

5. Chosŏn Period “Unofficial” Histories

“Unofficial histories” constitute a most interesting genre of the Chosŏn period, one that adds significant depth to accounts of how people lived, what they thought, and where they found entertainment. Nonetheless, it has been largely overlooked because of the eclectic nature of the narratives, especially the dividing line between fiction and nonfiction. Indeed, many of these works are recorded as factual accounts, and given the common presence of supernatural elements, this has caused the narratives to be dismissed as simply “tales heard” or, in current parlance, urban legends. Yet that is a disservice to the genre and the recorders of these works.

In the many extant literary miscellany (文集 *munjip*) or unofficial history (野談/野史 *yadam/yasa*) collections are elements of culture in Chosŏn that are simply not found elsewhere. We find the syncretic worldviews that guided the lives of the people, the belief in the interaction between the human and sacred worlds, humor and conflict in domestic life, and also the encounters that were no doubt commonplace in everyday life. Thus, by reading narratives in this genre we can appreciate the multifaceted lives of the people in Chosŏn, not simply the Confucian-dominated society that has been given perhaps too much hegemony in other genres. We can find a world of ghosts, biting satire, and sex,

a world that certainly is more interesting to glimpse and one more plausible than a staid, uptight Confucian one.

The genre itself is highly important in that it helps provide a fuller picture of life and culture in Chosŏn. It lacks the self-editing that many writers incorporated into their works in order to hone a didactic edge for their creations. In the genre of the novel (小說 *sosŏl*) we often find the reoccurring theme of *kwŏn sŏn ching ak* (勸善懲惡), or “reward of goodness and punishment of evil.” This leads to the greater portion of novels in the Chosŏn period having more or less happy endings that tend to reaffirm the in-place social systems. Also prominent is the validation of the Confucian ruling structures, which demonstrates to readers that virtues such as those of the Three Bonds¹ are in fact ones that function in a positive manner in the lives of the people.

Yet as we can imagine, life was not such for many people at various times in Chosŏn. As Chosŏn was a highly hierarchical society that strongly privileged the upper-status elites, the lives of those of lower social statuses were inevitably filled with hardships such as poverty, enslavement, and the like. These unofficial histories reveal this part of Chosŏn and show that the lives of the people could be quite difficult. So more than simply being stories that were written to pass the time or share a laugh, the unofficial histories open new windows through which to appreciate the nuances and complex relationships in Chosŏn. We can see in these narratives that life was not really so different then from nowadays: people had hardships, successes, loves, and odd events that took place in their lives.

While it is not possible to provide translations of all the unofficial histories of the Chosŏn, we have tried to demonstrate the evolution of the genre in the following pieces. To that end we have selected works from three collections: *Idle Talk and Humorous Stories in a Peaceful Era* (太平閑話滑稽傳 *Taep'yŏng hanhwa kolgye-jŏn*) of the late fifteenth century, *Unofficial Narratives by Ōu* (於野談 *Ōu yadam*) of the early seventeenth century, and *Collection of Past and Present Laughs* (古今笑叢 *Kogŭm soch'ong*) of the nineteenth century.

MP

¹The Three Bonds (三綱 *Samgang*) are those of loyalty, filial piety, and distinction between husband and wife.

5.1 SŌ KŌJŌNG, IDLE TALK AND HUMOROUS
STORIES IN A PEACEFUL ERA (太平閑話滑稽傳
T'AEP'YŌNG HANHWA KOLGYE-JŌN)

Following are four pieces from Sō Kōjōng's (徐居正, 1420–1488) *Idle Talk and Humorous Stories in a Peaceful Era*. This is an impressive collection, written in Literary Chinese, that contains a wide variety of narratives that discuss famous personages, legends, historical events, and amusing anecdotes. Sō explains in the preface to this work that it was meant to help people forget the worries of the world and provide them relaxation and humor. While it was a collection intended for enjoyment, it is also an extremely valuable source for the oral stories that were circulating in late fifteenth-century Korea. It also shows the double life that many scholar-officials must have led: Sō was the leading literary man of his day and the chief compiler of the aforementioned *Anthology of Eastern Literature*, yet his tastes also included the sometimes bawdy narratives of this collection.

The pieces are not titled in the original work; titles have been added here for ease of reference.²

MP

TRANSLATION

"THE GUEST GETS A WIFE"

There was a local functionary [衙前 *ajōn*] with the surname of Chu who was handsome and had a good physique. While on his way to his hometown to visit his parents, he happened to stay the night at a home where the owner was about to hold a wedding ceremony for his daughter. Thus Chu, hoping to be treated to drinks, changed his clothes and waited at the main gate. When the wedding party was held at the owner's house, Chu was able to come in and sit among the guests.

As the night wore on the guests went off to their homes; the groom, who had had many cups, went outside to piss between stacks of grain bags, but fell and did not get up. Sitting alone at the table, Chu was mistaken for the bridegroom

²All translations from this work are from Sō Kōjōng, *T'aep'yōng hanhwa kolgye-jōn* [太平閑話滑稽傳, *Idle talk and humorous stories in a peaceful era*], ed. Pak Kyōngsin (Seoul: Kukhak charyowŏn, 1998).

by the servants of the house, and one holding a candle pulled back the curtains and another charged with decorum [禮 *ye*; for the wedding rite] bowed to him and ushered him [into the bridal chamber]. Chu entered the chamber and the bride followed him. Chu enjoyed the night with the bride.

At daybreak the groom had sobered up and attempted to go into the house. However, the gate was securely locked and there were no sounds of people around. He pounded on the gate and shouted, "I am the bridegroom!"

Those who heard him yelled back, "The bridegroom has already completed the beautiful ceremony. How dare you act like a crazy jerk [奴 *no*]!"

The groom, vexed, went out and informed his relatives who had accompanied him [to the wedding ceremony].

"Someone has wronged me! Someone has wronged me!"

Then the whole house was in an uproar, and it turned out that the man outside was the bridegroom. Bewildered, the elderly house owner asked Chu, "Who are you?"

Chu replied, "I am the guest that stayed here yesterday."

The old man replied, "Why are you causing such problems with my family?"

