

Eighteenth Century Korean Literatus Yi Ok and His Literature

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The reign years of King Chǒngjo (r. 1776–1800) in the eighteenth century is regarded as the golden age of Chosŏn. King Chǒngjo's policy of adopting talented officials from different political factions, the increased foreign travel opportunities of Korean envoys, and introduction of Chinese cultural items including works of fiction, artifacts, and antique objects led Korean literati faced the changes of international scenes in East Asia and reconsider the identity of Korean in East Asia. Approximately 600 envoys' travel accounts remain in existence, and most of them were written during the Chosŏn period (1392-1910). More specifically, during the 18th century when the Qing dynasty was firmly established, the number of records and descriptions of performances in the ambassadors' records increased significantly. Korean ambassadors were sent 497 times to the Qing (1644-1911). Young Korean scholars looked for a chance to experience Qing culture firsthand by traveling to Qing territory personally as Chosŏn ambassadors.¹ The purpose of the visits varied from presenting annual tributes and celebrating events such as an emperor's birthday to consulting about political issues in Chosŏn. During their travels, the ambassadors had many opportunities to enjoy Qing culture both in formal and in informal settings. As the Qing dynasty's political superiority strengthened and more Chosŏn ambassadors visited the Qing in the eighteenth century, diverse cultural aspects of Qing China were introduced to Korea and they brought changes in Korean literature.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the number of Chinese books circulated, including fiction and literary collections of Ming and Qing writers, greatly increased. The Chosŏn envoys to Qing China bought books on their foreign travels and introduced them in

¹ Hong Taeyoung, *Ulbyŏng yŏnhaengrok* (The Records of a Journey to Yanjing in 1765) I, ed. So Chaeyŏng (Seoul: T'aehaksa, 1997), 4. “대범 사람이 적은 일을 즐기고 큰 일을 모르는 자가 그 흥채 호준한 뜻이 저그미요 좁은 곳을 평안히 여겨 너른 곳을 생각지 아닛난 자는 그 도량이 원대한 계교 업사미라 이런 고로 장귀 말을 두어 갈오대 여름 버러지난 족히 더부러 여름을 니라디 못할 거시오 오국한 선비난 족히 더브러 큰 도랄 의논치 못하리라 하니 동국이 예악문물이 비록 자근 중화로 일카라나 따히 백니를 연닌 들이 업고 물이 천니랄 흐르난 강이 업사니 족히 중국 한 고을을 당치 못할 거시어날” [Generally, people who are satisfied with doing only small jobs without knowing big ones are trivial. People who have narrow minds are satisfied with insignificant areas without traveling to wide areas. Thus, *Zhuangzi* said that you cannot talk about ice with summer insects. You cannot debate the big *Way* with people from small countries. Even though our country is regarded as a small China because of its refined culture, the fields of our country do not exceed one hundred *li* and the rivers of our country do not run more than thousand *li*. Thus, our country cannot be the same as the one area of China.]

Korea. In 1614 and 1615, for example, Hō Kyun (1569-1613) purchased four thousand books when he went to Ming China as an envoy. Yi Ŭihyōn (1669-1754) bought 1,416 books in his two diplomatic travels to Qing.² Chosŏn literati shared these books, wrote critical essays, or criticized them in the court or casual meetings.³ The influx of a large number of Ming and Qing books greatly impacted the literary culture of Chosŏn. The most noticeable phenomenon was the popularity of casual writings from Ming and Qing China which were called *sop'um* 小品 (informal essays), *p'aesa* 稗史 (unofficial histories), *p'awgwan chapki* 稗官雜記 (miscellany writings of a minor official/a storyteller), or *sosŏl* 小說 (small/minor talk) in Korea.⁴ Some of most popular works of fiction includes *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms), a historical fiction written by Luo Guanzhong in the fourteenth century.⁵ It deals with the turbulent years during the end of the Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period (169-280) featuring Liu Bei and his followers as protagonists. Other popular works are *Suihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (Outlaws of the Marsh) which depicts the gathering of 108 outlaws gathers at Mount Liang and how are the outlaws eventually sent to resist foreign invaders and suppress rebel forces, *Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase) which deals with the love affairs among lustful man Ximen Qing and his wives and concubines, and *Xiyouji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West) describing the Buddhist monk Xuanzang's journey to India with three protectors.

During King Chōngjo's reign, Chinese fiction and prose-vignettes, were popular among Chosŏn literati and the popularity rose as a political issue at the court. *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* (The Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty) records more than fifty occasions in which the king discussed his

² Chosŏn envoys' purchase of Chinese goods largely increased from the eighteenth century. Kang Myōnggwan, *Chosŏn sidae munhak yesul ũi saengsōng konggan* (The Production Space of Literary Arts in the Chosŏn Period) (Somyōng ch'ulp'an, 1999), 256.

³ Ibid., 279.

