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The Psychology of a Sacrifice: *Seen through Yulgok Yi I's "Treatise on Death, Life, Ghosts, and Spirits"*

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Abstract

In his "Treatise on Death, Life, Ghosts, and Spirits" (*Sasaeng gwisin chaek* 死生鬼神策), Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584) rejects the Buddhist accounts of an afterlife because the dead have neither vital stuff (*gi* 氣; C. *qi*) nor consciousness (*jigak* 知覺; C. *zhijue*) when their death is natural and complete. Without these, there can neither be reward nor retribution, which is the basis of an afterlife. Yet, at the same time, Yulgok commends Confucian sacrifices for the dead. When there is utmost sincerity (*seong* 誠; C. *cheng*) and pattern-principle (*ri* 理; C. *li*) to do so, the living can gather the dead's already dissipated vital stuff. Yulgok argues that this is possible because the spirits of descendants are the spirits of their ancestors. This paper asks three questions that arise from the "Treatise" by bringing together Yulgok's various works. First, how do the dead, with only pattern-principle, motivate the living to gather the dissipated vital stuff? Second, Yulgok explains that the living may gather the dissipated vital stuff of their ancestors by virtue of having the same spirit, but what does he mean by the "same spirit"? Third, why does Yulgok restrict certain classes from certain sacrifices when individuals can gather even the dissipated vital stuff with utmost sincerity? While answering each question, this paper aims to channel the discussions of vital stuff and objects to those of emotional and mental states, using a sacrifice as a medium.

Keywords: Death, sacrifices, Neo-Confucianism, Korean philosophy, Yulgok Yi I

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I. Introduction and Background

Yi I 李珥 (1536-1584), widely known by his pen name Yulgok 栗谷, is a monumental figure in Korean Neo-Confucianism. His political and philosophical legacy is so deeply ingrained in Korea's cultural identity that he appears on the five thousand won Korean banknote. Particularly, Yulgok is praised for his intellectual rigor in the study of ideal kingship and the Four-Seven debate, in which he made an original contribution to the Cheng-Zhu 程朱 framework of pattern-principle (*ri* 理; C. *li*) and vital stuff (*gi* 氣; C. *qi*).[1] His intellectual legacy lasted throughout the rest of Joseon 朝鮮 period (1392-1897), as he was credited as the forefather of the *Giho* school of thought (*Giho hakpa* 畿湖學派), which regularly produced distinguished scholar-politicians.

Reflecting this significance, Yulgok has enjoyed the spotlight more often than most other Korean philosophers in the English-speaking world. Nonetheless, the scope of analysis of his thought has largely been limited to his famous Four-Seven debate, and his shorter essays have not garnered the attention that they deserve. This paper is an attempt to redress this by examining one of his rarely discussed writings, "Treatise on Death, Life, Ghosts, and Spirits" (*Sasaeng gwisin chaek* 死生鬼神策) (Yi [n.d.-b.] 1814).[2] In the "Treatise," Yulgok starts out

[1] As the name indicates, the Cheng-Zhu school was grounded in the philosophies of Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), and it was one of the most influential schools of Confucianism during the Chinese Song 宋 (960-1279) and Ming 明 (1368-1644) dynasties and the Korean Joseon 朝鮮 (1392-1897) period. While I cannot illustrate them fully in this footnote, one of the most remarkable features of the school is its commitment to metaphysics, influenced by the Buddhist and Daoist understanding of the natural world. As this paper will demonstrate, Yulgok likewise exhibits a strong tendency to describe ghosts and spirits as a natural—as opposed to supernatural—phenomenon. In so doing, Yulgok uses pattern-principle (*ri* 理) and vital stuff (*gi* 氣), the centerpieces of the Cheng-Zhu metaphysics. *Ri* 理, originally referring to patterns in jade, encompasses the pattern or configuration of nature and human affairs. Moral behaviors and human relationships, for example, have inherent patterns, and Neo-Confucians believed that humans *should* treat them as principles and follow them. Hence, I use "pattern-principle," rather than "principle," to capture both descriptive and normative aspects of *ri*. *Gi* 氣 has many translations, including "material force" and "vital energy." As these translations suggest, *gi* is physical, yet it is fluid and gives rise to *jil* 質, a physical substance.

[2] All translations are mine, and all quotations are from "Treatise" if not otherwise noted. For the secondary sources that discuss Yulgok's view of death and ghosts, see Yoo (2009), Choi (2010), Kim (2007), and Lee (2010).

by raising the question: Do the deceased have consciousness (*jigak* 知覺; C. *zhijue*)? This concerns Yulgok greatly because if the answer is yes, then the Buddhist understanding of the afterlife, which presumes the dead have consciousness, is supported. If the answer is no, it seems to pose a problem for the Confucian practice of sacrificing to ancestors, since those ancestors would be incapable of taking note of it. Yulgok addresses this issue by expounding on the different states of vital stuff after one's death and how the dead in each state interact with the living.

