



How Neo-Confucianism Influenced Decision-Making of the Joseon Elite During the Imjin War of 1592-98

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How Neo-Confucianism Influenced Decision-Making of the Joseon Elite During the Imjin War of
1592-98

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A Thesis in the Field of History
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

There are several ways in which the philosophy of Neo-Confucianism influenced the decision-making process of the Joseon ruling elite during the Japanese invasion of 1592-1598. First, it influenced leadership selection through the *gwageo* (Joseon civil-service examinations) based on the successful memorization of Neo-Confucian literature. The *gwageo* as well as lineage were used as the main leadership selection criteria for the *sadeabu* (scholar-officials) that populated all high-level civil and military leadership positions within Joseon. The Imjin War of 1592 would demonstrate that the Joseon selection process was a near complete failure for selecting effective leaders in times of war. Secondly, the concept of *zhengming* (rectification of names) influenced decision making because it inadvertently limited the available manpower for both agriculture production and military conscription during the war due to the exclusion of secondary sons and slaves. Thirdly, philosophical interpretation of Neo-Confucian concepts led to intense factional strife in the Joseon court as the two main factions devoted their energies to battling each other and demoting appointed officers and government officials which had dire consequences during the war. Fourthly, the Neo-Confucian concepts of *yi* (righteousness) as well as the process of self-cultivation embodied by the *sarim sajok* (rural scholars devoted to self-cultivation) would contribute to the creation of *uibyeong* (Righteous Armies) which played an essential part in the first year of the war. In addition, the Battles of Chinju in 1592 and 1593 would violate the of the principle of *ren* (benevolence/humanity/goodness) and would lead to the Ming withdraw from

negotiations with the Japanese and the Joseon's rejection of any compromises towards ending hostilities. Lastly, the war would demonstrate how the decision-making of King Seonjo went against the established Neo-Confucian concept of "sage king." Confucius believed that an effective ruler or official was required to ethically develop himself in order to understand human nature enough to properly choose advisors and leaders that would truthfully and wholeheartedly uphold the ideals and principles of Neo-Confucian governing. In contrast to King Seonjo, throughout the war Ryu Seongnyong would best embody the "sage" concept of a proper Neo-Confucian leader.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my wife Helen. She is the reason why I've achieved anything worthwhile in my life. The lucky ones, perhaps through complete chance, meet someone who with a compassionate hand constantly leads them forward in life. Thank you for being an example of how to be a better human-being and a braver soul. You are someone who knows loss yet still willingly chooses to smile each day. In reference to this project, thank you for giving your time towards translating and editing parts of the Joseon texts *Seonjo Sillok*, *Jingbirok*, and *Saemirok*.

I would like to also dedicate this paper to the people of South Korea. Your history is your pathway and your guiding light on how to survive and prosper in times of national peril. Those of the righteous who long ago gave their lives on the altar of freedom through countless wars of national survival should never be forgotten. Remember the lesson provided by Yi Sunsin, Ryu Seongnyong and endless others: prepare yourself for tomorrow in order to survive today.

Acknowledgments

Cicero said, “What greater gift can we offer the republic than to teach and instruct our youth?” In a time when teachers are facing greater challenges than ever, I want to first acknowledge the dedication and duty to society that all teachers provide. Specifically, I would like to personally thank Professor Michael Tworek who helped me understand the importance of a well-crafted question and who encouraged me to explore a subject that has been sadly neglected in the West. I would also like to thank Professor Ariane Liazos for assisting me in organizing a strong thesis proposal. In addition, I’d like to thank Professor David L. Howell for agreeing to advise this project which may have required more of his time than usual. Having the privilege of participating in one of his classes on Tokugawa Japan I left completely inspired to further pursue Asian studies. Finally, I’d like to acknowledge all the great Neo-Confucian scholars who dedicated their lives to improving themselves in order to better society. Confucius once said, “Education breeds confidence. Confidence breeds hope. Hope breeds peace.” Let this ancient wisdom continue to be a guiding light for humanity well into the future.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

*The only thing I've managed to do is make tens of thousands of men
ghosts overseas. Alas, what is to become of me?*¹

—Toyotomi Hideyoshi

Toyotomi Hideyoshi rose from common peasant to Oda Nobunaga's personal sandal bearer to becoming the unifier of all Japan. In 1587, Hideyoshi sent his first envoy to Korea to reestablish diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan, which had been broken since 1555. But diplomatic efforts failed, and the Koreans further distanced themselves from interactions with Japanese envoys. In 1589, Hideyoshi sent a final letter to the Joseon court requesting unobstructed passage through Korea to China. The letter claimed that he was originally conceived "by a beam of sunlight" and was destined to be the ruler of all the land the sun shone on. Hideyoshi shared his grandiose plan to replace the Ming order and invited the Koreans to join him in this enterprise. The Koreans, thinking Hideyoshi mentally deranged, declined his offer stating that China was like their parent.² Filial piety was the root of all virtues within Confucianism as well as the

¹ Kenneth M. Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail: Ming China and the First Great Asian War, 1592-1598* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 227.

² Samuel Hawley, *The Imjin War: Japan's Sixteenth-Century Invasion of Korea and Attempts to Conquer China*, 2nd edition (Berkeley: Conquistador Press, 2014), 80.

foundation of social order. And to harm one's parent was considered the vilest of immoral actions under Neo-Confucian ethical laws.³

Hideyoshi appointed his infant son Tsurumatsu as the Toyotomi heir which was then followed by a series of mass executions. According to Berry, this suggests "a loss of control, perhaps of sanity."⁴ But in 1591, Hideyoshi's only son Tsurumatsu died, and his health began to falter causing his daimyo feudal lords to grow concerned for the future. Hideyoshi initiated his plan to invade Korea, and eventually China, as a means of providing new lands to his daimyo and solidifying his reputation by openly challenging the Imperial Chinese hegemony.⁵ In May of 1592, Hideyoshi invaded Joseon Korea with over 160,000 men and 700 ships. The resulting Imjin War of 1592-1598 is considered the second-most devastating conflict in Korean history, with the war of 1950-1953 only exceeding it in overall destruction. Yet little attention has been focused on the political and philosophical aspects of this conflict which killed and enslaved around twenty percent of Korea's total population. But Joseon Korea survived and following Hideyoshi's death in 1598 the Japanese eventually withdrew.⁶

Several historians believe that Hideyoshi invaded Korea as a direct political challenge to China's hegemony and as a way to expand their own holdings. Revisionists such as Ji-Young Lee and Kenneth M. Swope point out that Japan during the sixteenth century had become economically isolated from profitable regional trade and that by the

³ Miaw-Fen Lu, "Friendship and Filial Piety in Ming Neo-Confucianism," *Diogenes* (English Ed.), (January 2024): 77, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0392192123000068>.

⁴ Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* 1st ed. (Harvard University Asia Center, 1982), 207.

⁵ Stephen R. Turnbull, *The Samurai: A Military History* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1977), 142.

⁶ John S. Lee, "Postwar Pines: The Military and the Expansion of State Forests in Post-Imjin Korea, 1598-1684," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no.2 (May 2018): 319, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911817001322>.

1590s Hideyoshi wished to re-enter the tributary system to provide economic benefits to his daimyo through international trade and thus secure his own political position.⁷ It is possible that Hideyoshi's own insecurities about securing a lasting legacy influenced his desire to use the internationally recognized Ming political structure as a means of achieving this goal. At a fundamental level the Toyotomi federation lacked the mechanisms of a dynastic tradition and rather centered on the strong personal leadership of one man, Hideyoshi.⁸

Since Ming China was both the biggest producer as well as the largest consumer market in the world at that time, regional nations were incentivized to follow the Chinese tributary system for economic reasons alone.⁹ Part of what led to the war in the first place was Korea's rejection of trade and foreign relations with Japan on any significant level. But as James Palais suggests, the Joseon economy and trade volumes by the mid-sixteenth century had regressed to such a degree that even metal and paper money had disappeared as a form of exchange. The limited trade that did go on used bags of grain or pieces of cloth as the means of completing transactions.¹⁰ Whereas in Japan, people could pay for most everything with cash and had a far healthy and varied economy compared to Korea at that time.¹¹

Hideyoshi had followed the successful political strategy of moving vassals from one fiefdom to another that was significantly richer to them as a reward for their loyalty. Lee suggests that Hideyoshi had cornered himself politically by outlawing in 1588 any

⁷ Ji-Young Lee, *China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 45.

⁸ Berry, *Hideyoshi*, 227.

⁹ Lee, *China's Hegemony*, 110.

¹⁰ James B. Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyongwon and the Late Choson Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 50.

¹¹ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 56.

forms of private warfare as well as piracy, which many daimyo were actively and profitably engaged in since the 1550s.¹² According to Lee, what Hideyoshi failed to realize was that the central feature of the Chinese tributary system were long-accepted Neo-Confucian norms that governed political, cultural, and economic interactions between the members who willingly engaged. It was a system of superior and inferior status members involving the mandatory sending of embassy envoys that acknowledged the “cultural superiority of the Chinese emperor, but not his political authority over their states.”¹³ Hideyoshi on the other hand, was looking to replace this system with the feudal-based Japanese one, and as Swope points out, Hideyoshi’s full ambition could never be realized unless he conquered the Ming.¹⁴ It is also equally possible that the Spanish and Portuguese expansion into Asia, with their abundant access to coinage, firearms, and fleets, influenced Hideyoshi’s decision to establish his own empire as a means to rival growing European prosperity and power in the region. A year into the Imjin War, Hideyoshi briefly considered invading the Philippines to acquire the vast storehouses of Spanish gold from the New World stored there, but lacked the naval assets necessary to decisively engage the Spanish.¹⁵

The problem that Hideyoshi faced in Asia was that international status and legitimation could only be conferred by the Ming under the Neo-Confucian-based tributary system.¹⁶ In some ways Neo-Confucianism created a bias towards how countries interacted with entities outside the system’s collective. Though the Japanese studied

¹² Lee, *China’s Hegemony*, 96.

¹³ Lee, *China’s Hegemony*, 55-56.

¹⁴ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 49.

¹⁵ Stephen Turnbull, “Wars and Rumors of Wars: Japanese Plans to Invade the Philippines, 1593-1637,” *Naval War College Review* 69, no.4 (Autumn 2016): 109, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1145&context=nwc-review>.

¹⁶ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 184.

Chinese institutions and classic literature, it did not import the names and terminology as did Korea. Japan simply took the ideas it liked and then mixed and adapted those ideas to fit the governing style of the warrior class rulers.¹⁷ In addition, neither China nor Korea held a high regard for Hideyoshi as a political entity. When Hideyoshi's first ambassadors arrived in Korea in the years preceding the invasion, Joseon officials had no idea who Hideyoshi even was but already knew that he was not the shogun of Japan.¹⁸ Therefore Hideyoshi also had a reputation and ultimately a legitimation problem as the Ming and Joseon didn't take him seriously as a proper head of state. This was because they incorrectly believed that Hideyoshi had committed a serious Confucian cardinal sin; he had usurped the legitimate king of Japan Oda Nobunaga from the Minamoto line. Therefore, according to Swope, the Ming and Joseon referred to Hideyoshi as *taiko*, minister to the king of the petty state of Japan.¹⁹ But Hideyoshi had not usurped Nobunaga, but in fact had avenged his murder in 1582 by killing his assassin and taking charge of his master's Oda coalition.²⁰

Neo-Confucianism has a very set worldview of how things should be which at times clouded the rational judgment of its high officials. For example, when Vice-Ambassador Kim Seong-il (1538-1593) was sent on a goodwill mission in 1590 to assess Hideyoshi, he gathered no useful information about Japanese political or military strengths and weaknesses. Instead, Vice-Ambassador Kim focused on how the barbaric Japanese were uncivilized and how unworthy they were of a goodwill mission in the first

¹⁷ Lee, *China's Hegemony*, 42.

¹⁸ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 52.

¹⁹ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 167.

²⁰ Berry, *Hideyoshi*, 2.

place from the Dragon Throne in Seoul.²¹ Other complaints noted by Kim Seong-il were that the wine served was both mediocre and presented in common unglazed cups which was unacceptable etiquette for a foreign envoy. He also complained about the overall low quality of the food in Japan. When questioned back in Seoul about his impression of Hideyoshi, Kim Seong-il replied: “Hideyoshi looks like a rat. We need not fear him.” He added that he was confident that the Japanese once they realized their diplomatic gaffes and inferiority, they would send envoys to apologize in shame. The problem was that Hideyoshi didn’t view the world in cultural or philosophical terms, though he enjoyed different aspects of both. Hideyoshi’s primary aim was to wage war in a way that would provide economic benefits to him and his supporters at the end of the carnage. The Koreans would discover that the Neo-Confucian ideal of “morally superior man” (*hyeon*) would prove useless to the onslaught of Japanese blades and muskets.²²

A bigger problem with Joseon Neo-Confucianism was how political factionalism affected policy making at all levels. The members of the Joseon court were Neo-Confucian idealists to the extreme and picked apart everything and everyone that failed to meet its high moral and cultural standards. The elite in Korea were expected to show more virtue and individual moral characteristics than the rest of society. Neo-Confucian ideals such as benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*) took on an almost zealous fever.²³

John Duncan and Martina Deuchler both researched the Confucian transformation of Korea and its implications on Joseon society. Duncan examined how the *yangban* (landowning elite) families both promoted and prevented reforms circulating within the

²¹ Hawley, *The Imjin War*, 85.

²² Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 57-58.

²³ JaHyun Kim Haboush, William Haboush, Jisoo Kim, *The Great East Asian War and the Birth of the Korean Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 67-68.

Joseon court. One of the most important, with implications for the Imjin War, was the introduction of the Rank Land Law reform of 1390. The reform put the central government, and especially its military operations, in a position to be financially self-sufficient as well as providing livelihoods for the officials who served in the state bureaucracy. The Rank Land Law supported and ensured the perpetuation of a category of people who both lived in the capital and held office in the central government.²⁴ A system of hereditary government appointment was starting to be solidified during the period involving the Imjin War and its aftermath. Martina Deuchler has stated that the *yangban* intensified Neo-Confucianist practices during the early Joseon dynasty, and that “scholar-officials...became directly involved in policymaking at all levels.”²⁵ Factional divisions within the literati political elite would directly hamper the decision-making process during the Imjin War.²⁶ Swope believes the governing elite lost focus on real issues and simply aligned themselves along partisan lines to curry favor with superiors in hopes of receiving a promotion.²⁷ But looking deeper, it is likely that the Joseon elite lost their alignment with the fundamental aspects that legitimized Neo-Confucianism as a governing philosophy in the first place.

Historians have looked at various aspects of the political decision-making process during the war, but none through the lens of Neo-Confucianism as a governing philosophy. No author has contrasted the central Neo-Confucian virtues of benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), ritual propriety (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), and trustworthiness (*xin*) as

²⁴ John Duncan, *The Origins of the Choson Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 208-209.

²⁵ Martina Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes: Kinship, Status, and Locality in Premodern Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 292.

²⁶ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 50.

²⁷ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 55.

well as concepts such as *zhengming* (rectification of names) with the decision-making process of the Joseon elite during the Imjin War. Nor has the Neo-Confucian governing ideal *neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王 (inner sage-outer king) also known as a “sage king” been examined in the case of Joseon King Seonjo (1552-1608) who led Joseon during the dark events of the Imjin War. According to Yi Hwang (1502-1571), the king’s virtue and sincerity were central to ideal governance.²⁸ Since Neo-Confucians considered self-cultivation for the development of righteousness and wisdom to be central to proper decision-making, the question needs to be asked: Did King Seonjo live up to the central Neo-Confucian ideal of sage king which legitimized his ruling authority?

Korean Neo-Confucians believed that it was necessary to “renovate the people” (*sinmin*) and this was best done through a life-long process of self-cultivation of moral character. This meant that all true Neo-Confucians, the king included, were required to practice constant vigilance in leading a moral and upstanding life. Since all government and military leaders were selected based on their understanding of Neo-Confucian literature and principles, corruptive and immoral behavior was counter to the governing philosophy and the norms and expectations of *hyeon* (morally superior man) which *zhengming* (the rectification of names) required of them. Korean Neo-Confucians also believed as Deuchler states that “the quality of the customs its people practiced was an indicator of the state’s health and strength” as well as being “directly related to its rise and fall.”²⁹ So how strong were Joseon’s Neo-Confucian ideals, norms, and customs within the governing elite during the period leading up to and including the Imjin War of

²⁸ Hyoungechan Kim, *Korean Confucianism: The Philosophy and Politics of Toegye and Yulgok* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd., 2018), Loc. 115-129, Kindle.

²⁹ Martina Deuchler, *The Korean Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 109-110.

1592-98? How did this affect the decision-making process of the Joseon elite and society at large?

The Joseon elite believed that all government and military officials should be exclusively selected through the *gwageo* (Joseon civil service examination system) believing that an examination system based on the understanding of Neo-Confucian literature was the best mechanism for filtering and selecting a leader infused with fundamental virtues. In this way, the scholar-officials (*sadaebu*) could fulfill the recognized role of morally superior man (*hyeon*).³⁰ Therefore a proper assessment of *hyeon* should have taken priority as well as a person's practical talents and experience. Instead, the appointed of candidates who passed the *gwageo* examination was solely based on the mastery of classical Confucian literature as well as their family lineage. Out of 364 ministers in the Joseon Kingdom, 323 passed the highest-level literary examinations and only a total of 15,000 applicants ever passed this exam in Joseon's 500-year history. It likely that the narrow criteria required of those that passed the *gwageo* and which positioned them among the highest civil and military positions contributed to the serious leadership failures seen during the Imjin War.³¹

Joseon society was also greatly hampered by Neo-Confucian governing norms, principles, and laws. For example, the Confucian idea of *zhengming* (rectification of names), states that people's social positions in life are fixed such as ruler and ruled, father and son, husband and wife, and teacher and student.³² The strict interpretation of

³⁰ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 110.

³¹ Chang-ae Won, "Gwageo exam is ladder to success in Joseon Kingdom," *The Korea Times*, April 1, 2014, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/03/386_154487.html.

³² Young-jin Koh, "Neo-Confucianism as the Dominant Ideology in Joseon," *Korea Journal* 43 no.4 (December 2003): 3, <https://accesson.kr/kj/assets/pdf/8021/journal-43-4-59.pdf>.

zhengming by the Neo-Confucian literati meant that in Joseon society secondary sons were prohibited from taking the civil service examinations and therefore had no chance of participating in government.³³ In addition, inheritance documents from the early Joseon nobility suggests that the total slave population of Korea may have been as high as forty percent of the total population.³⁴ Even though slavery at its core went against the moral code of Neo-Confucianism, the Joseon ruling elite did nothing to end the practice.³⁵ This was because the same ministers that made the laws benefited most from the slave system staying in place. They even enacted new laws including the *Kyeongguk taejeon* (Great Code of Administration) in 1486 that stated that if one parent was a slave than all the offspring were slaves.³⁶ With over a quarter of the population in slavery, it came as no surprise that during the war Joseon faced a serious lack of manpower due to these policies. In addition, banditry broke out across the nation as slaves and soldiers alike ran away and hid in remote areas where they banded together to survive.³⁷ Since a large portion of the agricultural land was worked by slaves combined with the fleeing of frightened farmers from lands occupied by the Japanese led to widespread famine.³⁸

Counter to the principles of Neo-Confucian practices of the “morally superior” ruling elite, corruption became even more prevalent during the hostilities with even Chief State Councilor Ryu Seongnyong (1542-1607) stating that only around two or three-tenths of the tax was going to the government, with the rest ending up in a variety of

³³ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 286.

³⁴ Sonkyu So, “A Theory of National Ruin by Confucianism by New Right, Embellished as Socioeconomic History: Criticism of Slavery Theory in Is Sejong Truly a Great King? By Lee Yeong-Hoon,” *Critical Review of History* 136 (August 2021): 307, <https://doi.org/10.38080/crh.2021.08.136.282>.

³⁵ So, “A Theory of National Ruin,” 307.

³⁶ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 6.

³⁷ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 99.

³⁸ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 195.

official and private pockets.³⁹ The ruling elite were forced to make decisions that worked against their efforts to win the war and society paid a ghastly price as famine and strife swept up the country while the advance of the enemy could not be stopped. Leaders at all levels from king all the way down to the lowest government administrator choose to protect themselves and their own families over fulfilling their duties as a recognized Neo-Confucian “morally superior man” who was required to serve society rather than his own interests. Manpower became such a serious issue during the war that Admiral Yi Sunsin commented how even though he built new ships he could not find the men to man them and his existing crews could not be relieved to go back to work their own family fields.⁴⁰

Factional strife also played a major part in the Joseon decision-making process during the war. Misinterpretations of Neo-Confucian terms and concepts created divisions between groups of officials. The opaque nature in some of the meta-physical aspects of Neo-Confucian interpretation led to never-ending debates and counter debates.⁴¹ Each side focused their combined energies on weakening the power and control of the counter faction by advancing their own members by any means possible and using perceived failings of moral virtue or ritual observance as the pretense for dismissal.⁴² While King Seonjo quietly sat on the sidelines constantly playing one side off the other as a means of weakening the courts overall power and influence over the

³⁹ *Seonjo Sillok* (The Veritable Records of King Seonjo), revised edition: volume 28, 27th year of King Seonjo, 6th article, April 1, 1594, “Yeonguijeong Ryu Seongnyong’s appeal against the military governing,” accessed through the Database of the National Institute of Korean History website: *Seonjo sujeong* 1567-, <https://sillok.history.go.kr/main/main.do>.

⁴⁰ Yi Sunsin, *Imjin Changcho* (Admiral Yi Sun-sin’s Memorials to Court), trans. Tae-hung Ha (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1981): 143-144, memorial 48, “Proposed Committal of Delinquent Magistrates for Trial by Court-Martial.”

⁴¹ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 55.

⁴² Hawley, *The Imjin War*, 66.

king.⁴³ In addition, factional strife influenced both the military preparations and leadership appointment and removal of key figures before and during the war. For example, Yi Sunsin was recommended and promoted by Ryu Seongnyong, leader of the Eastern faction (*Tongin*) and in response Won Kyun of the Western faction (*Seonin*) continuously sent false reports to the court which influenced Yi Sunsin's eventual removal and resulted in the Joseon navy's near complete destruction in 1597.⁴⁴ Factionalism also went counter to primary Neo-Confucian value of *ren* (benevolence) and the ideal of selfless duty for the betterment of society. Neo-Confucianism states that everything is connected in the universe and that *ren* runs through everything ultimately actualized in the world through human being's empathetic actions.⁴⁵

The Neo-Confucian concept of self-cultivation also had implications on the war. Neo-Confucians believed as Bol points out, that a "successful government was dependent on a process of personal and social transformation adopted by all people" including rulers and officials.⁴⁶ Many qualified and morally sound but disgraced or disgruntled scholar-officials fled to the countryside due to continuous literati purges in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This had the effect of weakening the overall effectiveness of the government in making concrete changes in society that would realize the Neo-Confucian idea of a balanced and mutually beneficial existence for all people.⁴⁷ Scholars such as Yi Hwang choose to leave government service and did not directly criticize the political

⁴³ Byonghyon Choi, *Ryu Songnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea: On the Battlefield and in Memory* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2022), 128.

⁴⁴ Choi, "Ryu Songnyong, Chancellor of Choson," 395.

⁴⁵ Ning Zhao, "From Is to Ought: A Comparative Study on the Neo-Confucian Concept of *ren* and Care Ethics," *Journal of Humanities Therapy* 11, no.1 (2020): 183, <https://doi.org/10.33252/jht.2020.06.11.1.171>.

⁴⁶ Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Boston: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 116.

⁴⁷ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 42.

power struggles that swirled around him daily for fear of serious retribution. Yi Hwang believed that self-cultivation was the central pursuit in life and required a dedication towards *gyeong* (reverence; mindfulness; seriousness; respect).⁴⁸ Yi I (1536-1584) believed that the self-cultivation of *yi* (righteousness) was the most important aspect in the selection of capable leaders. Both Yi and I believed that leaders without righteousness would not fulfill their duty and eventually lead the country to ruin.⁴⁹

Neo-Confucian scholars that left the capital court life for quiet study and reflection in the countryside would come to play a major role in the leadership of small groups of guerilla fighters that disrupted Japanese supply lines and augmented counterattacks by regular forces. These ousted or voluntarily disconnected Confucian scholars would form the core of the *uibyeong* (Righteous Armies) which in the beginning of the war sprouted up spontaneously to fight against the Japanese. Scholars such as Gwak Jae-u (1552-1617) became outstanding military strategists even though they had never previously served in any military capacity. Gwak was the first to develop the effective technique of ambushing Japanese foraging parties in the countryside and then melting away before anyone could respond.⁵⁰ The Righteous Armies were headed for the most part by Neo-Confucian scholars and patriots recognized for their personal virtuous conduct based on the strict following of Neo-Confucianism. They would become national heroes that contributed greatly to boosting national moral at a time of great suffering and chaos. The Righteous Armies would also continue to be an important source of useful

⁴⁸ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 116.

⁴⁹ Min-Hyeok Yim, "The Establishment of Literati Governance Society in Early Joseon, and Its Continuation," *The Review of Korean Studies* 8, no.2 (2005): 245-246, <https://accesson.kr/rks/assets/pdf/7540/journal-8-2-223.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson*, 270.

intelligence for which Ryu Seongnyong could plan military strategies in the local areas and whose surprise attacks against Japanese logistics networks and bases forced the enemy to move through the countryside only in large numbers. These actions would eventually contribute to the Japanese need to withdraw to well-fortified bases on the southern coast.⁵¹

The Neo-Confucian virtues of righteousness (*yi*) as well as benevolence (*ren*) would also play a part in the discontinuation of negotiations between the Japanese and the Ming and Joseon officials. Neo-Confucians believe that human nature is ultimately good. Chinese scholar Cheng Yi (1033-1107) stated that a proper human being should be “acting from humanity [*ren*] and moral righteousness [*yi*]” (*you ren yi xing*). Mencius (372-289 BC) once stated that: “Whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human.”⁵² Neo-Confucianism at its foundation was a moral action philosophy that ultimately judged people on their individual deeds. Both the Joseon and Ming engaged the Japanese in negotiations throughout the war as a civilized means of solving the dilemma. But after the Japanese experienced their first major loss at the first Battle of Chinju from November 8th to 13th, 1592, they unleashed their murderous revenge in the second Battle of Chinju on July 21st of the following summer. The Japanese not only defeated the Joseon defenders, which included several Righteous Army groups, but committed the greatest rampage of the war killing an estimated 60,000 men,

⁵¹ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 136.

⁵² Yong Huang, “Why be Moral? The Cheng Brothers’ Neo-Confucian Answer,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 2 (May 2008): 341, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2008.00348.x>.

women, and children. This act went against the very foundations of Neo-Confucian moral understanding of human civility. This act demonstrated to both the Joseon and the Ming that the Japanese were “lower than beasts” and therefore could no longer be dealt with as normal men. The repercussion of the Chinju massacre was that Joseon broke off negotiations completely and the Ming eventually did the same. Even Ming general Li Rusong (1549-1598) shouted at Japanese commander Konishi Yukinaga (1558-1600) that “I could have killed every Japanese when I took Pyeongyang, but I didn’t. That means you owe me your lives! Now you dare to attack Cheolla [Chinju] and violate your promise?”⁵³ The Japanese deceitfulness and lack of humanity was a major factor in why the Chinese refused to give anything that Hideyoshi asked for in the negotiations during the war.⁵⁴

Another way in which Neo-Confucianism influenced the decision-making of the Joseon elite during the war was the concept of sage king. Neo-Confucians believed that sages are people who have in their lifetime perfected their characters so that they are able to respond correctly to any situation they encounter. They are also able to provide wise insights into political organization, cosmic order, and personal development.⁵⁵ For Zhu Xi (1130-1200), a sage must focus on the cultivation of their own mind in order to help bring order to the world.⁵⁶ For Neo-Confucians, the king or leader of any nation is still a man who “has to conquer his own humanity by cultivating himself properly.”⁵⁷ Mencius

⁵³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson*, 373, quote taken from *Seonjo Sillok*, 40:38a (1593.7.18).

⁵⁴ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 234.

⁵⁵ Stephen Angle and Justin Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 14.

⁵⁶ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 181.

⁵⁷ Isabelle Sancho, “Confucian Identity, Political Ideals and Philosophical Exegesis: The Reception and Reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism in the Beginnings of Choson Korea,” *Cambridge: Harvard University, Korea Institute, Lecture and Performance Series* (February 2020): 14, <https://hal.science/hal-02905217>.

stated that: “Let the prince be righteous, and all his acts will be righteous. Let the prince be correct, and everything will be correct. Once rectify the ruler, and the Kingdom will be firmly settled.”⁵⁸

Korean Neo-Confucians believed that the state was situated within society and that the state and society therefore was wholly governed by the Confucian moral principles. This weakened the king’s authority and power because it said that perceived moral principles override the king’s behavior and wishes.⁵⁹ Most Neo-Confucians recognized that virtuous advisors could make up for some of the shortcomings in a ruler and this was done thorough teachings on self-cultivation and governance. Yi Hwang, who advised the young King Seonjo for a short time believed that the creation of the ideal society could only happen from the top down, and that the elite needed to focus on proper self-cultivation in order to live an ethical life and therefore govern without self-interest. According to Yi Hwang, the king’s virtue and sincerity were central to ideal governance.⁶⁰

Both Yi Hwang and Yi I were appointed to be chief lecturers to King Seonjo. Both seemed underwhelmed by the king’s fundamental character and personal motivation to advance himself along the Neo-Confucian journey of self-cultivation. Many accounts in *Seonjo sillok* describe the king’s failure to control his anger which is often described as *chinno* (thunderous rage). Seonjo’s royal rage was a central concern from the very early years of his reign, because it tended to disrupt the court business and prevented the

⁵⁸ Mencius, IV.A.20, 110.

⁵⁹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 397.

⁶⁰ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 115-129.

resolution of factional conflicts.⁶¹ Both Yi Hwang and Yi I strongly believed in the Confucian ideal of “Sage on the inside, virtuous king on the outside (*naeseong oewang / nei-sheng-wai-wang*) which King Seonjo simply did not embody.”⁶² Ryu Seongnyong who started his civil service career as a young court scribe saw the king as a highly intelligent man, but lacked the will to bring about the needed and meaningful changes as those suggested by Yi I who over time became more and more visibly frustrated with the passivity of the king.⁶³

It seemed that King Seonjo was mostly concerned not with the betterment of Joseon society, but rather how to successfully strengthen his own power and authority over the established bureaucratic court factions. This translated into serious mistakes in judgement during the war. Seonjo would often appoint new officials and then dismiss them before they could even begin their official duties.⁶⁴ In contrast, Chief Councilor Ryu Seongnyong followed the Neo-Confucian principle of filial loyalty and duty to society in a most absolute way. To Seongnyong, the king was the embodiment of the rules and values that constituted the state as well as the Neo-Confucian values and principles that upheld the society. For Seongnyong, no matter how weakened the king appeared, the state could not be restored without the king himself. If the king was weak, it was his duty as a Neo-Confucian advisor to be the proper example even to the king himself.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Hwisang Cho, “Feeling Power in Early Choson Korea: Popular Grievances, Royal Rage, and the Problem of Human Sentiments,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2015.0000>.

⁶² Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 439.

⁶³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 94.

⁶⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 220-221.

⁶⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 247-248.

Besides King Seonjo, the Joseon leader wielding the most power during the Imjin War was Chief State Councilor Ryu Seongnyong. But the contrast between the two highest leaders of the Joseon state could not be more extreme. Whereas Seonjo would spend long periods of time lost in depression and idleness, the chief state councilor would make critically important decisions throughout the war, even while suffering personally from crippling illness and pain. These decisions would ultimately influence the strategic defeat of the Japanese.⁶⁶

King Seonjo's single most effective royal decision during the war was arguably his appointment of Ryu Seongnyong himself. But the king would have him removed from office twice during the war, while appointing a long list of failing officials and commanders that only added to the ease at which the Japanese took over the country. On the other hand, Seongnyong was a leader that carefully took time to think through both the character and experience of officials and commanders. He would be the one that personally pushed for the appointed Yi Sunsin to command the Joseon Navy which strategically blunted the Japanese western advance into the critical Cheolla Province and prevented the use of the sea to transport vital supplies further up the peninsula.⁶⁷ He also organized important military reforms including the establishment of the Military Training Command in 1593 that was run by military veterans. But even after loyally serving the king faithfully throughout the war, King Seonjo had Seongnyong permanently and disgracefully removed from office in 1598. The king claimed that Seongnyong's failure to correct the country's military deficiencies before the outbreak of the hostilities made him solely responsible for the embarrassing military collapse in the first few months of

⁶⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 293.

⁶⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 491.

the war.⁶⁸ Though history would tell a different story. Ryu Seongnyong upheld the Neo-Confucian ideals of filial piety and loyalty to the king and state. He would also be the one high-ranked Joseon official that came closest to fully realizing the Neo-Confucian philosophical concept of a sage whose conduct and “virtue” is what “most distinguishes them.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 446-447.

⁶⁹ Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18.

Chapter II.

Korean Neo-Confucianism

*The faculty of innate knowledge is to know good and evil. The investigation of things is to do good and to remove evil.*⁷⁰

—Wang Yangming

Neo-Confucianism refers to the renaissance of Confucian thinking that developed during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) which profoundly influenced the thought and behavior of the educated class.⁷¹ Neo-Confucianism is a modern term, whereas the Chinese names for the movement were *Daoxue* (the learning of the Way), *Xinxue* (the learning of the mind), *Xing lixue* (the learning of nature and principle), and sometimes *Sheng xue* (the learning of the sages).⁷² The Neo-Confucians of the eleventh century desired to create a new society and questioned many concepts and issues such as the structure of the cosmos, how best to organize human society, and how to improve oneself.⁷³ This evolution in Confucianism thinking resulted from scholars criticizing Confucian lecturer's tendency to provide standards and directions without any explanation. The Neo-Confucians sought to find answers to these questions.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Yangming Wang, *Wang Wen-ch'eng King Ch'uan-shu* (The Complete Works of Wang Yang-ming, Instructions for a Practical Living) in Shun Kwong-Loi's "Wang Yang-Ming on Self-Cultivation in the Daxue," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38 (March 2012): 105, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6253.2012.01691.x>.

⁷¹ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 1.

⁷² Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 78.

⁷³ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 5.

⁷⁴ Weon-Ki Yoo, "A Research Methodology for Korean Neo-Confucianism," *Acta Koreana* 16, no.1 (June 2013): 181-182, <https://www-earticle-net.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/Article/A200030>.

The two early Confucian thinkers that most influenced Neo-Confucian thinking were Meng Ke (372-289 BC), more commonly known as Mencius, and Zhu Xi (1130-1200). Meng Ke wrote the *Mencius*, considered by Angle and Tiwald as “perhaps the most influential of all early texts” and which “argued that human nature is fundamentally good, containing moral drives toward compassion and wisdom.”⁷⁵ Most Neo-Confucians explain the goodness of human nature through three concepts: *xing* (nature), *xin* (heartmind), and *qing* (emotions). Using these concepts, they provided explanations for the gap between metaphysical concepts and observations of individual psychological realities.⁷⁶ Zhu Xi believed that the human mind is focused on the pursuit of two aspects of physical desire. The first type of physical desires are those considered necessary for life such as to eat food when hungry or wearing clothes when cold. The second are physical desires that are not necessary for survival such as the desire for more food and better clothes, etc., which leads to immoral behavior.⁷⁷

Neo-Confucianism provided an alternative to Buddhism and Taoism and is based on the theory of *li* and *qi* (*i* and *gi* in Korean) which sought to explain nature, man, and society.⁷⁸ The two primary concepts of Neo-Confucianism are *qi*, rooted in the idea of “breath” but which Neo-Confucians broadened to mean the basic stuff of the world including energy, matter, and psychological phenomena. The second key concept is *li*, which translates to Pattern. It encompasses the structure, order, and value of things, which themselves are composed of *qi*.⁷⁹ All things have a shape and can change either

⁷⁵ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 13.

⁷⁶ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 50.

⁷⁷ Sangik Lee, “Individual & Community in Korean Neo-Confucianism,” *The Journal of Korean Philosophical History* 38, (2013): 103, <https://doi.org/10.35504/kph.2013..38.004>.

⁷⁸ Koh, “Neo-Confucianism as the Dominant Ideology,” 59-60.

⁷⁹ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 23.

“quickly like a person moving” or “slowly like a mountain eroding.”⁸⁰ The Neo-Confucian concepts of *qi* and *li* were built atop the earlier ideas of *yin* and *yang* connected to the patterns of changing objects.⁸¹ According to Zhu, “Pattern produces all vital stuff,” but as soon as it comes into existence, “Pattern is no longer able to control it.”⁸² According to Zhu, nature’s potential is open-ended and has a definite sense of direction.

Most Neo-Confucians agree that four virtues are central to the philosophy: *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (ritual propriety), and *zhi* (wisdom). Most Daoxue Confucians also add a fifth virtue, *xin* (trustworthiness).⁸³ Neo-Confucian scholars debated concepts such as *siduan* (The Four Beginnings of virtue) which consist of “heart-mind compassion; shame and dislike; courtesy and modesty; and right and wrong,” as well as the *qiqing* (The Seven Emotions) which in Neo-Confucianism are: “pleasure, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hatred, and desire.” Scholars debated how they influenced or hindered one’s path towards self-cultivation and leading a virtuous life.⁸⁴ Neo-Confucians believed that human emotions are natural and unavoidable but can lead us to destructive behavior so must be regulated.⁸⁵ This process of regulation of destructive behavior was best accomplished through dedication to the life-long process of self-cultivation of oneself for the betterment of humanity. In ancient times the Confucian sages began the process of self-cultivation training “by instructing children in how to sweep their rooms, entertain guests, show filial respect for their parents and elders, be

⁸⁰ Angle, *Sagehood*, 38.

⁸¹ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 25.

⁸² Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 41.

⁸³ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 160.

⁸⁴ Edward Y.J. Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought of Yi Hwang (Toegye): A Study of Neo-Confucian Ethics and Spirituality* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), 54.

⁸⁵ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 91.

loyal and true, treat friends cordially, and observe rites and music.” The *Daxue* (*Great Learning*), one of the “Four Books” central to Confucian doctrine, states that the process must “begin with the cultivation of the individual self and then proceed to the transformation of the world.”⁸⁶

Neo-Confucianism in Korea can be traced back to its introduction by An Hyang (1243-1306) and Kwon Po (1262-1346) who first introduced the Chinese texts to Korea.⁸⁷ The early Joseon Neo-Confucians put an emphasis on Zhu Xi’s teachings with a focus on the practice of self-cultivation. Zhu Xi’s slogan: *xiuji zhiren/sugi ch’iin* (“cultivating one’s self in order to participate in the socio-political ordering”), was central to Joseon Neo-Confucian thinking.⁸⁸ When the last kings of the Goryeo state (918-1392) weakened through questionable succession practices, power shifted to the military. Deuchler points out that an important alliance formed “between Yi Song-gye, the military hero, and the Neo-Confucian scholar-officials” which resulted in the beginnings of the Joseon dynasty.⁸⁹ The men who assisted Yi Song-gye in the establishment of the new Neo-Confucian-based society were mostly civilians who had served as officials under the last Goryeo kings. Some of them belonged to established aristocratic groups, but as many as two-thirds came from less distinguished backgrounds and possessed no large landholdings at the beginning of the dynasty.⁹⁰

From the very beginning of the Joseon dynasty, Yim suggests that “Confucian intellectuals began to use literati governance (*munchi*) as the ruling mechanism” of the

⁸⁶ Palias, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 156.

⁸⁷ Sancho, “Confucian Identity,” 3.

⁸⁸ Sancho, “Confucian Identity,” 4.

⁸⁹ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 90.

