

7. Anecdotes of Saimdang

Famous persons always have anecdotes. The higher the fame, the greater the number of anecdotes available of that person. Such anecdotes are either true or embellished stories with exaggerations of their specific features. In either case, anecdotes provide indirect clues to the character of the person in question.

In the following, the anecdotes related to Saimdang are presented. Some are documented, whereas others are hear says.

Promise of a 10-year study

At the age of nineteen, Saimdang was married to Yi Won-su. By that time, Saimdang's knowledge and art, which she had accumulated over many years under the guidance of her father, already reached a monumental level. Considering her innate intelligence and high-quality education, it could be assumed that her husband was inferior to her in every aspect.

Saimdang could not but become disappointed, but she made up her mind to assist her husband to the best of her knowledge and ability. Hop-

ing that her husband would advance in his study of Chinese classics, she strongly encouraged him to learn.

Meanwhile, Yi Won-su could not but follow his wife's words out of admiration for her knowledge, artistic talents, and noble personality, which he deemed superior to his achievements, although she was his wife and three years younger. Saimdang suggested one day to live in separation for 10 years, promising to each other to devote these 10 years to studying. Saimdang persuaded her husband into making that promise out of her wish to see him grow into a great scholar. Yi Won-su seemed to have no other choice. He had to leave Saimdang at her parental house and go to Seoul. Finally, he left Gangneung, with her stern words ringing in his ears: "Please devote your mind one-pointedly to learning and come back as a successful scholar 10 years later." When he arrived in Seongsan, about eight kilometers away from Ojukheon, he waited until the sunset and returned to Ojukheon, to his wife's great surprise.

On the second day, Yi Won-su walked for 12 kilometers to a place called Gamagol, at the foot of Daegwallyeong. From deep sorrow and despair, Saimdang said to her husband, "Once a man sets an ambitious goal and leaves home, he must pursue his goal until he reaches it. You have been leaving home for three consecutive days with a promise to devote yourself to studying for 10 years, but you keep coming back without passing even a day. What will become of you with such a weak willpower?" Yi Won-su replied: "I know I have to learn, but I cannot leave you and live alone for 10 years. What shall I do-I cannot bear to be separated from you even an hour." To mend her husband's weak disposition and lack of interest in study, Saimdang decided to resort to a drastic strategy. She took a pair of scissors out of the sewing basket and put it in front of

her husband and said in a serious voice, "Seeing that you are such a weak and incompetent man, I have no hope in this world. I better cut my hair and enter a mountain to become a nun, or else put an end to this hopeless life, even though it would be the most abominable thing to do." These words startled Yi Won-su and led him to realize that he had no other choice. The next morning, he made up his mind once again and left Saimdang to go to Seoul. He studied hard for three years, but he could not bear the separation from his wife and thus, again, returned to her.¹⁰⁾

I am also a chestnut

Yulgok's parents Yi Won-su and Shin Saimdang lived in separation for 10 years after their marriage so that Yi Won-su could devote himself to learning to become a scholar. However, Yi Won-su could not keep his promise not to return before completing the 10-year study, and thus only five years away from the decade-long separation, he frequently came back to Gangneung, unable to suppress his longings for his wife Saimdang. Consequently, he could not reach any significant level of learning because he spent more time coming back to his wife and staying with her so long as he possibly could. In the meantime, the couple had two sons and two daughters, and their third son Yulgok was yet to be born.

Yi Won-su was in Seoul at that time. One day, overwhelmed by a sud-

10 This story, which has been told among people in Gangneung, was provided by Yi Jang-hi.



Monument of Pankwandae

den longing for his wife, he left for Bongpyeong (Baegokpo-ri, Bongpyeong-myeon, Pyeongchang, Gangwon-do, now commonly called Pankwandae). He passed by Pyeongchang-eup and walked along the Pyeongchang River. The night fell when he arrived at a mountainous village called Daehwa-ri, after he turned left from Weoldu, which was about eight kilometers away from their home in Bongpyeong.

Yi Won-su had to spend a night at a tavern at the foot of the mountain. When the night went deeper, the tavern owner spruced up herself and entered the room where he was sleeping. She brought with her a small table with drinks and food. Offering him drinks, she asked him to

spend the night with her. When Saimdang's stern face appeared in his mind, as if to keep an eye on him, he involuntarily gathered himself.

The tavern owner, who was seducing Yi Won-su with a bashful glance, was extremely beautiful and graceful like a fairy living on only fresh food. Her face was so clean and clear like air and water of deep mountains. However, Yi Won-su did not succumb to her seduction. He refused her gently but resolutely. The tavern owner was deeply ashamed, and the embarrassment felt by a woman being rejected by a man is beyond comparison with that of a man being rejected by a woman. After spending the night with light on, Yi Won-su left the tavern at Daehwa-ri and arrived home to see his wife whom he missed so much.

