

# The Filial Daughter of Kwaksan: Finger Severing, Confucian Virtues, and Envoy Poetry in Early Chosŏn

Wang Sixiang

Among the three cardinal human relations in Confucian morality, filiality stands out as the only one with the potential of being universally applicable. While chastity fell upon women and loyalty was meaningful for elite men, all human beings were children of some parents. This paper will investigate filiality in early Chosŏn Korea through one relatively obscure figure, Kim Sawŏl. Severing her finger and feeding it to her ailing mother, Kim's remarkable act of filial devotion earned the recognition of the Chosŏn court. Though not the only finger severer in Chosŏn, a fact of geography propelled her to renown among the generations of Ming envoys who passed by her hometown, many of whom left poems in her honor. Both the Ming envoys and the Chosŏn court, however, had to grapple with the potentially heterodox implications of her cannibalistic filial act. Not only did finger severing have resonances with Buddhist notions, local religious traditions, and fringe medical lore, but it directly contradicted classical Confucian injunctions against "self-harm." The resolution of this problem, in both the envoy poetry and the Chosŏn social context, involved reinterpretations and rewritings that converted a problematic category of behavior into symbols of a Confucian civilizing project by emphasizing the affective power of sincere filial emotion. This mechanism of conversion and accommodation may partly explain how local differences and alternative cosmologies persisted in the context of Confucian hegemony in Chosŏn Korea.

**Keywords:** Filiality, envoy poetry, cannibalism, *Samgang haengsil to*, Confucianism, early Chosŏn

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*Sixiang Wang (sw2090@columbia.edu) is a Ph.D. Candidate (History-East Asia) at Columbia University*

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## Introduction

In 1422, King Sejong (r. 1418-1450) ordered a memorial gate (*chǒngnyŏ* 旌閭) be erected in honor of a woman named Kim Sawŏl 金四月 from the Korean provincial town of Kwaksan 郭山. Kim had been brought to the court's attention because she had cured her mother of an illness through a remarkable feat of filial devotion. Learning that the pulverized bone of a living person could cure madness, she severed her own finger and fed it to her mother as medicine.<sup>1</sup> The rulers of Chosŏn Korea (1392-1910) made it a point to recognize individuals who displayed such virtues as part of a concerted effort to propagate Confucian social norms. Besides granting rewards and emoluments associated with official recognition, these rulers also included exemplary individuals in compilations of didactic texts, the *Illustrated Guide* (*Haengsil to* 行實圖) series.<sup>2</sup> These compilations honored individuals whose deeds exemplified the three cardinal human relationships (K. *samgang*, Ch. *sangang* 三綱) by demonstrating the corresponding virtues of filiality (K. *hyo*, Ch. *xiao* 孝), loyalty (K. *ch'ung*, Ch. *zhong* 忠), and chastity (K. *yŏl*, Ch. *lie* 烈; Ch. *jie* 節) in Confucian morality.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike loyalty to the state, generally the purview of elite men, and chastity, which only applied to women, filiality alone among these three had the potential to be universally relevant. In later compilations of the *Illustrated Guide*, the roster of filial children expanded to include considerable numbers of non-elites: commoners and slaves, and both married and unmarried women (Chŏng 2010, 83-89). Filiality was arguably the prime virtue in this triad, with sections devoted to its exemplars listed first in these compilations.<sup>4</sup> Not

1. *Sejong sillok* 16.18a [1422/06/27].

2. See Pak 1990 for an overview of the state reward system in the Chosŏn period. The Chosŏn court sponsored several separate editions of the *Illustrated Guide* series: *Samgang haengsil to* 三綱行實圖 (1431), *Sok Samgang haengsil to* 續三綱行實圖 (1514), *Tongguk Samgang haengsil to* 東國三綱行實圖 (1617), *Tongguk sin sok Samgang haengsil to* 東國新續三綱行實圖 (1617), and *Oryun haengsil to* 五倫行實圖 (1797).

3. The terms that fall underneath the category of “chastity” occupy different places in Chosŏn and Ming commemorative practice. The Ming distinguished between *jie* and *lie* as distinct categories and honored both with memorial gates. The first category applied to women who refused remarriage, while the latter often involved steadfast commitment to chastity demonstrated through death or self-mutilation. The early Chosŏn court, on the other hand, only commemorated “*yŏllyŏ*” women who “have revealed really extraordinary chastity” (Lee 2009, 138-139); Jungwon Kim also distinguishes between Chinese and Korean usage of these terms (Kim 2007, 17-18; 41).

4. The male gendering of loyalty can be seen in the circuitous manner in which the courtesan Non'gae 論介 came to be commemorated as an exemplar of “loyalty.” During the Imjin War, she

surprisingly, the celebration of filial virtue played a pivotal role in the early Chosŏn state's project of Confucianization. Filiality manifested as a central concern accompanied shifts in mourning and burial rituals and notions of paternal descent, a gradual process that extended well into the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup>

The case of Kim Sawŏl offers another perspective into how filiality fit into this process of Confucianization. While the Chosŏn state could appeal to the Confucian canon to justify its encouragement of Confucian family rituals, her act of finger severing, even for an ailing parent, fell outside the purview of classical prescription. When Sawŏl was finally included in the *Illustrated Guide* compilation in 1617, she was not alone. Of the 706 filial children included, there were two hundred others who, like she, had severed a finger to feed to a sick parent.<sup>6</sup> Sawŏl's distinction from these other figures is due partly to an accident of geography. Imperial envoys from Ming China (1368-1644) traveling between Beijing and Seoul regularly journeyed through her hometown of Kwaksan, a stop along the way through P'yŏngan province. On his way back to Beijing, the 1449 envoy Ni Qian 倪謙 (1415-1479) noticed, alongside the road,

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killed an enemy general by embracing him and jumping into a river. Dying along with him, she was remembered for this act of sacrifice. According to Jung Ji Young, a combination of her social background and gender may have excluded her from the *Tongguk sin sok Samgang haengsil to* (hereafter the TGSS) compiled in 1617. The compilation, dividing virtuous individuals into "loyal subjects" (*ch'ungsin* 忠臣), "filial children" (*hyoja* 孝子), and "chaste women" (*yŏllyŏ* 烈女), left no room for *Non'gae*, who, as a woman, did not fit the category of a loyal minister, and as a courtesan, could not be considered "chaste." The state recognition of *Non'gae* as a figure of loyalty did not come until the 18th century, after significant changes in how her story came to be interpreted and remembered (Jung 2009, 161-176). The TGSS does include examples of non-elites of both genders in its section for loyal subjects. These cases all date from the Imjin War and involve male and female slaves dying for their masters. In such cases, the master-slave relationship serves as an extension of the ruler-subject relationship. Notably, none of these cases involve loyalty directly to the state; neither are there elite women represented in this category. For examples of female slaves, see TGSS, *ch'ungsin* to 1:81-85. The TGSS from 1617 will be the primary edition of the *Illustrated Guide* series cited and referenced in this paper. As the largest compilation of these illustrated guides, it alone contains 706 out of 746 cases of "filial children" documented in these series (Yi 2004, 203); Chŏng Ilyŏng has reviewed scholarship on these texts and written a comprehensive study on the TGSS (2010, 70-74). Kim Sawŏl appears in the TGSS, v. 3.23.

5. Martina Deuchler has discussed the role of the Chosŏn state extensively, noting the importance of local traditions in this process. Though the state hailed the observation of three-years mourning as a "universal" expression of filial emotion, its actual practice was contingent on social background (1992, 192-196). For a succinct appraisal of the implications of Deuchler's research for understanding changing notions of filiality, see Haboush 1995, 130-133.

6. The increased scope of the TGSS also extended to the celebration of female chastity, and ought to be understood in the context of rebuilding state authority and social order after the Imjin Wars (1592-1598). The commemoration of virtuous acts became more prevalent after the Imjin Wars (Lee 2009, 144-153).

a stone tablet inscribed with the words, “The Gate of the Filial Girl, Sawöl” (*Hyonyö Sawöl chi mun* 孝女四月之門). Ni wrote the following of this encounter:

Since it is my duty to discover good deeds, how can I not have a single word to eulogize this? Now, if those gentlemen who have accompanied me could write a poem in response, it would do justice to the virtue of the East [i.e. Korea.]

The poem Ni composed, and his exhortation to follow his example, helped inaugurate a tradition in Chosŏn-Ming diplomacy. Though not the first Ming literatus to exchange poems with Koreans, Ni Qian’s eagerness for recognition outstripped that of his predecessors. He was the first to publish his envoy poetry in Ming China. His anthology, the *Liaohai Compilation* (*Liaohai bian* 遼海編), published in 1464, helped bring Kim Sawöl to the attention of future Ming envoys, who in turn also wrote poems on Sawöl as they passed her memorial gate. The Chosŏn court’s own poetry anthologies, *The Collection of Brilliant Flowers* (*Hwanghwajip* 皇華集), a series that collected the poems of Ming envoys, catalyzed these interactions by documenting the poetic accomplishments of their predecessors.<sup>7</sup>

Kwaksan thus became a place where subsequent Ming envoys rendered homage to the filial Sawöl, one of the most persistent subjects of their envoy poetry. These anthologies fostered a sense of tradition, embedded in space and through time, providing a textual repertoire of poetic knowledge. The 1488 envoy Dong Yue 董越 (1430-1502), inspired by Ni’s poems, declared his hope to “follow the emotions and thoughts of those before” (欲繼前人覺思遲), and retraced the footsteps of his predecessor:

I once read Lord Wenxi’s (i.e. Ni Qian) poem of the filial daughter  
And I knew that the Eastern Kingdom cared for the people’s mores.  
Her life and death has become a dream for a thousand years;

7. “Poem of the Filial Daughter of Kwaksan” 孝女四月詩 in the *Liaohai bian* 遼海編 and the 1449 *Hwanghwajip* 皇華集 in the *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 4 四庫全書存目叢書 (集部) (hereafter, SKCM) v. 301.242b-243a: 茲予職當咨諏善道 可無一言紀詠之乎 凡我同行諸公 倘惠和答 亦足成東方之美也。 Editions of the *Hwanghwajip* (hereafter HHJ or *Brilliant Flowers*) will be cited according to the year of the envoy mission it documents followed by its location in the SKCM. The HHJ was usually compiled shortly after the departure of a Ming envoy and some of the printed copies were sent to China. The SKCM version contains editions of the HHJ from the early Chosŏn collected in Chinese libraries, but is incomplete. For editions of the HHJ not included in the SKCM, I cite from the Berkeley Asami Collection. The version in the Asami Collection is a 1773 Chosŏn compilation and includes most extant versions of the HHJ. There are also copies of both sets in the Kyujanggak archives, but the SKCM and the Asami editions are more widely available. For an overview of available editions of the HHJ, see Du 2010, 274-280; Kim 2008.