Yulgok's essay recapitulates earlier Neo-Confucian thoughts. It has little to no original argument on its own.[3] Nonetheless, this work is illuminating when it is read together with Yulgok's other works. Yulgok is particularly applauded for theorizing pattern-principle and nature (*seong* 性; C. *xing*) in terms of vital stuff, which is also an indispensable concept for understanding ghosts and sacrifices.[4] In addition, in Neo-

[3] For instance, inspired by the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077) characterized ghosts as "the good ability of the two [kinds of] vital stuff [i.e., *yin* and *yang*]. 鬼神者，二氣之良能也." (Zhang n.d.). Similarly, while explaining the *qian gua* 乾卦 from the *Changes*, Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) said, "Speaking of shape, it is heaven; speaking of presiding mastery, it is the supreme ruler; speaking of meritorious function, it is a ghost; speaking of subtle function, it is a spirit; speaking of nature and emotion, it is the *qian* 乾. 以形體謂之天，以主宰謂之帝，以功用謂之鬼神，以妙用謂之神，以性情謂之乾." (Cheng n.d.). Likewise, Zhu Xi referred to vital stuff when theorizing about ghosts: "To discuss, [a ghost] is just vital stuff that is *yin* and *yang* and that coils up and stretches out, so it is also possible to just call it *yin* and *yang*. However, we must call it a ghost and spirit because we speak of it in terms of its good ability and meritorious function. 論來只是陰陽屈伸之氣, 只謂之陰陽亦可也. 然必謂之鬼神者, 以其良能功用而言也" (Zhu n.d.-b.). Zhu Xi also used the sameness of the ancestors' and descendants' vital stuff to support the practice of sacrifice: "There is no object amassed in the emptiness, waiting for the descendants to look for it. However, if the person who hosts a ritual was handed down the same type of vital stuff, then the vital stuff will certainly lodge here when [the descendant] exhausts his sincerity and respect and feel [the ancestors' spirit]. 然非有一物積於空虛之中, 以待子孫之求也. 但主祭祀者既是他一氣之流傳, 則盡其誠敬感格之時, 此氣固寓此也" (Zhu n.d.-a.). As it will become clear in Section II, Yulgok's argument in the "Treatise" more or less faithfully followed these views.

[4] One of the most famous theses of Yulgok is *giballiseung ildoseol* 氣發理乘一途說, which emphasizes the relevance of vital stuff in all circumstances, including those that are moral and sagely. To be specific, Yulgok advances this thesis against Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501-1571; a.k.a. Toegye 退溪), another Joseon Neo-Confucian giant, and Seong Hon 成渾 (1535-1598, a.k.a. Ugye 牛溪). Upholding the orthodox Cheng-Zhu view that pattern-principle and vital stuff can be neither mixed nor separate, Toegye theorizes that either pattern-principle or vital stuff arises first and the other follows (理氣互發說). If pattern-principle arises first and vital stuff follows, then it becomes Four Beginnings (*sadan* 四端). If vital

Confucian philosophy, sacrifices are where metaphysics, epistemology, social philosophy, and theories of emotion converge. Therefore, the close analysis of the "Treatise" could connect these different fields and enhance our understanding of Yulgok's philosophy and Neo-Confucianism in general.

As such, in this paper, I will incorporate Yulgok's various works to sharpen his arguments in the "Treatise." In doing so, I aim to highlight how Yulgok construes individuals' emotional and mental states in relation to the vital stuff and objects around them. In Section II, I will summarize Yulgok's "Treatise" and pose three questions: First, how can the dead, without vital stuff, incite feeling in the living and motivate them to perform sacrifices? Second, once motivated, how do the living gather the dead's already dissipated vital stuff? In particular, Yulgok attributes this ability to sharing the same spirit, but what does he mean by "same spirit"? Third, why should common people not perform sacrifices for their own ancestors, mountains and rivers, and heaven and earth when they inherited spirits from them? In Section III, I will answer these questions one by one in three parts. Each of these discussions will call attention to the emotional and mental states of the performers of a sacrifice. Section IV will conclude.

II. An Exegesis of a "Treatise on Death, Life, Ghosts, and Spirits"

In the beginning of "Treatise on Death, Life, Ghosts, and Spirits," Yulgok is asked to justify a sacrifice while explaining the pattern-principle of

stuff arises first and pattern-principle hops on, then it becomes Seven Emotions (*chiljeong* 七情). Yulgok refuted this thesis, arguing that all Four Beginnings and Seven Emotions are emotions (*jeong* 情), and it is always vital stuff that arises. Pattern-principle hops on vital stuff in the sense that it is a reason for such an occurrence. In other words, in Yulgok's philosophy, all pattern-principle comes through vital stuff when it is phenomenalized, and thus vital stuff occupies a relatively prominent role in explaining every object, affair, and feeling. As such, Yulgok's emphasis on vital stuff is well-discussed in the scholarship of Korean Neo-Confucianism. For a general introduction to Yulgok's philosophy in English, especially concerning his discussion of pattern-principle and vital stuff, consult Ro (1988) and Chung (1995).

ghosts and spirits.[5] Yulgok starts answering this by elaborating several key concepts that appear within his arguments.[6] A human body is the fortress of soul (*hon* 魂; C. *hun*) and vigor (*baek* 魄; C. *po*), which are the spirits (*sin* 神; C. *shen*) of vital stuff and the most refined vital stuff (*jeong* 精; C. *jing*), respectively.[7] Since a living human has a body, which entails vital stuff, and "vital stuff has consciousness," a living human has consciousness (*ji* 知; C. *zhi*).[8] The same can be said about a human ghost whose vital stuff has not yet dissipated. In contrast, pattern-principle does not have consciousness.[9] While pattern-principle serves as the reason for vital stuff's movement, it does so only as an explanation for

[5] "If the dead are conscious, then is there not something to the Buddhist theory of karmic retribution? If the dead are not conscious, what moral pattern-principle (理) grounds the practice of sacrificing to the spirits of one's ancestors? 死若有知, 則釋氏報應之說, 無乃不虛歟. 死若無知, 則祭祀祖考之神, 有何義理歟" (Yi [n.d.], "Treatise on Death, Life, Ghosts, and Spirits"). *Ji* 知 encompasses the capacity that we broadly relate to knowing. For instance, it can mean various types of knowing, such as "know about" (e.g., know about the Earth's rotation), "know to" (e.g., know to meet a friend this evening), or "know how" (e.g., know how to be filial). It can also mean the state of being aware of something (e.g., being aware that there is a person behind you) or understanding something, which requires a deeper sense of grasping than knowing. In this text, we can infer that "*ji* 知" means having awareness or consciousness because Neo-Confucians generally shared the view that pattern-principle has no ability to discern things on its own. For more discussion of *ji* 知 in the Neo-Confucian context, refer to Angle and Tiwald (2017).

