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Two Korean Women Confucian Philosophers: *Im Yunjidang and Gang Jeongildang*

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Abstract

This essay introduces two Korean women Confucian philosophers: Im Yunjidang and Gang Jeongildang who lived in the latter period of the Joseon dynasty. Im Yunjidang was the first Confucian woman to explicitly claim women possessed an equal capacity to become sages as men. Gang Jeongildang made it clear that she was inspired by and sought to develop the thought of Im and added her own unique insights and new perspectives. Though they and their writings differ in many ways, these two women philosophers created a lineage of female sages, marking a turning point in the history of Confucian philosophy. This paper aims to provide the historical background that shaped their thought and to introduce some of their writings in the hope of inspiring readers to study further the lives and philosophies of these two remarkable women and to take up and extend the insights they have left behind.

Keywords: Neo-Confucianism, Im Yunjidang, Gang Jeongildang, Women philosophers, Joseon Korea

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I. Introduction

This essay introduces two Korean women Confucian philosophers from the late Joseon dynasty (18th-19th century)—Im Yunjidang 任允摯堂 (1721-93) and Gang[1] Jeongildang 姜靜一堂 (1772-1832), briefly describes a few of their writings, and sketches some of the ways their work can contribute to contemporary philosophy. Both women are known for arguing, on the basis of distinctively Neo-Confucian philosophical claims about an original, pure moral nature shared by all human beings, that women are as capable as men of attaining the highest forms of intellectual and moral achievement. They contended that if given the chance to educate and cultivate themselves, women could become fully enlightened sages. This does not mean they believed in the political or social equality of women and men or basic human rights. They did not challenge the general gendered structure of late Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) society. What they insisted on is that women be allowed to cultivate themselves and were fully capable of becoming female sages (*yeoseong* 女聖; C. *nusheng*), by which they meant, roughly, that women could attain equally high moral character as male sages, while expressing their virtue in ways consistent with traditional ideals of womanhood.

While they clearly did argue for the intellectual and spiritual liberation of women, we shall not present them as feminists, which would be both anachronistic and, given our purposes, distracting. Instead, we will present them as women philosophers and focus on their ideas, highlight how the fact that they were women presented special challenges to the development of their philosophy, and describe how this informed and enriched their philosophical explorations.

[1] Editor's note: a number of scholars Romanize popular surnames like 김 and 강 as Kim and Kang respectively, but in this essay, we will Romanize them as Gang and Gim, in order to maintain consistency with other publications by the authors of this essay.

II. The Life and Thought of Im Yunjidang[2]

Born in 1721, Yunjidang's intellectual talents were recognized early on by one of her brothers; another brother assumed primary responsibility for her education and became her life-long mentor. When young, she often joined in philosophical debate with all of her brothers (she had five as well as one sister) and they regularly praised her originality and insight. When nineteen years old, she married Sin Gwang-yu 申光裕 (1722-47). They had a daughter together, their only child, but sadly the child died in 1747. In the same year she lost her child, when Yunjidang was 26 years old, she also lost her husband. After being widowed, she remained with her husband's family. Her brothers-in-law loved and respected her and came to regard and treat her as if she were a second mother to them, but she also had frequent contact with her own brothers. When she was more than forty years old, in order to ensure that a male descendent would continue her husband's family sacrifices, Yunjidang adopted the son of her younger brother-in-law. There is good evidence that in 1785, at the age of 65, she organized her various writings into the form they later would take in her posthumously published collection. In 1787, her adopted son died unexpectedly at the age of 28. Only her youngest brother outlived her, and it fell to him to write a remembrance of his sister that appears in *The Extant Writings of Yunjidang* (*Yunjidang yugo* 允摯堂遺稿).[3] She died in 1793, at the age of 73, in the family home in Wonju. Three years later, her only remaining brother and her brother-in-law published her literary works.

Yunjidang led the life of a Joseon noble woman, but the early passing of her parents, husband, and children, along with her close relationship with her brothers afforded her considerably more freedom, opportunity, and leisure time than many. Nevertheless, she had to pursue her scholarly endeavors largely out of public sight. A number

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2 For short introductions to the life and thought of Im and Gang that focus on different aspects of their significance, see Gim (2004, 455-88), Gim (2011, 71-88), Gim (2014, 28-47), and Gim (2017, 177-95).

3 See the Postscript (*bal* 跋; C. *ba*) by Im Jeongju 任靖周 (1727-96) in the Appendix (*burok* 附錄; C. *fulu*), 7b-8a.

of sources describe her as diligently serving her family by day while assiduously pursuing her studies at night. She was good at poetry and her extant writings include a number of poems, scholarly expositions, discourses, and letters, as well as other genres of writing. We only have time to offer a glimpse into her philosophy and begin by discussing one of the eleven Discourses (*non* 論; C. *lun*) she wrote on historical figures. One reason to focus on her Discourses is because this is a genre often found in the writings of orthodox Neo-Confucian philosophers, but almost never in those of women. Unlike Gang Jeongildang, Yunjidang produced a number of works in a variety of such standard genres; this makes her collected works more traditional in approach and likely reflects, among other things, the fact that she had more time and resources to pursue scholarly endeavors. We will also briefly discuss one of three Inscriptions (*myeong* 銘; C. *ming*) that are found among her extant writings to give some sense of the range of her literary style and how she used different genres to explore philosophical themes.

