Resolutions to Become a Sage: An Annotated Translation of the *Chagyŏngmun*

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The learner needs to immediately get away from Buddhist teachings as if from licentious music and beautiful women.

*Zhū Xi* 朱熹, *Jìnìlù* 近思錄, 13.5

*Introduction: Yulgok’s Quest for Meaning*

The Koryŏ 高麗 (918–1392) literati scholars An Hyang [Hoehŏn] 安珦 [晦軒] (1243–1306) and Paek Ijong [Ijae] 白頤正 [尋齋] (1247–1323) were instrumental

Notes on Romanization and Style: Korean terms and names are romanized using the McCune-Reischauer system. The phonetic transcription of Chinese is given according to the *Hànyǔ Pīnyīn* 汉语拼音 system including tone marks. Japanese is romanized using the Hepburn system. The original notation—*han’gŭl* 漢字 or *han’ga* 漢言—is added to romanized terms and names where they are mentioned first or when deemed necessary. Korean and Chinese names are written according to the East Asian custom: family name precedes personal name. To romanize Korean given names, hyphens are included between syllables. Pen names or courtesy names are given in brackets.

1 “學者子深氏之説。直謂如謹聲美色以語之。” *JSL* 13.5.
in introducing the teachings of Zhū Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) to the Korean peninsula, thereby sustainably implementing Neo-Confucian thought in a predominantly Buddhist environment. The coup d'état of Yi Sŏnggye [T'aejo] 李成桂(太祖) (1335–1408, reg 1392–1398), backed by the newly emerged Neo-Confucian elite, expedited the peninsula’s transformation into a strictly Neo-Confucian country, then called Chosŏn 朝鮮 (1392–1910). 2 Over time, the sŏngni-bak3 tradition infiltrated all aspects of society, and centuries later became a veritable «cultural grammar», regulating «the customs and the consciousness of the Koreans». 4 Despite the hegemony of Neo-Confucian ideology and the concomitant political suppression of divergent worldviews, the doctrinal rivals of Neo-Confucianism—in particular Buddhism—remained relatively vibrant during the Chosŏn dynasty. 5

In particular, Buddhist and Daoist6 teachings kept their appeal and charisma, even having an influence on the Neo-Confucian ruling class. As was the case with many eminent Chinese Confucians such as Zhū Xi or Wāng Shōurēn [Yángmíng] 王守仁(陽明) (1472–1529), Korean scholars delved into Buddhism during their formative years. Similarly, one of the most significant exponents of Korean Neo-Confucianism, Yi I [Yulgok] 李耳(栗谷) (1536–1584), ventured to learn more about the way of the bodhisattva, indulging in these studies while

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3 Xīngjīxíu性理修 (Chinese, ‘school of nature and B 理’) also chuabak 朱子學 (Chinese Zhūzìxué, ‘school of Master Zhū’) or chéngjīxīu 程朱學 (Chinese chéngzhūxué, ‘school of Chéng [Chéng Yī 程頤] and Zhū’). Refers to the Neo-Confucian tradition according to Zhū Xi who amalgamated the teachings of several doctrinal precursors such as Chéng Yī (1032–1107), Chéng Hào 程顥 (1032–1087), Zhāng Zāi 張載 (1020–1077), Zhōu Dúnyí 周敦頊 (1071–1120) and Shāo Yóng 邵雍 (1010–1077).
5 Robert E. Buswell, Jr., Buddhism under Confucian Domination: The Synthetic Vision of Sŏsan Hyujong, in Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea, ed. by Ja Hyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), 134–159.
spending a year at a Buddhist monastery. Along with his older contemporary, Yi Hwang [T’oegye 李滉 (眞溪) (1501–1570)], Yulgok went down in history as the most brilliant and influential orthodox exegete of sŏngnik. However, like many before and after him, he passed through a time of intellectual experimentation, setting out on a quest for meaning as illustrated in the following poem, which he composed in 1555:

Learning the Way is without attachment,
I follow my affinity wherever it roams.
Leaving Ch’ŏnghaktong for a while,
I come and play at Paekkuju.
My body is in a cloud of thousand li,
The universe at the end of the sea.
Passing the night in a thatched hut,
Shining moon on the plume tree: this is elegance.