Chu answered, "I was escorted in by the one charged with the ceremony."

With no other choice, the old man was about to throw Chu out and let the bridegroom enter. Then Chu, attired in his official cap and gown, made a deep bow to the old man at the stone step, saying, "I wish to say one thing before I leave. As far as I know, it is propriety that once a woman sleeps with a man, till the end she does not go to another. If she loses her fidelity, a virtuous man would be chagrined to call her his wife and neighbors would feel shame to call her name. As parents, do you wish to preserve her chastity [節 *chōl*]? Or do you want to keep her deficiency [虧 *hyu*]? Esteemed master, if your daughter comes with me, she will be faithful; if she goes with [the other], she will be flawed. Now, you are not able to control your temper, but while she is with me, her fidelity is intact, but if she is with another, she is flawed: is that really the best course? I [have no wife and] can become your son-in-law. Please reconsider."

The old man clucked his tongue for a bit and said, "What can I do since a thief has already outsmarted us?"

Then he decided to accept him as his son-in-law, and Chu later led the family and his generation to thrive greatly.

"THE SAGE AND HIS AFFAIRS"

There was a man called Student Sōng [成生] who committed adultery with the daughter of his wife's wet nurse.

His wife was furious, saying, "Although there is distinction of noble and base [貴賤 *kwi ch'ŏn*], the nanny's daughter is as my own sister! How can you violate morality like this?"

Sŏng replied, "When the great sage Shun [舜] took the two daughters of Yao [堯] for his wives, there was no objection and it was not against the customs of posterity. How much less [is an affair with] the daughter of a lowly nanny?"

Enraged, his wife asked, "Do you think you are Shun?"

Sŏng retorted, "What sort of person was Shun and what sort of person am I?"

So whenever the couple quarreled, she mockingly called him Shun.

One night when they were sleeping a thief entered their house and stole a purse and lock box. His wife said, "You always call yourself Shun, so why could you not catch the thief?" This was because the word *xun* [巡], indicating a watchman, was pronounced similarly to Shun, the great sage.

"THE WAILING GHOST"

In P'ungyang [豊壤] there was a servant of a noble family who had a prosperous house in his hometown. The servant had a daughter by the name of Chongga [從佳]. She was only sixteen years old, but so beautiful and virtuous that she seldom left her home. A young student by the name of An Ryun [安綸] stayed nearby. He had heard talk of the young girl's striking beauty and talent and tried by every means to get close to her but failed. Consequently he dyed his body yellow with the fruit of a pagoda tree and feigned illness as if he were about to die. His mother had an old woman tell the girl's parents, "Master An is critically ill because of your daughter and may die in the morning or evening. Thus, if he dies, it will be a curse on your daughter."

Because of this the girl's mother urged her to accept him, and the two shared a deep and intimate love.

The noble family was so furious that they took the girl away, worked her very hard, and even locked her up in a remote building. As there was no way for her to share her love with An, she felt miserable and worried deeply. Her disheveled hair was like stalks of mugwort and her face was covered with thick dirt. In a fit of anger, the noble family married her off to a strong and fierce man with a bushy beard. She swore off her life, hanging herself. An was deeply grieved and heartbroken. He kept wailing and could not fall asleep even while lying down.

One night, after midnight, the moon was bright in the sky and all was silent. Sitting alone and lost in reflection, An heard the sound of dragging shoes, and

it seemed as if a woman were standing before him. Although looking intently, he could not see [her] but just heard the sound of wailing in the empty air. This continued for days on end before finally ceasing. Whenever An thought of her, he could not forget her. So, whenever drinking, he held back his tears and lamented bitterly. Years later, he also died.

"GENERAL KIM WHO WAS AFRAID OF GHOSTS"

A general with the surname of Kim was by nature wild and fierce, but he was also fearful of ghosts. When the ancestor rites for his father were held at Chungŭng Temple [中興寺], there were a few mischievous young students who stayed at the temple doing their reading. On the evening of the rites, the monks prepared a sleeping place for the spirit in an outer room. The bed was surrounded by paper curtains, and a grand offering table with confections, noodles, rice cakes, and so on was arranged to the front.

One student hid behind the curtains with his hands and forearms painted black. When the general prostrated himself in front of the spirit tablet [靈座 *yŏngjwa*] while wailing and offered a cup of liquor, the student with his painted hand reached out from behind the curtain and grasped the cup while saying in a ghostly voice, "You are a filial son."

The general was greatly frightened and shook off the hand and extended his fist, saying, "If this is a ghost, I am overcome by it even if it is my father!"

He then went to his quarters with an ashen face and feeling so frightened that he could not speak. After the monks also scattered, the crowd of crazed young students gathered before the spirit tablet and ate up everything on the offering table.

5.2. YU MONGIN, UNOFFICIAL NARRATIVES BY ŌU (於于野談 ŌU YADAM)

This collection follows in the tradition of the preceding collection by Sŏ Kŏjŏng. The emphasis was on the actualities of society and stories that were in circulation. The work does have a didactic edge, as seen in Yu Mongin's (柳夢寅, 1559–1623) inclusion of commentary at the end of some of the pieces. While this genre was criticized, at least publicly, by Confucian scholars at the time, the popularity is undeniable. Moreover, the contents of this work, written in Literary Chinese, reveal much about how people lived, their wishes, and many other historical circumstances that would not have been recorded in the government-sponsored works of the day.

The titles here, too, have been added to the translation, in this case by the editors of the works listed in the note.³

MP

TRANSLATION

"GHOSTS OF THE SŎNGGYUN'GWAN"
(SŎNGGYUN'GWAN KWISIN)

Early in the [Chosŏn] dynasty, the Sŏnggyun'gwan [成均館, Royal Confucian Academy] had East and West Dormitories [東西齋].⁴ Each dorm had dozens of rooms that had wooden sliding walls and no heated floors. It felt so chilly that scholars living there tried to stay warm by lying close together with many layers of blankets under them on the floor. In the Chinsa Room⁵ of the West Dormitory [西齋], a young student with a beautiful countenance always read the *Classic of Encountering Sorrow*.⁶ Two *chinsa* fought over him, each pulling on one of his legs since they wanted to sleep next to him; however, he died after his legs were torn off. Since that time, on dark and rainy nights the sound of reciting, "As a descendant of Emperor Gaoyang's [帝高陽之苗裔]"⁷ was sometimes heard in the Chinsa Room. This continued for several years, and most students who stayed in this room were hagridden with terrible nightmares.

