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Chŏng Yakyong (1762–1836) and Yi Kigyŏng (1756–1819): A Contentious Friendship

Jee Hyun Noe

Jean Moulin Lyon 3 University, IETT

Email: jee-hyun.noe@univ-lyon3.fr

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Abstract

This paper examines the friendship between Chŏng Yakyong and Yi Kigyŏng and its evolution. Their friendship rested on many commonalities: they both passed the doctorate competition together successfully in 1789, they belonged to the same political faction, the Namin, they were both officials at the court of King Chŏngjo in Chosŏn Korea, and both had important roles and contributions in this period of great socio-political, religious, cultural, and intellectual transformations. Being interested in different areas of knowledge from the West that had reached Chosŏn Korea, Chŏng Yakyong, or Tasan, adopted the Christian faith in 1784 before publicly renouncing it in 1797 due to criticism and slander. His friend Yi Kigyŏng, however, did not believe his apostasy and became his enemy. By studying the official and personal documents available, we attempt to reconstruct the vicissitudes of their friendship that resulted in Tasan's long and painful banishment.

This essay seeks to explore the fluctuations of a personal bond that suffered from the vicissitudes of time: the friendship between Chŏng Yakyong and Yi Kigyŏng and its significance in their lives. Both brilliant graduates of the 1789 doctorate class belonged to the Namin political faction. They were civil servants at the court of King Chŏngjo (r. 1776–1800) in Chosŏn Korea (1392–1897), a time of major socio-political and cultural changes. These transformations were first and foremost the effect of the temperance policy implemented by King Chŏngjo, which instilled destabilizing factors at the royal court: among them was the introduction of Christianity, which was later freely adopted by Namin scholars persuaded by Western missionary works written in classical Chinese. Significantly different attitudes were adopted towards this foreign religion, ranging from vehement rejection to enthusiastic acceptance. The difficulties raised by Christianity were not limited to the religious domain: they involved the

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broader political sphere and permanently impacted the two friends' exercise of their duties and life. One of them would fare much better than the other.

Historical background

Chŏng Yakyong, henceforth referred to by his nickname Tasan (다산, Tea Mountain, from the hill where he was exiled), was born in an eventful year. A terrible event took place in 1762: Crown Prince Sado (1735–1762), arguably a person with intellectual disability, was executed by his father, Yŏngjo (r. 1724–1776). His death set court parties against each other. The debates it fueled would eventually turn into violence, which claimed the lives of a considerable number of people over several decades. Chŏngjo, who succeeded Yŏngjo, was Sado's son. Parties were divided according to their hostility towards, or pity for, the unfortunate Prince Sado. During Chŏngjo's reign, these two political factions were known by two new terms: *pyŏkp'a* 僻派, the Intransigents, and *sip'a* 時派, the Expedients. The Intransigents were attached to principles rather than to the actual demands of their time, while the Expedients formed a more pragmatic party, with the main goal of meeting the needs of the moment, so much so that they were given the pejorative label of 'opportunists'. The Intransigents approved of Sado's death on the grounds of realism and *raison d'État*, while Chŏngjo put in place a moderate policy of appointing government officials from diverse backgrounds. Officials belonging to the Intransigents would therefore attack scholars open to the Christian religion.

The Expedients, troubled by Sado's death, supported Chŏngjo's tolerant policy; most of its members had embraced Christianity. The contrast between the two factions was insurmountable. Yet while political factions were now split along these two camps, scholars had been long since divided between Namin (남인, Southerners) and Noron (노론, the Old Learning). Among both Namin and Noron, some scholars took the side of the Intransigents, others of the Expedients.

Tasan and Yi Kigyŏng belonged to the same Namin faction. They knew each other well and had many common friends, but they parted ways when Tasan and his close friends joined the Expedients, while Yi Kigyŏng followed the Intransigents. The contrast was prompted by religion: their friendship would be devastated in the process of Christianization of Chosŏn's Korea.

Who was Tasan? Born into a family of learned Namin officials and benefiting from Chŏngjo's policy of conciliation, he was admitted to Sungkyunkwan College (성균관) after passing the literary licentiate in 1783. Yi Kigyŏng joined the College in 1784. The two students, ranked first and second at the licentiate, were repeatedly noticed by Chŏngjo. Both obtained their doctorate in 1789. Out of 60 laureates, Tasan was ranked second and Kigyŏng fourth. They were accepted as civil servants upon recommendation of the State Council, and took the civil service examinations of the Royal Library (규장각, Kyujanggak). This was a selection process intended to form the public service elite. Many of Tasan's friends would undergo the same process, and many of them would eventually show enmity towards him. As Tasan had briefly embraced Christianity in his youth, it was the plausible cause of their hostility.