After spending several months with Saimdang, Yi Won-su left Bongpyeong. On his way to Seoul, he remembered the tavern owner and thought, "It was not a manly behavior to refuse such a beautiful lady's wish because of my longing for my own wife. I will ask her myself this time so that she can save her face." Thus, he went to the tavern, and the woman seemed glad to see him again. As the night fell, he asked her to come to him. Asking for apologies for his behavior last time they met, he asked her to spend the night together. This time, however, she turned his request down: "Thank you for your kind mind, but I am no longer attracted to you. When I approached you last time, it was not because I had a strong desire that night but because your face radiated auspicious light, and I felt that you would father a precious son who would be a man of worldwide fame. So, I did what I did to conceive that son. Now, your face no longer has that auspicious radiation. That precious son is already in your wife's womb, and I lost my interest." She then went on to say, "Unfortunately, the baby will be born in the hour of the tiger [3:00-

5:00 AM], and will be harmed by a tiger before he reaches the age of five. That's the only problem," Yi Won-su saw that the tavern owner is not an ordinary woman who sells drinks at a tavern but a special being. Showing his reverence for her prediction that the child to be born will be a great man and encounter a tragedy, he asked her to tell him how to save him from the tiger. She answered:

I am still very upset because you did not accept me that night, but I cannot but help you when I think of that precious baby.

As the saying goes, "A child of a virtuous family does not stand under a stone wall. " Tragedies can be dispelled by accumulating virtues. As life is in humans and plants alike, please plant a thousand chestnut trees instead of saving a thousand lives. In the year when the child turns five, an old monk from Mt. Geumgang will come around on a certain day of a certain month and claim the child. Don't show the child and just say this to him: "I have also accumulated virtues and you cannot take my child away from me." If he asks you to show your accumulated virtues, show him the one thousand chestnut trees. Then, the tiger's tragedy can be avoided.

After some months, on December 26 [lunar calendar] in the hour of the tiger, Saimdang gave birth to a child Yulgok. Yi Won-su was reminded of the words of the tavern owner and planted a thousand chestnut trees in Mt. Nochu, about 40 kilometers south of Gangneung.

Mt. Nochu, which is also called Mt. Sadal, is a high mountain located in the present-day Gujeol-ri, Wangsan-myeon, Gangneung-si, where Seol



Two-Saint Pavilion of Mt. Nochu

Chong of Silla Dynasty studied and Yulgok was to study later. To commemorate these two genius scholars, a small house named Two-Saint Pavilion was built. The memorial tablets of Seol Chong and Yulgok are enshrined there, and a traditional tea ceremony takes place annually.

After planting a thousand chestnut trees, Yi Won-su waited for Yulgok to turn five. On the day of the month indicated by the tavern owner, he hid Yulgok in the innermost room and waited for the monk from Mt. Geumgang. Toward dusk, an old monk came and begged for donation, requesting Yi Won-su to show him the child. Seeing the prediction com-

ing true, he answered calmly, with his heart beating fast, "I have also accumulated virtues and you cannot take my child away." He told the monk about the one thousand chestnut trees, and led the latter to the slope of Mt. Nochu and showed him the chestnut grove. They then started to count the trees.

One, two, ... one hundred, two hundred, ... nine hundred ninety-nine. But where is the thousandth tree-is one tree missing? One chestnut was indeed rotten and perished. Yi Won-su panicked. The monk was delighted and insisted on taking the boy with him. At that moment, they heard a voice saying, "I am a chestnut tree, too." They turned back and saw a tree looking like a chestnut tree but not a real chestnut tree it was stood on the edge of the field and shouted, "I am a chestnut tree, too." The monk recognized it as the thousandth chestnut tree. At the very moment, he turned into a big tiger and ran away.¹¹⁾

True-to-life paintings

About 250 years ago (during the reign of Sukjong), Song Sang-ki wrote about Shin Saimdang's paintings:

A clansman of mine used to say, "I have a grass-insect painting of Yulgok's mother. When I took it out to the yard on one summer day, to air it under the sun, chickens came and pecked holes on the paint-

11 This story, which has been told among people in Gangneung, was provided by Yi Jang-hi.

ing where the insects were painted."

I was curious to see the painting but, to my great regret, had no opportunities to see it. Then I've had the luck to see the collection of Jeong Jong-ji. The flowers, cucumbers, insects, and all other details were exquisitely sophisticated and delicate. Above all, insects and butterflies clearly showed her divine skills. It was as if they were breathing and moving, and it was unbelievable that they were only painted objects. Then I could realize the truth of what my clansman said.¹²⁾

Such stories reflect a viewer's admirations of the verisimilitude¹³⁾ of Saimdang's paintings.

