

EPISTOLARY KOREA



*Letters in the
Communicative Space
of the Chosŏn,
1392–1910*

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Columbia University Press



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Daughters' Letters to Members of Their Natal Families

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Legislation concerning Confucian patriarchy and patrilineality in the early Chosŏn began to have a serious impact on family structure and social customs by the seventeenth century. Though presumably there was wide variation by region, family, and class, the native custom of uxoriocal marriage, which had remained common through the sixteenth century, was, with increasing frequency, replaced by virilocal marriage; by the seventeenth century it had become accepted practice for married women to move into their husbands' familial residences. The Ha family correspondence, with which we are familiar by now (see chapters 19 and 21), shows that married daughters were living with their husbands' families, some quite distant from their parents' homes. Presented here are four letters by Ha daughters, three to their mother, and one to a sister, also married. It is not clear why a letter between married sisters found its way into Madam Ha's tomb.

The Ha daughters' letters express sentiments that came to be thought typical of married women's feeling: as members of their husbands' families, they were caught up with their new lives and had little time for their natal homes, which remain as objects of longing and sources of guilt. The three letters addressed to their mother express regret that their marriages require them to live distant from their natal home. What these women seem to be mourning is that they were no longer members of their natal family; their marriages took them to new homes, and their childhoods at their natal home had irrevocably passed from them. Thus, what is lamented is not merely physical but also psychological distance. In this sense, their letters differ in tone from the Kim family correspondence (see chapter 23) in which both parents and daughters seem to assume that their relationship will continue after the daughters' marriages regardless of their places of residence.

The third letter by a Ha daughter, which mourns the death of her grandmother, is especially poignant. It speaks of the worst nightmare of every mar-

ried daughter—that while she is busy with her own life a beloved member of her natal family falls ill and dies and she cannot be in attendance at the deathbed. The remark that “daughters are all sinners” probably rings true to many women situated similarly in a patriarchal system. The fourth letter, from one married sister to another, also speaks of a woman thinking of good times gone by when she was home with her sister and realizing that those days, despite the continued affection between her and her sister, now belonged more to memory than to real life.

The fifth letter, from another collection, is quite unusual. The author is Sin Puyong (1732–1791), and the letter, written in literary Chinese, is addressed to her older brother, Sin Kwangha, on the occasion of the ceremony celebrating his becoming a man, in his twentieth year. Puyong, the daughter of Sin Ho, had three older brothers; Sin Kwangha was the third. Although the oldest, Sin Kwangsu (1712–1775), a scholar particularly admired for his prose, calligraphy, and painting, was the most well-known, two other brothers were also known for their writing.¹ Some of Puyong’s writing, including this letter, is appended to the *Assembled Literary Works in Homage to Literature (Sungmun yŏnbangjip)*, the collected literary works of the Sin brothers.² It is noteworthy that a younger sister wrote and offered advice and good wishes to her brother on the occasion of his embarking on the course of life as an adult man. It may be that all family members were expected to write and offer good wishes, but it is remarkable that Puyong wrote in literary Chinese. It is not known whether she was married when she wrote this letter. From this letter and other examples of her writing, we may infer that she had a close association with her natal family members and also learn her opinions on history and other subjects.

ORIGINAL TEXTS



1. A Daughter’s Letter to Madam Ha (1623)

Paek, Hyŏnp’ung Kwak ssi ōn’gan chuhae, no. 129, 582–85.

I hope my older brother and younger siblings are doing well.³ I am sorry that I could not send news. Because the distance is so great, I do not hear news from home. Do not marry a daughter off to a faraway place! I am so sad. T’aebok,⁴ a luckless fellow, has contracted an embarrassing disease. His symptoms are

not that serious, but after he urinates, blood and puss come out. He is in a foul mood, refusing food. It has been about ten days since he took to bed. I am worried that he might die.

I feel terrible that because the messenger came so suddenly I cannot send anything home. Please give my love to my siblings. I have been having an eye problem, and so I am writing this letter with one eye closed. I am unable to write to []⁵ Please give him news of me. Please take care of yourselves and be well.

The sixteenth of the sixth month, the kyehae year [1623]



2. A Daughter’s Letter to Her Mother (1623)

Paek, Hyŏnp’ung Kwak ssi ōn’gan chuhae, no. 130, 586–91.

Greetings! How are you doing looking after [my] young siblings in this hot season? Because I have not heard from home for so long, I am anxious day and night, unable to forget you even when I sleep. All I can do is shed tears. For some time I have meant to send a messenger, even empty handed, but was unable to do so because of extreme busyness and because there was no one to send as a courier. Of the few slaves that I have, two or three have been sick by turns, and, because we are so shorthanded, our fields, both wet and dry, have not been tended.

Because no new letter came from home, weeping, I took out an old letter of yours and reread it many times. I am so sad that you have forgotten me and do not send news. I do not expect much, but in my longing I wish that at least I might have frequent dreams so that I might see you in one of them. Whenever I think of those days I was with you, tears well in my eyes.

How is the measles in your area? I hope there are no other diseases there. In this region, all sorts of infectious diseases are going around, and everyone is nervous. My father-in-law has been seriously ill. He is unable to take food and must take medicine all the time, and so the family is in a state of deep anxiety. Ŭngnang is ill, cannot take any food, and is in a miserable state. Olmi also became sick. It is just terrible.

I want to give more of my news, but since I am not sure whether this letter will be delivered to you, I will skip other things. What I truly wish at this distance is that you along with my younger siblings stay well. I will end here.

