



# VIRTUOUS WOMEN:

THREE CLASSIC KOREAN NOVELS

(A NINE CLOUD DREAM, QUEEN INHYŬN, CHUN-HYANG)

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*by Kim Man-jung*

*trans. by Richard Rutt*

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*trans. by Kim Chong-un*

THE SONG OF A FAITHFUL WIFE, CH'UN-HYANG

*trans. by Richard Rutt*



## Preface

The *three works* translated in this volume are generally recognized as the most significant products of traditional Korean fiction. *Kuunmong* was written in the reign of King Sukchong (1674-1720); *Inhyŏn Wanghu chŏn* describes events of that reign; and *Ch'unhyang ka* is a romance set in the same period, which came to be regarded as an ideal age of peace and prosperity. The second and third stories, however, did not attain the form in which they are here translated until the nineteenth century.

The three stories were translated independently of each other between 1968 and 1971 at the request of the Asia Society of New York. Mrs Bonnie Crown, director of the Society's literature program, noticed that the theme of woman's life and ideals is common to all three tales and suggested they should be published in one book.

I am responsible for all introductory matter and for the translations of *Kuunmong* and *Ch'unhyang ka*. I have also edited Professor Kim Chong-un's translation of *Inhyŏn Wanghu chŏn*, principally in order to unify the treatment of technicalities. I refer chiefly to four matters. Chinese names are transliterated as Chinese, Korean names as Korean; the ages of characters, and the counting of time in general are expressed according to western computation, and are thus one or two years less than the figures given in the original texts, which use Korean computation; and year dates are given according to the western era only, disregarding the Chinese sixty-fold numeration system, except where that system has some significance beyond bare chronology. The text has not been annotated, because the book is intended for the general reader's enjoyment. Explanatory phrases have been inserted into the translation where it seemed necessary to illuminate what would otherwise be merely mystifying allusions. Students requiring critical texts and detailed references can be

expected to be capable of using Korean editions.

The illustrations to *Kuunmong* are taken from Gale's *The Cloud Dream of the Nine* (London 1922), which contains a picture for each of the sixteen chapters in the Chinese text, inscribed with the appropriate chapter heading. The English legends provided here, however, identify the incidents represented.

I am grateful for the generous help of many people; especially Professor Chŏng Kyu-bok of Korea University; Professor Pak Yo-sun of Sungjŏn University; Mr. Choi Woon-sok of Korean National Commission for Unesco for editing, layout and proofreading; and to my wife, Joan, for improving the English style of *The History of Queen Inhyŏn*.

Taejŏn, Korea

3 December 1973

Richard Rutt

# General Introduction

*Korean fiction* was relatively slow in developing written forms. It is not in fact until the late seventeenth century that works by certainly identifiable authors can be found. The tradition of story-telling is, of course, very much older, but the linguistic conditions of the country prevented that tradition from blossoming into the production of novels, as the Chinese and Japanese traditions had done long before. There was no sanction for the wide use of the vernacular in literature. Although after the invention of a native Korean script in the middle of the fifteenth century it was theoretically possible to write the national language, in fact the entrenched use of Chinese continued to dominate Korean literary culture. It was possible to write novels in Chinese, but the scholastic tradition set more store on poetry and discussion than on fiction. Fiction in Korea remained for the most part oral.

Under a Confucian orthodoxy, male society did not provide the best setting for the growth of fiction. The Confucian ethos gave men a great interest in history, so great that ‘made-up stories’ were deemed frivolous; the stress on philosophy—especially moral philosophy—emphasized this disregard for fiction. The western concept of the novel as a contribution to thought has scarcely even today made much impression on Korea.