To commemorate her there still stands a three-foot stele.<sup>8</sup>

With subsequent Ming envoys returning to the locations visited by their predecessors and composing poems inspired by what had been written before, poems written about Sawöl numbered over a hundred (including poems written by Chosŏn officials) in these poetry anthologies.<sup>9</sup>

This number was only a small subset of the entire corpus of three thousand or so Chosŏn-Ming envoy poems contained in the *Brilliant Flowers* (Sin 2005, 23). Numerous other locations visited by Ming envoys overshadowed Sawöl's memorial site. Notable sites such as Kija's tomb, Tangun's shrine, Koryŏ's old capital, scenic vistas, and the Confucian Temple came to be featured in Ni Qian's travelogue and the writings of subsequent Ming envoys (Du 2010, 55-65). Although Ni portrayed his encounter with Sawöl's gate as serendipitous, one cannot rule out the possibility that it was planned all along. A whole entourage of Chosŏn officials—welcoming emissaries, interpreters, court physicians, and local bureaucrats—had guided, and guarded, him during his sojourn in the country. Other destinations visited along his trip had been carefully selected to represent Chosŏn's culture and history. Ni's hosts may have very well been cognizant of the potential symbolic resonances Sawöl's memorial had, and chose it deliberately for inclusion in the Ming envoy's tour.

Whether or not they were initially planned, these visits to Sawöl's gate made it unique among the many such gates spread across Chosŏn because it was the only one that became a site of homage for Ming envoys. The Chosŏn interpreter Ō Sukkwŏn 魚叔權 (fl. 1525-1554), noting that “Chinese envoys all wrote eulogies for her as they came and went,” worried about the removal of her dilapidated stone stele by local bureaucrats, fearing the Chinese would no longer believe that the “Koreans [paid] due respect to fidelity and righteousness.”<sup>10</sup> Sharing Ō's concerns, So Seyang 蘇世讓 (1486-1562), as part of a comprehensive plan for the entertainment of Ming envoys, proposed to rebuild the stele at Kwaksan with a better stone and place it in a more visible location, in addition to decorating sites frequented by Ming envoys with steles and plaques containing their writing. While the celebration of Ming envoy writing reassured these visitors of Chosŏn's desire to maintain friendly ties with the Ming court,

8. HHJ 1488 Asami v. 6, 11.2a-11.2b: 曾讀文信孝女詩 又知東國重民彝 死生已落千年夢 表樹猶存三尺碑.

9. I count forty-seven individual poems by eighteen Ming envoys and fifty-seven by fourteen Korean officials. Sin Taeyŏng has translated several of these poems into Korean and discussed them in the broader context of the HHJ (Sin 2005, 126-136).

10. Ō Sukkwŏn 魚叔權, *P'aegwan chapki* 裨官雜記 v. 4 in Lee 1989, 232: 人豈謂我國能尚節義乎.

an act of remarkable filial devotion tangibly demonstrated the success of Chosŏn's civilizing project to Ming observers.<sup>11</sup> The memorial gate of the filial daughter evolved into a key site in the Chosŏn court's self-representation to Ming envoys, and granted Kim Sawŏl an alternate literary life in their envoy poetry.

The spatial significance of Sawŏl's gate as a site of Chosŏn-Ming diplomacy illustrates that the value of Sawŏl and her gate was not simply a question of how frequently they appear in envoy poetry.<sup>12</sup> Kim Sawŏl's presence reveals relationships between a series of important historical processes and intellectual concerns that emerge in Chosŏn and Ming history. While the Chosŏn state's commemoration of Sawŏl's filial act captured its efforts at spreading Confucian social norms, Ming envoys took her to symbolize the extension of Ming's civilizing influence over Korea.

In these poems, the meaning of filiality also came to be unraveled and repackaged. Sawŏl's celebrated deed sat uncomfortably with classical notions of filial devotion that emphasized the preservation of one's body. With tenuous roots in the Confucian tradition, acts of filial cannibalism like that of Kim Sawŏl were "tainted" by popular and religious practices and were likely inspired by discredited medical practices. Her eulogizers grappled with these problems through a series of rhetorical interventions that situated Sawŏl within a broader discourse of filial daughters, anchoring her to canonical models. By emphasizing what JaHyun Kim Haboush has called the "affective power of filial emotion," where utmost sincerity could inspire "sympathetic resonance between human endeavor and natural reaction," these poems also reinvented and repackaged the filial daughter of Kwaksan into a new narrative that circumvented problems of orthodoxy (Haboush 1995, 149-175; Sibau 2011, 38).

When the Chosŏn and Ming courts appropriated filial children such as Sawŏl within their own social vision, they had to tacitly accept the diverse circumstances that may have initially motivated such actions. Within these poems, the actions of Kim Sawŏl, the filial daughter of Kwaksan, became a site

11. *Chungjong sillok* 90.75b [1539/05/28].

12. Late Chosŏn period anthologies and Qing dynasty envoy writings make no mention of Sawŏl and her severed finger, suggesting her relevance to diplomacy stops with the fall of the Ming. The local significance of Kim Sawŏl for Kwaksan, however, remained. Late Chosŏn period maps mark the location of Sawŏl's stele. Gazetteers mention the filial daughter of Kwaksan, whose "filial acts were heard in the Celestial Kingdom [i.e. the Ming] and a stele was erected near Unhyŏng Pavilion in Hŏmundong by the roadside." See "Kwaksanji" 郭山誌 in *Ŭpchi P'yongan-do* 邑誌 平安道 v. 4, 138d.

of contention, appropriation, and imagination for both Ming envoys and their Chosŏn hosts.

### Finger Severing and Filial Cannibalism in Regional Perspective

The commemoration of filiality was part of an extensive state-sponsored project for the promulgation of Confucian morality in early Chosŏn. Kim Sawŏl's act of feeding her severed finger to her ailing mother could be taken simply as another example in a long tradition of "filial cannibalism."<sup>13</sup> It should be recognized, however, that the veneration of such acts was by no means inevitable in a Confucian socio-political context. The cutting of one's own flesh required of such acts seemed to contradict orthodox understandings of filiality, where self-inflicted mutilation was seen to be quintessentially "unfilial" behavior (Cho 2009; Qiu 1995, 49-51; Sibau 2011, 34-35). The *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經) states, for example, "Your physical person with its hair and skin are received from your parents. Vigilance in not allowing anything to do injury to your person is where [filiality] begins."<sup>14</sup> Though filial cannibalism can also be read as a logical extension of the notion of self-sacrifice, Ming period editions of the popular *Twenty-four Filial Acts* (Ch. *Ersbisi xiao* 二十四孝), which praised children who made personal sacrifices for their parents, did not contain any

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13. In this paper I use "filial cannibalism" tentatively to describe instances of children offering their own flesh to their parents as acts of filial devotion. The term is not without its problems, since it risks conflating the "cannibal" i.e. the parent, with the child, the filial agent. Martha Sibau, who is critical of the term "cannibalism," prefers the term "filial slicing" partly because the emphasis in these filial narratives is not on the act of eating per se, but on the action of the cutting (2011, 105n127). "Filial slicing" then, is a derivation of the term used for these instances in Chinese sources: *gegu* (K. *halgo* 割股) literally "slicing the thigh (or limb)," but can also refer to any kind of flesh cutting (Qiu 1995, 51; Yu 2008, 96). While Tina Lu generally prefers the term *gegu*, she notes that "filiality and cannibalism are inextricably linked" in late imperial China (Lu 2008, 147-148). In the Korean context, "thigh slicing" often appears alongside *tanji* ("finger severing" 斷指) to describe what Cho Namuk has termed *yuksin hyohaeng* 肉身孝行, "filial acts of the body" (Cho 2009, 124-145). The term "finger severing" I will reserve specifically for such instances where fingers are involved, in order to distinguish the specificity of the practice in the Korean context.

14. Rosemont and Ames 2009, 105: 身體髮膚 受之父母 不敢毀傷 孝之始也. According to Maram Epstein, *gegu*, a practice "counter to orthodox ritual" (Ch. *fei zhengli* 非正禮) was portrayed in Ming fiction as a conflict between "orthodoxy and expediency." In the story she examines, the parent came to realize the manner by which she was cured and disapproved of the act, calling it "ignorant filiality" (Ch. *yuxiao* 愚孝) but "the immediacy of the unorthodox cure proves its value as a filial act" (Epstein 2001, 246).

examples of filial cannibalism.<sup>15</sup>

The historical evolution of filial cannibalism in imperial China points to a complex intersection between popular and elite culture, state and society, and different interpretative positions in Confucian thinking. Qiu Zhonglin has argued that while filial cannibalism began as popular practice in the Tang-Song periods, it reached general social acceptance among gentry circles by the Ming. Even amid reluctant imperial recognition by the Qing (1644-1911), Chinese literati discourse did not settle into an easy consensus regarding the propriety of filial cannibalism, though there appeared to be a growing set of voices pushing for the acceptance of filial cannibalism as a legitimate practice (Qiu 1995, 72-90). Though there was official recognition of such acts during the Ming, they were also controversial. The first emperor, Ming Taizu (r. 1368-1398) had actually explicitly banned both this and similar practices and their commemoration. The prohibition against “thigh slicing” and “ice sitting” as acts “harmful to the body” (割股臥冰 傷身有禁) arose from Ming Taizu’s reaction to a particular incident involving a man who offered his own flesh to his parent, and failing that, prayed to a god and killed his three year old child as an offering. When a local official proposed to honor him as a paragon of filial devotion, Ming Taizu was “angered that [he] has destroyed morals and extinguished principle” (怒其絕倫滅理), and instead had him flogged and exiled. The Ming emperor’s injunction against such behavior was rooted in the perceived incompatibility between orthodox notions of filiality and self-mutilation. The circumstances of the case also suggests multivalent religious traditions and local practices may have informed behavior, even as these actions all become conflated into the larger categories of “mutilation” (Ch. *shangshen* 傷身) and “violation” (Ch.

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15. *Twenty-four Filial Acts*, better understood as a “genre of popular works,” rather than a single text, has existed in various forms. The individual stories date from medieval China, and figure prominently in Song, Jin, and Yuan tombs (Knapp 2005, 4-5, 110). The work usually consists of twenty-four illustrations depicting acts of filial devotion, each accompanied by a brief text description. For the purposes of this paper I will refer to a Ming period manuscript edition with an attributed date of 1546, the *Selected Poems of the Twenty-four Filial Acts* (*Ershisi xiao shi xuan* 二十四孝詩選) that has been preserved in the Ryūkoku University Library and a Qing edition reproduced in Chang’s comparative study of didactic texts for filiality in China and Korea (Chang 2004, 267-292). The original work by this title was a Yuan album, likely intended for children (Knapp 2005, 46). Although the *Twenty-four Filial Acts* did not seem to enjoy wide popularity in Korea, the Koryŏ period *Illustrations of Filial Acts* (K. *Hyohaeng* to 孝行圖) had adapted this format, which in turn has been seen as a precursor to the *Illustrated Guides to the Three Bonds*. Both Korean works adapt stories from the *Twenty-four Filial Acts* (Kim 2009, 3-11). For an overview of the various iterations of works by this title, and a brief discussion of the omission of “filial cannibalism” in Ming editions, see Osawa 2002, esp. pp. 16-17.



*weidao* 違道).<sup>16</sup> Multiple voices regarding these issues seem to emerge especially in literature, where often fantastical allegories demonstrate diverse attitudes towards the practice (Lu 2008, 135-174; Sibau 2011, 34-119).