In her "Discourse of On Gyo Tearing the Hem of His Garment" ("Non On Gyo jeolgeo" 論溫嶠絶裾), Yunjidang discusses the well-known case of On Gyo (C. Wen Jiao), a man renowned for the loyalty and dedication he showed to his ruler. When appointed to undertake a dangerous mission as the king's envoy to a distant and hostile state, On Gyo did not hesitate. When his aged mother beseeched him to stay, he did not falter or delay but tore the hem of his garment, which she had grabbed on to while pleading with him, in his haste to depart. Yunjidang shows tremendous intellectual independence and courage by questioning his behavior and character and arguing that he actually behaved rather badly. She begins by asking whether the mission *really* was as pressing and critical as people claim? Next, she asks if it was really the case that he alone was capable of undertaking this duty. She further argues that since On Gyo was not formally a minister of the king whose general approached him to undertake the mission, contrary to what many had claimed, he was not bound by loyalty to accept. After questioning the importance of the mission and the need for him to undertake it, she goes on to analyze the way in which On Gyo responded to this call to duty, offering insightful

criticisms of this as well.

The case of On Gyo resembles Sartre's famous hypothetical scenario of a young man torn between staying to help his mother or leaving her to fight with the Free French forces against the Nazis (1991, 345-68). Sartre seems to argue that there is nothing to choose between these two alternatives; one must recognize this and realize that in making the choice one is determining what is right and who one will be. He makes an important point, though he seems to say, or at least imply, that in making one's choice *one confers* value on the chosen option. Charles Taylor argues that it is critically important to understand this scenario as posing two *equally valuable* courses of action; only under such conditions will one feel the difficulty of the choice one faces (1985, 15-44).[4] It is not that the choice *alone* confers value on the course one follows: the value already is there as part of a preexisting framework of meaningful choices. Yunjidang's analysis presupposes a similarly juxtaposed value-laden choice, but, as described above, she takes much more care in exploring the alternatives to ensure that the apparent equal value of the two alternatives can indeed withstand careful scrutiny. Setting aside these various issues for the sake of argument, she then asks why On Gyo did not take the time to explain the true nature of the situation to his mother but instead brusquely tore himself from her arms without deigning to address her concerns? Had he really needed to go and had he explained the situation to his mother, Yunjidang contends, she would likely have seen the need and urged On Gyo to fulfill his mission. One could fault the young man in Sartre's example for similar failings—no matter which alternative he chose. The choice is not just between staying or leaving; the moral obligations are more nuanced and subtler. For example, in Sartre's case, there is an asymmetry between choosing one's mother or the Free French forces. If one chooses the latter, one owes the former an explanation; if one chooses one's mother, one need not explain oneself to the Free French Forces.[5] Yunjidang shows that often there is much complexity in such

4 See especially pages 29-31.

5 The case of On Gyo appears to be different in this respect.

basic "existential" choices, and her analysis makes clear that one can approach such moral conflicts in ways that do not avoid hard choices but recognize and honor all the demands involved. Her concerns and approach are things that women and particularly mothers would be more likely to think of and highlight issues that often fall outside the standard ambit of Confucian discourse. Her writings open up and develop new and profound aspects involved in such decisions, with implications that extend far beyond the Confucian tradition.

Yunjidang's "Inscription on [the Theme of] a Mirror" offers a marvelous example of her employing poetic composition to present and explore a core set of Neo-Confucian beliefs about the heart-mind, self-cultivation, and the perfected spiritual state. The idea that the enlightened heart-mind is a mirror that accurately reflects and properly responds to each and every situation it encounters has a long history in East Asian philosophy;[6] among Neo-Confucians it was developed and deployed to illustrate the belief that each and every person has within a flawless and fully-formed moral heart-mind that can effortlessly grasp, assess, weigh, and respond to any situation it encounters. The only thing preventing our internal mind-as-mirror from operating (*yong* 用; C. *yong*) in this way, which is its essential nature (*che* 體; C. *ti*) to do, is if its natural functioning is impeded by adventitious defilements. In the metaphor, these appear as dust on the surface of the mirror and represent self-centered human desires, which defile and interfere with the natural functioning of our inherent, moral heart-mind. Given this picture, the central task of self-cultivation is to work to remove the impurities that have accumulated on our original and pure heart-mind and allow its inherently bright nature to illuminate, discern, and respond appropriately to every moral challenge.

6 For a revealing discussion of many of the philosophical aspects of such conceptions, see Cline (2008, 337-57).

III. The Life and Thought of Gang Jeongildang

Jeongildang was a member of a clan whose fortunes had declined in her age; as a girl, she learned needlework from her mother, a skill that she and her future husband would come to rely upon for support. She married Yun Gwang-yeon 尹光演 (1778-1838) when she was 20 years old but was unable to move in with her new husband for three years because his family was too poor to support them. After moving in together, she began to learn the classics alongside her husband, at first, ostensibly, to help him study for the first level of the civil service examinations.

