

# *The Korean Images of Tibet and Sirhak Scholars: the Plurality of Truths? In Relation to the Issue of the Epistemological Shift in Eighteenth-Century Korea.*

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1. As is well-known, the proto-Korean state of Silla has its origins in the tribal chiefdoms of Kyōngju valley (south-eastern part of the Korean Peninsula). It cemented its nascent statehood in late fifth, early sixth centuries, adopted Chinese-style administrative laws (520), Buddhism (527) and its own independent era name (536) (Seth 2006, 38). The formation of Tibetan statehood proceeded almost concurrently, although it began to play a significant historical role in Northeast Asia only later. By the end of sixth century, Gnam ri srong btsan, a tribal chieftain of Yarlung area to the southeast of today's Lhasa, managed to solidify his control over the Yarlung valley and the adjacent lands (Beckwith 1987, 14-19). While both Tibet and Silla decisively strengthened their respective statehoods through a complicated process of both peaceful and military (inimical) interactions with Tang China in mid-seventh century, the direct information exchange between the two states does not seem to have flourished. Whatever information the Silla intellectuals could obtain on Tibet was mostly acquired from the Chinese sources, while the Tibetans' knowledge of the "countries east to the sea" (Haedong—the name under which the Korean peninsula states and sometimes also the polities of the Japanese archipelago were known in China) was mostly limited to their representatives residing in China. For a good example, the commentary to *Sandhinirmocanasūtra* (known in Korean as *Haesimmilgyōng so*) by the famed Silla-born Buddhist monk, Wōnch'ūk (613-696), was translated into Tibetan by the Dunhuang-based translator, Gos chos grub, in early ninth century. It was then included in the treatises section (Bstan 'gyur) of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, and cited by many later scholars, for example, by the great Tsong kha pa (1357-1419) (Inaba 1977; Kapstein 2002, 78-81; Ko 1997).

Another Silla-born monastic, Sichuan-based meditator Kim Musang (680-756), is mentioned in several Tibetan works as someone related to the early development of the Tibetan Buddhism. Significantly, *Sba bzhed* (*The*

*testament of Ba*), a famed account of the establishment of Buddhism during the royal period, mentions a mid-750s meeting between the Tibetan emissaries to “Eg-chu” (Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan) and “master Kim, a clairvoyant and tamer of tigers.” He was said to have greatly assisted the Tibetan guests by producing some – in the view of the authors of the *Testament of Sba* – rather correct predictions about the imminent persecution of Buddhism at the Tibetan court. Of course, “master Kim” was assumed to be Chinese. The record of this important encounter was preserved in some later works, notably Dpa’ bo gtsug lag phreng ba’s (1504-1566) *Mghas-pa’I dga’-ston (The Banquet of Scholars)*. Otherwise, it was generally ignored, partly because Kim Musang did not have any known Tibetan disciples, or possibly because of the animosity of Yuan period and post-Yuan Tibetan authors towards Chinese influences (Pyön 2009, 298-310; Kapstein 2002, 69-84; Stein 1961, 4-9). Both proto-Korean Buddhists, Wönch’ük and Musang, exclusively used literary Chinese in their writings, spoke Chinese during their sojourns in China, ultimately gave up hope that they would return to their native land of Silla, and ended their days in China. That was why they could be introduced to Tibet as “Chinese” authors, with all the consequences, also negative, it could imply. For the Tibetans, they represented not Silla (“Korea”), but rather Chinese Buddhism of various sectarian colours — just brought to them by the Sinified foreigners from a country about which they knew close to nothing.

China dominated not only the material but also the information exchanges between the two peripheral lands of the Tang-centred oikumene. Its hegemonic position in the field of exchanges between the peripheries of what is often called “East Asian cultural sphere” is underscored by a comparison with mediaeval Europe. There, a peripheral country like eleventh-century Kievan Rus’, could enter into marriage alliances with such far-lying states as France, Hungary, Norway, and possibly Anglo-Saxon Britain (Bogomolets 2005; Cross 1929; Ingham 1998). It is not that Tibetan affairs did not exert influence upon Korea; in fact, it seems a plausible theory that Tang’s preoccupation with the struggle against the powerful Tibetan Empire of Mang song mang btsan (r. 650-676) in the early 670s (Beckwith 1987, 32-36) ultimately weakened its onslaught upon Silla and enabled the latter to consolidate its position as the unifier of the Korean Peninsula south to Taedong River (Sö 2002). But to what degree Silla rulers themselves were aware of the influence Tibet (Kor. T’obön, Ch. Tufan) could exert on the contemporaneous politico-military situation in East and central Asia remains a mystery. After all, no direct embassy, emissary, trade, or religious exchanges between Tibet and the early states of the Korean Peninsula (before Koryō) are known to us.

