



## A glimpse of Confucian scholar's intimacy

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**A glimpse of Confucian scholar's intimacy.  
The correspondence of Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584).**

The topic I would like to address today is related to a both simple and ambitious question: “How Confucianism, regarded as a historical phenomenon and not solely as a philosophy, can be studied today? And what can be really said about it?” With the recent renewal of intellectual history, Confucianism can no more be encapsulated in fixed scholarly – and even Byzantine – debates, as well as in a few great figures that are supposed to embody them. With the new interest in anthropology and history for private life, socio-cultural aspects and multidisciplinary approaches, Confucianism should now also be studied through its representatives, that is to say the Confucian scholars-officials. Even in literature, the commonly accepted suspicion towards the biographical dimension in the study of a writer tends now to be questioned. To sum up, the very idea of a strict objectivity in humanities is fruitfully challenged, even if this raises a few problems too, and among them a tendency to relativism.

What I am currently interested in is to try to grasp Confucianism as a lively phenomenon. Before being often reduced to a fleshless and voiceless body of texts by most modern scholarship, both in Korea and, in a mimetic phenomenon, abroad, Confucianism used to be something basically in motion in pre-modern times. Besides, before being labeled as a philosophy, a religion or even a somewhat colorful Oriental wisdom, what we call Confucianism referred to a common ideology and identity, a common culture shared by generations of scholars-officials. I am precisely interested in what could be called, in a bit pedantic way, the dialectic of theory and praxis or, to say it more simply, in what it meant to be a Confucian scholar and to live with a Confucian mindset in pre-modern times. By doing so, my aim is twofold. On the one hand, I would

like to go against the angelic vision of Confucian scholars as great men, that is to say monolithic men without personal depth and intimate complexity. Beyond the anecdotic and biographical interests, it is worth noticing that this approach is really needed in order to fully understand the Confucian project and worldview from the inside. On the other hand, I would like to take a critical distance from the well-spread utilitarian and cynical vision of Confucianism regarded only as an ideological tool for social reproduction and social control. These two visions, the angelic one and the cynical one, used to be useful to tackle the role and place of Confucianism in history, but they can't avoid the pitfalls of caricature when they are not contrasted and further questioned.

So in this general perspective, letters are of the highest interest for this kind of project. As the latest book directed by Pr Kim Haboush from the University of Columbia, *Epistolary Korea*, has recently underlined for instance, the very epistolary genre stands between private and public space but also between collective norms and individual freedom. It is thus allowing some insightful glimpses of the intimacy, or the inner world of Confucian scholars. However, such insights are only insights, and, as such, they tend to be largely tentative. Generally speaking, the epistolary corpus can indeed be characterized by: 1) its fragmentary nature, because of both the material and ideological conditions of its transmission; 2) its polymorphous writing, going from self-staging, later censure by disciples and descendants, to the social codes of writing of a specific time. So, as historical sources, letters have to be studied with high caution. In spite of this inherent and undeniable limitation, something interesting can still be found in those stimulating and even sometimes entertaining texts that portray Confucian scholars in some unknown and surprising aspects of their characters.

One attempt to overcome the limitations of the epistolary genre is to combine and contrast multiple case studies with a general analysis. As for now, I have chosen one specific case study, which is part of a long-term research project on the 16<sup>th</sup> century Confucian scholars' correspondence. I have chosen Yulgok Yi I, for I have a special empathy for him since I have done my PhD on him (and this kind of strong relationship is, I guess, needed in order to hold a detailed investigation in a voluminous amount of texts written in Classical Chinese), but also because he is a pretty good choice for my project.