⁹⁰ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 93.

political elite.⁹¹ The first generation of high office holders laid the foundation for the dynasty's legislation and governance. Position was not hereditary and so positions in government were very competitive for the generations that followed.⁹² But by the fifteenth century the ruling elite devised new rules for those looking to take the *gwageo* (civil-service exam). As Deuchler states: "The upper echelons of the government were virtually monopolized by aristocrats [which] combined aristocratic privileges with bureaucratic qualifications."⁹³ By the end of the fifteenth century the *sarim* (rural Neo-Confucian literati) emerged as a power base in the central government under King Seongjong (r.1469-1495). The *sarim* censored the *yangban* (landowning aristocracy) through a campaign to restore the *yuhyangso* (local government advisory committee) by investigating corruption. The *sarim* also took control of the education system by establishing *seowon* (private Neo-Confucian academies) which prepared students for taking the civil-service examinations.⁹⁴ The *munchi* system of governance based on Neo-Confucian principles and norms quickly gained acceptance as it held the promise of change for the commoner's dire reality of continuous poverty and struggle.

Neo-Confucian scholar-officials of the early Joseon period were confident in their ability to translate principles into workable actions.⁹⁵ To achieve their goals, they believed it was necessary to "renovate the people" (*sinmin*) under the direction of the Neo-Confucian *hyeon* (superior men). As Hyongchan Kim notes, the early Joseon reformers believed that this moral renovation was achieved largely "by strengthening

⁹¹ Yim, "The Establishment of Literati Governance," 223.

⁹² Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 96-97.

⁹³ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 290.

⁹⁴ Koh, "Neo-Confucianism as the Dominant Ideology," 9.

⁹⁵ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 102.

society's basic relationships (*kang*) which were expressed in its customs (*pungsok*).” Pungsok therefore represented the basic moral energy of the state. Korean Neo-Confucians believed that “the quality of the customs” supported by the people within society was directly tied to the state’s overall health and strength as well as contributing to its success or failure as a governing philosophy.⁹⁶

Yi Hwang and Yi I

Yi Hwang (1501-1570) penname Toegye and Yi I (1536-1584) penname Yulgok are widely recognized as the two most influential Korean Neo-Confucian scholars. Yi Hwang devoted his whole life in the pursuit of self-cultivation and by the age of forty-nine had resigned from all government positions in an attempt to achieve this goal. In contrast, Yi I once reaching the top levels of political power at the young age of twenty-nine, remained in government service until his death.⁹⁷ Differing from Yi Hwang, Yi I focused his energy on how better to govern the people justly through social reforms aimed at improving the lives of the ordinary people. While both were devoted to Neo-Confucianism based on Zhu Xi’s philosophy, their own viewpoints and political orientations were essentially very different from each other.⁹⁸

According to Yi Hwang, the king’s virtue and sincerity were central to ideal governance. The king’s mind should be disciplined and focused constantly on cultivating superior morality through the process of life-long self-cultivation.⁹⁹ Essentially, Yi

⁹⁶ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 109-110.

⁹⁷ Hyongchan Kim, “The Theory and Practice of Sage Politics: The Political Philosophies and Neo-Confucian Bases of Yi Hwang and Yi I,” *Acta Koreana* 17, no.1 (June 2014): 257, https://oak.go.kr/central/journallist/journaldetail.do?article_seq=18416.

⁹⁸ Kim, “The Theory and Practice,” 257.

⁹⁹ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 115-129.

Hwang believed that the creation of the ideal society could only happen from the top down, and that the elite needed to focus on living an ethical life and govern without self-interest.¹⁰⁰ Most of Yi Hwang's career as an official was during the reign of King Jungjong (r.1506-1544) where he filled twenty-nine different positions between 1534 to 1549.¹⁰¹ His resignation in 1549 was likely influenced by four major literati purges that he personally witnessed at different stages and which claimed the life of his older brother who died on his way to political exile in the north. Fearing retribution, he only indirectly expressed his concern over the purges through his lectures and writing.¹⁰² In 1552, he was convinced by King Myeongjong (r.1545-1567) to accept the privileged position of headmaster of the Seonggyungwan royal academy but served less than a year. He blamed his resignation on illness yet secretly harbored doubts about the intentions of the king, the queen, and the advisors that surrounded them.¹⁰³ At the age of sixty-seven, Yi Hwang was ordered to serve the young new ruler King Seonjo (r.1567-1607) as chief state councilor. But he likely had no intention of ever serving the post and hastily "left the capital before the appointment could be made official," again claiming illness.¹⁰⁴ During his time in office, Yi Hwang "presented petitions seeking permission to resign to the king a total of fifty-three times."¹⁰⁵

In contrast, Yi I was devoted to his duties and to King Seonjo who regarded him as a close and trusted advisor. But over time the king's feelings for Yi I dramatically

¹⁰⁰ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 169.

¹⁰¹ Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 6.

¹⁰² Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 7.

¹⁰³ Edward Y.J. Chung and Robert E. Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way of Life and Thought: The Chasongnok (Record of Self-Reflection) by Yi Hwang (Toegye)* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), 159.

¹⁰⁴ Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 16.

¹⁰⁵ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, Loc. 863.

changed and as a result, Yi I's opinion of the king also shifted. It seemed to Yi I that King Seonjo mainly wanted to hear about manipulative techniques and wisdom that would be useful in a political setting and disregarded ethics-based lecturing. The young king tended to appoint people with excellent academics and reputations as advisors but failed to put their suggestions into practice.¹⁰⁶ There were many cases in which Yi I criticized certain actions or inactions of the king in person and in front of other officials. There were equally as many cases where Seonjo was visibly displeased with Yi I to the point of open anger.¹⁰⁷

In 1569, Yi I was granted permission for a reading sabbatical at a government villa near the mouth of the Han River. It was here that he penned the manuscript *Dongho mundap* (*Questions and Answers at East Lake*) as a political reform report for King Seonjo to actively implement. Unfortunately, Seonjo largely ignored it and preferred to refer to Yi Hwang's *Ten Diagrams* instead.¹⁰⁸ Yi I was driven by his dream of solving Korea's systematic social problems. He believed that several important reforms could be implemented once the king and other powerful officials were convinced of his righteous cause. Then in 1570, a year before he would die, seventy-year-old Yi Hwang received two letters from Yi I which contained lists of questions he needed help answering in the younger scholars' drive to solve Joseon's mounting social problems. But Yi Hwang wholeheartedly believed until the end of his life that self-cultivation was the best way of changing society and not relying on a fractious and unreliable government system to

¹⁰⁶ Yi I (Yulgok) *Dongho Mundap* (*Questions and Answers at East Lake*), ca.1569, trans. Oesoong Ahn. (Seoul: The World of Books, 2017), 110.

¹⁰⁷ Yi, *Dongho Mundap*, 131.

¹⁰⁸ Yi, *Dongho Mundap*, 10.

implement social reform.¹⁰⁹ After Yi Hwang's death in 1570, Yi I requested the enshrinement of Yi Hwang's tablet in the National Shrine of Confucius.¹¹⁰ Upon hearing of Yi Hwang's death, King Seonjo surprisingly wept bitterly and supported a generous funeral.¹¹¹ Yi I left office in 1576 following a contentious factional split between the two main political groups at court, the Easterners (*Tongin*) and Westerners (*Soin*) over appointments of officials to influential posts. He then spent three years writing, studying, and teaching at his wife's hometown of Haeju, but returned to office in 1581, resigning again in 1583 and dying the following year.¹¹²

Both Yi Hwang and Yi I believed that Neo-Confucianism in its purest form was the best chance for a renewal of Joseon society. They also clearly saw cracks in the existing governance structure which would prove to have serious consequences during the Japanese invasion of 1592. Both men understood that a proper Neo-Confucian society should be led by a benevolent sage king inspiring society to return to the pursuit of personal self-cultivation, ethical and empathetic governance, and political unity necessary for meaningful and lasting social reform. The Chinese Neo-Confucian scholar Wang Yangming understood that the most important pursuit of any moral society was to “do good and remove evil.” In Joseon Korea, the selection of leaders to follow this mandate relied almost solely on pedigree and an examination based on the memorization of Neo-Confucian literature.

¹⁰⁹ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 2981-2986.

¹¹⁰ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 4812-4819.

¹¹¹ Yi, *Dongho Mundap*, 108.

¹¹² Sanghoon Na, “The Letters Exchanged Between Yi I (Yulgok) and Song Ikp'il (Kubong) Concerning the Kyongmong Yogyol, *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 32, no. 2 (December 2019): 313, <https://doi.org/10.1353/seo.2019.0018>.

Chapter III.

How the *Gwageo* (科擧) Influenced Leadership Selection

*I'm a scholar who only writes and doesn't know anything about the world, so I'm not familiar with the art of war. But now that I've ascended to the rank and been appointed general, I'm afraid that I wouldn't be able to serve as a good general to my comrades.*¹¹³

—Cheolla Governor Go Gyeong-myeong, June 1st, 1592

The scholar-official class of the Joseon dynasty were commonly known as *sadaebu* (great and common officers). They embodied the ideal Confucian gentlemen of virtue and wisdom and were largely selected through the use of two mechanisms: ancestry lineage and the *gwageo* civil service examination system.¹¹⁴ By the beginning of the sixteenth century anyone wishing to sit for the examination had to first prove through lineage documents that someone in the previous four generations had also passed the *gwageo* and had been officially recognized as a *hyeongwan* (office holder).¹¹⁵ The Joseon elite believed that the best way to select *sadaebu* was through the *gwageo* because it was based on the understanding of Neo-Confucian literature which focused on the proper principles for generating morality (*todok*) and how best to apply it to governmental work. The *sadaebu* fulfilled the recognized role of morally superior man (*hyeon*) “who is called

¹¹³ Huimun O', *Saemirok (Record of a Worthless Wanderer)*, trans. Hyeon-gyu Lim (Seoul: Social Criticism Academy, Inc., 2013), 37.

¹¹⁴ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 119.

¹¹⁵ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 55.

upon to lead the ignorant masses” and who held an esteemed place at the top of Joseon society.¹¹⁶ To become a sadaebu was to be recognized as being at the top of Joseon society and allowed a family to build a lasting legacy that was by the closing of the sixteenth century no longer possible for the majority of society.

Even though the Chinese chose to ignore rigid systems of decent lines, the Joseon in contrast followed a more literal interpretation of the Neo-Confucian societal blueprint. The sadaebu combined their insights on Confucian kinship organization with a restrictive system of civil service qualifications to separate and elevate themselves from the rest of society.¹¹⁷ They controlled Neo-Confucian learning and administered a ritual program that was only shared indirectly with the lower social classes.¹¹⁸ Chinese Neo-Confucians on the other hand tried their best to limit the total amount of literati who entered government service due to family connections and even required candidates to provide written affidavits confirming their ethical standing and moral conduct.¹¹⁹ But in Joseon Korea, commoners who lacked the proper social qualifications to make them eligible for access to education and the examination were simply excluded from the process all together.¹²⁰

The Joseon gwageo was divided into three levels: *munkwa* (civil service exam for higher office), *sama* (secondary civil service exam), and the *mukwa* (military officer exam).¹²¹ If you passed the minors and majors, you’d be eligible to enter the

¹¹⁶ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 109-110.

¹¹⁷ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 292-294.

¹¹⁸ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 296.

¹¹⁹ Bol, *Neo Confucianism in History*, 54.

¹²⁰ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 4.

¹²¹ Mark Peterson, “Royal Control of Court,” Seoul: *The Korean Times*, May 1, 2020, 1, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/10/638_288770.html.

Sungkyunkwan, the highest educational institution in Joseon.¹²² Passing the *munkwa* represented the highest honor and achievement within Joseon society, but only sons of primary wives from distinguished and recognized lineages were allowed to be tested, “while secondary sons and sons of twice-married women were disqualified.” Deuchler’s research concluded that during the entire Joseon dynasty, only 750 decent groups were represented among the successful candidates of the higher civil service examinations, and “only thirty-nine leading lineages produced fifty-three percent of all passers” of the higher-level gwageo examinations.¹²³ Since the sadaebu refused “to take primary wives from the lower classes, women whose agnatic kin belonged to the ‘noble’” part of society therefor provided the majority of sons that entered higher levels of government service generation after generation.¹²⁴

Joseon *Sadaebu* Failed to Follow Neo-Confucian Principles

In 1519, scholar-official Cho Kwang-jo (1482-1519) stated he believed the civil service examination system was inadequate at judging the qualifications of candidates for higher office and instituted the Recommendation Examination Council to handpick men “whose talents and conduct were useful.”¹²⁵ Cho’s actions unleashed what would become known as the *Kimyo sahwa* (Purge of 1519) which banished or killed many young literati reformists including Cho himself. In the decades following Cho’s death, many people outside government started to criticize the gwageo system where people would study from childhood until they were old and grey before finally passing the exam as older men

¹²² O’, *Saemirok*, 330-331.

¹²³ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 297.

¹²⁴ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 301.

¹²⁵ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 72-73.

without practical experience except reading and writing.¹²⁶ They also criticized the fact that in most cases a student preparing for the exams required the tutelage of a competent teacher in the classical Confucian texts. Taking lessons from a qualified teacher meant a tuition payment was necessary and put the exam out of reach of many families whose sons might even meet the lineage qualifications but had experienced economic hardships. In addition, the great majority of Neo-Confucian texts were printed in classical Chinese and therefore presented yet another difficult roadblock to overcome. Both Yi Hwang and Yi I came from land-owning elite lineages and were educated from a young age in the Chinese classics. An elitist book culture emerged with an emphasis on early education geared towards passing the gwageo. In this way knowledge and position intertwined and became tied to civility and morality in Joseon society.¹²⁷ Therefore, status became linked to position and with position came power. It was this positional power through status which eventually led to high levels of corruption within the government and military ranks of Joseon Korea.

For Yi Hwang, there was nothing necessarily wrong with taking the examination, as he recognized it as an economic necessity for many. O' Huimun commented in March of 1597 after his youngest son Soo-in passed the civil service exam: "There was no one in the O' family who passed the state examination below our 5th great-grandfather, and this time, our son was the first to do so."¹²⁸ For the O' family this meant economic stability and higher status which also translated into higher power. Part of the reason that the O'

¹²⁶ Lee, *China's Hegemony*, 47.

¹²⁷ Ariella Napoli, "Plurality Within Singularity: Choson Korea's Neo-Confucian Framework," *ASIANetwork Exchange* 27, no.1 (July 2020): 153-154, <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.337>.

¹²⁸ O', *Saemirok*, 301, March 19, 1597 entry.

family was able to survive the war was that O' Huimun, even as a low-ranking civil servant, still had access to some government benefits like food and cloth when available.

A major problem with the gwageo examination system was that candidates studied the Neo-Confucian required texts as a means to demonstrate their memorized knowledge. This didn't mean that they would follow its multitude of ethical governing lessons while in office, and many did not. Yi Hwang stressed that the proper way for any Confucian student was *wihak* (learning for learning's sake).¹²⁹ Zhu Xi also stated in the *Analects* that: "Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous."¹³⁰ Essentially Neo-Confucian scholars such as Zhu Xi or Yi Hwang believed that the creation of an ideal society could only happen from the top down, and that it was essential for the governing elite to focus their collective energy on proper self-cultivation in order to live an ethical life and therefore govern without self-interest.¹³¹ Yi Hwang stated when debating about the Four and the Seven moral virtues and emotions that one must "empty one's mind-and-heart [of selfish thoughts (*sayok/siyu*)] and keep one's *gi/qi* serene." Furthermore, "the Seven Emotions are originally good, but they can easily lead to evil [due to the influence of external things involving *ki*]."¹³² In the *Chaseongnok*, Yi Hwang stated that "when material cravings are eliminated, Heaven's principle emerges clearly."¹³³ According to Yi I, "The human mind is always treacherous because of selfish human desire, so one must cultivate one's mind by refining it and being wary of acting in a way that is contrary to what is right."¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 177.

¹³⁰ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 14, quote taken from "Weizheng," in Gardner, *Zhu Xi's Reading of the Analects*.

¹³¹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 169.

¹³² Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 127, translated from original *Chaseongnok* 1:58b-63a.

¹³³ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 87, translated from original *Chaseongnok* 1:27a-37a.

¹³⁴ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 3113.

Song Insu (1499-1547) believed that a true scholar was a person who possesses knowledge and virtue based on moral character and upholds justice in society. Therefore, Song Insu believed that the reason a scholar enters government service was due to his strong sense of service to society based on the virtues of benevolence and righteousness.¹³⁵ Yi Hwang commented that he had witnessed in his time the Neo-Confucian character of the sadaebu diminishing and that false representation was arising everywhere due to ambitious people with no moral center being appointed to positions of power. In his reply letter to No Ijae, he states: “Some people pretend to be wise and gain honor by falsely representing themselves or by being deceitful and making up lies; in this case, any disaster and failures that results is truly self-generated.”¹³⁶ In the same letter Yi Hwang goes on to say that “people are arrogant toward each other, reject those who do good things, and publicly denounce those who pursue learning.” Furthermore, he believed that this was occurring in greater frequency due to Neo-Confucian norms and practices no longer being followed in government and that it would eventually lead the country toward collapse. He believed that when society rejects a path of ethical development, the society is in a process of moral decline. Yi I agreed with Yi Hwang stating: “The morality of politicians and the moral process and consequences of political action cannot be separated.”¹³⁷

Yi Hwang criticized the “obsession of many scholars with passing” the gwageo to “seek quick career gains.”¹³⁸ He adds: “You should not be attracted to government

¹³⁵ Suk-won Oh, “Song Insu’s Thoughts on Righteousness,” *Confucian Thought and Culture Research* 29 (2007): 358, <https://kiss-kstudy-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/Detail/Ar?key=2637659>.

¹³⁶ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 137, translated from original *Chaseongnok* 1:68b-71b.

¹³⁷ Yi, *Dongho Mundap*, 136, taken from Chapter 2 entry 12 “A report on political reforms.”

¹³⁸ Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 11.

service examinations and the danger of making [selfish] profits.¹³⁹ In his letters, Yi Hwang constantly warned his junior colleagues about the examination trap which was leading many promising young men into a life of “worthless fame,” cheating oneself and others,” and other forms of immoral behavior.¹⁴⁰ This combination of immoral behavior and unbridled ambition was eating away at the fabric of long established Neo-Confucian norms and practices. Yi Hwang stated again and again that the only means of bettering your society in any permanent and long-lasting way was through learning how to lead an ethical life by devoting oneself to self-cultivation. He believed that changing the world first began with the process of changing oneself.

Central to self-cultivation were the core Neo-Confucian values of respect, benevolence, empathy, and ancestral ritual observance. But the reality of the Joseon governmental society of the late sixteenth century was an interconnected web of vertical and horizontal relationships formed between peer students, teachers, and examiners who influenced state service advancement through this obligation-based system.¹⁴¹ An example of this obligation-based system was how magistrates regularly spent money on banquets and gifts for other influential high government officials in a bid to gain their support in advancing their own careers.¹⁴² This went against the fundamental virtue expected of a *sadeabu* official in government service: selfless duty for the betterment of society.

¹³⁹ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 101, translated from original *Chaseongnok* 1:37a-44a section 14, “Reply letter to Yi Sukheon.”

¹⁴⁰ Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 11.

¹⁴¹ Barend Noordam, “The Soldier as a Sage: Qi Jiguang (1528-1588) and the Neo-Confucianization of the Military in Sixteenth-Century China,” (PhD diss., University of Leiden, 2018): 204.

¹⁴² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 81.

Yi I also felt similar to his teacher Yi Hwang that the civil service examination system “should not be based on the talent with which one could pass the civil service examination or on literary talents but rather on the achievement of high morality.”¹⁴³ Yi I even commented directly to King Seonjo that ambitious high officials “obsessed with titles or salaries do not have the fidelity to devote themselves to national difficulties. You must see that a person who had sincere discussions but has little practice is a person who only pretends to be righteous on the outside.”¹⁴⁴ Yi I had the foresight to see how ambition for status and personal profit was leading to corrupted behavior of government and military officials. This corrupted governing structure was affecting the morale of the Joseon society in a corrosive way, and Yi I believed that this immoral behavior would have serious consequences in the future. Both Yi Hwang and Yi I commented on how the government ultimately needed the support of society to exist and rule through the Mandate of Heaven. This view was rooted in Mencius’s statement that: “Heaven gives it [the mandate] to him [the ruler] and so the people give it to him.”¹⁴⁵ This was central to the Neo-Confucian philosophy but the reality of late sixteenth century Joseon was losing touch with such principles as Yi I wrote:

One of the good conditions is that there is a holy and bright monarch above, and the other is that there are no treacherous followers below. One of the bad conditions is that people’s support of the government has been down for a long time, and the other is that the government officials’ fighting spirit has been very low.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Suk-Ku Song, “Yulgok’s Social Reform Thought,” *Korean Journal*, July 1984, 45, www.dbpia.co.kr.

¹⁴⁴ Yi, *Dongho Mundap*, 61. Chapter 7: “Seeking the truth is the key to the self-cultivation of mind and body.”

¹⁴⁵ Mencius, *Mencius*, trans. Irene Bloom. (Grapevine India Publishing, 2022): 5A5.

¹⁴⁶ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 50. Chapter 6: “Discussing the situation of today’s era.”

Yi I also believed that Joseon Neo-Confucianism was degrading at a rapid rate as a legitimate social and governing philosophy and would ultimately result in dire consequences for society. He commented that no one could easily advance in court rank without giving some form of a bribe. In the same way, the average person could not finalize a legal matter or be released from their prison sentence without paying a bribe. Yi I asserted that these evil practices must be rectified, or society as a whole would one day perish.¹⁴⁷ Yi I had deep insights into some of the more practical reasons for the rampant government corruption. He pointed out that “we must provide them [officials] with goods that can replace their income from farming. This is because, in the past, the aristocrats received a fixed salary, but today’s aristocrats are not guaranteed a livelihood, and unless they steal something from others, they cannot avoid starving or freezing.”¹⁴⁸ Though, in reality Yi I was mostly referring to officials that had little to no land or other means of income which by the late sixteenth century was not the majority. Most *sadeabu*, like himself, came from families of abundant economic resources. Yi I was criticized for stating that officials must not receive grain from another magistrate. The criticism came because receiving any food from government officials was wrong and was forbidden by national law. What Yi I was suggesting was the arrest of anyone engaging in the practice. Yet most officials of Yi I’s time sold grain to earn money in which to bribe their own superiors in order to receive higher appointments.¹⁴⁹ By threatening to arrest those engaged in the practice would mean the virtual destruction of the current government system.

¹⁴⁷ Song, “Yulgok’s Social Reform Thought,” 46.

¹⁴⁸ Yi, *Dongho Mundap*, 83. Chapter 9: “Discussion of people’s security policy.”

¹⁴⁹ Na, “The Letters Exchanged,” 317-318.

Yu Hyeongwon believed that the corrupting of government officials began the moment they passed the gwageo examinations successfully. Established government officials subjected the new degree-holders to a form of severe hazing “treating the newcomers as if they were animals.”¹⁵⁰ Once given an official posting the new civil servants were forced to provide financial compensations to the higher ranked officials in a variety of different ways. One example of this was the *myoensillye* which was a rite of passage that all first-time office holders had to undergo. First established in the late Goryeo period, the *myoensillye* was originally intended to lessen the arrogant behavior of young officials who came from powerful families and who expected deference because of their background. By the Joseon dynasty it had become a serious financial burden and cause of distress. In addition, new recruits were expected to contribute to the financing of the annual feast held by each office, and to pay for a series of banquets for senior officials in their office. Many of the newcomers had to sell properties or borrow money to pay for the lavish events. Yet each knew they had no choice if they wanted to get promoted.¹⁵¹ Such “traditions” ingrained a sense of financial obligation to seniors within the governing system and those that followed the proper Neo-Confucian practice of honest duty and selfless service were quickly left behind by not receiving the necessary promotions. It also led to government officials who “follow only the order of the superior without questioning whether it is right or wrong.”¹⁵² All those that choose to engage in the compensation practices did so knowing that they would be able to press the lower ranks for compensation when they were appointed to the higher ranks. This meant that the most

¹⁵⁰ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 181.

¹⁵¹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 66-67.

¹⁵² *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 16, 15th Year of King Seonjo, 1st article. January 1, 1582. “Yi I was appointed judge but declined.”

corrupted individuals were constantly pushed upwards in rank while those that were incorruptible tended to wallow in low-ranking and obscure postings.

Yi I also realized that the purges of the previous generation had deeply affected the current political landscape. He said that since the time of the literati purges “those who wanted to do good were afraid...because of this, only those who coveted riches with a vague attitude were in offices enjoying good food and comfortable seats.”¹⁵³ To the very officials in court that he was criticizing, Yi I stated that “a person who knows how to maintain his fidelity even a little bit does not want to hold a government post. Only those who covet success and prosperity, or those who have no way to live in poverty, can gain power through jealousy or bend their hearts and minds to stay in office for a long time.”¹⁵⁴ Yi I could see that corrupted officials permeated every level of Joseon government possessing no empathy for the common people which is fundamental to the Neo-Confucian idea of ideal governance. Yi I stated that “it has been a long time since I have seen politics that seems to care for a sick person.”¹⁵⁵ Therefore, in the years leading up to the war, the Joseon government was populated with officials that did not follow or live up to the Neo-Confucian principles studied for passing the gwageo, nor the societal norms and practices expected from them as revered sadaebu.

Shen Yueh of the Liang dynasty (502-57) believed that rulers the Han dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD) were the most successful at selecting government officials because they made no distinctions between scholars and commoners. So, the Han had not created

¹⁵³ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 52. Chapter 6: “Discussing the situation of today’s era.”

¹⁵⁴ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 16, 15th Year of King Seonjo, 1st article, September 1, 1582: “Yi I’s appeal discussing the revision of the four incorrect and harmful phenomena in the country.”

¹⁵⁵ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 61. Chapter 7: “Seeking the truth is the key to the self-cultivation of mind and body.”

the urban/rural gap that existed in all preceding dynasties that solidified class differentiation that went counter to core Confucian values. Shen also praised the Han for requiring all talented officials to serve at the lowest levels of the state bureaucracy as clerks or assistants to local magistrates until they could prove their merit through their actual performance. Shen believed that this was the reason why the Han reached the heights it did was directly linked to their ability to obtain the right kind of leaders which consisted of morality, duty, and ability.¹⁵⁶

Gwageo-Based Leadership Selection Led to an Unprepared Bureaucracy and Military

A major problem with the Neo-Confucian governing system was that those that filled its ranks were not selected based on any practical experience, but rather on how well they did on a state examination that tested only their literary memorization skills. Yi Hwang commented that:

In retrospect, as I reflect on the people of this [current] age, I see that there are certainly more than one or two persons of talent or exceptional intelligence. However, [there are among them] many who have not yet advanced to the higher honors of learning [because] they have been ensnared by the government examination system.¹⁵⁷

Furthermore, Yi Hwang adds that: “Those whose scholarship is not established nevertheless praise themselves too highly and try to become heroic about governing the state without carefully considering if the time is right.” Yi Hwang could see how unprepared the majority of government officials were for their official duties and those

¹⁵⁶ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 136.

¹⁵⁷ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 101, translated from original *Chaseongnok* 1:37a – 44a, section 14: “Reply letter to Yi Sukhon.”

with talent were entering service too young and inexperienced to tackle the large problems facing Joseon.

Unlike Yi Hwang, Yi I believed the best remedy for solving the ills of the country was not to retreat to self-study in the countryside until one is an old man, but instead to allow more experienced people to apply for government service that are ineligible under the current system of qualifications. Yi I stated: “Today, the way to find talented people is to focus only on writing skills and not on morality. That’s why, no matter how much he has knowledge that is common in all parts of the world and has the best conduct in the world, there is no way to use his way unless he passes the exam.”¹⁵⁸ Yi I suggested that Confucian scholars of merit and ability should focus on teaching “the fundamentals of humanity” [benevolence/empathy], “clarifying the reason for things” [wisdom in decision-making], “moral achievement” [selfless service], and “being proficient in governing and economy” [practical skills through experience].¹⁵⁹ In addition, Yi I felt that more young people needed to be brought into the government and “those who are old but lack talent must be weeded out.”¹⁶⁰ Yi I believed that rather than making literary talent the prerequisite for higher education, the government must go back to the Neo-Confucian fundamentals of morality as the primary deciding factor for a candidate.

Another problem with the gwageo system is that military officers were also recruited based on the use of examinations known as *mukwa* which centered on knowledge of Confucian literature mixed with general classical military texts as well as archery and horsemanship. This guaranteed that scholar-officials with outstanding

¹⁵⁸ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 91. Chapter 10: “Discussion on education policy.”

¹⁵⁹ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 92. Chapter 10: “Discussion on education policy.”

¹⁶⁰ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 93. Chapter 10: “Discussion on education policy.”

memorization and literary skills yet with little or no practical military experience or knowledge occupied the highest positions of the Joseon military.¹⁶¹ Preparation for the mukwa was also expensive and could not have been undertaken by common people or yangban of smaller means. The reason was that the horsemanship component of the exam demanded that the candidate was able “to possess, train with, and bring their own horses.”¹⁶² In the Joseon system, military officials were placed below the civil officials. All government officials both civil and military were given ranks from 1A to 9B. There were three divisions of officials *chamha*: lower; *chamsang*: middle; *tansang*: high. Only *tansang* could approach the throne if necessary and could participate in state level decision-making. Furthermore, all military officers were placed under *tangha*.¹⁶³

For the most part, Neo-Confucians considered war to be an uncultured pursuit and that its actions led to immoral behaviors. The Korean literati considered military officials as a class of people who should be discriminated against and therefore faced many obstacles in their professional career.¹⁶⁴ The Joseon mukwa was discriminatory in nature because once a member of a family passed the military exam, almost never will descendants in that line pass the higher level *munkwa* (civil service exam). A ramification of this norm, one which the Chinese did not follow, was that *munkwa*-passing segments of society would almost never marry into military lines and therefore strong blood-based hierarchies appeared in the Joseon government that would greatly influence decision-making during the Imjin War. This is because top position holders in government were

¹⁶¹ Yim, “The Establishment of Literati”, 224-225.

¹⁶² Eugene Park, “Military Examinations in Late Choson: Elite Substratification and Non-Elite Accommodation,” *Korean Studies* 25, no.1 (2001): 3, <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/scholarly-journals/military-examinations-late-choson-elite/docview/220339137/se-2>.

¹⁶³ Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi (War Diary of Admiral Yi Sunsin)*, trans. Ha Tae-hung. (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1977), 163.

¹⁶⁴ Yim, “The Establishment of Literati,” 224-225.

made up exclusively of civil service exam passers who may also have brothers, uncles, or cousins that were in the top military positions since these top positions in the military were almost always assigned to civil officials and not military officers. This meant that military exam passers were always at a political disadvantage because their genealogy had no higher civil officials in it and were forced to align themselves to power structures that could both protect them and reward them.¹⁶⁵ In addition, corruption and factionalism had declined the quality of the military examinations to the point that by the 1580s everyone who took the military exams were passed and sent off to their non-specialized command.¹⁶⁶

Earlier in the Joseon dynasty King Sejong (r.1418-1450) and King Jungjong (r.1506-1544) had both commented on the declining preparedness of the military. Both monarchs considered national defense a priority and insisted that yearly military exercises be organized and taken seriously. When King Sejong pushed for regular military exercises as being “one of the most important national tasks” and met fierce resistance at court. Sejong stated “there are some officials who thoughtlessly criticize this practice [military exercises] as an example of the king’s private ambitions making their way into the public sphere without giving any consideration to the above-mentioned reality. This is nonsense which the king cannot abide by.”¹⁶⁷ Decades later the situation had only become worse with King Jungjong commenting that:

The Ministry of Military Affairs should be the ones to decide when military exercises should be conducted. However, over the last fifty years they have been restrained from taking such actions. As a result, our military, not only the regular soldiers but the generals as well, now have

¹⁶⁵ Peterson, “Royal Control of Court,” 1.

¹⁶⁶ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 69.

¹⁶⁷ Yim, “The Establishment of Literati,” 241-242, taken from the *Veritable Records of King Sejong*, vol. 63, January 15 of the 16th Year of King Sejong.

no inkling about how to go about defending the nation. Such a lack of military discipline has never been seen before. Moreover, our soldiers have grown so slothful that they now even refuse to conduct basic training for even one day. How can we then expect them to carry out full-fledged military exercises?¹⁶⁸

Another unorthodox feature of Joseon Neo-Confucian governing was that in times of emergency, civilian officials doubled as military commanders even though most of them had no military experience or even the most basic understanding of the arts of war. Neo-Confucian thinking put diplomacy and civil example above the barbaric nature of warfare. The Imjin War would starkly demonstrate the mistake of putting such ill-prepared Neo-Confucian scholars-officials in leadership positions directly on the front lines. The majority of these officials, if they even bothered to orchestrate a half-hearted defense, only contributed to a near-complete collapse of the military and governing structure of the kingdom during the war.¹⁶⁹

Even though Joseon found itself in constant periods of minor instability due to Japanese sea pirates in the south and Jurchen tribes in the north, the Neo-Confucian literati elite continued to be critical of any defense policies such as military exercises, fortification building, or increasing military expenditures.¹⁷⁰ The reality was that in the decades preceding the war, the Joseon military was perhaps at its weakest point since the beginning of the dynasty. The literati governance system became so deeply entrenched with scholarly officials with no practical know-how when it came to military preparedness and execution. Even the conducting of military exercises was only

¹⁶⁸ Yim, "The Establishment of Literati," 242, taken from the *Veritable Records of King Jungjong*, vol. 82, June 21 of the 31st Year of King Jongjong.

¹⁶⁹ Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 31-32.

¹⁷⁰ Yim, "The Establishment of Literati," 223.

reinstated by King Seonjo in 1595, three years into the war and at the insistence of Ryu Seongnyong.¹⁷¹

The literati's political power over the military ultimately came from a section of the Great Code of Joseon which stated "that only literati officials should be entrusted with the task of operating the core political organizations," which included the military. In addition, under the Neo-Confucian structure of diplomacy and the foreign policy of "serving the great" [China], these officials believed that military preparedness was a waste of resources since they would always be protected by China in the event of serious hostilities.¹⁷² They also believed that Zhu Xi's idea of just war placed Neo-Confucians in a position to morally justify or evaluate military conflicts between those termed "barbarians."¹⁷³ When hostilities did break out in 1592, leading intellectuals, even while their country burned all around them, emphasized the need to follow Confucian concepts of "virtue and righteousness as proper defense against the uncultured barbarians."¹⁷⁴ The Neo-Confucian governing elite believed that culture and wisdom were fundamentally stronger than the sword. Yim states that literati governance was based on the Neo-Confucian belief "that gaining the support of people represents the most important action a ruler can take to maintain the security of the state and assure national defense."¹⁷⁵ Both of these notions would prove false in the face of the Japanese onslaught as the Joseon army disintegrated and the people fled deep into the mountains and valleys leaving a country in chaos and emptied of all prosperity.

¹⁷¹ Yim, "The Establishment of Literati," 242-243.

¹⁷² Yim, "The Establishment of Literati," 223.

¹⁷³ Sungmoon Kim, "Making Peace with the Barbarians: Neo-Confucianism and the Pro-Peace Arguments in 17th-Century Korea," *European Journal of Political Theory* 22, no.1 (January 2023): 117, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885120963966>.

¹⁷⁴ Yim, "The Establishment of Literati," 224.

¹⁷⁵ Yim, "The Establishment of Literati," 226.

A fundamental problem with Joseon society was that it didn't really emulate its Neo-Confucian ideals to a point that the common people benefited in any real way. Therefore, In Joseon the philosophy was hypocritical in nature as the so-called harbinger of equality, morality, and prosperity for all. The promised "rejuvenation of society for the betterment of everyone" just never seemed to percolate its benefits into the lives of most people. Like all systems where power is protected at the top for a few, the Joseon government mostly devised ways to strengthen central power and crush any decent before it became a threat. The *yangban* [landowning elite], many of whom served as the governing elite, were exempt from military service and corvee duty. Whereas the commoners, the majority being poor peasants between the ages of sixteen and sixty were by law forced into military service which generally translated into forced labor for local government officials. The sons of the yangban who failed to pass the *munkwa*, could still sit for the lower civil exams or willingly choose military service as either a royal guard in the capital or assigned a military administration position.¹⁷⁶ In the period of the late sixteenth century, neither of those options were available to the commoners' offspring. This resulted in commoners resorting to willingly indebting themselves to obtain the necessary cloth tax that would gain them exemption from active military duty. They did this because military service in Joseon was nothing more than back-breaking forced labor for one official or another. Even worse was the fact that the corrupted officials would devise ingenious ways to exhort what little money soldiers had through brides to the yamen clerks. The result being that the name "soldier" came to mean "cotton cloth [*myeonpo*] so that if you called someone an infantryman [*pobyeong*], everyone thinks it is

¹⁷⁶ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 4.

the name for cloth and did not realize it is a term for soldier¹⁷⁷ Therefore, the Joseon military was a well-organized extortion-based institution designed to enrich the elite either through paying to avoid service or through labor and bribes while serving.

Another difficulty facing military preparedness was the general lack of motivation from the majority of the population. People didn't understand or care about dredging moats or reinforcing fortification walls when their own crops needed to be worked on. In addition, the majority of the population didn't believe that the Japanese were even capable to ever invade. To them the Japanese were nothing more than degenerate barbarian pirates that from time-to-time pillaged isolated coastal villages. In one letter from Ryu Seongnyong's old friend Yi No he commented: "Building fortresses is not a good idea. Samga is protected by the river, and you can only get there by ferry. How can the Japanese cross the river? Do they know how to fly? Why do you want to harass people, making them work on fortresses for no good reason?"¹⁷⁸ Ryu Seongnyong commented that during the war Japanese fortification construction was far superior to Korean methods. He criticized the fact that Korean troops had the tendency to simply pile up earthen walls or low stone walls instead of constructing palisade walls with slits for firing guns.¹⁷⁹

In addition, the morale of the common conscripted soldier was extremely low while in service. This was due to many factors including households burdens of paying a cloth tax that supported the military at that time.¹⁸⁰ Yi I commented that in the years leading up to the Imjin War the military was facing serious manpower shortages because

¹⁷⁷ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 401-402.

¹⁷⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 174.

¹⁷⁹ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 90.

¹⁸⁰ Lee, *China's Hegemony*, 46.

poor households that couldn't afford to pay the military taxes were fleeing their localities in huge numbers in fear that they would be imprisoned by corrupted officials or enslaved by debt collectors. If families fled, then other clan families were forced to fulfill the fleeing families' original obligations creating a cycle of military service avoidance. Yi I stated of the seriousness of the situation that "in the end, there will surely be no remaining people. Therefore, villages that were 100 houses a few years ago now have less than 10 in use." Yi I also issued a warning to the court: "If these evil laws are not corrected, the fundamentals of the country will be overthrown, and the country will not be able to be governed."¹⁸¹ Yi I had the foresight to recognize that these policies would lead to another future consequence: a lack of trained and available soldiers in times of crisis. Therefore, he reasoned that: "The state should be preoccupied with helping the weak and exhausted people, but on the contrary, it is trying to scatter even the people who have not yet been scattered through vicious and cruel politics."¹⁸² So in essence, Yi I was criticizing that the current leadership criteria based on solely on passing the gwageo and family genealogy was not providing officials who governed using Neo-Confucian virtues and principles.

Yi I also believed that a major problem concerning the military preparedness was found in the corrupted practices of local officials hoarding grain tax for their own benefit. Yi I commented in *Yukchoegye* that: "To make supplies sufficient is designed to expand the number of soldiers to a sufficient level. To accumulate food-grain sufficiently should be considered as the basic requirement. It is because of lack of food-grain that even an

¹⁸¹ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 74. Chapter 9: "Discussion of people's security policy."