2. “China” is a word with many meanings. In Yuan Dynasty times, when both the successor of Silla, the proto-Korean state of Koryō (after 1270), and Tibet found themselves to be tributaries of the Yuan court, the Yuan Dynasty-ruled

“China” became the conduit for the first ever large-scale exchanges between the Korean Peninsula and Tibet. Both territories were in a relationship of dependency with the Yuan dynastic government. Between 1259 and 1356, Koryō was effectively a vassal state of the Yuan court where both kings (who regularly intermarried with Mongol emperors) and the most influential aristocrats (routinely described in South Korean historiography as “pro-Yuan elements”) were following instructions from the Yuan capital, having also, to a considerable degree, internalised the culture and lifestyle of the metropolitan Yuan society (Min 2000; Lee 2002a). Almost concomitantly with the eventual subjugation of Koryō, in 1260, ’Gro mgon chos rgyal ’phags pa (1235-1280), the head of Sa skya School, became the “Imperial Preceptor” and the spiritual head of all the Mongolian Buddhist domains. At the same time, Tibet was formally placed under the administration of the Mongol-appointed local officials directly reporting to the Mongol throne. Thus it became a “special administrative district” of sorts inside the Yuan Empire (Shakabpa 1967, 81-90). The ties of dependency were probably somewhat stronger in the case of Tibet, which practically lost its political autonomy at that period, while Koryō remained, in principle, a self-governing realm; but in any case, both Tibet and Koryō became two parts of the same politico-cultural space, albeit under slightly different conditions.

This political development led to a significant intensification of mutual contacts. Tibetan esoteric teachings were introduced to Koryō (Sørensen 1993), and the esoteric Buddhist art of Tibetan origin seemingly transferred through Mongol-ruled China, exerting influence on the development of the Koryō Buddhist art. In some cases, the skills of Yuan artisans were directly imported. Yōnboksa Monastery bell in the Koryō capital of Kaesōng was cast by commissioned Yuan craftsmen (1346), and Kyōngch’ōnsa Monastery’s ten-storied pagoda (Kyōnggi Province, Kaep’ung County) was also erected by imported artisans from the Mongolian Empire (1348). Otherwise, large numbers of Koryō monastics, including monastery craftsmen, were able to witness the esoteric Buddhist art in Yuan’s cultural centres, to where they could relatively freely travel, and use the imported art objects (Chin 1985, 3). A result of such a broadening of the space for contacts was a visible trend towards esoterism in the late Koryō Buddhist art. The combined statue (*hapch’e pulsang*) of Vairocana and Śākyamuni from Unjusa Temple, where the two Buddhas sit back to back, is understood to be one such example of Tibetan esotericism influencing Koryō art. Another well-known example is Ch’ilchangsa Temple’s four-faced stone pillar (*sabangsamyōnjon*), with Akṣobhya, Amitābha, Ratnasambhava, and Amoghasiddhi representing east, west, south, and north respectively (Hō 2000). Tibetan Vajrayāna-influenced images—especially that of Śākyamuni and Avalokiteśvara—were common in early fourteenth-century

Koryô Buddhist art. The most typical traces of Vajrayāna art influence upon the Koryô Buddhist sculpture include double-layered props with upwardly oriented lotus ornaments (*angnyōn*) and downwardly oriented lotus ornaments (*pognyōn*) that are tightly linked (or sometimes almost merged) together. They also include triangle-shaped props substituting the traditional Korean round ones, or high, pearl-shaped *uṣṇīṣa* (excrescence) on the top of the head, as well as three- or five-faceted crowns (*pogwan*) (Chin 1985, 7-16). In most cases, the late Koryô or early Chosŏn Vajrayāna-influenced Buddhist images from Korea are easily recognisable; the stylistic differences between them and the preceding tradition are clear.

