

7
The Tale of the Virtuous Woman née Park¹⁶³ of Hamyang
烈女咸陽朴氏傳

¹⁶³ The given names of women were rarely recorded in Korea. In most cases they were known by the surname of their fathers, née Park, née Kim or née Yi.

The people of Qi¹⁶⁴ have a saying: "A virtuous woman never takes a second husband." This theme is expressed well in the poem "Boat of Cypress Wood"¹⁶⁵ from the *Book of Songs*. The legal codes of our country declare that the descendants of a woman who remarries cannot assume an official government position. In ancient times such laws were certainly not intended for *hoi polli*. But over the last four hundred years of peace in our kingdom, commoners have imbibed the civilizing properties of the Confucian way.¹⁶⁶ So also today all women adhere to chastity as widows, regardless of whether they are *yungban* or commoner, regardless of whether they come from prominent or insignificant families.

Over time such behavior has become the custom in Korea. What we call a widow today is what was meant by the term "virtuous woman" in ancient times.¹⁶⁷ And what about the widows who live in country villages, or in the alleys of the town? What about those widowed young? Their hair is still rich black. They were not compelled to remain unmarried by the objections of parents. They

164 Qi (齊) was a state in ancient China.

165 "Boat of Cypress Wood" (*Bozhou* 柏舟) is of the Odes from the State of Bei describing an upright person who suffers insults and setbacks. The central metaphor is one of a boat tossed on the ocean's waves.

166 Buddhism was the primary religion in Korea before the Joseon kingdom. The spread of Confucian practices such as the prohibition on remarriage were contrary to previous conventions. Such strict regulations of behavior, the core of Confucian ideology, formed the core of the royal family's claim to legitimacy.

167 The "virtuous woman" (*lienu* 烈女) is a general term employed in the Chinese classics for women of remarkable merit. It is not accurate, however, that all "virtuous women" in the classics were widows.

are not concerned about the possible shame for their descendants, who cannot hold public offices. And yet simply maintaining chastity and never remarrying is not a sufficiently virtuous act for them. So, in almost all cases, they waste away both night and day. They beg for immolation at their husband's grave. They end their days by water, by fire, by poison, or by hanging. It seems they are delighted to have the chance to end it all. Now virtue is by definition always virtuous, but can we not say that such behavior is a mistake?

Long ago there lived two brothers who were distinguished officials. The two brothers consulted with their mother as to how they might stymie a certain man in his career.

Their mother asked, "What trouble has he caused you that you would want to disrupt his life?"

They responded, "His mother is a widow who has stirred up quite a scandal."

Their mother was startled. She replied, "Such matters are confined to the private quarters. How did you come to hear about such scandals?"

"Such rumors waft in the wind," they replied.

Their mother explained, "The wind may produce sounds, but it has no shape to it. You can stare all you want at the wind with your eyes, but you will not see anything. You can grasp all you want at the wind with your hands, but you will not catch anything. Wind is produced by a vacuum. It causes a variety of things to float or sway. So how can you use such floating, insubstantial words as a reason for maligning someone?"

"Moreover, you are yourselves the sons of a widow. Tell me, how can sons raised by a widow make such judgments about widows? Sit down for a moment. I have something to show you."

She pulled a single copper coin from her blouse pocket. "Do you see any of the stamped rim remaining on this coin?" she asked.

"There is nothing left," they replied.

"Do you see any writing left on this coin?" she asked.

"There is nothing left," they replied.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she exclaimed, "This coin is

a token of how your mother has struggled to overcome her desire to die. For ten years I rubbed this coin with my hands. I have worn the surface right off it. As a general rule, the blood and breath of men are rooted in the forces of Yin and Yang.¹⁶⁸ Human feelings and desires concentrate in the blood and breath. The thoughts of men are produced out of isolation and solitude. Sorrow and remorse derive from such thoughts. Therefore, because the widow dwells in isolation and solitude, her sorrow and remorse is extreme. On the occasion, the flow of blood and breath reaches a peak. How can the widow remain without feelings then?"