Understanding Sawöl's finger severing (K. *tanji* 斷指) solely as one form of filial cannibalism, however, risks ignoring the specificity of finger severing as a significant social phenomenon in Chosŏn Korea. Its prevalence in official discourse and frequency in social practice distinguishes it from the development of filial cannibalism in China. In over 2400 examples of filial cannibalism documented in the early Qing encyclopedia *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成, only ten cases involve finger severing.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, 29% percent (203/706) of all documented instances of filial devotion in the 1617 compilation, *The New, Expanded Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds of the Eastern Country* (*Tongguk sin sok Samgang haengsil to*), specifically involve finger severing. Documented cases also increase in frequency from the early Chosŏn to the time of its publication.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, acts of "thigh slicing" occupy only a miniscule proportion

16. *Ming Taizu shilu* 明太祖實錄 v. 234.3a-4a, pp. 3418-3420 [1388 (Hongwu 27).9 yisi]; *Ming shi* 明史 v. 296, p. 7576; Qiu 1995, 75-76; "Ice sitting" is a reference to the story of a man who sat on a frozen lake with his naked buttocks, hoping to melt the ice in order to catch fish for a parent. See *Ershisi xiao shi xuan*, 4a; Chang 2004 62, 287.

17. Most examples are of "thigh slicing." "Arm slicing" comes in second at 140 counts. Finger severing is fifth, outnumbered by "liver slicing" (85 examples) and "chest slicing" (46 examples). Given the large number of examples of *gegu*, it remains questionable whether it is anatomically specific and could be an example of idiomatic usage describing the general behavior of filial cannibalism. Nevertheless, the low ratio of "finger severing" relative to examples with specific body parts identified, does suggest that, "finger severing" in imperial China as a filial act was actually a rather unusual practice. It should also be noted that there are numerous other examples of finger cutting, not as instances of filial devotion, but as cases of widows showing their resolve to refuse remarriage (Qiu 1995, 52).

18. Qiu Zhonglin's numbers are taken from cases mentioned in the sections of the *Gujin tushu jicheng* dealing with exemplars of "Learning and Deeds" (學行典) and exemplary "Wives and Daughters" (閭媛典), and thus include examples from early times through the Ming. Unlike the *Illustrated Guides* in Chosŏn, these examples are collected from a variety of sources and, as one section in a massive compilation, were not intended for broad dissemination. Some figures appear in local gazetteers or literati poetry, while only some may have received state recognition. Although these two sources document "filial cannibalism" in rather different ways and for distinct purposes, making definitive comparisons difficult, the contrast in the frequency and relative occurrence of "finger severing" between the two compilations is stark. According to my tabulation of cases of finger severing in the TGSS, the rates for finger severing in proportion to other acts of filial devotion over time are as follows: 5 out 64 (7.8%) cases from pre-Chosŏn, 42/184 (22.8%/36 commemorations per year) from before the reign of Yŏnsan'gun (1392-1494), 73/217 (33.6%/72) commemorations per year between the reigns of Yŏnsan-Sŏnjo (1494-1608), and 83/240 (34.5%/10.375) in the first decade of Kwanghaegun's reign alone (1608-1617). These figures do not include cases where individuals were recognized for a different kind of filial act, but were also known to have severed their fingers. Chŏng argues that the publication of this particular source should be understood within its context and should not simply be taken as a verbatim

of the total.<sup>19</sup>

The recognition of finger severing as a specific, localized phenomenon reveals a distinct historical trajectory in the Confucian civilizing project of the early Chosŏn state. To be sure, the early Chosŏn state shared reservations about finger severing similar to the early Ming court's anxiety regarding filial cannibalism. King Sejong attributed its practice to the ignorance of the common people:

Even learned people have yet to understand the proper way and principle and to distinguish between the heterodox and the orthodox. What more is there to say of the benighted commoners who are unlearned? In acting for their parents, they are confused by Buddhist ways, confused by the sayings of shamans, to the point that they do things such as severing their fingers.<sup>20</sup>

Echoing the concern that the inspiration for such acts may have arisen from local religious practice or Buddhism, proposals during the reign of Yŏnsan'gun (1476-1506) described finger severing as a means of "idolizing Buddha" (*yŏngbul* 佞佛) and called to discontinue its commemoration.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, while the Confucian *Classic of Filial Piety* discouraged self-mutilation, a Buddhist sūtra widely circulated in both Korea and China offered an alternative understanding of a child's body in relation to the parent (Chŏng 2006, 211-214; 220). This sūtra, the *Pulsŏl pumo ūnjung nanbo kyŏng* 父母恩重難報經, described the ultimate inability of a child to recompense the parents for their grace, even with her own body:

If there be one who suffered the calamity of famine, and for his mother and father gave up his entire body, slicing, cutting, mincing, and destroying it [until it became] fine grains of dust, even after a hundred and thousand kalpas, he still cannot repay his father and mother's profound grace.<sup>22</sup>

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record of the history of commemoration or the degree of "Confucianization." The caution is warranted; nevertheless, the preponderance of "finger severing" in these texts only reinforces its significance as symbolic act (Chŏng 2010, 73-74).

19. Most instances of "thigh slicing" occur early in the compilation. Only seven counts of "thigh slicing" appear in the first three volumes, compared to fifty counts of "finger severing." The proportion declines significantly in later volumes. See TGSS v. 1.2, 11; v. 2.4, 11, 12; v. 3.58, 70.

20. *Sejong sillok* 58.19b [1432/11/28]: 學者尚未知道理邪正 況愚民不知學問 其爲親惑於佛事 惑於巫覡以至斷指之類.

21. *Yŏnsan'gun ilgi* 26.3b [1497/08/02]. It was decided that it should only be eliminated gradually.

22. *Pulsŏl pumo ūnjung kyŏng ōnhae*, 18b: 假使有人 遭饑饉劫 爲於爹娘 盡其己身 鬻割碎壞 猶如微塵 經百千劫 猶不能報父母深恩. Many scholars have also noted the apocryphal origins of sūtras related to filiality, products of long term cultural exchange between Confucian and Buddhist ideas and

Far from being monopolized by Confucian orthodoxy, the discourse of filiality in Chosŏn Korea extended into the realms of Buddhism and popular religion. As such, a single filial act could have been motivated by an array of factors.<sup>23</sup>

Keen to promote filial behavior, King Sejong eventually justified the commemoration of finger severing, despite its association with non-Confucian practices, declaring, “though these [acts] do not correspond to the proper Way, the feeling toward their parents can still be worthy of emulation.”<sup>24</sup> By encouraging emulation of the emotions behind the act rather than the act itself, filial finger severing could be honored without becoming a celebration of these alternative traditions. The continued rewarding of such actions that were “beyond the norm” (K. *kwasang* 過常) lead to concerns that they would overshadow more habitual, prosaic forms of devotion that were harder to observe, but were—because they reflected sincere sentiments through their consistency—more fundamental to filiality.<sup>25</sup> In practice, however, dramatic

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practices in East Asia. When it comes to filiality, Buddhist and Confucian ideas were not necessarily seen as antithetical, but rather complementary, especially for those in the late Ming who sought a synthesis of the “Three Teachings,” of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism (Lü 2011, 150-158); for a discussion of the textual history of this particular series of sūtras, see Guang 2008.

23. The first documented example of a filial child who fed his flesh to a parent was a Buddhist monk from the Silla. Most examples in the TGSS do not indicate how a filial child came to be inspired to sever his finger. In two early examples, the child learns of the method through a dream, one visited by his sick father and the other a Buddhist monk. See TGSS v. 1.2; v. 2.19, 82. A few other cases only mention that they “heard” from others that “the bone of a living person” could heal their parent. See TGSS v. 2.16; v. 3.17, 23. A doctor appears in another, later example: TGSS v. 6.28. For Chŏng Ilyŏng, the practice of filial cannibalism in the Korean context is explained as a turn to “superstitious” healing methods by individuals of lower status who may not have had access to medical treatment, a situation he believes to be parallel to how such acts emerged in China (Chŏng 2010, 87). The lack of definitive or direct evidence, however, makes the ascertainment of the precise origins of “filial cannibalism” difficult in the Chinese context as well. While a general trajectory of “bottom-up” has been proposed (Qiu 1995, 49-51), explanations range from using human flesh as food in times of need, such as famine, to self-mortifying ascetic practices in Buddhism. Jimmy Yu relates the practice to all of the above as well as to “regenerative cannibalistic sacrifices of ancient China,” and “hermeneutic practice of medicine.” He too, however, refrains from identifying one specific origin, but chooses to emphasize the potential for symbiosis among different practices (Yu 2008, 100-120). Yü Chün-fang also discusses *gegu* in the Mahāyāna Buddhist context (Yü 2000, 338-347). For a discussion of cannibalism in social and religious contexts in Korea, see Kenneth Koo’s manuscript, “Korean Cannibalism, Past and Present” (Koo 2012).

24. *Sejong sillok* 58.19b [1432/11/28]: 雖不合於正道 然其爲親心切者則取之可也.

25. *Sejong sillok* 94.8b [1441/10/22]: “The act of finger severing, however, is something that goes beyond the norm—one need not do such a thing in order to be filial. When it comes to those who have filial hearts that are pure and sincere, and serve their parents with joy, beyond reproach and going above and beyond others, they should especially be rewarded. From now on, have both the central and provincial officials recommend examples of these so that we can promote virtuous

gestures, such as finger severing, had the convenience of visibility and offered tangible examples for emulation.

The questionable appropriateness of finger severing may also be related to the medical dimension of the practice. The earliest account of Kim Sawŏl's actions in the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* describes Kim searching for a way to cure her mother's madness. She was told to "crush the bones of a living person" and that "consuming them will have immediate results."<sup>26</sup> Filial cannibalism was thus likely rooted in some belief that human flesh itself had intrinsic curative properties. A startling case from 1546 involving a missing child illustrates this point. The three-year-old's corpse was discovered after two weeks, with its right hand missing two fingers. According to the investigation, a man afflicted with a "severe illness" had paid the murderer to kidnap the child and sever his fingers for medicine.<sup>27</sup> In apologies for filial cannibalism, the curative power of the child's flesh was attributed to the "affective power of emotion" eliciting a sympathetic response from nature, not medical properties inherent in human flesh. In this case, however, the belief in the therapeutic effect of consuming human flesh could not have rested on the power of filial emotion alone, but on the belief in the inherent curative properties of severed fingers.

It is difficult to ascertain a distinct relationship between specific medical ailments and practices of finger cutting, especially when early Chosŏn records of filial cannibalism are generally vague about the symptoms of the parent's disease. Though they constitute a small portion of the total number of cases involving finger severing, those that do mention specific ailments use terms such as *kwang* 狂, *chŏn* 癲 or *p'ungil* 風疾, which are associated with a constellation of interrelated symptoms in the Sinitic medical tradition that may be understood as forms of "madness" (Simonis 2010, 20-53).<sup>28</sup> The relationship to medical knowledge is, nevertheless, inconclusive. The act was clearly seen as a way to alleviate disease, but consumption of human flesh was not indicated as a

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customs." 然斷指則過常之事 不必如是而後以爲孝也 至如孝心純至 順悅親意 人無間言 特異於人者 則尤宜褒獎 自今令中外一皆褒舉 以勵風俗。

26. *Sejong sillok* 16.8a [1422/06/27]: 平安道郭山郡民金鷹彦妻得癲狂疾鷹彦棄之 其女四月旁求醫治之術 有云碎生人骨 服之則立效 四月即載左手無名指碎之 和羹以進 病遂已。

27. *Myŏngjong sillok* 4.80a [1546/11/25].