Apart from the seemingly indirect artistic and religious influences, some direct contacts between Tibetan figures and Koryô court—unheard of in Silla times—materialised too. Koryôsa (fasc. 31, Ch'ungnyôl-wang fourth year, seventh lunar month) records a touching story of a Korean monk known only under the Tibetan-styled name Jizhe Xiba (Dge bshes Se-pa? 吃折思八), who, as a young layman, originally from Chindo Island (near the southwestern coast of the Korean Peninsula), was taken prisoner during the suppression of the anti-Mongol Sambyôlch'o Mutiny in 1271. In Yuan China, he was ordained as a monk. Having been trained in the Tibetan tradition, he came back to Kaesŏng in 1294 as a Yuan imperial household teacher, in search of his parents. He was given a solemn welcome by selected royal officials, and his parents, who turned out to be poor farm hands struggling to eke out their living near Sôsan, were allowed residence on Kanghwa Island (closer to the royal capital of Kaesŏng) and given tax exemption privileges. It is unclear whether the Koryô prisoner was taken as far as Tibet proper, but it is clear that his visit—which also enriched the Koryô court with some Tibetan scriptures and ritual implements—brought Korean Buddhism into direct contact with the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition. Another visit by a Tibetan monk was recorded by 1314 and yielded more than eighteen thousand Tibetan Buddhist scriptures presented by the visitor to the Koryô court.

The best known recorded case of a Koryô royal visiting Tibet, however involuntary, was Ch'ungsŏn-wang's (r. 1298, 1308-1313) exile to Tibet (1320-1323), although it is not specified in which Tibetan region he actually sojourned. Interestingly, Ch'ungsŏn-wang and his family were also said to have received their Buddhist precepts from the Tibetan monks (*Koryôsa*, fasc. 33, Ch'ungsŏn-wang original year, sixth lunar month, *pyŏngjin* day). The special position of the Tibetan monks as Dharma teachers to the Yuan imperial house added a political motive to the purely religious interest in Vajrayānas esoteric rituals, and provided an additional stimulus for Koryô's monastics and courtiers to enter into direct contact with the Tibetan Buddhist

tradition. However, it remains unknown to what degree the Tibetan esoteric tradition that the Koryô intellectuals of the Mongol domination period were undoubtedly well aware of was identified with “Tibet” as a geo-cultural reality. Although superficially direct in the sense of direct contacts between Koryô court, monks and Tibetan religious figures, it appears that the interaction between Koryô and Tibet was still essentially mediated by the regional centre, Yuan China. Without the monks from the Tibetan periphery of the Yuan realm being stationed in the Yuan imperial capital and serving as imperial teachers, they probably would not have made contact with yet another Yuan periphery, namely Koryô kingdom.

3. In the Neo-Confucian realm of Koryô’s successor state, Chosôn (1392-1910), Tibetan Buddhism lost its relevance for the new literati elite. Tibet is referred to in Chosôn’s royal *Veritable Records* (*Chosôn Wangjo Sillok*) mostly in relation to the Tang Dynasty history and politics. It was mentioned, for example, in 1404 as a tributary country which sent its scions to Tang’s Confucian Academy (T’aejong fourth year, eighth lunar month, twentieth day), and in 1537 as a vassal state which was granted the imperial gift of the *Shujing* and *Shijing* texts by the Tang imperial court (Chungjong thirty-second year, second lunar month, first day). The Tibetan Empire’s military intrusions upon Tang were used as a precedent in court discussions of Hideyoshi invasion in 1592 (Sônjo twenty-fifth year, tenth lunar month, fourteenth day), Tibet being chiefly mentioned as a “threatening” semi-barbaric neighbour of Tang (Sônjo twenty-ninth year, sixth lunar month, twenty-third day). In any case, in the historical imagination of the Chosôn officials Tibet had hardly any independent existence of its own. It was essentially seen as a part of Tang-related, or sometimes Yuan-related, memories. It is suggested, for example, that some of the letters of the Korean alphabet invented on a royal decree of King Sejong in 1443 might have followed the patterns of the relevant letters of the new Mongolian script invented by a Tibetan lama, “Imperial Preceptor,” ’Gro mgon chos rgyal ’phags pa, for Kublai Khan (Ledyard 2002, 70-73). The suggestion seems fully plausible since ’Phags pa’s alphabet as a source of inspiration for Sejong’s scholars was already mentioned in Chosôn Dynasty’s linguistic scholarship (Lee 2002b, 12). However, the Tibetan origins of ’Phags pa’s, or Tibetan roots of his new script did not seem to have attracted much attention: ’Phags pa’s script was viewed primarily as a part of Yuan history.

