

How Cruelty Became a Public Persona in a Neo-Confucian Society
: A Selfhood Imagined in Seventeenth-Century Chosŏn Korea

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Abstract This paper examines how cruelty was promoted as a public persona in a Neo-Confucian society by examining a biographical writing written by Hŏ Kyun (1569-1618). By focusing on a problematic paragraph in the *Biography of the Master Namgung* (hereafter the *Biography*), this paper attempts to answer a question: how can a quality alienated from the orthodox ideology be endorsed without total rejection of the orthodox doctrine? This paper departs from previous studies, dominated by nationalistic interpretations, which anachronistically assumed the *Biography* as unorthodox and independent from the sociocultural environment of Chosŏn. To overcome these limitations, this paper contextualizes the text in a broader cultural context, reconsiders the orthodox/unorthodox dichotomy and a notion of selfhood. By contextualizing the text, this paper demonstrates that cruelty is presented as a ‘situation-specific’ virtue and as a public persona shaped by oscillation between the orthodox and the unorthodox imagination of selfhood. The implication of this case study is that an alternative framework, unfettered by nationalistic assumptions, which takes historicity into account is required to interpret premodern Korean literary texts.

Keywords Cruelty, Hŏ Kyun, Neo-Confucianism, Nationalism, Historicity

I. Introduction

In the autumn of 1558, an elite male, named Namgung Du, kills his concubine and her lover with arrows and flees to a monastery. There, he meets a guru who recognizes Namgung Du’s cruelty and advises him to pursue a goal of becoming an immortal. Namgung Du delightedly agrees to the offer and undertakes a tortuous discipline with an exceptional determination. Yet he ruins his goal by mistake in the final stage. The guru claims that the reason for the failure is due to Namgung Du’s being insufficiently cruel. This is the alleged life-story of Namgung Du transcribed by Hŏ Kyun (1569-1618),¹ a temporarily retired local magistrate. Hŏ Kyun claims that he recorded Namgung Du’s own words. In the very last sentence of the *Biography of the Master Namgung* (hereafter the *Biography*),² Hŏ Kyun ruefully states, “Just because he was unable to be cruel, he blasted his almost-achieved-goal. Alas, it is lamentable.”

Such remarks by Hŏ Kyun puzzles readers. Here, he postulates cruelty, a morally questionable quality, as a desirable one for achieving immortality. Considering that most of the Chosŏn literati were

¹ Hŏ is his surname. In this paper, East Asian names are presented in the conventional order (surname first, without a comma). Hŏ Kyun served as a bureaucrat of the Chosŏn dynasty, composing many official documents. Some of his works have survived in Hŏ Kyun’s *Sŏngso Bubugo* [An Insignificant Manuscript of An Enlightened Man]. This paper uses an edition published by Taedong Institute for Korean Studies at Sŏnggyun’gwan University as the primary text. For a brief overview of Hŏ Kyun’s life in English, see Victor Mair, *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1077. For detailed information on Hŏ’s life and works, see Hŏ Kyŏngchŏn, *Hŏ Kyun Yŏnbo* (Seoul: Pogosa, 2013); Yi Changheon, “Hŏgyun Yŏnboŭi Chaegŏmt’o,” *Injaenonch’ong* 14 no. 2.

² This text is cited from Hŏ Kyun, *Kugyŏk Sŏngso Bubugo* vol.2 [The Translation of the Anthology of Hŏ Kyun] trans. Im Hyŏngt’aek (Seoul: Minjok munhwa ch’ujinhoe, 1989), 127-42. Translations are my modifications of Im Hyŏngt’aek’s work.

professed advocate of Neo-Confucian ideology,³ Hō Kyun's attitude seems problematic in two senses: setting a goal to be an immortal, not a Confucian sage, seems heterodox; promoting cruelty for attaining the goal is also perplexing in that the word 'cruelty (Chinese: *ren* ; Korean: *in* ; 忍)' in its original language shows the direct contrast to the Mencian virtue, "the mind that cannot bear the suffering of others (Chinese: *bu ren ren zhi xin* 不忍人之心)." Cruelty in the original manuscript clearly refers to a questionable quality, which is alienated from the orthodox cannon.

