

Materials on Korean Studies

Author's Preface and Chapter 1 of  
*Key to Breaking Folly's Hold:*  
An Annotated Translation of Yulgok's  
*Gyeongmong yogyeol*

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## Introduction

This is an English translation of the preface and the first chapter of Yi I's 李珥 擊蒙要訣 (*Key to Breaking Folly's Hold*).<sup>1</sup> Previously, in 2012, there appeared a complete English translation for general readers,<sup>2</sup> which was uploaded on Project Gutenberg's website.<sup>3</sup> This published version, however, presents no more than a liberal translation without a primary text or an annotation. So here I attempt to offer a new version which is more faithful to the primary source text and supplies a proper amount of footnotes that are useful to the reader.

Yi I (1536-1584) was one of the most prominent Confucian scholars during the Joseon period. He was also an active politician, but left office in 1576 because of factional strife between the Easterners and the Westerners.<sup>4</sup> After leaving office, he went to his wife's hometown, Haeju in Hwanghae province (now located in North Korea).<sup>5</sup>

While he was in Haeju, a few students came to see him to ask questions about learning.<sup>6</sup> At first he was reluctant to answer them because he had two problems. One belonged to himself, and the other to the students. He considered himself to be unqualified to teach<sup>7</sup> and deemed them ineligible to learn unless they had a strong will.<sup>8</sup> He wanted to give them something more than a makeshift solution or a desultory talk about learning.

In order to solve these two problems, he wrote *Gyeongmong yogyeol* in 1577.<sup>9</sup> By doing so, he did not have to teach them in person, and he could

1. Translating the title has been tried several times: *On the Secret of Expelling Ignorance* (Yi 2012), "Essentials of Enlightenment" (Yi 2009, 148), or *Important Methods of Eliminating Ignorance* (Haboush 1999, 23). However, none of them delivers the subtle meaning of the character "gyeok" 擊, so this version attempts to convey its literal meaning by translating it into "breaking." And moreover, the meaning of the character "mong" 蒙 is not limited to mere ignorance. It should be extended to all kinds of "folly" which was adopted here. The expression "Breaking Folly's Hold" was borrowed from Waltke's commentary on the *Book of Proverbs* (Waltke 2005, 216).

2. For more information, see Yi 2012.

3. The material is available at <http://gutenberg.us/details.aspx?bookid=wplbn0003466791> (last retrieved Feb. 17, 2016).

4. For more information, see Kim 1973, 27-28.

5. For more information, see Pak 2009, 164.

6. The tenth verse of the author's preface, which is indicated as P10.

7. The eleventh verse of the author's preface, which is indicated as P11.

8. The twelfth verse of the author's preface, which is indicated as P12.

9. For more information, see Yi 2014, 24.

provide them with substantial, meaningful, and serious instruction about learning.

There were two results he expected to get from himself and his readers. He wanted to alert himself through *Gyeongmong yogyeol*<sup>10</sup> along with his other work, *Jagyeongmun* 自警文 (*Written to Alert Myself*).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, through his writing, he was eager to see his students' cleansing their minds, making firm decisions to learn, and putting their actions into practice immediately.<sup>12</sup>

Besides the author's preface, the book consists of ten chapters that unfold as follows: making a resolution 立志, revamping the old habits 革舊習, behaving oneself 持身, reading books 讀書, serving parents 事親, performing mourning rites 喪制, conducting ancestral rituals 祭禮, staying at home 居家, treating others properly 接人, and finally, living in society 處世.

The first chapter, "making a resolution," implies that it is crucial to make a firm resolution before anything else. A firm resolution enables a person to immediately begin to study. It also alerts him that he should not shrink back from learning.<sup>13</sup>

## Text and Annotated Translation

### *Author's Preface of Key to Breaking Folly's Hold* 擊蒙要訣序

P1. 人生斯世，非學問，無以爲人，

People are born in this world, but without learning, they cannot be fully human.

P2. 所謂學問者，亦非異常別件物事也。

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10. The fifteenth verse of the author's preface, which is indicated as P15.

11. It was written three years after the death of his beloved mother in 1551. For further details, see Pokorny and Chang 2011, 142: "The so-called *Jagyeongmun* 自警文 (*Written to Alert Myself*) is relatively brief, yet marks a watershed in Yulgok's intellectual development. It represents his written resolution to henceforth wholeheartedly adhere to Confucian teachings while keeping any 'false doctrines' (*wihak* 僞學) at distance. The authoring of the *Jagyeongmun* concludes his yearlong sojourn in a Buddhist monastery at Geumgangsan 金剛山."

12. The fourteenth verse of the author's preface, which is indicated as P14.

13. The twentieth verse of the first chapter, which is indicated as 1.20.

So-called learning is not something unusual or extraordinary.

P3. 只是爲父當慈, 爲子當孝, 爲臣當忠, 爲夫婦當別, 爲兄弟當友, 爲少者當敬長, 爲朋友當有信,

Learning merely runs as follows: as fathers, be benevolent; as children, be filial; as ministers, be loyal; as a husband and a wife, be separate; as brothers, be fraternal; as young people, respect elders; as friends, be faithful.

