the mind of Chosŏn literati is the question of the exegetic apparatus employed. Although the ideal was to accomplish unbiased and objective reading of the message of the sages, myriads of commentaries (and our own reading experience) teach us that understanding *sola scriptura* was hardly ever possible. The problem of the relation between a text and a commentary is well described in a frequently quoted Yu Sŏngnyong's 柳成龍 (1542–1607) remark:

Generally, when reading books we should not look first at commentaries and explanations. We should re-read the texts of classics closely, examine it in detail and

32 “此非臣書。乃聖賢之書也。” *Ibid.*, 19: 3a.

33 聖賢復起。更無未盡之言。 *Ibid.*, 19: 2b.

wait for it to reveal a new meaning. Only then we can employ commentaries and explanations and the complexity of the meaning of a classical book will remain lucid and not obscured by other theories. But if we first look at explanations and commentaries, they will obstruct our mind and the classical text will not acquire any new meanings.³⁴

The interplay between a classical text and its orthodox interpretation was thus an inevitable part of *toksöpöp*, and we may assume that some commentaries, namely Zhu Xi's philological *zhangju* 章句 ('sentence by phrase') and the 'philosophical' *buowen* 或問 ('by asking questions') were an integral part of the reading process. This is already mentioned in *Kyōngmong yogyōl* where the classic text is automatically connected with a commentary (»then we read *Daxue* with the *buowen* commentary«³⁵). Although these commentaries were clearly considered an indispensable part of the reading process, which is quite natural in the light of the fact that Zhu Xi's commentaries interpret classical texts in a way that readers not familiar with the *xinglixue* paradigm could view as a brutal twist of the original meaning. Even more surprising is the fact that commentaries are not mentioned as frequently as we would expect. His neglect of secondary literature is especially frustrating when we look at thousands of commentaries then available and we would like to know which were used and what their influence was.

This dilemma arises from a rather ambiguous status of all kinds of commentaries from short pieces, such as annotations in *kugyōl* and grammatical notes, to complex full-fledged interpretations. Commentaries are, on one hand, very helpful and can explicate the meaning of a text, but, on the other hand, they are merely instruments that may facilitate readers' effort and are put aside after use. The fact that commentaries are only auxiliary means is well reflected in Zhu Xi's metaphor that compares the relationship between a text and a commentary to a master and his slaves. A frequently stressed admonition is to keep a proper distinction between a text and a commentary in order not to interpret the original through the eyes of a commentator who is always of lower authority than the Sage, the author of a classical text.³⁶ Commentaries are indispensable but they should not be confused with the final goal of reading. Once they have fulfilled their role, they are not needed anymore. The process itself is well described in

34 凡讀書。不可先看註解。且將經文反覆而詳味之。待自家有新意。卻以註解參校。庶乎經意昭然。而不爲他說所蔽。若先看註解。則被其說橫吾胷中。自家竟無新意矣。 *Sōae sōnsaeng munjip* 西厓先生文集 [Collected Works of Sōae], 15: 15b.

35 次讀大學及或問, *YCGS* 27: 8b.

36 Many examples are collected in Yi Chongho 李鍾虎, »T'oegye haktanüi toksöron« 退溪學團□讀書論 [Discussion on Reading Within the T'oegye Group], *T'oegye hakpo* 80 (1993), 175.

Zhu Xi's statement, used by Yulgok to illustrate the relationship between texts necessary for reading and the proper goal of reading:

He also said:

In the case of one book, the *Daxue* (Great Learning), we have the primary text, *zhangju* commentary and *huowen* commentary. When we read the original text thoroughly we do not need to use *huowen* commentary and it suffices to read only *zhangju* commentary. When we read it over a long time (the text with *zhangju* commentary) it suffices to read only the primary text of the classical book. And when we do this for a long time, complete passages of *Daxue* become part of our mind. Then we do not even need to use the classical text.³⁷

This rather surprising statement broadens our perspective not only in the sense of reading commentaries but also in the status of written texts *per se*, and we are forced to return to the very beginning of the curriculum and formulate what readers were supposed to achieve within their interaction with books.

End Without Books

The eternal process of consuming and absorbing books naturally includes the criterion of 'definite' understanding that allows us to assume the book has been completely understood. For young students it means that the process of reading is finished when they »have fully grasped the meaning of the book and understand it with certainty.«³⁸ This type of understanding allows students to finish one volume and advance to another, but it certainly does not provide full comprehension of the topic which is to be acquired on further levels gradually achieved during the whole life. The ultimate understanding (if possible) is very close to the abovementioned concept of an internalized text, i.e. the level of understanding acquired after the reader has absorbed the message of a text to such extent that he no longer needs to consult the written text, and the message of a classical text has become an internal part of his mind and body. In *Sōnghak chibyo*, Yulgok quotes Zhu Xi's description of the process of how to acquire wisdom contained in texts:

He also said: First we should empty our minds and sooth our *qi* [氣 or 'life energy'], read the text with familiarity and deep understanding and deliberate its essence. When every word and phrase find their proper place we proceed to various commen-

37 又曰。大學一書。有正經。有章句。有或問。看來看去。不用或問。只看章句便了。久之。又只看正經便了。又久之。自有一部大學。在我胸中。而正經亦不用矣。YGCS, 20: 2 6b.