One might be tempted to assume Hō Kyun as a heresy. Hō Kyun proclaimed this idea openly by circulating this text to his fellow literati.⁴ Yet as it will be discussed later, Hō Kyun was not an apostate to the Neo-Confucian faith. How can a quality alienated from the orthodox ideology be endorsed without total rejection of the orthodox doctrine? This is the central question this paper seeks to answer.

This paper departs from previous studies' nationalistic interpretations in that this study attempts to employ a more historically conscious approach. Existing scholarship failed to recognize this puzzle by assuming Hō Kyun as a dissenting figure who advocated Daoist ideal or as a maverick thinker who was freed from the given ideological setting.⁵ Based on this assumption, previous studies interpreted the *Biography* as unorthodox simply because it promotes Daoist immortals.⁶ This interpretation derived from the necessity to discover a literary hero who openly approved heretical ideas and thereby proving the diversity of the Korean literary history.⁷ Previous studies applied the modern concept of a Korean nation-state to the Chosŏn society wishing to construct a Korean literary history neglecting the obscure sense of belonging the literati's self-consciousness had to their society. Thereby it overlooks Hō Kyun's ambition to belong to the Chinese Civilization and his favorable comments on Neo-Confucian doctrine.⁸ In this vein, the *Biography* was presumed to present a heretical idea which

³ My understanding of Chosŏn society as a Neo-Confucian society is mainly informed by Martina Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes: Kinship, Status, and Locality in Premodern Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015).

⁴ For publishing and circulating his own anthology and manuscripts, see *Kugyŏk Sŏngso Bubugo* vol 3. [The translation of the anthology of Hō Kyun] trans. Im Hyŏngt'aek, (Seoul: Minjok munhwa ch'ujinhoe, 1989), 104,192.

⁵ Im Hyŏngt'aek, Yi Ihwa Yi gawŏn, and Cho Dong-il are the most notable scholars who viewed Hō Kyun as a maverick thinker championing unorthodox ideology. See the bibliography at the end of this paper.

⁶ The dominant scholarly interpretation of this text is to understand it as an expression of the author's preference for the Daoist ideal. For example, Pak Hŭipyŏng interprets this work as reflecting the author's Daoist belief by contextualizing this work with other immortal stories of its contemporaries. Park Hŭipyŏng, "Inŏrhwawa shinsŏnjŏn," in *Han'guk kojŏn inmulchŏn yŏn'gu*, (Seoul: Han'gilsa, 1992), 187–255. Since Pak categorizes the *Biography* as a Daoist literature, he does not entertain the puzzling aspect of this text. Although he focuses on the promotion of cruelty, he does not treat it as a contradiction. This is partly because Pak continues to adopt a nationalistic viewpoint as well as a lineal model of historical progression. In his literary historiography, he uses terms like "novel," which derives from Western-style literature. Much of his books mentioned above are devoted to finding the correspondences between Chosŏn literature and Western novel.

⁷ For a criticism on the nationalistic discourse in South Korean scholarships, see Park Si Nae, "A textual study of *Tongp'ae naksong*: problems of oral storytelling, genre and the vernacular in late-Chosŏn yadam" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2012), 18-20, 42. For an academic rebuttal of the nationalistic discourse in South Korean scholarship, see Carter Eckert, "Epilogue: Exorcising Hegel's Ghost: Toward a Post-nationalist Historiography of Korea," in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Cambridge MA. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 366.

⁸ Hō Kyun's aspiration to engage with prominent Chinese literati was most vividly expressed in his anthology's preface. He requested Li Tingji (1542-1616; *jinshi* 1583) to write a preface for his anthology. In this preface, Hō Kyun's writing is assessed compared to the Chinese "Seven Late Masters (*hou qizi*)."⁸ See Hō Kyun, *Ibid.* vol. 1, 19-21.

is far from the dominant ideology at that time. Thereby, the problematic aspects of promotion of unorthodox idea in the *Biography*, which was uttered by a person who had an ambiguous attitude toward the orthodox, was unnoticed.

Such inclination of the previous studies is understandable in that the South Korean scholars aspired to overcome the Japanese colonial historiography that viewed Korean literary history as a static one or the addendum of Chinese literary history. However, the nationalistic reading of the *Biography* as an exceptional one cannot be supported in that it dehistoricizes the text from the context in which it was produced, thereby exaggerating its exceptionality, and obscures the complexity of the *Biography* by using the orthodox/heterodox dichotomy.