Indeed, Yulgok is basically a *cliché*. He is one of the few great men Korean people like to put front and center as icons and symbols of their national pride. Let me remind that Yulgok is printed, as well as his contemporary and elder T'oegye Yi Hwang, on bank notes in South Korea. He is the paragon of the Korean Confucian man, since he was an important state man as well as the supposed founder of one Korean Neo-Confucian school, the *Kiho hakp'a* 畿湖學派. Lastly, his special aura is also due to his mother, Sin Saimdang, who is, as for her, the paragon of the ideal Confucian woman, that is to say the perfect daughter, mother and wife, but also a decent female painter. So, precisely because of his memorial stature in contemporary Korea as well as his own fame in his lifetime, many of Yulgok's writings have been retained and compiled in spite of the losses due to the foreign invasions of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. His collected writings, the *Yulgok Chŏnsŏ*, are thus providing a sizeable amount of texts, especially private, or to be more precise semi-private texts.

It is worth noticing, indeed, that defining the intimacy and the privacy of many writings resembles sometimes an intellectual challenge for pre-modern Korea. What we call a letter is not that easy to identify in scholars' collected works. *Epistolarity*, that is to say, etymologically, "addressing to others with letters", implies a few basic characteristics of the very epistolary genre. Among them, let's cite the indications of time and space, an opening with the mention of the addressee, and the ending with a set phrase and the signature. In most cases, scholars' letters don't include all these elements and, sometimes, it even happens that none of these elements is present. So letters are usually identified and located in the *Collected writings*, the *munjip*, thanks to their classification under the category "letters" (mainly *sŏ* 書; but also *pyŏlji* 別紙 or *kandok* 簡牘). But, it often happens too that some fragments of letter, full letters as well as little notes that are not classified in this category can be found elsewhere in the *munjip*. As for example, official year-by-year biography (*yŏnbo* 年譜) usually quotes parts of letters regarded as representative of something substantial and telling about the life and work of a scholar, with the precision "to be found in this edition". This very practice is interesting, for it reminds us that there is always a selection process that is going on in the compilation of one specific scholar's writings. Besides, the official biography and the classification of

the texts inside the *Collected writings* are certainly implementing a sort of reading convention that gives shape to our understanding of one scholar's life and work. Especially, only a few texts are highlighted and pointed out to the reader in the biography of a *munjip*. As for Yulgok's letters, what is underlined as meaningful markers of his life is mainly his philosophical correspondence – with T'oegye and Sŏng Hon as for example. Since most of the manuscripts are now lost, the authenticity and the very textual integrity of the collected writings can't be checked. So what can be investigated nowadays is only a very fragmentary corpus that is, moreover, heavily tributary to the strategies that have been involved in the building of both familial and scholarly lineages.

Another reason why it is difficult to identify and even locate what we would like to call today a letter is due to a certain amount of notes and little texts addressed to others for specific occasions and that are not properly labeled as letters. There are, as for the *Yulgok Chŏnsŏ*: 1) the official letters and memos addressed to the king or colleagues, the *sŏ* 疏, *kye* 啓, *ŭi* 議 (131 texts from 1565 to 1583), 2) the *sŏ* 序, which are not prefaces but short notes given as presents to friends after a meeting or for special occasions (8 texts), 3) and even some poems also offered as presents to friends who are taking leave after a visit or who are leaving for a diplomatic mission to China.

I would also like to mention two other important difficulties when locating and studying scholars' letters. Firstly, some letters sent by one scholar have to be found out in another scholar's collected works. Secondly, it is the lack or simply the loss of most of the answers. We are then left with only one side of a correspondence and we are reduced to listen only to one side of a fragmentary dialogue. Yulgok's case is pretty representative, for only one exchange of letters with his friend Sŏng Hon can be identified in their respective *Collected works*. And, among the seven letters supposed to be addressed to Yulgok in Sŏng Hon's works (all consisting in philosophical discussions), only one letter is, in fact, written by Sŏng Hon. The six other letters are Yulgok's answers. Worst, in one letter compiled in Sŏng Hon's *collected works*, no visual mark has been made between Sŏng Hon's letter and Yulgok's one, and it is just a puzzle to define who is talking.

Besides, a letter listed as one single letter is actually a juxtaposition of fragments of sent and received letters.