P4. 皆於日用動靜之間, 隨事各得其當而已.

All these relationships belong to the way of life,<sup>14</sup> working and resting. Each person gets what he deserves according to the effort of his work.

P5. 非馳心玄妙, 希覬奇效者也.

Learning is not about driving the mind to something esoteric or expecting outstanding results.

P6. 但不學之人, 心地茅塞, 識見茫昧.

People without learning have their mind cluttered by thistle-like desires and their mental vision beclouded by ignorance.

P7. 故必須讀書窮理, 以明當行之路然後, 造詣得正而踐履得中矣.

Therefore, learners must be engaged in reading books and exhaustively investigating the principle<sup>15</sup> and thus, after clarifying the way they should go, they can be corrected and put their learning into practice precisely.

P8. 今人不知, 學問在於日用, 而妄意高遠難行,

People these days do not know that learning is simply part of everyday life but vainly think that learning is something lofty, distant, and hard to practice.

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14. For the art of living (*ars vitae*), see Han 2015, 9.

15. *Gunghni* 窮理 was translated into “the exhaustive investigation of the principles of things” by Michael Kalton. See Kalton 1988, 89.

P9. 故推與別人, 自安暴棄, 豈不可哀也哉.

So they pass up the opportunity to someone else and are content to do violence to themselves and throw themselves away.<sup>16</sup> How can we not lament this?

P10. 余定居海山之陽, 有一二學徒, 相從問學,

When I decided to reside in the southern area of Haesan, one or two students followed me and asked questions about learning.

P11. 余慙無以爲師, 而且恐初學, 不知向方,

I felt ashamed of myself as an unqualified teacher, but at the same time was afraid as well that those beginning students might not know the direction [if I did not teach them].

P12. 且無堅固之志而泛泛請益, 則彼此無補, 反貽人譏,

Moreover, without a firm will, if they hang around and ask for more, there would be no reciprocal benefits to one another, and it would incur the ridicule of others.

P13. 故略書一冊子, 粗敘立心飭躬奉親接物之方, 名曰擊蒙要訣,

That was why I briefly wrote a booklet and roughly described in it how to make up one's mind, behave oneself, serve parents, and treat others properly. Its title is the *Key to Breaking Folly's Hold*.

P14. 欲使學徒觀此, 洗心立腳, 當日下功,

I would like to let students look at this, by which their minds may be cleansed and their decisions firmly made, and proceed to set to work on the very day.

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16. Yulgok refers to a passage in the “Works of Mencius” 孟子. The “Works of Mencius” states: “Mencius said, ‘With those who do violence to themselves, it is impossible to speak. With those who throw themselves away, it is impossible to do anything. To disown in his conversation propriety and righteousness, is what we mean by doing violence to one’s self.’ To say ‘I am not able to dwell in benevolence or pursue the path of righteousness,’ is what we mean by throwing one’s self away” 孟子曰 自暴者 不可與有言也 自棄者 不可與有爲也 言非禮義 謂之自暴也 吾身不能居仁由義 謂之自棄也 (Mencius 4. 10. 1; qtd. in Legge 1870, 104). Also available at <http://ctext.org/mengzi>.

P15. 而余亦久患因循, 欲以自警省焉.

At the same time, I also have long been worried about myself if I may be subjected to the debilitating effects of routinization, and hence want to alert myself with it.

丁丑季冬, 德水李珥書.

In late winter of the year of the Ox (1577),<sup>17</sup>

Written by I 珥 of the Deoksu Yi clan

### **Chapter 1: Making a Resolution** 立志章 第一

1.1. 初學, 先須立志, 必以聖人自期, 不可有一毫自小退託之念,

A beginning student, first of all, should establish a firm intention to pursue learning and promise himself to become a sage. He should not hold any slightest idea of excusing himself to shrink back, considering himself incompetent to do so.

1.2. 蓋衆人與聖人, 其本性則一也.

On the whole, ordinary people and sages have the same original nature.

1.3. 雖氣質, 不能無清濁粹駁之異,

Although temperament and character<sup>18</sup> cannot but have differences from one another, such as difference between purity and turbidity, or fineness and coarseness,<sup>19</sup>

1.4. 而苟能真知實踐, 去其舊染而復其性初,

nevertheless, if one is able to truly know something and puts it into practice, removing the old corrupt practices and restoring the original nature,<sup>20</sup>

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17. Jeongchuk 丁丑 is the 14<sup>th</sup> year of the sexagenary cycle.

18. For the “temperament and character” 氣質, see Han 2015, 20.

19. For the *Cheongtaksunbak* 清濁粹駁, see Kalton 1988, 50.

20. *Seong* 性 was interpreted as potential by Han. For further details, see Han 2015, 19.

1.5. 則不增毫末而萬善具足矣。

then, without adding the slightest bit to it, all goodness will be equipped in him in its fullness.<sup>21</sup>

1.6. 衆人，豈可不以聖人自期乎。

So how can an ordinary person not promise himself to become a sage?

