Material

“Gazing at the White Clouds”: An Annotated Translation of Yulgok’s *Sŏnbi haengjang*

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Introduction

Yi I [Yulgok] 李耳 [栗谷] (1536-1584) ranks among the most important figures of Korean Confucianism.¹ His copious œuvre (cf. Yi 1978a and 1978b) influenced legions of Confucian scholars and still receives wide attention in academia today. Yulgok’s varied contributions to sŏngnihak 性理學 (xinglijixue in Chinese) lastingly shaped its discourse and, concomitantly, political factionalism in Chosŏn 朝鮮 (1392-1910).² Similarly, his memories of his mother Sin Saimdang 申師任堂 (1504-1551)—the Sŏnbi haengjang (Biography of my Late Mother)—became the locus classicus for the “Sin Saimdang myth” (Yi 2004, 70-73), which elevated his mother to the Confucian paragon of “womanly virtue” 婦德 (pudŏk), and from the early twentieth century onwards (cf. Choi 2009), the archetypal “wise mother and good wife” 賢母良妻 (hyŏmma yangchŏ). Neo-Confucianism in Chosŏn gradually inscribed women the roles of “guardians and transmitters of Confucian norms and values,” rendering them “axial elements of the Confucian hegemonic system” (Deuchler 2003, 165). This artificially constructed ideal of female virtue became a culturally entrenched measure of womanly moral qualities, a “self-perpetuating concept” (Pettid 2011, 51) in which Sin Saimdang embodied the anticipated model.

Her mastery of painting was later often taken as an expression of her superior moral character, a mirror of her exemplary conduct as a mother of a sage, and has been extolled not only by disciples within Yulgok’s line of tradition 畿湖學派 (kiho hakp’a) such as the likes of Kwon Sang-ha [Suam] 權尙夏 [遂菴] (1641-1721) and Kim Ch’ang-hŭp [Samyŏn] 金昌翕 [三淵] (1653-1722), but also by many Confucian literati in general. For centuries after her demise, many artists who produced works often attributed to her, had yielded their own authorship to participate.

¹ For biographical information, see the Haengjang 行狀 (Biography) authored by Yulgok’s disciple Kim Chang-saeng [Sagye] 金長生 [沙溪] (1548-1631) in Yi (1958) 1978a, 35.2a-35.51b, 342-66. For secondary readings, see, for example, Hwang 2001, 13-22; Ro 1989, 3-10.
² Xìnglǐ or “School of Nature and lǐ” refers to the doctrinal lineage of Zhū Xī 朱熹 (1130-1200), the dominant (and only tolerated) Neo-Confucian tradition in Chosŏn.
in, and contribute to, the tradition of Sin Saimdang anonymously. In the Confucian tradition, it is not uncommon for a single individual to become a corporate symbol as people place themselves in the context of the initiating person and contribute their own uniqueness and qualities to the formation of the living tradition. Through this process, just as Confucius (tr. 551-479 BCE) himself was transformed from a failed politician at the end of his life to the position of “uncrowned king” 素王 (sowang in Korean, sùwáng in Chinese) by the Hán Dynasty 漢朝 (206 BCE-220), Sin Saimdang was elevated from a talented female painter who passed away prematurely to the status of exceptional female painter who gave birth to a most renowned Confucian scholar. This status was established through a complex century-long discourse in which evaluative disagreement was often involved (cf. Yi 2008), for her artistic career moved beyond the familial realm, thus conflicting with the orthodox neo-Confucian expectations vis-à-vis womanly virtue. Thinkers such as, most notably, Song Si-yŏl [Uam] 宋時烈 [尤庵] (1607-1689), who is considered to be the direct heir of Yulgok’s thought, faced a veritable dilemma in appraising Sin Saimdang because they found she obviously violated the female norms they strongly advocated. That is to say, in their eyes she had failed to maintain the discreet reserve between genders and transgressed gender boundaries to enter the world of men, that is, the extrafamilial world of achievement, leaving professional artworks for future generations. While some Confucians like Sin Saimdang’s contemporary Ŭ Suk-kwŏn [Yajoktang] 魚叔權 [也足堂] did not see her artistry as at variance with the moral underpinnings of ideal Confucian womanhood,

