Gods and Ghosts

Extraordinary Tales from Old Korea

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## PREFACE

In *Gods and Ghosts: Extraordinary Tales from Old Korea*, besides being entertained with flights of fancy, we can learn a lot about life in mid-Chosun Dynasty Korea. Though the stories are fiction, several of the characters are historical figures and the stage props and costumes for every scene are authentic, based on firsthand knowledge of the author.

The stories were all written by Im Bang (1640-1724), an aristocrat descended from a long line of illustrious ancestors. He passed the higher civil service examination with highest honors, served in the government of the Chosun Dynasty (1392~1910), and wrote several books of poetry and philosophy on the side. In the civil service he served for a time as Minister of Public Works, but then resigned from that position in protest when his mentor, the political philosopher Song Ji-yeol, was exiled as a result of his involvement in the intense, brutal factional fighting that plagued Korea relentlessly for centuries. After a while, though, Im returned to serve in the government, this time as magistrate of Damyang, a district in Chungcheong Province. After serving in a couple other posts in the bureaucracy, factional intrigue caused Im himself to be exiled, and he died in exile in Geumcheon, Hwanghae Province (now in North Korea). He was exonerated posthumously by King Yeong-jo (r. 1774-1776).

During his lifetime, Im Bang picked up several pseudonyms (Dae-jung, Su-chon, Mun-heui). An aristocrat who practiced any of the arts made a pseudonym or two for himself, and, in this mutual-admiration system, fellow aristocrats awarded pseudonyms in recognition of the recipient’s meritorious activity in the arts, philosophy, government or military.

Most of the stories reflect aspects of the author’s life. The main character, like the author, is often the scion of a noble family who has passed the higher civil service examination (with highest honors, of course) and then served the royal court. In none of the stories is the major character lower than nobility, or a woman. Women, though, do play major supporting roles in almost all of the stories. The viragos in stories 21 and 22 are women of noble class. The celestial daughter of a Taoist immortal plays a major supporting role in story 2, and a few gisaeng (women of the lowest class who entertained men of the noble class) play major roles.

Also like the author, several of the characters in our stories had pseudonyms. In fact, the ones whose pseudonyms appear in the stories were real-life characters, but it is not clear where fact ends and fiction begins. One major historical figure, the Shilla Dynasty general that every child knows, appears in story 9 (with his pseudonym Gae Guk-gong); he executes someone with a dream. We also read of Jeon Wu-chi, another historical personage, who appears in two of the stories (1 and 18) as a sorcerer.

These stories were written in one of Korea’s most difficult eras. The nation was impoverished and exhausted from several recent invasions by Japan and China. In 1592 the Japanese troops of daimyo Toyotomi Hideyoshi began to brutalize Korea and stopped only after six long years (1598). The troops of China’s Ming Dynasty that came to help Korea against Japan ate up much of Korea’s already depleted agricultural production. Soon after that, Manchuria’s Later Jin dynasty invaded in 1627, followed by the Qing dynasty (the successor to the Later Jin dynasty) in 1636. And there was the factional fighting, previously mentioned. By the time Im Bang was born, in 1640, Korea was a land of physical and moral devastation. We see an example of the endemic poverty in story 1; aristocrat Lee, who represents much of the aristocracy of those days, invited Jang to “his humble home” to dine “whenever there was food to share.” In story 15, all the family has left to eat are a few chestnuts. And in story 26, the Confucian scholar temporarily assumes that the main character is a member of an aristocratic family who had fallen into genteel poverty. Commoners and slaves were not the only ones that did not always eat well.

The devastation wrought by so many invasions in such a short period forced the aristocracy (who ruled in the name of the weaker kings and whose support was essential even to the stronger kings) to self-introspection and to reconsideration of Neo-Confucianism, the system of political philosophy that informed decisions made by the royal court. The result was the Practical Learning movement, which shifted the focus of many prominent civil administrators from the increasingly idealistic nature of Neo-Confucianism to a more humanistic view. (In story 9 Im severely criticizes Neo-Confucianism.) This may partially explain Im’s willingness to include in his stories women who were smarter and stronger than men (as in stories 21, 22, 27 and 28) and foolish male characters who represented the aristocracy (as in stories 23 and 24), In fact, in one story the author showed an unorthodox degree of humanity by having the King permit the main character to take a gisaeng as his official wife and decree that their children would inherit aristocratic status. And in another story the author had the main character cherishing his concubine (formerly a gisaeng) as his main consort through her whole life.

Possibly another sign of the new humanist movement is the authors’ rather favorable depiction of Buddhism. Buddhism was the state religion in the Koryeo Dynasty, which preceded the Chosun Dynasty. In the Chosun Dynasty, Confucianism was the state “religion” and Buddhism, like Shamanism, was proscribed. In stories 4 and 17, though, Im depicts monks as honorable and helpful people; in no story does he portray Buddhism in a negative manner.

Im did not entirely drop his Confucian, aristocratic attitude. His full membership in the aristocracy is apparent in both the deference that he has servants and commoners show the aristocracy, and in the aristocrat’s habitually and unconsciously disdainful treatment of the lower classes. In story 2, Im unwittingly shows us how the nobility regarded their servants as no more than tools to be discarded when no longer useful: the young aristocrat’s servant dies as the two are traveling down a country road, so “[the aristocrat] moved the servant’s corpse off the road to some bushes at the base of a hill, got on his pony, and pushed on.” Commoners and slaves are disregarded in most of the stories, except in their occasional supporting role in development of the nobility-centered story line. You see it again in story 28, where Minyong, the young noble, leaves Jaran the gisaeng behind in Pyeongyang "as easy,” in Minyong’s own words, “as leaving behind a tattered old pair of shoes."

When you read these stories, it will be helpful to have as background knowledge other aspects of contemporary Korean life.

* People sat and slept on the floor; the floor was heated by a system of flues under the floor.
* Gisaeng were prostitutes first, and artists in music and poetry second. Their behavior in stories 23 and 24 will flesh out this statement. In other stories, particularly 27 and 28, though, they were as talented in the arts and as splendid in character as they were beautiful. A caveat: The woman in story 28 was trained as a gisaeng but met her love (the main character of the story) before she was old enough to lie with a man.
* The stories treat men’s relationship with gisaeng as a very natural thing, not as the immoral and insulting practice that we regard it in modern society. Neither was it regarded a moral problem if a man had, in effect, two wives, one wife being the official wife and the other a concubine. Women accepted this system of bigamy, along with the fact that they could not enjoy male gisaeng.
* Marriage among the aristocracy and middle class was not primarily a love match, it was a utilitarian political pairing. Affection sometimes developed between the married couple, but just as often the husband would favor a concubine over his official wife. Story 27 tells of such a situation. Children sired by an aristocrat and born of a concubine did not enjoy aristocrat status, though the King might waive this law.
* The four major castes in Chosun Dynasty Korea—all inherited—were yangban (aristocracy and gentry), jungin (technicians, administrators, military officers, artisans, merchants), sangin (farmers, fishermen, laborers, etc.), cheonmin (slaves and despised occupations like gisaeng, butcher, etc.).
* Only yangban were allowed to take the higher civil service examination, which was modeled upon China’s equivalent; if, over four generations, a member of a yangban family failed to pass the exam, that family would lose their yangban status. Those who passed the exam were the counterpart of the Chinese scholar-official (mandarin). The exam that we see mentioned in several stories in our book is the literature exam, the highest in status among the civil exams. The successful candidate showed understanding of the Confusion classics, demonstrated his writing skills in prose and poesy, and wrote a competent essay on an assigned political problem. (Other subjects like science and mathematics were tested in exams for candidates of lower social status, who served in occupations supporting the scholar-officials who passed the literature exam.)

#### A note on Romanization of hangul

The system Revised Romanization of Korean, promulgated by the National Institute of Korean Language, is used for Romanizing hangul (pronounced han-geul), the Korean script. Two sounds that are Romanized with spellings that will seem strange to readers unfamiliar with Korean are the rounded어(as in *saw*), Romanized as *eo*, and the unrounded으 (as in *book*), Romanized as *eu*.

With all this under your belt, you are now armed with enough knowledge to enjoy the stories thoroughly. All that *you* need to provide is the will to believe.

Kim Jung-eun and John Holstein, 2017

Chapter 1: Stories from the Netherworld

Story 1

## Government Official Lee Meets a Taoist Mystic on Mt. Jiri

This is a story from the early sixteenth century, in the reign of King Jung Jong.

Once there lived a beggar on the streets of Seoul. He appeared to be in his forties but seemed not to have married yet, as his hair was still in a topknot. His face was caked with grit and grime, and fearsomely sinister. Carrying a large bag over his shoulder, he scavenged all over during the day and slept at the front door of just anyone’s house every night. The beggar could often be found in the Jonggak area, the center of town, passing his time with the day laborers and hooligans that hung around there. He introduced himself with the family name Jang, so everyone teasingly called him Jang Doryeong from then on; they thought it was so funny because the word *doryeong* means an unmarried scion of a noble family.

This was when the Taoist mystic Jeon Wu-chi was alive. He could perform extraordinary feats of sorcery and thought himself superior to everyone. But even this great man, when he came across Jang, would roll off his horse lickety-split, approach him in cringing, mincing steps, and bow deeply in greeting. Of course, he did not dare look Jang in the eye.

Jang, holding himself erect, would return Jeon’s bow with, “So, having fun with your little tricks these days?”

And Jeon would tremble, bow again, and raise his cupped hands to his forehead, managing only to utter, “Yes, yes sir…”

Sometimes, though, Jang would ignore him and pass him by without even a glance. People witnessing this could not understand and were very curious. They asked Jeon why he treated this beggar Jang with such deference. “In our country,” explained Jeon, “there are three great Tao mystics, all with miraculous powers, and all called Doryeong. Jang is the most powerful among them. Then there is Jong Ryeom Doryeong, and the last is Yoon Se-pyeong Doryeong. You don’t see others treating Jang like I do because I’m the only one who knows who he really is. Yes, I know this very well, so how could I not fear and respect him?”

But people still could not fully comprehend the mystery. And even if they wanted to believe him it would have been difficult, knowing his reputation for manipulating reality.

There lived a low-level government official nearby, whose family name was Lee. He had a low position because, though he was of noble blood, his family could not afford to send him to Seoul to study for the higher civil service exam. His humble home was situated right by the roadside, so he witnessed Jang begging many times. Jang had a certain bearing that other beggars or denizens of the market did not have, so one day Lee approached Jang and asked him how he had become a beggar.

“I was born into a noble family,” Jang answered, “in the Honam region*.* My parents died suddenly in an epidemic. I didn’t have any siblings or relatives, so I had no one to lean on. I begged to keep myself alive, wandered here and there, finally ending up in Seoul. But I have no skills to speak of, can barely tell my left hand from the right.”

Upon hearing that he was born an aristocrat, like himself, Lee felt sympathy for him. He provided him a meal and a few drinks at his home, and even gave him some rice to take with him. From then on Lee treated Jang kindly and, whenever there was food to share, sent a servant out to bring Jang home for a hot meal.

Then one day Lee saw a long procession carrying a corpse out of the city through East Gate. Normally, he would not have been able to see this because, when he was out in public, he would hide his face with a fan to keep people from recognizing him and asking for special attention. But on this day he was riding a horse, so he could not hide his face and eyes with his fan, and saw the whole scene. He could tell at a glance that the corpse was that of Jang. He felt awful to see this and kept grieving over Jang’s death even after returning home.

“In this world,” Lee thought to himself, “there are more than a few with an unfortunate fate, but can there be another as unfortunate as Jang’s? He suffered fifteen years here as a beggar, and now his corpse gets thrown into a beggar’s grave. Such a pitiful fate!”

Many years passed. There came a day when Lee had to travel to the Honam region to see to some official business. When he was deep in Mt. Jiri he lost his way, and seemed to be getting more lost as the daylight dimmed. He was beginning to lose hope of ever finding his way, but just then in the thick forest he spied a path that was so narrow it seemed only a small child could walk it. He thought there must be a village nearby and started following the path. As he continued walking this long, winding path, he marveled at the clean, clear springs and the fresh green trees and mountains. He must have walked a few dozen *li* when the view suddenly got even better. An enchanting new world spread before him.

He saw in the distance a man dressed in traditional blue nobleman’s attire mounted on the great mythical bird Cheongnosae. The nobleman and several attendants were coming his way, gliding along on the clouds at their feet. This looked like a visit of high government officials, but then Lee doubted his own eyes, thinking, “What would officials be doing here, so deep in the mountains?” He pulled his horse back to hide himself among the trees, but before he could get out of sight they were right in front of him.

The man on Cheongnosae politely brought his cupped hands to his forehead, bowed, and asked, “Have you been well since we last met?

Lee was shocked by this greeting, and did not know what to say.

The man just smiled and asked, “I live here, but what brings you to visit this remote place, honored sir?”

Then the man pulled the mythical bird’s head around and turned back in the direction he had come. This happened in an instant, and in the very next instant he was disappearing from Lee’s view.

Lee followed him. After a while, a huge palace came into view. The palace was great in scale and appeared to take up several square *li*. This marvelous edifice shone brilliantly with shimmering gold in blue light, and it was so huge that he could barely see its entirety.

An official in full court dress was waiting at the front gate of the palace. When Lee arrived the official greeted him with a deep bow. The official gestured with a polite invitation to accompany him, and after passing by three or four palatial mansions they arrived at the main palace. As Lee entered the main hall he saw a man of an imposing presence, dressed in splendid attire, coming his way. In attendance were dozens of women, all exceptionally beautiful, along with over ten small children. Attendants and court officials were present in full regalia, and the whole scene was exactly like that of any audience with a king.

Lee approached the great personage with respectful mincing steps and dared not raise his head to look at him. So the man responded with a modest smile. “You don’t recognize me? Take a good look!”

Lee raised his head just a bit. He saw that this was the same man who had greeted him in the mountains, the one mounted on the great bird Cheongnosae, with the servant holding that fancy parasol for him. But he could not remember having seen him before that.

“I did not know what was happening when I first met you today, and even now when you are asking me this question I have no way to answer you.”

“I am Jang Doryeong. Don’t you recognize me?”

Lee at last raised his head all the way to get a look at the eyes and face of the man in front of him. He was indeed Jang Doryeong. But Lee was stunned to see that, unlike the dirty and shabby man that he knew from the past, this man was so refined and exuded a robust dignity.

Jang prepared a banquet and treated Lee to a feast. The table was heavy with all sorts of exotic dishes and side dishes served on elegant tableware. Dozens of young women played musical instruments and sang and danced. Their performance was also from another world. The women were as beautiful as the goddesses Yoheui and Oknyeo.

Jang told Lee, “In Korea there are four primary mountains and each has a ruler. I rule Mt. Jiri. I made a small mistake in the past, so I was banished to the world of humans for a while. You treated me with sincere kindness then, and I have not forgotten your generosity. I also know that you showed concern for my corpse and arranged for a proper mourning. But I wasn’t really dead then, I had just completed my term of exile. And so, here I am. I heard that you would be passing by today and I wanted to invite you so I could repay your kindness. But this isn’t all my doing—wouldn’t you say your karma with me also had something to do with your being here today?”

The feast ended only when they had had their fill of drinks and happiness. Lee rested that night in a guest suite within the palace. The windows and doors of the guest house, even the eaves and rafters, were studded with precious gem-like corals and crystals and shone so brilliantly it was like daylight. His mind was so clear and his body so energized, all the way through to his bones, that he could not get to sleep.

A farewell party was prepared for him the next day. A bit tipsy from a few drinks, Jang said, “This is not a place for a mortal to stay too long, so you probably ought to be on your way now. The world of immortals is very different from your world, and we will probably not meet again in the future. It is my sincere wish that you take good care of yourself, my honorable friend.”

With this said, he ordered a servant to get Lee safely on his way back. Lee bowed and left. Not long after leaving the palace, they came to a wide-open road. This road was certainly not the same narrow path that he was traveling when he first entered the forest. When they arrived at the spot where he met the welcoming party the day before, his escort bid farewell, turned, and started back toward the palace. Lee marked the path by sticking some branches in the ground, and continued on his way to the Honam region.

A few years later Lee returned to the area and tried to find the branches marking the spot where he had parted with his escort. But all he could see were hill upon hill carpeted by dense forest. As the years went by he felt as young as ever, his hair never went gray, and his health never faltered until the day he passed away, in his nineties.

They say that just before he died he mused, “Thinking back on Jang’s life in this world it’s not all that strange that in all those fifteen years he wore only one set of tattered clothes and didn’t age at all. Yes, he lived fifteen years like it was a single day. But he was not an ordinary person, so it’s only natural that ordinary people couldn’t really see him for what he was…”

Story 2

## A Young Scholar in the World of the Immortals

This story happened in Gapyeong district in Gyeonggi Province during the reign of King Injo (1623-1649).

A young student by the name of Minyong was studying at a Confucian school in the small, remote town of Gapyeong. He had not married yet, and though he was young, he was well-versed in literature and history.

One day, he had some business to attend to in Gwandong, so he called his young servant to accompany him, mounted his slow-footed pony, and started on his way. Soon, though, when they arrived at the road leading into the mountains, they encountered heavy rain. They had no place to go to shelter themselves from the rain, and were forced to keep on riding in it for almost half of the day.

Then, all of a sudden, the young servant dropped dead right there in front of the pony. This stunned Minyong and he just sat there in a daze for the longest time. When he finally came to, he moved the servant’s corpse off the road to some bushes at the base of a hill, got on his pony, and pushed on.

After traveling a few *li* the pony suddenly collapsed and died. Minyong still had a long way to go, but now both his servant and his pony were dead and he just stood there staring ahead vacantly. To make matters worse, the rain continued and his agony became unbearable.

“It’s almost impossible to get all the way to Gwandong on foot,” he moaned, “and all by myself.” At this desolate thought, tears started trickling down his cheeks, and soon he was sobbing with his face in his hands.

After a while he ran out of tears and dropped his hands from his face. And right there in front of him was an old man with a cane, studying him. He had long white hair down to his waist, with salt-and-pepper eyebrows. Even at a glance he seemed like quite an extraordinary character.

The old man asked the young scholar, “What on earth is making you cry like this?”

“My young servant and my pony died on me all of a sudden, and I’m getting soaked, and it seems no matter how far I walk I will never be able to find any shelter at all . . .”

“Oh my, you certainly are in a fix!” The old gentleman lifted his cane and pointed towards the mountains. “Look over there, lad. Do you see that grove of pine trees and bamboo? On the other side of it there is a stream. If you follow upstream a ways you will find some people living there. You’ll probably be able to find shelter with them.”

Minyong managed to pull his eyes from the man’s uncommon appearance and look where the man was pointing with his cane. About one *li* off he could see the grove packed thickly with pine and bamboo trees. He bowed gratefully to the old gentleman and started straight away toward the grove. After taking a few steps he looked back to where he had last seen the old man, but he was nowhere to be seen. It surprised Minyong and made him wonder, but he continued on toward the place that the old man had told him about.

He walked through the grove of big, sturdy pines with a patch of bamboo bowing gracefully in the breeze. And when he came to the other side of the grove, there was a stream, just as the old man had promised. The floor of the stream was covered evenly with smooth white pebbles, making the young scholar think of a carpet of fine white silk. And the water itself shimmered with the color of jade. He rolled up his pants and started walking upstream; the water was so shallow that it barely covered his toes.

After he walked upstream about one *li*, three huge towers came into view in the distance, looming over the woods and stream at their base. Their walls were painted in bright primary colors and covered in fancy carvings that stood out in sharp relief. Fancy balustradesconnected all three stories.

The young man’s clothes were drenched and he was exhausted. With a thorn tree cane that he had found at the bank of the stream he dragged himself slowly toward the towers. When he arrived there he sat down to rest in their shadow.

Halfway up, in a window-like opening in one of the towers, sat a flat white rock two arms’ length square, like a small table, that looked as clean and smooth as a huge gem or whetstone. He took a closer look and found that it was indeed without a single flaw. Soon he realized that every chamber in each tower had one of these stones, and on each stone lay a Book of Changes. From the single stalk of incense in the stone brazier in front of each table curled a single thread of bluish smoke. He could see nothing else in the towers.

He ventured inside one of the towers. Soon he felt a fresh and clean ambience disturbed by neither rain nor wind from the outside. His anxiety and worries subsided in this tranquil place.

He was marveling at this magical atmosphere when he suddenly heard shuffling footsteps coming from the back of the tower. He turned around in surprise to see an old man standing there. He had the hunched body of a turtle and the long beak of a crane, along with a dignified and sophisticated demeanor. He was dressed in elegant blue gossamer silk as fine as the wings of a cicada and was carrying a bamboo cane with nine joints. His divine mien was the complete opposite of the mundane. Minyong knew instinctively that this old man was the master of these towers and, approaching him in humble, sincerely respectful mincing steps, greeted him with a deep bow.

The old man returned his greeting with a kind smile, saying, “I am Seon Ong, the master of this place.” Then he turned, and, motioning to Minyong to follow, continued, “I have been waiting a long time for you.”

The deeper they traveled into the forest, the more amazing became the vision of gorgeous mountains and streams and brilliant open sky. There was a breeze and the sun shone brightly.

But within the brief moment that Minyong looked off to enjoy this view, the old man disappeared. When he looked back to enjoy the beautiful scenery, spread out before him, extending several *li* both left and right, was a resplendent palace made of gems. Several years before, when he had gone to Seoul to take the higher civil service exam, he had seen the royal palaces, but in comparison with this splendid palace, Seoul’s palaces amounted to no more than the humble homes of commoners.

As soon as he reached the outside gate of the palace compound, an official in full court regalia greeted him and took him inside. After they passed several stately buildings, each one as marvelous as a palace, they came to one much grander that looked worthy of accommodating a King. Minyong climbed a few stone steps to the reception hall and saw an elderly man in a bejeweled gown sitting there on a chair that resembled a throne, casually leaning on one armrest. The young man was awestruck and quickly lowered his eyes, because he had never met nobility of such stature before, even during his years of study in Seoul.

In a pleasant voice, the old man told our young scholar to sit. “This place,” he told Minyong, “is not of the human world. It is the world of immortals. I knew that you would come, and that’s why I amsitting here now, welcoming you.”

Only then did Minyong raise his head, slowly, and meet the old man’s eyes. And only then did he realize that this was the master of the fancy towers, the one who had announced himself with the sound of his shuffling feet.

Seon Ong looked around for an attendant and gave him an order: “This young man is probably hungry, so bring him some food. But wait, if he takes food of the immortals he might not be able to digest it properly, so bring him food from the world of humans.”

A short time later, a young servant brought a tray full of food. It was food of the human world, but the dishes on it were rare and quite sumptuous fare. And the young servant served Seon Ong something in a stone bowl. The content of the bowl was bluish in color and looked like a thick soup. Minyong could not be sure, but it seemed it might be a concoction made from the dew of stalactites or precious stones, which only immortals drink. The old man took the bowl from the young servant and swallowed it in one gulp.

Minyong, who had been cold and hungry a moment before, was intoxicated with this world of immortals. Seon Ong waited for him to finish eating, then ordered the servant to take the trays away.

After studying Minyong briefly, Seon Ong made a proposal. “Karma probably brought you to this place. You see, I have a daughter. She has already reached marrying age, but still has not found a suitable person to marry. I would like you to live here and be my son-in-law.”

Minyong was confused. He just stood there staring at the floor and dared not reply. So Seon Ong ordered his servants, “Bring the children here.” Almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth, two girls came from an inner room and bowed to Seon Ong, then sat next to him. They looked to be around twelve or thirteen. Their faces radiated like freshly bloomed peach blossoms, with glowing cheeks and lovely big eyes. They were indeed like a pair of angels.

“These are my daughters,” said Seon Ong. Then he turned to them. “I want this young scholar to be my son-in-law. And I would like you to decide on a good day for the marriage. Figure out an auspicious day and let me know.”

The girls did not waste a second. They immediately started calculating days on their fingers and soon suggested, “The day after tomorrow is the most auspicious day.”

Their father told Minyong, “There, the auspicious day is set now. You can stay in the guest house for the time being.”

Then Minyong heard the master tell a servant to go and fetch somebody. Shortly, a young attendant appeared, eager to do Seon Ong’s bidding. He was dressed in simple but formal attire, with a belt tied loosely at his waist. He was clean and fresh in appearance, and strong and sturdy. As soon as the young man bowed, Seon Ong ordered, “Take our young scholar out for a couple days and entertain him. Have him back here in time for his wedding.”

The attendant accepted his mission and prepared to take Minyong out with him. Minyong bowed to Seon Ong and took his leave. A red palanquin borne by eight men was already waiting for them when the two came out of the palace. The young escort showed Minyong to the palanquin, mounted his horse, and the party set off.