[6] Nine books containing the poetry and prose of Yulgok Yi I were compiled in 1611 by a group of scholars, under the title of *The Collection of Yulgok* (*Yulgok jip* 栗谷集). As Yulgok remained crucial in the subsequent Korean intellectual tradition, more books were added to the collection in 1682, 1749, and 1814. The last two collections were titled *The Complete Works of Yulgok* (*Yulgok jeonseo* 栗谷全書), and the final version of the collection included 44 books. A "Treatise on Death, Life, Ghosts, and Spirits" (Sasaeng gwisin chaek 死生鬼神策) was added in the 1814 edition, but the original date of publication is unknown. Nonetheless, we can infer that Yulgok wrote the "Treatise" in his twenties because *chaek* 策 refers to a question and response given as a part of a civil service examination. (Can you say something about whether the treatise reflects his mature ideas? Did he revise his views on ghosts and spirits later? The fact that this was an exam essay makes more pressing the question: why this essay?) Yulgok passed the final stage of the exam and took up a public office in 1564.

[7] Note that "spirits" (*sin* 神) refers to the spirits of the living and is different from the ghosts of the deceased.

[8] "Pattern-principle is without consciousness, while vital stuff has consciousness. 理無知. 而氣有知."

[9] See footnote 8.

a phenomenon, not motivation.[10] Therefore, pattern-principle can attain consciousness only if it is accompanied by vital stuff. For this reason, when dead people's vital stuff is entirely scattered, they no longer have consciousness or mental faculties of any sort.[11] Based on these ideas, Yulgok argues that the Buddhist view of an afterlife is flawed. In the Great Vacuity (*taeheo* 太虛; C. *taixu*), there is no ear, eye, or heart-mind, and hence there is no consciousness. If there is no consciousness, then there can be neither suffering nor joy. If there is neither suffering nor joy, then there can be neither reward nor retribution for what one has done while alive.[12]

Yet still, Yulgok believes that the Confucian sacrifices for the deceased are justifiable. To explain why, Yulgok distinguishes three different states of death throughout his essay: (i) when not much time has passed, and vital stuff is still dispersing (a process that is natural though at this point incomplete); (ii) when much time has passed, and vital stuff has been completely dissipated (a process that is natural and now complete); (iii) when vital stuff was agitated at the time of death, and so it cannot disperse until it is assuaged (a process that is unnatural).[13] For the first and third states of death, the importance of

[10] "What one hears, sees, thinks, and reflects upon is vital stuff; that by which one hears, sees, thinks, and reflects is pattern-principle. 其聰明思慮者. 氣也. 其所以聰明思慮者. 理也." In addition to the "Treatise," Yulgok's argument in the Four-Seven Debate also confirms this.

[11] "Once the most refined vital stuff is dissipated, the ears cannot hear, the eyes cannot see, and the heart-mind cannot think or reflect. So, I do not know what kind of thing would then have what kind of consciousness! 精氣一散, 而耳無聞目無見, 心無思慮, 則不知何物有何知覺耶."

[12] "Moreover, amid the dark and indistinct Great Vacuity (*taeheo* 太虛), how could a thing without ears hear; without eyes see; without a heart-mind think and reflect? Since there is no consciousness, even if there is a heaven and a hell, who is there to experience suffering and joy? Even if we do not attack it, the Buddhist theory of karmic retribution collapses by itself. 則而況太虛杳茫之中, 安有一物無耳而能聞, 無目而能見, 無心而能思慮者哉. 旣無知覺, 則縱有天堂地獄, 誰知苦樂哉. 釋氏報應之說, 不攻自破矣."

[13] (i): "When people have become ghosts and yet not much time has passed since their deaths, although their refined vital stuff has dispersed, it has not yet disappeared. 其死不久, 則精氣雖散, 而未卽消滅. 故吾之誠敬, 可格祖考矣."
(ii): "When the age in which an ancestor [was alive] grows distant, their vital stuff disappears but their pattern-principle is not lost. Therefore, with sincerity, one can still sense their presence. 若其世系之遠者, 則其氣雖滅, 而其理不亡. 故亦可以誠感矣."
(iii): "His vital stuff was agitated and became a resentful ghost. There is also a pattern-principle for this. 其氣激而爲怨鬼者, 亦有一理也."

performing sacrifices can be readily defended. Since the dead still have vital stuff and thus consciousness in these cases, paying respect to them through a sacrifice is not much different from paying respect to one's living parents.[14] For instance, deceased people in the third state can take notice when their descendants resolve the problem that caused their vital stuff to be agitated, thereby allowing their vital stuff to disperse.[15] By the same token, in the first state, when their predecessors' death is incomplete, the performers of a sacrifice may "[stimulate a] response in my ancestors."[16] However, it is much harder to justify a sacrifice in the second case because the dead no longer have vital stuff (that is aggregated together) and thus have no consciousness.[17] Without vital stuff, can the deceased take notice of a sacrifice, and can the performer of a sacrifice feel the dead who are without vital stuff? If neither is possible, then a sacrifice would be a pointless ceremony in which neither the agent performing the ceremony, nor the receiver of the sacrifice is impacted. We can infer from Yulgok's criticism of Buddhists

[14] For example, see the following passage: "Since the Duke of Zhou stretched out vital stuff that had already coiled up, his expression of filial piety to the deceased was his pure and original heart-mind. The words he spoke on the three altars were so sincere and earnest, like the words a son of spoken at his parents' knees. 周公旣伸已屈之氣, 則其致孝於死後者, 亦其素心也. 三壇之辭, 懇懇惻惻, 如人子膝下之語."