When fiction came to be written down, adventure and romance were the chief topics, and it was only to be expected that the needs of women would be of great significance for the writers. Equally inevitable was the fact that only upper-class women and professional entertainers would be realistically described in written fiction. For coolies’ wives and farmers’ daughters, and indeed sometimes even for the upper classes, fictional descriptions of their ideals and their dreams would have more

success than true descriptions of the hardship which was the lot of most people. Life in East Asia was hard by any modern western standard. Even the ladies of the palaces lived in what would now be regarded as unbearable discomfort, cold in winter and stifled in summer, without bathrooms, without holidays, and with acute discomfort if they ever travelled. Japanese ladies had bathrooms, but their quarters were in general fitted for a rugged life. The men were no better off, and because such discomfort was accepted as part of the way of the world, it was not remarked on in fiction. Occasional phrases remind the modern reader of the smells of the old houses and palaces, of the rigors of the climate, and the problems of the water supply. Most of the nation lived in what its present-day descendants would call squalor.

Physical discomfort was not the worst thing in life. Nervous strain was intense, and grew more intense as one went up the social scale. The byzantine politics of the palace were reflected in other large households. Everyone was vulnerable to jealousy. A woman's social fortunes were tied to the careers of her menfolk, who could be influenced by the way in which she satisfied the men and thereby held at bay the dangers of concubines and singing-girls. Such stresses were also accepted as part of the framework of life, but differed from physical hardships in that they provided suitable material for fiction. They were subject to luck, that 'good fortune' which is a leit-motif of East Asian literature: one could always hope that things would turn out better, or stay well. Dreams of good fortune buoy up most of the human race on its passage through the vale of tears.

That the longest, and in most ways the best, of Korean stories should have been written specifically for a woman and called 'a nine cloud dream', *Kuunmong*, is therefore not in the least surprising. It was intended to divert and console an ageing mother. The interest of the story centers in its women, three of whom are mothers, and the remaining eight eventually married to one man. This is a *reductio ad absurdum* of a

major problem of Yi dynasty family life: secondary wives and concubines. In *Kuunmong* the problem works out with smooth perfection, comfortably suggesting that such a life was possible; or perhaps ironically understating that such felicity was impossible. The ability of the eight women to live together is of greater concern than their relations with their husband. His role is to provide the social framework on which they can embroider the pattern of what really matters to them: their emotional relationships in the inner quarters. Their world is as narrow as their courtyards, as wide as the human heart. Affection is what matters most. The husband plays a role that is remarkably modern in that he is expected to provide a firm emotional basis for his women. The book is a dream of what women wished for: women's converse with women was as essential as marriage itself.

Philosophically the book is an account of the tension between Confucianism and Buddhism that was latent in Korean thinking, but more obvious in the lives of women than of men. A man could be brought up to despise Buddhism and be a whole-hearted Confucian. Most men were. Women had to conform to the role allotted to women by Confucianism but were rarely allowed to study Confucianism deeply, and would probably have had little taste for it had they been so allowed. They retained much Buddhist devotion, and were thus induced to enjoy the religious aspect of *Kuunmong*. Simply expressed, the argument was between Confucian emphasis on the right ordering of this world, (with its natural concomitant of the pursuit of honor by men vying in their worthiness to achieve that right ordering), and the other-worldliness of Buddhism. The Confucian who failed in his personal ambitions could find solace in self-regard, quietly rejoicing in his own nobility of mind, or taking comfort from a more or less stoical, yet essentially humanistic philosophy. For men this was usually sufficient; for women it was not enough. They needed the help of mysticism and of religious devotion which Buddhism was able to supply. Men were sometimes



attracted to Buddhism in a notably more intellectual fashion, but the confrontation between Confucianism and Buddhism in *Kuunmong* is only implicitly philosophical. It is essentially poetic. Kim Man-jung, who wrote the book, was deeply influenced by women, and wrote naturally in a vein that would appeal to his mother, who had been the dominant influence in his spiritual formation.

