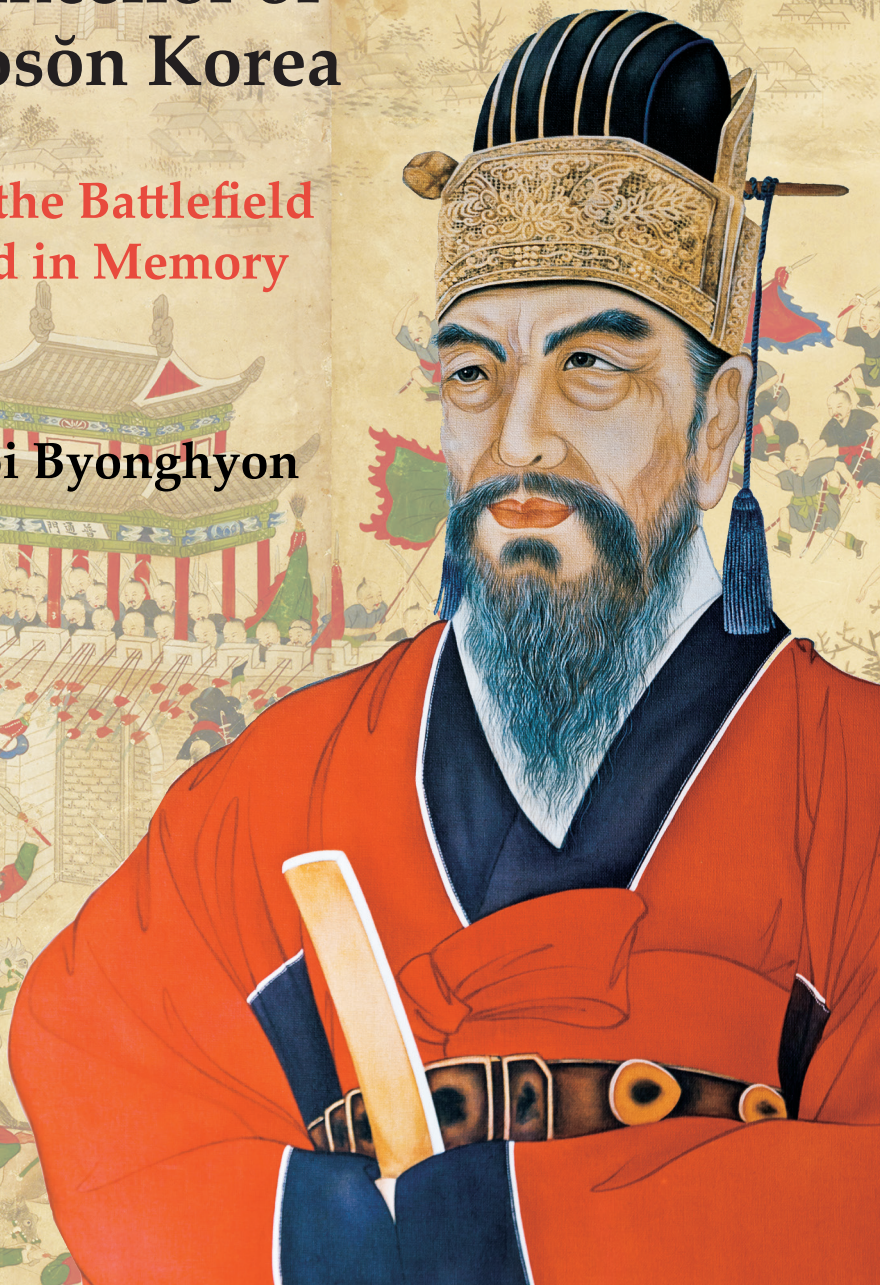


# Ryu Sŏngnyong, Chancellor of Chosŏn Korea

On the Battlefield  
and in Memory

By  
Choi Byonghyon



With the Japanese invasion of Chosŏn, King Sŏnjo's court was thrown into panic and disarray. Ryu Sŏngnyong alone stood out, negotiating with Ming China for military aid and leading the Korean people through the crisis. Sŏnjo was the king, but Sŏngnyong was the leader. His mission could be described thus: "Though horses are lost, the stable must be repaired."