The flickering candle casts long shadows

So hard to pass the night in solitude

Rain pours from the roof, soaking the ropes of bells¹⁶⁹

Framed in a window, the moon bleeds white

A single leaf buffeted in the courtyard

A solitary goose¹⁷⁰ cries out in the skies

The distant cock's call cannot be heard

Nothing but the hearty snore of the servant girl

Eyes wide open; no sleep tonight

With whom can I speak of my bitterness?

"Over many such nights it became my habit to take out this coin and roll it on the floor. I then felt around the whole room in the darkness until I found it. The coin being round, it rolled easily, but I heard it stop as soon as it hit a corner. I hunted for the coin and then rolled it on the floor again when I found it. Every night I would roll this coin in the dark five or six times and then search for it."

"And while I was so occupied, dawn's light slowly crept

¹⁶⁸ Yin and yang, the recessive and the dominant, that are used in classical metaphysics to describe all phenomena. The flow of blood and breath were traditionally ascribed to the interaction of yin and yang, as were shifts in mood and metabolism.

¹⁶⁹ Strings of bells that hang down in chains from the rafters of temples and catch the rain and channels it down to the ground.

¹⁷⁰ Migrating geese fly in pairs. A single goose signifies a widow.

into the dark sky. The number of times that I rolled the coin each night diminished over the first ten years of widowhood. After ten years had passed, I found myself rolling the coin once every five nights, or even once every ten nights. My vitality has so declined that I no longer feel a need to spin this coin. But I still I keep it wrapped in ten layers of cloth. I hide it away where it is safe. It has been twenty years since I lost your father, and I have not forgotten the efficacy of that coin. In fact from time to time I take it out and gaze on it as a reminder of how I should behave."

The sons embraced their mother and all collapsed into tears. When the better people of the town heard this story, they remarked,

"This woman should be considered a model of virtue. Her bitter constancy and her unwaiving devotion are of an extraordinary degree. Yet no monument exists to record her actions for the current age. Her name has sunk into obscurity and will not be passed down to future generations. Why is that? A widow's chastity and righteousness are nothing less than the core practices that binds the nation together. Yet we have no means to acknowledge a widow's true constancy at the gate of her home while she is still alive."¹⁷¹

I was sent on an assignment to the Anui district¹⁷² on a certain date in the following year of 1793.

It was just before the dawn. I had drifted up just barely to consciousness from a deep sleep. I heard something amiss in front of the office courtyard. Several people were whispering to each other in furtive voices. I also overheard a pathetic and grieving lament. I wondered whether there might have been some sudden and distressing incident. Perhaps, I thought, the local officials are afraid they might disturb my sleep with this crisis.

I called out in a loud voice, "Has the cock crowed yet?"

They answered together, "Yes, the cock has already crowed three or four times."

"So what is going on out there?"

171 The government put up memorials to the self-immolation of widows in Korea and China to encourage to encourage such marital devotion.

172 Located in Hamyang prefecture.

They responded, "The elder brother of assistant¹⁷³ Park Sanghyo has a daughter who married someone in Hamyang. She was left a widow early in life. She just finished her three years of mourning and promptly drank poison."¹⁷⁴ She lingers on the verge of death. We came with this urgent message to report to assistant Park about his niece. We urged him to return home and care for his niece. But he is on duty at this moment. Flustered and worried though he is, he does not dare take off on private business."

I ordered deputy Park to return home at once. I inquired again that evening whether or not the widow in Hamyang had regained consciousness. They informed me that she had passed away.

I let out a heavy sign of regret, saying, "If anyone is virtuous, it is that woman."

I called all functionaries back to the office and started my inquiry: "There lived a certain virtuous woman in Hamyang prefecture. Her paternal family is registered in Anui district. Do you know how old she was? Can you tell me into which family in Hamyang she married? What can we say about her behavior and her spirit since childhood? Did any of you know her personally?"

The crowd of functionaries came forward, still sniffling.