*Kuunmong*, however, is not a romance for ill-educated women. On the contrary, it is carefully constructed fiction for a discriminating and sophisticated woman who had led her family from distress to success and then seen the almost inevitable fall from success which was the lot of the seventeenth-century Korean politician. The bitter uncertainties of life in that atmosphere of jealousy and maneuvering appeared to be under control by the men. Life was tougher for women, who had to accept the family fortunes for which the men were responsible. For women the comforts of Buddhism were of greater importance.

But not all women, not even all court women, were either well-educated or mild. Many of them were powerful political forces and they were openly accepted as such. *Kuunmong* does not touch on this aspect of women's life because the author could not have shown his women characters manipulating the male characters politically without spoiling the moral idealism of the book. He could allow himself to be witty, and could describe in full the way in which women teased men sexually, so long as he did that with propriety within the contemporary conventions.

The *History of Queen Inhyŏn* belongs to a different literary genre, and describes the same society as *Kuunmong* does, but as history, not as fiction. Yet it gives a heightened account of the noble qualities of some of the male characters, applauding Confucian virtues to an extent that is obsequious to King Sukchong (about whose personality there is obviously something important to be said on the debit side); and describes a virtuous woman, in the person of Queen Inhyŏn, driving her virtue to

logical extremes that verge on caricature. The book is staunchly orthodox and makes no mention of Buddhism, though it describes a macabre and despicable charade of shamanism. The result is an account of the life of aristocratic women at once historically more accurate and poetically more distorted than the picture provided by *Kuunmong*. Chang Hŭibin is an ill-educated, coarse, selfish and scheming woman, the antithesis of the ideal. Whether the real Chang Hŭibin was as bad as the character in the History is of little importance. There were women of this kind, and they played important roles in politics. In describing her the writer intends a contrast with the perfection of Queen Inhyŏn's character; indirectly he underlines the weakness of the king, and of any other men who could be swayed by such women. Thus the polemical purposes of the *History* provide a revealing account of the life and character of highly-born women. The formality of the writing does not obscure the relentless intensity of purpose and emotion that distinguished the life of the palace from the life of the commoner.

Both *Kuunmong* and *The History of Queen Inhyŏn* deal with the life of aristocrats. *Ch'unhyang ka* comes to us in a text that was formulated for different audiences. Unlike the other two works it is properly part of oral literature. The heroine is not an aristocrat, but she is of aristocratic descent and could reasonably be imagined marrying into an aristocratic family. Social protest has a long history in East Asia, and elements of it are much easier to descry in *Ch'unhyang ka* than they are in the other two stories in this collection; but it would be a mistake to emphasize the disparate social origins of the hero and heroine and treat that point as the whole purpose of the story. (It would be wiser to note that though Ch'un-hyang's mother was a dancing-girl, her father was an aristocrat. The social distinction is a subtle device to provide and emphasize romance, rather than a blunt instrument of social criticism.) The audience for which *Ch'unhyang ka* was intended constitutes the real social distinction between

this work and the other two. *Ch'unhyang's* audience could include the illiterate, and it is provincial, whereas the other two are metropolitan; it is more human, less urbane; it contains low comedy, contrasting with the high comedy of *Kuunmong*. It does not describe the lower classes, but it was designed to appeal to all classes.

It resembles the other two works, nevertheless, in that it deals with the ideal woman, and sets its ideal in an aristocratic milieu. Of all the elements that have been blended in the story—romantic love, social justice, melodrama, horseplay, mild eroticism, descriptive poetry, high morality—idealized female virtue is the most important. The point is adequately proved by the alternative titles by which the story has been known. The women of *Kuunmong* are an ideal group, Inhyŏn is a paragon of correctitude and goodness, and we are expected to admire them, perhaps even to envy them. What distinguishes Ch'unhyang, who is equally idealized, is that clearly we are expected to respond to her with affection and with a pity warmer than that elicited by the dazzlingly virtuous Queen Inhyŏn, whom we never see falling in love and romping under the quilts with her husband. In spite of the literary conventions that mould the form of Ch'unhyang, the story is essentially earthy, and so the ideal of Korean womanhood comes over more believably. If the T'ang court of *Kuunmong* is cooled by the fragrant breezes of cloud-cuckoo-land, and the palaces of Queen Inhyŏn enshrine morals that surpass our belief, the village alleys and vulgar parties of Ch'unhyang's lusty Namwŏn give us an insight into the place of feminine idealism in the life of the whole peninsula of Korea.

