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Special Feature

Unhappy Confucians, Take Heed!
Reading Seoljam Kim Siseup's
Geumo sinhwa as Anti-Religious
Propaganda-Fiction

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Introduction

Kim Siseup 金時習 (1435–1493; styled Maewoldang 梅月堂) was a major philosopher and poet of the early Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) and arguably one of the most prolific, multifaceted, yet also enigmatic intellectuals of his age. While in premodern times his memory and legacy defied reduction to a single label, since the beginning of the twentieth century, his fame has primarily rested on his work as a writer of narrative fiction, as today he is mainly known for authoring *New Tales of the Golden Turtle* (*Geumo sinhwa* 金鰲新話), a collection of five “Tales of the Strange” (C. *chuanqi* 傳奇) artfully narrated in Literary Chinese, which holds an exceptionally high status in the canon of national literature in both Koreas.¹ As a child prodigy, who at the age of five was recognized by high-ranking scholars and even King Sejong 世宗 (r. 1418–1450) on account of his remarkable literary capacities, Kim was already a famous figure during his own lifetime (*Maewoldang jip*, 21:21b). He did not hold office, however, and never achieved prominence in government service—from a Confucian standpoint, his life was a disappointment, to say the least. And in spite of his great talent, in 1453 he failed the civil service examinations. For someone hailed as a Confucian Wunderkind since early youth, this must have been a gut punch, and his failure must have left him utterly embarrassed. Notably, not long after this personal fiasco, he turned his back on Confucian society. In his self-referential writings, Kim is suspiciously vague about what may have triggered this action (*Maewoldang jip*, 9:37a), yet in later Confucian tradition, this radical step was hailed as an expression of protest vis-à-vis the so-proclaimed illegitimate usurpation of the throne by Sejo 世祖 (r. 1455–1468), and in loyalty to the first demoted and eventually assassinated Danjong 端宗 (r. 1452–1455). He expressed his alleged protest in a rather unconventional way (at least in the framework of Korean history), for maybe in the slapdash manner of a snubbed young man with a big and bruised ego, he forthwith adopted the tonsure and garb of a Buddhist monk, eventually spending almost the entire rest of his life roaming the Korean Peninsula as a wayfaring monk in abject poverty under the dharma name of Seoljam 雪岑. However, centuries after his

death, and especially during the late eighteenth century, Seoljam Kim Siseup was reintegrated into the Confucian sphere: he was made the object of sacrifice at official Confucian shrines, was enshrined at Confucian academies, was posthumously promoted to office, and at the court was even iconized as the “Boyi of Korea.” During this process, his Buddhist life and identity were more or less brushed aside. Yet the image of Seoljam Kim Siseup as a Confucian in Buddhist guise was already promoted by some of his sixteenth-century biographers. For instance, in his *Biography of Kim Siseup* (*Kim Siseup jeon* 金時習傳), the acclaimed Confucian thinker Yi I 李珥 (1538–1584) formulated the later often cited statement, “His heart was Confucian, his behavior was Buddhist.” We can dismiss this as a blunt state-driven attempt to seize interpretational control over Kim’s unique form of dissidence. If we look at extant texts in his collected writings *Maewoldang jip*, however, we find that these assertions were not entirely groundless. There are certainly valid reasons to argue that the life and works of Seoljam Kim Siseup reflect the productive hybridization of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism (Sim 2004, 49–79; Lee 2019, 313–40; Cha 1986, 49–54; Plassen 2012, 363–79; Kim 2023, 119–46), and his influence as a Buddhist thinker is both undeniable and well-studied.²

Yet while we do know that in the mid-1460s Seoljam Kim Siseup was involved in government projects designed to strengthen the influence of Buddhism in the public and state domain, some later sources suggest that he did so under duress, and that he went to great (and rather revolting) lengths to escape these official obligations imposed upon him by King Sejo.³ In this

2 Cf., Mok 1996, 117–62; Ven. Haeju and McBride 2012, 42–48. For religious interpretations of *Geumo sinhwa*: Kim 2006, 247–65; Lee 2014, 241–68. For an extensive, in-depth study of Kim Siseup’s Buddhō-Confucian life, the tumultuous times he lived in, as well as his *Geumo sinhwa* as a prime example for the circulation and transformation of *chuanqi*-literature in the premodern Sinographic sphere, see the introduction of my *Tales of the Strange by a Korean Confucian Monk. Kūmo sinhwa by Kim Sīsūp*. Note that the argument presented in the article at hand is a new idea that is not treated in *Tales of the Strange*.

3 For instance, in *Records of Mr. Dragon Spring’s Talks in Solitude* (*Yongcheon damjeok gi* 龍泉談寂記; 1525), the author, Kim Allo 金安老 (1481–1537), recounts the following incident: “Gwangmyo [King Sejo] early on held a Buddhist service at the Inner Palace, and Seoljam was yet again selected to appear [at the venue]. [Kim Siseup did come to the palace, but] suddenly, in the wee hours, he ran away and nobody knew where he had gone. [Sejo] dispatched a number of people to follow and find him. They discovered that he had jumped into the excrement in a roadside village’s latrine—only half of his face sticking out from [the muck] was all [they could see]” (*Huirakdanggo*, 8:438b). *Huirakdanggo* (Konkuk University Library, Database of Korean Classics, n.d.) is also available at <http://db.itkc.or.kr>.

1 Consequently, interpretive approaches as well as academic articles are legion, particularly in South Korea. Examples comprise So 1991, 179–207; Yun 1994, 253–81; Choi and Zhang 1999, 359–82; Kim 2013, 235–58.

context it is important to point out that in a number of his extant texts, Kim refutes the concept of Buddhism as a state religion, deliberately avoiding Buddhist terminology and using fundamentalist Confucian code to express his views (*Maewoldang jip*, 16:13b). Kim's negative posture towards governments drawing legitimation from Buddhism is evidenced, for instance, in a recorded discussion contained in one of the final entries of the *Maewoldang jip*, for when someone asks him, "Is it possible to govern the world by means of the Buddha's theories?" Kim flat-out replies, "That's impossible" (*Maewoldang jip*, 23:13b).

Seoljam Kim Siseup moreover openly addressed his personal difficulties with the "heterodox teachings" (C. *yiduan* 異端, K. *idan*; a castigating Neo-Confucian term jointly referring to Buddhism, Daoism, and Shamanism) (Hejmanek 2013, 17) and also the problematical circumstances under which he came to enter the mountains and spend his life in religion and on the fringes. For instance, some of his extant letters reveal that he felt bitter about having taken a wrong turn at a critical juncture and having wasted a life that had begun so promisingly and that he consequently slid into a serious mental health crisis, a depression that caused erratic, anti-social, and self-destructive behavior. Looking back at this period, in his *Letter Explaining my Situation to Yu*, [*Magistrate of Yangyang* (*Sang Yu Yangyang jinjeong seo* 上柳襄陽陳情書), which he wrote to his benefactor Yu Chahan 柳自漢 (dates unknown) towards the end of his life, Kim states:

Moreover, the heterodox teachings greatly prospered while *This Culture of Ours* [Confucianism] was in decline. My own aspiration was already laid waste! Eventually I became friends with bald-heads [monks], roaming through mountains and along rivers. Thus, people believed I enjoyed Buddhism, but I didn't want to become prominent in the world by means of the heterodox Way. [...] My appearance and conduct increasingly wasted away, people I despised, and this is why some thought me an imbecile while others thought me a madman. (*Maewoldang jip*, 21:22b)⁴

For one, this passage illustrates how he found solace in the support offered by those sharing his outsider's position—Buddhist monks. Though elsewhere Kim

claims to have "never cared for the heterodox teachings of Buddha and Lao[zi], nor for having bald-heads as companions" (*Maewoldang jip*, 21:18a), the Buddhists had cut themselves off from all social obligations, and their disinterest in worldly affairs as well as their escapist, next-world-focused dismissal of this life as a mere illusion, must have appeared enticing, comforting to him during this time of personal crisis.