In this paper, we will focus on how each of the two friends reacted to the emergence of the new religion in Chosŏn Korea. We will attempt to assess its impact on the

evolution of their friendship. However, as Tasan's writings are far more numerous than Kigyŏng's, a closer focus will inevitably be on his point of view.

On August 22, 1810, from his cottage on Tea Mountain, the place of his long exile (1801-1818), Tasan addresses a text titled 'Remonstrance' to his eldest son. He alludes to the mistakes he made in choosing his friends (Chŏng 2012: vol. IV, 25), unlike his ancestors:

As for me, I was not wise in choosing my friends. Those who sharpened the arrowhead and coated it [with poison] were many among those who once were close friends.

Among those close friends, we read in his self-epitaph which indeed became an autobiography, Yi Kigyŏng is most often mentioned:

It was the summer of *kapjin* year [1784]. I was accompanying Yi Pyŏk¹ down the Tumi river by boat when I first heard and read about the religion of the West. As I devoted myself to mastering parallel prose and practiced *biao/p'yo* 表, *jian/chōn* 箋, *zhao/cho* 詔 and *zhi/che* 制², I had accumulated a hundred rolls. At the end of monthly lessons and examinations at Sungkyunkwan College, I was appointed to the highest rank. The king granted me books, paper, and brushes. On several occasions, I received the favor of approaching the king as a close advisor. I really had no time left for any other occupation. From *chŏngmi* year [1787] onwards, the king's gifts became more frequent. I often stayed at Yi Kigyŏng's river pavilion, where I could devote myself to my work. Kigyŏng enjoyed learning about this Western religion. By his own hand, he copied a fascicle. His misgivings date from the year *musin* [1788]. (Chŏng 2012: vol. III, 253)

We may observe that, while Tasan recalls his first contact with Christianity, he devotes very few words to it. Who mentioned it to him? Yi Pyŏk. Where did he hear about it? On a boat. If we consider that this text was written in 1822, after Tasan had gone through the torments of interrogation, imprisonment, torture, and banishment, this statement is significant in its brevity. Yet Tasan must have repeatedly spoken of his early days in the Christian faith. He also recalled it in the epitaph for his younger brother, Chŏng Yakjŏn (1758-1816), with whom Tasan felt the deepest fraternal and intellectual affinity. This time, he provided more details:

On the 15th day of the fourth month of *kapjin* (1784), after the commemoration of my sister-in-law's death, my brother and I were in the same boat with Yi Tŏkjo [another name for Yi Pyŏk], going down the river. That is where we were instructed on the Creation of the Universe as well as on the Principle of Life and

¹Yi Pyŏk 李藥 (1754-1786), whose first name originally was Tŏkjo 德祚, was a Namin Expedient scholar. In 1777, having participated in debates on Western knowledge with Kwŏn Ch'ŏlsin, Chŏng Yakjŏn, and others, Yi Pyŏk converted to Christianity; he was baptized by Yi Sŏnghun. Following Kim Pŏmu's arrest in the 3rd month of 1785, he was pressured by his father and Yi Kigyŏng to abandon the Christian faith. He died shortly afterwards.

²Four writing styles found in official documents.

Death of the body and the soul. My surprise and amazement were as boundless as the Milky Way.

Back in the capital, following in Tökjo's footsteps, when we saw several books, such as *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* and *The Seven Deadly Sins*, among others, we joyfully became fond of them³. At that time, the ban on ancestral rites had not been promulgated [by the Church of Rome]. It was from the winter of *sinhae* (1791) that the proscription in our country became increasingly severe. (Chöng 2012: vol. III, 247)

This text describes Tasan's state of mind after his first contact with Christianity: surprise and amazement. Is this surprise stemming from a *thumazein*, a wonder? There is little room for doubt here, since Tasan himself asked for books on Christianity. We will see later what happened during the *sinhae* year. Intellectually, Tasan does not seem to see major clashes between Confucianism and Christianity, which was in accordance with the feeling of Western missionaries, unlike what the Roman Church would eventually decide. Tasan will elaborate on this point with great detail in his 1797 memorandum to the throne.

In the excerpt from the self-epitaph quoted above, Tasan mentions his student occupations at Sungkyunkwan and how he was repeatedly rewarded by Chöngjo. The emphasis on these gifts seems to hint at possible jealousy from his fellow students, and particularly from Yi Kigyöng. Finally, Tasan alludes to Yi Kigyöng's change of mind about Christianity. He seems to suggest that he is not fully convinced of the sincerity of Kigyöng's rejection of Christianity, which Kigyöng based on the claim of superiority of Confucianism.

