

# Contemporary Interpretation of Yulgok's Educational Philosophy: Discovering The Secret to Banishing Ignorance (*Gyeongmong yogyeol* 擊蒙要訣)<sup>1</sup>

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This article investigates the educational philosophy of the 16th-century Korean Neo-Confucian scholar Yi Yulgok (1536-1584), evaluates its contemporary relevance through an analysis of his seminal text, *Gyeongmong yogyeol* (The Secret to Banishing Ignorance), and concludes with an autoethnographic reflection by the author. This argument is grounded in a methodology that combines textual analysis of Yulgok's primary writings with biographical-historical contextualization, complemented by autoethnographic reflection on fifteen years of teaching this philosophy to a global student body. The analysis traces this holistic perspective to the foundational influence of Yulgok's mother, Sin Saimdang, whose progressive pedagogical methods—emphasizing empirical observation and self-directed inquiry—cultivated the pragmatic, interdisciplinary mindset that allowed him to integrate Confucian principles of benevolence (*in* 仁) and virtue (*deok* 德) with the practical challenges of statecraft and social ethics. Ultimately, Yulgok's holistic educational model, which inextricably links internal moral cultivation with external public service, offers a potent corrective to the compartmentalization prevalent in modern higher education, advocating for the cultivation of an ethically integrated public intellectual.

**Keywords:** Yulgok, *Gyeongmong yogyeol*, Saimdang, Education, pragmatism, virtue, public service

## Introduction

The Confucian scholar Yi Yulgok 李栗谷 (1536-1584) is one of the most prominent and recognized thinkers in Korean history. A philosopher, politician, and economist, he was able to convey his knowledge, especially as a great educator of the youth of his time. His mother, Sin Saimdang 申師任堂 (1504-1551), famous for her artistic qualities, educated him from a very young age in the study of classics, writing, and the arts. She left an imprint on him that would mark his entire life. After resigning from all his government positions, Yulgok founded an Academy to focus his later years on the education of young Confucian scholars preparing to hold various positions in the

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is part of the research conducted by the authors within the framework of the project of the Ministry of Education of South Korea: AKS Seed Program Advanced Track “Path to Equality: Korean Studies Network on Inclusiveness (AKS-2021-INC-2250002)”.

Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) government apparatus. Directed at these young people, he wrote a treatise on education titled *Gyeongmong yogyeol* 擊蒙要訣 (The Secret to Banishing Ignorance). This work presents in ten brief chapters the essential principles that any young man of the time should practice in his daily life to advance intellectually and morally along the right path.

In this article, I examine Yulgok's educational philosophy and its relevance for today's university students both globally and specifically in Spain.

I offer a modern re-interpretation of Yulgok's key ideas about education, both at the philosophical level and in practical application. Starting from his own educational experience under his mother's guidance during childhood and adolescence, the influence of Confucian scholars and Buddhist masters, then applying what he learned, and finally teaching based on his own experience to young scholars beginning their careers in civil service and governance.

Yulgok was passionate about education and knowledge, constantly seeking truth and social righteousness. He knew how to apply his philosophical and scientific knowledge to improve the daily lives of his contemporaries, also engaging in political, governmental, and educational life.

In this study, I will first analyze Yulgok's educational process, then delve into the main characteristics of his teachings on education that may be most relevant to students and teachers today. Finally, in the conclusions, I will share my own experience as a teacher of Korean philosophy and religions when presenting the figure of Yulgok to current young students.

I will analyze my experience as a university professor specializing in Korean religions and philosophy through an autoethnographic lens. I have taught three courses on the religions and philosophies of East Asia and Korea, including the teachings of Yulgok, to students in the Bachelor's Degree in East Asian Studies and Korean Studies at the University of Malaga (Spain) over the past 15 years.

Some of the main questions I want to answer through this research are: How did Yulgok teach his students about the plurality of thoughts? Is human benevolence a key element to be conveyed through academic university studies? What are the values that should be transmitted in current higher education? How do we prepare students for their roles in society, government, and leadership? What reinterpretation can we make of Yulgok's Confucian thought to address the challenges of today's society?

To answer these questions, we will examine the life and thought of Yulgok, our main reference will be his writings, mainly *Gyeongmong yogyeol*, and we will draw on my own experience as a professor of Korean Studies.

Yulgok will be our guide throughout this educational journey for both students and teachers in the modern world.

### Yi Yulgok, a Confucian scholar Educated by a Learned Mother, Sin Saimdang

Yi Yulgok was a prominent scholar and politician during King Seonjo 宣祖's reign (1567-1608), the fourteenth king of the Joseon Dynasty. He is regarded as one of the

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most influential thinkers in Korean history. As a philosopher, politician, economist, and educator, he did not limit himself to just one field; instead, he combined these areas of knowledge and became a great intellectual of his era.

