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 every-
body 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 ev-
ery 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 con-
sort, with all her heart. She entrusted him the entire household without
interfering with his house management.

Imjin-Wacran (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 in-
tuctions: "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 con-
tinued: "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, related 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 Bukpyeong, 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-

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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 Binho-Byeojje [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 Byeonwo-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 seojjas. 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

42 *Yulgok Yeonbo*