[15] "For this reason, King Cheng 成 of Chu 楚 closed his eyes only after his posthumous name had been changed. The vital stuff of pent-up frustration had become concentrated on his posthumous name, and so when it was changed, the vital stuff dispersed. Xun Yan closed his eyes only after [being assured that] the state of *Qi* 齊 would [continue to] be attacked. The vital stuff of pent-up frustration had become concentrated on *Qi*, so when [he knew] it would be attacked, the vital stuff dispersed. How could it be that only Bo You and Zhao were like this! Bo You's vital stuff became pent up with frustration because no one offered sacrifices to him. Zichan understood this was the case and built an ancestral shrine for him so that his vital stuff would have a way to dissipate; relieved, it then dispersed on its own. 是故, 楚成改謚而瞑目. 則鬱結之氣, 鍾於謚者, 故改謚而其氣散矣. 荀虞伐齊而瞑目, 則鬱結之氣. 鍾於齊者, 故伐齊而其氣散矣. 豈獨伯有, 趙氏爲然哉. 伯有之氣則鬱結乎不祀者也, 子產見其然而爲之立廟, 則其氣有所洩, 而釋然自散矣."

[16] See (i) of footnote 13.

[17] Throughout a "Treatise on Death, Life, Ghosts, and Spirits" and his other writings, Yulgok employs expressions such as "there is no vital stuff" (*mugi* 無氣) and "the vital stuff is dissipated." These statements can appear contradictory because there should be vital stuff in order for it to scatter or dissipate. Based on the textual evidence, I interpret Yulgok to mean "there is no vital stuff [that is aggregated together and thus has consciousness]."

that he would hold that those in the second state of death cannot take notice of a sacrifice.[18] In the natural and complete state of death, one's vital stuff is entirely scattered and thus there is only the Great Void. And the Great Void, in turn, does not have consciousness. Nevertheless, Yulgok says that a performer can feel the dead even if they do not have vital stuff and uses this to support a sacrifice for the dead. Yulgok explains how this may happen in the following:

> Their vital stuff, which already has dispersed, certainly cannot hear, see, or think. But when I sincerely think of their residence, [when I sincerely] think of their laughter and talk, [when I sincerely] think of what comforted them, [when I sincerely] think of what they enjoyed, I clearly see that my ancestors are always before me. Thereby, the vital stuff that has already dissipated comes together again.[19]

In this passage, surviving descendants can gather the dispersed vital stuff of their ancestors by sincerely thinking about them, which is in accordance with the pattern-principle of filiality and sacrifices. This example is also in line with the idea that "their vital stuff disappears but their pattern-principle is not lost. Therefore, with sincerity, one can still sense their presence."[20] In addition, anticipating that this explanation will raise further questions, Yulgok supplements it with the following lines:

> Therefore, when not much time has passed since their deaths, one can sense them through vital stuff; when much time has passed since their death, one can sense them through pattern-principle. Whether there is vital stuff or not, the ability to stimulate a response is the same. How much more is this so in the case of descendants, whose spirits are the

[18] Though Yulgok rejected the Buddhist karma and afterlife in the "Treatise" (see footnote 12), the textual evidence clearly suggests that Yulgok saw a ritual as a reciprocal act. For instance, later in this treatise, Yulgok approvingly discusses the examples of Bo You 伯有 and King *Cheng* 成 of *Chu* 楚, both of whose pent-up vital stuff dispersed on its own in response to a proper sacrifice (see footnote 15).

[19] "彼已散之氣, 固無聞見思慮矣. 而以吾之誠, 思其居處, 思其笑語, 思其所樂, 思其所嗜, 而宛見祖考常在目前, 則已散之氣. 於斯亦聚矣."

[20] "則其氣雖滅, 而其理不亡, 故亦可以誠感矣."

> same as their ancestors'; by means of what they have, the former can feel what the latter lack. What is there to doubt about this?[21]

In short, if their spirits match, the living can provide the vital stuff the dead themselves lack. Therefore, the living can feel the dead even if there only is pattern-principle for doing so.

Though Yulgok's justifications for a Confucian sacrifice are thorough, his views still raise three questions. First, as I will illustrate in the next section, Yulgok clearly thought that there must be an external object present in order for someone to be stimulated and harbor feelings. So how do the dead, when they do not have vital stuff, incite feelings in the living and motivate them to gather the dissipated vital stuff in a sacrifice? Second, how do the living, once they are motivated, gather vital stuff that is already completely dissipated? Yulgok says that the living may provide their own vital stuff as their "spirits are the same" as that of their ancestors, but what does he mean by "spirits are the same?" Third, if sharing the same spirits enables one to feel the presence of one's ancestors and perform a sacrifice, why does Yulgok dissuade commoners from performing sacrifices for their own ancestors and beyond? As I will demonstrate in the discussion, answering these questions about a sacrifice will disclose various ways individuals' emotions and mental states interact with vital stuff and objects around them.

III. Discussion

A. How Do the Dead, without Vital Stuff, Motivate the Living to Extend Their Vital Stuff?

According to the "Treatise on Death, Life Ghosts, and Spirits," a person's vital stuff is dissipated in the natural and complete state of death. Yet, in certain circumstances, the performers of a sacrifice can still feel the presence of the dead by providing their own vital stuff, thereby

[21] "是故, 其死不久, 則以氣而感. 其死已久. 則以理而感, 或有氣或無氣. 而其感格則一也. 而況子孫之精神. 乃祖考之精神, 則以我之有, 感彼之無者. 亦何疑哉."

gathering together the vital stuff of the dead. However, in the Four-Seven debate, Yulgok says that there must be an external object (*oemul* 外物; C. *waiwu*) for one to be stimulated, feel emotion, and be moved.

