

## 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<sup>28)</sup>



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<sup>29)</sup>

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

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<sup>28</sup> Yulgok Yeonbo

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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<sup>30)</sup>**

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<sup>31)</sup>**

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<sup>32)</sup>

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"<sup>33)</sup>

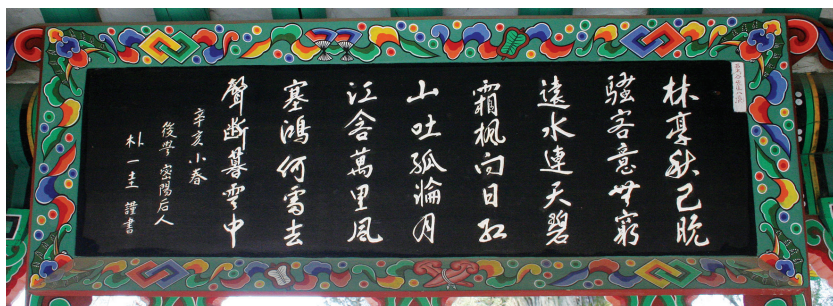
The Hwaseokjeong [Flower and Rock Pavilion] in Yulgok-ri, Paju-

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**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, Hamgyeong-do.

**33** *Complete Works of Yulgok*





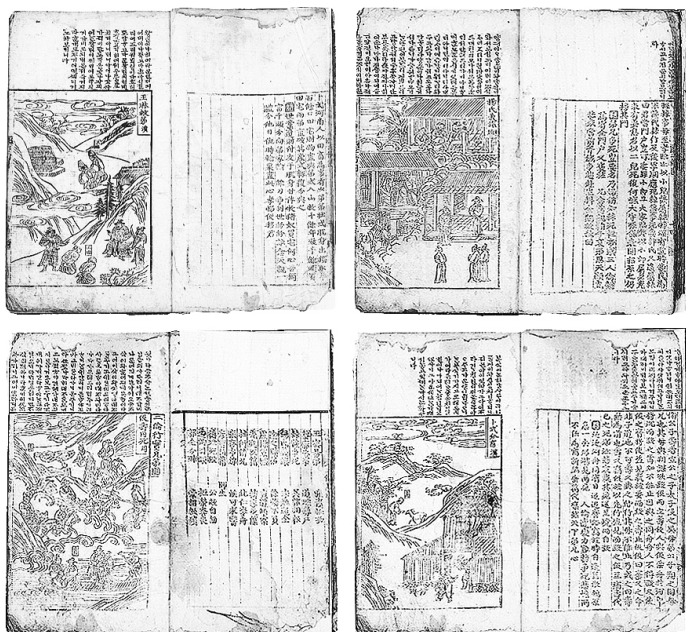
Tablet and Poem monument of Hwaseokjeong

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.

## Age 9: Painting showing ways to serve the parents<sup>34)</sup>



*Two Moral Rules Yulgok read earlier*

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.

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<sup>34</sup> Yulgok Yeonbo

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.

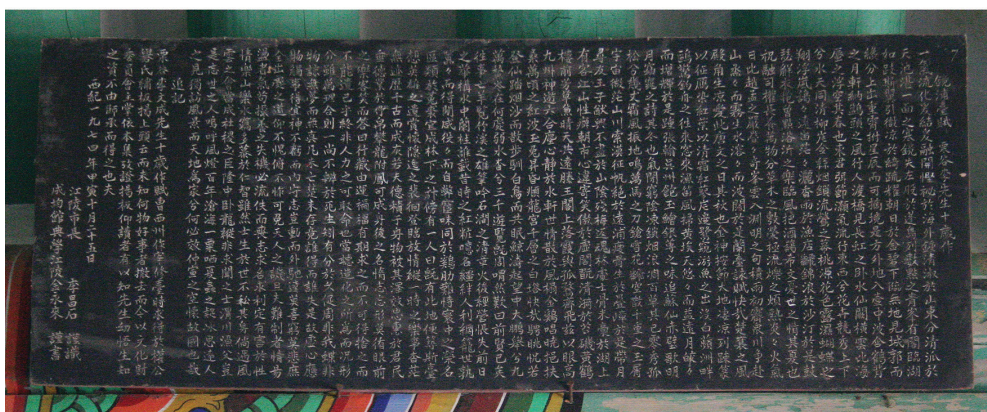
### Age 10: Composing the poem "Ode to Gyeongpodae"<sup>35)</sup>

Gyeongpodae, 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 Chungseok of the Goryeo kingdom). An Chuk wrote its story. Two centuries later, in 1508 (the third year of the reign of King Jungjong 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.

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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 11: Prayer for father<sup>36)</sup>**

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 backyard 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 [耳]." That was how his name was changed from Hyeol-long to I.

### **Age 13: Tapping the Jinsasi<sup>37)</sup>**

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.

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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.