

Great Teachings of Yi Sun-Shin

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NOTE: This is Part 2 of the Yi Sun-Shin educational series that begins with “A Brief Study of Yi Sun-Shin.” It is strongly urged that readers begin by reading that article first as this article expands upon items discussed in “A Brief Study of Yi Sun-Shin.”

Why is Yi Sun-Shin so highly respected?

Aside from his magnificent military accomplishments and unsurpassed devotion to his country, Yi Sun-Shin's exemplary character and attitudes toward life make him a hero in the true sense of the word. Throughout his life, he constantly strove to improve himself, thoughtfully seeking the best action to take in any given situation. Through his unswerving commitment to do the right thing in every situation and his unrelenting efforts to make himself the best person that he could be, Yi Sun-Shin lived an exemplary life, exhibiting the following desirable character traits that we should all try to develop:



1. Thinking of Others First:

The fundamental spirit of Choongmu-gong refers to a way of thinking that values others and their happiness over most things, especially over one's own self and selfish wishes. This ideal, which seems very consistent with the foundation of democracy today, incorporates the ideals of Loyalty, Filial Piety, Service to Others and Fairness. The essence of Choongmu-gong, thus, is exhibited in honoring one's nation and parents to an exceptional degree and in treating people in a fair and righteous manner.

Exemplifying this spirit of Choongmu-gong, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin sacrificed his own life willingly for the sake of his country and his countrymen. He sacrificed his life literally as he died while defending his country in battle; and, he also sacrificed his life figuratively as he committed much of his adult life working toward defending his country and countrymen against foreign invaders.



Admiral Yi Sun-Shin further exemplified the spirit of Choongmu-gong by showing exceptional filial piety to his parents. In the approximately 108 references to his mother that he makes in his diary, for example, in over 100 of those times, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin referred to his mother as “CHUNJEE” (天只)—an old Chinese term that gives the word “mother” the equivalent stature of the word “Heaven.” That is the level at which he placed his parents.

Further, in the true spirit of Choongmu-gong, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin valued and loved his family and his subordinates very deeply and treated them with honor and fairness. In the heyday of feudalism and imperialism, when many leaders viewed the common soldiers and the common people of Chosun as little better than animals, Yi Sun-Shin placed great value on each and every life and showed consideration for each person’s right to dignity and happiness. Along these lines, when King Sunjo, misinformed by Japanese spies, ordered Admiral Yi Sun-Shin to take all of his men to Pusan to intercept a famous Japanese commander, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin refused because he knew that following such an order would mean certain death for his men. Even though he personally suffered imprisonment, physical torture, the threat of a death sentence and the humiliation of the Baekuijongkun, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin held steadfast in his refusal to send his men to a certain death. The ensuing ambush and total devastation of the Chosun admiral and his forces that were sent by King Sunjo in Yi Sun-Shin’s stead, furthermore, proved that Admiral Yi Sun-Shin had been right in his understanding of the situation. Thus, centuries before the American Revolution, The Civil War and the The Civil Rights Movement here in the U.S., Admiral Yi Sun-Shin’s beliefs in the value of each human life, the right of each person to be treated with dignity and the right of each to go in pursuit of happiness presaged the democratic ideals that we embrace today.

2. Strong Sense of Justice, Responsibility and Unyielding Courage:

Admiral Yi Sun-Shin had a strong sense of Right and Wrong. He always sought to do the right thing, even at the risk of his own position, benefit, or even, at the risk of his own life. As discussed in “A Brief Study of Yi Sun-Shin,” when he was unfairly dismissed because he refused to promote his supervising officer’s friends over those who actually deserved the promotions, Yi Sun-Shin stood firmly against orders from his supervising officers if he concluded that



Hyunchongsang- Yi Sun-Shin shrine at

what they were ordering him to do was wrong or unjust. Admiral Yi Sun-Shin consistently did this and stood up for what he knew was right, even though it meant very negative and real consequences of being demoted, slandered unfairly, or worse.

Admiral Yi Sun-Shin's Courage was just as strong and unyielding. From history, we have learned that great strength of character and courage are ubiquitous in the achievement of great things, because such heroic achievements almost always require great obstacles to be overcome. Armed with this type of remarkable strength of courage, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin was able to achieve magnificent victories against the Japanese time and time again. Always severely outnumbered, sometimes Admiral Yi Sun-Shin and his men fought enemy forces that were 2, 3 or even 10 times their number! Despite such overwhelming odds, Yi Sun-Shin and his men came out victorious over the Japanese through every single confrontation. More importantly, despite such intimidating odds, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin never shied away from battle, risking his life again and again, against such horrible odds, in order to do his duty by his beloved country.