Yi Yulgok was born in the city of Gangneung 江陵, on the east coast of the Korean Peninsula, in a noble house called Ojukheon 烏竹軒, and in the still-preserved room of Mongnyongsil 夢龍室, in the year 1536. His mother was named Sin Saimdang, famous for her artistic qualities. When she was pregnant, she dreamed of a dragon, a sign of the greatness of the child to be born. Because of this, he was called "Dragon Vision" 見龍 when he was a child. From a very early age, he showed remarkable abilities. His talents amazed the society of his time due to the wisdom and skill with which he composed lengthy works in the most admired styles of the era.

At twelve years old, he began taking exams to become a public official. He passed the first level with the highest score and continued on, passing the next nine levels also with the best grades, which earned him fame in his community.<sup>2</sup>

Yulgok's mother, Sin Saimdang, had a significant influence on her son's education and the way he faced life and thought. This woman, so special and visionary for her time, influenced Yulgok's view of education and what it meant to be a man. Sin Saimdang's education of her son, Yulgok, was a central factor in his rise to prominence as a renowned Confucian scholar. Although during the twentieth century she was represented and used for different ideological purposes by the political powers in the Korean Peninsula,<sup>3</sup> to understand Yulgok's personality, thought, and educational philosophy, it is necessary to delve into the influence of his mother during his childhood. It is essential to analyze Saimdang as a formidable pedagogical practitioner whose deliberate educational philosophy directly shaped one of Korea's most significant thinkers.

Sin Saimdang's ability to create a sophisticated learning environment for her child was the result of her rare and rigorous education. In a strictly patriarchal era where such opportunities were mostly limited to men, her family's decision to give her comprehensive instruction was a bold act. This set her apart from her peers and made her a uniquely qualified educator. She mastered an extensive curriculum of classical literature, history, and Neo-Confucianism, studies usually reserved for a son. This exceptional classical education laid the intellectual groundwork for the pedagogical environment she carefully designed. Her methods were intentional and rooted in a sophisticated teaching philosophy. Her own study of Neo-Confucian principles, emphasizing self-cultivation and sincere inquiry, would have directly influenced her

<sup>2</sup> Ro Young-chan, *The Korean Neo-Confucianism of Yi Yulgok* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Modern representations of Shin Saimdang can be found in the following article: Hong Yang-hee, "Shin, Saimdang, the Symbol of 'a Wise Mother and Good Wife': the Representation of Shin, Saimdang and Gender Politics," *The Review of Korean History* 122 (2016): 155-190. Codruța Sintionea, "The Appropriation of Sin Saimdang as a Symbol of Modernization during the Park Chung Hee Era," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai Philologia* 65, no. 1 (2020): 85-98.

decision to reject rote memorization in favor of a teaching approach that encouraged real understanding in her son.

Saimdang's intellectual life was further protected by her family's uxoriocal living arrangement, in which she primarily resided at her maternal home, Ojukheon, in Gangneung. Although this practice was not entirely uncommon, it was becoming less widespread as Joseon society increasingly adopted stricter patrilocal norms. For Saimdang, it created an uxoriocal shield that maintained her domestic and financial independence, shielding her from the immediate and often restrictive control of her husband's family. This protective environment allowed her the freedom to pursue her scholarly and artistic pursuits without much interference.<sup>4</sup>

Her identity as a master educator was a role she deliberately embraced. Her father gave her the pen name Saimdang in hopes that she would embody the virtues of a mother. The name directly references Tairen, the respected mother of King Wen of the Chinese Zhou Dynasty, renowned for her prenatal education. By giving her this name, her father framed her life's work as a scholarly and philosophical pursuit comparable to those of male intellectuals. Saimdang's later life and work showed a clear alignment with this strict Neo-Confucian ideal of moral and intellectual leadership, reflecting her strong dedication to the educational goal of raising virtuous and intelligent children. This uncommon combination of scholarly insight and personal independence laid the groundwork for her pedagogical philosophy, which was as innovative as it was effective.

Sin Saimdang's pedagogical philosophy represented a deliberate departure from the standard rote memorization that characterized much of the era's educational practices. Instead of focusing on the simple transcription of knowledge, her approach was engineered to foster deep, personal understanding and to cultivate the tools of intellectual discovery within her son. The three main principles of her teaching approach were discipline, meticulous observation, and practical realism.

At the heart of her method was creating an immersive, creative environment. Saimdang guided Yulgok to experience the process of creation itself, shifting learning from a passive act of reception to an active act of engagement. She skillfully fostered his intellectual independence by encouraging him to ask his own questions and discover his own answers. This approach cultivated a habit of self-directed inquiry, empowering him to become an active participant in his education rather than just a holder of classical texts.

Saimdang cleverly incorporated her artistic skills into her teaching, showing Yulgok how a great artist perceives the world. This was a direct transfer of the disciplined, detailed observation she honed in her famous Chochungdo 草蟲圖 (grass and insects) paintings. By teaching her son to view the world with the precision and focus of an artist, she gave him a powerful analytical tool. The artist's focus on meticulous,

<sup>4</sup> Burglind Jungmann, "Changing Notions of 'Feminine Spaces' in Chosŏn-Dynasty Korea: The Forged Image of Sin Saimdang (1504–1551)," *Archives of Asian Art* 68, no. 1 (2018): 49.