38 盡曉義趣。貫通無疑。Ibid., 27: 9b.

taries and understand and comprehend them one by one. Only after that it is possible to compare what is true and false and we can seek the original meaning of words established by sages and worthies. When we have accomplished that we still keep thinking about it to let it sink into our flesh and permeate through bones to marrow. Only then we can speak about study.³⁹

Such physical metaphors are intended to emphasize the ultimate goal of reading: to let the knowledge contained in texts become an integral part of ourselves.⁴⁰ Once in possession of this knowledge, we are able to command it without doubts, *clare et distincte*, without the help of commentaries and even without written records which we left during the process of study as no longer necessary. The idea that a true scholar should remember and fully understand the whole classical cannon and be able to expound, teach and even act according to its message in every moment is in full accord with Confucian moral absolutism and it naturally raises doubts whether this goal has ever been achieved (like other Confucian ideals). This naive but necessary question was both discussed and answered in a conversation between Yulgok and King Sŏnjo in 1575 during royal lectures:

His Highness asked Yi [I]: Which books do you usually read? Which book do you like the most? He answered: What I read when I was preparing for state examinations was as if I had not read it at all. After I started to study, I read [classics] from *Xiaoxue* to *Daxue* and *Lunyu* with Mencius but I did not manage to get to *Zhongyong*. I finished reading and began again, but I was not yet able to completely understand them. Therefore I have not accomplished to read the Six Classics [yet].⁴¹

39 先要虛心平氣。熟讀精思。令一字一句。皆有下落。諸家註解。一一通貫。然後可以較其是非。以求聖賢立言之本意。雖已得之。亦更反復玩味。令其義理淪肌浹髓。然後乃可言學耳。YGCS, 20: 24b.

40 The important aspect of the process is, of course, the fact that we can remember texts word by word. Although Yulgok does not address this problem specifically we have at disposal many texts discussing the question of how many times should we read a text in order to understand it (and remember it). Frequent anecdotes tell us stories about bizarre records in reading but the most standard number of re-readings was around 20-50 times. Zhu Xi comments on the problem with a very realistic view that »With the fiftieth reading there's sure to be some understanding. If with fiftieth reading he's still in the dark and doesn't understand, it's that his psychophysical stuff is no good.« *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, 4: 35; quoted from Chu Hsi, *Learning to Be a Sage: Selections from the Conversations of Master Chu, Arranged Topically*, tr. by Daniel K. Gardner (Berkeley; Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 135.

41 上謂珥曰：珥常讀何書？所最喜者何書乎？最喜對曰：喜習學業時所讀，見猶不讀也。向學之後，從《小學》、讀來，以至《大學》、《論孟》，猶未及《中庸》。終而復始，尙未能通

At first sight, this personal note seems to substantially doubt the relevance of *toksŏpŏp* methods prescribed in Yulgok's works. When Yulgok confessed at his late age of 40 that even he was not even able to master more than one third of the prescribed curriculum it sounded like an acknowledgement not only of his own failure, but also the failure of the whole method. The humble tone of the conversation, however, does not deny the important fact that in the process of reading quality is valued more than quantity. The issue in question is not how much we are able to read, but how much we are able to understand and to practice the content of reading. In this sense, there never existed an ultimate goal of study that could be defined by a number of books read, and it would be very naïve to think that reading of all texts in the cannon could be sufficient to acquire the desired wisdom. The question of whether to believe that the process of study has an end is answered by Confucius' advice »One studies as if one does not get there.«⁴² This means that we should not focus on the final gain that is not strictly defined, but varies according to our own abilities and efforts. Classical texts were supposed to be studied as means of self-cultivation ending only in death when we finally put all books aside.

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會?故不及於六經矣。 Sŏnjo 9 kwŏn, 8 nyŏn (1575 ūrhae/Wanli 3 nyŏn) 6 wŏl 24 il (sinmyo) 1 pŏntchae kisa 宣祖9卷, 8年 (1575 乙亥/명만력〔萬曆3〕年) 6月24日 (辛卯) 1번째기사 [King Sŏnjo vol 9, 9th Year (1575, Year *ūrhae*, 3rd Year of Wanli Era) 24th Day (*sinmyo*) of the 6th Month, 1st Record], YGCS, 32: 30a.

42 學如不及。 *Lunyu*, 8: 17.