Ryu's last battle was to put the war on record so that its bitter memory could survive. His agonizingly detailed records and admonitions for posterity were no less fierce and stirring than Yi Sunsin's last battle at the Noryang strait. Yi's tragic death made his star shine bright, but Ryu had to choose a different path to recognition than that of a warrior. His sacrifice was to persevere until he could finish recording his history.

## Notes to this edition

This is an electronic edition of the printed book. Minor corrections may have been made within the text; new information and any errata appear on the current page only.

Korea Research Monograph 39  
*Ryu Sŏngnyong, Chancellor of Chosŏn Korea:  
On the Battlefield and in Memory*  
By Choi Byonghyon

ISBN-13: 978-1-55729-200-1 (electronic)  
ISBN-13: 978-1-55729-199-8 (print)  
ISBN-10: 1-55729-199-3 (print)

Please visit the IEAS Publications website at  
<http://ieas.berkeley.edu/publications/>  
for more information and to see our catalogue.

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KOREA RESEARCH MONOGRAPH 39

CENTER FOR KOREAN STUDIES

Ryu Sŏngnyong,  
Chancellor of  
Chosŏn Korea  
On the Battlefield  
and in Memory

Choi Byonghyon



**Institute of  
East Asian Studies**  
University of California, Berkeley



A publication of the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley. Although the institute is responsible for the selection and acceptance of manuscripts in this series, responsibility for the opinions expressed and for the accuracy of statements rests with their authors.

The Korea Research Monograph series is one of several publication series sponsored by the Institute of East Asian Studies in conjunction with its constituent units. The other series include the China Research Monograph series, the Japan Research Monograph series, the Korea Research Monograph series, the Research Papers and Policy Studies series, and the Transnational Korea series.

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Choi, Byonghyon, 1950- author.

Title: Ryu Söngnyong, chancellor of Chosön Korea : on the battlefield and in memory / Choi Byonghyon.

Description: Berkeley : Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, [2022] | Series: Korea research monograph; 39 | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "This biography of Ryu Söngnyong presents his childhood and education, his career as a government official, and his scholarship during retirement. The narrative includes descriptions of the Imjin War between Hideyoshi's Japan and Chosön Korea, and their negotiations with imperial China"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022025930 (print) | LCCN 2022025931 (ebook) | ISBN 9781557291998 (paperback) | ISBN 9781557292001 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Yu, Söng-nyong, 1542-1607. | Korea—History—Chosön dynasty, 1392-1910—Biography | Korea—Officials and employees—Biography. | Korea—Politics and government—1392-1910. | Korea—History—Japanese Invasions, 1592-1598.

Classification: LCC DS913.392.Y825 C46 2022 (print) | LCC DS913.392.Y825 (ebook) | DDC 951.9/02092 [B]—dc23/eng/20220601

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022025930>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022025931>

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Cover image: Imaginary portrait of Ryu Söngnyong, commissioned by the government in 1988 (courtesy Hwang Huenman). Background is a portion of a screen showing the combined armies of Ming China and Korea attacking the walls and gates of P'yöngyang fortress (courtesy Jinju National Museum).

Cover design: Mindy Chen.

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# Preface

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the Chosŏn kingdom endured the most profound crisis in its long history, suffering two successive invasions by Japanese armies intent on subjugating the Korean peninsula and using it as a base for the further conquest of China. The one man who did more than any other to hold the country together, like a pillar holding up a solitary pavilion against a deluge,<sup>1</sup> was Chosŏn's chief minister, Ryu Sŏngnyong. He was its preeminent statesman, an astute military strategist, and an accomplished scholar. The role Sŏngnyong played in his country's defense was so vital and all encompassing that an envoy from China's Ming empire, traveling to Korea to rebuke King Sŏnjo for his hapless rule,<sup>2</sup> credited Sŏngnyong with the ability to "renew the mountains and rivers of Korea." Yet when the crisis ended and the Japanese were driven back into the sea, Sŏngnyong was falsely charged with disloyalty to the throne and expelled from court. Always disdainful of partisan politics, he never protested; and in his own mind, despite the victory proclamations ringing throughout the land, he considered that he had failed to prevent the shocking devastation wrought by the Japanese invaders. Retiring to the countryside, he resolved to seek deeper knowledge and to compose a record, for future generations, of the lessons contained in the seven-year war. Years later, realizing the injustice of the verdict rendered against Sŏngnyong, the king sought to make amends by sending an artist to Sŏngnyong's village to capture his likeness, a sign of his return to royal favor and national renown. But Sŏngnyong declined to sit for his portrait, asking the painter to return to Seoul instead. This refusal of courtly reputation and the honors that most of his countrymen considered his due was part and parcel of Sŏngnyong's character, ingrained throughout a life of constant duty and faceless heroism.