A change in perspective—at least, in some quarters—came in the late eighteenth century. Politically and culturally, this period inaugurated important changes both in Tibet and in Chosôn Korea. In Tibet, Qing imperial troops were stationed in the capital, Lhasa, from 1750, with the power of the Chinese administrative representative, *amban*, being drastically

strengthened. In a way, Tibet was administratively incorporated into the Qing power structures, although Qing rule there was certainly much looser than in China proper (Shakabpa 1967, 140-152). In Chosŏn Korea, the last half of the eighteenth century saw increasing acceptance of the “barbarian” Manchu Qing Dynasty as an economical and cultural superpower that Korea was supposed to diligently learn from. The members of the late eighteenth-century Korean “tribute” missions to Qing were often people of unusual intellectual curiosity, who were deeply interested in acquiring more precise knowledge of what they perceived as peripheries of the world. They pursued this by meeting with the different “barbarians” that one could encounter in the imperial metropolis, both Europeans and the representatives of non-Han peoples from the margins of the Qing Empire, Tibetans included (Jung 2010). That was the context for the accidental meetings between Chosŏn literati and Tibetans in late-eighteenth century China, which vastly improved the level of awareness about Tibet in Korea’s intellectual elite. The meetings took place in Beijing or in the vicinities of the imperial capital, which basically meant that China continuously appeared as the “central” mediator in the contact of two peripheries. What changed, however, was the perspective. Tibet was becoming not simply a part of the historical reminiscences from the Tang times, but a historical and cultural reality meriting interest in itself.

4. In twentieth-century Korean historiography, *sirhak* (“real scholarship”) is the generic term referring to all the Neo-Confucian literati of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Chosŏn deemed either more iconoclastic or more pragmatic and less dogmatic than contemporaneous mainstream thought. First used in the 1930s, the concept of *sirhak* reflected the passionate willingness of Korea’s nationalist and (at least, partly) leftist historians to search for the indigenous roots of modernity in Korea’s pre-modern past, thus rebuffing the theories of the Japanese colonialist historiography which tended to regard Korea as a quintessential “Oriental” society unable to develop any modernity on its own. The term *sirhak* denotes a modernist evaluation of certain pre-modern thinkers as “relatively progressive” rather than implying any intrinsic connection between different intellectuals labelled together as “*sirhak* scholars.” The philosophers, writers, and statesmen known as “*sirhak* proponents” in today’s scholarship never formed any sort of unitary scholarly group or lineage (Baker 1981). There was, however, one feature more or less common to the majority of all those now known as “*sirhak* adepts” across all the fractional differences—namely the encyclopaedic nature of their scholarship and insatiable curiosity about regions of the world and natural phenomena that were less known to their contemporaries (Setton 1992). *Sirhak* was about broadening the current notions of the world, in a time when increased contacts with Qing China and the improved ability to absorb newer

European scholarship via Qing made such an intellectual enterprise possible. Thus, it hardly comes as a surprise that most new information on Tibet in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Korean literature is to be found in the writings of scholars classified today as *sirhak* adepts.