3. For further information, see Yi 1994a, 216-17: “Now, the excellent virtue of Madame Sin that gave birth to a great worthy [i.e., Yulgok] is comparable to [that of] Madame Hu [Hóu in Chinese 侯 (1004-1052)] who had the Chéng brothers [i.e., the influential Neo-Confucians Chéng Hào 程顥 (1032-1085) and Chéng Yí 程頤 (1033-1107)]. According to the biography of Madame Hu, she considered it extremely improper to hand works of prose and calligraphy down to others. Madame Sin’s view must have matched hers....This scroll now resembles the style of painting of a specialised artist, not that of an accidental brush stroke once performed for amusement. That is to say, it is different from a painting drawn diligently on the same day in fear of one’s father’s strict order.” 盖惟申夫人賢德。鍾生大賢。克娘侯夫人之有兩程也。侯夫人行狀云。夫人以婦人之文章筆札傅於人。深以爲非。而申夫人所見。克與符焉。… 今兹之簇。一似畵工業於其事者之規模。似非一時偶然之戲筆也。則恐與當日。窳勉於嚴命之下者。有異矣。

4. For further details, see Minjok Munhwa Ch’ujinhoe (1973) 1983, 782: “Now there is Lady Sin of Tongyang [i.e., P’yŏngsan 平山]. From a young age she excelled in painting. Her [paintings of]
others either overlooked this issue, as the majority did, and paid dutiful respect, or like, for instance, Sin ûng-jo [Kyejôn] 申應朝 [桂田] (1804-1899), took a reconciling view between her role as a professional artist and the exemplary, that is, modest and family-centred, behaviour expected from a Confucian woman.\(^5\) Although such ambivalent feelings towards Sin Saimdang were never more than marginal, let alone detrimental in respect to her overall favourable reception, they resonantly reignited again recently when in 2009 the Bank of Korea unveiled her likeness on its new 50,000 Wôn bill.\(^6\) In its wake, most feminist groups opposed the decision because Sin Saimdang was deemed a symbol of the patriarchal female model while the official statement of the Bank of Korea declared that she had not only been a model of the Confucian housewife but stood as an historic icon of career women and model of equality among genders. This has been the most recent addition to the Sin Saimdang discourse whose point of origin is the Sônbi haengjang.

Yulgok seems to have enjoyed a close relationship with his mother, as evidenced through a Buddhist episode at Kûmgangsan 金剛山, a quest for meaning following a three-year mourning period at Sin’s gravesite (cf. Pokorny and Chang 2011). The biographical account of his mother is formally patterned in line with the haengjang genre. Usually written by a close family member or acquaintance, a haengjang succinctly reviews the life and achievements of the deceased person. A woman’s haengjang normatively focuses on the virtuous attributes of the deceased and her harmonising impact.

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5. For more information, see Yi 1994a, 185: “Madame Hu did not want her calligraphy to be handed down. Madame Sin, on the contrary, is appreciated as a most exquisitely recognised painter, which seems incongruent with Madame Hu. However, in reality, she is not incongruent but consonant with Madame Hu. Now, Madame Sin did not wish to bequeath her works to the world, yet it is the people who valued them like a treasure. Thus, one could not possibly discriminate between Madame Hu having left no paintings and Madame Sin having left paintings. For their intentions never differed.”

6. For the nineteenth-century discourse on Sin Saimdang, see Kim 2008.
on family life in an attempt to connect to the idealised Confucian image. Little anecdotes personalise the content (cf. Yi 2007). Yulgok’s *Sŏnbi haengjang* is an exemplar.