Later, King Yŏnsan-gun [燕山君, r. 1494–1506] roamed the streets [seeking pleasure] and happened to be caught after curfew. At that time he figured out that if he said himself to be Yi *chinsa* [李進士], even the police who captured thieves would not punish him. Believing that titles such as *saengwŏn*⁸ and

³Yu Mongin, *Ōu yadam* [於于野談, Unofficial narratives by Ōu], ed. Yi Wŏryŏng and Ch'ae Kwisŏn (Seoul: Han'guk munhwasa, 1996); Yu Mongin, *Ōu yadam*, trans. Sin Ikch'ŏl, Yi Hyŏngdae, Cho Yungthŏi, and No Yŏngmi (Seoul: Tolpegae, 2006). Translations of the individual pieces are designated as either 1996 for the former work or 2006 for the latter.

⁴This translation is from the 1996 edition listed in n. 3.

⁵*Chinsa* (進士, literary licentiate) is the title given a person who has passed the preliminary literary licentiate examination (進士科) that was taken before the government service examination (科擧 kwagŏ).

⁶The *Classic of Encountering Sorrow* [離騷經 *Lisao jing*] is a lengthy poem attributed to the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.E.) aristocrat Qu Yuan (屈原).

⁷This is the first line of the *Classic of Encountering Sorrow*.

⁸*Saengwŏn* (生員, classics licentiate) is the title given a person who has passed the preliminary classics licentiate examination (生員試) that was taken before the government service examination.

chinsa could intimidate even people in power, he thus made those people carry his palanquin every time he went out.

Sometime later the dining hall at the Sŏnggyun'gwan was demolished and in its place Hogwŏn East and West Dormitories [虎園東西齋] were built. Here, many *kisaeng*⁹ gathered and stayed. There was one *kisaeng* who stayed in the Chinsa Room and died in an evil and odd manner. Since that time, the scholars staying there had dreams, inevitably frightening nightmares, where a beautiful woman appeared.

On the fifteenth day of the sixth month in 1578 [萬曆戊寅], a Sŏnggyun'gwan official treated the students with *soju* and roasted dog meat.¹⁰ At that time there was a certain *saengwŏn* named Chang Ōnjin from the Honam region.¹¹ He stayed in the Chinsa Room, and on that day he was exhorted by his friends to drink copious amounts of *soju* and died as a result. On the same day of the next year the Sŏnggyun'gwan official again prepared *soju* and roasted dog meat for the scholars. The night before, *chinsa* Yi Ch'ŏlgwang [李哲光] slept in the Chinsa Room, and a scholar whom he did not know appeared in his dream saying, "I am *saengwŏn* Chang Ōnjin. Tomorrow you will be treated by an official with liquor and meat. Please allow me to taste some as well."

After waking, Ch'ŏlgwang thought the dream odd and asked of the others who had slept in the same room, "Is there a person by the name of Chang Ōnjin here?"

Someone answered, "Yes."

Ch'ŏlgwang asked, "Will the officials treat the scholars with liquor and meat?"

They all replied, "Yes."

[Yi] continued, "Is Chang Ōnjin alive?"

They all replied, "Last year he drank too much *soju* and died."

Ch'ŏlgwang was greatly surprised and told the group about his dream. That morning he attended the feast. He set aside an extra bowl with dog meat and another with *soju*. He put the bowls in the middle of the table and sat kneeling with his hands clasped, never touching his own meat or *soju*. The others elbowed one another and laughed, saying, "Student Chang offers you a cup of liquor; how can one remain a *saengwŏn* for ten thousand years on this earth?"

⁹*Kisaeng* (妓生) refers to female entertainers.

¹⁰The fifteenth of the sixth month is *yudu* (流頭), a popular holiday in Chosŏn where people would picnic and wash their hair in streams. It is also the advent of the hottest season in Korea, and this was marked by eating dog meat as a means of giving the body the energy it needed to endure the difficult season. *Soju* (燒酒) is a distilled liquor of varying, but oftentimes high, alcoholic content.

¹¹Honam (湖南) is the southwestern part of the Korean Peninsula.

Student Yi offers you [Chang] some meat; how can one remain a *chinsa* for ten thousand years on this earth?"

MP

"FOX PASS" (YŎU KOGAE)

Kwach'ŏn [栗川] lies south of the Han River and north of Ch'ŏnggye [靑溪].¹² The main road winds behind the government office residence [官舍 *kwansa*] of Kwach'ŏn; this road is called Fox Pass [狐峴].

Long ago, a wayfarer passed by on this road. Looking around, he saw a small thatched-roof house from which the sound of pounding emanated. The wayfarer peeked inside the house and saw an old gray-haired man sitting on a cowhide while carving a wooden ox's head. The wayfarer looked on and asked, "What's the ox's head for?"

[The old man answered,] "It has a purpose."

Before long, the old man finished the ox's head and handed it to the wayfarer, saying, "Put this on."

He also handed the wayfarer the cowhide and said, "Try it on."

Thinking this a joke, the wayfarer took off his headgear and put on the ox's head. Then [after removing his clothing] he put the cowhide on. The old man said, "Take it off."

The wayfarer tried to take off the articles but could not; he was simply a large ox. The old man tied him up in a stall, and the next day he went to the marketplace riding on the ox. Since it was the peak season when there was much farm-work, the wayfarer-ox would fetch a high price.

The wayfarer-ox shouted loudly at the marketplace, "I am a man, not a cow!"

Although he told the whole story of what he had experienced, those who came out to buy and sell things could not understand what he said. Someone said, "Did this ox leave a calf at home, or does it have a bezoar in its stomach? Why is it so loud like this?"

The old man sold the wayfarer-ox at the high price of fifty bolts [端 *tan*] of hemp cloth and instructed the buyer, "Do not go to a daikon radish field with this cow; it will die as soon as it eats daikon radish."