After traveling several *li* they arrived at a stately palace facing a stream. The grounds were clean and well-maintained. Near the mansion was a brilliant pavilion surrounded by gorgeous flowers and luxuriant bamboo. The guard brought the young scholar to the pavilion and had him rest there. He suggested Minyong might want to bathe, and then took out a set of clothes from a small chest made of jade and suggested he dress in these clothes when he finished.

Getting ready to bathe, Minyong was very happy to shed his torn, rain-drenched clothes. The clothes that the attendant had given him were rare and indescribably elegant, and the brilliance of this palace and, later, the delicious taste of the food at dinner were also difficult to express in language of the human world.

Minyong and his escort spent two days at this lovely place. When the auspicious day for the wedding came, the attendant handed him another jade chest of clothes, so Minyong bathed and then put them on. This new ceremonial attire was even more magnificent and luxurious than the clothes he had changed out of. The escort invited Minyong to board the palanquin again. Dozens of guards had assembled both in front and back of the palanquin for the return trip to the palace.

When they arrived at the main gate, one of the palanquin escorts guided the young scholar into a room inside the palace, where he was instructed to stand in a certain place. Soon the Geese Father, the bearer of the traditional pair of wooden goose and gander that signified marital faithfulness, handed the pair to Minyong. The groom bowed to the Geese Father and turned to enter the reception hall.

As the young scholar entered, he heard the tinkle of jewelry in the distance, and felt a puff of fragrant breeze. And there in the great hall were dozens of beautiful women lined up on either side. They all had lovely faces and their gowns were splendid. It would be no exaggeration to say they were sisters of the goddesses Yoheui and Oknyeo. Minyong thought that Seon Ong’s daughters must be among those beautiful women.

A short while later, his bride entered the hall from an inner chamber. The beads of jade in her necklace were so brilliant that they seemed to be lighting up the whole room. She approached the young scholar and lowered the jade fan she was holding in front of her face. Her graceful countenance and beautiful figure were enough to make one’s eyes pop. Compared to the rest of those beautiful ladies in the hall, she was like a phoenix among a flock of sparrows. Minyong was so awed by the radiating bright light that he felt giddy and dared not keep on looking, for fear he would pass out. He was in this state of bedazzlement when a wedding attendant approached to guide him to his post so that the ceremony could proceed. The next step was the bride and groom’s bow to each other, and then sipping from the same cup, not at all different from the traditional procedure in the human world.

When this main part of the ceremony was over, he was led to the groom’s room. There he found finely embroidered folding screens made of gold, which served as room dividers, and silk bedding and a jade bed, all of transcendental quality.

The day after the wedding ceremony was one surprise after another. His mother-in-law came to greet him. In her mid-thirties, she had the pristine beauty of a new lotus bloom. After the lady departed, Minyong attended a fine banquet in his honor, hosted by his father-in-law, the lord of the palace. The guests came and filled the palace inside and out, like drifting clouds. The fabulously provisioned banquet tables and the magnificent music provided an experience beyond his human imagination. Once the drinks were served, a troupe of beautiful women flowed into the banquet hall, long dresses trailing on the floor. As they danced, their broad sleeves and billowing skirts flowed gracefully through the air. They sang in such perfect synchronicity that it seemed as though they were speaking to each other, and their voices were enchanting enough to stop the clouds in their journey overhead. Their song had been written long ago by the Emperor Hyeon Jong, of the Tang Dynasty, and it was called “Dance of the Flying Rainbow Gowns.” The grand feast was over only when the sun set and everyone was in his cups.

Till now Minyong had lived in a humble home with a door made of mugwort stalks and a roof of thatch. The young scholar had been leading a middling life with little worldly experience, but now he felt the rapturous sensation of living the life of a king. He had his misgivings and an occasional bout of anxiety, to be sure, but in his present state of enthrallment those negative thoughts were few and far off in the distance.

However, at night when his new bride came into the room, he was so overwhelmed by her beauty that he froze up and could not approach her. So he went to sleep fully clothed, laying on his stomach and hiding his face in his hands. He carried on like this for about ten days, but his odd anxiety started to subside bit by bit and finally he was able to make the marriage complete. From then on he and his lovely bride blissfully indulged in the exquisite pleasures of being together and never spent even a moment apart.

Then one day Minyong’s wife asked him, “Wouldn’t you like to see the rest of father’s palace?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” he answered. “I’m really curious. Yes, I would love to see it all!”

As soon as he said this she took his hand and led him off to the back garden. There appeared a low reddish-blue cliff and down its middle coursed a stream of spring water, raising a mist where it splashed into the pond. The deeper they went into the garden, the more extraordinary and exquisite the scenery became.

Beautiful flowers and other rare plants shaded them from the hot sun and extraordinary birds and animals came and went ceaselessly. Minyong’s wife took his hand again and led him to the back of the garden, then up a hill. The climb was not that high or that rough, but they had to round quite a few bends on the winding road to the top. When they got to the top they found a platform two or three stories high that looked as though it was a natural creation. They mounted it, and when they looked down from the platform an endlessly vast ocean opened to view. There, riding the ocean waves, were three islands flickering in and out of sight. And they saw scenes illustrating the different phases in the process of enlightenment. Minyong’s bride pointed to each and identified them for him. “That is Bongnae, that one over there is Bangjang, and that one to the right is Yeongju.” And the rest—Hyeonpo, Changju, Gwangsang, Nangweon, Gon-gu and another two—were also showing themselves off. Golden palaces and silver towers floated far off in the middle of the sky, surrounded by lovely clouds and mist. Someone was riding a phoenix, another was on the *nansae* bird, one on a crane, one on a dragon, one herding giraffes, one jumping up and down on a cloud, one directing winds, another walking on air, yet others strolling on rolling ocean waves. . . And other figures played with each other in twos and threes, going from east to west, north to south.

The two newlyweds could hear the pleasant subtle sounds of panpipe and bamboo flute from the world of immortals. Minyong had filled his eyes with fantastic sights, but he did not get to see all that he wanted to see—they had to return to the palace because it was getting dark.

One day, half a year after coming to live in his new world, the young scholar’s father-in-law called him. “Hasn’t it been a while since you married? Your wife is showing no sign of pregnancy yet. Perhaps that is because you haven’t been able to let go of the ways of the human world.”

Then he ordered a servant to bring a certain remedy. When the servant brought the gourd-shaped jade bottle, Seon Ong opened it and poured out two or three pills into his hand, then offered them to Minyong. “If you take these you can adapt better to our world.”

Minyong took the pills right away. His body became marvelously light and his heart felt buoyant. Not long after this, his wife became pregnant. In a few months she gave birth to a healthy boy, and then to another boy the following year.

Three years passed since Minyong first met Seon Ong. One day he was lazing around with his wife, when suddenly a tear tickled down his cheek. His wife was alarmed and asked what the matter was.

“There is no end,” answered Minyong, “to the happiness that this mortal country bumpkin feels at being Seon Ong’s son-in-law. But it’s already been three years since I last saw my aging parents. That tear came naturally from my longing to see them again.”

His wife smiled and tried to console him. “Oh, my! You miss your parents—of course! Why don’t you go see them if you like, no need to be feeling sad.” And she appealed to her father, “My husband needs to see his parents.”

Seon Ong, after hearing his daughter’s appeal, called the young scholar and told him that, indeed, he should go visit his parents.

He felt elated when he imagined how impressed the villagers in his hometown would be when they saw the carriage he arrived in, and the countless servants that would form his train. What a surprise when, soon afterwards, his wife handed him a simple bundle containing commoner’s clothing. He did not let this bother him, though, and he got all ready to leave. Soon he was bidding farewell to his parents-in-law.

Seon Ong said to him, “Enjoy your visit with your parents. Don’t worry, we won’t forget you. I will get you back here before too long,” and he called on a faithful servant to accompany Minyong on his way.

When Minyong finished taking his leave and came outside, he found one skinny pony with tattered saddle and a servant holding onto the pony’s reins, smiling at him. Upon closer look, they were the servant and pony who had suddenly dropped dead toward the beginning of his journey. At first he was so surprised that he could not utter a word. But finally, “How . . . Why . . . What are you doing here?! What on earth is going on?”

“While I was accompanying you,” the servant replied, “someone suddenly dragged me off and brought me here. I can’t explain this any better than you can. But since coming here I have spent three comfortable and leisurely years. Yes, already three years . . .”

The young scholar’s head was spinning with all this and it was all he could do to pull himself together. He forced himself to stop thinking about it and hung his bundle of clothes over the saddle, got on the pony, and started on his way. When he first came here, it had taken him hours to pass those utterly beautiful secluded hills and rivers before arriving at Seon Ong’s palace. But now, even though he was not even a few dozen steps away from the palace gate, those beautiful hills and rivers were nowhere to be seen. Only thick haze and endless rough fields of weed filled his view. When he turned to look back, that land of immortals was gone as though it had been only a dream. He felt sad and, before he could help himself, sad tears started falling down his cheeks.

Unable to bear watching this, the faithful servant finally said to him, “Calm down. You lived in the land of immortals for three years—haven’t you found purity of the heart after all that time? It looks like you still haven’t gotten rid of the seven emotions that humans are burdened with. That’s why you are so sad now.”

“Ah, yes, I’m sorry,” replied Minyong, wiping his tears in embarrassment.

They had been traveling less than a *li* since leaving the world of immortals, but that world’s wide, smooth roads were already far behind them. Here the road was narrow and bumpy. At around this point in Minyong’s journey, the servant told him that he would be going back, and bade farewell. “You are already well on your way home now, so I will say good-bye. Go in peace.”

And so the young scholar returned to his village. When he arrived at his home he heard a raucous cacophony of drums and cymbals coming from it. A shaman had been hired to beckon and beseech the spirits of the house. The young scholar walked into the house during this ritual, and when his family saw him they all fell back in shock. At first they thought he was a ghost, but when he greeted them with a big smile, they realized he was alive. His mother asked why he had waited so long to come back from his trip. She was a sensible woman who did not believe in magic, and he thought that if he told her the truth she would not believe him, thinking he was telling a foolish lie. So he muttered and stuttered the first thing that came to mind.

Three years before, when they had all thought he was dead, they quickly held a memorial service and by now had already performed three annual services. This very day they had called on the shaman to perform a ritual to the spirits to let his soul stop wandering and finally rest in peace.

Once he was in his tiny old room, he opened the bundle he had brought with him and found that it contained one full set of clothes for each of the four seasons.

One year passed. His mother felt sorry for the young man still living his single life, and arranged for the daughter of a village scholar to be his wife. Minyong was docile in nature and his mother was very stern; he did not have it in him to go against her wishes. So he took the girl as his wife. But the marriage turned out to be unhappy and ultimately the relationship between them soured.

Meanwhile, Minyong had an old friend, who was such a good friend that Minyong felt closer to him than he did to his own siblings. They even shared Minyong’s room and would talk long into the night. One night Minyong’s friend finally asked him why he had not returned home for three years. Minyong had been holding his experience in the world of the immortals in his heart all this time and could not hold it in any longer. He told his friend all about his life there in the world of immortals and even how he had a wife waiting for him. This surprised his friend so much that he could hardly believe it, and he regarded Minyong very closely. But no matter how closely the friend studied Minyong, he could not find anything different about him from before. Except for one thing: his clothes were made of no fabric he had ever seen, not cotton, nor cotton wool, nor silk . . . Neither were they died or embroidered. On the other hand, they looked strangely light and warm. And another thing: He had noticed that in each season Minyong wore only one set of clothes, without ever having to wash them. They never became dirty nor did a single thread ever become undone. And, strangest of all, they always looked new.

A couple more years passed. The young scholar finally found a chance to tell his mother about his life in the world of immortals. He was surprised to see that, though at first his mother thought it awfully strange, in the end she came to believe him.

One day, three years after the young scholar’s return home, Seon Ong’s messenger suddenly paid a visit. He brought a letter from Minyong’s wife, along with his two children.

“Next year, there will be a big calamity in the world of humans, and everyone in your area will suffer a disastrous end. I’m sending an escort. Follow the escort with your whole family; he will lead you back to our world.”

Minyong showed the letter to his friend, and even brought his two children out to show him. His friend was delighted to see that each child looked clean and fresh, as bright as a marble and as healthy and beautiful as a tree in spring. Minyong told his mother about the letter that he had received from his wife from the other world, and asked her to come along with him with the whole family. She agreed without any hesitation. Finally, they sold their home and farm and invited all their relations and neighbors to a farewell feast that lasted the whole day.

It was the year 1635 when the whole family and their friends left with the escort sent by Minyong’s wife.

EPILOGUE: The year after they left their village, in 1635, the great Qing invasion swept through it, killing almost everyone still living there. Ever since Minyong and his party left their village, no one has ever heard anything at all of Minyong or his family.

Story 3

## A Retired Scholar meets the Lord of the Underworld

There lived a retired scholar in Yeonan, which is in the northern province of Hwanghae. No one remembers his name. He was ill one day so he stayed in bed moaning away, when he experienced an unbelievable event.

Suddenly, in broad daylight, two gaolers from the Underworld barged into his room and roared, “Get up! You are ordered to the Underworld!” Without giving him even a moment to respond, the two gaolers slapped an iron shackle around his neck. He was dragged off one hundred *li*,totally oblivious to what was happening. They arrived at a fortress that was so tall it pierced the sky. They entered through the huge gate and kept on dragging him several more *li*, toward a faintly visible palace floating in the wide open sky. When they arrived at the gates of the palace, each gaoler grabbed one of his arms, dragged him up to the throne room, and forced him to lie face down at the foot of the throne. The scholar sneaked a look up at the throne and saw someone that looked like a king sitting on it. Officials stood to the left and right of him, and in the courtyard in back of the scholar he could hear a large honor guard drilling. The troops seemed to be marching in fine order in accordance with their commanders’ stern orders.

A cold sweat of fear trickled down his back. The fear forced his eyes back down to the floor and they stayed there. After a while an official stood between him and the throne and asked, “Where do you live and what is your name? How old are you now and what kind of work do you do? You had better be truthful in every detail, and don’t even think of lying.”

The scholar’s whole body trembled as he answered, “My family name is so-and-so and my given name is such-and-such. I live in Yeonan, in Hwanghae province. My family has been living there for generations. I was born with a plain and foolish disposition so I couldn’t do anything but pray all day. I was told that I could avoid going to hell if I prayed to the Buddha for mercy, so I spend most days praying and attending services for the dead.”

As soon as the scholar finished speaking, the official went into another room. After a while the official returned and told the scholar, “You were not supposed to be brought here. You have the same name as someone else who was on the list and the gaoler made a mistake. You may return home.” The scholar stood up, pressed his palms together in respect and gratitude, and bowed.

Then the official told the scholar to go back down the stone steps and prostrate himself to the throne. Soon the person on the throne spoke to him:

“I have a favor to ask you. When you return to your world visit my home and tell them that I need a new outfit. It has been a long time since I came here, and the seams of the outfit I was wearing when I came here are coming apart. My attendant will give you directions to the house. No mistakes, mind you.”

The scholar replied, “I humbly accept Your Excellency’s command. How dare I not convey your message? I will keep it in my heart and make certain that the message arrives without mishap. However, the Underworld and my world are different. People may think that I am talking nonsense and may not believe me. What should I do if this happens? Please provide me with some proof to make them believe the order came from you.”

“You are absolutely right,” replied the man on the throne. “When I was alive I served as a mid-level official in the government. The belt of office that I used to wear around my waist is there with my family. It has a small scratch on one side. This belt should be in a book chest together with the third volume of the Book of Odes. No one in the family knows this but me. If you tell them this they will certainly believe you came from me.”

The retired scholar replied, “Yes, that will work. But even if they do make a new set of clothes, how can it be sent from the world of humans to this world?

“The clothes can be burned after performing a memorial service in my name,” the man replied.

The scholar answered, “All right then, I will do as you ordered.”

He was then told that he could leave. On his way out, he asked his gaoler escorts, “So, who was that great personage sitting on the throne?”

One of the gaolers answered, “He is the Lord of the Underworld. His family name is Bak and his given name is Wu. Now, let’s go.”

Soon after they left the fortress they came upon a wide river. When they arrived at its bank, each gaoler grabbed the scholar by one arm and tossed him into the water. His eyes popped open in surprise, and he saw that he was in his bed at home. And he found, more to his amazement, that he had actually been dead for three days already.

The old scholar left for Seoul as soon as he felt better. He found the house that the Lord of the Underworld had told him to find, and indeed, it was the house of Bak Wu. Bak’s two sons had passed the higher civil service exam recently and were already public officials of some note. He approached the outer gate of the house and asked the guards there to announce him, but the guards refused. The heavy doors of the great red gate were shut tight, and it seemed no one would ever be able to enter. The old scholar didn’t know what to do, and just lingered there leaning against the wall, exhausted from his search.

He stayed there a long, long time. The sun was starting to sink in the western sky when he happened to notice a servant coming out of a side gate. He seemed to be around the old scholar’s age. He thought this was his big chance and so he pleaded with the servant to somehow arrange for him to see the owner of the house. The aged servant sensed the seriousness of the scholar’s plight and went inside to inform the owner of his request. After a short while he came back out and escorted the scholar into the house. Bak Wu’s two sons were sitting in the reception room.

The servant indicated that he should sit in a spot facing them, and when he got seated one of them asked, “Who are you and what is it that you have to say?”

He answered, “I am a scholar living in Yeonan in Pyeongan Province. Recently I died and was taken off to the Underworld. There I met His Excellency, your deceased father. He asked me to convey a message to you, so now I dare to approach you with that message . . .”

The two sons became angry and, even before finishing what he had to say, one of them shouted angrily at the servant, “Who is this old gremlin that dares come into our house to tell such a frivolous and absurd story? Show this man out right away.”

The anxious scholar thought this would just not do and raised his voice, “Now look here! First listen to everything I have to say, and if you still think the story still doesn’t make sense it won’t be too late to kick me out then. I have proof that will show you I’m telling the truth.”

They were taken aback by this insolence, but one of them became curious and pressed, “You have proof, do you? Alright, what is it?”

Without further ado the scholar told them about Bak Wu’s belt. At hearing this concrete proof, the two sons began to doubt their own doubts. They found the book chest and opened it. Sure enough, there was a rank belt packed in along with the third volume of the Book of Odes.

Yes, the belt had disappeared after Bak Wu’s death and no one had been able to find it till now, with the old scholar’s help. So now they believed that what the old scholar had told them was all true, without even a single discrepancy. This contact from Bak Wu revived his memory in the hearts of the whole family and they began to wail as though the patriarch had just died and the mourning had just begun.

Bak’s wife gathered everyone in the family together and asked the scholar exactly what he had seen and heard. They immediately assembled a new outfit, as the Lord of the Underworld had requested. They set an auspicious date for the memorial rites, and on that day burned the outfit and let the ashes fly away. On the third day after they burned the memorial rites incense, the old scholar and everyone in the family saw Bak Wu in their dreams. They all reported that Bak Wu thanked them for sending the new outfit.

The family asked the scholar to stay with them for a while. They treated him cordially to wonderful food and presented him with plenty of new clothes.

After this occasion the scholar visited them every time he came to Seoul, and kept warm relations with them until the day that he visited the Underworld again and didn’t return.

Story 4

## Hong Naebeom Visits the Netherworld

Hong Naebeom was a civil official in Pyeongyang. He passed the civil service examination in the year 1603, during King Seonjo’s reign, and was promoted to a vice-ministerial post in 1637, during King Injo’s reign. When he turned eighty-two years old in 1643, his son, a scholar, petitioned the Chief Royal Secretary to award his aging father the status of Civil Servant Emeritus, a commission without portfolio. However, his petition was rejected.

In 1644, Prince So-hyeon, the son of King Injo, was staying in Pyeongyang for a short time on his return to Korea from Shenyang, China. Hong Naebeom’s son, whose petition for his father had been turned down by the Chief Royal Secretary, appealed to the prince. Prince So-hyeon sent the petition to the King, and the King himself appointed Hong as Court Scribe. One day, though, Hong unexpectedly announced to his family, “I will die this year, for sure.” And shortly after his prediction he did indeed die.

Actually, a few years before this happened, in 1594 when he was relatively young, he had already died once. He had been suffering from typhoid for about ten days when death came for him. And this is how that story goes.

When Hong died his corpse was wrapped in a shroud and placed in a coffin, and then everybody except his wife left the room. She stayed at his side, wailing in her misery. Suddenly, the corpse started moving on its own, and rolled out of the coffin and onto the floor. This shocked his wife, and she screamed and fainted. Those outside the room heard her scream, and rushed into the room to help. They also saw the shrouded corpse moving. So they quickly unwrapped the shroud and discovered that the corpse was a corpse no more. Hong told his family that he had died, gone to the world of the dead, and returned. Then he related the whole story to those hovering around him. . .

In my dream—for that is what it felt like—when I arrived in the world of the dead I found myself at what seemed like a district office. It was quite an imposing, solemn place. Inside were row upon row of officials working away at their desks. In the courtyard outside, idling away their time as they waited for a mission, was a group of scary-looking *yaksha* and *rakshasha* demons, the spirits that escort and torment the dead on their way to hell. A couple of these gaolers caught sight of me and jumped up nimbly and grabbed me, then made me kneel at the front of the courtyard. An official in a long robe all black shouted down at me, “There are three philosophies in the world. One of them concerns the Buddha: Please the Buddha, you go to heaven, offend the Buddha and you go to hell. Is it true what they say, that you constantly blasphemed against the Buddha, and didn’t believe in heaven or hell at all? That you always persisted in your narrow-minded ways and acted with spite and ill will? Now, I order you to hell for all eternity, never to be free again.”

As soon as he finished speaking, two gaolers holding iron lances grabbed me by the hair and tried to drag me away. I shouted, “No! Something is wrong here!” Right then a Bodhisattva with a golden face appeared, raised her hand to stop the gaolers, and said with a smile, “Yes, something must be wrong! This person is supposed to live until he turns 83. He is appointed to die only after he has reached junior grade of the second rank. Why is he here already? The person I told you to bring is the Hong Naebeom that lives in Jeonju. But, since this gentleman has come all this way, he might as well get a look around, and serve later as witness to people still alive that heaven and hell really do exist.”

The gaolers grunted their assent and took me off to our first stop. We soon arrived at the chamber where antagonistic people are punished. I saw a tablet that read “Hell for the Antisocial.” Inside was a tall barrel-like furnace made of brick, full of sizzling-hot coals venting a fierce blaze out the top. A sinner was brought to the furnace and made to kneel by it. A burning iron skewer was taken from the barrel and jabbed repeatedly into the sinner’s eyes. About ten sinners in a row were given the same horrible treatment, and afterward they were hung upside down like drying fish.

The guard explained, “These people, while they were alive, were not only nasty to their family and friends but treated them like enemies, like citizens of warring countries. They are being punished for their sin of ignoring their blood ties and coveting their relations’ wealth.”

The next place we visited was “Hell for Liars.” There were several tall iron columns, with a huge rock laid at the base of each. The gaolers brought sinners there to kneel at the base of the columns and then pierced their tongues with pokers. Then they stuck wire through the hole in their tongues and hoisted them up with the rope that was hanging from the top of each column. These sinners dangled there with enough space between their feet and the floor for the heavy rock to be hung from their feet. Their eyes popped out with the pain of their tongues being pulled out.

One of the gaolers explained, “These people, while they were living in the world, used their long tongues to cleverly manipulate language and separate their own blood relations and alienate friends. That is why they are being punished in this way.”

The next chamber we visited was “Hell for Bloodsuckers,” where they punish those who tried to cheat everyone they ever met. There were dozens of people, all naked, lying on the ground. Several inexpressibly heinous-looking demons had bound these sinners with thick wire, so that they could not move at all. Suddenly about eight or nine emaciated and starving ghosts came crowding around them. They whipped out their knives and started carving flesh from the prostrate sinners with practiced ease, then put the pieces of flesh in a cast iron pot to boil. Even after they gorged themselves they still seemed hungry. They went back, then, and dug into the sinners’ heads and ate their brains. After a while a magic breeze passed through and the sinners’ bodies became whole again. But now, iron snakes and copper dogs went at them and drank their blood and sucked the marrow from their bones. Their agonized screams of pain were so loud that they made the ground tremble.

“This type,” one of the gaolers told me, “served as important high-level officials during their time on earth. They pretended to be righteous but they took bribes on the sly and while they served as high officials, aiming to be admired for their propriety, they sucked the blood and sweat from the people. And those playing the role of scholars, for their own selfish reasons, only pretended to honor our ancestors. These masters of deception twisted the noble words of our revered ancestors, like the Duke of Zhou and Confucius, using them for their own ignoble goals. That’s why they are being punished like this.”