So, all these material difficulties to study pre-modern scholars' letters tend to argue that this kind of study mainly consists in studying biography and that it is only an anecdotic research. Let's now see how it is in practice.

As for now, I have chosen to limit my research to Yulgok's letters/*sŏ* in order to have at my disposal a manageable group of texts that are coherent and consistent in both style and content. The main difference between *sŏ* and other types of letter-like texts lies indeed in the themes and writing codes that are expected from each type of text. Just to recall the cases of the homophone *sŏ* (the notes offered as gifts to friends and acquaintances) and the circumstantial poems or songs given to friends, they are all referring to conventional topics, notably friendship. They are explaining the relationship between the two protagonists, by giving details about how they met, what interests and ideals they are sharing, and to sum up, how much they like each other. So, even if these texts do illustrate one main function of correspondence taken in a broad sense, that is to say the expressive function (the expression of feelings and the relationship to others), they however heavily rely on the rules of polite society and the literary codes of the time.

In the *Collected works of Yulgok*, there are 139 letters/ *sŏ* that have been sent to 24 people over 30 years, from 1554 (Yulgok is then 19 years old) to 1584 (Yulgok dictated a letter to a nephew a few days before his death, at age 49).

When we look at the distribution of these letters, three main addressees who received more than the half of the total letters can be noticed: Song Ikp'il (38 letters), Sŏng Hon (33 letters) and Chŏng Ch'ŏl (25 letters). The three of them are famous Confucian scholars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Korea, so they have had the privilege of having got some of their writings collected and transmitted to posterity through *munjip*. What is however striking is that, when we are reading the letters that Yulgok send to them, we got the impression that they are really close friends, playing an important role in Yulgok's life. But when we are looking for their own letters to Yulgok in their *Collected works*, we cannot help but feel disappointed, since we can find no letter sent to Yulgok in Song

Ikp'il and Chŏng Ch'öl's *munjip* and, as I already said, there is only one real letter sent to Yulgok in Sŏng Hon's *munjip*. So we have no choice than limit ourselves to what Yulgok is writing.

Let's then see more precisely the reasons why Yulgok is writing letters, in order to have a general picturing of the epistolary practice at his time. Here are, without order, the main reasons of writing a letter for Yulgok. You will see that this is not far from what we are doing today by e-mails, phone calls and, still sometimes, by letters:

- 1) inquiring after someone, with a strong emphasis on either health or Confucian Learning
- 2) asking after someone because he randomly heard about him by another person or a common acquaintance who came to visit him
- 3) giving the latest news at court, about common friends or about himself (his projects, decisions, etc)
- 4) protesting about something he heard about himself or others
- 5) desiring confirmation about important second-hand information or news
- 6) giving and asking for an advice about a text, a ritual matter or an on-going political or philosophical polemic
- 7) starting a philosophical discussion about a specific problem
- 8) thanking for a visit, a letter, a poem
- 9) continuing a discussion started at a recent meeting
- 10) asking for an appointment (especially when communicating by letters is not enough to solve a problem or a misunderstanding)
- 11) delaying a visit or making excuses for not being able to pay a visit
- 12) (one case) wishing a happy new year
- 13) asking whether or not the last letter has been received
- 14) introducing oneself in order to get in touch with someone
- 15) expressing feelings of friendship and the desire to meet someone again
- 16) writing on behalf of someone else

To sum up, we can notice here the three traditional functions of a letter: 1) the informative function, 2) the expressive function and 3) the argumentative function.

Yulgok's letters are also providing some interesting information about the practical dimension of the epistolary exchange, notably thanks to a few references made to the very situation of utterance.

As for example, we can see that letters are circulating by the means of a slave or a servant, a friend or a family member. When the servant is sick, as it happened twice to Yulgok, the letter cannot be delivered. Generally speaking, depending on the messenger and the distance between two people, the delivery of a letter can take only a few minutes, or it can be delayed for a couple of months, with the risks of physical damage and loss but also the risk of lacking confidentiality, which is paradoxically one of the main demands for a private letter.