The buyer rode the ox to his home. The wayfarer-ox carried heavy loads for long distances and plowed fields. He was exhausted and gasped for breath, but on any such occasion, he was whipped, and he could not bear the pain. In

anger he complained, but his owner could not understand. The wayfarer-ox lamented to himself that he, a human—the greatest creation of the cosmos—had lost his form and been transformed into an animal. He wanted to die but he could not.

The barn of that house was near the gate, and a boy servant entered with a basket full of washed daikon radishes. The wayfarer-ox thought about the old man's saying that he [the ox] would die if he ate daikon radishes, so he struck the basket with his mouth and knocked the radishes to the ground and ate them quickly. As soon as he ate the radishes, the ox's head fell off him as did the cowhide. He was completely naked. When the master of the house asked in surprise, the wayfarer told him the whole story and then set off for Fox Pass again. There, the thatched-roof house had disappeared, but a few bolts of hemp cloth were left. This is how the pass became known as Fox Pass.

A man of virtue [君子] said, "Although this is close to a groundless story, it is enough to enlighten people about the ways of the world as they are. In difficulties many people lose their way and fall into wicked places. They sell themselves to those who are cunning and they end up being exploited like oxen. Even if they wish to explain their hastiness with thousands and thousands of words, it is certain that people will not believe them. Alas, how deplorable this is!"

MP

"THE CLEVER TRICK OF PAK YŎP TO HAVE AN AFFAIR"
(KKOE RŪL NAEŎ SAT'ONGHAN PAK YŎP)

When Pak Yŏp,¹³ the future magistrate [府尹] of Ŭiju [義州], was young, he experienced the wars and became a drifter, wandering here and there.¹⁴ During this time, he happened to arrive at a house where he saw the beautiful form of the owner's wife, and the two exchanged glances. A bit later the owner, a young and handsome man, came around, and Yŏp knew things would not go as he had hoped.

After the night had passed and the day was about to break, Yŏp went into the cowshed and untied an ox from its tether and opened the gate. He then stabbed the ox in its rump with an awl, causing the ox to run away through the [open]

¹³The translation is from the 1996 edition listed in n. 3. Pak Yŏp (朴堧) may refer to a near contemporary of Yu Mongin who lived from 1570 to 1623 and was a scholar-official.

¹⁴The "wars" (亂難 *nalli*) indicate the Japanese invasions of 1592–1598.

¹²The translation is from the 1996 edition listed in n. 3.

gate. Yŏp pounded [the door] and shouted. The house owner asked, "What is this noise?"

Yŏp informed him, "The ox pushed the gate [open] and ran off."

The owner hurriedly dressed and chased after the ox. The ox, already frightened after being stabbed with the awl, ran further away when it saw the man chasing after it. With this scheme, Yŏp was able to share an unforgettable love with the owner's wife.

Well after daybreak, the owner returned in dew-soaked clothes, leading the ox.

MP

"THE MOTHER OF KANGNAMDŎK" (KANGNAMDŎK MOJA)

The mother of Kangnamdŏk [江南德] was the wife of Hwang Pong, a boatman of the West River.¹⁵ Hwang had a home in Chamdu and made a living by selling seafood. In the Early Wanli period [1573–1619], he went out to sea. But he met a typhoon and could not return home. His wife put on mourning garb and held his funeral. After three years of mourning, she lived as a widow for many years. One day, a man who had just returned from China delivered Hwang's letter to her. Written in the letter was the following: "Drifting in the sea, I reached a certain place in China. There I became a pieceworker for private houses."

Reading the letter, Hwang's wife broke into tears and lamented, "From the beginning, I thought that my husband was buried in the belly of a fish, but now I am hearing that he has saved his life and is living in China. Even though I may collapse in the street and die while begging with a gourd dipper, I am determined to go search for him."

Villagers tried to dissuade her, saying, "There are barriers between our country and China that prohibit a border crossing, so a person who speaks a different language and wears different dress does not dare to cross them. In addition, there is a prescribed punishment for those who violate this ban. If you make a long journey alone now for ten thousand *li*, you are bound to fail to reach China, ending up as a skull by the roadside."

But the wife did not listen to the villagers, shook out her sleeves, and departed. She crossed the Amnok River surreptitiously, walking straight into the land of China. With her clothes in tatters, her hair unkempt, her face covered in dirt, and barefoot, she begged for food in the street. About a year later, she

¹⁵The translation is from the 2006 edition listed in n. 3.

reached the South of the River mentioned in her husband's letter and was finally reunited with him in a remote province on the seashore. At last, they set forth on their return to Chosŏn. On their way back home, she became pregnant. When they arrived at their old home, she gave birth to a girl. The baby girl was named Kangnamdŏk [Virtue of the South of the River], so the villagers called the wife the mother of Kangnamdŏk instead of using the name of her natal hometown. People considered her an eccentric that would appear only in a book.

In my opinion, there are clearly marked borders between Chosŏn and China that distinguish the inside and the outside. Thus, both countries were strict in banning comings and goings before war became utterly chaotic. As a mere woman, the mother of Kangnamdŏk dared to enter China by herself and return home as if she had visited a neighboring village and eventually found her husband in such a vast and boundless land. There had been no such incident like this under heaven. It can duly be said that her strong and courageous fidelity firmly established the Three Bonds throughout time, both past and present.¹⁶

Since the war broke out in the year of Imjin, those Chosŏn men who were swept into the Chinese army and killed in battle were listed on the roll of honor. Those who were carried in bags and crossed the border gate into China are countless. However, I have never heard of even one person who privately crossed the border into China and then escaped back to Chosŏn. Is there anyone who does not have parents and a spouse? Everyone, however, loves his body. No one would risk his life by entering a land of ten thousand deaths and then try to escape. A person like the mother of Kangnamdŏk can surely be said to be the most unusual of the unusual. The mother of Kangnamdŏk died in the spring this year, and she was eighty years old.

This was recorded in the summer of the first year of Tianqi's reign [1621].