¹⁸² Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 75. Chapter 9: "Discussion of people's security policy."

army of one million soldiers would disperse overnight.”¹⁸³ This systematic corruption was much deeper than local officials simply skimming government grain stores. The buying and selling of military posts and bribes for military service deferment was nationwide in the years leading up to the war. Yi I put forth a reform plan that called for the assigning of army and navy soldiers to defending their native places and inspecting of the military registers to clamp down on the practice of paying off officials to avoid service. But unfortunately, it was never put into action and was shouted down by the opposing faction.¹⁸⁴ Even the tragedy of the Imjin War could not motivate change. Yu Hyeongwon writing sixty years after the Imjin War commented that the military rosters were still worthless pieces of paper and that:

Even garrisons of a thousand soldiers in fact did not have a single man on duty, while the men who were assigned as soldiers worried day and night over whether they could manage the cloth tax payments and did not know a thing about shooting an arrow or riding a horse. All types of soldiers, including the infantry, ended up as names [on the rolls] of cloth taxpayers. Even the so-called cavalymen only paid a cloth tax; not one of them had a horse.¹⁸⁵

As early as 1571, when Ryu Seongnyong was transferred to the war ministry as the vice-administrator, he also commented on the lack of capable troops and the endemic corruption throughout the military and government bureaucracy. He believed that the state of the Joseon military was a real threat to its future security.¹⁸⁶ But in the decade preceding the Imjin War, Yi I as Minister of National Defense stated that 100,000 well-trained soldiers should be made available for any unexpected crisis. But instead, Yi I was accused of being paranoid and as was a central Neo-Confucian belief that “the most

¹⁸³ Song, “Yulgok’s Social Reform Thought,” 44.

¹⁸⁴ Song, “Yulgok’s Social Reform Thought,” 46.

¹⁸⁵ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 399.

¹⁸⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 134.

important element of national defense was to gain the people's heart."¹⁸⁷ Neo-Confucian governance at this point had reached almost naïve levels as court officials spouted phrases about how Joseon's cultural superiority was a shield against any barbarian attack. Thus, they largely believed that clever diplomacy and a conciliatory policy based on the Neo-Confucian belief that all people have goodness inside their hearts and can therefore be reformed through proper example and guidance. This demonstrated that the political elite in the decades leading up to the war had a strategy that was essentially the same in peacetime as during a crisis.¹⁸⁸

Back in 1582, Yi I had given a stark warning to the royal court that "the people are scattered, the military is in decline, and even the grain in the storehouse is exhausted. If by any chance a foreign enemy invades the frontier or bandit rebels arise within the country, there are no troops to defend, no grain to eat, and no food to keep in good faith."¹⁸⁹ He recommended that secondary sons (*seol*) and slaves (*nobi*) be recruited into the army and that 20,000 soldiers be trained and stationed in the capital and 10,000 in each of the provinces. All Yi I's proposals were rejected on the grounds that it would cause more damage than it would help.¹⁹⁰

Yi I's predictions would turn out correct because by the eve of the hostilities in 1592, Korea had less than one thousand professional soldiers in its entire army which were spread out in small garrisons across the country.¹⁹¹ In theory there was a large pool of reserves that could be called up in case of an emergency to man the fortifications. But

¹⁸⁷ Yim, "The Establishment of the Literati," 246.

¹⁸⁸ Yim, "The Establishment of the Literati," 249.

¹⁸⁹ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 16, 15th Year of King Seonjo. 1st article: September 1, 1582, "Yi I's appeal discussing the revision of the four incorrect and harmful phenomena in the country."

¹⁹⁰ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 76.

¹⁹¹ Lee, *China's Hegemony*, 93.

because there had never been any military exercises in living memory and registers were basically non-existent, nobody knew what would actually happen if the order was given to mobilize. In addition, the fortifications that Ryu Seongnyong had ordered reconstructed and improved upon were largely built with walls far too long to defend with the manpower that would be called up.¹⁹² When the Japanese did eventually invade Korea, Ryu Seongnyong voiced his admiration of Yi I at the royal court, praising him as a true sage for his foresight, that had not been listened to.¹⁹³ By then the southern provinces were burning and the remnants of the Joseon army laid dead or fleeing northward.

¹⁹² Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 71.

¹⁹³ Pyong-ju An, "Yi I (Yulgok) and His Thought," *The Academy of Korean Studies Korea Journal* 11, no. 4 (April 1971): 15, <https://www.dbpia.co.kr/search/topSearch?searchOption=all&query=An%2C+Yi+I+and+His+Thoughts>.

Chapter IV.

Joseon Leadership's Response to the Invasion

*The storm has swept over the whole land, even the sun and moon are eclipsed. All the prosperity that grew here is gone: It is a chaos as at the worlds dawn.*¹⁹⁴

—Jong-gil Kim

In the spring of 1592, Chief State Councilor Ryu Seongnyong was starting to feel nervous about the possibility of military conflict with the Japanese due to the failure of diplomatic talks over the previous year. Two envoys hand-delivered a letter to King Seonjo from Hideyoshi which stated:

I plan that our forces should proceed to the country of the Great Ming and compel the people there to adopt our customs and manners. Then that vast country, consisting of more than four hundred provinces, would enjoy our imperial protection and benevolence for millions of years to come... You King of Korea, are hereby instructed to join us when we proceed to [the country of] Great Ming at the head of all your fighting men.¹⁹⁵

King Seonjo found Hideyoshi's letter more ridiculous and insulting than the previous ones sent as well as being so completely outside the understanding of Neo-Confucian norms and practices that the king felt it deserved no response at all. What Hideyoshi was suggesting, to fight against Joseon's parent nation, was considered a great sin in the eyes of all Neo-Confucians. In addition, Kim Seong-il of the Eastern faction,

¹⁹⁴ Jong-gil Kim, *Slow Chrysanthemums: Classical Korean Poems in Chinese* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1987), 79.

¹⁹⁵ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 57.

one of the two envoys sent on the diplomatic mission to Kyoto in 1590, firmly believed that, “Japan was in no position to attack.”¹⁹⁶ His assessment clearly turned out to be wrong.

Ryu Seongnyong, though hoping that his envoy’s observation would prove correct, knew that Korea was not prepared for hostilities for a multitude of reasons. Foremost in his mind was the scarcity of competent commanders within the Joseon military itself. As the head of the military, he had been forced to employ senior officers that put preparations at the bottom of their list of priorities and were experienced only in fighting sporadic border engagements with the Jurchens of the north. Ryu believed the current defensive plan called the Sure Strategy for Victory (*chesueng pangnyak*) was too top heavy and inefficient. It was a hierarchical system of command where the top commanders stationed in the capital were permanently situated hundreds of miles from the troops they commanded. When an emergency occurred and a mobilization order was given, soldiers would arrive at the designated spot but were forced to wait for their commander to arrive from Hanyang [Seoul].¹⁹⁷ Ryu commented that: “However, if the general does not come and the enemy attacks, the army will scatter and ultimately be defeated.”¹⁹⁸ Ryu wanted to replace the Sure Strategy for Victory system with the traditional *chingwan* system of mobilizing local militia for collective defense. Unfortunately, Ryu’s proposal was quickly rejected with the governor of Kyeongsan

¹⁹⁶ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 58.

¹⁹⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 179.

¹⁹⁸ Seongnyong Ryu, *Jingbirok (War in Hell and Records of Reflection)*, trans. Hong-sik Kim (Paju: Seohae Literature Publishing, 2015), 44. Written in 1600 and originally published in 1695.

Province stating: “The current system has been established for so long that it cannot be altered abruptly.”¹⁹⁹

In the spring of 1592, the court sent out commanders Sin rip and Yi Il for an inspection tour of the country’s defenses. The two top commanders completed the task within a month claiming that everything was fine and offered no new ideas for defensive improvements. Ryu commented on the conduct of the two commanders tasked with the defense of the nation that “the only things they investigated were bows and arrows, spears and swords. Counties and towns were equipped with weapons only on paper, but in reality, there were no weapons at all.”²⁰⁰ Ryu felt that these two commanders did not possess the prudence and strategic insight necessary to successfully face the Japanese. Neither commander followed the Neo-Confucian philosophy of self-cultivation Ryu deemed necessary in any leader of any quality. He felt that Sin Rip was reckless and Yi Il irresolute to the point of being deceitful. Ryu proposed that the government start replicating muskets which have a more effective firing distance than Korean bows and arrows. In addition, Ryu wanted to start producing a lightweight mortar capable of hurling explosive shells called the *sunja chongtong*. Both proposals were rejected with Sin Rip commenting in a condescending way about the chief state councilor’s noticeable concern about the Japanese.²⁰¹ On April 1st, 1592, just weeks before the Japanese invasion, Ryu Seongnyong wrote:

I went home and I asked Sin Rip to come and visit. “It looks like a major upheaval will occur in the near future. If that happens, you will have to take charge of the military, so are you confident enough to stop the enemy?” Sin Rip answered indifferently: “There’s nothing to worry about.” I said again” “That’s not true. In the past, the Japanese army only

¹⁹⁹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 180.

²⁰⁰ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 1, 45.

²⁰¹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 180-181.

had short weapons. But now they have rifles. I don't think they are an opponent to be taken lightly." However, Sin Rip responded in a calm tone the whole time of the conversation. "Oh, does that rifle hit you every time you fire it?"²⁰²

Ryu Seongnyong wasn't the only leader worried about the preparedness of the military. Admiral Yi Sunsin commented on February 25th, 1592, after completing an inspection tour of southern naval stations that: "Here [Pyeong-jin] the defense condition was the worst of all the five naval ports, but since the Traveling Tiger Commissioner had already dispatched his report with recommendations for rewards, I was unable to probe deeper into their crimes. I was only struck dumb with amazement."²⁰³ Yi Sunsin was pointing out how the Western faction was protecting their appointed commanders by sending glowing reports in light of the actual reality on the ground. Since the reports were sent before Yi Sunsin arrived, he already noted that if he sent a contradictory report, it would be used against him at the royal court by the opposing faction.

Another problem in the military system noted by Yi Sunsin was the difficulty in recruiting quality naval officers because "sailors are held in contempt by other people." When he referred to other people he likely meant the yangban class which: "If they are transferred to the navy overnight to become sailors not only do they grumble with mortification for their life, but once entered into naval service their children will not be free from the same pains generation after generation."²⁰⁴ This unique hereditary feature of the navy was a major factor why the majority of naval leadership were looking for a way to be promoted up and out of the naval service altogether. Yi Sunsin who was

²⁰² Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 1, 45-46.

²⁰³ Yi Sunsin, *Imjin Changcho*, 10.

²⁰⁴ Yi Sunsin, *Imjin Changcho*, 141-142, taken from Memorial 47: "Request for Reconsideration on the Exchange of Army and Navy in Defense."

promoted as a naval commander must have also known that his lineage was likely destined to serve in the navy also unless he himself was promoted out of the military into the highest ranks of the government. This was not a prospect likely for someone like him who was by nature blunt and straight as an arrow in his ethical conduct.

How An Unprepared Leadership Lost the Capital in Seventeen Days

Before abandoning his command post without a fight, naval commander Pak Hong sent a report ahead of him as he fled north which stated: “Looking down, we saw the fortress of Pusan filled with red banners.”²⁰⁵ Pak had slipped away in fright and left his men to be slaughtered by the Japanese. In contrast to Pak, the garrison commander of Tadaepo, Yun Hungsin, had not fled Pusan choosing instead to stay and fight valiantly and as a result died in battle with most of his men. Ironically, Yun had once been dismissed for his poor administrative skills, a necessary skill in a Neo-Confucian-based military. At the moment of invasion Yun provided a brief buffer on that day for civilians to flee northward as well as many military and government officers who previously abandoned their posts. Military commander Yi Kwak, stated to his officers, “I am the commander, so it is appropriate to stay outside and conduct a pincer attack. I must immediately go out and encamp at Sosan Station.”²⁰⁶ Yi Kwak fled his fortress just north of Pusan in such a state of terror that he didn’t know where to go but sent a message to Seoul that he was intending to hold a defensive line at the Sosan Station further north. Yi

²⁰⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 186.

²⁰⁶ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 26, 25th Year of King Seonjo. 1st article: April 14, 1592, “The Japanese invaded and captured Busanjin and Busa Jeonbal and Song Sanghyeon were killed.”

Kwak did find the time though to evacuate his concubine and all her personal possessions.²⁰⁷

The Japanese continued north towards the narrow pass in Chakwon where the Korean soldiers guarding the vital defensive barrier fled in all directions when they saw the first Japanese scouts coming towards them. Pak Chin, the magistrate of Miryang, also fled to the garrison in Miryang which was strategically located behind the defensive pass. He took the time to destroy all the weapons in the armory before escaping deep into the mountains with his family. The commander of Miryang castle followed his superiors' example and left at dawn with the 1,000 pieces of cotton that he had stored inside. Seo Ye-won, governor of Gimhae likewise abandoned his fortifications and fled with the remaining soldiers feeling the situation now hopeless. When the Japanese arrived, the soldiers did not even resist as the enemy rushed in all around them.²⁰⁸

The primary reason why the Japanese were able to move quickly north from their initial landings was the catastrophic collapse of civil and military leadership across most of Kyeongsang and Cheolla provinces in the south. Virtually all of the leaders had not prepared in the slightest for such an incursion by the Japanese. But equally damning was the lack of ability and preparation found at the highest ranks of Joseon military leadership located in the capital. Before departing south from Seoul, Supreme Commander Yi Il checked the capital reserve list of those that would accompany him as readily available reinforcements. Shockingly the list consisted of only three-hundred frightened palace guards with little military experience. Even half of them were just Confucian scholars

²⁰⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 187.

²⁰⁸ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 2, 25th Year of King Seonjo. 3rd article: April 14, 1592, "The Japanese invaded the Miryang area."

that had shown up to roll call not in military clothing, but rather in traditional outfits and holding notebooks and class caps as if they were going to morning lecture. It would take three days before Yi Il even departed for the south.²⁰⁹ He left most of the capital soldiers behind judging them next to useless for battle, and instead settled on sixty cavalymen to head south with him and with no follow-up troops.²¹⁰ Sin Rip is recorded as saying that Yi Il “is not a fighting general, so we must urgently send a military commander first to support Yi Il.”²¹¹ The second highest commander of the country was admitting that the highest commander was not suited to lead an army into battle.

When Yi Il finally made it down to the southern provincial capital of Sangju, he found that the magistrate Kim Hae had already fled into the mountains. After scouring the area, they could only locate a few hundred men, mostly local farmers, and handed them weapons to guard the city walls. The Japanese easily took the city the next day and Yi Il “being chased, abandoned his horse, took off his clothes, let his hair down, and ran away naked.”²¹² Impressively, Yi Il still found the time to obtain paper and brush to send word to court that: “The enemy we faced today could be called immortal soldiers. Normal men can’t stand up to them in battle.”²¹³ When word reached the capital of the major defeat there was mostly confusion because Yi Il had just left Hanyang [Seoul] four days before. It seemed impossible that the commander could have been routed before the main battle could even begin.²¹⁴

²⁰⁹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 188.

²¹⁰ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 79.

²¹¹ Seonjo Sillok, volume 26, 25th Year of King Seonjo. 6th article, April 14, 1592, “Daegan made a request to make the minister the inspector and inspect the generals in order to encourage to work hard.”

²¹² Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 1, 64-65.

²¹³ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 94.

²¹⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 194-195.

The second supreme commander Sin Rip reached Chungju with an army of around eight thousand and was tasked to defend the vital Bird Peak just southeast of the city. Bird Peak was a natural chokepoint because it could only be traversed in single file which made it the ideal place to hold back the advancing Japanese. Rather than placing his full force on the peak, he divided them into two groups and placed half of them in reserve. The other half took positions on the peak but throughout the night many of them quietly left their posts and disappeared into the darkness not to return. The next evening Yi Il rode in from the south on a donkey barely covered with ripped and soiled clothes and his hair hanging down in long strands. Sin Rip was shocked at his former commander's appearance and quickly ushered him into his tent before the other soldiers could see him and sense defeat. Perhaps spooked himself from Yi Il recounting of his defeat or that so many of his own soldiers had already slipped away, Sin Rip quickly made the decision to abandon the strategically advantageous Bird Peak for the flat ground behind the mountain pass. With the river to the army's back and therefore nowhere for his army to flee, the Japanese army of eighteen thousand easily overwhelmed the much smaller and disorganized Korean force. In the midst of battle Sin Rip who by this point was overcome with shame drowned himself in the nearby river.²¹⁵

Kim Myeong-won (1534-1603) was a Neo-Confucian scholar who had gained fame in 1589 for exposing the Jeong Yeo-rip plot to attack the capital with his rebel army. For his loyalty, King Seonjo awarded him with the highest military position of *Dowonsu* (Commander-in-chief) even though he had no military experience at all.²¹⁶ Following the invasion Kim Myeong-won was tasked with defense of the Han River, but

²¹⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 199.

²¹⁶ Hawley, *The Imjin War*, 147.

once the Japanese arrived and began shooting at the pavilion he was situated in “he became so terrified that he lost his will to fight.” Seeing the endless lines of red banners approaching he threw his weapons into the river, quickly changed into scholarly clothes, and fled the city. The Japanese entered Seoul through the main city gate which was conveniently left wide open. By the time Kim Myeong-won reached the king’s entourage that was rapidly fleeing north from the capital he was welcomed in without even the slightest reprimand for having let the enemy walk into the capital. Instead, he was given the new command to defend the Imjin River north of the capital.²¹⁷ There Kim, rather than defend the north bank of the river, inexplicitly commanded his generals to cross back over the Imjin River and attack the Japanese resulting in a total rout. Kim Myeong-won with noticeable fear abandoned the defense of this second vital river and fled north to catch up to the king once again.²¹⁸

After the Japanese crossed the Imjin River unopposed, they chased the king’s entourage all the way to Pyeongyang which lay across the Taedong River. Once across the river the Japanese cautiously approached Pyeongyang yet again unopposed and entered an empty city through the massive gates which had been left wide open. Before taking flight for the Chinese border, Seonjo had once again appointed Kim Myeong-won the commander of Pyeongyang’s defense even though he had failed his command twice before. Shortly after the king’s departure, Kim Myeong-won threw the contents of the armory and all the fortress cannons into the large pond of Pungwol Pavillion and for a third time scurried north to catch up with the king.²¹⁹ Tragically, the 100,000 *sok* of grain

²¹⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 219.

²¹⁸ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 26, 25th Year of King Seonjo. 19th article, May 1, 1592, “Appointed Lee Sanbo and Han Eung-in and stationed them at Imjin.”

²¹⁹ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 113.

that had been laboriously built up by Ryu Seongnyong to feed the anticipated Chinese army had been left for the Japanese in its entirety like a gift from heaven.²²⁰ Though the Ming army would finally come to the rescue and push the Japanese back down the peninsula, Korea would continue to be plagued by incompetent commanders and corrupted government officials.

The celebrated military strategist Sun Tzu once said that “The Commander stands for the virtues of wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage and strictness.”²²¹ All of Sun Tzu’s listed virtues of command can be said to be foundational Neo-Confucian virtues, and therefore central to proper leadership. A core process of Neo-Confucianism was the regulation of destructive behavior through the dedication of life-long self-cultivation with the goal of bettering society through sage-like insights guiding right conduct in all situations. War represented the movement away from the heavenly balance and into a state of disorder. Even though the founding of the Joseon dynasty was a partnership between the military and Neo-Confucian idealists, by nature the two sides could never comfortably merge together well. War went against the virtues of a Neo-Confucian moral man. Sun Tzu himself was often criticized for being immoral by Neo-Confucian sages like Zhu Xi.²²²

What Neo-Confucian scholars failed to understand is that generals like Sun Tzu won wars and protected people who desired to live in peace and continue to advance along that noble goal of becoming a moral man. The great Chinese scholar-general Wang Yangming (1472-1529) did his best to utilize Neo-Confucian ideals and principles when

²²⁰ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 245-246.

²²¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, edited by Lionel Giles (Sweden, Chiron Academic Press, 2015, Ebook edition): 1:9.

²²² Noordam, “The Soldier as a Sage,” 181.

dealing with the rebellions in the south to “awaken” the disorderly people to reform themselves. But even Wang came to realize that the power or appeal of Neo-Confucian ideals did not work as a permanent solution without the threat of military force to back it up with.²²³

In the cold December of 1592, while the defeated and fragile Joseon king waited impatiently to be granted permission to seek shelter across the Chinese border, Seonghon of the Joseon King’s State Affairs Coordination Office informed Seonjo his thoughts on the current military leadership. Seonghon said that those in charge of the military and government are too used to a comfortable life of privilege. Therefore, it would be more prudent to appoint those “who are strong, aroused, and courageous to take the lead in the attack” and that “there is no strict military law, so the defeated generals are allowed to carry out their duties even after defeat.”²²⁴ In the Joseon Neo-Confucian world, a leader had already been judged as being of the highest moral character due to hereditary and educational evaluation scrutiny. The principle of self-cultivation was an open-ended road on the way to perfecting the moral man. Defeat therefore was looked at more as a learning lesson rather than a leadership flaw. But what officials like Seonghon and Ryu Seongnyong knew was that most of the Joseon civil and military leadership, all selected purely on a combination of genealogy and successful memorization of classical Neo-Confucian text, were unsuited to successfully lead a nation in war. Those same leaders that had been judged to be *hyeon* (morally superior men) had in disproportionate numbers engaged in immoral behaviors and ultimately when called upon, failed to live up to the

²²³ Noordam, “The Soldier as a Sage,” 139-140.

²²⁴ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 26, 25th Year of King Seonjo. 8th article: December 1, 1592, “Woo Cham-chan Seonghon sent King Seonjo [articles].”

responsibility and expectations that their positions under the Confucian concept of *zhengming* (rectification of names) required of them.

Chapter V.

How the Confucian Concept of *Zhengming* (正名) Influenced Decision-Making

*To rule (zheng [政]) is to set straight (zheng [正]). If you give an upright lead, sir, who will dare walk crooked?*²²⁵

—Confucius

Neo-Confucianism centers on the relationships between social superiors and inferiors with a view towards sustaining order. The Confucian idea of *zhengming* (rectification of names) predicates that people's social positions in life are fixed such as ruler and ruled, father and son, husband and wife, and teacher and student. Defoort stated that Confucius believed "that 'names' could positively steer people's behavior [because rectified or correct names] function as stable norms to measure and guide behavior." Addressing a person by their proper name such as "wife" or "general" has the effect of reinforcing the required behavior norms associated with their position title.²²⁶ *Zhengming* serves as an "indicator of the proper position of an individual" within a society. It is "about rectifying people's behavior patterns so that they" live up to the expected virtue of their given titles.²²⁷

Confucius believed that the rectification of names should not start at the grassroots of society, but rather needed to be practiced first at the top levels of the community including the king and top ministers. Furthermore, Confucius believed that if

²²⁵ Carine Defoort, "Confucius and the "Rectification of Names": Hu Shi and the Modern Discourse on Zhengming." *Doa: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (April 2021): 620. Confucius quote taken from *Analects* 12.17, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-021-09801-z>.

²²⁶ Defoort, "Confucius and the "Rectification of Names," 617.

²²⁷ Kim, "Confucianism Before Confucius," 162.

a ruler's conduct does not match his title, then all government officials under his leadership would copy his misaligned example.²²⁸ This is why The Analects is filled with references to Confucius warnings against “*xiaoren* (petty men), whose clever talk and pretentious manner win them an audience.”²²⁹ Confucius believed that *zhengming* was a key factor in the realization of social harmony and political order. If those making up society do not live up to the expectations and duties associated with their names and titles, then society would morally disintegrate, and the government would collapse.²³⁰

Confucius wrote:

When names are not correct, what is said will not sound reasonable; when what is said does not sound reasonable, affairs will not culminate in success; when affairs do not culminate in success, rites and music will not flourish; when rites and music do not flourish, punishments will not fit the crimes; when punishment do not fit the crimes, the common people will not know where to put hand and foot.²³¹

According to Korean Neo-Confucians, *samgang* (the three core human relationships) that provided a fundamental structure to human society were: “the relationship between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife.” And according to Deuchler, the *samgang*,

were reinforced by the five moral imperatives (*oryun*) that guided interpersonal relationships: righteousness between ruler and subject; proper rapport between father and son; separation of functions between husband and wife; proper recognition of sequence between elder and younger brothers; and faithfulness between friends.²³²

²²⁸ Halla Kim, “Confucianism Before Confucius: The Yijing and the Rectification of Names,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 46, no. 3-4 (September 2019): 166, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15406253-0460304005>.

²²⁹ Kim, “Confucianism Before Confucius,” 169.

²³⁰ Mark Omorovie Ikeke, “Confucius’ Philosophy of Zhengming (“Rectification of Names”): Implications for Social Harmony in Africa,” *Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies* 11, no.2 (February 2020): 129, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1041728>.

²³¹ Confucius, *Analects*, XIII, 3, taken from Ikeke, “Confucius’ Philosophy of Zhengming,” 134.

²³² Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 110.

Zhengming as a Tool of Exploitation

Deuchler points out that early Joseon scholar official Qwon Geun (1352-1409), “spoke of learning as the instrument for bringing people under control.” He advocated “concrete learning” which “stimulated the process of self-realization with the ultimate aim of finding the Way in oneself.” In addition, it regulated relations between people so that everyone in society would come to know their proper place in life.²³³ In Joseon Korea commoners were forced to wear distinct attire, follow a simplified ritual program, and speak a different form of speech which reinforced the divide between the elite in society and everyone else. Marriage between the upper and lower parts of society was also regarded as socially unacceptable, except between elite men in a secondary marriage. Commoners therefore became a hereditary “service class,” producing the main tax items of grain and cloth with no real means of moving up the social ladder.²³⁴ This structure of social positions by names reinforced by marriage, education, dialect, and norms and customs distinction was wholeheartedly supported by the Joseon elite. By the sixteenth century even reform-minded scholars such as Yi I and Toegye had the same strong consciousness of class distinction. Both maintained a belief in a social order governed by the yangban class.²³⁵ Even though Neo-Confucianism supported the principle of “serving for the benefit of people” and that holding office did not give anyone the right to feel superior, the sixteenth century yangban officials became distinguished as a separate class.

²³³ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 101-102.

²³⁴ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 4.

²³⁵ Joseph Jeong-il Lee, “Use of Neo-Confucian Universalism and Practice in Seventeenth-Century Choson Korea,” *Archiv Orientalni* 84, no.1 (May 2016): 163, <https://doi.org/10.47979/aror.j.84.1.159-187>.

The *yangmin* (commoners) became quietly recognized as a despised category, barely above the status of slave.²³⁶ Yu Hyeongwon stated that in Joseon:

We only respect pedigree [*munji*]. Because of the sad state of established custom, we only talk about how exalted or debased a hereditary lineage [*chokes*] is; we do not inquire whether the person has cultivated proper behavior or not. As long as a person is a son or grandson of a hereditary lineage then even though he may be inferior in talent or a worthless individual, his status is sufficient to enable him to reach the highest post of State Councilor.²³⁷

The early Joseon radicals wanted to solve the socioeconomic problems facing the country by addressing the mistakes of the previous dynasty. They introduced the Rank-Land System (*Rwajinpop*) which was the allocation of rank land entitled recipients to collect tax instead of the state. They believed that corrupted government officials of the previous Goryeo dynasty had been the root cause of the tax burden and believed that officeholders with strong Neo-Confucian ideals backed by the responsibility of title would properly collect tax from the people.²³⁸ Unfortunately, Neo-Confucian ideals proved unable to stem corruptive behavior of the appointed tax collectors. By using land to compensate for government service made the ruling elite into what Deuchler termed as “intermediate exploiters.” In the mid-sixteenth century the system was discontinued due to the problems arising from corruption, and officer holders received salaries in the form of sellable products such as rice instead of land.²³⁹ But by that time it was too late as multitudes of landless poor wandered across the country trying to survive day by day.

²³⁶ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 35.

²³⁷ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 137.

²³⁸ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 203.

²³⁹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 78-80.

Many were falsely arrested accused of being thieves and imprisoned with many of those dying from being tortured for confessions.²⁴⁰

Even though the idealistic founders of the Joseon dynasty claimed to be heralding in a new era of morality and prosperity for all, the opposite is what happened. The accelerated privatization of land in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries forced peasantry unable to pay rising tax burdens to abandon their homesteads and seek protection on the estates of the yangban. As a result, the Joseon government consistently experienced decreasing tax revenues from the common population.²⁴¹ Though the Joseon regulations forbade the illegal seizure of land, it had become systematic by the sixteenth century and the changing of policy seemed to do little to address the problem. Even the forced exploitation of skilled artisans and craftsmen was a method regularly used by the elite. Around 2,800 men in 130 different artisan categories were employed in the government workshops in the capital just to produce goods needed to maintain the prestige of the ruling class. Thousands more toiled in workshops around the peninsula producing surplus goods to be purchased by yangban class. Private artisans also engaged in the manufacture of weapons, agricultural tools, paper, pillows, and bedding for the ruling elite and were also occasionally mobilized by force for government work.²⁴²

In addition, both land seizures and labor exploitation were enforced under the Neo-Confucian principle that interpersonal debts needed to be paid to keep order in

²⁴⁰ Soon Nam Kim, "Disturbance of Joseon's Local Military System During the 16th Century-Background of the Formation of the Ivory Troops (Abyeong)," *Journal of Joseon Dynasty History* 73 (June 2015): 246, retrieved from KISS (Koreanstudies Information Service System), UCI I410-ECN-0102-2015-900-001839921.

²⁴¹ Seoung B. Kye, "Confucian Perspectives on Egalitarian Thought in Traditional Korea," *International Journal of Korean History* 12 (August 2008): 69, <https://www-dbpia-co-kr.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE01205678>.

²⁴² Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 29.

society. But the tax burden on commoners was so high that by the mid-sixteenth century an ever-increasing number of smallholders and artisans wanting to avoid prison or enslavement fled to the mountains or distant regions of the country. By the time of the outbreak of the war the problems with fugitives on the run had reached such a level that both Ryu Seongnyong and Kim Seong-il made official remarks to the court about finding solutions to the problem.²⁴³

Yi I for instance commented that officials tasked with tax collection were putting unbearable pressure on society and would lead to serious consequences in the future. In *Dongho Mundap* Yi I stated that “the common people are being cut to the bone. All kinds of tax without a name are being abused in every county, and the collected tax is larger than tribute they were supposed to officially collect.”²⁴⁴ When people were unable to pay their tax or rent debts their land many times passed onto the same officials as compensation. Yi I went on to explain that: “Now, land ownership is unlimited, so the gap between rich and poor is wide, and the people’s behavior is not regulated, so the *Hyangyak* (Self-governing rules of the village) has collapsed, and the regulations of the past system are worse.”²⁴⁵ Yi I insisted on implementing a Land System Reform (*Cheungjeon-je*) as a new economic system to put an end to the nobility’s economic exploitation of commoners. The idea for the reform was that all farmers would become self-employed farmers and that forced servitude contracts would be abolished.²⁴⁶ Yi I’s land reform idea likely originated from the Tang Equal-Field System (*Juntian Zhidu*) as a

²⁴³ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 222.

²⁴⁴ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 84. Chapter 9: “Discussion of People’s Security Policy.”

²⁴⁵ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 96. Chapter 10 “Discussion Education Policy.”

²⁴⁶ Hyong-Hio Kim, “Cultural Thought of Yulgok,” *Korean Journal* 12, no. 2 (1972):18, located at www.dbpia.co.kr.

way to create more taxable landholders paying a flat tax rate of 10 percent. This shift from taxing people to taxing land size is what shifted the Chinese economy successfully from a command to a market one.²⁴⁷ But unfortunately, Yi I's reform ideas largely fell on deaf ears as the court largely consisted of families of large land holders who were not interested in increasing their own tax burdens.

Another problem linked to the concept of *zhengming* and the social hierarchy problems facing the Joseon dynasty was the status of the *sool* (secondary sons). During the previous Goryeo dynasty secondary son status was never a problem because as Kye states: "Goryeo was a polygamous society in which men were legally allowed to take up to four wives." On the other hand, the Neo-Confucian Joseon society was monogamous "in which all secondary wives and their sons were legally classified as concubines and secondary sons, and thus deprived of rights enjoyed by primary wives and sons." And by 1471 were officially excluded from taking the *gwageo*. Due to the social ramifications of the new law, *yangban* refused to marry off their daughters as concubines, and ultimately were stripped of their elite status. Concubines therefore were usually supplied from commoners or slaves whose offspring could not inherit the father's *yangban* status.²⁴⁸ The result was that a large number of qualified and talented secondary sons were not allowed to serve as government or military officers.

Deuchler commented that even "Yi, who did not have a primary son, made the eldest of his two secondary sons his ritual heir."²⁴⁹ Ritual heirs under the Joseon Neo-Confucian ritual laws were entitled to receive special economic benefits such as the

²⁴⁷ Lee, "China's Hegemony," 32.

²⁴⁸ Kye, "Confucian Perspectives," 59.

²⁴⁹ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 154.

chongga (“buildings to which the ancestral hall was attached”), as well as the fields and slaves that were set aside for financing ancestral services. This of course was a privilege only open to those from elite office holding families. Even if a yangban father died poor, he was entitled to compensation from outside family members with the economic means to build the required ancestral shrine in which to perform Neo-Confucian ancestral rituals.²⁵⁰ In this way the Joseon Neo-Confucian social status system was not based on wealth, but on family social position which was itself based on office title within the previous four generations and legitimized through the zhengming stratification of names. Secondary sons being barred from taking the gwageo had no chance of participating in the government and therefore “became marginalized genealogically, socially, and economically.”²⁵¹

By the time of Yi I’s government service appeals from sonless primary wives and their families started to change the laws that allowed secondary sons to inherit ritual benefits and were by then routinely granted “appeals to rescind their late husbands’ choice of heirs.”²⁵² Yi I at this time recommended that secondary sons who had fought for the country or served in the military for over three years to be granted the privilege to sit for the civil service examinations. He also recommended that new laws should allow any slaves, public or private, that were recruited to fight in the military be granted the right to become freeborn citizens following completion of their service. Given that the sons of the elite families were exempt from compulsory military service, Yi I’s incentive program to enlarge the military and tax base seemed sensible to many in court including

²⁵⁰ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 168.

²⁵¹ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 288.

²⁵² Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 153.

Ryu Seongnyong who agreed that the recommendations should be readily adopted. But Ryu's own Eastern faction opposed the proposals, arguing that such a radical disruption of the established social order would plunge the country into chaos. King Seonjo who was always looking for stability also refused Yi I's reforms. But following the 1583 Yain rebellions on the northern border and the lack of motivated soldiers to defend the area, Seonjo decided there was no other choice but to accept Yi I's proposal. Yi I, then serving as the minister of war, detailed a plan of quickly building up eight thousand troops which included secondary sons and slaves. After the successful recruitment plan was initiated, it took only a year to suppress the rebellion.²⁵³ But the use of slaves and secondary sons as soldiers would turn out to be a one-time emergency fix only.

The third major problem with the zhengming-based system, and one that would have serious ramifications during the war, was that of slavery. According to Peterson, "Korea has the longest held, unbroken chain of slavery of any country in the world," running for an estimated 1500 years in total.²⁵⁴ An ancient myth states that slavery was first introduced in ancient Choson by the mythical Kija, a Chinese sage-hero who introduced the fundamental institutions of governance and enacted a penal code, one of which said that thieves would become the slaves of the families they had robbed.²⁵⁵ More likely, as was the case for many ancient societies, slavery was a result of becoming a war captive. In Choson though it later became a form of enforced punishment for serious crimes and sometimes debts but was never hereditary. Any slaves in bondage due to debts were freed once the debt obligations were resolved. The slave population remained

²⁵³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 133-134.

²⁵⁴ Mark Peterson, "Korean Slavery," *The Korean Times* online edition (November 5th, 2023): 1.

²⁵⁵ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 212.

around ten percent of the whole population until the early Goryeo dynasty period when a new *nobi* (slave) system was established as an official caste. The *nobi* system became a means for the government to increase its agricultural yields on government and Buddhist temple owned lands.²⁵⁶

O' Huimun, a low-level Joseon government official, commented on how "the ruling class, including the royal family and nobles, devised a different system for recruiting slaves. The so-called slave tax law, a law that passed down a slave status from generation to generation, was created."²⁵⁷ From the thirteenth century onward the slave population steadily increased with forced bondage reaching about thirty percent of the total population by the time the Joseon dynasty took over.²⁵⁸ Inheritance documents coming from the early Joseon nobility suggests that the total slave population may have even been as high as forty percent of the total population by the sixteenth century. Some scholars believe that this increase was mainly due to slave reproduction within existing populations as the government had initiated new laws to prevent the enslavement through debt obligations by then.²⁵⁹ But evidence shows that it is likely that these new laws were rarely enforced. From the beginning of the Joseon dynasty the *sajok* (scholar-officials) were able to wield considerable power during the ruling process and continuously expanded their land holdings through land reclamation. This was largely achieved through the use of slaves and the willing enslavement of debt fugitives on the run seeking protection from politically connected land holders.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁶ So, "A Theory of National Ruin," 286-287.

²⁵⁷ O', *Saemirok*, 180.

²⁵⁸ Kye, "Confucian Perspectives," 65.

²⁵⁹ So, "A Theory of National Ruin," 294.

²⁶⁰ Kim, "Disturbance of Joseon's Local Military System," 238.

There were a number of similarities between slavery in China and Korea. In both societies slaves lived as “kinless” persons without an acceptable lineage because they could never be absorbed into the master’s kin group.²⁶¹ The Koreans differed from the Chinese because the Ming tolerated mixed decent lines and even admitted slaves into officialdom. Also, Korean slavery was distinct in that “Korean slaves did not differ ethnically from their masters” and constituted “40% of the total population at some nine million people” in the early Joseon period.²⁶² This massive amount of labor directed solely to the enriching of the large landowners of Joseon would prove to be a serious weakness in times of war because a nameless, classless, landless person has no motivation to fight for a system that oppresses it.

The Joseon inherited the preexisting slave system which was largely administered by the yangban families whose members increasingly populated the government ranks.²⁶³ When the Joseon government took over, they closed down most of the Buddhist monasteries and confiscated their slaves. Rather than freeing them, the Joseon officials simply converted 80,000 of them into government slaves.²⁶⁴ The Joseon government didn’t have the political will to end slavery, but at least presented a theory of justification which placed nobi as beings within the Neo-Confucian social structure, though at the very bottom, but at least with basic human rights.²⁶⁵ This system known as *Yangcheon* divided slaves into *yangin* (slaves with rights) and *cheonin* (slaves without rights).²⁶⁶ One of the reasons why there are so few surnames in Korea to this day is because of the

²⁶¹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 407.

²⁶² Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 5.

²⁶³ So, “A Theory of National Ruin,” 296.

²⁶⁴ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 217.

²⁶⁵ So, “A Theory of National Ruin,” 307.

²⁶⁶ O’, *Saemirok*, 180-181.

slavery system. A slave would only be identified by their first name when they were registered as the property under the owner's surname.²⁶⁷ In this way the Joseon census system based on the Confucian zhengming turned forty-percent of the Korean population into non-existent people because they had no legally registered family name.

Slavery actually posed a serious legitimization problem for the Joseon government because it clearly went against the Neo-Confucian ideals of self-cultivation and moral righteousness. Kye suggests that to justify such a counter-intuitive position in their support of the slavery system, Neo-Confucian scholars of the Joseon dynasty put a "high emphasis on the usefulness of slavery as" a deterrent and as a form of punishment for immoral behavior, the "tradition of Korean slavery, and the necessity of slavery to maintain social order based on the principle of *myongbun* (status distinction)." Kim Sisup (1434-93) wrote that *myongbun* can be defined "as strict distinction between upper and the lower" and considered "the very principle [necessary] to govern a state and manage a family." *Myongbun* served as the principle ideological justification of slavery within a Neo-Confucian society.²⁶⁸ Under zhengming the relationship between master and slave was the same as the relationship between father and son or ruler and subject. And just as a king cannot deny the relationship between a king and subject, a master could not be deprived of the right to demand absolute obedience over a slave. The early Joseon dynasty officials even went so far to justify a slave as being "helpful for moral education."²⁶⁹ Even though the Joseon elite believed it a moral obligation to recognize

²⁶⁷ Peterson, "Korean Slavery," 1.

²⁶⁸ Kye, "Confucian Perspectives," 65-67, taken from *Maewöltang chip* [梅月堂集 Collected Works of Kim Sisūp] 5:3a, (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1973).