Besides, letters refer to a kind of specific "economy" in terms of writing and reading practices. Letters can be written in bed, dictated, when sick, at night, between two appointments or courtesy visits, in a rush when meeting a potential messenger, in one go or, conversely, with a discontinuation. Letters are also read and read again, detailed, shown to an outsider for a comment, circulated among common friends, copied out, cut up, supplemented with comments and replies, shed tears over, partly recited. So, writing and reading letters are taking an important part of life, and even the most important part of the intimate and private life of a scholar. It is a time-consuming activity as well as a pleasure and a necessity. To sum up, it can be said that it is a sort of art of living or a way of life.

Lastly, letters are going with presents of all kinds: poems, philosophical diagrams, notes, books, inkwell and brush, but also food, grain and medicine. They are parts of the multiple and repetitive proofs of consideration and affection. In their very circulation, one can fully sense the Confucian friendship and sociability on the go, on the making.

Let's now move on to the content of Yulgok's letters. What is he talking about, what is he telling his friends, colleagues, acquaintances but also the king Sŏnjo? Four



main topics, which are very closely related to each other, can be roughly noticed: 1) Confucianism (Confucian Learning, texts, rituals, worldview, identity, etc.), 2) the very Confucian dilemma of “serving or retiring” (that is to say, the dilemma between passing the civil service examination and taking a position on the one hand, and staying out of the court and governmental affairs as a retired scholar on the other hand), 3) Yulgok’s feelings, state of mind and mood, 4) his bad health.

One of you might ask, for good reasons since the title of this talk is focusing on the idea of “intimacy”: How about Yulgok’s family? How about his love life? Unfortunately, you will certainly be as disappointed as I have been when I first looked at his letters. There is no room for spicy details in these letters, only a few vague allusions to his family.

More seriously, Yulgok is mentioning from time to time a few members of his family circle. He is alluding to his father and mother. He is notably stressing his father’s will to see him becoming a high official for economical reasons, and he is also mentioning the trauma of his mother’s death when he was a teenager. His grand-mother, on his mother’s side, is often cited in his letters to the king, showing us his deep attachment to her. As for his wife and concubine, he is only mentioning them two times, when he is talking about his moving house, or when he is concerned that they are threatened by epidemic disease or dangerous vagrants in their countryside house while he is living alone in the capital city. In one interesting letter to Song Ikp’il however, he is protesting against a criticism that Sŏng Hon made about him when they were young men, that is to say that he loves his wife too much. By the way, this is the only one mention to his “love life” in his whole correspondence. Besides, he alludes only one time to one of his children, when he announces, also to Song Ikp’il, half happy and half ashamed that he is the father of a baby girl. To Song Ikp’il, he is also asking about his nephew, who is studying with him. As for his brothers and sisters, he only mentions in a very few letter his concerns about one of his brothers, as well as his sister-in-law. Lastly, he is talking about the old concubine of his father, whose sickness is worrying him.

So, family is certainly not the main topic of Yulgok's letters. Generally speaking, even in Western traditions, the same can be said about the minor presence of intimacy, taken in the narrow sense of family and love life, in real correspondence (I mean in a non literary correspondence) until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The intimate dimension of Yulgok's correspondence is rather to be found elsewhere. This leads us to tackle now the delicate question of the nature and uses of intimacy in a pre-modern Confucian scholar's letters. Indeed, intimacy is very difficult to define as a universal notion. It might be safer to try to understand it as the sphere of the expression of the self as well as of interpersonal resonance that is created within the specific framework of the mindsets and social practices of a specific time and space. One good possible means to try to understand what was the intimacy of a pre-modern Confucian scholar like Yulgok is thus to study his multi-layered discourse, both theoretical and practical, that can be found in the very specific discursive space created by a letter.