⁴ The terms "*chapki*" 雜記 "*sop'um*," "*p'aegwan sop'um mun*" 稗官小品文, "*p'aesa sop'um mun*" 稗史小品文, and "*p'aesŏl*" 稗說 are often adopted without clear distinction at the eighteenth century Korea. It indicates a broad range of miscellaneous literary works which were not highly recognized, such as short essays and works of fiction. This dissertation uses the term a "casual writing" to indicate Chinese miscellaneous works represented by prose-vignettes of the *Gongan* School and late Ming and Qing fiction.

⁵ "The Qing Dynasty historian Zhang Xuecheng famously wrote that the novel was "70% fact and 30% fiction." Luo Guanzhong, *Three Kingdoms*. Translated by Moss Roberts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 980.

concern for the undesirable impact of the Chinese works in the society, with such statements as “I witness that recent writing is weak and it makes me worry”⁶ and the “recent writing style is shallow and stiff and far from great official writing. This decline is caused by the introduction of the Chinese casual writings.”⁷ *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* also contains a number of entries regarding the king’s reproach of officials who enjoyed the Chinese writings. Representative figures are Nam Kongch’ŏl 南公轍 (1760–1840), the son of the king’s teacher; Yi Mansu 李晩秀 (1752–1820), who served as a director 大提學 in the Office of Special Advisers 弘文館; Yi Sanghwang 李相璜 (1763–1841),⁸ who later became chief state councillor; and Kim Chosun 金祖淳 (1765–1832), who later became the father-in-law of King Sunjo (1790–1834, r. 1800–1834). These literati-officials were accused of enjoying or sharing works of fiction during their night duty in the Office of Royal Decrees 藝文館. Beyond *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, records of private literary collections show the literati’s preference for the criticized casual writings. Yi Mansu, a leading political figure, read the *Record of the Western Chamber* and *Outlaws of the Marsh* and commented that these works’ artistic achievements changed his view toward appreciating literature; he changed his writing style to suggesting that he became favorable to works of fiction, as well.⁹ Additionally, Yi Sanghwang enjoyed the *Record of the Western Chamber*, saying that the work was superior to the ancient-style writing of the Tang and Song, the prose of the Pre-Qin and Former and Later Han 先秦兩漢, and the Confucian classics.¹⁰

Traditionally, literati were supposed to write morally healthy writings to cultivate the public. Kings’ recommended officials wrote literary works that could uphold the ruling ideology, Neo-Confucianism. Chŏng Tojŏn (1337–1398), a renowned Neo-Confucian scholar of late Koryŏ and an important founding member of the Chosŏn dynasty, proclaimed that literature was a tool to embody the Confucian Way, for “literature is a vehicle of the Way. It results in the

⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷ “最所切可惡者，所謂明末、清初文集及稗官雜說，尤有害於世道。觀於近來文體，浮輕嚆殺，無館閣大手筆者，皆由於雜冊之多出來。” *Chŏngjo sillok* (Veritable Records of King Chŏngjo) 24:34b4–6 in *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*.

⁸ Chŏng Sŏnhŭi, *Mok T’aerim munhak yongu* (A Study of Mok T’aerim’s Literature) (Pogosa, 2005), 83.

⁹ Kang, *Chosŏn sidae munhak yesul ūi saengsŏng konggan*, 272.

¹⁰ Yi Sanghwang later wrote poems to Chŏngjo and added words to express the righteousness of the king to express to Chgannonggan, Leng, and Ya, including fiction and prose-vignettes of the *Gongan* School writers.

configuration of men. If one attains the Way, one can illuminate the world with the teachings of the classics.”¹¹ If a writer is sincere in Confucian principles, then his inner self is necessarily reflected in writing in such a way that expresses Confucian moral themes. When such moral writings prosper in the country, it was believed that then the country is sound, healthy, and well-governed. In contrast, the popularity of literary works which contains socially disruptive characters, anti-moralistic themes, and vulgar and obscene language may signify people’s disregard for Neo-Confucian teaching and the incompetence of a king who is responsible for the social health of his kingdom. According to the idea, literati were supposed to write morally healthy writings to cultivate the public and king’s recommended officials to write literary works that could uphold the ruling ideology, Neo-Confucianism. However, as the number of the educated without political and economic basis increased, late Chosŏn literati’s writings show change in the representation of themselves and their society. A number of the discouraged literati’s writings depict literati in a different way that conventional Neo-Confucian scholars have done. The literati writers show that literati are weak who easily fall into temptation of profits and women and also vulnerable being who cannot keep moral integrity without proper economic and social basis.

One of the outstanding authors of this era was Yi Ok (1760–1812), who wrote fictionalized accounts of the government’s incompetence and the despair and weakness in the lives of literati. Yi’s portraits of literati include “Tale of Yu Kwangŏk” 柳光億傳, “Tale of Student Sim” 沈生傳, and “Tale of Righteous Gentlemen, Ch’a and Ch’oe” 車崔二義士傳. “Tale of Yu Kwangŏk” depicts the student Yu who made a living by selling his answers for the civil service examinations and “Tale of Student Sim” is about a scholar who had a secret affair with a *chungin* (middle people) woman.¹² Yi depicted the literati with recognizable literary or military talents, but they lived as criminals or otherwise unhappy lives because of poverty, literati obligations, irresponsibility, or unfair treatment from the government. This study demonstrates

¹¹ Chŏng Tojŏn, *Sambong chip* 3:92, in his preface to the *Mogŭn munjip* (Collected Works of Yi Saek). *A History of Korean Literature*. 317.