In order to overcome these limitations, this paper employs an approach which appreciates historicity and the dialogical relationship between the orthodox and heterodox.⁹ First, this paper focuses on the historical settings in which a literary text was produced, especially concentrating on the relationship between the orthodox ideology and a seemingly heretical idea. Second, it also focuses on observing the process of shaping selfhood. By examining the tension between an individual author and the orthodox belief at that time, this paper attempts to figure out how a seemingly subversive idea could be avowed without denying the orthodox ideology.

In examining the central question, this paper assumes the cultural matrix of Chosŏn as a Neo-Confucian society.¹⁰ The elite class accepted Neo-Confucian value, at least in utterance, in order to pursue a bureaucratic career for supporting livelihoods and social prestige. This professed acceptance of Neo-Confucianism should be given a serious consideration for it limited the range of expressions the literati could employ; literati's writings were largely constrained by the conventions deriving from Neo-Confucianism as well as Chinese classical tradition. It is this cultural setting that makes Hŏ Kyun's endorsement of alienating virtue a perplexing one.

In order to solve this puzzle, in the following section, the discourse on cruelty will be contextualized in its cultural context with special focus on the semantic aspects regarding the word's conventional usage. Next, by concentrating on how cruelty is presented in the *Biography*, the third section will discuss how cruelty could be justified and promoted publicly. In the last section, it will discuss how the seemingly subversive feature of the discourse on cruelty is in fact more complicated than its appearance. Reexamining the customary dichotomy between the orthodoxy and the unorthodoxy and the selfhood imagined in the *Biography*, the meaning of the discourse on the cruelty will be reconsidered. Through these discussions, the need for an alternative framework for examining premodern Korean literature will become clear and the benefits of historicity to interpreting texts will be demonstrated.

II. Contextualizing a Discourse on Cruelty

As presented earlier, Hŏ Kyun employs cruelty as the central thread of Namgung Du's identity. To probe into the contrasting feature of the word 'cruelty,' it might be helpful to revisit the original expression in *Mencius*.

⁹ For the definition of historicity in this paper, see Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 8-19. For the dialogical relationship between the orthodox and heterodox thought, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 9, 208-11.

¹⁰ For the ideological climate of early Chosŏn period, see John Duncan, *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 263. For the spread of Neo-Confucianism in mid-Chosŏn era, see Martina Deuchler, *Ibid.* For comprehensive study of Neo-Confucianism in Korea, see Theodore De Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

“All human beings have a mind that cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. The Ancient Kings had such a commiserating mind and, accordingly, a commiserating government. Having a commiserating mind, and effecting a commiserating government, governing the world was like turning something around on the palm of the hand”¹¹

This statement purports that having “a commiserating mind that cannot bear to see the sufferings of other” is the paramount virtue of any human being. In this text, Mencius argues that the extension of one’s affection is the basis for good governance. It could be conjectured from the passage that the objective of holding the commiserating mind is to emulate the Ancient Kings who ordered the world in an ideal way.

In comparison, Namgung Du’s goal in the *Biography* is private; his personal endeavor to obtain immortality contrasts dramatically from the publicness of the Kings describe in *Mencius*. Furthermore, wishing to be cruel violates the Mencian virtue of promoting a commiserating mind.

Another literary convention to consider is the usage of the word, ‘cruel person’ in Chosŏn. During the Chosŏn dynasty, the official records of the dynasty used ‘cruel person’ in a derogatory manner. In 1473, it was written in the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn dynasty*:

“O Cha Kyŏng (1414-1478), due to his wickedness and treacherousness when he was a soldier at Ŭiju, he committed murder and fled, escaping punishment, he deserves to be called a *cruel person*.”¹²

This convention did not change even after 200 years since this was recorded. It is also recorded in the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn dynasty*:

“Previously you quoted Minister Kim’s [Kim Ik’i (1610-1656)] words, designating my deceased father as a *cruel person*. For you have passed these words so far removed from the truth. How, as a son’s heart, forgo this anguish?”¹³

This statement was made by Yun Chŭng (1629-1714) to reproach Song Siyŏl (1607-1689) for accusing Yun’s father as a ‘cruel person.’ According to Yun, such accusation was made for Yun’s father of abetting suicide of Yun’s Mother. The usage of ‘cruel person’ in this context demonstrates how grave an offense it was to designate someone as a ‘cruel person’ for it was reserved for an act similar in gravity to murder. From these cases, we can conclude that ‘cruel person’ had a strong negative connotation.