HY

"THE KŎMUN'GO OF SIM SUGYŎNG AND A PALACE WOMAN"
(SIM SUGYŎNG ŬI KŎMUN'GO WA KUNGNYŎ)

Prime Minister [相國] Sim Sugyŏng [沈守慶, 1516–1599] from a young age had great mien, composure, and musical talent.¹⁷ From a young age he

¹⁶This is an interesting statement by the writer, since women were generally expected only to be dutiful wives in terms of the Three Bonds.

¹⁷A *kŏmun'go* is a six-stringed zither that is plucked with a short bamboo stick. The translation is from the 1996 edition listed in n. 3.

temporarily stayed at the outer annex of Prince Ch'ongwŏn [淸原君]. One autumn evening when the moon was high in the sky he played his *kŏmunŏ* at a pavilion by a lotus pond. A beautiful young palace woman approached and bowed to him. The [future] prime minister greeted her and allowed her to have a seat in the pavilion.

The palace woman said, "I, all alone in this palace, have greatly admired you in my heart seeing your dignified manner. Now I have dared to come forth and greet you to hear the elegant and beautiful melody of your *kŏmunŏ*. I hope to again hear your playing."

The [future] prime minister played a few more songs before leaving with his *kŏmunŏ*. Afterward he never again visited that pavilion. The woman, with a lovesick heart, was driven to great despair and eventually died from illness.

MP

"THE LIFE OF CHINBOK, A LICENTIOUS WOMAN"
(ŬMBU CHINBOK ŬI ILSAENG)

Chinbok [珍福] was born to the concubine of a minister, but I will not reveal who her father is because Chinbok is notorious for lewdness.¹⁸ The minister, seeing his concubine lovingly cuddling her daughter, took pity on the mother, so he asked both female and male shamans about the girl's fortune. One of them said, "Although her parents love her, it is not a good idea for them to raise her. It would be better to let her be adopted as someone else's daughter and raised in a different home."

In those days, there was an old woman living in Chikcho-ri [織組里] in Seoul. She was wealthy but had no children. She visited the minister's concubine on holidays, always treating her kindly with the first seasonal harvests. The concubine told the old woman everything that the shamans had said about her daughter and expressed her desire to find shelter for her daughter in the old woman's home. The old woman willingly agreed to her proposal, saying that she would adopt the girl as her stepdaughter and pass down her family business to the girl. The concubine could not have been happier to hear this, so she made a firm promise and gave her daughter away to the old woman. Reaching the age of sixteen, youthful Chinbok boasted a beautiful face and a graceful figure, and the old woman loved her as if she had been her biological daughter.

The old woman had many relatives, all of whom hoped that the rich but childless woman would adopt their children. However, they all became angry

because she did not adopt a boy from her own family but a girl with a different surname, in her pursuit of power.¹⁹ They tried every possible way to devise a scheme to break the old woman's plan. Since no sweet talk could persuade her to approve their requests, they decided to incite Chinbok in such a way that the old woman would hate her. One day, one of the woman's relatives with a fluent tongue told Chinbok quietly, "The other day, a young scholar working as a recorder [注書 *chusŏ*] in the Office of Royal Secretariat [承政院 *Stingjŏng'wŏn*] was passing by your house and happened to see you standing against the gate. He could not help stopping and asking in hesitance, 'Whose daughter is that girl in this house? She is truly a rare beauty. I would love to have her as my concubine even if it were to cost me a fortune. If permitted, I will set a date quickly and welcome her by sending a horse and an old servant.' But Great Aunt by nature covets wealth, so she is planning to marry you off to a son of a merchant without checking whether the bridegroom is a good man or not. You are originally a daughter of a minister, and how can you become the wife of a merchant? Since you are now old enough to marry, you must hurry to come up with a plan for yourself."

As she was listening to him, the girl felt so ashamed that she could not say a thing. But the glib man called on her for several days, trying to lure her secretly, and she began to vacillate in spite of herself. Moreover, deep down Chinbok envied her mother, who enjoyed wealth as the concubine of a scholar. At last, Chinbok believed the words of the glib man. Shortly thereafter, a horse and a servant from the scribe arrived and waited for her in front of the gate. Chinbok put on new makeup, changed into beautiful clothes, sneaked out at night, and nimbly mounted the horse.

She passed several bends of a winding road, galloping in all directions, and finally reached a place where she found tall gates wide open. As soon as she got off the horse in front of a board fence, the glib man led her inside the gates. She passed a big garden to discover a tall house with a large pond. Blue lotus flowers bloomed along the red rail of the pond, but the place was empty with no sign of a man. The inside of the house was covered with a folding screen and curtains. The glib man led her and sat her inside the folding screen. Shortly thereafter, a man with a long, shaggy beard appeared in hemp clothes and barefoot. He embraced her and had his way with her as he pleased. He soon ran away, abandoning her, but not even one servant was to be found there. She called the glib man but to no avail. There was no way of knowing where he had disappeared.

Chinbok was born and raised deep within the women's quarters [of a scholar family's home] as a well-cared-for girl, and she had never left the inner court in

¹⁸The translation is from the 2006 edition listed in n. 3.

¹⁹Even though Chinbok was born of a concubine, her father was a powerful minister. Thus the adoption would be a bond with his family.

her life. How could she know the long road with thousands of forks that she passed across Seoul? Even though she wanted to ask someone, no one was there to ask, and even though she tried to return home, she had no idea of the way back. Thus, she was wandering the streets in tears.

As the sky began to brighten, she asked a person in the neighborhood, "Whose house is this?"

"It is the Office of the Inspector General [司憲府 *Sahŏnbu*]."

She asked if there was a man with a long beard in the office. The answer was that he was the Ink Man in the Office of the Inspector General. When she finally made her way back home, it was already midday. Appalled, the old woman said, "I have nothing to say for myself to the family of the noble master."

As the minister's family heard about this incident, they decided to disown Chinbok as their daughter and expel her. They gave her completely to the old woman, letting the girl do whatever she wanted to do. Realizing that her parents would no longer accept her because she had already lost her chastity, Chinbok abandoned her body, turning into a lascivious woman. As a result, she could not find a companion for the rest of her life, leading a debased and impoverished life until she died.

