

# “Questions to the Creator” in Korean Intellectual History

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to make sense of Yi Gyu-bo's (1168-1241) seemingly religious and apolitical text, "Munjomul" (Questions to the Creator), as a political text, and to suggest its vision as a possible prelude to the Goryeo (918-1392)–Joseon (1392-1910) transition. If Neo-Confucianism articulates a political vision for the Joseon dynasty, one can construe that political vision as an answer to the previous dynasty's long-lasting questions about the relation of the self and politics as the dominant political thought loses ground. To the extent that "Munjomul" shows the weakening state of the ideological foundation of Goryeo, it can be interpreted as the embodiment of the problem, the answer to which was statecraft thought and Neo-Confucianism in early Joseon. This paper sees that Yi Gyu-bo disconnected the link between politics and the power of the God, and foregrounded the issues of the self while Neo-Confucianism forged the link between the self and politics.*

**Keywords:** Yi Gyu-bo, "Munjomul," Neo-Confucianism, Goryeo-Joseon transition, "Ten Injunctions," statecraft, John Duncan, Ancient Style Learning

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to make sense of Yi Gyu-bo's (1168-1241)<sup>1</sup> seemingly religious and apolitical text, "Munjomul" (Questions to the Creator), as a political text, and to suggest its vision as a possible prelude to the Goryeo (918-1392)–Joseon (1392-1910) transition. For those interested in Korean intellectual and cultural history, the Goryeo–Joseon transition represents, first and foremost, the decline of Buddhism and the ascendancy of Neo-Confucianism as the dominant system of social governance. Indeed, Korean society underwent significant changes that affected the ruling elite as well as other members of society as Neo-Confucianism gained wider acceptance during the Joseon dynasty.<sup>2</sup>

1. Active in public life, Yi Gyu-bo was an official for the Choe's military rule in the Goryeo dynasty, who composed many official documents. Some of his works have been preserved in the *Dongguk isangguk jip* (Collected Works of Minister Yi of Korea). He is better known by scholars in the field of premodern Korean literature than in the field of Confucianism or Korean intellectual history. For detailed information on Yi's life and works, see Yi G. (1241/1980, vol. 1, 1-20).
2. To clarify the term "Neo-Confucianism" in this paper, a few words seem necessary. "Neo-Confucianism" in this paper refers to a school/way of thought built on Song moral philosophy after the fall of the Tang Empire. Neo-Confucianism represents first and foremost an emphasis on personal morality as a way to bring order to the world. It includes, but is not limited to, Cheng-Zhu learning. In other words, Cheng-Zhu learning is a branch of Neo-Confucianism, not Neo-Confucianism as a whole. Much of the traditional research about Neo-Confucianism has been based on the assumption that Neo-Confucianism is a revival of Confucian philosophy, which had been out of favor since the Warring States period. This type of scholarship has been instrumental in correcting the somewhat simplistic view of Confucian tradition as a mere political ideology rather than a series of philosophical reflections. However, it begs the question: Do the Han and Tang dynasties, the intervening periods between the Warring States period and the Song dynasty, represent some sort of philosophical vacuum? Since 1980s, a group of intellectual historians have addressed this problem as they fault the historians of philosophy for divorcing the philosophical ideas from the intellectual contexts of the ideas. Peter K. Bol and Hoyt Tillman, among other scholars, broadened the horizon of thought about Song philosophy by considering other contemporary intellectual alternatives such as Su Shih and Chen Liang. In particular, Peter K. Bol's research is anchored in an impressive array of historical, literary, and philosophical sources. In it, Neo-

As the general rubric of the "(Neo-)Confucianization of the Joseon dynasty" was becoming common knowledge, scholars have taken a step further to investigate and build more concrete pictures of the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Joseon dynasty. As a consequence, quite a few scholarly works argued that it was not until the late Joseon period, after the 1592 Japanese invasion of Korea, that Neo-Confucianism became fully rooted in Joseon society at its most basic cultural level. Martina Deuchler's *The Confucian Transformation of Korea* is the prime example of this argument (Deuchler 1992).