Yulgok accentuates his sincere desire for a knowledge that overcomes any prejudice or intellectual dependence. To grasp to 道 one implicitly needs to overcome the limiting boundaries of blind doctrinal obedience. Yulgok’s free-spirited and unattached mind sought a profound understanding of to 道, unhindered by any intellectual restraints. The youthful Yulgok wittingly delved into sŏnjio 三教, rambling from Ch’ŏnghaktong 青鶴洞 (Buddhism and Daoism) to Paekkuju 白鶴洲 (Confucianism) and back.11

Yulgok was born on December 26, 1536, into a well-established yangban family in today’s Kangnung 江陵. He was raised in a staunchly Confucian milieu,

7 The li 里 (Chinese lǐ) is a traditional unit of distance. Its exact length has varied in the course of time, lying roughly between 300 and 600 meters.
8 Yŏsan’ın poıp han, chip’ang’am yikwangmun chiwŏn ka, sukch’odang With Po’ng I came down the mountain, arrived at the home of P’ung’am Yi Kwang-mun (Chiwŏn) and passed the night in the thatched hut—. YC 1 1.23a, 13.— For full bibliographical information, see List of Sources in the end of this article.
9 Chinese dào, i.e. the overarching principle of Being.
10 Korean samgyo 삼교, i.e. ‘three teachings’, comprising Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism.
12 Detailed biographical information on Yulgok can be found in YC2 35.2a–35.51b, 342–366. For a brief outline, see Lukas Pokorny, Ontologische Parallelen im Neuplatonismus und Neokonfuzianismus:
receiving comprehensive education from childhood on, in particular through his mother Sin Saimdang (1504–1551), who was later extolled as the epitome of Confucian womanhood. At an early stage, he constantly amazed the people around him owing to his outstanding perspicacity and wide reading. Despite keen interest in Buddhist and Daoist thought as an adolescent, Yulgok became a dedicated and rigorous proponent of sŏngnihak, entering officialdom in 1564. Until his untimely death on January 16, 1584, at age 47, he held a number of influential ministerial offices and produced a considerable amount of literature. His œuvre contains a plethora of seminal writings, a great many of which are not yet translated into Western languages. The paper at hand meets a desideratum, providing a first annotated translation of a well-known and frequently cited but—oddly enough—untranslated text. The so-called Chagyŏngmun (Written to Alert Myself) is relatively brief, yet marks a watershed in Yulgok’s intellectual development. It represents his written resolution to henceforth wholeheartedly adhere to Confucian teachings while keeping any ‘false doctrines’ (wihak) at distance. The authoring of the Chagyŏngmun concludes his year-long sojourn in a Buddhist monastery at Kŭmgangsan. Yulgok, severely struck by the death of his beloved mother in 1551, mourned at her gravesite for three years, experiencing an existential crisis. Longing for answers and to ease his bitterness, he decided to retreat to seclusion, setting off to Kŭmgangsan in the spring of 1554. Before entering the sŏn-Buddhist monastery, he prepared another piece of poetry, which again echoes his intellectual curiosity:

乾坤孰開闢  谁曾开天立地?
日月誰磨洗  谁曾洗日月镜?
山河既紡結  山河已纠缠?


