Saimdang and Yulgok

Incorporated Association
YULGOK STUDIES INSTITUTE
This book was supported by South Korea’s Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism,
(Project for Developing Contents of Yulgok Studies and Promoting Social and Global Propagation)
Each family rich in tradition has a gem passed down as a family treasure through generations, and each nation with a long history has great figures among its ancestors that are more precious than gems.

Korean stands on many millennia of history, looking back on a vast past studded with great figures sparkling like diamonds and venerated by the entire nation for generations.

Deplorably, however, we do not know that we have our own treasures at home and envy our neighbors because of their own treasures. We do not know that great personalities exist among our own ancestors, and we look up to those of foreign countries.

We must first keep our own family treasure and let the light shine on it. We must venerate our own ancestors and feel pride in them. In the past, even under the Japanese occupation, we tried not to lose our own national studies and bring them to the fore as far as we could. Now, we are free to cherish our own academic heritage.

Nevertheless, we have lukewarm affection for and interest in our traditional knowledge and science. There is also a lack of publica-
tions to satisfy the need of those who seek knowledge.

Accordingly, books about our history and geography or biographies of national heroes and heroines are appreciated deeply in the writing and publishing milieu.

Even more valuable are the publications presenting research results in these areas. More still, we feel the need for a public educational version to provide people with an easy-to-read source of common knowledge. The rationale behind this is simple. Knowledge and science of one's own country must not be the subject of research of a small number of researchers; rather, they must spread like wildfire as a common knowledge shared by all people.

In my intention to pursue this end, I decided to write an academic paper on Saimdang and Yulgok. It is written in a narrative style so that people learn their lives through an easily digestible reading while at the same time enjoy their stories.

Despite the use of a narrative style as a form of writing, to make the book fun, easy-to-understand, and accessible to everyone, no compromise has been made in staying on a strictly academic
path, based on a thorough literature research.

Unfortunately, there are books that spread inaccurate descriptions of facts, although they were written with good intentions of providing common knowledge of our history, geography, and great figures. Great care must be taken to convey accurate facts, especially in a book presenting historical figures in a narrative style.

With this in mind, I kept the easy and simple writing style but completely refrained from adding or omitting events that may give an artificial flavor to the book. I wrote this book within the self-imposed boundary of presenting accurate facts based on literature and records. It would be my joy to see this book contribute to enhancing our common knowledge.

December 1966
Nosan Lee Eun-sang
As is well-known, many scholars have conducted research on Shin Saimdang and Yulgok Yi I from various perspectives.

Notable among such works is a book titled Saimdang and Yulgok written by Nosan Lee Eun-Sang (1903~1982) in 1966. This book records the lives and achievements of Shin Saimdang and Yulgok, compiling the stories less known to the public that have been passed down orally or presented in the writings of the contemporaries of Shin Saimdang and Yulgok, after carefully selecting and thoroughly investigating them. Six decades has passed since then and the book has long been out of print with no prospect of a reprint.

Driven by the desire to have this valuable record authored by Nosan widely read by people living in the present era and to present afresh Saimdang and Yulgok as guiding stars for many generations to come, we have decided to reprint this book, adding new materials that have been unearthed since its first edition. We would like to ask researchers and interested readers to afford understanding for some inevitably overlapping parts. Certain expressions have been simplified by editorial decisions,
It is our sincere hope that this book will serve as a good resource for understanding still another aspect of Shin Saimdang and Yulgok, the most famous mother and son in our history. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the Governor of Gangwon-do and the Mayor of Gangneung-si for their support for this publication.

December 2014

Director of the Yulgok Center for Lifelong Education

Cheong Moon-Kyo
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1. **Saimdang’s Timeline**
2. **Yulgok’s Timeline**
Saimdang

Shin Saimdang (1504–1551)
1. Brief Biography of Saimdang

Saimdang is a name known to any Korean who has basic general knowledge. However, few people have concrete and accurate knowledge of her life and art.

Most people deem Saimdang famous only because she is the mother of the great scholar Yulgok. However, Yulgok may not have become the great sage as we know him had Saimdang not been his mother. Therefore, it would be impossible to understand the true personality of Saimdang without going beyond the parameter of their mother-son relationship.

Without a doubt, Saimdang was a woman of noble character, a brilliant scholar, a poet, and an ingenious artist with exquisite skills in calligraphy and painting, even viewed from the angles unbiased by the labels put to her name, such as a devoted daughter, a virtuous wife, and a wise mother. We can catch a glimpse of her life in the book Saimdang’s Life, which Yulgok wrote at the age of sixteen, shortly after Saimdang’s death.
Born in 1504 at Ojukheon in Bukpyeong, Gangneung

Gangneung is a city in Gangwon-do, a province on the east-central coast. It has a long history as the capital of the ancient State Ye. Going westward for a short distance, from the scenic spot Gyeongpodae [Mirror Beach Pavilion], there is a house called Ojukheon in the village of Bukpyeong (now Ojukheon). Ojukheon House is venerated by many because Yulgok was born there.

It ought to be borne in mind, though, that not only Yulgok but also his
mother Saimdang was born at Ojukheon.

Saimdang’s father Shin Myeong-hwa, Gyeheum by courtesy name and Songjeong by art name, was a scholar of the illustrious Shin clan of Pyeongsan. He was born as the 18th generation descendant of Sunggyeom Jang Jeol-Gong, a statesman trusted by King Taejo of the Goryeo kingdom (9th century).

Saimdang’s maternal grandfather Yi Saon settled down in Bukpyeong, Gangneung Saimdang’s mother grew up there and did not leave, even after her marriage to Shin Myeong-hwa because she was the only child. Saimdang was also born at Ojukheon on October 29, 1504 (by the lunar calendar), the 10th year of the reign of Yeonsan of the Joseon kingdom.
Five daughters (and no son) were born to Saimdang's parents. Saimdang was the second daughter.

Born with outstanding beauty and gentle disposition, she received a distinct love and attention from her parents. Her natural artistic talent and intelligence were such that she showed remarkable mastery of not only embroidery and sewing, which were the main skills that women of that time had to learn, but also writing, calligraphy, and painting at an early age.

**Married to Yi Won-su at 19**

Saimdang started painting at age seven, imitating the landscapes of An Kyeon, a famous painter during Sejong's reign, and learned the Confucian classics and Chinese literature from her parents. She was trained early on in basic culture and mindset\(^1\) as an ideal womanhood of that time to become a good wife and a wise mother.

At the age of nineteen, she was married to Yi Won-su of the illustrious Yi clan of Deoksu, who was born as the 12th generation descendent of Don Su, a high-ranking military general of Goryeo. Yi Won-su lost his father at an early age and was raised by his widowed mother Lady Hong. His first given name was Nansu and courtesy name Deokhyeong. He was twenty-two years old, or three years older than Saimdang, when he married.

Saimdang's parents, who adored her for her extraordinary talent and

\(^1\) Internalized aptitude and disposition [Editor]
intelligence, would not let her leave them even after her marriage. Shortly after the wedding, her father said to his son-in-law, "I have many daughters, but I cannot bear to see your wife leaving me." This alone is enough to show how much Saimdang was loved by her parents. As they wished, Saimdang continued to live with them after the wedding, but, alas, her father died (aged forty-seven) at the ancestral house in Seoul on November 7, a few months after her wedding.

**Residence changes to Paju and Bongpyeong**

After her father's death, Saimdang stayed with her mother because she could not let her live alone, although her mother-in-law was alone in her husband's house after the latter's death. After the three-year mourning period, she went to her husband's house in Seoul to be introduced to her mother-in-law for the first time after the wedding.

Saimdang was married at nineteen and went to Seoul to live with her husband's family at twenty-one. However, she often changed place of residence. The Yulgok village in Paju, about 50 kilometers west of Seoul, was her husband's ancestral base. Yulgok often lived there, which explains why he took the art name "Yulgok" (literally, chestnut valley). Clearly, Saimdang was often there, too.

Saimdang missed her mother so much and thus often visited her in Gangneung. She also spent several years with her husband in Bongpyeong (now Baegokpo-ri, Bongpyeong-myeon, Pyeongchang-gun, Gangwon-do), located west of Daegwallyeong and was commonly called Pan-
kwandae. It was during this time that Saimdang, when she conceived her third son Yulgok at age thirty-three, dreamed that she arrived at a beach by the East Sea and saw a fairy emerging from the sea. The fairy was holding in her arms a baby boy with skin shining like white jade. She put the child in Saimdang’s arms and disappeared. In the night when she gave birth to Yulgok at her mother’s house in Gangneung, she dreamed that a black dragon flew from the East Sea and lingered above the bedroom door. Hence, the room was given the name Monglyongsil [room of dragon dream] and Yulgok was named Hyeonlyong [manifested dragon] when he was born (later changed to I).

According to Yulgok’s descendants and Bongpyeong inhabitants, Saimdang conceived Yulgok in Bongpyeong. There is no available evidence proving such claim, but Yulgok’s writing confirmed that Saimdang lived in Bongpyeong for many years.
Death in Samcheong-dong, Seoul at 48

After constantly changing residences for 10 years, Saimdang left her mother in Gangneung for good and came back to Seoul at age thirty-eight and Yulgok was six years old.

Back in Seoul, she lived at Sujinbang (now Susong-dong / Cheongjin-dong) for 10 years and moved to Samcheong-dong in the spring of the year of her death at age forty-eight.

In the summer of that year, Yi Won-su was appointed to the Pangwan [Chief Clerk of the Seoul Magistracy, rank Jr. 5] he was responsible for inland waterway transport of the grains collected throughout the country as in-kind taxes to the State. As he was on a return trip from Pyeongan-do and on board a ship with the grains collected, Saimdang fell ill and, suddenly, instructed all her children remaining at home to come to her bed-
side. She revealed to them, "I won't be able to get up again." She passed away only two or three days after getting ill. It was at the dawn of May 17, 1551 (by the lunar calendar), the 6th year of the reign of Myeongjong.

Accompanied by the eldest and third sons Seon and Yulgok (aged sixteen at that time), Yi Won-su arrived at Seogang (west river port) in the morning of the day of Saimdang's death. On receiving the news, they broke into tears and could not stop crying for hours on the street.

Yulgok recorded: "In the morning, when we were taking brass bowls out of the luggage we transported from Pyeongan-do, we saw them all turned red." This strange phenomenon seemingly struck Yulgok as an ominous sign. Not only the brass bowls but also the whole world around them must have had changed color. Even mountains and rivers must have had grieved for the loss of this paragon of virtue, exemplary character, knowledge, and art among all women throughout the country's history she, who, at the age of only forty-eight, disappeared like a comet after embroidering the sky with dazzling light.

Saimdang's body was buried at the foot of Mt. Jawun in Dumun-ri, Paju, but her spirit and name have remained in the collective memory of the entire nation, along with her splendid works of art. Even more glory was added to her eternal presence among us through her achievement as the mother of the great scholar Yulgok. The two gems, mother and son, have been bringing each other into prominence and shining ever more brightly for generations.
2. Saimdang’s Mother Lady Yi

Whoever knows Yulgok associates him with his mother Shin Saimdang. However, those who know Saimdang rarely know her mother Lady Yi. Referring to Saimdang and Yulgok, we say "like mother, like son." In this context, once we know who Lady Yi was, we can also say "like mother, like daughter." On the same note, Saimdang’s eldest daughter Maechang was also a brilliant artist who inherited every inch of her mother’s artistic talent—what a family!

Such a family is admittedly an exceptional case in our history. We will look into this extraordinary family, beginning with the life and personality of Saimdang’s mother Lady Yi.

**Born in 1480 as an only child**

Saimdang’s mother Lady Yi was born to Yi Saon (Yi clan of Yongin) and Lady Choi from Gangneung, who was the second daughter among the 11 children of Choi Eung-hyeon, a high-ranking official (Champan, Deputy Minister).

Lady Yi was born on January 24, 1480 (the 11th year of the reign of
Seongjong of Joseon) at her maternal grandparents' house in Gangneung, where she was raised. She was taught to read the classics as a child under her grandfather’s guidance, and learned by heart the classics written for women, including Samganghaengsil (Conduct of the Three Bonds). Her father Yi Saon settled down in Bukpyeong, Gangneung, in a place where the Ojukheon House was to be built later. That is, Yulgok’s maternal grandmother Lady Yi grew up in a house erected on the same property on which Ojukheon was built.

There, Lady Yi was married to Shin Myeong-Hwa [Saimdang’s father] from Seoul, who was later to be esteemed as a venerable scholar. Immediately after their marriage, she went to Seoul to live with her parents-in-law. However, when she returned to her parental house in Gangneung to take care of her ill mother, she eventually stayed and continued to live with her parents in Bukpyeong, with the approval of her husband and parents-in-laws, especially because she was an only child. Yulgok recorded: "My maternal grandparents lived apart in Seoul and Gangneung as long as 16 years."

Although five daughters (and no son) were born to the couple, they lived separately for so long. This aspect alone is enough to assume that their marital life could not have been happy, but Shin Myeong-hwa seemed to frequent Gangneung.

An interesting anecdote Yulgok wrote in *Lady Yi Moves Heaven* when he was sixteen years old is that he described the character of his maternal grandmother Lady Yi in the following words: "She was not eloquent but very agile and even audacious for right causes while being always cautious in doing things." This brief comment portrays vividly Lady Yi’s character and attitude.
Saimdang was the second among the five daughters. She was more likely tutored under the guidance of her mother than her father, who were often absent.

**Mother’s death and husband’s illness**

Lady Yi’s husband Shin Myeong-hwa was four years older than her. When he passed the Jinsasi [Literary Licentiate Examination] at age forty-one, high-ranking officials, such as Chief Minister Yoon Eun-bo and Senior Minister Nam Hyo-eui, tried to recommend him for an important civil service position. Nevertheless, he refused to enter officialdom and was contented with devoting himself to the study of the classics. In 1519, when he was forty-four years old, in the 14th year of the reign of Jungjong, the Gimyo Sahwa (Literati Purge of the Year Gimyo) broke out.

Although Shin Myeong-hwa was out of harm’s reach when many righteous scholars, led by Jeong Am Cho Gwang-jo, fell victim to the Purge, he was nonetheless disheartened and disgusted over the deplorable politics, and wished to do anything but devote himself to the pursuit of knowledge.

In the spring of the year when Shin Myeong-hwa turned 46, Lady Yi’s mother Lady Choi died. The sorrow of Lady Yi, who was incredibly devoted to her mother, was beyond description. Yulgok’s *Lady Yi Moves Heaven* relays what happened at that time. The entire story is presented here as recorded by Yulgok.

Shin Myeong-hwa received the news of his mother-in-law’s death
when he reached Yeoju. He was so shocked that he could not eat and sleep well during the rest of the journey, and got seriously ill by the time he reached the Wungyo station over Hoengseong, with the posterior part of the brain affected by cold exposure, to the extent of hearing loss and high fever. On arriving at Mt. Nae-eun in Changdu, over the Jinbu station, his entourage tried to persuade him into staying there, but he continued the journey without caring about his illness, insisting that "hurrying up is the best way. "By the time he arrived at the Hoenggye station, his disease already worsened that he coughed up blood.

A Gangneung townsman Kim Soon-Hyo saw this and hurried to Ojukheon to bring the news to Lady Yi. She felt as if the sky crumbled down. However, Lady Yi could not stay passively there and felt sad about her deathly ill husband just after losing her mother. So, she went to meet him, accompanied by Saimdang and other daughters and her maternal cousin Choi Su-mong.

Shin Myeong-hwa was staying at the Gusan station at that time and was not even able to sit up. He was carried to Choi Su-mong's ancestral shrine house located in Josan in Gangneung, where he met his family. But he could not even talk, and kept coughing up blood. The illness was so deep that medicines had no effect, and there wasn't a faintest shimmer of hope that he would recover. Lady Yi found herself in a complete darkness of desperation at the imminent loss of her husband while she was still in mourning for her mother.
Lady Yi's prayer moves heaven

The only way left for her was to pray to the gods and spirits. Lady Yi kept praying for seven days and seven nights without a moment's sleep. Seeing her prayers unanswered, she took a bath of purification and cut her finger and toe nails. Then she hid a small knife and climbed the hill at the back of the house to the grave of her maternal great grandfather Choi Chi-wun. She built an altar and lit an incense crying aloud, she prayed to heaven.

In his Lady Yi Moves Heaven, Yulgok wrote the content of the prayer in detail. The following is the translation of the prayer transmitted by Yulgok (written in Chinese characters).

God! God! Blessing the good and punishing the bad are heaven's ways. Accumulating good acts and repeating bad acts are men's ways. My husband has always acted in loyalty and faith, and has not committed even a single act of fraud and deception. His conduct has always been flawless. He fulfilled his filial piety and mourned his father for three years, living in a pavilion built beside the grave and eating only wild greens.

If heaven knows all and weighs the good and the bad, why such a severe punishment? We have lived 16 years in separation to serve our own parents in Seoul and in province.

I have just lost my widowed mother and now my husband's life hangs by a thread. Where should I then go and on what can my lonely body rely? Please listen to my prayer. Heaven and this world run on the same principle without any gap between them. God, oh, God, I beseech your grace with all my heart and soul.
Then she took out her knife and cut two phalanges of her left hand's middle finger. She kept praying to heaven, holding the cut finger against the sky and caressing it.

It is my fault, my lacking devotion and prayer that my husband is in this miserable state. The whole body down to a hair has been given by my parents and should not be harmed\(^2\), but my husband is my sky. So, if I lose him, how will I be able to live alone without the sky? I am ready to sacrifice my body to save my husband, God, oh, God, I beseech your grace with all my heart and soul.

Having thus prayed, she left the altar. When she saw Choi Chi-wun's grave, she prostrated before the grave and prayed again.

You were a loyal and righteous subject throughout your life and became a pure soul after your death. Please forward my prayer to God and make my heart reach Him.

Back home, she did not show any sign of her brave act lest her husband would be concerned. At that time, a long drought was in progress. After an hour or so, however, dark clouds gathered all of a sudden and a heavy shower, with thunder and lightning, began.

The next morning, the second daughter [Saimdang, eighteen years old at that time], while dozing off at her father's bedside, dreamed that a

\(^2\) Quoted from *Xiao Jing* (Book of Filial Duty): The body, hair, and skin, all these have been received from the parents, and, so, one should not dare damage them—that is the beginning of filial duty [Editor's note].
medicine ball as big as a red date descended from the sky, and a divine appeared from nowhere and put the medicine into her father's mouth.

At that moment, her father murmured, with eyes closed, "I will recover from my illness tomorrow." Asked by Choi Su-mong, "How do you know that?" he said, only half-conscious, "A divine being has just told me so and has gone."

Just as he said, he recovered as if from a fake illness. The entire village praised Lady Yi, saying "Heaven was moved by the devotion of Lady Yi." This anecdote was told by many and the government recognized Lady Yi's virtuous act by erecting a Yeolnyeo (virtuous woman) Pavilion in 1528, the 23rd year of the reign of Jungjong, when Lady Yi was forty-nine years old and her daughter Saimdang was twenty-five. Sadly, however, Shin Myeong-hwa passed away the year following his miraculous recovery from a fatal illness shortly after Saimdang's marriage [nineteen years old], and he had been dead for six years by the time the Yeolnyeo Pavilion was erected.

The source of this story is the Lady Yi Moves Heaven contained in Vol. 14 of the Complete Works of Yulgok. Yulgok wrote it at the age of eighteen, when his grandmother Lady Yi was seventy-four years old and his mother Saimdang had been dead for two years.

**Lady Yi's influence on Yulgok**

As described above, Lady Yi was born to Yi Saon as an only child and enjoyed a long life. However, she had to go through heartbreaking experiences of losing her parents and husband, and even her beloved daughter Saimdang in the vicissitudes of life.

As if as a compensation for the loss of Saimdang, however, Lady Yi
found great joy and consolation in her grandson Yulgok, who not only
grew to be such a great scholar with a nationwide reputation but also was
extremely devoted to her grandmother. Yulgok never neglected to serve
his grandmother to the best of his ability, not in the sense of filling up the
empty space left by his mother but in consideration of the loneliness his
grandmother might be feeling. According to the Yulgok Yeonbo [Personal
History of Yulgok], when he was returning from Mt. Geumgang at the
age of twenty [Lady Yi, seventy-six years old], after giving up his plan to
become a monk, he first went to visit his grandmother in Gangneung.

When Yulgok was thirty-three years old [Lady Yi, eighty-nine years old],
he went to Gangneung on receiving the news of his grandmother's ill-
ness, giving up his civil service position (ljo-Jwarang) to which he was ap-
pointed in November. The Office of Censor-General requested the King to
dismiss him, arguing that the illness of the maternal grandmother cannot
be a legitimate reason for a leave of absence.