Yet the above-quoted epistle also shows that there existed a discrepancy between his self-perception and the way he was regarded by others. His self-imposed exile to Buddhism, which came at the cost of his career, was by the majority obviously recognized as neither sacrifice nor dissent, but merely taken as an expression of honest religious beliefs. At the root of his frustration with this could have been the role model which may have inspired his particular form of dissidence: against the backdrop of several texts in his collected writings, Kim may be hypothesized to have emulated the iconic Northern Song (960–1127) intellectual Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085; styled Mingdao 明道), who alongside his younger brother Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) served as one of the preeminent thinkers during the formative period of Neo-Confucianism. Kim was well acquainted with the lives and thoughts of the Cheng brothers through his reading of such seminal works as the *Reflections on Things at Hand* (*Jinsilu* 近思錄) by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and Lü Zuqian's 呂祖謙 (1137–1181), which gained central importance in the adoption of conservative Neo-Confucianism and the marginalization of Buddhism in Joseon.⁵ Kim's extant writings show his fascination with the lives of ancient Confucian model figures and the Five Masters of the Northern Song period, yet he appears to have idolized especially the "Two Cheng": he wrote biographies for both Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi and frequently worked their anti-Buddhist polemics into his own texts.

In terms of Cheng Hao serving as a stimulus and justifying authoritative model for his decision to become a monk, it is crucial to note that Kim was well aware that Cheng himself had at one point strayed from the Confucian Way and had fallen for/into the "heterodox teachings," but also that Cheng had later managed to reemerge and return to the Confucian fold after allegedly reading the *Six Confucian Classics*, only to eventually be recognized as a celebrated

4 A discussion of Kim Siseup's letters to Yu Chahan, as well as copiously annotated translations of these epistles, can be found in my "Thus I May Now Dare Explain My Actual Situation" (Wuerthner 2023).

5 For the Buddhist-Confucian conflict in Korea, see Goulde 1985; Muller 2015.

innovator and “True Confucian” (*jinyu* 眞儒). There are several texts dealing directly with Cheng Hao in Kim’s collected writings, such as the *Introduction to Teacher Mingdao Cheng* (*Myeongdo Jeong seonsaeng seo* 明道程生先序) or the *Biography of Cheng Hao* (*Jeong Ho jeon* 程顥傳). Modelling his words after the relevant passage about Cheng Hao’s “Buddhist turn” from chapter fourteen of the *Jinsilu* (Hejtmanek 2013, 21), in *Biography of Cheng Hao* Kim portrays Cheng as a Confucian who had given himself away to heterodoxy with the purpose of tackling it from inside (*Maewoldang jip*, 20:8b). Thereby he may have striven to validate his own decision of giving up studying for the civil service examinations and retreating into religion, while simultaneously offering a blueprint for his envisioned personal rehabilitation. And in terms of social reintegration, Kim did try to follow in Cheng’s footsteps: after King Seongjong 成宗 (r. 1469–1495) had ascended the throne and the political atmosphere in the capital changed, Kim Siseup, like Cheng Hao, picked up the *Six Confucian Classics* again, returned to the laity in the early 1480s, and even appears to have married. Some years later, when recounting these events in a letter, Kim mentions his “original intentions” (*soji* 素志) (*Maewoldang jip*, 21:22b), and though he does not go into any detail, he might have referred to his initial strategy of emulating Cheng Hao by first plunging into heterodoxy, then returning to orthodox Confucian society, and finally living out his days amid the admiration of his peers. Society, however, had moved on, and after his long absence, aside from close friends such as early Joseon intellectual giant Seo Geojeong 徐居正 (1422–1488), no one seems to have remembered, understood, or even cared about him and his “original intentions” anymore. Quite the contrary, instead of being applauded for his sacrifice, the one-time admired Wunderkind had become a laughingstock (Wuerthner 2020, 197). Thus, he capitulated, and letting go of the promise embodied by his role model Cheng Hao, he put his monk’s robe back on and returned into the mountains, where—so much we can gather from his extant texts written during the final phase of his life—he lived out his days in bad health, abject poverty, and overall misery in the company of veritable anti-heterodoxy hardliners such as his closest friend Nam Hyoon 南孝溫 (1454–1492).⁶

6 Nam had viciously polemicized against Buddhism and Shamanism in a memorial presented to King Seongjong in 1478, asking the king to eliminate both. *Chugang seonsaeng munjip* 秋江先生文集, 4:5a-b (Seoul National University Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies Library, #Ko-3428-309, 1921,

Worldly Treasures, Wind Burials, and Gawking Onlookers: Criticism of Buddhist Votive Offerings, Funerary Rites, and Burial Practices

The struggle not only with religious beliefs but also with specific religious institutions and practices played a crucial role in Seoljam Kim Siseup’s life. For example, he looked critically at the feasibility and humaneness of the fundamental Buddhist prerogative of not taking a life and of not killing animals, under certain circumstances. In the final passage of his *Discussion on Being Sparing of Animals* (*Aemul ui* 愛物義)⁷ he sarcastically states, “In the Buddhist canon, not taking a life is a precept. [...] But if the people [either on account of natural disasters or a bad government] are forced to eat one another, and then somebody comes along and says, ‘Thou shall not kill!’ now that’s a good deed, indeed!” (*Maewoldang jip*, 20:35a). Kim’s criticism of foundational Buddhist structures and rituals is visible in a variety of his writings, including *Geumo sinhwa*.⁸ The, at least apparently in Kim’s eyes, lavish materialness of Buddhist worship and the clergy’s demand for worldly riches are, for instance, intricately exposed in the collection’s final tale, “Report of [Scholar Han] Attending a Banquet in the Dragon Palace” (Yonggung buyeon rok 龍宮赴宴錄). Here, the protagonist at one point requests to be shown around the realm of the Dragon King, an illustrious guardian deity in Buddhism, and is eventually led to the king’s storehouse of the “Seven Treasures” (Wuerthner 2020, 117). These *chilbo* 七寶 (C. *qibao*; generally understood to include gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, pearl, red corral, and agate) were votive offerings by pious laypeople to temples or monks—the Buddhist institutions and representatives, in turn, made substantial economic profit through the donation of such precious objects. In the tale, Scholar Han is portrayed as being flabbergasted, overwhelmed upon

also available at <http://db.itkc.or.kr>). For a fabulous discussion of this as well as the relationship between Kim and Nam, see Evon 2023.

7 Toward the end of his *Aemul ui*, Kim Siseup cites a passage from *Mengzi* 7A.45 (where it says that, “They [the Confucian gentlemen] are benevolent [K. *in*] toward the people, and then are sparing [K. *ae*] of animals”), and therefore I have rendered the term *aemul* (C. *aiwu*) in accordance with this source. In a Buddhist sense, the term could be translated as “caring for/loving all creatures,” i.e., treating all sentient being with compassion and refraining from killing and eating them, but this clearly was not what Kim Siseup appears to say.

8 All translations from *Geumo sinhwa* derive from my copiously annotated full translation of the work, *Tales of the Strange by a Korean Confucian Monk. Kūmo sinhwa by Kim Sisūp* (Wuerthner 2020).

seeing the enormousness of the Buddhist deity's depot that is bursting with treasures offered up by average people and believers hoping to acquire merit and favor from the dragon (who was considered the main god in charge of rain, a vital resource for an agricultural society). In this passage of *Geumo sinhwa*, the author, himself an impoverished mountain-man, appears to sneer at the demand for worldly commodities with high economic value by representatives of a religion that explicitly ought to reject such mundane riches.