²⁶⁹ Jinhoon Park, "Rectification of the Problems on Land-People in Late Goryeo and Nobi Policy in Early Joseon," *Critical Review of History* 122 (February 2018): 233-235, <https://doi.org/10.38080/crh.2018.02.122.221>.

status distinction going so far to call it “a natural principle of Heaven and Earth.” But as Yu Hyeongmon suggested, *myeongbun* basically derived from the gap between those considered educated and those deemed ignorant. The *myongbun* system therefore cemented into existence the determination of a man’s worth based on “how exalted the official posts and rank his forbears were” and not on the individual themselves.²⁷⁰ The *myongbun* system therefore could not be easily discarded. Even when King Kojong abolished hereditary slavery in 1886, the status discrimination of *myongbun* still held firm and culturally imprisoned these newly freed slaves as being outsiders within society. Ironically, it wouldn’t be until the Japanese-sponsored cabinet instituted the *kabo* reforms in 1894 that real progress to integrating former slaves into society could begin.²⁷¹

The early Joseon elite also faced a difficult challenge when they attempted to reform the balance between commoners and slaves and the *yangban*’s economic livelihood which was based largely on slave labor. Since the same ministers that made the laws upheld the slave system, they ultimately “put personal advantage above the public good” and therefore went directly counter to the foundational viewpoint of the *zhengming* ideal of living up to the virtue of your name for the betterment of society. The Joseon literati elite even enacted laws including the *Kyeongguk taejeon* (Great Code of Administration) in 1486 that stated that if one parent was a slave then all the offspring were considered slaves.²⁷² This determination of the status of children of mixed marriages where the mother was a slave but the father was not was a clear violation of the Confucian ethical norms that put an emphasis on a father’s lineage and ancestral rites

²⁷⁰ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 138.

²⁷¹ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 269.

²⁷² Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 6.

that were expected to be performed by the father's offspring.²⁷³ In the cases where a member of the elite class had a son with a slave, the son "could gain release from the bondage of slavery but were... excluded from" any form of government service.²⁷⁴ As early as 1392 the Slave Agency warned that if slaves were manumitted they would "seek public office and marry women of families of good status, causing confusion in the social order," and that slaves were considered "the hand and feet of the *sa* [scholar-officials]."²⁷⁵

The cultivation of land demanded a large force of slaves to sustain the economic prosperity of the elite who owned them. The elite also prospered from having large amounts of slaves to do the back-breaking work of clearing tracks of new land. By greatly expanding their own production yields they were thus able to acquire slaves from owners willing to part with them or needing to sell them or trade them for a variety of different reasons including bribes.²⁷⁶ During the Goryeo dynasty, there was never a limit on the number of slaves an individual could own, and this made it possible to secure unlimited labor. The Joseon government proposed a policy to limit the number of slaves but failed to implement it.²⁷⁷

Unlike land, slaves were moveable and therefore were conveniently used as bribes and gifts as well as to settle ownership disputes. They also constituted the most valuable part of an inheritance.²⁷⁸ It was common for sons that passed their civil service examinations to receive slaves as a reward. A document from the township of Ochon

²⁷³ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 236.

²⁷⁴ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 127.

²⁷⁵ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 219.

²⁷⁶ Park, "Rectification of the Problems," 226.

²⁷⁷ Park, "Rectification of the Problems," 238.

²⁷⁸ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 206-207.

showed how a yangban son named Yon received a gift of several slaves when he passed the lower chinsa examinations, munkwa higher exams, and also when he advanced in office to become the magistracy of Kyongju.²⁷⁹ In addition, the elite added to their economic prosperity by purchasing land from destitute small landowners who didn't have the same social, economic, and political connections to survive a bad harvest year. The sixteenth century saw new heights of poverty among the peasantry due to ever-increasing defaults on high-interest loans or tax payments. They were forced to sell or seek protection from large landowners by contributing their labor for their upkeep even though they were not among the classified slave population.²⁸⁰ That would mean that likely over half of the total population of Korea worked directly for the large land-owning elite. When you factor in that the yangban were exempt from military service, this would leave only a small portion of the population in a position to be legally called up to defend the country in times of war.

The slavery system of Joseon was a glaring contradiction in the Neo-Confucian claims of ethical and moral superiority. It cost two or three slaves for one horse. And as one Joseon official commented: "How could there be any [moral] principle by which men would be exchanged for horses?"²⁸¹ But a large portion of Neo-Confucian scholars of the period leading up to the Imjin War were active slave holders. O' Huimun was an example of a master totally dependent on the labor of his nobi.²⁸² Even Yi Hwang, the most recognized and celebrated Neo-Confucian scholar of the Joseon dynasty possessed

²⁷⁹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 137.

²⁸⁰ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 134.

²⁸¹ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 218.

²⁸² Kichung Kim, "Unheard Voices: The Life of the Nobu in O Hwi-Mun's "Swaemirok," *Korean Studies* 27, no.1 (January 2003): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.2005.0009>.

hundreds of slaves. He once advised his son Chun in a letter how to properly handle slaves, warning him not to be timid or indecisive in the management of the slaves. Yi Hwang believed that by nature, slaves were obstinate and lazy, and required diligent supervising at all times. He also recommended beating lazy slaves as a warning to the others and not to tolerate claims of illness as a way to avoid work. Yi Hwang, the most celebrated Joseon Neo-Confucian scholar, was refuting his own claims that all people are born good and endowed with *ren*. Furthermore, slavery by the time of Yi Hwang and O' Huimun was also far crueller than in the past due to the nature of the work required from them to reclaim land and expand production yields.²⁸³ Scholars and yangban such as Yi Hwang tried to justify these actions as rooted in the immorality of the nobi themselves and therefore should be looked at as being an object of pity. This was because according to the scholars all nobi were essentially the descendant of a "horrible high traitor and an inhumane being," and therefore had to bear responsibility for living on the outside of the Neo-Confucian domain.²⁸⁴ The Imjin War would also do nothing to change this norm, with slavery continuing on for two more centuries.

In 1560, eleven *tongnyeong* (ward laws) were introduced to deal with privately held slaves which accounted for eighty-five percent of the rural slave population. The government deemed this large slave population enough of a threat to take restrictive action. Slave crimes had risen to a serious level and slave owners were covering up the crimes of their slaves for fear of losing their primary source of income.²⁸⁵ By 1590, two

²⁸³ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 140-141.

²⁸⁴ Young Jeon Sae, "The Contradiction Between Toegye Humanism and the View of Slaves," *Journal of Korean and Oriental Political Thought* 17, no.2 (September 2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.35161/rkapt.2018.09.17.2.1>.

²⁸⁵ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 210.

years before the war, the court engaged in heated discussions about the problems arising from slavery. King Seonjo himself seemed to not understand why the people were as he said, “so heavy in slave labor.” The court official Seonghon stated that he believed that the root of the problem lay in the fact that the demand for luxury “was several times greater” than in the past.²⁸⁶ Yi I understood far better than the king that the Joseon economy which was built upon a foundation of slave labor would lead to ever decreasing tax revenues and a lack of available manpower for mobilization in times of national emergency. The problem of slavery was at that point so beyond the acceptable ideals of Neo-Confucianism that it was common practice for corrupted officials to force regular people into servitude and even kidnap people and make them private slaves on one of their distant estates.²⁸⁷ Yi I said in a memorial to the king: “If the country becomes wealthy and prosperous, all the people will become soldiers. And so, there is no need to worry about lack of soldiers.”²⁸⁸ Yi I as Defense Minister in the decade before the outbreak of the Imjin War clearly understood how a large portion of able-bodied men, classified as slaves, were unable to serve in a military capacity at a time when the Joseon manpower was at all-time low numbers.

How Zhengming Affected Joseon Society During the War

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, fewer people of the common classes were strictly observing even the most important Neo-Confucian norms and rituals. For

²⁸⁶ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 24, 23rd Year of King Seonjo. 2nd article, April 1, 1590: “Donji Seong-hon complains about the people’s devastation and the evils of the group.”

²⁸⁷ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 23, 22nd Year of King Seonjo. 1st article, April 1, 1589: “Saving the people and the appeal of Cho Heon, who formerly impeached ministers such as Kim Gwi-young.”

²⁸⁸ Song, “Yulgok’s Social Reform Thought,” 47.

example, everyone was required to observe the three-year mourning rituals for deceased parents, but most commoners and even many of the sadaebu weren't observing the hundred days ritual. Even worse, commoners were regularly abusing the mourning period as a way to avoid corvee labor obligations and military service.²⁸⁹ When the Imjin War broke out the country was thrown into a state of disarray that "it [Joseon government] was driven to sell posts and titles of nobility to the highest bidder, further disrupting the social structure." The Joseon social structure based on the distinctions of zhengming cracked to the point that "everywhere was in confusion."²⁹⁰

In the first months of the war native "bandits," comprising of former slaves, fleeing soldiers, and the landless poor, began roaming the Korean countryside looting towns, stealing grain, and burning slave records located at government buildings. In one confrontation Joseon troops captured upwards of 3,000 bandits with 300 of those being beheaded as punishment.²⁹¹ It is not surprising that in a society where names and titles determined everything, slave registries were a common target for destruction. A slave could never be free in Joseon unless his designation as a slave without a surname was destroyed. Once his record was destroyed, he could reinvent himself and begin to live as a common peasant who was simply restarting his life in a new area.

This destruction of slave records was widely recorded in sources during the war. When the government abandoned the capital following the invasion, the royal procession looking back could see smoke rising high. Within hours the people were already plundering the royal warehouses and setting fire to the documents in the civil

²⁸⁹ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 195.

²⁹⁰ Woo-keun Han, *The History of Korea*, trans. Kyung-shik Lee (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1974), 247.

²⁹¹ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 202.

punishments and slave administration offices. The thousands of volumes of dynastic annals and diaries in the Bureau of State were also set alight. People even sought out specific residences such as Prince Imhae and Minister Hong Yeosun, who were notorious for their cruelty, and burned them to the ground.²⁹² Even some of the troops tasked with guarding the capital joined in the looting before abandoning their posts and fleeing the city.²⁹³

Again, when the king's procession left Pyeongyang to the Chinese border, it was noted that every town and village along the route had been thoroughly looted. Mobs attacked the state granaries and plundered them dry.²⁹⁴ Ryu Seongnyong commented, "After the king left Pyeongyang, people's sentiments became harsh, and whenever he passed, he saw refugees looting grain from warehouses."²⁹⁵ In less than two months the very fabric of Neo-Confucian-based civil society had broken down. Common people were openly stealing and throwing insults directly to the king himself. Under Neo-Confucian norms, this was so abnormal that the recorders of such events didn't know how exactly to frame them. For example, when the king returned to the capital in 1593, he had expected to see the people lined up to greet him in mourning dress, since many of their family members and relatives had died during the occupation. But instead, when the king looked down from his horse, none of them were wearing white. Upset at the apparent slight to his position as king, he called his minister of rites and said, "How did this happen? Have discipline and morality died out too? I want every office and

²⁹² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 212-213.

²⁹³ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 98.

²⁹⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 246.

²⁹⁵ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 1, 114.

department to address this problem immediately.”²⁹⁶ But the root of the problem originated from the fact that the king himself had abandoned his people to their miserable fate to save himself, thereby breaking the Neo-Confucian ideal expected from the title of king under zhengming.

During the winter of 1593 the number of wandering people drifting across the land seemed to be increasing at an alarming rate. Ryu Seongnyong sent official dispatches to all district magistrates and provincial governors to get them to urge the people to sow seeds and cultivate their lands. But when he checked again in spring, to his total shock and dismay, he found most of the farmland still lay abandoned all across the country. While on the seacoasts, salt farms owned by high officials lay idle, because the slaves working them had long ago fled.²⁹⁷ Near the end of the war in 1598, the king questioned why there still existed problems with having enough food for the military and population. He said: “Our country is surrounded by the sea on three sides, so fish and salt are produced everywhere.” An official replied to the king: “When evil is created by law, it is like a shadow that follows a shape, but the law becomes a shadow and evil becomes a shape, which is not only useless but also harmful.”²⁹⁸

The “evil” that this official likely was referring to was that of slavery and the institutionalized exploitation of the commoners that plagued Joseon Korea and poisoned the very Neo-Confucian ethical foundations that it was built on. The real reason why people still starved is that a large percentage of farmland was owned by the Neo-

²⁹⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 343, quote taken from *Seonjo Sillok*, 43:1a (1593.10.2).

²⁹⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 359.

²⁹⁸ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 32, 31st Year of King Seonjo. 2nd article: May 1, 1598. “Announced at Bibyeonsa to select suitable person to supervise the management of fish and salt.”

Confucian official elite and worked by slaves and indentured commoners who during the war found ways to flee in the chaos. Many of those slaves who fled their master's lands later worked as free men or found self-sufficiency on their own terms. O' Huimun commented in his diary that he had many slaves take off during the war. One entry on March 8th, 1597, states: "Doljong, the male servant whom Ina brought to Pyeongyang ran away at dawn. It's very unbearable... On the way, two female slaves ran away, and one male slave has run away again, so only one female servant is left."²⁹⁹ The war seemed to act like a rock thrown through glass; it shattered the illusion of a society firmly rooted in Neo-Confucian ideals and practices intermeshed with a stratification system that would always be obeyed. King was no longer king, master was no longer master, and slave was no longer slave. It was a system of names and titles that largely ceased to hold any meaning to the majority of the population looking to live a free life.

The war also highlighted the stark differences between the elite and everyone else and demotivated everyone from high-official down to the slaves. O' Huimun commented on November 22nd, 1594, that while he stayed home and played boardgames with his friends he had his slave Hyangbi take the homemade alcohol to exchange it for rice in town. Hyangbi came back empty handed saying he lost everything.³⁰⁰ O' Huimun didn't even bother at that point to inquire or punish, everyone knew that the system of zhengming no longer existed as before, and everyone ultimately was free to make their own decisions on how they would survive or serve.

The core foundation of the zhengming system was the recognized virtue of a position identified by a name. Being named a general came with recognized norms and

²⁹⁹ O', *Saemirok*, 299.

³⁰⁰ O', *Saemirok*, 113.

responsibilities attached to it. Though based on the Neo-Confucian virtues of *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (ritual propriety), *zhi* (wisdom), and *xin* (trustworthiness), the norms of a general had been established long before Neo-Confucianism. The problem with Neo-Confucianism is that people not suited to be generals had become generals through a faulty selection process and corrupted factional influence. Even Ryu Seongnyong who was well aware of the problems that existed in the Joseon military leading up to the war was shocked that so many Korean generals and civil officials proved so reluctant to stand and fight and did everything in their power to avoid facing the enemy. He encountered one Korean general named Kim Yong-il in Jeonju running away with his wife and children and stealing grain out of the government warehouses. Ryu had the general arrested saying: “As a general, you were defeated in battle but did not die, so it will be difficult for you to survive for that crime alone. How much worse are you trying to steal the country’s grain?”³⁰¹ In Neo-Confucian terms, Ryu Seongnyong was expressing to the general that he had not lived up to his title and was acting as though he was a lowly thief and therefore should feel nothing but shame.

It wasn’t just the high leadership that was failing to live up to their position, the common soldiers also seemed unwilling to fight for their own lands. Ryu Seongnyong thought that the problem was connected to incentives and that soldiers and civilians were not motivated to fight because anything of value captured from the enemy is just confiscated by the magistrates or officers.³⁰² The real problem was that Joseon Korea was a social system based on Neo-Confucian principles that were represented through the *zhengming* system and embodied by the ideal of *hyeon* (morally superior man) of the

³⁰¹ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 1, 116.

³⁰² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 283.

very leaders that oversaw and led them. When every leader from the king down to the captain did not properly uphold those ideals and norms, the common person only emulated what the leadership did or simply lost any motivation to follow such a hypocritical system.

Many soldiers that had fled the early battles formed bandit groups that roamed the south plundering villages and hiding deep in the mountains avoiding both the enemy and their own government. Even when government troops tried to suppress them, they would just disperse deeper into the mountains making it impossible to clear them out. The government eventually issued a pardon to the rebels as a means to stop the banditry.³⁰³ A lot of the banditry resulted from a loss of belief in the government to save them and therefore turned to their own means for survival. In January of 1594, a military officer named Yu Geun believed that the best remedy for lessening banditry was by helping the wandering and destitute people. So, he brought grain crops and cattle and distributed them to the farmers and organized the giving of shelter and small plots of land to farm, and the bandits gradually disappeared.³⁰⁴

The breakdown of the Neo-Confucian social system based on clearly defined names and titles would have profound effects throughout the war. One of the most serious repercussions for a nation fighting for its very survival was the chronic lack of necessary manpower for the military to defend and counterattack. Yi Sunsin commented in December of 1593 that: “Since the outbreak of the war, the navy conscripts have been evading the sea service with clever means by moving from place to place. Moreover,

³⁰³ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 28, 27th Year of King Seonjo. 3rd article, January 1, 1594.

“Execute the rebel, Song Yu-jin and issue a pardon across the country.”

³⁰⁴ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 28, 27th Year of King Seonjo, 8th article, January 1, 1594, “With Yu Geun appointed as Gyeonggi patrol officer, the people became comfortable, and bandits gradually disappeared.”

some vicious local magistrates do not search for the deserters who pretended to be refugees.”³⁰⁵ This meant that he couldn’t fill the manpower necessary to operate the new warships under construction nor the vacancies due to casualties on the ships in service at that time. A month later Yi Sunsin commented that due to the absentee among navy draftees, crews on watch cannot be relieved all year round.³⁰⁶ But Yi Sunsin wasn’t the only commander that was suffering from low manpower shortages. Ryu Seongnyong proposed again that slaves be recruited for military service in exchange for freedom. And on January 25th, 1594, King Seonjo finally gave in to the idea and ordered the recruitment of all freedmen (*myeoncheon*) and also gathered all slaves in the capital to be formed into military companies. But this was too little too late and seemed to be more of an additional security barrier in which to protect the king himself rather than a means of filling manpower gaps in the frontlines.³⁰⁷

Famine and disease also had a detrimental effect on manpower throughout the war. Famine and disease were not unknown in Joseon Korea, with a lot of the famine being regionalized because of corrupted officials over-taxing the locals. In April of 1590, for example, the court official Seonghon complained that the suffering in the region of Hwanghae Island was extreme and was due to the corruption of the administrator Cai Su. “The poor wander around and starve to death, and rich sell all their houses...Indeed,

³⁰⁵ Yi Sunsin, *Imijin Changcho*, 136, taken from Memorial 44, “Request for Orders Not to Move Coastal Guards, Provisions, and Weapons Elsewhere.”

³⁰⁶ Yi Sunsin, *Imijin Changcho*, 143-144, taken from Memorial 48: “Proposed Committal of Delinquent Magistrates for Trial by Court-Martial.”

³⁰⁷ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 88. After the war King Seonjo further expanded the manumitting of slaves to serve in the military as archers (*sasu*) but reversed this policy in 1603 and returned those freed slaves back to their masters.

soldiers only look at favors when choosing generals, and people only give bribes when sent a military service summons.³⁰⁸

But the famine that occurred during the war was a direct result of the collapse of agriculture based largely on slavery. Most cities and townships relied on food produced and then sold to the population. Even the emergency grain storage warehouses established by the government to guard against times of famine relied on tax being paid in the form of grain. In 1593, a major nationwide famine occurred due to unseasonal heavy rains and insufficient planting by the displaced population. Ryu Seongnyong at this time commented how “starving people gathered in my room in the middle of the night and groaned, but I could not bear to hear them. The next day there were many corpses of people who had starved to death.”³⁰⁹ By October, those who had died from famine and disease were piled in the streets of Seoul. Ryu Seongnyong commented that “the corpses piled up outside Dongdaemun gate were as high as the castle. The smell was so dirty I couldn’t even get close. People ate each other, and when they saw a dead body, they immediately cut it open, leaving blood and flesh splattered.”³¹⁰ Women and children did not travel alone for fear of being cannibalized. Disease was rampant, and many people became covered with ulcers and boils and the ditches were full of the dead and dying.³¹¹ The suffering of the people peaked in the spring of 1594, with Joseon society broke down to such a degree that even the king issued a decree condemning himself for the current situation.³¹² O’ Huimun wrote that he had his slaves peel the inner bark of pine trees to

³⁰⁸ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 24, 23rd Year of King Seonjo, 2nd article: April 1, 1590, “Donji Seong-hon complains about the people’s devastation and the evils of the group.”

³⁰⁹ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 2, 172.

³¹⁰ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 2, 288.

³¹¹ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 202.

³¹² *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 28, 27th Year of King Seonjo. 1st article, April 1, 1594, “When the people’s hunger reached its peak, the king issued a decree condemning himself.”

add to their food, even his own wife and three daughters sometimes went an entire day without eating anything while he and his sons shared a half a bowl of watery bean porridge.³¹³ He commented that by April it was even rare to see a beggar in his village as everyone had already starved to death. He also heard that in Yeongnam and Gyeonggi Province: “People often eat each other, and they even go so far as to kill and eat their immediate relatives.”³¹⁴ Ryu Seongnyong who personally witnessed many horrible scenes as he moved around in his official capacity wrote that:

Old people and children, exhausted from transporting military supplies were lying everywhere. All those who had power became thieves, and the epidemic broke out, and not many people survived. It even got to the point where fathers and sons were eating each other, husbands and wives were killing each other, and the bones of the dead people were scattered like weeds along the roadside.³¹⁵

It was not just Joseon civil society that was being decimated by famine and disease, the military also suffered greatly. Yi Sunsin in April of 1594 sent a report to the court concerning malnutrition and disease that stated: “The total deaths reached to 1,704 with 3,759 still in sickbed. Due to the large number of deaths among good sailors and innocent people, making the daily decrease of bowmen, gunners, and ships’ crews, it is exceedingly difficult to operate so many warships.”³¹⁶ Out of desperation, the Choson government allowed slaves to buy their freedom for 500 *som* of grain. Once manumitted former slaves could purchase rank or office as well where officials were given quotas of blank *napsok* warrants that they sold off in their districts as a means to collect much needed grain.³¹⁷

³¹³ O’, *Saemirok*, 140, March 1, 1594 entry.

³¹⁴ O’, *Saemirok*, 145, April 3, 1594 entry.

³¹⁵ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 2, 185.

³¹⁶ Yi Sunsin, *Imijin Changcho*, 181-182, taken from Memorial 67: “Request for Punishment of War Captains who Failed to Send Defense Guards.”

³¹⁷ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 228.

The Joseon government of course had a welfare safety net of government grain storage warehouses that were supposed to be used in such emergencies. The problem was that the government officials in charge for inspecting the grain stores were corrupted and in many cases the grain was not there. In some cases, the local officials had transported the grain stores to their own private facilities when the war broke out. In the early spring of 1594, at a time when farmers should be planting, Yi Sunsin complained in a report to the court that the War-Inspection Envoy had given the order “to close the warehouse under lock and seal, making it impossible to use them for seed grain or relief food.” In desperation Yi Sunsin stated: “If the agricultural season passes with no crop cultivation of the soil there will be no food supply for this year and the coming year, to our grave distress.”³¹⁸ He added that he was forced to recruit beggars and wanderers to fill vacancies which likely were former slaves willing to do anything for a meal. Yi Sunsin complained that his men are so hungry and weak “that they can hardly draw bowstrings or pull oars.”³¹⁹

All systems of stratification ultimately survive on the collective acceptance of the people that participate within it. The breakdown of the Confucian *zhengming* system led to a chaotic and unrecognizable society with neither king, general, nor slave fulfilling the necessary duties required of them by their appointed position in society. The Joseon Neo-Confucian system based on the leadership of the *hyeon* (morally superior man) tirelessly working for the betterment of society was simply never realized, so therefore leadership from the *hyeon* was largely rejected by the common people during the war. The

³¹⁸ Yi Sunsin, *Imijin Changcho*, 96-97, taken from Memorial 25: “Request for Order to Kwangyang Magistrate O Yong-tam to Remain in Office.”

³¹⁹ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 195.

zhengming system prevented both slaves and secondary sons from participating in civil and military life, so manpower was a serious problem throughout the war. Nor could a potential pool of skilled and talented men be utilized in any useful manner. Furthermore, the motivation of the population dipped to extreme lows and corruption and immoral behavior peaked during this time. Famine and disease broke out due to the problem of both commoners and slaves fleeing the fields and of corrupted officials hoarding or selling off grain stored in the government warehouses specially designated for use in times of emergency. As the very foundational norms and principles of Neo-Confucianism evaporated, people entered into a mode of self-preservation leading to sons abandoning fathers, husbands abandoning families, slaves abandoning their masters, kings fleeing their subjects, and generals leaving their own soldiers to the slaughter. The pillar on which Confucius claimed a society must rely on, zhengming, ceased to function during the war and therefore highlighted how the society had in fact moved so far away from foundational Neo-Confucianism that it no longer seemed viable as a governing framework.

Chapter VI.

How Neo-Confucian Interpretation Created Factional Strife

*A gentleman is open, not partisan; A lesser man is partisan, not
open.*³²⁰

—Confucius

Joseon scholars such as Yi Hwang and Yi I created a new framework of Neo-Confucianism that helped better define the interconnected relationships within society. They started to use terms such as *uiri* (proper fidelity), *kunjuseonghak* (sage rulership), *kongnon* (public opinion), *kungnon* (national opinion), and *taesinnon* (ministerial initiative while debating in court. Such powerful terms were hijacked by the factions and used as political weapons against each other. Rather than embracing such concepts as focal points to drive great changes within society, they became tools to trap and ensnare vulnerable officials.³²¹

Following Yi Hwang's death in 1570, his disciples fractured into separate factions due to differences in interpretation and understanding of what Neo-Confucianism meant in real life. Cho Mok insisted on the unalterable purity of Zhu Xi's teachings whereas Ryu Seongnyong favored a more flexible approach and wanted to look for ways in which Neo-Confucianism could be used to address contemporary issues. In the decade preceding the Imjin War, members of Seo Gyeong-dok, Yi Hwang, and Jo Sik schools formed the Easterners' (*Dongin*) faction, and members aligning with Yi I and Seong Hon

³²⁰ Confucius, *Analects*, 2:14.

³²¹ Lee, "Use of Neo-Confucian Universalism," 161.

schools became the Westerners' (*Seoin*) faction. The Westerners followed a more conservative approach to Neo-Confucian governing while the Easterners were made up of younger reform-minded members in favor of extending the king's power.³²² Yi I consolidated his position as a statesman and powerful court lecturer and tried in vain to prevent factionalism from deepening the division between the groups.³²³ Following the Jeong Yeo-rip plot of 1589, the Easterners further split into Southerners (*Namin*) and Northerners (*Bugin*).³²⁴

What is interesting is that factionalism itself was considered a Confucian moral sin since it didn't align within the recognized and accepted zhengming social structure where officials were expected to show complete loyalty to the king and not to another group or organization.³²⁵ But by the time of King Seonjo's reign, the power of the political factions had almost eclipsed that of the monarch in that any order or policy was regularly petitioned to advantage of either side with the king acting more like a referee or bored spectator. The *sadeabu* had by then perfected the use of Neo-Confucianism itself as a political weapon that could be effectively wielded against any opponent. This was because a major problem facing members of the Joseon court was that all Neo-Confucian texts were written in classical Chinese which uses many ambiguous terms and concepts.³²⁶ Interpretations of Neo-Confucian terms and concepts created divisions between groups and centered on which group was properly living up to the correct ideals and practices. The opposing factions used different political techniques to influence the

³²² Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 183.

³²³ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, Loc. 432-439.

³²⁴ Koh, "Neo-Confucianism as the Dominant Ideology," 14.

³²⁵ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 63.

³²⁶ Yoo, "A Research Methodology," 192.

king into siding with them such as presenting formal resignations or demanding the resignations from the other side. Song dynasty scholar-official Su Shi (1037-1101) commented on this predicament saying that by resigning yourself from your posting you would just strengthen those you believed corrupted and misguided and therefore Su Shi understood that it was better to be more accommodative and leave room for compromise.³²⁷

Unfortunately, compromise seemed non-existent in the Joseon court in the decades leading up to the war. Joseon-styled factionalism was very complex because it was initiated by social, political, intellectual, and ritual issues ranging from proper qualifications for office holders to how one should properly choose a marriage partner. Some factional disputes delved into meta-physical interpretations of Neo-Confucianism such as the proper understanding of *i* (principle) and *ki* (mind-matter) and would be battled in court for years coming to no mutually satisfactory conclusion.³²⁸ Debates were rigorous as they analyzed “the metaphysical theories of Neo-Confucianism to explain the moral and psychological nature of the Confucian heart-mind.”³²⁹ Members of the Joseon elite therefore lost focus on real issues and simply aligned themselves along partisan lines to gain political support from their superiors in hopes of being rewarded with coveted government posts.³³⁰

Joseon scholars also had a tendency to form self-contained master-disciple cliques who, as Yoo explains, “fought for political hegemony along with philosophical or

³²⁷ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 54-55.

³²⁸ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 238.

³²⁹ Boggrae Seok, "The Four–Seven Debate of Korean Neo-Confucianism and the Moral Psychological and Theistic Turn in Korean Philosophy," *Religions* 9, no. 11 (September 2018): 4, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9110374>.

³³⁰ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 55.

ideological dominance.”³³¹ But Joseon Neo-Confucian scholar-master groups of the late sixteenth century were unique because they interacted and debated in a more open and egalitarian way. Before Yi Hwang changed the norm, scholarly debate between master and student was non-existent. Therefore Chung and Buswell state that Yi Hwang’s first debates with his junior colleague Gobong therefore “broke this tradition for the first time in Korean intellectual history.”³³² But in general, many debates were opaque in nature discussing endlessly the meta-physical aspects that led to a never-ending cycle of debate and counter debates. An example of one such interpretation dilemma can be found in the “Four-Seven Debate” between Yi Hwang and Gobong where Yi Hwang confronted his junior colleague by saying:

You must understand that two things that look the same have differences, and at the same time, their differences arise from common ground. In order to keep things in perspective, you must realize that viewing them as two different things does not prevent them from “not being independent of one another” and that viewing them as the same thing does not necessarily mean they are “interdependent of each other.” All phenomena undergoing comparison are composed of common ground and differences. While paying attention to their differences, one must understand that they have common ground, whereas, in paying attention to their common ground, one must understand that they have differences.³³³

The problem with Neo-Confucianism was that many of its theories about the universe and human nature could not be proven without reasonable doubt one way or the other. So even though Gobong criticized Yi Hwang concerning his argument that both the four beginnings and the seven feelings are still all human emotions without distinctions, or Yi Hwang countering that he needed “to think about why the ancient

³³¹ Yoo, “A Research Methodology,” 192.

³³² Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 19-20, translated from the original *Chaseongnok* 1:50a-53a sec. 16: “Reply Letter to Hwang Chunggo Continued.”

³³³ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 136, translated from original *Chaseongnok* 1:67a-68a sec. 20 Letter to Ki Myongon (Gi Gobong).

sages had differentiated between the purely good four beginnings and the seven feelings, which tend to become evil,” in this way, the argument would never conclude.³³⁴ The result was that political factions split and then split again over such scholarly interpretation quagmires. These differences in interpretations and the resulting fracturing of the court officials into cliques created a permanent polarization of opinions that would have dire consequences during the war when officials would go out of the way to back fellow clique members over making a sound decision at a time of national peril.

The leading intellectuals of the different factions, convinced of the moral soundness of their own arguments continuously restated the same interpretations to king Seonjo hoping to sway his opinion and wield his authority and bring a possible conclusion to the debate in favor of a particular faction. Yi Hwang in his day realized the futility of such practices stating that:

There are those who lack in illuminating the teaching of the classics; instead, they darken the true meaning and disrupt the true views. This is indeed a common defect among scholars. In the old days, people diligently discussed learning for [the duration of] their lifetimes and still said there was not enough time. Isn't this because the moral principles are so subtle that it is difficult to illuminate them and easy to misinterpret, as in our case.³³⁵

Yi Hwang, though firm in his own orthodox interpretation of Neo-Confucian text, understood well the dangers of political factionalism enough that he tended to not challenge too harshly those he deemed politically powerful. This is likely the real reason he preferred to avoid political postings that put him at risk of facing unwinnable confrontations with other powerful figures. He was comfortable discussing contentious

³³⁴ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 136, translated from original *Chaseongnok* 1:67a-68a sec. 20 Letter to Ki Myongon (Gi Gobong).

³³⁵ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 117, translated from original *Chaseongnok* 1:50a-53a sec.16: “Reply Letter to Hwang Chunggö Continued.”

issues among his own students or fellow colleagues but preferred not to challenge the status quo as Yi I would do. Yi I would openly challenge those he felt were dishonest in their words or actions pushing for more competent persons to be appointed to the government. In the same breath he tried desperately to find ways to unite the factions but arguing that “public opinion alone could unify state opinion.”³³⁶

The end result was that factions imposed ever greater doctrinal orthodoxy, arguing even against long established and foundational Neo-Confucian concepts as self-cultivation and private study of the Way as being suspicious in the context of factional loyalty. Yi I commented that “if there is someone who wants to faithfully carry out his duties, many people gather to ridicule, curse, point fingers at him, call him an idiot, and in many ways block and hinder him, making it impossible for him to accomplish anything.”³³⁷ Therefore, Korean Neo-Confucianism by the time of the outbreak of the war had lost the Mencian ideal of *chakoek* (obtaining the truth through one’s own efforts).³³⁸ Neither side held a recognizable ideology and rather focused their full energies on weakening the power and control of the opposing faction by promoting or advancing their own members wielding the powerful Neo-Confucian political weapon of “perceived failings of moral virtue or ritual observance” as their weapon of opposition removal.³³⁹

When the Japanese armada set sail, the Western faction had consolidated their political dominance in the court. Over the previous two years since the 1589 coup attempt

³³⁶ Song, “Yulgok’s Social Reform Thought,” 49.

³³⁷ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 16, 15th Year of King Seonjo. 1st article, September 1, 1582: “Yi I’s appeal discussing the revision of the Four incorrect and harmful phenomenon in the country.”

³³⁸ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 401.

³³⁹ Hawley, *The Imjin War*, 66.

that had been indirectly blamed on the Eastern faction the Western faction was finally in Seonjo's good grace. The king as he had done many times in the past, would eventually counter this growth in the Western faction's influence by turning his support towards the opinions of the Eastern faction whose envoy Kim Seong-il had just announced to the court that Japan would definitely not invade. It is likely that King Seonjo used this firm declaration as a political hedge that if such a thing occurred, the king had someone to blame.

How Factionalism Influenced Decision-Making During the War

The problem with factionalism is that it created animosity between groups that prevented meaningful dialogue and effective non-biased decision-making. A lot of the disagreements centered around perceptions of moral conduct and ritual procedures concerning the members of the royal house. But the core concern really centered on status and status legitimacy as well as factional power through governmental appointments.³⁴⁰ Ryu Seongnyong had noticed how factional strife had disrupted the court to the point that the two sides were "attacking each other like sworn enemies."³⁴¹ Both the court and the king faced an unfocused and chaotic environment where small parties within larger ones did nothing but petition to secure their own interests rather than tackling the country's numerous problems. Most of the time each side sent daily memorials to the king requesting that members of the other faction be reassigned or

³⁴⁰ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 399-400.

³⁴¹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 109.

removed. King Seonjo tended to sit in the background strengthening his power by continuously playing one side off the other.³⁴²

In the years preceding the war, partisans in the personnel ministry were able to completely clear out their political rivals due to the king's suspicion and dissatisfaction of Yi I and supporters of his faction.³⁴³ This was largely due to the Cheong Yorip attempted rebellion of 1589 which spooked the king and sent him into a state of paranoid fury ordering anyone who had previously spoken in favor of Yorip punished. Documents had been found in Yorip's house denouncing the king for his misrule so Seonjo had Yorip and his aide Pyeon Peom quartered and displayed in the open market in Seoul. This incident pushed the Western faction to call openly for arrests and interrogations resulting in many scholars being stripped of their office titles, exiled, or even beaten to death. Even Ryu Seongnyong was questioned when his name was mentioned in a letter sent by Paek Yuyang to Cheong Yorip.³⁴⁴ This demonstrated that the king felt uneasy of even his closest advisors around him. Pyeongyang governor Jo Daejung, a former student of Yi Hwang, was arrested under the false claim that he had shed tears and worn mourning clothes following the death of Cheong Yorip. King Seonjo personally ordered that Jo's entire family arrested and his house destroyed.³⁴⁵ The paranoia and fury was so high that he was sentenced to death to which Jo resentfully commented in a letter to his brother: "There will definitely be public discussion after my death, but it will be too late, which is laughable."³⁴⁶

³⁴² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 128.

³⁴³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 115.

³⁴⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 150-152.

³⁴⁵ Hae Jang Park, "A Life and Thought of Jeonggok Jo Dae-Jung," *Honam Studies* 46 (December 2012): 141, found at KISS (Koreanstudies Information Service System) UCI I410-ECN-0102-2015-900-000633458.

³⁴⁶ Park, "A Life and Thought of Jeonggok Jo Dae-Jung," 139.

When Hwang Yun-gil (1536-1600) of the Western faction and Kim Seong-il (1538-1593) of the Eastern faction returned from their diplomatic mission to Kyoto in the early spring of 1591, the king met Seong-il privately and asked: “Your opinion is completely different from your boss’s. What are you going to do if war breaks out?” King Seonjo was forcing Kim Seong-il to clearly state his position without any ambiguity. The intense factionalism of the Joseon court had created a system where even the king was hedging his bets. If war didn’t break out, he could use Kim’s statement against the Western faction to tone down their recently growing power, and if in the unlikely event that the Japanese did in fact invade Kim Seong-il and the Eastern faction would pay a political price and ultimately be blamed. This type of environment forced all players to seek protection under the wings of their factions and zealously follow the faction line. Kim Seong-il would respond in private to the king: “Yun Gil’s words were so strong that I deliberately said that because I was afraid that if I made a mistake, the public sentiment in the country would be shaken,”³⁴⁷ Kim Seong-il was stating that even though he was publicly supporting his faction’s position that the Japanese were no real threat, he personally might agree with his boss but wanted to prevent panic. Kim Seong-il was also hedging as he clearly had the sense to understand that the king was trying to corner him. By that time, everyone knew it was far too late to properly prepare for war, so the members of the court did their best to solidify themselves under the warm protective embrace of their own faction and waited to see what would happen. When earlier in the year court official Cho Heon had spoken of his personal concern about the Japanese, he wasn’t just shouted down but accused of treachery and charged with wanting to stir up

³⁴⁷ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 1, 36-37.

public fear.³⁴⁸ So in this light, Kim Seong-il faced political repercussions from his own faction if he had supported Hwang's opinion of imminent Japanese aggression. In Joseon politics it was better to face the wrath of the king than the collective power of one's own faction. Most court officials knew that even if the king had them dismissed from a position, it was more than likely one's own faction would eventually convince the king for the disfavored official's reassignment through the effective use of daily petitioning. Whereas if the faction decided that you were finished, you really were finished without their support.

A major problem with Joseon factionalism was that unqualified people were constantly promoted to high positions in the government and military due to factional loyalty ties. Yi Sunsin commented on one such incident in 1597 when Kim Ok-chu received a promotion far exceeding his experience and ability. Yi Sunsin said that Kim "is only qualified as a captain and is not worthy to be a Navy Commander, yet he was commissioned as Commander by the favor of Kim Ungnam, Left State Councilor in the royal court. Can it be said that there are men of capability in the royal court today? I can only sigh, for the times do not seem right for me or our country."³⁴⁹ Even though the promotion of Kim Ungnam was done through factional favoritism as Yi mentions, he himself was also promoted through the same factional mechanisms.

Factionalism Influenced the Promotion and Demotion of Yi Sunsin

The Chinese general Sun Tzu once said: "The general who advances without coveting fame and retreats without fearing disgrace, whose only thought is to protect his

³⁴⁸ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 55.

³⁴⁹ Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi*, 308-309.

country and do good service for his sovereign, is the jewel of the kingdom.”³⁵⁰ Yi Sunsin can be considered one of those rare “jewels of the kingdom.” The fact that Yi Sunsin largely went unrecognized before the war and was never recommended for promotion in his first ten years of military service speaks to the state of the Joseon military at the time.³⁵¹ Ryu Seongnyong once commented that ultimately the art of war “depends on the commander’s abilities. From that perspective, there is no need for a thousand words or ten thousand strategies; only one outstanding general is important.”³⁵² Yi Sunsin would prove to be one of the few military commanders to stand up to the Japanese and would prove instrumental in stemming the enemy’s western advance to secure a sea route and control over Joseon’s main agricultural areas of Cheolla province.