Sŏngnyong had originally wanted to become a scholar, wishing to devote himself to his studies and to stay away from the distractions of the world. However, his wishes could not be fulfilled unless he first proved



himself deserving of them, and the only way to do so was to take the civil service examinations. Personal recognition, social status, and family fortune all depended on these exams, but his success in them and ensuing public service made it even more difficult for him to become a scholar. Ironically, the harder he struggled to extricate himself from public service, the higher he rose through the ranks, eventually reaching the position of chief state councilor, the highest official under the king.

Once established in officialdom, he had to fight a four-front war: first, against domestic opponents due to factional strife; second, against Japanese invaders; third, against the Ming armies that tyrannized the Korean government under the pretext of providing relief; and fourth, against the king, who cared only for his own safety, betraying his country and people. Söngnyong coped with all these challenges without a misstep, saving the country from ruin.

The existing biographies of Ryu Söngnyong are focused mostly on his extraordinary achievements, paying little attention to the elements that enabled him to realize them. Mainly due to the lack of records and other materials, these accounts tend to start with Söngnyong's ancestral lineage and family and his passing the civil service examinations. So, readers have few clues about his childhood education, his personal experiences, and the influences of the people around him, which must have been important to the formation of his character and personality.

The general perception of the Imjin War is also problematic. It is especially manifest in a variety of appellations, showing differences in significance. The Japanese call it the "Bunroku-Keichō War." Since Bunroku and Keichō are the era names of the two Japanese emperors whose reigns span the period, 1592–1596 and 1597–1615, respectively, the name may be intended to conceal or neutralize the fact of the invasions carried out by the Japanese. This name perniciously implies that the war is merely something that happened during a particular period of time. The Chinese, on the contrary, call the war "Military Assistance to Repulse the Japanese" (*kangwo yuanzhu*), which emphasizes their role and reminds Koreans of the fulfillment of their duty to their tribute state.

These misleading names of the Imjin War can affect the general perception beyond the borders of Japan and China and highlight only the clash and contest between them, leaving out Chosŏn Korea, where the war actually took place. Most people are unaware that Koreans played a more significant role than Hideyoshi, the mastermind of the invasions, could have imagined. Hence, critical approaches to and analyses of the war also need to consider the Korean perspective. Although Ryu Söngnyong himself attempted this when the war was over, the current biography, the first in English, attempts to address this lack.

Furthermore, this work introduces the historical background so that the life of the hero can be seen in a broader perspective. The sixteenth century for Korea, as well as neighboring China and Japan, was an age of great changes marked by domestic troubles and wars that led to the decline of the dynasty and regime. Though Korea's Chosŏn dynasty survived the catastrophic wars, it would never be the same as before. Ming China's grand world order was challenged by the Japanese, who brought the war accelerating its decline. Japan, led by Hideyoshi, though triumphant at first, lost the war, and his failure and death ushered in the new reign of his rival. Sŏngnyong's life and achievements cannot be measured properly without taking the enormity of the changes and challenges he had to face into account.

Perhaps there is one more perspective necessary for understanding and assessing Ryu Sŏngnyong the man. Modern readers may well wonder in what sense he was heroic, since the notion of heroism in Confucian East Asia did not resemble the common depictions of heroes today. Generally speaking, the first Western heroes were warriors, who fought for fame and honor. Homer sings of the anger of Achilles, the greatest of the Greek warriors. In contrast, the roughly contemporaneous poets of the Chinese *Classic of Poetry* sing of the virtue of sage rulers. Thus the first Eastern heroes were cultural titans such as Yao or Shun or Wen, creators of a new civilization. Over time, while the Western tradition produced knights in armor and codes of chivalry, the Eastern tradition turned out scholars and intricate social rituals. When poets in one tradition celebrated individual prowess and power, poets in the other extolled moral virtue and enlightenment. One wielded a sword, the other a brush or pen. In the sixteenth century, the conflict between sword and brush was played out in Asia on a grand scale during the Japanese invasions of Chosŏn. Sŏngnyong and his contemporaries certainly perceived the situation as a contest between physical power and moral force.