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empirical observation of the natural world provided the perfect intellectual training for a philosopher focused on practical activity and empirical knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of this emphasis on practical realism was significant. It fostered in Yulgok a respect for pragmatic engagement with the world. This principle would become central to his philosophical school, which focused on empirical knowledge and *gi* 氣 (practical activity). By basing his early learning on careful, empirical observation of the natural world, she laid a philosophical-in-practice foundation for his later emphasis on pragmatism rather than abstract theory.

Her educational success was not limited to a single prodigy. Her son Yi U and oldest daughter Yi Mae-chang also became accomplished artists and scholars, showing the wide and consistent influence of her guidance.

Although history remembers Sin Saimdang as the ideal “Wise Mother”, her most lasting legacy is her innovative teaching approach. Her brilliance was in recognizing that true education isn’t just about passing down facts but about fostering a particular way of seeing. An approach based on careful observation, hands-on learning, and intellectual curiosity.

In exploring the life and influence of Sin Saimdang in Yulgok’s teaching philosophy, we can confidently affirm that she was a dedicated and innovative educator whose methods were remarkably progressive for her time. Her groundbreaking focus on experiential learning, self-directed inquiry, and careful observation helped cultivate one of Korea’s most esteemed minds and stands as a lasting testament to her skill as a teacher.

### Pluralistic and Interdisciplinary Thought in Yi Yulgok’s Educational Philosophy

The plurality of thought in Yi Yulgok stems from his comprehensive intellectual approach that synthesized various fields of knowledge. Considered one of the most influential Korean intellectuals of the sixteenth-century Joseon dynasty, he was not limited to a single field; instead, he was known for integrating his knowledge across multiple areas. He was recognized as a philosopher, politician, economist, and educator.

Yulgok was an expert in Buddhist philosophy. At fifteen, he experienced his mother’s death and mourned deeply at her grave for three years. The pain led him to Bongeunsa 奉恩寺, a Buddhist temple nestled in the mountains. There, he eagerly studied Buddhist writings, and driven by his calling for writing, he entered monastic life on Geumgangsan 金剛山 (Diamond Mountain) for a year, until he became a scholar in philosophy. This convergence of foundational Confucian study, in-depth

<sup>5</sup> Yi Sŏng-mi, “Sin Saimdang: The Foremost Woman Painter of the Chosŏn Dynasty,” in Young-Key Kim-Renaud, ed., *Creative Women of Korea: The Fifteenth Through the Twentieth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 2003), 62.

Neo-Confucian theoretical defense, and broad knowledge of Taoism and Buddhism characterizes the synthetic nature of Yulgok's thought.

Yulgok's intellectual history further illustrates his commitment to epistemological pluralism. He applied his rigorous historical and philological methods to study Buddhist scriptures as easily as Confucian classics, even engaging with Buddhist monks. His willingness to investigate differing historical developments and pursue truth in actual facts regardless of the source demonstrates a core non-dogmatism.<sup>6</sup>

*Gyeongmong yogyeol* exemplifies a complex model of pluralistic and interdisciplinary thought, combining philosophy, ethics, politics, and social conduct into a comprehensive framework for human growth. It is a curriculum designed not just for the classroom but for life itself.

Yulgok himself articulated the text's comprehensive purpose in its introduction, stating, "I wrote this compendium in which I have pointed out the way to determine the will, the norms for serving parents, the norms for treating other people, and I have called it The Secret to Banishing Ignorance" 故略書一冊子, 粗敍立心飭躬奉親接物之方, 名曰擊蒙要訣.<sup>7</sup> This statement shows a project that smoothly combines the inner world of moral commitment with the outer world of social duty, forming the heart of his educational vision.

Yi Yulgok's personal and professional experiences were not incidental to his educational philosophy; they directly shaped its interdisciplinary nature. His life was a testament to the Confucian ideal of applying profound learning to the practical challenges of governing a state and cultivating a just society. His remarkable legacy, which earned him the posthumous title Munseong 文成 "the one who assimilates and practices study" and enshrinement in Munmyo 文廟 "the National Confucian Shrine," was built upon a deliberate synthesis of diverse fields of knowledge.

Yulgok's prodigious intellect was recognized early; he famously passed nine consecutive civil service examinations with the highest possible marks. His philosophy was not confined to abstract speculation but was rigorously tested through a distinguished career in government, where he served as Minister of Finance and King's Counselor. He applied philosophical principles to real-world crises, creating local governance rules to regulate economic and social life, advising on military matters, and developing policies for the grain loan system. This practical experience is directly reflected in his educational framework, which culminates in *Gyeongmong yogyeol*'s Chapter X, "Cheose jang" 處世章 (Social Relations), a guide to the duties of a government official.

