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

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 Bujehak [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

154 Saimdang and Yulgok
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**<sup>61</sup>

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**<sup>62</sup>

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

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<sup>61</sup> Source: *Pojeo Collection, Cho Ik*
<sup>62</sup> 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

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.\(^{64}\)

**Yulgok’s death predicted in his wife’s dream\(^{65}\)**

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.

**Yulgok’s character and disposition**

**Inspector-general Yulgok and a mother and a daughter\(^{66}\)**

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

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\(^{64}\) Source: *Supplementary Work of Yulgok Vol. 5*

\(^{65}\) Source: *Yulgok Yeonbo*

\(^{66}\) 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\(^{68}\)

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\(^{69}\)

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

\(^{68}\) 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 Jaejoeonbangji [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 seoja 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-seoja 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**

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

71 Source: *Dongjahwijip*, Yi Won-myong.
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-
nessed 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.