

## Sŏn Master Chaun

It was the 24th year of King Sŏnjo's reign. Admiral Yi Sun-sin arrived in Sunch'ŏn as the newly appointed Commander of the Left Chŏlla Fleet. Since his arrival, Admiral Yi had been extremely busy everyday training his navy soldiers.

One such day, a soldier rushed to him and reported urgently: "Admiral, a strange ship showed up on the shore." Admiral Yi then ordered his soldiers to pursue the unidentified ship.

The strange ship was getting away by sailing through the chasing boats of the Chosŏn navy and finally disappeared behind an island. But it showed up again the next day. Admiral Yi's soldiers tried to catch it to avenge their failure from the day before, but they failed once again.

Several days passed. One day, as Admiral Yi along with two soldiers sailed out to the east of Tolsan to have a break from his busy work, he caught a sight of that ship again. Luckily, this time he was able to approach it. On the ship were three young women in blue ramie clothes. Standing against the backdrop of the horizon, with their shadows reflected on the clear water, these women were as beautiful as three immortal fairies.

Without thinking, the admiral pressed for who they were. One of them then replied with poise and a gentle smile on her face, "How could I have a name as a mere drifter on the winds and waves? If you really want to know who we are, please visit us again without any company. After saying these words, she hurried away.

The next day, Admiral Yi rowed out on a boat by himself as he had been told to by the lady. When he got to the place, he saw them already waiting for him. With serious faces, they questioned him. "Sir, if hundreds of thousands of enemy soldiers invade our country one morning, do you have any plan to repel them?"

Admiral Yi was baffled momentarily at their daring question, but within a second, something came to his mind. So he said calmly and courteously, "It is a shame, but I have not yet found a way to stop such an invasion."

The ladies said again. "They will soon invade our country for sure, and it is our wish that you prepare a way to counter their attack," Upon listening to this, Admiral Yi respectfully entreated the three Sŏn masters to teach him a means to prevent the invasion for the future of the country.

On that same day, Admiral Yi received two volumes of military strategy books from the three masters: *Way of Non-self* and *Mind of Utter Devotion*. He studied them diligently from that day on and became greatly enlightened about many things. Since their meeting with Admiral Yi, the

masters made frequent nightly visits to him and taught him war tactics, shipbuilding, weather forecasting, maritime geography, etc.

When the admiral encountered the three masters for the first time, there were purple clouds over their heads. This is how the oldest among the three came to be called Master Chaun (Purple cloud).

In the summer of the following year, which was the 25<sup>th</sup> year of King Sŏnjo's reign, Hideyoshi indeed invaded Chosŏn. As the Chosŏn navy in the Pusan area failed to break the brunt of the enemy, Commander of the Eastern Kyŏngsang Fleet, Wŏn Kyun asked for reinforcements. Full of prowess, Admiral Yi and several officers under his leadership were ready to charge immediately. However, they were a little hesitant only because they were not quite familiar with the geography of the seas in the Pusan area.

It was then that Master Chaun suddenly appeared in a marine-colored navy uniform and pleaded with the commanders, while showing a nautical chart in her hand: "Please let this humble soldier lead this battle." Admiral Yi readily granted her wish, so their navy went into battle under her leadership. They won a great victory, burning so many enemy ships in five or six battles that they fought one after another non-stop. This began on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of May in the year Imjin when they destroyed 30 enemy boats in Okp'o until the 10<sup>th</sup> day of July. As a government dispatch reported the situation to the king in detail, Admiral Yi was promoted to Great Lord Chŏnghŏn.

However, Admiral Yi did not forget his indebtedness to Master Chaun, so he revealed his intention to report to the court that the victory was in fact due to her military merit. Upon hearing this, Master Chaun refuted his plan, insisting that "How can a lowly soldier enjoy the admiral's noble military distinction? Your decision is utterly unreasonable. If you cannot handle my feelings appropriately with such a report, this humble soldier wishes to withdraw completely from the war." Admiral Yi could not but accept her determination.

Later, three admirals, Yi Sun-sin, Wŏn Kyun, and Yi Ŏkki joined their forces and set up a tactic to retake Pusan, which served as the enemy's den at that time. They planned to mobilize all their soldiers and launch an all-out attack on the enemy in Sŏhop'o, Tadaep'o, and on Choryŏngdo. However, Master Chaun objected to their plan adamantly, "More than five hundred enemy boats concentrate in Pusan, and because the land is close, enemy soldiers will run away if they fall in crisis. Moreover, it will be difficult to lure the enemy to turn around and then destroy them. I think it will be more effective to observe the situation and try to induce the enemy three or four times." Master Chaun did not hesitate to counsel the admirals about their disadvantage.

However, for no apparent reason, Admiral Yi seemed to be reluctant to accept the master's proposal.

“As for this operation, the three admirals have agreed; therefore, they have already mobilized their forces. There is no way of demoralizing our troops now. But if this operation is truly disadvantageous to us, I will think about changing our tactics.”

