

## 5. Yulgok and Kisaeng Yuji

Yulgok seemingly did not have relations with other women than his wife Lady Noh and his first and second consorts Kim and Yi. In Hwangju, Hwanghae-do, a Kisaeng (a professional female entertainer) named Yuji lived. She admired and revered Yulgok, who also liked her company because she was charming and agile. They did not have a physical relationship, which showed Yulgok being quite disciplined in that matter.

Hwanghae-do and Yulgok had a close relationship in many ways. First, his in-laws lived in Haeju. His father-in-law's place of origin was Goksan, Hwanghae-do. His father-in-law was highly esteemed as an upright official, and lived in Yaduchon in Haeju after his dismissal from the post of the Magistrate of Sukcheon, Pyongan-do, owing to a political intrigue. Before this post, he served as the Magistrate of Seongju, Gyeongsang-do. Hence, Yulgok's first encounter with Hwanghae-dow as his wife.

Second, Hwanghae-do was his chosen hometown. First, he built a retreat house at a scenic spot in Seokdam, Haeju, a short distance upstream (north) of his in-law's village. In this house, he taught and spent his leisure time. Later, he built a house there and had his deceased eldest brother Seon's extended families come to live in a family community. He wrote Gosangugokga there, leaving an importance resource for Korean traditional poetry.

Third, Yulgok served as the Governor of Hwanghae-do when he was thirty-nine years old. Although he governed this province for only about half a year, he was much acclaimed for his innovative measure to reform the administrative system, cultivate the people, and establish welfare programs.

Fourth, of Yulgok's three sisters, the eldest sister Maechang's husband Cho Dae-nam was the Chief of Cheongdan Station. His second sister lived in Hwangju with her husband Yun Seop's parents, where Yulgok was a guest several times. Interestingly, Yun Seop's grave is in Paju, but her sister's grave remains in Hwangju. The grave of Hong Cheon-wu, Yulgok's younger sister's husband, is also located in Seokdam, Haeju.

Fifth, Yulgok (aged forty-seven) had to pass through Hwanghae-do whenever he went to meet and see off Ming's Imperial envoys, such as Hwang Hong-heon and Wang Gyeong-min, in Pyeongan-do, as the chief of the envoy reception committee.

Sixth, Yulgok met Yuji whenever the reception committee stopped in Hwangju. They not only knew each other by face but also Yulgok enjoyed her company in terms of entertainment. In other words, they had been on familiar terms, if not intimate, until Yuji mustered the courage and asked Yulgok to spend a night with her. However, Yulgok was adamant in refusing her request and, instead, left a prose poem to console her. Based on its content, Yulgok and Yuji shared only platonic moments. The original manuscript of this poem is now archived in the Museum of Ewha Women's University. This manuscript is all the more a valuable piece of Korean literature as it is not recorded in other materials. The following is the translation (from Chinese) of the entire length of the poem.

## Yulgok's poem to Yuji

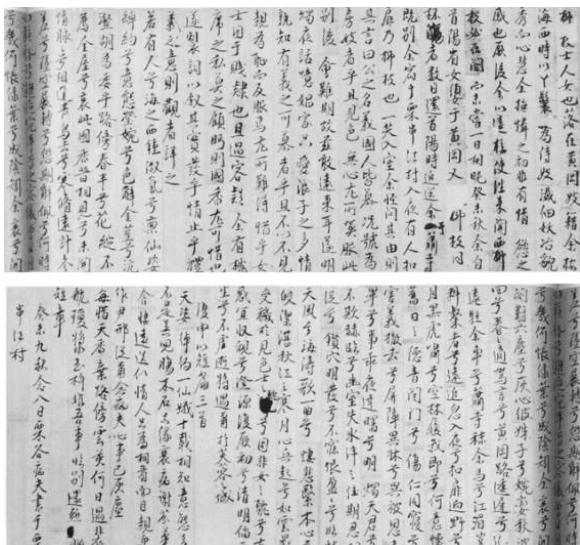
Yuji was born to a noble man. Life's vicissitudes had it that she became a kisaeng in Hwanggang. When I was the Governor of Haeseo, Yuji, a young maidservant with ahwan (a Y-shaped braid) at that time, used to wait for<sup>43</sup> me. With a slender body and well-groomed look, her face was fair and bright I showed my affection by favoring and stroking her, but I have not had any lustful intentions toward her from the beginning. Whenever I stopped here on my way to and from Gwanseo as Wonjeonsa to meet and see off Imperial envoys, Yuji was always in my room, but we have never been on intimate terms.