The incident with the Ministry of Justice in ũlsa (1785)

For his part, Yi Kigyöng inserts into a text an official document ascribed to a certain 'Graduate Yi': a report titled *In defense of orthodoxy against heterodoxy* (關衛編, *Pyökwip'yöŋ*) that related the circumstances of the arrival of Christianity into Chosön Korea and how a first circle of Christian scholars was discovered. From a remark at the beginning of this document we learn that Yi Kigyöng was officially in charge of providing information concerning the Han River region. The document relates this event:

In winter of Chöngjo *kyemyo* year (1784), [...] as Sünghun⁴ [...] arrived in Beijing [with a diplomatic mission], he began to study the heterodox doctrine in a

³ Authored by Matteo Ricci and Diego de Pantoja respectively.

⁴ Yi Sünghun 李承薰 (1756-1801): Namin Expedient scholar and government official, and the first baptized Korean. In 1783, as he was about to leave for Beijing, his friend Yi Pyökh asked him about the Christian doctrine and practice, and instructed him to buy books on Christianity. He left Seoul on the tenth month, 14th day, and arrived in Beijing on the 12th month, 21st day; he stayed in Beijing for over 40 days, where he visited *Nan tianzhu tang* 南天主堂, the church built by the Jesuit Matteo Ricci in 1605, to learn the Christian doctrine. In the first month of 1784, he was baptized under the name of Pierre by a French Jesuit missionary, Jean-Joseph de Grammont, thereby laying the foundation stone of the Church of Korea. On the third month, 24th day of 1784, he returned to Seoul with icons, rosaries, and parts of the Bible translated into classical Chinese. In the spring of 1785, he gathered the first Christians at the home of Kim Pömu 金範禹 (1751-1787) in Myöngnyedong (明裡洞, today's Myöngdong): Yi Pyökh, Yi Kahwan, Chöng Yakyong, Chöng Yakjong, Chöng Yakjön, and other Namin scholars attended. Sections of the Bible were

Catholic church. After having gone through dozens of those books, he began to realize that they practiced such rites as baptism and mass.

[...]

In the spring of ŭlsa (1785), Sŭnghun, accompanied by Chŏng Yakjŏng, Yakyong, and others, preached at the home of Kim Pŏmu, of the *chungin* class⁵. Yi Pyŏk was there [...], who with a green cloth had covered his head to the shoulders, and sat in the place of honor. Sŭnghun, the three brothers Yakjŏn, Yakjong⁶, and Yakyong, both father and son Kwŏn Ilsin – all professing themselves his disciples and holding a book under their arm, sat around him, as servants. When Pyŏk preached and taught, the ritual was more rigorous than the one that binds master and disciple by us, Confucians. They set a day to meet, and just a few months later, dozens of dignitaries and *chungin* went there for a gathering. An officer from the Ministry of Justice, wondering whether there was some drinking or gambling going on there, went in to check. They were all disguised and covered in blue clothes, and he found their behavior more than suspicious. Eventually, he seized the portrait of Jesus Christ, along with books and other objects, and handed them over to the Ministry of Justice. But the Minister of Justice, Kim Hwajin (1728-1803), took pity on the children of the government officials, decided that they had taken a wrong path, and sent them home. Only Pŏmu and Ilsin were convicted. (Kim 1987: 463)

This scene reveals the involvement of Namin Expedient scholars in Catholicism. We also learn that the Ministry of Justice did not really take them seriously; at least, these young scholars who belong to government officials' families were not prosecuted, as their participation was considered a youthful error. On the other hand, their host Kim Pŏmu was the only person imprisoned, partly because as a *chungin* he belonged to a lower social class, and partly because a lesson had to be given somehow. He died of the torture wounds two years later, and thus became the first Christian martyr of Chosŏn Korea, according to the Catholic Church in South Korea.

This event took place in the spring of 1785. While Yi Kigyŏng was aware of it, his bond with Tasan still seemed solid then. During the summer of 1785, Tasan often visited Yi Kigyŏng at his pavilion on the Han River, in the Yongsan area, to practice parallel prose, in which lines of four and six characters follow one another (Cho 2004: 57).

translated into Korean and distributed to those who could not read Chinese. In the third month, the gathering was discovered by the government; Kim Pŏmu became Korea's first Christian martyr. While he was third class district judge in P'yŏngt'aek (平澤縣監), he was discharged following the Chinsan Incident (1791). In 1795, having smuggled the Chinese priest Zhou Wenmo into Korea, he was exiled to the Yesan 禮山 Commandery in Ch'ungnam province. He refused to renounce his Christian faith and was beheaded in 1801 (Noe 2013: 377-378).

⁵See Kim (2017) for more information.