After the gaolers explained this, they conferred between themselves. One said, “There’s no point in showing him all the other chambers. Let’s skip them and end our tour on a more positive note.” And the other replied, “That would certainly be better!”

So they stopped showing me around the prison. We walked about ten minutes to the southeast. A huge watch tower came into view, with a sign on it that read “Hall of Impending Reincarnation.” Auspicious milky-white clouds hung low and a light incense haze suffused the air. I saw hundreds of monks in their robes, some of them holding hand fans of white jade, some holding pale blue lotus flowers, and some of them in the lotus position quietly chanting the Diamond Sutra or the Sutra of Nirvana to themselves. All of them were Bodhisattvas, on the way to enlightenment.

The guard explained, “Everyone here practiced the tenets of Buddhism throughout their lives, so they have all avoided the suffering and agony that you saw before and made it into paradise. In other words, this is heaven.”

After seeing heaven, we returned to the palace of the Underworld. The Bodhisattva with the golden face asked me, “Can it be true that most people in the world do not believe in Buddha, or that there are heaven and hell? Well, how about you now?”

“Yes,” I answered, “thanks to you I learned a lot. I will keep it in my heart and tell everyone in the world of the living.” I bowed, showing my appreciation for the lesson I had been given.

Then the official in the black robe ordered the gaolers, “Take him back now.”

At that moment I woke up. I remembered the fate that I had just escaped and my heart trembled with fear and awe. That was three days after my death.

Hong Naebeom felt proud to have been to the Underworld and he boasted of it to everyone. After that, he enjoyed the rest of the life span originally allotted to him and was promoted to the proper official rank, exactly as the Bodhisattva had promised.

Finally, he returned to the world of the dead, this time for good.

Story 5

## The Ghost of Scholar Shin Bewitches Choi Munbae

Choi Munbae, who lived in the district of Un-gok in the city of Wonju, was a scion of a noble family that boasted generation after generation of high government officials. He and all of his siblings were good scholars and were preparing to take the higher civil service exam at the same time.

Beginning in July of that year, all of Munbae’s brothers, together with two of their friends, lived at the dormitory in the nearby shrine to revered Confucians and spent their days studying for the exam. One day at dawn, Munbae went outside to relieve himself. One friend followed him out soon after, but when he got outside he could not find Munbae. His friend noticed that Munbae’s shoes still lay side by side by the door, and when he went back out to the gate, he found Munbae’s coat there on the ground outside the wall. The friend thought it very strange and called Munbae’s brothers to let them know what was happening. All of them started searching at the foot of the mountain behind the school.

The morning dew on the leaves and grass had already dropped to the ground by the time the students came upon the freshly-snapped end of an arrowroot vine. A few steps further they found Munbae tied to a pine tree. As they drew closer, they saw that both of his arms were wrapped around the tree as if he were hugging it, and an arrowroot vine around his waist secured him to the tree. It was evident that the vine had been snapped off just before they found him.

Munbae was in a daze, and his lips were moving but no sound came from them. Remembering a cure from folk medicine, one of his brothers went off and soon came back with some urine and washed Munbae’s eyes with it. Only then did Munbae respond, mumbling, “You’re here, Big Brother!” But after this, he became mute again.

The sun had already risen by this time. They took Munbae home, one of them carrying him on his back. All the way back, Munbae kept on losing and regaining consciousness, and he did not begin talking again until late that night, after they gave him some medicine. The next morning, he was normal, though he felt like he was waking with a hangover. His father and brother pried him with questions about his experience, and this is what Munbae told them. . .

When I first went out to pee, a young boy with an honest and noble face came up to me, bowed, and said, “I would like to make your acquaintance.”

I asked him who he was.

“I am Shin Hae-ik.”

When I heard his name I realized that he was the famous Scholar Shin, who had already passed the government exam with highest honors, and at a very young age. I did not realize then that he had already died.

Shin continued, “I am supposed to get together with some people near here. Why don’t you come and join us for some good conversation?” Without waiting for my answer, he told his servant to bring around a couple of small palanquins. When they arrived, he got me into mine and then he got into his own. Besides the porters there were several others in attendance. Shin and I travelled side by side. He hurried the porters along. “We must get there before the sun rises.”

I suddenly regained my presence of mind and told Shin, “I should let my parents know where I’m going. . .”

He interrupted, “Well, we really don’t have much time now. You can send them a letter.”

“But where can I find a courier around here, at such a late hour?”

“You’re right. But I have a way.” He handed me a writing brush and paper.

When I got ready to write something, suddenly nothing came to mind and I couldn’t think of anything to write. “What should I do? My mind has gone blank and I can’t think of a thing to say. . .”

“All right, then, I’ll tell you what to write.” Before long, he articulated a verse and I wrote it down. Then he took the verse, wrapped it around a stone and threw it into the air, in what seemed the direction of home.

After this we hurried along, and in just a short while we arrived at our destination. The place was as big and as beautiful as a royal palace. There in the main hall sat a man who looked like a high court official. He was wearing a golden headpiece and dressed in official red attire and looked very grand. Scholar Shin approached him in respectful mincing steps and greeted him with a bow. I followed, in the same manner.

The official studied me with piercing eyes, then said, “All right, it might be worth trying a discussion with him.”

Then he took out a book and handed it to me. When I opened the book, I found that the margins were full of notes, in both big and small characters. It was an original edition of a history, and looked freshly printed. The official pointed to a phrase in the book and invited, “Read this, here. What does it say?”

I uttered, “It reads “yellow – sprout – rock – life. . .”

“And what does that mean?”

“I. . . I do not really know.”

“Tsk-tsk, how can you say you don’t know?” he said.

I looked carefully at each and every big and small marginal note but nowhere could I find any explanation of the phrase, and in the end, I wasn’t able to figure out the meaning.

The official exploded in anger and reprimanded me. He then ordered his guards, “Take him out now and tie him up!”

I was terribly afraid and didn’t dare do anything to resist; they dragged me all the way out to the middle gate of the compound. Scholar Shin followed along, feeling really bad for me, and didn’t know what to do. “I’m so sorry! Oh, what can I do?! I’m so embarrassed—you came here because of me, and now you’ve ended up in an awful predicament like this. But I’m sure you will be released soon, so don’t fret too much.”

After that, everything began to go hazy, and then I went blank. I remember nothing until my brothers rescued me.

After Munbae recounted his story, on the collar of his shirt he discovered the verse that Shin had dictated to him. The brush strokes were straight and the characters distinct, and he recognized in them his own hand.

This is the verse that scholar Shin dictated:

The fringe of a gale buffets the sky.

When will we return to our palace Cho-weon-gak,

set alight by the setting sun’s oblique rays?

If the divine wind chances to catch the Blue Bird’s wings,

pray the wheel of karma turns ‘round to our world!

Chapter 2: The World of Ghosts

Story 6

## The Ghost Inspectors

Han Jun-gyeom, also known as Han Gong, was a former prime minister who retired to the town of Seo-pyeong. He had a distant cousin in Honam Province. That cousin was somewhat weak-spirited by nature, and as poor as they come. Because he was so poor, he would often come to Han Gong for support. Every time he visited, Han Gong felt sorry for the ragged and hungry man shivering in the cold and never failed to treat him with kindness. He never turned him down and would treat him to food and even give him the clothes off his back. Once this distant cousin visited, he would stay almost a whole month. Han Gong thought that his cousin was by nature a rather incapable sort but never blamed him for his unfortunate situation.

One day Han Gong’s cousin came to see him again. But this time, for some reason, he soon said he needed to leave for home. New Year’s day was near, however, so Han Gong tried to get him to stay longer and said, “It wouldn’t do you any good to greet the new year on the road, just you and your horse and your empty belly, would it now? Why don’t you stay and fill yourself up with a nice traditional New Year’s soup, and wake up in a warm bed when you greet the new year? Come, I insist.”

But Han Gong’s cousin stubbornly persisted. Han Gong, though, in his way, did not give up, and kept trying to get him to stay. So finally his cousin, acknowledging to himself his dire situation, could not help but give in to Han Gong, and ended up staying.

A few days later, at the end of the month, he asked Han Gong for a favor. “I never told anyone this before, but I have a secret power that no one else has. Now please don’t be shocked by what I tell you. Every year on the first day of the first month, tens of thousands of ghosts report to me and I inspect them. If they are not constantly monitored these ghosts torment people, in any way they want. This is a very serious situation. That’s the reason I repeatedly insisted on going back home sooner. Since you got me to stay longer I will have to ask you to let me inspect the ghosts right here in your home.”

Han Gong thought this was quite peculiar and could hardly believe it, but gave his consent anyway. Then his cousin, once he got Han Gong’s permission, begged for Han Gong’s understanding again and said, “Since this work is of most importance, I will need to use your main hall to carry it out.”

“You can certainly use the main hall,” Han Gong told him. He ordered his servants to clean it.

That night, the cousin sat stiff and erect on the floor of the main hall, facing the south like a king facing his subjects. From outside the hall Han Gong peeked in at his cousin sitting there exuding an aura of authority. It was not long before a horde of innumerable ghosts on horses burst into the yard, dismounted and crowded into the hall. Han Gong saw that his cousin’s mention of “tens of thousands” was not an exaggeration. No words can describe their weird appearance and strange attire. They all gathered in a circle around Han Gong’s cousin and bowed. The crowd was so dense that there was not enough space for all of them and as more came they overflowed into the courtyard and then out to the stone stairs leading from the street into the compound. Finally, after they all managed to squeeze inside, the cousin took out a ledger and started calling out names. A few guard demons at the top of the stairs leading up to the main hall yelled these names out to the milling crowd in the courtyard, as if this were a roll call of the clerks employed at a government office.

The inspection had started in the late evening, and was nearing its finish just before dawn when a ghost arrived late. Then another ghost came in, this one jumping over the wall. Han Gong’s cousin ordered the ghosts brought to him, and demanded an explanation for their tardiness.

The first tardy ghost explained, “Well, I was lucky enough to be down in Yeongnam at this difficult time and see all those people finding it so hard to come up with even one meal—anyway, I was infecting a certain scholar’s home with smallpox when I heard about your inspection.” Then he added, in a falsely diffident voice, “But I’m very sorry if I have committed some unforgivable sin.”

The one who had come jumping over the wall copied the other ghost’s excuse. “I was infecting a certain family in Gyeonggi Province, where a famine has been going on for a long time, and I just found out that roll was being called. So I rushed off and arrived just now.” Then this ghost made a deep bow. “And because I was late I committed this offense of jumping over the Prime Minister’s wall.”

After hearing their explanations, Han Gong’s cousin scolded them, bellowing, “What?! Not only have you two disobeyed my orders by coming late, you have also spread illness among the people. But you,” he said, addressing the second ghost, “as if coming late and spreading illness weren’t bad enough, have committed a much more serious offense by jumping over the wall of our noble Prime Minister’s home. Such behavior can hardly be forgiven.” To all of the gathered ghosts, he announced, “The one who simply came late will be given one hundred lashes, and the one who jumped over the wall gets a few hundred lashes and will then be shackled and locked up in prison.”

Then he ordered all of the other ghosts to refrain from harming the people. Only after confirming their understanding several times did he end the inspection and dismiss them. The ghosts surrounding Han Gong’s cousin bowed to him and left, squeezing back out through the front gate. Those tens of thousands of ghosts leaving at the same time made a huge ruckus and it took quite a while for the commotion to subside.

Han Gong’s cousin, still sitting there so erect in the empty main hall, gazed off into the void, focusing on nothing in particular, with a touch of concern on his brow. He sat there like that until the rooster crowed and daylight began to brighten the sky.

Han Gong, who had been watching everything from the other side of the wall, was in a trance, still shaking his head in astonishment, unable to make sense of what he had just witnessed. Later that morning, first chance he got, Han Gong asked his cousin how in the world he had acquired the ability to handle ghosts.

And his cousin answered, “It was in the days when I was young and studying in a temple in the mountains. There was a monk who had quite a fearsome and bizarre countenance. He was very old and did not have long to live. Most people looked down on him and spoke ill of him. But when I saw this shabby old man, somehow I felt sorry for him and gave him leftover rice now and then and helped him in one way or another. Things went on that way and then one day, on a bright moonlit night, the old monk whispered to me, ‘The view of the valley behind the temple is superb. Won’t you come with me to see it?’

“I had been staying in my room studying all the time and had never seen the valley, but I believed him and followed him out. We left the temple and reached a point where there was no sign of people. He stopped us there and pulled a book from inside his coat, close to his heart. As he handed it to me he said, ‘I have this certain magical power but I am old and don’t have many more days to live. I decided long ago to bequeath this power to someone else, but no matter how far I searched—throughout the whole country, in fact—I could not find the right person. Now, at long last, I have finally found that person. That is you, and so I want to give this to you. Please take it.’

“I opened the book and read the title: *Appendix: Ghosts*. One section contained the rules for managing ghosts. The old monk magically created a copy of the section right there on the spot and then set it afire. In an instant hundreds of ghosts appeared. I trembled in fear when I saw them. The old monk sat next to me and called the roll for each and every name on his list, then told his demon assistants, who had appeared along with the ghosts, ‘I am very old. I have asked this young man to take charge of inspection, and you will follow his orders from now on!’

“I took the book and issued a few orders, then sent them on their way. I returned to the temple with the old monk and went to sleep. When I woke up early at dawn I looked for the old monk, but he was gone. Since that day, for many years now, I have continued to manage the ghosts. Nobody else knows this—you are the first person I have told.”

Han Gong marveled at hearing this and asked, “Can you instruct me in this magic?”

“I could, I suppose. With your positive spirit you are certainly qualified. But this kind of work is for some lowly and destitute scholar, not for the honorable Prime Minister.”

The next day, the cousin said good bye to Han Gong and left, and after this he never came back. Han Gong one day sent someone to search out his whereabouts. He was told that his cousin was living deep in the mountains in a ramshackle hermitage the size of a crab shell and there was no one living for many *li* in all directions. Han Gong kept asking him to visit again; each time, though, his cousin ignored his invitation. Han Gong sent someone once again, but by then his cousin had moved elsewhere.

He had covered his tracks forever.

Story 7

## The Smallpox Ghost and the Scholar

A scholar whose home was in Seoul was returning home from a trip he made to Yeongnam on some business he had to attend to. The sun was setting, so he stopped at a village inn to spend the night. But the innkeeper could not accept any customers, saying he had a child who was critically ill with the smallpox. The scholar had no choice but to stay in a storeroom attached to the inn.

That night, a grizzled old man visited the scholar in his dreams and told him, “I’ve been a guest here for several days.” The scholar then told the old man about his frustration with the innkeeper for closing the door in his face when he had tried to enter.

The old man replied, “Yes. That innkeeper was unreasonable, and to top it off he was rude. Consequently, I have decided to kill his child.”

“But what was so irritating that you speak of killing?”

“That innkeeper has live pheasants, he has beef, dried persimmons . . . an abundance of food in his house, but he hides it all away under lock and key and has never even once shared any of it with me. I loathe the man. In fact,” he cackled, “that’s why his child is sick now.”

Only then did the scholar fully realize that this old man was the Smallpox Ghost.

“Well, that may be enough reason to loathe someone, but isn’t it going too far to kill a small child over something like food? The poor boy’s father may simply have forgotten to serve it. I will talk to him tomorrow morning and have him lay out a nice table for us. And if we can share such a meal, won’t that be a sumptuous treat for the road?” Then he pleaded, seriously, “How about giving a special gift of mercy to the child and return him to health?”

“I have already made up my mind. No, I can’t go along with you on that.”

“Come now, let’s just do as I ask for now, and see what happens. I really do wish you would agree.”

“Well, we’ll see. . .” The smallpox ghost grumbled, yielding to the scholar’s plea for the time being. Then he vanished.

At dawn, the scholar called the innkeeper and asked him how far the smallpox had progressed.

“Oh my oh my, his life is hanging by a thread!”

“I can save your child’s life. Will you do what I ask you to do?”

“I will do whatever you ask if you can save my child.”

The scholar pointed his thumb back over his shoulder, indicating the inn. “You have a live pheasant in there, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. But how. . . ?”

“You have beef, too, of course?”

“Yes, I also have that.”

“Dried persimmons, too?”

“Yes. . . yes, of course.” The expression on the innkeeper’s face was that of wonder at each piercing question that the scholar uttered in the form of a correct answer.

“Your child’s situation is as grave as it is because you are keeping these foods all for yourself. Slaughter the cow immediately and boil it, roast the pheasant, and serve them to me. And don’t forget the persimmons. Fill up two tables with those foods, end to end. Then let me know when you have done this.”

The innkeeper rushed off to prepare the food as the scholar had instructed him, and even added a few rice cakes, which the scholar had not required. He filled two tables with all this food, laying out everything very neatly. Then he informed the scholar that his table was ready. The scholar entered the inn and told the host to bring the tables into the main hall, and to place one of them by the front wall under the empty family memorial tablet, and the other in front of the scholar himself. The scholar sat at his table and raised a spoon in a gesture, across to the other table, as though he were urging someone seated there to eat. He watched a moment, then he himself began to eat.

After eating a little, the scholar stood up and raised the cup of rice wine to the memorial tablet ten times in a row, in the proper manner, each time taking a sip. After a while, a bit tipsy, he pointed to the tables. “You may remove the tables now.” As soon as he finished saying this, they heard the spooky *clink-a-dink!* of a spoon falling off the table by the memorial tablet.

The innkeeper was about to remove that table when the voice of the child lying sick with smallpox was heard: “Papa, how come you aren’t giving me any pheasant or beef or persimmons?”

The shocked innkeeper tried to pick up the table and bring it to the child, but the table felt like it weighed ten thousand *geun* and refused to move. Till now a few people had been watching with curiosity, and when they saw this they trembled in fear. The owner had no choice but to leave that table there. Instead, he gave his child some leftovers from the kitchen. The child attacked the food, as if he had never been sick. At this moment, everyone could see that all the symptoms of the child’s illness were gone and his condition was stable.

The innkeeper was astonished, and overwhelmed with happiness. His eyes filled with tears and he did not quite know what to do. He and his wife regarded the scholar as some sort of divine spirit and they bowed deeply to him and asked him to stay a bit longer. The scholar could not refuse, and stayed a few more days.

Then, one night, the old Smallpox Ghost appeared again in the scholar’s dreams. “I have granted you a favor, so now can you do me a favor?”

“Yes, please tell me what you would like me to do.”

The old man said, “I became a Smallpox Ghost when I died, and I have been spreading smallpox around this area for a while. It’s been two years since I died and my children are preparing for my second-year memorial service, but I am too busy now and it will be difficult for me to get home on time. When they hold that memorial service, if I can’t be there and can’t eat the ritual offerings, it’s as good as not holding the service at all. Now, I am from Gundang-myeon in Yeongnam. Since my home is on your way back home, I wish you would stop by my place and deliver a message for me. Please tell them this: ‘If you do the memorial service now I can’t be there, so choose a date a few days later and I will be there to accept the offerings then.’ I have three children,” and he told the scholar their names. “If you can deliver my message, I’ll be very grateful.”

“It won’t be difficult at all to deliver your message. But, what if they don’t believe what I tell them?”

“Yes, you may be right! I bought a piece of farming land in the past and I put the deed in a small hole in the pillar of the wall where I used to sit. After that, I forgot that I had put the deed in that hole, and later covered the hole with new wallpaper. Several years passed without my giving it a thought, and then I died. Of course, it’s only natural that my children would not have found the deed. Well, after I died, the previous owner found out somehow that the deed had gotten lost, and he sued my family to get the land back. It’s all just a terrible headache for my children. . . If you go there and give them the facts and help them find the deed, they will have proof that they own the land.”

“Yes, I will do that,” promised the scholar. The old Smallpox Ghost pressed the seriousness of his request upon the scholar a few more times, then left.

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On his way back to Seoul, the scholar stopped by the old man’s house and found out from a servant that the family’s situation was just as the old man had told him. So the scholar thought he would first get a servant to put him up in the servants’ quarters, and then meet the sons and help them find the deed. But when he asked at the door to see the old man’s sons, he was told that the old man’s memorial service was planned for the next day, so they could not receive any guests.

The scholar sent back a message saying that he absolutely must see the sons before the memorial service. Sensing the importance of the scholar’s request, they invited him in and asked the reason for his visit. The scholar told the sons in detail about the old man that he had met in his dreams, but the sons at first regarded what he said as the words of a deranged person and could not believe him. The scholar described to them the old man’s appearance and even showed the three sons that he knew their names. Though this caused them to doubt him a little less, they still could not shake off their doubts completely. When the scholar told them about the deed stuck in the hole of the pillar, the sons immediately went to the wall and ripped off the wallpaper where the scholar told them to. Sure enough, the deed was there in the hole, right where the scholar said it would be. With this, of course, they believed the scholar. Surprise and relief and yearning for their dear departed father combined to overwhelm them and they started wailing. When they finally dried their tears, they invited the scholar to stay with them for a while, and treated him generously.

The Smallpox Ghost’s sons called the family together for a meeting. Although they understood that their father’s spirit could not be there to enjoy the food offered to him, tradition required that they hold the service on the anniversary of their father’s death. Accordingly, they held a ritual on that day, the day they had already planned. And then they held a proper service a few days later with their father, the Smallpox Ghost, in happy attendance.

On that day, after witnessing this practical solution to the family’s dilemma, the scholar returned to his journey home.

Story 8

## The Skeleton Scholar’s Gratitude

In this wondrous world, even stories like this can happen.

It was a time long ago, during the Goryeo dynasty (918 – 1392), when a special sitting of the higher civil service exam was scheduled.

A Confucian student who lived in a remote province was on his way to Seoul to take the examination. Daylight was waning as he passed through beautiful mountains and meadows. Suddenly, he heard the sound of sneezing coming from a small wood overgrown with arrowroot and other vines. He thought it quite strange for such a sound to be coming from a place where there was no one to be seen, so he decided to get off his horse and take a closer look. The student was approaching the area where he thought the sound came from, straining his ears to listen, when the sound of another sneeze came from under the matted roots of an arrowroot vine. He had his servant dig there, and soon they came upon a human skeleton. The skeleton was stuffed with soil and natural debris, and the roots of an arrowroot vine were growing out of the skull’s nostrils.

The scholar reckoned that the sneezing must have been made by the spirit of the skeleton’s host, who could not bear his nose being blocked by the vines. Feeling sorry for the skeleton, the student freed it from the vines, cleaned it, wrapped it in thick paper, and buried it in drier soil in higher ground. Then, he put a clean bowl of rice by it and wrote a letter of condolence. When he was satisfied that the spirit would be more comfortable, he continued on his way.

That night, he had a dream. A Confucian scholar with a full head of gray hair approached him and bowed. He then expressed his gratitude to the student. “I committed an offense in my previous life. Because of my offense, I was executed and my family was destroyed. My corpse was left right there on the spot to rot. In time, the flesh fell from my bones and became one with the earth. Only this skeleton remained intact, and it was thrown into this wild arrowroot patch. The vines bound my spirit to my skeleton and came out through my nostrils, and I was left to suffer like this, day and night. But now, in this horrible state of mine, you came along and bestowed on me ten million blessings. You felt sympathy for me even though I could not ask you for it, and you buried me in clean ground and even burnt incense for me—all this, without expecting anything in return. I can never express in words this great kindness you have shown me. No path exists between our worlds that would allow me to gift you in kind. But my heart insists. Therefore, kind student, I will give you the one thing that I can give.”

“But you don’t have to . . .”

The scholar continued, “I do. The poesy requirement in the exam that you are about to take will be a five-character rhyming scheme, with the title “Summer Cloud Mysteries,” and *bong* as the rhyming word. I have already constructed a verse for you. If you submit it you will perform best of all in the exam.”

This is the poem that the scholar recited to the student:

The sun has risen to mid-heaven,

Floating clouds have formed peaks on their own.

A monk seeing this thinks it is a temple,

But a crane regrets the absence of pine trees.

Lightening flashes on the ax blade of a child chopping forage,

Thunder makes the hermitage bell ring.

Who ever said the mountains do not move?

The wind blows from the cloudless twilit sky.

The scholar, after telling the student the whole poem, left with a bow expressing his heartfelt gratitude.

Waking from the dream, the student could only marvel at its bizarre nature. He continued on to Seoul and then went straight to the exam site. When he looked at the exam he was astonished to find that the requirements of the exam were a perfect match with what the scholar had told him in his dream. Hence, he wrote the poem that the scholar had dictated to him.

In the end, he achieved first place in the examination. This was his reward for the help that he had so unselfishly given to the skeleton scholar.

Story 9

## General Kim Yushin Terrorizes an Insolent Provincial Scholar

Seo-ak Academy is located just south of the city of Seo-ak, which is west of Gyeongju. It is a place where revered figures of the Shilla Dynasty (57 BCE – 967 CE) are memorialized: Hong Yuhu (*pseud* Seol Chong), Kim Yushin (*pseud* Gae Gongguk), and Mun Changhu (*pseud* Choi Chi-weon).

