

King Sejong's State Administration: Focusing on the Process of Enforcement of *Yukgije* (Six-Year Scheme for Chief Magistrates)

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What did politics mean to King Sejong (世宗: 1397-1450) of the Joseon dynasty?

His theory on state administration is clear in the expression *siin baljeong*, that is, to “practice virtue and govern the nation,” which shows that Sejong succeeded the thoughts of Mencius. This concept in particular focuses on the formation and praxis of an institution, in which the practice of virtue, a Confucian idea, and governing the country, its actual policy, complement each other.

The specifics of Sejong's thoughts are evidenced in a number of literary records and books. This article will therefore focus on the process of how he enforced and institutionalized *yukgije*, the six-year term scheme, which was suggested as part of the policy regarding the long-term duty of chief magistrates.

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Suryeong Yukgije: Yukgije for Chief Magistrates

Traditionally, a government official had a three-year term of office. In other words, what was called *samgije*, the three-year scheme for chief magistrates, was related to the assessment of the official, and the chief magistrate's performance was reviewed once or twice annually based on five to seven categories.

The accumulated results of all three years were then added and classified into three levels, good, fair and poor, based on which his following position was determined. This system was originally enacted in the Yuan Dynasty, and was later introduced to Goryeo. Joseon also applied it to the assessment of chief magistrates but Taejong and Sejong extended the criteria to seven categories in the process.

During Sejong's reign, a policy to extend the three-year term to six years was established and enforced. The person who made this proposal was Heo Jo, minister of the Board of Civil Office at the time. However, the bureaucrats were opposed to *yukgije* from the onset. Just as those who adhere to textbook principles today are scorned at for being old fashioned and unrealistic, so Heo Jo was criticized for being similar to Zhougong of China. However, Sejong was the decision-maker and the implementation of the scheme was never put up for open discussion, which shows that the will of the monarch was the decisive factor.

I tend to enforce many affairs with my just cause instead of following others' opinions. Affairs such as *yukgije*, *yanggye chukseong*--building walls on eastern and northern boundaries--or conforming the pay of *haengjik* (those with high rank but in a low position) and *sujik* (those with low rank but in a high position), which were rejected by all, I executed them without considering their arguments. (*Sejong sillok* 26/07/23)

In other words, although he continued to accept persistent criticisms on tributary law, he reaffirmed his decision to "reinforce with just cause." This reflects how Sejong governed based on public opinion, but when it came to policies approved by examples in history, he accepted them as timely despite public opinion and pursued them until they were institutionalized. In this regard, policies such as *yukgije* and *yanggye chukseong* conform to "rigorously selecting and holding fast to Zen" in *The Doctrine of the Mean*.¹

The Process of Enforcement and Debate

The debate on the enforcement process can be divided into three main stages.

1. 誠之者 擇善而固執之者也 in *Doctrine of the Mean*, Ch. 18.

The initial stage was about two years from the seventh year to the eighth year of Sejong when the King, after declaring the enforcement of the scheme, demanded complementary measures of the scheme to the bureaucrats, initiating the debate between him and them. The middle stage lasted about five years from the ninth year to the 13th year. This period is important because this was the time when the first *yukgije* that began in the fifth year of Sejong was coming to an end. The final stage began in the 22nd year of Sejong, which is also when the debate between the King and Ko Yak-hae started to become very intense, towards the end of his reign when the scheme was rapidly institutionalized.

1. Initial Stage: From the Seventh to Eighth Year

In the second lunar month of the seventh year of Sejong's reign, the King declared the establishment of *yukgije* and demanded additional measures of the officials. The characteristic of the controversy that followed is an "introduction" to the debate in which the bureaucrats criticized at a theoretical level and the King responded at a textbook level. However, the list of criticism and response appeared in full.

The criticism was divided into two areas, namely, ideological and administrative. Ideological criticisms were that there was no historical basis (in the study of the Classics and in history), and that it was neither suitable to the examples in China (Six Codes) nor to the cases of previous kings (Taejo and Taejong). The administrative issue was that there were problems concerning the status of bureaucrats (discrimination of promotion between local and central positions), and that it was also problematic from the people's standpoint (as six years was a long time and due to certain qualities of some chief magistrates, it could cause misgovernment).

