

Gwang Mun⁹⁷ was a beggar. He was wont to make his rounds in the streets bordering the Jongno Market in Seoul. The gang of young beggars that worked that district appointed Gwang Mun as their boss and assigned him to stand guard over their lair.

The wind was blowing cold and rain fell steadily, turning to snow. The gang was gathered together preparing to set out for a day of begging. One child was quite ill and could not join them; he shivered in the cold, his body wracked by coughs. The child's whimpering sounded most pitiful. Gwang Mun felt great sympathy for this little beggar. He brought home all the food he had collected that day to feed him. But when he arrived at the lair, he discovered that the child had already died.

When the rest of the gang returned from their rounds, they immediately suspected that Gwang Mun had murdered the sick boy. They fell upon him, beat him and drove him out into the street. Gwang Mun crawled through the dark night until he found a small house in the neighborhood that was open in which he could take shelter. When he crawled in the gate, however, he startled the watchdog. The owner of the house then grabbed Gwang Mun and tied him up. Gwang Mun cried out,

⁹⁷ Gwang Mun (廣文), "Gwang" is presented as his last name and "Mun" as his personal name in this translation. The discussion with the trickster in the postface, however, suggests that the entire personal name is Gwangmun.

"I am merely hiding from my enemies. I would never dare to steal anything from you. If you do not believe me sir, just go to the market tomorrow morning and ask around."

The owner of the house found Gwang Mun's words naïve and pure. He knew in his heart that this Gwang Mun could not possibly be a thief. So he set Gwang Mun free at dawn. Gwang Mun thanked the owner and took his leave. But before he departed, he asked for a worn-out old mat. The owner of the house granted the request, but thought it rather peculiar. He followed Gwang Mun surreptitiously to learn what the beggar had in mind.

The owner observed a gang of young beggars dragging a body behind them. When they arrived at the Fathoming Bridge⁹⁸ they tossed the corpse down into the water. Gwang Mun had been hiding under the bridge the whole time. He pulled the child's body out of the water and wrapped it in the old mat. Stealthily he threw the corpse on his back and scurried off. He buried the child at the common cemetery at the western city wall. He cried aloud and muttered to himself in alternation.

At that moment, the owner of the house came forward and grabbed hold of Gwang Mun.⁹⁹ When the owner grilled him, Gwang Mun confessed to the events of the previous day in their entirety.

When he heard the circumstances leading up to Gwang Mun's unexpected visit to his home the night before, the owner of the house put his complete trust in Gwang Mun. He took Gwang Mun home with him and gave him a new set of clothes. He went to great lengths to treat Gwang Mun with proper respect. In the end he recommended Gwang Mun to a wealthy pharmacist as a bond servant.

Gwang Mun worked at the pharmacy for some time. One day the pharmacist stepped out of the front gate, looking this way and that repeatedly. The pharmacist turned around and entered the office again. After inspecting the bolt on the door carefully, he promptly went back out through the gate and took off in earnest.

⁹⁸ The Fathoming Bridge (*Supyo-gyo*, 水標橋) was the location from which the depth of the river water was measured.

Clearly the pharmacist's mood was foul in the extreme. When he returned again his expression was one of astonishment. He glared intently at Gwang Mun. It seemed as if he were about to say something, but his expression softened, and he stopped.

Gwang Mun had no idea what was going on. After that strange incident, he had kept to himself all day long, observing complete silence in his work. He did not dare to quit the job. After several days had passed in this manner, a nephew of the pharmacist's wife arrived carrying a bag of silver. He gave the money to the pharmacist. He explained,

"The other day I wanted to borrow some money from you, uncle, but when I arrived you were not home. So I just walked into your office and took some. I was afraid that perhaps you did not know what had happened."

When he heard the true state of affairs, the pharmacist was overwhelmed with remorse for the suspicions he had held about Gwang Mun. He apologized to Gwang Mun profusely, saying,

"I have acted in such a horribly petty fashion. And I hurt a decent man like you through my actions. I cannot even bring myself to look you in the eyes."

The pharmacist then visited all the nobles and gentry he knew, as well as rich men and major merchants. He sang Gwang Mun's praises to every person he met. He told them, "Gwangmun is a man of great integrity."

He also extolled to the utmost Gwang Mun's character when talking with his customers, who included the royal family, mentors to the crown prince, and various acquaintances serving under high-ranking officials. Those customers from the royal family and the offices of high-ranking officials, in turn, took up the story of Gwang Mun as material for their late-night storytelling. Within a few months time, all the Yangban gentry⁹⁹ had heard about Gwang Mun. Gwang Mun's actions were as familiar as those of historical figures of ancient times.

⁹⁹ The term used here, *sadaebu* (士大夫), refers to government officials and scholars qualified to serve in government.