With due respect, it is also undeniable that the founders of the Joseon dynasty explicitly advocated Neo-Confucianism as a new vision of society. Combined with the argument of (Neo-)Confucianization of the *late* Joseon, thus, this observation leads one to investigate the temporal differences of Neo-Confucianism throughout the Joseon dynasty. The problematic issue of Silhak (Practical Learning) aside, the unfolding of Neo-Confucianism in the Joseon marks at least two significant transitions: The transition from Buddhism in the Goryeo to the rise of Neo-Confucianism in early Joseon, and that from early Joseon Confucianism to mid/late Joseon Confucianism.

There seems to be consensus of scholarly opinion concerning the introspective character of Korean Neo-Confucianism in mid-late Joseon dynasty. Along with Neo-Confucians' concern for personal morality was an emphasis on introspection and the regulation of one's mental state. Common Neo-Confucian activities like quiet-sit-

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Confucianism revealed itself to be one of the many alternatives to cope with the political and social crisis of the Tang-Song transition. More recently, Yu Yingshi's study of Zhu Xi initiated a new debate about how to make sense of the political aspects of Neo-Confucianism. In making sense of Neo-Confucianism, this paper takes Peter K. Bol's study seriously for several reasons: First, its methodological stance as intellectual history sheds light on the various aspects of the Goryeo-Joseon transition which have not been readily visible from the perspective of philosophy. Second, his works (*Neo-Confucianism in History*, in particular) synthesize much of recent scholarship. Third, it provides the framework in which one can view literary figures like Yi Gyu-bo as an intellectual and political actor. In sum, this paper draws on Peter Bol's study not because of the absence of other research, but because of its relevance to the subject matter.

ting (*jeongjwa*; *jingzuo* in Chinese) are also pregnant with psychological implications. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that many of mid-late Korean Neo-Confucians were interested primarily in the state of an individual's mind and heart. It does not mean that there existed only one style of Neo-Confucianism at that time, but that it was dominant to the point that Toegye, the intellectual leader of such Neo-Confucianism, ended up being one of the famous cultural paragons of the Joseon dynasty. However, this tendency eventually invited the critique of those who thought that Confucianism was too introspective.

On the other hand, there is hardly consensus of scholarly opinion concerning the nature of Neo-Confucianism in early Joseon, despite the fact that the Goryeo-Joseon transition has received a great deal of attention in Korean studies. For example, many Korean historians of philosophy argued that, "the founding of the Joseon was a direct consequence of the late thirteenth-century importation of Cheng-Zhu learning. Cheng-Zhu learning gave rise to a critique that attributed the problems of society to the decadence and corruption of Buddhism" (Duncan 2000, 238). On the other hand, many of the so-called nationalist historians proposed a more sociological account: "Cheng-Zhu learning rose to dominance as the class ideology of a 'new scholar-official' group of medium and small landlords who seized power with the founding of the Joseon dynasty" (Duncan 2000, 237). Until recently, the second view seems to be the most widely accepted explanation of the intellectual history of the late Goryeo and early Joseon period.<sup>3</sup> However, John Duncan, a noted scholar on the Goryeo and Joseon periods, made two important revisions to the so-called new scholar-official thesis: First, they did not constitute a new social group in terms of pedigree. Rather, the radical reshaping of the dynasty's institutions reflected the reality of the central *yangban*'s emergence as the dominant social group.<sup>4</sup> Second, the

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3. For detailed discussion on existing interpretation of the Goryeo-Joseon intellectual transition, see Duncan (2000, 237-239).

4. The Goryeo sociopolitical system was an institutional framework designed to accommodate the interests of local influentials, who were the dominant social group in the tenth century. See Duncan (2000, 261).

*yangban* reformers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also displayed a political attitude closer to that of Ancient Style Learning (*guwen*) than to that of Cheng-Zhu learning.