28. In Kim Sawŏl's case, and in several other examples, the word used is *chŏn'gwang* 癲狂, or simply *kwangil* 狂疾. For other examples, see TGSS v. 1.16, .46; v. 2.16, 67, 79, 2.85; v. 3.14, 23, 14, 49. In late Chosŏn, the practice of finger severing in order to use the blood to revive a person on the brink of death also emerged. While 15th and 16th century records mention "severing the finger and mixing it with medicine" 斷指和藥, "severing the finger to let the blood" 斷指出血 begins appearing in 17th century records. Later examples in the TGSS illustrate this shift (v. 6.68, 73, 79, 84); see also *Tanjong sillok* 12.6b [1454/08/17]; *Injo sillok* 20.22a [1629/04/22].

treatment for “madness” in Sinitic medical texts. There is also no mention of such practice in the Korean pharmacopeia *Tongjiu pogam* 東醫寶鑑, printed in 1613 and compiled contemporaneously with the 1617 *Illustrated Guide*. Ming medical texts do document the alleged efficacy of human flesh for the treatment of consumption or bone ailments. Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518-1593) recorded several such formulas in his famous medical text *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目, but only to condemn their medicinal use, and made no mention of fingers or madness.<sup>29</sup> Though the connection between the medical properties of severed fingers and established medical knowledge was tenuous at best, these examples of filial finger severing nevertheless insisted on the efficacy of such deeds in curing disease. Taken together this evidence—the specificity of finger severing to Chosŏn Korea, its application for specific ailments, its absence or marginal presence in established medical texts, and the court’s concerns about its impropriety—suggests that the practice was rooted in local, autochthonous practices.

Though the evidence for the above hypothesis is circumstantial, the diverse associations of finger severing should suffice to caution against reading the spread of the phenomenon as a straightforward indicator of Confucianization. On the other hand, understanding the origins of finger severing in either medical or religious terms need not deny the role the Chosŏn state’s own ritual commemoration of filiality played in inspiring these actions. Another documented finger severer was a Confucian student who, after reading an example of finger severing in the *Illustrated Guide*, decided to emulate the moral exemplars in this text and severed his finger to feed to his father who was afflicted with “madness.”<sup>30</sup> Committed to building a “Confucian society,” the Chosŏn state, by including such acts in the *Illustrated Guide*, may have not only provided a new rationale for undertaking such deeds, but also reinforced

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29. *Bencao gangmu* v. 52, p. 2960: “Alas! One’s body, hair and skin, are all received from one’s father and mother, and so one dares not bring them harm. Even if a father or mother is severely ill, how could they wish for their child to harm their own bodies and devour their bones and flesh? Such are the views of ignorant people.” 嗚呼 身體髮膚 受之父母 不敢毀傷 父母雖病篤 豈肯欲子孫殘傷其支體 而自食其骨肉乎 此愚民之見也。 Li does not deny the medical efficacy of human flesh, but rejects the practice on moral terms: because filial cannibalism involves damaging one’s body, it violates a basic tenet of filiality and blames the prevalence of human parts in medicine on “quack practitioners whose minds are set on profit and gain.” Although by Li Shizhen’s time filial cannibalism was tacitly recognized by the Ming state, Li cited earlier Ming imperial prohibitions put in place by Ming Taizu against both the practice and its recognition to justify his position. See also 2967-2968.

30. *Chungjong sillok* 57.28a [1526/07/25].

whatever existing ideas the people had about its efficacy.<sup>31</sup> Concerned that remote villages would not have access to the texts, King Chungjong (r. 1509-1544) ordered several new cases of exemplary moral behavior, including filial cannibalism, to be written down on notices to be distributed widely.<sup>32</sup> Their inclusion in *Illustrated Guide* texts, accompanied with vernacular Korean, were, after all, intended to encourage exactly the kind of emulation mentioned in the above anecdote.

These examples from the sixteenth century leave open the question of whether the belief of medical efficacy arose from the circulation of local medical or religious knowledge, or was a direct result of the Chosŏn state commemorating finger severing. By the early sixteenth century, however, the court no longer dwelled on the potential “unorthodoxy” of finger severing. Instead, actions such as “finger severing and slicing flesh” were unequivocally exemplary and remarkable, and as “actions that not everyone can reach,” were thus deserving of commemoration.<sup>33</sup> Public demonstration may have encouraged emulation, but ostentation created a separate set of problems. The spread of these practices was not always interpreted in a glowing light. In the annotations to a *Veritable Records* entry from 1555, the compiler commented on the proliferation of filial children and chaste wives.

A child to his parents is as a wife is to her husband. Their basis is the same. Unless it is someone who is completely without morals, if one's [parent or husband] is on the brink of death, one will out of desperation try to save them without regard to anything else, and will not bother with one's own hair, flesh, limbs or body. And so, those who would cut their thighs or sever their fingers are not in themselves particularly praiseworthy, it is just that, as a child or as a wife, they do not think about themselves. However, now we are in a troubled age, full of falsehood. Customs and morality grow corrupt and the hearts of men become conniving. Among them, there must be many who did these things in search of honor and recognition, and not because of what was originally in their hearts.<sup>34</sup>

31. How one understands the success of state efforts in encouraging emulation partly depends on the question of reach. Martina Deuchler, for example, has noted that the initial effect of these texts on society at large was “apparently slight” (Deuchler 2003, 146). It should be noted that the dissemination of the *Illustrated Guides* was only one mechanism of encouragement. Memorial gates erected throughout the country, such as the one in the provincial town of Kwaksan dedicated to Kim Sawŏl, may have had a potentially more significant role in propagating these ideas beyond the confines of a literate and elite audience. State commemoration in early Chosŏn also involved tangible rewards such as the commutation of corvée or tax duties, rewards of grain, and the granting of official titles incentivizing such behavior (Pak 1990, 30-59, 65-68).

32. *Chungjong sillok* 62.55a [1528/08/21].

33. *Yŏnsan'gun ilgi* 57.3a [1505/01/04].

34. *Myŏngjong sillok* 18.21b [1555/03/29]: 夫子之於父母 妻之於夫 其義一也 若非大無道之人 則當死生

The Chosŏn court's civilizing project was being criticized, not for encouraging unorthodox behavior, but rather for promoting actions at the expense of proper feeling. For this annalist, ostentatious commemoration may have only encouraged the aping of the deed and not the sincere emulation of its moral sentiment. While Sejong had reluctantly permitted the commemoration of unorthodox behavior by emphasizing the authenticity of the feelings that motivated them, the problem now shifted from one of praxis and orthodoxy to one of authenticity: whether proper actions reflected true feeling. Finger severing, as an act, was no longer the problem.

This shift in the nature of these anxieties suggests a parallel ideological shift in which finger severing, both as an act of filial (and conjugal) devotion came to be normalized within a Confucian frame of reference. The existence of this shift is reinforced by the adoption of these methods by the royal family. When King Injong (r. 1544-1555) was on his deathbed, his soon-to-be widowed queen attempted to sever her finger in order to resuscitate him, only to be dissuaded by court doctors who said, "such an act will have no benefit to this disease."<sup>35</sup> On his mother's deathbed in 1635, Prince Sohyŏn 昭顯 also tried to sever his finger, but was stopped by his father.<sup>36</sup> As King Injo (r. 1623-1649) was dying, King Hyojong (r. 1649-1659), then the crown prince, was seen with his "finger on his left hand dripping blood, probably because he had attempted to sever his finger, but was stopped by the grand prince, so that he did not cut through the bone."<sup>37</sup> If finger severing, as Chŏng Ilyŏng has argued, had originated as a desperate measure taken by individuals on the "margins" of society, then early Chosŏn likely saw not only a gradual increase in the frequency of filial cannibalism, but also its movement from the "fringe" of orthodoxy to the center of social normalcy.<sup>38</sup>

As concerns about its appropriateness as an act faded with continued state commemoration, the original medical and religious connotations may have receded as well. Regardless of whether they were done out of genuine emulation

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之際 其情之迫切 必欲其無所不至 而不暇顧惜吾之髮膚肢體也 然則其所以爲之割肢斷指者 皆不足深貴 而亦爲人子爲人妻之所不容自己者也 況末世滋僞 習俗偷薄 人心狡詐 其間不能無爲名譽而爲之者則非其本心者亦多矣。

35. *Injong sillok* 2.77a [1545/06/29].

36. *Injo sillok* 31.69b [1635/12/09].

37. *Injo sillok* 50.19a [1649/05/08].

38. Chŏng understands the commemoration of finger severing to be correlated to the social background of the filial children in question. Showing that finger cutters were more likely to be non-elites or women, Chŏng argues that as an originally "unorthodox" action, its commemoration was a way of celebrating the virtue of non-elite members of society (2010, 83-92).



or a desire for social recognition, finger severing increased in social visibility, if not in actual frequency, through early Chosŏn. When the Chosŏn court compiled the *The New, Expanded Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds of the Eastern Country* in 1617, over one third of those honored for finger severing (83 out of 203) had been rewarded since the accession of Kwanghaegun in 1608.<sup>39</sup> Would-be filial children may have no longer heard of such remedies from practicing healers, but rather through public and visible displays of filial behavior sponsored by the Chosŏn court through an array of memorial gates and texts.

In rewarding emulation, the Chosŏn court may have partly stripped the original, though “unorthodox,” medical and religious context of this practice and imbued it with a new sort of meaning. Through this shift, finger severing became acknowledged as a legitimate and acceptable means for demonstrating filial behavior. This change, however, was made possible by the emergence of a separate discourse, one that emphasized not so much the appropriateness of particular actions, but the authenticity of emotion.

### Filial Cannibalism and Orthodoxy in Ming Envoy Poetry

The social evolution of filial cannibalism, a practice that occupied a tenuous position in the Confucian canon and associated with “heterodox” religious practices and fringe medical lore, calls attention to problems of orthodoxy in the Chosŏn state’s civilizing project. The Ming literati who came to Chosŏn bore witness to this project in their eulogies of Kim Sawŏl. Though invariably praising, these encomiums had to reconcile canonical injunctions against bodily harm with the act of filial finger severing.