In terms of his objection to specific Buddhist rituals, sources suggest that Seoljam Kim Siseup disagreed with the deeply rooted Buddhist funerary custom of cremation (Wuerthner 2020, 73), and his opposition to Buddhist rituals surrounding death is also visible in *Geumo sinhwa*. In the collection's fourth tale, "Gazetteer of the Southern Continent Yeombu" (Nam Yeombu-ju ji 南炎浮洲志), a story dealing with a conversation about religion, philosophy, and statecraft carried out between the human protagonist Scholar Pak, who travels to the Buddhist underworld in a dream, and King Yama, the ruler of the dead, Kim equates Buddhism with disorder and chaos, portraying it as equal to the story's overall setting—hell. Confucianism, on the other hand, stands for consistency and order, and in an ironic twist, this very notion is embodied by Yama, a Buddhist god here flipped into a starch-Confucian, who belittles Jutan's teachings as wild words designed to control the inferior, those who are (unlike Confucians) foolish enough to easily believe the cultish gibberish. Yama, who proclaims to have become ruler over the compassionless Buddhist netherworld solely on account of his undying loyalty towards his own king during his human life, constantly negates core Buddhist beliefs and lambasts Buddhist traditions and rituals, especially those related to his own domain: death. When their discussion touches on the subject of allegedly quasi-mandatory practices concerned with the dead in contemporaneous Joseon under Sejo's rule—the tale is set at the outset of the reign of the Chenghua Emperor of Ming (r. 1464–1487), i.e., the heyday of Sejo's reign from a Korean perspective—Scholar Pak particularly criticizes the forty-nine-day period in which the bereaved are to hold lavish rituals and make wasteful offerings to influence the process of the ten kings passing judgement on the departed soul. Yama, who is traditionally counted among these ten underworld rulers, here proclaims to have never even heard of any such kings. These Buddhist funerary rites, which became relevant only as late as the early Joseon (Vermeersch 2014, 23), are in Scholar Pak's account portrayed as synonymous with indecent exposure, disrupting

noise, pollution, and (from a Confucian perspective) appallingly lewd disorder. It is interesting to note that his words comply with the fourth chapter of Zhu Xi's pivotal set of ritual prescriptions *Master Zhu's Family Rituals* (*Zhuzi jiali* 朱子家禮), which deals with funerary rites, and especially the subsection "Do not Perform Buddhist Services" (Buzuo foshi 不作佛事). In this part of the *Family Rituals*, a book that was first printed in Joseon in 1403 and hereafter played a key role in the spreading of Confucian rites into people's everyday lives,⁹ Zhu Xi warns of socially disruptive Buddhist beliefs such as the prospect of a speedy rebirth in the Heavenly Halls or the Earthen Purgatories depending on the quantity of offerings made by the bereaved during the "seven-seven" period (Ebrey 1991, 79). Yet the passages from "Nam Yeombu-ju ji" can also be brought in line with some of Kim's own non-fictional writings. For instance, in his text *On Funerals: 10th Article* (*Sangjang jesip* 喪葬第十), Kim equally criticizes raucous, overcrowded Buddhist ceremonies for the dead, asking, "How then could there be a commotion of bells, drums, and all sorts of cymbals disturbing the soul [of the deceased father] as it is right by [the mourning son's] side?" (*Maewoldang jip*, 17:37a).

Next to funerary rites performed by the bereaved, in *Geumo sinhwa* Kim also draws critical attention to heterodox burial-processes. In the first tale, "Account of a Jeopo-Game at Manbok Temple" (Manbok-sa jeopo gi 萬福寺樗蒲記), we find the procedure of *gasa* 假男, i.e., the process of first placing a corpse in a temporary grass- or pit-grave and later holding a secondary burial, for which the corpse would be moved to a permanent site after completed purification caused by the "de-fleshing of the bones" (Horlyck 2014, 90). This long-standing Buddhist practice—which, according to Yi I's biography, Kim Siseup ironically was later subjected to himself (*Yulgok jeonseo*, 14:27a)¹⁰—was popular in early Joseon times (Vermeersch 2014, 25; 29; 52n41), and often temples would be used for the preliminary resting places (Horlyck 2014, 90). In "Manbok-sa jeopo gi," the female protagonist is the ghost of a young woman killed during the raids of the seaborne Japan-based marauders in late Goryeo (918–1392). On account of war and turmoil, her parents performed the *gasa*-practice and provisionally buried her in the

9 For the introduction and diffusion of *Zhuzi jiali* in Korea, see Chang 2010, 183–206.

10 *Yulgok jeonseo* 栗谷全書 (Sejong University Central Library, #811.97-Yi I-Yul, 1814, also available at <http://db.itkc.or.kr>).

mountains near a sequestered monastery called Boryeon-sa. Her violent death notwithstanding, it is especially the temporary burial in the wilderness that causes her to be trapped in an intermediate sphere devoid of meaning between our world and the dark realms. While all around her in the real world flowers bloom and fall away as waters and clouds rush by without ever returning to their original place to be reborn,¹¹ she is caught in a gloomy, dull state of limbo, and it is only after the male protagonist Scholar Yang has performed a secondary burial at the end of the story (infused with heterodox practices such as the killing of sacrificial animals and the burning of paper money, which Kim Siseup equally rejected) (*Maewoldang jip*, 17:37b) that she can finish her process of reincarnation. She is subsequently reborn, one must note, as a boy in another country, which implies that all connections with the protagonist are severed and that Scholar Yang is left with nothing.

In the collection's second tale, "Biography of Scholar Yi who Peered over the Wall" (Yi-saeng gyujang jeon 李生窺牆傳), yet another Buddhist burial practice—while admittedly not explicitly written out—is alluded to. In a climactic scene, the female protagonist Miss Choe is slain by a Chinese Red Turban warrior after having fought off a sexual assault by the foreign aggressor, choosing death over defilement. After murdering the girl, the Red Turban rebel—the member of a movement which traced its origins to a Buddhist monk by the name of Peng Yingyu 彭瑩玉 and may therefore have appeared to Kim Siseup as an ideal group to produce such a barbarous antagonist—dismembers her dead body. Importantly, after this act of excessive killing, the villain leaves her cut-up corpse at the scene of the slaying, exposing it to both elements and beasts. Yet it is not primarily the heinous murder which later burdens the soul of Miss Choe after her return from the dead into the arms of Scholar Yi, but the fact that her remains are yet unburied (Wuerthner 2020, 99; 101). It appears plausible that Kim Siseup used the drastic postmortem treatment of the body of Miss Choe—the virtuous daughter of a noble house and the faithful wife of a young Confucian official, a woman who, in accordance with ultra-conservative Neo-Confucian positions on the subject of female chastity, guards her integrity with death—to critically hint at another traditional Buddhist burial practice, namely that of leaving the corpse at an isolated, open place,

covering it with nothing but straw or twigs, thereby having it exposed for the flesh to decay and eventually collecting merely the "purified" bones for a much later burial (Vermeersch 2014, 30). According to *Master Zhu's Family Rituals*, in the Confucian funerary process the body was to be buried after three months at the latest, and not unprotected but in a coffin (Ebrey 1991, 67; 72). Hence, for contemporaneous Confucian readers of the tale, and here specifically younger to middle-aged ones who in all likelihood were still in the early stages of married life themselves, the repeated mentioning of an exemplary wife's body-parts being intentionally left to rot in the open for a span of twelve years must have felt quite appalling. And again, Kim's fictional- and non-fictional writings can be brought into accord, for he treats this Buddhist burial process in his *Funerals*: surely aiming to shock potentially older Confucian readers, who are more likely to have personally experienced the death of a parent, Kim here specifically speaks of a *father's* dead body being subject to the "wind burial" (*pungjang* 風葬; also referred to as *yajang* 野葬, "wilderness burial") procedure, thereby depicting Buddhist ways as contravening the most fundamental human norms:

Those who held [Buddhist] funerals in ancient times would cover [the corpse] with straw and just leave it out in the open fields. Foxes and weasels would gnaw on it, flies and horseflies would suck on it, and if [the deceased's] son passed by, he would stare at it in horror, his forehead drenched in [cold] sweat, because he simply could not bear to look at his father's bones being exposed in such a way. (*Maewoldang jip*, 17:36b)

Rounding off the collection's ghost-lover section, the third tale "Travel Record of a Drunken Excursion to Bubyek Pavilion" (Chwiyu Bubyek-jeong gi 醉遊浮碧亭記) likewise features a short funeral-scene at the end. After the male protagonist Scholar Hong has passed away, it says that "His body lay in state for several days, but his facial color did not change. People believed that he had met an immortal and said that he had shed his lifeless human body to become an immortal himself." (Wuerthner 2020, 114) Lying-in-state periods of multiple days, during which the dead body could be observed, were part of Buddhist funerary procedures. A three-day laying-out period was likewise included in Confucian rituals, but through *Master Zhu's Family Rituals*, the actual procedure was very strictly regulated (Ebrey 1991, 74), both to prevent inappropriate behavior by outsiders as well as pollution and the possible transmission of

11 For the Neo-Confucian critique of the Buddhist doctrine of transmigration, see Muller 2015, 56.

diseases. It was clear to Confucians that the natural process after death led to decay (*Maewoldang jip*, 17:37a), and therefore the lying-in-state procedure was an intimate gathering. Against this backdrop, it may be hypothesized that Scholar Hong's corpse not putrefying, and random "people" (i.e., not close family members but gawking onlookers) standing nearby, gossiping about the dead body's strange condition, must have been read as the depiction of a preposterous spectacle to conservative Neo-Confucians.

In comparison to the other deaths depicted in *Geumo sinhwa*, Scholar Pak's passing at the end of "Nam Yeombu-ju ji" takes place in an orderly, dignified fashion. After having awoken from his Buddhist nightmare, he is convinced that his encounter with Yama was real and that he shall pass away before too long. Thus, when he falls ill a few months later, he does not cling to life by calling on charlatans or shamans but accepts his call and transforms, to eventually rule over the benighted in their Buddhist hell.

Lust, Fame, and Deepest Misery: Preventing Unhappy Confucians from Plunging into Heterodoxy

The Neo-Confucian pioneers Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi considered Buddhism as dangerous to the uninitiated, and Zhu Xi likewise remarked that, "The Western teachings of dependent origination and karma have excited and awakened a crowd of fools and have now been long disseminated in the world" (Muller 2015, 73). Yet especially Cheng Yi, who (like Kim Siseup himself) had failed Confucian examinations at one point in his life (the palace examinations of 1059) and had hereafter stopped trying for a degree (Bol 1992, 300), also saw the danger that even the brightest minds could potentially be lured into religion, which would then result in a shortage of able Confucians to run the government and ultimately lead to the demise of state structures. The Chengs' anti-Buddhist polemics were a reaction to contemporaneous developments in Song China, where the educated elites were often enthusiasts of Chan (Meditation School) Buddhism (Brook 1993, 58–59). In Northern Song there existed a tension, friction in the upper levels of society, which in turn led to the production of philosophical texts by intellectuals who reacted to the conflict and through writing strove to lessen or even isolate Buddhism's influence within the elite. Equally, the Buddhist-Confucian conflict may be viewed as a

primary impetus for the creation of writings of literature and thought in early Joseon. Regarding such issues as the elite tolerance and official endorsement of Buddhism, Kim Siseup may have recognized parallels between his own age and that of the Northern Song philosophers, and like the "Two Cheng" whom he revered so much, Kim tackled this subject with writing, the means of expression he knew best.

In "Nam Yeombu-ju ji," King Yama clearly polemicizes against Buddhism as a basis of the state, and his stance—theorized here as reflecting Seoljam's own critical view—can be brought in line with both foundational Neo-Confucian texts as well as Kim's own non-fictional writings. In *Critique of Heterodox Teachings* (*Idan byeon* 異端辨), Kim Siseup's very own take on such Neo-Confucian anti-Buddhist model-texts as the chapter "On Heterodox Teachings" (Yiduan) from *Jinsilu*, or the section "Critique to Expose Heterodox Teachings" (Byeok idan-ji byeon 闢異端之辨) from the powerful statesman Jeong Dojeon's 鄭道傳 (1342–1398) *Array of Critiques of Buddhism* (*Bulssi jappyeon* 佛氏雜辨) (Muller 2015, 80–81), Kim makes it clear that Confucians must take heed and guard against religion, lest a crack may open through which the heretics can infiltrate the core of the state and influence the ruler (*Maewoldang jip*, 20:28b). Citing Cheng Hao, in *Critique of Heterodox Teachings* Kim warns of the seductive potential of the Buddhists' "clever speech" for the uneducated masses, but also of its potential to plant a harmful seed in the minds of cultured Neo-Confucians. He offers several reasons why high-minded Neo-Confucians may be tempted to "throw themselves" (*tu* 投) into heterodoxy:

If there is an attained [Confucian] man who exhausts the principle by studying and fulfilling nature, and who exposes [Buddhism's] outlandishness, he will not drown therein! Yet if there is an attained [Confucian] man or high-minded scholar who actually does drown therein, that may have happened out of unhappiness. But what could have caused this unhappiness? [Confucians] may throw themselves into [heterodoxy] because the country is in peril or they themselves are worn out; because their ambition is great but their talents meager; because the situation is dire or the state of affairs desperate; because their spirit and moral principles have become listless; because they were banished or are living in anger and regret—all of this can make a high-minded, enlightened [Confucian] act this way [and plunge into heterodoxy]. (*Maewoldang jip*, 20:28a)

Clearly, Kim here writes from personal experience. Again, with Cheng Hao as his frame of reference and in a matter-of-fact manner, in his *Introduction to Teacher Mingdao Cheng* he goes one step further by elucidating the negative consequences that such a large-scale outflow of “unhappy Confucians” is bound to have on the state:

Without True Confucians, all under Heaven will be thrown into chaos, for there won't be anyone left who knows anything about it [the practice of good government] anymore. When [improper] human desires become unrestrained, the Principle of Heaven will be destroyed!

(*Maewoldang jip*, 20:29a)

Ergo, in Kim's mind, the exodus of “unhappy Confucians” into seemingly soothing Buddhism needed to be stopped and prevented. And to avert possible social turmoil and the collapse of political order, not only older, higher-up Confucians but those of all ages and life-situations needed guidance.