A few years before hostilities broke out with Japan, King Seonjo had asked the officials for recommendations for military officer promotions. Yi Sunsin was put forward by the Eastern faction as a man of great integrity who had distinguished himself fighting the northern Jurchens.³⁵³ Yi Sunsin demonstrated a deep well of responsibility and honesty that followed him throughout his career as a military officer. Ryu Seongnyong told of an incident where a military official named Seo-ik wanted to recommend a friend to a position but Yi Sunsin, who was the training center’s director, refused to do so and later faced serious consequences because of it. When Yi Sunsin was imprisoned under false charges the jailer told Yi Sunsin’s nephew: “If you use a bribe, you can avoid this crime.” When Yi Sunsin heard this, he became visibly angry and shouted at the jailor: “If

³⁵⁰ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, edited by Lionel Giles (Sweden: Chiron Academic Press, 2015, Ebook edition), 10:24.

³⁵¹ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 1, 40-41.

³⁵² Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 2, 237-238.

³⁵³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 176.

you die, you are dead. How can you hope to live by doing something that is against morality?”³⁵⁴ Hearing of this incident, Ryu Seongnyong had arranged for Yi Sunsin to be further promoted and sent to the most important and vulnerable sector in Korea which was the southern province of Cheolla to serve as military aide to the governor. Considering his many years of distinguished service, Ryu Seongnyong believed that Yi Sunsin deserved a much higher rank and moved him up to the junior sixth rank.³⁵⁵

During the majority of Yi Sunsin’s career, he and most other people in the military did not know that it was Ryu Seongnyong quietly guiding his advancement up the ranks and protecting him from the Western faction’s growing effort to have him removed. Very few people, including Yi Sunsin, knew that Seongnyong had been a schoolmate of Yi Sunsin’s older brother Yosin at the Eastern Academy in Seoul. They had been neighbors living in the same area at the foot of Namsan Mountain while they were studying together. It was at that time that Yosin had told stories about the bravery of his younger brother. Later when Yosin was serving as magistrate of Sangju, he mentioned to Seongnyong that Sunsin was an officer at the Military Training Command. Around the same time, someone from Seongnyong’s faction mentioned that the minister of war had wanted to make Sunsin his son-in-law by giving him a daughter born of his concubine. Sunsin refused saying: “I’ve just entered government service. I don’t want it to appear that I’m seeking promotion by making a connection with a powerful family.”³⁵⁶ This type of behavior was by then very contrary to the norm, as promotion through connection was the preferred way to move up in rank because it offered a degree of

³⁵⁴ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 2, 220.

³⁵⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 176.

³⁵⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 176-177.

personal protection. Yi Sunsin's integrity impressed Ryu Seongnyong so much that after receiving word that Yosin had suddenly died, he likely felt naturally obligated to take the younger and very vulnerable brother under his wing. Years later, Ryu Seongnyong heard that Yi Sunsin had taken into his house the wives and children of both his deceased brothers. Some criticized Yi Sunsin saying he was breaking the law by taking too many wives to which Yi emotionally replied he simply could not bear the thought of abandoning his brothers' children.³⁵⁷

When Seongnyong was serving as *Yeonguijeong* (Chief State Councilor), the highest civil position in Joseon, he sent Yi Sunsin a copy of his own book titled *Defensive Strategies for Increasing Enemy Losses* (*Chungson cheonsu pangnyak*) which is mentioned in Yi Sunsin's personal diary in the entry for March 5th, 1592. He wrote: "The strategies in this book are the best that I have found since antiquity."³⁵⁸ He understood from reading the book what Seongnyong wanted him to do in case of war with Japan – cut off Japanese supplies and reinforcements by blocking the sea lanes. Yi Sunsin expressed in his diary that it was a very useful book that gave "explanations on the land and sea battles with fire attacks for sure victory. I enjoyed it, because it was an eye opener."³⁵⁹ Yi Sunsin took these concepts and developed both the strategies and ships needed to make it reality.

At this exact time, the Joseon government was finally getting serious about the possible Japanese invasion in 1592. Ryu Seongnyong saw the opportunity to promote Yi Sunsin to the position of naval commander of eastern Cheolla province which instantly

³⁵⁷ Deok-il Lee, *Leaders in Difficult Times: Ryu Seongnyong* (Ilsan: Wisdom House Co. Ltd. Publication, 2012), 85.

³⁵⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 262-263.

³⁵⁹ Yi Sunsin, *Imjin Changcho*, 11-12.

moved him up another seven ranks. Even though the king accepted, the censor general office objected and felt that both Ryu Seongnyong and Yi Susin's call for committing precious resources to building up the navy's strength was futile since it was a commonly held belief that the Japanese possessed a weak and inexperienced navy. They wanted to put all effort into strengthening land defenses to which Seongnyong responded: "They must be stopped at sea and prevented from landing. That is the best strategy, and to defend our sea lanes, there is no one more capable than Yi Sunsin." Turning to the king, Seongnyong said: "An artisan intent on doing a good job sharpens his tools first."³⁶⁰ Ryu Seongnyong had made a keen observation that Joseon's sharpest tool in its possession was Yi Sunsin and his navy.

In the summer of 1592, while the king fled northward and the country burned and bled in all directions and the Joseon military crumbled, the only decisive victories to be had were produced by Yi Sunsin alone. In the Battle of Tanhangpo all Japanese warships were destroyed by Yi Sunsin's fleet.³⁶¹ On June fourteenth, Yi Sunsin returned to his headquarters at Yosu after winning a series of battles from Okpo to Yulpo. After restocking his provisions, he immediately set sail for the Noryang strait to join forces with Won Kyun and Yi Okki. Upon meeting the two commanders, they discussed strategy with Won saying that they should sail directly to Kyonnaeryang and attack without hesitation. But Yi Sunsin knew that area had shallow water with many hidden rocks and so he rejected it outright. A verbal quarrel broke out between the two commanders with Yi Sunsin stating: "You don't know the art of war. You will definitely

³⁶⁰ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 176-177.

³⁶¹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 266.

lose the battle fighting that way.”³⁶² Yi Sunsin prevailed, and the battle plan preceded in accordance with Sunsin’s strategy resulting in a series of major victories for the Joseon navy that summer.

Yi Sunsin was a learned general who as Ryu Seongnyong describes “spent all day and night studying battles with his generals, and no matter how low their military rank was, anyone was allowed to come and talk freely about anything military-related at any time.”³⁶³ He was a flexible and open-minded commander who in the summer of 1593 sent a report to the court explaining that he had seized many Japanese guns and had them tested for function and power. With the help of some blacksmiths, he had reproduced and sent five of these weapons to the court with the recommendation that “the royal court will command head officials in each province to produce guns after this model.”³⁶⁴ Another example of his creative ingenuity that directly influenced military operations was the setting up of military farms for self-sufficiency. He expanded salt farming, employing local residents and refugees, and collecting fees from boats carrying goods over the sea. With the increase in revenue, he used the proceeds to build more turtle boats and warships.³⁶⁵ Yi Sunsin’s genius was that he was the only Joseon commander always developing ways for his fleet to be self-sufficient which meant that in times of war it wasn’t affected by the central government’s logistical weaknesses. Yi Sunsin could finance and build his own boats, produce his own gunpowder and guns, and grow his own food.

³⁶² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 267.

³⁶³ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 2, 197.

³⁶⁴ Yi Sunsin, *Imjin Changcho*, 110, taken from Memorial 31: “Report on Firearms.”

³⁶⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 393.

How Factional Interference Almost Lost the Joseon Navy

In the first days of the invasion, Pak Hong and Won Kyun, the naval commanders of eastern and western Kyeongsang Province, fled in fright at the outbreak of the war making no attempt to stop the invasion. A show of force at this time would have at the very least caused a pause or even disrupt the landings all together but they didn't even do that. Instead, Commander Won Kyun decided to destroy most of his ships, artillery pieces, and weapons before he fleeing the scene, stating later that he did this to prevent them getting into enemy hands.³⁶⁶ The ten thousand sailors and soldiers under his command also disintegrated and fled inland seeking refuge in the mountains and valleys. Trying to cover himself, Won sent messages to Yi Sunsin requesting urgent reinforcements even though he had already burned his own ships and therefor was in no position to reengage the enemy.³⁶⁷ Yi Sunsin sent Won a reply that stated: "Each soldier is given a role and mission. Therefore, until the king ordered command to me, I won't cross the line."³⁶⁸

Yi Sunsin observed that sometimes Won fought hard but for the sole sake of collecting heads for rewards and not for winning battles. After and sometimes even during battles, Won's ships would be busy collecting Japanese bodies from the water to take the heads. Won also had a serious drinking problem that turned him into an unbearable and abusive person to be around. Sunsin commented that when Won was heavily drunk he had the tendency of "exciting the anger of all sailors on board. His mean and absurd behavior was beyond description."³⁶⁹ On one occasion Won had ordered one

³⁶⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 200.

³⁶⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 263.

³⁶⁸ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 1, 125-126.

³⁶⁹ Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi*, 27.

of his clerks to the mainland to purchase grain. In the clerk's absence Won Kyun attempted to seduce the clerk's wife, but the woman was able to jump out of his malicious embraces. The clerk even told Yi Sunsin that he believed that Won Kyun was corrupted to the core and "the cargoes of his bribes in transit continue their procession on the roads leading to Seoul."³⁷⁰ Even O' Huimun in his diary commented that on the evening of June 20th, 1595, he had seen Won Kyun as he "passed by here while drunk and being supported. He was escorted back and forth."³⁷¹

Won Kyun was also a coward and many men under his command recognized this trait. Yi Sunsin of course recognized this early in their professional relationship but the full scope of Won's cowardness would only be fully realized during the war. Following a battle off the coast of Hansan Island near Pusan on September 10th, 1592, more than four hundred Japanese who had escaped the sinking ships, many wounded by arrows, took refuge on a small island to await rescue. Yi Sunsin explained that the Japanese were "caught like birds in a cage and within ten days they would have starved to death."³⁷² Yi Sunsin had asked Won Kyun to surround the stranded Japanese and kill them off if they failed to surrender. Frightened by the prospect that a Japanese rescue force might show up, Won quickly sailed off allowing the Japanese time to construct rafts and escape to Koje Island.

After Yi Sunsin received a promotion that placed him higher, Won Kyun sent memorials to the court stirring up enough concern that investigators were sent down to determine if the two commanders might in any way undermine the war effort. The

³⁷⁰ Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi*, 268.

³⁷¹ O', *Saemirok*, 210.

³⁷² Yi Sunsin, *Imijin Changcho*, 76, taken from Chapter 12: "Escape of Defeated Soldiers and Sailors."

investigators reported their findings, and this divided the court into their subsequent factions.³⁷³ Won Kyun had two powerful connections in Yun Tusu and Yun Kunsu, two brothers who were the leaders of the Western faction. Through the Yun brothers, Won gained leverage that reached the ears of the king. The Western factions consistent complaining and questioning of Yi Sunsin's perceived misconduct based almost solely on reports from Won Kyun began to affect the king. One day, Seonjo said to Ryu Seongnyong: "Don't you think that Yi Sunsin has fallen asleep on his job these days?" Surprised by the king's accusation, Seongnyong replied: "To me, he is the most outstanding commander we have, army or navy."³⁷⁴ By this time, many in the court even outside the Western faction came to view Yi Sunsin's upright and strong character as a liability and more often than before even praised Won Kyun.³⁷⁵

On another occasion the Border Defense Council submitted a report that recommended that one of the two commanders should be transferred. King Seonjo by this time had completely turned negative on Yi Sunsin and stated: "In my opinion, Yi Sunsin is playing boss. He is probably in the wrong and should be transferred. If he leaves, then Won Kyun should take his place, and some other person can then take Won Kyun's place." But the court may have understood the possible military ramifications of such a move, and going against their personal dislike of Yi Sunsin, agreed that Won Kyun should be transferred. Subsequently Won was removed from his post in the navy and given the command of Chungcheong's provincial army. Feeling resentful, Won Kyun

³⁷³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 393-394.

³⁷⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 394, quote taken from *Seonjo Sillok*, 57:33a (1594.11.28).

³⁷⁵ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 28, 27th Year of King Seonjo. 7th article, December 1st, 1594: "Kyeongsang Ususa, Won Gyun was reappointed as Chungcheong Jeoldosa."

took it out on his men by releasing his soldiers early so that they could return to their farms and pay him in beans from their harvest. If they didn't compensate him, they were unjustly punished with a few even dying prompting loud complaints from across the province. The Office of the Inspector General even recommended that Won Kyun should be dismissed altogether but the king refused saying: "In times like these, we must not chastise a distinguished general." Instead, the king gave Won another promotion making him military commander of Cheolla province and even rewarded him with a fine horse from the Royal Stable to go with his appointment. It is likely that King Seonjo was trying to get rid of Yi Sunsin, by then the country's most celebrated war hero, by promoting Won. Yi Sunsin's successes were becoming a sore reminder of the king's own failures and shortcomings.³⁷⁶

In the autumn of 1597, information from a Japanese spy named Yozira claimed that Kato Kiyomasa had arrived on Tsushima Island with seven thousand troops and planned to land them at Pusan as soon as the winds changed. The spy who worked as an interpreter for Konishi Yukinaga stated that his master wanted the Korean navy to stop Kato's fleet. The rivalry between the two Japanese commanders was by then well-known and going against Ryu Seongnyong's suggestion of caution, the king sent an order to Yi Sunsin to inform him of the information and to develop a plan of attack. But Yi Sunsin flatly refused because such an attack would expose them to a deadly counterattack. When the king heard that Yi Sunsin had failed to attack Kato's fleet which had docked safely in Pusan, he was deeply upset stating to the Hundred Officials: "This naval commander on Hansan Island is too complacent. He couldn't even be bothered to get out of bed to deal

³⁷⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 395.

with it.” The assembled officials led by the Western faction began to loudly denounced Sunsin and called for his immediate arrest. Ryu Seongnyong replied: Where we are right now is critical. If we lose Hansan Island by replacing the commander, the defense of all our territory will start to unravel, beginning with Cheolla.” The next day the king sent a royal messenger with a warrant for Yi Sunsin’s arrest and to replace him with Won Kyun.³⁷⁷

The king and his ministers didn’t suspect that they had fallen into a cleverly devised trap set by Konishi Yukinaga, who looked to have Yi Sunsin removed by any means available. Yi Sunsin was arrested, tortured, and then was released from prison with orders to report to the southern military camp to serve the remainder of the war as a common soldier. As he headed south a messenger arrived telling him of his mother’s sudden death and at his lowest point wrote: “All I could conceive was that I had better die soon.”³⁷⁸

It's hard to fathom how this situation could have transpired at a time like that. But Joseon’s most able commander was demoted to the rank of conscripted soldier because he appeared to be tardy in his approach to the war. Yi Sunsin’s arrest and demotion is the best example of what happens when factionalism is out of control and balanced reason is in short supply. Yi Sunsin had demonstrated to his men and superiors both his inborn ethical virtues of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi*, and *xin* claimed by Neo-Confucian scholars as being the most important in selecting a leader as well as a commander, one of the few in the war, that had actually proven himself successful in numerous engagements with the Japanese. He was a commander that had won the hearts of the nation because of his recognized

³⁷⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 396-398.

³⁷⁸ Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi*, 261.

moral nature and ability to destroy the enemy that had cost so many innocent lives. He lived and worked with his men on the front lines of the war rather than far away in the safe confines of the court making ill-informed judgements based on hearsay and gut feelings. Yi Sunsin was one of the few elites that embodied the norms and principles of Neo-Confucianism as a life philosophy of self-development, ethical living, and selfless duty, even at the cost of one's own life in upholding what is morally right.

On the other hand, when Won Kyun took command of the navy, he purged all the officers loyal to Sunsin, which constituted the majority of talented veterans, and then spent his days drinking and womanizing. When his subordinates took issue with his conduct, he had them publicly whipped causing the overall morale of the navy to plummet to all-time lows. When Won received the order to engage the Japanese the new commander continued to make elaborate excuses of why he couldn't sail out. But Supreme Commander Kwon Yul suspected correctly that Won was needlessly delaying, ironically being the same charge that Won had accused Yi Sunsin of. Kwon ordered Won to his headquarters where he was berated and flogged. Enraged and humiliated, Won began to drink even more heavily and avoided any contact with his officers. When he received information that the Japanese had assembled once again, he finally led his entire fleet straight towards Pusan as Japanese scouts on the hilltops sent signals of its progress. After an exhausting day of chasing a lone Japanese decoy ship, nearing dark, Won ordered the fleet to continue the pursuit even though the men were so fatigued they could barely handle the oars.³⁷⁹ Then nearing dusk Won's entire fleet was finally ambushed by a much larger Japanese fleet that had been patiently waiting to crush them. Rather than

³⁷⁹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 401-402.

fighting at the head of his navy, Won fled to a nearby island, climbed a hill and proceeded to get drunk while sitting under a tree. Before passing out he told those with him that: “We have death before us and that is all. There’s no need for more talk!”³⁸⁰ That was the last that was ever heard of Won Kyun, Supreme Commander of the Joseon navy.

The scale of Won Kyun’s defeat was unprecedented in Korean history. In one night, the entire fleet of 134 ships was destroyed, which Yi Sunsin had painstakingly built over the years since the invasion of 1592 when Won had burned most of the original first fleet. The news was so profoundly shocking that all the ministers and councilors when first hearing it in court remained completely silent, not knowing what to say. Annoyed the king finally shouted: “Why are you keeping so quiet? Are you going to let things stand and say nothing?” Acting as if he was not the one who ultimately issued Yi Sunsin’s arrest and Won’s appointment, King Seonjo demanded that the Western faction take responsibility for slandering Sunsin and recommending Won. Without hesitation everyone gathered quickly recommended that Yi Sunsin be reinstated to the command of the navy.³⁸¹

When the Royal Supreme Commissioner Yi Won-ik arrived with the king’s letter of reappointment Yi Sunsin read it. The royal letter expressed the king’s regrets that in his “lack of benevolence, I have brought us to this shameful footing - what can I say? What can I say?”³⁸² Yi Sunsin wasted no time and with only one officer he rode down to Cheolla “passing through rugged mountain paths day and night.”³⁸³ At Suncheon, he

³⁸⁰ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 240.

³⁸¹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 402.

³⁸² Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi*, 271.

³⁸³ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 2, 204.

found the town completely empty except for a lone Buddhist monk named Hyehui whom took responsibility to guard the discarded armory. Sunsin gave Hyehui a written appointment as a Volunteer Captain of monk soldiers and ordered him to bury the weapons that had been abandoned by the army commander in a new underground vault.³⁸⁴ Passing through Changhung, he caught the Provincial Inspector and his men stealing the grain intended for distribution to the army and navy and had them arrested on the spot.³⁸⁵

Receiving news from Yi Sunsin of the state of the navy in which only twelve ships remained, the king advised that the remaining sailors should be absorbed into the army, and the Western faction supported the king's proposition. Collectively the king and court wanted to just quietly bury their embarrassing mistake in backing Won Kyun by eliminating the entire navy itself. Or perhaps they all feared Yi Sunsin's success more than his failure but when Ryu Seongnyong heard of this he was utterly appalled because he felt this was the surest way to permanently wound Yi Sunsin by denying his command of what was left of his destroyed navy. And so, Ryu Seongnyong submitted his resignation in protest feeling complete disillusionment with the politics of the court and for where it had brought them to this point. But the king refused and Ryu Seongnyong immediately sent a message to Yi Sunsin explaining the insanity of what the government wanted to do with the remnants of the navy. In complete shock Yi Sunsin sent an appeal to the king:

Your Majesty, I write to inform the court that we still have twelve ships, and your humble subject Yi Sunsin is not dead yet. During the five and a half years since the start of the war, the Japanese enemy has not dared to approach Cheolla and Chungcheong directly, because our navy has always

³⁸⁴ Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi*, 298-299.

³⁸⁵ Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi*, 302.

controlled the sea lanes. Heaven has now placed at least twelve ships in your subject's hands, and we are ready to sail out and risk our lives knowing that we can win any fight. Your Majesty's order to scuttle the navy can still be withdrawn.³⁸⁶

At the same time, Yi Sunsin received intelligence that a Japanese flotilla was moving towards Myeongnyang, a narrow strait between Chin Island and the mainland. Without waiting to even hear the court's decision on the navy, Yi Sunsin gathered his tiny fleet and prepared his attack in the strait.³⁸⁷ Yi Sunsin knew that this was a suicide mission because the odds were so amazingly disproportionate, and he decided to not hide the reality of the situation to his gathered men. Speaking with emotion he said: "We are under orders of the King. Since the situation has reached to this extremity we must resolve to die together. Why should we hesitate to repay the royal bounty with our glorious deaths. There is only nothing - victory or death!" Deeply moved, his officers and men hailed, "Long live our Admiral!"³⁸⁸

On November 2nd, 1597, Yi Sunsin's tiny fleet was able to destroy 31 out of 133 enemy ships while sustaining only minor damage to their thirteen ships. When Sunsin's victory was reported to the court in Seoul, the response from the king and his ministers was subdued and according to the court records, everyone, including the king seemed uncomfortable with Sunsin's victory because as Ryu Seongnyong feared, it placed all of them in an uncomfortable position. It is possible that the king felt that the circumstances that surrounded this entire affair of Yi Sunsin's removal and the destruction of the navy would be known to the Ming who may push for the Joseon king's eventual impeachment.

³⁸⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 404.

³⁸⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 405.

³⁸⁸ Yi Sunsin, *Imijin Changcho*, 226, taken from *Biography of Admiral Yi Sun-sin* By Yi Pun (Yi Sun-sin's nephew) from *Yi Chungmu-kong Cheonso* vol. IX.

About a month earlier, Xing Jie, the Chinese minister of war, had submitted a memorial to the emperor addressing the failure and incompetence of the king and his subjects and sent a copy to the Joseon court. The king, always sensitive to any criticism felt resentful and depressed with his own political prospects. When Ming Logistics Commissioner Chen Deng congratulated King Seonjo on Yi Sunsin's amazing victory, the king rather than praising Yi Sunsin's victory responded that "our small success in reshaping ourselves to a certain extent must also be indebted to his grace. [Ming Emperor] So, I can hardly refrain from expressing my gratitude."³⁸⁹

On December 15th, 1598, at the Battle of Noryang, Yi Sunsin was struck by a Japanese bullet. As people helped move him inside, he knew that he was dying and said to his nephew Wan: "The fight is urgent right now. Don't let people know that I'm dead."³⁹⁰ Wan put on the general's armor and continued to lead the fight to a victorious end. When the soldiers heard of Yi's death they all "fell down and wept so loudly that the sea rang."³⁹¹ It was said that the sea also turned red with the blood of the Japanese with the Ming general Chen Lin later estimating that around 20,000 Japanese were killed in the battles at Suncheon and Noryang.³⁹² When King Seonjo was first told of Yi Sunsin's great victory he didn't want to believe it and coldly stated that: "The theory that the naval forces won the battle seems to be an exaggeration."³⁹³

By the end of the war the Joseon court had become so bitterly divided that most decision-making had come to a standstill. One faction accused General Kyungshin of

³⁸⁹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 407.

³⁹⁰ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 2, 217.

³⁹¹ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 2, 218.

³⁹² Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 271-274.

³⁹³ Lee, *Innovative Leaders in Difficult Times*, 392, taken from *Seonjo Sillok*, February 2, 1598, article 32.

collecting bribes from soldiers and for using spies to gather information on civil servants to blackmail them. They accused him of plotting a coup to gain power and ordered the king to have him arrested. Days went by with the two sides screaming at each other until it was discovered that the information had been falsely fabricated and instead of putting the matter to final rest it just sent the court into a bigger frenzy.³⁹⁴ Pointing to the disarray, newly appointed chief state councilor Yi Wonik said to the king:

When it comes to factions, there were Easterners and Westerners at the start, but after the Westerners withdrew, the Easterners split into Southerners and Northerners, and the Northerners split again into Greater Northerners and Lesser Northerners. If they keep feuding like this, there will be no distinction between high and low, and I cannot imagine what the consequences will be for our protection of the state.³⁹⁵

Yi Wonik wanted to remind the king of the difference Seongnyong's recent departure from the court had made. While he was in command, the court had fought, but only rarely had it lost its focus on the task at hand. Factionalism was like a cancer eating away at the heart of the government. Its members simply looked for the destruction of the other side and failed to understand that the country had almost plunged into the oblivion of non-existence. And the threat was not gone yet. By then Yi Sunsin was dead, and Ryu Seongnyong had been banished from court, blamed for not preparing properly for a Japanese invasion. Confucius had long ago warned of the destructive nature of factionalism because it went counter to the virtues of ethical governing. Neo-Confucianism in Joseon had lost its power as the guiding light in the political sense as almost no members seemed to abide by its practices, norms, and ideals anymore.

³⁹⁴ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 32, 31st Year of King Seonjo, 4th article, July 1st, 1598, "General Hong Kyungshin and Jeongeon Park Seung-eop impeach each other."

³⁹⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 453.

Chapter VII.

The Neo-Confucian Concepts of Self-Cultivation and Righteousness

*From the Son of Heaven on down to the commoners, all without exception should regard self-cultivation as the root.*³⁹⁶

—Zhu Xi

Zhu Xi suggested that the mastery over one's mind is the foundation of all one's actions in life. That devotion to self-cultivation would lead to the proper governing of the state and even ultimate peace in the world.³⁹⁷ Neo-Confucians believed that human nature had to be developed or “cultivated” like a garden with care and dedication and with an understanding of the importance of interpersonal interactions.³⁹⁸ Neo-Confucians believed that by quelling human desires and following established moral principles through the continuous practice of self-cultivation, society would enter a period of rejuvenation and prosperity.³⁹⁹ The Neo-Confucian concept of self-cultivation made the attainment of sagehood possible for everyone from any social status. The goal being “the unity between human and nature, individual and universe, self and society.”⁴⁰⁰

Neo-Confucians believed that a successful government was dependent on the process of self-cultivation being adopted by all people including rulers and officials.⁴⁰¹ But as Bol points out: “Politics had become distinct from morality, those responsible for

³⁹⁶ Bol, *Confucianism in History*, 116, taken from Zhu Xi, *The Great Learning* Section I.

³⁹⁷ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 1152-1187.

³⁹⁸ Donald L. Baker, “Human Nature in Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism: Guest Editor’s Introduction,” *Acta Koreana* 20 no. 1 (June 2017): 2, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/756493/pdf>.

³⁹⁹ Koh, “Neo-Confucianism as the Dominant Ideology,” 1-2.

⁴⁰⁰ Noordam, “The Soldier as a Sage,” 123.

⁴⁰¹ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 116.

politics needed to accept the correct view of morality, authority over morality belonged to those who had cultivated it rather than those who held political authority, and morality could be practiced by anyone independently of government instruction.”⁴⁰² According to Neo-Confucians, politics should be guided by learning with the process of learning administered by those deemed most qualified. They advocated for a form of politics centered on the ethical standing of those involved as the surest way of restoring social order. This likely explains their abandonment of the traditional Confucian interest in state governance for the pursuit of personal moral self-improvement.⁴⁰³

Korean Neo-Confucians largely followed Zhu Xi’s understanding of the importance of long-term dedication to *kyoyang* (self-cultivation). Yi Hwang made self-cultivation his personal central principle believing that the result of such dedication was that the heart-mind becomes united with the principle of things. Yi Hwang said that as a result of proper self-cultivation “you will not face any trouble with mind control.”⁴⁰⁴ According to Yi Hwang, the true path of self-cultivation is a lifetime endeavor and not an “immediate awakening of self for the first time, such as in the Buddhist way.”⁴⁰⁵ He further stated that “the cultivated person’s self is clear because it has no attachment to thinking about or leaning toward only one side from any particular angle.”⁴⁰⁶ Yi Hwang also felt that contemporary scholarship was too biased toward theoretical studies rather than self-cultivation.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰² Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 153.

⁴⁰³ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 191.

⁴⁰⁴ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way of Life*, 68, translated from *Chaseongnok* 1:13b-15a.

⁴⁰⁵ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way of Life*, 82, translated from *Chaseongnok* 21b-25a.

⁴⁰⁶ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 104, translated from *Chaseongnok* 1:50a–53a sec. 16 “Reply Letter to Yi Sukhon.”

⁴⁰⁷ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 670-679.

In *Chaseongnok*, Yi Hwang's reply letter to Gim Donseo states "that self-cultivation requires a dedicated life of *gyeong* (reverence; mindfulness; seriousness; respect)." Yi Hwang agreed and said that "there is nothing more important than reverence (*gyeong/jing*). Never let it out of your mind; make no selfish effort... This is the sagely method of mind cultivation." Furthermore, "*Gyeong* also means proper daily conduct by being 'correct in movement and appearance and orderly in thinking and deliberating.'"⁴⁰⁸ According to Yi I, *gyeong* differed in form between different states of the mind. At times when the mind was inactive and tranquil, Yi I says "entails the investigation of the principle of each thing and the recognition of 'the inevitable law of morality.'"⁴⁰⁹ In contrast, Yi Hwang devoted significant time to better understanding the fundamental reasons how emotions affected the moral mind and the human mind. Yi Hwang believed that period when the mind was in a tranquil state was the ideal time for self-cultivation rather than when the mind has been stirred by external stimulation.⁴¹⁰

Neo-Confucian scholars who made self-cultivation for the moral governance of men his identity became known as "*sarim*."⁴¹¹ In Joseon Korea the pursuit of ethical development took on an almost zealous character as many *sarim* choose to avoid government service and rather devote themselves to pursuing their own moral cultivation. They felt that it was their duty to enact a moral vision in the society they lived locally as recognized examples of living the proper Neo-Confucian life. In this way they believed that their example and teachings would have the biggest impact on society in the villages

⁴⁰⁸ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Neo-Confucian Way of Life*, 69, translated from *Chaseongnok* 1:13b-15a.

⁴⁰⁹ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 1206.

⁴¹⁰ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 3144.

⁴¹¹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 73.

and not in the plush surroundings of the capital.⁴¹² Yi Hwang while serving in government commented that: “In our town, however, our scholars and friends and those determined people are mostly tied to their [normal] work and therefore unable to fully dedicate themselves to learning and are hardly watchful over their work.”⁴¹³

Traditionally, Neo-Confucianism compared human nature to water which is “clear” and peacefully flows in a state that is “the original nature of water.” It becomes contaminated when it encounters muddy soil.⁴¹⁴ Confucius believed Heaven was “the moral power and ultimate truth of human nature was the doctrine of Heaven (*cheon/tian*).” Mencius took this idea and expanded it to include a pathway to sagehood open to all those wishing to strive towards moral self-perfection.⁴¹⁵ Yi Hwang’s philosophy which centered on the belief that human nature is essentially good and pure at birth influenced his scholarship, especially *Seonghak sipdo*, *Chaseongnok*, and the Four-Seven debate letters.⁴¹⁶ Yi Hwang firmly agreed with Zhu Xi’s belief that *i/li* represents moral order embodied in original human nature, which is pure and good. In contrast, *gi/qi* refers to a vital energy that actually brings each phenomenon into existence and influences its transformation into either good or evil.⁴¹⁷ Therefore a human being is fundamentally created to lead a moral life in line with the original moral nature which is good and pure.⁴¹⁸ In a letter to Gi Gobong, Yi Hwang stated that in reference to “the relationship between a ruler and a minister, there exists the *i/li* of that relationship. Before

⁴¹² Haboush, Kim and Kim, *The Great East Asian War*, 67-68.

⁴¹³ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way of Life*, 54, translated from *Chaseongnok* 1:4a-4b.

⁴¹⁴ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 71-72, translated from *Chaseongnok* 1:15a-18a.

⁴¹⁵ Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 45.

⁴¹⁶ Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 39.

⁴¹⁷ Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 40.

⁴¹⁸ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 1845-1854.

the relationship between father and a son, there exists the *i/li* of the relationship.”⁴¹⁹ Yi Hwang believed that *gi/li* breaks down if the self is not controlled effectively “because one’s mind does not follow moral principles of *i/li*.”⁴²⁰ He said in the *Chaseongnok*: “Let it [the mind] not deviate or become disorderly so that you do not resent or get angry. This is the essential method.”⁴²¹ He believed that the path of self-cultivation entails oneself to “follow the moral nature that transcends all forms of selfish emotions and cravings.”⁴²²

According to Yi I, when the mind reacts to external things, *qi* gives rise to either good or evil.⁴²³ He recommended that when one’s mind is distracted by stimulation, “one must aim to turn the human mind into the moral mind through self-cultivation and self-discipline.”⁴²⁴ He also believed that only focused human willpower and discipline can affect *gi*, which by its very nature is constantly changeable, and lead to a purification process that fully realizes the goodness of *li*.⁴²⁵ In addition, Yi I also believed that uncontrolled stimulation and the leading of a base physical existence forces people to become a slave to these desires that surround them in their everyday lives. “Things stimulate and upset such people, who end up consumed by selfish desire.”⁴²⁶

Yi Hwang expressed in the *Classic of the Mind-and-Heart* that quiet sitting and self-cultivation through *gyeong* helped to attain *ui/yi* (righteousness) that in turn generated *chung* (loyalty). Yi Hwang believed that following these steps would culminate

⁴¹⁹ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 130, translated from *Chaseongnok* 1:63a-67b.

⁴²⁰ Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 114.

⁴²¹ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 52, translated from *Chaseongnok* 1:1a-4a.

⁴²² Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 152.

⁴²³ Edward Y.J Chung, “Yi Yulgok on Hsin, Hsing, and Ch’ing: a Korean Neo-Confucian Interpretation Revisited,” *Monumenta Serica* 46 no.1 (April 1998): 265–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02549948.1998.11731319>.

⁴²⁴ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 3151.

⁴²⁵ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 3563-3570.

⁴²⁶ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 162.

in the ordering of the world.⁴²⁷ Ryu Seongnyong believed that the Neo-Confucian idea of *chunghyo* (loyalty and filiality) was the root of all virtue. One who is loyal is principled and sincere, and one who is filial knows how to conduct oneself properly.⁴²⁸ By conducting oneself properly in the world, they are embodying the Neo-Confucian ideal of righteousness.

Song Insu (1499-1547) believed that the purpose of living a righteous life is to realize the true value of one's existence and living a morally upright life was the ultimate goal.⁴²⁹ During the early Joseon period the group that best exemplified living a righteous life were the *sajok sarim* (countryside scholars devoted to self-cultivation) who comprised of mostly disenchanting, uninterested, or exiled government officials who created Neo-Confucian academies in the countryside. These scholars always followed a strict adherence to righteous conduct. If serving in government, it was the duty of the *sajok sarim* to voluntarily resign if the situation made it impossible to realize righteous conduct or if the intentions of behavior of the monarch or highest officials showed the slightest injustice or immoral conduct.⁴³⁰

The Sarim faction began in the Early Joseon and were defined as being literati that refrained from holding office in order to devote themselves to moral cultivation and placed righteous conduct at the center of their practice. They believed that there should be a balance of power between the king and the ministers whose combined focus was to take responsibility for governing morally and justly.⁴³¹ The Sarim faction followed the

⁴²⁷ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 180.

⁴²⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 470-471.

⁴²⁹ Oh, "Song Insu's Thoughts on Righteousness," 349.

⁴³⁰ Jung Shin Kim, "Source Theory and View of Meritorious Subjects of Hungu and Sarim in the Early Joseon Dynasty," *Hankuk Sasang Sahak* 37 (April 2011): 56, <https://kiss-kstudy-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/Detail/Ar?key=2912731>.

⁴³¹ Kim, "Source Theory and View," 30-31.

political theory of Zhu Xi and stimulated the evolution of the sajok moving out of government and into the countryside during the late fifteenth to mid sixteenth centuries. Some like Yi Hwang attempted to move back into government by the invitation of the young King Seonjo. They followed the political governing theory of *seogi* (qualities and abilities of a ruler) which used self-cultivation as the means to develop the virtues of righteousness and benevolence to rule in a wise and moral manner. They had done this as Neo-Confucian leaders in their own localities and believed that the king was to put forward the example of proper Neo-Confucian conduct.⁴³² Sarim such as Song Insu believed that the spirit of “righteousness” and proper conduct centered on the willingness to give up one’s life for justice and truth.⁴³³ During the first half of the sixteenth century the sajok sarim would suffer deadly persecution during the Literati Purges, but would later become or their students would become the resistance leaders of what would become known as the *Uibyeong* (Righteous Army) during the first year of the Imjin War.

The Literati Purges Narrowed the Joseon Leadership Candidate Pool

The literati purges that occurred in the first half of the sixteenth century resulted from orthodox Neo-Confucians seeing no possible way of uniting the lineage of the kingship (*wang-tung*) with the orthodox Dao (*toa-tung*).⁴³⁴ The problem originated in the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven which required obedience to the ruler, but also required the ruler to obey the moral laws of the cosmos.⁴³⁵ Tensions grew as the moderate

⁴³² Kim, “Source Theory and View,” 52-53.

⁴³³ Oh, “Song Insu’s Thoughts on Righteousness,” 340.

⁴³⁴ Sungmoon Kim, “Between Confucian Ideology and the State: A New Approach to Understanding the Literati Purge of 1519,” *The Review of Korean Studies* 5, no. 2 (2002): 236, <https://accesson.kr/rks/assets/pdf/7467/journal-5-2-233.pdf>.

⁴³⁵ Kim, “Between Confucian Ideology,” 240.

faction battled the radical reform faction over land system reform and other socioeconomic challenges facing the country. The moderate action placed the king firmly at the top of the ruling structure and called only for the basic reform of the management of institutions while keeping the power structure intact. By contrast, the radical reform faction made up of low-ranking young officials advocated for a balance of power between the king and the ruling class.⁴³⁶

Both the tyrannical rule of King Yoson (r.1495-1506) and the indecisiveness of King Chunjong (r.1506-1544) drove all the scholar-officials to view the king's power as dangerous and planted the seeds for extreme factionalism in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁴³⁷ During the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries an unprecedented number of government officials left the capital to rural areas for a number of reasons. First, there was a gradual breakdown of the salary system which meant that incomes needed to be acquired through working properties for long-term survival. The Literati Purges ended many political careers and forced many disgraced or disgruntled officials to seek refuge in distant countryside locations. These newcomers from the capital built up new socioeconomic orders and initiated networks of peer cooperation and as Deuchler suggests, "transformed their kin groups and communities into tightly structured social organizations."⁴³⁸

Factional struggles continued between those who wished to preserve the status quo and those who vied for major reforms for the realization of Neo-Confucian ideals. Starting with the *Muo sahwa* purge of 1498 to the *Gimyo Sahwa* purge of 1519, many

⁴³⁶ Kim, "Source Theory and View," 236.

⁴³⁷ Kim, "Between Confucian Ideology," 256.

⁴³⁸ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 42.

scholar-officials were not just removed from power but actually killed.⁴³⁹ In 1519 Jo Gwang-jo tried to implement a series of radical reforms including a new system of government recruitment not based on the traditional examination system but through a system of moral character assessments. It ended in a bloody purge of Jo and the young literati who were challenging the power of the established elite by questioning the morality behind the exploitation of the rural population.⁴⁴⁰

During the period from 1534 to 1549 when Yi Hwang was actively participating in various government postings, the Neo-Confucian concepts of moral governance was under relentless siege by powerful and established kin groups. The fourth literati purge of 1545 (*Eulsa Sahwa*) occurred as a result over reformists stating the supremacy of Confucian ideology over the state and king's authority.⁴⁴¹ Yi I commented that: "There was nothing more serious than the *Eulsa Sahwa* [Conflict Over Throne Succession] in which sarim were killed all at once and shook the fate of the nation."⁴⁴² Yi Hwang's elder brother Yi Hae (1496-1550) died from his flogging wounds while journeying into forced political exile in the far north of the kingdom. Yi Hae had made the mistake of openly criticizing the conduct of certain relatives of the king's maternal family. His outburst centered around the purges and political persecution of the scholarly class. This continued persecution had led him to completely resign from government life in 1549.⁴⁴³ This corresponds to the initial period when most of the sarim were excluded from serving in any government posts. This period of suppression came to an end in 1565, following

⁴³⁹ Koh, "Neo-Confucianism as the Dominant Ideology," 10.