The constant principles that inspired Korean women were the same as those that inspired Korean men: the principles of orthodox Confucianism. But humanity kept breaking through. Women wanted to be modest, pure, obedient, ceremonious, and noble-minded. They were also jealous, ambitious, and clever. Some were ignorant, but many were accomplished and well-educated. The tension between the formal role

expected of them by society and the spiritual forces within them combined to make women more interesting subjects for fiction than men were.

Did these women live fulfilled and happy lives? The answer must be Yes. Fictional descriptions of ideals presuppose a sound basis in a happy view of life. If there is real lack of fulfilment there will be a lack of consistent ideals in fiction. Despair does not breed ideals, but blank questioning. No one should be misled by the superficial fact that western women and twentieth-century women could never find happiness within the conventions of Yi dynasty society.

## **A Nine Cloud Dream**

## *Introduction*

*Kuunmong*, '*A Nine Cloud Dream*', holds a special place in the history of Korean fiction: it has traditionally been regarded as the oldest major novel written in the Korean language, yet it is a story of China and there exists no Korean text that can confidently be identified as the original. It is scarcely a true novel in the modern western sense, but more nearly a romance, which at first reading tells little of the author or his times.

It was written in the seventeenth century, when Korean culture was still dominated by Chinese influences. Even the language of everyday life was deeply imbued with Chinese thought-forms. Korean belongs to a quite different linguistic family from Chinese, but as Latin was the language of literature and administration in the Europe of the high Middle Ages, so Chinese was the language of literature and administration in Korea until the end of the nineteenth century. Koreans looked to China for their artistic, political and moral ideals, and Korean compositions in Chinese often earned the esteem of Chinese critics.

Most of what was best in Korean aristocratic culture had been learned from China. Confucianism, in the syncretistic form developed in China during the Sung dynasty, was the official philosophy and, in effect, religion of the Korean nation. It provided the canons of art and literature as well as the code of ethics. Buddhism was in a period of eclipse, though far from dead: its temples flourished in the mountains outside the cities, and its mysticism satisfied the emotional needs of women, for whom Confucianism had little to offer. Taoism did not exist as a formally-organized religious system, and like Buddhism was officially frowned on, though its myths were known from Chinese books and it was influential in so far as it was mediated through the works of the Sung Confucian commentators. The ruling dynasty had deliberately



developed a Confucian system of government with elaborate attention to ritual propriety and manners, which in theory ensured both the continued blessing of heaven and the political stability of the state.

*Kuunmong* reflects this background: it is a Korean story, but it is set in an idealized China. Korean ideals could not, in the seventeenth century, have been imagined in any other fictional setting. Paradoxically, the chinoiserie of *Kuunmong* is one of its most typically Korean characteristics.

The author was Kim Man-jung, commonly referred to by his pen name, Söp'o (Western Port). He was born in 1637, shortly after the death of his father, who committed suicide on the island of Kanghwa in the aftermath of the Manchu invasion of Korea in that year. The fact that he had never seen his father and was brought up with his only brother in a household of women deeply influenced Kim Man-jung for the whole of his life. His mother was a Yun of the Haep'yŏng clan, and a granddaughter of the royal princess Chŏnghye. Haep'yŏng Yuns were noted for strict adherence to Confucian propriety, especially their womenfolk. In spite of the poverty of the boy's early days, their social status was maintained and one of Kim Man-jung's nieces eventually married into the royal family and became Queen In'gyŏng.

