

4. Saimdang as a Judicious Wife

Saimdang was nineteen years old when she married Yi Won-su from the Yi clan of Deoksu. According to hearsay, Yi Won-su was not up to the noble character of his wife Saimdang under many aspects, such as virtues, dispositions, talents, and scholarly achievements.

At that time, it was not customary even in aristocratic families that daughters were exposed to the education that only sons received. Saimdang was a rare exception.

Saimdang could receive high-quality education reserved for the sons of the aristocratic class as a result of the confluence of many circumstances: her father was a great scholar no son was born to him and Saimdang was exceptionally talented among the five daughters. She was taught the Confucian classics early on and was deeply inspired by the teachings of sages and scholars. She was also trained in poetry, calligraphy, and painting. As a result, she could accumulate culture and knowledge comparable to any well-educated men. Needless to say, she was superior in all matters, and Yi Won-su treated her with reverence like the one afforded to a teacher.

Do not remarry after my death

Yi Won-su, who was three years older than Saimdang, was fifty-one years old when Saimdang passed away at the age of forty-eight. He remarried a woman from a Kwon family and lived with her until his death at the age of sixty-one.

This woman caused serious problems later in Yulgok's life. As if Saimdang had seen what was to come, well aware of the character and person of his husband, it seems that she felt the need to warn him against remarrying after her death. A related conversation between Saimdang and Yi Won-su is recorded in *Donggyemannok*, which is authored by Jeong Nae-ju (1680~1745):

Saimdang : I am feeble-bodied and will die before you. I request you not to remarry after my death. We have already seven children and that's enough. So there is no need to disobey the teachings of *Liji* [*The Classic of Rites*]. Please never neglect the parental obligation to provide an environment for the children to grow and thrive well.

This extract strongly suggests that Saimdang had already seen what was to come, given the character of her husband. Instead of promising, Yi Won-su asked her:

Yi Won-su : What's the use of talking about the time after your death? Rather, I would like to know what kind of norm Confucius was following by casting out his wife.

Saimdang : When Confucius had to escape to Nixi in the Qi state when a rebellion broke out during the reign of the Duke of Shao in Luo, At that time, Confucius's wife went to Song instead of following his husband. That's why Confucius parted with his wife. He did not live with her after parting with her, but there is no record that he casted her out.

Then Yi Won-su asked about Zengzi this time.

Yi Won-su : Then I would like to know what kind of norm Zengzi was following by casting out his wife.

Saimdang : I will tell you the story of Zengzi and his wife. His father liked steamed pear very much. Whenever his wife prepared steamed pear, however, it was not to his taste. He was obliged to comply with his filial duty by sending her wife back to her parents'. However, he remained faithful to his first marriage by not remarrying.

After listening to this, Yi Won-su asked again, this time about Zhu Xi.

Yi Won-su : Then, what about Zhu Xi's family?

Saimdang : His wife Liu died when he was forty-seven years old. Zhu Xi did not remarry, although there was nobody to run the household because his first son Shu was not married yet.

After asking the remarriage-related behaviors of Confucius, Zengzi, and Zhu Xi, and listening to Saimdang's answers, Yi Won-su did not have anything else to add and could not but show again his admiration and reverence to his wife's profound knowledge and noble character.

Don't cross the threshold of Yi Ki's house

Yi Ki, Munjung by courtesy name and Gyeongjae by art name, once wielded power over the whole country. His place of origin was also Deoksu, sharing the same pedigree with great men, such as Yulgok Yi I and Chungmugong Yi Sun-sin. But he was much older than them. He was twenty-five years older than Yi Won-su and a second-degree relative to him.

In Korean history, there were four Sahwas (Literati Purges), or disasters experienced by Confucian scholars by falling victim to a series of political purges. The last of these purges was Eulsa-Sahwa that broke out in 1545, the year of Myeongjong's coronation.

When Jungjong passed away in 1544, his son Injong succeeded him, but the latter died eight months later without any descendant. Injong's brother Myeongjong succeeded him at the young age of twelve, and the latter's mother Queen Munjeong of the Yoon clan grasped power as the regent. Queen Munjeong's brother Yoon Won-hyeong orchestrated a political intrigue, accusing his rivals of plotting treason, and killed most of them. This disaster became part of history as Eulsa-Sahwa. Along with Yoon Won-hyeong, Yi Ki played a major role in this abominable political crime. For this atrocity, Yi Ki was praised and rewarded as a hero who

saved the king from the traitors he was given the title of Internal Prince of Pungseong and appointed the Chief State Councilor. He was revered by many people for his power. When Saimdang knew that Yi Won-su went to see Yi Ki with those people day in day out, she warned her husband with these words: "You should not go with a fleeting power. The power of that Chief State Councilor won't last long." When Yi Won-su replied that he came from the same clan and kin, Saimdang emphatically repeated her point, saying, "Even though he comes from the same clan, knowing that he is not a righteous man, you should not cross the threshold of his house. He has committed many atrocities with false accusations of righteous scholars, living with the sole purpose of grasping power, and his power will be short-lived." Yi Won-su was touched by Saimdang's sincere words and followed her advice. He stopped visiting Yi Ki and thus escaped a possible disaster that could have befallen him later because of his relationship to Yi Ki. This incident not only provides clues to Saimdang's foresight but also reflects her upright character of choosing to walk on the righteous path and doing right things as well as her knowledge and insight in supporting and advising her husband.