

2. Saimdang's Mother Lady Yi

Whoever knows Yulgok associates him with his mother Shin Saimdang. However, those who know Saimdang rarely know her mother Lady Yi. Referring to Saimdang and Yulgok, we say "like mother, like son." In this context, once we know who Lady Yi was, we can also say "like mother, like daughter." On the same note, Saimdang's eldest daughter Maechang was also a brilliant artist who inherited every inch of her mother's artistic talent—what a family!

Such a family is admittedly an exceptional case in our history. We will look into this extraordinary family, beginning with the life and personality of Saimdang's mother Lady Yi.

Born in 1480 as an only child

Saimdang's mother Lady Yi was born to Yi Saon (Yi clan of Yongin) and Lady Choi from Gangneung, who was the second daughter among the 11 children of Choi Eung-hyeon, a high-ranking official (Champan, Deputy Minister).

Lady Yi was born on January 24, 1480 (the 11th year of the reign of

Seongjong of Joseon) at her maternal grandparents'house in Gangneung, where she was raised. She was taught to read the classics as a child under her grandfather's guidance, and learned by heart the classics written for women, including Samgangaengsil (Conduct of the Three Bonds). Her father Yi Saon settled down in Bukpyeong, Gangneung, in a place where the Ojukheon House was to be built later. That is, Yulgok's maternal grandmother Lady Yi grew up in a house erected on the same property on which Ojukheon was built.

There, Lady Yi was married to Shin Myeong-Hwa [Saimdang's father] from Seoul, who was later to be esteemed as a venerable scholar. Immediately after their marriage, she went to Seoul to live with her parents-in-law. However, when she returned to her parental house in Gangneung to take care of her ill mother, she eventually stayed and continued to live with her parents in Bukpyeong, with the approval of her husband and parents-in-laws, especially because she was an only child. Yulgok recorded: "My maternal grandparents lived apart in Seoul and Gangneung as long as 16 years."

Although five daughters (and no son) were born to the couple, they lived separately for so long. This aspect alone is enough to assume that their marital life could not have been happy, but Shin Myeong-hwa seemed to frequent Gangneung.

An interesting anecdote Yulgok wrote in *Lady Yi Moves Heaven* when he was sixteen years old is that he described the character of his maternal grandmother Lady Yi in the following words: "She was not eloquent but very agile and even audacious for right causes while being always cautious in doing things." This brief comment portrays vividly Lady Yi's character and attitude.

Saimdang was the second among the five daughters. She was more likely tutored under the guidance of her mother than her father, who were often absent.

Mother's death and husband's illness

Lady Yi's husband Shin Myeong-hwa was four years older than her. When he passed the Jinsasi [Literary Licentiate Examination] at age forty-one, high-ranking officials, such as Chief Minister Yoon Eun-bo and Senior Minister Nam Hyo-eui, tried to recommend him for an important civil service position. Nevertheless, he refused to enter officialdom and was contented with devoting himself to the study of the classics. In 1519, when he was forty-four years old, in the 14th year of the reign of Jungjong, the Gimyo Sahwa (Literati Purge of the Year Gimyo) broke out.

Although Shin Myeong-hwa was out of harm's reach when many righteous scholars, led by Jeong Am Cho Gwang-jo, fell victim to the Purge, he was nonetheless disheartened and disgusted over the deplorable politics, and wished to do anything but devote himself to the pursuit of knowledge.

In the spring of the year when Shin Myeong-hwa turned 46, Lady Yi's mother Lady Choi died. The sorrow of Lady Yi, who was incredibly devoted to her mother, was beyond description. Yulgok's *Lady Yi Moves Heaven* relays what happened at that time. The entire story is presented here as recorded by Yulgok.

Shin Myeong-hwa received the news of his mother-in-law's death

when he reached Yeosu. He was so shocked that he could not eat and sleep well during the rest of the journey, and got seriously ill by the time he reached the Wungyo station over Hoengseong, with the posterior part of the brain affected by cold exposure, to the extent of hearing loss and high fever. On arriving at Mt. Nae-eun in Changdu, over the Jinbu station, his entourage tried to persuade him into staying there, but he continued the journey without caring about his illness, insisting that "hurrying up is the best way." By the time he arrived at the Hoenggye station, his disease already worsened that he coughed up blood.

