

### 3. Yulgok and His Stepmother Kwon

Yulgok's mother Saimdang passed away at the age of forty-eight when he was 16 years old. His father Yi Won-su was fifty-one years old at the time and could not raise the seven children alone.

Therefore, a woman named Kwon lived in the house. Although she did not have the status of the mistress of the house because his father did not officially remarry, Yulgok showed all respect to her regardless of her status as his father's consort. As Yi Won-su survived Saimdang for only 10 years, Kwon was not his consort for a long time. Nevertheless, Yulgok performed his filial duty to the widowed stepmother as earnestly as he could.

However, Kwon must have been a woman with a peculiar character. Judging from the sporadic accounts on her in the miscellaneous records contained in the *Supplementary Work of Yulgok*, her words and deeds in the house must have been nasty beyond description.

1. If she was upset even so slightly, she used to come down to the yard and cry loudly like a child, with her head stuck in an empty

- pot, to the bewilderment of the whole family and neighbors.
2. She habitually feigned to hang herself with a rope to scare the people in the house, making a big fuss about it to make people hurry to her to save her.
  3. One day, someone presented a tray of persimmons to Yulgok, and a guest happened to be with him. Seeing that the guest was hungry, Yulgok offered him one persimmon and took another for himself. Then, the tray, with all the remaining persimmons, was sent to Kwon. Finding fault with Yulgok for having taken two without her permission, she made a fuss, saying, "If you had such a big appetite, why have you sent me the rest in the first place?" Yulgok immediately gathered the two persimmons and politely gave them to her, saying, "Please forgive my mistake and take these, too." She then calmed down.
  4. One day, she was dissatisfied with something and locked herself in her room. She stayed in bed all morning, and was only soothed after Yulgok put on a high hat and headband and sat down solemnly before the door, bowing, and asking for forgiveness.
  5. She liked drinking at any time of the day. Yulgok would wake up in the early hours and serve her liquor in order not to neglect his filial duty.<sup>38)</sup>

Yulgok always endeavored to treat his stepmother as if she were his own mother, despite her vile character. He acknowledged her authority as

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38 *Supplementary Work of Yulgok*

the head of the household after his father's death. He also did not skip his courtesy visit to her every morning and evening whenever he was at home.

When Yulgok became a Minister, he treated his stepmother with even more respect and acted like a child before her to please her. Such treatment continued even when Yulgok built the family community at Seokdam in Haeju, Hwanghae-do. His saintly efforts finally moved Kwon to become a kindhearted person. She showed respect for Yulgok after his death by clothing herself in a funeral dress for three years. Consequently, the relationship between magnanimous Yulgok and his once vile stepmother ended in a beautiful story.