¹² The examination of the “Righteous Gentlemen, Ch’a and Ch’oe” is in the section of “Stories of Virtuous People.”

how Yi Ok's writings differed from the official mode of writing, and why the king believed that Yi's writings could not serve social cohesion and cultural continuity.¹³

Late Chosŏn literature witnessed changes in the representation of the literati as the number of the educated without political and economic basis increased.¹⁴

In late Chosŏn, a great many individual born into *yangban* lineages were unable to maintain their claims to that status. The most numerous such group, no doubt, were those who have been called "fallen" *yangban*. These may be defined as those with impeccable *yangban* lineage antecedents but whose claim to the privileges of the *yangban* status had eroded.¹⁵

Many politically fallen *yangban* suffered from economic hardships and made their living as teachers of private village schools, geomancers, or tenant farmers which were not better than lives of poor commoners. Unofficial histories show the poor *yangban*'s pursuit of material gain and hypocritical behavior forsaking their dignity. They accumulated wealth by trading and saving while avoiding meeting friends, or made their living by begging for food or money from their relatives or former servants.

The "Tale of Yu Kwangŏk" deals with a talented but poor and politically-fallen *yangban* who made a living by selling his civil service examination answers to rich but academically deficient candidates.

Yu Kwangŏk was from Hapch'ŏn, Yŏngnam. He was widely known in the southern area for his answers for the civil service examinations. However, he was poor and his family

¹³ Peter Lee, *A History of Korean Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 129.

¹⁴ The corruption and disorder in the civil service examination is revealed in many documents. Pak Chiwŏn wrote a letter of congratulation to a successful candidate in his neighborhood saying that "I celebrate that you do not need to go into the examination hall in disorder again, which is enough to make nine people out of ten die out." An Taehŭi, *Sŏnbidapke sanŭnbŏp* (The Art of Living as Confucian Scholars) (P'urŭn yŏksa, 2007), 296. "The sole duty of the *yangban* was to devote themselves exclusive to the study and self-cultivation that Confucian doctrine holds must underlie the governing of others, and their sole profession was the holding of public office." Eckert et al, *Korea: Old and New*, 181.

¹⁵ Eckert et al., *Korea: Old and New*, 181.

was meager. In rural areas, many literati made a living by selling their civil service examination answers, as Yu did.¹⁶

Yi Ok views Yu with sympathy by highlighting the corrupt civil service examination system that drove Yu to live such an unprincipled life. The corruption includes practices of bargaining for answers, proctoring officials' negligence, and ineffective examinations which failed to select good candidates. Yi points out the civil service examination corruption of his time as historical documents show that such corruption was a widespread social problem:¹⁷ some candidates bribed examination committee members, others bought answers from poor writers, and some asked examination inspectors to overlook cheating. *Yöllyösil kisul* (Narratives of Yi Kūngik)¹⁸ has a record about the official Yi Ich'öm (1560–1623), who leaked the examination questions to pass students of his political party and strengthen his party's status at court:

In advance of a civil service examination, Yi Ich'öm secretly let his party members decide the examination topic and write answers in advance. This was intended to increase his political supporters. Later at the examination site, Yi issued the topic. However, the topic was known to others as well because many prepared answers in advance. During the preliminary examination in the *muo* year, some students said that today's examination topic would be this. Indeed, they were right. Then, other students clamored three times to change the topic. They said that students who did not prepare the answers in advance could not take the examination well. They disrupted the examination site and left. The examination committee members were frightened. Pointing at the sun,

¹⁶ Yi Ok, *Wanyök Yi Ok Chönjip* (Collection of Yi Ok's Works in Translation), vol 2, Silsi haksa kojön munhak yöngu hoe tr., (Somyöng ch'ulp'an, 2009), 350.

¹⁷ An Taehüi, *Sönbidapke sanünböp*, 296.

¹⁸ *Yöllyösil kisul* (Narratives of Yi Kūngik) by Yi Kūngik (1736-1806) is a description of major events in the history of Chosön through the reign of Sukchong (1674-1720), drawn from hundreds of individual accounts. Eckert, et al. *Korean Old and New*, 168.

they promised the students, “If you return and take the examination, we will grade the answers fairly.” However, the students were not satisfied with the promise.¹⁹

The prevalent illegal practices in the examination discouraged literati who were poor and politically insignificant. Yi Ok’s story also revealed the inattention and carelessness of examination committees who took bribes and carelessly graded the answers. They also, for fun, made bets to find Yu’s answers among many answers that Yu wrote for the rich candidates, which eventually caused Yu’s indictment and suicide. Yi Ok did not find the reason for Yu’s misconduct in his evil personality, but Yi details Yu’s desperate economic difficulty: Yu borrowed a large amount of grain from a local office, and his debt needed to be paid off soon. His family was politically insignificant, and he had no one to recommend him for a political career. His poverty and cold treatment from the local office were a strong contrast with large profits and warm treatment from the rich who hired him.