Among the four general topics of Yulgok's letters that I have mentioned earlier, the first two ones are concerning Confucianism in a broad sense. This is not surprising since Yulgok's philosophical debates, notably through letters, are already well-known features of Korean intellectual history. However, no study has underlined yet the common and prosaic use of what is usually thought to be only a philosophical terminology. The obsessive focus on the philosophical content of his discourse tends, indeed, to shade the underlying polyphony of the discourse itself.

Even if it sounds like a truism when we are thinking about it properly, it is worth reminding that when Yulgok is talking about political matters, his health, his progress in the study of Confucian Classics, but also about his feelings and state of mind, he is actually using the same vocabulary as in his most famous philosophical writings. The reason is that, as it is said in the Confucian texts, the Confucian Learning precisely lies in daily life (*hakmun chae ō iryong* 學問在於日用). Besides, there is a continuum between human world and cosmic world (which is summed up in the well know sentence: *ch'ōnin hapil* 天人合一). So, terms like *yi* 理, *ki* 氣, *chōng* 情, *sōng* 性, *myōng* 命, *sim* 心, *sōng*

誠, *kam* 感, *pal* 發, *pon* 本, *chǒng* 正 as for instance, that are all significant examples of the linguistic arsenal used in the very technical philosophical discussions are also used, in a pretty pedestrian way, to describe the weather, Yulgok's numerous little diseases and his generally anxious feelings.

You may all already know that one major, essential topic of Korean Neo-Confucianism is, in a nutshell, the control of emotions and how to strengthen human perfectibility –a topic that is usually illustrated by the so-called “four-seven debate” (*sadan ch'iljǒngnon*) or the controversy about the supremacy of the Yi or that of the Ki, notably between Yulgok and T'oegye. In Yulgok's letters, we can actually sense that this problem is the paradigm or, conversely, the product of his way of seeing and living things in his real, daily life. Even if it is really tricky to demonstrate it, there must have been an interaction, a certain dynamic at play between how Yulgok was seeing things in his own life and what he wrote as a thinker.

To play with words, the control of emotions is precisely what Yulgok, apparently, never achieved in his own life. To summarize in one statement the topics of his letters, and to say it in a bit provocative way, Yulgok's major concern is: himself. The dilemma of his serving or retiring, and the obsessive, invasive topic of his mental and physical weaknesses are the major problems of his life. This is really different from others scholars' letters. Sǒng Hon, for instance, is having a very different character and writing style. So the main autobiographical conclusion we could draw from Yulgok's correspondence is that he was a depressed and maybe a bit hypochondriac man. There is indeed a real sense of melancholy and even a touch of tragedy in his letters. This is precisely providing us an opportunity to further investigate into the relationship between intimacy and epistolarity for a Confucian scholar.

The epistolary writing is often, in its very nature, a hyperbole. It is alternately lyrical, pathetic or polemical. This is due to the fact that expressing oneself is always a self-staging process, especially when the letter is semi-private, semi-public as it was in pre-modern Korea. But this is also due to the specific temporality of the writing of a letter. Even if a letter is primarily intended to communicate something to someone else, there is

an inherent ambiguity and a paradox in this writing, which is in fact a “mono-managed” communication. To say it in other words, the communication by letters is not like a direct dialogue, face to face. It is a monologue, a well controlled monologue. Because of the solemnity of written words, a letter is always written with care, which requires time and often rewriting. In such a process, the hyperbole in both style and content is one of the rhetorical strategies that are commonly used in order to give the illusion of sincerity, transparency and spontaneity to the expression of feelings and thoughts. Yulgok’s letters are, in this regard, very illustrative. His letters are literally invaded by sighs, laughs, tears, exclamations of all kinds. As for example, he is using a lot of repetitions and expressions of exclamation like: *yōha yōha* 如何如何, *ch’eang ch’eang* 切仰切仰, *naeha naeha* 奈何奈何 (all meaning “What can I do! What can I say! Alas! ), *kagwoe kagwoe* 可愧可愧 (What a shame! What a shame!), *haengsim haengsim* 幸甚幸甚 (What a chance! What a chance!), *ch’a kat’an ya* 此可嘆也! (This is really pathetic!) *ch’a kaso ya* 此可笑也 (This is really laughable!). We could even say that his letters are just full of an “overflowing Ki” (a *hoyōn chi ki* 浩然之氣), as Mencius said, but in a different meaning.