The following exchange between the 1582 Ming envoy Huang Hongxian 黃洪憲 (fl. 1571) and the Chosŏn Confucian scholar Yi I 李珥 (1536-1584) illustrates this point. Huang wrote the following as a preface to his poems:

Cutting one’s own flesh to feed one’s parents is not filial. These affairs are not seen in the classics. During [Ming Taizu’s] time, there was one who cut flesh from his thigh to treat a parent, and [these things] were at first honored. This is different from later times, where this stopped and was severely prohibited. Although [he of] the Han 漢 [who] asked for a bowl of stew [i.e. Han Gaozu] and [he of] the Jin 晉 [who] tore off his sleeve [i.e. Wen Jiao] were all remarkable men, compared to the

39. There are also twenty-eight more from the reign of King Sŏnjo (r. 1567-1608). See TGSS 5.41-5.90; 6-1-6.17. Kwanghaegun period examples are found in TGSS 6.18-6.88; 7.1-7.89; 8.1-8.80.



infinite devotion of this girl, their virtues are deficient.<sup>40</sup>

The lack of classical precedent and Ming prohibitions against filial cannibalism made Huang voice such doubts in his preface. On the other hand, even great men such as Han Gaozu 漢高祖 (?-195) and Wen Jiao 溫嶠 (288-329), who were willing to cast aside filial devotion for their political goals, would feel their virtue deficient in the face of a woman who willingly brought harm to herself for the sake of a parent.<sup>41</sup> For Huang, Sawōl's act, hardly an unequivocal example of filial devotion, was only laudable when relativized against negative examples of historical figures who discarded filial feeling in the name of political gain or reputation.

Yi P's response to Huang reframed the conversation and avoided direct discussion of either the early Ming prohibition or the appropriateness of commemoration. In his reply, Yi turned to a narrative of filiality that emphasized the emotional authenticity of filial devotion:

Hear ye! How could this be done for the mere sake of reputation?  
She knew only to learn from her mother and tend to her lapel and tassels.<sup>42</sup>  
I only regret that this pinch of blood,  
Could not recompense the love of three springs for an inch of grass.<sup>43</sup>

Describing the natural debt a child owes the parent, Yi allowed blood to become controvertible as a currency of filial recompense; but, in emphasizing its ultimate inadequacy, the poem implied that such actions were the least one

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40. HHJ 1582 Asami v. 18 35.13a: 刲股非孝也 其事不經見 高皇帝時有刲股療親者 始見旌 異後卒深禁之 雖然漢俎分羹 晉裾割 別士也 罔極于女 有慙德矣. The term *kuigu* 刲股 literally refers to thigh-cutting, but here it is taken as a generic act of filial cannibalism.

41. "Basic Annals of Xiang Yu" 項羽本紀 in *Shiji* 史記 v. 7, 327-328. When Han Gaozu's father was captured by his rival Xiang Yu 項羽, Xiang threatened to slay the father and cook him unless Han Gaozu acceded to his demands. Gaozu replied that because he and Xiang had once served the same lord, they were as brothers, and if Xiang had no qualms about cooking someone who ought to be treated as his own father, he too would gladly partake in "a bowl of the stew." "Biography of Wen Jiao" 溫嶠傳 in *Jin shu* 晉書 v. 69, 1786. Wen Jiao was sent on a distant mission by his lord. His mother tried to dissuade him, fastening on to his sleeve upon his departure. Wen "tore his sleeve" and left on his mission.

42. I.e. attend to her proper presentation.

43. HHJ 1582 Asami v. 18, 35.15b: 嗟爾區區豈為名 惟知學母理衿纓 可憐一捻織蔥血 不盡三春寸草情. The last line is a direct citation of the poem "Wanderer's Song" 遊子吟 by the late Tang poet Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751-814) that describes a son's inability to repay the love his mother shows him by sewing him a garment before his departure. The last couplet of this poem reads, "Who will say that the heart of an inch-long grass / can repay the sunlight of three springs?" 誰言寸草心 報得三春暉. See *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 v. 372, 4179.

could do. Hardly an injunction against flesh sacrifice, the poem took it to be proof of emotional authenticity. In a separate poem, Yi refuted the notion that harm to one's body was unfilial. For him, because "a finger [was] less than a person," it could not "diminish filiality" (指不若人何損孝).<sup>44</sup> Through what Tina Lu has called an "arithmetic of filiality," Yi resolved the contradictions presented by filial sacrifice through a metaphor of recompense. As a part is used to save the whole, a child's act of repayment could not fulfill the demands of filial devotion.<sup>45</sup>

Notably, in Yi's and many other eulogies of Sawöl, her humble and difficult background was effaced to accentuate the moral environment of her upbringing. While historical records mention that her father had deserted the family on account of the mother's illness, in the first Sawöl poem, Ni Qian created a much more harmonious image of their domestic life. In his version, Kwaksan's filial daughter was "sincere and pure ever since she was young" and "served her two parents, each to joy" (少小性純誠 奉侍雙親悅). This halcyon family life created a context out of which Sawöl's filial behavior naturally emerged.

[...] The doctor said, if one uses human flesh,  
And feeds it to her, the illness will surely stop.  
The girl, hearing that her parent could be saved,  
Rather than think of the damage to her own body,  
Brandished a knife and entered her boudoir,  
And severed her finger, with fresh blood flowing.  
Cooking it, she prepared it in a tonic,  
And with one drink, [the disease] melted away like snow.  
Perfect filiality comes in touch with the divine—  
How clear are the powers of emotion!<sup>46</sup>

Here, the filial daughter followed the doctor's advice, but her mother's recovery was ascribed to the sympathetic resonance achieved through the intensity of her filial emotion, not the curative properties of her finger *per se*.

This emphasis presaged the narrative pattern of later poems, in which the figure of the "doctor" and the specific context of the illness were gradually

44. HHJ 1582 Asami v. 18 35.25a.

45. Lu writes of an early Qing discussion of *gegu*, where self-injury done on behalf of a parent was seen as a mechanism for transferring his own lifespan to his parent. The central notion here is that this decrease in a child's own life span was a way to repay the "three years" owed to the parent for rearing him (Lu 2008, 148, 152-156)

46. HHJ 1449 in SKCM 4, v. 301.242b-243a: 醫云用人肉 食之病良輟 女聞親可延 寧計體虧折 揮刀入中 閨 斷指流鮮血 燒灰進湯劑 一飲真消雪 至孝通神明 感致何昭哲。

obscured to center her intuitive sense of moral duty. In these rewritings, Sawöl severed her finger out of desperation as a last resort to save her dying mother. Through the gradual elision of the “doctor,” the Ni poem not only obfuscated the source of her medical knowledge, but, by removing the possibility of external influences, also excluded the potential for the intervention of corrupting, heterodox influences. Understanding Sawöl’s deed as a spontaneous act of devotion thus served as a central mechanism for reconciling this act of filial cannibalism with classical ideals. In the following poem by the 1521 envoy Shi Dao 史道 (1485-1554), the medical dimension was retained in the narrative, but its position was marginal: the “strange doctor” did offer advice, but what mattered was Sawöl’s unwavering resolve.

[...] By chance a strange doctor came,  
And told her how to treat the illness.  
The filial girl went ahead, inspired,  
And severed her finger without hesitation.  
A severed finger, its pain was connected to the heart,  
But the filial girl—no eyebrows did she knit.  
Cooking the finger, she knelt and served her mother.

Lest there be any doubt, Shi reminded us that the finger had, in fact, no therapeutic properties: “it is not that a finger can cure disease,” and her mother was cured because her “heart” had moved the “ghosts and spirits.”<sup>47</sup> Several Chosŏn officials who accompanied Shi Dao also denied the finger any curative power. Yi Haeng 李荇 (1478-1534) wrote, “an ounce of sincerity is enough to move the divine / the end of the disease could not be because of a single finger” (寸誠自是感神明 病已應非一指效).<sup>48</sup> Yi Hŭibo 李希輔 (1473-1548) expressed something similar: “What is moved by pure sincerity naturally is known to heaven / [it was] a mistake to say this was a result of an insignificant drug” (純誠所感自通天 誤道區區一藥效).<sup>49</sup> With no doctor and no specific illness, the bone and flesh themselves became irrelevant as curative agents; instead, Sawöl’s finger severing, motivated by human emotions, had its own “affective power” to move heaven—this reasoning, not a belief in the pharmacological powers of

47. HHJ 1521, in SKCM 4, v. 301.371b-372: 偶有奇醫來 告以愈病因 孝女奮然往 斷指不逡巡 指斷連心痛 孝女眉不顰 然指跪奉母 動進復諄諄 指非可療病 心能感鬼神; Though these “ghosts and spirits” suggest the involvement of the supernatural, such statements in the 16th century Ming context may be better understood as a metaphor for a sympathetic resonance with nature. See Lü 2011, 136-143, 146-149 for a discussion of mid-Ming ideas on the resonant power of filial devotion and its cosmological implications.

48. HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, v. 301.379b-380a.

49. HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, v. 301.381b-382a.

human flesh, explained the mother's recovery.<sup>50</sup>

Drawing on this notion, the 1537 Ming envoy Gong Yongqing 龔用卿 (1500-1563) asked, "Who is this person, the young woman of Kwaksan / With tresses of a child and virtuous, young as spring?" 郭山孝女何許人 髫年淑質當青春. In the answer to his own rhetorical question, he took the narrative of moral spontaneity even further, "Upholding morals, her filiality, pure, came from her innate character; / Calmly she severed her finger to cure her parent" (秉彝純孝出天性 從容斷指療其親).<sup>51</sup> By emphasizing the "affective power of filial emotion" over the act of cannibalism *per se*, these poems effectively sidestepped potential points of controversy: the questionable appropriateness of filial cannibalism in general and the source of Sawöl's "medical" knowledge.

The next poem, by the 1537 Ming envoy Wu Ximeng 吳希孟 (fl. 1533), like the above examples, attributed the success of Sawöl's act to sympathetic resonance, but also used Kim Sawöl to challenge the notion that mutilation itself was contrary to filial devotion:

[...] She asked doctors and asked fortunetellers, all in vain,  
So she took a knife, fell her finger, and cooked it well.  
Who said that because one received it [from parents] one cannot do it harm?  
A great contradiction! It conceals one's true heart.  
A flash of blood shines across the four walls,  
The ghosts and spirits protected her mother and raised her from disease.  
Since the beginning, heaven and man come from one principle—  
With sincerity, [heaven] can be moved, words that are not lies.<sup>52</sup>

For Wu, the contradiction lay not in a cult of filiality that encourages self-mutilation, but instead in the idea that actions could be seen as improper, despite the sincere feeling that lay behind the deed. A common apology for filial cannibalism in the Ming, this position may have drawn from Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucian ideas, which emphasized innate morality over particularities of

50. For example, the 1488 Ming envoy Wang Chang 王敞 wrote, "Good medicine was used in vain / Death soon could not be avoided" 良藥空見投 屬纊恐不免. Wang Chang's Chosŏn counterpart, Hō Chong 許琮 responded to similar effect, "Sawöl was panicked and had nowhere to turn/ How would she know what was a good drug? / [...] Flesh and skin, she did not begrudge. / [...] cutting her finger she presented it in stew / and with one taste the illness went away. / Kowtowing, she thanked the lord of heaven / and her tears of joy for a long time did not stop" 蒼黃無處投 何由辨良劑 [...] 肌膚非所惜 ... 斷指和羹進 一嘗病即療 叩頭謝天公 喜淚久未收. See HHJ 1488 Asami v. 7, 12.23b-24a.