> One must have a stimulus to be moved, and everything that stimulates is an external object. . . . Under heaven, how can there be an emotion that does not have stimulation and arises from inside by itself? Now, let us discuss this with the example of commiseration (*cheugeun* 惻隱; C. *ceyin*). I see a young child falling into a well, and thereupon the feeling of commiseration arises. That which stimulates is a child. Is a child not an external object? How can there be someone who does not see a child falling into a well and simply feels commiseration on their own? Even if there were such a feeling, it would be no more than an illness of one's heart-mind, and this is not human emotion. . . . The four beginnings are merely another name for good emotions. When it comes to the seven emotions, the four beginnings are a part of them.[22] (Yi [1572] 1814)

Then, when the dead have no vital stuff, how are the living stimulated to provide their vital stuff in a sacrifice to begin with?

The answer to this question can be found in the "Treatise." For example, Yulgok states that the living can clearly see their ancestors even when their vital stuff has completely dissipated if they sincerely think of the dead's residence, laughter, talk, objects that comforted them, and objects that amused them.[23] In other words, a stimulating object does not have to be the object your emotion is directed at, as long as it is present and suitably related to the absent object. For example, I can see the footprints of the child who fell into a well earlier and feel as if the child is present and feel commiseration for it. In such a case, the object of my feeling—the child—is not physically present, yet its footprints can stimulate emotion in me, serving as the required external object. However, given that broccoli has no association with the child whatsoever, were I to feel the child's presence and experience commiseration upon seeing broccoli, one could argue that this was

[22] "必有感而動, 而所感皆外物也...天下安有無感而由中自發之情乎...今以惻隱言之. 見孺子入井, 然後此心乃發. 所感者, 孺子也. 孺子非外物乎. 安有不見孺子之入井, 而自發惻隱者乎. 就令有之.,不過爲心病耳, 非人之情也...四端只是善情之別名. 言七情則四端在其中矣."

[23] See footnote 19.

simply "an illness of heart-mind."

Moreover, even though an external object is necessary to stimulate one's feeling, once stimulated, such feelings can be sustained without the object or even a related surrogate being present. For instance, consider the following anecdotes from Yulgok's "Treatise":

> Moreover, when the former kings longed for their [departed] parents, their features were never lost to their eyes; their voices were never gone from their ears; their intentions and desires were never absent from their heart-minds. Though their mothers and fathers had passed away, there was never a day when their heart-minds did not rest upon them to the left and to the right.[24] (Yi [n.d.-b.] 1814)

> When the Duke of Zhou sought to save the life [of King Wu], the Three Kings had passed away. And though much time had already gone by [since they died], his heart-mind had never grown in the least complacent. At times, he would see them in his soup; at times, he would see them on the wall. . . . People thought that the vital stuff of the Three Kings had dispersed, but the Duke of Zhou did not see their vital stuff as having dispersed.[25] (Yi [n.d.-b.] 1814)

In both these cases, the living never fail to focus their heart-minds upon the dead. The latter case is the more extreme, as the Duke of Zhou 周公 (*Jugong*; C. *Zhougong*) (1042-1035 BC) sees images of the dead reflected in irrelevant objects—his soup and a wall—unrelated to them, even though their vital stuff has dissipated. Nevertheless, neither the Former Kings nor the Duke has "an illness of one's heart-mind," unlike a person who feels commiseration without seeing a child falling into a well. There are several reasons why this is the case. For one, their feelings conform to filial piety and thus the pattern-principle of the universe. Secondly, they harbor these feelings by deliberately keeping the memories of the ancestors *at all instances*. The Former Kings and the Duke of Zhou are the sagely figures in Confucianism, whose cognitive and ethical abilities are far superior to those of common people. Using these extraordinary

24 "且先王之慕親也, 色不忘乎目, 聲不絶乎耳, 心志嗜欲, 不忘乎心. 父母雖歿, 而此心未嘗一日不在父母左右也."

25 "周公請命之時, 三王之歿, 雖已久矣, 此心未嘗少懈. 或見於羹. . . 人以爲三王之氣已散, 而周公則不見其已散也."

abilities and utmost sincerity (誠), they preserved the ancestor's spirit—the proper objects of the feelings—in their minds. This is clearly different from letting an unrelated object unexpectedly incite feelings in one's heart-mind in an inappropriate fashion.

B. How Do the Living Gather the Dead's Already Dissipated Vital Stuff; What Does Yulgok Mean by Spirits Are the Same?

Now that we know how the living may be motivated by the deceased whose vital stuff is entirely dissipated, it is time for us to ask how they can gather the dissipated vital stuff. Yulgok turns to the same spirit thesis to justify his claim, but what does he mean by the same spirit? At the first glance, Yulgok's proposition seems to be mystical at best.

To comprehend this thesis, we should take a closer look at the word "spirits." At the beginning of the "Treatise," Yulgok draws a clear distinction between a ghost and a spirit: "At birth, they stretch out and become [a person's] spirit (*sin* 神; C. *shen*); at death, they coil up and become [a person's] ghost (*gwi* 鬼; C. *gui*)."[26] That said, though a spirit is neither visible nor tangible, it is not equivalent to a phantom or other mystical thing. As the following description of Buddhists reveals, by a spirit, Yulgok refers to the whole range of mental states that are accessible and can be even cultivated by an individual:

> They practice exercises aimed at honing their sacrifice essence (*jeongsin* 精神; C. *jingshen*) and not being led by enticements exterior to the self. They can maintain a perverse type of mental calm so that when they approach death, they sometimes see aberrant illumination or smell aberrant odors [emanating from them]; they turn upside down and stand on their heads or die in a sitting posture.[27]

Therefore, by saying the spirits of descendants are the spirits of their ancestors, Yulgok is not conflating a certain feature of living people with that of dead people, but rather connecting the living's mental states to

26 "其生也伸而爲神. 其死也屈而爲鬼."

