

## The Story of a Widowed Mother: The Mother–Son Relationship in *The Record of So Hyönsöng*

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This article explores the widowed mother figure in *So Hyönsöng rok* 蘇賢聖錄 (The Record of So Hyönsöng), particularly how a widowed mother successfully distinguishes herself as the head of the household through her relationship with her son. The story deals with the aspirations of mothers of elite yangban families who dream of achieving power despite the social limitations placed upon them. *The Record* presents the ideal mother–son relationship as both close and hierarchical. The closeness of their relationship enables the mother and son to achieve emotional unity when the boy is young. However, by demonstrating that she is more capable and has better judgment than her son, the mother ensures that their relationship remains hierarchical, enabling her to retain a superior position in the relationship into the boy’s adulthood. The story portrays the complicated relationship between a controlling mother and submissive son in a positive light, despite it being in sharp contrast to the compassionate mother and heroic son of earlier literary works. This article argues that Madame Yang, the widowed mother and main protagonist, reflects both the anxiety and aspirations of contemporaneous Korean women facing the major social changes of the 17th century.

**Keywords:** *So Hyönsöng rok* (The Record of So Hyönsöng), clan fiction, female head of household, mother–son relationship, 17th-century Korea

## Introduction

This article takes as its subject *So Hyönsöng rok* 蘇賢聖錄 (The Record of So Hyönsöng, hereafter, *The Record*),<sup>1</sup> an anonymous work<sup>2</sup> of fiction written in vernacular Korean and also transcribed by Lady Yi of Yongin 龍仁李氏 (1652–1712) during the late 17th century.<sup>3</sup> *The Record* is largely understood as an early work of clan fiction (*kamun sosöl* 家門小說), a narrative genre that typically revolves around conflicts and difficulties that occur both within and outside households.<sup>4</sup> It deals with the lives of the members of the So 蘇 family in Song China<sup>5</sup> and focuses on their household affairs and the relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and wives and concubines. This study focuses on the mother–son relationship between Yang Puiin 양부인 (hereafter Madame Yang), a widowed mother, and her son So Hyönsöng 소현성 (hereafter, Hyönsöng), who was born after the death of his father. In the preface, the anonymous writer suggests that future generations can learn from what he has written: “I wrote a story of several volumes and introduced the story to the world to recommend that mothers follow Madame Yang, and that children be obedient like Hyönsöng” (여러 권 설화를 세상의 던훤은 대개 사림의 어미 되야 공의

<sup>1</sup> In this study, *So Hyönsöng rok* refers to the four-volume work. The anonymous writer divided *So Hyönsöng rok* into *Ponjön* 本傳 (The main story) and *So-si samdae rok* (A record of Lady So’s three generations) or *Pyölbön* 別傳 (The sequel). Most previous studies have combined the four volumes discussed here with the 11 volumes of *So-si samdae rok*, and regarded the two as the complete *So Hyönsöng rok*. While the two works are closely related in terms of characters, *So Hyönsöng rok* (*Ponjön*) can be treated as a separate and complete story, with its own beginning and end. The present study uses the terms *Ponjön* or *Pyölbön* whenever a distinction between the main story and the sequel is necessary. This paper uses a facsimile reproduction of the Ewha Womans University edition: Chöng Sönhüi, Cho Hyeran, Ch’oe Suhyön, and Hö Sunu, trans. *So Hyönsöng rok* [The Record of So Hyönsöng], 4 vols. (Söul: Somyöng Ch’ulp’an, 2010). For further information on the manuscript editions, see Pak Yöngghüi, “Changp’yön kamun sosöl üi hyangyu chiptan yön’gu,” in *Munhak kwa saboe chiptan*, ed. Han’guk Kojön Munhakhoe (Söul: Chimmundang, 1995), 357–58; and Ksenia Chizhova, *Kinship Novels of Early Modern Korea: Between Genealogical Time and the Domestic Everyday* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Most clan fiction in the vernacular scripts were written by upper-class women and circulated through kinship networks. As it was written in premodern Korea, neither the authors nor the details of circulation of *The Record* are known. See Chizhova, *Kinship Novels of Early Modern Korea*, 22. Previous studies have assumed that it was most likely written by a woman from an upper-class (*yangban*) family, considering the detailed depiction of the female characters. However, the gender of the author has not been definitively determined. What is clear is that it has significant value in terms of 17th-century Chosön literature, which had relatively few literary works on the lives of women of the time.

