

1. Brief Biography of Saimdang

Saimdang is a name known to any Korean who has basic general knowledge. However, few people have concrete and accurate knowledge of her life and art.

Most people deem Saimdang famous only because she is the mother of the great scholar Yulgok. However, Yulgok may not have become the great sage as we know him had Saimdang not been his mother. Therefore, it would be impossible to understand the true personality of Saimdang without going beyond the parameter of their mother-son relationship.

Without a doubt, Saimdang was a woman of noble character, a brilliant scholar, a poet, and an ingenious artist with exquisite skills in calligraphy and painting, even viewed from the angles unbiased by the labels put to her name, such as a devoted daughter, a virtuous wife, and a wise mother. We can catch a glimpse of her life in the book *Saimdang's Life*, which Yulgok wrote at the age of sixteen, shortly after Saimdang's death.



Born in 1504 at Ojukheon in Bukpyeang, Gangneung

Gangneung is a city in Gangwon-do, a province on the east-central coast. It has a long history as the capital of the ancient State Ye. Going westward for a short distance, from the scenic spot Gyeongpodae [Mirror Beach Pavilion], there is a house called Ojukheon in the village of Bukpyeong (now Ojukheon). Ojukheon House is venerated by many because Yulgok was born there.

It ought to be borne in mind, though, that not only Yulgok but also his



Ojukheon

mother Saimdang was born at Ojukheon.

Saimdang's father Shin Myeong-hwa, Gyeheum by courtesy name and Songjeong by art name, was a scholar of the illustrious Shin clan of Pyeongsan. He was born as the 18th generation descendent of Sunggyeom Jang Jeol-Gong, a statesman trusted by King Taejo of the Goryeo kingdom(9th century).

Saimdang's maternal grandfather Yi Saon settled down in Bukpyeong, Gangneung. Saimdang's mother grew up there and did not leave, even after her marriage to Shin Myeong-hwa because she was the only child. Saimdang was also born at Ojukheon on October 29, 1504 (by the lunar calendar), the 10th year of the reign of Yeonsan of the Joseon kingdom.

Five daughters (and no son) were born to Saimdang's parents. Saimdang was the second daughter.

Born with outstanding beauty and gentle disposition, she received a distinct love and attention from her parents. Her natural artistic talent and intelligence were such that she showed remarkable mastery of not only embroidery and sewing, which were the main skills that women of that time had to learn, but also writing, calligraphy, and painting at an early age.

Married to Yi Won-su at 19

Saimdang started painting at age seven, imitating the landscapes of An Kyeon, a famous painter during Sejong's reign, and learned the Confucian classics and Chinese literature from her parents. She was trained early on in basic culture and mindset¹⁾ as an ideal womanhood of that time to become a good wife and a wise mother.

At the age of nineteen, she was married to Yi Won-su of the illustrious Yi clan of Deoksu, who was born as the 12th generation descendent of Don Su, a high-ranking military general of Goryeo. Yi Won-su lost his father at an early age and was raised by his widowed mother Lady Hong. His first given name was Nansu and courtesy name Deokhyeong. He was twenty-two years old, or three years older than Saimdang, when he married.

Saimdang's parents, who adored her for her extraordinary talent and

1 Internalized aptitude and disposition [Editor]

intelligence, would not let her leave them even after her marriage. Shortly after the wedding, her father said to his son-in-law, "I have many daughters, but I cannot bear to see your wife leaving me." This alone is enough to show how much Saimdang was loved by her parents. As they wished, Saimdang continued to live with them after the wedding, but, alas, her father died (aged forty-seven) at the ancestral house in Seoul on November 7, a few months after her wedding.

Residence changes to Paju and Bongpyeong

After her father's death, Saimdang stayed with her mother because she could not let her live alone, although her mother-in-law was alone in her husband's house after the latter's death. After the three-year mourning period, she went to her husband's house in Seoul to be introduced to her mother-in-law for the first time after the wedding.

Saimdang was married at nineteen and went to Seoul to live with her husband's family at twenty-one. However, she often changed place of residence. The Yulgok village in Paju, about 50 kilometers west of Seoul, was her husband's ancestral base. Yulgok often lived there, which explains why he took the art name "Yulgok" (literally, chestnut valley). Clearly, Saimdang was often there, too.

Saimdang missed her mother so much and thus often visited her in Gangneung. She also spent several years with her husband in Bongpyeong (now Baegokpo-ri, Bongpyeong-myeon, Pyeongchang-gun, Gangwon-do), located west of Daegwallyeong and was commonly called Pan-



Yulgok village in Paju

kwandae. It was during this time that Saimdang, when she conceived her third son Yulgok at age thirty-three, dreamed that she arrived at a beach by the East Sea and saw a fairy emerging from the sea. The fairy was holding in her arms a baby boy with skin shining like white jade. She put the child in Saimdang's arms and disappeared. In the night when she gave birth to Yulgok at her mother's house in Gangneung, she dreamed that a black dragon flew from the East Sea and lingered above the bedroom door. Hence, the room was given the name Monglyongsil [room of dragon dream] and Yulgok was named Hyeonlyong [manifested dragon] when he was born (later changed to I).

According to Yulgok's descendants and Bongpyeong inhabitants, Saimdang conceived Yulgok in Bongpyeong. There is no available evidence proving such claim, but Yulgok's writing confirmed that Saimdang lived in Bongpyeong for many years.



Death in Samcheong-dong, Seoul at 48

After constantly changing residences for 10 years, Saimdang left her mother in Gangneung for good and came back to Seoul at age thirty-eight and Yulgok was six years old.

Back in Seoul, she lived at Sujinbang (now Susong-dong / Cheongjin-dong) for 10 years and moved to Samcheong-dong in the spring of the year of her death at age forty-eight.

In the summer of that year, Yi Won-su was appointed to the Pangwan [Chief Clerk of the Seoul Magistracy, rank Jr. 5] he was responsible for inland waterway transport of the grains collected throughout the country as in-kind taxes to the State. As he was on a return trip from Pyeongan-do and on board a ship with the grains collected, Saimdang fell ill and, suddenly, instructed all her children remaining at home to come to her bed-

side. She revealed to them, "I won't be able to get up again." She passed away only two or three days after getting ill. It was at the dawn of May 17, 1551 (by the lunar calendar), the 6th year of the reign of Myeongjong.

Accompanied by the eldest and third sons Seon and Yulgok (aged sixteen at that time), Yi Won-su arrived at Seogang (west river port) in the morning of the day of Saimdang's death. On receiving the news, they broke into tears and could not stop crying for hours on the street.

Yulgok recorded: "In the morning, when we were taking brass bowls out of the luggage we transported from Pyeongan-do, we saw them all turned red." This strange phenomenon seemingly struck Yulgok as an ominous sign. Not only the brass bowls but also the whole world around them must have had changed color. Even mountains and rivers must have had grieved for the loss of this paragon of virtue, exemplary character, knowledge, and art among all women throughout the country's history she, who, at the age of only forty-eight, disappeared like a comet after embroidering the sky with dazzling light.

Saimdang's body was buried at the foot of Mt. Jawun in Dumun-ri, Paju, but her spirit and name have remained in the collective memory of the entire nation, along with her splendid works of art. Even more glory was added to her eternal presence among us through her achievement as the mother of the great scholar Yulgok. The two gems, mother and son, have been bringing each other into prominence and shining ever more brightly for generations.