⁶Chŏng Yakjong 丁若鍾 (1760-1801), Christian name Augustino: Christian scholar and Tasan's brother. He studied under Yi Ik, then embraced the Christian doctrine upon becoming familiar with Christianity through Jesuits' writings. Following the Chinsan Incident in 1791, his brothers abjured their faith, but he remained faithful to his convictions. He was appointed chair of the Myŏngdo Cenacle by Zhou Wenmo and was the first to write a book on Christianity in Korean: *The Essentials of the Lord's Teaching* (主教要旨, *Chugyoyoji*). In 1801, while composing the anthology *The Complete Book of the Holy Religion* (聖教全書, *Sŏnggyojŏnsŏ*), he was captured, then beheaded, along with Yi Sŭnghun and others (Noe 2013: 430).

There he composed three poems in the sixth month of 1785, including the following, pervaded by friendship and peace before their relationship fell apart:

强策蹇驢到水濱
書樓長夏客如雲
都緣附鳳攀龍志
聊作雕蟲繡虎文
花下酒因佳句得
月中茶倩小奴分
有時獨臥東牕外
閒視江天白鷺群

Pulling my lame donkey, I reach the water's edge.
In [Kigyŏng's] library, along the long summer, hosts are swarming.
They aspire to hold the phoenix and climb the dragon⁷.
They strive to carve insects and embroider the tiger⁸.
Elegant verses proceed from flowers and wine.
In the moonlight, a young domestic serves tea.
Sometimes I lie alone by the east window.
Contemplating flocks of white egrets in the river and sky.
(Chŏng 2012: vol. I, 205-206)

In the seventh month of 1785, Yi Pyŏk, harshly scolded by his father, renounced his Christian faith and died soon later. Through his learning, his personality, and family relationship by marriage, he was close to Tasan. Yi Pyŏk was in fact the brother of the wife of Chŏng Yaghyŏn, Tasan's older brother. It was in this pavilion on the banks of the Han River that Tasan and Yi Kigyŏng must have talked about Christianity while they were preparing for their doctoral degree (Kim 2018: 13). Indeed, according to a passage in Tasan's self-epitaph, their meetings lasted from 1785 to 1787.

The Pan district meeting in chŏngmi (1787)

In the winter of 1787, a terrible event occurred. Namin scholars were meeting at the home of a certain Kim, near the Sungkyunkwan, to continue their study and religious service. If the 1785 meeting had been led by Yi Pyŏk, the following one was led by Yi Sŭnghun and Tasan. The meeting was discovered by Yi Kigyŏng. The event in itself was not dramatic, yet it prompted a clear break within Namin scholars (TCF 2019: 1391). A letter from Hong Nagan⁹ to Yi Kigyŏng, contained in the *Defense of orthodoxy against heterodoxy* (Kim 1987: 461), mentions Kigyŏng, who, 'in tears', implores his friends to abandon heterodox books (邪書). Hong Nagan proposes to write a joint report to the government. In his reply, Yi Kigyŏng expresses his hesitation to denounce his close friends (至密之人) (ibid.). He prefers to beg them once again to abandon their faith. The correspondence clearly indicates that the main detractor is Hong Nagan, who nonetheless seems to need Yi Kigyŏng to accomplish his mission.

Meanwhile, Tasan has written to Yi Kigyŏng to tell him of the insomnia he is suffering from due to the anxiety he is beset with; he asks him not to divulge the story of the Pan district meeting. Yi Kigyŏng replies that he did not reveal the names of the participants, and urges him repeatedly to come to his senses.

As Tasan had feared, the meeting in the Pan district would be reported by Hong Nagan on the sheet of a royal examination (策文) on the seventh day of the first month of 1788. The topic was given by Chŏngjo:

⁹Hong Nagan 洪樂安 (1752-?): scholar-functionary of the Namin Intransigents.

Man has to learn; in this study there are orthodox and heterodox [doctrines], there is difference between truth and error. We shall discern them early enough to be able to discuss them thoroughly (Kim 1987: 460).

The question corresponds to the burning situation of the time. Chŏngjo was probably aware of the meeting in Pan. Hong, in his sheet, proposes to burn all books of heterodox content, lest they provoke unrest such as that caused by the Yellow Turbans or the White Lotus rebellion in China. He makes no difference between religious and scientific writings. Everything must be committed to the flames. He was ranked third. Tasan ranked second¹⁰, from which we can infer that Chŏngjo was oriented to protect Tasan from the attack of his fellow student Hong.

On the second month, 11th day of 1788, King Chŏngjo, by his own brush, appointed Ch'ae Chegong, leader of the Namin faction, to the post of Right State Councilor (우의정, Uuijeong) of the State Council of Joseon. From then on, Chŏngjo's government seemed to favor the Namin scholars. On the third month, tenth day of 1789, Tasan ranked second in the regular doctoral class (held every three years). Ten days later, he was recommended to the Royal Library by the State Council under the 'outstanding officials' program (抄啓文臣, *ch'ogye munsin*), along with Yi Kigyŏng and a few others. On the fifth month, 12th day, Yi Kigyŏng replaced Tasan in the position he held as Deputy Secretary of the Privy Council. By then, their friendship had probably already started to fall apart. Chŏngjo, aware of their history, ranked Tasan second and Kigyŏng fourth at the doctorate, and in exchange had Kigyŏng replace Tasan at the Provy Council. Staging competition was part of Chŏngjo's policy (Cho 2016: 146).