The locus classicus of this term also designates a murderer as a ‘cruel person.’ The *Zuo*

¹¹ Irene Bloom and Philip Ivanhoe, ed. *Mencius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 35.

¹² The *Veritable Record of King Sŏngjong* (*Sŏngjong sillok*), 27:7a [4/2/#3]. The *Veritable Record of King Sŏngjong* is cited in these notes according to the fascicle and page (i.e., 27:7a) followed by an entry number in brackets (i.e., [4/2/21#3]). The entry number reflects the organization of individual daily records in the *Veritable Record of Kings of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok*) provided by the Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wi’wŏnhoe (National Institute of Korean History) at <http://sillok.history.go.kr/>. The entry number is in the order of reign year, a lunar month, the specific date number, and the entry order.

¹³ The *Veritable Record of King Sukjong* (*Sukjong sillok*) 15: 9a [10/8/21#1].

Tradition: Commentary on the Spring and Autumn annals (Chinese: *Chunqiu Zuoshi zhuan* 春秋左氏傳) introduces an episode where the newly appointed king is called a ‘cruel person’ when he ignores the dying wish of the former king. It is written:

“For this person’s eyes are like those of a wasp and his voice is like that of a wolf, he is a *cruel person*. Therefore, he must not be anointed as a crown prince.”¹⁴

The commentator states the meaning of “cruelty”: “This indicates that he would willingly act injustice.”¹⁵ The former king’s dying wish was to postpone his death sentence. Yet the newly appointed king ignores this wish and commands quick execution. Regarding this episode, the commentary states that the new king is an “extremely cruel person.”¹⁶ From these writings, we can conclude that ‘cruel person’ was used to portray a murderer.

If there is such a convention in the usage of ‘cruel person,’ can his promotion of cruelty be interpreted as advocating for a heretical idea as previous studies have? On the contrary, Hō Kyun himself made several remarks favorable to Neo-Confucianism.¹⁷ In *On Learning*, he comments as follows:

“In my opinion, if a true Confucian is hired to govern, the ideal ruling of Yao and Shun and the achievements of King Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu will be realized. The ideal ruling was a case which a true Confucian’s ability became embodied. If a true Confucian is not hired to govern, their ability is realized in the form of the teachings of Confucius or Mencius, and of Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073), Cheng brothers (Cheng Hao (1032-1085), Cheng Yi (1033-1107)), Zhang Zai (1020-1077), and Zhu Xi (1130-1200). [...] Alas, as hypocrites disarrange the true Confucian’s career; everything degenerates in this extreme situation. Finally, they made the king become sick of Learning of the Way (*Daoxue*), and thereby hindered the employment of true Confucians. This is the fault of the hypocrites.”¹⁸

Although it is inconclusive to conclude Hō Kyun as a Neo-Confucianist from this statement alone, at least, it is certain that he is not an outright heretic. Since previous literary historians were so eager to interpret Hō Kyun as a nonconformist, Hō Kyun’s advocacy for cruelty was never questioned. If he cannot be understood as a heretic, his argument for cruelty becomes a paradox that begs solution.

Therefore, Hō Kyun’s advocacy for cruelty can be contrasted with Mencian virtue and also recalls to the literary convention of his times and to texts from the *Zuo Tradition: Commentary on the Spring and Autumn annals*. Thus, the problem becomes clear. A solution must consider how these two conflicting perspectives can be resolved; how does he advocate for cruelty while not subverting the

¹⁴ Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg. *Zuo Tradition / Zuozhuan: Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals”* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 463.

¹⁵ Ibid., 463.

¹⁶ Ibid., 463.

¹⁷ For Hō Kyun’s endorsement of Neo-Confucian ideology, see *Kugyōk Sōngso Bubugo* vol.2 [The translation of the anthology of Hō Kyun] trans. Im Hyōngt’aek, (Seoul: Minjok munhwa ch’ujinhoe, 1989), 41, 84, 183, 200, 202.

¹⁸ Hō Kyun. Ibid., 181.

Neo-Confucian values? The upcoming sections will explore how cruelty can be justified under and related to the Neo-Confucian context.

