

## The Ch'unhyang Story

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Formerly there lived in the province of Cholla, in the town of Namwon, a magistrate's son named Yi Mongyong. He had much literary talent, and grew up to be a handsome young man.

One beautiful morning, Master Yi Mongyong called his servant, Pangja, and asked him to show him a place where he might see wild flowers. Pangja led him to a summer pavilion near a bridge called "Ojak-kyo," or the "Magpie Bridge." The view from the bridge was as beautiful as the summer sky, and thus was named after the tale of the herdboyc and the Weaving Maid.

Looking at the distant mountains, Yi Mongyong caught sight of a young maiden swinging beneath one of the trees. He asked Pangja about the lovely maiden and her attendant. He replied that she was Ch'unhyang (Spring Fragrance), a daughter of Wolmae (Moon Plum), the retired kisaeng entertainer. Pangja related to his young master that this young girl was not only beautiful but also virtuous. Yi Mongyong insisted that Pangja inform Ch'unhyang that he wished to meet her.

"Don't you know the butterfly must pursue the flower, and the geese must seek the sea?" retorted Ch'unhyang.

Pangja reported what she had said to Yi Mongyong, who became disconsolate. The servant suggested that he see the young maid himself. Yi Mongyong approached Ch'unhyang. She was even more beautiful than he had first thought.

The wind blew her black hair and long ribbon over her rosy face, and she glowed with virtue and happiness. "This good fortune is offered me today. Why wait until tomorrow? Should I not speak to this pretty girl now?" Yi Mongyong said to himself. Just then Ch'unhyang, frightened at being watched, jumped down from her swing and ran toward her house. Stopping under a peach tree at her garden gate she plucked a blossom and kissed it, her lips and cheeks redder than the bloom, and was gone.

Pangja urged his master to hasten home so that his father might know nothing of his adventure, and then punish Pangja for allowing Yi Mongyong to wander so far. The youth returned home in a trance, and went immediately to sit at dinner with his parents. With the meal finished, Yi Mongyong went to his room, lit a candle, and opened a book. Reading proved impossible. The words blurred before his eyes and every word and every character was "Spring" and "Fragrance"- Ch'unhyang, Ch'unhyang, Ch'unhyang. Calling Pangja, he said, "Tonight I must see Ch'unhyang. Did she not say that the butterfly must pursue the flower?"

They went to Ch'unhyang's house, stopping under the peach tree in the garden as they approached. At that moment Ch'unhyang's mother was telling her daughter that she had had a dream in which a blue dragon coiled itself around Ch'unhyang's body and, holding her in its mouth, flew up to the sky. Looking up, instead of the dragon in the clouds, the girl's mother saw a dragon on earth, for Yi Mongyong walked out of darkness and spoke to her.

On learning the purpose of his visit she called Ch'unhyang to meet the young nobleman, and Yi Mongyong asked Ch'unhyang's mother for the hand of her daughter. The old woman, thinking her dream had come true, gladly consented, and said, "You are

a nobleman's son and Ch'unhyang is the daughter of a kisaeng, so there cannot be a formal marriage. If you give us a secret marriage contract, writing your pledge not to desert her, we shall be contented."

Yi Mongyong seized a brush and set down the following lines: "The blue sea may become a mulberry field, and the mulberry fields may become the blue sea, but my heart for Ch'unhyang shall never change. Heaven and earth and all the gods are witnesses."

In their sleep that night they dreamed of Mandarin ducks swimming together. For several nights he visited his beloved, until she teased him, saying that he should go home and study hard to become a great official like his father. Unfortunately, their time together did not last.

Not long after the secret marriage, the servant brought Yi Mongyong a message saying that his father, newly appointed to the King's cabinet, was being recalled to the capitol. Yi Mongyong, who was to accompany his father, went that evening to Ch'unhyang and told her the bad news. The young couple was forced to say a tearful goodbye at the Magpie Bridge.

"Since there is no way to change our fate, let us embrace and part," said Ch'unhyang, throwing her arms around her lover. She then gave him a ring. "This is my token of love for you. Keep it until we meet again. Go in peace, but do not forget me. I shall remain faithful to you and wait here for you to come and take me away to Seoul." With these words, they parted.

The new Namwon magistrate arrived soon afterward, and among his first words to his servant were, "Bring me Ch'unhyang, the pretty girl I have heard of."

"This is difficult sir," replied the retainer, "for she is already married secretly to Yi Mongyong, the son of the former magistrate."

Angered, the new magistrate ordered Ch'unhyang summoned at once. Too terrified to disobey an order by the magistrate, Ch'unhyang accompanied the servant. The magistrate looked at her attentively. "I heard much of you in Seoul, and today I see you are very beautiful. Will you come to me?"

Choosing her words carefully, Ch'unhyang replied, "I am committed to Yi Mongyong. That is why I cannot do as you ask. The King has sent you here to take care of the people. You have a heavy responsibility to the throne. It would be better to fulfill your duties and apply justice according to the laws of the country." Ch'unhyang's defiance enraged the magistrate, and he ordered her taken to prison.