During the reign of King Injo (1623-1649) there was a discussion among the members of the Seo-ak Association of Confucian Scholars about whether they should petition to make certain changes concerning the memorial tablets in their shrine. During this discussion, a certain scholar of the Chinese classics asserted his opinion:

“For many years in the old country we did not have Confucianism. We were remote from the center of Confucianism, and in a generally Buddhist environment. Then, however, Hong Yuhu [650-730] elucidated the meaning of the *Nine Classics* of ancient China in our language, so we came to understand the sacred books of the sages. Hong Yuhu, therefore, is indeed the father of Confucian classics in our country. And our Mun Changhu [born 857] earned high renown in the land of China for his writings; ever since then, everyone who studies literature considers him their teacher. I am sure you will agree that this is truly beneficial to our literary tradition. Accordingly, these scholars have been enshrined in the Confucian memorial shrine, Munmyo, since the Goryeo dynasty [918-1392]. This tradition of honoring great scholars in Munmyo has a long history. I truly believe that there is no objection to continuing this tradition in our shrine for these two revered sages.”

“The case of Kim Yushin [595-673], however, is different. He was a great general during the Shilla Dynasty, and I will grant you that his accomplishments are worthy. Nevertheless, he is not a character who can be discussed together with the Confucian sages, so it clearly follows that he should not be revered side by side in our Academy with them. Therefore, I think it would be good that his memorial tablet be removed now, without delay. We can inform our superiors afterwards.”

There was a long debate over this, and it ended before they could come to a consensus.

That night, this scholar who sought removal of Kim Yushin’s memorial tablet dozed off in his dormitory. . .

“Make way!”

Suddenly, from off in the distance, the scholar heard this street-clearing injunction announcing a great personage, and it was coming closer and closer. Presently, a general dressed in a full suit of armor with a sword at his side stormed through the gate of the Academy compound and into the main hall, and audaciously occupied the spirit chair. Outside in the courtyard, flags and spears lined up left and right, filling the space and covering the sky. It was truly a majestic and imposing spectacle. The scholar then heard the sound of someone giving an order, which seemed to be coming from the main hall. The voices of tens of thousands of troops boomed “Aye!” in response to the order. At the same time, two soldiers with clubs approached the scholar and right away grabbed him by the hair, dragged him out to the center of the yard, and forced him to lie prostrate before the main hall.

The general started to reproach the scholar. “You were born here and grew up here, so you have heard what kind of person I am. You know the legacy of Gae Gongguk Kim Yushin. You say Confucianism is important, so let me ask you a question. A Confucianist’s goal is loyalty and filial devotion, is it not? I dedicated this body to the nation ever since I put my hair up in a topknot. It wasn’t only once or twice that I rose to personally risk my life, and I stood in the path of death every time an enemy invaded and the country was in danger. In the end, I thwarted invasion by two hostile countries. I transformed a weak nation into a strong nation, so that even the great emperor of Tang in all his majesty did not dare to dispatch armies against our country. But I never sought recognition for this as distinguished service. Thus, as for loyalty, my deeds meet the test.

“Now, shall we consider filial devotion? My family, for generations, contributed much meritorious service to the dynasty, and I practiced and upheld the precepts of my ancestors, from beginning to end without deviation. And did I not maintain the integrity of my family’s name and cause it to be recognized by the world? In spite of this, you still classify me as no more than a military commander. Even Confucius himself admitted the necessity of maintaining a military. Did I accomplish all those military feats just for my own enjoyment? I was not just playing games. Further, Confucius required of us filial devotion to our sovereign and our elders. If I hadn’t done what I did, the troubles facing my King and my father could not have been averted. As such, all my achievements, every one of them, sprang from loyalty and filial devotion; they supported the entire nation and harmonized relations among all of its families.

“How can you compare me with the likes of your kind, who do nothing more than taking brush in hand and plying ink to paper only to circulate hackneyed phrases? The great Tang scholar Han Gongsaid, ‘In the old days, rites were performed at ancestral shrines even for village teachers.’ In truth, I, through my acts of loyalty and filial devotion, was also a teacher in this region. The great academies of the past are the village shrines of today, and it was with the unbiased consensus of all the village elders back then that my memorial tablet be installed in the academy. Even the great scholar Toegye Yi Hwang had no objections. Well then, who do you think you are to make such reckless remarks that insult the sacred spirits of your village ancestors? You are no one, yet you have no hesitation behaving like this. There is no match for your impudence, and I will soon chop off your head for it. That should set a good example to those other foolish, shameless Confucian scholars. Your behavior is unforgivable!”

The scholar trembled in fear, speechless, and just lay there on his stomach, face buried in his bedding. The general looked to his left, and to his right, then issued a command. “This wretch has committed an unpardonable sin. He should be slaughtered right now, but memorial rites are scheduled to be held here soon, and this kind of punishment cannot be carried out at the site of such a ceremony. His sentence, therefore, will be executed at his home tomorrow.”

With those words, the scholar woke from his dream. His back was drenched with the cold sweat of fear. He was in a daze and could not move. That night, he came down with a cold and he eventually had to be carried home in the middle of the night. His condition continued to worsen. Before dawn he began to spew a steady stream of blood. Soon he was dead.

And Kim Yushin’s memorial tablet continues to this day to occupy a place of honor in Seo-ak’s memorial shrine.

GG Story 10

## The Gaoler Ghost’s Unjust Punishment of Choi Won-seo

My name is Im Bang, and I am the author of this story. In the year 1716, I suffered the misfortune of being interrogated and then incarcerated by the Office of Interrogation. Choi Won-seo, a military officer, was involved in the same case and he was also being investigated. In prison together we shared many stories to get through those tedious days.

One day while we were talking, the subject of ghosts and monsters came up. Officer Choi said that, when he was young, he met a ghost face to face and almost died, but barely managed to survive. I asked him to tell me the story in detail and he obliged me. It was truly the oddest story, but here it is, in his words. . .

Originally, when I got assigned to Seoul, I had no place to house my family. Fortunately, before long I heard that there was a house for rent in Bu-dong, and I decided to take it. My father moved the family into the main building, and I lived by myself in the detached gatekeeper’s quarters.

Then, one late night, I had gone to bed but wasn’t quite asleep yet when suddenly a woman opened the door, came into the room, and stood by the lamp. Upon closer look I realized that she was a servant of an aristocratic family that I knew, and I had seen her there a few times in the past. She was beautiful and I wanted to take her in my arms, but I couldn’t think of a good ploy, so I just played with her in my thoughts. However, she had come to me of her own accord, taking advantage of the dark of the night—hence I grew bold. After all, this was such a delightful surprise and I had no way to suppress my wonderment and happiness.

“Ahem. . . So, why not come closer and sit here with me?”

She kept silent and did not move. I got up and reached out to take her hand. She backed off, out of my reach. I pressed her all the way to the door, but then with the heel of her foot she pushed the door open, and ran off. Though I followed immediately, by the time I got out the door she was gone, nowhere to be seen. I looked for her in every direction, yet saw only the empty yard. I thought that she had probably hidden herself somewhere; it never occurred to me that it was anything more unusual than that.

Next night she was back again, standing there by the lamp. Beguiled with her now as much as I was the night before, I stood up again and tried to pull her into my arms. Just like the night before, though, she backed off, then ran away. Again, she was nowhere to be found, no matter how hard I tried—just like the night before. My desperation and suspicions increased even more, but I still had no idea at that time that she was actually a ghost.

Several days passed. Then again, deep in the night, I was lying on my mat in my room, by myself, when suddenly I heard a shuffling noise coming from the ceiling. It sounded like someone was up there rustling sheets of paper, or cleaning the place. The noise was getting louder when suddenly a large curtain dropped down from the ceiling. This deep blue curtain divided the room down the center. Then, in an instant, burning coals covered the floor of the whole room, shooting out menacing red flames. The coals’ heat seemed powerful enough to consume the whole room in an instant. Sure enough, except for the small space I was lying in, the rest of the room was swept up in flames and I couldn’t see a single way to escape. I was scared to death that, the way things were going, I was going to burn up in those flames.

This awful situation continued until the sun came up and the roosters began to crow. And then, to my relief, the shuffling sounds from the ceiling instantly subsided, the blue screen cleared, and the burning embers died—all by themselves. And the whole room was left without a speck of debris, as though it had just been given a thorough cleaning.

And then again, the next night. . . I was alone, lying on my bed but not quite ready to sleep yet. This time, a fierce giant of a man forced the door open and barged into the room. With that felt hat on his head and the blue armor he was wearing, he seemed to be a soldier gaoler. He looked all set on getting hold of me and dragging me out of the room. I was young then, and had some fighting spirit, so I put up some resistance. But I could not possibly overcome his awesome strength. There was nothing I could do to stop him from dragging me out into the courtyard.

He held me up above his head with both hands and swirled me round and round, then threw me with great force onto the stone stairs of the main house. At that instant I lost consciousness and could not move at all.

The soldier stood guard over my unconscious body. There were dozens more soldiers gathered in the fenced-off yard, all dressed in armor and soldier’s felt hats, and they also looked like gaolers. They had been standing at a distance, observing at first, but when they saw what my tormentor was doing to me, they started shouting all at once, “Don’t do that. . .! We’re telling you, stop it. . .!”

The one who had just thrown me on the stairs became irritated. “What do you care? Don’t bother me!”

They were quarrelling back and forth for a while, then someone said, “That fellow is due to become a high official. You shouldn’t be doing that to him. Absolutely not!”

“What does that have to do with anything? I told you it’s none of your business!” He lifted me up in the air with both hands again as though he were taunting them, and then tossed me, and I soared quickly up, up into the sky, in a southerly direction, whizzing along like an arrow. I flew over Gyeonggi Province, thenall of Hoseo, and landed in an isolated place way down south, in the Honam region. While I was airborne I could see every detail of everything that was going on in those three regions. The muscle-bound thug was waiting there in Honam for me, and threw me back into the air. I soared up to the sky’s apex, whizzed off in a northerly direction, and landed on my home’s stone steps, where I had first fallen on my face.

Then again from the courtyard came the sounds of men trying to stop my tormentor. “We told you, don’t do that. Now stop it!”

“What do you care?” The thug’s answer was the same as before. Then he picked me up again and threw me into the air. I soared all the way to Honam again and landed there. The thug was waiting for me there and threw me out of Honam again and I fell again on those same stone steps of my home. And the thug took hold of me and seemed about to toss me into the sky yet again, when one of the men watching came over, pried loose the thug’s hold on me, and took him over to the fellows in the courtyard. After a round of boisterous shouting, followed by a round of laughter, they dispersed. They didn’t appear again.

I was lying face down, unconscious, at the top of the stone steps, and did not come to until the next morning when my father came outside and discovered my unconscious body. He quickly carried me into the house and had my wounds tended to. In a while, I regained consciousness.

We finally abandoned that house and escaped to a different neighborhood. It was only later that we found out that the house was haunted.

Story 11

## The Serpent Reborn as the Son of Its Killer

Once upon a time a soldier lived inside Sugumun, one of Seoul’s fortified gates. He was a man of superhuman strength. There were five square holes at the bottom of the gate that let the water of the big stream crossing under Gwantong Bridge flow out of the city. Small iron posts were installed in these holes at regular intervals to prevent animals and people from passing through.

One day a huge serpent tried to get through one of the holes from outside the gate. It got its head and part of its body through two posts, but its body was too big to get through all the way and it got stuck there.

The soldier saw the serpent and drew his bow, aimed, and shot it right through the head. The head burst and the serpent died right there on the spot. The soldier dragged the dead serpent out of the stream, beat it to a pulp, and then threw it away.

After this, the soldier’s wife got pregnant and gave birth to a son. The child, ever since its infancy, would glare at his father every time he saw him, and scream his lungs out. This would set everyone’s nerves on edge. As the son grew a few years older, his hatred for his father also grew. The father, also, seeing the son that he used to love behave like this, came to dislike him.

Then one day the soldier lay down on his mat and settled in for a nap. His son was nearby in the room. The father covered his eyes with his arm, pretending to be sleeping, but he was secretly observing his son. He saw his son glaring at him with wide-open eyes that seemed to burn with vexatious energy. The child, thinking that his father was asleep, slowly approached, step by step, holding a dagger in his hand. The instant that he was about to stab, his father got up, grabbed the dagger from him, and started beating him mercilessly with a big club. The boy died, his body ending up as a formless lump of flesh and bone. Then his father threw out the corpse and went off somewhere.

When his wife later found her son’s corpse she wailed away in her grief, then wrapped his corpse in a blanket to bury it. She left it unattended for a while and, when she returned, she noticed something wriggling in there. Thinking it very strange, she unwrapped the blanket, only to find that the body of her son was slowly transforming itself into a serpent. Half of it was serpent and the other half was still a human being. The wife was in such a state of shock that she ran out of the house and would not come near the thing again.

Her husband came back home that night. After hearing from his wife the weird story that had taken place earlier in the day, the soldier unwrapped the blanket and took a look. The boy’s corpse had already turned completely into a serpent, and on its head he could clearly see the wound that his arrow had left. He removed the blanket and, performing the Goyu rite for appeasing the spirit of the dead, told the serpent:

Serpent, there was no enmity between you and me, and I killed you not from hate but on impulse. Yes, that was my mistake. But you, too, are at fault. Out of revenge you reincarnated as my son.

Truly, there is no more bizarre calamity than this. But now you have got your revenge. Fully.

And you, my son, tried to kill your father, so how could I not kill you? And if you try to harm me again, I will have no choice but to kill you again. If you do not stop this, our feud will see no end.

Getting your revenge is what started your change back into your original form, isn’t it? So, it is done, and now let us forget about everything that happened in the past.

Hearing this effort at appeasement from its killer, the serpent lowered its head, as if bowing to show that it understood.

The boy’s father opened the door, and told the serpent, “Now you are free. Go where you like.”

The serpent slithered straight out the door and off towards Sugumun Gate, then somehow passed through the iron posts. Where he went after that, nobody knows.

Story 12

## The Wicked Child Who Spread Typhoid at a Banquet

A certain government official was celebrating a happy occasion with a big banquet in his house. All of his relatives had come together and filled the whole house.

Suddenly the guests in the main hall noticed a boy standing with a vacant look on the courtyard side of the beaded hanging screen. He was only fifteen or sixteen years old, but had a sinister countenance. The boy’s hair was in tangles and he looked like a street urchin. At first, the host and the guests all assumed he was someone’s servant and did not question who he was. But then a female guest, annoyed because he had come too close to the main room, ordered a servant girl to kick him out.

The girl tried to get the boy to leave, but he did not budge. She scolded, “Whose servant are you anyway that you dare approach so close to the banquet room? Someone in there wants you to go away, but you just stand there like a statue!”

Even then, the boy did not utter a word in response and just stood there. Everyone heard the exchange and began to ask each other whose servant he was, and everyone answered that they did not know. Again, they got someone to ask the boy whose servant he was, but he was as silent as a stone. Though several servants tried to drag him out, their efforts amounted to the efforts of a mere fruit fly trying to move a boulder.

Everyone’s anger was boiling over now and they told the lower-ranking guests in the detached room to get rid of the boy. So those guests passed the order on to a few muscular servants to grab him and kick him out. But even these servants could not budge him. Everyone was trembling with rage at this infuriating situation.

“What sort of moron is this, just standing there like that without uttering a word?”

Their anger kept building, and they were getting quite concerned too, so next they mobilized dozens of young musclemen to tie him up with a rope and drag him out. But this, too, was like trying to move a mountain and not even one hair on the boy’s head stirred. It seemed it was no longer a situation where any ordinary muscleman could get him out.

Then, one of the guests watching could not stand it any longer and shouted, “That creature is only a human being, so how is it that humans can’t move him? Send for a few soldiers to come and beat him with their clubs. That should convince him to move.”

Five or six soldiers came around and brought their clubs down on the boy with all their might. They caused a tremendous racket that sounded like thunder striking. With the force of their blows the boy should certainly have been crushed like an egg, but, just like before, not a hair on his head moved and he did not blink an eye.

With this, terror struck the whole crowd. The guests and servants and soldiers all hurried out to the courtyard, knelt in front of the boy and bowed to him. They rubbed their palms together praying in desperate supplication.

After quite a while, the boy beamed a smile, then turned around and walked out the front gate. He was soon gone, without a trace. The banquet guests were all in great shock, did not know what to do, and with an ominous feeling in their hearts they ended the banquet right then and everyone went back home.

The next day, typhoid struck. It spread rapidly through the homes of the host and everyone who had attended the banquet. Those who had scolded or insulted the boy, those who had tried to drag him out, the soldiers who had beaten him with their clubs, and all the servants who had touched him—they all died within a few days. In the end, all who attended the banquet died, without a single exception. And the heads on all those corpses split open.

In the story that has been passed down to us, this child is called the Duweok Demon; but the basis for calling him this is unknown.

Story 13

## The Stench Monster Invades a Provincial Government Office

A long time ago, in a certain district near the northern boundary of Hamgyeong Province, a monster that gave off a hideous stench caused quite a commotion.

The commotion started with the sudden calamitous death of the district’s chief magistrate only about ten days after he took his post. After he died, all five or six of those who were appointed to replace him also died. Naturally, officials who were being considered for appointment as chief magistrate of this district tried to get out of consideration, and everyone that was appointed came up with all sorts of excuses to get out of actually taking the post. Consequently, the post went unfilled.

At this time, it so happened that there was one official in another district who was already on the civil service ladder but drifting from one low-level post to another. Then one day he was appointed chief magistrate of this district. He was a brave person with outstanding physical strength, ready to take on any challenge. “How could it ever be possible that everyone dies just because they meet some ghost or demon?” he thought to himself. He was brimming over with self-confidence and made up his mind. “I’ll take on that job!” He bade farewell to the staff at his current post right away, and went to his new post in the district seat.

When he arrived at the district office he moved into the official residence. He strapped his long sword to his side and wore it at all times. On the very first day that he took office, a slight stench of rotting meat came drifting in on the wind. And it got worse as the days went by. After five or six days, as if the stench were not enough, a low-lying fog-like air came floating into the magistrate’s quarters. The fog got thicker as the days went by, and the stench became almost unbearable.

Ten days passed like this. The former magistrates had all died at around this stage. Thinking that it was about time for this magistrate, too, to meet his end, his military aide, his maid, his errand boy and all his other help ran away. There was no one around anymore.

Ever since the first day he took his post, the magistrate was able to endure the situation only by keeping a jug of liquor by his side and drinking it straight from the jug. One day he was staggeringly drunk, more so than at other times. When night fell, he sensed something forcing its way into the residence. The fog air coagulated and began to take an indistinct form. It was a forearm’s height and two legs’ length. A light beamed from eyes at the top of the form, but the body, face, head, hands and feet were not clearly discernible.

The magistrate jumped up from his chair and ran down to the courtyard. The cloud-like form followed him. The magistrate abruptly turned on the form and charged, shouting “Ya-a-a-h!” He struck down hard at the form with his long sword, and it bellowed the sound of thunder, echoing far and wide. Then, the thick cloud began instantly to disperse and, before long, completely disappeared without a single trace. That awful stench was also gone. With this, the magistrate threw his sword on the ground and keeled over from exhaustion and intoxication. He did not get up again.

The next morning, the servants thought the magistrate must be dead by now so they went to his residence to tend to his corpse. They discovered him lying face down where he had fallen the night before, inside the main gate. Of course, they were all shocked.

One whispered, “Huh? All the other magistrates’ bodies were found up inside the residence.”

“That’s right. How is it that this magistrate is down here in the yard?”

“Strange. . . !”

A few men came forward and were bending over to get hold of the body when, to everyone’s surprise, the magistrate sat up with a jerk, glared straight ahead, and shouted “Ya-a-ah!” The others were all so shocked that they fell back, prostrated themselves and trembled in fear.

From this day on, the curse of the stench monster, which had claimed the lives of several magistrates, was never to strike again.

Story 14

## The Fox Spirit

Jeong Seung’s son, Lee Hwae, passed the civil service examination and was on a sure path to appointment to high government office. He had accompanied his father, the provincial Royal Inspector, to Pyeongyang in his early years, and was living in the magistrate’s official residence when this story happened.

At the time, the Inspector did not have a legal wife, and a concubine occupied the women’s quarters. One day, the Inspector had to leave for a round of inspection to other provinces, and Hwae was left alone in the residence compound with his father’s concubine and a few servants.

There was a detached house called Sanjeong in another small compound separated by a wall from the garden in back of the official residential compound. A small door was built in the garden wall to provide passage through to the residence compound. Lee Hwae spent his days reading here, attended by a young servant.

One day, Hwae was reading into the night and his young servant happened to have gone off somewhere, when someone suddenly appeared at his door. He looked up in surprise and found that it was a young girl! Her clothes were neat and clean, and even better, her figure and countenance were matchless in their beauty. He closely observed all of her features and realized that he had never seen anything like her before, not even among all of the city’s gisaengs.

Suddenly he became suspicious and began to scrutinize her behavior. She came into the room and sat in one corner without saying anything. After a while he became impatient with her silence, and asked, “Well, who are you, anyway?”

She just smiled and remained silent.

Next, he ordered, “Come closer.”

She stood up at once and came and sat facing him. He took her hands and caressed them, pretending to enjoy it. She too seemed pleased, and smiled. He thought to himself, “She certainly is a sly one! Must be either a witch or a fox spirit. But how can I control her? How, indeed. . . ?”

He thought to himself for a long time but could not come up with a good idea. Then he just snatched her up and threw her over his shoulder, holding her tight so she could not move an inch. Then he ran out of the pavilion and through the door in the wall to get to the main residence. He urgently called out to his father’s concubine and some of the servants. But, perhaps because it was already deep into the night and they were all fast asleep, no one came out.

And then, the wicked one on his back viciously bit his neck. That is when he realized that she was a fox spirit. He could not bear the pain from the bite and loosened his hold on her a bit. The fox spirit took this chance, jumped onto the floor, and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

After this, every time he thought about this incident, he felt regret. “If only someone had helped me then, I could have kept her . . .”

He did not realize that he had been lucky to escape with his life.

Story 15

## The Wolf Who Posed as Kim’s Wife

This is a story of Kim Su-ik (1600 to 1673) in his younger years. His home was in Changdong, in Seoul, but he later served once as magistrate of Gwoesan District in North Chungcheong Province, and was also dispatched once to head the administration of Jeju Island.

One winter night, Kim was reading into the wee hours and became hungry. He asked his wife to fix him something to eat.

His wife answered, “But what can I serve you? We don’t have anything special, nothing that would serve as dinner. All we have is six or seven chestnuts. They might help to stave off your hunger for a while.”

“I guess it’ll be better than nothing.”

At this time, the servants were fast asleep in another room and there was no one around that could do the job, so his wife reluctantly went to the kitchen herself, started a fire, and roasted the chestnuts. Meanwhile, Kim just tightened his belt, continued reading, and waited for his wife to return.

His wife soon returned with roasted chestnuts in a bowl made from an old pine tree. She sat by her husband’s desk while he shelled the chestnuts and ate them. He had almost finished them when someone opened the kitchen door again. He raised his head and what did he see but another woman, a perfect look-alike for his wife, entering the room with a bowl of roasted chestnuts. He looked carefully from one to the other under the lamp light but could not see even the slightest difference between these two women, who both wore his wife’s face. The two women looked shocked when they saw each other.

One grumbled, “Something’s amiss here, something bad. . .”

And the other mumbled, “What is this? What in the world . . .?”

Kim accepted the bowl of chestnuts from the second woman and casually popped a chestnut into his mouth. Then he took one woman’s hand, felt it, and then the other’s. But he could feel no difference at all. He thought a bit, and took back in his right hand the hand of the first woman who had come in, and in his left hand he took the hand of the woman who had come in next. He held tight, so that they could not escape, and kept them waiting there with him through the night.

In time, the rooster crowed and the sky in the east slowly brightened. Then the woman he was holding in his right hand suddenly screamed, “Why are you holding me so tight? It hurts! Let go of my hand—right now!”

She struggled to free her hand. He held on even tighter. After a while she suddenly fainted, and turned into her original form—a big wolf! Kim was in such shock that he let go of the hand that he was holding so tightly. The wolf grabbed this chance and took off, vanishing without a trace.

It is said that, until the end of his life, Kim grumbled over and over, “I should have held on, even if it meant tying her down.”

Story 16

## The Sick Father Who Changed into a Fish

This happened when a certain prime minister-to-be was the magistrate of Goseong District.

One day a low-ranking government official happened to visit this magistrate at lunch time. The magistrate pushed a bowl of fish soup over to the official and invited him to have it. When the official saw the skate fish in the soup, he frowned, because he knew that he could not accept the magistrate’s offer.