King Seonjo, however, did not approve the request, saying, "If his love
for his grandmother is so great, he cannot but go and take care of her.
He is doing his filial duty, and dismissal is a disproportionate punishment."

Yulgok stayed until June of next year, when he was thirty-four years
old [Lady Yi, ninety years old]. With Lady Yi, he returned to Seoul to ac-
cept his appointment to the Gyori [Fifth Counselor (of the Office of Special
Counselors), rank Sr. 5]. In August, his request for a leave of absence to
take care of his grandmother was declined, but he could go to Gang-
neung in October with a furlough3) of the King Seinjo. He served his
grandmother until her death on December 8 of that year at the age of

3 Granting a leave of absence [Editor's note].
ninety, 47 years after the death of his husband Shin Myeong-hwa and 18 years after that of his daughter Saimdang.

Lady Yi was buried in her husband's grave site in Josan in Gangneung. Each year, Yulgok would perform Jesa (ancestral rite) of his maternal grandparents. A cross check of the ancient documents kept at Ojukheon in Gangneung revealed that Lady Yi bequeathed Ojukheon to Kwon Cheo-gyun, her fourth daughter's son, to take care of the graves, and a tile-roofed house [maybe originally possessed by Shin Myeong-hwa] in Sujinbang in Seoul to Yulgok, to perform Jesa.

In the year following her death, Yulgok wrote Jesa Text for Grandmother Yi. Yulgok's sorrowful longings for his grandmother are felt in every line.

My grief of having no parents to serve buried in my heart
I served you, my only grandmother
Waking or sleeping, you were always in my heart
Now, even you have left me.

As depicted above, Yulgok's affection for his maternal grandmother was deep and sincere during and beyond her life. Virtuous and generous Lady Yi not only gave birth to a daughter like Saimdang but also exerted a profound impact on her grandson Yulgok. Therefore, although Yulgok is inseparably associated with his mother Saimdang, it must also be borne in mind that his extraordinary grandmother casts an auspicious shadow over Yulgok.

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4 Checking against each other [Editor's note].
Lady Yi's documents of property distribution for five daughters
3. Saimdang as a Devoted Daughter

Saimdang, born to and raised by pious and well-lettered Lady Yi, famous for her brave act of devotion to her husband that moved heaven, was predisposed to become an extraordinary person that she turned out to be. It is only natural that Saimdang stayed by her side so long as she could and longed for her all her life. She did not leave Lady Yi even after her marriage because her father died when she was nineteen years old, shortly after her wedding. At the end of the three-year mourning period, she went to Seoul to be presented to her parents-in-law. She nevertheless soon returned to her mother and took care of her so long as she could. When she was thirty-eight years old, she had to leave her mother without a prospect of return. Saimdang used to break out in tears ever since, longing for her mother. Her poems testify to her feelings.

Looking back homeward from Daegwallyeong Pass

Leaving my old mother in my hometown
I'm going to Seoul alone with a saddened heart
Turning back, Bukchon village is far away
Only white clouds rush down the mountains in twilight.
Saimdang, thirty-eight, left her parental house in Gangneung and went to her parents-in-law’s with her six-year-old son Yulgok. This poem was written from atop Daegwallyeong, looking down her parental house in Bukpyeong.
Longing for Mother

My hometown is many mountains and miles away
Awake or dreaming, I wish I were there
Lonely moon over Hansongjeong
A gust in front of the Gyeongpodae
White gulls gathering and scattering on the sandbank
Fishing boats coming and going on the sea
When will I be walking again the roads of Gangneung
Sitting at home and sewing in my colorful dress.

This poem depicts her constant state of mind, overwhelmed by her longings for her mother who she had left alone at her parental house in Gangneung.

Praying to the moon\(^5\)

Night after night I pray to the moon
Wishing to see my mother again while alive.

These two lines are the remaining lines of an octet. Unfortunately, the other lines are missing.

Each of these poems expresses Saimdang’s longings for her mother, which were also well-described in Yulgok’s *Biography of My De-\

\(^5\) The title was given by the author for the sake of convenience.
ceased Mother: "My mother always missed her mother in Gangneung and used to shed tears at night after others had gone to sleep, sometimes all night long." Yulgok also wrote the following incident:

On one occasion, when our kinsman Shim visited us, his maidservant® played the zither. My mother was overwhelmed by her emotions and shed tears, which made everybody in the room feel down.

This anecdote testifies to Saimdang’s warm sentimentality, and above all, her constant state of longings for her mother. It portrays Saimdang as a devoted daughter and a poet.

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6 A maidservant waiting on the master or lady of an aristocratic household [Editor’s note].
Saimdang’s paintings
4. Saimdang as a Judicious Wife

Saimdang was nineteen years old when she married Yi Won-su from the Yi clan of Deoksu. According to hearsay, Yi Won-su was not up to the noble character of his wife Saimdang under many aspects, such as virtues, dispositions, talents, and scholarly achievements.

At that time, it was not customary even in aristocratic families that daughters were exposed to the education that only sons received. Saimdang was a rare exception.

Saimdang could receive high-quality education reserved for the sons of the aristocratic class as a result of the confluence of many circumstances: her father was a great scholar no son was born to him and Saimdang was exceptionally talented among the five daughters. She was taught the Confucian classics early on and was deeply inspired by the teachings of sages and scholars. She was also trained in poetry, calligraphy, and painting. As a result, she could accumulate culture and knowledge comparable to any well-educated men. Needless to say, she was superior in all matters, and Yi Won-su treated her with reverence like the one afforded to a teacher.
Do not remarry after my death

Yi Won-su, who was three years older than Saimdang, was fifty-one years old when Saimdang passed away at the age of forty-eight. He remarried a woman from a Kwon family and lived with her until his death at the age of sixty-one.

This woman caused serious problems later in Yulgok’s life. As if Saimdang had seen what was to come, well aware of the character and person of his husband, it seems that she felt the need to warn him against remarrying after her death. A related conversation between Saimdang and Yi Won-su is recorded in Donggyemannok, which is authored by Jeong Nae-ju (1680~1745):

Saimdang: I am feeble-bodied and will die before you, I request you not to remarry after my death. We have already seven children and that’s enough. So there is no need to disobey the teachings of Liji [The Classic of Rites]. Please never neglect the parental obligation to provide an environment for the children to grow and thrive well.

This extract strongly suggests that Saimdang had already seen what was to come, given the character of her husband. Instead of promising, Yi Won-su asked her:

Yi Won-su: What’s the use of talking about the time after your death? Rather, I would like to know what kind of norm Confucius was following by casting out his wife.
**Saimdang**: When Confucius had to escape to Nixi in the Qi state when a rebellion broke out during the reign of the Duke of Shao in Luo. At that time, Confucius’s wife went to Song instead of following his husband. That’s why Confucius parted with his wife. He did not live with her after parting with her, but there is no record that he casted her out.

Then Yi Won-su asked about Zengzi this time.

**Yi Won-su**: Then I would like to know what kind of norm Zengzi was following by casting out his wife.

**Saimdang**: I will tell you the story of Zengzi and his wife. His father liked steamed pear very much. Whenever his wife prepared steamed pear, however, it was not to his taste. He was obliged to comply with his filial duty by sending her wife back to her parents’. However, he remained faithful to his first marriage by not remarrying.

After listening to this, Yi Won-su asked again, this time about Zhu Xi.

**Yi Won-su**: Then, what about Zhu Xi’s family?

**Saimdang**: His wife Liu died when he was forty-seven years old. Zhu Xi did not remarry, although there was nobody to run the household because his first son Shu was not married yet.
After asking the remarriage-related behaviors of Confucius, Zengzi, and Zhu Xi, and listening to Saimdang’s answers, Yi Won-su did not have anything else to add and could not but show again his admiration and reverence to his wife’s profound knowledge and noble character.

Don’t cross the threshold of Yi Ki’s house

Yi Ki, Munjung by courtesy name and Gyeongjae by art name, once wielded power over the whole country. His place of origin was also Deoksu, sharing the same pedigree with great men, such as Yulgok Yi I and Chungmugong Yi Sun-sin. But he was much older than them. He was twenty-five years older than Yi Won-su and a second-degree relative to him.

In Korean history, there were four Sahwas (Literati Purges), or disasters experienced by Confucian scholars by falling victim to a series of political purges. The last of these purges was Eulsa-Sahwa that broke out in 1545, the year of Myeongjong’s coronation.

When Jungjong passed away in 1544, his son Injong succeeded him, but the latter died eight months later without any descendant. Injong’s brother Myeongjong succeeded him at the young age of twelve, and the latter’s mother Queen Munjeong of the Yoon clan grasped power as the regent. Queen Munjeong’s brother Yoon Won-hyeong orchestrated a political intrigue, accusing his rivals of plotting treason, and killed most of them. This disaster became part of history as Eulsa-Sahwa. Along with Yoon Won-hyeong, Yi Ki played a major role in this abominable political crime. For this atrocity, Yi Ki was praised and rewarded as a hero who
saved the king from the traitors he was given the title of Internal Prince of Pungseong and appointed the Chief State Councilor. He was revered by many people for his power. When Saimdang knew that Yi Won-su went to see Yi Ki with those people day in day out, she warned her husband with these words: "You should not go with a fleeting power. The power of that Chief State Councilor won't last long." When Yi Won-su replied that he came from the same clan and kin, Saimdang emphatically repeated her point, saying, "Even though he comes from the same clan, knowing that he is not a righteous man, you should not cross the threshold of his house. He has committed many atrocities with false accusations of righteous scholars, living with the sole purpose of grasping power, and his power will be short-lived." Yi Won-su was touched by Saimdang's sincere words and followed her advice. He stopped visiting Yi Ki and thus escaped a possible disaster that could have befallen him later because of his relationship to Yi Ki. This incident not only provides clues to Saimdang's foresight but also reflects her upright character of choosing to walk on the righteous path and doing right things as well as her knowledge and insight in supporting and advising her husband.
5. Saimdang as a Wise Mother

Saimdang fulfilled her filial duty by serving full-heartedly her widowed mother Lady Yi from the Yi clan of Yongin, assisted and advised her husband as a judicious wife, leading him along the right path with her wisdom and insight, and raised and educated her children with all her might as a wise mother.

Saimdang’s children

Saimdang’s first son Seon (art name Jukgok) repeatedly failed in Gwageo [National Civil Service Examination], despite his diligent learning from his early childhood. He passed the Jinsasi at the age of forty-one, when Yulgok, who was 12 years younger, was already Hojo-Jwarang [Assistant Section Chief of The Ministry of Taxation, rank Sr. 6], which was higher than the former’s position. Seon was a late bloomer even in building a family, marrying very late (aged thirty-two) by the standard of that time. He was appointed to his first civil service position of Nambu-Chambong [Southern District Caretaker, Jr. 9] in Seoul at the age of forty-seven, but he died in August of the same year. Yulgok felt remorseful about his
brother’s unfortunate life that he read the ritual text he wrote for his
to the coffin he also composed his epitaph.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order of Birth</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>Saimdang’s Age When Her Children Were Born</th>
<th>Spouse (Name/Place of Origin)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st son</td>
<td>Seon</td>
<td>Jungjong 19 (1524)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Lady Gweky/Seonseon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st daughter</td>
<td>Maechang</td>
<td>Jungjong 24 (1529)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Cho Dae-nam/Namyang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd son</td>
<td>Beon</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Lady Hong/Namyang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd daughter</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Yoon Seoj/Papyeong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd son</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Jungjong 31 (1536)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Lady Nohy/Goekseon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd daughter</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Hong Cheon-wui/Namyang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th son</td>
<td>Wu</td>
<td>Jungjong 37 (1542)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Lady Heung/Deokseon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The eldest daughter Maechang inherited all her mother’s talents—not only erudition and wisdom, personality, and talents for poetry, calligraphy, and painting but also sewing and embroidery, thus earning her the nickname "little Saimdang."

Maechang was married to Cho Dae-nam, a descendant of a traditional elite family of Hanyang. Her husband, who was younger than her by one year, was not an easy person to deal with and enjoyed drinking and companies. They had three sons and three daughters. Maechang is known to have influenced Yulgok with her wisdom, and her artistic works have remained valuable gems of the country, along with her mother Saimdang’s paintings. However, she lived an unhappy life, losing many of her beloved, starting with her mother at the age of twenty-three, her father 10 years later, her brothers Seon and Yulgok when she was forty-three and fifty-six years old, respectively, and her husband at fifty-eight. Imjin-Waeran (Japanese invasion in 1592) broke out when she was sixty-four years old, and she evacuated to Yeongwon Castle in Wonju with her three sons (In, Yeong, and Jun). The castle fell on August 25. Her first son In took her on his back and escaped, but they were soon attacked by the enemy.
Maechang's paintings
Cho In tried to save her mother by taking the sword with his body, but both were killed by the same sword. Cho In's brave filial love entered history together with his mother Maechang's art.

Saimdang's second son Beon (art name Jeongjae) is not found in any biographical records. There is no record of the dates of his birth and death. Only one writing left by him testifies to his high scholarly achievements.

Nothing is known about the second daughter, except that she was married to Yoon Soop and lived in Hwangju in Hwanghae-do. Yulgok wrote that he visited his second elder sister whenever he was dispatched to Hwanghae-do, as its governor, or on his way to and from Pyeongan-do to meet and see off Imperial envoys, as the chief of an envoy reception committee.

Nothing is also known about the third daughter, except that she was married to Hong Cheon-wu from Namyang and had a sad fate of being widowed at an early age of twenty-seven or twenty-eight.

The fourth son Wu (art name Oksan), the youngest of the family, was six years younger than Yulgok. He died at sixty-eight in the ancestral burial mountain in 1609, the first year of the reign of Gwanghae. Wu passed the Saengwonsi [Classics Licentiate Examination] when he was only twenty-six years old. He was appointed to the post of Gyeonggijeon-Chambong [Celebration Hall Caretaker, rank Jr. 9] but did not accept the position. He instead served as the county magistrate in several villages and made it to a high-ranking position of the Gunja-Gamjeong [Secretary of the Military Procurement Administration, Sr. 3]. He was a born artist after all. Song Wu-am's *Myogalmun* [inscriptions on the tomb] reads:

Yulgok built a house at Seokdam in Haeju and spent leisure hours with his brother Wu. They enjoyed each other's company around a ta-
Oksan’s paintings
ble of drinks and food, listening to Wu’s zither and composing poems together, and Yulgok called his younger brother his confidant.

The above excerpt shows that Yulgok and Wu were linked by deep brotherly affection and friendship. Wu was the Magistrate of Goesan when Imjin-Waeran broke out. The fifty-year-old Wu gathered young men and resisted the Japanese invaders. He saved his county from famine by guiding safely the people’s agricultural activities through accurate reconnaissance of the enemy’s positions and moving patterns. Later, he was awarded Seonmuwonjonghun by the central government in recognition of his contribution to defeating the invaders. Above all, however, Wu stood out with his exquisite skills in the four arts of zither, calligraphy, poetry, and painting, which were in his very being. Among Saimdang’s seven children, Wu and Maechang inherited their mother's artistic legacy. Moreover, Wu married the only daughter of Gosan Hwang Ki-ro, renowned as the best cursive-script calligrapher across the history of Korea, and studied calligraphy under his guidance, thus inheriting his legacy as a calligrapher.
Meaning of the art name Saimdang

Saimdang’s unabated devotion to educating her children, leveraging the virtues she cultivated as a woman, and her choice of art name Saimdang are clear indications of the direction she set for her culture and efforts.

This art name is still a subject of speculation. There is no consensus in the Chinese characters for Saim: besides 師任 師姓 思任 and 思姓 are used. However, 師任 is the most reliable one used by his son Yulgok in his book Biography of My Paternal Grandfather Shin Myeong-hwa.

Broken down by character and meaning, 師 means teacher, that is, to emulate, whereas 任 stands for 太任 (Tae-im Tairen in Chinese pronunciation), who was the mother of the ancient Chinese King Wen praised to be the wisest woman. Hence, Saim ought to be interpreted as "emulating Tae-im" as explained above, although others have interpreted differently this art name.

Yeonjae Yoon Jong-eui’s colophon on the engravings of Saimdang’s scripts, which were produced to be archived at Ojukheon in 1868, read:

… As for her scripts, each stroke cautiously placed by her radiates delicacy, elegance, clarity, and tranquility, and reflects her endeavor to emulate King Wen’s mother Tae-im.

After that, Onyujae Yoon Jong-seop praised Saimdang with a poem:

Your fetal instruction / One motherly heart
Your lofty art name / Emulating Ji-im
Ji-im is another name for Tae-im because she was the second daughter of the king of the Ji State. Fetal education refers to Tae-im’s fetal instruction when she was pregnant with King Wen she guarded her eyes, ears, and mouth against seeing evil sights, hearing perverse sounds, and uttering careless words. This poem refers to Saimdang’s fetal instruction when she was pregnant with Yulgok. These records support the adequacy of interpreting the art name "Saimdang" as "imitating Tae-im." Saimdang not only provided her children with such virtuous education but also treated all the servants in her household on the same principle all the people living under her roof admired her from the depth of their hearts.
6. Saimdang as an Artist

Saimdang had a holistic personality. She qualified as a devoted daughter, a judicious wife, and a wise mother. She was also a great artist with astonishing intelligence and exquisite skills in the classics, poetry, writing, and, above all, calligraphy and painting.

**Authentic calligraphic styles**

Saimdang was a prolific calligrapher. However, only six cursive scripts and one regular script are left to our great regret. These pieces nonetheless eloquently bear witness to Saimdang’s noble mind and spirit the orthodox style of her Chinese calligraphy, which was true to the ideal of "horseshoe and silkworm head,“^7) strikes an awe into the beholderns.

In particular, the six pieces of cursive script had been passed down over generations in the in-law family of Saimdang’s youngest sister’s

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^7 This describes the ideal shape of the horizontal stroke of the Chinese character for the number one of which the beginning should look like a horse shoe and the end like the head of a silk worm [Editor’s note].
granddaughter, Kwon Cheo-gyun, the son of Saimdang’s fourth younger sister, was in possession of these scripts. However, the scripts became the treasure of the family of Kwon Cheo-gyun’s son-in-law when his daughter took them with her after her marriage to Choi Dae-hae thereafter, the scripts were passed on in that family down to Choi Don-gil in Dusan-ri, Gangneug-si. The originals are now exhibited at the Ojukheon Museum in the form of a folding screen. Their engravings, which were made in 1868 by Yoon Jong-eui, Magistrate of Gangneung, are also archived there for fear of loss.
江南西祠栄山顧小雲

山上水にたのむ

写人手跡

春江新荷

たる久に

東邦到で

同役に

同作に

同作に

同作に

同作に

同作に

同作に

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同作に


Exquisite works left by Saimdang

Saimdang’s paintings brought forth eulogies from numerous scholars early on, Eo Suk-kwon’s Paegwan-Japki [story collector’s miscellaneous records], which contains the story of how Saimdang taught the classics to Yulgok at an early age, reads:

Shin Saimdang studied painting early on, and her skills were so exquisite that people praised that her grapes and landscapes were second only to those of the famous painter An Kyeon who lived during
the reign of Sejong. Seeing her paintings, how can we disparage⁸ them only because they were done by a woman, and how can we ever reproach her for doing what a woman is not supposed to do?

It is hardly imaginable that a woman who lived in the Joseon era could reach such a high level of artistic achievements, in addition to cultivating virtues and high moral standards. Although they say that Saimdang put much effort into emulating⁹ An Kyeon’s paintings from an early age, she showed clearly that the real driving force for establishing one’s own artistic space is innate talents rather than learning and practicing.

Saimdang’s paintings can be classified into seven categories, namely, grasses and insects, grapes, birds and flowers, fish and bamboo, plum flowers, orchids, and landscapes. Only about 40 paintings have been attributed to Saimdang. They are color and ink monochrome paintings, and each of these paintings is evaluated as a great gem of Korean art.

The colophons written on these paintings by dozens of well-known persons, such as King Sukjong, and famous poets and scholars, including So Se-yang, Song Si-yeol, Hong Yang-ho, and Kwon Sang-ha, do not spare superlatives in praising the artistic qualities of Saimdang’s paintings.

Saimdang’s paintings are characterized by delicate brushstrokes. Their extremely delicate details strike an awe into the beholders’ heart, even though they are seen on paper that has faded after the lapse of four centuries.

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⁸ To dismiss a word or act as being of little worth [Editor’s note].
⁹ Acquiring knowledge and skills by following in the footsteps of a spiritual teacher without receiving a person-to-person instruction [Editor’s note].
Saimdang's paintings
7. Anecdotes of Saimdang

Famous persons always have anecdotes. The higher the fame, the greater the number of anecdotes available of that person. Such anecdotes are either true or embellished stories with exaggerations of their specific features. In either case, anecdotes provide indirect clues to the character of the person in question.