In 1789, Ch'ae Chegong became Left State Councilor, while Kim Chongsu of the Norons replaced him as Right Chairman. These appointments reflected the same royal policy: favor mutual conciliation of factions by appointing them together.

1791: The sinhae judicial case

In the autumn of 1791 (*sinhae*), a major incident broke out in Jeolla province. It involved two scholars, Kwŏn Sangyŏn 權尙然 (?-1791, baptismal name Jacques) and Yun Chich'ung 尹持忠 (1759-1791, baptismal name Paul), who were cousins and were both born in Chinsan (珍山). Yun Chich'ung had become acquainted with Christianity through his maternal first cousin, Tasan, and was baptized in 1787 by Yi Sŏnghun. Yun Chich'ung then converted his mother, his brother, and his maternal first cousin, Kwŏn Sangyŏn. In 1790, though, the bishop of Beijing proclaimed a ban on ancestral rites. Yun burned the tablets in his house. In the summer of 1791, his mother died; following her last wishes, his son refused to carry out a Confucian burial, prompting anger among people around him. The news reached the Court. Chŏngjo tried to not give much importance to the matter, until the Noron Intransigent faction convinced him otherwise. The king then ordered an investigation, during which Yun Chich'ung and Kwŏn Sangyŏn refused to recant their faith, even under torture. Eventually they were

¹⁰See *Daily Records of Royal Secretariat of Joseon Dynasty* (승정원일기, *Seungjeongwon ilgi*), first month, seventh day, 12th year of Chŏngjo, <http://sjw.history.go.kr>.

beheaded. Later, the Catholic Church in Korea recognized them as the first martyrs among Korean nobility.

This incident was to be particularly damaging to Tasan's career:

At that time, the *Judicial Affair of Kwŏn [Sangyŏn] and Yun [Chich'ung]* happened in the Honam province. Despicable people, Hong Nagan and others intrigued, taking advantage of this case to get rid of valuable people. So they sent a report to Pŏnong (Ch'ae Chegong), claiming that 'among the brilliant and talented [scholar-officials] who wear a tablet wrapped in red silk attached to their belt and a black Samo, seven or eight out of ten are enmeshed in the religion of the West. There will be unrest like [that caused in China by] the Yellow Turbans or the White Lotus. (Chŏng 2012: vol. III, 254)

Tasan reports the strong words employed by Hong Nagan to forewarn the government about some of its scholar-officials. As we know, Chŏngjo had already read them in Hong Nagan's sheet three years earlier. But rehashing a past is often futile. In response to a detailed report of the incident, Chŏngjo issues a remark which is not meant to please Hong Nagan and his accomplice:

The king says: '[...] To refute heterodoxy, nothing is better than to intensify orthodoxy. [...] In general, Ming and Qing writings, cursory and outlandish as they are, are not really convenient to rule the world. Yuan Hongdao's works¹¹ are the most radical example. Current habits show [a tendency] to relinquish the study of the Classics to run after all sorts of books, as diverse and assorted as they are. But if discerning scholars disappear from the world, then uneducated people will no longer feel [the emotion] that their presence inspires. As for novels, I myself cannot open, let alone read, a single one. If there were such books in the Royal Library, I have already eliminated them all. By this you can understand the source of my [main] concern'¹².

In response to this incident, which Namin Intransigent scholars considered of great consequence because it undermined the state's ideology, Chŏngjo's words may have surprised many. According to the monarch, who was a staunch defender of ancient style writing, Christian books did not significantly differ in style from late Ming and early Qing literature. His lenient view is that to defuse heterodoxy, orthodoxy needs to be strengthened and refined. For him, this new heterodoxy can be equated to the forms of literary entertainment that plague literature at the time, such as popular novels. Is this what Chŏngjo really believed, or did he try to protect some of the scholars involved in the case, and particularly Tasan? We can hardly answer this question, but that is certainly the effect it had.

¹¹Yuan Hongdao (袁宏道, 1568-1610): Chinese government official, essayist, and poet. With his two brothers, he opposed the imitation of the Ancients and defended literature written in vulgar language; the three Yuan brothers initiated the Gong'an (公安) literary school.

¹²See *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (조선왕조실록, *Joseon wangjo sillok*), Chŏngjo Annals, 11th month, seventh day of 1791, <http://sillok.history.go.kr>.

