

## Lesson 1, Character Profiles

### Kisaeng

Pak Sun-Hi, court *kisaeng*, or *kwangi*, is one of the great contradictions of Choson culture. Talented, beautiful, fashionable, accomplished, and intelligent, she has gained the benefit of formal education few females can claim, even in Seoul. Steeped in court politics, she uses her poetry to disseminate political messages at court for outcast factions. At banquets full of *yangban*, she sings beautiful songs, most of which are thinly veiled political manifestos. Her knowledge does little to improve her circumstances, however. If anything, it increases her frustration.

Her family shuns her, despite her political importance. Once they sold her to a *yangban* trainer for food when she was 14, she never saw her home again. She sends most of her earnings home with her peddler brother to help her mother, and sometimes letters, but they are never returned. She doubts her mother has even told her proud father that it is his *kisaeng* daughter that buys most of his seed, not his *pobusang* son. While she looks like the ideal woman, her violation of the sex segregation codes make her a target for scorn from others in society.

## Farmer

Pak So-Bang may indeed be one of the most unfortunate men alive. His wheat farm in Man-won was never very profitable, although he labored faithfully and had four sons to help him. When the droughts began, his crops suffered even more than usual, and his third son had to become a peddler to help the family. He thought that he would have to sell the farm and become a merchant himself, but thankfully he was spared that indignity when his son began to do well as a *pobusang*.

It's too bad he wasn't so lucky with daughters. He sold his elder daughter as a *kisaeng* to help his family. His younger daughter just caught possession sickness and left home, never to return from the local shaman's hut. Now, who will take care of him when he is old! But, while he's sad and frustrated that she's now in such a shameful profession, when she left, some of his bad luck left, too. This past season the wheat harvest was good, and his youngest son has won a sitting at the lowest of the Confucian exams. Although neither of his two elder brothers passed the tests, Pak So-Bang is confident he will do better.

## Pobusang

Pak Nam-Ho is a traveling peddler, or *pobusang*, from Manwon. During the droughts of his adolescence, his father's farm, already scarcely profitable, fell on truly hard times. Becoming a traveling peddler was something he did out of duty to his family, although he makes a fairly good living. He sells his many pots, utensils and brassware at the five-day markets throughout the province, and stops at his family's farm to give his father his profits.

He may no longer claim the status of farmers, with their connection to nature and fruitful production, but he has his own duties and an important role to fulfill. After about a year of peddling, he joined the *pobusang* guild, and became one of the king's chief letter carriers. Based in Haeju, he reports news of unrest and delivers messages from the country magistrates to the headquarters in the city after each of his market circuits. He garners respect many other merchants do not, because of his nobility in service to the king and his guild's renown, irreproachable morality

## Yangban Man

Yi Sang-Do, a yangban official in Seoul, son of a magistrate, grandson of an advisor to the king, is more than a rich merchant who purchased his way into the yangban class. He comes from a long line of noble and moral scholar-officials, all of whom have done surpassingly well on the literary licentiate examination, or *munkwa*, the highest civil service examination. He had the tenth highest score of all those in his class. His wife, daughter of a well-loved magistrate, is lovely and discreet.

His two sons will no doubt follow in his footsteps and make their ancestors proud of their scholarship, position and proper attitudes. His eldest son will most likely do even better. He attends the private school for Confucian classics to train for his future as a civil servant. His sons by his concubine will be provided for as well, perhaps as chungin clerks. His daughters have been taught to be the very essence of courtesy, respect and Confucian modesty.

## Yangban Woman

Yi Sang-Do's wife, Paech'on Taek - meaning a lady from Paech'on - is a very lucky woman. Her husband is more than a rich merchant who purchased his way into the *yangban* class. He is a scholar-official in Seoul, son of a magistrate, grandson of an advisor to the king, and did surpassingly well on the literary licentiate, the *munkwa*. Her father was one of the most well respected magistrates in the country, so the match was perfect.

She is beautiful, as well as skilled in embroidery and cooking. She is an avid reader of novels written in *hangul*, and is well versed in Korean *sijo* poetry. Paech'ong Taek has continued to make her family proud by producing two sons. Her eldest son has almost finished the private school for Chinese classics, where he is training for his future as a civil servant. Her two sons will no doubt follow in their father's footsteps and make their ancestors proud of their scholarship, position and proper attitudes. She has also raised two daughters, both dutiful and modest, who will be able to care for her and her husband in their old age, or perhaps aid their father by making politically profitable marriages when they are a little older. Right now, all Paech'on Taek's energy is concentrated on her youngest child, the other son, as well as being a dutiful daughter-in-law to her husband's parents. If her good fortune continues to hold, he will be just as precocious as his elder brother, and will add yet another illustrious scholar-official to her father's and husband's lines. Perhaps she should hold a *kût*...

## Shaman

The shaman, Mae Ja Dong-Mansin, has taken in the young daughter of a farmer after the girl arrived at her door shivering and nauseous with possession sickness. So now she has an apprentice, and Mae Ja Dong is remembering all over again the pain of becoming a *mansin*, or Korean shaman. It's not just the physical torment of possession sickness, although that can be quite tortuous; it is the sudden and total switch from one life to another. One day the shaman was an artisan's young wife with one baby born and another on the way. The next day she had a miscarriage, and a high fever that wouldn't subside. The next week, her mother-in-law paid for a kût, only to discover that there were no demons to be exorcised. She had possession sickness, and could either surrender to the gods and become a *mansin* or die from the illness. She was banished from her home almost instantly. She never saw her husband or young son again. In three weeks her whole life had been stripped away.

Now she wields power here, far from her home village, with her shaman's name, bright clothes, and shaman's bells and cymbals. The wives of farmers and yangban officials alike come to her for spirit exorcisms and the expelling of bad fortune from a home or husband. She is considered more essential than doctors in the birthing chamber. The gods of the kût demand satisfactory payment for such services, and Mae Ja Dong-Mansin reaps that benefit. She makes more money than her ex-husband. Still, even young children talk to her with the respect they would give a dog.