A Gangneung townsman Kim Soon-Hyo saw this and hurried to Ojukheon to bring the news to Lady Yi. She felt as if the sky crumbled down. However, Lady Yi could not stay passively there and felt sad about her deathly ill husband just after losing her mother. So, she went to meet him, accompanied by Saimdang and other daughters and her maternal cousin Choi Su-mong.

Shin Myeong-hwa was staying at the Gusan station at that time and was not even able to sit up. He was carried to Choi Su-mong's ancestral shrine house located in Josan in Gangneung, where he met his family. But he could not even talk, and kept coughing up blood. The illness was so deep that medicines had no effect, and there wasn't a faintest shimmer of hope that he would recover. Lady Yi found herself in a complete darkness of desperation at the imminent loss of her husband while she was still in mourning for her mother.



Saimdang's painting

Lady Yi's prayer moves heaven

o]The only way left for her was to pray to the gods and spirits. Lady Yi kept praying for seven days and seven nights without a moment's sleep. Seeing her prayers unanswered, she took a bath of purification and cut her finger and toe nails. Then she hid a small knife and climbed the hill at the back of the house to the grave of her maternal great grandfather Choi Chi-wun. She built an altar and lit an incense crying aloud, she prayed to heaven.

In his *Lady Yi Moves Heaven*, Yulgok wrote the content of the prayer in detail. The following is the translation of the prayer transmitted by Yulgok (written in Chinese characters).

God! God! Blessing the good and punishing the bad are heaven's ways. Accumulating good acts and repeating bad acts are men's ways. My husband has always acted in loyalty and faith, and has not committed even a single act of fraud and deception. His conduct has always been flawless. He fulfilled his filial piety and mourned his father for three years, living in a pavilion built beside the grave and eating only wild greens.

If heaven knows all and weighs the good and the bad, why such a severe punishment? We have lived 16 years in separation to serve our own parents in Seoul and in province.

I have just lost my widowed mother and now my husband's life hangs by a thread. Where should I then go and on what can my lonely body rely? Please listen to my prayer. Heaven and this world run on the same principle without any gap between them. God, oh, God, I beseech your grace with all my heart and soul.

Then she took out her knife and cut two phalanges of her left hand's middle finger. She kept praying to heaven, holding the cut finger against the sky and caressing it.

It is my fault, my lacking devotion and prayer that my husband is in this miserable state. The whole body down to a hair has been given by my parents and should not be harmed², but my husband is my sky. So, if I lose him, how will I be able to live alone without the sky? I am ready to sacrifice my body to save my husband. God, oh, God, I beseech your grace with all my heart and soul.

Having thus prayed, she left the altar. When she saw Choi Chi-wun's grave, she prostrated before the grave and prayed again.

You were a loyal and righteous subject throughout your life and became a pure soul after your death. Please forward my prayer to God and make my heart reach Him.

Back home, she did not show any sign of her brave act lest her husband would be concerned. At that time, a long drought was in progress. After an hour or so, however, dark clouds gathered all of a sudden and a heavy shower, with thunder and lightning, began.

The next morning, the second daughter [Saimdang, eighteen years old at that time], while dozing off at her father's bedside, dreamed that a

² Quoted from *Xiao Jing* (Book of Filial Duty): The body, hair, and skin, all these have been received from the parents, and, so, one should not dare damage them—that is the beginning of filial duty [Editor's note].

medicine ball as big as a red date descended from the sky, and a divine appeared from nowhere and put the medicine into her father's mouth.

At that moment, her father murmured, with eyes closed, "I will recover from my illness tomorrow." Asked by Choi Su-mong, "How do you know that?" he said, only half-conscious, "A divine being has just told me so and has gone."