Viewed in the framework of *Geumo sinhwa*, this figure of the “wavering Confucian” is embodied perfectly by Scholar Pak at the beginning of “Nam Yeombu-ju ji,” for he initially appears as a high-minded yet unsuccessful scholar on the verge of succumbing to heterodoxy himself. In the human world he is under the influence of Buddhist acquaintances and even writes a *Discussion on the One Principle* (*Illi ron* 一理論), a Neo-Confucian manifesto in the tradition of the Cheng brothers and Jeong Dojeon. In this *Discussion* Pak stresses the role of *li* 理 (K. *ri*; principle) in guiding and serving as the root for all things and criticizing the Buddhist idea of two levels of reality, to convince himself to not be won over by his Buddhist friends' ideas of karma, or their flamboyant stories of ghosts and spirits, Heavenly Halls and Earthen Purgatories. Yet only when he awakes in the second reality, meets King Yama, and actually gets to experience a realm originally under Buddhism dominion, does he fully grasp what a fiery hellhole of anarchy would open up if the Buddhists were in charge. Initially, Scholar Pak is shown as a mere shadow of an ideal Confucian superior man, who, according to *Mengzi* 3B:2, never bends to awe and might. While in the human world Pak does refuse to be browbeaten, when he awakes in hell and comes face to face with what he initially perceives to be a menacing Buddhist underworld guardian, he instantly throws himself onto the ground, trembling with fear, and submissively begs for leniency and forgiveness though

having done nothing wrong. Yet upon seeing the Confucian hunched up “like a chiming-stone,” this beastly gatekeeper of hell immediately scolds the scholar, reminding him that a cultured Confucian gentleman ought to be steadfast and stand upright even in the face of authority and adversity (Wuerthner 2020, 117). Certainly meant to represent wimpy Confucians bowing to Sejo's might, in the ensuing scene Scholar Pak yet again kowtows to what he believes to be the Buddhist god Yama but is reprimanded once again, as the core-Confucian king appeals to his honor and self-respect as a Neo-Confucian intellectual, saying, “As a nobleman who understands the principle, why would you bend your body to awe and might?” (Wuerthner 2020, 118). It is only then that Pak regains his composure, comes to his senses, and straightens—essentially just like the positive mighty spirits/deities (*sin* 神) spoken of by Yama which, different from the ghosts (*gwi* 鬼) that are blocked by desolate frustration, can right themselves even after having been bent. The gatekeeper and King Yama's admonitions rekindle his Confucian pride and identity, perhaps even an “us vs. them”-spirit. In the end, Pak is even enthroned as the next king of hell, becoming Yama's Confucian successor. This final scene's message is clear: if unhappy Confucians do not bend over but straighten out and face menacing Buddhist powers head-on, they will prevail, and after meeting a virtuous king, will be rewarded for their correctness in the end.

Scholar Pak (perhaps a figure representing Kim Siseup as a young man) is thus saved by King Yama (possibly the aged author's alter-ego), but the male characters from the other four tales are not quite so lucky, for they get to meet the real representatives of Buddhism and Daoism during their respective netherworld experiences. At first, these men are aspiring young model Confucians on their way to become productive members of the government and society. Once they come into contact with the transcendental, however, their intellects, spirits, and judgements are corrupted or deadened by empty pleasures, gratifications, or flattery. In his more formalized non-fictional writings, Kim Siseup time and again mentions that improper desires and aspirations, if not satisfied, ultimately lead to unhappiness, which in turn can cause Confucians to seek solace in the hollow promises of religion. Similar to the *Jinsilu*, where moral contamination through the arousal of desire or ambition is warned against in 2.8 and 2.85 (Hejtmanek 2013, 21), in *Geumo sinhwa* lust, yearning, or the craving for praise also open the crack through which the harmful supernatural creeps into the lives of the male protagonists.

There is, for instance, Scholar Yang from “Manbok-sa jeopo gi,” who at the outset of the tale is shown lodging in a ramshackle temple named Manbok-sa, perhaps as part of his leisure travel, perhaps to study for the civil service examinations in the solitude of a mountain monastery (which both actually were vogues of the Goryeo period that continued into the early decades of the Joseon dynasty), or perhaps because he, too, is on the verge of joining the monastic order. Scholar Yang is introduced to the reader as “yet unmarried,” and his opening poem, in which he bemoans that the moonlit springtime night shall pass in vain while wondering where a beautiful girl might be blowing the flute (in classical Chinese literature, flutes can be taken as phallic symbols, while the blowing of flutes often alludes to sexual intercourse), leaves no doubt as to which kind of desires are on the young man’s mind. Astonishingly, his lustful poetic prayer is answered by no other than the Buddha himself, who calls out to him from the heavens, saying, “If you want to obtain a good mate, why worry that it might not be achieved?” (Wuerthner 2020, 74). The sarcasm of having the Buddha, the “Emperor of Enlightenment,” act as a scheming matchmaker who eventually tricks the scholar by hooking him up not with a real woman but a dead person’s ghost, can hardly be denied. The ensuing unnatural sexual encounter between the human and the ghost,¹² by means of which the Confucian’s immoral thirst is quenched, is depicted as undignified and coarse, too, for it takes place stealthily, hastily in a “very narrow shack” at the end of an abandoned corridor in a remote corner of the decaying temple compound. Moreover, when the scholar “coaxes” her, or maybe even just puts her on his shoulder to carry her into the shed (the word *do* 挑 can carry both meanings), “the girl does not make it hard” (Wuerthner 2020, 76). Leading a moral life was a central concern for Neo-Confucians, and the scholar “not being able to keep his passions at bay” must have made him look base in orthodox Confucian eyes. What is more, the girl is also driven by sexual lust, and from a Neo-Confucian

perspective, she thereby fails to safeguard her integrity. Since female chastity was one of the principal virtues for women especially advocated by conservative Neo-Confucians, her behavior must have seemed particularly scandalous to mid-fifteenth century Korean Neo-Confucian readers.¹³ Moreover, though the ghost-woman is clearly aware that their relationship violates basic Confucian norms (Wuerthner 2020, 76), she brushes all worries aside to enjoy quick gratification, exclaiming, “But let us feast and play, for this is certainly the strangest encounter of my entire life!” (Wuerthner 2020, 76).

The ghost-lover bewitches the man’s senses, and under her spell he loses the ability to trust his own judgement (Wuerthner 2020, 78). If the female characters in “Manbok-sa jeopo gi” are read against this backdrop, even the initially somewhat puzzling, in terms of plot-development seemingly unfitting appearance of the four female figures Miss Jeong, Miss O, Miss Kim, and Miss Yu begins to make sense: these women, who are described as “the girl’s kin who live together with her in the same village,” meaning that they are all ghosts of murdered women who were provisionally buried next to the female protagonist in the vicinity of Boryeon Temple, present the scholar with farewell poems which are also marked by a wealth of sexual innuendos, making the sexually unfulfilled scholar’s head spin. The dolled-up (corpses, is what they really are) Miss Jeong and Miss O wooingly whisper lines into his ear, saying, for instance, “How enviable, those lotus flowers are bound to one another by their stalks, and as night deepens they bathe in a pond as one” (Wuerthner 2020, 80). Hereupon Miss Kim even pretends to chide their verses’ licentiousness, but while coyly saying, “Do not take the flute of jade, do not play on it a second time; the flirtatious expressions, I fear the human might understand” (Wuerthner 2020, 81), she really spurs the scholar on, further arousing his desires.¹⁴

For the human Scholar Yang, who fails to take heed and whose newfound joy wills deep eternity, both delight and gratification, as well as the dream-like realm of strange phenomena and ghosts, are not profound and everlasting but insubstantial and fleeting. In the wake of his return to the real world, however,

12 Although the protagonist Scholar Yang may at this point not yet be aware of the fact that the girl is the ghost of a deceased woman, intended mid-fifteenth century readers of the *Geumo sinhwa* would certainly have been cognizant of this. For Kim Siseup incorporated a clear reference to the popular ghost-wife tale “Biography of a Lady in Green” (Lüyiren zhuan 綠衣人傳) from *New Tales for the Trimmed Lampwick* (*Jiandeng xinhua* 剪燈新話) in the Scholar’s initial poem, where it says, “At whose house does she have an appointment to tap the chess pieces aboard?” (Wuerthner 2020, 74). Hence, the unnaturalness of the two characters’ relationship must have been obvious to a knowing contemporaneous readership of “Manbok-sa jeopo gi.”

