



# SONGGANG KASA:

A SHIJO POET AT THE COURT OF KING SONJO

CHONG CH'OL

Translated by KEVIN O'ROURKE

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# A SHIJO POET AT THE COURT OF KING SONJO

A Shijo Poet at the Court of King Sonjo: The Pine River Songs is a translation of Songgang kasa, Chong Ch'ol's (1536-1593) famous collection of Korean songs. The translations are by Kevin O'Rourke, one of the foremost translators of Korean literature into English in the world today. Professor O'Rourke includes in the volume a biographical sketch of the Choson dynasty poet-official and a critical analysis of his work. These essays provide a fascinating background to the life and work of this enigmatic man.

Royal Inspector, governor of a province, personal secretary to the king, second prime minister, general of the army - these are some of the positions held by Chong Ch'ol during a career that was punctuated by periods of voluntary retirement, dismissal and exile. He was by nature a brilliant but rather stubborn man. Loved by his friends, hated by his enemies, his life was marked by continuous controversy. Korean commentators traditionally regard Chong Ch'ol as the greatest exponent of the essay-poem genre called kasa- his kasa were immensely popular in his own lifetime - and they consistently place him among the great shijo poets. Readers of A Shijo Poet at the Court of King Sonjo: The Pine River Songs will be struck by the literary quality of the shijo, which are without peer in the history of the genre, and by the urbanity and cultivation of the kasa poems. These poems come alive for the first time in English versions that stand on their own as English poems.

Kevin O'Rourke is professor of English at Kyunghee University in Seoul. An Irish priest (Columban Fathers), he has lived in Korea since 1964. The first foreigner to receive a PhD in Korean literature (Yonsei University 1982), he has published many translations of classical and contemporary texts and also many critical essays on

themes related to Korean literature. For many years Kevin O'Rourke's poetry column in the Korea Herald, A Poem for Breakfast, has provided expatriates with a real insight into the riches of Korean literature and culture.

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# CONTENTS

Chong Ch'ol: Biographical Sketch

Chong Ch'ol: Critical Essay

## Untitled Shijo

*People of Kangwon Province*

*I race through Kwanghwamun*

*On Pongnaesan where my true love lives*

*Stock from boiled bitter greens*

*When did Liu Ling live*

*Listen here*

*Whether I eat wheat bran or rice chaff*

*Ten years I followed you*

*If you truly hoped to achieve something*

*I say it once again*

*Human life lasts a hundred years*

*If I lifted my wings*

*I wish to dismember my body*

*I'll cut out my heart*

*The rise and fall of nations are myriad*

*When Shin Kunmang was a fifth rank official*

*When the South Pole Star*

*That zelkova planted on the terrace  
Crane, flying high  
When I strike the great string of the komun'go  
When my long feathers molt  
Now that I'm keeper of the state guesthouse  
Now that I'm keeper of the state guesthouse  
Now that I'm keeper of the state guesthouse  
When I think of King Chang Sha's tutor  
I'm aware that I'm not  
The tree is diseased  
Yesterday I heard that Master Song  
After a ten-year interval I see again  
What happens if you pull down  
Holding back a horse laugh  
No moaning, please  
We'll strain sour wine and drink  
A tall Shilla pagoda  
A sudden shower  
Where has the crane gone  
I'll wash and rewash  
Somewhere on Namsan Mountain  
My old loves are still my loves  
I'm fifty now, no longer young  
My carelessness  
Shall I put my worries aside  
Don't waken babies from sweet sleep*

