

KIM TONGNI'S "THE ROCK"

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CULTURAL MATRIX TO THE INTERPRETATION OF LITERATURE

GRADE LEVEL: High School

SUBJECT: Literature

TIME REQUIRED: Two to three class periods

OBJECTIVES:

Students will:

1. Know some of the attributes of the three religions of Korea: Shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism.
2. Understand the importance of the cultural matrix of literature, the ways in which a society's culture can be seen in literature and how a reader's culture influences interpretation of literature.
3. Be able to explicate a work in light of knowledge of aspects of its cultural matrix, and a conscious evaluation of how individual prejudices, preconceived ideas and attitudes influence interpreting a text.

MATERIALS REQUIRED (all attached)

- Worksheet 1: Initial Responses to Kim Tongni's "The Rock"
- Worksheet 2: Rereading Kim Tongni's "The Rock"
- Worksheet 3: Final Assessment and Evaluation: Responding to what you have learned
- Background Paper: Cultural Considerations Important to Understanding Kim Tongni's "The Rock"
- Short Story: "The Rock" by Kim Tongni

BACKGROUND:

The literary criticism movement known as the New Formalism rejects the idea of looking outside the text itself, in the process of interpretation or critical assessment. If the cultural background of the reader and writer are the same, or if the reader has an adequate understanding of the cultural matrix of the text, the New Formalist approach might be viable. However, without at least a general understanding of the cultural matrix of a work, the New Formalist approach is questionable. In fact, much, if not most, of the meaning of the text is beyond the apprehension of the reader who is unaware of the text's cultural matrix.

PROCEDURES:

1. Begin by informing students that they will be reading a Korean short story, Kim Tongni's "The Rock." Distribute to students worksheet1: Initial Response to Kim Tongni's "The Rock."
2. As students read, ask that they keep a list of unfamiliar words they encounter and make notes in the margin of the text. These notes are to include aspects of the story they find:
a) familiar, b) strange, c) confusing, or d) which explain other parts of the story. Note:

Aside from these instructions, students are to be given no additional introduction beyond the fact that the story is Korean. This is to prevent their being misled by the footnote references to the Chinese Confucian classics.

3. After reading the story, instruct students to individually answer the questions on Worksheet 1. (The above can be assigned for homework.)
4. Upon completion, break students into small groups of 3 to 5. Have students discuss unclear words and define them, and compare answers to the questions. Emphasize that groups should try and reach consensus on their answers. Note: These instructions are also explained on the worksheet.
5. Students should gather again the next day to discuss their explications.
6. When the worksheet is completed, give students the Background Paper: Cultural Considerations Important to Understanding Kim Tongi's "The Rock" and Worksheet 2: Rereading Kim Tongni's "The Rock." Students should follow the steps on the worksheet.
7. After completing their response to the second reading, students will gather in small groups again to consider their understanding of the story as a result of reading it in light of the information on the cultural matrix provided by the background paper.
8. Conclude the lesson with a large group discussion that considers the findings of each group, and the importance of the cultural matrix in literary analysis.
9. Distribute as homework Worksheet 3.

EVALUATION:

Worksheet 3: Assessment and Evaluation: Responding to What You Have Learned gives instructions for the final assessment and evaluation of the lesson based on Kim Tongi's "The Rock"

WORKSHEET 1: INITIAL RESPONSE TO KIM TONGNI'S "THE ROCK"

- I. Read the Korean short story "The Rock" by Kim Tongni. Read carefully and closely, utilizing all you know about close reading. As you read, keep a list of words unfamiliar to you. Make notes in the margin of things you find:
 - familiar,
 - strange,
 - confusing, or
 - explain other parts of the story.

- II. When you have completed a careful and close reading of the story—this may well include having looked up words and rereading the story a second or third time—answer the following questions:
 1. Who are the characters in the story? What are the relationships among the characters? Include the social or class relationships.
 2. What is the setting (be as specific as possible about time and place)?
 3. Are there aspects of the story with which you identify?
 4. What, in the story, confuses you?
 5. What influences are at work on the characters?
 6. What are the conflicts in the story?
 7. What is the theme of the story?