To these critiques, Sejong reminded them of the issue of discontinuity in governance due to frequent changes of chief magistrates and that the scheme was a reform policy that aimed to correct the abuse of reception and farewell of magistrates that weighed heavily on people. He then cross-questioned the basis in the Classics concerning harmful effects of *yukgije*. By demanding the "meaning of public opinion" (that is, self-interest of bureaucrats that they cannot establish personal relationships when living away from Seoul for so long), he stood strong in his will to continue executing the scheme.

2. Middle Stage: From the Ninth to Thirteenth Year

As the *yukgije* that began in the fifth year of Sejong was increasingly enforced, the main point of criticism expanded and intensified from theoretical to empirical. In the eleventh year of reign when the first *yukgije* came to an end, the chief magistrates were exhausted and accordingly the criticism of the scheme became stronger and more precise. Six years of experience was enough to highlight the defects of the scheme.

From spring to fall of the thirteenth year, important criticisms were raised on *yukgije*. In spring came an appeal from a Confucian scholar, Oh Heum-ro, followed by another from the Office of the Censor-General (Saganwon) in the fall. The appeal in spring was the most careful criticism of the scheme that covered the standpoint of bureaucrats. On the other hand, the appeal from the Office of Censor-General was important in that it was an opportunity to spread latent issues concerning the scheme, which had been the cause of discontent amongst bureaucrats, to a political level. This appeal initiated conflicts within the Cabinet, and the Cabinet divided into a pro-scheme group led by Heo Jo and Hwang Hui, and an anti-scheme group led by Maeng Sa-seong.

King Sejong continued to push the scheme forward but it is also evidenced that he accepted the reform measures. In the thirteenth year, he ordered the Hall of Worthies (Jiphyeonjeon) to research long-term duty policy by studying classical texts. As a result, he ordered a strict enforcement of a reform measure called the “circular duty system of central-local posts.” By making the promotion of local magistrates equal to that of bureaucrats in Seoul, Sejong resolved bureaucratic dissatisfaction. That Sejong provided the basis from the study of classical texts is an important factor worth noting.

3. Final Stage: From the Fourteenth Year to the End of the Reign

The most important incident of this period is the dispute between the vice-minister of Finance, Ko Yak-hae, and the King. Nothing could have been more vivid than the detailed descriptions of this debate found in *Sejong sillok* (Veritable Records of King Sejong). The icy atmosphere of the court with the intensifying debate, the raised voice of hot-tempered Ko Yak-hae, the King’s persuasions and headshakes, the subject losing his anger and the King being stupefied at the official who had crossed the propriety between king and the subject are all fully described. The depiction continues on the following day as the King decided to

regard this particular incident as blasphemy against the monarch, and his concern was that such an incident should not become an obstacle to the formation of public opinion.

Through this debate the King displayed his thoughts on the officials who were against *yukgije*. That is, though the bureaucrats who were opposing the scheme held up public opinion as the basis of their argument, the truth was that they were neglecting the public nature of national policy for their personal interest. The confrontation between public and individual is a theme that had continued from Mencius in the study of the Classics. As this dichotomy was established, those who criticized the scheme were now accused of pursuing individual interest. The reason the criticisms disappeared after the Ko Yak-hae incident seems to have been due to the fact that Sejong politically seized upon this dichotomy. *Yukgije* was completely institutionalized after this incident and was maintained till late Joseon.

4. Influences Thereafter

In spite of persistent opposition from the bureaucrats (especially from the local ones), *yukgije* seems to have been established as an institution during King Sejong's reign. When it comes to the critique of the scheme, nothing is more comprehensive than the following one written by a historiographer. In the seventh year of King Sejong's reign, when the criticism was first raised, he wrote as follows:

When Sejong acceded to the throne, Yu Jeong-hyeon and Heo Jo repeatedly suggested that he enforce it. When at this time (the fifth year) Heo Jo became the minister of the Board of Civil Office, the King finally determined his will and enacted the law.