51. HHJ 1537 in SKCM 4, v. 301.405a-b.

52. HHJ 1537 in SKCM 4, v. 301.539a-b: [...] 問醫問卜功不奏 取刀落指烹美候 誰謂受之不敢傷 出爾反爾真心藏 血光照耀驚四壁鬼神呵護起母疾 由來天人自一理 誠而能動非虛語.

practice. For defenders of filial cannibalism, its detractors were “pedants” (Ch. *furu* 腐儒), who used doctrine as a way to discount the “sincere feelings” of humble, unlearned folk (Sibau 2011, 30, 110-111).<sup>53</sup>

In light of the above defenses, a couplet from a poem of So Seyang 蘇世讓 (1486-1562), “That slicing the thigh is a breach of propriety is not something worth stating / a medicine that is not a medicine naturally brings joy” (刲股失禮無足說 勿藥之藥自有喜) can then be read as a convenient encapsulation of the rhetorical strategies at play.<sup>54</sup> The *poesis* of Sawöl’s filiality functioned as “sanitization,” where problematic details are expurgated or rewritten into a more streamlined narrative. This “sanitization” repositioned the filial act into another spiritual universe, one that, rhetorically, centered on the power of human agency, but that was still replete with the miraculous. The persistence of the miraculous may serve a dual role: maintaining compatibility with orthodox and hegemonic (Confucian) narratives of filiality, while allowing its applicability to the performance of filiality by individuals who may have been inspired by other ideas.<sup>55</sup> A Confucian observer may attribute it to “sympathetic resonance,” while the finger severer may thank a deity or believe that the finger itself was the curative agent.

To see this phenomenon as “sympathetic resonance” is to grant curative agency to the emotions that motivated the act, not the finger, or even the act itself. The canonical *Twenty-four Filial Acts* too, which often serves as a reference point for eulogies of Kim Sawöl, highlights the power of affect to elicit natural responses. In one story, a filial son hopes to melt the icy surface of a frozen river by sitting on it, in order to get fish to feed a parent. To reward him, the fish emerge from the river of their own accord. Bamboo shoots spring spontaneously in the dead of winter for another filial son after he cried out of desperation because there were no fresh shoots that he could dig for his ailing mother.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, the *Illustrated Guide* series, shorn of explicit miracle, has been described as a guide to “practical behavior,” and contrasted with the “supernatural,” therefore impractical to emulate, filial models in *Twenty-four Filial Acts* (Yi 2004, 205). The poetry exchanges between Chosŏn officials and Ming envoys, however, show that elements of the miraculous

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53. Lü elaborates on the relationship between the cult of filiality and Wang Yangming thought in Ming China (Lü 2011, 116-122, 159-167).

54. HHJ 1539 in SKCM 4, v. 301.585b-586a

55. Miracles had been a consistent feature in stories of filial devotion, at least since the Han. The “resonance between heaven and humans” is well situated in early Han period Confucianism (Knapp 2005, 87-112).

56. *Ershisi xiao shi xuan*, 4a, 3b; see also Chang 61-62, 286-287.

persisted as an imagination of immanent morality embedded in a sympathetic nature. While Boddhisattvas or deities may have been elided in these poetic narratives, the practical logic of filial acts and their relationship to the miraculous did not change.

The persistence of the miraculous at this level of discourse hints at the operating logic that may have informed the commemoration of actions like those of Kim Sawöl. If the Buddhist and shamanistic elements that drive later popular narratives of filial devotion in Chosŏn Korea, such as the *Song of Sim Ch'ŏng*, are any indication, the elaboration of the cult of filiality in Chosŏn was not so much the result of state efforts to spread filial behavior as a Confucian doctrine, but rather the reframing (and thereby sanctioning) of existing practices as Confucian behavior. Kim Sawöl and those like her may have been inspired by any combination of beliefs or motivated by any series of social factors—whether they acted out of a desire to fit promulgated norms, a belief in a resonant nature, or faith in divine intervention may not have mattered to the state, so long as the action undertaken was legible within a Confucian discourse. Upholding emotional motivation over doctrinal inspiration meant that those who severed their fingers to feed to their parents could always be seen as paragons of filial devotion.

If one accepts the above hypothesis, then the gradual normalization of filial cannibalism can be understood as an accommodation of diverse world views in an orthopraxy cast within the rubric of Confucian doctrine. Looking from the top down, those who held Confucian ideals integrated specific behaviors, which may have carried varied sets of meanings, into one streamlined narrative by insisting on one interpretative code. From the bottom up, narratives of filiality infused with Buddhist and shamanistic notions were in fact interfacing with state-oriented and elite narratives, appropriating those discourses to their own cosmologies. This dialectic interaction between diverse particularities and the hegemonic ideologies that subsume them may be compared to processes in other social and historical contexts, such as the interplay between changing burial rites and the authority of the church played in the rise of the cult of the saints in early Christian Europe, or the continuous reinventions of a local religious cult amidst the social and political transformations in Tokugawa and Meiji Japan (Brown 1982, 23-49; Thal 2005). The accommodation, as such, was a mutual one and may partly explain how “counter-hegemonic” narratives of filiality inspired by Buddhism and shamanism persisted in late Chosŏn popular culture: they were legitimized by a state-sponsored, hegemonic discourse of filiality as a Confucian value (Haboush 2005, 132, 142-151, 175-177).

## Gender and Empire

The poetic sanitization of finger severing involved not only the reinvention of Sawöl's motives, but reframing the context in which she was to be understood. Her eulogizers drew from examples of filial daughters from canonical sources. Two Han period paragons, Cao E 曹娥 (130-143), and Chunyu Tiying 淳于緹縈 (fl. 167 BCE), remembered for their willingness to put their own lives on the line for their fathers, emerge as Kim Sawöl's antecedents.<sup>57</sup>

Tiying's father, about to be punished for a crime, lamented his lack of sons and scolded "his daughters for being of no use." Tiying, spurred on by her father's indignation, rose to the occasion and came to the emperor's court in person to ask for clemency, offering to take her father's place in punishment.<sup>58</sup> Shi Dao took what motivated Tiying to "take her father's place to give up life, with life she would him repay," to be analogous to what led "Lady Kim to sever her fingers to cure her mother." The authentic emotion shared by the two filial daughters made it impossible for the finger severing to have been done because "she heard a rumor that it would be effective."<sup>59</sup> In his praise of Sawöl, the 1573 Ming envoy Cheng Xian 成憲 chided Tiying's father, asking "why is [it] that the hearts of parents / value sons but do not value girls?" He compared these virtuous daughters, "the children who cleaved their fingers" to Han Gaozu, the "son who asked for stew" (see note 41), elevating them as virtuous paragons who surpassed men in their actions.<sup>60</sup> In both these cases, the story of Tiying legitimizes Sawöl's finger severing not simply by providing another example of a virtuous daughter, but by contextualizing finger severing as a form of filial sacrifice.<sup>61</sup>

The story of Cao E functions similarly in this context. After her father had drowned in a river, Cao E was said to have cried for seventeen days. Not seeing his corpse, she jumped into the river on the fifth day of the fifth month and

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57. For additional examples see HHJ 1573 in SKCM 4, v. 301.785b-786a; Im Ch'aemyöng analyzes several poems connecting Sawöl and Cao E not discussed in this paper (2001, 44-46).

58. *Shi ji* v. 105, 2795: 罵其女曰 生子不生男 有緩急非有益也.

59. HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, v. 301.380a: 漢家唯有緹縈孝 代父捐生可報 金娥斷指療母心 豈是聞風知所效.

60. HHJ 1573 Asami v. 17 32.12b: 胡為父母心 貴男不貴女 試觀落指兒 何如分羹子.

61. The 1582 Ming envoy Wang Jingmin 王敬民 also equated Sawöl with Tiying. He wrote in his "Passing by the former residence of Kim, the Filial Girl" 過金孝女故廬, "Slicing her finger to feed her mother, so that her illness heals / [a deed] to be spoken of together with Tiying who would take her father's place." 戒指食母病因愈 代父緹縈堪並言. HHJ 1582 Asami v. 18, 35.21b.

retrieved her father's corpse five days later. Unable to bear the grief of losing her father, she committed suicide by diving into the river again.<sup>62</sup> To Ni Qian, the deeds of Kim Sawöl were "no different than that of Cao E," in that both women were remembered for endangering themselves for the sake of a parent. Chǒng Yūgil 鄭維吉 (1515-1588), in a poem matching the verses of the 1573 Ming envoy Han Shineng 韓世能 (1528-1598), made the same comparison: "Cao E, after a thousand years still has a stele / finger severing and diving into the river belong to the same track."<sup>63</sup> Offering to take one's father place in punishment, jumping into a river to retrieve his body, and severing one's finger to cure one's mother, generalized as filial sacrifice provided the equivalents necessary to situate Sawöl within a tradition of paragon filial daughters. This frame of reference, where filial cannibalism was understood as risking oneself for one's parent, allows an exception to the original injunction against "harming one's body" as doing harm, by proxy, to a "parent's body." Preserving the equivalence of one's own body and that of a parent, self-harm became permissible, so long as it was done for a parent.<sup>64</sup>

This rhetorical strategy of legitimating Sawöl in a tradition of filial daughters carried other implications. For one, the expectation that women would be less aware or less inclined to behave according to Confucian norms made her doubly exemplary.<sup>65</sup> The presumed moral inferiority of Kim Sawöl's sex served an additional rhetorical purpose: the authentication of Chosŏn's overall state of civilization. Ming envoys read Sawöl, or at least chose to represent her to their Chosŏn hosts, within a broader celebration of Korea's

62. *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 v. 84, 2794.

63. HHJ 1573 in SKCM v. 4, 301.785b-786a: 曹娥千載有遺碑 斷指投江同一規.

64. Mutilation as a consequence of filial devotion also helped connect Sawöl's deeds to other classical figures, most notably Mi Zixia 彌子瑕. A favorite of the ruler, Mi had stolen the chariot of his lord to visit his mother. Although he was to be punished with pedal amputation, the ruler forgave him on account of filial behavior. Once he lost favor with his ruler, however, he was punished for his actions. See the poems by Yi Haeng, HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, 301.380a: 百身難報昊天恩 彌子當年亦忘別; and Kim Allo 金安老, *Hüiraktang mungo* 希樂堂文稿 v. 4 in *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* 韓國文集叢刊 21.336a-d (hereafter HMC): 丁寧聖訓歎兩星月 賦與初無愚智別 至性君看斷指人 古來非獨子瑕別.