In the following, the anecdotes related to Saimdang are presented. Some are documented, whereas others are hear says.

Promise of a 10-year study

At the age of nineteen, Saimdang was married to Yi Won-su. By that time, Saimdang’s knowledge and art, which she had accumulated over many years under the guidance of her father, already reached a monumental level. Considering her innate intelligence and high-quality education, it could be assumed that her husband was inferior to her in every aspect.

Saimdang could not but become disappointed, but she made up her mind to assist her husband to the best of her knowledge and ability. Hop-
ing that her husband would advance in his study of Chinese classics, she strongly encouraged him to learn.

Meanwhile, Yi Won-su could not but follow his wife's words out of admiration for her knowledge, artistic talents, and noble personality, which he deemed superior to his achievements, although she was his wife and three years younger. Saimdang suggested one day to live in separation for 10 years, promising to each other to devote these 10 years to studying. Saimdang persuaded her husband into making that promise out of her wish to see him grow into a great scholar. Yi Won-su seemed to have no other choice. He had to leave Saimdang at her parental house and go to Seoul. Finally, he left Gangneung, with her stern words ringing in his ears: "Please devote your mind one-pointedly to learning and come back as a successful scholar 10 years later." When he arrived in Seongsan, about eight kilometers away from Ojukheon, he waited until the sunset and returned to Ojukheon, to his wife's great surprise.

On the second day, Yi Won-su walked for 12 kilometers to a place called Gamagol, at the foot of Daegwallyeong. From deep sorrow and despair, Saimdang said to her husband, "Once a man sets an ambitious goal and leaves home, he must pursue his goal until he reaches it. You have been leaving home for three consecutive days with a promise to devote yourself to studying for 10 years, but you keep coming back without passing even a day. What will become of you with such a weak willpower?" Yi Won-su replied: "I know I have to learn, but I cannot leave you and live alone for 10 years. What shall I do—I cannot bear to be separated from you even an hour." To mend her husband's weak disposition and lack of interest in study, Saimdang decided to resort to a drastic strategy. She took a pair of scissors out of the sewing basket and put it in front of
her husband and said in a serious voice, "Seeing that you are such a weak and incompetent man, I have no hope in this world, I better cut my hair and enter a mountain to become a nun, or else put an end to this hopeless life, even though it would be the most abominable thing to do." These words startled Yi Won-su and led him to realize that he had no other choice. The next morning, he made up his mind once again and left Saimdang to go to Seoul. He studied hard for three years, but he could not bear the separation from his wife and thus, again, returned to her.10

I am also a chestnut

Yulgok’s parents Yi Won-su and Shin Saimdang lived in separation for 10 years after their marriage so that Yi Won-su could devote himself to learning to become a scholar. However, Yi Won-su could not keep his promise not to return before completing the 10-year study, and thus only five years away from the decade-long separation, he frequently came back to Gangneung, unable to suppress his longings for his wife Saimdang. Consequently, he could not reach any significant level of learning because he spent more time coming back to his wife and staying with her so long as he possibly could. In the meantime, the couple had two sons and two daughters, and their third son Yulgok was yet to be born.

Yi Won-su was in Seoul at that time. One day, overwhelmed by a sud-

10 This story, which has been told among people in Gangneung, was provided by Yi Jang-hi,
den longing for his wife, he left for Bongpyeong (Baegokpo-ri, Bongpyeong-myeon, Pyeongchang, Gangwon-do, now commonly called Pankwandaes). He passed by Pyeongchang-eup and walked along the Pyeongchang River. The night fell when he arrived at a mountainous village called Daehwa-ri, after he turned left from Weoldu, which was about eight kilometers away from their home in Bongpyeong.

Yi Won-su had to spend a night at a tavern at the foot of the mountain. When the night went deeper, the tavern owner spruced up herself and entered the room where he was sleeping. She brought with her a small table with drinks and food. Offering him drinks, she asked him to
spend the night with her. When Saimdang's stern face appeared in his mind, as if to keep an eye on him, he involuntarily gathered himself.

The tavern owner, who was seducing Yi Won-su with a bashful glance, was extremely beautiful and graceful like a fairy living on only fresh food. Her face was so clean and clear like air and water of deep mountains. However, Yi Won-su did not succumb to her seduction. He refused her gently but resolutely. The tavern owner was deeply ashamed, and the embarrassment felt by a woman being rejected by a man is beyond comparison with that of a man being rejected by a woman. After spending the night with light on, Yi Won-su left the tavern at Daehwa-ri and arrived home to see his wife whom he missed so much.

After spending several months with Saimdang, Yi Won-su left Bongpyeong. On his way to Seoul, he remembered the tavern owner and thought, "It was not a manly behavior to refuse such a beautiful lady's wish because of my longing for my own wife. I will ask her myself this time so that she can save her face." Thus, he went to the tavern, and the woman seemed glad to see him again. As the night fell, he asked her to come to him. Asking for apologies for his behavior last time they met, he asked her to spend the night together. This time, however, she turned his request down: "Thank you for your kind mind, but I am no longer attracted to you. When I approached you last time, it was not because I had a strong desire that night but because your face radiated auspicious light, and I felt that you would father a precious son who would be a man of worldwide fame. So, I did what I did to conceive that son. Now, your face no longer has that auspicious radiation. That precious son is already in your wife's womb, and I lost my interest," She then went on to say, "Unfortunately, the baby will be born in the hour of the tiger [3:00-
5:00 AM], and will be harmed by a tiger before he reaches the age of five. That's the only problem," Yi Won-su saw that the tavern owner is not an ordinary woman who sells drinks at a tavern but a special being. Showing his reverence for her prediction that the child to be born will be a great man and encounter a tragedy, he asked her to tell him how to save him from the tiger. She answered:

I am still very upset because you did not accept me that night, but I cannot but help you when I think of that precious baby.

As the saying goes, "A child of a virtuous family does not stand under a stone wall, " Tragedies can be dispelled by accumulating virtues. As life is in humans and plants alike, please plant a thousand chestnut trees instead of saving a thousand lives. In the year when the child turns five, an old monk from Mt. Geumgang will come around on a certain day of a certain month and claim the child. Don't show the child and just say this to him: "I have also accumulated virtues and you cannot take my child away from me." If he asks you to show your accumulated virtues, show him the one thousand chestnut trees. Then, the tiger's tragedy can be avoided.

After some months, on December 26 [lunar calendar] in the hour of the tiger, Saimdang gave birth to a child Yulgok. Yi Won-su was reminded of the words of the tavern owner and planted a thousand chestnut trees in Mt. Nochu, about 40 kilometers south of Gangneung.

Mt. Nochu, which is also called Mt. Sadal, is a high mountain located in the present-day Gujeol-ri, Wangsan-myeon, Gangneung-si, where Seol
Chong of Silla Dynasty studied and Yulgok was to study later. To commemorate these two genius scholars, a small house named Two-Saint Pavilion was built. The memorial tablets of Seol Chong and Yulgok are enshrined there, and a traditional tea ceremony takes place annually.

After planting a thousand chestnut trees, Yi Won-su waited for Yulgok to turn five. On the day of the month indicated by the tavern owner, he hid Yulgok in the innermost room and waited for the monk from Mt. Geumgang. Toward dusk, an old monk came and begged for donation, requesting Yi Won-su to show him the child. Seeing the prediction com-

64 Saimdang and Yulgok
ing true, he answered calmly, with his heart beating fast, "I have also accumulated virtues and you cannot take my child away." He told the monk about the one thousand chestnut trees, and led the latter to the slope of Mt. Nochu and showed him the chestnut grove. They then started to count the trees.

One, two, ... one hundred, two hundred, ... nine hundred ninety-nine. But where is the thousandth tree—is one tree missing? One chestnut was indeed rotten and perished, Yi Won-su panicked. The monk was delighted and insisted on taking the boy with him. At that moment, they heard a voice saying, "I am a chestnut tree, too." They turned back and saw a tree looking like a chestnut tree but not a real chestnut tree it was stood on the edge of the field and shouted, "I am a chestnut tree, too." The monk recognized it as the thousandth chestnut tree. At the very moment, he turned into a big tiger and ran away.\footnote{This story, which has been told among people in Gangneung, was provided by Yi Jang-hi.}

**True-to-life paintings**

About 250 years ago (during the reign of Sukjong), Song Sang-ki wrote about Shin Saimdang's paintings:

A clansman of mine used to say, "I have a grass-insect painting of Yulgok's mother. When I took it out to the yard on one summer day, to air it under the sun, chickens came and pecked holes on the paint-
ing where the insects were painted."

I was curious to see the painting but, to my great regret, had no opportunities to see it. Then I've had the luck to see the collection of Jeong Jong-ji. The flowers, cucumbers, insects, and all other details were exquisitely sophisticated and delicate. Above all, insects and butterflies clearly showed her divine skills. It was as if they were breathing and moving, and it was unbelievable that they were only painted objects. Then I could realize the truth of what my clansman said.\textsuperscript{12}

Such stories reflect a viewer's admirations of the verisimilitude\textsuperscript{13} of Saimdang's paintings.

\textsuperscript{12} Source: \\textit{Ogo-feijip}
\textsuperscript{13} An object on a painting so realistic that it can hardly be distinguished from the real object [Editor's note].
The verisimilitude of Saimdang's painting
**Painting on a ceramic tray**

On the day on which Saimdang left her mother and was on her way to see her parents-in-law in Seoul, her husband Yi Won-su wanted to show her wife's unique artistic talent to the guests. Therefore, he asked Saimdang to join the company and draw a painting. When Saimdang did not come after a while, he was embarrassed and sent the maid several times to urge her to come.

Saimdang was in dilemma between two embarrassing situations. She could not refuse her husband's request and have him lose his face before the guests, but she considered it improper to make a big fuss of spreading paper, grinding an ink stick on the inkstone, and painting with people looking at her as if she were a great painter, and all that on the first day of visiting her parents-in-law. Hence, she asked the maid to bring a ceramic tray and drew a simple and small painting on it. All the guests could not help but praise profusely the exquisite artistry of Saimdang.

Uam Song Si-yeol commented on this incident later: "It was very wise of her to paint on a ceramic tray because the guests would have wished to have the painting had it been painted on paper or silk."§

However, it is more likely that the circumstance on that day did not allow her to paint on paper because it was during a journey.

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14 Source: Song Si-yeol's colophon to Saimdang's painting collection,
Grapevine painted on a skirt

On one occasion while Saimdang was living in Gangneung, she was among a group of ladies gathered in a banquet in the neighborhood, with a young lady who befriended Saimdang.

After a while, Saimdang saw the young lady worrying about her red silk skirt soiled by splashes of broth while going in and out of the kitchen. She was from a poor family and borrowed the skirt from a friend to come to the banquet. She could not return the soiled skirt, but she had no money to buy cloth for a new skirt.

Because Saimdang felt sorry for her and wanted to help, she asked the skirt to be spread in front of her and then painted grape leaves on the soiled parts. Then she started to paint a grape vine covering the whole space of the skirt with graceful brush strokes and produced bunches of grapes exquisitely realistic as if they were exuding enticing smells of fully ripe grapes.

All the ladies sitting could not praise her skills highly enough. The young lady was all smiles and gratitude. She sold the skirt for a handsome sum of money. She then used the money to buy red silk cloth, which was enough for making not only a new skirt, to return he borrowed skirt to the owner, but also many other outfits.15

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15 Source: Gangwondoji, Volume I (Famous Persons of the Gangwon Province).
Saimdang’s painting
Yulgok Yi (1536 ~ 1584)
1. Brief Biography of Yulgok

As among the most famous comments comparing great scholars and philosophers of Korea, the following is a pair of phrases describing Toegye Yi Hwang and Yulgok Yi I: "spring water filling ponds up" and "summer clouds shaping mysterious peaks." This comparison is well-founded.

The interesting contrast conveyed by these phrases lies in the depiction of Toegye's comprehensive knowledge and philosophy, which is compared to spring water that fills up all ponds, and Yulgok's ingenuity shown in his innovative knowledge and political acumen, which are compared to summer clouds that gather and build magnificent mountain peaks.

Without this great scholar and philosopher in our history, without Yulgok's great contribution to the nation's intellectual landscape, Korea's spiritual sky would have been much more monotonous. If we were to select one figure from the pantheon of great figures of whom we proud in our historiography of scholars and thinkers, it is Yulgok.
Born in 1536 at Ojukheon in Bukpyeong, Gangneung

"Gwandong-Palgyeong" [eight most scenic spots of Gwandong] is the word frequently associated with the east-central coast of Korea. Of these scenic spots, Gangneung stands out Gyeongpodae and Hansongjeong are two top attractions of Gangneung. Ojukheon is worthy to be mentioned in the same breath with them.

Ojukheon [Black Bamboo House] is known to have been named because of a small black bamboo grove growing around the house. However, it was named after the art name "Ojuk" of its owner Kwon Cheogyun, the son of Yulgok’s youngest aunt.

This house was built by Yulgok’s maternal grandmother and then be-
quathed to Kwon Cheo-gyun. It has remained in possession of this family for generations. Because Saimdang and her son Yulgok were born in this house, people associate Ojukheon only with Yulgok's birthplace they are completely oblivious of the fact that it was named after its owner that is, Ojukheon's popularity and honor are owed to Yulgok alone.

Yulgok was born in the Yi clan of Deoksu as a 13th generation descendant of Don Su, a high-ranking military general of Goryeo. He was born on December 26, 1536 [lunar calendar] in the 31st year of the reign of Jungjong as the fifth of the seven children of Yi Won-su and the famous Shin Saimdang. He was named I, Sukheon by courtesy name and Yulgok by art name.

He was a born genius and could read the Chinese classics at the young age of three or four. He left his maternal hometown Gangneung with his
mother when he was six to live in his paternal hometown Seoul. When he was seven years old, he surprised everybody by writing a sketch of the persona of a man named Jin Bok-chang, "Hwaseokjeong" [Flower and Rock Pavilion], a poem written by the eight-year-old Yulgok, showed the level of a full-fledged poet. He wrote "Ode to Gyeongpodae" when he was ten. He passed the Jinsasi [Literary Licentiate Examination], winning first place, at the age of only thirteen, to the admiration and delight of everybody, especially his mother Saimdang.

He lost his beloved mother at sixteen. Stuck in an abysmal grief, he spent three years in tears and deep contemplations of existential issues, and became skeptic and ascetic. After completing the mourning period of three years, he decided to seek truth in Buddhist books and set off to Mt. Geumgang at the age of nineteen, and came back to the mundane world a year later.

**Winning first place in all nine state examinations**

After his seclusion in Mt. Geumgang, he went to Gangneung and lived at Ojukheon. He wrote Jagyeongmun [Self-Admonitions] and set a sole goal of diligently acquiring knowledge and philosophies left by sages and saints.

After devoting himself to solely learn for one year at Ojukheon, he returned to Seoul at age twenty-one and passed the Hanseongsi [state examination administered by the Magistracy of Hanseong (Seoul)] with the highest score. In September of next year, he married the daughter of Noh Gyeong-rin, the Magistrate of Seongju.

In spring of that year (aged twenty-three), he visited Toegye Yi Hwang
in Ye-an, Andong, on his way from Seongju to Gangneung. Toegye was fifty-eight years old at that time he was thirty-five years older than Yulgok. In company of Yulgok for two days, Toegye, a great master of that time, could not but admire young Yulgok’s knowledge and attitude he exclaimed, "The ancient saying about ‘formidable young talents’ is not empty words. On arriving in Seoul, he passed the Byeolsi [state examination provided by the King on a special occasion] held in winter, outperforming all other candidates with his writing of Cheondochaek [Heavenly Policy], for which he received high acclaim from the examiners, including great scholars, such as Jeong Sa-ryong and Yang Eung-jeong."

Yulgok’s father passed away in May when Yulgok was twenty-six years old. On completing the three-year mourning period at twenty-nine, he passed other examinations in July and August, thus passing all nine state examinations (all three categories at all three levels), winning first place each time. Whenever he was seen on horseback on the streets, people used to surround him, praising him loudly for his unprecedented attainment he was nicknamed "Lord of the Nine Examinations."

Yulgok joined the public service at age twenty-nine. The first position to which he was appointed was Hojo-Jwarang [Assistant Section Chief of the Ministry of Taxation, rank Sr. 6]. He was promoted successively to Yejo-Jwarang [Assistant Section Chief of the Ministry of Art, rank Sr. 6] in the next spring, Saganwon-Jeongeon [Fourth Censor of the Office of Censor-General, rank Sr. 6] in November of the same year, and Ijo-Jwarang [Assistant Section Chief of the Ministry of Personnel, rank Sr. 6] in the winter next year (aged thirty-one).
Winning the King’s heart with sincere words

Yulgok forged a social and political career, but his innermost goal was to realize an ideal. When he was thirty-one years old, he presented to the King three urgent measures to be taken to achieve the goal of improving society, which he prepared with his colleagues:

First, establish a firm political foundation with a righteous mind,
Second, hire wise and righteous men regardless of their social classes and give them important civil service positions,
Third, solidify the nation’s roots by providing people with comfortable life.

At thirty-three years old, he was promoted to the position of Saheonbu-Jipyeong [Fourth Inspector in the Office of Inspector-General, rank Sr. 5] in the spring. Shortly after that, in April, his father-in-law died. He was then sent to the capital of the Chinese Ming Dynasty as the Secretary of Royal Envoy Committee and reappointed to the post of Ijo-Jwarang in winter. However, he resigned from this position upon receiving the message of his grandmother’s illness because she had no other children around her who would take care of her.

The Office of Censor-General requested the King to dismiss him, arguing that serving the ill maternal grandmother could not be a legitimate reason for a leave of absence. However, the King did not approve the request for dismissal, saying, "If his love for his grandmother is so great, he cannot but go and take care of her. He is doing his filial duty, and dismissal is a disproportionate punishment."

In June of that year (aged thirty-four), he was appointed to Fifth Coun-
seler. This time, the King even asked the Ministry of Personnel to make an exception for Yulgok and offer him a leave of absence as often as he needed to take care of his ill grandmother, although such concession was not allowed by law. This shows how Yulgok was favored by the King.

In the same year, Yulgok wrote Dongho-Mundap [Questions and Answers at East Lake] and presented it to the King. This treatise consists of 11 points regarding the things to be corrected in line with the key principles of politics and actual situations.

When he was thirty-five years old, his eldest brother died in August. He was deeply disheartened again. He retired from the post of the Fifth Counselor in October on pretext of illness and went to his wife’s parental house in Yaduchon in Haeju to rest his troubled mind. Young scholar aspirants from cities and villages across the country began to come to Haeju to see him. Toegye passed away in December of the same year. On hearing the news of this great scholar’s death, Yulgok set up an altar, tied a white band around his forehead, and cried loudly and bitterly. Staying in the inner yard, he wrote a poem for the deceased scholar.

Innovating the provincial administration as a magistrate

After one year of stay in Haeju, Yulgok (aged thirty-six) went to Yulgok-ri, Paju. He was appointed as the Ijo-Jeongnang [Section Chief of The Ministry of Personnel, rank Sr. 5] and to other positions, such as the Uijeongbu-Geomsang-Sain [Legal Secretary of the State Council, rank Sr. 5], Gyeonyeon-Siganggwan [Expositor of the Office of Royal Lecturers, rank Sr. 4], and Chunchugwan-Pyeonsugwan [Compiler of the Bureau of
State Records, Jr. 3]. After retiring from all these central government positions, he returned to Haeju. While living at the parental house of his wife, he used to enjoy intellectual conversations with scholars. One day, he travelled upstream northward to the headwaters in Mt. Gosan, passing along a series of scenic watercourse bends called Seokdamgugok [Nine Rock-Pool Bends] to spend the day in company with the scholars who visited him. He named the fourth bend "Song-ae" [Pine Tree Cliff] and wrote a prose about its beauty. It was then and there that he planned to build a house and live there.

However, before he had time to put that plan into action, he was appointed as the Magistrate of Cheonju in June of that year. He devoted himself to providing the best guidance for the people there. First, he wrote the Hyangyak [Village Pact] and established the basis of villagers' livelihood and autonomy. This is a memorable milestone in Korea's history of public administration.