Despite his best efforts, Yun Gwang-yeon repeatedly failed to pass the examination; this was not unusual in his time, because an increasing number of candidates were vying for a shrinking number of official positions. Throughout his successive attempts to pass, Jeongildang supported him, materially, psychologically, and intellectually. As we shall see in some of the writings we discuss below, she offered her husband regular advice about his studies and his own moral self-cultivation, chiding him for and correcting his shortcomings while guiding and encouraging him in the development of virtue.

In addition to supporting and offering advice to her husband about the classics and the examinations, at times studying alongside him, Jeongildang also studied on her own, often reporting her progress to him, and at times expressing her frustration with not being able, like him, to devote herself completely to moral and intellectual development. She had far fewer opportunities for study than did Yunjidang; her life and economic condition were much more difficult, less conducive to study, reflection, and writing. Her practical moral advice and theoretical reflections always arose from and were expressed in terms of the challenges she was forced to deal with in the course of her everyday life. In the face of their grinding poverty, she was scrupulous about not compromising herself or her husband morally when inappropriate material gain was offered to them, and she remained optimistic that through frugality, temperance, diligence, and study they would succeed, if not in the examinations and the competition

for official position then in the higher calling of moral cultivation. Eventually, on the advice of his wife, her husband followed the example of many other unsuccessful candidates; he abandoned his aspiration to pass the examinations and opened a local academy (*seodang* 書堂; C. *shutang*) to teach the Chinese classics to children in the area.

Jeongildang gave birth to five sons and four daughters; all of them, unfortunately, died before they learned to speak. She herself died in 1832 at the age of 61. In 1836, her husband arranged for the publication of a collection of her writings under the name *The Extant Writings of Jeongildang* (*Jeongildang yugo* 靜一堂遺稿). Like Yunjidang, Gang Jeongildang pursued her education and self-cultivation as a kind of guerrilla activity, carried out behind the scenes and in the face of superior challenges and resistance. In her case, economic hardship added an additional, profound difficulty and shaped both the form her writings took and the themes that dominated her reflections. Unlike Yunjidang, she did not produce works in more traditional genres; we will examine examples of her poems, some short missives to her husband, and an exposition she wrote on the theme of an inkstone.

The first poem, "Beginning to Study" (*sigwa* 始課), succinctly and elegantly conveys several critical aspects of her intellectual life. It makes clear that she began her studies rather late in life, around the age of 30. Moreover, it notes that, unlike Yunjidang, she had no teacher, mentor, or formal guidance. Nevertheless, the poem expresses her lifelong, unwavering commitment to becoming a sage. The second selection, "Human Nature is Good," begins by proclaiming what is perhaps the core belief of Neo-Confucianism: that human nature is originally and wholly good. It goes on to affirm that the ultimate goal of Confucian learning is to become a sage. Quoting the *Analects*, it expresses optimism and faith in the value of commitment and resolve and concludes by linking the deep nature of the world to the true and ideal nature of the self. The third selection opens with humble words about Jeongildang's early life and reveals when and where she learned the craft of needlework: the skill that supported and sustained them both. She urges her husband to put his heart and mind into his studies, focus on "authentic work," and not to worry about supporting

the family. Of course, her "authentic work"—her needlework—is what enables his "work" and her own study to continue. Our last poem offers encouragement to the young but also can be read as expressing her regret for her own late start in learning. It goes on to issue a commonly expressed warning against sterile forms of learning and upholds the true aim of learning, which is developing the self and ultimately becoming a sage.

In the first Personal Missive (*cheokdok* 尺牘; C. *chidu*) we will discuss, Jeongildang explains to her husband how an old woman had come to their door and offered him provisions to support a journey he was about to set off on as thanks for him saving her when she was accosted by several vagabonds on the road outside their town. After some deliberation, Jeongildang decides that she cannot accept the gift without risking the appearance of moral compromise. This missive presents an excellent example of a Joseon dynasty woman wrestling with the application of Confucian values in the course everyday life. Like many of the other personal missives, it shows her sharing and discussing such everyday challenges with her husband, thereby revealing a hidden but highly significant dimension to the practice of Confucian self-cultivation. More generally, these missives offer new and vital insights about the psychology of trust and its importance in attempts to move others toward the good. In a number of them, she offers direct, focused, and quite pointed criticisms of her husband's behavior, as in the next short missive, in which she mildly but firmly criticizes him for being overly harsh in his reprimand of another. The content of the advice itself is not surprising, one finds examples of teachers offering their disciples such advice throughout the Confucian tradition, but many will find it both surprising and revealing that it is from a Joseon dynasty Confucian wife to her husband. The collegial tone of the advice may also surprise many and open up a new perspective on the moral roles and lives of Confucian women.

The third missive offers another dramatic example of Jeongildang correcting her husband's behavior. She begins by quoting a line about moderation in regard to food and drink from the *Book of Changes,* but it soon becomes clear that she is most concerned with drink and

its deleterious effect on virtue. She then moves on to again warn her husband about his apparent inclination to overly harsh reprimand. In contrast to his excessive behavior, she describes a person of ideal temperament, following this description with a supporting quotation from the *Book of Poetry.* She concludes by encouraging him to emulate these classical ideals and maintain "a very mild and harmonious temperament" when reprimanding others.