*Forty thousand boxes of bright jewels*

*Somehow or other*

*As I move the goosefoot forward*

*The falling paulownia leaves*

*I've been gone such a very long time*

*Clouds shrouded*

*When our droopy-eared horse*

*Take all the misfortunes*

*Snow falling in the pine forest*

*A shadow is reflected in the water*

*The lad has gone to dig fernbrake*

*Were I brilliant*

*Butterflies hover in pairs where flowers blossom thick*

*Pearly raindrops on green hills*

*Sleep bound birds fly home*

*The evening sun slants low*

*Two stone Buddhas, naked and fasting*

*Husband dead*

*Where is that boat going*

*Why does that pine tree stand*

*White gull*

*When did the leaves come out*

*Genuine jade, they said*

*Fishermen of the Chu River*

*I promised to return to rivers and lakes*

*When the paulownia leaves fell*



**Hunmin ka (Instructing the People)**

*Father's Honor; Mother's Affection*

*King and Subject*

*Respect between Brothers*

*Filial Piety*

*Grace between Spouses*

*Distinction between the Sexes*

*Educating Children*

*Etiquette among Villagers*

*Order between Old and Young*

*Trust between Friends*

*Family Support in Poverty and Calamity*

*Mutual Help in Marriage and Death*

*Farm the Land and Cultivate Silkworms Assiduously*

*Do Not Steal*

*No Gambling, No Litigation*

*Don't Let an Old timer Carry a Burden on the Road*

Sasol shijo or kasa

*Changjinju sa (An Inducement to Imbibe)*

Kasa

*Samiin kok (Love Song)*

*Sokmiin kok (Love Song Continued)*

*Kwandong pyolgok (Song of the East Coast)*

Bibliography

Endnote

## Chong Ch'ol: Biographical Sketch

Chong Ch'ol (1536-1593) was the youngest of six children in a not very prominent noble family that advanced itself through marriage into the royal family. Chong Ch'ol's elder sister was married to Injong; his second sister was married to Prince Kyerim. A regular visitor to the palace as a boy, he was particularly friendly with the future king Myongjong.

In 1545, Injong came to the throne. Dead within eight months, he was succeeded by his half-brother, Myongjong, who was just a boy at the time. Myongjong's accession was followed by the great Ulsa purge of 1545. Orchestrated by Yun Wonhyong, younger brother of Myongjong's mother, Queen Munjong, the Ulsa purge was an attempt to aggrandize power. Prince Kyerim, who belonged to Injong's side of the family, the opposition in the struggle for power, was promptly executed, and his wife's family, Chong Ch'ol's family, was swept into the ensuing vortex: Chong Ch'ol's father was sent into exile and his eldest brother died on his way into exile, a victim of the severe torture he had endured. Chong Ch'ol, only ten years old at the time, followed his father into exile, first to Kwanbuk, subsequently to Chongbyong, and finally to Yonil, where he remained until Myongjong lifted the decree of exile in 1551.

The Chong family now moved to Ch'angp'yong near Tamyang in Cholla Province. Chong Ch'ol lived in Ch'angp'yong until he passed the civil service examination. Kim Yunjae, his master, had retired from the bureaucracy at the time of the Ulsa purge. Returning to Tamyang, he had set up a sort of school-salon, which had become the cultural center of the area. Chong Ch'ol studied poetry under Im Okryong (1496-1568) and Ki Taesung (1527-1572); he also received instruction from Song Sun (1493-1583) and Kim Inhu (1519-1560), prominent literati of the period, and he was on friendly

terms with the hanshi poets Paek Kwanghun and Ch'oe Kyongch'ang, and such prominent men of letters as Yi T'oegye, Yi Yulgok, Song Hon and Song Ikp'il. Im Okryong, magistrate of Tamyang, became Chong Ch'ol's poetry teacher in 1558. An important hanshi poet (Korean poet writing Chinese verse), Im was skilled in Tang poetry, notably Li Bai style, at a time when the Song tradition was in the ascendancy. He was sixty-three years old; Chong Ch'ol was twenty-three. The master obviously had political ambitions that had not been realized. "Cold Moon on Autumn Mountain" expresses his feelings:

The autumn mountain throws up a cold moon;  
it hangs through the night on the paulownia in the yard.  
I've waited long for the noble phoenix;  
it will hardly come in my lifetime now

Chong Ch'ol's reply is filled with a graciousness surprising in such a young man:

The master's poems have the phoenix heart;  
the moon hangs in the paulownia branches.  
White hair fills the autumn moon;  
the worn face is that of a hero.

In 1561, Chong Ch'ol passed the civil service examination at the chinsa level, the equivalent of a modern undergraduate degree. In 1562, he took first place in the shimungwa (Chinese classics examination) and began his public career as an arbitrator in the Office of the Inspector General. His childhood friend, Myongjong, welcomed him to court. Indeed Myongjong saw to it personally that he got the position

in the office of the Inspector General. This should have been a happy period for the young bureaucrat, but unfortunately, Myongjong's cousin, Prince Kyongyang, in a ploy to get control of his wife's family property, murdered his wife's brother. Myongjong suggested lenience, but Chong Ch'ol insisted on the rigor of the law. Father and son were executed. Chong Ch'ol's relationship with the king never recovered. While Myongjong remained king, advancement for Chong Ch'ol in the bureaucracy was effectively blocked; he circled in a series of low-level posts, an easy target for his enemies.