65. Sin Sukchu 申叔舟 writes of Sawöl's actions, evoking two examples from the *Twenty-four Filial Acts*, "Wang Yang sat on ice for jumping fish / Shouchang wrote in blood / How could she know of this in her boudoir? / Her innate virtue was white as ice and snow" 王祥氷躍魚 壽昌書刺血 閨中豈知此 天資皎冰雪. See *Pohanjae chip* 保閑齋集 v. 12 in HMC 10.98a. Gendered readings at once made a woman more remarkable and absolved her of any potential ignorance. In the Ming, the Xuanzong emperor (r. 1425-1435), despite sharing Taizu's reservations regarding filial cannibalism and generally punishing such cases, withheld punishment because the perpetrator was an "ignorant" woman (Qiu 1995, 76).



moral attainment as a Confucian state. For Wu Ximeng, since “even the women of the East [i.e. Korea] are as such,” then “the gentlemen’s morals [would be] supreme.”<sup>66</sup> While employing the tropes of sympathetic resonance and the spontaneity of filial devotion, a poem by the 1539 envoy Xue Tingchong 薛廷寵 (fl. 1532) incorporated Sawöl’s femininity within a narrative that centered the Ming envoy’s role of representing Chosŏn’s state of civilization:

The filial girl of Kwaksan, Kim Sawöl,  
Once severed her finger and brewed it in tonic.  
Since then, a hundred and ten springs have passed;  
Her decorated column and stone stele stand tall, facing each other.  
On these green hills, the grass spreads all over.  
In front of the filial daughter’s gate, the traveler rests.  
In the past, Tying moved the Emperor of the Han—  
Even her deeds were not as remarkable as this!  
The fish of the river and bamboo shoots have all been heard of;  
These deeds of men, one may still speak of them.  
But, the graceful woman from an orchid boudoir—  
Heaven and earth will shine with brilliance for her filial heart.  
I come from the Jade Halls in the heavens above, locked in azure,  
Where flowing among the poems and brushes, the dragons and serpents dance.  
I know well enough that this woman’s name will not be effaced,  
And shining with the sun, it will travel in the sky, and be worshiped like the  
mountains and hills.  
Ah, this country in the East of teaching and transformation!  
With patterning and brilliance united, they are diffused radiantly.  
How could the filial girl of Kwaksan be a thing of chance?  
Original essence and spirit are drawn to the true and virtuous.  
The *Airs of the States* collected from a boudoir gate—  
The Imperial Envoy searched for them all around.  
I wish to submit and exhibit them to the Officials of Music,  
To advise you to carry on these glorious deeds for generations more.<sup>67</sup>

In a less-than-humble self-positioning, the Ming envoy saw himself akin to a divine messenger descending to Korea. Recasting his role of an imperial emissary in classical terms, he was like Confucius of yore, who had set out to collect the folk songs of feudal states in order to document their social mores. In

66. HHJ 1537 in SKCM 4, v. 301.539a-b: 東方女流尚如此 因誠君子倫理敦。

67. HHJ 1539 in SKCM 4, v. 301.585b-586a: 郭山孝女金四月 當年斷指曾煮藥 只今一去百十春 華表碣石相突兀 一種青山草離離 孝女之門行人歇 從前綈綈感漢皇 未有此女行奇絕 江魚竹笋俱有聲 丈夫之行猶可說 綽約蘭房閨女流 孝心天地為昭灼 玉堂青瑣天上來 淋漓詞翰龍蛇躍 足知此女名不磨 貫日行空齋山岳 吁嗟東方教化邦 一統文明況旁燭 郭山孝女豈偶然 元精間氣鍾真淑 國風歌謠采閨門 皇華使臣徧詠述 我欲獻之列樂官 示爾世世承芳躅。

Korea, he discovered a land thoroughly resplendent with the fruits of civilization. Appropriating Chosŏn's filial daughter as a testament to the success of the Ming's civilizing project, Xue incorporated the finger-severing daughter of Kwaksan within a high imperial narrative.

This rhetorical mode was not unique to Xue's writing, but found ample representation among the poems of Ming envoys who traveled through Kwaksan. Ni Qian's original preface also made use of this technique.

As for filial duty, it is the beginning of a hundred [good] deeds and myriad kinds of goodness. With one young woman of a boudoir chamber able to act upon it, what more can we say of the gentry [of this country]? Now, I ever more realize that the civilizing transformation of the Successive Sages of Our Dynasty [i.e. the Ming Emperors], has truly extended far.<sup>68</sup>

While Ni went on to praise the Chosŏn king for erecting a memorial to Sawŏl, for him, Sawŏl's deeds were a direct result of the Ming's civilizing project. Exemplary acts of filial devotion, however, were also emblematic of Chosŏn's civilizing project. The Chosŏn official Sin Sukchu 申叔舟 (1417-1475), who accompanied Ni, reminded him of that fact:

[...] Our King affirms filial principles;  
Where there is good he will bring it to light.  
Praising the beautiful to admonish future men,  
He carves [these deeds] in stone to set them apart.  
To set examples, so that all will have their place,  
Are memorial doorways, gates and posts.  
And so, this filial daughter—  
Her fragrant name will always be exalted.

While the Ming envoy may have celebrated the extension of Ming's civilization abroad, Sin found a different role for the Ming envoy.

Your poems uplift customs and virtues.  
In Korea, for million and a myriad generations,  
A clear wind will blow among the stalwart and righteous [...] <sup>69</sup>

68. *Liaohai bian* v. 2 25a-25b in *Shi Chaoxian lu* 使朝鮮錄 570-571: 夫孝者 百行之首 萬善之原 以一房闈少女 猶能踐之 矧其士大夫乎 予於是益知我朝列聖教化之漸被者遠矣. Echoing these lines, Ni writes in his poem, "Finally I know that the sentiments that the Emperor bestows / does not distinguish between the Chinese or the barbarian" 始知帝降衷 不以華夷別.

69. *Pohanjae chip* v. 12 in HMC 10.98a: 吾王重孝理 有善必昭哲 褒美示後人 勒石以旌別 垂範各適宜 模闡與居楔 所以此孝女 芳名常揭揭...作詩樹風節 三韓億萬世 清風吹凜烈.

In this alternative narrative that centered Chosŏn's royal initiative, the Ming envoy's role was to bring recognition to virtue with his writing. The shift in emphasis, subtle but important, exposes the coexistence of two kinds of appropriation. Sawŏl's actions became incorporated within two parallel political projects: the Chosŏn court's appropriation of local practices within a broader project of Confucianization, and the Ming's political imaginary of universal empire, viewing Korea as an object of its influence and testament to its virtue. These two narratives were not necessarily contradictory, but existed in tension with each other and social reality. Neither necessarily captured Sawŏl's own motivations or the immediate context of her actions, but instead inform us of the political considerations that made her actions meaningful for both sides.

Subsuming filial cannibalism within these grand narratives also served to allay the human complexity of the practice itself. One of the critiques of the practice, captured in Li Shizhen's diatribe against filial cannibalism in the *Bencao*, was the problem of the grief that the healed parents would feel upon seeing the injured body of their child.<sup>70</sup> The following poem by Shi Dao treats the problem of grief, building up a narrative that culminated in the mother's wailing; but the emotional climax is interrupted:

[...] The girl's finger, once it enters the mouth of the mother,  
Heals her body and she comes to life again.  
Though she did not see what drug was used,  
Without asking about the missing finger,  
The loving mother knew what had come about,  
And her sudden wails moved the neighbors!

The grieved cries of Sawŏl's mother, who just discovered that her daughter had mutilated herself for her sake, gave way to a celebration of Chosŏn's civilizing project.

The vassal king affirms the teaching of proper names  
And, the filial principles extend to the people of the East [i.e. Korea].  
Praise and exaltation are done according to model of sages,  
And the mores of the East are thus persisted.  
The story of the filial girl is now old,  
[But] her name will live for a thousand ages.<sup>71</sup>

70. *Bencao gangmu*, 2967.

71. HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, v. 301.371b-372a: 女指入母口 羸體隨復振 藥品雖未喻 缺指寧弗詢 慈母知所故 驚泣動比鄰 藩王重名教 孝理漸東民 褒崇有聖典 東方風以諄 孝女事已舊 千古名常興.

In this denouement, the personal pathos was left unresolved, merely overwritten by a grand narrative of state commemoration.

It was not that Chosŏn writers always chose to emphasize their state's civilizing project and Ming envoys invariably celebrated an imperial vision. While Gong Yongqing used Sawŏl's story as an opportunity to praise the Ming, "Imperial airs naturally extend beyond the Nine Reaches, / its beneficence has reached the Eastern Vassal to this degree!" Shi Dao did not refer to the Ming at all.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, it was Shi's Korean interlocutor, Yi Haeng, who incorporated Chosŏn within the Ming's imperial vision:

[...] Who knew that this one girl,  
Would alone be collected among the envoy's poems?  
I heard that Confucius had once said  
"Virtue will certainly have its neighbors."  
Though [this] small country is a foreign land,  
Its people are also of the Imperial House.  
Its people all devote themselves,  
To better understand the Sage King's transformations.<sup>73</sup>

This declaration was not founded on a desire to become a Ming subject *de jure*, but an appeal to the universal applicability of classical civilization. By recognizing both the legitimacy of Chosŏn's claims to classical civilization and its capacity to actualize them, Shi Dao implicitly acknowledged Korea's cultural parity with Ming China. Yi Haeng's affirmation of the Ming imperial imaginary in this context was, perhaps, to return Shi Dao's favor. By together eulogizing the filial daughter of Kwaksan, the two parties co-constructed a shared political imaginary through mutual praise. The Ming's civilizing power and Chosŏn's project of Confucianization blended together in a narrative of filiality that reconciled these contending visions.

In these gestures of mutual acknowledgment, the envoy and his writings sometimes stole Sawŏl's spotlight. Yi Haeng offered the following advice to Shi:

The starry chariot has traveled far—where does it go?  
Its path leads to the Verdant Hills [i.e. Korea] for collecting poems.  
Sagely Transformation has reached the east; every family is virtuous and righteous.  
Now, there is more than what [you have seen] on Kwaksan's stele.<sup>74</sup>

72. HHJ 1537 in SKCM 4, v. 301.405a-b: 皇風自是式九圍 澤被東藩乃如此。

73. HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, v. 301.371b-372a: ... 那知一女子 獨取於諮詢 我聞孔氏說 惟德必有隣 小邦雖異土 亦是皇家人 斯民各盡性 益知王化諄。

74. HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, v. 301.380b-381a: 星軺跋涉向何之 路入青丘為採詩 聖化東漸家節義

As Yi reminded his guest of his duty to “collect poems,” Sawöl’s filiality became relevant only inasmuch as it was a representative object of Chosŏn’s civilization. Yi’s colleague Chŏng Saryong 鄭士龍 (1491-1570), also present, echoed this sentiment:

The envoy passes by the gates to ask [about her]  
And troubles himself with a brush to write a poem.  
Her fragrant name shall now carry on for a thousand ages;  
What need do we have to erect a stele several feet high?<sup>75</sup>

The Ming envoy’s written acknowledgment, the only recognition Sawöl needs, replaced the physical monument, the stele and memorial gate, as the ultimate testament to her virtue.<sup>76</sup>

Shifting attention away from the poems and their narratives, and to the social conditions that informed their production, one observes how a specific literary sociability interceded on the scope and the relevance of the ideas represented. While these poems exposed prevailing ideas about filial devotion, they were poems of diplomacy first and foremost, and the social demands of poetic exchange did much to color the way in which Kim Sawöl came to be represented. Her continued appearance may have depended less on her renown or representativeness than on a tradition that developed within Chosŏn-Ming diplomacy. The contemporary literary practice of *ch’aun* 次韻 (Ch. *ciyun*), writing poems using the same rhyme words as one’s predecessors fostered the recycling of similar themes and images.<sup>77</sup> This flurry of eulogies emerged not necessarily out of a desire to exalt Kim Sawöl *per se*, but to exhibit literary virtuosity and address the concerns of social interaction.