In our final example of this genre, we find Jeongildang gently counseling her husband not to be distressed over his lack of renown and urging him to remember that true virtue is all that matters. Likening virtue to jade and alluding to a well-known story from early China, she reminds him that the value of a piece of jade does not depend on the unreliable opinions of others; similarly, popular opinion does not add to or detract from the value of true virtue.

She concludes with the inspiring lines, "I want you, my husband, to work at real virtue. Do not be ashamed beneath heaven; do not be mortified upon the earth; do not be distressed whether people know or do not know."

These missives reveal how she and her husband not only thought of one another as partners in pursuit of the Way but also regularly served as ethical and spiritual critics and coaches to one another. One of the most intriguing aspects of such exchanges is the mutual recognition that these and other spouses share; they know each other in ways few people do or can, both because of the challenges they have faced together and the intimacy they shared. The bond between spouses not only provides them with remarkable epistemological privilege, it also offers them the opportunity to hone their ability to give advice and ensures that the recipient of such advice will be inclined to trust that it is given with loving intent, often with a desire to facilitate a shared goal, in this case the quest for moral improvement. While it is commonly accepted that the Confucian tradition sees the family as central to the work of developing moral character and fulfilling the relationship between husband and wife is a critical part of the Way to become a noble person,[7] research on Confucian

[7] Cf. Chapter 12 of the *Doctrine of the Mean.*

self-cultivation rarely focuses on the ways in which husbands and wives work together to promote their mutual moral improvement. Exploring the moral dimensions of this fundamental human relationship has the potential to contribute in profound ways to ethical philosophy more generally.

Jeongildang's "Exposition on an Inkstone," is a bit like Yunjidang's "Inscription on [the Theme of a] Mirror," which we discussed above, in that it takes an everyday object—an inkstone—as the embodiment of virtue, in this case the three distinct virtues of firmness, stillness, and weightiness. Unlike the inscription, though, this work is addressed to a particular individual: a young man whose wellbeing Jeongildang has been entrusted with while his father is away on business. Moreover, this particular object is a basic tool of scholars; it belonged to the young man's grandfather, who bequeathed it to him, and who had earlier received it as a special reward from the king himself. And so, in addition to the virtues that Jeongildang ascribes to it, the inkstone is saturated with a range of profound additional values and meaning. Her exposition clarified and amplified the worth and significance of this family treasure and ensured that it would remain the focus of this young man's meditations on his grandfather's legacy and his own moral development, throughout the years that followed.

IV. Conclusion

We have briefly introduced two remarkable women Korean Confucian philosophers, trying to convey some understanding and appreciation of the lives they led, the philosophies they developed, and some of the ways in which the former informed and shaped the latter. In our discussion of Yunjidang's "Discourse of On Gyo Tearing the Hem of His Garment," we compared her essay with a famous example from the works of Sartre, seeking to show both similarities and differences in the approaches and insights of each. In our description of Jeongildang's personal missives, we noted how these writings offer a unique opportunity to explore the philosophical implications of close relationships for the challenges associated with successfully offering

moral advice. In both cases, our brief comments suggest important ways in which the work of these two late Joseon dynasty women can contribute to and enhance philosophical inquiry today. Finally, we sketched some of the influences behind and implications of the different genres they employed: e.g. Discourses, Inscriptions, Poems, Personal Missives, and Expositions.

We hope to have succeeded not only of alerting readers to the existence of these two late Joseon dynasty social and intellectual pioneers but also given them some sense of the exceptional lives they led and the original and revealing philosophical insights they developed.

We have not had time to discuss the literary quality of their writings or address the historical value of their works as windows into the lives of gentry (*yangban* 兩班) women in the latter part of the Joseon dynasty but hope those who have read this short essay will be inspired to study further the lives and philosophies of these two remarkable women and to take up and extend the insights they have left behind.

V. Selected Translations from the Works of Im Yunjidang and Gang Jeongildang

Im Yunjidang

Discourse on On Gyo Tearing the Hem of His Garment

The *Analects* says, "Master Yu[8] said, 'Filial piety and brotherly respect—are they not the roots of humaneness!'"[9] An ancient text also proclaims, "If you seek for loyal ministers, look at the gate of filial sons."[10] There has never been anyone who proved loyal as a minister who was not filial as a son. On Gyo of the Jin dynasty 晉 (C. Jin) (266–420 CE)

8 Yu Yak 有若 (C. You Ruo) was a disciple of Gongja 孔子 (C. Kongzi). He was a native of No (C. Lu). His courtesy name was Jayak 子若 (C. Ziruo).

9 *Analects* 1.2.