Chinbok had a younger sister, who married a military general. This sister was permitted to attend parties at the minister's house whenever they held them for a wedding or for honored guests. However, they excluded Chinbok, who thus could not participate in the banquets. Not only that but she was not even allowed to sit on the wooden veranda and be close to the other women.

Alas! Chinbok was once a loose woman who certainly deserved lifelong shame and disgrace because of that one mental mistake. And yet how can we not fear man's jealousy and wickedness that can throw someone's life into such an immeasurable quagmire?

HY

"THE STARVING THIEF" (KUMJURIN TOJŎK)

In the present year, a scholar who lived in Seoul traveled hundreds of leagues to buy rice since the price had become very expensive at the markets of Seoul.²⁰ He was traveling back with a load of rice when he reached a pass in the mountains. At that time a man wearing a long sword stepped in front of his horse and bowed to him.

²⁰The translation is from the 1996 edition listed in n. 3.

The scholar asked, "Who are you?"

He answered, "I am a wayfarer."

The scholar queried, "Why does a wayfarer bow to me?"

He replied, "My group wants some rice since we have had nothing to eat and are starving."

Because the scholar could not respond at once, his servant replied, "You can have half the rice."

The man replied, "We have so many mouths to feed that half the load will not do—give us the full load."

As the scholar nodded his head and gave all the rice to the man, the man spoke again, "The rice is too heavy to carry. If you lend me your horse, I will return it later after I am done."

At the end of the mountain path, he returned the horse, saying, "I am sincerely grateful to you for giving us the rice. Please allow me to escort you, sir."

After some distance they arrived at the bottom of the valley, where a group of people wielding clubs and weapons blocked the path. The man who had escorted the scholar said, "The general ordered me to escort this scholar since he gave us a load of rice."

Thus through all these troubles, the scholar returned safely.

After a bad harvest the common people [良民 *yangmin*] suffered from starvation and came together to form brigands. They only robbed and did not hurt others. One day thereafter, an itinerant peddler [行商 *haengsang*] ran into a thief on the street and chased after him. Unlike the peddler who could eat his fill, the thief, weak from hunger, fell to the ground, and this gave the peddler a chance to prevail [over the thief]. The thieves were soon scattered bit by bit and became all the more pitiful.

MP

"YI YESUN WHO DEVOTED HERSELF TO BUDDHISM"
(PULGYO-E YI YESUN)

Ogyŏ Yi Kwi [玉汝 李貴, 1557–1663] was a friend from my youthful days.²¹ As magistrate (府使 *pusa*) of Sukch'ŏn, he rose to *kasŏn taebu* [嘉善大夫] of junior second rank. He had a daughter named Yesun, and her husband was Kim Chagyŏm, who was a grandson of Kim Ŏngyŏng's and a son of Magistrate Kim T'ak's.

²¹The translation is from the 2006 edition listed in n. 3.

Kim Chagyŏm was deeply absorbed in Buddhism, which he practiced together with his friend O Ŏn'gwan, the son of a concubine. In terms of residence and food, Kim made no distinction between male and female. He even slept in the same room with women and children. Later when he was taken ill and lay on his deathbed, he asked O to take care of his wife. He then composed a verse.

I arrived nowhere when I came.
 Going away is like the clear autumn moon.
 Coming is not coming in reality.
 Going is not going in reality.
 True appearance of things delights my nature.
 Only this should be followed as the true way.

On finishing this verse, Kim passed away.

After Kim's death, O visited Yesun's house frequently as if it were his relative's. He brought her many books on Buddhism. Soon Yesun declared that she had gained an ability to see into other people's minds. Her body emitted a mysterious fragrance, and mystical lights filled her room. Some people called her a living Buddha.

One day Yesun wrote a letter, placed it in a box, and left her father to follow O to Mount Tŏgyu [德裕山] in Anŭm [安陰]. There she shaved her head and became a Buddhist nun. Yesun and O cut bamboo trees, built a hut with them, and lived therein. People in town venerated them, so they gathered rice and donated it to them. However, when their manservant was caught stealing by the police, the local government arrested Yesun and O and incarcerated them. As this incident was reported to the provincial governor, their case came to be known to the court.

O changed his name to Hwang, and Yesun changed hers to Yŏng'il, which was the name of O's deceased wife. They were transferred to Seoul. This happened when a treason case was being investigated there; therefore, the court was suspicious of their activities and interrogated them at the palace compound. O died during the interrogation, and Yesun was imprisoned. She composed a quatrain and gave it to her brother. The poem read,

Now my monastic robe is soiled with yellow dust.
 Why does the Blue Mountain not allow me in?
 The world may confine my body.
 But even the special police force cannot stop my wandering spirit [遠遊].

Her confession in the police record is roughly as follows: "I learned how to read and write when I was six or seven years old. At that age, I was already indifferent

to worldly delights. I married at age fifteen, but I was not interested in the affairs between a man and a woman. I set my mind only on the ultimate Way. After practicing diligently for eight or nine years, I seemed to have achieved something."

She also said, "In my view, Śākyamuni became the world-presiding Buddha ten years after he gave up his country as a crown prince and left his castle to practice as an ascetic in the snow-covered mountains. Mañjuśrī [文殊, K. Munsu], who in a previous life had been female, engaged in the Way without looking after his body and finally attained perfect enlightenment. As a queen, Lady Wŏnang made a long journey in search of the Dharma. But when she realized that she could not reach it by herself, she lived an ascetic life even by selling herself. She was Avalokiteśvara's [觀音, K. Kwanŭm] previous form. Besides Lady Wŏnang, a countless number of people pursued ascetic lives in history. During the Tang dynasty, Buddhism did not thrive greatly, but innumerable ladies from prominent families became nuns. However, there are many cases in which we do not know how they died. Although the past and the present times are different, would their will be any different?"