Tears shone in the official’s eyes as he said, “I am really at a loss, Your Excellency. You are offering me lunch but I had lunch before I came here, so I find myself rudely declining your kind offer.” Now his tears were streaming down his face.

The magistrate was quite taken aback, and he pressed the official to tell him what was wrong. Finally, the official held back no longer and presented the magistrate with all the details. . .

A really awful thing happened to me. It is something that cannot happen in real life, so I have never told anyone. But now that Your Excellency is asking me, I do not dare keep it to myself. My father lived a long life, and had almost reached the ripe old age of one hundred, when one day he came down with a fever. His whole body was burning like a ball of fire, and gradually the fever reached a critical point. My siblings and I thought he was about to take his last breath and gathered around him, mourning tearfully.

A few days later, on his deathbed, Father made a request. “I’m feverish and my chest is so congested I can’t stand it. I want to go out in front and sit by the river. It seems I’ll get better if I can sit and watch the flowing water. Come now, take me out there and,” knowing we would object, he pressed, “don’t go making a fuss.”

But we insisted that he should stay inside and refused to take him out to the river. He refused to change his mind and said angrily, “If you don’t do as I ask, it will be the same as killing me.”

Hence, we had no choice but to help him out of his bed, put him on my back, and take him out to the stream, where we sat him down.

Father gazed at the flowing water and said, happily, “The sight of this clear flowing water makes me feel like my fever is already gone.”

After sitting there for quite a while, Father told us, “I want to watch the stream by myself. It’s a bother having you all sitting around watching me. Now off you go into the woods, all of you, and don’t come back until I call you.”

We earnestly objected, but again he angrily, stubbornly insisted. We worried that our sick father would get even sicker if we continued objecting so we could only do as he told us to do. We went off elsewhere.

A while later we looked back to where we had left Father, but he was not there. We ran over to the spot and found that our critically ill father had taken off his clothes and was now in the river. Worse, his whole body was turning pink, the color of a fish, and he was actually taking on the form of a fish. In fact, half of his body had already turned into a fish, with the other half still human. We were so shocked and scared that we did not dare approach any closer. Within a few hours his whole body had changed into a fish. A big skate fish he was, flipping and flapping in the water, blissfully swimming to and fro, his face a picture of total contentment.

But then he looked at us with a sorrowful farewell and let the river carry him along. We followed him downstream along the river’s bank, all the way to where the river enters the sea. Then we lost sight of him. We returned to the spot where he had shed his clothes and found only his hair and fingernails and toenails.

In the end, we mourned him and buried just his hair and nails. To this day no one in our family has ever eaten skate fish again. Every time we even catch a glimpse of boiled skate fish, we get all upset and flustered. That is why I could not hold back my tears before.

And that is the whole story of the unappetizing skate fish.

Story 17

## The Petty Official Saved by Venerable Su-il’s Mystic Powers

Venerable Su-il was a Zen Buddhist monk who practiced asceticism in a temple in the city of Ulsan, in Yeongnam Province. He had acquired Taoist magical powers, and miracles happened wherever he went. Venerable Su-il had a big, broad face and a strong and sturdy physique, and it was said that even at a glance you could tell he was an extraordinary person.

Because of this, other monks in the area both respected and feared him. And perhaps also because of this, he had no disciples, which meant that he had no one to assist him. Seeing his situation, the monks in his temple took turns helping him out with provisions. It was amazing to see how, at every mealtime, he would find the monk whose turn it was to feed him, and sit down across from that particular monk, as though someone had already told him who his provider was that day. He always found the right monk, every time. That is why people thought he could read people’s minds.

Venerable Su-il spent most of the day in deep meditation, his eyes closed to the world. At night, though, he would climb the low hill behind the temple and sit in contemplation, with no thought of sleep. Occasionally, when the night was still young, monks from the temple would come to him for a chat and then return to the temple.

But one evening, Venerable Su-il made a request to the other monks. “Everyone, please do not visit me tonight.”

Of course, this request only stimulated their curiosity. In the deep of the night, a few of the younger monks went to his customary place and spied on him. They saw, from afar, that he was sitting face to face with another monk. The faint sound of their conversation drifted over to them. The young monks inched closer, step by step, the distance narrowed, and then, believe it or not, the monk facing Venerable Su-il suddenly turned into a huge tiger. When the tiger saw the young monks getting a bit too close, it set the mountains trembling with a horrific roar, and charged them. Frightened out of their wits, they turned and ran, some falling over themselves and some even pissing themselves.

Then Venerable Su-il laughed, “Ha-ha!” and called out to the tiger, “That’s enough now!” Only then did the tiger stop. It returned to Venerable Su-il and sat with him again.

The young monks, who had run far away, sneaked back to steal another look. And they saw that the one sitting across from Venerable Su-il was not the tiger but the monk that had been there before. How utterly inconceivable!

There is also this story about Venerable Su-il. . .

He was passing through Gangwon Province on his way to Mt. Geumgang. He decided to sit down on a rock by the roadside and take a rest.

But before we proceed further, some background. . . In those days, there was a certain official of ministerial rank in Seoul. He had a servant that was unruly, the kind who never obey their master at all. And then one day, this servant just up and ran off. The minister sent a secret letter to the military unit in the province where the servant lived, ordering the officer in charge there to send someone to the servant’s hometown and round up the servant’s wife and children and all of his relatives and bring them up to Seoul. The commander delegated a petty government official—his name was Hong—to take the letter to the district office responsible for the servant’s hometown and have them take care of the situation. It seemed that everything was set up nicely to carry out the Minister’s orders.

When Hong arrived in the district, the sun was setting; the district magistrate had finished with official duties and had already gone to sleep. A petty official in the office told Hong, “Our lord has already gone to sleep. You can present your letter to him early tomorrow morning. There will still be plenty of time to do what you need to do.”

The local official then invited him to join with the other officials and clerks in a round of drinks, and it seemed to Hong that he was getting a really cordial welcome. He soon got caught up in the music and singing, and his new friends got him to drink to his heart’s content—but all with the goal of getting him drunk. When they succeeded, they filched the secret letter that Hong was carrying and opened it for a look. The runaway servant that the minister mentioned in the letter was none other than a relative or a neighbor—or both—of these local officials. In the end, because the minister’s orders had gotten out, by the break of dawn all of those that the minister wanted rounded up had run off.

The next day, the district magistrate read the letter, and issued an order to arrest everyone and bring them in. But it was discovered, of course, that their homes had already been vacated. The military officer who had delegated Hong received this report from the district magistrate, and figured out that the letter had been opened. He exploded in anger, then sent a functionary to arrest Hong and bring him in at once.

The functionary arrested Hong and was bringing him in when they happened upon Venerable Su-il. The monk had tied his horse to a tree and was sitting on a rock, about to have his lunch. But before Venerable Su-il could bring out his food, Hong, thinking the monk looked very hungry but had nothing to eat, offered him a bowl of gruel. Venerable Su-il accepted it.

Hong sighed and mumbled almost to himself, “Oh dear, I’m as good as dead. . . But if this Venerable were the Buddha he would save me.”

The monk listened quietly, then asked for an explanation. Hong told his story, in great detail. Venerable Su-il remained silent for a long time, then asked, “When are you supposed to meet with the officer?”

“I should probably meet him right away, before nightfall anyway.”

“Tsk-tsk, today is inauspicious. It would be better for you to show up around midday tomorrow. Now make sure you do that!”

Hong asked why, but Venerable Su-il left without giving him an answer.

The functionary and Hong continued on their way to meet the military officer. Hong managed to delay their return so that they arrived the next day at noon. They entered the military headquarters and reported their arrival. The officer in charge was sitting with some department superintendents and casually ordered Hong to be brought in. He reprimanded Hong for all the trouble he had caused. Filled with anger, he was about to bring his baton down upon Hong when he suddenly stopped and asked himself, “Wait, do I really have to torture the fellow like this?” He could not decide and just stood there like a statue.

Then a superintendent, who had a close relationship with the officer, came up to him and said, “It is our magistrate who decides sentences, not you, so why are you going back and forth on this like a hounded fox?”

“Because one thing is bothering me.”

“What might that be?”

“I saw my deceased father in my dream last night. He appeared together with a strange-looking monk, and said, ‘You must treat the petty official Hong cautiously. Do not raise your baton thoughtlessly!’ And I answered him, ‘I would not dare go against your instruction.’ I was saying that, even as I woke from the dream. Then I had another dream near dawn. Again, my deceased father appeared, with the same monk, and said, ‘I’ve come back because I was afraid that you, thinking your dream was no more than a dream, might go and beat the man anyway. You absolutely must not beat him, do you understand?’ He repeated that several times before leaving. Even now, after waking, the dream is so vivid that I can’t go ahead with this.”

Soon afterward, this officer pressed Hong, asking, “Have you, by any chance, attended a Buddhist service recently?”

“No sir, I have not.”

“And you haven’t given alms to a Buddhist monk?”

“Well, sir, I do not ordinarily. But yesterday I did give a bowl of rice to an itinerant monk that we happened to meet on the road.”

“Is that so? And what did the monk look like?”

Hong’s description of Venerable Su-il was a perfect match for the monk that the officer had seen with his father in his dream. He asked one more question, “And what happened when you gave him the rice?”

Hong relayed the conversation with the monk almost word for word. The officer was amazed at this bizarre development.

And in the end, he set Hong free.

Story 18

## Yun Sae-pyeong and the Shapeshifting Sorcerer Jeon Wu-chi

Yun Sae-pyeong was a high government official with a military background. In his early years, on his way to China he met a man of extraordinary ability and was instructed by him in the secret arts of sorcery. But he hid this ability and did not boast of it to other people. He kept to himself in his room and would never allow even his wife or children to peep inside. Thus, no one in the world knew what he was up to.

There was one exception, though. His wife and children were able to witness quite often how, on winter nights, he would put a cold piece of iron under each armpit, and, after a while, switch each iron piece to the other armpit. Every time he did this, they could see the iron pieces that he clutched in his armpits turning as hot as if they were being heated over a fire.

Just around that time, Taoist master Jeon Wu-chi was using his magic to kidnap people in Seoul. He would sneak into someone’s home and if he found a beautiful wife there he would transform himself into the form of her husband, and violate her. For quite a while people were getting quite upset over this. When Yun Sae-pyeong came to know about it, he figured out that Jeon Wu-chi was the culprit, and he began his attempt to eliminate the unwholesome creature. Jeon sensed this and, to hide from Yun, avoided showing himself in public. As he always said, “I am just a magician; Yun Sae-pyeong, now, *he* is a real sorcerer.”

Then one day Jeon Wu-chi, with a serious countenance, asked his wife a favor. “Yun Sae-pyeong is going to visit our home today to try and kill me. I’m going to transform myself and stay out of his way, so when he comes looking for me simply tell him that I had just left, and don’t say anything else at all. Do you understand?”

Then he placed an empty earthenware jar upside down in the yard and shook himself hard, which turned him into a small insect. The insect crawled into the overturned jar and hid itself there.

That day, around eventide, a beautiful woman suddenly showed up at Yun’s front gate. “Hello. . .? Is Official Jeon home?” she called.

A servant came out to her and relayed the prepared message. “He has gone out and has not come back yet.”

The woman said, smiling, “Oh, come now. Official Jeon and I have been intimate with each other for a long time. We agreed to meet here tonight, so please stop acting like that and tell him I’m here.”

Yun’s wife heard this and stormed out to the front gate in a lightning bolt of anger. “So, this devoted husband of mine has been seeing another woman behind my back?! Then what he said before was all a lie to trick me! I’m not going to stand for this!”

She stomped right off to the back of the house, picked up a mallet, and smashed the earthenware jar to pieces. Now the small insect hiding under the jar was exposed. And at that moment the beautiful visitor turned into a huge bee and started stinging the small insect. This turned the insect back into the original form of Jeon Wu-chi, and he died. The bee instantly took off and disappeared into the sky.

And there was another incident involving Yun Sae-pyeong.

One day the sound of wailing shattered the peaceful quiet of Yun’s house. Yun’s cry surprised everyone, and they asked him what was wrong. He surprised them again with his extraordinary reply: “My sister in Honam Region has just departed this world.” He had received no messages that day, so how did he know this? Then he commanded, “Bring out the implements for the mourning rites immediately. Her family lives in a remote hamlet, and if I don’t send the ritual implements to them they might not even be able to prepare the body for burial.”

When the ritual implements were ready, he wrote a letter. He told his servant, “There’s a person wearing a bamboo hat outside the gate; call him in right away.”

A robust man came into the front yard and prostrated himself at Yun’s feet. Yun then gave him an order: “My sister’s family is carrying her coffin to Handong District in Honam Region. I want you to deliver this letter to the family. Now, you must bring back their reply before dawn. This is most urgent, and if you aren’t back by dawn, you will be severely disciplined. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes, of course, Sire. I will do as you command. I would not think of returning late, not even a bit.”

The man was given the letter and the ritual implements in a wrapping cloth, and he disappeared as soon as he was out the gate. The same day, even before sundown, he arrived back at Yun’s front gate and handed over to Yun the reply he was waiting for. The letter read something like this:

“Today, in the early afternoon, your sister’s coffin was to be carried out to her grave, but we were very short of the required ritual implements and could not perform the mourning rites properly. We were truly at a loss. Then, however, your package and letter arrived, everything meticulously arranged. It all seemed that you had personally seen to getting everything together, as there was nothing missing. We all thought that only a ghost could have known of her death right away and done everything so perfectly. Thank you again, and again.”

A journey from Yun’s home to the home of the bereaved family would ordinarily take about ten days, yet the letter had been sent at midday and the reply was in Yun Sae-pyeong’s hands before nightfall. The whole trip amounted to only a few hours!

Story 19

## The Soldier Who Subdued the Palace Thugs

Won Baek (1647~ ?), whose pseudonym is Hwang So, told this story.

I was on my way back to Seoul from a trip south of the Han River. When I arrived at the Noryangjin ferry, a scholar got off his horse, beckoned me with a wave of his hand, and called out, “Would you come over here and see this?”

I urged my horse on and trotted over to the scholar. He was standing by a half-demolished palanquin lying on the ground. The sad sound of a woman crying was coming from inside the palanquin, and a young child, who looked about thirteen or fourteen, was standing behind the palanquin, also crying. Their entourage, even the horses, were nowhere to be seen.

The scholar explained the whole story. “Just when the woman’s party arrived here, a dozen servants in the service of King Injo’s grandson, Lord Bok Chang-gun (? ~ 1680), came along on their horses. One of them brushed the palanquin on their way by, and the palanquin bearers protested. At this, the palace servants got angry and were down off their horses at once, cursing at the palanquin bearers and attendants. They even threatened that they were going to, as one of them said, ‘violate the woman.’ Then they smashed the palanquin and beat the palanquin bearers and servants and even the horses. All the palanquin attendants and horses ran off, and the palace thugs got back on their horses and casually went on their way.” Then the scholar pointed off into the distance, and said, “There! Those fellows over there are the ones!”

When I heard this, I was furious. But I was also afraid, and didn’t know what to do. Well, soon a soldier came riding up on his horse. I imagine the lady’s servants had run for help and this soldier was sent to track down the thugs. He appeared to be in his early thirties; he didn’t seem to have a very strong or sturdy build . . . Anyway, after hearing all the details and seeing the mother and son still in tears, he couldn’t help but become enraged, and vowed, “I’ll see they regret the day they got *me* angry.”

He jumped down off his horse, tied the horse’s reins to a post, loosened one side’s stirrup from the saddle, wrapped its leather strap around his forearm, and shook his sleeve back down over it. Then he attached his belt to the saddle, to use in place of the stirrup. When the soldier finished, he looked back at the crying child behind the palanquin and said, “It’s impossible now for you to continue your journey, so you might as well wait for your people to return and then head on back to Seoul.”

The soldier got back on his horse right away and started off after the palace thugs. When he got close behind them he brought down his metal stirrup on the shoulder of the last one in the group, and the thug somersaulted off his horse and ended up splayed out on the ground. Immediately the soldier proceeded to bring his stirrup down on the shoulder of each thug, one by one, watching each fall like an autumn leaf to the waiting ground. Sprawled out in the dirt, they could not move a muscle and looked like a bunch of corpses.

The soldier got off his horse and chastised them severely. “You are mere servants who think that strength makes you the master. You insulted the lady of a noble family and beat her servants and horses mercilessly so they could do nothing to protect their lady. Your crime is already serious, and I doubt that you will want your situation to get even more serious. So, it would be best for you to cooperate. Are all twelve of you servants from the palace? Doubtless only a few of you are, and the rest of you are from other households and you let the palace servants talk you into this thuggery. If your leader confesses and surrenders, I will of course spare your lives. If not, I will kill you all. . .”

Right on, several of them shouted out in desperation, “The palace servants are those four, it was all their idea!”

“Their crime is serious, but killing them would be excessive. I will spare their lives. However. . .” and with his stirrup he struck each of the four twice at the top of the spine. “You will not die, but you will be burdened with this as long as you live. That will be suitable punishment for your malicious behavior.” With that, the soldier quietly attached the stirrup back on his saddle, and casually rode off, leaving the four palace thugs as good as dead and the rest of them still unable to move.

And the woman and her entourage headed back for Seoul.

Hwang So often said that he regretted he was never able to learn the name of the righteous warrior.

Story 20

## The Official Who Became Rich by Catching a Monster Serpent

A long time ago a royal envoy’s entourage was sailing to China. The ship that was carrying the envoy came upon an island in the middle of the ocean and anchored there for a little while. Then, a wind from the island whirled round and round the ship, creating waves big enough to swallow it. It seemed as though it would capsize at once, and there was no question of sailing onward.

Then the ship’s captain said, “Surely, this is happening because we have something on the ship that the water spirit wants to have. If we throw whatever it is into the ocean we will be safe, and if not, we’re definitely asking for more trouble.”

At these words, the entire entourage threw all of their personal belongings into the sea. They waited for a calming, but the wind did not die down.

With this, the captain spoke again, “Then surely there must be a person on board that the water spirit wants to get hold of.”

The envoy decided to try something: He had each official and deputy, one at a time, step off the ship onto the island. Almost everyone took his turn getting off the ship, but the winds raged on. And now there was only one person who had not stepped off the ship. As soon as that person left the ship and stepped onto the island, the wind suddenly decreased in strength and the waves calmed. Hence, everyone agreed, “It’s unfortunate for him, but what else can we do?”

Before they left, they unloaded all sorts of supplies for the man that they were leaving behind: much of what was left of the rice and other foods, porridge bowls, knives, an ax, a few court garments that the officials were going to use, and other travel gear. Tears appeared in the eyes of many of the entourage as they said goodbye, but that did not stop the ship from finally sailing on.

The were no humans on the island, nor were there any animals. But it was thickly, luxuriantly forested. The official, alone now, prepared a place to sleep. He cut branches with his machete to make a frame for a shack, and cut bamboo to weave for a roof. That night he lay down to sleep, but before long he heard an ear-splitting whistling sound coming from the sea. When he peeked outside, hiding himself, he saw a huge serpent. Its body was as wide as a house and as long as a string of oxen. It slithered up to the highest point on the island, and then, after a long while, came back down and slid back into the sea, all the while making that awful whistle. It appeared every night, not skipping even once, traveling the same path back and forth without even the slightest deviation.

The official decided he could not just let the situation be. He cut down hundreds of bamboo and carved the ends to a sharp point, making the equivalent of big nails. Then he planted them tightly together in a row across the path that the serpent traveled. That night he waited for the creature to appear. As he expected, the whistling sound soon came to his ears, and before long he saw the serpent crawling out of the sea and then coming toward the path it liked to travel. It climbed further onto the island and seemed like it was advancing a dozen or so paces, when it suddenly stopped. It lay there immobile, unable to advance any further.

The next day, the official went to that spot to have a look, and saw that the serpent had made a desperate attempt to cross the bed of bamboo nails, but had ripped open its chest and belly, and died with its guts burst out all over.

The hot sun blazed on the serpent’s cadaver for a few days. It was rotting and its stench covered the whole island. The official made a huge basket from branches and filled it with all of the rotten meat, then he threw it into the sea. When he returned to where the serpent’s cadaver had been and looked at the ground there, he saw countless beautiful pearls, big and small, spread out all over. There were enough to fill over two large sacks. The official cut down reeds and bamboo and made two sacks out of them, then filled them with the pearls. He took pretty round white pebbles that he had found on the beach, and covered the pearls with them.

Several months later, the ship with the envoy and his entourage returned to the island on its way back to Korea. The ship anchored at the island and everyone shouted with happy surprise when they found the official alive and well.

When they saw him carrying two sacks onto the ship, everyone was curious and asked, “What is this, anyway?”

“These are pebbles I collected. They have a great deal of personal value to me. This is all that I have, so please don’t throw out any.”

They were just happy to see that he had not died and was doing so well, so they did not question him any further and gladly stored them away for him. No one knew that under the beautiful pebbles were even more beautiful pearls.

So, the official returned home safely. He sold some of the pearls to Koreans, but also to foreigners in their embassies. Most of the pearls were of the highest value and he pocketed lots and lots of money. And in the end, he was one of the wealthiest men in the country.

CHAPTER 5: Extraordinary Women

Story 21

## The Officer Who Was Humiliated by His Extraordinary Wife

Wu Sang-jung (? ~1636) was a soldier, originally from Gongju. His courage and boldness were said to have no match. He passed the higher military service examination during the reign of King Injo (1595~1649) and came up to Seoul to serve as one of the King’s personal secretaries.

Suddenly, in 1624, the rebel Lee Gwal (1587~1624) incited an uprising. The King was forced to flee Seoul. Wu escorted the King’s royal palanquin to the river, but when they arrived at Noryangjin ferry, they discovered that there was only one boat anchored there, a little upstream. The guards ordered the boatman to bring the boat immediately, but the boatman just gave them a brief glance and looked away, refusing to budge an inch. Wu could not just stand there looking on, so he took off his jacket and jumped into the river. He swam to the boat in one breath, jumped onto it—and cut off the boatman’s head. Then he rowed the boat over to the ferry’s pier and anchored it. The King, witnessing all this, was highly impressed with Wu and promoted him to the position of his chief military liaison.

Later, Wu was given the rank of admiral, and was promoted again shortly after that, to the position of Chief of Naval Affairs in Cheolla Province. In this position, he was in charge of the province’s hundreds of naval vessels, and one day he departed for Tongyeong for naval exercises. Gisaeng were also on board the ship that the admiral was on, and they played music and raised morale in that special way that gisaeng have.

Around that time, a servant that the admiral’s wife had sent for some reason to naval headquarters returned to their home. The admiral’s wife asked this servant about her husband. “How is the admiral getting along down there?”

“He went to Tongyeong for naval exercises. They say a few gisaeng were also taken aboard the flag ship, and it left harbor with music and laughter and the whole crew in very good spirits.”

“What?! The man has been away from me only a short time and he’s already misbehaving? I guess I’ll have to teach him a lesson. If I don’t put a stop to it right now, he’ll be out of control later.”

Right away the wife, brimming with anger, put some food into a bag, slung it over her shoulder, slipped into her hemp sandals, and was on her way. She had only one thing on her mind, that she was going to teach her husband a lesson, and in that spirit she was able to ignore the hardships of the journey and stubbornly walked hundreds of *li* each day. As soon as she reached Tongyeong beach, she could see, approaching from the distance, the ships that her husband was commanding. When her husband’s ship came closer, she shouted in a loud and resonant voice, “Ahoy there! Land that ship, right now!”

The admiral almost fell over from the shock of that familiar voice. “Oh no, that’s my wife’s voice! Oh my stars, what a catastrophe!”

He was extremely upset and did not know what to do, but in the end he just gave in and issued the order to land the ship at the beach. As soon as the ship touched shore, the admiral’s wife jumped nimbly aboard and, scattering the officers and men, perched at the helm. The admiral, deserted by his crew, knelt in supplication at his wife’s feet.

His wife roared, “Haven’t I warned you about this before? How on earth. . . music and gisaengs. . . No, I’ll never forgive you, absolutely not!”

All the admiral could do was beg. “I have wronged you. Even death is too good a punishment for me. Tell me what to do—I’ll do anything.”

His wife, now at the apex of her anger, told him to bare his buttocks. She took a switch and thrashed him. After 30 lashes the admiral’s buttocks were burning red.

Even with this, though, his wife had not vented all of her anger. “Giving you a good thrashing isn’t enough to mollify me,” and she grabbed her husband’s beard and cut it off. Now she was satisfied, and jumped off the boat and headed back home as fast as she had come.