- III. Move into your assigned small group. In the group:
 - a. gain clarity on the unfamiliar words. Make a combined list for your group; include definitions, and
 - b. compare answers to the questions. Revise your answers as needed. Try to reach consensus on answers.

- IV. Write a well-supported, two page or three page explication of "The Rock" using the insights from your own work and that of your group members. This is your homework assignment. Your explication will be distributed to your group members by copying or electronically.

- V. In your small groups again, compare your explications.

WORKSHEET 2: REREADING KIM TONGNI'S "THE ROCK"

- I. Read the Background Paper: Cultural Considerations Important For Understanding Kim Tongni's 'The Rock.' Make notes in the margins as you read.
- II. Reread "The Rock." Using ink of another color, make notes in the margin in light of your reading of the background material (first see instruction sheet for items to be noted).
- III. Using the first instruction sheet, answer the same questions again in light of what you have learned reading the background material and rereading "The Rock."
- IV. In your small group, compare your answers and revise as needed.
- V. For homework, rewrite the paper you wrote for Worksheet 1.
- VI. Again, in your small groups, discuss each student's paper. Keep careful notes.

WORKSHEET 3:
FINAL ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION:
RESPONDING TO WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

- I. Drawing upon all you have learned in your work with Kim Tongni's "The Rock" and the material related to it, write a 3 to 5 page paper in which you:
 - a. Explicate the story. You may explicate the entire story or just the ending which begins with the paragraph "When she got to the rock it was sunset..."
 - b. Discuss how your initial understanding of the story was influenced by your own culture, prejudices and background, and how these changed the meaning of the story. Use specific examples and support from the story.

- II. Turn in the results of your work with Worksheets 1 & 2 and a rough draft of the paper in response to the two items above (your first and final revision). Place them in the order listed (i.e., final paper on top, first work on bottom).

- III. Extra Credit: A German school of literary criticism called Reader Response has spread throughout the western world in the last few decades. Reader Response holds that the meaning of a literary text is in the response of a reader to it. In a well-developed and supported paragraph, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to literature in light of your experience with Kim Tongni's "The Rock."

BACKGROUND PAPER: CULTURAL CONSIDERATION IMPORTANT FOR UNDERSTANDING KIM TONGNI'S "THE ROCK"

Setting: Kim Tongni's short story "The Rock" is set in a rural village in Korea in the period before the 1950 Korean civil war. During this time, Korea was essentially a rural, agricultural country. Her people lived in small, isolated farming villages. Unlike the present-day urban and industrial Korea, the Korea of this period was sharply divided into the yangban, or aristocratic upper-class, and the poor farmers, most of whom were dependent upon working the lands owned by the yangban.

Religion: Shamanism, Korea's oldest and indigenous religion, is a form of spirit or nature worship, which has its origin in Central Asian Altaic culture. Viewed by many modern Koreans as superstition, it is, nonetheless, still a powerful force among Koreans, even for those who, on the surface, dismiss it. Shamanism is based upon the belief that not only human beings, but also animate objects (animals), inanimate objects (rocks, streams, mountains, etc.) and natural forces (winds, storms, etc) have spirits. These spirits are both good and evil. The shaman - *mudang* in Korean - is an intermediary between individuals and the spirits. Those who believe in and practice shamanism believe good spirits may bring good luck, cure sickness, avert bad luck and assure safe passage from this world to the next. At the same time, evil spirits may do or cause the opposite. While appeals may be made to a mudang, to serve as an intermediary between a person and a particular spirit, individuals also make appeals to the spirits. Shamanistic beliefs and practices were more common in the isolated rural villages of pre-1950 Korea than today, but shamanism—often as elements in Buddhism, Confucianism and, some maintain, in Christianity—is still very much a part of Korean life.