Whatever interpretation is correct, it seems clear at this point that any understanding of early Joseon Confucianism is linked to how to make sense of the Goryeo-Joseon transition. In other words, it is indispensable for defining early Joseon Confucianism to ask why and how a number of Korean intellectuals wished to abandon Buddhism and accept Neo-Confucianism around the time of the dynastic changes. This paper suggests that Yi Gyu-bo's "Questions to the Creator" may be crucial to understanding the Goryeo-Joseon transition, despite its temporal remoteness and apparent apolitical character. By the same token, "Questions to the Creator" may be best construed as a question to which Neo-Confucianism was an answer.

### Reading "Questions to the Creator"

Given its compact but rich content, Yi Gyu-bo's "Questions to the Creator" deserves translation in full.

I said to the Creator of the universe: "When Heaven gave birth to man, it created men first, and then the five grains so that man would have things to eat. Then it created mulberry and hemp so that man would have clothes to wear. This would indicate that Heaven cherishes man and desires that he live. But it is also true that Heaven created evil things. It created savage animals, such as bears, tigers, wolves, and jackals, and such vermin as mosquitoes, gadflies, fleas, and lice. Inferring from the existence of creatures that do great harm to man, it would seem that Heaven detests man and wishes him dead. Why is Heaven so inconsistent in its love and hate?"

The Creator replied: "You ask about the birth of man and other things. But from the remote beginning they came into being of themselves according to the spontaneous workings of Nature. Heaven itself does not know why, nor do I. Man's birth occurred of

itself, not because of Heaven. The five grains and the mulberry and hemp came to the world of themselves, not because of Heaven. If so, how could heaven discriminate among benefits and harms and manage good and evil? He who has the Way accepts good when it comes, without rejoicing, and accepts evil without dread. Because he takes all things as nothing, nothing can harm him.”

I asked the Creator: “In the beginning primal material force divided itself into three powers: Heaven above, Earth below, and Man between. Since one principle runs through the three, is it possible that there are evil things in Heaven?”

The Creator replied: “Have I not said that nothing can harm a man who has the Way? Could Heaven be less than a man with the Way and harbor anything harmful?”

“Then, once man attains the Way, can he reach the Jade Palace of the Taoist trinity?”

“Yes.”

“Now you have clearly dispelled my doubts . . . . But I am unclear on one point. You say Heaven does not know, not do you. Heaven is nonaction, and therefore it is natural if it does not know. But how could the Creator not know?”

The Creator replied: “Have you seen me create anything? Things come into being of themselves and change of themselves. How could I fashion things, and how could I know? I do not even know that you call me Creator” (Yi G. 1241/1980, vol. 6, 66-67).

– *Translated by Uchang Kim*

Indeed, this essay apparently puts the most religious subject to the fore, focusing on the creator, as the title of the essay indicates. At the beginning, the writer sees the world as having the creator who needs to be served, and those who are there to serve. The creator is assumed as the one who is responsible for the order of the universe. By invoking the difficulty in finding coherence supporting humans' well-being on earth, however, the essay problematizes the place of man, and his relationship to Heaven and the supposed Creator. As the Creator relinquishes claim to responsibility for the well-being of the human world, the essay goes on to ask what is the role and goal of man on earth. It is said that all the good and bad things available

to men were not created, but that they came into existence of their own will and that we bring about good and bad things of our own, not by the will of a higher being. The essay seems to suggest that as there is no creator who is responsible for the well-being of the earth, and that it is best to detach oneself from contingencies.

How is it that this apparently religious and apolitical text is remarkably amenable to shedding light on the Goryeo–Joseon intellectual transition? Before proceeding to this question, let me briefly go over the existing interpretations of this essay.

### Interpretations

"Questions to the Creator" has been studied by several Korean scholars, who agree on at least one point: It is one of the most interesting pieces of writing in Korean intellectual history. However, there are considerable differences in the ways in which they contextualize Yi Gyu-bo. I will briefly go over three representative interpretations, before I present mine.