Yu entered a household decorated with several red gates. Several dozen luxurious buildings were in the household. The residence for Yu was in the inner chamber of the house. Excellent meals were served five times a day. The master of the house visited him three times and paid respect to him like a son serving his parents. Finally, Yu took a civil service examination instead of the son of the rich master. Indeed, the son passed the examination and acquired the literary licentiate degree. Yu was sent home with a horse and a servant. When he returned home, a servant carried twenty thousand *yang* and his grain-loan from a local office was already paid off.²⁰

The kindness of the rich came from Yu’s writing skills and had nothing to do with a respect for Yu’s literary talents. Less proficient literati, including aged calligraphers and writers, desperately waited outside to be hired by the rich. Yu’s good writing was regarded as a mere technique, as lower-class people’s butchery or manufacturing skills, rather than the outcome of his knowledge

¹⁹ Yi Kūngik, *Yöllyösil kisul* 燃藜室記述 (Narratives of Yi Kūngik) (Minjok munhwa ch’ujin hoe, 1977), 21:678-679.

²⁰ Yi, *Wanyöck Yi Ok chönjip*, 2: 351.

and self-cultivation. For a poor *yangban* whose living depended on the rich, making more money from a bargain mattered the most while morality suffered. It can be assumed that social recognition for the *yangban* without political or economic basis was low. Such corruption produced Yu Kwangŏk, who relied on the corruption of the examination system but felt little shame or guilt.

While Yu's livelihood exposes the fallen literati's social vulnerability, having no alternative for living, Yu's suicide shows his weakness—failing to take responsibility for what he had done.

The day before the magistrate arrested and sent Yu to the capital for trial, he was very afraid. He thought he would be executed anyway because he had violated the examination law. He thought 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 a river at night.²¹

In a moment of crisis, he chose suicide rather than facing trials or fleeing to save his life. Such weak character is also described in the “Tale of a Righteous Female Entertainer,” that concerns a female entertainer and a literatus. The literatus was involved in political struggles and was exiled to the remotest island. Without hope to return to the capital, he spent his time and energy in drinking and sexual indulgence to cause an early death. As soon as he was expelled from his usual privileges, he quickly collapsed without any attempt to overcome difficulties with self-discipline.²²

²¹ Ibid., 253.

²² Peter H. Lee shows the exemplary attitudes of Confucian literati who faced difficulties, as revealed in Chŏng Ch'ŏl's (1536–1593) and Yun Sŏndo's (1587–1671) writing. “In a culture where only the king could make or unmake the courtier, lying low in the wilderness while awaiting a pardon or summons represented a life of anguish. Chŏng Ch'ŏl and Yun Sŏndo, however, made use of adversity as a trial of spirit. Poems by Chŏng Ch'ŏl on the theme of constancy were praised by his contemporaries as perfect examples of patience and fortitude. They find in them a poet speaking with such individual style and such strength of spirit and dignity that his virtue is never overcome by ill fortune.” Lee, *A History of Korean Literature*, 236.

In the year of *Urhae* [1755], many gentlemen were exiled for their involvement in a political event. One gentleman was charged, lost his position in the Office of Special Counselor and the Office of Royal Decree, and was exiled to Cheju Island as a government slave there...A female entertainer said to him, “It is certain that you cannot go back to Seoul. Living a short pleasurable life is better than a long miserable life. Why don’t you pursue an enjoyable one?” She provided wine every day and made him drunk. When he was drunk, she spent the nights with him, regardless of time. Before long, he became sick and died.²³

The life of the literati was different from those who regarded adversity as a test of true worth in which they overcome adversity with strong self-discipline in order to achieve spiritual progress.²⁴ Yi’s representation of these vulnerable literati characters shows good similarity and contrast with biographies on literati by other writers. Yi Kwangjǒng (1674-1756)’s “Story of Kim Sunbu” concerns a literatus who was involved in a political struggle because of his kinsman’s false accusations. He was sent into exile and suffered from several trials, poverty, and illness. Kim, however, refused to counter the kinsman by saying that he would not trouble the senior official and endured all difficulties without complaint. As a sign of his endurance, Kim chose his pen name as “deaf and dumb” 聾啞 and lived a reclusive life. Yi Kwangjǒng, through Kim Sunbu, criticized social injustice and an unreasonable legal system that made innocent Kim into a criminal. Still, unlike Yi Ok, Yi Kwangjǒng chose a literatus character who did not pursue personal profit. Yi Ok expanded his subject choice by including those who deviated from Confucian literati principles and expressed his sympathy. This signifies the unconventionality of Yi Ok’s writings and need to approach Yi’s works differently from conventional biography works.