3. Wisdom to Discern the Difference Between Major and Minor Concerns:

Amongst a variety of goals and concerns, some goals or concerns are given priority over others. How one prioritizes these goals or concerns can reveal what that person deems more important and what that person deems less important. Further, the ability to recognize the most pressing and urgent priorities over the less urgent ones, oftentimes, can be the difference between success and failure. As one can see, this ability is an essential tool in achieving the best results in any given situation, but especially in situations in which more than one priority compete for attention.

Admiral Yi Sun-Shin was blessed with the wisdom to discern between the most pressing and urgent priorities over those that could wait. He unfailingly chose to address the bigger, more important and more urgent goals first, regardless of his own personal preferences. By doing this, he consistently derived the best results in every case.

One good example of this is in how he rushed to prepare Chosun against a possible war with Japan immediately upon attaining the rank of the Juasusa, even though many of his colleagues did not believe in the imminence of such disaster. Admiral Yi Sun-Shin rushed to prepare for battle because he knew that proper preparation for such a confrontation would entail a lot of practice, planning and time and because he knew that such proper preparation would mean the difference between the freedom of his country and its subjugation. Thus, due to its importance and urgency, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin properly placed this as an extremely high priority and directed all of his efforts and attention toward preparation.

Admiral Yi Sun-Shin also put the punishment of his soldiers as a high priority and he punished them severely, quickly and consistently for wrongdoing. This was a high priority because his navy would have collapsed upon itself in disorder without such unrelenting discipline, rule and order.

Further, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin did not allow his own personal preferences to affect his list of priorities. For example, as he himself lamented in his diary, he determined that he could not take time away to be with his dying wife “because of urgent, national concerns.” Also, in the three years that he was stationed at Hansan Naval Headquarters, situated within one day’s sailing from where his mother lived near Yeosu, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin did not take any time off to visit his beloved mother, even though he missed her terribly, because he deemed the fulfillment of his national concerns too important to put aside even for the briefest of visits.

4. Harboring No Feelings of Resentment but Having True Modesty:

During his 22 years of service to his country after he passed the Kwago National Military Exam at the age of 32, Yi Sun-Shin was unfairly dismissed or demoted three times. Twice he suffered the humiliating degradation of the Baekuijongkun—the most severe military punishment at that time. And, once, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin was almost sentenced to death by his own king, who was greatly influenced by the poisonous innuendos dropped by Yi Sun-Shin’s most hateful and notorious rival and fellow commanding officer, Won Kyun.

Despite these many, grave injustices meted out to him, Yi Sun-Shin never complained. Neither did he blame nor resent another for his misfortunes. In fact, instead of expressing resentment for his demotions, Yi Sun-Shin rather expressed modesty over his promotions. He seemed embarrassed by the many promotions that he received for his magnificent victories over the Japanese and he repeatedly claimed to have been “awarded fame for nothing.” His true modesty is further evidenced by the fact that he felt remorse, anguish and guilt for “making his king flee and suffer humiliation and indignities, and for making his people suffer through the pains of war.” In other words, Yi Sun-Shin fully accepted responsibility of what he deemed his failures upon his shoulders but he did not seek to grab all of the glory and credit for his successes.

5. Forbearance to Overcome the Difficulties and Suffering:

As even the prominent Japanese Admiral Togo admitted, no other commander has ever had to fight under the circumstances which Admiral Yi Sun-Shin had to endure. Such acknowledgement by other admirals of other countries of Admiral

Yi Sun-Shin's achievements under tremendous difficulties should be reason enough to deem him a hero of heroes, the greatest of the greats.



At the inception of the Imjin War, Yi Sun-Shin had to gather rations for his soldiers; repair and manufacture weapons; and care for the refugees who had fled their homes to get away from the reach of the imposing Japanese. The Japanese had already quickly dispatched the forces of two Chosun admirals, who, up against a new and deadly antecedent to the rifle called the “Jochong,” had given up the fight and fled for their lives. There was no support for Yi Sun-Shin from his country as he prepared to defend Chosun against the implacable Japanese as the king of Chosun had evacuated the capital city of Hansung (modern-day Seoul) and fled to the city of Uiju, located off the border by the Abrok (Yaloo) River. The country was in an uproar and in disorder. Yi Sun-Shin was on his own.

And, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin managed to devise a brilliant military campaign and pull together his forces to defeat the invading Japanese despite the disorder of his fleeing government. He did this in spite of the political ongoings, maneuverings and machinations of feuding parties, which added to the confusion of the moment and nullified what support Yi Sun-Shin may have been able to garner from his government. Moreover, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin managed to effectively lead his men to this magnificent victory even though he was suffering from acute stomach pains—probably caused by an ulcer—brought on by the stress and pressures of the grave responsibilities of his country's future that lay heavy upon his shoulders.