After nine months of governing Cheonju, he (aged thirty-seven) left it in March, after achieving many innovative reforms. He was appointed as the Saganwon-Sagan [Second Censor of the Office of Censor-General, rank Jr. 3] in September, then Hongmungwan-Eunggyo [Fourth Counselor of the Office of Special Counselors, rank Sr. 4] in December, and Hongmungwan-Jikjehak [Second Counselor, rank Sr. 3] the following year (aged thirty-eight). Each appointment ended up with Yulgok's request for a retirement and the King's approval. One of his scholar-official colleagues commented, "You must be pleased to get permission to retire whenever you request, but who will stand by the nation if everybody wants to retire?"
Yulgok answered, smiling, "If all high and low rank officials are ready to retire, the nation's political path will be naturally led along a broad way
and nobody will have to worry about the nation’s survival." This reflects his lofty mind, free of petty ambition.

In the same year, he was appointed as the Daesagan of Saganwon [Censor-General, Sr. 3], from which he retired again. Then he was appointed as the Governor of Hwanghae-do [rank Jr. 2] in October, where he showed his talent again for guiding his people and reforming the provincial administration.

Yulgok (aged forty) retired from his governorship in March and returned to Yulgok-ri, after successfully reforming Hwanghae-do’s administration in a five months’ time. In the fall of the same year, he wrote Seonghakjibyo [Essentials of the Studies of the Sages] and presented it to the King. It is a compilation of valuable phrases on self-cultivation and statecraft extracted from the teachings of ancient sages, which could be instrumental to governing the nation.

Living at Seokdam in a community of extended families

Yulgok (aged forty-one) returned to Haeju in October and built the dwelling Cheonggyedang [Waterfront Hall]. In January of next year, he invited his eldest brother Seon’s extended families for them to live together. It is a famous story that he wrote Donggeogyesa [Community Life Code of Conduct] to keep peace and order of the family community so that they could live together in harmony with one another. It is worth noting that Yulgok’s famous book Gyeongmongyogyeol [The Secret of Expelling Ignorance] was also written in this period.
Donggeogyesa [Community Life Code of Conduct]

One year into living in this community, Yulgok (aged forty-three) built a retreat house Eunbyeong-Jeongsaeast of Cheonggyedang and wrote the famous Gosangugokga, a set of nine poems singing the beauty of the nine-bends of the river valley of Mt. Gosan. He planned to build a shrine called Zhu Zici behind Eunbyeong-Jeongsa and enshrine Jeongam and Toegye, the two great scholar-philosophers who were his role models. However, he could not implement it in his lifetime. Two years after his death, however, his disciples put this plan into action and built a shrine and enshrined the memorial tablets, as Yulgok wished. This beautiful story demonstrates how Yulgok was loved and revered as a teacher.

During the time he was living in Cheonggyedang (aged forty-three), he was called by the King in March to accept the position of the Censor-General. After his subsequent retirement, he was reappointed in May and retired again, Yulgok presented Maneonso [Ten-Thousand-Word Supplication], pleading with the King, "If your majesty wishes to know if I am worthy of your favor, please ask me about the state of affairs of the nation, and if I am not worthy of great responsibilities, please do not call for me again."

He was appointed again in June as the Censor-General and retired
once more. This series of appointment and retirement went on with the appointment to the Third Minister of Personnel and noncompliance that year and the appointment to the Censor-General in May the next year (aged forty-four), and then retirement over again. Finally, he could no longer withdraw from the repeated appointment to the Censor-General and accepted it in the winter of the following year (aged forty-five).

The tenacity of the King in appointing Yulgok to the Censor-General repeatedly until he complied with his calling demonstrates the great favor and trust put in him by the King. In the course of his activities as the Censor-General (aged forty-six), he advised the King to distribute equally the burdens of tax and military conscription among all classes of people he also requested to cluster the villages in larger administrative units to simplify administration and prolong the mandates of provincial magistrates and governors.

Noble virtue and lucid wisdom

Yulgok was promoted to the Gaseondaebu\textsuperscript{16} Inspector-General in June (aged forty-six) and the Yemungwan-Jehak [Deputy Director of the Office of Royal Decrees, rank Jr. 2] at the same time. According to the records, bureaucracies and customs underwent bold reforms, which were attributed to Yulgok. He was appointed to the Jaheondaebu\textsuperscript{17} Minister of Taxation in October, and additionally to the Chief Counselor of Hongmungwan, Yemungwan-Daejehak [Director of the Office of Royal Decrees] and

\textsuperscript{16} A prestige title given to rank Jr. 2 officials [Translator's note].

\textsuperscript{17} A prestige title given to rank Sr. 2 officials [Translator's note].
Jigyeongyeon-Churchugwan-Seonggyungwansa [Director of the Royal Lectures, State Records, and National Academy, rank Sr. 2].

In January of next year (aged forty-seven), Yulgok was ordained\textsuperscript{18} to the Minister of Personnel. During the summer months, he wrote several treatises, such as the "Commentary on the Human-Tao Mind Dichotomy," "Biography of Kim Shi-seup," and "School Models and Functions," on the King's demand. He was appointed as the Minister of Justice in August, and the Fourth Minister of the State Council and the Sungjeongdaebu\textsuperscript{19} Fourth State Councilor in September. He requested three times for dismissal, but they were not approved. He then presented Maneonso to the King, arguing with the King\textsuperscript{20} to fix the problems that make the country unstable and vulnerable.

In October, Yulgok led the reception committee to meet the Ming Imperial Envoys Huang Hongxian, Imperial Academy Compiler, and Wang Jingmin, Minister of Works. The envoys were in awe of Yulgok's noble character and deep knowledge.

In December, he was appointed as the Minister of Military Affairs. A few months later, Yulgok (aged forty-eight) received reports that Orangkae (a loanword of Mongolian origin meaning forest folks, referring here to the Tungusic people who inhabited the region of Manchuria) soldiers were invading the border. He did not cease for a moment to peruse the reports and records deep into the night. He handled all details with such dexterity that even the experienced senior officials admired his ability and

\textsuperscript{18} Appointment by a Royal Decree [Editor's note].
\textsuperscript{19} A prestige title given to rank Jr. 1 officials [Translator's note].
\textsuperscript{20} To speak out courageously and vehemently to the King to correct the wrongs [Editor's note].
skills. In June, he presented a political treatise to the King describing the following six urgent political programs:

1. To hire capable and wise persons as public officials
2. To create a corps of civilian soldiers
3. To replenish the State treasury
4. To strengthen the border guard
5. To prepare cavalry horses
6. To educate systematically the people

In April, Yulgok presented a series of reform programs. For example, he proposed to give the sons, who were born of concubine, opportunities to pursue public career according to their talents and to give capable private and government servants (slaves) the opportunities for redemption\(^{21}\). It was also during this time that Yulgok presented his proposal to train a hundred thousand soldiers.

One day, Yulgok proposed to the King:

The nation is in a precarious state. We must strengthen our military power by training ten thousand soldiers. Otherwise, a great disaster will befall the country within ten years. Twenty thousand soldiers must be positioned and trained in Seoul, and ten thousand in each province.

However, this proposal was not adopted in the face of a vehement opposition by Yu Seong-ryong, that turned out later to be the greatest detri-

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\(^{21}\) Act of setting slaves free from slavery against ransom and granting them the status of commoner [Editor’s note].
Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592, Imjin-Waeran
ment to the nation, Yulgok passed away eight years before the Japanese invasion, but Yu Seong-ryong had to regret bitterly his shortsightedness and admit with sorrow Yulgok’s foresight.

Death at Daesa-dong in Seoul at 49

In June of that year (aged forty-eight), under the pressure of the Samsa [three censoring bodies] (Hongmungwan, Saheonbu, and Saganwon), which unjustly impeached Yulgok, he assumed responsibility and offered to be dismissed.

The events that the Samsa put forward as the grounds for the impeachment were as follows. First, when he dispatched well-trained archers to the battlefields in the northern border, more horses were needed. Thus, he exempted old and frail men who offered horses from conscription. The Samsa argued that Yulgok took the measure without a proper procedure. Second, when Yulgok was called for by the King, he had difficulty walking because of dizziness from hard work and had to rest in his office, failing to make it to the court. The Samsa accused him of arrogance and of relying on his political power.

As the news of his dismissal spread, the whole nation was enraged over the injustice even the children and those with mental health issues could not stop lamenting. Seong Hon pleaded with the King, pointing out

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22 Court of Transmission where the royal orders were managed [Editor’s note],
23 Literally, innocent children and silly people, meaning that all people-young or old and educated or uneducated-bemoaned Yulgok’s dismissal [Editor’s note].
Samsa’s errors, Seonggyeunwan students and Honam and Haeseo24) literati protested furiously. As a result, the King appointed him in September as the Deputy Director of the Royal House Administration, and then as the Minister of Personnel.

Alas, he was not destined to stay longer in this world. Soon afterwards, on January 16, 1584 [lunar calendar], he passed away at the age of forty-nine at his accommodation25) at Daesa-dong in Seoul.

He had been confined to his bed for over 10 days when he received Seo Ik, who was to leave for the northern border for patrol. His condition was exacerbated by his exertion to sit up and provide Seo Ik with strategies for guarding the border and instructions for things to do when he arrives at the northern border.

Yulgok’s last request to Jeong Cheol, who came to see him at his bedside on the day before his death, was to be free of factional biases when hiring officials. The next morning, he bathed and had his finger and toenails cut clean, had himself dressed formally in a side position, laid his head eastwards, and quietly breathed his last.

At the news of Yulgok’s death, the King wept aloud and did not come to the daily audience for three days. He sent a ritual officer to hold a Jesa, with a memorial text that read: "You have nothing to cry over because you devoted yourself to the last drop, but the sorrow is all mine because I have lost my paddle in the middle of the stream."

All scholars in Seoul and provinces across the country cried, extremely

24 Whanghae-do (northwest province) [Editor’s note].
25 Literally, innocent children and silly people, meaning that all people-young or old and educated or uneducated-bemoaned Yulgok’s dismissal[Editor’s note].
saddened as if they had lost their own blood families. People of all classes, county people, and country folks shed tears in grief. The funeral altar was crowded with the students of the National Academy and three Medical Bureaus (Palace Medical Bureau, Directorate of Medicine, and Public Medical Bureau) and officials of each ministry and office. Mourners gathered in mountains and valleys, and wept together.

On the way when the funeral procession left the house, the streets were filled with people escorting the procession the wailing sounds reached the sky and flooded the earth. Guard troops and citizens gathered holding torches, of which the light was seen many kilometers a far.

The burial took place on March 20 at the ancestral burial site in Mt. Jawun in Paju, next to the graves of his parents. During the reign of King Injo, a posthumous epithet that promoted him to rank Sr. was conferred and the posthumous title Munseonggong was granted. During the reign of Sukjong, he was granted the honor of being enshrined in Munmyo [Primary Temple of Confucius], in the East Hall next to Yi Hwang.

26 Daegwangboguk Sunglogdaebu Uijeongbu Yeonguijeong and Yeonggyeongyeon Hongmungwan Yemungwan Chunchugwan Gwansanggamsa
27 A title given posthumously to a king, a minister, and a scholar-sage in commemoration of his achievements and virtues [Editor’s note].
2. Perspicacity and Artistry of Young Yulgok

All great persons who left behind their distinguished names across Eastern and Western cultures were born with prodigious intelligence and talents. They left many original anecdotes, which show how different they were from other people from the beginning.

Yulgok's ingenuity is hardly second to any prominent men and women in history. He read the Chinese classics at the early age of three, and won first place in the Jinsasi at an exceptionally young age of thirteen.

People tend to doubt the truth of such unbelievable stories and wonder whether they are exaggerated descriptions of great figures embellished by their followers. However, stories of a high state official whose life was devoted to strenuous self-cultivation and people's welfare are not objects of careless talking, and such child prodigies have existed throughout human history. Seeing three-year-olds who easily solve integrals and derivatives and read foreign languages, we cannot but believe stories of geniuses, although it could be beyond our imagination.

The following are recorded stories of Yulgok's childhood.
Age 3: Pomegranate question and answer

Yulgok could read Chinese classics when he was only three years old. Adults seemed to enjoy listening to him reading ancient poems. One day, someone brought a pomegranate and gave it to him. He brought it to his grandmother Lady Yi. Asked by Lady Yi what it looked like, Yulgok surprised all by answering the question with two lines from an ancient poem he heard several times:

A green jade shines in a gingko shell
Broken red pearls are wrapped in a pomegranate peel

Age 4: Correcting a teacher’s phrasing of a sentence

One day, when Yulgok was four years old, he was learning a passage from the Chinese classic Saryak [Brief History] Vol. 1. When the teacher read a sentence, phrasing it to yield the meaning "When King Wei of Qi could not first reign well the feudal lords, they came all and hit him," Yulgok did not read after the teacher and focused his eyes on the book.

To the astonishment of everyone, he asked the teacher, "Why don’t

28 Yulgok Yeonbo
29 Yulgok Yeonbo
you phrase the sentence to yield the meaning, 'Because King Wei of Qi could not reign well first, all feudal lords came and hit him.'

**Age 5: Prayer for mother**

When Yulgok was five years old, the whole family was in a great flurry because Saimdang fell sick. They suddenly realized that little Yulgok disappeared. In great panic, they searched everywhere and found Yulgok on his hands and knees at the shrine of his maternal grandfather located in the backyard he was praying for his mother's recovery. Yulgok wouldn't stop praying and had to be carried into the house.

**Age 5: A scene by a flooded stream**

One day, when Yulgok was in a crowd near a flooded stream after a heavy rainfall, a man fell down while crossing it and was about to fall into water. Everybody was amused by that scene and laughed, clapping their hands. Far from laughing, Yulgok was very agitated to see the man in peril, holding fast onto a pole, then showed relief as the man stood upright and got himself out of harm's way. This anecdote shows his innate kindness. People say that his generosity and love of others were not cultivated but rather innate.

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30 *Yulgok Yeonbo*  
31 *Biography of Yulgok*
Age 7: A sketch of the persona of Jin Bok-chang

Yulgok moved to Seoul with his parents when he was six years old. At age seven, he wrote a sketch to describe the impression he had of a man named Jin Bok-chang:

A junzi [a man of virtue, gentleman] accumulates virtues in his mind and, therefore, always has a calm and steady mind. A xiaoren [a man of no virtue, a petty person] accumulates vices in his mind and, therefore, always has an uneasy and unsteady mind. From my observation of Bok-chang’s character, I can say that he carries uneasy thoughts in his mind and feigns calmness. If that person comes to power, he will cause endless afflictions.

Jin Bok-chang, who lived in the neighborhood, was popular. His crooked persona did not escape the eyes of the boy Yulgok, who predicted his future.

Age 8: Composing the poem "Hwaseokjeong"

The Hwaseokjeong [Flower and Rock Pavilion] in Yulgok-ri, Paju-

32 Yulgok Yeonbo, A man named Jin Bok-chang, Sucho by courtesy name and Yeoyang by place of origin, passed Jinsa in 1531 (the 26th year of the reign of Jungjong) and made his career up to the Inspector-General. He was skilled in writing and calligraphy, but he obtained a nickname of viper for his crookedness and slyness. When Yun Won-hyeong grasped power with the coronation of Myeongjong, he arrested and killed without mercy all the political rivals who Won-hyeong wanted to eliminate. In the end, he fell into disgrace of Won-hyeong and died in misery while in exile in Samsu, Hamgjeong-do.

33 Complete Works of Yulgok

94 Seomdang and Yulgok
Tablet and Poem monument of Hwaseokjeong
gun, Gyeonggi-do was built by Yulgok’s fourth great-grandfather Gangpyeonggong Myeongshin in 1478. Its name was given by Mong-am Yi Suk-ham, who was famous for his exquisite writing. It was an important place for Yulgok’s self-cultivation because he used to read and contemplate there. He came to Hwaseokjeong for the first time when he was eight years old. The poem he wrote at that time reads:

Autumn is deep at the pavilion in the woods  
Poet’s heart is filled with endlessly deep emotions.  
Water and sky meet and entwine in blue veil  
Frosty leaves are stained red under the sun.  
Mountains are disgorging the round moon  
The river is holding the long wind flow.  
A wild goose from afar flies to somewhere  
Its cry dares not penetrate the evening clouds,
Yulgok had talents for not only Chinese classics and poems but also painting. This anecdote not only shows that the boy Yulgok could paint well at the age of nine, although not in a professional way, but also provides clues for his penchant to be a great Taoist philosopher in his later years.

He was deeply touched by the story of Zhang Gongyi’s family community of nine generations living in a house that he read earlier in the Two Moral Rules.
Zhang Gongyi lived during the Tang rule with nine generations in a house. Seeing that, Emperor Gaozong of Tang asked him how he could live in such a big family community. Instead of answering, Zhang Gongyi wrote the character "忍 [patience] hundred times and presented it to the Emperor, who was touched by this answer and returned. This story deeply moved Yulgok and led him to think, "It may cause troubles and difficulties to live in a house with nine generations like Zhang Gongyi, but brothers should live together." To the admiration of everyone, he produced a painting in which he depicted how all brothers can live together and serve their parents in a house.

Age 10: Composing the poem "Ode to Gyeongpodaede" 35

Gyeongpodaede, a beautiful pavilion at the seashore located about seven kilometers northeast of Gangneung city center, is at a short distance from Ojukheon, where Yulgok was born. This pavilion, which was built on the western hill of Lake Gyeongpo, has a long history of construction and reconstruction, Park Suk built it in 1326 (the 13th year of the reign of King Chungsuk of the Goryeo kingdom). An Chuk wrote its story. Two centuries later, in 1508 (the third year of the reign of King Jungjung of the Joseon kingdom), Han Geup rebuilt it at the present site. Later on, Sukjong's poem was hung. In 1742 (the 18th year of the reign of Yeongjo), Cho Ha-mang came to Gangneung as the Magistrate at the age of sixty-one and reconstructed it on a large scale.

35 Supplements to the Complete Works of Yulgok
Gyeongpodae and *Ode to Gyeongpodae*
Around the time when the reconstruction work was completed, the "Ode to Gyeongpodae," which was attributed to the ten-year-old Yulgok, was found among the old documents at nearby Ojukheon. The Magistrate thought such a timing was not a coincidence and had it printed on a plaque and hung over the gate. The last time it was repaired was in 1961. The pavilion commands a breathtakingly scenic panoramic view of the mirror-like lake and the surrounding pine grove that reflects its image on the lake, and beyond it, a long white-sanded beach of the endlessly extended deep-blue East Sea. No wonder that four Gukseons of the Silla Dynasty [Hwarang leaders] came here for recreation it occupies one of the top places of the Gwandong-Palgyeong and top eight sights of Gangwon-do. Its particular significance also lies in the fact that a poem singing its beauty, written by the great genius Yulgok at the young age of ten, is exhibited there.

This poem has 1,056 Chinese characters. It cites a vast spectrum of stories recorded in famous ancient Chinese literature and deep philosophical thoughts lofty moral spirits permeate every line of the poem. On account of its unbelievably high scholarship and profound philosophy, there are speculations that either Yulgok himself retouched that work in his later years or it was written when he was twenty years old, after he came back from Mt. Geumgang, and the character two (二) before ten (十) was inadvertently dropped when compiling the collection of his works. However, such speculations are unfounded and unreasonable considering his ingenuity. There is no reason to doubt the record in the Supplements to the Complete Works of Yulgok Vol. 1 that the poem was written when Yulgok was ten years old. It serves as a good resource that displays the immense ingenuity of Yulgok.
Age II: Prayer for father\textsuperscript{36}

When Yulgok was still a young boy, aged eleven, his father Yi Won-su became seriously ill. Yulgok cut his own arm and let drops of blood fall into his father's mouth. He then went to the ancestral shrine in the back-yard and prayed, "I am still young, but I know how to serve the spirits. My father is too old and will not be able to serve you as well as I can, dear spirits, so, take me instead of him." The next morning, his father woke up from coma and said, "An old spirit appeared in my dream and said, pointing at my son, that this child would be a great Confucian scholar of the eastern country and that I should name him I [珥] composed of jade [玉] and ear [珥,]" That was how his name was changed from Hyeol-long to I.

Age 13: Topping the Jinsasi\textsuperscript{37}

Yulgok passed the first-level Jinsasi [Literary Licentiate State Exam] at age thirteen, with the highest score. This was only an admission examination to become a Jinsa, but being exceptionally young at the time and at the same time obtaining the best score demonstrate his extraordinary intelligence. Therefore, he was sent for by high officials of the Royal Secretariat. It happened that there was another prodigy who also passed the Jinsasi. These two were presented to the high officials.

\textsuperscript{36} Yulgok Yeonbo
\textsuperscript{37} Yulgok Yeonbo
It is not recorded who was the other boy, but he must have been as light-hearted as he was smart and his attitude displayed his proudness. In contrast, Yulgok behaved with sincerity without the slightest haughtiness. His attitude was all the more praised by these scholars, who said in agreement that he would be a great man.
3. Yulgok and His Stepmother Kwon

Yulgok’s mother Saimdang passed away at the age of forty-eight when he was 16 years old. His father Yi Won-su was fifty-one years old at the time and could not raise the seven children alone.