First, generally speaking, Korean-Chinese and North Korean scholars take Yi Gyu-bo as a materialist thinker who criticized idealistic superstitions in "Questions to the Creator" (Ju et al. 1988, 79-89). This interpretation is based on Marxist historiography, which has influenced the vast majority of historians of East Asian thought in mainland China. Chinese Marxist historiography tries to trace the development of so-called materialism (*weiwulun*) and idealism (*weixinlun*). In my opinion, Marxist interpretation in general and Chinese Marxist historiography in particular suffer from a reductionist fallacy: They reduce a given thinker's philosophy to an imposed interpretive framework.<sup>5</sup>

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5. J. G. A. Pocock provides a fitting criticism of Marxist historiography: "The historian often reacted to his predicament by seeking to reduce the order of ideas to identity with some other order which he was better equipped to handle . . . Reductionism failed to rescue the historian from the circumstance that the intellec-

Second, there are scholars who consider syncretism of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism to be the defining characteristics of Yi Gyu-bo's thought (Center for Korean Philosophy 2001, 307). While I agree with them that there is such a tendency in Yi Gyu-bo's thought,<sup>6</sup> I think their interpretation begs the question, "What is his syncretism for?" While Yi Gyu-bo made many references to a variety of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist texts, and sometimes says that their teachings are ultimately identical, he made it clear that he was using existing teachings to come up with new ideas.<sup>7</sup> In this situation, the term "syncretism" may describe the way in which Yi Gyu-bo formulated his ideas, but does not explain what his ideas were about.

Another way to contextualize Yi Gyu-bo is to locate him in the tradition of what is called *qixue* or *qi* philosophy (Kim H. 1979). Many historians of ideas search for what is seemingly the same idea across several time periods, and gather them together under the name of a certain ideology. However, such an approach may stifle appreciation of the novelty and real context of what has taken place. Furthermore, it can suggest an altogether different meaning from what ideas stood for in the original context. For example, one can find the term, "primal material force" (*wongi*; *yuanqi* in Chinese) in the text of "Questions to the Creator." But it is not very fruitful to locate a thinker in the tradition of *qi* philosophy, for there are many radical differences among those thinkers collected retrospectively as *qi* philosophers, and they do not represent a sociologically distinct or wholly self-conscious school of thought.

The main difficulty in interpreting "Questions to the Creator" is that we do not know when and on what occasion Yi Gyu-bo wrote this essay, making it difficult to explain the motives behind it and

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tual constructs he was trying to control were not historical phenomena at all, to the extent to which they had been built up by non-historical modes of inquiry" (Pocock 1971, 10).

6. Certainly one can find the traces of all three teachings in "Questions to the Creator."

7. See "Dap jeolliji nonmunseo" (A Reply to Jeolliji on Writing) in Yi G. (1241/1980, vol. 4).

place it in immediate context. Meanwhile, the very fact that Yi Gyu-bo was living at the time when the Goryeo political system began to become increasingly unstable suggests an alternative way to contextualize it. The thematic dimension of "Questions to the Creator" can be best understood through comparing it with Wang Geon's (877-943) "Hunyo sipjo" (Ten Injunctions), which has been believed to epitomize the political vision of the Goryeo dynasty.<sup>8</sup>

The "Ten Injunctions" provides a good view of Goryeo's intellectual climate from its beginning to Yi Gyu-bo's time. As is well known,<sup>9</sup> in the "Ten Injunctions," Wang Geon, the founder of the Goryeo dynasty, left his descendents clear instructions at the end of his reign on how to ensure the flourishing of the dynasty. We can assume that the vision articulated in this important document exerted great influence on Goryeo society. For one thing, when the Mongols arose as a superpower in Asia and invaded Goryeo, the government undertook another woodblock carving of the Tripitaka, trusting in the power of Buddha to intervene in the national crisis (Eckert et al. 1990, 92). While the Goryeo Tripitaka is cherished by modern

