

# Unyŏng-jŏn

A Love Affair at the Royal Palace  
of Chosŏn Korea



Introduction and Annotations

Michael J. Pettid

Translation

Kil Cha and Michael J. Pettid



INSTITUTE OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES  
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# Acknowledgments

This project began during my postdoctoral studies at the University of California at Berkeley, where I was fortunate enough to have “rediscovered” *Unyŏng-jŏn* in the Asami collection while working on another project, a serendipitous discovery that was to eventually redirect my entire project. The staff and faculty at the Center for Korean Studies at Berkeley, particularly Clare Yu and Jonathan Petty, were extremely helpful in all matters during my stay and assisted this project greatly. The postdoctoral fellowship itself was funded by the Korea Foundation. The Korean Literature Translation Institute provided a generous grant for the translation project, and that grant helped provide the time and resources for this volume. Haechang Choung of the Academy of Korean Studies kindly provided the copy of the Changsŏ-gak version of *Unyŏng-jŏn* that I also used in this translation.

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Any errors, omissions, or oversights are, of course, my own. I have endeavored to create an accurate translation, and I believe that the translation of *Unyŏng-jŏn* presented here meets that criterion and will stand the test of time. As with any translation, decisions had to be made in regard to the best word or phrase for items in the original text that do not have close matches in English. I hope that the choices I made have resulted in an

## *Acknowledgments*

enjoyable translation of a work first conceived some three centuries ago in a set of social circumstances quite different from our own. It is also my hope that this work will allow scholars and students access to a true jewel of not only Korean premodern literature, but premodern literature in general.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

In Chosŏn Korea of 1601, a socially inept scholar, Yu Yŏng, decides to experience the wondrous beauty of the Inwang Mountains, and alone ascends the mountain and enjoys a bottle of wine he had carried with him. He happens upon a beautiful woman and young man sitting together and joins their company, asking them who they are and why they have come to this mountain. After much prodding, the two reluctantly agree to tell their story. The woman, named Unyŏng, begins her story by telling Yu that she was once the palace woman of Prince Anp'yŏng (1418–1453) and that the young man with her was a *chinsa* by the name of Kim.<sup>1</sup> Anp'yŏng was a great lover of literature and the arts, and when dissatisfied with the literary level of the men of the day, decided to train ten of his palace women, one of whom was Unyŏng, in letters. Anp'yŏng always guarded the women closely, never revealing their presence to any outsiders. Yet one day, Unyŏng met Kim and a forbidden love affair exploded.

Thus unfolds the story of Unyŏng and Kim *chinsa*. This early-seventeenth-century novel follows the winding path of the secret love affair between these two and the difficulties they encounter in attempting to realize their desires. The novel holds all the elements needed for a truly captivating story: love, treachery, heartbreak, danger, and friendship.

*Unyŏng-jŏn* [The tale of Unyŏng] is noteworthy among premodern Korean novels in several respects. First, it is generally said to be one of the very few premodern romance novels with a tragic conclusion. Most commonly, Korean novels featuring a love affair end happily as seen in works such as *Ch'unhyang-jŏn* [The tale of Ch'unhyang]. Even heroic novels featuring a love affair such as

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<sup>1</sup> The literary licentiate (*chinsa*) was the first major stepping-stone toward passing the government service examination (*kwagŏ*).

*Cho Ung-jŏn* [The tale of Cho Ung] have gratifying conclusions. Perhaps because readers desired happiness in their own lives, novels—works created largely for entertainment—carried such endings.

Also notable in *Unyŏng-jŏn* is the narrative structure. The narrative voice is largely that of Unyŏng, and the story unfolds through her eyes and experiences. *Unyŏng-jŏn* is the first Korean novel to utilize a female narrator. Thus, this novel evolves through Unyŏng's space, emotions, and experiences. Consequently, it offers readers an opportunity to enter a very restricted space in the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910), the world of the palace women who served at the royal palaces.

Given the woman's voice and view prominent in this work, *Unyŏng-jŏn* demonstrates how women grappled with the difficulties brought about by the very restrictive Confucian ideology of the seventeenth century. Through the voice of Unyŏng and her fellow palace women, we gain insight into the hardships these women experienced in matters such as the realization of love and the loneliness of isolation. The reader also will understand the comradeship between the palace women, who all suffered under the restrictive rules governing their lives at the palace. In such aspects, *Unyŏng-jŏn* is one of the very few premodern Korean records of any sort depicting a woman's understanding of life.