During an interrogation that followed the incident, Yi Sŭnghun, a close friend of Yi Kigyŏng, lies to get out of trouble. According to his claims, Kigyŏng slandered him:

The king ordered Pŏnong to sit in the Office of the Inspector-General (사헌부, Saheonbu [司憲府]) and summon Mok Manjung, Hong Nagan, Yi Kigyŏng, and others, to sort out truth from falsehood. Kigyŏng replied, 'In those books [on Christianity], there were good sides. Sŭnghun and I read them together at the Royal Library. If having seen these books is a crime, both of us shall receive a dire punishment'. Then [Kigyŏng] hastened to write to Yong that his reply would be weighed, and that he expected to be supported by him in order to be released. (Chŏng 2012, vol. III: 254)

Chŏngjo and Ch'ae Chegong, worried that this case might become a windfall for pursuing honest people, implemented a political strategy to shelter those who were denounced and to punish denigrators (Kim 1987: 126). In this context, Yi Sŭnghun's defense will be indulgently heard. Kigyŏng, who had just become a father, had lost his mother and was in mourning; he and Hong Nagan complained that their claims had not been taken more seriously:

On this, Yi Kigyŏng, as an 'official in mourning', sent a report [in which] he blamed the higher officials for having unfairly investigated the case¹³. He bolstered the truth of the reading in the Royal Library by providing additional evidence. The king, upset, banished him to Kyŏngwŏn. Many observers rejoiced, but I warned them: 'This is no good! Misfortune for our faction begins here'. I immediately went to Kigyŏng's house (at the time, his home was in Yŏnjidong) to console his children, and on the anniversary of his mother's death, I supported his family with a thousand qian¹⁴. In the spring of ŭlmyo [1795] a general amnesty was declared in the country, yet Kigyŏng was not released. I told Yi Igun: 'Although Kigyŏng certainly had bad intentions, during his trial he suffered an injustice. The happiness of one moment is the misfortune of other days. We better go and tell our king, so that he would set him free'. Igun replied, 'Such is also my intention'. We went to inform the king, as we agreed, who exceptionally had Kigyŏng released¹⁵.

This extract from his self-epitaph, in fact an apologetic autobiography, reveals an important aspect of Tasan's character: his intolerance of injustice (Kim 2018: 27). Yet we can observe another quality: his capacity to make logical predictions. He has a prophetic skill. However, his text was written *after* he had lived through all the events he reports; we might claim that he conveniently represented himself to the best of his advantage. At some point in his life, either for survival, political ambition, or benevolent curiosity, Tasan had gotten along with scholars from the opposite faction, the

¹³Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty (조선왕조실록, Joseon wangjo sillok), Chŏngjo Annals, 11th month, 13th day of 1791, <http://sillok.history.go.kr>.

¹⁴Equivalent to 20 sacks of rice of 93 kg each. Qian were also known as 'cash coins'.

¹⁵He was released by the Court on the first month, 24th day of 1794, according to the *ilsŏngnok* (일성록). Tasan mistakenly recalled that Yi Kigyŏng had not been released by 1795.

Intransigent Norons, including Sim Hwanji (Kim 2018: 21-22). And although he was not a part of their party, they nonetheless appreciated him, especially for his subtle discernment of people's minds (Kim 2018: 21-23). This old bond saved his life in the judicial case of the *sinju* year (1801). This may attest a talent for foresight, if not clairvoyance.

During Kigyŏng's exile, Tasan provided financial support to his family. We have no information whether Kigyŏng felt gratitude or humiliation for this help. But Tasan mentions it as a way to attest his sincere friendship with Yi Kigyŏng.

In the fourth month of 1795, as Zhou Wenmo (1752-1801), the first foreign missionary to enter Korea, was exposed, Christians started to be harshly persecuted. Tasan was sent to the provinces. However, this was a royal act of courtesy, as the king wanted him to publicly prove his Confucian virtue in the same way others under his administration did, most of whom were already converted. He fully succeeded, and was widely appreciated by the population. Under these circumstances, on the tenth month, ninth day of 1795, Yi Kigyŏng sent a letter to Tasan. Apparently, Kigyŏng's purpose is to ask Tasan to pay for his son's wedding (Cho 2016: 331), as though they were still close friends. Tasan is astonished to receive such a letter. His reply is translated in full.