Even if she mattered to these officials only as an opportunity to give meaning to their own literary activities, some Ming envoys took their ascribed

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如今不獨郭山碑。

75. HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, v. 301.381b: 使節經閭一問之 更煩椽筆為題詩 芳名定自流千古 不必堅頑數尺碑。

76. Yi Haeng wrote to the same effect: “It is not that these [deeds] did not exist in the past— / We value the envoy’s seven poems. / From now on they will be common ditties in the mouths of men, / We will have no need for a three-foot stele by the road” 非今難得古無之 鄭重皇華七首詩 從此更為人膾炙 不須三尺道傍碑。 See HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, v. 301.379b-380a.

77. The largest body of Sawöl poems, sixty-three individual poems, came from the 1521 Ming envoy mission, where between the Ming envoys Tang Gao and Shi Dao, and their Chosŏn hosts, Yi Haeng, Chŏng Saryong, So Seyang, and Yi Hüibo, nine series of seven quatrains were composed one after another: citation, counting Kim Allo’s quatrains that were not collected in the HHJ, would make seventy individual quatrains. The 1521 mission included seventy-four poems in total, nearly three-quarters of all the extant poems on Kim Sawöl.

role as messenger and literary agent with particular earnestness. The 1521 envoy Tang Gao 唐皋 (1469-1526), for example, offered this fanciful vignette of an imagined encounter with Sawŏl's ghost:

At midnight who comes to knock on the door to my bedroom?  
It must have been the young woman's spirit, not yet dispersed.  
It was the spring wind that came through, all without intention,  
To give thanks to the poems that remember her deeds.<sup>78</sup>

Tang's poem combined the literary trope of a lingering ghost who remained in the human world because of unrequited emotions with the hagiography of a filial daughter. By assuring it was really only a "spring wind" and not a ghost, the poem transferred the affective power of emotion present in eulogies of filial children to the actions of the Ming envoy. The power of poetry to represent and recognize, not the filial act itself, took center stage. Gong Yongqing, for example, felt duty-bound to represent Kim Sawŏl in verse. Calling Kwaksan an "empty mountain" difficult to find, Gong lamented the "lost site" of her "broken stele strewn among fallen flowers and wild grasses" (落花荒草臥殘碑). His romanticized account of discovering an allegedly hidden locale again underscored the power of his writing, for without his "writing poems for her," "she would have fallen into obscurity in this eastern land."<sup>79</sup>

Rather than dismiss envoy poetry for the self-congratulatory tone that often pervades its lines, it should be noted that such notions of self-importance were reinforced by their Chosŏn hosts. In his response to Gong, the Chosŏn official So Seyang articulated the relationship between Sawŏl's filiality, the Ming's imperial project, and the role of the Ming envoy:

[...] The envoy in one gaze gathers the people's customs,  
For a myriad ages, his writing will be as the seas and mountains.  
In the East, the principle of filiality has been recorded since antiquity,  
Ever more that the Sagely Ming now tends the jade candle.  
The "Cry of Fishhawks" begins: the origin of civilization;  
Women have their proper behavior and men devote themselves to studies.  
If one wants to present this in detail to the Son of Heaven,  
Without writing (Ch. *siwen* 斯文), with what other means does one describe?  
If you are to investigate all of the Eastern Kingdom,  
Then it will not just be Kwaksan that has such sites!<sup>80</sup>

78. HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, v. 301.380a-b: 夜半誰來叩寢門 女郎應有未消魂 春風一破元無意 為報詩存迹亦存。

79. HHJ 1537 in SKCM 4, v. 301.405a-b: 幸有吾人為賦詩 不然泯沒在東土。

80. HHJ 1539 in SKCM 4, v. 301.585b-586a: 皇華一顧採民風 萬古文章同海岳 東方孝理著自古 況今

Literary embellishment, which sometimes involved forcing references and phrases into fixed rhymes, was common in the social conventions of envoy poetry and may have contributed to the proliferation of poetry on Kim Sawöl; but such production was not “merely literary,” a fiction to address the extemporaneous needs of craft. This poem, in charging the Ming envoy with the duty of representation, echoed the claims to literary power made by the Ming officials themselves. So, associating their writing with the “Cry of Fishhawks” (“*guanju*” 關雎), the first poem of the *Airs of the States* (*Guofeng* 國風), one of the definitive classical expressions of the canonical and moral imperatives connected to writing, elevated their literary activities by seeing them as the continuation of a hallowed, ancient goal.<sup>81</sup> Like the *Airs*, reputed to have been collected by Confucius from the vassals of the Zhou, their poetry exchanges were to reflect the social mores of Chosŏn. The filial daughter of Kwaksan, among other paragons, demonstrated the attainment of Chosŏn as a civilized state. While the hierarchical implications of this analogy—the Ming as the Zhou, and the Chosŏn as a vassal state—were clear, it also revived the image of the classical, ideal past in the current world, a revival that had come about through Chosŏn’s civilizing project.

This process of co-construction, turning to literature itself as the origins of the civilizing project, converted the political relationship between the Chosŏn and the Ming into one that served a larger purpose. Their activities were to be part and parcel of a grand reenactment of the classical past. In what has been described as “using literature to adorn the state” (*munjang hwa guk* 文章華國) the poems in these anthologies become in and of themselves the mechanisms of the civilizing project (Sin 2010, 158-159). The literary here circumscribes the political within the moral and the aesthetic, where the literary tasks of the envoy became the express purpose of diplomacy itself.

These poems bear witness to how, through literary exchange, a broader political vision of Chosŏn-Ming diplomacy and the relationship of Chosŏn to classical civilization and the Ming’s imperial imaginary came to be constructed, elaborated, and reified. Fundamentally, both the Chosŏn state and the Ming envoys’ attempt to appropriate Kim Sawöl’s actions rested upon the same poetic logic. Their own ideals required existing examples, and Kim served both. Just as the Ming envoy took the actions of a Chosŏn woman to be representative of the

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聖明調玉燭 閔雎首開風化原 女子有行男私淑 願為彌縫獻天子 不有斯文亦何述 倘得諮詢徧東國 豈唯郭山有遺蹟。

81. Stephen Owen (1992, chap. 1-2) discusses the significance of this text and the *Airs of the States* in the literary tradition.

Ming's civilizing power beyond its own territory, the Chosŏn court saw in Kim Sawŏl a tangible example of the success of their own social reforms.

## Conclusion

For the envoys of Chosŏn-Ming diplomacy, Sawŏl acquired a whole range of significance beyond the scope of filial devotion. Although a hundred-odd poems is no small number, Sawŏl remained a largely localized figure, remembered in Kwaksan within the space of envoy poetry, as one among many filial children mentioned in the *Illustrated Guides*. Sawŏl's significance to our understanding of Chosŏn society lies not in the rather limited horizontal diffusion of this figure, but rather her vertical depth: Sawŏl's filial act strung together several discursive and social layers and offered glimpses into different kinds of processes. From the provincial town of Kwaksan to the Chosŏn court and the banquet table of a diplomatic mission, Sawŏl was the combined cultural product of local and popular practice, the Chosŏn court's civilizing project, and a high imperial poetic mode.

Filiality in Chosŏn society, as embodied in Sawŏl's severed finger, carried a wide range of meanings, but they converged on the importance of authentic feeling. Both envoy poets and Chosŏn officials came to focus on the filial emotions that motivated the act. The rhetorical strategies in envoy poetry exhibited a congruity with the historical processes initiated by the Chosŏn state that gradually integrated a once problematic act into social normalcy. The shared strategies of cultural legitimation in these distinct, though related, discursive contexts hint at the proliferation of not just common attitudes, but also hermeneutic patterns and structures of relevance. Such congruity is not surprising, given that the writers of envoy poetry, their anthologizers, and the compilers of these collections of moral deeds were sometimes the very same court officials.<sup>82</sup>

However, the marginalization of the heterodox thus achieved may have only occurred on the page. The "authenticity of filial emotion" and the "sympathetic resonance of nature," notions used to describe filial cannibalism, may have sanitized the discourse and flattened unseemly diversities, but the assumption that performed actions authenticated filial emotions was a tenuous one. Just as a Korean Confucian could take a case of finger severing by a commoner as an

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82. The compiler of the 1617 anthology was Yu Kŭn 柳根 (1549-1627), who was also the chief welcoming emissary for the 1606 and 1609 Ming embassies (Du 2010, 18-10).



authentication of a Confucian value, viewed from a distance, in the eyes of a Ming envoy, Chosŏn's project of Confucianization itself authenticated the Ming's own civilizing project. Ming officials disregarded local difference and understood the finger severing on their own terms, which their hosts were eager to confirm. When made to bear witness to the act of finger severing, Ming envoys took a phenomenon that had its own historical specificity in Chosŏn and understood it as a manifestation of what they perceived to be a universal ideal. Their Chosŏn hosts played along, and the universality of filiality so expressed, "... for all eternity, moral order hangs above like the sun and moon, / a filial heart was from the beginning no different between man and woman," produced a seeming convergence of Chosŏn and Ming practices.<sup>83</sup>

The irony of this claim to universality was that the value of filial devotion was not only a moral ideal for all to follow, but that it may really have been available for anyone to *interpret*. Against the backdrop of state orthodoxy, popular narratives such as the *Song of Sim Ch'ŏng*, Buddhist parables, and shaman songs, containing alternative, counter-hegemonic belief systems thrived (Haboush 1995). But this may very well be because of the process of accommodation, which we witness in the case of finger severing, was achieved with an emphasis on "authentic feeling" over the details of doctrine, such that alternate meanings of filiality could persist in tandem with official, public interpretations.

As this discussion has tried to show, however, filial cannibalism in Korea and China was not only different in the specifics of practice, but also in the mechanisms of its dispersion. What emerged as a "common" Confucian culture between the Chosŏn and the Ming, then, was not so much a direct product of cultural transmission, nor a self-evident elaboration of classical notions, but a more subtle interplay between various processes. The Ming did not bring Confucianism to Korea, nor could shared classical texts (like the *Classic of Filial Piety*) guarantee identical developments. Instead, literary production, diplomacy, state initiative, along with the slower processes of social transformation, interacted in complex ways to give credence to these narratives.

These hegemonic narratives of civilization, whether centered in Chosŏn or in the Ming, have in common the disembodiment of individual actions from their original reference of meaning. Whatever hegemony Confucian ideals had in Chosŏn society may have been more fragile than imagined in either discourse. In this context then, hegemony did not so much suppress as appropriate existing notions with its own interpretative authority. The Confucianization of

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83. HHJ 1521 in SKCM 4, v. 301.379b-380a: 萬古綱常懸日月 孝心男女初無別

society was achieved not solely through the imposition of new social norms or practices, but the figural “cannibalization” and incorporation of preexisting ones within a new frame of reference. Thus, the parallels between how filial cannibalism became normalized in the early Chosŏn context and the compositions of Ming envoys on the subject may well exist because they were both poetries of sorts: the manipulation of existing signs to serve a different system of symbols. In this case of filial cannibalism, this transformation was not so much the engineering of a society as it was its *poesis*.

## Abbreviations

HHJ *Hwanghwajip* 皇華集.

HMC *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* 韓國文集叢刊.

SKCM *Siku quanshu cummu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書.

TGSS *Tongguk sinsok Samgang haengsil to* 東國新續三綱行實圖.

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