Finally, *Unyŏng-jŏn* is notable for its focus on the issue of human freedoms. The central theme of the novel is that of basic rights of humankind: the right to select a lover, the right to follow one's own choices in life, and the right of women to have rights equal to those of men. The author of this work had a clear vision for a more equitable society, and this work was the forum for introducing basic human autonomy. Debates and conversations in the text present vivid arguments for the realization of basic rights to readers. For an early-seventeenth-century work, *Unyŏng-jŏn* is centuries ahead of its time in the quest for basic rights that are taken for granted at present. Such a historic call for autonomy is unrivaled in the fiction of this period in Chosŏn.

While the genre of the novel was held in contempt by many upper-class elite males in Chosŏn, it nonetheless was greatly popular among women. Accordingly, we should understand *Unyŏng-jŏn* as being reflective of the desire of many women for the realization of love and personal fulfillment. The fact that this work was widely circulated demonstrates that it matched a need among readers during the last half of the Chosŏn dynasty.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Historical Backdrop

The dynastic change from Koryŏ (918–1392) to Chosŏn (1392–1910) marked the rise of Confucian ideology as a governing system and way of life in Korea. While this ideology had been present in Koryŏ, it was not given supreme status within the government and played a secondary role to Buddhism in the customs of the people.<sup>1</sup> This was all the more true in the lives of women, who enjoyed substantial rights in regard to economic and social matters in Koryŏ. Chosŏn was to be a period in which women were to lose a tremendous amount of freedom as their lives became heavily influenced by the Confucian vision of womanly virtue and an ever-strengthening patriarchal system.

### Chosŏn Dynasty and Change

Yi Sŏnggye (1335–1408), the founder of the Chosŏn dynasty, was able to usurp the Koryŏ dynasty through a combination of military power and support from those later designated as meritorious elites (*kaeguk kongsin*). While it is sometimes argued that the so-called newly risen literati class (*sadaebu*) came into prominence at this time, in fact there was a great deal of continuity from Koryŏ to Chosŏn in terms of the Confucian scholar group; some Koryŏ Confucianists even opposed the new dynasty out of loyalty.<sup>2</sup> While the aims of the meritorious elites and the literati class often clashed in the first two centuries of Chosŏn, both advocated changes to the existing social systems. In particular, the two groups composed a scholar-official class that spearheaded various changes designed to create a society that reinforced their positions of privilege.

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<sup>1</sup> Confucianism entered the Korean peninsula in the fourth century via China.

<sup>2</sup> John Duncan, *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty*, 237–238.

## CHAPTER THREE

# *Unyŏng-jŏn*: An Analysis of a Seventeenth-century Novel

While the original edition of *Unyŏng-jŏn* is no longer thought to be extant, numerous copies have been preserved. Despite the lack of the original, we can state with authority that the work was originally written in literary Chinese and then later “translated” into Korean script. Moreover, while there are various versions of *Unyŏng-jŏn*, these are largely the same and hold only minor variations. The work is also known by different titles, a common feature of premodern Korean novels.

### The text

Considering the stylistic sophistication of the versions of *Unyŏng-jŏn* written in literary Chinese, we can logically surmise that these versions are the original form of the novel.<sup>1</sup> So Chaeyong writes that while the versions in literary Chinese have some minor differences in regard to the degree of elaboration in some passages and use of homonyms in places, they are largely the same. The hangul renditions, on the other hand, demonstrate a much lower level of literary sophistication as manifested in less artfully wrought descriptions and numerous errors.<sup>2</sup>

To such a stance, we should also add that the poetic forms that abound in *Unyŏng-jŏn* are uniformly forms written exclusively in literary Chinese (*hansi*). Such poems, utilizing *hansi* forms such as seven-character quatrains (*ch'irŏn chŏlgu*), simply could not have been initially written in hangul, which does not allow for such brevity and further cannot match the required form. The frequent

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<sup>1</sup> Such a stance is supported by numerous scholars. See Pak T'aesang, *Chosŏnjo aejŏng sosŏl yŏn'gu*, 353; Cho Tongil, *Han'guk munhak t'ongsa*, 3:493.

<sup>2</sup> So Chaeyong, “*Unyŏng-jŏn yŏn'gu*,” 154–158.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Chosŏn Society as Revealed in *Unyŏng-jŏn*

Important considerations concerning *Unyŏng-jŏn* include how readers of the mid- to late-Chosŏn period engaged this narrative and what that engagement reveals about life in the Chosŏn dynasty. The narrative reflects many aspects of life in early-seventeenth-century Korea, some obvious to the twenty-first century reader and others buried under thick layers of changed circumstances and worldviews. This analysis is not meant to be exclusive or exhaustive inasmuch as the dynamic relationship between readers and the text would have permitted myriad understandings and reactions. What this investigation seeks is to provide a foundation for appraising the value of this text to readers, particularly women, in the late-Chosŏn period.