The Northern Learning School scholar Pak Chiwǒn (1737-1805) pointed out incompetent literati as a social problem in his tales. In the “Tale of Student Hǒ,” for example, Pak presents a literatus whose poverty drove him to stop studying Confucian classics and find an alternative

²³ Ibid., 316.

²⁴ Peter H. Lee, trans., *Pine River and Lone Peak: An Anthology of Three Chosǒn Dynasty Poets* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 6.

way of life. When Hō's wife complained about his inability to make a living, Hō made a great fortune with his commercial skills, which he already had but had not put into practice because of his literati dignity. Hō borrowed seed money from a rich merchant, named Pyōn, and earned a large amount by monopolizing daily necessities. Hō, however, fulfilled the obligation of the ruling class. With the money he earned, he helped thieves who had been farmers but turned to robbery out of poverty by giving them land and women to marry. Though Hō accumulated his wealth by monopolization, he was doubtless a member of the literati. He cared about public affairs and spent all his money to save the poor. Later, he paid back the seed money and returned to his poor home without a penny. In portraying a similar subject, Yi Ok and Pak Chiwōn cover a great distance. Hō's priority was in correcting social problems for national prosperity while keeping his moral purity: "it's people like you only who became happy with money. How could money, however much, possibly enrich my Confucian Way?" Pak's work shows that ruling class members should keep their dignity under any circumstances.

Yu Kwangōk in Yi Ok's story, however, showed little consideration for Confucian literati norms or public morality. Instead, the story highlights why the politically-isolated literati came to live in a socially undesirable manner. The literati, from Yi Ok's view, had no talent for business or connections to generous supporters such as the rich Pyōn, who could loan them great seed money for free. This difference in literati subjects between Pak and Yi signifies the different social views of the two: Pak regarded that a righteous individual, even if he lacks economic or political power, can save the society or make the society better, at least. On the contrary, Yi reveals that an individual without political or economic support is merely an unimportant component of a society which would be replaced easily when broken. The individual cannot make an attempt to resist existing social institutions, which would bring the collapse of the individual.

Traditionally, literati biographers chose the literati who kept their personal purity intact by living reclusive lives in the midst of factional struggles; as Confucius said, a literatus should seclude himself when the time is not good.²⁵ Chang Chiyōn's (1865-1921) "Biography of Kim

²⁵ "The Master said to Yen Yuen, "When called to office, undertake its duties; when not so called, lie retired;—it is only I and you who have attained this." Arthur Waley trans., *The Analects of Confucius*. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949), 18. "子謂安淵曰 用之則行 舍之則藏 惟我與爾有是夫"

Öm”²⁶ concerns a poor literatus who made living by farming. Kim studied Confucian classics in the hope to be an official and devoted himself to establish 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 examination system that blocked politically insignificant literati like him from officialdom.

When Student Kim Öm visited Seoul, factional struggles reached their peak at court and one faction lost. People from the victorious faction acquired official positions, showed their gratitude to the king, and greeted visitors who packed their gates. Those of the defeated faction were expelled from the court, exiled, or forced to leave for remote islands in a hurry. Their leaving was urged fiercely and the streets were filled with the unending sounds of their wailing and lamentation. One particularly dreadful scene was the condemned people’s clothes being stripped off and their heads were covered with them. Wearing cangues, they were taken to the State Tribunal 義禁府. . . . Kim was startled and asked the reason from the inn keeper. He said, “Two factions fought for power. Their trivial struggles developed into big crimes and reached this degree. The beginning of the struggle was not about the matter of loyal subjects or traitors. Neither was it the matter of people’s being good or bad. It was only because the same kinds of people gathered and rejected others. When one faction acquired power, it avenged themselves on others. Literati who knew Confucian classics and commoners who sought profits are all engaged in it and were shaken by this struggle and cannot do their jobs.” After hearing this, Kim lamented and said, “If I can acquire a position, then I will report the situation to the king to the best of my ability and manage to stop the factional struggles.” The innkeeper sneered at him and said, “You are really foolish. You are from a humble family. Even if you pass the examinations, your position will be different from politically powerful families. At the beginning, you may get a position at *sabu haktang*,²⁷ but you cannot gain a high and powerful position no matter how much time you spend.

²⁶ “Tale of Kim Öm” was written by Chang Chiyön (1864-1921). It is included in *Ilssa yusa* 逸士遺事 (Stories of Forgotten People) which contains the biographies of literati of humble origin.

²⁷ *Sabu haktang* 四部學堂 indicates four public schools for students who prepared for the civil service examinations.

Though you pass the examinations, how can you possibly obtain a high position and say righteous words?” Kim replied, “You’re right.” He packed up and returned home.²⁸

The dialogue between Kim and the innkeeper illuminates that his goal of being a competent official could not be attained in the current political situation. Kim finally gave up on the examinations and went back to his hometown. Similarly, the “Story of Student Hō” 許生傳 by O Toil (1645-1703) concerns Student Hō, who felt sick at the literati purges and gave up his political ambitions.