13 For a discussion of the gradual radicalization of the meaning ascribed to the idea of chastity in conservative Neo-Confucian circles, see Pang-White 2022, 50–63.

14 One must note that the character of Miss Yu, who is last in line to sing her poem, is different from the other three. She is not done up but wears plain white burial clothes, her hair is “like the flying pappus of the artemisia,” and her lyrical work is not licentious but more focused on the female protagonist’s conjugal happiness.

he is also lost to the human world. After having given in to, and thereby having been morally contaminated by, the heterodox transcendental, the Confucian scholar cannot be reintegrated into regular society but must spend the rest of his life with the senseless, trivial occupation of herb-picking before eventually disappearing into the wild.

The same holds true for Scholar Han from “Yonggung buyeon rok.” Obviously a spitting image of the author in his younger days, Scholar Han is said to have been “a talented poet in his early youth; he had been brought forth at the court, where he was praised as a *man of letters*” (Wuerthner 2020, 128). In his first depiction, this Scholar Han is shown as “sitting quietly in his living-room one night.” On the one hand, this might imply that, similar to Kim Siseup’s own path, Scholar Han’s career has stagnated that he is sitting around in idleness instead of busily working at a government office. On the other hand, Kim Siseup may have meant to indicate that Scholar Han is in the midst of a core Neo-Confucian practice designed by Cheng Hao: the meditation-like method of the examination of one’s mind-and-heart through “quiet-sitting.” By sitting quietly in reverence and moral seriousness, Neo-Confucians were to distinguish desires and intentions that served the public, common good from those that were selfish, partial, or immoral, while acting on the former and eschewing the latter (Chan 1999, 689–90). Yet for Han, serving the common good seems out of reach, and a selfish, distracting desire weighs heavily on his mind: for while all the praise of his younger years seems to have dwindled away, it is recognition of his value as a poet he craves more than anything. The loss of fame paired with a feeling of underappreciation makes him unhappy, vulnerable, and the supernatural representatives of heterodoxy—in this case messengers sent by the Dragon King—seize this opportunity to encroach upon him. These messenger-figures are intriguing, as they can offer a glimpse into the way in which Kim Siseup consciously altered underlying narrative material from the Chinese *chuangqi*-collection *Jiandeng xinhua* by Qu You 瞿佑 (1347–1428), which served as a hypotext for Kim’s Korean adaptation *Geumo sinhwa*. “Yonggung buyeon rok” is modelled after the two dragon-related *Jiandeng xinhua*-tales “Records of a Celebratory Gathering in the Water Palace” (Shuigong qinghui lu 水宮慶會錄) and “Report of a Numinous Gathering in the Dragon Hall” (Longtang linghui lu 龍堂靈會錄). Kim reworked the initial passage from “Longtang linghui lu” into the opening of his own tale (Choe 2007, 1:276) but chose to transform the Chinese Dragon King’s messengers

from “two people with the heads of fish and the bodies of ghosts” into “two court officials wearing blue robes and winged hats” (Wuerthner 2020, 128). The reason for this is evident: what Scholar Han desires is official recognition of his poetic and scholarly excellence, and whereas monstrous fish-head-envois would likely have scared him away from the supernatural, the stern figures dressed in the attire of high-ranking Chinese government officials (robes and *futou*-hats) exude such grave authority that after a feeble attempt of resistance he is swayed and cannot but accept the Dragon King’s invitation, thereby plunging headfirst into heterodoxy. And in the otherworldly dragon realm the scholar’s desire is not disappointed: the Dragon King constantly lauds him and praises his alleged literary brilliance. The ridgepole-blessing which Han is requested to write is filled to the brim with quotations from ancient, traditional models of poetry and thought, and I wonder whether a contemporaneous readership might not have taken it as cluttered and pretentious. Be that as it may, Kim informs us that “The divine king was greatly pleased” (Wuerthner 2020, 132). How overly self-confident Han is, and how desperately he longs to prove his worth, is evidenced when he produces yet another verse composition towards the end of the tale: for instead of following the model set by the three dragon kings of the rivers (they each present heptasyllabic poems of eight lines), Han writes a pentasyllabic poem of twenty rhymes in forty lines. Though the protagonist from “Shuigong qinghui lu” also writes a forty-line poem in the relevant model-scene, the Chinese tale does not feature preceding compositions by the three deities and therefore lacks the notion of the human striving to outshine the gods. That the Dragon King finally reaches his goal of converting the Confucian, of wooing him into religion, can be seen at the very end of the tale when Scholar Han, who in a Gollum-like manner hides the parting-gifts he received from the Buddhist deity and vows to never show his “precious” treasure to anyone, is said to have lost all interest in official society. Like Scholar Yang, Scholar Han, too, simply vanishes without a trace. The endings in both the first and the last tale—which could be understood as a frame of morally corrupting private desires—are generic to a certain extent (Choe 2007, 1:59), but in my mind, they do contain a sharp criticism directed at those who succeed in turning unhappy Confucians.

In his *Critique of Heterodox Teachings*, Kim Siseup suggests that Confucians may plunge into heterodoxy if their lives are full of regret. Grief and remorse also shape Scholar Yi from “Yi-saeng gyujang jeon” after the death of his wife. Initially, Yi is portrayed as an exceptionally talented, ambitious young

Confucian who constantly has “books tucked under his arm” and “even reads poetry by the roadside when on his way to the [Confucian] National Academy” (Wuerthner 2020, 88). After having overcome adversity and social boundaries in marrying Miss Choe, “Scholar Yi passes the civil service examinations, ascends to high office, and his good reputation is even heard of at court” (Wuerthner 2020, 98). Yet when the Red Turbans attack the city of Gaeseong in the year 1361, havoc erupts. Yi and his wife try to make their escape, but while “Scholar Yi ran as fast as he could and managed to shake off [the pursuer], his wife was captured by the enemy” (Wuerthner 2020, 98). Frightful by nature, Yi abandons both his parents and his wife, and, seemingly caught in a frenzy, runs away into the wilderness, solely focused on saving his own skin. Naturally, when he later discovers that his parents have died and his wife has been murdered, he is bitterly ashamed of himself and, regretting his cowardice, plunges into a deep depression as he sits in the small tower alone and “like a lump of earth” (Wuerthner 2020, 98). Again, it is at this very moment of deepest misery and weakness that the unorthodox otherworldly approaches, for suddenly he hears “the sound of footsteps from the corridor below” (Wuerthner 2020, 98) and then encounters his dead wife’s ghost. Grief quickly turns into yearning, the desire for a second chance—one last opportunity to make up for his mistakes and live the life of long-awaited conjugal harmony. His wish is granted, yet as he slips deeper and deeper into the realm of the supernatural, he, too, loses touch with the real world to the point where he locks himself up and shuns the world (Wuerthner 2020, 100). Under the otherworldly spell, Scholar Yi comes to disregard his intimate family and even abandons the king, committing (in Confucian eyes and against the backdrop of such texts as *Array of Critiques of Buddhism*) a truly unforgivable crime (Muller 2015, 66).