12 Source : *Ogo-Jeji*

13 An object on a painting so realistic that it can hardly be distinguished from the real object [Editor's note].



The verisimilitude of Saimdang's painting

Painting on a ceramic tray

On the day on which Saimdang left her mother and was on her way to see her parents-in-law in Seoul, her husband Yi Won-su wanted to show her wife's unique artistic talent to the guests. Therefore, he asked Saimdang to join the company and draw a painting. When Saimdang did not come after a while, he was embarrassed and sent the maid several times to urge her to come.

Saimdang was in dilemma between two embarrassing situations. She could not refuse her husband's request and have him lose his face before the guests, but she considered it improper to make a big fuss of spreading paper, grinding an ink stick on the inkstone, and painting with people looking at her as if she were a great painter, and all that on the first day of visiting her parents-in-law. Hence, she asked the maid to bring a ceramic tray and drew a simple and small painting on it. All the guests could not help but praise profusely the exquisite artistry of Saimdang.

Uam Song Si-yeol commented on this incident later: "It was very wise of her to paint on a ceramic tray because the guests would have wished to have the painting had it been painted on paper or silk."¹⁴

However, it is more likely that the circumstance on that day did not allow her to paint on paper because it was during a journey.

14 Source: Song Si-yeol's colophon to Saimdang's painting collection.

Grapevine painted on a skirt

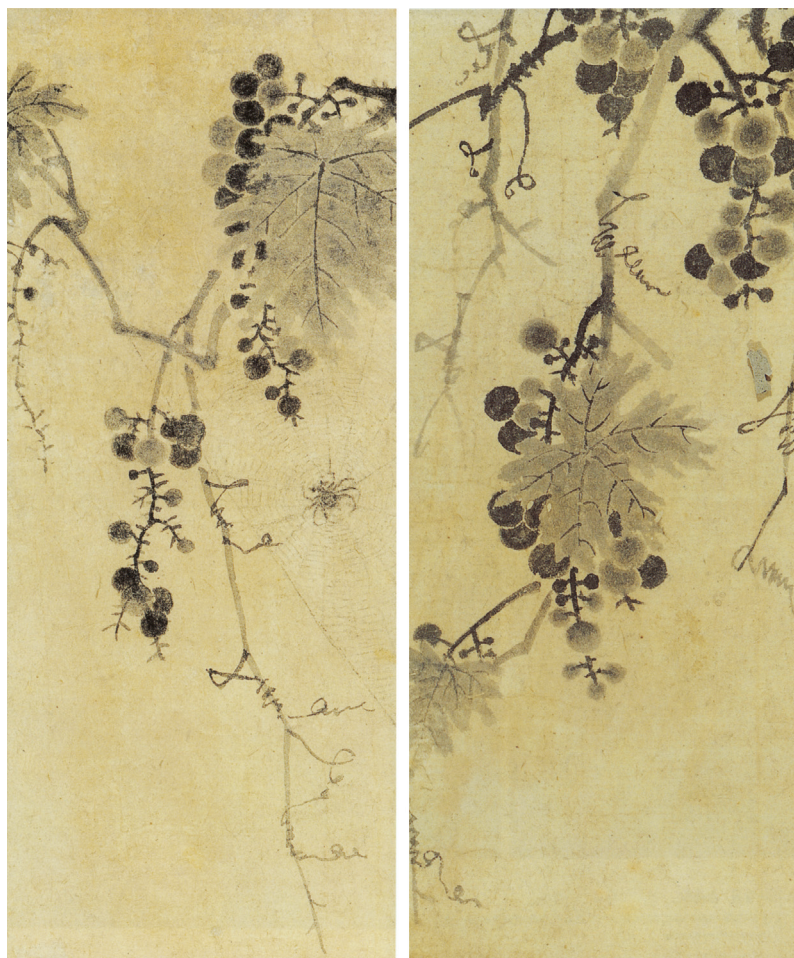
On one occasion while Saimdang was living in Gangneung, she was among a group of ladies gathered in a banquet in the neighborhood, with a young lady who befriended Saimdang.

After a while, Saimdang saw the young lady worrying about her red silk skirt soiled by splashes of broth while going in and out of the kitchen. She was from a poor family and borrowed the skirt from a friend to come to the banquet. She could not return the soiled skirt, but she had no money to buy cloth for a new skirt.

Because Saimdang felt sorry for her and wanted to help, she asked the skirt to be spread in front of her and then painted grape leaves on the soiled parts. Then she started to paint a grape vine covering the whole space of the skirt with graceful brush strokes and produced bunches of grapes exquisitely realistic as if they were exuding enticing smells of fully ripe grapes.

All the ladies sitting could not praise her skills highly enough. The young lady was all smiles and gratitude. She sold the skirt for a handsome sum of money. She then used the money to buy red silk cloth, which was enough for making not only a new skirt, to return the borrowed skirt to the owner, but also many other outfits.¹⁵⁾

15 Source : *Gangwondoji*, Volume I (Famous Persons of the Gangwon Province).



Saimdang's painting