13 The yangban denote the aristocracy in the Chosŏn dynasty.
14 For a Korean translation including scarce but auxiliary notes, see Kim Ik-su 金益洙, 「Yulgok-ui chagyŏngmun’gwa ipchiron」 읆 곡의 자경문 (自警文) 과 입지론 (立志論) [Yulgok’s Chagyŏngmun and the Discussion on Acquiring Determination], Han’gug’ŭi ch’ŏngonyŏn munhwa 10/2007 韓國의青少年文化 vol 10 (2007), 19–27.
15 “十六歳。丁內憂。隕墓三年。一應家禮。不勝哀痛。躬執祭禮。難洗湔之事。不使僕負任之。” YC2 35.3a–b, 342.
16 For a succinct discussion why Yulgok sought isolation, see Kim Hak Ze, «Two Neo-Confucian Perspectives on the Way: Yi Yi’s and Li Zhi’s Commentaries on the Laozi» (PhD thesis National University of Singapore, 2008), 36. Kim underlines Yulgok’s earnest inclination towards Buddhism.
17 Chinese chán, Japanese zen.
In the poem Yulgok articulates his overwhelming inquisitiveness and candid readiness to plunge into any doctrine, that might facilitate a deeper understanding of the cosmic principle to 道. Finally, he donned a monk’s habit, striving to dwell upon afflicting existential issues, and to allay his poignant grief at Kümjangsan. It is not recorded what exactly happened during his retreat, but it is assumed that while reflecting on his existential dilemmas and dealing with his grievance over his mother, Yulgok also engaged in intense reflection on the doctrines Buddhism itself. For example, the *Yulgok chǒmio* (Complete Works of Yulgok) relate a dialogue between Yulgok and an old monk, whom he met during one of his woodland strolls at a small hermitage. A part of the conversation reads:

余曰：佛家妙處－不出吾儒。何必棄儒而求釋乎。
僧曰：儒者亦有卽心卽佛之語乎。

19 Babuang 八荒 (Korean: *palbwaung*) denotes ‘every direction’ or ‘everywhere’.
20 Jiùzhōu 九州 (Korean: *kju*?i) usually signifies China’s ancient nine provinces (‘China’), occasionally the ‘nine continents’ (‘world’), denoting ‘every place’ or ‘everywhere’.
21 *Ch’ultongmun* 出東門 [Departing from the East Gate], YC1 1.9b, 11.
22 For an elaborate discussion on Yulgok’s quest for the ‘absolute’, also taking into account his engagement with Buddhism, see Yi Sang-ič  이상익, *Yulgog’e issosó kunggúkcha’wa kunggúk-chók kwansim* 운곡에 있어서 궁극자(窮極者)와 궁극적 관심 [The Ultimate Being for Yulgok and His Ultimate Interest], *Yulgo munhwa yóngu* 儒教文化研究 vol 13 (2009), 29–46.
23 For a discussion on Yulgok’s stance toward Buddhism, see Yi Hee-jae, *Yulgok’s Perspective on Buddhism*, *International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* vol 6 (2006), 265–289.
24 *P‘ungak ch‘ung soam nosüng* 棋嶋査小庵老僧 [Presented to an Old Monk of a Small Hermitage at Pungak], YC1 1.20b–1.21b, 12—Autumnal Kümjangsan is called *P‘ungaksan* 棋嶋山.
In this short passage, Yulgok poses a provocative question with the aim to initially contrast both teachings' doctrinal foundations. He proceeds to indicate apologetically that the Confucian precept of sŏngsŏn 性善 (‘human nature is good’), in fact, conveys the core Buddhist ethical tenet of chiaksim chišipul 即心即佛 (‘mind is Buddha’). By comparing Buddhism and Confucianism, Yulgok expects to gain more refined insight into the nature of to 道. For Yulgok, the conversation evidently served a learning purpose in the existential search for meaning that first led him to Kṣomgangsan. In the spring of 1555, Yulgok decided from then on to follow the Confucian way only, and he returned home. A post hoc account in the Yulgok chŏnsŏ reads:

Now this learning [i.e. Buddhism] is not something particularly mysterious. It only strives to cut off the path of distracting the heart-and-mind[9] and condensing the spirit in order to create a condition of supreme serenity, emptiness and brightness. Hence [Buddhist teachings] deceptively establish hwadu 話頭, [30] causing [people] to