When a literati purge occurred, student Hō 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 asked his friend, “Morals and society have already collapsed. How can a literatus live in such a world? I have decided to hide myself from this world.”²⁹

Ŏ Toil values Hō’s decision by saying his integrity is respectable compared to those involved in dirty politics and tainted themselves shamelessly.³⁰ The discouraged literati characters express the writer’s political criticism, which is presented only through characters who maintained their decency. From Ŏ Toil’s and Chang Chiyōn’s perspectives, Yu Kwangōk is enough to be blamed as one who sought personal interests and tainted himself. Yi Ok’s criticism, however, addresses the buyer rather than the seller Yu. According to Yi, such a mean bargain originates from the need, the rich’s misconduct: “Because of buyers’ need, sellers come to appear. . . . According to law, the same weight of punishment should apply to both the giver and receiver.”³¹ Compared to Ŏ and Chang, Yi Ok blamed corrupted society more severely while minimizing the responsibility of an individual.

²⁸ Kim Yōngil ed., *Hanguk kiin yōlchōn* (Biographies of Extraordinary Korean People) (Uryu munhwasa, 1972); Chang Chiyōn, *Ilsa yusa* 逸士遺事 (Stories of Forgotten People) (T’aeaksa, 1982)

²⁹ Sin Haejin, *Chosōnjo chōngye sosōl* (Biographical Fiction of Chosōn) (Wōrin, 2003), 115.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Yi's representation of literati also emphasizes their unreasonable sufferings and sadness under politics which ruling class members have attempted to avoid dealing with in literature. The "Tale of Two Righteous Literati, Ch'a and Ch'oe," for example, concerns two Korean gentlemen, Ch'oe Hyoil (d. 1639) and Ch'a Yerang (d. 1639), who fought against the Manchu. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Manchu defeated the Ming and established the Qing dynasty. The Korean government had maintained an amicable relationship with the Ming because of their assistance in the repulsion of two major Japanese invasions between 1592 and 1598. In contrast, the Korean government perceived the Manchus as barbarians, since their invasion of 1637 led to a humiliating Korean defeat. Yi Ok's story deals with Ch'a Yerang, a man who held a strong hatred against the Qing, which caused Korea's humiliating defeat. He attempted to ally with the Ming generals and attack the Qing. Ch'a found Ch'oe Hyoil, an extraordinarily brave man who had once served in the military, but withdrew and waited for a chance to exact his revenge on the Qing. Under Ch'oe's plan, Ch'a went to Qing and made allies with Ming generals. However, their plan was leaked and Ch'a was executed in Beijing without help from Korea. After the execution of Ch'a, Ch'oe refused to surrender to the Qing and soon died from grief and loneliness. Yi highlighted that the government and the people unreasonably undervalued the two's virtues because they were not from politically influential families and did not achieve success. Yi's criticism was aimed at the incompetent Chosŏn government, which hesitated to reward the two loyal subjects in the fear of upsetting the Qing, and also revealed the limitation of a politically insignificant person regardless of their life devotions. This work generally highlights the subjects' sadness and dissatisfaction, previously disregarded aspects of exemplary people by other biographers, rather than focusing on their determined will to perform moral acts.

From the court's view, Yi's works can be problematic because they attack the government, which failed to give appropriate rewards to people who fulfilled their duties. In the "Tale of Righteous Gentlemen Ch'a and Ch'oe," The government bestowed them relatively lower official rank and belated rewards, while those from renowned families received immediate and generous rewards though they had not participated in battles. Yi's first mission was to reveal their significance on their actual practice of belief, hatred of the Qing, for the final success or failure alone could not reveal one's true loyalty. Yi drew parallels between Ch'ae and Ch'oe and Im Kyŏngŏp (1594-1646), Nam Ihong (1576-1627), and the three scholars who received praise

for fighting against the Manchu invaders. These heroes, who were from renowned families, were highly praised by the government despite the fact that their efforts turned out to be fruitless. Yi also depicted how Ch'a was brave, how Ch'a and Ch'oe came to a mutual understanding of each other, and how loyal they were in implementing their plan to attack the Qing. Yi inserted the poems that Ch'a sang during the farewell party in a somber mood.

My bravery spreads through the world
My sincere loyalty is bright like the sun
I, a man, shed tears
not because of where I am going.³²

Yi also compared the two with Ming generals who fought together, but followed the Manchu immediately after the establishment of the Qing. The two Koreans were even superior in loyalty than the Ming general.