10 This line appears in the sixteenth biography "Yeoljeon je sibyuk" 列傳第十六 (C. *Liezhuan di shiliu*) of the *History of the Later Han* (*Hu Han Seo* 後漢書; C. *Hou Han Shu*), chapter 26 (*gwon* 26 卷二十六; C. *juan ershi liu*).

originally had a reputation for being earnestly filial throughout his county and village. When the Western Jin dynasty collapsed (317 CE), the world was thrown into chaos and confusion, barbarians gathered like clouds on the horizon, and people like Yu Gon 劉琨 (C. Liu Kun),[11] Dan Pil-je 段匹磾 (C. Duan Pidi),[12] and others swore blood oaths with one another and dispatched representatives and submitted petitions in an attempt to influence the Prince of Nang Ya 琅琊 (C. Lang Ya) [to assume the throne].[13] Yu Gon said to Taejin (i.e. On Gyo), 'I am accomplishing great things in the area north of the Yellow River; you should spread word of this south of the Yellow River and urge him [Sama Ye] [to claim the throne].'[14] Taejin accepted this mission and made preparations to depart. As he was about to leave, his mother, Madame Choe 崔 (C. Cui), took hold of his lapel, but Taejin pulled away abruptly, tearing the hem of his garment, and departed. His mother's taking hold of his lapel was the highest expression of a mother's love for her child. Not considering the moral imperative to save the world in her time, she thought only that he might fall into danger and perish. Her son tore the hem of his garment because he worried that his mother would not let go and he would be unable to successfully complete his work and gain renown throughout the

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11 Yu Gon (271-318 CE) was a Jin general who for years fought but ultimately lost Byeong (C. Bing) Province 并州 (what is now modern central and northern Shanxi Province) to the Han Jo 漢趙 (C. Han Zhao) (304-29), a Southern Hyungno 匈奴 (C. Xiongnu) state and adversary of the Jin.

12 Dan Pil-je (?-321 CE) was the governor of Yu (C. You) Province 幽州 (what is now modern Beijing, Tianjin, and northern Hebei).

13 When Sama Eop 司馬鄴 (C. Sima Ye), who became Emperor Min of Jin 晉愍帝 (300-18 CE), the last Western Jin monarch, was captured by the Han Jo former officials like Yu Gon, Dan Pilje and others plotted together to re-establish the Jin dynasty to their own advantage. Dan killed Yu in 318 when he came to believe Yu posed a threat to his own designs on power. The Prince of Nang Ya is Sama Ye 司馬睿 (C. Sima Rui) (276-322 CE; r. 317-22 CE) who became Emperor Won (C. Yuan) of Jin 晉元帝. When the Hyungno 匈奴 (C. Xiongnu) captured Jang An 長安 (C. Chang An) (in 316 CE), the capital of Jin, the Emperor, Sama Ye was forced to abdicate the throne. Sama Ye, had escaped from Jang An to Geongang 建康 (C. Jiankang) (present day Nanjing) and declared himself the new Emperor of Jin.

14 In other words, Yu Gon commissioned On Gyo to make his way to Geongang to present Sama Ye, the Prince of Nang Ya, with his petition to assume the imperial title, which subsequently he did.

world. Alas! The relationship between parent and child is the first of the Five Relationships, and mutual love between them is Heavenly pattern-principle. Completing one's work is the basis for gaining fame and benefit, but the desire for success is self-centered.[15] To allow the self-centered [desire] to complete one's work to harm the greatest affection to be found among the Five Relationships, even someone lacking in humaneness would be unlikely to do such a thing—how much less someone like Taejin, who enjoyed the reputation of being filial? How could he bear to do this?

Oh! For those who serve as ministers, on occasions when they must carry out their lord's commands in circumstances of danger and chaos, it is right that they are not swayed by personal affection. Nevertheless, they should keep in mind their parents' anxiousness and distress, remember that they are in their parents' thoughts, and should find it difficult whenever they must bow and take leave of them. [Moreover] what Taejin did was not a case of carrying out his lord's commands; rather, this was the command of Yu Gon. So why didn't Taejin accede to his mother's request and arrange for someone else to carry out [this mission]?"

Someone said, "Yu Gon had to send Taejin; isn't this clearly the case? If he had sent someone else and that person had miscarried the affair, then the revival of the Jin could not be assured. This is also the reason Taejin could not refuse the mission."

Yunjidang replied, "That is not so. There has never been an age with as much overflowing talent as was available in their time. How could there be no one other than Taejin to take up this assignment? Moreover, at the time, Taejin and Emperor Won were not yet established in the relationship of ruler and minister, and so had he acceded to his mother's request and not gone, what harm would that have

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15 "Self-centeredness" is our translation of *sa* 私 (C. *si*). It refers to the tendency to give preference to oneself and one's needs and desires in ways that violate what is morally "correct," which is how one would act if one were perfectly in accord with one's nature and the mandate of heaven. Those who are able to overcome self-centeredness realize their nature and the mandate and become "one" (*ilche* 一體; C. *yiti*) with heaven, earth, and all things.

done to his loyalty? Oh! When he tore the hem of his garment and left, what did this do to his mother's heart? The *Book of Poetry* says, 'Oh father!—you gave me life; Oh mother!—you nourished me. . . . The kindness I wish to repay is as limitless as the heavens.'[16] If Taejin was as earnestly filial as was said of him in his time, how could he have endured behaving as he did? This is why I say, when we consider this affair, we know that he was not really sincerely filial; we also know that he was not really loyal to his lord."

Someone said, "Originally Taejin had the reputation of being fervently loyal and magnanimous because when his state had been destroyed and his lord disgraced and he was overcome with sincere sadness and indignation, he worked together with Yu Gon and others of like mind to establish Emperor Won and plan for the revival of the state. The survival or destruction of the Jin depended on their actions. Though you say that, at the time, Taejin and Emperor Won were not yet established in the relationship of ruler and minister, how, on that day, could any minister of Jin bear to sit idly by and watch as the temples and ancestral altars [of the Jin] were cut off and the territory of the Central Kingdom lost [to barbarians] without thinking of some way to revive the state? It is true that Taejin was unable to realize both perfect loyalty and filial piety; why though do you criticize him so severely?"