Yulgok's work as an educator was the culmination of his life's synthesis of knowledge. He founded the Academy Eunbyeong Jeongsa 隱屏精舍 (1577) and authored influential educational texts, including *Gyeongmong yogyeol* (1577) and *Hakkyomobeom* 學校模範 (Rules of Exemplary Behavior in the School, 1582) and

<sup>6</sup> Ro Young-chan, *The Korean Neo-Confucianism of Yi Yulgok* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Yi I, *Gyeongmong yogyeol*, trans. Lee Minsu (Seoul: Eulyoo Munhwasa, 2006), 15.



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*Simuyukjo* 時務六條 (Six Rules for Selecting Capable People, 1583). In these works, he distilled his diverse experiences as a philosopher, politician, and economist into a coherent program for cultivating the next generation of scholar-officials, transforming his personal synthesis into a public pedagogy.

Yulgok's philosophical system is distinguished by two interdependent characteristics: pluralism and interdisciplinarity. His pluralism is not a simple tolerance for diverse views but is rooted in a sophisticated non-dualistic ontology that establishes a relational understanding of all entities in the cosmos, a view that contrasts sharply with the dualistic structures emphasized by many of his contemporaries.<sup>8</sup> Building upon this unified foundation, Yulgok's thought exhibits a remarkable interdisciplinarity, systematically connecting high-level metaphysics to the pragmatic concerns of pedagogy and statecraft. This integration is not an afterthought but the central purpose of his work, linking the most abstract philosophy to the most concrete aspects of human experience. For Yulgok, education was the essential bridge between internal moral cultivation and external public service, the path by which an individual perfects the self in order to transform the world.<sup>9</sup>

Crucially, Yulgok's ethical framework requires social involvement. If morality is rooted in everyday, contextual emotions, then moral perfection must be tested and improved in the complex settings of social interaction and public responsibility. This provides the philosophical basis for including practical and administrative topics, from funeral management to anti-corruption measures, in his core teaching. The development of the self is therefore inherently unfinished without societal transformation. This ethical vision directly informs its practical application within his educational curriculum. Yulgok's educational philosophy is the systematic use of his unified metaphysics and ethics. He saw education as a holistic process guiding students through Confucian cultivation, from investigating things to governing the state. His curriculum was designed to be interdisciplinary and grounded in pragmatic realism, emphasizing the importance of experience, education, and practical intelligence.<sup>10</sup>

*Gyeongmong yogyeol* became a semi-canonical text in Joseon Korea, essential for the education of students from commoners to royalty. Its very structure exemplifies Yulgok's interdisciplinary commitment. Its ten chapters are organized as a deliberate progression, moving systematically from individual self-discipline to applied social and administrative functions. After establishing foundational ethics and personal habits in the initial chapters, the book extends its scope to include practical guidance on managing funerals, treating slaves humanely, and specific admonitions against official corruption. This architectural choice was a strategic masterstroke, embedding

<sup>8</sup> Ro Young-chan. "Yi Yulgok's Life and His Neo-Confucian Synthesis," in Ro Young-chan ed., *Dao Companion to Korean Confucian Philosophy*, vol. 11 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2019), 179-195.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Y.J. Chung, *Korean Confucianism: Tradition and Modernity* (Seongnam: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2025), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 65-73.

a reformist political ideology within the core education system. By mandating that future elites study practical governance alongside the classics, Yulgok aimed to cultivate officials who were not only morally upright but also capable of addressing the state's concrete challenges.<sup>11</sup>

The curriculum starts by building an internal foundation rooted in self-cultivation. These opening chapters, I. "The Determination of the Will" 立志章, II. "Self-Control in the Face of Old Customs" 革舊習章, III. "Personal Conduct" 持身章, and IV. "True Reading" 讀書章, set up learning as a discipline of both mind and spirit. Yulgok emphasizes that before one can govern a family or serve a country, one must first govern oneself. This phase focuses on cultivating moral strength, breaking harmful habits, and engaging with classical texts as a way to foster internal growth.

Once the foundation of the self is established, the curriculum expands to the domestic sphere, which involves the governance of the family. The following chapters, V. "Filial Piety" 事親章, VI. "The Mourning System" 喪制章, VII. "Funerary Rites" 祭禮章, and VIII. "Home Life" 居家章, blend personal ethics with the concrete responsibilities of family life. Yulgok shows how cultivated virtue is expressed through respect for parents, proper observance of rituals related to life and death, and harmonious household management. This area connects internal psychology with the practical needs of kinship.

The educational journey ends with applying virtue to the larger social world through engagement with society. The final chapters IX. "Friendship" 接人章 and X. "Social Relations" 處世章 finish the curriculum by applying conduct principles to civic life. This section discusses the ethics of interacting with peers and, importantly, highlights the attitude needed of a government official. The student's growth is thus complete, evolving from a cultivated individual to a responsible family member and ultimately to a contributing member of society.<sup>12</sup>

This architecture is a pedagogical embodiment of the central Neo-Confucian project articulated in the *daxue* 大學 (Great Learning), where the ordering of the world begins with the rectification of the heart-mind. Yulgok's curriculum reveals a vision where personal ethics, domestic duty, and civic engagement are not separate domains but interconnected spheres of a single, integrated human life.