Shizu 世祖 (r: 1644-1661) of Qing entered Shuntianpu 順天府 and Wuyingtian 武英殿 and received all the officials' congratulations. He ordered everyone around the country to shave their hair. All the Ming generals, including Wu Sangui 吳三桂 (1612-1678) danced, trampled on the ground, released their armor, and took off their hats, and shaved their hair, being afraid of falling behind. Only Ch'oe refused to celebrate Shizu and to shave his hair. He spent ten days wailing at the tomb of Emperor Chongzhen (r: 1627-1644). During this time, he refused to eat and eventually died in the woods near the tomb.³³

³² Yi, *Wanyŏk Yi Ok chŏnjip*, 2: 285. “壯氣連天鬱/精忠貫日明/男兒一掬淚/不獨爲今行”

“Min Chinwŏn reported to King Sukchong, “After the Manchu invasions, Ch'a Yerang from Kwansŏ had tens of followers who had a mind to attack Shenyang 瀋陽 with the Ming. Ch'a went to Qing when Ch'oe Hyoil from Ŭi province followed the Ming. Ch'a and Ch'oe promised, “When Ch'oe goes into the Qing and attack Shenyang with the Ming, Qing will ask support reinforcement. Then my country will conscript soldiers for Qing. We then volunteered, went into Qing and make our great plan come true secretly. Later, Ch'a went into Shenyang secretly as a spy. Their plan was discovered by Chŏng Myŏngsu and ten of Ch'a's followers met disaster. Hwang Ilho, the prefect 府尹 of the Ŭi province was also killed because of the incident. Ch'oe and Ch'a also met calamities in Beijing. Our government did not praise them yet in the fear of disclosing the praise to Qing. Now the government rose his rank and bestowed posthumorous official position to Hwang Ilho. Thus, Ch'a should be rewarded too. Now it would be appropriate to let the province thoroughly investigate and report names and behaviors of those who met disaster regarding the incident. Then the government rewards them according to each individual's level of devotion.” *Sukchong sillok* (Veritable Records of King Sukchong) 53:27a15-28b1.

³³ Yi, *Wanyŏk Yi Ok chŏnjip*, 2: 279.

Yi's positive description of the two can increase the readers' sympathy, especially in light of how they received little recognition because of their family background.

Alas! People cannot intervene in what Heaven abandons. Who can be blamed, even though their efforts did not bring good results? Still, despite their extraordinary deeds, they are ignored because of their low social position. On the contrary, those who brag are respected and known to the people. This is why we passed our hands on books, strike swords on the ground, and keep choking back tears.³⁴

Yi criticized the government for bestowing rewards to those who had achieved nothing, but were recognized for their "loyalty" because of their strong family backgrounds. Yi's social criticism is problematic because it may increase readers' dissatisfaction about the current reward practices. Also, in a departure from traditional biography, in which virtuous people are satisfied and recognized by others, Yi reveals that their exemplary lives brought them neither recognition nor self-fulfillment.

Another interesting feature of the literati in Yi's work is irresponsibility in love. Chosŏn *yangban* pursued marriage within their class to protect their privileges. When marriage is a social custom preserving the hereditary nature of *yangban* status,³⁵ those who reject the custom will lose the privileges and social protection. The example is the "Tale of Student Sim," a romantic story about Student Sim and a woman from the *chungin* class. When the student saw a young and beautiful girl on the street, he immediately followed her and secretly waited near her room. The woman was the daughter of a rich petty official working in the Ministry of Taxation.³⁶ To win her love, Sim waited patiently for a month. However, when she finally accepted him, he showed a passive and irresponsible attitude in maintaining the relationship.

³⁴ Ibid., 289.

³⁵ Eckert et al, *Korea: Old and New*, 109.

³⁶ Kyungmoon Hwang deals with the rise of the secondary status group in the mid-Chosŏn era in *A History of Korea*. "Many of the rich but sub-aristocratic members of society who could not hope to enter high office or marriage relations with the ruling aristocracy—i.e., those belonging to the secondary status groups—turned to monetary influence-peddling to gain the prestige that otherwise was denied them." Hwang Kyŏngmoon, *A History of Korea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 96.

Because her family was rich, the lady made excellent clothes for him. However, he could not wear them for fear of arousing his family's suspicion. With all of Sim's precautions, however, his family could not help but develop suspicions about his leaving and sleeping away for a long period of time. Thus, he was ordered to go to a Buddhist monastery on a mountain and study there. Although he did not like the command, under pressure from his family and friends, he could not avoid moving to Mount Pukhan Fortress with his books.³⁷

Sim refused to wear clothes or eat food that she made, lest their relationship be known to his parents. When his parents forced him to study at a Buddhist temple and ended the secret liaison, he did not resist. Sim was described as a coward who left her without suggesting future meetings. The letter of the woman demonstrates that Sim's submissive attitude to the custom of avoiding marriage between different social classes made their love unfulfilled and the beloved die lonely.

I was deceived by another [Sim] and did not see a single old female servant of yours. I made disgraceful choices while living, and will become a wandering ghost who has nowhere to go after death. This is my second regret. Among the wife's duties to her husband, nothing is greater than preparing food to serve and clothes to wear. It has not been a short time since I met you. I have made a small number of clothes for you. However, I could not let you eat even a single bowl of rice in my home or wear a single suit of clothes I have made for you, and I have served you only in bed." After reading her letter, Sim burst into tears and cried in spite of himself. Although he cried sorrowfully, what was the use?³⁸

The love which took her life and his promising future can be touching, but his failure to resist sexual desire or take responsibility for what he had done distinguishes Sim from disciplined Confucian scholars.