Therefore, a woman named Kwon lived in the house. Although she did not have the status of the mistress of the house because his father did not officially remarry, Yulgok showed all respect to her regardless of her status as his father’s consort. As Yi Won-su survived Saimdang for only 10 years, Kwon was not his consort for a long time. Nevertheless, Yulgok performed his filial duty to the widowed stepmother as earnestly as he could.

However, Kwon must have been a woman with a peculiar character. Judging from the sporadic accounts on her in the miscellaneous records contained in the Supplementary Work of Yulgok, her words and deeds in the house must have been nasty beyond description.

1. If she was upset even so slightly, she used to come down to the yard and cry loudly like a child, with her head stuck in an empty
pot, to the bewilderment of the whole family and neighbors.

2. She habitually feigned to hang herself with a rope to scare the people in the house, making a big fuss about it to make people hurry to her to save her.

3. One day, someone presented a tray of persimmons to Yulgok, and a guest happened to be with him. Seeing that the guest was hungry, Yulgok offered him one persimmon and took another for himself. Then, the tray, with all the remaining persimmons, was sent to Kwon. Finding fault with Yulgok for having taken two without her permission, she made a fuss, saying, "If you had such a big appetite, why have you sent me the rest in the first place?" Yulgok immediately gathered the two persimmons and politely gave them to her, saying, "Please forgive my mistake and take these, too." She then calmed down.

4. One day, she was dissatisfied with something and locked herself in her room. She stayed in bed all morning, and was only soothed after Yulgok put on a high hat and headband and sat down solemnly before the door, bowing, and asking for forgiveness.

5. She liked drinking at any time of the day. Yulgok would wake up in the early hours and serve her liquor in order not to neglect his filial duty.38

Yulgok always endeavored to treat his stepmother as if she were his own mother, despite her vile character. He acknowledged her authority as

38 Supplementary Work of Yulgok
the head of the household after his father's death. He also did not skip his courtesy visit to her every morning and evening whenever he was at home.

When Yulgok became a Minister, he treated his stepmother with even more respect and acted like a child before her to please her. Such treatment continued even when Yulgok built the family community at Seokdam in Haeju, Hwanghae-do. His saintly efforts finally moved Kwon to become a kindhearted person. She showed respect for Yulgok after his death by clothing herself in a funeral dress for three years. Consequently, the relationship between magnanimous Yulgok and his once vile stepmother ended in a beautiful story.
4. Yulgok’s Wife and Children

Lady Noh’s life

Yulgok married at age twenty-two. His wife was the daughter of Noh Gyeong-rin, the Magistrate of Seongju. His place of origin was Goksan. Born in 1516, he was twenty-three years older than Yulgok, and he died in 1568 at age fifty-three. He was an upright person and maintained good relationships with most of his acquaintances. He was also on good terms with Jin Bok-chang at first. Seeing the latter’s wrong doings after gaining power, he nevertheless avoided him. This is comparable with the premonition Yulgok had when he was a seven-year-old boy by writing the Sketch of Jin Bok-chang.

Yulgok’s wife was born in 1541, the 36th year of the reign of Jungjong. She was five year younger than Yulgok, whom she married at seventeen. With her tender and magnanimous nature in handling all matters in the household, she proved herself worthy of becoming the wife of a great man of Yulgok’s caliber. Above all, she served her stepmother-in-law with all respect as if the latter were her own mother. She also served Lady Gwak, the widowed wife of Yulgok’s eldest brother. She treated Yulgok’s two consorts as if they were her own sisters, and raised
Yulgok’s children with the latter two with love and care as if they were her own children. Her compassionate character and attitude moved everybody around her. She was friendly to her subordinates and never became angry.

She was widowed when she was forty-four years old. In the spring of that year, she went to Haeju with Yulgok’s home altar. With both Yulgok’s widowed consorts, she arranged a table of sacrificial food every morning and evening in front of the home altar, with full devotion and esteem. Even after the completion of the three-year mourning period, she did not skip Gok (ceremonial wailing) on new moon and full moon days. She loved the ritual heir, the first son from Yulgok’s second consort, with all her heart. She entrusted him the entire household without interfering with his house management.

Imjin-Waeran (Japanese invasion in 1592) broke out in the eight year of Yulgok’s death. On hearing the news, Lady Noh, who was in Seoul at that time, gathered Yulgok’s children and nephews and gave them instructions: "I am very feeble and cannot ride a horse. Enemies are arriving across the country, and we would be safe nowhere. I will go to Paju where my husband is buried rather than move here and there and then die far from home. Don’t worry about me and escape the catastrophe. Come back after the end of the scourge and bury my body next to my husband." At the protest of all the sons and nephews gathered, she continued: "Why is it so difficult to accept my wish to die beside my hus-

39 An altar set out in the bereft home after the funeral on which the memorial tablet and other memorabilia of the deceased are put in honor of the deceased [Editor’s note].
40 Ceremonial food offered to the home altar table in the bereft home twice a day (morning and evening) [Editor’s note]
band? Don’t you think I have lived long enough after I lost my sky eight years ago? Where else shall I try to live on at this time of woe than the side of my deceased husband? I have already decided and won’t listen to any protest against it."

After the evacuation of King Seonjo and his entourage to Euiju at the end of April, Lady Noh went to Yulgok’s grave site in Paju, carrying his sinju [ancestral tablet used for rituals]. She bravely faced the enemies without moving a step from Yulgok’s grave. The invaders killed her on May 12, 1592, at the age of fifty-two. After the King came back to Seoul the following year, he ordered to build a Yeolnyeo Pavilion for her.

Lady Noh’s parental origin was Goksan in Hwanghae-do. She married Yulgok when her father Noh Gyeong-rin was the Magistrate of Seongju in Gyeongbuk. Noh Gyeong-rin was an uncorrupted and upright official he refused to be of servile to people in power. As a result, he was dismissed from his last post as the Magistrate of Sukcheon. He then and settled down in Yaduchon in Haeju to live a tranquil life with his family. It was also during this period of visiting his wife’s parental house that Yulgok decided to establish a family community in Haeju. He built a house in a scenic place of Seokdam in Haeju and lived with Seon’s extended families in a community. Lady Noh gave birth to a daughter but lost her at a young age. She became childless afterwards.

**Yulgok’s consorts Yi and Kim**

Yulgok’s wife Lady Noh was childless, but he had two sons and one daughter from his two consorts. Although it was customary at that time
for the yangban (gentry) class to have mistresses, it could be assumed that
Yulgok had consorts only to have children.

According to Yulgok’s lineage heir Jae-neung, Yulgok’s first consort
Kim was buried next to Yulgok in the ancestral burial ground in Mt.
Jawun in Paju, and his second consort Kim from the clan Yi of Yongin, in
Haeju.

As the first consort Kim did not bear a son at first, Yulgok received Yi
as the second consort whom he had a son Gyeong-rim and a daughter.
The latter became a consort to Kim Jip (art name: Shindokjae), who was
born in 1574 and of the same age as Yulgok’s first son Gyeong-rim. Kim
Jip was a learned man in the scholar line of Yulgok as the son of Yulgok’
s disciple Sagye Kim Jang-saeng. Kim Jip and Yulgok were, therefore, re-
lated by both scholarly lineage and family union.

Five years after the first son Gyeong-rim was born, the first consort Kim
gave birth to the second son Gyeong-jeong. The two were begotten
when Yulgok was thirty-nine and forty-four years old, respectively. They
were eleven and six years old, respectively, when Yulgok died. Lady Noh
loved them all the more for that and raised them with loving hand and
devoted heart. Gyeong-rim and Gyeong-jeong later bore five and two
sons, respectively. The 14th generation heir Jae-neung, the descendent of
Gyeong-rim, escaped from Haeju after the end of the Korean War and
lived at #1 Hongpa-dong in Seoul, where Yulgok used to study.

There is no clear record of the place of origin and hometown of
Yulgok’s first consort Kim. As the lineage of her son Gyeong-jeong is
said to be of Bukchon clan, it can be assumed that she was from Bukpy-
eong, Gangneung, or was presented to Yulgok through the mediation of
that clan.
Yulgok’s blood line and seoja issue

According to ancient customs, a seoja (a son born to a gentry father and a commoner mother) was not given opportunities to pursue a public career and was deprecated, however noble in character and high in erudition, Yulgok’s sons born by his consorts and their descendants were a great exception in Joseon history. According to Yi Hang-bok’s petition to the King for granting Yulgok a posthumous epithet, his friends and admirers raised funds to grant a house for the bereft family, donated grains to the state treasury for his two sons, and made it possible for them to pursue a public career.

The first son Gyeong-rim was appointed to the post of an education officer, but he did not serve the position and was promoted posthumously to the Secretary of Royal Stable. Gyeong-rim’s first son Je served as the North District Caretaker [Jr. 9]and promoted posthumously to the Third Minister of Taxation [Sr. 3]. Of the succeeding generation heirs, the third and fourth generation heirs Hu-shi and Yeon were granted the position of Jangwonsi-Byeolje [Civil Floriculture Administrator, Sr. 6] and the Magistrate of Jeoneui [Jr. 6], respectively. In the eighth year of the reign of Yeongjo (1732), the King wrote a preface to Yulgok’s Seonghakjibyo [Essentials of the Studies of the Sages] after reading it. He ordered his secretary to hold Jesa at Jawun seowon in Paju, where Yulgok’s memorial tablet and portrait are kept, grant a rank upgrade\(^{41}\) to the present ritual heir to a high-

\(^{41}\) An altar set out in the bereft home after the funeral on which the memorial tablet and other memorabilia of the deceased are put in honor of the deceased [Editor’s note,}
rank official [ranks Sr. 1-Jr. 3], and appoint all primary descendants to government officials for generations.

The fifth generation heir Don-o was appointed as Seobu-Chambong [West District Caretaker, Jr. 9], of which he did not serve the sixth generation heir Baek, as Bingo-Byeolje [Cool Warehouse Administrator, Jr. 5] the seventh generation heir In-rim, as the Magistrate of Geunsam [rank Jr. 4] by a special decree the eighth generation heir Muk, as Jinsa the ninth generation heir Jong-hyo, as a Hongneung-Chambong [Caretaker of Gojong's Mausoleum, Jr. 9] and Jinsa by a special decree the tenth generation heir Min-do, as the Magistrate of Gangnyeong [Jr. 4] by a special decree the eleventh generation heir Han-yeong, as the Byeongjo-Champan [Second Minister of Military Affairs of Civil Service, Jr. 2] and the twelfth generation heir Jong-mun, as the Hongmungwan-Gyori [Fifth Counselor of the Office of Special Counselors, Sr. 5]. The 13th generation heir Hak-hi passed away at twenty-nine. The 14th and 15th generation heirs Jae-neung and Hae-yong and his brothers lived in Seoul.

Yulgok's primary lineage enjoyed social rights and treatments equal to the status of legitimate sons of a yangban class. Apart from this is fair in principle, it was only natural to pay tribute to a great sage-scholar, by giving public recognition to his descendants even if they belong to a non-yangban class, even in the Joseon era strongly marked by a class system.

On this note, this seojja issue was among the important claims raised by Yulgok. Deep-rooted in the social system of long tradition, nobody had ever dared to present unconventional opinions on it or even shown interest in it. In contrast, Yulgok considered the issue of seojja a fundamental human problem and advocated strongly for establishing their social status,
It became one of Yulgok's hallmarks, as demonstrated by the following episode included in Wu Bok-ryong's *Donggye-Japnok* [*Donggye's Miscellaneous Records*].

One day, when Min Seong-jang and Yulgok met at Ugye Seong Hon's house, Yulgok said, "It is really deplorable that talented seojas named Kim or Yi have died without doing good things because our country does not give them opportunities to pursue a public career." After Yulgok left them, Min Seong-jang said, "Yulgok says such things because his sons are from his consorts. He may wish to pave the way for a public career for his sons." On hearing this, Seong Hon reproached him loudly, saying, "Yulgok is not a person to be biased for his own sake. He always has microscopic views for the benefit of the whole nation."

To be sure, Yulgok did not take issue with the jeokja (legitimate birth) and seojja system because his sons were seojas. Incidentally, his in-laws had the same problem. His father-in-law Noh Gyeong-rin passed away when Yulgok was thirty-three years old. Before his death, family members asked him how to handle the inheritance after his death. Noh Gyeong-rin just said, "Yulgok will take good care of this matter." Yulgok's mother-in-law told this story later: Yulgok said, "The deceased had no legitimate son, but only two sons from his consort. There is no need to apply the jeokja-seojja division, so, you have only to follow the heavenly law and divide equally." The two sons were touched by his reasoning and accepted his suggestion. This implies that Yulgok advocated for jeokja-seojja equality as a matter of principle.⁴²

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⁴² *Yulgok Yeonbo*
5. Yulgok and Kisaeng Yuji

Yulgok seemingly did not have relations with other women than his wife Lady Noh and his first and second consorts Kim and Yi. In Hwangju, Hwanghae-do, a Kisaeng (a professional female entertainer) named Yuji lived. She admired and revered Yulgok, who also liked her company because she was charming and agile. They did not have a physical relationship, which showed Yulgok being quite disciplined in that matter.

Hwanghae-do and Yulgok had a close relationship in many ways. First, his in-laws lived in Haeju. His father-in-law’s place of origin was Goksan, Hwanghae-do. His father-in-law was highly esteemed as an upright official, and lived in Yaduchon in Haeju after his dismissal from the post of the Magistrate of Sukcheon, Pyeongan-do, owing to a political intrigue. Before this post, he served as the Magistrate of Seongju, Gyeongsang-do. Hence, Yulgok’s first encounter with Hwanghae-dow as his wife.

Second, Hwanghae-do was his chosen hometown. First, he built a retreat house at a scenic spot in Seokdam, Haeju, a short distance upstream (north) of his in-law’s village. In this house, he taught and spent his leisure time. Later, he built a house there and had his deceased eldest brother Seon’s extended families come to live in a family community. He wrote Gosangugokga there, leaving an importance resource for Korean traditional poetry.
Third, Yulgok served as the Governor of Hwanghae-do when he was thirty-nine years old. Although he governed this province for only about half a year, he was much acclaimed for his innovative measure to reform the administrative system, cultivate the people, and establish welfare programs.

Fourth, of Yulgok’s three sisters, the eldest sister Maechang’s husband Cho Dae-nam was the Chief of Cheongdan Station. His second sister lived in Hwangju with her husband Yun Seop’s parents, where Yulgok was a guest several times. Interestingly, Yun Seop’s grave is in Paju, but her sister’s grave remains in Hwangju. The grave of Hong Cheon-wu, Yulgok’s younger sister’s husband, is also located in Seokdam, Haeju.

Fifth, Yulgok (aged forty-seven) had to pass through Hwanghae-do whenever he went to meet and see off Ming’s Imperial envoys, such as Hwang Hong-heon and Wang Gyeong-min, in Pyeongan-do, as the chief of the envoy reception committee.

Sixth, Yulgok met Yuji whenever the reception committee stopped in Hwangju. They not only knew each other by face but also Yulgok enjoyed her company in terms of entertainment. In other words, they had been on familiar terms, if not intimate, until Yuji mustered the courage and asked Yulgok to spend a night with her. However, Yulgok was adamant in refusing her request and, instead, left a prose poem to console her. Based on its content, Yulgok and Yuji shared only platonic moments. The original manuscript of this poem is now archived in the Museum of Ewha Women’s University. This manuscript is all the more a valuable piece of Korean literature as it is not recorded in other materials. The following is the translation (from Chinese) of the entire length of the poem,
Yuji was born to a noble man. Life's vicissitudes had it that she became a kisaeng in Hwanggang. When I was the Governor of Haeseo, Yuji, a young maidservant with ahwan (a Y-shaped braid) at that time, used to wait for me. With a slender body and well-groomed look, her face was fair and brain, bright I showed my affection by favoring and stroking her, but I have not had any lustful intentions toward her from the beginning. Whenever I stopped here on my way to and from Gwanseo as Wonjeongsa to meet and see off Imperial envoys, Yuji was always in my room, but we have never been on intimate terms.

In the fall of the year of gyemi (1583, Yulgok aged forty-eight), when I left Suyang and visited my yeosu (elder sister) in Hwangju, Yuji accompanied me and stayed there for several days she sat by my side at the drinking table. On my way back to Haeju, she saw me off to a quiet temple, Sosa.

We parted ways. I spent the night in Yulgwan-Gangchon. Someone knocked at the door. It was Yuji. She showed a bright smile and entered the room. Asked why she came so late, she said, "Your reputation is such that the entire nation cherishes your name dearly. Kisaeng as I am, my feelings are stronger, of course. Seeing that you keep your steady mind instead of succumbing to seduction like most men, my admiration grows even stronger. I have dared to come to you, making a long way, because I don't know when to see you again if I leave

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43 To be around someone to do errands and attend to his needs [Editor's note]
now." We had a long conversation under the candlelight.

Alas, people think that a kisaeng is only there to entertain and love men, and cannot imagine that there is a kisaeng that loves ethics and righteousness. And lo, she is not ashamed of being refused but is even touched by that. It is a rare thing to encounter such a woman. What a pity that such a noble mind is in a body of a kisaeng, whose life is full of sufferings.

It would be even more deplorable for this admirable damsel if other men think that she is Yulgok's woman and avoid her. So, I am writing this poem to declare that we have started our relationship with affection and ended it with a good conduct. Readers shall be assured.

Behold! An immortal-like being was born in Hwanghae-do
Thoughts and deeds are genteel and face and voice are clear

This fair being like a morning sky dew was thrown on the road
Alas, beauty, spring cannot carry your bloom to a golden house

When we first met, you were still a bud, but we felt affection
Without a matchmaker, we drifted away from each other

Good occasions missed, your promised one yet to come
Now I see you again at sunset, you are still the same damsel

I bemoan the fleeting time, life's summer green is fading
I am past the age for seeking bodily pleasure, long-extinct ashes

You beautiful woman, you are casting lovely eyes
My cart is on the ground of Hwangju, the road is long and slow

The cart resting in a temple, horses grazing on the river bank
A surprising night visit of a beautiful woman from afar

Dim moonlight on the wide field, tigers roaring in the empty forest
She came after me in admiration of my old reputation

In dilemma between closing the door and lying down together
No screen between us, but separate beds and separate covers

Unable to display emotions, we spent a white night together
No escape from the eye of heaven, even in the deepest room
No secret deeds, not risking your opportunists for marriage

Side by side till dawn, hearts bursting with feelings
Winds blowing, waves coming and going, a song sung sadly

Looking into my heart, it’s like a full moon on autumn water
Clouds of a dark-light war, dark is the lust for bodily pleasure
Man’s lust is no honorable thing, that of a woman even less

Hearts calmed and roots cleansed, back to the pure core
If reincarnation is real, I will see you again in the Lotus City

Three two-liners as postscript

A born beauty like a fairy, so familiar after a 10-year acquaintance
Not made of wood or stone, but no fire in this old and brittle body

Separation in desolation like lovers, but known are only faces
Even if you were Yin or Xing, alas, this frail body and ashen heart

Pity the flower thrown away, yearning for Pei Hang like Yunying
Not free of our bodies, I can console your heart only with this poem.
[September 28, 1583, the old Yulgok at Yulgwan-Gangchon]
[Notes]

- Hwanggang: Another name of Hwangju, Hwanghae-do
- Haeseo: The Hwanghae-do region
- Ahwan: Referred also to as Chahwan, Adu, or Agye. Young girls with Y-shaped braids, commonly used for low born maid servants
- Wonjeopsa: Chief of an envoy reception committee, an ad-hoc post responsible for the task of meeting the Imperial envoys from China near the border and guide them to the King
- Gwanseo: The Pyeongan-do region
- Suyang: Another name of Haeju, Hwanghae-do
- Yeosu: Elder sister here, Yulgok's second sister
- Sosa: Seongbulsa Temple at the foot of Mt. Jeongbang (unclear)
- Yulgwan-Gangchon: Yulgwanjin (Bamgoji), about 60 kilometers north to Jaeryeong. The river flows from Johwadong in Haeju. This ferry landing is adjacent to the tidewater of the Yellow Sea.
- Lotus City: In an ancient story, a man named Shi Manqing appeared to a friend in a dream-like hazy place, saying, "I have become an immortal and am reigning over a country called Lotus City." Therefore, "Lotus City" became a word that refer to a country

44 Source: Cheolgyeongnok
45 Source: Yeojiseungnam, Section on Jaeryeong
of immortals.\footnote{Yugilsihwa}

- Young man from O: The Chinese original of the phrase translated as "not made of wood and stone," meaning a man impossible to seduce. Xia Tong (Ha Tong) was a handsome and eloquent man who lived in Yongxing in the Jin era. One day, he went to the capital city and met the Prime Minister Jia Chong. Xia Tong did not accept his offer of public career. To persuade Xia Tong, Jia Chong used a beautiful woman to seduce him, to no effect at all. Jia Chong said, "This young man from O has wooden intestines and a stony heart."\footnote{Hatongjeon in Jinseo}

- Yin and Xing: Yin and Xing were two favorite consorts of Emperor Wu of Han. One day, Lady Yin asked the Emperor to allow her to meet Lady Xing. He adorned another woman and showed her to Lady Yin, but she was not fooled, saying, "This woman is not Lady Xing." The Emperor then showed Lady Xing clothed in an old garment, Lady Yin said, "This woman is Lady Xing, I see that she is worthy of your love," and cried sadly over her inferior beauty.\footnote{Shiji} Yulgok cited this ancient Chinese story and mentioned Ying and Xing, presumably meaning "If you become consort 1 and consort 2 like Lady Yin and Lady Xing…"

- Pei Hang, Yunying: In the Tang era, a scholar named Pei Hang met Lady Yunqiao [Cloud Bridge], who read him a poem: "Once
you drink the bejeweled nectar, all kinds of feelings will arise. Then you will meet Yunying only after grinding and offering an elixir called Black Frost. Blue Bridge is the abode of immortals, so you need not climb the Jade City in heaven." Later on, when Pei Hang was passing through Blue Bridge station, he stopped and asked an old woman for something to drink. The old woman let Yunying bring him a drink. Pei Hang drank it, and it was really bejeweled nectar. Yunying looked so beautiful, and Pei Hang asked the old woman to marry them on the spot. She answered, "Last night, an immortal gave me a spoonful of elixir, Black Frost. You can marry Yunying only after you have ground it in a jade mortar with a jade pestle for 100 days. Only after you have finished grinding the elixir, you will be able to marry Yunying," Pei Hang ground the elixir for 100 days. She then married Yunying they became immortal and went to heaven.\(^{49}\)
Choi Rip’s Poem

After this incident, this was a hot topic in the literati circles in Seoul and provinces. Choi Rip (art name: Ganijae), who was younger than Yulgok by three years and a renowned poet at that time, wrote a two-line poem using the first characters of Yulgok’s poem to Yuji:

You made the beautiful lady’s heart swell with your lines,
That sure makes occasions for smiles in later years,
In consideration of your reputation and feelings,
No more will she sit on a water chestnut flower to adorn herself.