<sup>3</sup> There are 16 extant manuscript editions of *The Record*. The Ewha Womans University edition was transcribed by Lady Yi of Yongin, the mother of Kwön Söp (權燮, 1671–1759). She entrusted it to the eldest son of the family and asked him to look after it. He stored it in the Kwön family shrine (*kamyo* 家廟). The ownership and readership of the other 15 manuscript editions are not known. However, the sequels and works derived from them, including *Han-si samdae rok* [A record of Lady Han’s three generations] and *Söl-si idae rok* [A record of Sol’s two generations], and references to *The Record* in later fiction suggest that this work gained some popularity among upper-class women. *The Record*, vol. 1, 10–12.

<sup>4</sup> Pak Yöngghüi, “*So Hyönsöng rok* yönjak yön’gu” (PhD diss., Ewha Womans University, 1994), 232–33; Chöng Ch’anggwön, “*So Hyönsöng rok* üi yösöngjuüijök söngkyök kwa üüi: Changp’yön kyubang sosöl üi hyöngsöng kwa kwallyönhayö,” *Kososöl yön’gu* 4 (1998): 29; Chöng Sönhüi, Cho Hyeran, Ch’oe Suhyön, and Hö Sunwu, trans. *So Hyönsöng rok*, 4 vols (Söul: Somyöng Ch’ulp’an, 2010), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Tang, Song, or Ming China are common settings for premodern Korean fiction.

효행 굿뜯을 권하미라).<sup>6</sup>

Biographies and biographical fiction in premodern East Asia often deal with the relationship between stepmothers (*kyemo* 繼母) and stepchildren.<sup>7</sup> Anecdotes describing malicious stepmothers and stepsons who practice unconditional filial piety toward their mothers often emphasize the qualities considered socially desirable in a son. A well-known example is Emperor Shun 舜 (d. 2184 BCE), who remained obedient to his brutal father and stepmother, despite their repeated attempts on his life. According to Mencius, Emperor Yao 堯 (r. ca. 2333–2234 BCE) regarded Shun’s unconditional obedience to his parents as qualifying him to be a Confucian sage-king and abdicated, transferring his throne to Shun.<sup>8</sup> Those exemplary stories also reflect in Korean fictional works, where stepmothers continue to hold prominent roles. Whether they hate or love their stepchildren, stepmothers have prominent roles in works of Korean fiction. However, the majority of fictional relationships between birth mothers (*saengmo* 生母) and their sons in this genre are free of animosity, at least on the surface.

In premodern Korean fiction, it is uncommon for a birth mother to overshadow her grown-up son,<sup>9</sup> or for such characters to evolve beyond their maternal roles. In premodern works, a birth mother and her children are usually depicted as a team that works together to overcome difficulties, while caring for one another with motherly affection and filial devotion. The mother often acts as a benevolent mediator between other family members when conflicts arise. Birth mothers have minor roles and are often portrayed as passive characters or as martyrs making sacrifices for the benefit of their children.<sup>10</sup> They can sometimes be found in situations that prevent them from speaking or acting for themselves—sick in bed, missing, or dead. The birth mother of Yu Ch’ungnyŏl in the *Yu Ch’ungnyŏl chŏn* 劉忠烈傳 (The Tale of Yu Ch’ungnyŏl), for example, is separated from her son soon after giving birth.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the birth mother of Hong Kiltong bids farewell to her son when he is young in *Hong Kiltong chŏn* 洪吉童傳 (The Tale of Hong Kiltong).<sup>12</sup>

*The Record* is typical of its genre in that it deals with the Confucian model of mother and son.<sup>13</sup> However, the mother in the story occupies as much, if not more, of the narrative as

<sup>6</sup> *So Hyŏnsŏng rok*, vol. 1, 3. All English translations in this paper are my own unless otherwise specified.

<sup>7</sup> Studies of relationships between stepmothers and their stepchildren include Jahyun Kim Haboush, “Filial Emotions and Filial Values: Changing Patterns in The Discourse of Filiality in Late Chosŏn Korea,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55, no.1 (1995): 129–77.

<sup>8</sup> Irene T. Bloom, trans., Philip J. Ivanhoe, ed. *Mencius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 97–104. According to *Mencius*, King Yao, instead of passing the throne to his own son, chose Shun, renowned for his filial piety, as his successor. King Yao spent several years educating Shun as his heir and married his two daughters to him. Eventually, Yao passed the throne to Shun.