III. Justification of Being Cruel: A ‘Situation-Specific’ Virtue

In the beginning of the *Biography*, cruelty is introduced as a defining characteristic of Namgung Du. “Namgung Du was stubborn and proud, his personality was stout and cruel, acting decisively. Being proud of his abilities, he acted as he pleased at his village.” As this excerpt reveals, Namgung Du’s tenaciousness and cruelty are associated with his reckless behavior.

Also, his cruelty is presented in relation to an act of murder. Fleeing after murdering his unfaithful concubine, he happens on a monk who practices physiognomy. The monk speaks of Namgung Du’s cruelty referring to his murder:

“In the wake of Namgung Du’s arrival, a monk who was young and good-looking also arrived there. He took off his hood and sat astride at the corner of the floor. Leered at Namgung Du, he said, “You are a member of literati lineages. Why did you take the tonsure at such a late age?” After a moment, he said, “You have a cruel nature.” Before long, “Once you had dedicated yourself to Confucian learning and attained the first-degree honor at somewhere.” After a long while, with a smiling, he said, “You killed two people, and because of the crime you are fleeing now.” All the four utterances were in accordance with facts.”¹⁹

Among those four utterances of the monk, the most developed scene in the *Biography* is that of Namgung Du’s murder. The interesting fact is that the act of murder is portrayed not as an illegal act. Since it was legal to kill an unfaithful concubine in Chosŏn, Namgung Du’s fleeing from his own village was not due to his violation of the law.²⁰ Rather it was due to the previous grudge of others provoked by Namgung Du.²¹

Regarding Namgung Du’s revenge on his concubine, Namgung Du’s cruelty is also the trait that allows him to bear his anger and wait for the revelation of truth:

“Namgung Du *pressed* his rage and waited for the sexual affair to end. After tying his horse by the door, he crouched and hid himself and looked at the man and the woman inside through the crack in the door. The two laid together naked and had some fun with each other. Now, Namgung Du was able to realize the truth without doubt.”²²

After that, Namgung Du murders both of them by shooting arrows. Since the act of murder demonstrates his cruelty, this usage is in accordance with the previous example of designating a murderer as ‘cruel person.’

¹⁹ Ibid., 129.

²⁰ Chang Pyŏngin, *Chosŏn jŏn-gi honinje wa sŏngchabyŏl* (Seoul: Ilgisa, 1997), 354-6.

²¹ Hŏ Kyun, op. cit., 128.

²² Ibid., 127.

In the original text, the character translated as “pressed” is the same character as “cruelty.” It is in this point that the word ‘cruelty’ presents dual meaning: to bear something and cruel quality. From the killing and the monk’s depiction of Namgung Du, the reader becomes aware of his cruelty. On the other hand, in this phase, the reader is able to recognize that the author uses these two meanings in an interchangeable manner.

Another point the cruelty represented in this text is a quality that allows one to be an immortal. This usage is closer to the meaning “to bear something.” Regarding this point, we may refer to the strict curriculum of Namgung Du’s training. First, he resists sleep for a week.

“On the first night, he stayed put. At one o’clock in the morning, he could hardly keep his eyes open, but he forced himself to stay awake until dawn. On the second night, he was so tired that he could not keep his balance, but by exercising his will, he suppressed his drowsiness. On the third and the fourth night, he was so exhausted that he could not sit straight, and his head sometimes bumped into the lintel. Still, he stood firm. On the seventh night, he experienced a spiritual awakening. His spirit was enlightened and exhilarated. The elder gleefully said: “You have a great power of *cruelty/perseverance*. I am sure you will be able to accomplish anything.”²³

In this passage, in the original manuscript, the word ‘cruelty’ is repeatedly used to point out the act of resisting drowsiness. It may be more appropriate to translate this term ‘persevere,’ ‘restrain,’ or ‘forgo’ rather than ‘cruelty’ in this context. However, it is worth noting that the letter ‘cruelty’ is the author’s word choice to describe Namgung Du’s repeated action of self-conquest rather than any of the other alternatives.

In the same manner, this word refers to Namgung Du refraining from sating his appetite to the point where he subsists on a powder of grain.

“Usually Namgung Du ate a lot, so hunger was not easy to bear. Thus, he was so tired that he felt dizziness to the extent that he could not distinguish anything. Nevertheless, he *restrained* himself. [...] The elder gleefully said: “You truly have an acute quality. The only thing I wish for you is to *restrain* the sentiment of desire.”²⁴

In this passage, the word ‘cruelty’ is also used to describe the ability to refrain from the bodily desire to eat.