While shamanism underlies almost all Korean religions, the largest religious group in Korea today are Buddhists. This was not true during the time of "The Rock." Brought to Korea from China almost 2500 years ago, Buddhism had a tremendous influence during the Three Kingdoms Period, (37 BC-668 AD), and became the state religion during the Unified Silla and Parhae Period (668-995 AD). As a state religion, Buddhism became an increasingly powerful force in Korea. With the support of the Silla kings, the monks and monasteries became very powerful politically and amassed tremendous wealth. In the Koryŏ Period (918-1392), royal patronage produced many Buddhist temples and Buddhist-inspired art flourished. It was during this period, with the building of many temples, that the Jewels of Buddha became important. Each temple's central Buddha figure contains certain designated objects. Among these are a copy of the sutra (or Buddhist scripture), five grains—oats, wheat, barley, millet and, of course, rice—and a relic of a saint. The relic is often what is known as Jewels of Buddha. These are pearl-like or crystal-like gems found after the cremation of a saintly Buddhist monk, frequently the founder of the particular monastery-temple.

In 1392, General Yi Song-gye staged a revolt against the Koryŏ kingdom and had himself proclaimed king, thus, establishing the Yi Dynasty or Chosŏn kingdom, which lasted until it was defeated by the Japanese in 1910. When the new Chosŏn Kingdom was established in 1392, one of the king's first policies was to remove all influence of Buddhism and encouraged Confucianism instead. All attempts to reestablish Buddhism were met with strong opposition by the kings. Denied the favoritism, support and protection of the state, many Buddhist temples

were destroyed, their wealth taken and monks killed.

Replacing Buddhism was Neo-Confucianism. More a set of teachings setting forth the guiding principles for state government and moral decorum than a religion, Confucianism has been the strongest influence in Korea to this day. This decision had a tremendous impact, especially on Buddhism, yet Confucianism was not new to Korea. The Three Kingdoms—Kogury , Paekche and Silla—all left records indicating Confucian ideas and teachings that had influenced them. In fact, all three had private Confucian academies. When the Japanese defeated the Chos ōn Kingdom in 1910 and established a colonial government in Korea, they attempted to introduce Japanese Buddhism into Korea. This met strong resistance from the Koreans and, in fact, sparked a revival of Korean Buddhism. Nonetheless, Buddhism remained eclipsed until recently.

In recent years, when Korea has had tremendous economic growth, Buddhism has enjoyed a revival. As more and more young people discover the emptiness of shallow materialism, many have become monks and nuns, seeking for meanings in life. In short, while Buddhism was not the strong force it had been before the Chos ōn kingdom, it was not unknown by the villagers in “The Rock” and some may have practiced Buddhism.

Unlike the West, East Asian peoples frequently practice one or more religions. Thus, the fact that many Confucian believers were Buddhist—secret or otherwise—should come as no surprise. Further, the problem of being both Buddhist and Confucian does not exist because, basically, Confucianism is not a religion. It is a philosophical system of morals and tenets involving human relationships. Later Neo-Confucian thinkers did institute certain supernatural elements, but these were closely related to shamanism and were the means of instructing simple and uneducated people in Confucian doctrine. These supernatural elements were primarily concerned with honoring one’s ancestors back five generations. This is, it should be noted, frequently called “ancestor worship” by westerners.

When Korea set out to be a model Confucian state, it proved itself more Confucian than Confucius’ own China. In fact, Korea became known as the most Confucian state in the world, a title it maintains to this day. During the period of “The Rock,” all human relationships were based upon the Confucian ideal; Confucianism has a major influence on the story although it might be argued that the most powerful influence is shamanism.

A major aspect of Confucianism is its insistence upon reward for merit. This found expression in China and Korea in the civil service examination. Appointment to any government post depended upon the score achieved on the *kwago* or civil service examination. Unlike China, where anyone could take the examination and be granted a post, in Korea it was open only to the yangban class. As a practical matter, it should be pointed out that the examination was extremely difficult, and preparation for it involved years of study of the Chinese Confucian classics. Even the Korean scholars who wrote and commented on the classics, wrote in Chinese. Thus, not only did a student have to learn the very complicated Chinese writing system, but also the Chinese language, a language vastly different from Korean. As a practical matter, limiting the examination to the yangban, probably denied few people the opportunity to pass the examination because a commoner would not have had the money or time to prepare for *kwago*.

From the beginning, it needs to be pointed out that Confucianism relegates women to a subservient role. They simply are not important in the overall scheme of things. This needs to be clearly understood in reading “The Rock.”