⁴⁴⁰ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 101-102.

⁴⁴¹ Kim, "Between Confucian Ideology," 233.

⁴⁴² Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 99, Chapter 11: "Arguing that *Zhangming* [rectification of names] is the foundation of politics."

⁴⁴³ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 550-565.

the death of Queen Munjeong and the expulsion of her relatives by King Myeongjong who died less than two years later.⁴⁴⁴

Following this purge, the sarim became both fearful and indifferent to politics due to the damage inflicted upon the scholars, with state administration became stagnant. Yi Hwang commented in his reply letter to Ki Myeongeon that: “Once a scholar takes on an official position in the central governing body, he, like others, becomes like a fish caught on a baited hook; therefore, [even the group of] people who hate evil cannot escape this reality.”⁴⁴⁵ The result was that scholars focused on learning for oneself came to attain higher value in the journey of self-cultivation. While the main focus of Confucianism, governing the people rightly, declined in value. Scholars also started employing such Neo-Confucian terms as proper fidelity/alliance (*uiri*), sage rulership (*kunjuseonghak*), public opinion (*kongnon*), national opinion (*kungnon*) and ministerial initiative (*taesinnon*)⁴⁴⁶ They also became more defensive in action with Yi Hwang advising that the sarim “not display yourself too prominently; do not suddenly become courageous in order to govern the state; and do not argue excessively for your own opinions in any of your dealings.”⁴⁴⁷

Former officials pushed out of office by opposing factions relocated to the countryside, which was still free from government control. In a bid to be economically self-sufficient, “they built up estates while maintaining political ties to the capital.” One mechanism of control was through the establishment of *seowons* (private educational

⁴⁴⁴ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 565-573.

⁴⁴⁵ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 144, translated from *Chaseongnok* 1:71b–76a sec. 22: “Reply Letter to Ki Myōngōn.”

⁴⁴⁶ Lee, “Use of Neo-Confucian Universalism,” 161.

⁴⁴⁷ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 121, translated from *Chaseongnok* 1:53a–58b sec. 17: “Reply Letter to Ki Chōngja (Gabong).”

academies). These former scholar-officials educated the local youth who largely came from *yangban* families. By the time of the war there was virtually no town without a seowon. These localized powerbases made King Seonjo nervous enough that he issued a decree in the middle of the war in 1595 that stated: “The corruption of literature is so severe that non-essential academies should be abolished first.”⁴⁴⁸ During the war the *sajok* used their economic resources and social networks to organize and fight back. By the end of the war, these localized *sajok* powerbases effectively controlled the countryside.⁴⁴⁹

How the *Uibyeong* (Righteous Army) Helped Win the War

The Chinese scholar-general Wang Yangmin seems to have thought that the moral nature of *xin* (heart-mind), was all that was needed to impact the morale of soldiers. This was also a commonly held belief of the Joseon scholar-officials. In addition, Wang believed that the people’s righteous sentiments (*yi li zhi xin*) could overcome any threat if their devotion to Neo-Confucian principles were strong enough.⁴⁵⁰ Yi I believed that cultural enlightenment based on Mencius’ principles of virtue, rites, and the cultivation of self-righteousness was the most important aspect in the proper selection of capable leaders. Because he firmly believed that leaders without righteousness would only lead the country to ruin.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁸ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 29, 28th Year of King Seonjo. 3rd article, July 1, 1595: “The deepening of literary corruption led to the abolition of non-essential academies should be abolished.”

⁴⁴⁹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 398-399.

⁴⁵⁰ Noordam, “The Soldier as a Sage,” 152.

⁴⁵¹ Yim, “The Establishment of Literati,” 245-246.

In the early summer of 1592, the military fled in all directions and very few commanders took a serious stand. Confucian scholar O' Huimun commented that even he knew nothing about the art of war, he understood that "a loyal subject should die in a national crisis, and the morale of an army going out to war is high if the purpose of rising is right. Furthermore, he stated that he believed that in a time where the country was meeting its peril: "All people of Cheolla Province should have fathers admonishing their sons and older brothers admonishing their younger brothers to rally the righteous army and rise together."⁴⁵² Though the regular armies were crumbling in the wake of the invasion, volunteer guerrilla groups organized by local *sajok sarim* were rapidly appearing across the country.⁴⁵³ These volunteer resistance groups quickly became known collectively as the *Uibyeong* (Righteous Army). To help strengthen these forces, Ryu Seongnyong requested that letters of freedom or official appointment be issued to all those talented in combat, regardless of social status.⁴⁵⁴

During the war, Pusan was the port of entry for most Japanese supplies which then moved northward, so Kyeongsang and Cheolla provinces were the areas where the *uibyeong* became most active. This was because local *uibyeong* leaders understood that military supply routes were Japan's greatest weakness and where they should concentrate their ambushes and attacks. They constantly hit these supply roads and the small, isolated garrisons that guarded them to inflict damage and draw more troops away from the Japanese northern advances. For the seven critical months from June until the end of the

⁴⁵² O', *Saemirok*, 37.

⁴⁵³ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 223.

⁴⁵⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 327.

1592, an estimated 22,200 guerrilla soldiers harassed and battered the Japanese until the Ming arrived in Korea to press down from the north.⁴⁵⁵

The majority of the uibyeong leadership were made up of local sajok such as scholar Gwak Jae-u (1552-1617) who upon first hearing of the Japanese invasion, sold all his properties to raise funds and enlisted close to two thousand volunteer soldiers. Gwak, like most uibyeong leaders, possessed no previous military experience. He was moved to action only through the patriotic spirit to fight along with the Neo-Confucian embodiment of righteousness to undo a serious moral injustice committed by the Japanese. Gwak was the first to take the fight to the Japanese and starting with just four men, he burned three docked Japanese ships. Gwak's exploits quickly spread and the mentality of resistance grew among the local population, eventually attracting thousands of volunteers.⁴⁵⁶ He was also the first to win a land battle in the war against the Japanese at the Battle of Uiryong when his small militia ambushed the Japanese attempting to ford the Nam River. Gwak's men inflicted heavy casualties preventing further movement west and forcing a lengthy northern detour. Through his use of lightening raids, Gwak became known as an outstanding strategist. He developed a specific technique of ambushing Japanese foraging parties while they crossed shallow river crossings and then melting away before reinforcements arrived. Whenever possible, Gwak avoided engaging the enemy when conditions were not favorable. Furthermore, he used the Japanese arquebuses slow rate of fire to their advantage when attacking and copied the Japanese communication techniques of drum and fan signals to sow confusion.⁴⁵⁷ Even though

⁴⁵⁵ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 82.

⁴⁵⁶ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 101.

⁴⁵⁷ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 101.

uibyeong leaders such as Gwak were vital to the early war effort, Joseon officials that came into disagreement with them would use charges of insurgency against the state to suppress their efforts, as Governor Kim Su would against Gwak.⁴⁵⁸

But it wasn't the Kim Su's that were stopping the Japanese or inspiring resistance. It was the sajok scholars such as Kim Seon-il's who in the early summer of 1592 sent out a letter of appeal that stated that the teachings of Yi Hwang promoted the Neo-Confucian "Learning of the Way and made it their mission to refine the people's hearts and support human order," which the Japanese were destroying. And since the military had largely proved ineffective at stopping the Japanese Kim declared: "Only thinking of our own lives, how could we face our forefathers in the netherworld?" So, it was imperative that every Korean "with hoe or rake, with a short or long knife, turning them into strong armor and frightening weapons, what would there be to be feared, even if the enemy came with long spears and big swords?" Kim believed victory would come to Joseon because it was their unity and superior moral tradition that would triumph of barbarity. But most importantly, the sajok sarim recognized that it would require blood and sacrifice to ultimately oust the Japanese from Joseon.⁴⁵⁹

Perhaps inspired by the efforts of Gwak Jae-u, Kim Seon-il, and other uibyeong leaders, royal proclamations were issued to the countryside Neo-Confucian scholars of Cheonju stating that "the island bandits have despoiled the ancestral altars and are carving up twelve generations of achievement like they are fileting a fish." And that "youths were to take up arms to personally avenge the deaths of their parents and the

⁴⁵⁸ Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 35.

⁴⁵⁹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 224.

deseccration of their ancestors' resting places."⁴⁶⁰ Nowhere in the royal proclamation did it mention where and when the Joseon forces would be arriving to push back the enemy or how the unarmed and untrained youth were going to face the Japanese. The government in their desperation were weakly trying to evoke feelings of patriotism through Neo-Confucian ideals that by that point had probably lost all meaning to the common person. But the devoted students of the uibyeong leaders did feel obligated and motivated to follow their teachers into battle and defend their local communities in whichever way they could, including giving up their lives in combat.

At the same time that Gwak and others were striking back at the enemy with limited numbers and resources, government officials continued to flee and hide. In July of 1592, as Japanese forces were taking Pyeongyang and while Ryu Seongnyong was heading to meet the fleeing king who had taken refuge at Uiju close to the Chinese border, a local scholar named Cho Ho-ik came to see him. A native of Kyeongsang province, Cho had been falsely charged and banished to the northern area as a result of a factional clash in the capital twenty years previous. He lived in poverty surviving on the meager compensation he received by tutoring students in the area. After listening to Cho's plan to raise a local militia to assist in the defense of Kangdong where he lived Seongnyong issued him a pardon. In addition, Seongnyong gave Cho an official warrant authorizing the raising of troops and the weapons they needed to fight. While the Ming and Joseon troops failed to engage the retreating Japanese, Cho and his army would continue to harass the enemy as they moved south the following year.⁴⁶¹ Seongnyong commented that Cho "was a man of strong faith and virtue... Although he was a well-

⁴⁶⁰ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 101.

⁴⁶¹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 273-274.

read scholar, he encouraged and led the soldiers with loyalty to their country.”⁴⁶² The Righteous Army would also be an important source of useful intelligence for which Seongnyong could plan military strategies in the local areas where uibyeong spies continuously probed for weakness and opportunities.

During the summer of 1592, as word spread of the Righteous Army courageously engaging the enemy, former scholar-officials from across the country organized resistance groups in their areas. It was during these guerilla-type actions on small isolated detachments that the Japanese actually suffered the heaviest losses.⁴⁶³ For example, Righteous Army leader Kim Joon-min defeated Japanese detachments one after another in his area of operations until the enemy withdrew and fled. Because of his victories the supply route of Udo was completely cut off.⁴⁶⁴ At Yeongcheon, uibyeong leader Kwon Eung-soo attacked the 1,000-man garrison stationed there. He linked up with other righteous army groups and recruited men from the surrounding villages and marched to the gates of the Japanese fort. As recorded by witnesses:

Kwon Eung-soo entered first with a large axe and cut down the enemy, and several soldiers advanced bravely, beating drums and shouting. When the enemy soldiers were defeated and went into the warehouse of the government office, the government army set fire to the warehouse, and all the enemy soldiers were burned to death, and those who escaped were intercepted by our soldiers and almost all died.⁴⁶⁵

The scholar Kim Cheonil raised a volunteer army in his hometown of Naju and combined his troops with other local leaders. Outside Suwon they launched a surprise attack against the Japanese holding the city and killed a substantial number before

⁴⁶² Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 1, 130.

⁴⁶³ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 225.

⁴⁶⁴ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 26, 25th Year of King Seonjo, 4th article, July 1, 1592: “Kim Joon-min and Kwak Jae-woo defeat the Japanese.”

⁴⁶⁵ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 26, 25th Year of King Seonjo, 10th article, August 1, 1592: “Kwon Eung-su defeated the enemies of Yeongcheon and took back the castle.”

moving to Ganghwa Island at the mouth of the Han River. There they established a permanent guerilla base for engaging the Japanese around Seoul. In recognition of his efforts, the king granted him the honorary title of “Scholar Promoting Righteousness.”⁴⁶⁶

At Cheonju, the city officials and regular troops had fled as the Japanese advanced towards them. But a scholar and former librarian of the National Academy, Yi Cheongam, rallied the minor officials and local residents and set torches on fire on the hillsides around the city. They also set up dummies in uniform and military banners on the fortress walls. The Japanese having already suffered serious casualties in the previous battles, upon witnessing the array of banners and an elaborate defense along fortified walls decided to withdraw from the area. The residents of Cheonju under the leadership of the former librarian Yi, had singlehandedly stopped the advance of the Japanese in that direction.⁴⁶⁷ Another librarian named Jo Heon, had once passed the state examination but was blocked from serving in government due to his family background.⁴⁶⁸ At Geumsan, growing impatient waiting for government troop reinforcements, Jo Heon decide to attack the Japanese with just 700 righteous army soldiers and monks. The monk Yeong-gyu tried to dissuade him to wait for the government troop support. Jo Heon cried out: “Where is the king? When a ruler is disgraced, a subject must give up his life, and that time is now. How can I calculate the situation according to my personal interest? And marched, beating drums.” The enemy advanced three times and were beaten back each time, but when Jo Hoen’s fighters ran out of arrows they fought with their bare hands to

⁴⁶⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 271.

⁴⁶⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 274.

⁴⁶⁸ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 26, 25th Year of King Seonjo, 12th article, August 1, 1592: “As Jo Heon had serious concerns on the situation in Joseon, he tried to figure out all kinds of phenomena in the universe and celestial bodies.”

the death killing many more Japanese than their small numbers. The next day the Japanese fled the castle taking their injured and weeping could be heard.⁴⁶⁹

As the guerrilla forces began to have an effect, they started receiving pushback from various magistrates and governors who commanded their own local regular army forces. These government officials tried to coerce the Righteous Army leaders into joining their units with their forces. When they refused, these officials accused the volunteers of rebelling against the government.⁴⁷⁰ The Righteous Army's ability to launch coordinated surprise attacks against Japanese logistics networks and bases forced the enemy to move through the countryside only in large numbers which in turn tied down troops needed to hold and advance northward. These actions would eventually hinder the overall Japanese advance and contribute to their need to withdraw all the way back to fortified bases on the southern coast. Though the uibyeong's actions were not decisive in the war, their combined efforts had an effect on the moral of both the Joseon population and the Japanese troops constantly harassed by them. It was these local Confucian scholars and banished officials compelled through patriotism and of doing the right thing as a Neo-Confucian community leader helped motivate the country from an initial place of fear and abandonment to active resistance.⁴⁷¹ A Jesuit priest named Francisco Rodriguez accompanying the Japanese noted that the local resistance became so fierce that the Japanese had no means to control areas that they had captured because

⁴⁶⁹ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 26, 25th year of King Seonjo, 11th article, August 1, 1592: "The righteous sergeant Jo Heon and the righteous monk Yeong-gyu attacked the enemy at Geumsan, but failed to overcome and were killed."

⁴⁷⁰ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 192.

⁴⁷¹ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 136.

the local populations fled into the mountains “where they lay in wait in holes in the ground to ambush the Japanese.”⁴⁷²

It therefore becomes difficult to understand why in 1594 King Seonjo ordered all uibyeong groups to be disbanded because of many leaders’ refusal to take orders from government officials who had earlier fled their posts.⁴⁷³ In the fourth month of 1594, with the king becoming more uneasy with the growing military power and independence of the uibyeong, he ordered all Righteous Army groups to be placed under the permanent command of Kim Tongnyong (1567-1596). Then in 1596 the government falsely charged Kim with sedition and put him to death at the young age of twenty-eight.⁴⁷⁴ Opinions vary on why Seonjo would rashly disassemble the most potent weapon of resistance within the Japanese occupied and frontline areas, but it is likely that the king feared having an interconnected network of experienced fighting groups led by banished or unsupportive rural sajok spread out across the country after the war.

The Japanese Violation of the Principle of Righteousness at the Battle of Chinju

According to “the Mencian theory of human nature... people are originally and naturally good” and therefore “no one is beyond redemption.”⁴⁷⁵ This is why the Neo-Confucian world view was one of non-confrontation and diplomacy rather than war and intimidation. In their minds even an enemy could be educated to realize the error of their thinking and persuaded to logically adopt the norms and practices of the Neo-Confucians

⁴⁷² Giuseppe Marino and Rebekah Clements, “Iberian Sources on the Imjin War: The Relação Do Fim e Remate Que Teve a Guerra Da Corea (1599),” *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 23, no.1 (2023): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15982661-10336282>.

⁴⁷³ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 190.

⁴⁷⁴ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 71-72.

⁴⁷⁵ Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 47.

and eventually themselves becoming a sage being. Accordingly, sages receive pure *qi*, evil people receive turbid *qi*, and common people receive mixed *qi*.⁴⁷⁶ In addition, Neo-Confucians believed that true nature originates only from the virtues of humanity (*ren*), justice (*yi*), propriety (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), and trustworthiness (*xin*). Song Neo-Confucianists believed it was essential “to transform the evil of the natural tendencies through the restoration of human nature {*bianhua qizhi zhi e yi fuxing*}.” Therefore, they tended to place central emphasize on one’s self-cultivation and dedication to life-long education.⁴⁷⁷ Cheng Yi stated that a proper human being “acting from humanity and moral righteousness” (*you ren yi xing*) and possessing the necessary knowledge, will naturally bring joy into the world. According to Neo-Confucians, “there is no difference between superior and inferior persons,” all can become sages. The difference is found in the actions of each person where one chooses to follow the path towards acquiring “moral knowledge through their own heart-mind,” whereas the other makes no effort. Cheng Yi’s declares, “What makes human beings different from animals is that they have the nature of humanity and righteousness. So if one loses the heart/mind and does not want to get it back, the person is not different from an animal”⁴⁷⁸ Cheng Yi’s view is also in agreement with Mencius’s view: “Whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human.”⁴⁷⁹ So according to Neo-Confucianists, though human nature is

⁴⁷⁶ Xiaomei Yang, “The Problem of Evil in the Neo-Confucian Context: Wang Yangming's View on Evil,” *Asian Philosophy* 30 no.4 (November 2020): 352, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2020.1846846>.

⁴⁷⁷ Paolo Santangelo, “The Origin of Good and Evil in Human Nature According to Neo-Confucianism Some Aspects of the Question,” *East and West* 40 no. 1/4 (December 1990): 250, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29756933>.

⁴⁷⁸ Huang, “Why be Moral?”, 341, taken from *Yishu* 25, 323.

⁴⁷⁹ Huang, “Why be Moral?”, 341, taken from *Mencius* 2a6.

essentially good, actions devoid of compassion and righteousness cannot be considered coming from the human realm. In the case of the Japanese, the invasion itself was an evil and unprovoked act. But what occurred at Chinju in the summer of 1593 would change the nature and outcome of the war.

At the heart of this war was a battle to control the political, economic, and cultural make-up of the East-Asian sphere. On one side was a world built on a foundation of Neo-Confucian norms and values. And on the other was a culture largely based on war domination sprinkled with some Buddhist and Neo-Confucian elements. In a memoir written by a Japanese soldier named Yoshino he stated that when the Japanese landed at Pusan and quickly overwhelmed the cities fortifications:

The enemy was running in search of hiding places. They hid between houses or under tables. Those who could not find places to hide ran to the east gate to escape. [When captured] they all put their hands together kneeling down and uttered words that we had never heard, incomprehensible words that sounded as if they were pleading for mercy. Yet, our forces ignored these words, slashed them and trampled them to death. This was done in the spirit of making an offering to the god of war. The victims were both men and women, and even dogs and cats were cut to pieces. In all, as many as 30,000 people were slaughtered.⁴⁸⁰

Therefor from the first days of the landings the Japanese committed acts of merciless slaughter. In addition, the Japanese committed acts considered the worst possible desecration. One such example was the destruction of the Yi Royal Temple (*Chongmyo*) in which the sacred tablets of the Yi royal ancestors were kept which centered the Neo-Confucian ritual observance rites. The Japanese also dug up and defiled the bodies of dead royals and plundered the tombs.⁴⁸¹ The Japanese committed countless examples of behavior considered so vial that not just to be outside the Neo-Confucian

⁴⁸⁰ Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 78.

⁴⁸¹ Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 82.

norms and practices but to be considered beyond the realm of humans and even animals. Most Ming and Joseon considered the actions of the Japanese pure evil and would affect the overall outcome of the war. Such acts rallied the collective fury of the population to emerge from the mountains and valleys and take up arms. Alarmed by the growing resistance the Japanese distributed posters in Kyangsang Province which stated: “The objective of this Japanese official is to put into effect our Highness’s goal of civilizing the world and establishing good governance for the people.” Yet in the very same message the official threatens: “If any Joseon were to take up weapons and interrupt our activities, all will be killed.” In another message to residents of Hwasan, Hwanghae Province states:

Japan is no longer the Japan of the past. It looks forward to a time when the whole world will enjoy peace. We will reduce corvee labor and lower taxes. There is no reason to be anxious. Return to your old life. When the great army of Japan passes through, adults and children alike should welcome and greet them. Those who flee to the mountains will be beheaded.⁴⁸²

The first Battle of Chinju from November 8th-13th, 1592, is regarded as one of the three most important battles of the war because the victory greatly boosted Korean morale. The Japanese planned to use the town as a major transportation hub for their forces in the south.⁴⁸³ Around 3,800 regular and irregular troops faced over 30,000 Japanese and caused an estimated 10,000 Japanese casualties in the end. Gwak Jae-u, Shim Dae-seung, Kim Jun-min, Im Gye-yeong, and Choi Gyeong-hoe all led their *uibyeong* to reinforce Chinju and relieve the siege.⁴⁸⁴ Gwak Jae-u had recommended abandoning Chinju after the first victory, arguing that it was isolated and hard to defend.

⁴⁸² Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 84-87.

⁴⁸³ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 139-140.

⁴⁸⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 333-334.

In the second Battle of Chinju on July 21st, 1593, the Japanese assembled over 90,000 soldiers to face the 3,800 defenders and 24,000 civilians inside. The battle was so intense that even women's hair was cut off to restring broken bows.⁴⁸⁵ The Japanese had learned hard lessons from the previous battles and built a vast array of siege towers and *kikkosha* (turtle carts) which allowed the attackers to get close to the city walls for sapping actions. When the Japanese finally breached the walls on the eighth day of the siege, they systematically slaughtered everyone reportedly leaving just one person alive to recount what he saw to his countrymen. An area of some five li (1.75 miles) around the city, including the river, was filled with around 60,000 Korean corpses.⁴⁸⁶ Ryu Seongnyong wrote that "even no chickens and dogs were left behind. The Japanese enemies not only destroyed the castle and filled up the trenches, but also committed atrocities such as burying the well and cutting down all the trees to vent their anger over their past defeat."⁴⁸⁷

The massacre of sixty thousand Koreans, including women and children, would change the minds of even the most optimistic Chinese official who would not only regard this as a violation of trust but a confirmation of the incompatibility of the Japanese to exist within a Neo-Confucian-based sphere of influence. The death and destruction visited on Chinju simply out of revenge and lust for blood, and ordered directly from Hideyoshi, placed them outside what would be considered human. Through both the initial action of the unprovoked invasion and then the massacres of tens of thousands of innocent people, the war was now fully categorized as a just war and a righteous action to

⁴⁸⁵ Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi*, xxiii-xxiv of "Synopsis of Battles in Japanese Invasion under Hideyoshi 1592-98."

⁴⁸⁶ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 175.

⁴⁸⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 373.

punish the offender or “rectify” (*zheng*) those who have critically undermined the well-being of peace-loving people.⁴⁸⁸ Therefore, the Japanese were not able to advance on the Neo-Confucian path to sagehood through self-cultivation for a better humanity because they were wholly considered pure evil by then. Even Ming general Li commented to Konishi directly that, “I could have killed every Japanese when I took Pyeongyang, but I didn’t. That means you owe me your lives! Now you dare to attack Cheolla and violate your promise?”⁴⁸⁹ It is likely that Japanese general Kato orchestrated the slaughter to outshine his rival Konishi Yukinaga. The results of the siege are reported to have delighted Hideyoshi and he bestowed Kato with honors. In the end the Japanese who held two captive princes were released as a sign of goodwill, but that action did little to change the minds of the Joseon and Ming officials.⁴⁹⁰

The lack of human empathy shown by the Japanese was a major factor in why the Chinese refused to give anything that Hideyoshi asked for in the negotiations. Hideyoshi had given the orders to rampage through southern Korea for a month or two and then return to the coastal fortifications of Pusan in an effort to move ahead the stalled negotiations and provide an honorable exit for the Japanese. This 250 kilometer line of fourteen Japanese fortifications extended from Ulsan in the east all the way to southern Suncheon in the west.⁴⁹¹ As a sign of either the mistrust or lack of motivation in his senior commanders, Hideyoshi appointed his fifteen year old nephew Kobayakawa Hideaki as the invasion commander, twenty-three year old Ukita Hideie as supreme

⁴⁸⁸ Kim, “Making Peace with the Barbarians,” 118, taken from “The Classical Paradigm” section.

⁴⁸⁹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 373.

⁴⁹⁰ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 176.

⁴⁹¹ Hawley, *The Imjin War*, 504.

commander and eighteen year old Mori Hidemoto as chief of staff.⁴⁹² Hideyoshi had commanded these young and ambitious daimyo to “cut down everyone universally, without discrimination between young and old, men and women, the clergy and the laity, high-ranking soldiers on the battlefield, that goes without saying, but also the hill folk, down to the poorest and meanest and send the heads to Japan.”⁴⁹³ These senseless actions obviously did not help in diplomatic efforts and communications between the parties largely disappeared.

To further emphasize the difference in the humanity between the Ming and Joseon and the Japanese during the war we only need to examine how the local people were treated. Those that survived the Japanese rampages of the previous years were worked to death building the southern Japanese fortifications until they either died of exhaustion or were beheaded when they were of no more use. Those more fortunate were sold by the Japanese commanders to slave traders who followed the troops up and down the peninsula buying up the most desirable to be shipped back to Japan. At least 50,000 Koreans were transported to work as farmers, laborers, or specialty artists in the variety of daimyo fiefs. Few ever made it back home again and their decedents integrated into Japanese society.⁴⁹⁴ Some were sold at the Nagasaki slave markets to Portuguese and Italian traders and were taken to Macao, Goa, and even Europe. Florentine merchant Francesco Carletti claimed to have seen “an infinite number of [Korean] men and women, boys and girls, of every age, and they all were sold as slaves at the very lowest

⁴⁹² Hawley, *The Imjin War*, 444.

⁴⁹³ Hawley, *The Imjin War*, 465-466, quote taken from the seventh and concluding item in Hideyoshi's orders to his commanders, recorded in the *Chosen ki* (Korean Record) of samurai Okochi Hidemoto.

⁴⁹⁴ Jurgis Ellisonas, “The Inseparable Trinity: Japan's Relations with China and Korea,” In *The Cambridge History of Japan* vol. 4 (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 293, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521223553.007>.

prices.” Carletti bought five of them for 440 grams of silver and set four free in Goa and a fifth went with him to Europe and settled in Rome.⁴⁹⁵

The Imjin War was considered a righteous and justified war to the Neo-Confucian world locked in a struggle to stop the advancement of the Japanese. The core belief that bonded all Neo-Confucian philosophy was that of benevolent action found naturally in all humans. But most importantly, self-cultivation was necessary to lessen the sprouting of immoral behaviors. Sadly, by the end of the sixteenth century, Joseon Neo-Confucianism was largely irrelevant as the corrupted ruling elite did not emulate its virtues. Those sarim that survived the literati purges focused their energies on developing themselves and teaching students of their rural area how to do the same for the betterment of their community. When the war arrived and the soldiers and officials largely evaporated into the hills, it would be these same sarim sajok who rallied their students and local communities to fight back and put pressure on the Japanese by cutting vital supply lines and drawing increasing numbers of soldiers to guard the routes. The uibyeong more than any other collective group, best realized the Neo-Confucian values of self-sacrifice and moral conduct in times of national peril. Most had started as eager yangban men looking to reform a broken social governing system through passing the gwageo and entering official duties. Most found an endless quagmire of deceit and corruptive behavior that ended with them voluntarily leaving officialdom to reside in the countryside or being purged through factional political maneuvering. Many would give their lives in defense of their country, but their surviving students would continue to pass on their Neo-Confucian teachings to the next generation. Some who were captured and brought back to

⁴⁹⁵ Chung, *The Moral and Religious Thought*, 68, taken from *Analects of Confucius* [Lun Yu], 6:28.

Japan would become the first teachers to transmit Neo-Confucian norms and principles to the land of their enemy.

Chapter VIII.

The Neo-Confucian Sage King

*Advance the upright and set aside the crooked, and the people will follow you. Advance the crooked and set aside the upright, and the people will not follow you.*⁴⁹⁶

—Confucius

Confucius believed that any person who possessed benevolence is “certainly a sage.” Meaning that anyone that has a true intention to be moral can become a sage in the Confucian sense. Mencius also believed that every person has the universal potential to become a sage through the dedicated practice of self-cultivation according to Heaven’s principle (*cheolli/tianli*).⁴⁹⁷ The Mandate of Heaven (*Tian Ming*) claimed “that heaven gave it the mandate to rule and heaven would take it away if the king did not rule well.”⁴⁹⁸ However, the theory of the Mandate of Heaven is premised on the impossible condition that the dynasty founder must be a sage of the highest moral virtue. The problem is that no dynastic founder, king, or emperor since King Wu (r.1046-1043 BCE) was acknowledged by the Confucians as a sage, even though all rulers looked to the Mandate of Heaven as the source of their ruling legitimacy. Therefore, the role of the Confucian scholar-officials became critical to help mold the ruler into a man of

⁴⁹⁶ Confucius, *Analects*, 2:19.

⁴⁹⁷ Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 47.

⁴⁹⁸ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 122.

formidable moral character, if not a sage, who was entitled to receive the Mandate of Heaven.⁴⁹⁹

The Neo-Confucians believed that sages are people who have in their lifetime perfected their characters so that they are able to respond correctly to any situation they encounter. They are also able to provide wise insights into political organization, cosmic order, and personal cultivation.⁵⁰⁰ Xunzi believed that sages fulfill human relations completely and thus represent the human achievement of moral perfection.⁵⁰¹ Wang Yangming believed “what is essential to becoming a sage is to investigate one’s mind rather than to investigate external things. Hence, one should spend one’s energy and time on rectifying the mind.”⁵⁰² Hu Yuan (993-1059) stated, “A sage will penetrate all things and illuminate all events. A sage will make himself available to society.”⁵⁰³ The founders of Neo-Confucianism believed that sages guided the construction of civilization through their moral conduct. It began with the cleaning of one’s *qi* in an effort to align oneself through awareness “and thus be in tune with the process of creation.” Zhang Zai (1020-1077) believed that the learning of the sages revolved around the practice of mental and moral self-cultivation. He referred to this as moral knowledge (*de-xing-zhi zhi*) and was something separate from the cumulation of factual knowledge. For Zhang, the sages could respond spontaneously yet appropriately to all events in human life. And because they recognize “patterns of development and change”, they were able to correctly and effectively “guide the populace” and motivate others through their own personal

⁴⁹⁹ Sungmoon Kim, “The Way of the Foreign Vassal State: Neo-Confucianism and Political Realism in Early Chosŏn Korea,” *Philosophy East & West* 73, no.1 (January 2023): 84, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2023.0004>.

⁵⁰⁰ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 14.

⁵⁰¹ Angle, *Sagehood*, 15.

⁵⁰² Yang, “The Problem of Evil,” 354.

⁵⁰³ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 45.

example.⁵⁰⁴ When human society breaks down, it disturbs the harmonious pattern of *qi* flow. It is therefore the ruler and his government's responsibility for properly managing the collective *qi* of society.⁵⁰⁵

Zhou believed that the absence of “desire” provides “tranquility” (*jing*) stating: “The sage settles human affairs using centrality, correctness, humanity, and righteousness...He regards tranquility as fundamental. Having no desire, he will be tranquil.”⁵⁰⁶ Wang Yangming stated that: “The reason the sage has become a sage is that his mind has become completely identified with universal coherence (*chun hu tianli*) and is no longer mixed with any impurity of selfish human desires.”⁵⁰⁷ For Zhu Xi, a sage must focus on the cultivation of their own mind in order to help bring order to the world.⁵⁰⁸ A frequently used slogan that encompassed this relationship between personal cultivation and proper governance was “inner sage-outer king” (*naesǒng oewang*). As Angle and Tiwald states: “Ethics and governance are two sides of the same coin.”⁵⁰⁹ Zhu wrote that, “the structural relationship between a ruler and his people reveals that the relationship works only when the ruler is motivated by humane love.”⁵¹⁰ But many founding Neo-Confucians of the Song era including Zhang Zai “accepted that the reality can be different from the ideal,” even in the case of a ruler.⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁴ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 68.

⁵⁰⁵ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 123.

⁵⁰⁶ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 96.

⁵⁰⁷ Angle, *Sagehood*, 19.

⁵⁰⁸ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 181.

⁵⁰⁹ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 183.

⁵¹⁰ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 125-126.

⁵¹¹ Yunwoo Song, “Sage and Great Person in Zhang Zai's Thought,” *Asian Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (2022): 191, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2021.1983951>.

Mencius stated that: “If the Prince is straightened, nothing will lack straightness; it is only if we straighten the Prince that the state will be durably stable.”⁵¹² Therefore, the goal of the Confucian state was to guard Confucian culture and moral perfection and to keep the king on the right track to obtaining this moral perfection.⁵¹³ Most Neo-Confucian scholars recognized that virtuous advisors could make up for some of the shortcomings in a ruler, but the ruler must still be genuinely concerned with the well-being of the country to listen to good advisors. Therefore, educating the *xin* (heartmind) of the ruler through the “Learning of the Emperors” (*dixue*) through teachings on self-cultivation and governance. Zhu Xi announced that “when the ruler’s *xin* (heartmind) is correct, not a single affair of the realm will fail to precede from rectitude.”⁵¹⁴ In the Confucian mind, the king acted as the guardian of the public good.⁵¹⁵ A ruler’s first and foremost consideration was to gain the people’s loving support through the proper moral governance and recognized personal integrity. Therefore, as Deuchler suggests, “the people’s compliance was intimately linked to the ruler’s moral leadership.”⁵¹⁶

According to Neo-Confucians, kingship must be absolute because without a strong king, an ordered society is not likely.⁵¹⁷ But even though the Neo-Confucians believed in absolute rule, the king was still seen as being human and therefore proper guidance was necessary. The Joseon went further than the Ming in the area of governmental policing with the establishment of the Office of the Censor-General (*Saganwon*) charged with inspecting the wrong-doings of government officials and the

⁵¹² Sancho, “Confucian Identity,” 14, taken from *Mengzi* IV.A.20.

⁵¹³ Kim, “Between Confucian Ideology,” 244.

⁵¹⁴ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 195.

⁵¹⁵ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 26.

⁵¹⁶ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 109-110.

⁵¹⁷ Kim, “Between Confucian Ideology,” 243.

Office of the Special Counselors (*Hongmungwan*) which was originally created with the task of maintaining classical records and giving royal advice but which possessed the powerful political power of impeachment.⁵¹⁸ When the king violated or even showed a slight inclination to violating Neo-Confucian norms or practices, they did not hesitate to criticize even at the risk of their own lives. They firmly believed in the Mencius notion that cosmic order was determined by the welfare of the people ruled by the sage-king.⁵¹⁹

Under Korean Neo-Confucian practice, the King was tutored on a regular, sometimes daily basis by a group of scholar-officials known as the *sadaebu* who were considered experts in Confucian teachings. The *sadaebu* could therefore mold, guide, and supervise the actions, edicts, behavior, and policy of the ruler.⁵²⁰ Over time the royal lectures evolved into an open discussion of pressing state affairs, often led by the king himself. The format usually started with a lecture by one of the dozen *sadaebu* in attendance which would transition into an informal discussion of the issues of the day. The *sadaebu* were made up of the state councilors, selected high ministers, selected members of the “Three Offices” of the Special Councilors, Inspector General, and Censor General’s Office.⁵²¹ The ultimate goal was to establish the proper behavior leading to the transformation of the king into a sage. Yi Hwang stated, “that the focus of sage learning should be on the realization of the unified mind of the king and on the study of the original nature inside his mind.” But according to Yi I, the main purpose of the education

⁵¹⁸ Kim, “Between Confucian Ideology,” 245-246.

⁵¹⁹ Kim, “Between Confucian Ideology,” 248.

⁵²⁰ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 70.

⁵²¹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 94.

of a ruler is in purifying the mind and the highest priority in the rulers' governance is the employment of wise and ethical advisors.⁵²²

The fact that the Joseon elite claimed political participation as a birthright had a direct impact for the makeup of politics. It was based on the Korean Neo-Confucian belief that the state was situated within society and that the state and society therefore was wholly governed by the Confucian moral principles. This weakened the king's authority and power because it said that perceived moral principles override the king's behavior and wishes.⁵²³ The learning principle (*ihak*) aimed to guide rulers by suppressing their individual human desires and used public opinion as a tool to control the king.⁵²⁴ The early Joseon dynasty instituted the *Kyeongyeon* (Office of the Royal Lectures) shortly after Yi Seong-gye's (r.1392-1398) accession and quickly it was an instrument through which the sadaebu rigorously indoctrinated the king. Unlike the Ming, who's autocrat emperor was his officials' teacher, Joseon kings from the beginning were urged to attend lectures every day.⁵²⁵ The royal lecture was based on the idea of rectifying the mind of the ruler (*gyeokgunsim*) and as a means for scholars to reinforce the political theory of the learning of the sages (*seonghak*) through book learning to educate the king.⁵²⁶ The Joseon sadaebu differed from previous traditions of Confucianism in that they made the learning of the sages not as objects of worship but rather as models to attain through self-cultivation.⁵²⁷ These daily lectures put the king under relentless pressure to exemplify the ideal of a sage-king. This royal lecture system

⁵²² Kim, "The Theory and Practice," 277.

⁵²³ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 397.

⁵²⁴ Bongkyoo Lee, "The Learning of Principle and the Governing by Culture in Joseon," *The Review of Korean Studies* 23 no.2 (December 2020): 12, <https://doi.org/10.25024/review.2020.23.2.11>.

⁵²⁵ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 69.

⁵²⁶ Lee, "The Learning of Principle," 13.

⁵²⁷ Lee, "The Learning of Principle," 19.

was effectively used by the sadaebu to supervise and guide royal behavior in a direction they deemed proper or advantageous. The Neo-Confucian scholars believing that their duty was to keep the king on the right track toward fulfilling the sage-king ideal of leadership as well as positioning for the clans that their lineage originated from.⁵²⁸

Neo-Confucian reformers wished to replace “the hereditary aristocracy with a meritocracy based on the knowledge of the Confucian Classics.”⁵²⁹ But what happened in the end is that a small minority of high-level officials inherited a concentration of governmental power. And their own relatives established ancestral networks secured a group’s continued existence among the capital elite.⁵³⁰ Even though Korean kings had supreme authority the same as any other nation’s king, their power was severely limited by his appointed advisors and bureaucrats who themselves controlled powerful groups of the aristocracy. Likewise, these same powerful groups became “the principal wife givers of the royal house.” Deuchler suggests that Joseon kings lacked true absolute power because they could not effectively “turn factional rivalries among their bureaucrats to their own advantage.” This unique social constitution of the Joseon Neo-Confucian state is the principal reason why royal despotism never arose in Korea.⁵³¹

Political rivalries originated from the fact that one side who generally encompassed the king’s own relatives and ultra-conservative literati looked at the king as the state itself, and who was the earthly embodiment of the Confucian ideal and the representative of the heaven mandate. On the other side where the more socially liberal scholarly officials who believed that the state must be subservient to Confucianism and

⁵²⁸ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 70.

⁵²⁹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 45.

⁵³⁰ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 58.