"Why put me in prison?" Ch'unhyang protested, "I have done no wrong. A married woman must be faithful to her husband, just as a magistrate should be faithful to the king."

This merely served to anger the magistrate further, and before long Ch'unhyang found herself in a prison cell.

Meanwhile, Yi Mongyong had arrived in Seoul, where he studied hard and learned all the famous Chinese classics. He passed the government examinations with the highest distinction, thereby qualifying for a position in the king's service. In congratulating him after the munkwa examinations, the king asked Yi Mongyong. "Do you wish to be a magistrate or a governor?"

"I should like to be appointed amhaeng osa," replied Yi Mongyong. Yi Mongyong, as an amhaeng osa, traveled around the country with his attendants, disguised as beggars. They inquired everywhere after the needs of the people in order to assess the

quality of local districts' administrations. Soon he arrived near Namwon, and came to a small farming village where the people were planting rice.

While working, the peasants sadly chanted: "We come out in the scorching heat, plough our fields, sow our seeds, and make the rice grow. First we must pay tribute to the king, give a part to the poor, a part to travelers who come knocking at our doors, and save money for ancestral services. This would be all right if the magistrate did not squeeze us for even more, leaving us with hardly anything to eat."

Much interested, Yi Mongyong approached and said, "I have heard that the magistrate of Namwon has married Ch'unhyang and that they live together happily."

"How dare you speak like that?" retorted one of farmers. "Ch'unhyang is faithful, true and pure, and you are a fool to speak thus of her and that tyrant, who is cruel to her. No, her fate is even worse than that because the son of the former magistrate seduced and deflowered that poor girl, and then abandoned her, never coming back to see her. He is a bastard, the son of a dog, the son of a pig!"

The farmer's anger shocked Yi Mongyong. He found that many villagers felt the same way. The local yangban aristocrats shared the people's wrath. Yi Mongyong happened on a spot where some yangban were having a picnic, comparing poems and conversing on a hillside. He listened as a scholar presented a poem railing against the unjust provincial government. When he was done, another picnicker said, "These are sad days! I've heard that a young woman called Ch'unhyang is to be executed in two or three days."

"Oh! This Magistrate is a wretch!" said another. "He is thinking only of overpowering Ch'unhyang, but she is like the pine and bamboo, which never change. She has remained faithful and true to her husband."

Another added, "She was married to the son of the old magistrate. What a pig her husband is! He abandoned the poor girl."

These comments made Yi Mongyong, weary and ashamed, hasten to Namwon. Meanwhile, Ch'unhyang, in prison all this time, remained faithful to the memory of Yi Mongyong. She had grown thin, feeble, and sick. One day she had a dream, in which she saw her house. In her garden, the flowers that she had planted and loved had faded. The mirror in her room was broken. Her shoes were hanging on the lintel of the door. She called to a blind man who happened to be passing by her cell window, and asked him the significance of her dream.

"I shall tell you what it means. These dried flowers shall bear fruit, the noise of the broken mirror will be heard throughout the world, and the shoes on the door indicate a large crowd visiting to offer congratulations."

Ch'unhyang thanked the blind man and prayed that his prophecy would come true. In reality, however, Ch'unhyang's doom was near. That very day the evil magistrate called his attendants together and said to them, "In three days I shall celebrate a great feast, to which I wish to invite all the magistrates of the nearby towns, and on that day Ch'unhyang shall be executed."

Meanwhile, Yi Mongyong arrived in the town and went to Ch'unhyang's house. At first, her mother did not recognize him. "I do not know who you are," she said. "Your face reminds me of Yi Mongyong, but your clothes are the clothes of a beggar." "But I am Yi Mongyong," said he.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Every day we have waited for you, but alas, in two or three days Ch'unhyang will be dead."

"Listen to me, Mother," replied Yi Mongyong. "Even though I am a miserable beggar, I still long for Ch'unhyang, and I want to see her."

With Yi Mongyong following, she knocked at the prison window, calling her daughter, who was asleep. Awakened, Ch'unhyang asked immediately if anyone had seen Yi Mongyong or heard news of him.

The mother replied that in place of Yi Mongyong, a beggar had come who claimed he was Yi Mongyong, and was there now to see her.

Yi Mongyong appeared at the window, and Ch'unhyang looked at him. It seemed to make no difference to her that he was badly dressed, and seemed to have failed at life in Seoul. Instead, she reached for him through the bars and struggled to be as close to him as possible.

"I may be a beggar in dress," replied Yi Mongyong, "but I have no beggar's heart!"

"Dear heart," said Ch'unhyang, "how hard your journey must have been. Go back with my mother and get some rest. Only please - since I am under a sentence of death and must die tomorrow after the feast - come to my window again in the morning so I may have the joy of seeing you once more before I die."