In the Eastern tradition, scholars were men dedicated to what they called the Way, meaning the right way or the natural way or the universal way. They thought of it as a moral principle, the common thread in the twin arts of self-cultivation and betterment of others. They endeavored to embody this principle in their personal life as well as in their service to the state, and the inner struggle they waged to achieve their goal was arguably as fierce as that of armor-clad warriors engaged in battle against the enemy. In those days, it was not uncommon for their commitment to principle to cost them their life as well as the fortunes of their family, and their self-sacrifice when it was required was every bit as exacting as the sacrifice chosen by Western martyrs to their faith. Ryu Sŏngnyong epitomized this tradition in the East.

What, then, is this heroic tradition more specifically? It can be seen in an attitude toward life that is unfailingly sincere, and in conduct that is always upright and straightforward. Believing that human beings and the universe are basically good, a Confucian promotes education and seeks enlightenment, using the knowledge he has for the benefit of others. But while he is ever willing to improve the world, he disdains worldly commitments that run counter to his principles. He follows his own compass, the sense of integrity that guides his conduct. He dares to say “no” even when the multitude shouts approval, and he is willing to say “yes” even if he is the only one. He may be imposing as a scholar, but he is always humble as a man. And he would prefer to live with less and freely, by taking the world lightly, than to seek enrichment and the encumbrances of being obliged to others. The countless resignations submitted by Ryu Sŏngnyong show that he remained unattached to the power and privileges of his position even when it was the highest in the nation.

From a modern perspective, the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592 rudely awakened the Chosŏn kingdom to the world beyond the edges of their Sinic-centered map. Hideyoshi had set out in search of new territories, but while seeking to challenge the Ming empire in China, he found that he had to deal with the inconvenience of a Korean doorstep first. His opposition in Korea, led by its master strategist Ryu Sŏngnyong with the aid of China, eventually pushed the Japanese aggressors back. Yet throughout the ordeal, Sŏngnyong never lost sight of the higher aim of his learning. Unlike his enemy Hideyoshi, Sŏngnyong had no interest in subjugating external territories and using them to boost his renown. The territory he aspired to own lay in his own mind, and his taking responsibility for the national crisis in the end by no means diminishes his dedication and contributions to his country, as we shall see in this biography.

“There is properly no history, only biography,” Emerson wrote. But in the East, the opposite was frequently the case. In the official history of the Chosŏn dynasty, there is no biography, only a sequence of historical events. In China, Sima Qian was the first to bring individual biographies to the center of historiography, thereby renovating the chronicle tradition descended from the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Korean historians, including Kim Pusik in the Koryŏ period and the historiographers of early Chosŏn, only appended the biographies of historical figures to the annals they compiled. By the Chosŏn dynasty, the tradition of strictly chronological annals had returned, limiting the interest of official historians in personal accounts of individual lives. In the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, the unbroken five-hundred-year record of the dynasty, the only material of biographical interest takes the form of brief mortuary tributes called *cholgi*, and these are limited to important ministers and select historical

figures. More detailed accounts of individual lives—the genre of chronologically arranged biographical sketches called *yŏnbo* or eulogies called *haengjang*—were the private affair of the subject's descendants and disciples, to be composed after his death. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that reputation building was the foremost concern of the writers who compiled these sketches, which were susceptible to exaggeration and embellishment.

Ryu Sŏngnyong was recognized from childhood as a gifted writer. Had he written his own life story with the same attention he devoted to *Chingbirok*, his memoir of the Japanese war, it doubtless would be far more interesting than any compilation of incidents, anecdotes, and personal testimony. His letters and essays address practical matters and clarify the teachings he was concerned to pass on. His poems give us further glimpses into a mental life whose full range and scope are tantalizing to imagine but mostly went unrecorded.

A friend of mine is a portrait painter. One day I asked him about the difficulty of his work, and he said, "I try to draw a nose, a mouth, and the eyes as accurately as I can, and yet, when they are put together, discover that they mask the person I portray." When I asked why, he replied that he had somehow failed to capture the character of the person, the essential element seen in every detail while remaining itself unseen. "The meticulous articulation of details is skill," he added, "and the creation of a true semblance, art. I wish I had more of the latter." The moment I heard this, I knew that the problem he was describing is exactly the difficulty faced by a biographer.