25 The phrase jixīn jǐfú 即心即佛 (Korean chiaksim chišipul, ‘mind is Buddha’) is central to sŏn-Buddhist thought, and bears upon the notion that the human mind in its primordial condition equates to ‘Buddha-nature’ (Chinese fāngxing 佛性, Korean pul’ŏng).
26 Chinese Mengzi 孟子 (tr 372–289 BCE).
27 Tradition holds that the sagely rulers Yáo and Shān (Chinese) were preceding the legendary founder of the prehistoric Xìa dynasty (tr 21c–16c BCE) Yú 尧. Confucian scholars idealized Yáo and Shān, highly esteeming their rulership as an era of utmost virtue.
28 Chinese xīnhú.
29 Sim 心 (Chinese xīn) designates the heart, which according to the Confucian tradition is the center of cognitive, emotional, and volitional capacities. The most appropriate rendering is thus ‘heart-and-mind’, combining the human faculty of reflection and feeling.
30 Hwadu (Chinese huátiā) investigation was the most prevalent technique in sŏn-Buddhist meditation practice during the Chosŏn dynasty. ‘Hwadu literally means ‘the head of the word’ but actually implies ‘the head of the thought’. A hwadu is the quintessential part of a kongam, i.e., the real object of contemplation. See Henrik Hjort Sørensen, «Mirror of Emptiness: The Life and Times of the Sŏn Master Kṣomgangsŏn», in The Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism, ed. by Jin Y. Park (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 138.
greatly rely on it in their efforts. And fearing that, if people first become aware of this thought they will certainly not concentrate on making efforts and in the end getting nothing whatsoever, [the Buddhist teachings] thus establish these commandments, deceiving [the people]. Consequently, I suspected this learning's wickedness and again took hold of the books of the sages and worthies, savoring them. I realized that the truth of their teachings did not defraud me. Then for the first time I greatly understood, packed up [my possessions] and returned home. 31

Shortly after, Yulgok put his resolution down in writing in the Chagyŏngmun, Yulgok's personal manifesto, in which he admonishes himself to remain on the true path leading to sagehood. It signifies a turning point of his intellectual ripening. Yulgok later reported to King Sŏnjŏ (1552–1608, reg 1567–1608):

When young I was very much fond of sŏn-teachings thoroughly investigating every sutra. But perceiving that they lacked a stable place I returned to Confucian teachings to seek knowledge in our Confucian books. 32

### Text and Annotated Translation

自警文
Written to Alert Myself

先須大其志。以聖人為準則。一毫不及聖人。則吾事未了。

[1] At first I need to set my aspirations high and make the sage the standard. If I do not attain sagehood by even a hair, my task is not completed.

心定者言寡。定心。自寡言始。時然後言。則言不得不簡。

[2] One whose heart-and-mind is settled is [a person of] scanty words. Settling the heart-and-mind begins by reducing words. If one talks only at the right time the words cannot but be concise.

31 “蓋其學無他奇妙。只欲裁斷此心之作之路。凝聚精神。以造靜極虚明之城。故假設話頭。便之依靠下功。而又恐人先知此意。則著功必不專精。卒無所得。故又設此禁而班之也。遂疑其學之邪。復取聖賢書而邊譯之。知其說之質不我欺也。始乃大悟。束裝而歸。” YC2 33.14a–b, 282.

32 “少時頗好釋學。泛觀諸經。覺得無着實處。反以求之吾儒之書。” SJS 8/6/24.