His mother was devoted to poetry and learning. To ensure that her sons should learn the Chinese classics and poetry, she taught them herself, begging or borrowing books for them, and even making her own handwritten copies. The effect of this genteel female-dominated upbringing shows in Kim Man-jung's writings. His poems have a concentration on romance, and his novels a preoccupation with the life of women that accord perfectly with his reputation, which was that of a womanizer. Extreme filial piety and concern for aristocratic manners are characteristic themes of *Kuunmong* and typical of the impression that he made on his contemporaries.

At the age of 28 he was placed at the top of the list in the national civil service

examination, which was the only gateway to a political career, and began to climb through the ranks of officialdom. It was a time when Korea should have been bending her energies to the reconstruction of the country after the destruction caused by the Japanese invasion in the last decade of the sixteenth century and the Manchu invasions at the time of Kim Man-jung's birth, but the aristocrats of the Korean court spent their efforts in jostling for power. They formed themselves into parties and then redivided themselves. Public life was a constant warfare of accusations and memorials to the throne. The questions at issue were often purely ceremonial; yet the fate of the losers was usually not only dismissal, but also exile to the remote countryside.

In 1671, Kim Man-jung was appointed a royal agent to travel in the provinces incognito and report to the king on the doings of local governments. In the following year he was back at the capital in the central government, but in 1674, on the death of Queen Insŏn, the statesmen indulged in one of their fiercer quarrels. This time it was about the appropriate form of mourning for the Lady Chaŭi, who was the royal consort next in rank to the dead queen. Kim's party was disgraced and he was removed from office. In 1679 he was restored to office and, after serving with the Board of Rites, in 1683 he became Minister of the Board of Works, and then held office in the judiciary, but was impeached again by the other party and forced out of office. In 1685 he was back at work once more at a high post in the office which concerned itself with the royal archives and rescripts. Before long he was in trouble again because he protested against what he considered an injustice in the treatment of another scholar-official. This time he was exiled to Sŏnch'ŏn, in the northern province of P'yŏngan. A year later, in 1688, he was recalled and was at once embroiled in the troubles arising from the king's dismissal of his queen, Inhyŏn, of the Min family. She was sent out of the palace to live in the city, and a concubine named Chang was put in her place. King Sukchong had more trouble with the palace women than any other Korean king, and

this particular story has passed into Korean folklore. The women were not only jealous of each other, but were involved with their family connections in the court factions. Kim Man-jung was again in disfavor, and in 1689 he was exiled to the island of Namhae off the south coast, near Yosŭ. He died there in 1692, before his faction could regain influence in Seoul. His mother had died while he was in exile and he never recovered from the loss.

However, in 1698 he was posthumously reinstated, and a few years later when Queen Chang was dismissed on the downfall of her party, he was officially given the honorific title of Munhyo—a name whose meaning honors his filial piety and his literary skill.

As with most personalities of the period, it is difficult to unravel from the records any reliable picture of his character. He is either praised or blamed, according to the political affiliations of the writer. However, it is clear that he was a man of unusually wide learning, interested in religion, music, mathematics, and astronomy as well as literature. His acquaintance with music is amply demonstrated by the subject matter of some of his poetry and also appears in the details of *Kuunmong*. His writings consist mostly of poetry and essays published, according to the custom of the time, in a collected edition after his death; and two novels: *Kuunmong* and *Sa-ssi namjŏng ki* (The Story of Lady Hsieh's Dismissal). The latter, much shorter and slighter than *Kuunmong*, was written about 1689 or later. It is a story about concubinage which, although it is set in Ming China, is only too clearly a satire about King Sukchong's home life.

The history of the text of *Kuunmong* is obscure. The tradition is consistent that Kim Man-jung wrote it to console his mother when he was first parted from her at the time of his exile to Sŏnch'ŏn. He was then about fifty years old. There is no more reason to doubt this tradition than there is to believe the more elaborate form of it that says the

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