⁵³¹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 61-62.

that the king could only be recognized as a sovereign if he followed the traditional dictates of Confucian ideology. In their mind the king was a limited and mortal being who had to be led and educated by his subjects who claimed themselves to be the collective voice of the Confucian Dao.⁵³²

According to Zhu, nature's potential is open-ended and has a definite sense of direction. This belief also encompassed the idea of a "sage" whose developed the ability to respond naturally to a great variety of things and sense the right direction to take.⁵³³ Yi Hwang believed that the creation of the ideal society could only happen from the top down, and that the elite needed to focus on proper self-cultivation in order to live an ethical life and therefore govern without self-interest. According to Yi Hwang, the king's virtue and sincerity were central to ideal governance. The king's mind should be disciplined and focused constantly on cultivating good morality through the process of life-long self-cultivation.⁵³⁴

Why King Seonjo Was Not a Sage-King

King Seonjo is portrayed in traditional accounts as a morally degenerate king who idled his time away with women and wine, placed his trust in incompetents, and fled like a coward as his people were put to the sword. These characterizations were challenged by Gari Ledyard who has argued that Seonjo was in fact a diligent and concerned monarch throughout the invasion. According to Ledyard, when his country was imperiled, Seonjo worked from dawn until late in the night and constantly met with his officials to devise

⁵³² Kim, "Between Confucian Ideology," 254.

⁵³³ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 55.

⁵³⁴ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 115-129.

strategy and rally the populace.⁵³⁵ Even though the evidence doesn't point to King Seonjo being a completely degenerate king, evidence from several primary sources including the *Seonjo sillok* confirms that he was most definitely far from being in line with the ideals of an empathetic Neo-Confucian sage-king. At best, it can be said that he wished prosperity for his country but put his own energies into safeguarding himself and his own position.

In 1567 Seonjo, at only sixteen, was unexpectedly thrust into power. In the beginning of his reign Seonjo tried to follow the suggestions of scholar-officials such as Yi Hwang to achieve political and social reform. At least that is what the young king claimed was his genuine intention. But Yi Hwang seemed underwhelmed with the new monarch yet offered the king the *Mujin yukio* (Memorandum on Six Points) in 1568 as a governing guide for the king. Before retiring to his hometown, Yi Hwang also presented in 1568 *Seonghak sipdo* (*Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning*) leaving a dedication to the king that read: "As your Majesty's servant, I feel sorry that my memorial about learning could not move your Majesty and that my humble advice was of little help to your Majesty's sagacious judgment. This petty servant is so embarrassed that I cannot make any excuse."⁵³⁶ This was a polite way to say that he felt that his teachings were not connecting with the young king. But as Yi Hwang knew himself, Seonjo simply had no desire to transform himself in any meaningful way and his feeble attempts were more cosmetic in nature.

When Yi Hwang wrote the *Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning* he focused on the importance of the king's own self-cultivation and stated that:

Everything is determined by the mind of the king, which is but one mind that must carry the weight of many responsibilities. There, numerous

⁵³⁵ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 70.

⁵³⁶ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 573-580.

desires war for priority and evil threatens to spread. A single act of negligence, neglect, or self-indulgence would lead to torrential or sea-borne flooding and to mountains collapsing. Who would be able to stop it?⁵³⁷

For Yi Hwang, the ultimate success of a Neo-Confucian governing system “depended on the cultivation and capacity for introspection of the king’s mind.” If the king’s mind was not interested in undertaking such a journey, then Yi Hwang’s time was better spent on his own self-development pursuit as well as teaching others to transform themselves through the ideals and principles of Neo-Confucianism.

Something all scholar-officials that surrounded the king said was that unrestrained royal anger became particularly problematic during the reign of King Seonjo. King Myeongjong had died in 1567 without providing a possible heir, so before his death Myeongjong instead appointed his nephew Seonjo to succeed him. Because Seonjo’s father was not a king, he did not have a chance to be trained as a crown prince, as was usual for future kings. Seonjo was described as possessing a quick temper which only highlighted his immaturity, as well as exhibiting inappropriate manners when responding to royal ministers’ advice. Many accounts in *Seonjo sillok* describe his failure to control his anger as “thunderous rage” (*chinno*). The royal rage was a main concern from the very early years of his reign because it disrupted court business and prevented resolution of conflicts. The first serious outburst of royal rage took place in 1574 when some censorial officials admonished the king when they suspected that one of king’s concubines was using expensive beeswax wastefully for the production of Buddhist statues, but the king strongly denied this. In the course of the debate, Seonjo “burst into a

⁵³⁷ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 5078-5092.

thunderous rage when the officials did not accept his account.”⁵³⁸ The king’s outbursts likely centered on his growing realization of his impotent position of power and the fearful prospect that he could one day be maneuvered out by one side or the other through the powerful mechanisms of impeachment unique to the Joseon system of governance.

In 1581, Song Hon (1535–1598) presented a memorial to Seonjo concerning the king’s rage. He pointed out that although Seonjo was “inherently brilliant,” his lack of serious studies made the expression of his innate goodness fluctuate as outer circumstances changed. Moreover, the king was so arrogant that he would not listen to others’ advice, and he expressed discomfort when hearing officials’ criticisms. Song pointed out that Seonjo’s public display of royal rage in response to officials’ comments virtually blocked communication. Song stressed that the benevolent kings of ancient China maintained a composed emotional condition regardless of outer circumstances. He closed his memorial by accentuating the significance of the king’s self-cultivation, which the ministers would aid. In Song’s view, it was imperative that the king restrain his rage during political debates with scholar-officials in order to maintain interactive communication.⁵³⁹ But the royal rage did not disappear and continued to aid in the further weakening of the Seonjo’s political power.

Confucian intellectuals continued to admonish Seonjo for failing to control his anger. The *sadeabu* used the king’s emotional immaturity against him in factional agendas and used the Neo-Confucian ideal of sage-king which required absolute control over one’s emotions and behaviors at all times, as their means of control over him. It has been noted by some scholars that the control of Joseon king’s anger was developed

⁵³⁸ Cho, “Feeling Power,” 16.

⁵³⁹ Cho, “Feeling Power,” 22.

among the literati as an actually academic subject that they openly lectured on in front of the king and ultimately used it as a political tool to sway royal opinion. They collectively developed a set of behavioral norms that were acceptable in which a Neo-Confucian-based ruler had no choice but follow on his heavenly journey towards sage-king embodiment.⁵⁴⁰ Unfortunately this royal rage would not be harnessed in a constructive manner during the war and seems to have been directed more towards the officials surrounding him.

Both Yi Hwang and Yi I strongly believed in “sage on the inside, virtuous king on the outside” (*naeseong oewang / nei-sheng-wai-wang*). However, they both pursued separate methods to achieve this goal.⁵⁴¹ Yi I stated that:

A person [monarch] who deprives himself of all power, worships only himself, rejects the sincere advice of his subjects, pretends to be holy, and then destroys himself [monarch] is a case of a tyrant. A person who has the will to do well in politics but does not have the intelligence to discern the cunning person, so those whom he trusts are not benevolent, and the appointed officials who ruin the country because they do not have talent are cases of *hongun* (unwise king). Those who are indecisive and follow only the old customs, but then decline and become feeble, are the cases of *yonggun* (impractical king).⁵⁴²

King Seonjo regarded Yi I as a close and trusted advisor, but over time the king’s feelings for Yi I dramatically changed. King Seonjo mainly wanted to hear about manipulative techniques and wisdom that would be useful in a political setting. The young king tended to appoint people with excellent academics and reputation as advisors but did not try to put their suggestions into practice.⁵⁴³ There were many cases in which Yi I criticized the specific actions of Seonjo in person and in front of other officials, and

⁵⁴⁰ Cho, “Feeling Power,” 7-8.

⁵⁴¹ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 439.

⁵⁴² Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 16. Chapter 1: “Discussing the way of a ruler.”

⁵⁴³ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 131. “Report on Political Reform.”

there were many cases where Seonjo was visibly displeased to the point of open anger.⁵⁴⁴ On one occasion as noted by Ryu Seongnyong, while Yi I was suggesting that the *Biographies of Six Martyred Subjects* should be published and distributed, King Seonjo exploded in a fit of rage, yelling at Yi I why he should support a work honoring men who had chosen to die rather than accept the legitimacy of his line of royal decent. He even went so far as to say: “Anyone who owns this book will be punished for treason!”⁵⁴⁵

Ryu Seongnyong had also been present for the king and Yi I’s major falling out. On that day while Yi I lectured on a sentence in the book of *Mencius*, he suddenly paused and then asked the king: “Today, when the people are impoverished, the borders of the country are insecure, and social norms and discipline are in disarray, if Mencius were to ask you, ‘What are you going to do?’ What would be your reply?” The king ignored his question and did not answer. Afterward, Yi I decided to return to his home in the country and left Seoul on the pretext of needing to attend to his grandmother’s illness. He had concluded that the king had little interest in benevolent government, and when he subsequently submitted his resignation, blaming his poor health, the king did not try to dissuade him, sending him only this note: “When sufferings build up, it is often advisable to devote oneself to recovery. There is an old poem that says: ‘No more worldly matters I hear, washing my ears. And I befriend the green pines, roaming with deer.’ How pleasant it must be to retire.”⁵⁴⁶ It is possible that Seonjo was a king who felt burdened, overwhelmed, or uninterested in the duties and responsibilities of his position. But under the Neo-Confucian zhengming system the king had no choice but to live up to his

⁵⁴⁴ Yi I, Dongho Mundap, 134. “Report on Political Reform.”

⁵⁴⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 99.

⁵⁴⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 106.

position. And under the Joseon governing norms, Seonjo also faced imminent impeachment if he failed to live up to those nearly impossible ideals, especially during a national crisis.

Even though the king thought that Yi I's learning and reputation for integrity were impressive, Yi I's self-righteousness and zeal for reform became a burden for the monarch to bare. In his mid-twenties, the king realized that he could not trust such a person, and Yi I never understood this, remaining frustrated to the end by the king's lack of interest in instituting meaningful changes.⁵⁴⁷ Ryu Seongnyong first entered the young king's court as a newcomer scribe attending royal lectures and noting the positions subjects took and the issues raised. Ryu Seongnyong, like Yi I, constantly argued for the king to reinstate the purged and exiled scholars from previous reigns in an effort to strengthen the waning government institutions. Seongnyong saw the king as a highly intelligent man, but lacked the will to bring about needed and meaningful changes as those suggested by Yi I who over time became more and more visibly frustrated with the passivity of the king.⁵⁴⁸

From the time of his enthronement, the king had been sufficiently diligent in his studies, yet as Yi I pointed out, he never seemed interested in the right way to govern and never asked any questions. Once, Yi I asked the king directly why he was so unresponsive to the lectures he was receiving. The king bluntly answered, "I am by nature dull and incompetent."⁵⁴⁹ Yi I at first thought that the king was someone who simply had lost trust in the advisors that surrounded him. He believed that it was

⁵⁴⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 112.

⁵⁴⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 94.

⁵⁴⁹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 107.

necessary for any effective ruler to surround themselves with learned and experienced men to advise the king in an honest manner. Yi I commented that: “Any ruler who wants to govern their country effectively and with ability, then they must have loyal retainers who respect and trust the ruler. The relationship between the king and the retainers is like that between parents and children, like fish and water meeting each other.”⁵⁵⁰ Yi I further expressed with blunt honesty that: “In this land the reason why royal politics cannot be practiced is simply because the monarch and prime minister were not the right people, and because it is a distant future world, it cannot be restored. When there is a lord worthy of a monarch and a minister worthy of a prime minister, royal politics can be restored.”⁵⁵¹

The reality was that King Seonjo seemed uninterested in how to rule effectively or in how better to follow the self-cultivation of a moral mind. This seemed to just be the king’s own weak nature. Yi I had directly challenged Seonjo by saying:

I’ve heard that Your Majesty once told someone, ‘I wish I had more time to study, but my work prevents it.’ Did you really say that? I did, the king replied. Your Majesty has wonderful talent but little ambition. This is why you don’t exert yourself. It isn’t that you’re prevented from pursuing learning. But as a result, state affairs continue to drift, morale has dipped, and your subjects have been disappointed.⁵⁵²

But by the late sixteenth century, Joseon was a Neo-Confucian realm in name only, with the enlightened words of scholars like Yi Hwang and Yi I fading into oblivion. According to Yi I’s thinking, people must be of the first importance for a ruler. National tradition follows people, and the King follows the national tradition. Since the king depends on the nation and the nation depends on the people, the king must uphold the

⁵⁵⁰ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 33. Chapter 3: “Discussing the difficulty of meeting a good ruler and a good subject.”

⁵⁵¹ Yi I, *Dongho Mundap*, 49. Chapter 6: “Discussing the situation of today’s era.”

⁵⁵² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 112-113.

people. The rule of a king means simply to protect the welfare of his people and to preserve their good minds.⁵⁵³ But as both Yi Hwang and Yi I pointed out, it had been a long time since the Joseon ruling elite had cared about the welfare of the people. It seemed that King Seonjo was most concerned not with the betterment of Joseon society, but how to more effectively strengthen his power and authority over the established bureaucratic system which in many ways held more power than him. When pushed to institute new reforms the king once remarked: “Making reforms recklessly will bring the state to ruin faster than keeping things as they are and gradually reducing our errors.”⁵⁵⁴ It seemed that Seonjo was very concerned with not upsetting the elite’s interests in an effort to protect his own political power and royal bloodline succession. Yi I in opposition presented the king with “a sage learning textbook which claims that the accumulated tradition of the Neo-Confucian sages is more legitimate than the royal succession of the king based on the royal bloodline.”⁵⁵⁵

It is likely that Seonjo had difficulty dealing with the high expectations placed on him under the Neo-Confucian demands of becoming a sage-king. Once, when a bad omen appeared on the first day of the year and a famine broke out in the north it plunged the king into a deep depression. Yi I was constantly lecturing him on how the country’s ability to deal with societies problems ultimately depended on the king himself and seeing the country experiencing growing hardships plunged him into a dark mental hole. The king started to have recurring migraines and more frequent episodes of uncontrolled anger which went contrary to the definition of a sage-king and so he started to doubt

⁵⁵³ Kim, “Cultural Thought of Yulgok,” 18.

⁵⁵⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 107.

⁵⁵⁵ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 5369.

himself.⁵⁵⁶ Commenting on a memorial that Yi I had presented to the king, Seonjo commented: “Having read your memorial, I am impressed by your loyalty,” he wrote. “It’s not that I haven’t wanted to pull myself together and do my duty. Things haven’t worked out, no doubt because of my lack of talent and intelligence, and that is regrettable.”⁵⁵⁷

It is likely that rather than feeling inadequate, the king was just being manipulative with Yi I. When Yi I died in 1584, it was said that wailing could be heard coming from the Seonjo’s chambers. But when the chief state councilor requested that the king raise Yi I’s rank and bestow a title in memory Seonjo replied: “Yi I was a man I knew very well, and there is no need for you to talk further about him. Since his rank is that of a state councilor, it seems high enough already. What good will it do to promote him any higher?” Hearing of Seonjo’s remark, Ryu Seongnyong felt a shiver run through him at the coldness behind the king’s remarks and wondered if the king was simply putting on a show in order to appear proper to the other officials.⁵⁵⁸

In February of 1596, he issued a proclamation to the people of the south as a means to motivated participation in military preparation work for the government. He explained: “Taking wealth and labor from the people is all out of necessity in the plan for the country, and training the military, building walls, and setting up mounds is something that cannot be delayed in order to preserve the country and prevent war. It is urgent.” But it is likely that the realization that the Chinese and Japanese were in secret peace talks without him that stimulated this proclamation. He remarked that the suffering of his

⁵⁵⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 126-127.

⁵⁵⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 129.

⁵⁵⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 138.

people “penetrates deeply into my bones, and I cannot sleep at night, and even when I have to eat, I forget to eat.” In reference to the economic suffering of the people and the lack of help for them was due to the fact that the national treasury is empty. He ends the proclamation with, “I hope you will be moved by this.”⁵⁵⁹ But by then the people clearly understood the true nature of the king who had fled and left them to suffer and die alone.

But like most of King Seonjo’s reign, his efforts were never enough to satisfy those around him. During the war, the Joseon people largely turned on him as an ineffective and unreliable leader. The Neo-Confucian ideal of sage-king was never realized by Seonjo who seemed less interested in genuine self-cultivation and more interested in how to manipulate the court’s powerful factions to focus their collective energies on battling each other rather than criticizing him indirectly as a ruler. The Neo-Confucian principle of sage was foundational to proper governing under the long-accepted Mandate of Heaven. Within the understanding of Joseon Neo-Confucianism, a king was central to upholding a system of benevolent governance. A king’s failure to realize or at least appear to realize those ideals meant that he could be removed from his position of rule by the people if necessary and therefore “sage-king” acted as an insurance policy for a tyrannical and unethical monarchy. Under Neo-Confucian understanding, if a king was unable to live up to the ideal of a sage-king, then it was left to his advisors to make up for the king’s shortcomings. In the case of Seonjo, it would largely fall to Ryu Seongnyong to take up the burden of selfless and benevolent governance.

⁵⁵⁹ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 30, 29th Year of King Seonjo, 2nd article, February 1, 1596: “Issuing a proclamation and inform that to the people of the South.”

Chapter IX.

A Leadership Comparison of King Seonjo and Chief State Councilor Ryu Seongnyong

*Only a great man is able to correct the errors of the prince's heart.*⁵⁶⁰

—Mencius

Ryu Seongnyong had been a student of Yi Hwang's and according to other contemporary students that attended, one of his most promising. Yi Hwang once remarked to another student Hakbong that Seongnyong was "a man of talent sent from heaven with the promise of becoming a great scholar in the years to come." Hakbong also commented that he had never heard Yi Hwang ever once give praise to any other student over his many years of study.⁵⁶¹ Still, Yi Hwang's central focus was on the idea that one should focus on self-cultivation to reach sagehood before attempting to accomplish anything else. But like Yi I, Ryu Seongnyong found it hard to understand how self-cultivation could be beneficial if it was disconnected from the well-being of others. He felt that a life of continuous self-cultivation became meaningless without applying it towards bettering humanity through public service.⁵⁶² Seongnyong and Yi I connected with the Confucian quote: "The superior man cultivates oneself to give rest to all the people." Though many Neo-Confucians including Yi Hwang had interpreted this to mean through a renewal of the people themselves who followed the example of the superior man, Seongnyong seemed to side with Wang Shuren's belief that what Confucius meant was that the purpose of cultivating oneself was to provide service as an act of pure

⁵⁶⁰ Sancho, "Confucian Identity," 5. Referenced Mengzi IV.A.20.

⁵⁶¹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 55.

⁵⁶² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 17.

love.⁵⁶³ Ryu Seongnyong was a man that through his long and difficult official career had devoted all his energy to improving the various institutions that he was charged with. At the center of his mind was to follow the cardinal virtues of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi*, and *xin* and to conduct all actions with the empathetic nature that was demanded by all Neo-Confucian *hyeon* (morally superior men).

Since beginning his civil service in 1566, Seongnyong experienced a meteoric rise through the ranks of court with the king clearly showing favor towards him to the jealousy of others. When Seongnyong gracefully declined the offer of Minister of Rites King Seonjo sent this reply letter:

You have served me as a royal lecturer over the last ten years without making a single error, and you have been steadfast in your practice of virtue all this time. Within the bonds of obligation and loyalty, I am your king, and you are my subject. Yet within the bonds of affection and understanding, we have been nothing but friends. When it comes to learning, you are not a shallow-minded scholar inclined to argue about sentences and phrases. When it comes to talent, you are capable of accomplishing great things.⁵⁶⁴

At the center of Confucian ideology is the emphasis on the upholding of rites. Seongnyong believed that the period of the Warring States in China was one of declining rites and therefore was ultimately responsible for national collapse. He firmly believed that the rise and fall of the state was dependent on the ability of the state upholding rites and adhering to Confucian principles and all effort and resources should be directed towards this end.⁵⁶⁵ Ryu Seongnyong devoted himself honestly to living a proper life

⁵⁶³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 32, Confucian quote taken from *Analects* Chapter 14.

⁵⁶⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 140.

⁵⁶⁵ Yim. "The Establishment of Literati," 231.

based on Neo-Confucianism and approached all problems facing Joseon in the period prior to the war with somewhat of a narrow mind to the threat that Japan posed.

In 1587, Japanese pirates raided coastal villages in southern Cheolla and in November of the same year a Japanese envoy named Tachibana Yasuhiro from Tsushima arrived at the Korean court requesting that emissaries be sent to Japan. When Seonjo heard of this he refused to give an audience and stated: “Japan is a country of traitors! They killed Oda Nobunaga and now they have a new king. How can I see his envoy?” In agreement, other officials added: “Since Japan is clearly outside the enlightened sphere, it does little good to reprimand them for transgressions of propriety. It would be advisable for his majesty to treat the envoy according to established precedents.” The king relented and followed their counsel.⁵⁶⁶

Many times before and during the war, King Seonjo was in a lose-lose position. In this case if he dismissed and embarrassed the Japanese envoy he risked further escalations in tensions, and if he gave an audience, he was encouraging the Japanese to continue raiding and causing problems in the south. Though this leadership dilemma is recognized as existing, the majority of King Seonjo’s decision-making before and during the war were more about protecting his power and position largely through his favored technique of playing one faction off the other. This behavior from a ruler went against the Neo-Confucian ideal of sage-king which was at its foundation a position legitimized through the Mandate of Heaven under the pretext of benevolent rule for betterment of the people and not through dishonest and self-serving politicking.

⁵⁶⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 163, taken from *Seonjo Sillok*, 21:16b (1587.10.20).

Shortly before the Japanese invasion in 1592, the king dismissed Cho Taegon and replaced him with his royal secretary Kim Seong-il which was a strange thing to do at a time of such heightened tensions with the Japanese. But the Border Defense Council retorted: “Kim is not the right person to defend the border at this time. He is a Confucian scholar.” But the king would not listen. Seongnyong could guess the reason behind the king’s decision. When Kim Seong-il had returned from Japan, he had reported that the Japanese would not invade, so the king believed that Kim more than anyone else should be held responsible for repelling the invaders if his report was in error. Seongnyong feared that his friend was now in a dangerous predicament because if war broke out, he would be the first to be blamed.⁵⁶⁷

The Japanese did invade and the first report of this didn’t even reach the capital until three days later from the Pusan naval commander Pak Hong. The three-day delay was shocking to Seongnyong since there existed a beacon fire system that could have easily sent the message within hours or a fast courier on horseback within a day. He immediately brought the report to the king and called an emergency meeting of the Border Defense Council. The king was visibly disturbed but didn’t say a word. He refused to attend the general meeting and just withdrew to his chamber in a daze.⁵⁶⁸ But once the king gathered himself, one of the first things that came to the king’s mind was the report made by Kim Seong-il, who had confidently said that the Japanese would not invade. The King immediately dispatched an officer to escort Kim to Seoul for interrogation and punishment. But Kim was already on route to Changwon to replace Cho Taegon, the commander of the provincial army who had by then already fled his

⁵⁶⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 184-185.

⁵⁶⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 188.

headquarters. Kim immediately took charge of the chaotic situation and gathered the remnants of Cho's army and mounted an attack on the Japanese in the area causing the enemy to briefly withdraw. Kim sent a report to the king, concluding with these words: "It is your subject's wish that his gratitude to you can be demonstrated forever with his death." Learning that Kim Seong-il had won the admiration of the people in the region, King Seonjo sent new orders to pardon him.⁵⁶⁹ At this time, the king also openly blamed both the soldiers and the people saying their collective fear and panic have led to the country's near-collapse and that "they have lost the will to die for their superiors."⁵⁷⁰

Shortly following the invasion, the king released a royal proclamation appointing the crown prince as his heir. In the letter to the public he stated: "I myself who is not good at understanding the right and wrong, faced many difficulties in the country, for 25 years I tried to do my best to rule the country, being careful and fearful, but since now billions of people were scattered, what should I do with the people's resentment."⁵⁷¹ Following this he called his ministers to prepare for his departure north to their collective alarm. One minister replied to the king: "The shrine of your ancestors and the royal tombs are all here! Where can Your Majesty go?" Right Royal Secretary Sin Chap said: "If Your Majesty should depart from Seoul against the advice of your subjects, I cannot follow. Instead, I will give up my life at the shrine of the royal ancestors even though my mother at home is over eighty." The sixth councilor, Pak Tonghyeon, joined him in remonstrance: "Once Your Majesty abandons the palace, there is little guarantee that the

⁵⁶⁹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 191-192, taken from Kim Seongil's *Hakbong cheonjip* [Complete Works of Kim Seongil], 620.

⁵⁷⁰ Lee, *Innovative Leaders in Difficult Times*, 127.

⁵⁷¹ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 26, 25th Year of King Seonjo, 17th article, May 1, 1592: "Proclamation of the appointing the crown prince was released throughout the entire Joseon and released the prisoners."

people's hearts will go with you. Even the bearers carrying the royal carriage might flee, leaving you alone on the street!" The color in the king's face changed, and he left the hall without a word.⁵⁷²

When the report arrived that stated the Japanese would arrive to the capital the next day, the king and his departing delegation were still waiting for the expected armed escort to arrive. The palace gates were wide open, and all the guards seemed to have vanished. After some searching a few guards were rounded up and attached to escort the king's procession out of the city. Just past midnight, exactly seventeen days after the Japanese had landed, a royal procession of no more than a hundred people total made their way north. As the procession came around in front of Kyeongbok Palace, loud wailing could be heard on both sides of the street. Here and there, voices cried out, "Your Majesty, how can you abandon your people?"⁵⁷³ The abandoning of the ancestral altars in the city meant a loss of face for the king whose own legitimacy was attached to the observance of the Neo-Confucian rites associated with the alters.⁵⁷⁴ After the king's entourage had fled, the people in a rage of anger set aflame Kyeongbok Palace and Changdeok Palace. This represented the king's symbolic loss of legitimization in the eyes of those in the capital because under Neo-Confucian norms the palace was the physical symbol of the king himself.⁵⁷⁵ When the king fled and the palace was handed over willingly to the enemy, the king had broken his agreement under the Mandate of Heaven as well as the predicate of rule as a sage king.

⁵⁷² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 204.

⁵⁷³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 211-212.

⁵⁷⁴ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 97.

⁵⁷⁵ Kyung-Soo Kim, "A Study of the Revolt of Lee Mong-Hak During the Imjin War," *The Korean Society of the History of Historiography* 46 (December 2022): 136, <https://doi.org/10.29186/kjhh.2022.46.131>.

The king began openly discussing what his plans were going forward. “Going on to China was what I originally intended to do,” the king said and then added: “I don’t mean to say we should cross the Yalu right away. I was only speaking of what we should do if worse comes to worst.” Seongnyong addressed the king firmly: “Right now, the eastern and northern regions are still intact, and in the south many volunteer militia groups [Uibyeong] are rising up against the enemy like a swarm of bees. It is wrong to make misleading remarks so recklessly.” In addition, the Korean navy led by Yi Sunsin was ready to test its strength against the Japanese fleet, and the seventy to eighty thousand soldiers under the joint command of the three southern provinces, Cheolla, Kyeongsang, and Chungcheong, would begin to attack the Japanese army, which had pushed north to Seoul, from behind.⁵⁷⁶ Seonjo through his own actions demonstrated that he was no longer accepting the responsibility of rulership and the Ming would later use it against him and the Joseon people also.

In the weeks that followed the king became more and more unpredictable changing his cabinet so often that newly appointed officials were sometimes dismissed before they could even begin their official duties.⁵⁷⁷ And as the procession moved ever northward with the king encouraging speed of movement, Seonjo realized at some point that they could move faster if they didn’t have to keep transporting the cumbersome royal spirit tablets that had been housed at the palace and now needed about fifty horses to transport. So, breaking probably one of the most sacred Neo-Confucian ancestral worship taboos, the king had them unceremoniously buried in the ground near Mokchong Hall without discussing the matter with any of the officials. His greatest concern was his own

⁵⁷⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 213-214.

⁵⁷⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 220.

safety, and he required his subjects to support his wishes and judged them for their loyalty according to their ability to satisfy those wishes. Arriving in Hwangju on the sixth day of the fifth month, he suddenly raised the rank of everyone who had escorted the royal procession, including the palace attendants, and even awarded military rank to the bearers of the royal palanquins. At the same time, he dismissed those who had failed to follow him, showed opposition to his conduct, or had simply lagged behind.⁵⁷⁸ By the time the king would reach Uji on the border of China, only seventeen officials, the Royal doctor, four to five personal servants, and three royal horsemen stayed with the king. In utter disappointment the king would proclaim: “All you scholars! For generations, your grandfathers and your fathers before you, and you have been in the good graces of the state. Yet, the moment you face a crisis, you all forsake me. Though I do not fault you, you cannot possibly behave thus to me.” Possibly to gain sympathy Seonjo blamed the current tragedy as “been caused by my mistake. I have no one but myself to blame and I feel nothing but shame.” But at the same time, it seems that Seonjo was also self-serving and less than truthfully in his rhetoric claiming that: “If I could, I would use my body as a sacrifice to apologize to the ancestral spirits and all the spirits between Heaven and Earth. My remorse is so acute. I ask scholars and commoners to allow me the chance to correct my mistakes and to search for a new rule.”⁵⁷⁹ It seemed to many listening that the king was less than genuine in his self-admonition and claims of remorse.

Upon reaching Pyeongyang and its protection of three thousand soldiers, the king was feeling much better. But instead of calling together all relevant official and military commanders within the city, the king demanded that the foods presented to him be

⁵⁷⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 221-222.

⁵⁷⁹ Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 106-108.

upgraded in quality. Many thought it peculiar to be concerned about such mundane matters as dinner ingredients when the country was in such a state of disarray.

Seongnyong believed that the king at this stage may have felt that his country was finished, and this unconscious bearing was starting to seep into the officials that gathered around him.⁵⁸⁰ It seemed to many that Seonjo was simply waiting for the Ming to allow him safe passage into their territory and for the remaining officials to attempt to clean up the mess left behind. During this time there was nearly no military planning discussed at royal meetings attended by Seonjo and all subsequent discussions centered on the best routes to flee north. The king complained: “It would have been better if we had gone to Liadong earlier, but we ended up in this situation because we couldn’t agree on anything. From the beginning, I always said that it would be difficult to avoid the Japanese enemy once they appeared in front of us.”⁵⁸¹

As the king was not thinking straight, he inexplicitly dismissed Ryu Seongyong when his councilor pushed back against the king’s recent behavior. Then a month later with the arrival of the Chinese military commissioners Lin Shilu and Cui Shichen who were admirers of the chief state councilor, Seonjo thought it best to reinstate Seongnyong in order to please the Ming delegation. The king excited with the prospect of salvation, personally entertained the two officials over the next couple of days which was uncharacteristic of a Joseon king. Around this time the defeated Joseon commander Yi Il had made his way from his defeat in the south all the way up to Pyeongyang wearing tattered clothing which barely covering his body and wearing shoes made out of straw. The entire situation was almost ridiculous, with the king playing the entertainer and

⁵⁸⁰ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 221-223.

⁵⁸¹ Lee, *Innovative Leaders in Difficult Times*, 159, taken from *Seonjo Sillok*, June 12, 1592, article 25.

begging to be saved by the Chinese, and the top Joseon army commander in a defeated daze strutting around with straw shoes. The Chinese who had come there under the suspicion that the Joseon may be secretly aiding the Japanese, left for Liaodong in a hurry to secure military aid before the country completely collapsed.⁵⁸²

When the Chinese commissioners had left, Seonjo began feeling uneasy about his own personal safety. With the enemy so near to Pyeongyang, he decided to quietly ready the royal party for departure once again. In no time word got around that the king was to soon leave, and the city started to rapidly empty of residents. They were called back and told that the king would in fact stay to defend the city. But the next day as the royal party tried to stealthily exit their quarters and make their way out of the city the streets filled with angry people crying out at the king: “You already knew you were going to run! You made us come back! Why did you lie? Do you want us to be slaughtered by the enemy?” Seongnyong was able to calm the crowd down, but he would state to other officials in desperation:

The fortress has a river in front to protect it, and the people of the city are resolute in their willingness to fight. Besides, we are only a short distance from China. If we can hold out for a few more days, the army the Ming is sending will be here without fail, and, with their assistance, we will certainly expel the enemy.⁵⁸³

But the king had already decided to leave the city and commanded that Queen Uiin should depart for Hamgyeong right away, and he would follow shortly. However, this plan also ran into trouble from the start. When the officials leading the queen’s carriage emerged from the palace gate, the people outside rioted to prevent their departure. People screamed: “You usually sit back and just waste the national tax, but

⁵⁸² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 229-231.

⁵⁸³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 231.

now you are ruining the country! You are deceiving even the people!”⁵⁸⁴ Completely at a loss, the king paced around the courtyard as he waited for his own carriage to be made ready.⁵⁸⁵ The king also inquired about how quickly he could cross into China if needed and instructed his ministers: “Everything must be fully prepared in advance, since entering Liaodong cannot be done abruptly.” Both the Joseon and Ming officials there were aghast at the proposal because, “the unconscionable act of deserting the people under his care an act that would turn him into a cowardly little man.” When the king brought up the possibility of moving to Liadong in September, Chong Chol, governor general of the three southern provinces bluntly stated: “He must not only not voice it but completely eradicate it from his mind as a possibility.”⁵⁸⁶ Minister of Rites Yun Kunsu pleaded with the king not to consider Liaodong. Ryu Seongnyong, who had just arrived from Yongcheon agreed stating: “Your Majesty, Hamgyeong, Pyeongan, and the three southern provinces are all still intact. Your example will inspire the people, and if we have them with us, there is every possibility for recovery.” Seongnyong choked back his tears, and everyone in the court, including the king, was moved. But still the king persisted: “Tell the Ming generals to divide the boats they have anchored on the other side into two parts and to bring one part over to this side. As to the horses needed for our cargo, let this county get them ready. We will also need horses for the royal escort, so let the neighboring districts take care of them.”⁵⁸⁷ In the end, neither his duty to his royal ancestors, Neo-Confucian ideals, nor personal shame moved the king to stand with his

⁵⁸⁴ Ryu, *Jingbirok*, vol. 1, 99.

⁵⁸⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 233-234.

⁵⁸⁶ Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 109-110.

⁵⁸⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 250-251, taken from *Seonjo Sillok*, 27:15a (1592.6.23).

soldiers and subjects against the Japanese. All that filled Seonjo's mind was how quickly he could exit his own country.

The king also gave orders to distribute some of the silver taels left by the Ming envoy to all the members of his entourage from the ministers and high officials down to the attendants and interpreters. Seongnyong understanding the state of the national treasury tried to counter the order by reasoning: "We wonder about the wisdom of extending your generosity now, and even to your lowest subjects. We would like to ask you to save the silver taels as rewards to be distributed to the kingdom's warriors later." "Don't worry. We still have enough," the king replied, "even if we give some now to the loyal escorts of the royal party." It was painful for Seongnyong to watch the king waste the generosity of the emperor. It appeared that the king took the Chinese emperor's assurance of help for granted, oblivious of how desperately Koreans had cried for help in the past few months.⁵⁸⁸ As the king's shrinking entourage moved at a rapid pace to the Chinese border, the king desperately tried to raise troops along the way to stall the Japanese and cover his escape. But the towns and villages they passed were largely abandoned already with people fleeing high into the mountains.⁵⁸⁹ When the king's entourage did encounter some people and soldiers within Pyeongan Province they "pointed their swords at King Seonjo's party."⁵⁹⁰

Not surprisingly, the Chinese Emperor issued an Imperial decree concerning military aid to Korea which basically shamed the Joseon king and blamed him for the dire condition his country. The emperor wrote: "And now Your Majesty has fled for the

⁵⁸⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 252.

⁵⁸⁹ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 113.

⁵⁹⁰ Lee, *Innovative Leaders in Difficult Times*, 137.

Western coast and is seeking refuge among the rustics. You must now focus your attention to the task at hand strengthen your resolve.” Likely the Chinese at this point were fearful that the Japanese would soon be walking unopposed into Chinese lands. The emperor further stated that King Seonjo needed to “exert all your energy in the business of saving your state and restoring its prestige” so that Seonjo could “regain the respect” that he had once beheld. But rather than feeling shame upon receiving such a rebuke, according to Sin Kyeong’s account, King Seonjo after reading the message to his officials cried tears of joy because he believed he would be shortly saved by the Ming.⁵⁹¹

Even though the king’s abandonment of the people went against everything Ryu Seongnyong believed in and what is to be expected from a sage-king, he would not disobey the wishes of Seonjo. His Neo-Confucian mindset and principle of filial loyalty could not be easily dismissed. The king was the embodiment of the rules and values that constituted the state and no matter how weakened, could not be restored without the king himself. If the king was not strong enough then according to Seongnyong it was his duty as a Confucian scholar-official serving the king to take responsibility for saving the state on the king’s behalf.⁵⁹² So while the king shed tears for himself and his desperate situation, Seongnyong issued orders to simultaneously attack points all along the over-extended Japanese supply lines in order to relieve pressure on the king hiding in Uiju waiting impatiently to cross the Chinese border.⁵⁹³

To the king’s relief the Ming did arrive with troops and eventually beat back the Japanese. So once things started to turn for the better the following year, the king started

⁵⁹¹ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 126-127.

⁵⁹² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 247-248.

⁵⁹³ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 114.

to plan ahead as to who other than him may shoulder the ultimate blame. But upon finding out about the peace negotiations between China and Japan were happening without him, he started to worry that he might be replaced with his son by the Ming emperor. He sent a desperate letter to Seongnyong with these instructions:

You are the minister I have always relied on. When signs of a Japanese invasion began to appear, I gave you several warnings, but you advised me not to be overly concerned. And what was the result? We have fallen into a situation I can scarcely believe, even though some still say it is heaven's decree. Since I have empowered you with great responsibility, taking revenge on the enemy is your duty—for me, it is my only prayer, for I am consumed with rage day and night. Yet every day there are rumors that negotiations for peace are under way. How could anyone dare to put so unspeakable a thought into words? Who would dare to utter such an obscenity within my hearing? If you fall for this, you will bring on a disaster even greater than your previous mistakes—how can you face the world?⁵⁹⁴

By this point in the war, the king appeared to have lost confidence in Seongnyong. In a council meeting King Seonjo remarked, “Since becoming high minister, he has not defeated the enemy with a successful strategy even once. What I wonder, if he is bound to fail in the end, is why we don’t let someone else do his job. I’m sure men like Kwon Yul, Ko Onbaek, or Cho Hoik could do what he does equally well.” The officials who heard what the king was saying were astonished. Why would the king suddenly take it into his head to criticize his favorite subject? They knew that there was no one more capable than Seongnyong. At a meeting of the Border Defense Council, they talked it over and then requested an audience with the king.

Their petition stated:

Ryu Seongnyong, one of the highest-ranking ministers in your court, has carried out the duties of the supreme overseer of military affairs since his appointment to that position. Although the results have been modest so far, he has not committed grave mistakes. His failure to resist and prevent

⁵⁹⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 308-309.

peace negotiations is attributable to the fact that the talks with the enemy, until very recently, were conducted in secret. We believe it would not be appropriate to deprive Seongnyong of his military duties solely because of the talks between China and Japan.⁵⁹⁵

Seongnyong was not surprised when he was told what the king had said. It was an expression of the way the king ruled his domain, a constant cycle of granting and withdrawing his favor, of promoting and demoting his subjects. For him, the invasion had occurred because of Seongnyong's failure to prevent it, and this was a thought never far from the king's mind.⁵⁹⁶ But King Seonjo was not being completely truthful because in 1588 an official from the Western faction demanded a harder line when dealing with the Japanese and even suggested the dispatch of an armed force to Japan. He blamed the officials such as Ryu Seongnyong, No Susin, and Cheong Yugil for their lack of action and preparation for possible Japanese aggression. But King Seonjo responded by sending Cho Hon into exile and appointing more Easterners to important posts. This places the final responsibility for the failure to take action with King Seonjo and most of the Eastern faction who recommended that no major military preparations be made in years leading up to the invasion.⁵⁹⁷ Therefore both the king and Ryu Seongnyong shared responsibility for failing to properly prepare.

Around this time the Ming emperor sent a letter to Seonjo criticizing the king for his improper leadership for the people, and his apparent lack of sympathy for the lives of his subjects. "If the cart in the lead has overturned, how can those behind it not follow it?" The Emperor also instructed the king of Joseon to return to Seoul, strengthen his defenses, and make sure his navy patrolled the coasts, warning him that after these steps

⁵⁹⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 310-311.

⁵⁹⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 330.