Reply to Yi Kigyŏng's letter, received on the tenth month, ninth day of 1795 in Kŭmjŏng:

- 1) When I received your letter, I almost fainted. We have not cultivated our friendship as much as we could have; there is no reason to be upset about it. Yet you unexpectedly and abruptly write me now, without the slightest hint of embarrassment; and while I know that you mean well, what would others say?
- 2) This is why even for you it looks strange; you are aware that this is all too forced. When things turn away from common sense, everything can have detrimental effects. In all that you have done in recent years, not only in one or two cases have you gone astray from common sense.
- 3) Due to the fact that you overestimate yourself and dig too deep [into the businesses of others], when you have to deal with something [tangible], you have a hard time handling things. All of your troubles come from that.
- 4) Those who do not know you well may believe that you have a peculiar mind; no one except me knows the source of your illness. This is why, each time I met Chun Bai or Ji Hua, I told them, 'I have a friend suffering from a troubled mind, but no one else [but me] knows'.
- 5) Today you sent me a letter asking news about me, and this was certainly well-intentioned. But it would have been appropriate for us to revive our relationship beforehand; you blatantly avoided this, and I have no way of knowing what might have happened to prompt it.
- 6) It seems that, in your mind, you already consider yourself as an elderly man; nothing would bother you anymore, noble and aloof like the moon [behind] a Chinese paper umbrella, free and unrestrained like the wind blowing through the aspens... Did you really expect the same of me? I am so narrow-minded that I am not up for the challenge. Neither are you, I am afraid.
- 7) Since we are not up for it, it would have been proper to exchange a few words beforehand. But even if you were not holding any ill will against me, and if

we were able to get along well from now on, and see each other as we used to, everyone would still go around spreading gossips, whispering that we have patched things up and pretended we forgot our old grudges. Even if I held no ill will, no one would believe it. You and I would be the laughing stock of the world, so casually befriending each other and splitting up [in fact, running after our own interests], as if we were in a market square. We could hardly avoid slander either – putting on a smile for all to see, but being mutually resentful behind closed doors. Have you not considered this?

- 8) We both have regrets. Ah, how fitting is this passage from Yuanliang's *fu* poem 'Return Home' [歸去來兮辭]¹⁶: 'Understand that [the mistakes of] the past cannot be amended, but if you look at the future you can find your right way' (悟已往之不諫, 知來者之可追)! Once, I was a young man, just like you. Our hot blood had not yet calmed down, our paws were restless. But as for what has happened, what is the point in asking more questions?
- 9) And yet, if you could remove the thick veil covering your heart, if you could enjoy the landscape before your eyes, if you could fervently devote yourself to the study of Sacred Canons and Sages' Commentaries (聖經賢傳), if your body and soul could joyfully return to a sincere and modest world, then your mind would gradually calm down, your happiness would grow day after day, and you would naturally experience those moments of joy when everything is in its right place.
- 10) Instead, if you only abide by your desires to reach your aims, you will not be trusted when you speak and things will not conform [to your desire] when you act. At the end of the day, you will not escape the shame of being denigrated and blamed. Be careful and vigilant. If we waste our time to no purpose, if we mistrust each other and if we daunt each other, we will hardly preserve our friendship – could we not dread it?
- 11) With the imposition of the three¹⁷ bonnets [三加] on your handsome heir approaching, you really have something to look forward to. Rituals are nowadays conceived as either too ceremonious or not ceremonious enough. We have the protocol bequeathed by the Lake of Stars (星湖, Seongho), why would you ever wish to neglect propriety? (Chǒng 2012: vol. IV, 84-85)

In the first paragraph, Tasan voices his astonishment at receiving and reading this letter. He has a hard time understanding this gesture. He wonders how he should understand it. Indeed, the whole letter displays clearly ambivalent feelings towards Yi Kigyǒng. Tasan writes about both good and bad memories, the bad ones being about public reputation. Tasan, loyal in friendship with his dear ones, is not fully at ease when it comes to Yi Kigyǒng.

In the second paragraph, Tasan disapproves of his correspondent's lack of genuineness. His tone is peremptory. And yet, Kigyǒng was older than Tasan by six years – a significant gap in Confucian society. Tasan is aware that his sharp tone may annoy

¹⁶This is the social name (zi 字) of Daoist poet Tao Yuanming (365-427).

¹⁷This ceremony took place when the elder son reached the age of 14. By imposing three types of bonnet on him, the son will be declared the official heir of a noble family before all participants (Couvreur 1913: 638).

Kigyŏng. Yet he does not stop. In the third paragraph, he elaborates on the causes of Kigyŏng's illness: pride, self-esteem, and narcissism. Too high an opinion of himself prevents Yi Kigyŏng from doubting himself and the ideas he has about others. Tasan has also suffered from Yi's attitude. In the following paragraph, he takes his discourse one step further: Yi Kigyŏng is definitely suffering from a mental problem, as we would call it. If we try to empathize with a scholar formerly ranked fourth in his doctoral class, we can imagine how difficult it would be for Kigyŏng to control his temper when he read this.