27 "釋氏之流, 堅執異見, 修煉精神, 不牽於外誘. 能守其邪定, 則將死之時, 或見異光, 或聞異香, 或倒立, 或坐化."

their ancestors' mental states during their lifetime. Accordingly, we can rephrase our question as follows: What would be the similarity between the mental states of the descendants and their ancestors during their lifetime? Although Yulgok does not answer this directly in the Treatise, we can infer it from Key to Breaking Folly's Hold (*Gyeongmong yogyeol* 擊蒙要訣). In Folly's Hold, Yulgok says that children inherit their vital stuff from their parents:

> Does the *Shijing* 詩經 not say, "My father gave birth to me, and my mom raised me. I yearn to repay their virtue, yet their virtue is as limitless as bright heaven."? When children are born, all their nature, fate, blood, and flesh are handed down to them from their parents. Their breath, vital stuff, and their beating pulse are in mutual communication with their parents. One's body is not a private thing; it is the vital stuff handed down from his or her parents.[28] (Yi [1577] 1814)

Here, Yulgok states that children inherit their vital stuff from their parents. Because one's parents are the children of one's grandparents, we can also conclude children attain their vital stuff from their grandparents. And so, we can inductively reason that descendants attain their vital stuff from their ancestors. And because vital stuff constitutes a spirit, if one inherits vital stuff from the other, we can conclude that the spirits of the two indeed share important qualities.[29] Therefore, when the ancestors' vital stuff has dissipated, the fact that the spirits of descendants are indeed the spirits of their ancestors—i.e., the descendants have inherited their vital stuff from the ancestors—serves as a metaphysical basis for feeling their ancestors during a sacrifice.

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[28] "詩不云乎, 父兮生我, 母兮鞠我, 欲報之德, 昊天罔極. 人子之受生, 性命血肉, 皆親所遺. 喘息呼吸, 氣脈相通. 此身非我私物, 乃父母之遺氣也."

[29] In Neo-Confucianism, vital stuff constitutes the physical aspect of a universe, including a spirit. By constantly circulating, dispersing, and consolidating, vital stuff configures in different fashions, so the similarity or difference between one individual from another—e.g., between sky and earth; animals and plants; non-human animals and humans; one human individual to another—can be explained by the configurations of vital stuff. That is to say, if one shares same vital stuff with another, their spirits share similarity in some sense. For more discussion of Zhu Xi's metaphysics, which Yulgok's philosophy is based on, refer to Kim (2000).

Nonetheless, this conclusion is still a bit unclear because we do not know what inheriting vital stuff really means. One possible meaning is inheriting an individualized material body, as it is shown in the following line from The Quotations (*Eorok* 語錄).

> The vital stuff of descendants is the body they inherit from their parents. Therefore, if they perform a sacrifice with extreme sincerity, then the ancestor's soul will be moved by this and gratified by it.[30] (Yi [n.d.-a] 1814)

This is to say, the descendants and the ancestors may have a commonality in their mental states in that the former inherited certain physiological features from the latter. And, with sincere effort, this can serve as a foundation upon which the descendants can appreciate their ancestors' spirits. Another possible interpretation lies in sharing a certain quality—i.e., purity—of the ancestors' vital stuff. Purity of vital stuff is important for Neo-Confucians because they generally agreed that the perfect, moral human nature given by pattern-principle (理) can be blocked by the impure vital stuff that configures each individual's body. Therefore, the purity of vital stuff determined one's cognitive and moral capacity. This interpretation is interesting especially because Yulgok expands the definition of inheritance from nature to nurture.

> The vital stuff of parents cannot guarantee that one's flowing vital stuff is extremely clear or muddied. But for people who are ordinary or lower, the vital stuff they received is neither clear nor muddied. And so, in the end, the vital stuff of their parents plays a central role.[31] (Yi [n.d.-a] 1814)

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30 "子孫之氣, 父母之遺體也. 故以至誠祭之, 則祖考之靈, 感而享之也."
As I demonstrated earlier, in the "Treatise," Yulgok stated that the dead do not have consciousness when their death is complete. Yet, this line says that the ancestors' souls are moved and gratified, which seems to be inconsistent with the earlier demonstration. However, they do not contradict each other because this line is discussing what happens after the descendants gather their ancestors' vital stuff with extreme sincerity. The observation I made earlier, on the other hand, alludes to the dead whose vital stuff is scattered and not gathered by their descendants.

31 游氣之至淸至濁者,父母之氣不能與. 而中人以下之人, 受氣不淸不濁. 故父母之氣, 終得爲主也" (Yi [n.d.-a] 1814).

In this line from The Quotations, Yulgok claims that most children—except for the children of sages, who have perfectly clear vital stuff—receive vital stuff with a mixed degree of purity. Their vital stuff inherits a specific quality from their parents, and this plays a central role in their initial moral and spiritual level. However, one should not conclude that biological inheritance is the only determinant of one's vital stuff. Specifically, in Rectifying a Vital Constitution (*Gyo gijil* 矯氣質) in Essentials of the Studies of the *Sages* (*Seonghak jibyo* 聖學輯要), Yulgok argues that even an inferior and impure vital constitution (*gijil* 氣質; C. *qizhi*) can change over time because a human's heart (*chon* 寸; C. *cun*)—unlike those of non-human animals—is empty and clear ([1575] 1814).[32] In other words, though biological factors matter in inheriting vital stuff, non-biological factors, such as one's sincere effort and upbringing, may transform one's vital constitution.[33] These two factors together

[32] "I say that the origin of one's vital stuff is clear and empty. Only its *yang* moves and *yin* stays still; sometimes goes up and down; flies and scatters in disorder; comes together and becomes a physical substance (*jil* 質); and thus becomes uneven. For an object being slanted and clogged, there is no art of changing it. Only for humans, though they have different clarity, unclarity, purity, and spottiness, their hearts are empty and bright so that they can change. 臣按. 一氣之源, 湛然淸虛. 惟其陽動陰靜, 或升或降, 飛揚紛擾, 合而爲質, 遂成不齊. 物之偏塞, 則更無變化之術. 惟人則雖有淸濁粹駁之不同, 而方寸虛明, 可以變化" (Yi, "Essentials of the Studies of the Sages").