Sonjo's accession to the throne in 1567 marked a new beginning for Ch'ong Chol's official career. Intent on bringing into the government all the young men of talent he could muster, Sonjo granted his special favor to Chong Ch'ol and to Yi Yulgok (1536-1584), who was one of Korea's greatest Confucian scholars.

The next few years were very active in the young official's life.

He appears to have been very outspoken in court, unwavering in his support of righteousness. In 1570, his father died, and mourning etiquette demanded that he withdraw from court activities. Two years of formal graveside mourning ensued before he returned to the bureaucracy. In 1573, his mother died, entailing a further two years of formal mourning. He returned to court in 1575.

Meanwhile, the great Easterner-Westerner factional battles had begun. Ch'ong Ch'ol's political fortunes ebbed and flowed with the oscillations of the battle between the rival groups. Initially, Kim Hyowon (1532-1590) and Shim Uigyom (1535-1587) were at the center of the controversy, but eventually they both faded into obscurity. The row began in 1575 over the appointment of the secretary in the Ministry of Appointments. This was not a ranking post, but it was a position that wielded significant power. The incumbent (Kim Hyowon) had the right to nominate his successor. Shim Uigyom, however, had opposed Kim's appointment to the post, so

Kim now opposed the appointment of Shim's brother as his successor. The sarim (Confucian scholars) in the government took sides. Kim lived in east Seoul; his supporters were known as the Easterners (Tongin). Shim lived in west Seoul; his supporters were called the Westerners (Soin). The Easterners were radical reformers; the Westerners were doves. The Easterners divided into Southerners (Namin) and Northerners (Pugin); the Westerners divided into Noron and Soron. The Easterners followed the teachings of Yi T'oegye, and the Westerners followed the teachings of Yi Yulgok.

There had been a rebellion in Hwanghae Province. Kim Hyowon's group sought to impeach Pak Sun (1523-1589) for his handling of the affair. Chong Ch'ol, a mere four months back in court at the time, vehemently opposed the move and tried to get Yulgok to restrain Kim Hyowon's Easterners. Disappointed with Yulgok's efforts and knowing that Sonjo was not going to do anything about the situation, he retired to the country despite Sonjo's efforts to dissuade him. He spent the next three years in the country, concentrating on what a yangban (nobleman) considered the finer things in life: study, poetry composition, music and wine. It was probably during this period that he wrote the kasa "Songsan pyolgok", which weighs the advantages of a life in harmony with nature against the glories to be attained in public life. It would seem certain that he still entertained political ambitions.

Factional rivalry ultimately was about power; Chong Ch'ol was at the heart of the battle.

In 1578, Chong Ch'ol returned to the court. During the next year he held ten different posts, testimony to the insecurity of his position. Yulgok, also fresh out of retirement, was anxious for peace between the rival factions. However, because he felt he had failed earlier in the role of peacemaker, he decided to take himself out of the equation and to cede responsibility to Chong Ch'ol. Instead of appeasement, however, factional

rivalry gained in intensity.

Battle lines were drawn again when Yi Su, county chief of Chindo Island, was accused of giving a bribe of rice to the Yun brothers, who were ranking members of the Westerner faction. The charge was disputed, but the Easterners made a big issue out of it. Chong Ch'ol was censured for his support of the Yuns and he retired to Koyang, outside Seoul. In a memorial to the throne, Yulgok vouched for Chong Ch'ol's integrity and thus became a target himself for Easterner attack. The Easterners, now firmly in power, continued to vilify the Westerners. Chong Ch'ol returned to Ch'angp'yong.

In 1580, Chong Ch'ol was appointed Governor of Kangwon Province. He had refused a number of appointments offered after the Yi Su bribery scandal, but the governorship was an appointment he felt he had to accept for reasons of family prestige. "Kwandong pyolgok", the "Hunmin ka" shijo series and a large number of hanshi were written at this time.