Confucianism, then, essentially regulates the life and morals of men. It involves women only indirectly (i.e., how a wife is expected to behave and what she is expected to do). The regulation of life and morals rests upon a hierarchy of relationships, all deriving from the prime relationship, that of king and subject. All relationships involved obligations and responsibilities, which provided benefits and privileges.

For example, the subject is obligated to obey the king, to provide for and serve him. In turn, the king is to provide good and fair government, protect and defend the people. Should, however, the king fail in his obligation and responsibility to the people, they are released from their obligation to him and have an obligation and responsibility to call the king to account and depose him if he does not change. This Confucian understanding of government underlies the protests by university students, which is an integral part of modern Korean life.

Of the Confucian relationships, the most important to “The Rock” are of filial piety, the relationship between parents and sons and between husband and wife. Filial piety meant faithfulness to the family including the ancestors. For a woman, loyalty to her husband extended beyond the grave and, therefore, a widow, regardless of age, was not to remarry. The husband’s obligation did not require faithfulness to his wife, but he would have to provide for her and his family. A woman might not divorce her husband, but a husband could “kick out” his wife for a number of reasons. These included failure to produce a son, gossiping, thievery, an incurable disease, infidelity, etc. Women, who were “kicked out” by their husbands, were utterly rejected by others. They became “nonpersons.” Such a woman was not free to return to her family because when she married, her name was stricken from her birth family’s register (i.e., she was no longer a member of her birth family). A woman “kicked out” could, if she were well and pretty, become a prostitute. If not, she became a beggar. In short, to be kicked out meant a slow death or a fast one, but was, essentially, a death sentence. Nonetheless, it is important to realize that under the Confucian system, a woman with an incurable disease was expected to be “kicked out” and failure on the part of the husband to do so, was a failure in his obligations and responsibilities to his family and community. (Prepared by Karin Kopciak)

THE ROCK¹

Kim Tongni

The cry of the wild goose is in the northern sky. Autumn is coming. The firefly is no longer on the wing, not even at night, and the Milky Way is gradually drifting near the dome of the sky. But for some people, the cry of the wild goose is an unwelcome sound. For people who have no homes, and who are used to falling down and spending the night wherever it happens to find them.

A group of cripples, beggars and lepers has gathered beneath a railway bridge a little way from town. The coming of autumn is a worry for all of them—the man lying with his feet wrapped in coarse straw matting, the man lying with his body buried in sand, and the man sitting with a sack thrown around his shoulders.

“The nights have got really chilly,” an old cripple says, and immediately a man with a twisted arm takes him up on it.

“Chilly, it is! My limbs are all caught up in a ball!”

On one side, a tremendous racket accompanies the teaching of one of those songs beggars use on market day.

I may look like a beggar, but I'm the son of a minister of state.

I could be governor of a province, yet here I am singing for pennies.

When they get about this far in the song, the “teacher” raises his hand, stops the performance, and proceeds to deliver a lecture.

“Body movement is everything. Whether you are wriggling your backside, or swinging your head, or dribbling excited spits as you swagger with the music, it's all got to match the rhythm.”

The lecture ends and straightaway two beggar kids sing out lustily:

Who is your teacher? He's better than me.

*Has he read the **Book of Songs** and the **Book of History**?²*

His style is cultivated.

*Has he read the **Analects** and **Mencius**?³ Every verse is really fine.*

This time everything is fine—head and arm action, the swinging of the hips.

“Ah, ha,” they cry and laugh in unison. Everyone seems pleased. A train goes by and immediately the group of lepers gathered in the lower corner has a new subject for discussion.

“Do you hear word of your son often, missus?”

The woman just shakes her head. She is the most recent arrival to the group. Silence for a while and a black gloom wraps them round.

¹ Kim Tongni. *The Rock: Modern Korean Literature: An Anthology*. Peter H. Lee, ed. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.

² *Book of Songs*: China's oldest anthology of poetry containing three hundred and five poems; one of the Confucian classics. *Book of History (Book of Documents)*: a collection of didactic speeches, exhortations, and debates attributed to rulers and ministers of ancient China from the legendary Emperor Yao to the return of the defeated army of the Ch'in in 626 B.C.