[Note]

- Water chestnut flower: Zhao Feiyan, a consort of Emperor Cheng of Han, used a large mirror (almost three meters high), with water chestnut flowers embroidered on it. Thus, “water chestnut flower” in this poem must be interpreted as a mirror. In Namgye-Gyeon-munnog [Observations of Namgye], it is recorded that Yuji came to Seoul on hearing the news of Yulgok’s death and stayed therefor three years to complete the mourning period. Although they were not united physically, she did the duty of a wife after Yulgok’s death because she loved Yulgok with all her heart as if he were her husband. This story demonstrates Yuji’s pure mind and virtuous deeds, although she was a kisaeng.

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Source: Zhao Feiyan Story

124 Saindang and Yulgok
6. Yulgok and His Sister Maechang

Yulgok’s sister Maechang was a spitting image of Saimdang under every aspect: virtue, art, knowledge, and wisdom. Hence, she had a profound influence on her younger brother Yulgok. Of course, Yulgok possessed sufficient knowledge and wisdom to be successful in everything that he touched, but it is highly probable that he consulted her wise sister.

When Yulgok (aged forty-eight) was the Minister of Military Affairs, the Orangkae army invaded the northeastern borders (Hamgyeong-do). This region was not stationed by the Joseon army, and thus no soldiers and horses were there to resist the invasion.

Yulgok, who held the position of the Minister of Military Affairs, set up a plan to gather seojas and private and government servants, and trained them as soldiers; then he sent them to the frontier in Hamgyeong-do. Among the target population, the weak and ill-suited for the battle were to be exempted by donating grains. At the same time, participating seojas may be given the opportunities to pursue a public career and servants, to be upgraded to commoners. Yulgok presented this plan to the King.

However, society was not ripe enough to understand such an innovative opinion. Many officials, who had been envious of Yulgok’s reputation and achievements, took that opportunity to make a great fuss about this
opinion. Apart from its political content, Yulgok’s opinion also reflected his conviction. Besides, there is an evidence of Maechang’s influence on this plan.

The following story, which is included in Giam-Japgo [Giam’s Miscellaneous Writing] authored by Jeong Hong-myeong, may have some fictional proportion, but it sounds credible. It reads therein: Seeing Yulgok worried about the Orangkae problem, his sister Maechang said, “The most urgent thing to do is to offer a policy that folks can follow gladly and voluntarily. When we look around, there are many talented soejas living in deep remorse for the lives, without any prospect of success. If they are given the opportunities to change the situation by donating grains, you can feed the soldiers and satisfy folks at the same time.” Yulgok saw the good reasoning in his sister’s idea and presented it in his plan to the King. 51)

51 Supplementary Work of Yulgok, Vol. 5
7. Yulgok's Seclusion in Mt. Geumgang

Yulgok lost his mother Saimdang at sixteen. After completing the three-year mourning period, he decided to devote himself to Buddhism and entered Mt. Geumgang in March when he was nineteen, and stayed there for one year. Next spring, he came back to the mundane world.

Later, some people criticized this incident as a betrayal to the pure Confucian path. Although one year's deviation was otherwise no big issue, it may be worth noting that this mountain is secluded. The following are some related stories extracted from the Complete Works of Yulgok.

Motives for Yulgok's mountain seclusion

First, determination to cultivate Ki in nature

Before going to Mt. Geumgang, Yulgok bade farewell to some friends in writing. The following passage is found among such writings.

Everybody is born with Ki [Qi in Chinese, vital energy]. Ki can be controlled by the mind if well-cultivated, but the mind is controlled by Ki if ill-cultivated. The Ki controlled by the mind can function in a way
that its owner becomes a sage, but the mind controlled by Ki can make its owner a foolish maniac devoid of any control over his lowly passions. Mencius set an outstanding example of well-cultivated Ki, and anybody who seeks this profound principle and fulfillment of the highest nature must follow his footsteps.

Confucius said that the wise finds pleasure in water and the virtuous, in mountains. However, enjoying mountains and water is not limited to their external nature of rising and flowing but embraces their dynamic and static essence, and cultivating the Ki by the virtuous and the wise can be done only in water and mountains.

Reading this, it becomes clear that Yulgok's mountain seclusion was motivated by his will to cultivate Ki in water and mountains and not to devote himself to Buddhism.

**Second, contemplations on life and death after Saimdang's death**

Yulgok's sorrow over losing his beloved mother at the young age of sixteen was so deep that he did not know where to rest his troubled mind. Records indicate that he did not stop crying day in, day out. Moreover, intelligent as he was, he must have had deep contemplations about life and death.

One day, while thumbing through Buddhist books in Bongeunsa, a temple located in Seoul across the Han River from Tuksaem at that time, he was attracted to the Buddhist idea of life and death and the mystic depth of its philosophy. This experience probably drove him to his decision to enter Mt. Geumgang.

Uam Song Si-yeol once said that Yulgok had read many Buddhist
and Taoist books by Laozi and Zhuangzi early on, and that Hwaemgyeong [Avatamaka Sutra, dealing mainly with cosmic inter penetration] and Neungeomgyeong [Suranama Sutra, dealing mainly with the mind and illusion] were his favorite. It is assumed that Yulgok, who could not find any guidance for his troubled mind after losing his mother in Confucian books, sought to find the answer to the question of life and death in Buddhist books.

Another story of a quite different nature can be read in the records of Cheonhyu Yi Yu-gyeong, one of Yulgok’s disciples:

In Yulgok’s household, there was a Buddhist book passed down over many generations. Yulgok read it in his childhood and remembered a passage that if one acquires a mysterious plot in Buddhism, one can see even the deceased. Yulgok was always curious to know its significance and was set to find the truth of it out of his longings for his deceased mother.

Of course, it is true that Yulgok missed his mother and entered Mt. Geumgang, driven by his philosophical urge to find the answer to the existential issues, it is out of the question that he succumbed to a superstitious belief of seeing the deceased.

Third, the family conflicts caused by his stepmother Kwon

Since Yulgok’s stepmother Kwon joined the family, Yulgok had to put all efforts to mitigate the continuous conflicts between her and Yulgok’s eldest brother Seon. However, his endeavors to bring harmony between them were fruitless. Severely stuck in his own sadness over
the loss of his beloved mother and unabated longings for her, the problems with his stepmother exacerbated his pains.

Yulgok finally made his mind to retreat in the mountains and left home, leaving letters to his father, stepmother Kwon, and his brother Seon on his bookcase. At the end of these letters, it read: "If there is no hope for harmony and peace of the family, living is not better than not living," entreating them for reconciliation.

To sum up these three possible reasons, Yulgok may have decided to set off to Mt. Geumgang i) simply to cultivate Ki in nature, ii) to delve into Buddhism to find answers to the existential issues, still stuck in painful longings for his mother, and iii) to come to terms with his frustration from the family conflicts caused by his vile stepmother.

All these three events may have played their respective roles in driving Yulgok to decide to go into seclusion in the mountains. It makes sense that Yulgok, a rational and intelligent young man, only wanted to devote himself to reading Buddhist books in search of the answer to the existential issues, to assuage his unabated desolation at the loss of his mother.

Did Yulgok shave off his hair?

Accordingly, seclusion in the mountains does not mean joining a monastic order. He came back to the mundane world after a year. Nevertheless, it may be an important point whether Yulgok shaved his hair off and became a monk during this one-year seclusion in Mt. Geumgang.

When Yulgok’s disciple Sagye Kim Jang-saeng asked him later wheth-
er he shaved his head and changed his appearance after entering Mt. Geumgang, Yulgok answered, smiling, "Once you are in seclusion in the mountains, it does not matter whether you have changed your appearance or not, if the heart is there." Here, Yulgok did not make it clear whether he shaved his hair off and became a monk. It is evident that he did not officially join a monastic order. As for whether he shaved his head, clues that can satisfy the curiosity are presented below.

First, from the fact that he gave himself an art name of Eui-am, it can be inferred that he did not intend to become a monk because it has a Confucian connotation.

Second, Yulgok had never cut his hair. He paid a visit to his earlier teacher Eo Suk-kwon on the second day of his return from Mt. Geumgang. Eo Suk-kwon asked him to take off the hat to see whether it was true that he lived as a monk during his mountain seclusion. As Yulgok resisted, he snatched the hat and was overjoyed, clapping the hands, to see the full-length of Yulgok’s hair appearing, and said, "I will tell the world that you have never been a monk." This scene was also witnessed by one of Yi Suk-kwon’s disciples named Yi Bung-sang.

Third, upon Yulgok’s return, it was a big social issue whether Yulgok shaved his hair off. This can be understood in light of the deeply rooted Confucian tradition of Joseon. The exhilaration shown by his former teacher Eo Suk-kwon on seeing that Yulgok had kept his hair can also be understood in this context. On the same note, when his sister Maechang met Yulgok, she was overjoyed to see Yulgok’s full-length hair and said,
"I am so happy that you are back. However, you have no time to sit idly at home because it is now on everybody's mouth whether you have shaved your hair off. It happens that many scholars have gathered together to sit for the state examination, and you can put this matter to rest if you go there and comb your hair before their eyes." Hence, Maechang sent him away with a comb pouch, Yulgok did as he was told and satisfied people's inquisitiveness. This story can be read in Jeong Hong-my-eong's Giam-Japnok [Giam's Miscellaneous Records].

Considering these records, although it is evident that Yulgok stayed for one year in Mt. Geumgang, and became committed to Buddhist books and deep contemplations, he had no intention of taking refuge in Buddhism or shaving his head and becoming a monk. As he himself said, however, it is true that he was immersed in Buddhist thoughts, although he did not change his appearance, and brave enough to cut all threads linking to the mundane world in an honest search of the truth of life and death.

Why did Yulgok return?

Regardless of the question of what motivated Yulgok to go into seclusion in the mountains, it is needless to say that Yulgok dedicated himself to seeking the truth confronting all his skepticism and existential questions. In light of this, it is also logical to assume that Yulgok was "awakened" to truth that he had been seeking, whereupon he decided to return to the world. The following record included in the Complete Works of Yulgok
provides clues to his state of mind.

Since a while back Yulgok had been in a deep and calm space immersed in contemplation, forgetting even eating and sleeping. One day, a question arose why Buddhist disciples are warned against thinking more and thinking less. Then he came to realize why.

This was because the practice of Buddhism of simply cutting the scattering mind’s paths and gathering the mind thus held to create an empty illuminated world with absolute imperturbability, in lieu of being anchored on a sophisticated theory. If the followers knew the significance of that practice before arriving at that state, they would lose their sincerity in their pursuit and would not gain anything. This was at the origin of the delusive prohibition of inquisitive thoughts.

This thought regarding Buddhism led Yulgok to call its doctrines into question and reread and reinterpret the books of the Confucian sage and worthies. After realizing that Confucian teachings were truthful and not illusory, he ended the seclusion and came back to the mundane world. According to a record of his disciple Yi Yu-Gyeong, the book that led Yulgok to this realization was the Analects of Confucius.
Yulgok's works written in his seclusion period

Yulgok wrote "Leaving the East Gate" at the moment of leaving Seoul. He wrote "Looking at Mt. Bogae" on his way to Mt. Geumgang. He also wrote poems that, among others, describe Manpokdong [Valley of Ten-thousand Waterfalls] and the landscape of Mt. Geumgang, that were written at Songna Temple, and that depict the sunrise at the summit of Gu-jeongbong [Peak of Nine Wells]. The most famous of them is a poem he wrote after a conversation with an old monk in a small temple, his contemplation on the state of "Flying Kite and Jumping Fish.\textsuperscript{52}\) The questions and answers between the old monk and Yulgok are presented below.

- To the old man in a small temple in Mt. Geumgang

While I was enjoying nature in Mt. Geumgang, I walked some 10 kilometers into a deep valley and came across a small temple. An old monk was sitting there in his habit, but he did not stand up or greet me. I looked around inside the temple. There was nothing in the temple, and herd in the kitchen seemed to have not been kindled for many days. Asked what he was doing there, the monk just smiled, without uttering a word. Asked again what he ate as food, he pointed to the pine tree, saying, "That's my food." To test him, I started to ask him:

\textsuperscript{52} This is a poem in Shijing [Book of Odes] and refers to the state in which all creatures function in accordance with their intrinsic nature.
A small temple in Mt. Geumgang.
Yulgok : "Who is the sage, Confucius or Buddha?"

Old Monk : "Please don't tease this old monk."

Yulgok : "As Buddhism is Orangkae doctrines, it cannot be practiced in China, right?"

Old Monk : "King Shun was from an Eastern country and King Wen came from a Western country. Do you mean they are also Orangkaes?"

Yulgok : "The most sophisticated in Buddhism spot is still within the boundary of Confucianism, This being so, why the conversion from Confucianism to Buddhism?"

Old Monk : "Is there also a saying in Confucianism that 'the mind is Buddha'?"

Yulgok : "Mencius said that human nature is good and always referred to Yao and Shun. How is it different from 'the mind is Buddha? We only seek the mind in reality."

The monk did not agree, but reflected a long time and asked,

Old Monk : "Do you know what it means 'neither being nor nothingness'?"

Yulgok : "That refers to the perceived boundary."

Yulgok added, seeing the monk smiling:

Yulgok : "Is a kite flying and a fish jumping being or nothingness?"

Old Monk : "It's neither being nor nothingness. That is the essence of truth. How can you compare it with a phrase of a poem?"
Yulgok: "If you name something, there is already a phenomenal boundary. How can you call it the essence? If so, the subtlety of Confucianism cannot be transmitted with words, and the Buddhist logic is within words."

The monk was surprised and told me, holding my hand:

Old Monk: "You are not a mundane scholar. Please write me a poem and interpret the phrase 'a kite flying and a fish jumping' for me."

I wrote a poem and gave it to him. He read it, rolled the paper, slid it into the sleeve, and turned back toward the wall. I left the temple and came out of the valley. Then I realized that I did not even know who he was. When I went there three days later, the monk had already left it.

A Fish Jumping and a Kite Flying
A fish jumping and a kite flying, the same law above and below,
It is neither being nor nothingness,
Smiling at nothing, I look at my abode,
I stand alone at sunset in a deep forest.

Yulgok’s first resolution after his return

Yulgok wrote Jagyeongmun [Self-Admonitions] was the first thing he did after returning to his maternal grandmother’s (aged twenty) side. He was away for one year, being secluded in Mt. Geumgang in search of
truth in Buddhism, Jagyeongmun was meant to be his signpost for a life
dedicated to self-cultivation. For this reason, all those who wanted to fol-
low his footsteps learned it by heart. The following is its translation (from
Chinese) of the entire text.

**Jagyeongmun [Self-Admonitions]**

1. Set a lofty goal of reaching the standard set by sages and do not
stop cultivating yourself until you have reached it down to the tip
of the finest hair.

2. A man of steady mind is not voluble. Hence, be parsimonious
with words to have a steady mind.

3. Words issued at the right time cannot be long.

4. It is never an easy task to muster the forces by gathering the mind
set loose for a long time in one morning. The mind is a living
thing and can become steady only after being held by firm forces.
When your thoughts are scattered, if you try to cut them in order
not to be bothered by them, the mind will grow even wilder due
to those recurring entangled thoughts. Even if they are cut, if the
thought of having cut those thoughts lingers in the heart, that is
also a delusory thought. Therefore, if your thoughts cannot be
gathered, gather your mind and treat it carefully and gently, with-
out getting dragged by those thoughts. If you persevere in these efforts, a tranquil moment will surely come. If you devote all of your heart and force, that also is a good discipline for holding on to a steady mind.

5. Always be on alert and never stop being vigilant at any moment even when you are alone. Then all petty thoughts will be calmed down and held in check.

6. Losing your hold on your mind because nobody is around is the source of all evils.

7. Only after you have achieved the control over your mind, you can realize the noble meaning of loving and enjoying nature.

8. Wake up at dawn and think about what to do in the morning. After breakfast, think of what to do during the day. Before falling asleep, think of what to do the next day. If there is nothing to attend to, let it be. If there is something to do, make a plan how to do it. Only after that, start your daily reading. The purpose of reading books is to learn how to discern right and wrong, and put it into practice. Reading without attending to the state of affairs is knowledge good for nothing.

9. Even if thoughts about wealth and honor have been uprooted, if you are inclined to choose something more convenient in the slightest in your dealings with daily affairs, it's an expression of a profit-seeking mind. More care must be taken to control such a mind.
10. If you take on a task, attend to it wholeheartedly without getting upset or neglecting the duty. If you judge a thing unworthy of your effort, you must cut it off resolutely, without giving room for an inner battle between right and wrong.

11. Always take to heart Mencius's thinking: "Even if the whole world can be gained by doing one unrighteous deed or killing one innocent person, this must not be done."

12. If you encounter a tribulation and hardship imposed by others, take them as an opportunity to examine your own heart and reflect on your own shortcomings, so that your sincere heart can touch the hearts of your opponents.

13. If you cannot win the hearts of those living in your own house, it is because you have not yet done your utmost in showing your sincerity.
14. Except when you go to sleep at night or you are ill, you must neither lie down nor lean back. Even at night, if you are not sleepy, do not lie down but do not force yourself to keep awake. If you feel drowsy in the daytime, spur yourself to keep your mind alert, and if your eyelids are still heavy, stand up and walk around to invigorate your mind.

15. Be steady in your efforts to learn without deliberately accelerating or decelerating. Learning continues until the day you die. Thus, if you want to see the fruits of your efforts as soon as possible, it is also a profit-seeking mind. If you are driven by such a mind, overwork will harm the body you received from your parents, and it is against your filial duty.
8. Yulgok’s Life at Seokdam

Yulgok Yeonbo provides the following story in relation to Yulgok’s visits to Haeju and the background of building an abode for retreat at Seoksam.

When he was thirty-five years old, he retired from the post of being the Hongmungwan-Gyori [Fifth Counselor of the Office of Special Counselors, rank Sr. 5] in October, and went to the parental house of his wife at Yaduchon in Haeju. This was presumably his first visit to Haeju for a longer stay. The house was crowded with his disciples coming from Seoul and provinces across the country.