From then on, everyone in Seoul praised the kindness of the man who had treated Gwang Mun with such consideration. He was held up as someone capable of recognizing the true nature of men. Even greater praise was heaped on the wealthy pharmacist. He was lauded as a superior man.

The money lenders of the capital had a habit of comparing the average prices for the pawning of jewelry, gems, clothing, household utensils, houses, farmland and slaves. Based on the information that they amassed, they demanded equivalent value as collateral before lending anything. If it were Gwang Mun who came forth as the guarantor for someone, however, the money lenders did not even ask for collateral. They would simply sign a contract to lend a thousand *yang*.¹⁰⁰

Gwang Mun's appearance was exceptionally ugly. His voice alone did not move anyone. His mouth was big enough to hold two fists. But he did an excellent job of reciting the drama "Mansook the Monk" and performing the beggar's dance.¹⁰¹ The kids would tease each other saying, "Dalmun is your older brother." Dalmun was another name for Gwang Mun.

Once when Gwang Mun was out wandering around the city, he ran into a bunch of street fighters. Gwang Mun stripped off his clothes too and joined in the fight. He bent down to the ground, muttering to himself incoherently. Then he drew a series of arcane lines on the ground. He started pontificating as if he were a judge deciding who was winning the fight. The whole marketplace burst into laughter. Even the fighters found themselves grinning. The fight dispersed soon after.

Even after Gwang Mun passed the age of forty he still kept

¹⁰⁰ *Yang* (*yang* in Chinese) was the basic unit of currency in silver (or gold).

¹⁰¹ The tale of how the monk Mansook (曼叔) broke his Buddhist vows was a popular topic in street dramas. The beggar's dance is identified as the *Tegui* (鐵拐), literally "Iron Cane," a standard accoutrement of a beggar. *Tegui* corresponds to the personal name of Li Tiegua, a historical figure of the Chinese Sui dynasty. He is one of the Eight Immortals of the Chinese pantheon who supposedly wanders the streets as a beggar. Most likely the reference is to a dance that was regularly performed by beggars.

his hair in the braids of a youth. Many encouraged him to marry.

He responded,

"Most men take great delight in a beautiful woman. But beauty is not only a concern for men. Women feel the same way about the opposite sex. So, since I am so ugly, I should not assume that a woman will allow me to marry her."¹⁰²

Others encouraged Gwang Mun to set up a household. But he refused them as well, saying,

"I have no parents, no siblings and no wife. What would I do with a home? I just enter the marketplace in the morning and sing my songs. I call out to passers-by all day long. At dusk, I make my lodging under the gates—right in front of those mansions of the rich. There are a good eighty thousand households that are well-off in the capital of Seoul. If I change the gate in front of which I sleep every day, I will not rest my bones twice at the same house within my lifetime."

No matter how winsome and urbane a distinguished courtesan in Seoul may appear, if Gwang Mun did not mention her in his banter, she could not earn a penny.

Now it so happened that everyone, from the royal guards, to the officials in charge of the royal palaces for the King and the Queen, to the minor officials and servants assigned to the royal son-in-law, all of them would rush out with their sleeves trailing behind them if given the opportunity to meet a remarkable lady by the name of Heart of the Cloud.¹⁰³ Heart of the Cloud was a most famed courtesan. The finest wine was served in her chambers. The sweet sound of drums and the *kayakko*¹⁰⁴ harp filled the air with music. The men who gathered with Heart of the Cloud on a certain evening had asked her to perform her dance. Heart of the Cloud's mind was elsewhere. She showed up late for the event and would not consent

¹⁰² This passage must be read in the context of eighteenth century Korea, where it was assumed that men would not consider the aesthetic opinion of a woman.

¹⁰³ Heart of the Cloud, or *Ursin* (雲心), was an actual courtesan famous for her sword dance. Courtesans in Joseon Korea were known as *hwaeng*.

¹⁰⁴ A traditional Korean stringed instrument.

to perform her sword dance.

Gwang Mun arrived at her place after dark and wandered around aimlessly beneath the stairs to the pavilion. Then he burst right into the gathering at exactly the moment that Heart of the Cloud was refusing to perform for the guests. Gwang Mun proceeded to sit down, without any hesitation, in the seat of honor. Although Gwang Mun was wearing a ragged shirt and soiled pants, the confidence he displayed in his gestures was unmatched. It seemed that his mind was completely at ease.

His eyes were infected in the corners and gunk dribbled down his face. He was soon roaring drunk¹⁰⁵ and belching nonstop. To top it all off, his hair was as shaggy as a sheep's and done up in a northern-style bun. Everyone at the gathering was mortified. They blinked their eyes at Gwang Mun in astonishment; some were ready to pummel him.

But Gwang Mun just moved right up to the front of the room and sat himself down. He drummed a beat on his knee and began singing a song. His nasal chant rose and fell in pitch.