In this work, the artistic challenge of drawing a portrait was compounded by the practical issues related to the dearth of materials essential to a biography, especially for Ryu Sŏngnyong's formative years. I had to believe that one can tell the tree by the fruit it bears, but I often felt as though I were sketching a likeness by tracing shadows cast on the wall. Be that as it may, I hope that those who might find the factual basis of this biography insufficient for a satisfactory portrayal of its subject may at least discover in it a credible rendering of the age he belonged to, however rough-hewn it might appear.

ONE

## A Child Named “Accomplished Dragon”

Ryu Söngnyong was the second son of Ryu Chungnyöng,<sup>1</sup> a local magistrate who served as governor of Hwanghae province and elsewhere. When he was born, his father was preparing for the civil service examinations. His parental home was Hahoe, a small scenic village circumscribed by the Naktong River close to the town of Andong, but he was born in nearby Sach'on in the district of Ŭisöng, the home of his maternal grandparents. The baby arrived on the first day of the tenth month in 1542, a cold day in late autumn, and the circumstances surrounding his birth were somewhat unusual.

Kim Sogang,<sup>2</sup> the expectant mother, had gone to visit her former home in Sach'on, a day's journey from Hahoe. Her father, Kim Kwangsu, also called Songün (Pinewood Hermit), was a member of the gentry who had retired to this village in the south decades earlier in the aftermath of the literati purge of 1498, during the reign of Yönsan'gun. Kim Sogang was the fourth of five daughters born to his second wife, and she had always been the cleverest and most ambitious in his eyes. When she was thirteen, during a long drought, he had dug a new well outside his house in the precise spot designated by the geomancer as the most auspicious. The first person to drink from the new well, the geomancer predicted, would produce a prodigy who would become a great minister. To everyone's surprise, when the water finally gushed out, the first to run to it and gulp it down was Sogang.

Kim's friend Ryu Chaon, who was also a literary licentiate, had paid him a visit a few years earlier, and, upon seeing a tall, intelligent-looking

## ONE

# A Heart Divided

A letter to Söngnyong from his father, the recently appointed governor of Hwanghae province, came to remind him of the upcoming examination, now only a month away. His father had carefully written down the examination procedure and schedule and some words of advice about how he should prepare himself. Söngnyong had already passed the lower-level exam once before, at the age of sixteen,<sup>1</sup> and was not worried about his readiness to take the next exam.

Late in life, Söngnyong reminisced about his experience with the first exam in an epitaph written for his friend and neighbor at the time, Pae Samik.<sup>2</sup> On the eve of the examination, Söngnyong had spent the night at Pae's house, and he remembered how quiet the streets of Seoul were, except for the sound of the bell from time to time, and how bright the moon was. When the rooster crowed, Pae kicked his friend in the feet to wake him up, and they rode their horses to the examination site. In the exam, Pae quickly wrote out his two essays while Söngnyong struggled to finish a poem. Near the end, he found that he was running out of time, so Pae helped Söngnyong make a clean copy of his exam paper and submit it in time.<sup>3</sup> On the following day, Söngnyong was surprised to find his name, but not Pae's, listed among the candidates who had passed. His friend was not deterred, however, for he took the exam again the following year and passed.

The civil service examination was not Söngnyong's only learning experience that year. A few months later, he heard that he was to be married soon. His bride-to-be was the daughter of Magistrate Yi Kyöng, a descendant of Lord Kwangp'yöng, the fifth son of King Sejong (r. 1418–1450). Yi Kyöng had known Söngnyong's father, Chungnyöng, for years, beginning during his term as magistrate of Yonggung, a district near Hahoe. He and Chungnyöng now owned houses in the same neighborhood at the foot of Mount Namsan in Seoul.



ONE

## Scholars and Warriors

The history of formal relations between Korea and Japan extends as far back as the ancient Korean kingdoms of Paekche and Silla. Yet shared knowledge and mutual understanding improved very little over the centuries. Contact between the inhabitants of the two countries barely existed apart from diplomatic exchanges, and Koreans and Japanese alike tended to regard their mutual enmity as a simple fact, like the physical distance between their countries. To the people of Korea, the Japanese were little more than barbarous pirates ravaging their villages, marauders who killed and plundered innocent people. The educated, who could not forget Korea's vulnerability to foreign invasion in the past, may also have felt apprehension that the writing brushes they wielded, in which they took inordinate pride, might yet prove powerless against an implacable foe.