Yesun continued. "There are three religions in the world: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. By cultivating the virtues of one's own and others, Confucianism helps king and subject and father and son realize the Five Relationships. Confucianism also helps all beings be peaceful in their proper positions and thereby benefits even insects and plants. This is what makes Confucianism stand out. Daoism is capable of training body and spirit with water and fire so that they may transcend the material realm. By doing so, Daoism prevents sickness and pain from approaching us and aging and death from invading us. However, it cannot help us escape the kalpas of the cycle of reincarnation. Therefore, its help is limited to the glory of longevity. Buddhist teaching is like the white moon in the sky; it helps one suddenly realize one's innate Buddha-nature and thereby purify one's original nature by itself. Bad habits are eliminated spontaneously, and delusions are cleared up spontaneously as well. Gradually this spreads throughout and [one] becomes free. As miraculous changes occur without any obstructions, the thread of reincarnation comes to an end, and so hell is destroyed forever. A bad karma from the past turns into dispersing clouds and scattered rain. As one crosses over to the shore of enlightenment, together with one's embittered friends from the last kalpa, one becomes all the stronger for an infinite period. If this is true of even a tiny bit of dust, there is no way of fully explaining the rest in words.

"I was born in the body of a woman, so even though I wanted to learn Confucianism, there was no way for me to realize its ultimate teaching by serving a king properly and conferring a benefit on people. The Daoist Way is one of appropriating the principle of harmony and playfully manipulating it on a large

scale. Thus I studied Buddhism, and so, when I had barely grasped a little bit, I tried to return the kindness of the rural Buddhist community by not losing that understanding throughout my life. Now I have fallen into disgrace and have very little time until death. However, the disintegration of one's bodily form is merely like taking off one's shoes, and the law of life and death is not different from the way morning comes when night passes. It is all the more so, as I am going to die without committing a sin. Dying is, on the contrary, living. Therefore, I have no lingering regrets."

HY

5.3. ANONYMOUS, COLLECTION OF PAST AND PRESENT LAUGHS (古今笑叢 KOGŪM SOCH'ONG)

This anonymous work dates from the late Chosŏn period and is written in a mixed script of *han'gŭl* grammatical particles and sentence endings and Chinese characters. This demonstrates the broadening of readership to those outside simply male elites to commoners of both sexes. The compiler of this work drew material from earlier Literary Chinese collections and supplemented them with other narratives in circulation at the time. The work has been categorized as being a collection of lewd or erotic tales, but that seems too judgmental. Rather, it reflects the social realities of the late Chosŏn, when there was a keen need for entertainment that might have matched life experiences or hidden desires. With the weakening of Confucian values in literature, carnality could come more to the fore, as we see in the following pieces from this collection.

The titles in the following are those from the original work.²²

MP

TRANSLATION

"FALSELY CUTTING THE NARROW HOLE" (佯裂孔窄 YANGYŎL KONG CH'AK)

On his wedding night a groom suspected that his new bride had already had experience [with a man]. He was determined to have her tell the truth. While

²²Translations are from *Kogŭm soch'ong* [古今笑叢, Collection of past and present laughs] (Seoul: Minsog'wŏn, 1953).

stroking her vulva with his hand, he said, "Your hole seems too small—I should cut it to make it larger, and then I will be able to put my thing in you." He took out his dagger and pretended to ready himself to cut her. The panicked bride snatched away the dagger, saying urgently, "In yonder village, the youngest son of Deputy Magistrate Kim has never had to cut [me]. Maybe it is because he is said to be good at inserting without having to cut."

MP

"THE SON-IN-LAW WHO RIDICULED HIS FATHER-IN-LAW" (婿嘲婦翁 SŎ CHO PUONG)

A father-in-law and his son-in-law happened to sleep in adjoining rooms. One night while the father-in-law and his wife were having sex, they reached a great climax. The man said, "It is as though both my ears had been deafened." His wife replied, "I feel as if my limbs had melted away."

When they were finished, the wife told her husband, "Our son-in-law might have heard our talk. We should warn him not to speak of this." The man smiled and said, "We should do that."

The next morning the father-in-law called on his son-in-law and admonished him, "Beware of gibberish coming from vulgar people." The son-in-law replied, "I am not like that. When I hear of others' faults, I feel as if both my ears were deafened and my limbs were melting away."

The father-in-law smacked his lips, not knowing what to say.

MP

"THREE WOMEN EXAMINE A MUTE" (三女儉啞 SAMNYŎ KŎM A)

In Sinjang [新昌] there lived three unmarried women. Because their parents died and the family was poor, they were not able to marry. All had passed twenty years of age and the best age for marriage.

One spring day the three were enjoying the fragrance of flowers in the garden.

The youngest mumbled, "It is said that there is a pleasure of men and women. What could that be?"

The second sister replied, "I too have wondered about that."

The eldest said, "Let's ask the maidservant, since she is fond of her husband."

The women asked of this pleasure to the maidservant, who replied while smiling, "How can I speak of that plainly?"

The three women pressed her, and she answered, "Between a man's legs is a meat club that looks like a pine mushroom. It is as long as two fists and called a *ch'öl* [ㄷ, protuberance]. The marvelousness [of this] cannot be fathomed. It comes into being and comes into being and changes and changes. Thus I have never left it alone for even a day."

The three women together urged, "Tell us more about it."

The maidservant continued, "The man's *ch'öl* is put into the woman's *yo* [ㄹ, hollow], and being combined, the pleasure that I feel then is indescribable."

The three sisters queried, "How is that pleasure?"

The maidservant replied, "When the *ch'öl* is put into the *yo*, it rubs as it moves up and down. As the movement becomes faster, I feel the bones of my limbs melting away. I cannot tell if I am alive or not alive, dead or not dead."

Fascinated, the sisters said, "You should stop now since we are feeling befuddled." But after that, the three sisters schemed about how to see the male [part]. "If we were to see a mute beggar, we could see a male *ch'öl*."

At that time a young man happened to pass by the wall of their home and heard what the three women had been talking about and thought that he would trick them. He returned to their house in ragged clothes and holding a gourd to beg for food with his mouth shut tightly as if he were a mute. The three women saw this with delight. They took him to a small room, took off his pants, and exposed his *ch'öl*.

The eldest handled the *ch'öl* and exclaimed, "It's leather!"

The second grasped it and said, "It is a mass of meat."

The youngest took hold and said, "It is bone!"