³⁷ Yi, *Wanyŏk Yi Ok chŏnjip*, 2:354.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 361.

Late Chosŏn unofficial histories deal with love between the literati and lower-class women. Interestingly, the literati are often depicted as self-centered and emotionally vulnerable people. “Yijŏng” 離情 (Separating Love) in the *P’asurok* 罷睡錄 (Records of Breaking Drowsiness) and “Pangmaeng” 芳盟 (Swear like a Flower) in the *Chŏnggu yadam* 青邱野談 (Unofficial Tales from the Green Hills) concern love between aristocratic males and women from the middle people class. The male characters are from poor and politically insignificant families and distressed about expectations to achieve official success and honor their family. They had secret affairs with beautiful lower class women, but betrayed them when they had the chance to marry better partners, women from rich or politically-influential families. The representation of selfish literati characters is presented in late Chosŏn works of romance fiction.³⁹ The “Story of Student Chŏng,” 丁生傳 by Kim Ki (1722-1794), for example, depicts Student Chŏng who fell in love with a lady from a rich *chungin* family. Chŏng promised marriage to her to earn her affection. However, when she was pregnant and asked Chŏng to run away together, he was afraid of the result and disappeared by following his relatives.

Chŏng was by nature indecisive and weak. He thought of his lonely status, having no wealth, servants, and not getting married until late. It was stressful. He thought that if he married a woman without his aunt’s permission, she would reproach him severely because it would hinder his future marriage.⁴⁰

Later, he married a daughter of an aristocrat and obtained economic and political basis from his parents-in-law. While Chŏng achieved literary fame and enjoyed his life with a new wife, the lady gave birth to a baby boy and committed suicide. At first, he decided to take care of her baby son, but when a nanny came to him with the baby, he abandoned him and disappeared in the crowd:

³⁹ Im Hyŏngt’aek, “Chŏngi sosŏl ūi yŏnae wa Wi Kyŏngch’ŏn chŏn” (Theme of Romance in Tales of Wonder and the *Story of Wi Kyŏngch’ŏn*), *Tongyanghak* 21 (1992): 11; Yi Sanggu, “Hanjung chŏngi soŏl ūi kwangye yangsang mit kŭ tŭkching,” 358.

⁴⁰ Kwŏn Togyŏng, *Chosŏn hugi chŏngi sosŏlsa ūi chŏnp’yŏn kwa saeroun sigak* (New Perspective and Changes in the History of Tales of Wonder in Late Chosŏn) (Pogosa, 2004), 148; Ch’a Yongju, *Hanguk hanmun sosŏlsa* (History of Korean Fiction in Literary Chinese) (Asea munhwa sa, 1992)

As soon as walking a few steps away, he changed his mind. He thought, “I had lived a poor life and barely had a wife and a child now. My life is now beginning. Still, this baby would not be accepted because my wife is narrow-minded. I cannot manage domestic affairs at all. How could my wife possibly accept the baby with pleasure?” Fear and suspicion heavily pressed his mind, and his affection for the child was already gone. He lost himself in the crowd and wanted to be apart from them. He ran to his home as fast as he could by taking shortcuts so they could not follow.⁴¹

Chǒng’s life of comfort and fame is earned by his marriage with the daughter of an influential official. The students are different from the male characters in early Chosŏn stories who managed a balance between private and official lives well. In the *Dream of Nine Clouds*, for example, the male character Xingzhen’s romance and official success harmonize and do not conflict. The harmony of his nine wives despite their disparity of social status demonstrates Xingzhen’s capability. Incompetent characters such as Students Sim and Chǒng are largely found in the late Chosŏn works while relatively few in the early works of fiction.

Yi’s representations of literati as a morally unhealthy and weak ruling class are not exemplary from the Confucian standpoint. The literati in his stories exerted their talents to acquire material gain and enjoy life; they did not focus on Confucian ethics. Yi’s stories show readers that the social problems of his time produced literati who deviated from the Confucian norm and that Confucian education does not always effectively make people suppress their secular desires. Readers of Yi’s stories will consider the literati’s weakness within the closed literati society and the ruling ideology’s failure in cultivating them.

These stories map the existence of a much more expansive characterization of the Chosŏn literati culture at large, which impacted the broader development of fiction in the late Chosŏn era. Yi’s writing talents were not accepted at court. However, his writings are valuable resources to show that politically insignificant literati, who were the majority of the literati population but

⁴¹ Kwŏn, *Chosŏn hugi chǒngi sosŏlsa ũi chǒnpyŏn kwa saeroun sigak*, 177.

mostly did not leave a mark of their existence on historical records, contributed to the diversity of late-Chosŏn literati culture.