Söngnyong's understanding of the Japanese and his perplexity over how to deal with the threat they represented were not much different from his compatriots'. Yet as a man bearing responsibility at a critical time, he needed to look at the matter from a broad perspective. When he was young, he had found poems describing Japan written by P'oün Chöng Mongju, an emissary sent there at the end of the Koryö dynasty. Raids by Japanese marauders had increased in frequency, and a Japanese mission had arrived in Koryö seeking an end to the rapacious piracy that was devastating the Japanese coastline as well. P'oün set out in 1372, tasked by King U with meeting the governor of Kyushu, the Japanese province closest to Korea. P'oün perceived in Japanese culture the seed of civility that Koreans believed had been transmitted to Japan from Korea long ago. Because of it, their faith in their innate cultural superiority was unquestioned, and P'oün's travels in Japan did nothing to alter it. P'oün's travel poems made a deep impression on Söngnyong when he read them, but they were hardly sufficient now to gain an accurate picture of how Japan's territory was laid out and whether its people were truly hostile.

ONE

## Yi Sunsin's Trials

On a clear sunny day, Yi Sunsin, the architect of Korea's victories at sea over the Japanese armada, was released after a month in prison. He had been charged with treason, slander, and deception; undergone the harsh interrogation and torture regularly meted out to political captives; and, deprived of his rank, been ordered to serve in the army as an ordinary soldier. It was the first day of the fourth month, 1597.

On the day of his release, Söngnyong sent a man to give him comfort, and Sunsin paid a visit to Söngnyong in return. In his war diary, Sunsin briefly wrote: "Toward the evening, I visited the chief state councilor at home and left after talking with him until the cock crowed."<sup>1</sup> There is no other record of this meeting; one can only speculate on what they talked about.

It was no secret that Sunsin was a protégé of Söngnyong, although he never admitted it and the government's highest-ranking minister never spoke of it. Sunsin's meteoric rise through the ranks had culminated in his appointment as the supreme naval commander of the three southern provinces, and his fleet had prevented the enemy from gaining access to the coastline and interior of Chölla province by water. As the peace negotiations between China and Japan took hold, however, the pace of the war at sea began to slow. Like the army, the navy was discouraged at first and then prevented from engaging the enemy aggressively, and over the four years from 1593 to 1596, the number of naval battles steadily decreased. The Korean navy took full control of the South Sea, severely restricting the passage of Japanese ships. Sunsin used the time to reinforce his navy, recruiting more men and setting up military farms so his troops could become self-sufficient. He expanded salt farming, employing local residents and refugees, and collected fees from boats carrying goods over the sea; with the increase in revenue he built more turtle boats and warships.

Trouble began after Sunsin's promotion when Wön Kyun, the naval commander of western Kyongsang province, complained that he was

## Disciples and Descendants

Sŏngnyong did not have many opportunities to involve himself in teaching during his years in public service. He taught briefly at a provincial school when he served as the magistrate of Sangju in 1590 and intermittently in the years following his retirement to Hahoe, mostly through personal letters and visits, and that was all. Nevertheless, the *Record of Literary Worthies* (*Munhyŏnnok*) lists 118 students and followers under his name.<sup>1</sup> Master-student relationships could be based on a number of elements, including family, school, political affiliation, and regional identity. Instruction was usually direct, in lectures and conversations, but could also be conducted through letters. The existence of an instructional relationship did not depend on its duration; what was important was the mutual recognition between teacher and student, especially when students became teachers in their own right, forming lineages connected to the original teacher. In this manner, the school of Neo-Confucian studies established by Master T'oegye branched out into a number of subschools, and the Sŏae school was one of them.

It was in Sangju that Sŏngnyong met the outstanding students, including Chŏng Kyŏngse and Yi Chun, who would become the cornerstones of his influence in that area. Years later, when Chŏng became the minister of rites, he wrote eulogies of Sŏngnyong, and taught Sŏngnyong's son Ryu Chin. Yi Chun served as first counselor and third minister without portfolio and wrote the postscript to the *Collected Works of Ryu Sŏngnyong*.

Few records of Sŏngnyong's lectures survive. Those that do focus on moral philosophy at a basic level—what every scholar should keep in mind. For the most part, they were given from the standpoint of a public official representing the authority of the king. Sŏngnyong's preference for practical instruction over the metaphysical analyses that characterized the intellectual milieu of his time can also be seen in the proclamations issued to the National Academy and the Four Schools in Seoul when he served

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