

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.

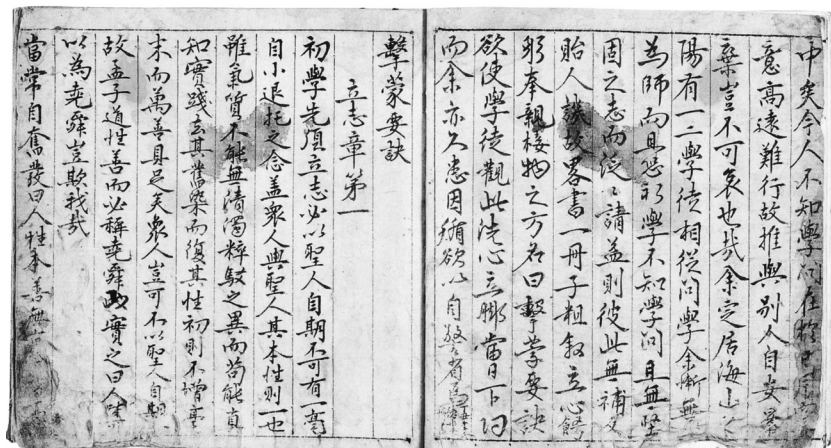
One day, Yulgok made a day's excursion with a group of scholars at a scenic spot, upstream of the Seokdam Stream, northward from Yaduchon, called Seokdamgugok [Nine Rock-Pool Bends] in Gosan-myeon. He named the fourth bend "Song-Ae" [Pine Tree Cliff] and wrote a prose about its beauty. He also named 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.⁵³ 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.

53 The central place of a dwelling as the main space of living, where Jesa and other family rituals are held [Editor's note].



Yulgok's *Gyeongmonggyeol* [The Secret of Expelling Ignorance]

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



Zhu Xi's historic site Mt. Wuyi in China

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 *Gyeongmongyogyaeol* [*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-ryong 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 arranged⁵⁴⁾ 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.⁵⁵⁾ Fifty-one years later (1661), Ugye Seong Hon's table was placed at the second row on the west wall. In 1717, Sa-gye 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.

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-yeol 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-yeol wrote in his preface to *Oksan's Poem 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 Gyecheon (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 reading⁵⁷ 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.

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