In the fall of the year of gyemi (1583, Yulgok aged forty-eight), when I left Suyang and visited my yeosu (elder sister) in Hwangju, Yuji accompanied me and stayed there for several days she sat by my side at the drinking table. On my way back to Haeju, she saw me off to a quiet temple, Sosa.

We parted ways. I spent the night in Yulgwan-Gangchon. Someone knocked at the door. It was Yuji. She showed a bright smile and entered the room. Asked why she came so late, she said, "Your reputation is such that the entire nation cherishes your name dearly. Kisaeng as I am, my feelings are stronger, of course. Seeing that you keep your steady mind instead of succumbing to seduction like most men, my admiration grows even stronger. I have dared to come to you, making a long way, because I don't know when to see you again if I leave

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43 To be around someone to do errands and attend to his needs [Editor's note]



Yulgok's poem to Yuji

now." We had a long conversation under the candlelight.

Alas, people think that a kisaeng is only there to entertain and love men, and cannot imagine that there is a kisaeng that loves ethics and righteousness. And lo, she is not ashamed of being refused but is even touched by that. It is a rare thing to encounter such a woman. What a pity that such a noble mind is in a body of a kisaeng, whose life is full of sufferings.

It would be even more deplorable for this admirable damsel if other men think that she is Yulgok's woman and avoid her. So, I am writing this poem to declare that we have started our relationship with affection and ended it with a good conduct. Readers shall be assured.

Behold! An immortal-like being was born in Hwanghae-do

Thoughts and deeds are genteel and face and voice are clear

This fair being like a morning sky dew was thrown on the road  
Alas, beauty, spring cannot carry your bloom to a golden house

When we first met, you were still a bud, but we felt affection  
Without a matchmaker, we drifted away from each other

Good occasions missed, your promised one yet to come  
Now I see you again at sunset, you are still the same damsel

I bemoan the fleeting time, life's summer green is fading  
I am past the age for seeking bodily pleasure, long-extinct ashes

You beautiful woman, you are casting lovely eyes  
My cart is on the ground of Hwangju, the road is long and slow

The cart resting in a temple, horses grazing on the river bank  
A surprising night visit of a beautiful woman from afar

Dim moonlight on the wide field, tigers roaring in the empty forest  
She came after me in admiration of my old reputation

In dilemma between closing the door and lying down together  
No screen between us, but separate beds and separate covers

Unable to display emotions, we spent a white night together

No escape from the eye of heaven, even in the deepest room  
No secret deeds, not risking your opportunists for marriage

Side by side till dawn, hearts bursting with feelings  
Winds blowing, waves coming and going, a song sung sadly

Looking into my heart, it's like a full moon on autumn water  
Clouds of a dark-light war, dark is the lust for bodily pleasure  
Man's lust is no honorable thing, that of a woman even less

Hearts calmed and roots cleansed, back to the pure core  
If reincarnation is real, I will see you again in the Lotus City

### Three two-liners as postscript

A born beauty like a fairy, so familiar after a 10-year acquaintance  
Not made of wood or stone, but no fire in this old and brittle body

Separation in desolation like lovers, but known are only faces  
Even if you were Yin or Xing, alas, this frail body and ashen heart

Pity the flower thrown away, yearning for Pei Hang like Yunying  
Not free of our bodies, I can console your heart only with this poem.  
[September 28, 1583, the old Yulgok at Yulgwang-Gangchon]

## [Notes]

- ▶ Hwanggang: Another name of Hwangju, Hwanghae-do
- ▶ Haeseo: The Hwanghae-do region
- ▶ Ahwan: Referred also to as Chahwan, Adu, or Agye. Young girls with Y-shaped braids, commonly used for low born maid servants<sup>44)</sup>
- ▶ Wonjeopsa: Chief of an envoy reception committee, an ad-hoc post responsible for the task of meeting the Imperial envoys from China near the border and guide them to the King
- ▶ Gwanseo: The Pyeongan-do region
- ▶ Suyang: Another name of Haeju, Hwanghae-do
- ▶ Yeosu : Elder sister here, Yulgok's second sister
- ▶ Sosa: Seongbalsa Temple at the foot of Mt. Jeongbang (unclear)
- ▶ Yulgwan-Gangchon: Yulgwanjin (Bamgoji), about 60 kilometers north to Jaeryeong. The river flows from Johwadong in Haeju. This ferry landing is adjacent to the tidewater of the Yellow Sea.<sup>45)</sup>
- ▶ Lotus City: In an ancient story, a man named Shi Manqing appeared to a friend in a dream-like hazy place, saying, "I have become an immortal and am reigning over a country called Lotus City." Therefore, "Lotus City" became a word that refer to a country