Your longing child.

Twenty-eighth day, seventh month, the kyehae year [1623]

3. A Daughter's Letter to Her Mother

Paek, Hyönp'ung Kwak ssi ön'gan chuhae, no. 160, 711-15.



I am writing this letter with deep grief. When a courier returned early this year, he reported that [grandmother] was well, without obvious illness. Saengjon,⁶ who went to see grandmother, reassured me on his return that she seemed in good health. I was so happy at these tidings. I planned that as soon as the health of the members of my own family here improved I would definitely go to see her, and I have been impatiently waiting for autumn to arrive.⁷ Receiving this incredible news so unexpectedly made me feel that there was no greater sadness, and I have not been able to stop weeping. It is even worse since I cannot just go to be with you.

Daughters are all sinners. The thought that if I had been born a boy, I would have gone home immediately regardless of my situation led me to plunge to even greater depths of sorrow. Even in the netherworld, grandmother would not forget us. I will make sure to go to you before the funeral. Because we have been away from home, all of our three sisters committed the terrible sin of being unable to keep a vigil at grandmother's deathbed,⁸ and we lost her forever without saying good-bye. The terrible weight of sin, grief, and regret is too great to bear. Although I am aware of the futility of expressing this, I am sending this message because I cannot contain myself.

Your child from Miryang, weeping with longing and grief?



4. To a Younger Sister

Paek, Hyönp'ung Kwak ssi ön'gan chuhae, no. 164, 731-35.

How are you and your family in this hot season? I have not heard news of you for a long time, but thoughts about you never leave me, and I am constantly worried about you. I was so upset at the news that [your husband] was sick with smallpox, I wanted to send someone immediately to find out what was going on. When I expressed my wish to my husband, he thought that the government would not allow it, and indeed we were forbidden to send someone.

I could not put you out of my thoughts even for a moment—it was really terrible not knowing how you were doing. Then, someone who had attended the wake of [your husband's] teacher sent us the news that my brother-in-law Master Pak¹⁰ "recovered with no visible mark from the disease." I was so happy and relieved. I so very much wanted to send someone at once to congratulate you, but I could not find a messenger because all the slaves were out in fields busy doing farmwork. There was nothing I could do but shed tears of frustration. Only now am I sending someone. I wonder whether you fathom the depth of my affection for you. Despite my bottomless love, our indigent state does not allow me to send you anything. How I regret this!

I am getting by alright. I do wonder, however, where your loving sisterly devotion has vanished. It has been four years [since I saw you], but I have not gotten even one short letter. These thoughts make me miss you all the more acutely, and I am filled with sadness. I wish with all my heart that you and your family stay well and that somehow I will see you soon. I have much to say, but this paper is small, and I will end here.

To Madam

A letter of congratulation to my sister.



5. To My Third Older Brother

Yi and Chöng, Han'guk kojön yösöng munhak üi segye, sanmunp'yön, 226-27.

On this auspicious day, my third older brother, Master Kwangha, wore the formal robe of an adult (*wönbok*) for the first time. Your little sister Puyong,¹¹ in the fullness of her heart, respectfully offers a few words of advice on her knees: From today, discard the ideas of a child, and follow the path of cultivating virtue. It is fitting to exert yourself with your studies to establish yourself and to brighten your name and so bring glory to your parents.

Bowing once more I take one more step and offer this: Your little sister heard, albeit briefly, that when a person is born, he is supposed to serve his parents well, serve his lord loyally, be filial at home and act modestly outside, be truthful to his friends, and, with his remaining energy, read and recite the *Book of History* [*Shujing*] and the *Book of Poetry* [*Shijing*]. This is how the ancients taught the young. My brother, be mindful!

NOTES

1. Yi and Chông. *Han'guk kojôn yôsong munhak ui segye*, sanmun'yon, 221.
2. Sin Puyong's extant writing includes eighteen poems, two letters, two eulogies, and four miscellaneous pieces (ibid.).
3. It is not clear which among the five Ha daughters wrote this letter.
4. T'aebok was a family slave who functioned as a family courier.
5. The name of the person is illegible in the original.
6. Saengjon appears to be the letter writer's child.
7. In an extended patriarchal family, paternal grandparents lived with their grandchildren, and so grandchildren often develop a bond with these grandparents, especially their grandmothers.
8. In Confucian societies, not being able to keep a vigil at your parent's (and by extension your grandparent's) deathbed is viewed as a great failure in filial duty. See Haboush, "Filial Emotions and Filial Values," 171.
9. This letter is from the daughter who married into a family in Miryang. This daughter is not the one who wrote the first letter. See Paek, *Hyônp'ung Kwak ssi ông'an chuhae*, 711-15.
10. "Master Pak" is Pak Saengwôn, a licentiate degree holder in classics.
11. This is one of few instances in which a woman reveals her name in writing.



PART V

Letters Written Away from Home

GLOSSARY

Chosôn	朝鮮	Ha	河
<i>kyehae</i>	癸亥	Miryang	密陽
Olmi	올미	<i>Shijing</i>	詩經
<i>Shujing</i>	書經	Sin Ho	申渚
Sin Kwangha	申光河	Sin Kwangsu	申光洙
Sin Kwangyôn	申光淵	Sin Puyong	申芙蓉
<i>Sungmun yônbangjip</i>	崇文聯芳集	T'aebok	태복
Ungnang	웅남	<i>wônbok</i>	元服