A great *sirhak* scholar coming from the mighty Patriarchs (Noron) fraction (Cho 2004), Pak Chiwŏn (1737-1805), developed an interest in Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism from direct experience. In 1780, he was lucky enough to be selected to join the escort of his distant relative, Pak Myŏngwŏn (1725-1790), who was sent as emissary to Beijing to congratulate Emperor Qianlong on his seventieth birthday. The emperor then ordered the Chosŏn emissary to pay respects to the person who he officially called his teacher, namely the sixth Panchen Lama, Lobsang Palden Yeshe (Slob bzang dpal ldan ye shes) (1738-1780), who resided in Jehol in a special luxurious monastic residence named after Tibet's famed Tashilhunpo (Bkra shis lhun po) Monastery, Panchen Lama's time-honoured seat of power. The Chosŏn emissary, an orthodox Neo-Confucian, was profoundly shocked by the order to bow to a "barbarian monk", but since the orders were imperial, there was no way to refuse. Pak Chiwŏn, who followed his highly-placed relative to the Tashilhunpo residence, was definitely not impressed with the "barbarian monk" who looked, in his view, "too fat to give a feeling of cleverness and smartness, and devoid of dignity in spite of the hugeness of his body." However, the display of Qing China's highest dignitaries—presided over by Emperor Qianlong himself—respectfully bowing to the "monk from a Western tributary state" and feeling enormously honoured by a touch of the monk's head on their heads, was definitely impressive. Pak Chiwŏn was, first and foremost, perplexed by the degree of importance attached to Lobsang Palden Yeshe by the Qing court, and started questioning on this matter the new friends he had made in Beijing and Jehol, mostly Chinese literati.

The replies he obtained were an even more perplexing combination of facts about Tibet and Buddhist legends, peppered with glaring inaccuracies. Pak Chiwŏn was told, for example, that the sixth Panchen Lama, Lobsang Palden Yeshe, was "fourth Panchen Lama." The contemporaneous Dalai Lama, the eighth Dalai Lama, Jampel Gyatso (Byams dpal rgya mtsho, 1758-1804), was erroneously identified as "seventh Dalai Lama." The Chinese interlocutors of Pak also wrongly described Panchen Lama, supposedly the reincarnation of Amitābha, as a reincarnation of 'Gro mgon chos rgyal 'phags pa, the famed teacher of Kublai Khan. In fact, it was the celebrated third Dalai Lama, Sonam Gyatso (Bsod nams rgya mtsho, 1543-1588), known for his conversion of the Mongols, who once proclaimed himself a reincarnation of 'Phags pa (and his powerful protector, Mongols' Altun Khan, to be a reincarnation of Kublai



Khan), so it is not impossible that the two were confused. Furthermore, Pak was assured that Dalai Lamas—who are celibate monks—were “hereditary rulers” of Tibet, whose wives, however, did not request the Chinese honorary titles for tributary rulers’ spouses since they were monks’ wives (Pak (1780) 2004, Vol. 2, 151-187). Given the number of mistakes in the description of Tibet offered to the curious Chosŏn guest, it was clear that Tibet was a peripheral place on the “mental map” of Chinese intellectuals who acted as Pak’s main information sources in this matter.

However, Pak managed to grasp several important facts. He was told, for example, that the historical and religious core of Tibet is its central-western region (Ü-Tsang, or Dbus gtsang), that contemporaneous Tibet was dominated by the “Yellow hat” (Dge lugs pa) denomination, and that “a great monk of the Ming times,” Tsong kha pa, was the founder of this denomination. It does not, however, transpire from the record of his travel, *Yŏrha Ilgi* (*Jehol Diary*), that he learned much about Tibetan Buddhism, beyond the stories of Tibet’s high-ranking monks’ miracle making, or their political involvement with the rulers of China. In fact, one of the key facts he gleaned about ’Phags pa was the invention of the new Mongol alphabet by a Tibetan monk on Kublai Khan’s orders (Pak (1780) 2004, Vol. 2, 203-214). It is “China” that emerges as central to the Tibet-related narratives of *Yŏrha Ilgi*; as the bestower of ranks and gifts upon Tibet’s monastic hierarchy; as the “senior country” that Tibet submits tributes to; and as the beneficiary of Tibetan monks’ supernatural abilities. Again, even *Yŏrha Ilgi*’s accounts on Tibet—some of the most detailed throughout the whole Chosŏn period—are formed in the context of China’s cultural, diplomatic, and informational dominance in the region. It was, in fact, still possible that Chosŏn intellectuals could only learn about Tibet and vice versa through China’s mediation. A China-centred regional network of knowledge provided the basic framework for any such learning about each other.