So, in the fifth paragraph, Tasan, out of kindness, softens his tone. He regrets that Kigyŏng cut ties between them, old friends. It is here that the ambivalence of their relationship appears. The sixth paragraph consists of a rather long sentence. A metaphor, tinged with irony: Tasan concludes that, for all their differences, they essentially share the same state. Alas, this common state – resentment – does not bring them any closer. Yet the first paragraph suggested that their friendship could have had a better outcome. Maybe this failure is the source of their resentment. Hence the ambivalence, regret, and mutual blame for aborting what could have been much nobler. In the seventh paragraph, Tasan refers again to the public's gaze and its importance. Their friendship would no longer be approved of by their friends and acquaintances. We observe how important external looks are to him: other people have to validate their friendship; and he assumes that Kigyŏng feels the same. The eighth paragraph alludes to mutual regret. Tasan continues to swing between distant and recent past. This fluctuation of the heart belongs to his temperament.

Then, Tasan provides his prescription to cure him of his deep-seated illness. This therapy comprises, in a handful of powerful words, the entire Confucian curriculum. No reference is made to other sources. We could rightfully claim that his discourse is meant to show that he no longer entertains reprehensible ties with that awkward Western heterodoxy. We might also wonder whether some intellectual pride is on display as well: had Tasan not reached a deeper understanding of the Confucian curriculum than his recipient? Had he not obtained higher grades in the royal examinations, despite his interest in 'other (unfortunate) things'? Between the lines, Tasan suggests that Kigyŏng failed to draw significant benefits from all his studies. Kigyŏng is the older one, yet has no lessons to teach him – nor has Tasan, the younger, anything to receive from him. At the end of this letter, Tasan warns Kigyŏng of the pernicious effects of dismissing his recommendations. However, after rebuking his former friend in a peremptory tone throughout the letter, he ends it with an encouraging tone. The reference to the ritualistic work of Yi Ik, also known by the name of Lake of Stars (星湖, Seongho), should be noted. It alludes to their common past, where good memories and friendship still lie.

Unfortunately, Yi Kigyŏng's reply, if any, has not come down to us. Tasan makes no mention of it. Yet, two years later, Tasan received another letter from Yi Kigyŏng, which extensively focuses on cut ties. Decidedly, Kigyŏng appears as an inconstant, impulsive, and obsessive man. We do not know whether his odd behavior was guided by a noble principle or by self-interest. Tasan seemed to lean towards the second hypothesis.

Despite Tasan's steady efforts to be cleared of his Christian past, notably through a long memoir he wrote in 1797, eloquent enough to move Chŏngjo, and by recurrently renouncing the duties he was assigned by the monarch, the attacks led by Yi Kigyŏng

and Hong Nagan kept strengthening. By 1801, Chŏngjo was no longer there to protect Tasan. Hong and Yi launched a final assault on him:

However, Kigyŏng was the main instigator during the *sinyu* [1801] *Judicial Affair*. He wanted my death and would not stop. Yet, when he spoke to people like Hong Ŭiho and they happened to talk about me, he always wept warm tears. So although he was running after grand aspirations, the good in his heart has not fully evaporated. (Chŏng 2012: vol. III, 255)

This last sentence reveals Tasan's idea of friendship: even in enmity, friendship still means hoping for the friend's best. Tasan will eventually survive this murderous trial; unlike most of his companions, who lost their lives, he was banished for a long time (1801-1818). During these 17 years, several attempts were made to free him. Yi Kigyŏng would always oppose them. Incidentally, his life was not easy either. Due to his 'hard' character, he was often banished from the court. However, he would always be admitted back as the court was filled with his own people, the Intransigents.

The friendship between Tasan and Yi Kigyŏng evolved alongside historical events. At first glance, their enmity might be explained through their attitudes towards Christianity. However, the Intransigents' priority had always been to prevent the Expedients from controlling the Court; considering that most of the Expedients had adopted this religion, we can easily conclude that the Intransigents saw Christianity as an excellent opportunity, indeed a golden pretext, for them to prevail. Did Tasan abjure his faith out of strategy, conviction, or both – considering that by the time the Chinsan incident took place (1791), the state would not tolerate a religion forbidding ancestral rites? Perhaps he actually came to consider it as an enemy, as we read in his 1797 memoir to the King. Not everyone believed the sincerity of this claim. On the other hand, each time Yi Kigyŏng wrote to Tasan with a proposal, it was out of necessity and the attempt to get back in his own camp's good graces. Did he ever aspire to a noble friendship, or really seek a solid support from his friend? Hong Nagan, as we have seen, joined him out of interest. Yet Tasan wished he could have remained a faithful friend, with the same fidelity he had for his dear ones. Tasan's principle in friendship was: 'An old friend, we do not let him down, whatever his faults' (Chŏng 2012: 255) – an adage from the *Book of Rites*, quoted by Tasan in his self-epitaph with reference to Kigyŏng.

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