Just as he said, he recovered as if from a fake illness. The entire village praised Lady Yi, saying "Heaven was moved by the devotion of Lady Yi." This anecdote was told by many and the government recognized Lady Yi's virtuous act by erecting a Yeolnyeo (virtuous woman) Pavilion in 1528, the 23rd year of the reign of Jungjong, when Lady Yi was forty-nine years old and her daughter Saimdang was twenty-five. Sadly, however, Shin Myeong-hwa passed away in the year following his miraculous recovery from a fatal illness shortly after Saimdang's marriage [nineteen years old], and he had been dead for six years by the time the Yeolnyeo Pavilion was erected.

The source of this story is the *Lady Yi Moves Heaven* contained in Vol. 14 of the *Complete Works of Yulgok*. Yulgok wrote it at the age of eighteen, when his grandmother Lady Yi was seventy-four years old and his mother Saimdang had been dead for two years.

Lady Yi's influence on Yulgok

As described above, Lady Yi was born to Yi Saon as an only child and enjoyed a long life. However, she had to go through heartbreaking experiences of losing her parents and husband, and even her beloved daughter Saimdang in the vicissitudes of life.

As if as a compensation for the loss of Saimdang, however, Lady Yi

found great joy and consolation in her grandson Yulgok, who not only grew to be such a great scholar with a nationwide reputation but also was extremely devoted to her grandmother. Yulgok never neglected to serve his grandmother to the best of his ability, not in the sense of filling up the empty space left by his mother but in consideration of the loneliness his grandmother might be feeling. According to the *Yulgok Yeonbo* [*Personal History of Yulgok*], when he was returning from Mt. Geumgang at the age of twenty [Lady Yi, seventy-six years old], after giving up his plan to become a monk, he first went to visit his grandmother in Gangneung.

When Yulgok was thirty-three years old [Lady Yi, eighty-nine years old], he went to Gangneung on receiving the news of his grandmother's illness, giving up his civil service position (Ijo-Jwarang) to which he was appointed in November. The Office of Censor-General requested the King to dismiss him, arguing that the illness of the maternal grandmother cannot be a legitimate reason for a leave of absence.

King Seonjo, however, did not approve the request, saying, "If his love for his grandmother is so great, he cannot but go and take care of her. He is doing his filial duty, and dismissal is a disproportionate punishment."

Yulgok stayed until June of next year, when he was thirty-four years old [Lady Yi, ninety years old]. With Lady Yi, he returned to Seoul to accept his appointment to the Gyorì [Fifth Counselor (of the Office of Special Counselors), rank Sr. 5]. In August, his request for a leave of absence to take care of his grandmother was declined, but he could go to Gangneung in October with a furlough³⁾ of the King Seonjo. He served his grandmother until her death on December 8 of that year at the age of

3 Granting a leave of absence [Editor's note].

ninety, 47 years after the death of his husband Shin Myeong-hwa and 18 years after that of his daughter Saimdang.

Lady Yi was buried in her husband's grave site in Josan in Gangneung. Each year, Yulgok would perform Jesa (ancestral rite) of his maternal grandparents. A cross check⁴⁾ of the ancient documents kept at Ojukheon in Gangneung revealed that Lady Yi bequeathed Ojukheon to Kwon Cheo-gyun, her fourth daughter's son, to take care of the graves, and a tile-roofed house [maybe originally possessed by Shin Myeong-hwa] in Sujinbang in Seoul to Yulgok, to perform Jesa.

In the year following her death, Yulgok wrote *Jesa Text for Grandmother Yi*. Yulgok's sorrowful longings for his grandmother are felt in every line.

My grief of having no parents to serve buried in my heart
I served you, my only grandmother
Waking or sleeping, you were always in my heart
Now, even you have left me.

As depicted above, Yulgok's affection for his maternal grandmother was deep and sincere during and beyond her life. Virtuous and generous Lady Yi not only gave birth to a daughter like Saimdang but also exerted a profound impact on her grandson Yulgok. Therefore, although Yulgok is inseparably associated with his mother Saimdang, it must also be borne in mind that his extraordinary grandmother casts an auspicious shadow over Yulgok.

4 Checking against each other [Editor's note].