Yi Mongyong went home and slept in Ch'unhyang's room. But the next morning, when his mother-in-law opened the door, she was surprised to find that he was gone. In fact, he had gone early to collect his attendants, all disguised as beggars like himself. He gave them strict orders. Then, as the magistrate received his guests and presided over the banquet, Yi Mongyong managed to get into the palatial office compound and approach the host.

"I am a poor man," he said, "and I am hungry. Please, give me something to eat." It was customary in Korea, during big feasts in the countryside, for a number of beggars to show up for handouts, but the furious magistrate commanded his servants to kick the intruder out.

Then Yi Mongyong entered the palace a second time, by climbing on the shoulders of his servants and going over the wall. The first guest he encountered was the magistrate of Unbong, named Yong-jang. He said to him, "I am hungry, could you not let me have something?" Yong-jang, feeling some compassion called one of the kisaengs and asked her to bring something to the beggar.

Yi Mongyong then addressed Yong-Jang: I am obliged to you for giving me good food, and I wish to repay you with a little poem." Then he extended a paper on which Yong-jang read the lines:

This beautiful wine in golden goblets  
Is the blood of a thousand people.  
This magnificent meat on these jade tables  
Is the flesh and marrow of a thousand lives.  
Burning in this banquet hall,  
The tears of the hungry people  
Pour from their sunken eyes.

Even louder than the noisy song of these courtesans  
Resound the complaints of the oppressed peasants.

Yong-jang, greatly alarmed, cried, "It is against us," and he passed the paper to the host, who asked, "Who wrote this poem?"

"It is the young beggar," said Yong-jang, pointing to Yi Mongyong, but he was frightened, thinking that whoever wrote such a poem must be more than a common beggar. Rising up, he suddenly pretended to have urgent business elsewhere and fled. The other officials likewise sprang to their feet and stampeded out of the room, only to be stopped by Yi Mongyong's men, who were waiting outside with their swords. The officials soon understood that the beggar-poet was in fact an amhaeng osa. As they cowered together in a corner of the courtyard, Yi Mongyong revealed his ma-p'ae and ordered the magistrate's runners to fetch Ch'unhyang from her cell and to say to her, "The King's envoy has sent for you. He is going to hear your case and pronounce judgement." In the jail, Ch'unhyang was greatly frightened.

"Oh!" she cried. "I am going to die! Please, may I see my mother?" Ch'unhyang's mother ran to her daughter. "Mother, now is the hour of my death. Where is Yi Mongyong?"

"The King's officer is waiting. Do not stop to chitchat!" snapped the runners, and before Ch'unhyang's mother could speak, they carried her away to the magistrate's courtyard. They removed the wooden cangue from around her neck and placed her in the presence of the Royal Secret Inspector, who, sitting behind a screen, questioned her sternly: "If you do not love the magistrate, will you love me and come to me, the King's envoy? If you refuse I shall order my men to strike off your head immediately."

"Alas!" exclaimed Ch'unhyang. "How unhappy are the poor people of this country! First the injustice of the magistrate, then you, the King's Inspector, who should help and protect the unhappy people - you think immediately to condemn to death a poor girl whom you desire. Oh, how sad we common people are, and how pitiful it is to be a woman!"

Yi Mongyong then ordered the courtesans to untie the cords that bound the hands of Ch'unhyang. "Now raise your head, and look at me," he said to her.

"No," she answered, "I shall not look at you, I shall not listen to you. Cut my body into pieces if you like, but I shall never go to you."

Yi Mongyong was deeply touched. He took off his ring and ordered a courtesan to show it to Ch'unhyang. She saw that was the very ring she had given to her husband Yi Mongyong and, lifting her eyes, recognized her lover.

"Oh," she cried in joy and surprise. "Yesterday my lover was only a beggar and today he is the King's officer!"

Yi Mongyong ordered a sedan chair to be brought at once and saw that Ch'unhyang was safely carried home. The people shouted joyfully and cheered for Ch'unhyang and Yi Mongyong. Then he summoned the magistrate of Namwon and said, "The King gave you instructions to feed the people well, and instead you fed upon them. I condemn you in the name of the King to forfeit your position. I banish you to a faraway island without meat, without wine, and without company. I give you permission to eat the

wild grass till your stomach repents for the way you have fed off the people of Namwon!"

When all this was done, Yi Mongyong took his bride back to Seoul and wrote out the story Ch'unhyang as an appendix to his official report. The King read it and was surprised to find such fidelity in a country girl of low birth. He made her a chung-yol pu-in, or Duchess, and declared that her loyalty was proof that she was just as good as any yangban daughter, even though her mother was a lowly kisaeng, and that her conduct should be a model for all women. Ch'unhyang was then officially presented to the parents of Yi Mongyong, and they accepted her as a proper daughter-in-law. In time, Ch'unhyang bore three sons and two daughters, and they all lived happily for many years come.