Yi Yulgok's *Gyeongmong yogyel* is far more than a simple primer on 16th-century Korean Neo-Confucianism; it is a powerful and enduring testament to the value of pluralistic and interdisciplinary thinking. As this analysis has shown, the text embodies a profound synthesis of knowledge at every level. Yulgok's own life, which balanced the roles of philosopher, politician, economist, and educator, provided the living model for this integration. The text's architecture reflects this holism, presenting a curriculum modeled on the *Great Learning* that guides the learner from internal self-cultivation

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Glomb, "Reading the Classics till Death: Yulgok Yi I and the Curriculum of Chosŏn Literati." *Studia Orientalia Slovaca* 11, no. 2 (2012): 321-325.

<sup>12</sup> Yi Yulgok, *El secreto para desterrar la ignorancia: Compendio básico de educación confuciana en la Corea del siglo XVI*, trans. Antonio J. Doménech (Madrid: Ed. Verbum, 2011).



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to external familial and civic responsibility. Finally, its content is enriched by a sophisticated philosophical pluralism and an intertextual pedagogy that draws upon the full breadth of the East Asian intellectual canon, positioning Yulgok as a crucial synthesizer in the Korean tradition.

In an era of increasing academic and professional specialization, Yulgok's vision of an integrated education remains profoundly relevant. He presents a model of learning that refuses to compartmentalize knowledge, insisting instead on the vital connections between personal character and public service, between moral philosophy and practical governance. The *Gyeongmong yogyeol* challenges us to see education not as the acquisition of isolated skills, but as the cultivation of a whole person prepared to engage with the world in a wise, ethical, and effective manner. Its secret is not merely to banish ignorance, but to build a more integrated and responsible humanity.

Yi Yulgok, the Educator: Educating Young People through Benevolence  
(in 仁) and Virtue (*deok* 德)

The education of young people through love and values, as outlined in Yi Yulgok's philosophical texts, especially the *Gyeongmong yogyeol* is fundamentally rooted in a Confucian system of moral cultivation and self-transformation. This approach aims to shape individuals who embody universal moral principles by promoting core virtues and disciplined behavior.

The education of youth starts with a deep commitment to human relatedness and recognizing the inherent moral nature (*seong* 性) shared by all human beings, whether ordinary or sage.

Yulgok's ideas are based on Mencius 孟子 (371-289 BCE) and discuss human nature and humanity. For Mencius, nature (*seong* 性) is a vital gift given by Heaven to humans, and he believes human nature is good. Mencius said: "All men have a heart incapable of bearing the suffering of others."<sup>13</sup> "Our spontaneous tendencies are good, and the good is what is desirable."<sup>14</sup> The original heart of people relates to our sense of moral consciousness. According to Mencius, within a person's heart are the seeds of morality, described as the tips of threads that only need to be pulled to reveal moral virtue fully. Proper education involves love and human-heartedness. The concept of *In* 仁 "human-heartedness or benevolence" is the highest, universal virtue and the source of all other virtues. Confucius described this as the principle to "love all human beings".

In the context of educating youth, love is clearly expressed through filial piety. The core of education is summarized as loving your son is what it means to be a father; loving your parents is what it means to be a child. The foundation of all moral behavior is recognizing that your physical body and life are precious gifts received from your

<sup>13</sup> Mencius 孟子 II, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Mencius 孟子 VII B, 25; VI A, 10.

parents. 父兮生我하 母兮鞠我하 欲報之德, 昊天罔極. 人子之受生, 性命血肉, 皆親所遺.<sup>15</sup> Filial piety (*hyo* 孝) is considered the cornerstone of family and social ethics and must be practiced by offering support and respect.<sup>16</sup>

The ultimate moral goal is the development of the moral mind (*bonshim* 本心) until one attains sagehood (*seongin* 聖人), which necessitates constant effort and moral transformation.<sup>17</sup>

This process starts with the most immediate and profound expression of human connection: familial love and respect. Filial piety (*hyo* or *hyodo*), the reverential virtue of children toward parents, is established as one of the most important values in Korean Confucianism and serves as the practical, foundational exercise in *in* “benevolence” and *deok* “virtue.” The Confucian structure holds that the family unit serves as the initial laboratory in which self-cultivation (*susin* 修身) proves its efficacy, preparing the individual for broader social and political responsibilities. The capacity for *in* is tested and trained first at home.

The sincerity needed for this moral practice is exemplified by Yulgok’s own life. He took sincerity (*seong* 誠) seriously, believing that a sincere person understood the reality of heaven and that this was essential for harmony, even within a single family. True virtue (*deok*) is demonstrated not through words or abstract thought, but through sincerity and practical, ongoing actions, in line with his philosophical belief in the importance of *gi*. Educating young people involves giving them practical guidance on developing their inner moral compass and ensuring their behavior aligns with ethical standards, transitioning from internal resolve to outward action.