6. Creativity in Coming Up with New Solutions to Problems:

Admiral Yi Sun-Shin was a progressive thinker and he did not relegate himself to the confines of traditional thinking or ideas. Rather, his mind was open and he always looked to come up with new or better solutions to problems.

A shining example of this trait is seen in his creation and development of the Gobuksun—the first and only turtle-shaped iron-clad ship in the world. The Gobuksun was designed to allow Chosun forces to penetrate the enemy's formation and fight the enemy safely from the center of their own formation. Being able to do this meant that the Chosun forces could fight more effectively by breaking up the enemy's forces. Thus, even when greatly outnumbered, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin and his men were able to defeat the enemy using such effective fighting tools and strategies.

Also, to address the concern over food rations for his soldiers, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin instituted a Farming System and a Sea Route Passage system. Under Admiral Yi Sun-Shin's Farming System, even though soldiers did not typically farm land back then, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin made his soldiers and the refugees who sought shelter under his protection farm available government land to ensure a food supply. In this way, he sought to have a regular source of food for the soldiers and the refugees under his care and protection. Although it seems like a simple and straightforward solution, this Farming System demonstrates Admiral Yi Sun-Shin's ability to think outside of the box to make use of all resources at his disposal effectively to achieve his goals, as no one had hitherto considered having soldiers farm their own land to supply their own food source.

The Sea Route Passage System also was designed to provide a source of food for his soldiers; but, it also had another important purpose. For the first time, the Sea Route Passage System required boats that passed through the waters governed by Admiral Yi Sun-Shin to register their boats and obtain permission to travel those waters. In order to obtain such permission, there was an annual fee assessed to each registered boat. The fee was often paid with food—3 bushels of rice for a large boat, 2 bushels for a medium-sized boat and only 1 bushel for a small boat, for instance. Even though one would expect citizens to grumble about the payment of such a fee that had not existed before, the citizens of Chosun were glad to pay the fee in order to be allowed free travel in waters governed by Admiral Yi Sun-Shin because they felt more security within territories under his supervision and vigilance. Moreover, this Sea Route Passage system also served to curtail enemy espionage activities by regulating and supervising boat travel that had not been supervised before and had been allowed to run free until then.

Also, the prolonged period of fighting during the Imjin War ironically prevented Admiral Yi Sun-Shin's soldiers from taking the Kwago National Military Exam as the exam was only offered in a city too far away from where his soldiers were situated. Knowing that his hardworking soldiers could not advance in their careers and become officers without passing the Kwago Exam, Yi Sun-Shin went to the extraordinary measure of requesting special permission from the Chosun government to establish an alternative location for the Kwago National Military Exam right within his Hansan Naval Headquarters so that his soldiers may take the exam and try to better themselves. What a thoughtful leader he was!

7. Unrivalled Spirit of Keeping Records and Diligence:



Admiral Yi Sun-Shin was an extremely diligent person and servant to his country. In his time, commanders were not only responsible for training and commanding their forces, but they were also required to submit regular reports to the king. Of course, back then,

everything was prepared and written by hand. Even requests for permission to do something or application to initiate something new had to be submitted in a well-written report prepared by hand.

Because of this requirement, even during the relentlessly hectic days during the Imjin War, without fail Admiral Yi Sun-Shin maintained a war diary in which he recorded summaries of the events of the day, his thoughts and his feelings. This diary is called the “Nanjung Diary.” And, because of the important insight afforded into Admiral Yi Sun-Shin’s mind and heart, the Nanjung Diary is an invaluable resource in understanding who Admiral Yi Sun-Shin was.

In various other records kept by Admiral Yi Sun-Shin, we also see that he composed many thoughtful and evocative poems that show a glimpse into his mind and soul. Like many intellectuals of his day, he expressed his deep emotions through poetry, such as the one that follows:

On Hansan Isle, in the bright moonlit night
On a lookout tower, I sit alone.

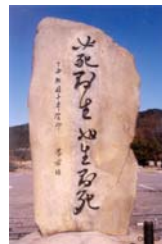
My long sword turning in my hands,
I sink into a deep gloom.

I catch the plaintive sound of a short reed-flute,
And, its sadness compounds mine.

The following is a famous quote from the Nanjung Diary that is frequently cited:

Work hard to death, and
You may survive.

Try to escape, and
You are sure to die.



As our brief glimpse into his mind and soul reveals, Choongmu-gong Yi Sun-Shin’s spirit and actions form valuable lessons for not only soldiers but also for family members, students and workers. Application of Admiral Yi Sun-Shin’s values and way of thinking will prove invaluable to the family unit, businesses as well as governing bodies. In fact, the unquestionable worth of his teachings has led to a revival of sorts where more and more people are studying Admiral Yi Sun-Shin’s life and following his example today, centuries after his heroic death.