All raised their voices and claimed inconvenience, some saying that "the law of the forefathers could not be changed," that they "would not be able to provide for the parents for a long time," or that they "will miss opportunities for their children's marriages," claiming harm would come from the scheme in various ways.

Quoting Lu Zhi's appeal to the Tang Emperor Dezong that it should not be continued for long, they kept appealing to the King. However, the King did not listen and pursued enforcement, at the end of which the Court was at peace and the people were assured to work. The establish-

ment of the law was precise and the bureaucrats were even more cautious in upholding the law. (*Sejong sillok* 07/26/27)

In the end, the debate over *suryeong yukgije* was established as an institution with a “public vs. individual interest” dispute as a turning point, despite various criticisms. What then happened to the scheme after the death of King Sejong?

The Minister of Culture and Education, Heo Hu, who assessed *yukgije* under the reign of King Munjong, who succeeded Sejong, pointed out that although “people were reluctant to take their office in the country before, there were now more applicants due to such a wonderful institution as *yukgije*.” He continued that the reason for such change was the “circular duty system between central and local posts,” a complementary measure that assured no discrimination in promotion between the local and central posts. *Yukgije* had already been established as “a wonderful institution” (*Munjong sillok* 00/12/22).

Institutionalized *suryeong yukgije* continued till late Joseon. Yi Yik (1681-1763) pointed out in his *Seongho saseol* (Collected Works of Seongho) that “in today’s system a chief magistrate is changed every six years but an additional year is given to those who have governed well” (*samgo*). It is also clear from this remark that *suryeong yukgije* maintained its identity till the late 18th century.

The Characteristics of Policy Debate

The resistance of the anti-*suryeong yukgije* group can be divided into three types according to the period of opposition. In the early stage, they criticized the scheme based on the justification of tradition and custom called *seonwang jije*, the institutions of the late king. The tradition here of course was *suryeong samgije*. They argued that one, the new policy was against the public opinion of the time, and two, that there was no similar example shown in the study of the Classics.

In the middle and final periods, most criticisms were based on empirical examples, as they claimed that *yukgije* was not a timely institution. These opinions on empirical examples and the untimely scheme were the views of bureaucrats, especially local ones. However, the initial criticism using the tradition of previous examples and the later criticism based on empirical untimeliness in fact contradicted each other, and Sejong saw this discrepancy as the oppositions’ pursuit of individual interest. Regarding such critiques, Sejong first of all argued

against the idea that there was a right time for traditions to be reformed. He then tried to persuade the bureaucrats by emphasizing that the scheme was to solve the practical issues of *samgije* and the complexities of reception and farewell of local officials. Thirdly, he deconstructed the meaning of tradition based on his extensive knowledge on the history of the Classics. Fourthly, he exposed the desire that was hidden behind what was called public opinion and showed that it was merely an assemblage of self-interest, thus deconstructing the meaning of public opinion. All these aspects were apparent in the Ko Yak-hae incident. The reasons for Sejong to enforce *yukgije* were as follows:

- 1) The reception and farewell of chief magistrates in *samgije* caused much inconvenience to people.
- 2) Continuity of governance needed to be assured in order to bring security to local administration.
- 3) The responsibility of a chief magistrate needed to be reinforced.
- 4) The expertise of a chief magistrate can be assured.
- 5) It was a compromise between the nine-year scheme in the Classics and the contemporary three-year scheme.

The Characteristics of Sejong's Leadership

As the purpose of this research was to uncover the King's political context as a state administrator, let us examine the characteristics of his leadership that appeared in the process of implementation and institutionalization of *suryeong yukgije*.

More than anything else, the uniqueness of his leadership seems to have come from his "understanding of the text" and his "ability for political assessment." As he recollected, his arbitrary decision was the main drive behind *suryeong yukgije* and the construction of the walls. However, behind such arbitrary decisions and enforcement lay his research, that is, the research of the Classics and history and the heartfelt understanding of his research.