Yunjidang replied, "That too is not so. Had his mother been fortunate enough to enjoy a thorough understanding of the situation, as Jin Yeong's mother[17] was, she would have urged him to be careful but still sent him on his mission. Then, from the very start, he would have been able to realize both loyalty and filial piety. Now, since this was not the case, as a son, he should have assumed a pleasing coun-

16 *Book of Poetry, Mao* #202.

17 Jin Yeong 陳嬰 (C. Chen Ying) (?-183 BCE) lived at the very end of the Jin 秦 (C. Qin) dynasty (221-206 BCE) and the beginning of the Han 漢 dynasty (202 BCE-9 CE; 25-220 CE). As the Jin collapsed, a group of people who were leading the revolt came to him and urged him to declare himself king. His mother though advised him against this arguing that since the overthrow of the Jin was not complete, to accept such a sudden rise in status would pose great peril. He followed his mother's advice and refused to accept the title of king.

tenance and pleasant expression, explained [to his mother] in detail the extreme situation the state was in and what duty demanded of him as a minister. He should have waited until he was able to resolve any remaining doubts she might have and ensure that she was at ease; then, he should have calmly bowed and taken his leave. In this way, within (i.e. toward his family) he would have realized filial piety to his parents and without (i.e. to his lord) he would have fulfilled his duty to be loyal to the state. What, in the end, are his renowned achievement and outstanding reputation worth, given that he earned them by tearing the hem of his garment, stabbing [the heart of his mother's] affection, and being able to endure forsaking his obligation to be a filial son? Maengja 孟子 (C. Mengzi) said, 'If the blind man (i.e. Emperor Sun's 舜 [C. Shun] father) had killed someone, Sun would have fled secretly carrying his father on his back and settled by the shore of the sea, delighting in his life and forgetting all about the empire.'[18] If even the empire can be regarded [so lightly] how much easier should this be when it is merely self-centered achievement and advantage? Abandoning his parents and stabbing [the heart of his mother's] affection with an eye toward realizing mundane ends—is this really the way a filial son behaves? Can one who behaves this way avoid offending against the great [Emperor] Sun? If, as someone said, there was no one else who could have been sent on this mission, Taejin was the one person needed to ensure the revival of the Jin dynasty, he had no prospect of resolving his mother's doubts, he felt the difficulty of fulfilling both the duties of loyalty and filial piety, and [under these circumstances] he acted as he did, then Taejin's behavior might be forgiven. Now, since this was not the case, and still he behaved as he did, we must wonder how a son could bear to do such a thing and how it could be motivated by anything other than a self-centered desire for gain.

Oh! The supreme tender feelings of a loving mother will always focus on her son's safety in times of chaos; it is only fitting that such feelings will go to any extreme. If her son, after tearing the hem of his garment and departing, should die amidst the chaos and she is unable

[18] *Mencius* 7A.35.

to see him again, what pain shall this loving mother feel to the end of her days! Even if he does not die while abroad, if when he returns his aged mother, ill with anxiety and worry, has already passed away, even if Taejin then were to weep till he is old and toothless, what good would it do? Though he mourns until he is withered and wasted, how could this be enough to atone for his behavior? One who is filial is accommodating and compliant. Can one really call Taejin's tearing the hem of his garment and departing accommodating and compliant? Alas! Someone like Taejin is indeed lucky that the learned have not condemned him. I cannot believe he really had the reputation for being earnestly filial in his time. Alas! Filial piety is the source of the hundred good types of behavior. Since he lost the original source, even if he fully developed all the worthy capabilities under heaven, he still would not be worth talking about. Even if one completely exhausts oneself in working ardently for the imperial family, still, if one is not filial to one's parents, one cannot really be loyal to one's lord. What would such efforts amount to? If, when his mother took hold of his lapel, Taejin had immediately acceded to her will, politely declined Yu Gon's request, and to the end of his life taken care of her in a simple thatched hut, thereby being the perfection of a filial son, then, though he might not have been famous in his own time, how could he not have enjoyed glory for ten thousand generations thereafter?[19] In the past, Jegal Gongmyeong (C. Zhuge Kongming)[20] lived at the end of the Han dynasty. He ploughed his own fields and did not seek to become famous. Later on, in response to three personal visits by Emperor Soyeol (C. Zhaolie),[21] he subsequently served him

19 The idea being both that the only reputation worth having is to be a moral person and that good people do in fact often attain a kind of immortality for their good deeds.

20 Better known as Jegal Ryang 諸葛亮 (C. Zhuge Liang) (181-234 CE), his courtesy name was Gongmyeong 孔明 (C. Kongming). He was a politician, military strategist, writer, engineer and inventor who lived during the Three Kingdoms 三國時代 (220-280 CE) period in China. Recognized as the most accomplished strategist of his era, his reputation as an intelligent and learned scholar grew even while he lived in relative seclusion.

