

3. Saimdang as a Devoted Daughter

Saimdang, born to and raised by pious and well-lettered Lady Yi, famous for her brave act of devotion to her husband that moved heaven, was predisposed to become an extraordinary person that she turned out to be. It is only natural that Saimdang stayed by her side so long as she could and longed for her all her life. She did not leave Lady Yi even after her marriage because her father died when she was nineteen years old, shortly after her wedding. At the end of the three-year mourning period, she went to Seoul to be presented to her parents-in-law. She nevertheless soon returned to her mother and took care of her so long as she could. When she was thirty-eight years old, she had to leave her mother without a prospect of return. Saimdang used to break out in tears ever since, longing for her mother. Her poems testify to her feelings.

Looking back homeward from Daegwallyeong Pass

Leaving my old mother in my hometown
I'm going to Seoul alone with a saddened heart
Turning back, Bukchon village is far away
Only white clouds rush down the mountains in twilight.



Monument of Saimdang's poem in Daegwallyeong

Saimdang, thirty-eight, left her parental house in Gangneung and went to her parents-in-law's with her six-year-old son Yulgok. This poem was written from atop Daegwallyeong, looking down her parental house in Bukpyeong.

Longing for Mother

My hometown is many mountains and miles away
Awake or dreaming, I wish I were there
Lonely moon over Hansongjeong
A gust in front of the Gyeongpodae
White gulls gathering and scattering on the sandbank
Fishing boats coming and going on the sea
When will I be walking again the roads of Gangneung
Sitting at home and sewing in my colorful dress.

This poem depicts her constant state of mind, overwhelmed by her longings for her mother who she had left alone at her parental house in Gangneung.

Praying to the moon⁵⁾

Night after night I pray to the moon
Wishing to see my mother again while alive.

These two lines are the remaining lines of an octet. Unfortunately, the other lines are missing.

Each of these poems expresses Saimdang's longings for her mother, which were also well-described in Yulgok's *Biography of My De-*

5 The title was given by the author for the sake of convenience.

ceased Mother: "My mother always missed her mother in Gangneung and used to shed tears at night after others had gone to sleep, sometimes all night long." Yulgok also wrote the following incident:

On one occasion, when our kinsman Shim visited us, his maidservant⁶ played the zither. My mother was overwhelmed by her emotions and shed tears, which made everybody in the room feel down.

This anecdote testifies to Saimdang's warm sentimentality, and above all, her constant state of longings for her mother. It portrays Saimdang as a devoted daughter and a poet.

6 A maidservant waiting on the master or lady of an aristocratic household [Editor's note].



Saimdang's paintings