This change was because of [the youth's] becoming gradually stimulated. The girls sat around and played with it, holding it and letting it go. Suddenly the *ch'öl* jerked up and down. The three women delightedly exclaimed, "This thing is going crazy!"

The youth then grasped the hands of the three women, sat up, and said, "Originally it is not crazy, but you three have made it so. Once it is crazy, though, it should go into your *yo* to calm it."

The three women turned pale and trembled. The youth told them, "If I speak a word of this, your house will be disgraced." The girls could not avoid this and submitted. Eventually he had sex with each of them. He did not stop in his indulgence until after a full day and night had passed and the dawn had broken. When he rose to leave the room, he could not take even a step. The three women helped him to his feet and sent him on his way.

"PREREQUISITE STUDY FOR A VIRGIN"
(處女先習 CH'ÖNYÖ SÖNSŪP)

There was a young girl who was pretty but had an indecent disposition. When she turned fourteen or fifteen, her parents selected a distant auspicious day on which to have her married off. One evening she stopped by a neighbor's to ask about something. However, a youth in the house had a lusty desire for her.

He said to her, "It is only a few days before your wedding and you have not practiced yet; when you meet your husband, what will you do? You will be embarrassed."

With a terrified look, she asked, "Stop speaking annoying words and teach me."

He replied, "Not a problem, just follow me."

He led her to a detached hut to have sex, saying, "There are six pleasures [六喜 *yukhūi*] a woman should have in order to give pleasure [助歡 *chowwan*]. Whether a woman is happy or not originates in this."

The girl asked, "What are these six pleasures?"

The youth recited, "First is to be narrow [窄 *ch'ak*], second to be warm [溫 *on*], third is teeth [齒 *ch'i*],²³ fourth is move one's body [搖本 *yobon*], fifth is to make pleasurable noises [甘唱 *kamch'ang*], and sixth to finish quickly [速畢 *sokp'il*]. These are what is meant by the six pleasures for a man. What you are lacking is body movements and pleasurable noises."

She replied, "I am too young to know those, so please teach me."

He said, "These things cannot be taught by words but only by practice. We should practice."

Until her wedding day, she learned all the six pleasures that women should master [with the youth].

On her wedding night the new bridegroom was about to take her, and she started using her body-movement techniques and making pleasurable noises. The bridegroom knew at once that she had been with another man. "Who is the man you had illicit sex with?"

The woman shed false tears and did not answer.

In a rage he said, "Given how you moved your body and made pleasurable sounds, you are certainly familiar with men. You are not a virgin!"

He then kicked her and went out of the room; the family expelled her.

Her mother admonished her, and the girl responded, "Master Kim [the youth] in the house over there told me that I had to learn beforehand."

²³This usage of teeth, *ch'i*, seems related to the verb to chew (*ssipta*) and the verb for copulating (*ssip hada*). The noun *ssip* can also indicate the vulva or copulation.

Her mother scolded her, "You are a fool! Master Kim is not your bridegroom! How could you use what you learned from him?"

She responded, "When I was reaching orgasm, I thought it was Master Kim. I could not remember that it was my new bridegroom."

When people hear this story they cover their mouths with their hands.

MP

"THE FIVE MARVELS THAT SHOOK THE HEART"

(五妙動心 OMYO TONGSIM)

Yi Hangbok met Namsung Tu when he was young. At that time, Namsung was already eighty years old or so. But he looked forty at most.

Hangbok asked, "Sir, although you are about eighty years old, your stamina is like that of a young man: what is the secret for that? I would like to learn."

He replied, "My secret is so easy. I have only abstained from sex with women."

Hangbok asked, "As a man loves sex with women, how can he abstain from it? If he stays away from sex, what is the good even if he lives for a thousand years?"

Tu replied with a smile, "What you are saying is not right."

Hangbok said playfully, "A man would be attracted to a girl with any of these: a blooming face like a flower, slender body, virtuous character like an orchid, singing in a crystal clear voice and dancing mesmerizingly like a snow flurry blocking a cloud, charming words and accents like rolling beads, the scent of her rouge and powder touching one's nose and mind, and playing the coquette on the silk blanket at night like a beautiful flower. Furthermore, if she has the five marvels in her appearance, character, voice, scents, and charm, how can even a man of an iron heart like Song Jing²⁴ keep from being moved?"

Tu responded, "How could you know that these five marvels are not those of the messenger [差使 *ch'asa*] sent by King Yōmma?"²⁵

Hangbok said with a smile, "There should be a woman even in the palace of the king of the underworld, shouldn't there?"

Tu just smiled without saying a word.

MP

²⁴Song Jing (宋景) was a famous subject during the reign of King Xuanzong during the Tang dynasty and a man of great integrity and righteousness.

²⁵The retainer of the king of the underworld or the one sent by a district magistrate to apprehend a criminal.

6. Late Chosŏn Period

AUTOBIOGRAPHY, SOCIAL COMMENTARY, AND PHILOSOPHICAL HUMOR

6.1. PAK CHIWŎN, "THE TALE OF MASTER YEDÖK" (穢德先生傳 YEDÖK SŌNSAENG-JŌN)

Pak Chiwŏn (朴趾源, 1737–1805) occupies a special place in the history of Korean literature. Though born into a distinguished eighteenth-century family, he eschewed the traditional path to success; it was not until he was married at the age of fifteen that he began his studies in earnest, and he never passed the civil service examination. His son later wrote that he would submit his examination papers unfinished or covered in strange drawings. His unconventionality was also evident in his writing as he sought to breathe new life into Korean literature written in Literary Chinese. Unlike many authors of the time, who placed great value on polishing their words and following the precedents of old, Pak Chiwŏn cultivated a simple style that depicted his subjects unvarnished. His stylistic innovations were considered so radical that King Chŏngjo (定祖, r. 1776–1800) initiated reforms to steer literary style back toward time-honored conventions. These reforms were a considerable setback to the development of Korean literature, but Pak Chiwŏn's works remain as a testament to his philosophy and ideas.

Pak Chiwŏn courted controversy in the content of his works as well. He did not hesitate to lampoon long-cherished institutions and traditions, turning these ideas upside down in an attempt to reform not only literature but also society as a whole. "The Tale