Lastly, Namgung Du mentions that being cruel is the essence of immorality. When Namgung Du visits Hō Kyun, Namgung Du summarized the kernel of the teaching of immortals as the single word ‘cruelty’ as follows:

“My teacher once approved my *cruelty/perseverance*. However, I could not exert that quality, so I ended up like this. Cruelty is the profound truth of immortals; you should keep this point vigilantly and try not to fail it.”

²³ Ibid., 131.

²⁴ Ibid., 131-2.

From this passage, readers may notice the cruelty is a decisive quality; the success or failure of becoming an immortal is at stake.

In sum, cruelty is a virtue that allows oneself to venture on a daring act, to control one's bodily needs, and thereby helping oneself attain the desired end. Cruelty is represented in the *Biography* is concordant with the linguistic convention which utilized 'cruel person' to describe a murderer.

Then, the question is how one can affirm a morally suspicious quality without denying the Neo-Confucian doctrines. One possible explanation is Hō Kyun's partial concession to the Mencius' assumption. He might have agreed that everyone possesses a mind that cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. However, Hō Kyun might have disagreed with the Mencius's argument that such a mind should be the base of ruling or that everybody has an instinct to take action in alleviating other's sufferings. In other words, Hō Kyun would agree that humans have the innate instinct to sympathize with other's sufferings but this does not automatically lead to an action that might abate their sufferings. If this was the case, Hō Kyun might have redefined cruelty as a quality that allows one to suppress one's commiserating mind and take an extreme action which increases the suffering of others. In this sense, the conception of cruelty necessitates the Mencian concept of 'commiserating mind.'

In the *Biography*, yet, additional dimension is depicted. In this text, cruelty is used not only to portray a murderer who accelerates other's sufferings but also for a person who suppresses one's own pain. When cruelty is defined as a conquering energy springing from one's innermost place, such a definition recalls the emotional dynamics that Mencius once described. Based on the partial acceptance of such inner dynamics, Hō Kyun's description of cruelty, at last, attains a vivid appearance.

Seen in this light, the promotion of cruelty itself might be somewhat unorthodox or subversive. However, the unorthodox idea holds when the author accepts the basic assumptions that supports the orthodox doctrine. Even if Hō Kyun did not admit the worthiness of the commiserating mind, he seems to have conceded to the orthodox assumption of a certain human instinct. Also, as the anecdotes of the *Biography* shows, the author's promotion of cruelty is limited to a specific, unusual, and extreme situation. Hō Kyun never tries to generalize the promotion of this dubious quality as a universal principle. In this light, Hō Kyun's advocacy of cruelty cannot be understood as an outright challenge toward the orthodox axiom. Thus, the previous appraisal of Hō Kyun as an outright heresy is exaggerated.

IV. A Selfhood and a Public Persona Imagined in the *Biography*

Though Hō Kyun's vision of cruelty is a highly conditioned one, the complicated feature of the way cruelty is depicted cannot be reduced to the partial concession to orthodoxy. It is not merely a capitulation to a dominant ideology or a challenge toward it as in the customary dichotomy between the orthodox and the unorthodox; it is a more complex process that begs interpretation.

For one thing, the structure of discourse on cruelty in the *Biography* is similar to that of Neo-Confucian project of self-cultivation.²⁵ In Neo-Confucian vision, one could be a sage through self-cultivation, especially by cultivating one's mind.²⁶ In the *Biography*, by contrast, one could become an immortal by cultivating one's body. The contents of an ideal being and the object of taming are indeed replaced. Yet the narrative structure of self-cultivation is still upheld. Of course, this is not to deny possibility the author was motivated to be subversive. Leaving the problem of proving the author's motivation, the fact that the author had to depend on the orthodox narrative of self-cultivation remains

²⁵ Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 116.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

unchanged.

The other reason that the promotion of cruelty could not be seen as a direct challenge toward the orthodox ideology is the usage of the word ‘cruelty.’ As we have seen in the earlier section, the word cruelty is only repeated, though it is used in an ambiguous manner, it does not mean that cruelty can be a principle of everyday life. No matter how uncanny it might seem to praise cruelty, the repeated use of the character cruelty as a central quality for attaining a desirable end is not transformed into a systematic argument of promoting cruelty. It is also possible that repetitive usage of the word might be a pun; not a serious doubt about the orthodox belief.²⁷ Presenting an alienated quality as a central virtue for becoming an ideal person might have also served this purpose. If the possibility cannot be absolutely eliminated, one could not subscribe to the previous study’s viewpoint.