33 The rectification of the heart-and-mind (chŏngsim 正心, Chinese zhěngxin) rests upon making one's intentions sincere (sŏngsĭ 懂意, Chinese chéngyi) by extending knowledge (ch’i’i 賦知, Chinese: zhīzhī) through the investigation of things (kyŏngmul 格物, Chinese: géwù). For a succinct discussion, see Huang Siu-chi, Essentials of Neo-Confucianism: Eight Major Philosophers of
How can it be easy to obtain the power to immediately gather the heart-and-mind that has been set loose for so long? The heart-and-mind is a living thing. If the power of stabilizing virtue is not completed, putting at rest the tremor of the heart-and-mind will be difficult. When thoughts and considerations are agitated and disturbed, I consciously detest it, and if I intend to cut this I am all the more aware of agitation and disturbance. It suddenly arises, perishes abruptly and seems not to have been caused by myself. Even if I sever these thoughts and considerations only this ‘severing thought’ will be obstructing in my chest. This is also a delusive thought. When agitating and disturbing thoughts arise, I must harvest the spirit, effortlessly control it and not go along with any agitating and disturbing thoughts. If I make efforts for long, the heart-and-mind must have time to settle firmly. Handling business while being focused: this is also the study of settling the heart-and-mind.

If thoughts that always caution and fear, and restrain themselves when alone are preserved in my chest, and if I am mindful and not negligent, naturally wicked thoughts will not arise. The ten-thousand vices emerge from all
who do not restrain themselves when alone. [Only] after restraining myself when alone, I am able to know the meaning of bathing in the Ki [river] and returning home singing.\(^{[37]}\)

Rising at daybreak I reflect on business that has to be done in the morning. After breakfast I reflect on business that has to be done during daytime. When I retire to rest I reflect on business that has to be done the next day. If I have no business, I put it down,\(^{[38]}\) if I have business, I need to reflect. I must obtain the way to appropriately manage affairs and thereupon I will read books. By reading books, I must seek to distinguish right and wrong and to carry it into practice. If I do not examine business and solely read books, this is useless learning.

財利榮利。雖得掃除其念。若處事時。有一毫擇便宜之念。則此亦利心也。尤可省察。

\(^{37}\) Reference to "點。爾何如。豉瑟希。鍾爾。舍瑟而作。對曰。異乎三子者之撰。子曰。何傷乎。亦各言其志也。曰。荷春者。春服既成。冠者五六人。童子六七人。浴乎沂。風乎舞雩。詠而歸。夫子喟然歎曰。吾與點也。" LY 11.25 [11.26], 248. In a conversation with four of his disciples Kóngzǐ asks what they were to do when in power. His senior disciple Zēng Dān [Zeng Dian] went last, saying after a while: "At the end of spring, with the spring dress being completed, along with five or six capped men, and six or seven boys, [I would like to] bathe in the Yi, enjoy the breeze by the rain altar, and return home singing. "M某春者。春服既成。冠者五六人。童子六七人。浴乎沂。風乎舞雩。詠而歸。" LY 11.25 [11.26], 248. Kóngzǐ thereupon spoke after a heavy sigh that he sided with Zēng Dān. Zēng Dān's response signifies his superior contentedness and humility, being in utmost harmony with to 達. For a detailed discussion of Zēng Dān's sagely character and different interpretations, see Sophia Katz, "The Tradition of Ruist Unrestrainedness: Zeng Dian, Shao Yong and Chen Xianzhang (6th c. BCE-11th c. CE)," in At Home in Many Worlds: Reading, Writing and Translating from Chinese and Jewish Cultures: Essays in Honour of Irene Eber, ed. by Raoul David Fineisen & al. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 69–79.

\(^{38}\) The passage recalls an account about Kóngzǐ: "When the master was sitting at leisure, he was distended, he was cheerful. "子之燕居。申申如也。夭夭如也。" LY 7.4, 196. If unoccupied with business, Yulgok enjoys his rest, putting aside any compulsion.
Aiming at property and fame: even if I sweep this thought away, if I just slightly think of picking out the convenient while conducting business this also displays a greedy heart-and-mind. I must still more carefully examine myself.

Generally speaking, when meeting the business, if it is business that can be done I will exhaust my sincerity when conducting the task and my heart-and-mind will not be weary no matter what. If it is business that cannot be done I will cut it off completely and right and wrong cannot be caused to strive against each other in my chest.