Sin Saimdang was born on December 5, 1504, into a *yangban* family in the village of Puk’pyŏng 北坪村, the area of today’s eastern coastal city of Kangnŭng 강릉. She was the second of five daughters to Sin Myŏng-hwa 申命和 (1476-1522) and Lady Yi 李, descendants of the Sin clan of P’yŏngsan and the Yi clan of Yong’in 龍仁, respectively. Sin Saimdang herself had seven children, four sons—Yi Sŏn 李璿 (1524-1570), Yi Pŏn 李璜, Yi I [Yulgok], and Yi U [Oksan] 李瑀 [玉山] (1542-1609)—and three daughters, of which only the eldest, Yi Maech’ang 李梅窓 (1529-1592), is known by her (pen) name. Likewise, “Saimdang” is Sin’s pen name **호** given to her by her father, whereas her given name is unknown. “Saimdang” 師任堂 literally means “hall of emulating Im,” expressing her father’s wish that his daughter would emulate the virtue of Tāirèn 太任 (T‘aeim in Korean), the mother of King Wén of Zhōu 周文王, who was being honoured as the founder of Zhōu Dynasty 周朝 (tr. 1046-771 BCE). In the Confucian tradition, Tāirèn was celebrated as a paradigm of motherly virtue.

While her father was mainly residing in the capital, Sin grew up in the house of her maternal grandparents, receiving large parts of her classical and art education from her grandfather, Yi Sa-on 李思溫, and her mother. In 1522, Sin married Yi Wŏn-su 李元秀 (1501-1561) of the Yi clan of Tŏksu 德水, a meritorious family whose roots can be traced well into Koryŏ 高麗 times (918-1392). Later that year Sin’s father passed away, prompting her to extend her stay in her hometown for two more years. Starting from 1524, she spent the next years in turns at her in-law’s countryside residence in the village of Yulgok 栗谷 in P’aju 坡州—the place

7. For rich details on Sin Saimdang and her family (background), see Yi 1994a; Yi 1994b.
8. Other pen names are “Saimdang” 師任堂, “Imsajae” 姫思齋, and “Inimdang” 姬姙堂.
9. As was customary during Chosŏn times, personal names of women were not recorded. Instead, women were referred to by their family position as mother, daughter etc.
10. Her grandson eventually conquered the Shāng 商 and thus became the first King of the new dynasty, King Wǔ of Zhōu 周武王.
11. A dedicated entry in the *Lièn Zhuàn* 列女傳 (**Biographies of Exemplary Women**) describes her as “upright, sincere, decorous, and only of virtuous conduct” (Liú, n.d. I.6). 大任之性。端一誠。莊。惟德之行。
12. Only late in his life Yi was to assume various minor government posts through family privilege 蔭職 (ŭmjik).
from which her son Yi I took his pen name—Pongp’yŏng蓬坪, that is, today’s Paegok’o백옥포 in P’yŏngch’ang County평창군, and Pukp’yŏng. In 1541, she settled in the capital of Hansŏng漢城,\(^\text{13}\) taking over the household of her elderly mother-in-law, Lady Hong洪. Sin Saimdang died unexpectedly after a few days of illness on June 20, 1551, aged 46 years.

**Translation**

先妣行狀
*Biography of my Late Mother*\(^\text{14}\)

慈堂諱某。進士申公第二女也。
*My mother’s name being so-and-so, she was the second daughter of the Gentleman Sin chinsa.*\(^\text{15}\)

幼時。通經傳。能屬文。善弄翰。又工於針綫。乃至刺繡。無不得其精妙。
*When she was young she comprehended the Classics and commentaries, was able in composing texts and excelled in handling the brush. Moreover, she was skilled with a needle and thread, and when it came to embroidering there was no [piece] which was not exquisite.*

加以天資溫雅。志操貞潔。舉度閒靜。處事安詳。寡言愼行。又自謙遜。以此申公愛且重之。
*In addition to this, her natural disposition was mild and refined, her*
determination was chaste and pure, her deportment was unengaged and quiet, when conducting business she was calm and meticulous, and she was [a woman] of few words [who exhibited] cautious conduct. Moreover, the Gentleman Sin loved and valued her because of her natural humility.

Moreover, her disposition was most filial; when her father and mother fell ill, her countenance would be transformed by sorrow, recovering only once the illness was cured.

When [my mother] was already married to my father, [Sin] chinsa spoke to my father: “I have many daughters. Although other daughters left from home to get married, I would not yearn [for their return], but I do not want to let your wife leave my side.”