Anyway, this hyperbole in both style and content is at the very opposite of the usual writing style of the serious, philosophical and official writings that constitute the main writing production of Yulgok as a high official but also as a respectable Confucian scholar. So, letters are the only one possible space for a free expression of the self, even if this expression does obey some social codes and writing rules. Letters might then have been the main realm of intimacy for Yulgok. In any case, they are the only remains of his intimate life, understood as an expression of his soul-searching.

I would like to evoke here briefly one last characteristic of Yulgok’s letters and intimate world. As for any other scholar, most of the remaining letters in his *Collected writings* are all addressed to his friends: his male, Confucian friends, in a word to his soul-mates in Learning if I may say this. In the Confucian *Weltanschauung*, friendship is the only one human egalitarian relationship. Indeed, among the *oryun*, that is to say the Five social relationships metonymical of all human relationships (sovereign/minister, father/son, husband/wife, elder brother/younger brother and friend/friend), the last

relationship, that of friendship is the only one egalitarian relationship. Moreover, this relationship is precisely what makes the other vertical relationships possible and even bearable, for it plays the role of the main driving force. Friendship is indeed the only true source of happiness and of the transparency of hearts. So, for a Confucian scholar, friendship is the only refuge, the only support he can get in order to live as a true Confucian. In all his letters, Yulgok is missing his friends, and most of them are conveying the usual message of intimate letters: I think of you. Yulgok is recurrently evoking his loneliness, his constant need to keep in contact and to recall himself to his friends. His incessant laments about himself, his failure as a true Confucian scholar as well as a good official, his life-long sickness and his disillusion are all screams and groans of feelings of despair and loneliness. This point may be worth noticing in order to fully understand another function of letters in Confucian scholar's real life. They are consolation, they are hope. Yulgok is portraying himself as a weak person, as a child who needs care, as an old man who lost all his vital energy, as an empty shell, as dead wood bearing the weight of an entire house, as a mosquito carrying a mountain on his shoulders. He is calling for attention, friendship and even, in a certain extent, love.

So, writing letters is certainly taking an important part in strengthening the will of becoming a true Confucian scholar, that is to say the famous *ipchi* 立志, a main notion in Yulgok's life and thought. Thus, writing letters could be regarded as a significant part of the Confucian Learning, taken as a vivid and lively process. Yulgok's well-known philosophical debates through letters are, of course, an illustration of this idea. Speaking of philosophical correspondence, I would just like to remind briefly that this is precisely the main reason why one scholar's letters have been retained, transmitted and collected in *munjip*. And significant scholars-officials were well-aware of this. As for instance, in one letter to Sŏng Hon, we can see an interesting literary *mise en abyme*: Yulgok and Sŏng Hon are writing to each other about the great Chinese Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi's philosophical correspondence.

So, by way of conclusion, I would just like to underline again the paradoxical nature of letters. Indeed, they are the only one window giving access to a pre-modern scholar's intimacy. But since they are, basically, a narrative and a discourse (a self-

staging discourse as well as a reconstructed discourse in the compilation process of a *munjip*), they are a double-edged source for historians. However, maybe because of its paradox, the study of letters, at the crossroad between history and literature, is both stimulating and interesting.

To end this long talk, I would like to read a few extracts of Yulgok's correspondence, in order to let you hear Yulgok's own voice, unfortunately in my bad English translation.