One of them explained,

"The woman née Park came from a family of hereditary functionaries in the prefecture. Her father's name was Park Sangil. He passed away early. He only had this one daughter. She also lost her mother early, so she was raised from infancy by her grandfather and grandmother. She followed fully all filial duties towards them. At the age of nineteen, she was married to Im Suljeung and entered his household. The Im family also serves hereditary functionaries. Suljeung was sickly and weak since childhood. She took the vows of

173 Assistant, or *longin* (通印), was a general term for supporting staff in local administration.

174 Confucian rules required three years of mourning for the widow. She was not permitted to commit suicide during that period because of her obligations to fulfill ritual duties.

marriage and returned with him to his residence, but not even half a year had passed before he died.

"The woman née Park fervently and single-mindedly mourned her husband. She followed fully the Confucian prescriptions for proper conduct. She also adhered to the role of a woman in serving her father-in-law and her mother-in-law. All of her relatives, in-laws, and neighbors in both towns¹⁷⁵ speak highly of her charitable person. From this day forward those qualities will surely manifest themselves."¹⁷⁶

A certain old functionary from the office was overcome with emotion by these words. He spoke of her in the following manner,

"Before that woman married him, when the wedding was still several months off, a certain person told her, 'Suljeung's illness has seeped into his bones. The disease is incurable. There is no hope for him to live a full life. Why don't you break off the engagement now.' Her grandparents also secretly encouraged her to do so. But she just stood there and would not respond. Her family sent someone to visit the fiancé Suljeung when the wedding date grew near. Suljeung remained just as handsome in appearance and visage. But he looked worn out from his illness and coughed constantly. When he stood up straight, his appearance was ephemeral. A shadow followed him as he walked.

"Dread swept over the family when they heard this news. They made plans to engage a different marriage broker. But she gathered her strength and with a calm face she declared, 'I have already cut and stitched clothes for him. Whose body did I measure when I made them? And now, who shall I say those clothes are for? A woman's deepest hope is to keep the first set of clothes she sews for a dowry.' Her family understood the meaning of her words. They married her off on the chosen date. Although the couple drank together from the matrimonial cup, in reality she would end up caring for a set of empty garments."

¹⁷⁵ Anni and Hanyang.

¹⁷⁶ It was a common belief that the spirit of an ancestor of great virtue has a salacious influence on the fortunes of a family.

Sometime after her death, the prefectural governor of Hanyang Yim Gwangseok had a curious dream one night. He was inspired to write a short novel entitled "The Tale of a Virtuous Woman." Yi Myeonje, administrator of Sanchong county, also wrote a short tale based on her life. Master Geocheang¹⁷⁷ Sin Tonghang is a scholar known for his eloquent writing. He compiled a history of the Woman née Park and her virtuous actions. He detailed her feelings from the beginning to the end of her life.

If a woman is left a widow at a tender age, and then lives many years more in this world, how she is to be pitied by her parents and relatives. It that not the case? Inevitably she will become the object of reckless speculation and rumors by her neighbors. Such a woman would seem to be better off ridding herself of that mortal body quickly.

Alas, the Woman née Park donned mourning clothes and endured her life alone. She did so in preparation for her husband's funeral and the mourning rites. She endured life alone after the funeral rites. She did so in preparation for the ceremony of "The Small Mourning Rites."¹⁷⁸ She conducted "The Small Mourning Rites" and then continued to endure life alone. She lived on in preparation for "The Main Mourning Rites."¹⁷⁹ When the final ceremony had been completed, she was released from her period of mourning and chose self-immolation on that exact day at that exact hour. Only at that moment could she fulfill her original intention. Is she not an example of virtue?

¹⁷⁷ Geocheang is the honorific name, or *ho* (*hao* 號 Chinese), of Sin Donghang.

¹⁷⁸ *Sosang* (sioxiang 小祥 in Chinese) is a critical ritual in Confucian mourning marking the end of the first year of mourning, or the thirteenth month.

¹⁷⁹ *Daesang* (daixiang 大祥 in Chinese) was the ritual of mourning that represented the passing of twenty four months (two years). *Daesang* represents the conclusion of the formal mourning period and as such was the moment at which a widow could commit suicide without violating any of the Confucian codes concerning chaste behavior.

The Novels of Park Jiwon

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