After a long thought, Master Chaun finally withdrew her proposal by saying, “We are bound to fight a large-scale battle anyways, and I do not wish to break the spirit of the several commanders. I only wish you admirals a good luck in this fierce battle, which will determine whether we will win or lose this war.”

In this way they set sail toward the seas off Pusan with ten thousand soldiers and about one hundred battle ships of the Western and Eastern Fleets from Chōlla and Kyōngsang provinces. They proceeded in the formation of a bird’s wings, the center and the right sides of which were under Admirals Yi Sun-sin’s and Yi Ŏkki’s leadership, respectively.

In desperation, the enemy fired from the land. Bullets fell down like rain, and because of the smokes of the explosives, nothing was clearly visible even in a short distance. The battle intensified as time went by, and it was clear that the Chosōn navy became more and more desperate. Commander Chōng Un, who was in charge of the left wing, was killed by an enemy bullet. When soldiers of Chosōn and Japan were entangled in a ferocious fight at the peak of the battle, Master Chaun, who had been waiving a flag and urging the soldiers to push, turned around to Admiral Yi all of a sudden, shouting, “Admiral, turn the head of your ship quickly and retreat! This humble soldier is going first.” Hearing this, Admiral Yi sped up his boat without retreating and got close to Master Chaun only to find out that she had already fallen by an enemy bullet.

“Master! Master Chaun!” Admiral loudly called out her name but to no avail; she was on the brink of passing. However, there was a peaceful smile on her face. “This humble soldier... goes... before you.” Admiral Yi was shedding tears bitterly, holding the master’s body, which was slowly losing warmth while she was barely able to speak to him.

“How noble she is! May the daughter of the nation rest for long!” Coincidentally it was Morundae (Fort of falling clouds) that the master died.

After the death of Master Chaun, the government named her “Chaunsōnūi (Purple cloud, the benefactor of justice), appointed her posthumously to the position of Prime Minister of Rank One, and enshrined her in Songgwang-sa temple. (The government changed the characters of Chaun from “Purple cloud” to “Compassionate cloud,” indicating that she had become the country’s protective deity due to her compassion.) The two “Un’s (Clouds)” fell in the seas of Morundae. Thus, the name of this place refers to Master Chaun and Admiral Chōng Un.

Because Master Chaun passed away without revealing her real name or address, there was no way of knowing her identity and inner strength (character) precisely. However, if we look up the *Samyōngdaesa ilgi* (Historical records on Great Master Samyōng), we can surmise who Master Chaun was.

Samyōng's civil name was Im Ŭnggyu, and his dharma name was Yujōng. He was a disciple of Great Master Sōsan, who named him as "Samyōng."

Samyōng had a younger sister whose civil name was Im Ch'aeun and whose dharma name was Poun. During this period, there lived Hwang Yuch'on, a wise grandson of Minister Hwang Hŭi's. He had a daughter named Hwang Hyōnok whose dharma name was Poryōn. Meanwhile, Kim Pulsan had a granddaughter, Kim Pogu whose dharma name was Powōl,

Im Ŭnggyu studied under Hwang Yuch'on, and it was agreed between the Kim and the Hwang families that Ŭnggyu would become Hwang's son-in-law later. Then Ŭnggyu's mother died suddenly, and a year later Ŭnggyu's father also passed away on the day of his wife's memorial service.

Heartbroken by the losses of both parents and deeply realizing the transience of life, Ŭnggyu was determined to become a Buddhist monk in order to find a path to enlightenment from life's suffering.

On his way to a monastery in the mountain, he stayed two nights at Kim Pulsan's house. It was then that Kim Pulsan recognized Ŭnggyu's extraordinary character and decided to have him as his son-in-law. His daughter Kim Pogu also fell in love with Ŭnggyu secretly.

In the following year, Ŭnggyu came down from the mountain on the memorial service day of his deceased father. As he came home, he sold out all the family properties and decided to conduct his parents' memorial services in the temple from then on. His sister Ch'aeun then decided to follow in her brother's footsteps, joining monastic life.

In the meantime, Hyōnok, the daughter of Hwang Yuch'on, was urged by her parents to marry, so she agreed to marry a man arranged by them. But as the wedding was approaching, she shaved her head, left her hair in her room, and secretly escaped to a temple to become a Buddhist nun.

Kim Pulsan's granddaughter Pogu who was in love with Ŭnggyu also refused to marry and became a nun.

When Ŭnggyu learned about all these developments, he fell in deep agony. This led him to resolve more strongly to become a good monk through diligent practice.

The three nuns—Poun, Poryŏn, and Powŏl—who all had karmic relations to Ŭnggyu happened to meet one another at Chikji-sa temple later. On the suggestion of Head monk of this temple Master Sinmuk, the three nuns traveled southward, passing through Ssanggye-sa temple in Hadong and reached Namhae (South Sea). There on Saho Island, they prayed day and night for seven days, along with an old monk, and finally came to realize their previous and present lives.