They were not married for long before [Sin] chinsa passed away. When the mourning period ended, according to the etiquette of a new bride, [my mother] went to see her mother-in-law, Lady Hong, in Hansŏng. Her conduct was not impulsive and her words were not imprudent.

One day the clan gathered for a feast and all the female guests chattered and laughed, but my mother remained silent and Lady Hong, occupying the place at the centre, pointed at her, asking: “Why does the new bride not talk?” Everybody sitting there felt ashamed.

Thereupon [my mother] kneeled down, saying: “A woman never leaves the house and does not see a single thing, so what shall I talk about?”
Hereafter my mother returned to Imyŏng for a visit to her family. When leaving she parted in tears from her benevolent mother. On reaching the halfway point [of her journey] at the Taeryŏng pass, she gazed at Pukp'yŏng, unable to bear the thought of the white clouds. She had the horses stop for a long time, while she grieved and shed tears.

有詩曰。慈親鶴髮在臨瀛。身向長安獨去情。回首北邨時一望。白雲飛下暮山青。
In a poem she wrote:

My benevolent mother with her crane-white hair, residing in Imyŏng, My body facing Changan, a feeling of lonely departure, Turning my head towards the northern village, I gaze once again, The white clouds descend, dusky mountains turn green.

到漢城。居于壽進坊。 She arrived at Hansŏng, taking up residence in Sujinbang.

時洪氏年老。【時辛丑歲】不能顧家事。 At that time Lady Hong was advanced in years (the time was the year of Sinch'uk [1541]), unable to take care of the household.

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16. Imyŏng 臨瀛 is an old name for the city of Kangnŭng.
17. Taeryŏng 大嶺 refers to Taegwallyŏng 大關嶺, a pass in the T'aebaek Mountains connecting Kangnŭng and P'yŏngch'ang County.
18. Pukp'yŏng 北坪 is the name of Sin Saimdang’s home village.
19. This is an allusion to a story in the biography of Dí Rénjié [Huáiyīng] 狄仁傑 [懷英] (630-700) found in the Tāngshū 唐書 (Book of Táng) and, later, the Xin Tāngshū 新唐書 (New Book of Táng). Dí epitomises the incorruptible and virtuous Confucian official. He was later to serve as a chancellor under Empress Wǔ Zétiān 武則天 (624-705; r. 690-705). When travelling, one day he ascended Tāiháng Mountain 太行山 near his home town, gazing at the white clouds while saying, “Under those [white clouds] dwell my parents” (Ōuyáng and Sòng 1975, 115). Dí’s utterance became an idiom for “remembering one’s parents,” as is, for example, expressed by the Chinese phrase báiyún qīnshè 白雲親舍.
20. Changan 長安 (Cháng’ān in Chinese) was the capital of various Chinese dynasties up until the Táng Dynasty 唐朝 (618-907). Here it is an allusion to the Chosŏn capital of Hansŏng (modern Seoul).
21. Sujinbang 壽進坊 was an area in what is today’s Ch’ŏngjindong 昌信洞, a neighbourhood in Seoul’s northern Chongno district 종로구.
22. Sinch’uk 辛丑 is the 38th year in the sexagenary cycle 干支 (kanji)—also yuksipkapcha 六十甲子 or yakkap 六甲—of East Asian traditional chronology.
My mother then was to serve as the eldest son’s daughter-in-law. My father’s disposition was free and easy. He did not engage in managing the estate, which is why the family was quite miserable. My mother was apt in husbanding, providing for those above [i.e., her husband and her mother-in-law] and rearing those below [i.e., her children].

She never did all the work as she pleased but always consulted with her mother-in-law. Before Lady Hong, she never scolded the servants.\(^{23}\)

Her speech was always gentle, and her looks were always mild. When my father accidentally committed an error, she would always remonstrate with him; when her children made a mistake, she would admonish them; when her attendants did wrong, she would reprimand them. All servants were reverential and honoured her to win her delight.

My mother all day long hankered for Imyŏng. In the middle of the night when all was quiet, she always wept tears, remaining sleepless until dawn.

One day her elder kinsman, the Gentleman Sim came with his maidservant who was plucking the lute. My mother, listening to the lute, shed tears, saying: “The sound of the lute moves those who yearn for the past.” All those seated looked sorrowful, yet no one understood the meaning.