Regarding the way of describing one’s identity in the *Biography*, the last point to examine is the relation between a narrative style of representing an individual in the *Biography* and the conventions of the traditional Chinese biographies.²⁸ In the *Biography*, the readers encounter Namgung Du through the linguistic medium the author employed, not the person *per se*. In this sense, the image of Namgung Du is a construct of the author’s observation, narrative sequence, and standards of what makes an individual an individual. Therefore, the readers’ encounter with Namgung Du is in fact a re-presented Namgung Du whose personality is publicly presented. In this sense, Namgung Du’s identity portrayed by the author could be viewed as a public persona; it is an aspect of an individual that is presented to or perceived by others. The concept of public persona requires the other person who perceives and presents the protagonist’s distinctive character. Thus, the concept is distinguished from the private self which includes the concealed aspects of one’s character.²⁹ To decide whether it is possible to separate the public persona and the private self is beyond the scope of this study. Yet it is certain that Namgung Du described in this biography should be understood as a public persona.

Keeping this in mind, in the *Biography*, Namgung Du is described as a cruel person throughout the text. Although he is accused of being insufficiently cruel in the last part of the story, the focal point of describing his nature is whether being cruel or not. In other words, cruelty is the “quintessential principle or archetypal quality”³⁰ that defines Namgung Du’s identity. At this point, the narrative style of the *Biography* is connected with the traditional Chinese biographies. As Andrew Plaks and other scholars have argued, one of the classical narrative style of Chinese biography is to dramatize the “quintessential principle or archetypal quality.”³¹ As Andrew Plaks pointed out, several plots of “small narratives illustrate the grand principles, and the grand principles are imagined by recourse to the lives of individuals who have played them out.”³² This explanation fits almost perfectly to the *Biography*,

²⁷ Feng Menglong (1574-1646), a Ming writer and Hō Kyun’s contemporary, is one of the eminent writers who frequently used pun for playfulness. See Pi-Ching Hsu, "Feng meng-lung's Treasury of Laughs: Humorous satire on seventeenth-century Chinese culture and society," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (1998): 1047. This is not suggesting that playfulness and seriousness are mutually exclusive. Although Hō Kyun might have cast profound doubt in the *Biography*, there is no hint of promoting cruelty in general. Also, as is usual for literary works, unexpected usage of familiar terms is intended for aesthetic pleasure or wonder.

²⁸ My understanding on the tradition of Chinese biographies is informed by the following works. Wai-Yee Li, "The Idea of Authority in the *Shih Chi (Records of the Historian)*." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54.2 (1994): 345-405; Stephen Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian*. (New York: SUNY Press, 1995).

²⁹ In this paper, the public persona refers to an expressed identity in a text; the private self refers to an inwardly focused identity. About the debate on the two concepts in several disciplines, see Paul Kléber Monod, *The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe, 1589-1715* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 16-19.

³⁰ Susan Mann, "Scene-Setting: Writing Biography in Chinese History," *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 634.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 634.

³² Andrew H. Plaks, "Towards a critical theory of Chinese narrative." in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and*
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as Namgung Du's life revolves around the principle of cruelty and cruelty is embodied by Namgung Du's repeated actions of cruel acts. Although the meaning of the character 'cruelty' is mercurial, the author chooses to make the radial meanings rotate around the word 'cruelty' because Hō Kyun opens this story with the anecdote of murder. In sum, the depiction of the public persona of Namgung Du is possible when the conventional framework of biography is available. No matter how amoral and alienated the principle seems, the *Biography* could be written based on the linguistic convention.

The final question this paper attempts to answer is this: how can we make sense of the uncertainty in Namgung Du's character, as the *Biography* ambiguously mentions him as cruel and not cruel at the same time. To understand the last minute's self-effacement of Namgung Du, his renunciation of being cruel,³³ it might be helpful to remind several points of new historicist concepts: self-fashioning, and multiple identities.³⁴

The concept of self-fashioning suggests that one's identity is not defined by a quintessential quality but is molded by constant interactions between a self and the outer authority.³⁵ Consequently, the interaction involves intermingling of and competition between multiple identities. When the self is shaped in such a way, there is no stable "haecceity" which means a property of a thing that makes it unique.³⁶ Rather, the self is constructed by performing cultural norms. According to the concept of self-fashioning, whether the performance is conforming or challenging a norm is not important. The point is to engage with the norms either way, whether it is conforming or challenging; the engagement is the key to constructing a self.