Admiral Wu was used to hearing how nice his beard looked. Now, though, that nice beard that used to reach his stomach was gone, and he was a completely different person. When he arrived at the district magistrate’s office in Tongyeong, the current magistrate, Lee Wan (pseudonym Sang Guk), saw Admiral Wu and asked in surprise, “I heard that you had a great beard. Why did you cut if off like that?”

“Your Excellency asks, and I dare not hold back. It is a very shameful thing, though, and I will never be able to show my face in public again.” He told Lee Wan the whole story, the whole truth.

Lee thus discovered that Wu’s wife was several times stronger and more courageous than her husband, the admiral. He regarded Admiral Wu, on the contrary, as a pathetic case. He exploded in anger, shouting, “This is too much! I mean how on earth is this admiral who can’t control his wife ever going to be able to turn back an enemy?”

Magistrate Lee decided that Admiral Wu was no longer qualified to serve in his current position. He immediately informed the royal court in Seoul that Wu had been dismissed.

Story 22. Pg 175

## Seong Ha-chang and His Buttocks-battering Wife

In the days of King Gwanghae Gun (r. 1608-1623) there lived Seong Ha-chang, who had passed the primary stage of the higher civil service exam. His was a notable family in the aristocracy, and he was renowned for his talents from an early age. However, he had a rather weak character and was rather timid.

His wife also came from an excellent family, and was endowed with wit and beauty. She took good care of the household; most of all, she did a splendid job of tending to her husband’s clothing and meals. The problem was that she had a fierce temper and a harsh personality. When her husband did even the smallest thing to aggravate her, she would burn in anger. Nagging was standard practice for her and she did not hesitate to issue a beating now and then. Seong was afraid of this woman with such a nasty behavior, and he did not dare to even think of confronting her.

Seong did not have the slightest freedom to act on his own. He was oppressed by his wife, and it was his hapless lot in life to stand when he was told to stand and sit when told to sit. Before long, even the servants felt contempt for their master, and feared and obeyed only their mistress. All dignity and authority in this household belonged to the wife. She was like Tang Dynasty Emperor Gojong’s wife Muhu, a virago who ruled over her emperor husband.

Seong was always trembling with the fear of inadvertently irritating his wife. When he occasionally happened to upset her, it was not unusual for her to tear his clothes or assault him with abusive words or even a club. Even worse for him was getting locked up in the tiny, stuffy storage space above the ceiling and receiving only the little food that she slipped through a hole in the door. He would be locked up for several days like this and be released only after his wife’s anger subsided. This kind of humiliation became an everyday occurrence, and his exasperation and resentment were reaching a peak. But there was not one concrete thing he could think of to do. . .

Until one day, after having lived so long like this, without letting his wife know, he took off to his relative’s home inside the city’s walls and hid himself there. He was hardly able to catch his breath, though, before his wife arrived there in her palanquin the next morning and raised that awful ruckus outside the front gate. He was scared out of his wits and, in his confusion, did not know what to do. His wife barged into the house, smashed big earthen storage jars and scattered dishes all over, and screamed at the people in the house, “When this creature escaped and came scampering to your house, you should have come and told me right away!”

The ruckus died down only after the people in the house mollified the woman by pleading with her in the most abject voices. She took her husband home and, telling him how grave was his sin of running away, applied the thirty-lash punishment that the officials used at the district office. Then she locked him up in the tiny attic again, and released him only after several days. After this, Seong’s relatives dared not take him into their home ever again.

Then one day, suddenly, a thought occurred to him: “Our former house servant is living in the house on our estate way down in Honam region. I will surely find safe haven if I run away and hide out there.” Hence, Seong mounted his horse and rode off from his home. He rode so fast that he was able to travel a thousand *li* in just a few days. He arrived at the servant’s house and the several servants there gave him a warm welcome. He thought that this must be what it felt like to escape from a tiger’s cave. Gradually, it became a pleasure again to sleep and eat.

But before a few days had passed, there was a noisy ruckus at the front gate. When he asked about the disturbance, he was told that his wife had arrived in her palanquin. He was so shocked that he felt like he was going mad. Even if he wanted to hide, there was no place for it in this world.

Seong’s wife had all of the servants rounded up and beaten, scolding in a loud voice, “That husband of mine, when he came running you should have sent someone to notify me right away. What in the world were you thinking?”

As for Seong, she told him that because of his shameful sins he could no longer wear the horsehair hat exclusively worn by the nobility, and he had to take it off right then. She got him onto his horse and made him ride behind her palanquin, and headed back to Seoul. As soon as they arrived, she had him given a severe thrashing. Then she locked him in the attic, and this time she did not let him out for months.

Seong’s relatives and friends rummaged in their minds for ways to help him.

“I see no other way than to use the divorce law.”

“But she isn’t the type of person who will abide by the laws of the land, so we can’t drive her away with divorce, can we now?”

“Then the only way left is to kill her. But we can’t kill her for something like this.”

When no ingenious plan came to mind, Seong spoke. “You say there is no specific way. Well, maybe not, but. . .” but could not think of anything and left it at that. And everyone else just sighed and went on their way. Several years passed like this.

Then one day Seong’s wife suddenly became ill, and died. All of Seong’s friends expressed their happiness and shouted in exultation, “Ha ha, a certain friend of ours finally has a life! Now he can finally live his own life!”

Everyone got together and went to congratulate Seong. The funeral had just ended and Seong was still in his mourning clothes. When he saw his friends, he thought that they had come to offer condolences, so he suddenly started wailing to get in harmony with their intention. One friend thought this was absurd and slapped his cheek hard, shouting, “Hey there, moron! What are you wailing for—to get our condolences? We came to congratulate you!”

With that, Seong stopped wailing and gave a sheepish smile.

Story 23

## The Education Inspector Ends up Naked in Public for Despising Gisaeng

A few years ago, an official from the Office of Government Affairs was newly posted to Gyeongju as Inspector of Education. Every time he left the government administration center and saw a gisaeng around the office he would give her a couple taps on the head with his short pipe and say, “Tsk-tsk, wicked energy here!” Or he would say of all gisaeng, “Ugh, what an appalling bunch!” and then assault them with more abusive language, as bad as, “How can a human being come close to such things!”

Of course, the gisaeng themselves were furious and they all hated him. Even the district magistrate detested him for such sanctimonious behavior. He made a proposal to a few gisaengs. “I will give a prize to the one who can come up with a really fantastic trick to teach him a lesson. How about it?”

Myeong-weol, a young gisaeng, came forward to accept his proposal, saying she would happily try it.

At the time, the inspector was living in quarters in the school attached to the Confucian shrine, with only a young servant boy in attendance. Myeong-weol, now dressed in the common garb of a village woman, passed by the inspector’s quarters. She leaned against the door and called to the servant, showing and then hiding her face in turn. Then when the servant actually came out to the door to ask what she wanted, the coquette just giggled and went on her way. She would come once a day, on some days twice.

After she kept on like this for several days, the inspector finally gave in to his curiosity and asked his servant, “Who is that woman that comes by calling on you like that every day?”

“Well, Sire, she is my sister. It’s been over a year since her itinerant peddler husband went on one of his trips and did not return. There’s no one else in her house but her. She’s like an older sister to me and calls on me like that every time she leaves her house, asking me to keep an eye on it for her.”

Then one day, around dusk, the servant left the school after dinner and the inspector was left alone in his room. Myeong-weol appeared at the door again that day, as usual, calling for the servant as she leaned against the door. Finally, the inspector beckoned her in and told her to come over to him. Myeong-weol approached, step by tiny demure step.

“The boy happens to be out right now. I was about to have a smoke. Could you bring me a light?”

Myeong-weol stirred the fire and brought him an amber.

“Now, come sit next to me and have a smoke with me.”

“How. . . How dare I!”

“Why be like that? There’s no one around to see us.”

So Myeong-weol, having no choice, sat beside him and let him persuade her to take a drag on his pipe.

Then the inspector began to open his heart. “I have seen pretty women many times before, but this is the first time I’ve seen one like you. After seeing you just once, I’ve been forgetting even to eat and sleep. Can you come here at night, secretly? We’ll be all by ourselves, so no one will notice us.”

Myeong-weol feigned fright and shock. “Excellency, what. . . what do you mean by that? You are a nobleman and I am just a lowbred, vulgar girl, a nobody. How can you even have such an intention with a common girl? You must be joking.”

Impatient now, he swore his devotion without hesitation. “I have just confessed to you my deepest feelings. How can you say I’m joking?”

Then Myeong-weol exploited his confession by getting him to protest his devotion a few more times. Finally, leading him on, she cooed, “Well, if Your Excellency truly has such feelings, I can only be deeply moved. How can I do other than obey your command?”

Hearing this, the inspector said with inexpressible happiness, “Is not our meeting truly due to my extraordinary karma?”

“That may be, but there is one thing. Your humble servant has heard that propriety forbids sleeping with a woman in such a hallowed place as the school in a Confucian shrine. Is this not true?”

Caressing Myeong-weol’s bottom, he groused, “How is it that a village girl is so smart? Alright then, yes, what you say is correct. So, do you have a nice scheme in mind to deal with this taboo?”

“If Your Excellency’s devotion is sincere, I will have to come up with a good one. . . My home is only a few steps outside the school and I am living there alone. If you come for me secretly we can manage a discrete meeting. I will ask my brother to do me the favor of delivering a fur hat to you by tomorrow night. Please wear the hat when you come, so that no one recognizes you.”

The inspector was so happy he could have jumped for joy. “What an amazing trick, and just for me! Yes, I will do as you say, so you must not break your promise.” They parted after professing their earnest desire twice, three times.

Right after Myeong-weol left, she rented an empty two-room thatched-roof house outside the school grounds, and waited. When night came, she sent a fur hat over by the inspector’s servant and, as promised, the inspector came, taking advantage of the dark night. Myeong-weol let him into the house, lit a candle and prepared a table of simple food for him. After pouring each other a few cups of wine, they started playing with each other. They went into the bedroom. The inspector took off his clothes and got into bed and lay down, then told Myeong-weol to take off her clothes. Myeong-weol tortured the inspector by undressing slowly. She was about to get into bed when suddenly, at that very moment, the quiet was shattered by a raucous noise from outside the thatched door.

Myeong-weol tilted her ear to listen and then showed shock, and her voice became urgent. “Oh no! What should I do! It’s my ex-husband Cheol-ho, a servant in the government office. An unfortunate situation caused me to put my trust in him and take him as my husband, but there must be no one in the world as mean as he is. And I don’t know how many times he has murdered and committed arson. I managed to separate from him three years ago, and married another man, and haven’t associated with Cheol-ho since. But I don’t know what business has brought him here tonight, out of the blue. His voice tells me he must be quite drunk. Surely Your Excellency is in big trouble. . . Oh, what should we do?”

As she said this, she opened the bedroom door and headed for the main door. She asked through the door in a loud voice, “Who do you think you are calling out in that liquor-laced voice in the middle of the night?”

Then that voice coming from outside, so full of anger, shook the whole house. “Bitch! You can’t recognize my voice? Open the door—now!””

“Ah-ha! Old bastard Cheol-ho! It’s been such a long time, what brings you here now?”

Again came that rasping shout from outside. “They say after you abandoned me you went to some other fellow. I’ve always resented that, and I’m here today to demand an explanation.”

Then he barged in through the thatched door. Myeong-weol ran back into the bedroom, all flustered. “Your Excellency! You have to hide now. But what can we do—the house is as small as a crab shell and there’s no good place to hide . . . Oh, here’s an empty chest! Hide inside it just a little while.”

She opened the top cover and urged him inside. The inspector had no other choice, so he quickly got inside the chest, totally naked. Myeong-weol slammed the top shut and locked it. Just then Cheol-ho burst into the room, swaying in a drunken swoon.

Myeong-weol launched a boisterous argument. “It’s been three years since we separated. What brings you here again to pick a fight like this?”

“Bitch! You abandoned me and went to someone else, so I want back all the clothes and other stuff I bought for you before. If you don’t give them to me, I’ll ransack the place and take them myself.”

“Good, take your junk and get out!”

Then the man pointed to the chest, saying, “This thing is mine too and I’ll take it with me now.”

“What do you mean yours? I paid two rolls of cotton for it. . .”

“And I gave you one of them, didn’t I? I’m not just going to leave it here.”

“You bastard, you might have gotten away with dumping me, but just try to take this chest with only one roll of cotton. No way am I giving it to you, never!”

And the two went on and on with their argument over the chest. Finally, the man threatened, “If you don’t give me the chest, I’m filing charges with the prosecutor.”

But she continued to refuse. When morning came he hoisted the chest onto his back and went off to the government office. She followed him and they entered the office’s courtyard together. The district magistrate was already seated there at his station. When the two finished giving their statements about the chest, the magistrate issued his verdict.

“You have each invested a roll of cotton into the purchase of the chest. According to the law, the best thing to do is split it equally.” And he immediately declared that the chest would be sawed into equal halves.

Following his order, a couple clerks got a big saw and set it on top of the chest. The fighting couple was told to each take one end of the saw and start sawing. As the biting sound of sawing began, an urgent scream came from inside the chest.

“Help! Stop!”

The magistrate pretended to be surprised. “Good heavens! What is this, somebody’s voice coming from inside the chest? Open it at once!”

At his command, the clerks tore off the lock and opened the chest. Incredibly, a naked man jumped out and stood in the middle of the courtyard. Everyone in the office was shocked and covered their mouths in horror. They all uttered the same reaction to this unexpected spectacle. “This man, isn’t he the inspector? How did he get in that chest. . . ?”

The magistrate had the inspector escorted up to his desk on the dais. The inspector kept his private parts covered with both hands and hesitantly walked up the steps and took a seat, his head down the whole time. The magistrate enjoyed a hearty laugh and only after quite a while did he get around to ordering clothes be given to the inspector. The gisaeng ladies managed to get Myeong-weol to give him her pretty gisaeng cloak. The inspector, with only this cloak to cover him, raced barefoot to the school.

And he left town that same day.

Even now in Gyeongju, this incident is handed down from generation to generation as the humorous story, “The Chest Inspector.”

Story 24

## The Royal Inspector Disgraced for Despising Gisaeng

A long time ago a certain well-known official in the court became a royal inspector and happened to be in Jeonju on an inspection round. His lofty opinion of himself, based only on his title and position, was so high that it seemed as though it could pierce the sky. He thought himself too good, for example, to accept the services of gisaeng when he was on inspection trips to the provinces. The gisaeng made themselves available to serve him at night, but he always slept by himself.

Both the governor of Cheolla Province and the district magistrate of Jeonju detested the royal inspector for his arrogance. Each of them knew that the other was thinking the same way, and they agreed to secretly employ a scheme to trick the inspector. They first chose the gisaeng with the best wit and beauty of all the gisaeng registered with the government office. They had her replace her bodacious gisaeng makeup with a more natural look, and dress in humble white mourning garb, to make her look like an average village woman who lost family. Then they told her to be very conspicuous in her comings and goings at the government office when the inspector was there and to hang around his lodgings. At the same time, they sent a servant to the royal inspector to attend him and be always by his side, with the purpose of initiating a meeting between him and the modest village woman.

As expected, the inspector was charmed by her from the moment he first laid eyes on her. He asked the servant, “Who is that woman?”

“She is my sister, Excellency. She comes here often to see me, but she is just a country lass and does not know the ways of the district office, so she does not know that she should avoid passing so close to Your Excellency’s lodgings like that. I grovel in abject humility, begging your merciful forgiveness.”

“What harm would there be if she *didn’t* avoid coming by. . .? But why is she wearing mourning garb like that?”

“Our father has passed away. The mourning period is not over yet.”

From then on, the inspector could not control his feelings for the woman. Then one day, at night, when just his servant was with him, he quietly asked a favor. “I would like to meet your sister once. Would you bring her here?”

The servant pretended to be horrified. “Your Excellency’s dignity is as high as the sky and my sister is just a vulgar country girl, so how could she dare pay Your Excellency a visit?”

Thereupon, the inspector persuaded the servant with gentle and artful coaxing. “Your sister has extraordinary looks. I would therefore like to have her by my side. . . If the child happens to have thoughts of marrying I am willing to take her as my concubine. Wouldn’t she be lucky! You go now to your sister and convey my intention. Bring her to me quietly, without anyone else knowing.”

The servant told him that this was impossible and could not give his consent. The inspector was becoming impatient, but enticed and cajoled the servant in many ways; the servant pretended to give in only then and relay the inspector’s intentions, as though he had no other choice. The next day, when night fell, he dragged his sister into the inspector’s residence.

Gisaeng are sly by nature and she plied all of her coquettish wiles on the inspector. In the end, he fell deeply for her. Day in and day out, she went to his residence around sunset and left around dawn. And she got him to promise to take her to Seoul—without fail.

One night around this time, the woman complained to the inspector. “Did not Your Excellency say that love is important? But it seems that was all just empty talk.”

“Why do you think so?”

“My humble home is not far from here, but you have shown no intention to visit, not even once. Is your deep love so shallow?”

“Why wouldn’t I have a thought of wanting to visit at least once? But you know. . . I. . . There are public eyes and ears to consider. . .”

“If you take advantage of the dark of the night—dress in plain clothes and come secretly—who would recognize you?”

Hence, the inspector, following her suggestion, finally made it to her house one dark night without anyone’s knowledge. The inspector arrived, took his clothes off, and was lying in readiness on the sleeping mat. The eavesdropping servant secretly reported this to the governor. Hearing this, the governor at once informed the magistrate, and they launched the next step in their plan—a banquet at the district office.

The full moon made that night as bright as day. There was splendid music, and even actors had been mobilized. They provided fantastic skits one after another. And only on this day the gate of the district office compound was left wide open so that the people of the district could come in and watch the spectacle to their hearts’ content. They came in droves to watch and enjoy.

The woman told the inspector about this. “Would you like to go and take a look?”

“You can go if you want to, but I won’t.”

“What fun would it be to go alone--might as well not go at all. Now, Excellency, do not be that way, come with me. Please.”

Because of her persistent urging, reluctantly he got up from the mat to go with her. He looked for his clothes and his nobleman’s hat, but he could not find them anywhere. She had hidden them when he lay down on the mat. When the inspector complained, the clever woman got him to think about the future instead of the present.

“Here is my mother’s fancy wig, and her long cloak with the veil. Disguise yourself in them—they look made to order for you. Your Excellency can go out in them and never be recognized.”

The love-smitten inspector took her word for it and disguised himself as an old woman. Then he and the woman went out together. He blended in for a while with the crowd gathered in the government office compound. Then he went over to the bamboo grove to hide himself, and watched the activity from there. He did not know that, just as he entered the gate, attendants who were secretly watching for him reported the couple’s arrival to the governor.

The governor gave the order immediately: “The crowd is getting too big here. Close the gate and don’t let anyone else in. Also, make sure that those who are already here stay inside, and do not let in anyone else.”

To the magistrate, he said in a loud voice, “If we don’t invite His Excellency to our banquet we will lose face.”

And everyone there all said in one voice, “Yes, of course!”

An administrator was sent to escort the royal inspector. But soon he came back and reported, “His Excellency is not there. I searched his lodgings everywhere but could not find him.”

The governor pretended ignorance and acted shocked. “What. . . What is this?” He immediately gave an order to search the whole government office compound thoroughly to find the inspector. In the end, however, they could not find him.

The magistrate asked the governor, “Perhaps His Excellency is in this crowd of spectators in disguise, because he wants to be incognito?”

Then everyone there said all at once, “No, do you really think so?”

And the magistrate insisted, “Well, you just never know, do you now?”

As they had planned, the governor had the gate keeper open the gate only half way and get the people who were already in the yard to leave one at a time. And he ordered the gate keeper to keep a close eye at the gate for the royal inspector. After a while, no one was left and the yard was empty. Whereupon the governor ordered some officers to search the bamboo grove thoroughly. The officers obeyed and ran off to the grove to search.

Only a short time had passed when they all yelled at once, “One person here is wearing a woman’s cloak and a fancy wig. . .!”

“But it’s so strange, she has a full beard. . .!”

“What sort of woman is this. . .?!”

The governor ordered the woman brought to him. He observed her closely under the light of a torch. Everyone gathered around and was looking in surprise and whispering, “It looks like the royal inspector!”

“Yes, it does look like His Excellency!”

The governor, as though he could not believe what was happening, said, “Surely, His Excellency would never dress in such attire!”

As he was saying this, he escorted the royal inspector up the stairs of the banquet hall and seated him. When under the candle light the governor took the fancy wig off the person’s head, lo and behold, it was the royal inspector!

“Why is Your Excellency dressed like this?!”

The royal inspector did not know what to do and his face turned ember-red. He could not say a thing and just stood there with his head down. The governor escorted the royal inspector, still in the same attire, up to the magistrate’s seat and sat him in it. He also called the country woman, the royal inspector’s love, and sat her next to him to serve him. Only when the inspector saw how elegantly she served him did he realize that she was no simple country woman but a sophisticated gisaeng.

More tables of food and drinks were served along with music, and merriment and laughter continued throughout the night until the banquet ended.

The next day, the royal inspector left that place without telling a soul. From that day, his path to higher government posts was blocked forever.

Chapter 6: Taking a Chance on Love

Story 25

## Kim Goes Mute and Loses His Love

Long ago, in Jeongeup District in Cheolla Province, there lived a chief magistrate whose family name was Kim. His son, whom we shall call young Kim, was born with a timid disposition, and even though he was in the prime of his life, he did not have even the smallest aspirations.

One day, when young Kim was traveling to Seoul, the day’s light was waning and he ended up spending the night in the detached room of someone’s home in a country village. The owner of the house was a Confucian scholar. The lamplight in Kim’s room reflected off a window in the main building on the other side of the low wall. Kim became curious, so he jumped over the wall and sneaked up to the window. He wet his finger with saliva, poked a hole in the window paper, and then peaked inside the room.

What he saw there was a young woman by herself, sewing under the dim light of an oil lamp. It seemed she was the owner’s daughter. Sitting there that way, she had the beauty of a goddess from heaven; an enchanting creature she was, like he had never seen in this world so far. His heart pounded like crazy even at this first sight of her, and he could not control himself. He ran out of his room, jumped the wall, dove through her window, and flew at her with every intention of having her. But she resisted with all her might, so that nothing happened between them other than a long struggle.

“I might be only a commoner,” she said when he finally settled down, “but I know a little about proper etiquette. You are trying to violate me like this, even though now is not the proper time for intimacy. I will die before I let you have your way. However, our skin touched during our struggle, and that is as good as having shared intimacy, so now I cannot marry anyone else. It would not be inappropriate for a Confucian scholar’s daughter to become a concubine of a man of noble birth, and you might appeal to my father to let you take me as your concubine. He will probably accept your request. If he does not consent, then I will take it on myself to make it happen, so take me as your concubine in the proper manner, *after* you get approval from my parents. Then I will serve you my whole life. I do not understand why you did not think about that before behaving so crudely.”

“Yes, you are right. But, wouldn’t it be all right for me to ask your father for your hand *after* you satisfy my need?”

“I absolutely cannot condone your insolent behavior—poking holes in my window, jumping over the wall, demanding intimacy before getting my parents’ approval. . . If you continue to act so obstinately, wanting to violate me like this, I will be forced to cut my throat and let my blood splash all over you.”

Young Kim came to the conclusion that he could not weaken her firm determination. “Yes, I will definitely ask your father for his approval. Tomorrow.”

And with that, he gave up trying to have his way and returned to his room. He tried to sleep but tossed and turned till dawn. He met her father in the morning, but before he could say even one word of the request that he had prepared through the night, his face turned red and, in the end, he could not utter a word. He could do nothing but continue on to Seoul.

Full of frustration, his heart fit to burst, Kim felt he would go mad. On his way from Seoul back to Jeongeup, he went to the Confucian scholar’s house to stay the night, even though it was several hours before sundown. When the night came, he sneaked into the girl’s room again and tried to have his way with her, but she mercilessly rejected him again, just as before.

“You were not able to say anything to my father, like I asked you to. How can you be so rude again today?”

“I really was going to ask him, but I suddenly became so flustered that I wasn’t able to do anything more than open my mouth. I will ask him tomorrow, no matter what. So, is it possible that you would kindly grant my wish in advance?”

She refused him with a very serious countenance. As before, she wrestled him off until late into the night, and finally young Kim had to give in and had no choice but to leave her room. When he encountered her father the next morning, again be became flustered and could not utter a single word. Finally, he just gave up and traveled on to Jeongeup.

After a few days, he made up an excuse to get his father to let him go to Seoul again, and he visited the Confucian scholar’s home. When night came, he again sneaked into the girl’s room.

“Father does not know that we are meeting, and has decided to marry me off to another man. If you do not talk to him soon, I will not hesitate to let him know my intentions—by killing myself.”

Young Kim was shocked. “Heaven forbid! I will certainly have to talk to him tomorrow!” Then he asked, after a long silence, “All right, I know I’ve been a coward—but why is it that *you* cannot talk to your father?”