Based on such profound reading and understanding of the Classics and historical texts, he was able to formalize political strategies by politically and also appropriately analyzing the contemporary circumstances of Joseon. This is a case that reminds us of the warning Confucius gave on the imprudence of plunging into politics without having a basis of reading in his *Analects*.² Therefore,

when the historiographer who recorded *Sejong sillok* (Veritable Records of King Sejong) pointed out that the bases of the King's independent drive that led *suryeong yukgije* were the Classics and historical texts, namely, *The Book of Documents* and *The Historical Records*, he could not have been any closer to the King's thoughts:

The king has studied the traditional six Confucian classics extensively and read *Shangshu* and *Sagi* widely, and his thoughts are thus so profound and comprehensive. Despite great controversy over one issue concerning the extension of the duration of a post and a severe drought that occurred at the time, he did not relent and finally success was evident. (*Sejong sillok* 07/06/27)

In this regard, Sejong's arbitrary decision, or the power to persuade in order to enforce policy seems to have come from his academic research. In other words, his leadership was based on the study of Confucian texts. Confucian texts were like identity certificates that ensured the political justification a Confucian nation tries to establish. In this aspect, Mote's suggestion that "what God's prophesy did in the West, history did in the East" helps highlight the political significance of Sejong's academic research. Political justification of a Confucian country ultimately boils down to a logical struggle on the Classics and historical examples, and Sejong's research and understanding of the text and its analysis were political actions in themselves. Therefore, his academic research shows that he was being faithful to the role of a monarch who had the responsibility to preserve the identity of a Confucian nation built on the foundation of the Classics.

As plainly shown in the case of *suryeong yukgije*, by providing historical origin and examples of *suryeong yukgije* he was able to isolate the opposition, and by thrusting the criterion of "public vs. individual interest" in the Classics, he

2. Zi Lu recommended the appointment of Zi Gao, who has not read any Classics, as the Chief of Fei region. Confucius said, "he will again harm another man's son!" Zi Lu said, "there are people and there are the guardian deities of the state who will protect him. Is it not enough? Must he read the Classics before he claims to have learned the politics?" Confucius said in anger, "this is why I detest those only with fair words!" (*Analects*: 11/23).

This shows us that Confucius believed that it was only after having read the Classics and having studied the achievements and philosophy of ancient kings that a man could enter actual politics. It is thus clear that Confucius attached importance to read in the reality of politics.

was able to expand the range of his political action.

At the same time, we must not neglect the fact that rather than being buried within the text itself, Sejong's academic awareness placed the political reality of the time at the center, and approached it at a practical level as a means to solve problems. He did not make absolute the Classics and historical books as the actualization of truth, but instead knew how to use them according to political needs. This also means that he had an independent and active stance that stood on reality without being buried in the past or taking future as a task. This was, I believe, his spatial and temporal perception as a politician.

Just as Stendhal viewed politics as "the sound of bullets during the opera séance," Sejong seems to have understood politics (or political incidents) as a truly "ambiguous arena" that occurred unexpectedly outside the text. He also seems to have known that a politician was like a "captain" who broke through an unfamiliar environment with a compass called text.

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Maengja (Mencius, *Mengzi* in Ch.)
Seongho saseol (Collected Works of Seongho)
Jungyong (Doctrine of the Mean, *Zhongyong* in Ch.)

Glossary

- haengjik* (行職, those with high rank but in a low position)
Jiphyeonjeon (集賢殿, Hall of Worthies)
Joseon wangjo sillok (朝鮮王朝實錄, Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty)
Saganwon (司諫院, Office of the Censor-General)
Sagi (史記, The Historical Records)
samgije (三期制, Three-Year Scheme for Chief Magistrates)
Sejong sillok (世宗實錄, Veritable Records of King Sejong)
Seongho saseol (星湖僊說, Collected Works of Seongho)

seonwang jije (先王之制, Tradition and Customs)

Sangseo (尚書, The Book of Documents, *Shangshu* in Ch.)

siin baljeong (施仁發政, Practice virtue and govern the nation)

sujik (守職, those with low rank but in a high position)

Suryeong yukgije (首領六期制, Six-Year Scheme for Chief Magistrates. Refers to *yukgije*)

Yangye chukseong (兩界築城, Building Walls on the Eastern and Northern Boundaries)

yukgije (六期制, Six-Year Scheme. Refers to *Suryeong yukgije*)

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