Also, look at the following examples from the same piece: "People whose vital stuff is clear but physical substance is spotted can know but cannot act. If they put the effort into carrying out an action and become invariably sincere and deep, then their action can be established. Hence, weak people can become strong. People whose physical substance is pure but vital stuff is murky can act but cannot know. If they put the effort into study and become invariably sincere and refined, then their knowledge can be unimpeded. Hence, foolish people can be bright. 氣淸而質駁者, 能知而不能行. 若勉於躬行, 必誠必篤, 則行可立而柔者强矣. 質粹而氣濁者, 能行而不能知. 若勉於問學, 必誠必精, 則知可達而愚者明矣."

[33] Yulgok's optimism about transforming vital stuff stands out especially in comparison to the view of Toegye Yi Hwang. Toegye identifies having a slanted and incomplete vital constitution (*gijil* 氣質) as a disease and says, "You can relieve it only by clearly [knowing] pattern-principle" ("先生曰. 病在窒滯. 曰. 何以則無此病. 先生曰. 惟明理可免") (Yi 1666). Two things can be noted from this passage. Firstly, even though Toegye is similarly optimistic about improving one's vital constitution, he sees this process as removing an accidental property of one's vital constitution—a disease (*byeong* 病)—rather than transforming one's vital constitution itself. Secondly, Toegye identifies pattern-principle as the sole importance, and recognizing non-physical pattern-principle will subsequently cure the disease of vital composition. In contrast, while Yulgok acknowledges the importance of pattern-principle, he deems it possible and even desirable to transform one's vital

determine the quality of vital stuff.

In sum, based on other textual evidence, we can demystify in the case of descendants, whose spirits are the same as their ancestors in the following way. Descendants and ancestors have a commonality in their mental states in that the former acquired the same quality vital stuff from the latter—by nature and nurture.

C. Why Should Commoners Not Perform a Sacrifice for Their Ancestors When They Can Gather Vital Stuff with Their Sincerity?

In the last part, we saw that inheriting vital stuff, which constitutes one's physical and mental characters, is essential for rationalizing sacrifices. However, Yulgok's proposition in the "Treatise" is puzzling because this essential quality does not explain every normative aspect of sacrifices. In fact, it appears that Yulgok contradicts his claim:

> Also, I have also heard that from the son of heaven [i.e., the Emperor] to the common people, each and every person has a proper object of sacrifice. Heaven and earth are the proper objects of sacrifice for the Son of Heaven. Mountains and Rivers are the proper objects of sacrifice for the Feudal Lords. Officials should direct sacrifices only to their own ancestors. The common people should direct sacrifices only to [the spirits of] their own fathers and mothers. Indeed, if they perform sacrifices for improper objects, is this not the height of confusion. . . . If this fashion does not change, then I fear that the chaotic morals of Jiuli will return today![34] (Yi [n.d.-b.] 1814)

composition directly. To learn more about Yulgok and Toegye's understanding of vital composition and its transformability in juxtaposition, see Lee (2017).

34 "抑又聞之, 自天子達于庶人, 莫不各有所當祭者焉. 天地則天子之所當祭也. 山川則諸侯之所當祭也. 士大夫之祭則不過祖考而已. 庶人之祭則不過父母而已. 苟其不當祭而祭之, 則豈非惑乎... 此風不移, 則愚恐九黎之亂德, 復見於今日矣."

According to Chinese tradition, the Jiuli 九黎 were a tribe who lived in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River Basin in ancient times who practiced witchcraft and believed in a broad assortment of ghosts and spirits. See Section 10 of the "Discourses of Chu" (*Chuyu* 楚語) Part II (*xia* 下) chapter of the *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu* 國語).

From my earlier exposition, we already know that Yulgok thought even when an ancestor's vital stuff is dissipated, their descendant can feel their spirits during a sacrifice by virtue of inheriting their vital stuff and being sincere. Following this thesis, common people, as long as they are sincere, would have no problem performing sacrifices for their ancestors. So why are they not supposed to do so, especially when people from higher classes are qualified to do so? Similarly, Yulgok says that heaven and earth are the parents of all humans, so why should the Son of Heaven alone perform a sacrifice for them but no one else?[35]

Perhaps, inheriting vital stuff and having sincerity are not sufficient but only necessary conditions for successful sacrifice. In addition to these prerequisites, one might need relatively pure vital stuff to be able to gather the already-scattered vital stuff of their ancestors during a sacrifice and feel it. And so, one might justify such a prohibition by claiming that common people's vital stuff is insufficiently pure, unlike that of people in the higher class. Therefore, commoners may perform sacrifices only for their parents, and not for their more distant ancestors. However, it is doubtful that this is an accurate reading of Yulgok's thesis. If this reading were accurate, people would not have the capacity to "flatter" an inappropriate object due to their physical limitation, so Yulgok would not worry about people of lower class causing "chaotic morals."