At this point, Heart of the Cloud suddenly arose and changed into her evening clothes. She then performed her sword dance for Gwang Mun. An exceptional time was enjoyed by all that evening, and everyone returned home as friends.

Postface to "The Tale of Gwang Mun the Beggar"¹⁰⁶

When I was eighteen years old I suffered a serious illness. I frequently summoned an elder servant who had long served in our home to be with me at night. I asked him to tell me about marvelous events that took place in the back streets of Seoul. He often

¹⁰⁵ Or perhaps "pretended to be drunk." The text has the Chinese character *yang* (陽), but the expression it forms is not a known compound. Perhaps the homophonous *yang* ("pretend" 佯) was intended.

¹⁰⁶ Many essays in literary Chinese feature a postface which can be of at least equal length and presents the interpretation of the author, or another reader.

recounted the exploits of Gwang Mun. I once caught a glimpse of Gwang Mun's face when I was still quite young. It was exceedingly repulsive.

These days I devote my days to writing. So I decided to write this tale that I might relate his remarkable story to distinguished members of society. The tale has received much attention as an example of the classical writing of our era.

Now I hear that Gwang Mun spent much time traveling through various districts of the Jeolla-do and Gyeongsang-do provinces in the south. A story has been passed down concerning each visit that he made. He did not return to the capital for decades.

One of the beggar kids who picked his way up and down the seashore once dropped by the Sutasa Temple in the town of Kenyeong to get a free meal and shelter.¹⁰⁷ That night the beggar child overheard the monks of the temple gossiping about the latest exploits of Gwang Mun in that region. Without exception the monks declared their affection and admiration for old Gwang Mun.

The beggar kid immediately felt a strong desire to see who this remarkable man is. So he just started bawling out loud, right then and there. The assembled monks were taken aback. They asked him what the matter was. The beggar kid faltered and then hesitantly explained that he was in fact the son of Gwang Mun.

The monks were astonished. They normally tossed an orphan child a clump of rice stuck to the shell of a gourd. But when they learned that the boy was Gwang Mun's son, they washed a ceramic bowl, filled it with rice, and presented it to him with a spoon and chopsticks. They then brought out spices and vegetables, presenting each dish on individual trays.

At this time there happened to be a trickster who traversed this region. He was surreptitiously planning assorted ruses. When he saw how this beggar kid was being lavishly treated at the temple, he set his hopes on using him to deceive the people. So he crept up to the beggar kid and stealthily whispered in his ear.

¹⁰⁷ Sutasa (水多寺, Temple of the Great Waters) is located in Kenyeong (開寧) in Gyeongsangbuk-do, the Northern part of Gyeongsang Province.

"You can call me 'uncle.' I promise that I will help you obtain wealth and status."

Thereafter, the trickster referred to himself as Gwang Mun's younger brother, the beggar boy's uncle. He explained that his name was Gwang Son so that the names matched up.¹⁰⁸

One observer grew suspicious.

"Gwang Mun said he did not know his family name," he thought to himself. "He has spent his whole life without any brothers and sisters, wives or concubines. So how comes it that suddenly we have an adult brother and a son in our midst?"

The man promptly reported the matter to the authorities. The trickster, the beggar kid and Gwang Mun himself were tracked down and brought to the authorities. When the three were subject to interrogation and cross-examination it became clear that they did not even know each other's faces. The trickster was executed and the beggar kid exiled.

Everyone, old and young, set off for Kenyeong to see Gwang Mun when he was released from captivity. Seoul was empty for several days as a result. Gwang Mun pointed to Iron Cane Pyo,¹⁰⁹ remarking,

"Are you not the Pyo Mangdong who was so good at beating up people? You have grown so old and feeble."

Mangdong was the literary name of Iron Cane Pyo.¹¹⁰ They discussed their recent experiences and consoled each other on the sadness of loss.

Gwang Mun asked, "How are Masters Yeongseong and Pungwon doing?"¹¹¹

"They have both passed away," Iron Cane Pyo replied.

¹⁰⁸ Often brothers share one Chinese character in their personal names.
¹⁰⁹ Pyo (表).

¹¹⁰ He had used the literary name *Mangdong* (望同, "hoping for togetherness") in better days.

¹¹¹ Master Yeongseong (靈城君) and Master Pungwon (豐原君) are the literary names of Park Munso (朴文秀) and Jo Hyomyeong (趙顯命) respectively. Both were leaders of the Soron (少論) ("Legitimacy of the Younger") party under King Yeongjo. A beggar would normally not have known such political figures.

"And how about Kim Gunyeong?"¹¹² What office does he hold now?" continued Gwang Mun.

"He is now a general in the Dragon and Tiger Commandery,"¹¹³

Iron Cane Pyo explained.