21 Emperor Soyeol 昭烈皇帝 (C. Zhaolie) is the posthumous name of Yu Bi 劉備 (C. Liu Bei) (161-223 CE), whose courtesy name was Hyundeok 玄德 (C. Xuande). He founded the state of Chok Han 蜀漢 (C. Shu Han) (221-263 CE) during the Three Kingdoms Period.

and succeeded in implementing his 'three-legged tripod' strategy,[22] which led to his immortal reputation. And so, if one cultivates virtue in oneself, then one's reputation naturally will become outstanding. If one lacks virtue and first thinks about establishing a name for oneself, though one might achieve some renown in a given age, one will not avoid being held up as the subject of critical discussions for ten thousand generations. Dong Jungseo (C. Dong Zhongshu)[23] said, 'Humane people correct their principles and do not plot to achieve gain; they make clear the Way and do not calculate their personal achievement.'[24] We can say that people like Taejin turn their backs on the proper standard of the Way and put working for gain as their highest priority. They themselves ruin the source of the hundred good types of behavior; is this not why they cannot avoid the censure of noble people?"

Inscription on [the Theme of] a Mirror

You are the full face of the moon,
The brilliant crystal of a sunny day.
The [icy] breath of a frosty morning,
The essence of autumn waters.[25]
Your heart-mind is unburdened by self-centeredness,
There is nothing your brightness does not discern.
The good is [revealed as] good; the bad as bad.
Even an *Imae* (C. *Jimei*)[26] cannot hide from you.

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22 In which he pitted different states against one another in ways that all contributed to the victory of the lord he served.

23 Dong Jungseo 董仲舒 (C. Dong Zhongshu) (179-104 BCE) was a Han dynasty Chinese scholar. He is traditionally associated with the promotion of Confucianism as the official ideology of the Chinese imperial state.

24 These lines appear in Dong Jungseo's *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunchu beollo* 春秋繁露; C. *Chunqiu fanlu*) 17.14a.

25 Autumn waters are thought to be especially pure and clear.

26 The *Imae* 魑魅 (C. *Jimei*) is a demon that is said to dwell in the mountain forests. It has the face of a human beings, the body of a beast, and four legs. It has the ability to enchant and charm people, but a mirror will reveal its true form. (A folk belief about mirrors East and West is that they can be used to reveal demons.)

You understand like a spirit,[27]
You are as straight as an arrow.
Polished, you become ever brighter,
Never allowing even a hair's breadth of distortion.
Oh! That human beings,
Are not the equal of a thing!
Human beings are not your equal,
When they become defiled by things.
How, then, can they remove the defilement?
By cleaning their heart-minds and overcoming themselves.
If for one day [they can] overcome themselves,[28]
Their bright virtue naturally appears.[29]
The purpose of this inscription,
Is to use a mirror to issue a warning.

Gang Jeongildang

Poetry

1. Beginning to Study (1798)

At thirty,[30] I begin my studies,
Not knowing which direction to turn.
From this day on, I must be diligent,
Aspiring to be like the ancients.

2. Human Nature is Good

Human nature originally is wholly good,

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[27] Section 10 of the Great Appendix Book I (繫辭上) of the *Book of Changes* says that only the most spiritual thing in the world has the ability "when stimulated it comprehends the principles of all things under Heaven."

[28] *Analects* 12.1 describes the task of attaining humaneness as "overcoming the self and returning to the rites" and says that if one day one overcomes the self and returns to the rites, all under Heaven will turn to benevolence."

[29] The opening chapter of the *Great Learning* begins, "the Way of the *Great Learning* is to make bright one's bright virtue."

[30] Since she was born in 1772, we should understand this as a poetic way of saying that she began her studies as she was approaching thirty years of age.

Developing it fully,[31] one becomes a sage.
To desire humaneness, humaneness lies therein,[32]
Make pattern-principle clear to make oneself sincere.

3. For my Husband [1]

To my shame, I lack talent and virtue,
But I learned needlework, as a child.
Authentic work requires exerting oneself,
Do not be concerned about clothes and food.[33]

4. Encouraging the Youth

You must be diligent when reading books,
Do not squander the vitality of youth.
How can you be satisfied with just memorization and recitation?[34]
You should aspire to be a sage or worthy!

Personal Missives

1. This morning, an old woman arrived offering a peck of rice and a catty of meat. I asked her the reason and she replied, "When I was travelling outside the town, I was accosted by vagabonds. Your husband happened to be passing by and in tears I appealed[35] for his help [standing] at the foot of his horse. He harshly upbraided the vagabonds and, subsequently, I was able to avoid them. I was profoundly moved by his kindness, and so, I offer this to show my sincerity."

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31 Cf. *Mencius* 7A.1 which discusses fully developing one's heart-mind and knowing one's nature.

32 Cf. *Analects* 7.30: The Master said, "Is humaneness far off? I desire humaneness, and lo and behold, humaneness arrives."

33 In this poem Jeongildang is urging her husband to focus on his studies and not worry about supporting the family, which she does through her needlework. This is a theme we also see in some of her personal missives. Nevertheless, it is her "authentic work" that enables his.