⁵⁹⁷ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 76.

were taken, the Ming would withdraw all their forces from Korea.⁵⁹⁸ The Chinese understood that the monarchy was a symbol of “court-and-capital” as “a microcosm of supernatural order” and “the material embodiment of political order.” The king abandoning the capital and leaving the vulnerable citizens exposed shattered the very foundation of the Neo-Confucian principle of filial observance and loyalty.⁵⁹⁹

Even though the Japanese abandoned Seoul on May 18th, 1593, it wasn't until November that Seonjo had finally taken Seongnyong's advice and moved back to the capital where the people expected him to reside. By the time that the royal entourage returned to the burned-out skeleton of what was once Seoul, only about ten percent of the original population of the city remained, and all in stages of starvation. It was so bad that one witness reported that when a drunken Chinese soldier vomited into the street, starving men crawled to the spot and fought over the steaming mess.⁶⁰⁰ The Ming commanders commented that people looked like ghosts, and the stench of decaying men and horses was so strong that everyone had to cover their noses. Zha Dashou who saw a starving child sucking on the breast of its dead mother was moved to tears and took the child back to the Ming camp to be raised by the Chinese. The Ming also distributed sixty-seven tons of food to those that were still alive.⁶⁰¹ King Seonjo was angry with the Ming's act of kindness because he himself had failed to bring in relief grain for his citizens and it made him look like a “cowardly king” and not a “merciful king.”⁶⁰²

⁵⁹⁸ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 197.

⁵⁹⁹ Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 28.

⁶⁰⁰ Hawley, *The Imjin War*, 346.

⁶⁰¹ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 170-171.

⁶⁰² Lee, *Innovative Leaders in Difficult Times*, 240.

A report came in that the Ming court was sending a special envoy bearing an imperial rescript to the Korean court. According to Yi Hangbok, who had greeted the envoy in Uiju, the rescript contained a reprimand of King Seonjo for his failures as a ruler. The gist of it was said to be that the benefit of protection that the sovereign grants to his vassal state will not be extended beyond this point. Should there be another disturbance in Joseon, no effort can be made to save its king. The king was startled by the report, and “his face burned.” A secretary in Beijing named Wei Xuezheng submitted a memorial to the emperor in which he proposed dividing the territory of Korea into several parts and letting only those capable of expelling the Japanese rule the land. His main purpose, he said, was to turn Korea into a barrier blocking any future Japanese attack on China, and he further argued that Korea deserved this fate because, by failing to stop the Japanese, it had only caused more problems for China.⁶⁰³

That night, the king sent for Seongnyong. “This is perhaps the last day I can see you,” he said. “Although it is late, I wanted to see you before I leave. In days of old, people would say, ‘No one is more unfortunate than a man dying with his life unfulfilled.’ With your learning and great talents, the only reason you failed to achieve more is that you served a man like me.” In tears, Seongnyong said: “You graciously chose this worthless man to assist you. Now that we have come to this pass, it is my blundering that is entirely responsible.” “That is not so,” the king replied. “Even though the state of Wei had a sage like Zisi, it could not keep its territory from shrinking, and even a great minister like Zhuge Liang failed to restore the Han royal family. How can you pretend to share the responsibility?”⁶⁰⁴ The king was privately admitting to

⁶⁰³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 346

⁶⁰⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 348.

Seongnyong that the ultimate responsibility for the country's predicament rested on his shoulders alone.

On the following day, the king visited Si Xian in his quarters and handed him a letter that stated: "I am no longer capable of ruling, because of poor health. I hope you can assist in granting my wish." Si Xian was surprised that the king was willing to relinquish his throne so quickly.⁶⁰⁵ But the Ming envoy Si Xian rejected Seonjo's request. If the king, age forty-one, who had ruled for twenty-five years, had been suddenly replaced by his son, age eighteen and inexperienced, the resulting disarray in the tenor and makeup of the government would have jeopardized all efforts to stabilize the country.⁶⁰⁶ In Seongnyong's reading of the situation, the king had never wanted to abdicate and was only pretending to as a way to strengthen his power and recover the authority he had lost during the war. The king was demonstrating to his subjects, and to the Ming court, that he still was of central importance in any resolution of the current crisis.⁶⁰⁷

But obviously the Ming did not completely trust in the decision-making ability of King Seonjo. Because the next day, Si Xian requested an audience with the king before his departure. Upon taking his leave, he mentioned: "All the Chinese generals and officials I have met here are impressed with the steadfast loyalty and humane principles of Ryu Seongnyong. You have a state councilor truly outstanding in wisdom." Upon returning to Beijing, Si Xian sent the king an official acknowledgment of the conclusion of his mission, stating: "State Councilor Ryu Seongnyong leads the Hundred Officials

⁶⁰⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 349.

⁶⁰⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 350.

⁶⁰⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 352-353.

because he follows the straight path. You can end your present trials and difficulties if you entrust him with all your official business. That is how you can reduce the anxieties that trouble you, restore the state, and renew the mountains and rivers of your land.”⁶⁰⁸

But, by this point in the war King Seonjo in his paranoid state was taking little advice from anyone. The king tried to select and promote military and government officials on his own without consultation. He tended to reward those that showed loyalty to him and was easily swayed by a confident argument even if it had no basis in fact or reality. An example of this happened when King Seonjo appointed Jeon Yu-hyeong to the post of Cheongan county governor. During a discussion on military matters the king commented to Ryu Seongnyong: “Looking at Jeon Yu-hyeong discussing soldiers, it seems that there is no better solution than that. In the future, I will make him a major general and test him out.” It was recognized by many that Jeon Yu-hyeong was well-versed in history and could speak very articulately so the king put him in charge of training soldiers, but because he had absolutely no experience in such military matters he could not handle the post and was quietly dismissed.⁶⁰⁹ The Emperor of China received word of King Seonjo’s lack of ability to instill proper discipline in the Joseon leadership. He told Seonjo in a letter that the most important thing Seonjo had to do was improve morale and then the newly appointed Korean commanders and also the king needed to prepare defensive positions and secure proper stores of food for the military. The emperor also pushed for the adoption of Chinese disciplinary measures such as summary

⁶⁰⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 351.

⁶⁰⁹ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 28, 27th Year of King Seonjo, 7th article, January 1, 1594: “Jeon Yu-hyeong, who frequently complained about soldiers, was appointed to the post of county governor, but dismissed for lack of ability.”

decapitation for anyone fleeing their post rather than the Joseon norm of the reassignment of failed leaders.⁶¹⁰

Why Ryu Seongnyong Embodied Proper Neo-Confucian Governance

Yi Sunsin had once stated that: “Hardly anyone exceeds him [Ryu Seongnyong] in the patriotic thoughts.⁶¹¹ He was a man that put king and country ahead of himself even under the most trying of circumstance such as what faced him in 1592. At a time when King Seonjo and his royal entourage were fleeing from Pyeongyang to the northern border area, Seongnyong who was suffering from piles, heat stroke, and extreme exhaustion, still faithfully made his way to join the king at Uji to fulfill his duty as councilor to the king. In a letter to his friend U Seongjeon he commented: “Right now, my energy is seriously depleted, and my eyes and head burn with a high fever. My overall condition is so weak that I have to take three breaths to finish a sentence whenever I speak.”⁶¹² When in the summer of 1594 a rumor that Ryu Seongnyong had suddenly died reached Yi Sunsin’s ears, he stated: “I was unable to control my fluttering heart. My worry doubles and triples. I could not sleep all night. What if Chief State Councilor Ryu is not up to his duties! What would happen to government affairs at this time of national emergency?” He even spent the next day casting divination sticks to detect the fate of the Chief State Councilor and was relieved when the signs were positive.⁶¹³

⁶¹⁰ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 244.

⁶¹¹ Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi*, 98.

⁶¹² Choi, Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea, 293.

⁶¹³ Yi Sunsin, *Nanjing Ilgi*, 103-104.

Even though the king had stripped him of his title and blamed him for the country's current debacle, Seongnyong would not neglect his duty to liaison with the Chinese generals. He knew that Joseon had insufficient stores of grain to feed the expected Chinese army and developed a three-day ration rotation system that would distribute along the marching route south to Pyeongyang.⁶¹⁴ But by 1598 the king was taking his advice less and less, especially in regard to China's demands. Confucius had made a clear distinction between loyalty to a sovereign and loyalty to humanity through the practice of filial piety. Seongnyong wanted to serve the king by nurturing his benevolence and could never imagine rebuking the king directly. But what faced Seongnyong now was how to serve a king who acted contrary to the best interests of his people. But loyalty and filial piety were fundamental Neo-Confucian ethical principles that could not be taken lightly.⁶¹⁵ Since the king was traditionally regarded as the "parent" of the people, loyalty to the father was looked at as a natural extension of filial piety which was considered since the times of Confucius to be "the root of all virtue." But Confucius also believed that "If a father had one son to reason with him, he could never lose himself in immoral conduct. Therefore, when a father contemplates an immoral action, a son must never fail to warn his father against it, nor should a minister ever fail to perform a like service for his prince." According to Confucius, filial piety does not consist of simply obeying a father. On reflection of his own personal conduct in relation to this dilemma, he realized the paradoxical nature of loyalty to the king.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 255-256.

⁶¹⁵ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 422.

⁶¹⁶ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, chancellor of Choson Korea*, 423.

The issue of responsibility in the Neo-Confucian-based Joseon court was a complex one due to several interconnect structures that it was built upon. First was the philosophy of Neo-Confucianism itself which placed responsibility firmly in each person designated a title [zhengming] which had expectations attached to it. For example, if you were the minister of war and your preparations for war proved ineffective then you were to be blamed under the zhengming system of titles. This is why zhengming was a powerful political tool for factions to wield against troublesome officials as long as it was never wielded against the king himself as that would also be a breach of the Neo-Confucian system of advisors to the king.

For example, Yi Sanhae, the chief state councilor preceding Ryu Seongnyong was condemned by court officials for encouraging the king to abandon the capital and escape to the north. Even though it was the king himself that proposed the idea, it was the chief state councilor's responsibility to discourage him and change his mind. Throughout the war the king accused Seongnyong of his failure to correct the country's military deficiencies before the invasion when he was the minister of war. But the real reason behind the king's displeasure with Seongnyong lay in his insistence that the king not abandon the capital at the beginning of the war as well as his pressure of the king to designate a crown prince, as well as his opposition to the king's plan to flee Joseon.⁶¹⁷ It was the job of the advisor to the king to point out when the king deviated from established Neo-Confucian norms and practices and gently guide him toward the expected direction when the king was conflicted with personal emotion.

⁶¹⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 446-447.

But the charge that Ryu Seongnyong had failed to make preparations for war was actually false, and both the king and Ryu Seongnyong knew this. Ryu had proposed several important military reforms in the years leading up to the conflict that met fierce resistance in court. For example, Ryu Seongnyong's proposal to allow slaves to serve in the military in exchange for their freedom was rejected by both factions. The main reason being that the *yangban*, making up the largest number of the Joseon leadership, were also the majority of the country's slave owners. They had no intention of handing their slaves over to the government to bolster its military ranks to their own economic peril. But many reforms initiated by Seongnyong would eventually be implemented throughout the war including the proposal of the use of slaves in the military in exchange for their freedom.⁶¹⁸

During the war Ryu Seongnyong imported Chinese training manuals and drilling techniques from the renowned Ming general Qi Jiguang (1528-88).⁶¹⁹ He also established the Military Training Command and organized the army into three combat arms composed of musketeers, archers, and lancers and swordsmen. He assigned experienced veterans to train selected men in these specialized military skills.⁶²⁰ Seongnyong's essay "Ten Articles Crucial to the Battle and Defense" clarified the basics of effective military command for those officials and commanders who had been primarily trained as literary scholars. It covered essential areas such as scouting and intelligence gathering techniques, troops organization, defensive fortification construction and defense, and formulating comprehensive strategy. One major point drawn from such crushing disasters

⁶¹⁸ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 327.

⁶¹⁹ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 12.

⁶²⁰ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 336-337.

as Sin Rip's abandonment of Bird Peak, was to avoid battle on open plains against the Japanese. He also pointed out that all Korean fortresses were lost by the Japanese strategy of positioning musketeers at the bottom of defensive walls firing upwards while bringing up ladders to scale the walls. Defensive moats needed to be built embedded with traps to prevent this in the future. Consequently, the only long-term strategy for defeating the enemy was to know their own weakness and turn them into strengths. He proposed that the Joseon military as a whole focus on attacking supply routes by utilizing joint operations of both land, sea, and guerrilla forces. He recommended that all crops and fields in the vicinity of the Japanese be destroyed as he believed that the dwindling food supply would physically and psychologically weaken the enemy over time, and he was right. The king being impressed with his "Ten Articles," ordered that it be distributed to all military and civil officials for immediate implementation.⁶²¹ Even though he had made all of these preparations to better organize the military, Seongnyong realized that no matter what changes he initiated, if those in positions of leadership were not focused or properly motivated, disaster would eventually arise again.

On the fifth day of the fifth month of 1598, Seongnyong got up by himself without assistance and asked a servant to prepare a seat for him in the main hall. The others in the house tried to dissuade him from leaving his bed, but he ordered them to assist him as he made his way there. In tears, his children helped him take his seat and watched in awe as he struggled to sit up and face north. "I have a few regrets, looking back," he said. "I never repaid the king and my parents for everything they gave me. I stayed in the highest position far too long despite my lack of ability. And lastly, I failed

⁶²¹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 357-359.

to persist in studying the Way, which is all I wanted from the beginning.” He stopped and steadied his breath. In a little while, he passed away peacefully.⁶²²

By law, all the markets were to be closed for three days during the funeral of a grand minister, but the merchants decided to extend it by one more day to express their respect for the deceased. They remembered how Seongnyong had tried to promote commerce and agriculture during the war so that common people could earn their livelihood without starving. They also remembered that he had championed their eligibility for office, contending that anyone who was talented and capable should be employable in public service regardless of their social status.⁶²³ Yi Ik wrote that Yi Sunsin was a hero who gave his life in defense of the country, but Ryu Seongnyong, who recommended him, deserved nothing less because without Seongnyong, Sunsin could not have become who he was.⁶²⁴ Furthermore, it was Ryu Seongnyong many years of diplomatic engagements with the Ming officials that gained their ultimate trust and which was the decisive strategic factor in pushing the Japanese back to the southern ports and ending the war.

⁶²² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, chancellor of Choson Korea*, 465.

⁶²³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 466.

⁶²⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 491.

Chapter X.

Conclusion

Philosophy is defined as the use of reason in understanding the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence.⁶²⁵ The introduction of the Chinese philosophy of Neo-Confucianism changed the fundamental socio-political culture of the Korean society, especially the ruling elite, following the establishment of the Joseon dynasty at the end of the fourteenth century. The inclusion of the practice of self-cultivation provided the means for attaining “a moral life of the inner self in the service of the outer world.”⁶²⁶ The problem that faced Joseon Korea was that a philosophy based on the betterment of man for the betterment of society became a contradictory identity. This was largely the result of the establishment of a hereditary governing elite, made up largely of Neo-Confucian scholars-officials known as *sadeabu* who failed to live up to the ideals they were expected to represent. More often than not the *sadeabu* followed personal and partisan self-interests while engaging in corruptive and unethical behavior at the expense of proper Neo-Confucian-based moral governance.⁶²⁷

It is true that philosophy has a powerful effect on society as in theory it provides a roadmap for citizens to achieve a better existence. For example, Hegel influenced Marx; Voltaire and Rousseau influenced the French Revolution. Buddhism and Taoism also influenced Confucianism which in turn influenced Neo-Confucianism. What differed in

⁶²⁵ Cambridge Dictionary, “Philosophy,” 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/philosophy>.

⁶²⁶ John Berthrong, “Confucius in East Asia: Confucianism’s History in China, Korea, Japan, and Viêt Nam by Jeffrey L. Richey (review),” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 42, no.2 (November 2014): 246–47, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jcr.2014.0033>.

⁶²⁷ Sancho, “Confucian Identity,” 16.

the philosophy of Neo-Confucianism from traditional Confucianism is that it took out all the superstitious and mystical elements that were originally rooted in Taoism and Buddhism. It also sought to answer the reasons why people acted as they did and the inner workings of the universe. At the root of Neo-Confucianism was the idea that human nature is fundamentally good but physical desires encountered in life influence actions and ultimately character. Neo-Confucians believe that human emotions are natural and unavoidable but must be regulated to prevent destructive behavior.⁶²⁸ They believe that this process of regulation of destructive behavior was best accomplished through dedication to the life-long process of self-cultivation of oneself for the betterment of humanity.

The Neo-Confucian world that made up sixteenth-century Asia placed the Chinese Ming at the top of the governing structure as the “parent” kingdom to the rest of the “son” states that willingly participated by recognizing the superior culture of Neo-Confucian China. States such as Joseon showed their deference by periodically offering symbolic tribute to the Ming emperor. The Ming in return allowed all Neo-Confucian states to engage in open economic and cultural trade as well as offering military protection from outside aggression. The trade-off was that each state continued to rule its own territory independently and had near complete control over how it governed its own kingdom. The Imjin War of 1592 was Hideyoshi’s misguided ambition to replace this established system with a feudal based one of his own, where his loyal daimyo ruled their own designated fiefdoms. The problem is Hideyoshi didn’t understand that the root of the Neo-Confucian system was one based on the betterment of man and of cultural and

⁶²⁸ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 91.

political independence.⁶²⁹ So when Hideyoshi approached the Joseon court with his demand that the Joseon king follow him on his holy crusade to unseat the Ming, his letter was literally laughed at for the ridiculousness of the idea. Firstly, the Ming were the recognized political and military center of the Asian world, and secondly, because under Neo-Confucianism filial piety was a sacred duty and therefore the Joseon would never bring harm to their designated “father.”

Even though the Joseon followed a philosophy that believed the pen mightier than the sword and that they were the moral and cultural superior entity, in the end Neo-Confucian ideals and proclamations would be nothing more than a paper shield. When the Japanese landed in the spring of 1592, the Neo-Confucian concept of moral man on a life quest of self-cultivation for the betterment of the world proved no match against experienced Japanese military might. The Neo-Confucian leadership that manned the helm of the governing institutions at the time of the invasion failed miserably in their duties from the king down to the common foot soldier. There were several reasons that directly contributed to the near complete collapse of Joseon Korea following the invasion: a flawed leadership selection system, corruption, factionalism, discrimination against the military, and a false superiority complex.

The first way Neo-Confucianism influenced the decision-making process of Joseon was the gwageo. All civil and military institutions were run almost exclusively by men who had passed the gwageo examinations. The Joseon elite believed wholeheartedly that the sadaebu should be selected based on their knowledge of Neo-Confucian literature and would be the best indication of a scholar who would embody the ideal of the

⁶²⁹ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 52.

trustworthy bureaucrat and commander. Originally this process of government participation was open to all free men of Joseon society but by the sixteenth century a gwageo candidate had to give proof of at least one officially recognized *hyeongwan* (office holder) from the previous four generations of his ancestors which officially became known as a *hyeonjo* (distinguished ancestor).⁶³⁰ But having a governing system populated with those judged morally superior men because of their understanding of certain passages of Zhi Xi's lectures would prove a poor indicator of sound leadership, and the war would largely prove that to be true.

A major problem with Neo-Confucianism is that it discriminated against military officials in a number of ways. First, Mencius's concept of virtuous government claimed moral superiority over military institutions in the act of governing society. Even the Great Code of Joseon gave the civil officials authority over the military as "only literati officials should be entrusted with the task of operating the core political organizations."⁶³¹ The result of a Neo-Confucian-based leadership selection structure which choose literary skills over military knowledge and experience was chaos and collapse during the invasion. From the highest ranks, including the king, all the way down to the common soldier, everyone seemed to flee when confronted with the enemy. Even Chinese scholar-general Wang Yangming had come to realize that Neo-Confucian ideals did not work as a permanent solution to internal or external aggression without a properly organized and well-led military to back it up.

Due to the fundamental nature of the Neo-Confucian belief in both self-cultivation as a life-long endeavor and *hyeon* (morally superior man) judged and

⁶³⁰ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 55.

⁶³¹ Yim, "The Establishment of Literati," 223.

appointed through the gwageo system is that defeated generals were allowed to carry out their duties even after shockingly embarrassing defeats. Under Joseon Neo-Confucian thinking, defeat was looked at as a useful learning experience rather than a leadership flaw. This is the reason why Joseon commanders such as Kim Myeongwon were able to lose Seoul, the Imjin River defense, Pyeongyang, and continue to hold a military post. Even after Kim Myeongwon voluntarily retired, King Seonjo still brought him back to oversee four more ministerial posts in Punishments, Rites, Public Works, and even Military Affairs.⁶³² Perhaps the likely reason for the king's ill-regarded reappointment of a man that lost so much can be found in the fact that Kim Myeongwon came from one of the most politically powerful families in Korea whose lineage went all the way back to the Shilla dynasty (57 BCE – 935 CE) ruling elite. The king was simply more interested in safeguarding much needed political support at a time when even common people had little regard for Seonjo as their monarch. The common people had rejected him and the elite in general because they had not lived up to the responsibilities of their titles under Neo-Confucian *zhengming* during the war.

Even King Seonjo knew that Neo-Confucian governance rested upon the Confucian idea of *zhengming* (rectification of names) so many times throughout the war he issued proclamations to the public asking for forgiveness due to his failure as a king. Zhengming stated that people's social positions in life are fixed and must be strictly acknowledged. With these social positions such as ruler and ruled, father and son, husband and wife, general and soldier, came responsibilities and a recognized social contract that must be upheld. In the case of the Imjin War, the social contract was largely

⁶³² *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 26, 25th Year of King Seonjo, 8th article, December 1, 1592, "Woo Cham-chan, Seonghon sent King Seonjo Simupyeonui [15 posts of Simu Pyeonui]."

ignored, and this led to a break-down in the trust of the Neo-Confucian-based governing system as a whole. When kings fled the capital, generals fled the battlefield, officials robbed the people, and slaves disregarded masters, society as a whole ceased to function and therefore delegitimized Neo-Confucianism as a governing philosophy.

Of course, the breakdown of *zhengming* and the weakening of Neo-Confucian principles and norms didn't suddenly appear because of the war, it had been slowly disintegrating for a variety of reasons for over a century before 1592. One problem was that Neo-Confucian Joseon deprived all secondary wives and sons of important rights including participation in the civil service examinations. This essentially closed off for them any chance of participating in the government or military.⁶³³ The result was that a large number of qualified and talented secondary sons were not allowed to serve as government officials nor as military officers further limiting the total pool of yangban sons to select from.

In addition, around forty percent of Joseon society were classified as *nobi* (slaves) of one form or another. Even though they were given basic rights by the Joseon ruling elite, slavery by nature was contrary to Neo-Confucian morality and ethics. But there was no political will in Joseon to change one of the longest running slavery systems in the world coupled with the fact that most of the elites' economic prosperity was derived from large landholdings labored by slaves. The elite tried to use the *zhengming* system itself as a way to justify and uphold the inhumane slavery system of force exploitation by stating that the past transgressions of the slave's ancestors made them responsible for making right the original wrong. Another problem that complicated the matter was that a large

⁶³³ Kye, "Confucian Perspectives," 59.

percentage of the original slave population were willing participates in the Joseon slavery system. This was a result of debt obligations or petty crimes usually due to poverty and people's willingness to seek out the protection of the yangban.⁶³⁴ To further cement the slave system, the Neo-Confucian literati elite even enacted laws including the *Kyeongguk taejeon* (Great Code of Administration) in 1486 that stated that if one parent was a slave than all the offspring were slaves.⁶³⁵ The Ming Chinese by contrast tolerated mixed decent lines and even admitted slaves into the officialdom.⁶³⁶

The Joseon dynasty relied wholly on the acceptance of the Neo-Confucian based zhengming for authority. By the breakout of the Imjin War there was a general weakening of Neo-Confucian norms and practices such as improper ritual observance and the selling of posts and titles. During the war banditry also broke out all over the peninsula. Even in the capital city, as the king and his entourage headed north, people of all classes plundered the most sacred Neo-Confucian sites. The dynastic annals and diaries in the Bureau of State Records went up in flames.⁶³⁷ People of all classes continued to suffer as the war progressed. Chief State Councilor Ryu Seongnyong believed that only around two or three-tenths of the tax was going to the government, with the rest ending up in a variety of official and private pockets.⁶³⁸ Slaves fled their masters, soldiers fled their units, families fled the tax collectors as well as military call up, and most of all, everyone fled the Japanese including the king. Those that wanted to fight like Admiral Yi Sunsin, who had put precious resources into building new ships,

⁶³⁴ So, "A Theory of National Ruin," 307.

⁶³⁵ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 6.

⁶³⁶ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 124.

⁶³⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 212-213.

⁶³⁸ *Seonjo Sillok*, volume 28, 27th Year of King Seonjo, 6th article, April 1, 1594, "Yeonguijeong Ryu Seongnyong's appeal against the military governing."

couldn't find the men to man them and his existing crews couldn't be relieved to go back to work their own family's fields.⁶³⁹ This disruption to the normal cycle of things upset the delicate balance of Joseon life. Countless fields were left unseeded because of the lack of slave manpower and a displaced population. The result was a great famine in the spring of 1593 which by the fall left families ravaged by death and disease. Even cannibalism, something so outside the moral correctness of a Neo-Confucian society, was not uncommon to witness, even in the capital itself.

Another way in which Neo-Confucianism influenced decision-making during the war was the creation of intense political factionalism rooted in misinterpretations of terms, concepts, norms, and principles. Groups began to believe that their faction's members were morally superior and this affected the functioning of the court and the institutions administered by the ruling elite. The opaque nature of some of the metaphysical aspects of Neo-Confucian interpretation led to a never-ending cycle of debates and counter debates. They lost focus on real issues and simply aligned themselves along partisan lines to curry favor with superiors in hopes of landing coveted government posts.⁶⁴⁰

The dangers of factionalism were real. Early Joseon experienced a multitude of literati purges which sent its victims into exile if lucky and torture and death if serious enough. This is the likely reason why skilled and ethically centered literati such as Yi Hwang tended to avoid political postings that put him at risk of unwinnable confrontation with other powerful elite figures. By the Eve of the Imjin War neither side drove forward

⁶³⁹ Yi Sunsin, *Imjin Changcho*, 143-144, taken from Memorial 48: "Proposed Committal of Delinquent Magistrates for Trial by Court-Martial."

⁶⁴⁰ Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 55.

a distinct or recognizable ideology. Rather each side focused their full energies on weakening the power and control of the counter faction by promoting and advancing their own members through the perceived failings of moral virtue or ritual observance.⁶⁴¹ King Seonjo tended to sit on the sidelines to strengthen his own power by playing one side off the other continuously.⁶⁴²

Factionalism also negatively influenced military preparation efforts as well as diplomatic missions and assessments. Factionalism influenced both leadership appointment and removal before and during the war. Admiral Yi Sunsin for example was recommended and promoted by Ryu Seongnyong, leader of the Eastern faction. A rival commander, Won Kyun of the Western Faction, continuously sent false reports to the court which influenced Yi Sunsin's removal and resulted in the Joseon Navy's near complete destruction in 1597. It is also possible that King Seonjo agreed to the removal of Yi Sunsin in an effort to please the Western faction and punish the Eastern faction for their belief that the Japanese would not attack, and as a way to shift focus away from the king's own embarrassing shortcomings. When Yi Sunsin was reinstated, both the king and the Western faction feared Yi Sunsin's success because it reinforced the humiliation of their own poor decision-making throughout the war.⁶⁴³ It is not too extreme to state that misguided and self-serving factionalism using Neo-Confucian ideals and norms as political weapons of removal almost cost Joseon the war. King Seonjo's removal of both Yi Sunsin and Ryu Seongnyong during the war due to factional in-fighting as well as the disbanding of the uibyeong greatly aided the Japanese war effort.

⁶⁴¹ Hawley, *The Imjin War*, 66.

⁶⁴² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 128.

⁶⁴³ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 403.

The Neo-Confucian concept of self-cultivation (*shushin*) and righteousness (*yi*) also influenced the actions of the Joseon leadership during the war. Neo-Confucians believed a successful government was dependent on a process of personal and social transformation adopted by all people including rulers and officials.⁶⁴⁴ Yi Hwang stated that “the cultivated person’s self is clear because it has no attachment to thinking about or leaning toward only one side from any particular angle.”⁶⁴⁵ But the Joseon Korean court was dangerous place to be in the sixteenth century due to the intense factionalism that existed there.

The Literati Purges of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ended many political careers and forced many disgraced or disgruntled officials to seek refuge in distant countryside locations.⁶⁴⁶ The cause of many of the purges was rooted in the elite’s retaliation against the younger and more reform-minded literati who questioned the exploitation of the rural population.⁶⁴⁷ Scholars such as Yi Hwang stated that the sarim had no real protection and could be openly prosecuted at any time by those in opposition.⁶⁴⁸ Both Yi Hwang and Yi I believed that personal self-cultivation developed self-righteousness and proper actions. Righteous actions led to a society that was fair and just. Furthermore, Neo-Confucians believed that the lack of righteousness would only lead the country into ruin.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁴ Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 116.

⁶⁴⁵ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 104, translated from *Chaseongnok* 1:50a–53a sec. 16 “Reply Letter to Yi Sukhon”

⁶⁴⁶ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 42.

⁶⁴⁷ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 101-102.

⁶⁴⁸ Chung and Buswell, *A Korean Confucian Way*, 144, translated from original *Chaseongnok* 1:71b–76a sec. 22 “Reply Letter to Ki Myōngōn.”

⁶⁴⁹ Yim, “The Establishment of Literati,” 245-246.

The Neo-Confucian scholars that had been ousted or voluntarily left government service to study and teach in the countryside would eventually form the core of the *Uibyeong* (Righteous Armies). They were given the title *uibyeong* because its leaders were recognized as being morally superior men (*hyeon*) and their willingness to fight against the unjust invasion was considered righteous by both the government and population of Joseon. In this way they embodied the accepted Neo-Confucian concept of *yi* as well as their fulfilling their duty under *zhengming*. During the war scholars such as Gwak Jae-u (1552-1617) became outstanding military strategists even though they had never previously served in any military capacity.⁶⁵⁰ The Righteous Armies would also continue to be an important source of useful intelligence for which Ryu Seongnyong could plan larger military strategies in areas where *uibyeong* spies probed for weakness and looked for opportunities.⁶⁵¹ The Righteous Army's ability to launch coordinated surprise attacks against Japanese logistics networks and bases forced the enemy to move through the countryside only in large numbers. These actions combined with Yi Sunsin's blockade of western approaches would eventually hinder the Japanese overall advance and contribute to their need to withdraw to fortified bases on the southern coast.⁶⁵²

Neo-Confucianism being a moral governing philosophy centered on righteous and benevolent actions believed that human nature is ultimately good. Cheng Yi stated that a proper human being should be "acting from humanity and moral righteousness" (*you ren yi xing*). Mencius's view: "Whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of

⁶⁵⁰ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 270.

⁶⁵¹ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestor's Eyes*, 225.

⁶⁵² Swope, *A Dragon's Head*, 136.

courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human.”⁶⁵³ After the Japanese faced their first truly humiliating loss at the first Battle of Chinju from November 8th-13th, 1592, they planned their revenge. In the second Battle of Chinju on July 21st of the following summer, the Japanese not only defeated the Joseon defenders but committed the greatest massacre of the war killing an estimated 60,000 men, women, and children. This act went against the very foundations of Neo-Confucian moral thought. Even though human nature was considered good, the Japanese demonstrated that they were lower than beasts and therefore could not be approached as men. Therefore, the Chinese broke off negotiations that threatened to partition Korea north and south. The deceitfulness and lack of human empathy shown by the Japanese was a major factor in why the Chinese refused to give anything that Hideyoshi asked for in the negotiations.⁶⁵⁴

After the death of Hideyoshi, the Five Regents were put in charge sent the terms of negotiations for the final withdrawal of Japanese forces from the Korean peninsula. In the end, all the Japanese received was some rice, honey, a couple of tiger and leopard skins and a vague promise that they would eventually be able to engage in trade with the Neo-Confucian states.⁶⁵⁵ But what they did not receive was admittance as a member of the Neo-Confucian hegemony. Interestingly, Neo-Confucian scholars kidnapped during the war and brought back to Japan would inadvertently directly transmit the values and culture of Neo-Confucianism to various Japanese nobles.

⁶⁵³ Huang, “Why be moral?”, 341. (*Mencius* 2a6).

⁶⁵⁴ Swope, *A Dragon’s Head*, 234.

⁶⁵⁵ Hawley, *The Imjin War*, 532.

Neo-Confucianism also influenced the decision-making process of the Joseon elite through the concept of sage and sage-king. Neo-Confucians believed that sages are people who have perfected their character through diligent self-cultivation to a point that they are able to correctly respond to any situation with clarity and wise insight.⁶⁵⁶ At the top of Neo-Confucian society rested the ruler who though still a man, was required to conquer his own humanity by cultivating himself properly and living a moral and benevolent life for the benefit of his subjects. Most Neo-Confucians believed that virtuous advisors could make up for some of the shortcomings of a ruler through teachings of the classics and counseling in proper governance. Korean Neo-Confucians believed that the state was situated within society and that the state and society therefore was wholly governed by Confucian moral principles. This weakened the king's authority and power because it said that Neo-Confucian moral principles override the king's behavior and wishes.⁶⁵⁷

Conservative Neo-Confucians such as Yi Hwang felt that the creation of an ideal society could only happen from the top down, and that the king and his advisors needed to focus on proper self-cultivation in order to live an ethical life. Therefore, the king's virtue and sincerity were central to ideal governance.⁶⁵⁸ But the problem was that it was very rare for a society to be ruled by a sage-king surrounded by sage advisors. In the case of King Seonjo, the evidence strongly suggests that he was far from being considered a sage or even on the proper path towards achieving ideal governance. The two most

⁶⁵⁶ Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, 14.

⁶⁵⁷ Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 397.

⁶⁵⁸ Kim, *Korean Confucianism*, loc. 115-129.

recognized sages of Korean Neo-Confucianism, Yi Hwang and Yi I, became disenchanted with Seonjo's lack of motivation and capricious self-serving ways.

Ryu Seongnyong who started as a young court scribe saw the king as an intelligent man, but not one possessing the will to bring about the necessary changes within the corrupted governance system. He personally saw how Yi I became visibly frustrated with the passivity of the king over time.⁶⁵⁹ It seemed that King Seonjo was most concerned not with the betterment of Joseon society, but how to strengthen his power and authority over the established court factions. This type of political shapeshifting was demonstrated shortly before the Japanese invasion in 1592 when the king dismissed Cho Taegon and replaced him with his royal secretary Kim Seong-il. This was considered a strange thing to do at a time of such heightened tensions with the Japanese. But this decision can be better understood when considering the king's weak political position and desire to separate himself from future accountability. Since Kim Seong-il publicly stated that he believed the Japanese would not likely invade, Seonjo argued that Kim more than anyone else should be held responsible for repelling the invaders if his report was in error.⁶⁶⁰ Yi Hwang and Yi I were correct in their earlier assessments of the king and therefore confirmed his lack of Neo-Confucian virtue as a monarch.

This lack of virtue and responsibility to his duties under zhengming as well as his legitimacy under the Mandate of Heaven was further highlighted when Seonjo made plans to flee Seoul to the north against the wishes of every one of his advisors. Ryu Seongnyong felt the king was sending the wrong message by putting his own safety first.

⁶⁵⁹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 94.

⁶⁶⁰ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 184-185.

Instead of talking about leaving the palace, Ryu felt the king should be rallying the people and urging them to rise up against the invaders. That was the proper course of action for a king.⁶⁶¹ And still further, breaking probably one of the most sacred Neo-Confucian ancestral worship taboos, Seonjo had the royal spirit tablets, the most sacred physical objects and which legitimized his rule as a Neo-Confucian king, buried in the ground without discussing the matter with any of the officials.

In the weeks that followed the king became more and more unpredictable changing his cabinet so often that newly appointed officials were sometimes dismissed before they could even begin their official duties.⁶⁶² When the king made preparations to flee Pyongyang and brought up the possibility of moving to Liadong within the borders of China, Chong Chol, governor general of the three southern provinces bluntly stated, “He must not only not voice it but completely eradicate it from his mind as a possibility.”⁶⁶³ But the Joseon king, far from being sage-like and benevolent in his decision-making, thought only of saving himself even at the expense of his own son and successor whom had already been captured by the Japanese to be used as a bargaining chip in negotiations.

In contrast, Ryu Seongnyong followed the Neo-Confucian mindset and principle of filial loyalty. Therefore, the king was the embodiment of the rules and values that constituted the state and no matter how weakened, could not be restored without the king himself. If the king was weak, Ryu believed it was his duty as a Neo-Confucian to be the example even for the king himself. Whereas King Seonjo appointed and fired officials

⁶⁶¹ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 205-206.

⁶⁶² Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 220-221.

⁶⁶³ Haboush, *The Great East Asian War*, 109-110.

and military leaders with such frequency that some were both appointed and removed on the same day. The king was also responsible for removing both Yi Sunsin and Ryu Seongnyong, the two most influential Joseon leaders of the entire war. Furthermore, the king was also responsible for disbanding the Righteous Armies (Uibyeong) in 1594, the most effective force fighting the Japanese in the south during the first year of the war.

It was Ryu Seongnyong who instituted the push for guerrilla tactics by actively supporting the Righteous Army movements. He also was the one who originally pushed for the appointment of Yi Sunsin to his leadership post that strategically blunted the Japanese's Western advance into Cheolla Province which was the vital breadbasket of the country. He organized important military reforms and established the Military Training Command run by military veterans that had already faced the Japanese in battle. But even after loyally serving Seonjo, the king removed him from power in 1598. He claimed that Seongnyong's failure to correct the country's military deficiencies before the war made him solely responsible for the collapse in the first months. The likely reason for his dismissal runs back to the time just before the invasion when Seongnyong forced the king to choose an heir against the king's own wishes. And during the war when he failed to support the king's personal desire to flee to China.⁶⁶⁴

Assessing leadership and decision-making through the lens of any philosophy can be a difficult and a frustrating task. This is because philosophy is prone to multiple interpretations and is inadvertently influenced by the cultural norms and historical precedents of the country it is utilized by. But the ancient sages going all the way back to Confucius believed that they had found the primary criteria to select leadership for

⁶⁶⁴ Choi, *Ryu Seongnyong, Chancellor of Choson Korea*, 446-447.

governing a society: personal morality. In Joseon Korea, this translated into the concept of *hyeon*, embodied by the *sadeabu* and represented by a sage king. Nearly all scholar-officials were screened through the *gwageo* which was the expected mechanism to filter the moral from the less moral. Yi Hwang, Yi I, Ryu Seongnyong, and Yi Sunsin were all selected through this process. The problem was that they were a minority in a sea of countless officials, military leaders, and even the king himself that did not live up to the ideals of Neo-Confucianism. In some ways it could therefore be said to delegitimized Neo-Confucianism as a governing philosophy, especially during times of crisis. Or maybe the Imjin War did in fact demonstrate that Neo-Confucianism had it right from the beginning, that all that was necessary for effective governance, even in times of war, was a few ethical and effective men that embraced and lived by the philosophy's norms and ideals guiding them to make wise decisions that changed the course of history. In this way the proper example of a few was still powerful enough make up for those many men that failed to live up to their titles.

Unfortunately, the lessons learned from the Imjin war quickly faded away and the corrupted and misguided policies of the court factions took over. Joseon's feeling of culturally superiority over the "barbarian" reemerged and once again. When in December of 1636 Qing Emperor Tai-tsung threatened and invasion unless his terms were met saying: "The ones who speak for your country are your Confucian officials, but do you think they can drive us off by wielding their pens?"⁶⁶⁵ Failing to properly organize and train men, stockpile reserves of food and equipment, repair important defensive fortifications in the north, and accumulate musket and cannon for a likely threat, the

⁶⁶⁵ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 100.

Manchus overran Joseon. Only this this time the Manchu cavalry arrived in the capital five days after crossing the Yalu River and forced King Injo to reject the Ming and serve the Qing.⁶⁶⁶

⁶⁶⁶ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, 95-99.

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