Gwang Mun continued, "Kim Gunyeong certainly was a handsome young lad. Although his body was a bit plump, he could grab a courtesan and scamper over a wall with her. He threw money around like manure on the fields. And nowadays you cannot find anyone with such a sense of taste."

He continued, "So what has become of Bundan the courtesan?"

Iron Cane Pyo replied simply, "I am afraid she has died."

Gwang Mun sighed deeply and continued,

"Master Pungwon held a banquet in the Unicorn Pavilion.¹¹⁴ one evening back long ago. He held Bundan back to spend the night with him at the pavilion. Master Pungwon awoke at dawn and prepared to return to the palace. But when Bundan picked up the candle, she inadvertently scorched Master Pungwon's sable cap. She stood there terrified. But Master Pungwon just laughed and said, 'What is there to be ashamed of?' He promptly gave her five thousand coppers as a 'payment for the shame caused.'¹¹⁵ I waited beneath the railing of the pavilion's terrace, holding the wrappings for Bundan's clothes and her pleated cloak. My black silhouette stood out in the darkness like a lingering wraith. It was precisely at that moment that Master Pungwon pushed the window open and spat out. He leaned close to Bundan and asked her, 'Who is that out there in the dark?' She responded, 'who doesn't know Gwang Mun?' Master Pungwon replied with a smile, 'Is he your escort?'"

"Master Pungwon then invited me inside to share a big

¹¹² Kim Gunyeong (金君擎).

¹¹³ Yonghoyeong (龍虎營).

¹¹⁴ The Unicorn Pavilion, or *Qilinge* (麒麟閣), was a hall featuring portraits of famous officials in the Han Dynasty. Most likely the Unicorn Pavilion referred to here was an entertainment hall in Seoul.

¹¹⁵ Master Pungwon does Bundan the favor of referring to the "shame" of ruining his cap as a euphemism for the payment given for her sexual favors.

pitcher of wine. Master Pungwon drank a good seven pitchers of Red Dew wine¹¹⁶ himself. He then mounted his carriage and took off. All these events happened long ago."

Gwang Mun concluded, "So tell me, who is the most famous courtesan in Seoul these days?"

"Nowadays I would have to say that it is So-A¹¹⁷," Pyo replied.

"And who is her agent?"

"Choi Parkman."

Gwang Mun introduced a new subject,

"This morning Kim Gwangsu¹¹⁸ sent one of his men down here to take care of me. I heard that he plans to move his residence to a spot in the foothills of the Wongyo¹¹⁹ Mountain. There is a turquoise firmiana tree¹²⁰ that grows in front of the main hall of his residence. I often sat beneath it and drank brewed tea. I would ask Soidol to play the *geomungo* zither for us."

"And now Soidol's brothers are prominent figures" added Iron Cane Pyo. "And what about the seven sons of Kim Jeong?"¹²¹ I was quite close to their father."

Gwang Mun's face fell, and he was silent for some time. Eventually he remarked,

"So many things have changed since I left the capital."

Gwang Mun cut his hair short, but still kept a boyish ponytail. Actually it looked rather like a rat's tail. Many of his teeth were missing and his cheeks were hollowed out. His mouth no longer looked like it could hold a fist in it.

Gwang Mun inquired of Iron Cane Pyo, "You have grown old. How do you manage to feed yourself?"

"My family is poor. I have taken up work as a middleman."

116 A type of *soju* rice wine produced in Pyongyang.

117 So-A (소아).

118 Kim Gwangsu (金光遂) was a famous connoisseur of painting and calligraphy identified here by his literary name: "The Hall of Honoring Antiquity" (*Sanggodang* 尙古堂).

119 Wongyo (圓嶠).

120 Firmiana, or the *Witong* (梧桐) tree.

121 Kim Jeong (金鼎).

Gwang Mun replied, "You have managed to survive through a lot up to now. How lamentable! Back then you had a family fortune worth tens of thousands of gold pieces. In those days they called you the boy with a golden cap. Where is that cap now?"

Iron Cane Pyo sighed, "I guess I have finally learned something about the world."

Gwang Mun replied with a faint smile, "One could say that you have studied to be a craftsman and lost your eyesight in the process."

I do not know what happened to Gwang Mun in the end.

The Novels of Park Jiwon

Translation of Overlooked Worlds

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Printed in Seoul, Republic of Korea

ISBN 978-89-521-1176-0 93810

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Seoul National University Press
599 Gwanak-ro, Gwanak-gu, Seoul 151-742, Republic of Korea

E-mail: snubook@snu.ac.kr

Home-page: <http://www.snupress.com>

Tel: 82-2-880-5252

Fax: 82-2-889-0785

First Printing: Jan. 25, 2011

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Translation and Introduction by

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