In 1581, Chong Ch'ol was appointed Director of the National Academy. Denounced for his uncompromising attitude, he returned to Ch'angp'yong. In 1582, he became First Royal Secretary and Second Minister of Rites. He was appointed Minister of Rites in 1583, and Inspector General in 1584. These were splendid years for Chong Ch'ol. Despite constant vilification by the Easterners, he managed to retain a special place in the affections of Sonjo and to advance his official career continuously. In 1585, however, criticism of his drinking habits forced him to retire to the country again. The next four years marked a severe downturn in his political fortunes. They were years of great personal trial, his longest period out of office. Friends interceded on his behalf. So Ik (1542-1587) and Cho Hon (1544-1592) both sent memorials to the king pleading Chong Ch'ol's cause, but such was the power of the Easterners in the court that Sonjo did not give Chong Ch'ol's friends a hearing. Eventually there was no one left to plead

for him. Beset by feelings of rejection and political alienation, he wrote the two famous "love of the king" *kasa*, "Samiin kok" and "Sokmiin kok." The official literary view is that these two masterpieces show the poet-official transcending his personal problems in his literary works. This seems an oversimplification of a complex emotional situation.

Chong Yorip's attempt to take power (The Kich'uk Affair) in 1589 provided the occasion for Chong Ch'ol's return to public office. Yi Yulgok had introduced Chong Yorip, a Westerner and a young man of exceptional promise, to the court. However, after Yulgok's death, Chong Yorip changed allegiance to the Easterner side when he saw that power rested firmly in the hands of the Easterner group and proceeded to excoriate his old teacher, Yulgok, an offence that his former Westerner colleagues were not going to forgive readily. The young man's deportment incurred the king's displeasure and he was sent to the country where the seeds of his rebellion were supposedly planted. In the event, there is some doubt as to whether there was a rebellion at all. The Easterners felt that Chong Ch'ol fabricated the entire affair. At any rate, Chong Ch'ol, who was living at the time in Koyang, outside Seoul, rushed to the king with a plan to deal with the enemies of the state. Sonjo, greatly impressed, restored his old friend to high office. In 1589, he appointed him Minister of the Right, and in 1590, Minister of the Left, both appointments of prime minister rank.

Chong Ch'ol's promotion in the government proved a mixed blessing. Against a background of increasing rancor and viciousness among the factions, he used his political position in prosecuting the case against the rebels to destroy some of the leading Easterners. Yi Pal (1544-1589), a close friend of Chong Yorip and a lifelong enemy of Chong Ch'ol, was cruelly tortured. He paid the ultimate price along with his aged mother and eight year old son. The Yi Pal - Chong Ch'ol enmity story went back to when they were both young men. Chong Ch'ol, an onlooker at a *paduk* game, offered



some unsolicited and unwelcome advice, to which Yi Pal retorted, "How dare the son of a traitor give advice here!" Then he crowned the insult with a yank on Chong Ch'ol's beard! Petty wrangling indeed, but seemingly time had not assuaged the affront. At least, the Easterners felt that Chong Ch'ol was now taking his revenge. Ch'oe Yonggyong (1529-1590), another close friend of Yi Pal, was also implicated in the Chong Yorip plot. He was an upright man who refused office repeatedly because of his horror of factional politics. He died under interrogation. Chong Ch'ol made many enemies in his ruthless prosecution of the crown's case.

In 1591, Chong Ch'ol made another political mistake when he proposed Kwanghaegun as Crown Prince, thus incurring the wrath of the king who favored Prince Shinsong. Subsequently, he was accused of plotting against Prince Shinsong and the prince's mother, a favorite of Sonjo. Censured by the Chief State Councilor, Yi Sanhae, leader of the Easterners, he was dismissed from his post and sent into exile. The extraordinary thing about this affair was that Kwanghaegun was the candidate of the Easterners. Chong Ch'ol would not have supported him unless he thought it was in the national interest. Presumably Yi Sanhae duped him into thinking this and then proceeded to censor him. The affair can be seen as one chapter in the book of Easterner revenge. For Chong Ch'ol, it was the beginning of another difficult, soul-searching period, but by this time he had become fatalistic in his attitude.

The Hideyoshi Wars broke out in 1592, and the king fled to P'yongyang. Chong Ch'ol was recalled from exile, ostensibly in consideration of his record of loyalty, but in reality because he was sorely needed by the king. He went directly to P'yongyang in order to escort the king to Uiju. Afterwards he came south to involve himself in military affairs with a view to retaking Seoul. Subsequently he went to Ming China as a member of the war delegation. The court returned to Seoul in 1593.

In 1594, Chong Ch'ol was censured once again by the Easterners, who maintained

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