Namgung Du's behaviors can also be understood in this engagement. He usually violates the norms by pursuing unorthodox ideal and practicing a morally dubious quality. As the individuals have been depicted in the Chinese biographies, Hō Kyun also focuses on Namgung Du's performance of the cultural norms. When we remind Susan Mann's observation of Chinese literary thought that what a person *did* was what person *was*,³⁷ it might be too extreme, though, Namgung Du's cruelty is also realized by his repeated action. Thus, his cruel actions make him a cruel person. In this sense, it would be safe to say that the way of presenting Namgung Du's persona has indelible vestige of Chinese biographical convention. From the case of the *Biography*, it is also certain that Namgung Du's public persona represented in the text is constructed by performance of cultural norms.

In this sense, the uncertainty of Namgung Du's cruelty makes the *Biography* especially intriguing. Namgung Du's cruel personality is established when he performs the cruel acts, and effaced when he ceases to act cruel. His identity oscillates between two extremes, which is a similar pattern with how the project of becoming an immortal oscillates between the orthodox and the unorthodox. Both cruelty vis-à-vis compassion and the orthodox vis-à-vis the unorthodox are interdependent in that they necessitate their opposites in order to realize their existence. Namgung Du's identity imagined by Hō Kyun reveals the trait of such oscillations. The imagination could only be properly understood when one considers the Neo-Confucian ideology as well as the convention of Chinese biographies as crucial reference points. Such influential ideology and convention are shared by the intellectuals on both sides of the Ming-Chosŏn border, not by the illiterate larger population who happened to be co-habited in the

Theoretical Essays 309 (Princeton: N.J., 1977): 309-352, quoted in Susan Mann, *Ibid.*, 634.

³³ In the *Biography*, Namgung Du not only abandons his goal of becoming a lower ranking immortal in a secular world, but also describes himself as not being able to be cruel. See Hō Kyun, *op. cit.*, 141-2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 637.

³⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *op.cit.*, 3-9.

³⁶ For various connotations of "haecceity" in the twentieth-century literary criticism, see Sonja Renee Nikkila, "Pseudonymity, authorship, selfhood: the names and lives of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot." (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2006), 9-11.

³⁷ Susan Mann, *Ibid.*, 637.

Korean peninsula. This is the reason why an awareness of historically specific cultural setting – which group were included and which group were excluded – is important to understand a selfhood portrayed in the *Biography* and historical texts in general.

V. Conclusion

This paper attempted to propose a new way of reading in order to overcome anachronistic approach of previous South Korean scholarship and to attract wider scholarly attention interested in premodern Korean literature. By examining Hŏ Kyun's promotion of dubious quality in the historical context, this paper explored a way of imagining a selfhood in early seventeenth century Chosŏn. This paper also revealed that the trace of the heretic idea cannot be clearly separated from the orthodox language. Therefore, the previous readings based on the orthodox/unorthodox binary cannot be supported.

This paper also confirmed that one's public persona is presented by linguistic medium which is deeply infiltrated by literary conventions. In this case, the traditional Chinese biographies; one's persona is described by an individual's performance of a quintessential principle, or a cultural norm. Thus, understanding the protagonist's identity requires knowledge of the cultural norms and of the conventions of the medium which has a constraining force in how that identity is described.

This paper endeavored to clarify the nationalistic approach's limitation; the critical oversight of the various puzzles that can be raised by the *Biography*. Such puzzles can enrich our horizon of imagining a self and its relation to the surroundings. As this paper demonstrated, retrospective approach which applies modern concepts such as 'nation' and 'national literary history' is problematic in that it clouds the transnational nature of the cultural norms. Being aware of the constraints by ideology and conventions allows us to grasp the agency of an author, allowing for a better understanding of a text.

This paper is an attempt to emphasize the importance of understanding historically specific cultural settings; an intellectual tradition that is derived mainly from China but also not exclusive to the Chinese literati community. By recalling the fluid nature of the cultural norms, this paper hopes to contribute to design an alternative framework to illuminate the premodern Korean texts as well as the texts from the neighboring areas.

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