5. Saimdang as a Wise Mother

Saimdang fulfilled her filial duty by serving full-heartedly her widowed mother Lady Yi from the Yi clan of Yongin, assisted and advised her husband as a judicious wife, leading him along the right path with her wisdom and insight, and raised and educated her children with all her might as a wise mother.

_Samdang's children_

Saimdang's first son Seon (art name Jukgok) repeatedly failed in Gwa-geo [National Civil Service Examination], despite his diligent learning from his early childhood. He passed the Jinsasi at the age of forty-one, when Yulgok, who was 12 years younger, was already Hojo-Jwarang [Assistant Section Chief of The Ministry of Taxation, rank Sr. 6], which was higher than the former's position. Seon was a late bloomer even in building a family, marrying very late (aged thirty-two) by the standard of that time. He was appointed to his first civil service position of Nambu-Chambong [Southern District Caretaker, Jr. 9] in Seoul at the age of forty-seven, but he died in August of the same year. Yulgok felt remorseful about his
brother's unfortunate life that he read the ritual text he wrote for his
brother in tears, holding on to the coffin he also composed his epitaph.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order of Birth</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>Saimdang's Age When Her Children Were born</th>
<th>Spouse (Name/Place of Origin)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st son</td>
<td>Seon</td>
<td>Jungjong 19(1524)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Lady Gwey-SeonSan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st daughter</td>
<td>Maechang</td>
<td>Jungjong 24(1529)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Cho Dae-nam/Namju</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd son</td>
<td>Beon</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Lady Hong/Namyang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd daughter</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Yoon Seo/Papyoong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd son</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Jungjong 31(1536)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Lady Nohy/Goheon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd daughter</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Hong Cheon-wu/Namyang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th son</td>
<td>Wu</td>
<td>Jungjong 37(1542)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Lady Hwang/Deoksan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The eldest daughter Maechang inherited all her mother's talents—not only erudition and wisdom, personality, and talents for poetry, calligraphy, and painting but also sewing and embroidery, thus earning her the nickname "little Saimdang."

Maechang was married to Cho Dae-nam, a descendant of a traditional elite family of Hanyang. Her husband, who was younger than her by one year, was not an easy person to deal with and enjoyed drinking and companies. They had three sons and three daughters. Maechang is known to have influenced Yulgok with her wisdom, and her artistic works have remained valuable gems of the country, along with her mother Saimdang's paintings. However, she lived an unhappy life, losing many of her beloved, starting with her mother at the age of twenty-three, her father 10 years later, her brothers Seon and Yulgok when she was forty-three and fifty-six years old, respectively, and her husband at fifty-eight. Imjin-War-an (Japanese invasion in 1592) broke out when she was sixty-four years old, and she evacuated to Yeongwon Castle in Wonju with her three sons (In, Yeong, and Jun). The castle fell on August 25. Her first son In took her on his back and escaped, but they were soon attacked by the enemy.
Maechang’s paintings
Cho In tried to save her mother by taking the sword with his body, but both were killed by the same sword. Cho In’s brave filial love entered history together with his mother Maechang’s art.

Saimdang’s second son Beon (art name Jeongjae) is not found in any biographical records. There is no record of the dates of his birth and death. Only one writing left by him testifies to his high scholarly achievements.

Nothing is known about the second daughter, except that she was married to Yoon Soop and lived in Hwangju in Hwanghae-do. Yulgok wrote that he visited his second elder sister whenever he was dispatched to Hwanghae-do, as its governor, or on his way to and from Pyeongan-do to meet and see off Imperial envoys, as the chief of an envoy reception committee.

Nothing is also known about the third daughter, except that she was married to Hong Cheon-wu from Namyang and had a sad fate of being widowed at an early age of twenty-seven or twenty-eight.

The fourth son Wu (art name Oksan), the youngest of the family, was six years younger than Yulgok. He died at sixty-eight in the ancestral burial mountain in 1609, the first year of the reign of Gwanghae. Wu passed the Saengwonsi [Classics Licentiate Examination] when he was only twenty-six years old. He was appointed to the post of Gyeonggijeon-Chambo- ng [Celebration Hall Caretaker, rank Jr. 9] but did not accept the position. He instead served as the county magistrate in several villages and made it to a high-ranking position of the Gunja-Gamjeong [Secretary of the Military Procurement Administration, Sr. 3]. He was a born artist after all. Song Wu-am’s *Myogalmun* [inscriptions on the tomb] reads:

Yulgok built a house at Seokdam in Haenam and spent leisure hours with his brother Wu. They enjoyed each other’s company around a ta-
Oksan's paintings
ble of drinks and food, listening to Wu's zither and composing poems together, and Yulgok called his younger brother his confidant.

The above excerpt shows that Yulgok and Wu were linked by deep brotherly affection and friendship. Wu was the Magistrate of Goesan when Imjin-Waeran broke out. The fifty-year-old Wu gathered young men and resisted the Japanese invaders. He saved his county from famine by guiding safely the people’s agricultural activities through accurate reconnaissance of the enemy’s positions and moving patterns. Later, he was awarded Seonmuwonjonghun by the central government in recognition of his contribution to defeating the invaders. Above all, however, Wu stood out with his exquisite skills in the four arts of zither, calligraphy, poetry, and painting, which were in his very being. Among Saimdang’s seven children, Wu and Maechang inherited their mother’s artistic legacy. Moreover, Wu married the only daughter of Gosan Hwang Ki-ro, renowned as the best cursive-script calligrapher across the history of Korea, and studied calligraphy under his guidance, thus inheriting his legacy as a calligrapher.
Meaning of the art name Saimdang

Saimdang’s unabated devotion to educating her children, leveraging the virtues she cultivated as a woman, and her choice of art name Saimdang are clear indications of the direction she set for her culture and efforts.

This art name is still a subject of speculation. There is no consensus in the Chinese characters for Saim: besides 師任 師姓 思任 and 思姓 are used. However, 師任 is the most reliable one used by his son Yulgok in his book Biography of My Paternal Grandfather Shin Myeong-hwa.

Broken down by character and meaning, 師 means teacher, that is, to emulate, whereas 任 stands for 太任 (Tae-im Tairen in Chinese pronunciation), who was the mother of the ancient Chinese King Wen praised to be the wisest woman. Hence, Saim ought to be interpreted as "emulating Tae-im" as explained above, although others have interpreted differently this art name.

Yeonjae Yoon Jong-eui’s colophon on the engravings of Saimdang’s scripts, which were produced to be archived at Ojukheon in 1868, read:

… As for her scripts, each stroke cautiously placed by her radiates delicacy, elegance, clarity, and tranquility, and reflects her endeavor to emulate King Wen’s mother Tae-im.

After that, Onyujae Yoon Jong-seop praised Saimdang with a poem:

Your fetal instruction / One motherly heart
Your lofty art name / Emulating Ji-im
Ji-im is another name for Tae-im because she was the second daughter of the king of the Ji State. Fetal education refers to Tae-im’s fetal instruction when she was pregnant with King Wen she guarded her eyes, ears, and mouth against seeing evil sights, hearing perverse sounds, and uttering careless words. This poem refers to Saimdang’s fetal instruction when she was pregnant with Yulgok. These records support the adequacy of interpreting the art name "Saimdang" as "imitating Tae-im." Saimdang not only provided her children with such virtuous education but also treated all the servants in her household on the same principle all the people living under her roof admired her from the depth of their hearts.