The three nuns then decided to go sightseeing on the beautiful island, together with Bhiksuni Sinwŏl whom they had met at Paenggyŏn hermitage of T'ongdo-sa temple on their way down south. Thus, the four of them visited Sejon Island, Tumi Island, and Yokji Island and finally arrived on Yŏnhwa Island.

It was said that Master Yŏnhwa (Lotus flower) had lived on this island. After he died, islanders threw his corpse into the seas according to his will, where a lotus flower bloomed later. Hence, they designated that lotus flower as Yŏnhwabong (Lotus peak) and erected an epitaph where the phrase “Burial site of Master Yŏnhwa” was engraved.

Afterwards, this island came to be called Yŏnhwa Island, and the peak which enshrined the lotus flower was named as Yŏnhwabong (Lotus flower peak).

While the four nuns were preparing for a night's stay on the island, they heard a gentle voice reading a book. As they quietly approached the place where the voice came from, they noticed a young monk reading a book alone. It was none other than Ŭnggyu whom they had missed so much. It is in this dramatic way that they encountered Ŭnggyu in the isolated cave of Yŏnhwabong.

Isn't this the so-called “karma of three lives” as is explained by Buddhism?

It was seventy years prior to the above incident. During Prince Yŏnsan's reign, many Buddhist temples were forcefully closed or changed to banquet places under his tyranny. Several parks in Seoul now have the similar history of tragic persecution.

In such a time, Master Yŏnhwa stayed at Silli-am hermitage in Mt. Samgak. That hermitage was not a safe place where one could avoid Prince Yŏnsan's tyranny. Having thus lost his hermitage, Master Yŏnhwa kept traveling southward, along with the three nuns, ultimately arriving on Yŏnhwa Island. He built Silli-am hermitage again on Yŏnhwabong and practiced there until he died.

As mentioned earlier, an epitaph was erected after Master Yŏnhwa's death, and it is said that on the back of the epitaph, “Sŏng'un, Sŏng'yŏn, Sŏngwŏl, and Kŏnrip” was engraved.

It is also said that Master Yŏnhwa's reincarnation was Master Samyŏng, and Sŏng'un, Sŏng'yŏn, Sŏngwŏl were reincarnated as Poun, Poryŏn, and Powŏl. That night when the five of them—

Samyŏng, Poryŏn, Poun, Sinwŏl, and Powŏl—met at Yŏnhwabong, one more person showed up there. It was Haesang Saho. When they drank a mystical drink that Haesang Saho brought to them, they were able to realize the subtle truth more profoundly.

The next morning, the five of them received the mystical drink from Haesang Saho and embarked on a journey to Hwang Yuch'on in Miryang, as they were told by Haesang Saho. When they arrived at Hwang's residence, they discovered that the old couple had been sick and were in a grave state. They gave the couple the mystical drink they had brought along, and the drink cured them completely with a mysteriously quick effect.

After they cured Hwang and his wife, Samyŏng and Poun made a short visit to their ancestral mountain. The group then continued their journey to Kim Pulsan's home. Kim and his wife, now old and weak, were also suffering from illnesses. They cured this couple as well with the mystical drink.

After this, the three nuns parted with Samyŏng and went down to Namhae, along with Sinwŏl, and there they learned swimming, horse-riding, martial arts, and military tactic from Master Saho as a way of preparing for the future.

They foresaw a Japanese invasion as unavoidable, so Poryŏn came under the command of Admiral Yi Sun-sin. Poun went under the command of General Kwŏn Yul. In the meantime, Powŏl urged Red-Coat General Kwak Chaeu to rise in arms against the Japanese.

The services of these three nuns during Hideyoshi Invasion were splendid, and their contributions to protecting their country and saving the nation should indeed become a model for later generations of Koreans.

When the war cloud lifted after seven years of national crisis, Samyŏng traveled to Japan as a special envoy of the Chosŏn court. After this mission, he built Paekbal-am hermitage in Samgang Village and continued repentance practice there, along with Poun and Powŏl.

At the end of this tale, four pieces of poems are presented. They were composed by Master Samyŏng, Poun, Poryŏn, and Powŏl at their reunion at Yŏnhwabong.

Postscript

Poun

Being only a drop of an ocean,  
I am not certain that the so-called “karma of three lives” is true.  
Today, only a short slate here reminds us of our past.

Powŏl

The thought that we will be forever apart in this life already brings me deep grief.  
Not to mention my fate in another life.  
I only wish the sea could wash away all the love and hatred.

Poryŏn

The Way of Lotus entered solitude.  
Without knowing why, I started to weep.  
When I encountered you, I wanted to talk to you about my previous life  
In which there were a sea of regrets and countless misfortunes.

Samyŏng

In this universe, we are all drops of an ocean.  
In the big waves of the Ganges, misfortunes are countless as sands in a river.  
Do not even mention those overwhelming love and hatred.  
Now the whole world is no more than a flower in my eye.