³ *Analects*: a record of conversations between Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and his disciples as recorded by the latter. *Mencius*: a record of Mencius's (372-289 B.C.) opinions expressed in the form of interviews and conversations.

“They say the Japs are going to kill off everyone suffering from paralysis.”

“They’re not going to kill people who’ve done no wrong.”

It was the most recent arrival who comments—the woman who had come from the village.

“Ah, the weather’s got right cold now.”

The young man beside her mutters again, and immediately thoughts of her son run through the village woman’s head. Up till last year she, too, had had a husband and a son.

Her son’s name was Suri. Although he still hadn’t got married by the time he was nearly thirty, he had saved up well over a hundred won and was an object of envy among his own friends. They say that he always maintained that he would get married and set up his own place when he had saved up two hundred won. Because of this he never allowed himself the drink he always felt like having; in winter he got by without wearing heavy woolen socks. In all probability, he would have got himself a wife and lived out a quiet, respectable life, had not the dreaded hand of disease reached out to his mother.

In one single night’s drinking and gambling, Suri threw away the twenty odd won that still remained of his savings, money not yet spent on medicine for his mother, and from that day on he was like a man deranged. He would wander around the streets with two raging, bloodshot eyes, cursing and fighting with the villagers for no reason, and he was liable at any moment to set fire to his mother’s hut. Then in the middle of all this, quite without warning, he just took off somewhere. That was this year, early in spring, when the buds were about to come out in the trees.

As for the old man, after he lost his son, he became more coarse and violent with every passing day. He came home drunk every night and beat his wife. Quite often he would forget to get food for her for several days at a time, and he was forever at her to die.

“Why can’t you just die?” ;

“A”

“I still have the strength left to bury you snug.”

His wife cried bitterly every time she heard him say this. He hadn’t always been this way. Up to a few months ago he would click his tongue in compassion when he offered her rice, wine, and scraps of meat he had managed to find.

“Eat that up and it’ll make you better.”

This was after they had been thrown out of servants’ quarters. He built a hut behind the village and installed his wife there, while he himself wandered around from house to house working as a day laborer and running errands for a tavern.

By early in the summer this year, the barley had almost ripened. Ugly rumors—of a wolf that carried off a child in a faraway village, of a leper in a barley field—began to spread through the village. The old man, well drunk, came to his wife’s hut. Under his shirt, wrapped in newspaper, he had a lump of rice-cake mixed with arsenic. It was evening. His wife had the straw mat that shaded the door pulled aside and was busy scraping bean paste stew from the sides of the pot with the stump of a spoon. As soon as she saw the old man she waved her hand and shook off the flies that were crawling on her sad face. She tried to force a smile.

The old man, tense with excitement, fingered the lump of rice-cake under his shirt. Even after going inside the hut he continued for some time to gaze silently at his wife, his eyes unnaturally bright with alcohol. He felt once again under his shirt.

When she first got the rice-cake she looked up gratefully at the old man. But she knew the color of arsenic, and when she discovered the dark-red substance mixed in the rice-cake she glared at the old man for a long moment, and her look was frightening.

The cry of the cuckoo came from a distant mountain ridge. At last, the woman understood everything and bent her head. Tears rolled down her black, blotchy, corpse-like face.

The old man, as if embarrassed, ignored her. He spat and got up.

"Die, can't you? You're only trouble."

He spat once again to hide his discomfort.

The next day the villagers whispered this story. For awhile after her husband had gone off, the woman continued to cry by herself. In the end she ate the rice-cake, but death was not so easy to come by. Eventually, she just had to get out; they say she left, leaving the rice-cake thrown up all over the hut.

The woman wandered from village to village, wherever her strength would carry her. It wasn't that begging was easier in the villages than in the marketplace, but that she thought she might happen to meet her beloved son. A summer of begging and sleeping out of doors went by in vain. In fact the idea that she might meet her son before autumn was completely hopeless. It was about this time, too, that she began to be lonely for the old man.

"I still have the strength left to bury you snug."

She thought of how the old man used to force death on her until she couldn't bear it, and yet she felt that if she were to meet him now, he'd build her some sort of hut for the winter.