The most essential starting point for a student is to determine their will (*ipji* 立志) and to set a goal to become a wise and holy person: *sage*. This strong resolve is necessary to prevent them from becoming discouraged or yielding to old, disorderly habits and customs.<sup>18</sup>

Moral development is actively cultivated through the practice of reverence (*gyeong* 敬). *Gyeong* is a self-reflection discipline and a tool used to align emotional responses with ethical standards. This ensures actions follow ethical norms. It involves being attentive to one’s thoughts, managing the heart-mind by distinguishing between the moral mind and the human mind, and maintaining ongoing discernment based on ethical principles.

<sup>15</sup> Yi I. *Gyeongmong YogyelYogyelYogyel* 擊蒙要訣, 事親章 第五, Dongyang Gogeon Jonghap 東洋古典綜合 DB ([https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti\\_5a0701&titleId=C8&compare=false](https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti_5a0701&titleId=C8&compare=false))

<sup>16</sup> Yi Yulgok, *El secreto para desterrar la ignorancia: Compendio básico de educación confuciana en la Corea del siglo XVI*, trans. Antonio J. Doménech (Madrid: Ed. Verbum, 2011), 63.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin N. Cawley, “Korean Confucianism,” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Yi Yulgok, *El secreto para desterrar la ignorancia: Compendio básico de educación confuciana en la Corea del siglo XVI*, trans. Antonio J. Doménech (Madrid: Ed. Verbum, 2011), 19.

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For Yulgok, the inherent goodness of human nature requires constant maintenance and training to manifest as reliable virtue in the external world. The practice of *gyeong* is essentially a rigorous psychological discipline. Its purpose is to control one's human mind and moral mind with a judicious and unwavering attitude, thereby preventing the turbidity of *gi* that leads to moral failure. *Gyeong* acts as the indispensable bridge between Yulgok's metaphysical belief (the unity of *i* and *gi*) and his pedagogical reality. If moral principle (*i*, the basis for *in*) is universal. Still, its stable realization (*deok*) depends on controlling the material force (*gi*); then *gyeong*, a sustained, watchful concentration, becomes the method for purifying *gi*. This ensures that the innate moral goodness consistently translates into manifest, practical virtue in daily life and, critically, in state administration. This dedication to psychological control aligns Yulgok's education with the key maxim proposed by the ancient Sage King Shun 舜, which Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) considered central to self-cultivation.<sup>19</sup>

The goal is to guide the student toward promoting good and rejecting evil. The emphasis is on sincere practice and avoiding harmful habits. Students should correct personal flaws, such as neglecting manners or being careless about appearance. They are instructed to take part in practical actions, like being careful while eating, dressing modestly, and speaking cautiously. The aim is to eliminate selfish tendencies by exercising conscious control and continuously discerning one's feelings.<sup>20</sup>

Yulgok's approach recognizes the "irreducible diversity" in individual dispositions (*gijil* 氣質, or material disposition). There is a need for inclusivity and pedagogical pluralism. Since not all beginners share the same intellectual or moral capacities, the *Gyeongmong yogyeol* serves as a foundational primer for beginners, with a progressive structure that moves clearly from basic to advanced ideas to accommodate different levels of maturity. The Yulgok approach to educating youth is like a gardener tending a diverse field. The key seed (*li* 理) is naturally good in every plant (youth), but the soil (*gi* "material disposition") varies greatly. Therefore, guidance involves both universal moral principles (the essential sunlight and water, or love and values) and specific, careful, and practical care (weeding and pruning, or self-discipline and rectification of conduct) to ensure each plant grows upright toward the shared goal of maturity.

The most important principle mandates that every learner must set a goal for learning and life from the very beginning, emphasizing the learner's autonomy. However, this autonomy must be understood within the context of moral self-determination.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Kim Hyung-chan, *Korean Confucianism. The Philosophy and Politics of Toegye and Yulgok* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 27-31.

<sup>20</sup> Yi I. *Gyeongmong YogyeolYogyeolYogyeol* 擊蒙要訣, 持身章 第三, Dongyang Gogyeon Jonghap 東洋古典綜合 DB ([https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti\\_5a0701&titleId=C6&compare=false](https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti_5a0701&titleId=C6&compare=false))

<sup>21</sup> Kim Shin-il, "Development of Qualification and Recognition System of Learning: The Case of Korea," *Lifelong Education and Libraries* 4 (2004): 58.

Integral to the *Gyeongmong yogyeol* is Yulgok's systematic instruction on the methodology of reading (*tokseopeop* 讀書法). Yulgok's work in this area is unique because his texts were both descriptive and prescriptive, detailing not only what texts are necessary but also how the learner must engage with them to internalize the philosophical Way.<sup>22</sup>

This strict discipline also extended to curricular boundaries, emphasizing a moral purpose. Yulgok strongly warned students against texts that could distract them from their moral path, explicitly stating that they should avoid even glancing at unorthodox books of false learning and questionable categories. For those dedicated to learning, the main focus should be on reading to understand the Dao. They will be able to distinguish good from evil and reach sagehood. 故入道莫先於窮理하고 窮理莫先乎讀書하니 以聖賢用心之迹과 及善惡之可效可戒者 皆在於書故也니라.<sup>23</sup>

This tension between emphasizing learner autonomy and enforcing strict moral rules is addressed through the text's function as a disciplinary tool. External strict rules are regarded as essential for disciplining young minds (the *Gyeongmong* function) and preventing the corrupting influence of impure *Gi* manifestations. By establishing a rigid moral orthodoxy in foundational education, the *Gyeongmong yogyeol* ensures that when learners independently choose their life goals, those goals are already aligned with the realization of universal *in* and *deok*.

