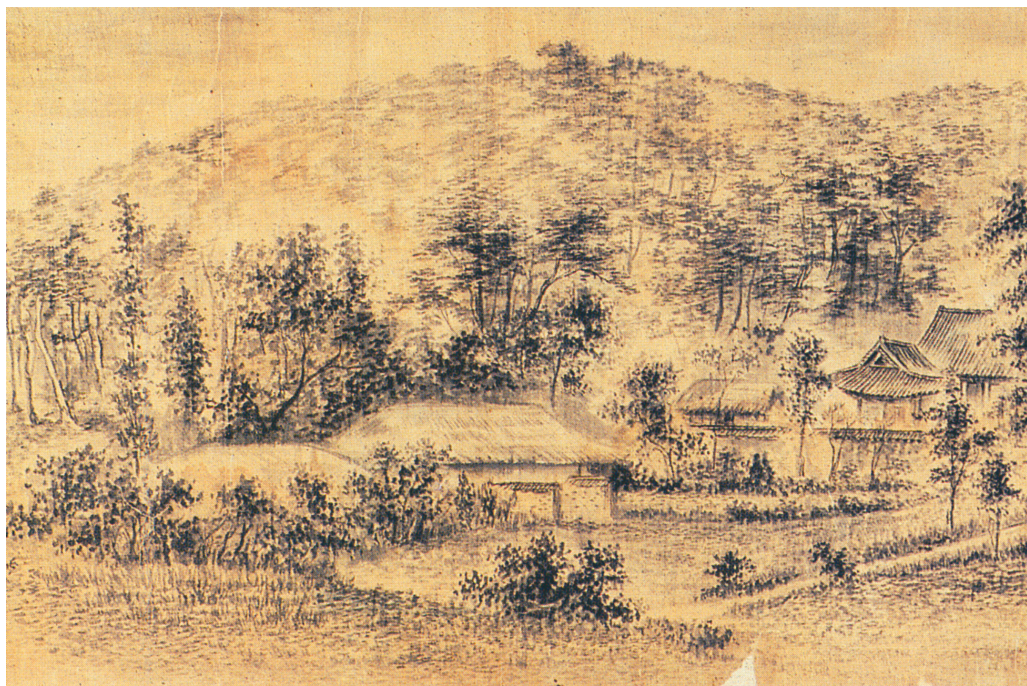


1. Brief Biography of Yulgok

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.



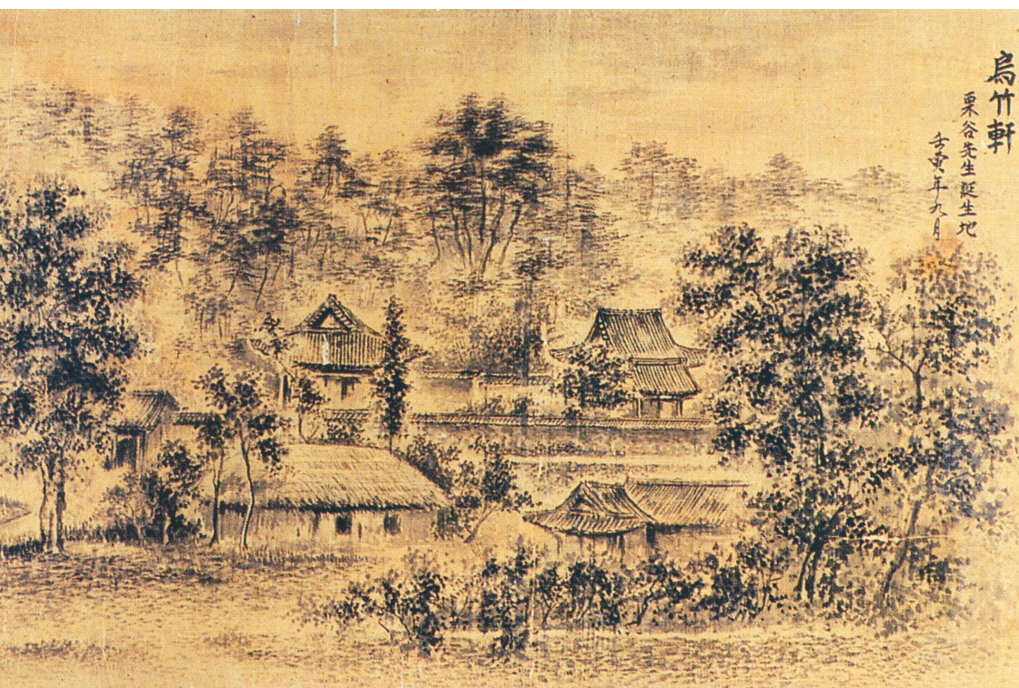
Ojukheon

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-



queathed 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-Jipyong [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-

selor. 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-Siganggwon [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

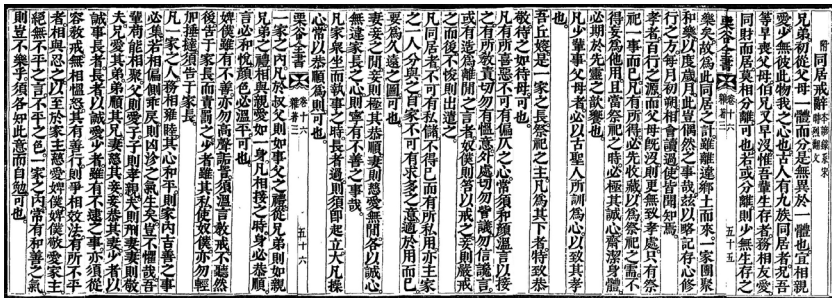
and nobody will have to worry about the nation's survival." This reflects his lofty mind, free of petty ambition.

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 *Gyeongmongyogyaeol* [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-Jeongsae 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 Gaseondaebu¹⁶ 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 Jaheondaebu¹⁷ Minister of Taxation in October, and additionally to the Chief Counselor of Hongmungwan, Yemungwan-Daejehak [Director of the Office of Royal Decrees] and

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

¹⁷ A prestige title given to rank Sr. 2 officials [Translator's note].

Jigyeongyeon-Chunchugwan-Seonggyungwansa [Director of the Royal Lectures, State Records, and National Academy, rank Sr. 2].

In January of next year (aged forty-seven), Yulgok was ordained¹⁸⁾ 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 Sungjeongdaebu¹⁹⁾ 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 King²⁰⁾ 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

18 Appointment by a Royal Decree [Editor's note].

19 A prestige title given to rank Jr. 1 officials [Translator's note].

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 redemption²¹. 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-

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 court²². 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 issues²³ could not stop lamenting. Seong Hon pleaded with the King, pointing out

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. Seonggyungwan 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.²⁶⁾ was conferred and the posthumous title²⁷⁾ 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].



Jawun Seowon in Paju