8. For the full text of the "Ten Injunctions," see Lee and De Bary (1997-2000, 154-156).

9. Lee and De Bary (1997-2000, 151). There are two important debates about the historical significances of the "Ten Injunctions": The first debate is whether or not the "Ten Injunctions" is a forgery. While Imanishi Ryu argued that the "Ten Injunctions" is a forgery from the mid-Goryeo period (Imanishi 1918), Yi Pyeng-do repudiates Imanishi Ryu's point by providing ample textual evidence (Yi P. 1980). The second debate is about how much Confucian or Buddhist its message is. While Kim Choong-Yeol argues that so-called Confucian elements play a prominent part in the "Ten Injunctions" (Kim C. 1987), Kim Seog Gun sees more Buddhist elements in it (Kim S. 1999). The two debates, their importance in Korean scholarship notwithstanding, are irrelevant to this paper's arguments. The reason I take the "Ten Injunctions" as a major reference point in discussing "Questions to the Creator" is not that the text of the "Ten Injunctions" per se is in a particular tension with that of "Questions to the Creator," but that it epitomizes Goryeo's intellectual climate. Although the historical significance of the "Ten Injunctions" has sometimes been contested, its status as a reflection of Goryeo's intellectual climate has never been questioned. Even Imanishi Ryu, who notes its dubious authorship, never denies the fact that the "Ten Injunctions" reflects Goryeo's intellectual climate.

Koreans for its exquisite artistry, its historical significance cannot be properly understood without considering the political vision of the “Ten Injunctions.” The “Ten Injunctions” includes a variety of significant observations on matters like royal succession and salaries for the bureaucracy. Arguably, however, one of the most important subjects in “The Ten Injunctions” is the connection between politics on the one hand, and Buddhism and geomancy on the other. This subject occupies the entire first section. According to this, people should worship the gods and spirits of heaven and of the major mountains and rivers in order to achieve social well-being.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the “Injunctions” recommends a life full of spirituality and gratitude for the favorable conditions of life through the divine intervention of Buddha. It was argued that “the founding of the Goryeo was legitimized in large measure by Buddhist and geomantic ideas that were part and parcel of the legitimating ideology of the dominant social groups” (Duncan 2000, 13).

My argument is that “Questions” can best be understood as a precursor to the founding of the Joseon dynasty and as a critique of this guiding political thought of Goryeo, which was not explicitly challenged until the time of Yi Gyu-bo. These two essays at first seem very different in terms of style, to the point that one may not find an effective way of comparing them. However, there are important differences.

First, Yi Gyu-bo’s essay seems to make Wang Geon’s suggestions irrelevant. In the dialogue between the Creator and Yi Gyu-bo, the Creator tells him that he did not create the world, but that “things come into being of themselves and change of themselves.” If this is true, then there is no need to act a certain way in order to show gratitude to a higher being for the way life is. Wang Geon’s “Ten Injunctions” deals with ways to keep a higher being pleased and how to

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10. Wang Geon’s first injunction states, “The success of every great undertaking of our state depends on the favor and protection of Buddha. Therefore, the temples of both the Meditational and Doctrinal schools should be built and monks should be sent out to those temples to minister to Buddha.” Statements regarding Buddhism and geomancy also appear in several other injunctions.

thank them for making one's life and lands as they are, but these are of no use since there is no one to thank according to Yi's "Creator."

Second, Wang Geon argued that the successes of the country should be attributed to the favor of Buddha, and that temples must be built to maintain a pattern of good fortune. He also promotes the use of geomancy, connecting fortune with nature. Yi Gyu-bo, however, implies that the human world, Heaven, and the Earth are independent of each other in terms of fortune, and that humans came about of themselves; thus human affairs are of their own making and consequence. Yi Gyu-bo's creator says that things are without any particular anthropocentric purpose, and the creator would not do anything to help a kingdom no matter how many temples they build.