The parenthesis explains the meaning of the term "hŭichŏp 姬妾, translated in the previous sentence as “servant”: all maidservants are called hŭichŏp 侍婢皆名姬妾. The literal meaning of the term is “(beautiful) concubine,” indicating a female servant.
Also, once in the past she composed a poem in memory of her parents, whose stanzas read: “Night after night I pray to the moon, wishing to meet them while I am alive.” In general, her filial affection arose naturally.

My mother was born in Imyŏng in the winter on the 29th day of the tenth month in the year of Kapcha during the reign of Hŭngch’i [1504].24 She married my father in the year of Im’o during the reign of Kajŏng [1522] and arrived at Hansŏng in the year of Kapsin [1524].25 After occasionally returning to Imyŏng and occasionally residing in Pongp’yŏng, she came back to Hansŏng in the year of Sinch’uk [1541].26

In the summer of the year of Kyŏngsul [1550], my father was appointed magistrate of water transportation, and in the spring of the year of Sinhae [1551], he moved to a temporary dwelling in Samch’ŏngdong.27

In the summer of the same year, my father went to Kwansŏ to conduct marine transportation business, accompanied by his sons Sŏn and myself, Yi.28

At the time, my mother sent a letter to the riverside inn [where my father was lodged], having, inevitably, wept tears while writing it. The people did not

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24. Kapcha 甲子 is the first year of the traditional sexagenary cycle. The date of October 29 refers to the lunar calendar, which is December 5 according to the solar calendar. Hŭngch’i 弘治 (1470-1505; Hóngzhì in Chinese) was a Ming Dynasty 明朝 (1368-1644) Emperor ruling from 1487 to 1505.
25. Im’o 壬午 is the 19th and Kapsin 甲申 the 21st year of the sexagenary cycle. Kajŏng 嘉靖 (1507-1567; Jiājìng in Chinese) is a Ming Emperor, whose reign lasted from 1521 to 1567.
26. Pongp’yŏng 蓬坪 refers to modern Paegokp’o in P’yŏngch’ang County. The hanmun 漢文 indicates that the Chinese characters specify a place name 地名.
27. Kyŏngsul 庚戌 is the 47th and Sinhae 辛亥 the 48th year of the sexagenary cycle. Samch’ŏngdong 三淸洞 refers to a neighbourhood of the same name in the present day Chongno district, in the north of historic Sujinbang.
28. Kwansŏ 關西 refers to the regional name of the north-western Chosŏn province of Pyŏngan 平安道. The son referred here next to the third son, that is Yulgok himself, is the oldest son, Yi Sŏn.
understand the cause [of the weeping].

In the fifth month, having completed marine transportation [business], my father secured passage on a vessel to the capital. Prior to his arrival, my mother fell ill. After two or three days passed, she spoke to all her children, saying: “I will not be able to recover.”

At midnight, when she was sleeping in peace as usual, the children thought that her health had improved; but on the 17th day of Kapchin [i.e., May 17], at daybreak, all of a sudden she passed away at age 48.

That day my father arrived to the west of the Han River (myself, Yi, also accompanying him). As all the brassware in the luggage turned red, everybody felt strange. Shortly thereafter, we heard of her death.

My mother’s ordinary ink paintings were very exceptional. From the age of seven, emulating An Kyŏn’s paintings, her creation of landscape art was particularly beautiful.

Moreover, there is no one in the world who could imitate her paintings of grapes.

29. In this context Kapchin 甲辰 stands for the 41st day of a sexagenary cycle. In connection with the reference to the 17th day, this calculation indicates May 17 according to the lunar calendar or June 20, 1551.

30. Sŏgang 西江 specifically refers to the area to the West of the Han river 漢江 centring on the capital.

31. An Kyŏn 安堅 was a most celebrated mid-fifteenth-century court painter, especially admired for his landscapes. Today, he is regarded as one of the great masters of Chosŏn painting.
Screens and scrolls based on copies [of her paintings] are abundantly spread across the world.

Appendix: The Original Text of Sŏnbi haengjang

[Text in Korean script follows]

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References


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