To be sure, Pak Chiwŏn was hardly in a position to relativise China and establish any of its neighbours on an equal footing, despite the emphasis in the modern South (and North) Korean research literature on his supposedly “independent” stance that was “transcendent of the Sino-centric worldview.” The non-Chinese peoples of the “outer” reaches of the East Asian cultural world are both exotised and marginalized in his account. Russia, for example, was understood by him to be a “cluster of barbarian villages” to the north of Amur River where the carriages were driven by donkey-sized hounds with more than ten small bells on their neck, and where the “giant barbarians” inhabiting it were always playing flute while going out (Pak (1780) 2004, Vol. 2, 195). Tibetans were essentially placed in the same category of non-



Confucian, “wild” tributaries of China—“the people who are ever rougher and tougher than Mongols, and whose appearance, which resembles strange beasts or bizarre spirits, is really frightening.” Tibetans were thought to be less “frightening” than “the Muslims, who descend from the ancient Uyghurs,” but religious magic, identified as their “essential skill,” was more or less equalled with the “brutal force” synonymous with Mongols or Uyghurs. The sinocentric “culture-barbarism” dichotomy was still valid for Pak, but the difference brought about by eighteenth-century developments lay in Pak’s stronger interest towards the “barbarian outskirts” of the world, and the realism with which he analysed them. For example, Pak expected that the Manchu rulers of China, slowly descending from the peak of their power, would be seriously challenged by Mongols, “the heirs of the great Yuan Dynasty”, in the near future. Moreover, he thought that Korea, isolated as it was by its peninsular position, should take a keener interest in the “barbarian” neighbours of China since the rule of Sinicised Manchus was not likely to continue forever, and some new “barbaric force” could come to replace them (Pak (1780) 2004, Vol. 2, 196-199).

If anything, Pak was a great realist and the relations between Tibet and China were also understood in *Yŏrha Ilgi* to be strictly pragmatic. They were essentially seen as China’s attempt to “divide and rule” the diverse “tributary monastic rulers” of Tibet by showering them with honours and gifts, and as Tibet’s attempt to use the formalities of the tributary system in order to maximise the advantages from its interchange with China. In other words, the answer to the question as to why Lobsang Palden Yeshe was being lionised by Qianlong’s court was realistic and simple: because Tibetans, “rude barbarians” as they were, represent a potentially threatening force to reckon with. Gone was the world seen through the prism of the Confucian ideology of “civilising the barbarians.” Pak saw “barbarians” own agency as decisive in their interactions with China. And, while emphasising the role of Confucianism as Chosŏn Korea’s “only valid teaching,” Pak was prepared to accept that the truth, to a degree, may be plural, and that even Buddhism, exemplified by its Tibetan form, might contain some grains of “final truth,” constituting a “teaching” in its own right (Pak (1780) 2004, Vol. 2, 185-186). Pak’s world still had a clearly distinguished “civilised”, Confucian centre and “barbarian” periphery; but the periphery, both in the geographical and cultural senses of the word, was decisively heightening its profile.

5. Apart from Pak Chiwŏn, another *sirhak* scholar to leave a lengthy description of Tibet was Yi Kyugyŏng (1788-1856). He was an encyclopaedic scholar, whose magnum opus, *Oju Yŏnmun Changchŏn Sango* (The Dispersed Manuscripts, Lengthy Writings and Extended Commentaries by

Oju [*Yi Kyugyǒng*], finished in the end of the 1830s, included practically everything that the erudite men of East Asia might interest themselves in the early-nineteenth century; from firearms and potato planting to arguments on Buddhist transmigration theory and the Christian doctrines. It is not, however, that the Christian doctrines attracted the indefatigable encyclopaedic scholar as much as, for example, Western astronomy or geography, which he had a genuine interest in (Kim 2009). As long as the realm of “teaching” was concerned, Yi professed his exclusive adherence to the Confucian orthodoxy, and attempted to explain the proliferation of all the diverse heterodoxies, from ancient Taoism to Catholicism, by the gradual decline of the “true,” Confucian learning. Unlike the orthodox Neo-Confucians, however, he was genuinely interested in the “diverse heterodoxies,” and felt challenged, for example, by the fact that so many learned Chinese and Koreans were “seduced” by the “Heavenly Lord’s Heresy” (Catholicism). Since the late Ming dynasty Chinese Catholic intellectuals often referred to Catholicism as “a teaching close to the Confucian Way,” Yi, who regarded Korean Catholics as “harmful heretics,” surmised that the sort of Catholicism which entered Korea might have been a mixture of the original Western teaching with “destructive heresies” of China, like folk Taoism or White Lotus sect (Yi 1980, Vol. 18, 303-319). Then how did the learned gentlemen of Korea end up being attracted by such an unhealthy mixture? Yi’s best guess was that it was exactly the superficial closeness of sinified Catholicism to the “Confucian Way” that facilitated the “seduction” of some of the best younger scholars of his time by the “Western heresy” (Yi 1980, Vol. 18, 316-318).