Third, although both pieces encourage the reader to take on certain types of responsibility, one deals with it on an individual level by promoting self-governance and accountability, while the other lays down an explicit course of action as to how one is to take responsibility for things other than his/her own life. In other words, from the start it seems that Wang Geon and Yi Gyu-bo have differing priorities. Wang Geon's model is that of a political leader; Yi Gyu-bo's is a model for the private individual. Wang Geon's injunctions are meant to keep the kingdom strong and whole, and all of his advice is toward that end. In "Ten Injunctions," Wang Geon lays out actions that must be taken and things that must be prevented in order to assure the kingdom's well-being and prosperity, clearly stating that we are fully obligated to obey certain rules to guarantee what is good for ourselves. On the other hand, in "Questions to the Creator," each individual should take care of oneself within his or her realm of existence.

I hope it is now clear how Yi Gyu-bo's vision departs from that of the "Ten Injunctions." The next question is how Yi Gyu-bo's vision could be a harbinger of things to come. By the term "harbinger," I do not mean that Yi Gyu-bo was articulating in advance some answer to the question with which the early Joseon intellectuals would wrestle. Instead, I would like to suggest that Yi Gyu-bo's idea is not an answer but a question regarding a new political vision.

Indeed, Yi Gyu-bo never developed a new political vision which could serve as an alternative of that of the “Ten Injunctions.” In the public realm, he was part of the political establishment, and complicit in the military rule of General Choe. Throughout his career, he was assigned to compose various official documents for the Goryeo government. Official documents like, “Royal Prayer on the Occasion of the Production of the Tripitaka,” show that Yi Gyu-bo did not challenge the dominant political ideas of the “Ten Injunctions” in public (Lee and De Bary 1997-2000, 239).

On the other hand, Yi Gyu-bo expressed unorthodox and subversive ideas in his more private writings. Indeed, the vision developed in “Questions to the Creator” is also found in his very personal poems. There are three other writings by Yi Gyu-bo in which a creator is explicitly mentioned: “Byeongjung” (Being Ill), “Ongno yugam” (Feeling at a Brazier), and “Tuhwapung” (A Chill Breeze in the Flowering Season), all of which are contained in *Dongguk isangguk jip* (Collected Works of Minister Yi of Korea) published in 1241. There are great many links between these poems and “Questions to the Creator” in terms of subject matter and ways of conveying their message. What is particularly noteworthy is that they put the issue of creator in apparently personal terms and discuss it in a casual manner. In other words, Yi Gyu-bo never problematizes the subversive vision in such a way that it may be viewed as a full-fledged idea concerning a public matter.

How, then, are we to make sense of the disparity between Yi Gyu-bo’s advocacy of existing political ideas in his public activities, on the one hand, and the subversive ideas in his personal writings on the other? I would like to suggest a Straussian esoteric reading as a solution (Strauss 1988). According to Leo Strauss, speaking a subversive truth may incur persecution.<sup>11</sup> But, “Persecution cannot prevent

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11. “The term persecution covers a variety of phenomena, ranging from the most cruel type, as exemplified by the Spanish Inquisition, to the mildest, which is social ostracism. Between these extremes are the types which are most important from the point of view of literary or intellectual history” (Strauss 1988, 32).

even public expression of the heterodox truth, for a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines" (Strauss 1988, 24). Granting that Yi Gyu-bo's idea was indeed subversive enough to provoke what Leo Strauss calls persecution, so much so that he advocated mainstream political ideas in public, what was his technique for writing so that his subversive truth is presented? In my view, it is that Yi Gyu-bo put the most provocative ideas in the most "private" context, such as casual poems and brief essays. Without considering the Straussian way of reading, we are left with only two banal possibilities: Yi Gyu-bo's thoughts changed over the course of his life, or he was so incoherent he did not deserve the title of philosopher.