So why should commoners not perform a sacrifice for anyone more distant in time than their deceased parents? To tackle this question, I suggest that we first examine the function of a Confucian sacrifice. A sacrifice is a medium of interaction between a performer and the object of performance. According to the "Treatise," human vital stuff has consciousness, so even the dead have consciousness as long as their vital stuff is present.[36] Additionally, the dead who still have vital stuff can respond to external circumstances, as in the examples concerning unnatural death. Therefore, sacrifices offered to a recipient whose vital stuff is present—heaven, earth, mountains, rivers, and the deceased

[35] "And heaven and earth are the father and mother of humans and things. 而天地又爲人物之父母矣" (Yi [1572] 1814).

[36] See footnote 13.

predecessors whose vital stuff is not yet dissipated—clearly involves an interaction between a performer and an object of performance. In addition, "vital stuff that has already dispersed gathers again" when people sincerely think of their predecessors during sacrifices, so we can say that a sacrifice serves as a mean of interaction in this circumstance as well. Also importantly, the interaction between recipients and performers in a sacrifice is not merely physical. Vital stuff can become muddied or cleared, and it shapes not only one's physical features but also moral character, mental states, and emotional dispositions.[37] After all, even if heaven and earth do not respond to common people's sacrifices, the fact that common people identify themselves with heaven and earth poses a great enough threat to sociopolitical orders.

We are now ready to answer our question. Because performing a sacrifice is interacting with (i.e., with a physical implication) and relating to (i.e., with a psychological implication) the receiver of a sacrifice, it carries important social implications. For instance, if you interact with heaven and earth through a sacrifice, you are attempting to form a relationship with them and potentially making their power—which presides over nature and all humans—accessible to you. The same can be said about mountains and rivers (which are a synecdoche for nature), ancestors, and parents. Nature is subordinate to heaven and earth, yet they are superordinate to humans. Ancestors are superior to parents because parents cannot exist without them. Hence, by asserting that commoners should only practice sacrifices for their deceased parents and not for their more distant and powerful ancestors, Yulgok is insisting that common people focus on their household affairs and not usurp authority beyond their proper realm. Likewise, ministers and scholars should stay away from manipulating greater nature, which is the proper jurisdiction of dukes; dukes should not attempt to control heaven and earth, as the Son of Heaven is the only person who should reign over all human subjects, nature, and heaven and earth. Ignoring these boundaries would disrupt the social order as it did in the town of Jiuli.[38]

[37] This is discussed extensively in Part B of Section III.

[38] Readers who are familiar with Yulgok's political philosophy may find the conclusion

IV. Conclusion

For Yulgok Yi I, a sacrifice is not simply a formal activity that improves sociopolitical order. In addition, it is also a physical, mental, and emotional interaction between the performer and the recipient. By examining Yulgok's "Treatise on Death, Life, Ghosts, and Spirits" with the aid of his other works, this paper aims to explicate how vital stuff and objects relate to individuals' emotional and mental states during a sacrifice.

Specifically, in Section II, I give a brief exegesis of the "Treatise," followed by the three questions that arise from the "Treatise." In Section III, I answer these questions. To summarize my points briefly, my first question is How do the dead, without vital stuff, motivate the living to extend their vital stuff? Yulgok sees two possible ways this can happen. First, the living may remember and harbor emotions toward the dead *at all moments*. However, this is an exceptional case attributed to sages or sage-like figures. Second, which is a standard case for most individuals, an external object is present to incite one's emotion, yet one's emotion is directed to another. In other words, even when the dead's vital stuff is completely dissipated and absent, as long as there is an external object that connects an individual to the dead, the living can be motivated to perform a sacrifice. As such, this discussion refines how individuals' emotions are related to objects around them. Part B addresses "How

in the previous section bewildering. Though Yulgok did not call for the abolishment of classes altogether, he wholeheartedly advocated class mobility. For example, Yulgok demanded that the sons of concubines be admitted to the civil service examination and argued that even bondservants should be given a government position if qualified (For reference, consult Yulgok's "Catechism at Eastern Lake" [*Dongho mundap* 東湖問答]). Yet, his views on sacrifice seem clearly to inhibit people from challenging the class system. We can comprehend this concurrence of conservatism and progressivism by distinguishing a class from individuals who belong to a class. For instance, in the *Essentials of the Studies of the Sages* (*Seonghak jibyo* 聖學輯要), Yulgok argues that a sage became a leader because he had superior vital stuff to commoners, which explains Yulgok's conservatism ([1575] 1814). That is, the class system originates from the different qualities of vital stuff and this distinction must be adhered in performing sacrifices. Nevertheless, as I demonstrated in Part B, Yulgok thinks that human vital stuff can grow pure or impure because it already has both qualities, an individual's social class should be adjusted accordingly. As such, Yulgok's conservatism and progressivism over social class coexist without conflict.

do the living gather the dead's already dissipated vital stuff; what does Yulgok mean by 'spirits are the same?' Using textual evidence, I argue that one shares the same spirit by virtue of having the same vital stuff, and vital stuff can be shaped by nature *and* nurture. In addition, having the same vital stuff and spirits means sharing physical features as well as mental states, such as moral characters and emotional dispositions. This part demystifies the connection between vital stuff, spirits, and a sacrifice by showing that the physical implication of vital stuff extends to a mental and emotional realm. The last question is "Why should commoners not perform a sacrifice for their ancestors when they can gather vital stuff with their sincerity?" I argue that this is because Yulgok sees a sacrifice as a genuine way of communicating with its recipients, not simply as a series of ceremonial acts. Therefore, commoners communicating with their ancestors, mountains and rivers, and heaven and earth is equivalent to them identifying with and assuming powers of the objects greater than their immediate families. Whether common people make physical changes through such sacrifices or simply harbor misguided feelings or perception of themselves, this would erode the social fabric.

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