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<sup>44</sup> Source: *Cheolgyeongnok*

<sup>45</sup> Source: *Yeojiseungnam, Section on Jaeryeong*

of immortals.<sup>46)</sup>

- ▶ Young man from O: The Chinese original of the phrase translated as "not made of wood and stone," meaning a man impossible to seduce. Xia Tong (Ha Tong) was a handsome and eloquent man who lived in Yongxing in the Jin era. One day, he went to the capital city and met the Prime Minister Jia Chong. Xia Tong did not accept his offer of public career. To persuade Xia Tong, Jia Chong used a beautiful woman to seduce him, to no effect at all. Jia Chong said, "This young man from O has wooden intestines and a stony heart."<sup>47)</sup>
- ▶ Yin and Xing: Yin and Xing were two favorite consorts of Emperor Wu of Han. One day, Lady Yin asked the Emperor to allow her to meet Lady Xing. He adorned another woman and showed her to Lady Yin, but she was not fooled, saying, "This woman is not Lady Xing." The Emperor then showed Lady Xing clothed in an old garment. Lady Yin said, "This woman is Lady Xing. I see that she is worthy of your love," and cried sadly over her inferior beauty.<sup>48)</sup> Yulgok cited this ancient Chinese story and mentioned Ying and Xing, presumably meaning "If you become consort 1 and consort 2 like Lady Yin and Lady Xing..."
- ▶ Pei Hang, Yunying: In the Tang era, a scholar named Pei Hang met Lady Yunqiao [Cloud Bridge], who read him a poem: "Once

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<sup>46</sup> Source: *Yugilsihwa*

<sup>47</sup> Source: *Hatongjeon in Jinseo*

<sup>48</sup> Source: *Shiji*





Saimdang's painting

you drink the bejeweled nectar, all kinds of feelings will arise. Then you will meet Yunying only after grinding and offering an elixir called Black Frost. Blue Bridge is the abode of immortals, so you need not climb the Jade City in heaven." Later on, when Pei Hang was passing through Blue Bridge station, he stopped and asked an old woman for something to drink. The old woman let Yunying bring him a drink. Pei Hang drank it, and it was really bejeweled nectar. Yunying looked so beautiful, and Pei Hang asked the old woman to marry them on the spot. She answered, "Last night, an immortal gave me a spoonful of elixir, Black Frost. You can marry Yungying only after you have ground it in a jade mortar with a jade pestle for 100 days. Only after you have finished grinding the elixir, you will be able to marry Yunying." Pei Hang ground the elixir for 100 days. She then married Yunying they became immortal and went to heaven.<sup>49)</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Source: *Taepyeonggwanggi*

## Choi Rip's Poem

After this incident, this was a hot topic in the literati circles in Seoul and provinces. Choi Rip (art name: Ganijae), who was younger than Yulgok by three years and a renowned poet at that time, wrote a two-line poem using the first characters of Yulgok's poem to Yuji:

You made the beautiful lady's heart swell with your lines,  
That sure makes occasions for smiles in later years.  
In consideration of your reputation and feelings,  
No more will she sit on a water chestnut flower to adorn herself.

### [Note]

- ▶ Water chestnut flower: Zhao Feiyan, a consort of Emperor Cheng of Han, used a large mirror (almost three meters high), with water chestnut flowers embroidered on it. Thus, "water chestnut flower" in this poem must be interpreted as *a mirror*.<sup>50</sup> In *Namgye-Gyeon-munnog* [*Observations of Namgye*], it is recorded that Yuji came to Seoul on hearing the news of Yulgok's death and stayed there for three years to complete the mourning period. Although they were not united physically, she did the duty of a wife after Yulgok's death because she loved Yulgok with all her heart as if he were her husband. This story demonstrates Yuji's pure mind and virtuous deeds, although she was a kisaeng.

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50 Source: *Zhao Feiyan Story*