One day, in desperation, the woman built a little hut on a hillock with her own hands. "Hut" is an exaggeration; it was nothing but sand and mud thrown on a three pole frame, with a coarse straw mat spread over it about enough, at best, to keep off the frost. It wasn't much, but she had had to wrestle with it for many days. Dirt lodged in her mouth, her nose, her eyes, everywhere there was an opening. Her skin couldn't be any more chapped; her bones were numb with pain.

She was ill for two days, just lying there, not knowing where she was. On the third day the owner of the field came. He cursed at her for some time and then roared.

"You've got today to pull your hut down, and if you don't I'll set fire to it and burn it down."

He then left. Now it wasn't only that she hadn't the strength to build, but there just wasn't another suitable place in the area. So she couldn't take the hut down, not even to save it from the flames. And in actual fact she didn't want to leave the vicinity of the railway bridge. This was because of a huge rock at the entrance to the village, right on the way from the railway bridge to the market. The rock had many names—the "Rock of Blessings," the "Wishing Rock," the "Tiger Rock." These were only a few of its names. There was a continuous stream of young women who came, throughout the four seasons, to implore these blessing. They would sit on the rock all day long, rubbing it with a stone about the size of one's fist, and if the stone stuck to the rock it meant that the wish would be granted. There were even women who used to wrap up some rice and spend day after day rubbing the Rock of Blessings.

It wasn't only the women coming to implore blessings who dearly prized the rock. The local children used to play horse there and the old people used to view the fields from there, with their back resting against the rock. All the village people set great value on the rock.

Suri's mother was no exception; the rock was important to her. She believed that by rubbing the rock she would get her wish. As she rubbed, she called Suri's name while managing to avoid being seen by the villagers.

About two weeks after she began rubbing the rock, it came about, whether by chance or as an answer to her prayer, that she met the son whom day and night she had so longed to see. It was in the morning when the marketplace was jammed with traders. Suddenly, there was

someone pulling her sleeve as, gourd in hand, she was about to go into an eatery. She knew instinctively that it was Suri. She lifted her head, and she saw her son's face. For a brief moment the mother's long, white bucktooth was visible.

The son grasped his mother's hands and they began walking. There was an old ruined castle a little way from the market and beside it a lane that had been there since olden times. The lane was covered with autumn grass so that not even the shadow of a passerby could be seen.

The two of them sat on the grassy lane holding each other and calling each other's name.

"Mother."

"Suri."

Streams of tears flowed from their eyes.

"Mother, where . . . how have you been? How have you been able to live? . . . Mother!"

The mother, her long bucktooth bared, could only cry. Even if flesh and blood itself were rotting, her tears were as plentiful as ever.

"Mother, how I've searched for you! How ..."

Suri buried his head in his mother's lap and wept. A red dragonfly lit on the flower of a buckwheat stalk in the middle of the wild grass. A snake on the hill opposite, its back a maze of designs, disappeared through a crack in the rock.

"I'll go try and raise some money quickly, Mother. You must come live with me. And please, please, you mustn't die till I come with the money."

He was stroking his mother's shoulders and arms as he made this request. Tears of dejection streamed down from his red eyes.

They went back to the marketplace. Suri pressed four yang into his mother's hand and, promising to come back in four days, he left her at the rice cake stall. The sun was already high in the sky. The marketplace was filled with the shouts of people coming and going. People driving cattle; people carrying wood; women standing there with babies on their backs and small wooden barrels balanced on their heads (what did they contain?); youths flying around on bicycles; a Jap upstart sitting in a swaying rickshaw—all laughing and chattering, or at each other's throats fighting, or crying as they ate... It was like the buzzing of swarming bees, and Suri, head bent, wandered vacantly in the middle of it all.

"The railway bridge beyond the Rock of Blessings."

He muttered this a few times as he wandered around the market, an empty A-frame pack slung on his back. It was a long time since he had been to the market, and he really wished he could go away with news of his father. But no one could give him clear information. Some said that the old man was half paralyzed and wandering in the streets, others said he had asthma, could hardly breathe, and was running errands for some inn in town. There was nothing comforting in the news he got.