The thought of not committing one act of unrighteousness and putting to death one innocent person in order to obtain the throne is always preserved in my chest.

Yul gok addresses a key issue of sŏngnihak, namely the constant struggle between insim (Chinese: rénxīn) and tosim (Chinese: dàoxīn). The locus classicus of this concept can be found in the shàngshū (Korean: sŏngsŏng). The Korean commentary of this passage sets the tone for the orthodox Neo-Confucian understanding of the relationship of insim and tosim: "心之虚靈知覺，一而已矣，而以為有人心。道心之異者，則以其或生於形氣之私，或原於性命之正，而所以為知覺者不同，是以或危殆而不安，或微妙而難見耳。然人莫不有是形，故雖上智不能無人心。亦莫不有是性。故雖下愚不能無道心。二者偏於方寸之間，而不知所以治之則危者愈危，微者愈微，而天理之公弊無以勝人欲之私矣。則察夫二者之間而不難也，一則守其本心之正而不離也。從事於斯，無少間斷。必使道心常為一身之主，而人心每聽命焉，則危者安，微者著，而動靜無為自無過不及之差矣。" ZYZJX 1. Zhū Xi points out the subtlety of tosim, which one is exhorted to uphold in action in order to thwart any interference by insim. Tsim indicates man's primordial excellence that is consistent with to, while insim epitomizes the psychophysical endowment that is prone to selfishness and other negative human traits. The Southern Sŏng dynasty (1127–1279) scholar Zhēn Děixū (1178–1235) included Zhū Xi's commentary right at the beginning of his well-known treatise Xīnjīng 心經 (Korean Simgyŏng), which circulated widely in 16th century Chosŏn, making Korean Confucian literati even more acquainted with this particular passage.

Reference to "伯夷。伊尹於孔子。若是班手。日。否。自有生民以來。未有孔子也。日。然則有同與。日。有。得百里之地而君之。皆能以朝諸侯有天下。行一不義。殺一不辜而得天下。皆不為也。是則同。

MZ 2.1.2, 194–195. In a conversation between Mèngzǐ and his disciple Gŏngsŏn Ch'ŏ (爾孫子), the latter asks whether Kŏngzǐ and the two admirable men Bó
If one’s perversity and unreasonableness befalls me, I will naturally turn back and deeply examine myself with the intention to make it an inspiration.

Apart from sleeping at night and being ill I cannot lie down and lean against something. Even at midnight, if I do not become sleepy, I do not lie down. I cannot be restrained from sleeping solely by force. At daytime, when I am sleepy I will properly arouse the heart-and-mind and fiercely stir up myself for ten minutes. Even if my eyelids are heavy, I rise and walk around all over to become clear.

Making efforts is neither slow nor quick, first at death it will cease. Even if I quickly seek efficacy, this also means to have a greedy heart-and-mind. Even if it does not appear as such, I punish and am a disgrace to my parents. I will instantly not be a son anymore.

Yí 伯夷 and Yí Yin 伊尹 of Shang dynasty (17c–11c BCE) were alike. Even though Bó Yí and Yí Yin did not reach up to Kǒngzi’s sageliness, Mèngzǐ praises their virtuousness. He replies that they would have reached agreement in that none of them would have committed even one act of unrighteousness or put to death one single innocent person to seize power, ascending the throne of a great empire.

Reference to "有人於此。其待我以橫逆。則君子必自反也。我必不仁也。必無禮也。此物非甚止哉。其自反而仁矣。自反而有禮矣。其橫逆由是也。君子必自反也。我必不忠。自反而忠矣。其橫逆由是也。” MZ 4.2.28, 333–334. In this passage Mèngzǐ refers to the demeanor of a júnzǐ 君子 (Korean kunja) when facing someone, who treats him in a perverse and unreasonable manner. In such a situation the júnzǐ would immediately examine himself, striving to be even more virtuous to be a positive influence on the person in front of him.