To Sŏng Hon: 答成浩原 (1554; Yulgok is 19 years old)

“Dear Sŏng Hon, in the last letter you sent me, the words used in your repeated efforts to explain to me your viewpoint are so honest and sincere that they could make a deaf person hear and a blind person see. Even if I am below average, how could I not be sensitive to this or be moved. Ah! What I mean could be understood by nobody but you. How fortunate I am! How fortunate! Your doubts about me are really well-founded. However, since there is a sort of misunderstanding between us, I would not like to leave something unclear in the knowledge we have of each other, by avoiding telling you my real state of mind. Since my childhood, I have been lazy regarding Learning.

Before age fifteen or sixteen, I did not read that many books. It is only at age seventeen that I started directing my heart towards Learning. After not getting any effective results, I caught in addition a bowel disease and since then, I have not been capable of studying anymore and had to limit myself to silently recollecting some previously read books. One day, I suddenly remembered Confucian masters saying that extensive recitation of books is harmful to the mind/heart and I never recited texts again. I then fully realised that I was not wasting energy anymore and it has now been a few years that I have felt good in my mind. Even if I were not lazy, because of the weakness coming from my disease, I could not show any substantial achievement. What could be said then, since my share at birth has been laziness and I am suffering from this disease. Even if I were whipped everyday to be exhorted to make efforts, I could not do it. What could be said then, since doubts about my zeal... (*missing part*) and that there is certainly much to be said about it! My

character predisposed me to not enjoy bustle and agitation, and I would be happy to spend my time in sitting meditation. That is why those who do not know me are suspicious about my understanding texts. And only those who used to share a common room with me can know my laziness.”

To Chǒng Ch’öl: 答鄭季涵 (after 1572; Yulgok is more than 37)

“Thank you very much for your reply, which I received yesterday. Knowing that you have not recovered yet just makes me feel unhappy. As for me, flu still remains the same with no sign of recovery yet. Although I would like to pay you a visit, I am not capable to do so as for now. What a trouble! I have fully got the meaning of what you have told me. Besides, if I have been talking about transferring you away, it was precisely in order to show you my consideration, in the name of the duty of giving friends advice. Don’t you think that it would not be reasonable if we ever crossed swords without taking account of this? Without meeting and speaking face to face, how could we talk in details? Generally speaking, to sort out any kind of problem, weighing is better than hurrying. Since I cannot do it myself, could you please, elder-brother, come tomorrow for a discussion?”

To Song Ikp’il: 答宋雲長 (? 1583; Yulgok is 48 years old)

“Receiving several letters from you has been such a good consolation. I wrote an answer a couple of days ago that I gave to your elder brother. I do not know whether you have already read it. Sǒng Hon has been given once more an unusual opportunity to take a position, but although there is no way for him not to face up to his responsibilities, he still has plans in mind to refuse it. That is a pity. But in the end, he will certainly not succeed in retiring. I could not help but feel very concerned once I fully realised that you were declining in health. For me too, the hundreds of worldly flavours have just become tasteless. This is certainly not a sign of my vigour for study, but rather of my getting old. What can I do, except trusting to luck and leaving all this to destiny! Since I am currently correcting my commentaries of the *Elementary Learning*, I cannot send them to you. I am sorry I do not have any copy. I will send them to you in a separate note. The story

portraying me as attracting many people and teaching disciples exceeds reality. When I first came to the capital city, many people did come to see me, but now there are less and less people coming. My vital energy is usually so unbalanced that when I come back from my day's work, I feel so bad that I have to go to bed. Even when I need to throw up, I do not have enough strength to do so. How pathetic. What kind of person is referred to when the selection of fit people is talked about? Even if someone is expected to get selected, how could they dare shout it in advance from the rooftops? My numerous inabilities, Chǒng Ch'ŏl's uncontrolled taste for alcohol, and Sǒng Hon's stubbornness to remain retired: these are the real concerns. The necessity to restrict the influence one can have on another should always be kept in mind."

Thank you very much!