34 "Learning by memorization and recitation" (*gisong ji hak* 記誦之學; C. *jisong zhi xue*) was a common target of Neo-Confucian criticism. It referred to a sterile type of learning and was opposed to "learning for oneself" (*wigi ji hak* 爲己之學; C. *weiji zhi xue*), which meant learning to improve oneself morally.

35 Reading 訴 as 訴 in the original.

When [the old woman came to our house,] I heard you entertaining visitors in the men's quarters and so did not dare to disturb you; on my own, I decided to return what she had offered. The old woman firmly and resolutely would not accept this, and so I told her, "Once, even after my husband had not eaten for seven days, he still declined a gift of one thousand gold coins. How can I possibly accept what you bring?" The old woman then sighed, picked up her rice and meat, and left.

Though she offered her gift with the sincere intention [of expressing her gratitude], had I accepted it, I would have been suspected of selling your favor, and so I handled it in this way. I don't know what you think about this.

2. Suddenly, I heard you reprimand someone; your tone was overly harsh. This is not the middle way. If you seek to correct this person in this way—without first being correct yourself—how can this be regarded as acceptable? I hope that you will think about this further.

3. The *Book of Changes* says, "Be moderate in eating and drinking."[36] Wine is an important[37] aspect of eating and drinking. I hope you will be moderate in your drinking and careful in regard to your virtue.

4. Suddenly, for some reason, you reprimanded someone harshly; might you have come close to overstepping the mean in your reprimand? Noble people must take special care to apply themselves in regard to their voice, expression, and speech. The *Book of Poetry* says, "The mild and respectful person. Such a one possesses the foundation of Virtue."[38] I dare respectfully to counsel you that you were a bit lacking in mild and harmonious temperament when you reprimanded that person.

5. If I have real virtue, even if people do not know this, how does it harm [my virtue]? If I lack real virtue, even if people offer empty

[36] See the Sang 象 (C. *Xiang*) commentary on the hexagram *I* 頤 (C. *Yi*) in the *Book of Changes*.

[37] Reading 犬 as 大.

[38] These lines are from the "Greater Odes" chapter of the *Book of Poetry*, *Mao* #256.

> praise, how does this add to [my virtue]? If I have a piece of jade and people say it is just an ordinary stone, this does no harm to the jade. If I have a stone and people say it is a piece of jade, this does not add to the stone. I want you, my husband, to work at real virtue. Do not be ashamed beneath heaven; do not be mortified upon the earth; do not be distressed whether people know or do not know.[39]

Exposition

1. Exposition on an Inkstone, Shown to the Child Yi Bul-eok 李弗億 (childhood name of Gyeonghyeon 敬鉉)

Inkstones have three virtues: the first is firmness, the second is stillness, and the third is weightiness. Because they are firm, they long endure. Because they are still, they are concentrated. Because they are weighty, they are unyielding. This is why noble people value them. How much more should we value the overflowing kindness of the former king, which is preserved in the remaining kindly influences of our ancestors. I have heard that your grandfather, the Honorable Willow Garden (Giwon 杞園), when he served as a Counselor (Gyori 校理),[40] was presented with an inkstone as a special reward by King Jeongjo[41] who said to him, "You are the grandson of Upright Abstention (Jikjae 直齋), a family of honest poverty. Make vigorous use of it! Make vigorous use of it!" The Honorable Willow Garden always treasured and made use of this ink stone. When he grew old, he handed it to you. Can you fail to reverence it? It has been years since you began to study with the master. The master recently went on a trip to Hoecheon 懷川 and will also tour the Gwanseo 關西 region.[42] [While away,] he entrusted your education to me.

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39 The idea that a person of genuine virtue is not concerned whether or not he is recognized is found in *Analects* 1.1. The metaphor of stone and jade recalls the well-known story of Mr. He's jade (*Hwassi byeok* 和氏璧; C. *Heshibi*) in chapter thirteen of the *Hanbija* 韓非子 (C. *Hanfeizi*).

40 More precisely, a counselor of the fifth grade.

41 Jeongmyo 正廟 is a temple name (Myoho 廟號) of King Jeongjo.

42 Now Pyeongan 平安 Province in North Korea.

You are young and your family is very poor. If you do not firmly establish a commitment [to learn and cultivate yourself], you will succumb and do violence to yourself or throw yourself away.[43] If that happens, not only will you disobey the intentions of your ancestors, but also you will turn your back on the command of the former king [to make vigorous use of it]. Always be fearful and apprehensive about this! Be diligent, both morning and evening! You must take the three virtues [of inkstones] as the model for your axe-handle.[44] Resolutely be constant [in your practice] as an inkstone is firm. Be exactly as disciplined as an inkstone is still. Be immovably self-restrained as an inkstone is weighty. Henceforth, be like this and advance without stopping. Then, you will be close to working the field of the inkstone[45] and each day will harvest [good results].

43 For making a commitment to learning, see *Analects* 2.4 For doing violence to oneself or throwing oneself away, see *Mencius* 4A.10.

44 This refers to a well-known line from the *Book of Poetry*, *Mao* #158 that is quoted in Chapter 13 of the *Doctrine of the Mean*. In part, it goes, "In hewing an ax handle, in hewing an ax handle, the model is not far off. One grasps one ax handle to hew the other."

45 The thought is that writing is like plowing a "field" with a brush.

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