She answered with a sigh, “You are not able to utter even a single word about taking me as your concubine, yet you still think only of having me. You are a man, yet when you open your mouth nothing comes out, so how do you expect a woman to say it? Ah, ah, I will die if things go on like this.”

Kim made a firm promise that he would definitely speak to her father, then left the room. The next morning, when he came upon her father, this time again his face just turned red and he was not able to come out with a word. And he left for Seoul. Several days later, on his way down to Jeongeup again, he stopped at the girl’s home and met her, but she refused him again.

“The situation is urgent. If you do not bring things to a conclusion now, we will never be able to save the situation, and I will surely die soon.”

But again, the next day, young Kim the mute swallowed his words, and he returned to Jeongeup. Several days later, he packed his travel gear, intending to go to Seoul again. But this time, his father reprimanded him, shouting, “Fool! You don’t stay in the office, nor do you stay in our home in Seoul, and just go back and forth a thousand *li* every time like a vagabond, wasting time. If this isn’t mental derangement, then what is it?”

Kim was helplessly detained by his father for about ten days. He did not even think of eating or sleeping, of course, and he would utter nonsense, walking aimlessly wherever his feet carried him, in and out of the house, like flowing water, unable to control his heart. Seeing his unhinged behavior, his father did not have the heart to detain him any longer and told him he could go up to Seoul. Kim went to the scholar’s home right away.

The scholar came out of the house in mourning attire. Kim, shocked, asked the reason.

“I had a daughter, she was of marrying age, so I had someone for her to marry already in mind, and. . . But the child suddenly went and hanged herself. Oh, but what good does it do now to talk about such a grievous thing!”

Hearing this, young Kim unconsciously grabbed the scholar and sobbed in a deranged voice. The scholar thought Kim’s sobbing was strange and asked, “It’s *my* daughter that died. What are *you* wailing for?”

Young Kim sobbed even louder. After a long while, he wiped his tears, and told the scholar everything that had happened so far. After hearing Kim’s story, the scholar exploded, crying, “What?! Then it is you who killed my daughter! If you had said even one word, she would not have died. You talk like this after she is gone—why didn’t you open your mouth before she died? You are my enemy. I won’t stand for this, I’ll get my revenge. . . !” And he took a swing at young Kim, but Kim barely managed to dodge the blow.

Then young Kim jumped on his horse and galloped away, leaving the scholar to his bitter grief.

Story 26

## Shim Declines a Good Chance and Becomes a Mockery

In Seoul there lived a young man named Shim, who passed the primary higher civil service exam. He was a person of eccentric behavior and personality. He considered himself a noble character but he was held in disdain and people ridiculed him. This is his story.

Shim had some business to attend to down south in the Honam region and he was on his way there now. The day was waning, so he checked into a country inn to spend the night. While he was taking a walk in the garden, he looked to the east and noticed the tall gate of a big and splendid house facing the riverbank, with locust and willow trees providing shade from the sun. He asked the people in the inn who owned the big house, and was told that it belonged to the inn’s owner and that he was the richest person in Honam.

After a short while, a servant came to him and handed him a message, saying it was from his master. The note read, “The inn—actually my servant’s home—is shabby. How can you stay in such a place? It is my wish that you turn yourself in this direction and come brighten my home.”

Shim accepted the owner’s invitation and entered the compound through its east gate. He passed by three or four huge, fantastic buildings, each a labyrinth of wing after wing. The servant guided him past the servants’ quarters, from where, in the distance, through a few rows of magnificent bamboo trees, he could see a mansion with a red balustrade decorated in colorful trim. They continued in that direction.

Water chestnut flowers in full blossom filled the pond beneath the balustrade and the fresh aroma from the flowers perfumed the whole garden. A murmuring spring with a bed of pebbles meandered its way from the bamboo patch into the pond. In the pond, orange and white carp breached the surface, occasionally even through clusters of water chestnut blooms. Spider brake tendrils drooping in all directions and thick foliage covering the top of a rocky knoll in the center of the pond provided shade from the sunlight, like parasols. In one corner of the courtyard, two trees, a camellia and a phoenix, faced each other, and in front of the mansion rested a beautiful oddly-shaped rock. Shim was led inside, where he found paintings and calligraphy hanging on the walls here and there, obviously all from the hands of masters. The splendor of this estate, with its big and airy buildings, its matchlessly refreshing bamboo and rockery, was like nothing he had ever seen before. He thought this was what it must be like where the gods live.

Ong, the landlord, welcomed Shim with a bright smile. ”All in this world are brothers. Our ancestors said that ‘sharing the shade on a wagon makes old friends,’ and we cannot say that this applies only to the old days, can we?”

After asking Shim’s name, where he lived, and general information about his family and relatives, he ordered the attending servants to bring wine. Thereupon, two serving ladies in flowery dress, appearing to have just applied fresh makeup, carried in a table. The table was full of delicacies from land and sea. Into jade cups the two men poured each other wine that seemed to have come from the vineyards of the gods. Shortly afterward, women wearing white face powder, eyebrows painted black, floated in like clouds, gliding gently in their silk dresses with their musical instruments. They formed groups of fours and fives, every one of the ladies refined and beautiful. They sang in birdlike voices and danced in light steps in harmony with the ensemble of musical instruments.

After Shim and the owner Ong poured each other a couple cups of wine, Ong held up his cup and said, “I have never met you before this, so we haven’t been acquainted long. We are meeting like this because I am desperate. I have an earnest favor to ask of you. It will not harm you in any way, so would you please at least give a listen?”

“Sire, you and I have not shared friendship before nor had we even met, but you have welcomed me with such good will. Please tell me what you want to ask of me. How can I refuse if it is something that is within my power?”

“Thank you for your open mind. I will tell you directly. This old man’s house shows that I am affluent; but, as you will see, it is very difficult to possess all five of life’s blessings. During my prime, neither my wife nor my concubine were able to have children, but then, when I reached old age, I barely managed to have a child—a daughter—with another concubine, of low birth. The girl has just turned sixteen years old, and I adore her.

My concubine, however—the mother of the child—left me to go up to Seoul, and unfortunately ended up somehow indenturing herself as a maidservant to a certain scholar’s family. When she complained of bad treatment, I tried to purchase her bond, even offered a very large sum for it, but the scholar stubbornly refused to accept my offer. I heard recently that he arranged for my daughter to work as a maidservant in his home and had already got an official to legalize the change. I am so furious I could die, but there’s no way I can stop it at this point. Well, my daughter managed to escape and come all the way here, but her master will know where to look for her. However, if I can get her married before then. . . No matter how hard it may be to protect my daughter, what I’m going to ask you is the only way. If I marry her off to a scholar as his concubine, her current master, no matter how mean and self-serving he is, would not be able to interfere. Given the circumstances, the situation has become most urgent. Even though my daughter is of low status, she is not of ordinary looks and she has the talents and disposition worthy of a lady of refinement. And I do not want to entrust her to some beast living in some remote village. You seem like a young man with talent, from a family that has lived generation after generation in the sophisticated capital of Seoul. I would have no regrets, I could die happily, if I could find someone like you for my daughter. What do you think? Will you accept my proposal?”

When Shim heard this, his face blanched, and it took him a while to speak. “From what you say, Sir, I think it is a good idea. Furthermore, there must not be a better opportunity than this for someone who wants to obtain a concubine. But I have no intention to ever take a concubine. I only regret that I am not able to consent to your request.”

“I understand your position,” said Ong. “Surely you must be hesitating because you think that I am trying to shed my worries onto you by making you my son-in-law and stick you with a daughter who is ugly. . . But she is not ugly, and what reason would there be for me not to show her to you? In fact, I will show her to you now.”

Immediately Ong told those nearby to bring his daughter out. Soon the tip of Shim’s nose was teased by a whiff of sweet aroma that drifted in on a breath of fresh air. Behind two handmaidens leading the way was a young woman. Her beautiful face and countenance were like hibiscus blooming in a pond. There is no way to describe in words the brilliant and exotic clothes she was wearing. Her splendid appearance was like a twilight sun glowing in the sky. Even Seo Shi, the legendary tragic beauty of China’s Yuan Dynasty, could not have been as beautiful as this.

Ong continued, “How about it? Now you must see that my daughter is not ugly. What do you think?”

“Ah! I have heard of but never seen the most beautiful woman in the country, and after seeing your daughter, now I can believe that there actually is such a beautiful woman. I have heard of kingdoms collapsing because of a beautiful woman, and of great men being destroyed by lust for one, and now I know that those are no empty words. Suddenly I am shaken to my innermost soul. I feel dizzy, out of my senses.

“Then, does this mean that you will accept my request?”

“Your daughter is truly lovely, but my answer is just as I told you. I cannot change what I said. I am sorry.”

“I can understand what is in your heart. You have a good relationship with your gentle wife and you must worry that, by taking in a concubine without a special reason, the morale of your household will suffer. Or your hesitation may be that your wife might become jealous.”

“My wife is ugly, and is too much of a simpleton to become jealous, so there is no need to worry about either happening.”

“Well, if not that. . . Are you refusing because your family is one of the impoverished nobility of our land and you cannot afford to take in a concubine? Don’t worry, I will be quite generous and provide the house, the servants, the clothing and food. . . Even if your daily expenditures come to a hundred coppers, no problem. Just let go of such worries. If it is difficult for you to take her to Seoul, she can stay here and you can visit occasionally on your way down south. There would be no harm in that. This old man’s wish, because I have only one child, is to have her near me, but whether you take her with you or leave her here, it’s all up to you. Even with all this, is it still difficult for you to make a positive decision?”

“Each and every word you say is good, Sir, but something deep inside me says no. I humbly decline, no matter how desperate your request. I am very sorry.”

“This child is the only blood tie I have, so I am planning to eventually hand down all my wealth to her. All this fertile land spread out around my house belongs to me, and the production from that land is hundreds of sacks each year. And those hundreds of homes along the boundary hedge are all my servants’ homes. And I’m not even counting my servants in other districts. There are thousands of sacks of grain in storage and I can’t even count all the silk and other possessions. If you take this beautiful child, all this wealth will be yours. Wouldn’t this be a fortune twice over?”

“Sir, your words would make anyone hearing them drool and jump to honor your wish. I am even now kicking myself for not being able to agree to your request, but no, I cannot.”

Master Ong could not hide his frustration. “Why are you being such a stubborn fool? If you really can’t live with her, I will tell my daughter to spend even just one night with you so that she can at least be recorded in your family tree as your concubine. And if you don’t care to see her again even after that one night, I will just regard this as her fate and stop worrying about it. Now, isn’t all this enough?”

“I am truly sorry.”

“Unless a man is a piece of wood, he will desire women. . . You have met a beautiful woman like this in a strange land, and by some lucky chance you have also met her father, who is desperate for you to give her your attention. If this is not a stroke of luck from heaven, then what is this? If even with this opportunity you have not changed your mind, how can you call yourself a man with human feelings?”

“You are right. This is absolutely not the behavior of a human with a heart. Even so, what is this feeling that prevents me from honoring your wishes? I do not know what this is myself.”

“Have you completely eliminated your desire for women because you are a scholar and are trying to keep the moral code of a scholar?”

“No, that is not the reason.”

“If not, what conviction, what feeling inside you makes you like this?”

“There is no principle or reason that I am aware of.”

As the tedious conversation continued, Master Ong’s anger grew, and finally, face red with anger, he called out abruptly to his servants. A few sturdy male servants ran up right away at the sound of their master’s call, and he gave them an order. “Take this fool by the hair and drag him out the gate. Ey-y-y, you wretch! Talking with you like I would with a human being—how could I have known that you are nothing more than an animal!””

And then he announced for the residents of the village out front, “My servants had better not let this fool take even one step into their homes. Not one step!”

The servants dragged Shim out onto the road. He wandered into the dark of the night, and came upon a village. He was famished because he had had nothing to eat for quite a while. But Ong’s servants were there too, and they had heard their master’s command, so they refused to take Shim into their homes. In the pitch black of the night, in the rain pouring from the sky, both mind and body were exhausted. Then he suddenly toppled over, sprawled out on the road. Near dawn, he managed to crawl into a dugout the size of a crab shell and rest.

This story about Shim later drifted here and there, all the way up to Seoul, and everyone called him a perversity and sneered at him behind pointing fingers. He became the butt of jokes and was finally ostracized. It is said that after this he buried himself in a corner of a remote country village and lived the rest of his life in hiding.

Story 27

## Memories of Shim’s Beautiful Love with Il Ta-hong

Shim Heui-su (1548-1622; pseud. Il Song, Shim Sang-gong) was renowned for his prose and poesy. In fact, he was already proficient in writing by the age of eight. He stood out among other children and was easily recognized as a prodigy. And he was quite attractive, with a complexion as light as snow and a statuesque figure. At an early age, he passed the higher civil service examination in the literature division, then held extensive official administrative posts, and was ultimately appointed a minister in the royal court. In his older years, he was known by the sobriquet “Venerable Minister.” He was active even in his advanced years, holding the post of vice-premier in his seventies.

One day, he went to the royal court with the intention of making a request to the other ministers. “This will probably be my last day here. I hope that all of you will take good care of your health. . .”

They interrupted, “Your Excellency is healthy and you have no illness. What on earth do you mean by saying this is your last day?”

Shim answered with a smile, “There are boundaries in life. How can I hope to hide from the fact that I cannot extend the time allotted to me? And why would it bother me that I cannot? But I just want to tell you my wish, that you gentlemen will devote all of your strength to assisting His Majesty, to show appreciation for his benevolence to all his subjects.”

Words of encouragement, but they left everyone confused. After he went home, however, the next day, he came down with a light illness. An official whom Shim regarded his protégé paid him a visit. Shim received him in his sickbed. Fortunately, it was quiet then and no one else was around.

“I am certain that I will die today. You still have a lot to do in your future, so please take good care of your health.”

The official noticed a slight trace of tears on Shim’s face. “Your Excellency is a very healthy person. Your illness is not grave and it does not seem to be a cause for concern. But now you are talking about dying, and I see you have shed some tears. It is not something that I can easily understand. Do you mind if I ask the reason for this?”

Shim smiled. “I haven’t told anyone before, but since it’s you who’s asking, there’s no reason to hide anything. I will tell you in detail the story of this old man, so please listen—and don’t laugh. . .”

My age, fifteen. In those days, as now, when a member of the family passed the higher civil service exam, the family hosted a three-day celebration for him. One day, ten of my friends and I attended such a celebration in a certain nobleman’s home. A magnificent banquet was laid out and entertainers and gisaeng were brought in. Among all those gisaeng dressed in their brilliant silk garments, one in particular caught my eye. She appeared to be around sixteen. Her basic countenance and every feature stood out as though she were a goddess descended from heaven. The person next to me told me, “She is the renowned Il Ta-hong!”

When I returned home after enjoying the banquet scene, my heart was quietly stirring and I began to miss her. In the end, I could not get her out of my mind and she came to have a place in my heart. About ten days passed. I was on my way back home after school, books clasped in my arms like any other day, when by chance I encountered a beautiful girl on the street. She was dressed elegantly in a splendid outfit, and was riding a noble horse with an excellent saddle. She came closer, got off the horse straightaway, took my hand, and started talking to me.

“Aren’t you young master Shim Heui-su?”

That surprised me, and I looked closely at her. She was none other than Il Ta-hong. “It’s true that I am Shim Heui-su, but how do you know my name?”

I was young, not yet married; there were a lot of people on the road looking at us, and I was feeling embarrassed. Il Ta-hong, however, did not seem to pay attention to our surroundings and just looked happy to see me. She turned around to the servant holding her horse’s reigns and told him, “Something has come up, so I won’t attend the banquet now. I’ll go tomorrow. Take the horse back and relay my message.”

Then she grabbed hold of my hand and took me to a place where we could get off the street. When we were seated, she began to tell me what was on her mind. “Young master, did you attend the celebration banquet at the home of the successful exam candidate a few days ago?”

“Yes, I did.”

“I saw your face that day and thought to myself, he must be a god descended from heaven.” You see, they say I was attractive in my youth. “I asked people around and someone knew who you were and told me, ‘He is the young master in the Shim family. His name is Heui-su and his talents and reputation are known far and wide.’ Since then, I really wished that I could meet you, but there was not a good way to bring this about, so my thoughts of you only deepened as the days went by. And now I have finally met you. Isn’t it truly like heaven is giving a helping hand?”

I was happy, so I said with a broad smile, “Yes, I feel the same.”

“We cannot talk privately here. My aunt’s home is in another neighborhood—we can talk better there.”

We got up right away and walked to her aunt’s house. The place was secluded and cozy, and Ta-hong’s aunt treated her as her own daughter. From this day on, we fell deeply for each other; we kept the door locked shut day and night and did not go out at all. Ta-hong had never experienced romantic love yet, and I became her first.

We spent about ten days like this, then one day out of the blue she said, “We cannot be together like this any longer. We should swear an oath to stay away from each other for a while and then meet again later.”

I asked why she was saying this and she answered, “I have already decided to serve you until the moment I die. But you have parents and you do not have a legal wife yet, so how would your parents ever approve of taking a concubine first? Considering your talents and caliber, it seems you certainly will pass the higher civil service examination soon, and one day you will be promoted to ministerial level. To allow you to concentrate on the exam, I will leave you for the time being. I will keep my chastity and remain faithful to you and wait for the day that you pass the exam. Then I will see you again within three days of your celebration banquet. I will consider this a promise written in iron and stone. Please do not even think of me before you pass the examination. You need not worry about me breaking this promise of fidelity and going with another man, because I have a way to protect myself. So, you will see me again when you pass the examination.”

After this, she let go of my hand and left without a hint of regret. She showed not even the subtlest sign of sorrow at our parting and she did not answer, even till the end, when I asked where she was going. I was dazed, feeling like I had lost something, and returned home with an empty and melancholy heart.

Meanwhile, my whole family was sick with worry because of my disappearance, and had spent many days in a frantic state. When I returned home, my parents could not contain their surprise and happiness to see me. When they asked where I had been, though, I did not tell them the whole truth and gave them an excuse. After this, it was difficult to forget about Ta-hong, and my condition worsened, with thoughts of her and longing for her even ruining my appetite and sleep.

Eventually, though, I began to come to my senses. And I finally became able to focus all my energy on preparation for the examination. I studied hard day and night, without rest. That was because I had only one purpose—to see Il Ta-hong.

In time, my parents told me it was time for me to marry. I dared not refuse, and took a wife, but even till the end I found no happiness in being married.

By nature, I was talented in writing from an early age, and because I worked ten times harder than others, sure enough, I was able to pass the examination five years after Ta-hong and I parted. Passing the exam at such a young age would be a happy occasion for anyone, but I had one more reason for happiness. It was that I was able to keep my promise with Ta-hong that we would be together again.

I was hoping to see her on the first day of the celebration of passing the exam. But I did not see her then, and I did not see her on the second day. And on the third and last day of the celebration I did not see even a shadow of her, all the way to the celebration’s end. I felt so disappointed and sorry that the joy of having passed the higher civil service examination disappeared completely.

At around sunset of the third day, my father told me, “It’s time you paid your respects to my childhood friend in Chang-eui district. It’s supposed to be done during the three-day celebration, so you’ll have to go today.”

I reluctantly went to pay my respects. The sun was already setting in the mountains to the west. Right around then, I was passing by the gate of a certain big house, and I heard someone shout “Shinrae!” from inside the house. That is what they call someone who has passed the exam, and they were calling me. It was the house of Public Affairs Minister Noh. His Excellency was not someone that I was acquainted with, but because it was an elder calling me I got off my horse and respectfully entered his house. To get a better look at me, he asked me to step back, and inspected me. Then he allowed me to sit—at the head of the table. We conversed and he grew more and more congenial. He even had food and drinks brought in.

His Excellency picked up a cup of wine and asked, “Would you like to meet someone with whom you are already acquainted?”

I was confused and answered with hesitation. “What do you mean by someone with whom I am acquainted?”

His Excellency answered with a smile. “That person is in my house now.”

Then he ordered the servant to bring that person in. It was her—Il Ta-hong! From that moment, my happiness knew no bounds.

On the other hand, though, I could not help but wonder, “How can you be here?”

Il Ta-hong answered with a smile. “Today is within the three days of celebrating your passing the examination, is it not? How could I ever forget the promise I made when we parted?”

His Excellency volunteered an explanation of what had happened up till now. “This child is the loveliest woman under heaven. Her fidelity is beautiful too, and the impression she leaves upon everything she does is amazing. I will tell you everything. . .” He thought a moment, then spoke again. “My wife and I have grown old together—I’m in my eighties now—but we have not been able to have children. Then one day, out of the blue, this child came to me and told me, ‘I will place my whole being under your patronage and promise to be always at your side, while taking last place among your servants.’ I thought this very strange, but she continued, ‘I am not running from any master, so you need not worry about that.’

“At first I did not accept her proposal. But this child would not leave, she held on, pleading with great determination. Alright, I thought, I would observe her behavior a while, as a test. And, as she had promised, she worked as a servant, serving tea and meals during the day and preparing the bedding at night, among other things. She was never less than meticulous when it came to household chores and service. Both my wife and I are old and sick and of course she has never left our side, and what’s more, she was always there to scratch our backs, massage our knees, in general taking great care in attending to our every need. We have spent very comfortable days because of her. In addition, she is highly skilled in sewing and has made clothing for us even without being asked. Always a perfect fit, they were, and quickly done, warm in the cold and cool in the heat. Both my wife and I have come to love her, my wife especially, and consider her our daughter. During the day, she attended us around the house, and at nights she attended me at my side.

“Once, in the quiet of the night, I asked her story, and this is what she told me. ‘I am from a good family but I lost both my parents at an early age and did not have anyone to rely on. Then an old woman in the village took me in and trained me to be a gisaeng. I was young, so it never got to the point where my body was sullied. I was lucky and met a certain young man and we took the oath to be husband and wife for a hundred years. But the man is still young and is not yet married, so we made a promise to meet again after he passes the higher civil service examination. The reason that I dared attempt to enter your noble family was so that I could spend a few years in hiding from the world I had been living in, to keep faithful to my husband. My thought is to leave as soon as my dear husband passes the examination.’

“So, I asked, ‘Who is your husband?’ and she mentioned your name right away. I am old and weak and near death, so it wasn’t my purpose to have a woman intimately. That is the reason that she was able to keep her chastity even though she did volunteer to be my concubine. It’s been four or five years already! Every time the names of those who passed the exam were posted and we didn’t see your name on the list, she said, ‘My husband will certainly pass the exam within four or five years, so there’s no reason for me to be so disappointed just because he has not passed it this year.’ Even though you two were apart, she never bothered others with any sign of melancholy or regret at any time.

“This year, I saw your name on the list that was posted in the public announcement, and told her. But she showed no sign of excitement or happiness and just said, ‘I have known for quite a while that this would happen, so why would this be so special? I have promised my husband that we will meet within the three-day celebration period, so I must keep that promise,’ and then she just went up to the roof to try to see the traditional procession of the new Confucian scholars. But this neighborhood is rather hidden in the back streets and out of the way, so she wasn’t able to see them for two days. She went up again today, saying, ‘They will definitely pass by here today.’ Finally, just now, she saw that you happened to be passing by the gate of my home, and she ran to me to ask me to call you. I have heard many stories passed down through the ages—romantic stories about famed women, anecdotes of revered sages joining in discussion, of their eccentricities—but I have never known of such an exquisitely extraordinary situation as this. Heaven must have been impressed with her true heart and taken a hand in helping to make your oath come true, so this meeting today is not something to be taken lightly.”

And that was the end of his story. Then he added, “This old man wants to give you and the child something, so why not stay here tonight?”

It was an unexpected surprise and pleasure to meet Ta-hong like this, and their story moved me deeply. I hid my feelings, though, and politely asked, “How can I take her back? I was intimate with her in my youth, but now she is serving Your Excellency.”

His Excellency gave a beaming smile and said, “I am old and it has been a long time since I had any intimate relations with women. The reason that I took her as my concubine was to protect her from my nephews’ covetous attentions. Actually, though, she had such strong integrity that no one would even think of trying to weaken her resolve to keep herself for you. Never doubt that.”

Hence, he sent home the horse that I had come on, my horse tender, and the rest of my entourage, and he sent his own servant to deliver his message to my father. He wrote, “I will have your son lodge here one night before letting him go.” Then he ordered a servant to straighten up and clean a room, and afterwards had the servant put in a colorfully-painted screen, flower-patterned sleeping mat and silk bedding, among other things, thus decorating the room brilliantly. He even had incense lit and a wedding candle placed there, making it a room fit for newlyweds. Then he left the room so that Ta-hong and I could sleep together.