From the time Suri's mother had succeeded in meeting her son, her thoughts more than ever centered on him. She roamed the market every day, craning her neck to spot him again. But the promised four days went by, then two weeks, then a month, and still he didn't appear.

With the passing of time her faith and trust became more and more bound up with the rock. It was as if she would always have the hope of meeting her son again so long as the rock stood on the ground, and perhaps even her own illness might somehow be completely cured.

"Come rain, come snow, just keep rubbing the Rock of Blessings."

Deep in the night, when everyone was asleep and she wouldn't be seen, she used to drag her sick, leaden body to the rock and caress the rock with her hand. But this time it wasn't as before.

The Rock of Blessings didn't so easily produce an answer to her prayers. She thought she was probably rubbing the rock in the dead of night and not using it properly.

Beginning the next day, she decided that insofar as she could, she would take advantage of moments when no one was looking, and would rub the rock in the daytime.

It's very difficult to avoid people's eyes in the daytime, however. One day as she was rubbing the rock, imploring it to grant her request to see her son, she was noticed by some of the villagers. Suddenly straw rope was wound around her. She fell bodily from the rock. Dragged along like a dog, her legs trussed up in the rope, her whole body burst into one bloody wound. She lost consciousness. When eventually she opened her eyes, barely conscious, a workman from the local village office was washing the rock with water. After that she never passed beside the rock without stopping dead in her tracks and staring at it fixedly for a moment. To anyone standing nearby it looked as if her feet had somehow stuck to the ground of their own accord. For her the rock represented something she longed for and missed indescribably, and at the same time something hateful and spiteful. She regarded all her happiness and misfortune as tied up with that rock.

On this day, too, she was on her way back from the market where she had been roaming all day long. It was evening. Mountain, stream, and village were all clothed in twilight. As always she had a gourd clasped to her breast as she passed the village. In the gourd she had a whole mess of rice, rice cake, taffy, overripe persimmon, buckwheat paste, jujubes, noodles, bean sprouts, cod heads, dried pollack tails, and the like, all in a lump. Her head had fallen far forward and she was pulling her legs heavily. Every now and again she would turn her head, stand for a moment, and then after a quick glance in the gourd force her steps forward again.

"Why didn't I press the point and ask just now?"

She muttered this to herself several times. "Just now" referred to when she was getting the bean paste at the bean paste stall and the old man beside her selling persimmons was saying to someone else:

"Did you know that Suri is getting out for good?"

"Didn't he get six months? Is he getting out already?"

She had heard secondhand stories like this only too often before. This time she had been too busy getting her bean paste to concentrate on what people beside her were saying. Besides, it seemed so unlikely that anyone would be talking about her son that the conversation only half-registered with her. But now as she was coming down the village road looking at the Rock of Blessings, what had been said in the market suddenly came into her mind. Now it seemed quite clear that those people had, in fact, used Suri's name.

"Ah, surely it was Suri they were talking about."

The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that they had been talking about him. It was as if she could still hear Suri's name in her ear. She stopped, stood, hesitated for a moment over whether she should go back to the market, and then continued on down toward the rock. Her whole body throbbed with pain; her legs felt heavy enough to fall off. Her head swam dizzily.

When she got to the rock it was after sunset, those first moments of evening when darkness begins to spread its wings in the corners of distant fields. As always, she stopped when she came face to face with the rock. She lifted her head and stared at it. Then, turning her head again, she looked in the direction of the hut. Then it happened. What she saw was not the tiny hut that she usually saw there; this time she saw flames leaping up into the sky. For a second she doubted her eyes. She looked again and still she saw flames. Behind closed eyes flames continued to roar.

Eyes closed—flames; eyes open—flames. Flames, flames, flames. She collapsed on the rock like a stick of wood.

She groped the rock with hands that were already without feeling. Then, embracing it, she rubbed her black, corpse-like face against it, seemingly content.

One cold tear rolled down the rock.

The following day the villagers gathered beside the rock. They spat as they spoke.

“The dirty thing would have to die there.”

“A leper dying with her arms around the Rock of Blessings.”

“Our precious rock.”

The tears of the woman on the rock had dried into crystals.