If "the real opinion of an author is not necessarily identical with that which he expresses in the largest number of passages" (Strauss 1988, 30), we may take "Question to the Creator" all the more seriously. As we discussed above, "Question to the Creator" implies a disconnect between politics and divine intervention, and shows a strong sense of selfhood without any political connections.

As is seen in Jeong Do-jeon's *Bulssi japbyeon* (Discourses on Buddha), the Joseon dynasty was established while the major ideologies of the time were criticizing the idea of the divine intervention of Buddha. Neo-Confucianism presented itself as an alternative as it redefined the individual self as a moral agent with the immense power to transform the whole world, not as the private self conceived in "Questions to the Creator." Confucian classics such as *Daxue* (Great Learning) and *Daxue yanyi* (Extended Meaning of the Great Learning), which were widely read in the early Joseon period, show how the self was connected to the ordering of the world at large in the Neo-Confucian vision.

If Neo-Confucianism articulates an alternative vision for the dynasty, one can construe it as an answer to a long-lasting question of the previous dynasty as the dominant political thought loses ground. My argument is that we can find a niche for Yi Gyu-bo in the

course of articulating the problem. Yi Gyu-bo disconnected the link between politics and the power of the God of the universe, and foregrounded the issues of the self while Neo-Confucianism forged the link between the self and politics.

### **Yi Gyu-bo and the Ancient Style Learning**

What made the development of Yi Gyu-bo's new way of thinking possible? This question compels one to revisit the Ancient Style Learning, which John Duncan brought to our attention in his studies of the Goryeo-Joseon transition. Duncan suggests that Confucianism in the Goryeo-Joseon transition should be understood as the combination of Ancient Style Learning and Cheng-Zhu learning: "The Goryeo intellectual tradition prior to the introduction of Cheng-Zhu learning can no longer be seen as a monolithic Tang belletrist tradition. From the twelfth century on, there also existed a significant Ancient Style Learning strain" (Duncan 2000, 246). For Duncan, the reason why the Ancient Style Learning is particularly noteworthy is its supposed connection to the project of a strong and activist central state. This idea was inspired by Peter Bol's study of Chinese intellectual history. In his study of the Tang-Song transition, Peter Bol showed forcefully that the institutional activists in Northern Song China were the ancient-style scholar-officials (Bol 1992).

What is Ancient Style Learning? The so-called Ancient Style Learning movement in China primarily meant the rise of the "ancient style" of literary composition. Its proponents argue that one should learn ancient sages' intentions, not their literary elaborations. In other words, writing should not simply be a matter of imitating ancient models, but a matter of necessitating thinking for oneself, just as the ancient sages supposedly did. It repudiates the idea of literature for the sake of literature itself, and accentuates content rather than form, while urging the writer to articulate new ideas. According to Peter Bol's study of the Ancient Style Learning movement in late Tang and Northern Song, although the Ancient Style Learning is pri-

marily about new standards for literary values, it had implications for political vision as well. The demand that individuals know for themselves and be substantial, conscious, intending creators of literature led to the creation of a new culture rather than maintaining the status quo. As Han Yu stated, being capable of responding emotionally and thinking responsibly required not an acceptance of social norms but a self-conscious commitment to being different from the times. As a consequence, it supported the creation of institutions by the central government in Northern Song.<sup>12</sup>

To a certain extent, the intellectual culture in early Joseon can also be characterized by activism in the central government, with an emphasis on institutional overhaul. Many scholars, including Martina Deuchler and Chai-sik Chung, observed that the founders of the Joseon were primarily interested in creating a more efficient central government in order to strengthen control over local societies. It seems true that, at that time, the creation of the central government's legislative authority was more visible than the emphasis on individual self-cultivation and independent local activities. It is quite understandable that the founding of a new dynasty requires restructuring of society.