As with any literary work, a reader's engagement with *Unyŏng-jŏn* would have varied depending upon a host of factors including gender, social status, time period, and personal life experiences. The reaction of a palace woman reader and that of an upper-class male *yangban* reader would have been greatly different. So too would have been the reaction among those of different life experiences. A woman in a happy marriage might not have felt strong empathy for the plight of Unyŏng, whereas a woman in a less than ideal marriage might have felt a deep bond with the protagonist and her hardships. Accordingly, we can only make general inferences based upon certain assumptions concerning the demographics of the readers of this work.

Determining the readership of this work is an excellent starting point for this analysis, and an important and interesting consideration. As this work was initially written in literary Chinese, we can assume that most early readers would have been men, save for the few women possessing sufficient education to manage such a lengthy and difficult work. Such a group of well-educated women

## CHAPTER FIVE

# *Unyŏng-jŏn*: Translation

Susŏng Palace, the old residence of Grand Prince Anp'yŏng, was situated to the west of Changan Castle at the foot of the Inwang Mountains.<sup>1</sup> The mountains and streams were so graceful that it seemed a dragon would soon appear, and also were so steep and rugged that they appeared like a crouched tiger. To the south was Sajik and the east, Kyŏngbok Palace.<sup>2</sup>

The Inwang Mountains meandered up and down, forming a high peak near the spot of Susŏng Palace. Although not high, if one went to the top and looked down, the shops scattered along the road and the houses in the capital looked like a *paduk* board<sup>3</sup> and also—like stars in the heavens—one could clearly see the details. The shape was as ordered as a loom clearly separates thread. If one looked to the east, the palace was in the distance and the double road to it seemed suspended in the air.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Grand Prince Anp'yŏng (1418–1453) was the third son of King Sejong (r. 1418–1450). His given name was Yong, his courtesy name Ch'ŏngji, and pen names Pihaedang and Maejukhŏn. His residence was Susŏng-gung Palace.

Changan Castle is actually the royal city of Tang China (618–907). In this instance, it refers to Kyŏngbok Palace.

Inwang-san is within the old city walls of Seoul. The elevation of the main peak is 338 meters.

<sup>2</sup> Sajik Altar was founded in 1394 by King T'aejo (r. 1392–1398). The kings of Chosŏn would perform rites to the deities of the earth (*t'osin*) and grains (*koksin*) on behalf of the people at this altar.

Kyŏngbok-kung was built under orders from King T'aejo in 1394 and destroyed by rampaging slaves during the Hideyoshi Invasion in 1592. The palace was in ruins for nearly three centuries before being rebuilt near the end of the Chosŏn dynasty in 1872.

<sup>3</sup> *Paduk* is a board game played on a board crossed with horizontal and vertical lines.

<sup>4</sup> The double road (*pokto*) refers to the roads leading to the royal palace. The upper road was reserved for use by the king, and the lower road for others.

# Character Glossary

a 雅

*akkong* 樂工

*akpu* 樂附

becoming clouds, becoming rain

(*wiun wiu*) 爲雲爲雨

Bing Ji 丙吉

*Book of Changes (Yökkjöng)* 易經

*Book of Rites (Yegi)* 禮記

*Book of Songs (Sigyöng)* 詩經

Ch'ae Chegong (1720-1779)

蔡濟恭

Ch'ae Su (1449-1515) 蔡壽

*chaha-ju* 紫霞酒

Changan Castle (Changan söng)

長安城

Changhön taewang 莊憲大王

Changle Palace 長樂

"Changmen fu" 長門賦

*changsäng chi yak* 長生之藥

Changsin Palace (Changsin gung)

長信宮

Changsö-gak Library 藏書閣

Charan 紫鸞

Cheng Hao (1032-1085) 程顥

Cheng I (1033-1107) 程頤

Cheng-tang 盛唐

*chikchehak* 直提學

*chinsa* 進士

Chiphyön-jön 集賢殿

*ch'irön chölgü* 七言絕句

Cho Sönggi (1638-1689)

趙聖期

Ch'oe Hünghyo 崔興孝

*chöktong* 笛童

Chöng Inji (1396-1478) 鄭麟趾

Chöng Tojön (1342-1398)

鄭道傳

*chönmin* 田民

Chongmyo 宗廟

*chönsön* 典膳

*chönüi* 典衣

"Chosin" 調信

Chosön dynasty (1392-1910)

朝鮮

Chowön Hall 朝元

Chu kingdom 楚

Chu-tang 初唐

*chungch'u* 仲秋

*chwa u* 左右

*Compilation of Royal Edicts (Sugyo*

*chimnok)* 受教輯錄

*Comprehensive Later National Code,*

*Supplemented (Taejön-hu sok-rok)*

大典後續錄

concubine 妾

*Conduct of the Three Bonds with*

*Illustrations (Samgang haengsil-*

*to)* 三綱行實圖

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