However, after three months into his private life, Yulgok (aged thirty-six) left Haeju in January and went to Yulgok-ri, Paju. He was appointed as Ijo-Jeongnang [Section Chief of the Ministry of Personnel, Sr. 5], which he did not accept he was reappointed as the Hongmungwan-Gyori [Fifth Counselor of the Office of Special Counselors, Sr. 5] in the summer, which he served. Then he was appointed successively to various posts, including the Uijeongbu-Geomsang-Sain [Legal Secretary of the State Council, rank Sr. 5] and Hongmungwan-Bueunggyo [Junior Fifth Counselor of the Office of Special Counselors, rank Jr. 4]. However, he resigned from all these positions due to illness and returned to Haeju six months after he left it last time.
One day, Yulgok made a day’s excursion with a group of scholars at a scenic spot, upstream of the Seokdam Stream, northward from Yaduchon, called Seokdamgugok [Nine Rock-Pool Bends] in Gosan-myeon. He named the fourth bend "Song-Ae" [Pine Tree Cliff] and wrote a prose about its beauty. He also named the other eight bends and marked the names of small temples with names. It was then and there that he decided to prepare his abode there. This is the first record regarding Seokdam.

In June, however, when not even a month had passed after his return, Yulgok was appointed as the Magistrate of Cheongju and left Haeju. In March next year, Yulgok (aged thirty-seven) resigned from the position after nine months of service. However, he lived in Seoul and Paju and did not return to Haeju. Two years later in October, Yulgok (aged thirty-nine) went to Hwanghae-do as Governor, resigned from it in March of the following year, after six months of service. He returned to Paju.

It was in October of the year after his return to Paju that Yulgok (aged forty-one) returned to Haeju and built Cheonggyedang, the first facility established at Seokdam.

In January of next year, Yulgok (aged forty-two) asked his extended family to come to Seokdam. They built the household shrine and established the Jeongchim. They invited the widowed wife Gwak of his eldest brother Seon to come, with the ancestral tablets, and hold Jesa. As a code of conduct was necessary for a peaceful living in the community of extended families, Yulgok wrote Donggeogyesa [Community Life Code of Conduct] and read it to all the household members.

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53 The central place of a dwelling as the main space of living, where Jesa and other family rituals are held. [Editor’s note]
On each new moon and full moon day, he bowed at the household shrine with the children, and gathered together after Jesa in the Jeongchim. Yulgok sat down on the east side and his stepmother, sister-in-law, and his wife and consorts on the west side they received obeisance from all sons, nephews, daughters-in-law, and daughters. Then he had one of the children read Donggeogyesa. After the family gathering, he had all servants and maidservants stand in rows on the right and left sides of the inner yard and received their obeisance. Then he instructed them with the words from Donggeogyesa translated into easy Korean. Thus, he managed the household with courtesy and discipline.

Whenever he left the house, he went to the shrine first to notify his absence to the ancestors, then bade farewell to the household members in the order of his stepmother, sister-in-law, and wife before leaving the inner living space, his two consorts and all children at the middle gate and
house gate, respectively, and the maidservants and servants in the mid-yard and outside the house gate, respectively.

Yulgok spent a whole year at Seokdam. It was during this period that he authored the famous book *Gyeongmongyogyeol* [The Secret of Expelling Ignorance] in December.

In the following year, Yulgok (aged forty-three) built a retreat house Eunbyeong-Jeongsa at Seokdam. Seokdamgugok is a cluster of nine bends along the river stretching over 15 kilometers west of Haeju. A branch of Mt. Suyang runs westwards toward the peak Seonjeokbong, and about 10 kilometers west of the peak, there is Mt. Jinam, the source of the stream that meanders its way over 15 kilometers, bending nine times and flows into the Yellow Sea. At each bend, there is a deep rock pond (seok dam in Korean). Earlier, it was called Gugok [Nine Bends],
named after the Gugok of Zhu Xi’s Mt. Wuyi.

Eunbyeong is the name of the fifth bend. Yulgok asked Park Yeo-ryeong and other disciples to build a retreat house east of Cheonggyedang and called it Eunbyeong-Jeongsa, naming it after Mt. Wuyi’s Dae-Eunbyeong. He then composed the famous *Gosangugokga* [*Ode to the Nine-Bend River Valley of Mt. Gosan*], mirroring Zhu Xi’s *Wuyizhaoge* [*Ode to Boating in Wuyi*]. It is an importance resource for Korean traditional poetry.

Yulgok also arranged to build a shrine behind Eunbyeong-Jeongsa and set up an altar for Zhu Xi on the main wall and those of Jeongam Cho Gwang-jo and Toegye Yi Hwang on side walls. He, however, passed away before he had time to put his plan into action. His disciples built the shrine two years after his death (1586) and enshrined the memorial tablets, as Yulgok wished. This beautiful story shows how Yulgok was loved and revered by his disciples.

The finished Eunbyeong-Jeongsa came to be called Sohyeon-Seowon. In 1596, 11 years after the foundation of the altars for Zhu Xi, Jeongam, and Toegye, Yulgok’s tablet was placed at the second row on the east wall. Fourteen years later (1610), the status of the shrine was upgraded by the bestowal of a title board. Fifty-one years later (1661), Ugye Seong Hon’s table was placed at the second row on the west wall. In 1717, Sagye Kim Jang-saeng’s tablet was placed at the third row on the west wall, which was moved to the third row on the east wall as Uam Song Si-yeol’s tablet was being placed there.

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54 To plan systematically in pursuit of a specific goal [Editor’s note],
55 Bestowal of a plaque inscribed with King’s handwriting to be hung on a shrine, Confucian academy, or pavilion gate [Editor’s note].
As such, the retreat house at Seokdam, where Yulgok taught and instructed his disciples, became a seowon (Confucian academy), boasting many centuries' tradition as a sage-scholar worship place. During Yulgok's lifetime, however, Eunbyeong-Jeongsa was a retreat house for Yulgok's tranquil self-cultivation and family recreation.

Yulgok's life at Seokdam was interspersed with the pleasant hours he spent in company with his younger brother Oksan Yi Wu, sharing a deep brotherly affection. In Oksan's Epitaph, Song Si-yeoil wrote, "While Yulgok was living at Seokdam, he often set up a table of drinks and food, having Oksan play the zither and composing poems together. It is truly an epitome of brotherly friendship." Moreover, Song Si-yeoil wrote in his preface to Oksan's Peom Collection, "Whenever Yulgok was sitting with his family and his stepmother, sister-in-law, and nephews, playing and laughing, he asked Oksan to play the zither and recite poems. The pure and elegant sound put the listeners' mind in a merry and peaceful mood."

He went on to write, "I often heard Yulgok praising Oksan that Gyeheon (Courtesy name of Oksan)'s disposition is superior to his beyond comparison."

These records reveal that Yulgok had happy moments at Seokdam with all household members, above all with his younger brother Oksan, with whom he shared artistic veins, as shown in his Gosangugokga.

As mentioned above, however, his life at Seokdam was short-lived. In March of the year in which he built Eunbyeong-Jeonga, Yulgok (aged forty-three) was appointed as the Censor-General and went to Seoul. He had a short stay in Seokdam at age forty-five (inferred from his poems). Then he could return at age forty-eight in July, but he was appointed as the Minister of Personnel and went to Seoul in September, never to return.
again, He passed away the following year.

The nine-bend river valley in Gosan entered history not only for its landscape and Yulgok’s poem but also as Yulgok’s haven.\(^56\) Curious to know how the place looked like, King Yeongjo ordered the Governor of Hwanghae-do on January 13, 1760 to draw Seondam-Seowon and Yulgok’s earlier dwelling facilities and send him, King Jeonjo also ordered the Governor of Hwanghae-do in the summer of 1781 to draw the landscape of Gosangugok, which was implemented in the form of the famous paintings of Choi Buk.

Choi Buk painted two sets of Gugok Landscape one was sent to King Jeongjo and the other was embedded in a folding screen and kept in the house at Seoksam. When the 14th generation heir came to south shortly after the Korean War, it was left there and nothing has been known about its whereabouts thereafter.

Later, a big monument was erected with Chusa Kim Jeong-hi’s calligraphy of a horizontal line of six characters, which mean "By King Jeongjo’s Sacred Decree" and two eight-character lines meaning "Munseonggong Yulgok is truly the Confucius of Joseon Zhu Xi and Yulgok, Lord of Wuyisan in China and Lord of Seokdam in Joseon, are two highest peaks of the Confucian sky." A memorial gate was also built and named "Cheonjogak" (Heavenly Conduct Pavilion). The first eight-character line was a phrase contained in the Jesa Text written by King Jeongjo on February 15 of the 13th year of his reign (1789), which the Royal Secretary Han Man-yu took to Yulgok’s tomb to hold Jesa. The second eight-character line

\(^{56}\) A place for resting body and mind [Editor’s note]
was a phrase contained in the ceremonial reading written by Jeongjo in the 19th year of his reign (1795) on the occasion of placing Yulgok’s memorial tablet in the West Gate of the Royal Ancestral Mausoleum in Hwaseong.

**Yulgok's Gosangugokga**

Gosan’s nine-bend river valley, their ponds are hiddengems.
As I cut grass and live here, friends are crowding.
Living here, I yearn for the philosophy of Zhu Xi in Mt. Wuyi.

Where is the first bend—Gwanam under sunshine,
Picturesque mountains beyond the smoke on the plain meadow.
Waiting for friends before a wine table between two pine trees,

Where is the second bend—Hwa-am in fading spring.
Flower petals on blue waves flowing to the fields.
I am afraid, these petals will boast these hidden gems,

Where is the third bend—Chwibyeong full of leaves.
Mountain birds playing on green trees, singing high and low.
Fresh wind on pine trees, summer heat is forgotten.
Where is the fourth bend—Song-ae at sunset.

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57 A text notifying an important event after carrying it out as a report to ancestors and spirits [Editor’s note]
Rock shadow in the pond, upside down reflecting color by color,
Deep forest fountains, gently succumbing to delicate playfulness.

Where is the fifth bend—Eunbyeong enticing the eyes,
A pavilion by the shore, so clean and so elegant,
A place to study, sing the moon, and recite poems.

Where is the sixth bend—Jogye with its Pavilion,
Hard to decide, who is more delighted—we folks or fish
Fishing rod on the shoulder at sunset, back by the moonlight.

Where is the seventh bend—Pungam in the clear fall color,
Crystalline frost on the high rock face, embroidered silk screen,
Sitting alone on a cold rock, forgot to go back home.

Where is the eighth bend—Geumtan in bright moonlight,
Two or three airs with a zither with gold marker and jade peg.
Nobody knows ancient airs, played to my own predilection.

Where is the ninth bend—Munsan bidding farewell to the year,
Fanciful rock faces and eerie bedrocks, buried in snow.
Spectators not knowing it, say there are no scenic wonders.
Folding screens of Gosangugokga
9. Anecdotes of Yulgok

Yulgok and poverty

Korean history abounds in touching stories of upright statesmen. However, in the shadow of Yulgok’s vast erudition and high philosophy, his practical life attracted little attention. Anecdotes of Yulgok’s poor household are not widely known. However, quite a few records testify to his unparalleled detachment from material goods.

Meal without side dishes\(^{(58)}\)

One day, when Yulgok was living in Paju after resigning from the position of the Daejehak [Director of the Office of Special Counselors, Sr. 2], Choi Hwang, the Bujeak [First Counselor, Sr. 3], visited Yulgok. On the dinner table prepared for them, there was hardly anything to eat except for rice and meager soup. Choi Hwang took the chopsticks, but he could not muster his appetite. After hesitating a while, he said

\(^{(58)}\) Source: Choi Jun, Changnang-Wueon
"How can you bear to live in such poverty? It's unbelievable that you take meals without side dishes... It's so embarrassing for this humble subordinate of yours."

Refusing rice donation

When Yulgok was living at Seokdam in Haeju, he always skipped lunch. At times, the family did not even have enough rice for cooking diluted rice porridge, not to mention rice. This came to the ears of the Magistrate of Jaeryeong, who then sent rice to the family. Moreover, the magistrate was Choi Rip, Yulgok's childhood friend.

However, Yulgok did not receive it. His children were too delighted at the gift that arrived when they had just run out of rice, but Yulgok refused it without any explications. His children did not understand it and asked him why. Yulgok said, "The national law prohibits selling and buying stolen goods under a severe punishment. Magistrates are provided with rice by the government. If the rice is not from the national warehouse but his personal stock, there is nothing wrong in receiving it. But I know well the government salary to a magistrate, and it's not enough to buy rice for our family. The rice was not his own but a public property. So, we cannot receive it and had better endure hunger."

Yulgok and a blacksmith's

This is what happened when Yulgok was living in Haeju. The family set up a blacksmith's and made hoes for a living. This story appears in a

59 Source: Complete Works of Yulgok, Vol. 38, Miscellaneous Records
letter that Yi Hang-bok sent to Choi Yu-hae: "In our recent history, Kim An-guk worked in the harvest field when he was living in retreat in Yeoju, admonishing people not to lose even one grain, saying that each grain was heaven's gift. In our time, Yulgok set up a blacksmith's and sold hoes to buy rice. It seems that such great statesmen of our country were not ashamed of such petty works done with a noble intention."

According to a different version of the story, Yulgok set up a blacksmith's in Haeju to solve the problem of lacking agricultural tools for the peasants. Yulgok used to say, "Peasants are foundations for everything necessary for the whole country. Only when peasants do their work well, the people will have enough to eat, and grains collected will enrich the national warehouse and train the soldiers to be dispatched to guard the borders. Unfortunately, our society looks down on the merchant class, and artisans leave their trade and homestead to strive for a higher social status, without worrying about who will then produce agricultural tools. How can peasants work without tools to work with? So, I am forced to make agricultural tools to contribute what little I can to help our peasants do their work."

No beef consumption

Yulgok did not eat beef. He used to say, "It is not forbidden by law, but it is inhumane to chew the flesh of cattle after exploiting them to exhaustion all their lives. "Then the court decree prohibiting beef consumption was issued, Yulgok said triumphantly, "Now that it is even

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60 Source: Supplementary Work of Yulgok Vol. 3
forbidden by law, it must be kept on any account." The family no longer cooked beef even for the sacrificial table.

**Selling a house and share one with his brothers**\(^{61}\)

It seems that not only Yulgok but also his brothers were poor. Considering Yulgok's career, he was likely in better situations than others. He was also better off thanks to his father-in-law Noh Gyeong-rin, who bought him a house in Seoul. Seeing that his brothers had difficulties nourishing their families, Yulgok could not keep that house to himself. Therefore, he sold the house and bought cotton cloth, and distributed it among his brothers, and thus he did not possess a house in Seoul. All his brothers ate or suffered hunger together, and at times they did not have grains to cook even diluted porridge.

**Yulgok's death and poverty**\(^{62}\)

It is somehow logical that Yulgok, a great scholar-sage with a formidable reputation who had influence over the entire country, lived in poverty. He devoted his undivided attention to national affairs, and was oblivious to family affairs.

The poor household was revealed clearly on the day of his death. There was nothing in the house. They had to even borrow the grave clothes to prepare the body for burial. The bereft family had to move from one place

\(^{61}\) Source: *Pojeo Collection, Cho Ik*

\(^{62}\) Source: *Yulgok's Posthumous Title, Yi Jeong-gwi*
to another without any abode for a longer stay, and used to skip meals and suffer from harsh weathers. Yulgok’s friends and scholars raised funds and bought a house in Seoul for them.

**Yulgok and dreams**

Yulgok’s life abounds in dream anecdotes from the day of his birth to the day of his death. This may be interpreted as divine providence portending his greatness in the form of divination of his future.

**A dream related to Yulgok’s conception**

When Saimdang conceived Yulgok, she dreamed that she arrived at a beach by the East Sea and saw a fairy emerging from the sea. The fairy was holding a baby boy in her arms her skin shining like white jade. Although there is no record of the place where Saimdang was living at that time, it is assumed from the family and regional hearsay that it was during the time that she was living at now Baegokpo-ri, Bongpyeong-myeon, Pyeongchang-gun, Gangwon-do.

**A dream related to Yulgok’s birth**

Yulgok was born on December 26 [lunar calendar] in the hour of tiger [around 4 a.m.] at Ojukheon in Bukpyeong, Gangneung, which was his mother Saimdang’s parental house. In the night when Yulgok was born, Saimdang dreamt that a black dragon flew from the East Sea and lingered

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63 Source: *Biography of Yulgok*
above the bedroom door. As she gave birth to Yulgok as soon as she awoke from this dream, Yulgok was named Hyeonlyong [literally, dragon manifestation] as a child and the room was given the name Monglyongsil [literally, dragon dream room],
Young Yulgok’s dream

Yulgok remembered a strange dream he had as a child. He saw God in his dream and received a folded script written in golden letters. In it, he found a puzzling poem.

Dragon went back to the dawn heaven, clouds are wet,  
Musk deer passed over spring mountains, grasses are fragrant.

This dream had remained enigmatic until his death. After his death, however, people realized that it was about Yulgok himself.

A dragon going back and a musk deer passing by meant Yulgok’s death, and wet clouds and fragrant grasses meant his achievements and reputation.

The ink stone Yulgok used in his childhood is still at Ojukheon in Gangneung. Its bottom surface shows a poem written and inscribed by
King Jeongjo later. This poem cites a phrase from the poem that young Yulgok received in his dream.\textsuperscript{64}

\textbf{Yulgok's death predicted in his wife's dream}\textsuperscript{65}

It is only natural that a great man whose birth was portended by a dream must also leave this world, leaving behind a dream portending his death. Yulgok passed away in deep winter, on January 16 [lunar Calendar]. The night before his death, his wife Lady Noh dreamt of a black dragon soaring out of his room into the heaven.

\textbf{Yulgok's character and disposition}

\textbf{Inspector-general Yulgok and a mother and a daughter}\textsuperscript{66}

Around the time when Yulgok (aged forty-six) was appointed the Inspector-General in June and about to begin his work, he was set to assume his self-imposed responsibility to "ensure public order and restore good social customs," He posted a Code of Good Conduct containing 50 items on the street. His intention was to have people read the Code of Good Conduct item by item and take them to heart so that they may exercise self-discipline and self-vigilance without state interferences.

These 50 items were based on the Confucian Five Moral Disciplines. A first-time offender was given teachings a second-time offender was given

\textsuperscript{64} Source: Supplementary Work of Yulgok Vol. 5
\textsuperscript{65} Source: Yulgok Yeonbo
\textsuperscript{66} Source: Yulgok Yeonbo
orders and a third-time offender was punished. Everybody was happy to comply and the people said to one another, "As this official became the Inspector-General, I have not seen any corrupted official, and people respect and bow politely to each other when passing by." One day, however, an old woman sued her daughter for neglecting her filial duty. Yulgok called on the mother and daughter to come together and showed his regret, saying, "It's my fault that morals have decayed this much because an unworthy person like me has become the Inspector-General," and explained kindly to them, giving examples, how important duties and morals are. They were deeply moved by Yulgok's words and hugged each other and cried. They returned home and became a loving mother and a caring daughter.

**Yulgok's reception of visitors**

When Yulgok was the Minister of Personnel, people of all walks of life—ministers, celebrities, scholars, and even job seekers—visited him at any time of the day. He would miss his meal and often had supper in deep night.

Yulgok's younger brother Oksan was concerned about his health and urged him to receive fewer visitors. Yulgok said, "If I should avoid receiving visitors, I had better idle away my time at Seokdam, instead of serving my country in Seoul. My duty as the Minister of Personnel is to employ good resources. I can do this well only by meeting people and gauging their characters and capacities. Only a person who is ready to meet every

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67 Source: Supplements to the Complete Works of Yulgok Vol. 38.
visitor is worthy of this position. Those who come to me with questions about state examinations are civil service candidates at the same time because their ultimate goal is public career. If I refuse to receive them, whom shall I receive? Even if my body is exhausted, I have to see all visitors personally and employ worthy candidates according to their talents and abilities. So, if one hundred persons come to see me, I must meet each of them." He not only met each visitor but also wrote down all names in his notebook and referred to them to select proper persons he also put the names of the short-listed candidates on the window for closer consideration.

**Yulgok never whispered**

The brothers Hong Gwi-sang and Hong Chi-sang were Yulgok’s relatives and disciples. They often said the following story:

We have served Yulgok and learned from him since our early childhood, but we have never seen him whispering mouth to ear. He used to say, "In all dealings, a junzi [man of noble mind] must behave like a blue sky and bright day without hiding anything."

His thoughts and deeds always coincided indeed.

**Yulgok never abandoned others**

A young boy from the family of Yulgok’s stepmother used to come to

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68 Source: *Supplementary Work of Yulgok Vol. 4*
69 Source: *Supplements to the Complete Works of Yulgok Vol. 38.*
the house and play. One day, he stole a valuable object from Yulgok's library. Yulgok's children ousted him when they saw it.