It is in this context that Duncan has traced the genealogy of the Ancient Style Learning in late Goryeo to find the theoretical underpinnings of the activism of central government in the founding of the Joseon dynasty. However, he overlooked Yi Gyu-bo in reconstructing the genealogy. It should be noted, however, that Choe Ja, one of the leaders of the Ancient Style Learning in late Goryeo, was Yi Gyu-bo's protégé, and that Yi Gyu-bo was under the influence of the Ancient Style Learning before Choe Ja had been.<sup>13</sup> It is understandable that

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12. I am following the discussion of Ancient Style Learning in Bol (1992).

13. Choe Ja seemed to be very critical of divine intervention in the ordering of the world (See Duncan 2000, 246). Insofar as one relies on the supernatural power, it is hard to expect major restructuring of Korean sociopolitical institutions. Perhaps Yi Gyu-bo prepared the way for later generation like Choe Ja, who launched explicit attacks on geomantic and Buddhist traditions beyond Yi Gyu-bo's skepticism, and advocated institutional innovations.

Duncan missed Yi Gyu-bo, for Yi Gyu-bo is different from many of Northern Song proponents of Ancient Style Learning. Yi Gyu-bo never advocated the institutional overhaul by central government. We should remember, though, that Ancient Style Learning per se was not a political program but a literary project. It was a movement about why and how to write. It did not necessarily require institutional activism. The reason why Ancient Style Learning was often connected to institutional activism is that it valued the personal acquisition of ideas over imitation of good cultural forms. When literary value is placed on the thinking process itself, the activity of writing serves as a mechanism through which the writer raises questions and attempts to answer them. When many of the proponents of Ancient Style Learning in Northern Song advocated institutional activism, institutional activism could be considered an answer to questions raised through such a writing process. Indeed, it is understandable that when the existing culture and institutions are in crisis, those who think for themselves rather than imitating transmitted cultural forms want to use government to change and benefit the world.

Yi Gyu-bo did not reach the point where major restructuring of Korean sociopolitical institutions was necessary. However, he refused to repeat the transmitted literary elaborations and wanted to be different. Contemporary literati recognized that Yi Gyu-bo accentuated the importance of new ideas in writing. As is shown in "Questions to the Creator," his vision was quite different from the main trends of his times.

But, as we have seen, his different vision remained in the realm of individual, not society as a whole. The demand that an individual take care of themselves without considering larger sociopolitical issues made it difficult to agree on what men should value in common and how to maintain order in the community. In this sense, Yi Gyu-bo's vision is hardly any answer to any of the sociopolitical problems that plagued Goryeo. But it does not mean that Yi's vision in "Questions to the Creator" is totally irrelevant to the intellectual history of late Goryeo through the founding of the Joseon dynasty. To the extent that it shows the weakening state of the ideological foun-

dation of Goryeo, it can be interpreted as the embodiment of the problem, the answer to which was the statecraft thought and Neo-Confucianism in early Joseon. This kind of significance would become apparent only when viewed over the long run.

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## GLOSSARY

<i>Bulssi japbyeon</i>	佛氏雜辨	<i>jingzuo</i> (Ch.) ▶	<i>jeongjwa</i>
Cheng-Zhu (Ch.)	程朱	Munjomul	問造物
Dap jeolliji	答全履之	Ongno yugam	擁爐有感
nonmunseo	論文書	<i>qixue</i> (Ch.)	氣學
<i>Daxue</i> (Ch.)	大學	Silhak	實學
<i>Daxue yanyi</i> (Ch.)	大學衍義	Toegye	退溪
<i>Dongguk isangguk jip</i>	東國李相國集	Tuhwapung	妬花風
<i>gomun</i>	古文	<i>weiwulun</i> (Ch.)	唯物論
<i>guwen</i> (Ch.) ▶	<i>gomun</i>	<i>weixinlun</i> (Ch.)	唯心論
Hunyo sipjo	訓要十條	<i>wongi</i>	元氣
<i>jeongjwa</i>	靜坐	<i>yuanqi</i> (Ch.) ▶	<i>wongi</i>

(Ch.: Chinese)