In chapter nine, Yulgok discusses how young people should build friendships. For him, the core attitude is benevolence, *In*.

The heart must always be compassionate, respectful, generous, and loving toward others; it should demonstrate kindness and share one's material possessions. Bad ideas should not linger in the heart, for example, harming others or destroying their belongings. Generally, when people pursue what benefits themselves, they often end up hurting others and damaging their possessions. That's why, if someone wants to learn, they must remove selfish intentions, and then they can follow the path of benevolence.<sup>24</sup>

常以溫恭慈愛, 惠人濟物爲心이니 若其侵人害物之事는 則一毫不可留於心曲이니라 凡人이 欲利於己인댄 必至侵害人物이라故로 學者先絶利心然後에 可以學仁矣리라<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Vladimír Glomb, "Reading the Classics Till Death: Yulgok Yi I and the Curriculum of Chosŏn Literati," *Studia Orientalia Slovaca* 11, no. 2 (2012): 322.

<sup>23</sup> Yi I. *Gyeongmong YogyeolYogyeolYogyeol* 擊蒙要訣, 讀書章 第四, Dongyang Gogeon Jonghap 東洋古典綜合 DB ([https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti\\_5a0701&titleId=C7&compare=false](https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti_5a0701&titleId=C7&compare=false))

<sup>24</sup> Yi Yulgok, *El secreto para desterrar la ignorancia: Compendio básico de educación confuciana en la Corea del siglo XVI*, trans. Antonio J. Doménech (Madrid: Ed. Verbum, 2011), 107-108.

<sup>25</sup> Yi I. *Gyeongmong YogyeolYogyeolYogyeol* 擊蒙要訣, 接人章 第九, Dongyang Gogeon Jonghap 東洋古典綜合 DB ([https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti\\_5a0701&titleId=C7&compare=false](https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti_5a0701&titleId=C7&compare=false))

Contemporary Interpretation of Yulgok's Educational Philosophy: 13  
Discovering The Secret to Banishing Ignorance  
(*Gyeongmong yogyeol* 擊蒙要訣)

The systemic educational structure created by Yulgok aimed to develop philosophically grounded, practical leaders for government service and had a significant, complex long-term effect on institutions. His systematic, prescriptive educational texts became essential for mastering the principles needed to succeed in the Joseon civil exam system, the established route to political power.<sup>26</sup> But the way he understands political power is very well defined in the last sentences of the *Gyeongmong yogyeol* as based in virtue, *deok*.

Those in high positions should strive to follow the right path; if they do not, they must resign from their roles as soon as possible. When poverty in your home forces you to take a public job to survive, you should set aside your inner work and focus on the external job. However, you should not pursue high positions, and it's better to be content with a lower position that can meet your basic needs, such as food and shelter. When you hold a public role, you must perform your duties diligently and with integrity. You should not accept any salary unless you have earned it through work.<sup>27</sup>

位高者는 主於行道하니 道不可行이면 則可以退矣요 若家貧하여 未免祿仕면 則須辭內就外하고 辭尊居卑하여 以免飢寒而已라 雖曰祿仕나 亦當廉勤奉公하여 盡其職務요 不可曠官而舖啜也니라<sup>28</sup>

Conclusion: A Contemporary Reading of Yulgok's *Gyeongmong yogyeol* in the Classroom

This article's conclusion on Yulgok's educational philosophy aims to reflect personally on how my teaching experience has communicated Yulgok's ideas and how students have absorbed them.

I conduct an autoethnography, meaning I reflect on myself as the object of study, drawing on my experience as a Korean Studies instructor and researcher on Korean Confucianism. This includes analyzing my classes on Yulgok's texts with students from Europe, Latin America, and Korea. I explore how students from different cultures perceive the methodology and the thinking of the author. This will serve as a foundation for developing teaching tools better suited to the global and intercultural needs of today's academic environment.

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<sup>26</sup> Vladimír Glomb, "Reading the Classics Till Death: Yulgok Yi I and the Curriculum of Chosŏn Literati," *Studia Orientalia Slovaca* 11, no. 2 (2012): 324-325.

<sup>27</sup> Yi Yulgok, *El secreto para desterrar la ignorancia: Compendio básico de educación confuciana en la Corea del siglo XVI*, trans. Antonio J. Doménech (Madrid: Ed. Verbum, 2011), 115.