1.7. 故孟子道性善，而必稱堯舜以實之曰，人皆可以爲堯舜，豈欺我哉。

That was why Mencius said that the human nature is good, and always made laudatory reference to Yao and Shun,<sup>22</sup> and proved it by saying that all men can become Yaos and Shuns.<sup>23</sup> [If this were not true,] what is the use of deceiving me [by saying so]?

1.8. 當常自奮發曰，人性本善，無古今智愚之殊，聖人，何故獨爲聖人，我則何故獨爲衆人耶。

A student always must exert himself and say, "If human nature is originally good and there has been no difference across the ages between the wise and the foolish, how come then a sage could become a sage by himself, while I have become merely one of the ordinary men by myself?"

1.9. 良由志不立，知不明，行不篤耳。

This is truly just because his intention to pursue learning was not firmly established, his understanding was not clear, and his deed was not earnest.

1.10. 志之立，知之明，行之篤皆在我耳，豈可他求哉。

Establishing a firm intention, having a clear understanding, and being earnest in deed all depend solely on the individual, so why would one seek that from

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21. This part refers to a passage in the "Introduction to the Subject Matter of the Elementary Learning" 小學題辭 of Chu Hsi 朱熹: "without adding the slightest bit [of further perfection] to it, all goodness is already there in its fullness" 不加毫末 萬善足焉 (Kalton, 1988, 68).

22. Yulgok refers to a passage in the "Works of Mencius" 孟子. The "Works of Mencius" states: 道性善 言必稱堯舜 (Mencius 3. 1. 2). Also available at <http://ctext.org/mengzi/teng-wen-gong-i> (last retrieved Feb. 2, 2017).

23. Yulgok refers to a passage in the "Works of Mencius" 孟子. The "Works of Mencius" states: 人皆可以爲堯舜 有諸 (Mencius 6. 2. 1). Also available at <http://ctext.org/mengzi/gaozi-ii> (last retrieved Feb. 2, 2017).

others?<sup>24</sup>

1.11. 顏淵曰，舜何人也，予何人也，有爲者，亦若是，我亦當以顏之希舜爲法。  
Yan Yuan said, “What kind of man was Shun? What kind of man am I? He who exerts himself will also become such as he was.”<sup>25</sup> I also should take as a model Yan’s wish to be like Shun.

1.12. 人之容貌，不可變醜爲妍，膂力，不可變弱爲強，身體，不可變短爲長，  
As for one’s countenance, it is impossible to transform an ugly look into a fair one. As for one’s strength, it is not possible to turn a weak man into a strong one. As for one’s body composition, there is no way to change short limbs to long ones.

1.13. 此則已定之分，不可改也。  
These physical traits are one’s predetermined lot, so they cannot be changed.

1.14. 惟有心志，則可以變愚爲智，變不肖爲賢，  
As for one’s mind and will, however, it is possible to change the foolish to the wise and turn degenerate persons into virtuous ones.

1.15. 此則心之虛靈，不拘於稟受故也。  
This is because these are mental traits, which are hollow and spiritual, and thus are not restricted by physical endowment.

1.16. 莫美於智，莫貴於賢，何苦而不爲賢智，以虧損天所賦之本性乎。  
There is nothing fairer than being wise and nothing nobler than being virtuous. What kind of problem is there that would prevent you from being wise and virtuous, which leads to the ruin of your original nature endowed by Heaven?

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24. Yulgok refers to a passage in the “Works of Mencius” 孟子. The “Works of Mencius” states: 孟子曰然不可以他求者也 (Mencius 3. 2. 4). Also available at <http://cctext.org/mengzi/teng-wen-gong-i> (last retrieved Feb. 2, 2017).

25. Yulgok refers to a passage in the “Works of Mencius” 孟子. See Mencius 3. 1. 4. Also available at <http://cctext.org/mengzi/teng-wen-gong-i> (last retrieved Feb. 2, 2017).

1.17. 人存此志, 堅固不退, 則庶幾乎道矣.

If one keeps this purport in mind and firmly resolves not to draw back, he will come closer to the Way.

1.18. 凡人自謂立志, 而不卽用功, 遲回等待者, 名爲立志, 而實無向學之誠故也.

In general, a person would say to himself that he established a firm intention but ended up quitting an immediate application of diligent efforts. The reason he put it off and waited around was that, though he seemed to establish a firm intention, in reality he did not have the sincerity to pursue learning.

1.19. 苟使吾志, 誠在於學, 則爲仁由己, 欲之則至, 何求於人, 何待於後哉.

If I set my own mind sincerely on learning, then the strength to practice humanity will come from within myself, and hence as long as I want to practice, I will be able to make it. So why seek from others? Why wait until later?

1.20. 所貴乎立志者, 卽下工夫, 猶恐不及, 念念不退故也.

It is important to establish a firm intention so that one immediately sets to work and fears if he may come short of it. Furthermore, he will always make sure that he should not shrink back.

1.21. 如或志不誠篤, 因循度日, 則窮年沒世, 豈有所成就哉.

If a person is insincere in his determination, a slave to habit and idles away time, then, until his time on earth is over, how can he have achieved anything?

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