Yi’s classification of the “teachings” was a vertical, hierarchical system, with “orthodox” views at the top, with diverse “heterodoxies” below. The latter were incomparable with the “sage learning” but still contained some elements which either superficially resembled the truth or even contained some elements of it. The Buddhist idea of transmigrations, for example, resembled to a certain degree the fully orthodox views on the cyclical circulation of the material force (*qi*) in the universe; and talk of humans reborn as beasts was not in reality that outlandish since, as Mencius said, lazy people who interest themselves only in getting food and clothing, are close to beasts (Yi 1980, Vol. 18, 220-227). Buddhist talks of “hells” and posthumous retribution were understood as an attempt to induce the “foolish” commoners to mend their sinful ways by appealing to their superstitious consciousness. The talks of hell were not fully nonsensical, since the realm of death corresponded to the *yin* element in the Neo-Confucian cosmology and the reward for good deeds, together with retribution for the bad ones, was also a law in the Confucian moral cosmos. The “heterodox” stories of hell did not seem, however, to succeed in reducing the numbers of sinners (Yi 1980, Vol. 18, 236-239). In the cases in

which stories of “heterodoxies” were intertwined with the genealogy of the “orthodoxy”, Yi was especially careful. He took great pains, for example, to diligently check whether a great Silla Confucian, Sŏl Ch’ong (seventh and eighth centuries), the son of the famed Buddhist exegete Wŏnhyo (617-686), was really a brother to Korean Avatamsaka school founder, Ŭisang (625-702), as some geomantic books claimed (Yi 1980, Vol. 20, 179-184). Such an attentive, soul-searching attitude towards the challenges of the “heterodoxies” was what made the difference between Yi’s *sirhak* scholarship and standard Neo-Confucian fare of the times.

First and foremost, Tibet interested Yi as an example of what Buddhist “heterodoxy” might develop into; at the same time, it was seen as a “tributary” of China from the times of Tang, its history becoming from that point a part of the history of the China-centred world. Apart from *Yŏrha Ilgi*—which Yi cites extensively—his work draws on several Qing geographical and historical treatises. His main sources include *Daqing Yitongzhi* (*Gazetteer of the Great Qing*, 1743), Chen Ding’s (b. 1650) *Dianqian Jiyou* (*Records of Travels by Dianqian*, 1702), and even the collection of works by Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735-1799), who was congratulated by the same embassy that Pak Chiwŏn had joined a couple of decades earlier. Yi’s sources contained a plethora of information that Pak Chiwŏn did not manage to access. For example, Yi describes in details the differences between the Yellow Hat (Dge lugs) and Red Hat (Kar ma bka’ brgyud) schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and cites a long Chinese account of Tibet’s early-eighteenth century history that was troubled by the Dzungars’ invasion of 1717, China’s intervention in 1718-1723, and the subsequent anti-Chinese insurrections in Tibet. Regardless of how detailed it may be, Yi’s description is also both exoticising and eroticising. Tibet, as seen through the eyes of China’s official and unofficial authors, looked like a country of mysterious esoteric rituals, often incorporating sex and sexual symbols. Some of the descriptions of such rituals resemble the accounts of “indescribable rites of the aborigines” by European travellers in Africa (in nineteenth-century Africa travelogues by the European writers. See, for example, Stevenson 1982), including a particularly terrifying account of a esoteric ceremony in which a pregnant woman was bound, sliced into small pieces, and cannibalised; her cries of pain being called “Buddha’s cries of joy.” The account, which depicted the Tibetan monks drinking the fresh blood of their dying victim and then scalping her to make a gilded alms bowl, adequately demonstrated what both Yi’s Chinese sources and Yi himself might have thought about the “Buddhist heterodoxy” in its Tibetan variety (Yi 1980, Vol. 18, 246-265). Buddhist Tibet was seen as a land of “evil heresy” (*sasul*)—frightening, but also fascinatingly exotic.