<sup>28</sup> Yi I. *Gyeongmong YogyeolYogyeolYogyeol* 擊蒙要訣, 處世章 第十, Dongyang Gogeon Jonghap 東洋古典綜合 DB ([https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti\\_5a0701&titleId=C13&compare=false](https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti_5a0701&titleId=C13&compare=false))



For this, I will focus on the course “Thought and Religions in Korea through Its Texts.” It is a course I have taught for the past 12 years. It is a required course for third-year students pursuing a Bachelor’s Degree in East Asian Studies, specializing in Korea. This course is part of earlier instruction in the history of the East Asian region and the History of Religions in East Asia, specifically concerning Korea’s religious and philosophical history. Its goal is to equip students with tools and knowledge to understand the thoughts, religious practices, and cultural developments that have shaped Korea throughout its history.

This course also aims to familiarize students with the use, translation, and interpretation of primary sources. It introduces students to specialized language to complement their study of Korean, which they undertake in language-specific courses throughout the Bachelor’s Degree in Korean Studies.

It emphasizes the use and familiarization with primary sources related to thought and religions in the Korean Peninsula. Primary sources include documents created during the same periods as the historical topics studied in the course, providing direct insight into the concerns and perspectives relevant to that time and place in our research. These sources can take many forms, such as historical documents, speeches, interviews, or materials from oral or artistic traditions of each era.

A work in the historical field must adhere to the rules of critical source analysis, contextualization, and interpretation to uncover the richness in the various texts analyzed throughout the course.

This course introduces students to translating original texts in Korean related to thought and religion in Korea. It gives them the tools to start specialized translation in this field.

In classes focused on Confucianism in Korea and Yulgok’s thought, I base my analysis and Spanish translation on the *Gyongmong yogyeol* text, translated into Korean, with specific references to the original in *hanmun* 漢文.

In this way, the goal of the course is for students to understand the life, work, and main ideas of Yulgok through analyzing his writings. It also aims to explore the intellectual principles, worldview, and mindset that underpin his thinking.

The first step is to understand the historical, ideological, and religious context of the period. Then, proceed to studying his work and thoughts, and finish with a detailed analysis and translation of selected fragments from the *Gyongmong yogyeol*.

To conduct this process, I introduce the fundamental theoretical tools for analyzing philosophical and religious texts, with a focus on their application to Korean culture. I also describe the key instrumental, bibliographic, and multimedia resources related to Confucianism in Korea.

The main points I emphasize in my teaching of Yulgok are the importance of asking the “right questions.” If we want to learn, we first need to “read the texts properly” to reflect on and understand them accurately. Only then can we ask the right questions that will help us improve our knowledge. Studying the classics, not just of Confucianism but of any subject, is essential for gaining a deep understanding of the material.



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Discovering The Secret to Banishing Ignorance  
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When I started teaching this subject, I felt like Yulgok: “I felt ashamed to admit that I couldn't be his teacher, and I also thought that if young people approached their studies for the first time, they would miss the proper direction. If they ask random questions without a clear purpose, we won't be able to help each other. Besides, I was afraid to think that we would probably be the subject of people's mockery.”<sup>29</sup>  
余慙無以爲師요 而且 恐初學이 不知向方하고 且無堅固之志而泛泛請益이면 則彼此無補하고 反貽人譏라<sup>30</sup>

It was a challenge for both the students and me. At first, the students responded with fear and distrust because it was their first time facing the task of analyzing and translating classical texts, but as the days passed, they began to feel the excitement of taking on a difficult task that brought them great satisfaction. A satisfaction that comes from not giving up and being perseverant, with a “determined will,” until the end.

One aspect that attracts students to studying Yulgok is the role his mother, Sin Saimdang, played in his education and the social responsibility embedded in his thinking. A way of thinking that, according to students, remains relevant today and should be more widely recognized. They also wonder how Yulgok's training and practical mindset can address modern issues, such as the importance of teaching values. In a society dominated by appearances and false ideas, there is a need to rediscover genuine human values and seek the truth.

Beginning with slow and in-depth reading, the students identify with Yulgok's disciples in their quest for genuine yet practical knowledge aimed at reaching their goals within the civil service hierarchy or well-understood social success.

The teachings of Yulgok, with a 500-year history, still surprise us with their relevance and modern appeal. Any young person or adult who begins a journey of learning to banish ignorance will naturally find in Yulgok's teachings the keys to understanding how to create that society of benevolence and virtue, dreamed of by the Confucian scholar—and perhaps also by us—a reality.

<sup>29</sup> Yi Yulgok, *El secreto para desterrar la ignorancia: Compendio básico de educación confuciana en la Corea del siglo XVI*, trans. Antonio J. Doménech (Madrid: Ed. Verbum, 2011), 17-18.

<sup>30</sup> Yi I. *Gyeongmong YogyeolYogyeolYogyeol* 擊蒙要訣, 序, Dongyang Gogyeon Jonghap 東洋古典綜合 DB ([https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti\\_5a0701&titleId=C1&compare=false](https://db.cyberseodang.or.kr/front/sabuList/BookMain.do?bnCode=jti_5a0701&titleId=C1&compare=false))

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