Letting the unnatural in thus leads to his ruin, and in this he matches Scholar Hong from “Chwiyu Bubyek-jeong gi.” At the outset of his narrative, Hong represents a kind of Confucian we cannot find in any of the other tales: he is a vivacious, good looking ladies’ man with a lust for life, many friends, and lots of money. Originally from Gaeseong, Hong travels to Pyeongyang for the mid-autumn full moon festivities, explicitly “bringing cloth to exchange for thread” (Wuerthner 2020, 103), meaning that he intends to have a party and have affairs with women (such as the courtesans who make eyes at him and his friends upon their arrival in the Western Capital). Scholar Hong, however, is not as shallow as he may seem at first glance. I have elsewhere

written on his *hwaigu* 懷古 (meditations on the past)-poetry and the criticism of contemporaneous issues contained therein, but it is important to point out that Hong is deeply dissatisfied with the political situation of the dynasty under Sejo (this tale is set “at the beginning of the reign of Emperor Tianshun [of Ming],” who reigned from 1457 to 1463). If viewed against the backdrop of Kim’s list of reasons why Confucians may plunge into unhappiness from his *Critique of Heterodox Teachings*, Scholar Hong represents the attained Confucian man who is in distress because “the country is in peril” (*Maewoldang jip*, 20:28a). During a time when the dynasty has been seized by an usurper, Scholar Hong longs for the legitimate rulers of antiquity and meets, hardly surprising, a Daoist immortal who claims to not only be the last direct descendant of the legendary culture-bringer Gija 箕子 but also a close confidant of Korea’s mythical earliest progenitor Dangun 檀君, i.e., the two most legitimate Korean rulers of all. Eventually, after the Daoist immortal has flown off into the morning sky, Scholar Hong’s “mind is occupied with the strange encounter,” and when he finally “climbed back into his skiff, he felt miserable and gloomy” (Wuerthner 2020, 114). Much like Scholar Yi, a cheerful, inquisitive young man who at the end of his narrative “remembered [his ghost-wife] with such longing that he fell ill and died within a few months” (Wuerthner 2020, 102), Scholar Hong, too, is not immune to the disease that is religion,¹⁵ for he contracts a “consumptive, weakening disease” (Wuerthner 2020, 114), and this may certainly be understood as a fictional representation of an idea contained already in *Array of Critiques of Buddhism*, where Jeong Dojeon writes, “The words of the Buddhists contain much that is harmful. [...] This is a sickness at the very foundations, which cannot go untreated” (qtd. in Muller 2015, 67). Scholar Hong’s sickness, however, appears untreatable—eventually, in feverish dreams he is approached by a messenger of the Jade Emperor, the highest deity in Daoism, who orders him to “subordinate himself under the command of Altair” (Wuerthner 2020, 114), thereby essentially taking Hong’s life. The Jade Emperor likewise plays a part in the death of Scholar Yi (for he granted the spirit of Yi’s dead wife to return to her husband for a period of twelve years), and thus in tales two and three the protagonists’ encounters with the Daoist transcendental end not merely in social irrelevance but in madness and *actual* death. Hence (with the

15 The claim that Buddhism and Daoism were “great diseases” was already made centuries earlier in China by, e.g., Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 (1007–1072) (Goulde 1985, 151).

exception of “Nam Yeombu-ju ji”), the way and positions in which the author decided to let the highest Buddhist and Daoist deities act in the different narratives reinforce the overall image of heterodox religion as the main cause for degeneration, a deadening of the spirit, moral deterioration, and (social) death.

The Persuasive Powers of Storytelling

Kim Siseup's concern with the as-such-perceived danger of a growing influence of religion on the government level is, in my view, closely intertwined with the times he lived in, for the mid-fifteenth century was a transitional age during which Buddhism not only thrived at the court but also still had a standing in Joseon society. After all, the dynastic divide had only occurred a few decades earlier, and rituals or traditions of pluralist Goryeo, during which Buddhism had been one pillar of society, were still ingrained in the lives of many who had grown up during the years of the Goryeo-Joseon transition. Buddhism still played an essential role in the sociocultural sphere, and maintained respectability in the upper echelons of society (Kim 2019, 296). The full Neo-Confucian transformation of Korea was yet unfinished, and Neo-Confucianism had not yet fully seized government ritual hegemony (Baker 2014, 155; 165). In this atmosphere, Kim Siseup appears to have been worried by the prospect of a Buddhist renaissance, and it is clear that in the early to mid-1460s, the assumed time of creation of *Geumo sinhwa*, such “fear” of a Buddhist resurgence on the state level was more justified than at any other stage during the Joseon dynasty. Sejo, who as an usurper-king could hardly claim authority as a legitimate Confucian ruler, openly favored Buddhism in the public and state domain: he founded Buddhist temples, treated big groups of monks to feasts at the court, sponsored large-scale vernacular Korean sutra-translation projects, and established the Gangyeong dogam 刊經都監, a court office responsible for the publication and dissemination of Buddhist texts. For someone like Kim Siseup, whose “heart was Confucian,” the danger of a complete Buddhist takeover must have felt imminent. Moreover, by the mid-fifteenth century the civil service recruitment system was producing a considerable number of scholars eligible for government service, while the number of official positions remained stable. Many qualified civil service examination-passers were thus unable to make their way into officialdom, which must have left them unhappy, and possibly leaning

towards heterodoxy as a remedy.

Generally, Kim Siseup's anti-Buddhist polemics were firmly rooted in the tradition of earlier Chinese and Korean incendiary anti-religious writings by Neo-Confucian thinkers. Yet while Zhu Xi, late Goryeo/early Joseon academicians, or also many of the historians responsible for the production of the *Veritable Records* (Kim 2019, 289–313) stuck to formalized theoretical texts designed for those highly trained in such philosophical, historiographical debates, Kim Siseup's approach appears broader, more innovative, and geared towards a more expansive target-audience than that of his precursors.

For the history of Korean literature and the narrative of its single linear teleology, his decision to create the one work which is today widely considered to have marked the beginning of classical fiction in Korea is, naturally, of tremendous importance. The *Geumo sinhwa*'s indisputable indebtedness to *Jiandeng xinhua* as well as Li Changqi's 李昌祺 (1376–1452) *Additional Tales for the Trimmed Lampwick* (*Jiandeng yuhua* 剪燈餘話) was, unavoidably, already broadly acknowledged during premodern times. Yet aside from this, since its reintroduction into Korea in the early twentieth century, Kim's collection has generally been regarded as one visionary genius's unique literary invention (Wuerthner 2020, 38); rarely has it been considered as part of a network of interlinked texts by the same author, or as the continuation of an active East Asian/Korean movement and school of thought. If, however, the five tales are placed in line with other works from Kim's oeuvre, such as the essentially content-related *Idan byeon*, *Sangjang jesip*, or *Myeongdo Jeong seonsaeng seo*, which themselves are closely interlinked with prior anti-Buddhist critiques formulated by some of the Neo-Confucian architects of the dynasty, *Geumo sinhwa* does not appear as a singular, detached literary phenomenon anymore, but rather a natural next step in Kim's endeavor to influence very specific groups of readers.¹⁶

16 Sources such as the poem *Written at the End of the First Collection* [of *Geumo sinhwa*] (*Seo gapjip-hu* 書甲集後) suggest that Kim wrote *Geumo sinhwa* in the mid-1460s when living on Mount Geumo in the vicinity Gyeongju (Wuerthner 2020, 145). In contrast, I have unfortunately not been able to date the other sources relevant for my argument. Therefore, due to the uncertainty regarding the time of creation, one may raise the objection that Kim's opinions might have changed over time, and that, consequently, the fictional and non-fictional texts are unrelated. However, if we look at autobiographical writings from which we know that they were produced decades after the supposed creation of *Geumo sinhwa*, we can find essentially the same anti-religious attitudes and ideas. For instance, in an extant sacrificial text written by Kim in the early 1480s, which is contained in *Sayings*