6. The perceptions of foreign lands and peoples deemed peripheral are often characterised by lack of direct contacts and first-hand knowledge. Since the peripheries are assumed to be less important, older knowledge about them may easily be neglected by next generations of intellectuals. It means that the perceptions of such peripheries in a traditional society, with its general scarcity of information on the outside world, would be characterised more by ruptures than continuity; the new generations having to develop anew knowledge of some particular faraway and unimportant parts of the world. These general reflections also seem to be applicable to the traditional Korean contacts with Tibet. In eighteenth-century learned milieus of Chosŏn, knowledge of the Kim Musang's Tibetan connections was absent, and Tibetan influences upon Koryŏ Buddhist art attracted little attention. Knowledge of Tibet was largely reduced to what little could be gleaned from the available Chinese sources and, while containing some interesting in-depth accounts (for example, Tsong kha pa was rightly understood to be the Dge lugs sect's founder), was mostly fragmentary and unsystematic. However, the knowledge of Tibet was certainly improving with time. Yi Ik (1681-1763), a great teacher of eighteenth-century *sirhak* scholars of the Southern (Namin) faction, was ignorant of Tibet to the point of identifying it as a "Xiongnu tribe" (*Sŏngho Sasŏl*, Fasc. 11, "Pukchŏk"), while the younger generation, represented by Pak Chiwŏn and Yi Kyugyŏng, managed to build up much more adequate accounts of Tibet's ethno-geography and history. It was, of course, mostly the history of Tibet's contacts with China that they managed to obtain access to, or the history of Tibetan Buddhism as seen through the exoticising lens of Chinese Confucianism. It was essentially a story of China's "western barbarian tributaries." The fact that Tibet, an obviously non-Sinitic part of China-centred, East Asian historical time and space, firmly entered the consciousness of at least some prominent intellectuals of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Chosŏn Korea, certainly points to an important epistemological shift that the Korean intelligentsia was undergoing at that point. Heterogeneous peripheries of the Sinitic oikoumene, such as Tibet, began to matter more than they used to. Still, they mattered only in the context of China-dominated spatial-temporal continuity and only to the extent that they were coverable by Chinese sources.

By way of a conclusion, it may be said that by the late eighteenth century the "western barbarians" of Tibet with their exotic "heterodox" rituals, and strangely prominent role to play in the complicated construction of Qing's world empire, attracted much deeper and broader interest from Korea's *sirhak encyclopedic* scholars than they had done before. "Barbarians" as they were, they were understood to be strong enough to press China into honouring them, in a world which no longer was automatically rotated around

its presumed centre in Beijing. And their religion, “heterodox” as it was, was also simultaneously seen as containing some grains of truth. While it catered mostly to “barbarians” or “superstitious commoners” and largely consisted of magic tricks, sometimes vile, sometimes titillatingly exotic, or “wild stories” of hells and paradises, it still had a positive mission to play, too. The world became too complicated to be explained by the literal application of the Neo-Confucian dogma alone, too multilayered, and too unpredictable. If the “barbarian Manchus” were able to sinify themselves and build a new Chinese empire on Ming’s ruins, why then should not one expect some new “barbarian” tribe to repeat this feat at a later point? And should not one pay more attention to the “barbarian” peripheries in a situation wherein they might lay claim to a more central role later? The rise of unified Japan and Qing China traumatised Chosŏn Korea, as it was accompanied by Hideyoshi invasion (1592-1598) and two Manchu incursions (1627 and 1636-37). But, in the end, it also played a role in relativising “centre-periphery” paradigms, making the Koreans acutely feel the necessity to learn more about the real diversity of the populations of the East Asian oikumene.

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