This part is a reference to “曾子曰。士不可以不弘毅。任重而道遠。仁以為己任。不亦重乎。死而後已。不亦遠乎。” LY 8.7, 210. Here Zěngzǐ 曾子 (tr. 505–436 BCE), a prominent disciple of Kǒngzǐ, explains that the cardinal virtue of rén 仁 (Korean im) is difficult to preserve, for at death one’s efforts will cease.
Concluding Remarks: The Chagyŏngmun as the Turning Point and Seed for Yulgok’s Later Works

As seen in the introduction, the Chagyŏngmun marks the turning point at which Yulgok left behind his keen interest in Buddhism and affirmed his commitment to Confucian learning only. His lifelong attention to the flaws and errors of Buddhism begins here, with a critical reevaluation of his own youthful indulgence in the Buddhist way.

Moreover, the Chagyŏngmun lays the foundation for Yulgok’s later treatises regarding self-cultivation including the Manŏn pongsa, the Songbak chibyo, and the Kyŏngmong yogyŏl. Every topic in this terse but concise work is repeated and elaborated in his later writings, which were to become an indispensable part of the self-cultivation literature of not only Yulgok and his followers but also of Korean Neo-Confucianism in general.

The first statement in the Chagyŏngmun, regarding setting one’s aspiration for becoming a sage, is restated and developed in the first part of the self-cultivation chapter in the Songbak chibyo, the chapter on setting one’s aspiration in the Kyŏngmong yogyŏl, and a section of the Manŏn pongsa. The notion of sŏng (‘sincerity’ or ‘sincere intention’), which marks one of the salient features of Yulgok’s thought appears at the first time in the Chagyŏngmun, being expanded into an independent section entitled sŏngsil in the Songbak chibyo, and appearing as crucial part of the ontological background of the Kyŏngmong yogyŏl and the Manŏn pongsa.

Yulgok’s self-cultivation begins with setting Confucian sages as immanent models to emulate. In his later writings, drawing upon the notion of tot’ong, he highlights exemplary figures, including cultural heroes, legendary rulers, and eminent scholars such as Fūxī, Shēnnóng, Huángdì, and Yáo.
and Shùn, Yǔ, Tāng, Wén, Wǔ, Zhōu Gōngdān, Kǒngzì, Mēngzǐ, Zhū Xi and the Chéng brothers. For Yulgok, the concrete deeds and the historical events concerning these sagely figures should become objects of emulation that guide one’s self development. The term »immanent models« is appropriate to describe these sagely exemplars, because there is no dichotomy between sages and the common people, and even an ordinary person is disposed to become a sage. One of the distinctive topics in Yulgok’s thought, and in Neo-Confucian literature in general, concerns how to articulate guidelines for attaining sagehood. Yulgok says: ”Now, the original nature of sages and common people is alike. Realizing what is genuine and putting it into practice, and breaking through conventionalities, one is capable of returning to the initial nature. How can [the saying that] "common people may become Yo and Sun“ betray me?“

According to the Chagyŏngmun, although one should aspire to become a sage, one’s very intentions to subdue an agitated and disturbed heart-and-mind can be self-defeating. As the myriad things including the heart-and-mind consist of ki, sagehood is attained not by imposing one’s intentions on the natural order, but by attuning oneself to one’s surroundings and nourishing one’s latent propensity. Yulgok writes that humans who are in tune with invigorating ki are able to exploit it to the utmost unless their own desires obstruct its growth.