Kim Siseup appears to have tried to catch different kinds of readers in every literary way possible: older, more conservative readers he addressed with his non-fictional, traditional *Biographies*, *Critiques*, *Explanations*, or *Introductions*; younger, emotionally more easily stirred, perhaps struggling Confucians he may have ventured to persuade through more exciting, captivating material, his *Geumo sinhwa*. And here we could find a possible answer to the pressing question as to why Kim chose to write a piece of narrative fiction in the first place. Naturally, literature is not created in a vacuum but responds to factors such as the author's life situation, literary influences, or the sociopolitical and religious situation of the age. Kim was intimately familiar with Chinese works of prose fiction such as *Jiandeng xinhua*, and he had personally experienced the power that storytelling can have on readers, or when told orally. In the final lines of his poem *Inscribed at the End of Jiandeng xinhua* (*Je Jeondeung sinhwa-hu* 題剪燈新話後), a piece of literary criticism in verse on the content, meaning, and impact of *Jiandeng xinhua*, Kim exclaims, "To read just one tale is sufficient for me to [laughingly] open my teeth, and swept away are the lumps [of sorrow] on my breast that had been there for all my life" (*Maewoldang jip*, 4:34b). Kim understood how stories can visualize and make tangible abstract issues and how they have the power to rouse to action, or to dissuade. His role as an innovator of Korean literature could consequently be found in his recognition of the potential of fictional storytelling and his literary ability to transform Chinese source-material in such a way as to make it meaningful, relatable for a mid-fifteenth century Korean reading situation (by, for instance, choosing Korean settings for his tales). *Jiandeng xinhua* is known to have been immensely popular especially with less-established yet aspiring Confucian scholars during the latter half of the Joseon dynasty (Nam 2005, 82–84). Yet the 1559 publication of the *Annotated Edition of Jiandeng xinhua* (*Jeondeung sinhwa guhae* 剪燈新話句解), a state-sponsored, fully annotated Joseon Korean woodblock-print edition of

Jiandeng xinhua, shows that the work must already have had broad readership acceptance in earlier decades, and Kim may have geared his own work *Geumo sinhwa*, which he closely modelled after *Jiandeng xinhua*, toward these readers, too. If we move away from our somewhat awestruck present-day perception of *Geumo sinhwa* as an unrivalled masterpiece of the national Korean canon and take the possible perspective and state of mind of a *chuanqi*-literature-loving mid-fifteenth century young, unhappy Confucian reader struggling in an overly-demanding society, a reader perhaps feeling enticed by the escape-route offered by religions with a focus not on this world but the next, the image of religion and religious practices as presented in *Geumo sinhwa*, must have been eye-opening, dissuasive, and, frankly horrifying.

Geumo sinhwa can therefore be read as a piece of narrative anti-religious propaganda-fiction,¹⁷ an agenda-driven work of indoctrination meant to manipulate opinions and geared towards producing an emotional response in a specific group of contemporaneous readers who were to recognize themselves in the tales' male characters and be appalled by the narrative depiction of heterodox practices and ideas. Through the recognition-effect, brought about by the readers' horizon of knowledge concerning fundamental orthodox Neo-Confucian texts and the connection of the fictional narrative with their own reality, as well as the ensuing response of aversion towards the non-Confucian, *Geumo sinhwa* may be hypothesized to have been designed to build readership consensus after cultivating an emotional understanding of the negative effects for both the individual and the state if Confucians turn to religion. Importantly, the work is here theorized to have been designed as propaganda for Confucian readers of fiction, not as agitation for Buddhist readers who needed to be persuaded to defect to the Confucian side—for, as Philip M. Taylor (2003, 8) argues, propaganda appears most effective when it preaches to the already converted.

Conclusion

This reading of *Geumo sinhwa* as a literary tool of anti-heterodoxy persuasion is,

and *Conduct of Teachers and Friends* (*Sau myeonghaeng rok* 師友名行錄) by Nam Hyoon, Kim claims to have been misled by Buddhist beliefs and states that "in terms of deceitfulness and fabrication there is nothing like *samsāra*" (Wuerthner 2023, 63). This very same critique of the Buddhist concept of the flow of cyclic existence can also be found in "Nam Yeombu-ju ji" from *Geumo sinhwa* (Wuerthner 2020, 124). Hence, although it is certainly possible that the *Geumo sinhwa*'s time of creation differs from that of a text such as *Idan byeon*, I think that there is enough textual evidence to support the hypothesis that Kim's fictional and non-fictional writings are consistent and interconnected in terms of their purpose.

17 The term "propaganda" as defined in Taylor 2003, 6.

of course, just one among a variety of possible interpretations, yet this approach appears valid to me, because it offers new ways to meaningfully interpret plotlines, incidents, and characters in the source which at first glance seemingly disrupt the artistic whole. Moreover, we know that *Geumo sinhwa* was circulated and read in the upper echelons of society at least until the end of the sixteenth century, yet the collection apparently never caused Kim Siseup or those who later transmitted the text any trouble from the higher-up authorities. What is more, the work was printed and even officially endorsed in pre-Imjin War (1592–1598) Korea.¹⁸ This supports, in my mind, the idea that *Geumo sinhwa* was considered in line with, and quite possibly beneficial to, the post-Sejo Neo-Confucian government's plan to marginalize Buddhism on a state level for good.

And there could not have been a better author for this kind of anti-religious propaganda, because Kim possessed a level of fame, credibility, and relatability like no other. As a Confucian prodigy, who during a time of national peril had experienced personal failure at the most important stage of a young scholar's life, had thrown himself into religion and come to regret his decision, Kim was in a unique position to underpin this anti-religious literary propaganda with his widely known personal story.

This is, of course, not to say that Seoljam was not an exceptionally knowledgeable, influential Buddhist thinker who had an innovative approach with regard to such things as the Meditation School, and in some respects even blended Buddhist, Daoist, and Neo-Confucian thought. He can perhaps best be viewed as a hybrid figure in line with earlier Korean literati who saw Buddhism as antithetical to the ideals of good government but believed that it might as well continue on as a private tradition (Goulde 1985, 176). Yet in terms of Seoljam Kim Siseup's views concerning the danger of a revival of Buddhism in the public- or government sphere during this transitional age, the five short tales in *Geumo sinhwa* seem to speak volumes.

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18 For the publication of *Geumo sinhwa* and the memorialization of Kim Siseup, see Evon 2023.

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of different texts from the collected writings of Kim Siseup (dharma-name Seoljam), this article offers an against-the-grain reading of Kim's famous collection of strange tales *Geumo sinhwa* (*New Tales of the Golden Turtle*). It is hypothesized that Kim's life as well as his fictional and non-fictional literature can be viewed in the tradition of earlier Chinese and Korean anti-Buddhist Neo-Confucian thinkers such as Cheng Hao, Zhu Xi, or Jeong Dojeon. Through close-reading and by discussing such issues as funerary rites, burial practices, “unhappy” Confucians, and the persuasive power of storytelling, the author aims to show that *Geumo sinhwa* may be understood as a piece of narrative anti-religious propaganda-fiction meant to dissuade a specific 1460s younger Korean Neo-Confucian readership from turning toward seemingly soothing religion, and as an agenda-driven work designed to thwart a revival of Buddhism on the state level.

Keywords: Kim Siseup, *Geumo sinhwa*, heterodoxy, storytelling, Cheng Hao, Jeong Dojeon, anti-Buddhist propaganda