After 10 days, Yulgok allowed the boy to come and play again, and treated him as if nothing had happened. His children asked him why he let the thief come again, Yulgok said, "He must have repented his wrongdoing in the meantime. You should not abandon a person for good." On hearing this, the boy was deeply moved.

**Yulgok read 10 lines at a time**

Yulgok and Ugye Seong Hon once talked about their reading practice:

Ugye: "When I read classics, I read seven or eight lines at a time."

Yulgok: "I also read some 10 lines at one glance."

**Weight of fountain water**

While Yulgok was staying in Mt. Geumgang, he used to have discussions with Buddhist monks. One day, looking at the clear water in a mountain spring, he said, "Clear water is heavier than foul water, although fouled water looks heavier because of dirt particles." A monk named Ilhak told this to his disciples when he was staying in Mt. Odae. They experimented it and found that Yulgok was right.

**Yulgok and high waves**

One day, Yulgok was riding a boat with Ugye on the river below the Hwaseokjeong. A fierce storm arose all of a sudden and high

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70 Source: Noseokimun, Yun Seon-geo.
waves beat into the boat, Yulgok didn’t move at all as if nothing had happened. He seemed to be immersed in a poetic inspiration.

Ugye was overwhelmed by fear and admonished Yulgok, saying, "Don’t you think we should do something in such a perilous situation?" Yulgok said, smiling, "I cannot imagine the two of us will drown." The storm calmed down soon afterwards.

**Yulgok and Hwaseokjeong**

Hwaseokjeong is located in Paju on the bank of the Imjin River. It was built by Yulgok’s fourth great-grandfather. Yulgok came here for the first time when he was eight and composed an eponymous poem.

One of the widely-spread anecdotes of Hwaseokjeong and Yulgok relates to Imjin-Waeran. Yulgok died eight years before it broke out, but he foresaw that such a crisis would come and the King would escape northward. Therefore, he prepared the pavilion to burn well even in a rainstorm by oiling it night and day, and the efforts bore fruit later.

When Imjin-Waeran broke out, the King left the palace with his entourage on April 30, and they headed northward to Euiju. Arriving at the Imjin River in the rain, darkness fell and they could not cross the river. They recalled that Yulgok had foreseen this situation and oiled Hwaseokjeong to burn well, they burned it and could cross the road safely.

As this story spread across the country, people came to believe that Hwaseokjeong was thus burned down, and Yulgok’s foresight became common sense.

But this is far from being true. Contriving such a story does not add to Yulgok’s greatness. This is a legend born from his followers’ desire to
make Yulgok a prophet.

According to a record in Vol. 1 of Jingbirok (Book of Corrections) by Seo-ae Yu Seong-ryong, who was escorting the King at that time, the real situation was as follows:

When we left the ferry landing, darkness fell and it was difficult to discern objects. There was an old waiting hall at the southern bank of the Imjin River. The King ordered to burn it lest the enemies should make a raft with its boards and cross the river. The light from the burning woods lit the way to the northern part of the river and we could advance safely.
According to similar stories reported in various books, including Vol. 26 of the Corrected Annals of King Seonjo and Vol. 1 of Jaejobeonbangji [Records of National Border Reconstruction], it was the waiting hall that they burned not Hwaseokjeong. It is also geographically impossible because the ferry landing for crossing the Imjin River to Dongpa and Hwaseokjeong in Yulgok-ri are kilometers apart. This story of Hwaseokjeong can be regarded as a legend that proves to what extent Yulgok was worshiped by the people.

**Yulgok and Song Gwi-bong**

Gubong Song Ik-pil, a friend of Yulgok's, was a great man much acclaimed for scholarship and noble character, although he could not pursue a public career because he was soeja. He did not achieve much in the social aspect because of his low social position.

Seo Go-cheong used to say to his disciples, "If you would like to know what kind of man Zhuge Liang [諸葛亮 also called Kong Ming, a famous chancellor and strategist in the ancient Chinese Three Kingdom period] was, you only have to look at Gubong." Such was his reputation that Yulgok always showed him deep respect. Gubong appreciated Yulgok's innovative ideas and advocacy for the abolition of soeja discrimination, and these two great men became close friends.

One day, Gubong proposed to become in-laws, but Yulgok refused, saying, "I am for friendship but against an in-law relationship." Gubong deplored and said, "Even Yulgok is not free of prejudice." Given that Yulgok spoke out for abolishing the jeokja-soeja dichotomy, arguing that it was against the fundamental moral principle, he might as well have put his claim into practice. However, it seems that he had reservations about provoking social confusion so long as the national law and customs pro-
hibited them,

**Yulgok’s death and devotees’ prayer**\(^{71}\)

Yulgok passed away at the dawn of January 16, 1584 at the age of forty-nine. The previous day was a full-moon day. A certain scholar from Seoul was journeying to Gangneung. Dusk fell and the scholar lost his orientation in the woods. He met a woodman and asked for directions. The woodman said that there was a gentry household over the hill and that he would be provided with a place to rest there.

The scholar went over the hill and there was a house standing alone without any neighbors. A young boy answered the door and went back to transmit the request of the visitor. The boy came back and invited the scholar into the house.

As the scholar was entering the room, an old man in shabby clothes was straightening his attire, "As I have an important affair to attend to tonight, both of us will feel uncomfortable. As the night has already fallen, I have no other choice but to ask you to stay. Please be warned and just sit there and say no words whatever we do here." The scholar wondered what all that might be, sitting down quietly.

After a while, a monk and another village scholar entered the room. The three of them didn’t say a word but asked the young boy bring a bowl of pure water and put it on a tray. They then started a ritual incantation. After about an hour of incantation with devotion, the master of the house sent the young boy outside to observe the sky. The boy came

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\(^{71}\) Source: *Dongjahwiip, Yi Won-myeong.*
back after a while and reported, "A large star in the eastern sky has just fallen, radiating a bright light." The three devotees lamented, "No way to change the celestial longevity." The two guests left the house with de-
spondent faces, and the master of the house was also very saddened. The scholar asked him what was happening and was told the following: "We recited sutras and prayed so that Yulgok's longevity might be prolonged even a few months or years. Now, the star fell, alas, and I believe that Yulgok has just passed away in Seoul." There is no knowing who the master of the house and the village scholar were, but the monk turned out to be Geumdandaesa.

The scholar encountered strange people in a strange house and wit-
tnessed a strange scene that night and came back to Seoul the next day. Then he realized that what he saw and heard was what he was to con-
firm, Yulgok passed away at the dawn of the 16 that the same moment when the big shining star fell.
### Saimdang’s Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>년도</th>
<th>나이</th>
<th>내용</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1504</strong>&lt;br&gt;10th year of the reign of Yeonsan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>- Born on October 29 (lunar calendar) at the parental house of her mother Lady Yi in Bukpyeong, Gangneung, Gangwondo, as the second of the five daughters (without a brother) of Shin Myeong-hwa (place of origin: Pyeongsan; age 29)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **1510**<br>5th year of the reign of Jungjong | 7 | - Although her father Shin Myeong-hwa came from Seoul, her mother Lady Yi always lived at her parental house, as she was the only child of the literati Yi Saon and Lady Choi. Saimdang also grew up there, learning Chinese classics from her grandfather and receiving virtuous instructions* from her mother.  
*) Cultivation of good character and ethical behavior  
- Saimdang studied paintings of, among others, landscape, grapes, grasses, insects, by imitating An Kyeon’s style. |
| **1516**<br>11th year of the reign of Jungjong | 13 | - Shin Myeong-hwa (age 41) passed the Jinsasi (Literary Licentiate Examination) in Seoul. |
| **1519**<br>14th year of the reign of Jungjong | 16 | - Gimyo-Sahwa broke out and many scholars, such as Cho Jeong-am perished, but Shin Myeong-hwa escaped the tragedy, although he was a victim. |
| **1521**<br>16th year of the reign of Jungjong | 18 | - Death of her maternal grandmother Lady Choi in Bukpyeong, Gangneung  
- Shin Myeong-hwa fell ill on his way to Gangneung from Seoul, and was close to death when he arrived, Lady Yi prayed at the ancestral gravesite, cutting her middle finger as a sacrifice.* The next morning, a divine being appeared in Saimdang’s dream and gave a date-shaped medicine ball to her father, He then miraculously recovered.  
*) Later, this story was written by Yulgok in *Lady Yi Moves Heaven*, |
| **1522**<br>17th year of the reign of Jungjong | 19 | - Married to Yi Won-su (place of origin: Deosu; age 22)  
- Lived at the parental house after the wedding; death of her father in Seoul on November 7 |
| **1524**<br>19th year of the reign of Jungjong | 21 | - Met her mother-in-law in Seoul for the first time  
- Gave birth to first son Seon in Seoul in September  
- Lived in different places, such as Paju, Gangneung, and Bongpyeong for the next 10 years |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Reign</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Events</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1528</td>
<td>23rd year of Jungjong</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Yeolnyeo Pavilion was constructed for her mother Lady Yi in Gangneung.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1529</td>
<td>24th year of Jungjong</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Gave birth to first daughter Maechang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gave birth to second son Beon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gave birth to second daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1536</td>
<td>31st year of Jungjong</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Gave birth to third son I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gave birth to third daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1540</td>
<td>35th year of Jungjong</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Was seriously ill, Yulgok (age 5) disappeared while the whole family was in distress because of her illness. They found him on his hands and knees at the ancestral shrine praying for her mother’s recovery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1541</td>
<td>36th year of Jungjong</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Composed a poem on Daegwallyeong on her way to Seoul, leaving her mother. Managed the household at her husband’s parental house in Sujinbang, Seoul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1542</td>
<td>37th year of Jungjong</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Gave birth to fourth son Wu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lived in Seoul and composed poems in tears, longing for her mother living alone</td>
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<tr>
<td>1545</td>
<td>Injong’s coronation year</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Suffered from intense longings for her mother, as the Eulsasahwa (literati purge) broke out and it reminded of her father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1550</td>
<td>5th year of Myeongjong</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>In summer, her husband Yi Won-su was appointed as a Suwun-Pangwan, or chief clerk of the Seoul Magistracy, who was responsible for inland waterway transport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1551</td>
<td>6th year of Myeongjong</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Moved to Samcheong-dong. Her husband left for Pyeongan-do with Seon in summer to transport the grains collected as in-kind taxes. Died on May 17 (lunar calendar) 2–3 days after falling ill. Her husband and two sons received the news of her death on the day they arrived at Seogang. Buried at Mt. Jawun, Dumun-ri in Paju</td>
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<tr>
<td>년도</td>
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<tr>
<td>1536</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Born on December 26 [lunar calendar] to Yi Won-su (age 36) and Saimdang (age 33) at the hour of tiger at the parental house of his mother in Bukpyeongchon, Gangneung.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1538</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Began to read Chinese classics to the surprise and admiration of all</td>
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<tr>
<td>1540</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Prayed for his mother Saimdang’s recovery at the shrine of his maternal grandfather</td>
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<td>Became worried about the safety of a man who was about to fall into a flooded stream while all onlookers were laughing, and showed relief when the man stood upright</td>
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<tr>
<td>1541</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Moved to Sujinbang in Seoul from Gangneung with his mother Saimdang</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1542</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Interpreted Chinese texts after learning them from his mother and mastering the Four Confucian Classics [Analects of Confucius (論語), Mencius (孟子), Doctrine of the Mean (中庸), and Great Learning (大學)]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1543</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Composed an eponymous poem at the Hwaseokjeong Pavilion in Yulgok-ri, Paju</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1544</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Painted a scene of all his brothers living in a house, serving the parent after reading the story of Zhang Gongyi's nine generation household in the book Two Moral Rules</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1546</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Cut his arm to give blood to his ill father and prayed for his recovery at the ancestral shrine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1548</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Passed the first-level Jinsasi [Literary Licentiate Examination], winning first place and made him famous as a prodigy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1551</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Death of his mother Saimdang</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Authored the Biography of My Deceased Mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1554</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Began his lifelong friendship with Ugye Seong Hon</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Went to Mt. Geumgang in March and was involved in Buddhism</td>
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<tr>
<td>1555</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Returned to the mundane world in spring; visited his maternal grandmother in Gangneung</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wrote Jagyeongmun [Self-Admonitions] at Ojukheon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Details</td>
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<tr>
<td>1556</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Returned to the house in Seoul in spring.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1557</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Married the daughter of Noh Gyeong-rin, the Magistrate of Seongju, in September.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1558</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Visited Toegye Yi Hwang (age 58) in Ye-an, Gyeongsangbuk-do in spring, and discussed the classics and philosophies with him; dropped by at Maehakjeong in Seonsan to meet Gosan Hwang Ki-ro, who seemed to have given the occasion for his brother Oksan to marry Gosan’s daughter.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1561</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Death of his father Yi Won-su in May; buried in Paju next to Saimdang.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1564</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Wrote Cheongsong Seong Su-chim’s biography, after his death, in spring</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Obtained the licentiate titles of Saengwong and Jinsa after passing a series of exams in July</td>
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<tr>
<td>1565</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Appointed to Yejo-Jwarang [Assistant Section Chief of the Ministry of Rites, Sr. 6] in spring</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1566</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Appointed to the Fourth Censor (Sr. 6)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Appointed to the Ijo-Jwarang in winter; brought order and transparency to the civil service system</td>
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<tr>
<td>1567</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Wrote King Myeongjong’s mansa* [mourning text]</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mansa: The writing crying for dead ones.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1568</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>In February, appointed to the Fourth Inspector (Jr. 5)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In April, death of Noh Gyeong-rin, his father-in-law</td>
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<td></td>
<td>In November, reappointed to the Ijo-Jwarang, but he resigned from it to return to Gangneung on receiving the news that his maternal grandmother Lady Yi fell seriously ill.</td>
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<td>The Office of Censor-General requested the King to dismiss him on the ground that attending to the maternal grandmother is no legitimate reason for a leave of absence, but King Seonjo did not approve the request for dismissal, arguing that if Yulgok’s love for his grandmother is so great, he must go and take care of her to do his filial duty.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1569</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>In June, appointed to the Fifth Counselor (Sr. 5); back to Seoul in July</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In September, presented Donghomundap to the King</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In October, returned to his maternal grandmother Lady Yi with a leave of absence specially granted by the King; Lady Yi’s death at the age of 90</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>년도</td>
<td>나이</td>
<td>내용</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 1570         | 35  | In April, went back to Seoul, and was appointed to the Gyori  
|              |     | In August, death of his eldest brother Seon  
|              |     | In October, resigned from the post because of illness and returned to Yaduchjon in Haeju, his wife’s parental house  
|              |     | In December, on receiving the news of Toegye’s death, he set up an altar and cried aloud.                                        |
| 1571         | 36  | In January, left Haeju for Yulgok-ri in Paju  
|              |     | Went back to Seoul; appointed to the Gyori and successively to Uijeongbu-Geomsangsain, Hongmungwan-Bueunggyo concurrently with Jiyeo and Gyeonyeon-Sidokgwang, and Chunchugwan-Pyonsugwan [legal secretary, counselor, royal editor, royal lecture reader, and state record compiler, ranks Sr. 3–Sr. 5]; resigned from all positions for health reasons and returned to Haeju  
|              |     | In Haeju, took an excursion with scholars to Seokdangmugok [nine-bend river valley of Seokdam] in Mt. Gosean; named the fourth bend Song-ae [pine tree cliff] and wrote a prose; gave names to the other eight bends; planned to establish a retreat dwelling there  
|              |     | In June, appointed to the Magistrate of Cheongju; cultivated the people to practice moral behavior and good customs; set out Hyangak [Milage Pact], and guided the people to keep it. |
| 1572         | 37  | In March, resigned as the magistrate and returned to Seoul  
|              |     | In summer, returned to Yulgok-ri; developed the theory of Li and Ki with Ugye.                                                      |
| 1573         | 38  | In July, appointed to the Jikjehak [Second Counselor, Sr. 3]; back to Seoul after failing to obtain the approval to resign.   
|              |     | In August, returned to Yulgok-ri after obtaining the approval to resign after a three-time appeal; composed the poem Gamguneum [Appreciation for the King’s Grace]  
|              |     | In September, reappointed to the Jikjehak; went back to Seoul.  
|              |     | Successively appointed to Tonjeongdaebu [prestige title granted to the officials of the senior third rank] Seungjeongwon-Dongbuseungi, Jiyeo concurrently with Gyeongyeon-Charmchangwan, and Chunchugwan Suchangwan [royal secretary, royal editor, royal lecture participant, and state record editor] |
| 1574         | 39  | In January, promoted to the Fifth Royal Secretary [Sr. 3]; presented Maneonbongs [Sealed 10,000 Word Supplication, also called Maneonso] and made proposals for saving the country from political and social crises.  
|              |     | In March, appointed to the Censor-General  
|              |     | In June, birth of first son Gyeong-rim as seoja  
<p>|              |     | In October, appointed to the Governor of Hwanghae-do   |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>년도</th>
<th>나이</th>
<th>내용</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1575</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>▶ Commencement of the East-West Fraction Rivalry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th year of the reign of Seonjo</td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ In September, presented the <em>Seonghakjibyo [Essentials of the Studies of the Sages]</em> to the King.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1576</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>▶ In February, returned to Yulgok-ri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th year of the reign of Seonjo</td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ In October, built Cheonggyedang as the first dwelling facility in Haeju</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1577</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>▶ In January, gathered the extended families in Seokdam and write the <em>Donggeogyesa [Community Life Code of Conduct]</em>; built the family shrine and invited the widowed wife of his eldest brother Seon to bring the ancestral tablets with her and hold Jesa; served his steppmother Kwon with devotion and filial duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th year of the reign of Seonjo</td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ In December, wrote <em>Gyeongmongyogyeol [The Secret of Expelling Ignorance]</em>; set out the Hyangak [Village Pact] to correct corrupt customs; implemented the village granary system for the well-being of all villagers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1578</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>▶ Built a retreat house Eubyeoong-Jeongsa at the fifth bend east of Cheonggyedang; composed the <em>Gosangyokgja, comparing the nine bends of Seokdam in Mt. Gosan to those of Mt. Wuyi of Zhu Xi</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th year of the reign of Seonjo</td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ In March, appointed to the Censor-General; went back to Seoul,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ In April, returned to Yulgok-ri</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ In May, presented <em>Maneonso</em> to the King</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ In winter, returned to Seokdam,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1579</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>▶ In March, built Dobong Seowon (a Confucian academy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th year of the reign of Seonjo</td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Birth of second son Gyeong-jeong as seojaj</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Wrote <em>Sosakjipju [Collected Comments on Lesser Learning]</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1580</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>▶ In May, compiled <em>Gijsilgi [Veritable History of Gija Joseon]</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th year of the reign of Seonjo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1581</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>▶ In April, proposed to hold a conference to rescue the people from misery and voluntarily hosting it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th year of the reign of Seonjo</td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ In June, promoted to the Gaseondaebu [prestige title for the officials of the junior second rank] Inspector-General</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ In October, promoted to the Jaheondaebu [prestige title for the officials of the senior second rank] Minister of Taxation,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>년도</td>
<td>나이</td>
<td>내용</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1582         | 47  | ▶ In January, appointed to the Minister of Personnel  
▶ In July, wrote the Commentary on the Human-Tao Mind Dichotomy, Biography of Kim Shi-seup, and School Models and Functions, and presented them to the King,  
▶ In October, a King’s order to led the reception committee to meet the Ming Imperial Envoys as Wonjeopsa  
▶ In December, appointed to the Minister of Military Affairs |
| 1583         | 48  | ▶ In February, presented reform programs to address the rampant national problems  
▶ In April, presented again a series of innovative rescue programs, such as eliminating unnecessary civil service positions, clustering villages in larger administrative units, encouraging production, reclaiming waste land, reforming the tributary payment regulations to ease the people of excessive burdens, strengthening castles and fortresses, keeping clear records of military servicemen, hiring seojas, and giving opportunities to the servant class to be upgraded to the commoner class against grain donation; claiming the necessity of training 100,000 soldiers to strengthen the national border defense,  
▶ In June, impeachment of the Samsa [three censoring bodies] for the northern Orangkae invasion; voluntary dismissal; returned to Yulgok-ri; return to Seokdam in Haeju,  
▶ In September, appointed to the Deputy Director of the Royal House Administration, followed by the Minister of Personnel |
| 1584         | 49  | ▶ On January16[lunar calendar], death at the house in Daesa-dong, Seoul,  
▶ On March 20, burial in Mt. Jawun, Paju,  
▶ Forty years later, grant of the posthumous honorary title Munseonggong in August 1624, the second year of the reign of Injo. |