In Yulgok’s Confucian project of »human becoming«, self-willed actions often do not produce desired consequences; rather, a single human being is an integrated part of the surrounding environment, and his or her efforts should arise spontaneously and naturally as reflections of potentialities in the larger
whole. This is expressed in the Sŏnghak chibyo: »The more one intends to detest futile thoughts, the more the heart-and-mind is agitated and disturbed. The intention to detest itself is a futile thought. Realizing the nature of futile thoughts, one can allow them to withdraw in a natural manner.« Elsewhere, when asked by the young scholar Yi Kyŏngjin [Sŏngbo] how to deal with carnal desire, Yulgok exhibits a similar attitude. He suggests that one should let carnal desire withdraw on its own accord by virtue of self-cultivation rather than repress it.Š

In the Confucian view of self-realization, a person’s day-to-day affairs take on crucial importance, given that he or she is affected by many elements in the surrounding environment, including other people, various tasks, and other life events. Virtuous action such as reflection (sa), restraint when alone (kŭndok), and appropriate management of affairs (ch′ŏch'i hab′i) are not faculties possessed by a substantive self, but are strategies for optimizing the mutual responsiveness between selves and worlds in process. This relational aspect of virtuous action is evident in Yulgok’s thought when he stresses the continuity between the internal and the external. While reverence (kyŏng) is connected to inner cultivation, and righteousness (ŭi) refers to the proper execution of affairs, Yulgok deemed reverence and righteousness to be inseparable.Š

The pragmatic orientation of Yulgok’s thought is already evident in the Chagyŏngmun. When reading a book, you should carry the acquired knowledge and judgments from it into practical everyday business—otherwise reading is completely in vain. Here Yulgok introduces the idea of sincerity as the transformative power to bring events to fruition. In the Chagyŏngmun we already see one of the major characteristics of Yulgok’s mature thought in which pragmatism, sincerity and efficacy are cherished. Yulgok repeatedly laments that even though there may be many ambitious discussions regarding how to govern

56 有意謂惡。則尤見擾亂。且此顯惡之心。亦是浮念。覺得是浮念後。只可輕輕放遏。” YC1 21.37b–21.37b, 480.

57 『李景震問。色欲之類發難制。何以抑絕此念心。粟谷日。此也無別工夫。只是心有存主。讀書則專心窮理。應事則專心踐履。無事則靜中涵養。常使此心無忘時。則色念自不得發。雖發亦必省覺。省覺則自退矣。不然。放心忘慮。而欲與色念齊駭。雖極費力。如上塗草。愈壓愈生矣。” YC2 32.2b, 260.

58 『朱子曰。恨下得糞持兩字好。敬主手中。義防於外。二者相差持。[...] 尊按。敬體義用。雖分内外。其實敬該夫義。直是之敬。敬以存心也。方外之義。敬以應事也。” YC1 21.32b–21.33a, 478.
the country properly, nothing is put into practice. Yulgok pragmatically recommends institutional and political reform to keep up with changing situations. The flexibility for timely change is important—for people's minds and hearts as well as for institutional structures—for once-relevant policies and principles too easily encourage a rigid adherence to convention, if they are not continually reassessed.

For Yulgok self-serving behavior, such as seeking pecuniary gain or promotion in rank, is directly contrasted with sincerity and efficacy and should therefore be critically examined and eventually eliminated. The late Yulgok elaborates this point in the light of his ontology, indicating that tosim should guide insim lest the human desire for self-benefit grow too powerful.

As is evident, the Chagyŏngmun is a seed, containing the kernel of Yulgok’s mature thought on self-cultivation, without the elaborate metaphysical scheme he later develops. This short treatise not only indicates his early departure from Buddhism and wholehearted dedication to Confucianism but provides a condensed introduction to the main themes of his later works.

See, for instance, YGI 15.52a, 220: “主人曰。終朝設食。不得一飽。空言無實。豈能濟事。今夫臣庶之上。章奏之閒。非無嘉謀讜論。足以治國。而未見一弊之革。一策之施者。只是不務實效故也。”
List of Sources and Their Abbreviations


LY  Lún yǔ 论语

MZ  Mēng zǐ 孟子

SS  Shāngbū 尚書

ZY  Zhōngyōng 中庸


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