The next morning, I thanked His Excellency and returned home. There I told my parents the whole story of my meeting with Ta-hong, from the beginning. They told me to bring her at once, and arranged for her to live together with my family in the same house. Ta-hong was extremely talented in the arts and crafts, and excelled in sewing, the string instrument *geomungo*, and the strategy game *baduk*. No one could come even close to matching her talents. Her behavior was outstanding—she attended the elders with filial piety and utmost respect, was thoughtful and wise, and treated the servants sincerely, with proper manners, so that everyone liked her and admired her. Even after I married my official wife, I loved Ta-hong and valued her above all else. I wanted to sleep only in her room, but she worried that my wife might not be able to conceive or that I might become estranged from her, and urged me to sleep with my wife.

When I was posted as chief magistrate of a district in Geumsan, far south of Seoul, Ta-hong came with me, and we lived together in the official residence for several years. Generally, she refused me at night, explaining, “If a man keeps too close to a woman, it is inevitable that his health will suffer,” and urged me to sleep alone. Then one day, quite unexpectedly, she offered to sleep with me. I was confused and asked the reason. She answered, “This concubine of yours is coming to the end of her life, so there are not too many days left to me in this world. I intend to enjoy life to the fullest so that I will have no regrets when I die.”

I thought it peculiar and couldn’t believe it, so I asked, “How would you know the day you are to die?”

She answered with a smile. “I have my ways.”

Five or six days must have passed, when she actually did come down with a slight illness. It lingered and got worse over the next few days. And then she died, without suffering much. As she was leaving me, she asked this favor. “We all have our own fate, so it is all the same whether we die young or live to enjoy a long life. I have given you myself entirely and received your utter devotion, so what regrets can I have if I die now? But there is one thing: If my bones could be buried next to your grave. . . so I could serve you in the underworld. . . I would have nothing left to wish for. . .”

Then she breathed her last breath. Her lovely face looked just like it did when she was alive. I could not hide my grieving heart. I prepared her for the funeral, cleaning her body and placing her in the coffin with my own hands. No laws prescribe the protocol for a funeral procession for concubines, and I knew of no precedent. I just told my superior the governor that I had business in Seoul and got several days leave of absence, then pulled her bier by myself all the way to the family grave site at Mount Goyang. Burying her there, I was carrying out her death wish. At the Geum River ferry I wrote this sad eulogy, letting her go.

A bouquet of popular flowers on your bier

Where are you headed, hesitant flower-like soul?

Funeral banner drenched in Geum River’s autumn rain

The tears of a beautiful woman?

After her death, she always came in dreams to alert me to big and small, good and bad things that the future held for me, and she was always right on the mark.

Several years passed like that. Then she came to my dreams a few days ago and told me, “You have lived all the days allotted to you, and soon it will be time for you to leave. We will meet again within the next few days.” So now I am keeping myself and my surroundings clean, and waiting. That is why I said my goodbye to the other ministers during our meeting at the office before.

And last night she appeared in my dream again. She told me, “You will leave tomorrow.” The conversation we had was so sad—how I cried even while I was dreaming! I still felt traces of tears on my cheeks when I woke this morning. I wonder now, why would I have cried such melancholy tears over dying, when it will actually bring me closer to her. . .? Anyway, my affection for you is as if you were family and, since you asked, I told you everything. Please do not bother telling this to other people.”

Shim Heui-su did indeed finish his life that day.

Story 28

## Fated Love Story from the Dynasty Annals

This is a story from the days that King Seongjong ruled (1469-1494).

A certain renowned minister of the royal court came to Pyeongyang as its magistrate. Pyeongyang and its outlying area were well-known from long before for their beautiful scenic sites. That is why people enjoyed dressing themselves up in their best clothes and going on an outing to view the delightful scenery from the banks of the river or from viewpoints on the slopes of the mountains, and enjoying music along with the view. The scenery here was regarded the best in all of the eight provinces of the country. Among the government officials who visited here and witnessed this natural beauty, there were a few talented poets and painters who stayed on for several years because of the deep impression the enchanting scenery made on them.

There was an especially lovely child among all those who were registered as gisaeng in Pyeongyang. Her real name was Jaran, but she was called by her gisaeng name, Oksoseon. She had just turned twelve years old at the time our story begins. Jaran was born extraordinarily beautiful and it seemed that no one in this world could match her beauty. Singing, dancing, even playing musical instruments—she was equally talented in all. Furthermore, since even her knowledge of the classics and her general erudition were outstanding, and she composed great poetry, she was commonly referred to as “first” or “the best” in the Pyeongyang area from early on.

Meanwhile, the newly posted magistrate had a son whose age was also twelve. Minho was his name. He was a handsome lad; in particular, his eyes and eyebrows were perfectly formed, as if they had been painted on. At an early age, he had already mastered the classics and history, and had such outstanding talent in creative writing that, when given a subject, he would complete an excellent poem without hesitation. People called Minho a prodigy. The magistrate treasured him because he was his only child and because he had such outstanding talents.

Along came the district magistrate’s birthday. The banquet hall Chu Hyang Dang was alive with the guests’ talking and drinking and the hired gisaeng troupe’s singing and dancing. Everyone was getting tipsy and the sound of boisterous laughter filled the surroundings. The festive atmosphere was growing to a crescendo when the magistrate, wanting to bolster the merriment, asked his son to get up and dance. Then he called the head gisaeng and had her choose one of her young gisaeng to partner with his son in a dance. The gisaeng ladies and people from the government office thought it was natural that the talented and beautiful Jaran should be the young master’s partner. After all, they were the same age and both very attractive.

Hence, the magistrate’s son and the budding gisaeng ended up dancing together. They circled each other, then stepped forward and away, and their supple movements reminded one of fresh and graceful young willows, or of swallows dancing in the air. Every step they took was superb. Their entire audience watched in jaw-dropping awe, amazed by their skill. The magistrate was impressed too, and when the dance was over he called Jaran to his table and had her sit there. He invited her to have the delicious food and even presented her with several rolls of silk, and on the spot he announced that Jaran would be his son’s attendant gisaeng.

Since that day Jaran was always at Minho’s side, serving him tea, grinding his ink for calligraphy, and frolicking and playing with him. Over the next few years of being together constantly, they fell deeply in love. The quality of love in those popular romance novels of Jeongsang and Yi Wa (which ended happily) and Jang Lang and Ang Ang (which ended tragically) could not even come close to the love that Minho and Jaran shared.

When the magistrate’s first term of office was over, the royal court deemed his rule in Pyeongyang province a big success and assigned him another term. Then, after serving six years altogether, he was called to Seoul to serve in the royal court. As the day of their departure approached, the magistrate and his wife became more and more concerned about their son having to part with Jaran. The thought of leaving her behind made them worry that Minho would be laid low with love sickness, but at the same time, they hesitated to take her with them because that might complicate the process of getting their son married. Since both choices were unpalatable, they could not easily make up their minds whether to take Jaran, so they decided to ask Minho directly.

The magistrate called his son to him. “Even a parent should think twice before preventing his mature son from doing something that he wants to. I certainly don’t want to do that. Since you and Jaran are already deeply in love, it would be very hard for you to part. On the other hand, I’m worried because you’re not married yet and being together with her might interfere with your getting married. However, it is not unusual for a man to have a concubine, and if you are so in love with her and cannot forget her, well, there’s nothing we can do about it, is there? I will respect your wishes, so tell me and please don’t hide your thoughts.”

The magistrate was surprised when Minho answered as though it was not a major concern to him. “How is it, Father, that you worry that my health will be damaged from love sickness at parting with nothing more than a gisaeng? For the last few years I was distracted, maybe even enthralled by her, but leaving her to return to Seoul with my parents would be no more difficult than leaving behind a tattered old pair of shoes. You can stop worrying, Father.”

The young man’s parents were very happy. “Our son is really turning into a great man!”

The magistrate finished his term in Pyeongyang, and he and his entourage left for Seoul. The day they left, Jaran could not even look at the young master and choked on the tears that she was swallowing, but Minho showed not even the slightest sign of loss or longing. The government office people watching this could only admire the young man’s unusually firm resolution, because it was an incomparably heartbreaking parting to everyone else and no one could ever expect that the boy would be able to part with Jaran so bravely after five or six years of being with her every single day.

Minho’s father became Vice-Minister of Government Affairs in the royal court. Meanwhile, the young man gradually weakened in his resolve to hide his longing for Jaran, and realized that his love for her was more intense than even he thought it could be. Yet he kept this to himself and did not express it in word or deed.

Around this time, there was a notice posted that the higher civil service examination was going to take place. Following his father’s instruction, the young master went to a mountain temple with a couple of friends to prepare for the examination. One night Minho and his friends had already retired for the night, but for some reason sleep did not come to Minho. He got up alone and went out into the courtyard. It was a winter night, with snow on the ground, the moonlight shining brilliantly. All kinds of sounds seeped in through the silence of the mountain’s depths. Watching the moon, his yearning for Jaran clutched his heart. He could not suppress the desire to see her face if only just once, and he began to feel he would go mad if he could not. Halfway through the night something seemed to drag him off and set him on the road to Pyeongyang. He started off with only some threadbare silk clothing on his back, his fur cap on his head, and his leather shoes on his feet. After walking only about ten *li*, his feet started swelling up and it became impossible for him to continue.

At a country village home Minho exchanged his leather shoes for thatched shoes, which were actually more comfortable for real walking, and he exchanged his fur hat for a torn bamboo hat to blend in with other travelers. Then he started on his way again. He begged some food on the way but more often than not he went without, and he stayed in country inns a few times but on most nights shivered in cold doorways through the night. He was the son of an affluent family and had grown up wearing silk clothes and eating fresh, wholesome rice and never walking even a few steps outside the gate of his home. Having lived like that, when suddenly having to walk a thousand *li* on foot, it was natural that he would stumble and fall on the road, even crawling a few times. But giving it all he had, he pushed his way forward. He went hungry, his clothes were all in tatters, he shivered in the cold. His face, gaunt and dark, made people think he was a ghost. But he bore each hardship with fortitude and overcame each crisis, getting closer to Pyeongyang with each step, until he finally reached the city about a month after he started.

Minho went straight to Jaran’s home, but he could not see a trace of her. Only her mother was there, all alone. He approached her mother and said, “I am the son of the magistrate who was previously posted here. I can’t forget your daughter and have gladly walked a thousand *li* to be with her. But where has she gone? I can’t see her here.”

The mother did not show any sign of happiness to see him, even after hearing his story. “She is probably in the pavilion at the district office now, with the son of the newly-appointed magistrate. He loves my daughter, and she stays with him day and night. That young master does not permit my child to come out, not even for a short time, so she never has a chance to come home. It has already been like that for several months. Though you have come a long way, it is not likely that you will be able to see her. Pity.” Then she just looked out to the distant mountains and did not think at all to invite him in to serve him something.

He just felt lost and thought, “I missed Jaran so much and went through all those hardships to get here, but I can’t see her here and I’m even being rejected by her mother. And to top it off, I don’t have a place to go to rest my tired body. . . What on earth am I to do?”

Not knowing where to go and feeling so desolate, he finally thought of a certain functionary who had served his father during the days his father was magistrate here. This functionary had committed an unpardonable crime and was waiting to be executed. Only Minho had felt sorry for him, and often, when paying his respects morning and bedtime to his father, asked his father to let the man live. Finally, because of Minho’s earnest persistence, the functionary’s sentence was commuted. “If he has not forgotten that kindness that saved his life,” thought Minho, “how hard can it be to get him to let me stay at his place for a few days?”

He immediately left Jaran’s house and went to look for the functionary. Because of Minho’s shabby appearance, the functionary did not recognize the young master at first. But when Minho told him his name, his eyes popped in surprise and he urgently invited him into his house. He cleaned a spot for the young master to use, and served him a generous helping of rice and side dishes.

Minho stayed there for a few days and together with the functionary pondered possible ways to see Jaran. Once during this time, the functionary came up with a proposal. “It is not going to be easy for you to see her, but if you want to see her, even just once, I have a scheme. I wonder if you will go along with it.”

“Of course! Please tell me, now!”

“These days, after a heavy snow, people are being drafted to sweep around the magistrate’s office. This work is always assigned to the civilians living within the city walls, and I am in charge of this work. My plan is for you to mix in among the workers and go into the pavilion area with a broom and sweep the snow. Then you will be able to see Jaran, who will probably be there in the pavilion. As of right now, there is no other way.”

Minho decided to follow this plan. The next morning, he went to the pavilion together with many laborers and started to sweep away the snow with his broom. The son of the current magistrate happened to have opened the window of the pavilion and was leaning against its frame. Jaran was standing next to him, but she was not visible from the outside. Meanwhile, other laborers, hardier than our young master, were cleaning away the snow vigorously, without much difficulty, but the young master was clumsy at using a broom and there was an obvious difference from the others. At seeing the awkward young man, the magistrate’s son burst out in laughter, and called Jaran to enjoy the spectacle with him. Soon Jaran, at his call, came and stood in the window. At the same time, Minho thought, “Now!” and he pulled back his hat and passed by the window—and saw Jaran.

Jaran saw the young man looking at her with a desperate look, but she just gave him a blank glance, just once, then turned back into the room and shut the window. She did not look out again. Thus did their brief encounter end, so cruelly. Minho had to go back to the functionary’s home, with only disappointment and sadness in his heart.

Though the young master’s appearance had changed, the always alert and wise Jaran recognized the young master at first glance. After she turned back into the room her tears flowed without stopping. The magistrate’s son was perplexed and asked the reason.

She kept quiet at first, but after the magistrate’s son pushed her a few times, she finally opened up. “It is a real blessing for a commoner like me to live my life with a dear husband’s love, covering myself with golden blankets at night and eating all kinds of delicious food during the day. But because you do not want to be apart from me I cannot go home, not even for a moment. It has been like this, every day, for several months already. All these luxuries that I have are a once-in-a-lifetime blessing, so I have not the slightest feeling of regret, except that I am from a poor family and my old mother is all alone. When I was at home, on the anniversary of my father’s death we always managed to carry out his memorial rites because I managed to beg or borrow the ritual foods. But now, I am locked up here tight without being able to do anything and the anniversary of my father’s death is near. In fact, that day is tomorrow. I am worried that my old mother will not be able to prepare even a single bowl of rice. The thought of this suddenly made me sad and I could not control my tears. What other reason would there be?”

It was a long time since the magistrate’s son fell deeply for Jaran and he did not doubt her words at all. On the contrary, he tried to console her. “Is that really the reason you are crying? Why didn’t you tell me that sooner?” He immediately had his servant pack plenty of food for the memorial rites, and handed them to Jaran, telling her to go home and perform the memorial service, and come back to him when she finished.

Jaran ran recklessly fast to her home and asked in great haste as soon as she saw her mother, “Mother, I know that the previous magistrate’s son is here in Pyeongyang. I thought he would certainly be waiting for me here, but he is not here. Where would he have gone?”

“The young master did indeed come to see you, walked all this way. He came to our house yesterday. I told him that you were living in the magistrate’s residence and there was no hope of seeing you, so he turned around and left. But it’s no longer my business where he went.”

Upon hearing this, Jaran let out her pent-up grief and started sobbing her heart out, as though she would burst in anger, and scolded her mother, “My mother did something that no person with any heart would do. You know what the young master and I had together. The day we danced together at the birthday banquet, both of us just twelve years old, everyone at the Government Affairs Office thought that I would become his partner. Even though it was other people that put us together, I thought he was a match made in heaven for me. The young master and I grew up together, never spending a moment away from each other. His father did not reject me just because I was a commoner, he thought of me as his son’s spouse and consoled and treated me generously. Where else could I get such kind love? And among all those Pyeongyang nobles that have come here, there has never been one with such dignity and such extraordinary talents as the young master. Above all, I considered him my husband and believed with all my heart that we would be together always. When those with great power told me to give myself to another, it would have been more honorable to end my life to keep my fidelity, but I wasn’t able to do that, holding my life for him so dear. No, I came to live in this situation, playing the heartless coquette with another man. Now, mother, what would the precious young master, a man like him, be missing so much that he would come walking a thousand *li* like this?” she scolded. “How can you have completely forgotten the love and the blessings that he and his family bestowed on us? How could you not even serve a warm meal to the one who walked all that way for me, taking on such hardship, and not even care to know where he has gone? It is not how a human being should behave, but my mother behaved in such a heartless way. How could you do such a thing?”

After this outburst, she calmed herself, then came up with an idea. “There is no place within the city walls where my husband could stay,” she thought to herself, “. . . other than at the home of that functionary whose life he saved! Yes, he must be there!” She flew out of the house and ran straight to the functionary’s home. The young master was there, as she had hoped. The two of them, speechless, just held hands while their tears flowed.

After a long while like this, Jaran took Minho back to her home and served him a generous table of food and drink. When the night came, Jaran asked him, “What should we do? We will not be able to see each other again after tonight.”

After discussing their situation, they decided to run away together. From the closet Jaran got some silk-embroidered clothing, took out all of the cotton lining, and sewed in a small amount of gold and silver coins. In a wrapper-cloth she put hairpieces and dowry jewelry and other accessories that would bring them some cash later. While Jaran’s mother was fast asleep the two of them shouldered their bundles and escaped, taking advantage of the dark night.

After wandering the foothills of Mount Maeng, in the Pyeongan Province district of Yangdeok, they came to a village where they found lodging in a small house, and were finally able to relax. The neighbors took to these two who had drifted into the village and lived in poverty, and felt pity for them and helped them out. The young couple survived by doing odd jobs. Though Minho, not used to working with his hands, was quite clumsy and useless, Jaran had good sewing skills and got along well with their neighbors, so they managed a hand-to-mouth existence. After a while, they were able to get a simple shack with a couple rooms. By nature, Jaran was diligent and she worked day and night sewing and weaving without rest. She sold her work in a timely manner, and they were able to buy some clothing and a few household items, so that their life was not lacking in the basic necessities. Later on, the young couple were even able to acquire a more comfortable home.

Meanwhile, those who had been studying with Minho at the temple, when they found him missing in the morning, mustered the temple’s monks and wandered the mountain in all directions looking for him. In the end, when they could not find him, they had no choice but to let his family know that he had gone missing. His family was frantic with worry. They sent all their servants to search for him thoroughly through all the temples within a hundred *li*, but his whereabouts remained a mystery even after many days. They concluded that either he had been possessed by a fox and died, or he was attacked by a tiger and became its meal. Thus, finally, he was pronounced dead. The family held a funeral and even entered his name in the family memorial shrine.

Meanwhile, back in Pyeongyang, the magistrate’s son ordered the officials to arrest Jaran’s mother and relatives and imprison them. They interrogated the family as to Jaran’s whereabouts. When they could not find Jaran even after a month, they gave up their search.

After the young couple found a comfortable place and settled in, Jaran told Minho, “You are the only son in a noble minister’s household, and you have fallen for a gisaeng and abandoned your parents to run away to a remote mountain valley and live in hiding like this. Your family does not even know whether you are alive or dead. Have you ever seen such an unfilial son? From now on you will have to behave in a way that you can redeem yourself of your unfilial behavior. But then, you cannot go home again as if nothing is wrong. What do you intend to do about this?”

At hearing this, tears fell from Minho’s eyes. “Frankly, I have been worrying about that all along. It’s just that I haven’t been able to come up with a plan.”

“There is one way. You can erase the past by returning to the world again, and then going back to your parents. Are you willing to try. . .?”

The young man’s thoughts raced. “Try what? Please tell me, now.”

“Just one thing: You must pass the higher civil service examination and achieve a good reputation. There now, I see you already know what I am thinking, so I need say no more.”

The young man was delighted. “That’s a great idea. But where can I get the books I will need to study?”

“Do not worry about that. I will do everything I can do to get them.”

From that day, Jaran started telling the neighbors that she wanted to buy certain books, no matter how much they cost. Because they lived in a remote village, however, for a long time she could not find the books. Then one day, an itinerant peddler passing through the village had a book that he wanted to sell. One villager wanted to buy it to use for wallpaper, but Jaran first borrowed it “for a short time” and took it home to show it to Minho. The book contained the subject used recently in the higher civil service examination—a petition to the King—and notes on the proper way to write the verses. The explanation and sample verses, written in very small characters the size of sesame seeds, filled the book. It was as big and as heavy as a roof tile and it contained thousands of verses.

“This one book is all I will need!”

Jaran immediately bought the book and gave it to Minho. Once he got possession of the book, he did not stop memorizing it. At night, they lit the oil lamp, sharing the light, and each diligently worked at their own task. While he studied his book, Jaran was beside him turning the spinning wheel to make yarn. When Minho’s energy flagged even a bit, Jaran was right on him, keeping him at his study for the exam.

Three years passed like this. Minho had a natural talent for writing, and with his sudden improvement in it—his heart growing in poetic sensibility and his head mastering the rhetoric—when he picked up his brush he came up with a complete and well-crafted poem very quickly. The beautiful and elegant poems that he created were better than anyone else in the country could write, and it seemed that, even if he were to take the examination right away, he would pass it in a snap.

As luck would have it, it was then announced that a special examination would be conducted, at which the King would attend. Jaran prepared some food for her husband’s trip, securely packed his travel gear, and sent him off to take the exam. The young man walked all the way to Seoul, straight to the exam site at Seong Gyun Gwan. The King himself set forth the subject for poesy. Upon receiving the subject, Minho’s thoughts flowed like a natural spring, and at once, with a few swift strokes of his brush, he dashed off his complete poem. Then he left the place.

When the list of those who had passed the exam was ready, the King ordered it to be opened on the spot. The one who passed in first place was none other than Minho. At that time, his father, currently Minister of Interior, was in attendance near the King’s desk. The King asked the Minister, “The one who placed first in the examination seems to be your son! For his father’s occupation, however, he wrote ‘Minister of Government Affairs.’ What is the reason for this?”

The King showed the exam poem to the young man’s father. When the minister saw the poem, he got up from his seat, tears in his eyes, and told the King, “Yes, it is correct that this fellow is the son of your humble servant. Three years ago, he was studying with his friends in a mountain temple, but he suddenly disappeared one night. We have not been able to find him all these years. We thought that he must have been killed by some wild animal, and we even put up a family shrine behind the temple where he had been studying. The mourning period is already passed, but the grief at suddenly losing a child does not die. He was our only child, after all, with outstanding talent and character. Now, looking at these brush strokes—yes, it is indeed his writing. I was the Minister of Government Affairs at the time we lost the child, and I imagine that is why he wrote such. However, I have no idea how or where he has been living for the last three years, nor how he came to participate in the examination now.”

The King was astonished to hear this, and had Minho called in for an audience. He was called even before the examination’s award was announced, so he was still wearing his commoner’s clothes instead of the outfit awarded to those who passed the exam. The King asked him why he had left the mountain temple, and where he had been living for three years, among other questions.

At this, the young man took a step back, bowed, and answered with his head still down. “Your humble servant is ashamed. I have committed a huge offense by forsaking my parents. Please impose a heavy punishment on me.”

“You certainly have committed an offense; even so, I will not punish you,” the King replied. “But you must conceal nothing from your King and your parents. Tell the entire truth.”

With this, the young man told the whole truth step by step, every detail of his behavior. Everyone around could not help but cock their ears to listen. Even the King was surprised at certain points and thought the whole story quite extraordinary.

Finally, he gave instructions to the young man’s father. “The son of the honorable Minister is now atoning for his past mistakes and has worked hard at his task and raised his qualifications to be included in the rolls of the government. If a man in his youth is indulgent with women that is not a cause for serious concern, so, forgive his sins of the past and use this opportunity to encourage him, in a way that he will become a great person in the future. It was quite exceptional behavior to go into hiding in the mountains with this Jaran, and it is praiseworthy of her that she bought him the book and helped him study diligently to make up for his past mistakes. It is not right to look down on her just because she was a gisaeng. Your child need not take a ‘proper’ wife—have him marry Jaran and make her his legal wife. I will make sure the children born of these two will not encounter any obstruction in taking higher government posts.”

Then he announced the list of successful candidates in the state examination for the higher civil service. Minho’s father was overjoyed to find his long lost son right in front of the King, and arranged that he return home on a horse, wearing the crown of acacia flowers and led by a band playing with gusto. At home, grief turned to joy and the whole household became boisterous with happy surprise.

Minho’s parents sent a palanquin to bring Jaran home, and prepared a great banquet to welcome her. They accepted Jaran as their son’s lawful wife. That very day, Minho was appointed directly by the King to a post in military affairs. Soon Jaran arrived in Seoul as the proper wife of a government official.

Later, Minho achieved the status of a minister of state, and Jaran and he grew old together. They had two children, who both passed the higher civil service examination and enjoyed prosperity.

Even now people living on the slope of Mount Maeng remember Jaran and Minho, and still call their village “the high official’s village.”