<sup>9</sup> Chŏng Hayŏng, “Kososŏl e nat’anan mosŏngsang,” *Han’guk kojŏn yŏsŏng munbak yŏn’gu* 4 (2002): 221–38; Pak Yŏnghŭi, “Changp’yŏn kamun sosŏl,” 351.

<sup>10</sup> Chŏng Hayŏng, “Kososŏl e nat’anan mosŏngsang,” 238; Pak Yŏnghŭi, “Changp’yŏn kamun sosŏl,” 361.

<sup>11</sup> Yi Sanggu, trans., *Yu Ch’ungnyŏl chŏn* [The Tale of Yu Ch’ungnyŏl] (Sŏul: Chisik ūl Mandŭnŭn Chisik, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Ku Inhwan, trans., *Hong Kiltong chŏn* [The Tale of Hong Kiltong] (Sŏul: Sinwŏn Munhwasa, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Some Confucian literati of the time expressed their expectation that this work would contribute to the cultivation of Confucian ideals in its readers. See Kim Wigyŏng, “*So Hyŏnsŏng rok* pyŏlchŏn e hyŏngsanghwa

her son, which adds variety to the positive representations of birth mothers in premodern Korean fiction. While *The Record* presents Madame Yang as a strict yet wise figure, she is at the same time a leading character who seeks power to control her family members and demands respect from them in order to maintain her dominant position as the head of the household.

Previous studies have argued that *The Record* represents Confucian patriarchy<sup>14</sup> by presenting Hyönsöng as an exemplary filial son, an ideal patriarch, and a sincere Confucian scholar, and Madame Yang as an exemplary Confucian woman who guides her family members with a combination of strictness and prudence.<sup>15</sup> Such studies portray *The Record* as educational reading material that illustrates the social expectations for each individual's role within the family and demonstrates how to protect the family and lead it to prosperity. Madame Yang fulfills the role of the head of the household in place of her husband, but her leadership goes beyond being a temporary substitute whose tenure ends as soon as her son reaches maturity.<sup>16</sup> This article focuses on the fact that she is involved in constant direct and indirect power struggles to solidify her position throughout her life. Simply interpreting *The Record* strictly as an educational story of Confucian family values and didactic themes<sup>17</sup> gives too little regard to the amount of the descriptions devoted to Madame Yang and often overlooks the unique characterization of the maternal figure in the Chosön fiction.

This study identifies *The Record* as the portrayal of the ideal son, Hyönsöng, from the perspective of the mother, Madame Yang.<sup>18</sup> As the preface states, “Upon reading the story, how could reckless and ignorant sons, who do not serve their parents, fail to become enlightened?”(이 설화를 보면 방탕무식하야 부모 헤디 아닛논 불효진들 감동티 아니라).<sup>19</sup> As insinuated here, interpreting this relationship in terms of the mother's desire to retain her influence highlights the subtle power struggle between mother and son that has been overshadowed in previous studies due to their focus on the Confucian didactic theme of filial piety.

In addition, widows in *The Record* reflect the social expectations placed upon upper-class widows in the 17th-century Korea. The work has two important widow characters, Madame Yang and her second daughter Kyoyöng.<sup>20</sup> These two characters reveal that the society of

toen So Subing üi sam kwa hyangyuch'üng üisik,” *Ömun nonch'ong* 83 (2020): 80.

<sup>14</sup> Im Ch'igyun, “Taejangp'yön sosöl üi susinsöjök söngkyök yön'gu,” *Han'guk munbwa yön'gu* 13 (2007): 83; Yi Chiha, “So Hyönsöng rok üi ijungsöng e naejaedoen yongmang üi silch'e,” *Pan'gyo ömun yön'gu* 40 (2015): 266.

<sup>15</sup> Chöng Sönhüi, “So Hyönsöng rok yönjak üi namsöng inmul koch'al,” *Han'guk kojön yön'gu* 12 (2005): 42–47; Cho Hyeran, “So Hyönsöng kwa yugyojök sam üi chinjöngsöng,” *Kosösöl yön'gu* 36 (2013): 168. For previous studies of *The Record*, see Ko Ünim, “Han'göl changp'yön sosöl üi kwan'gye yulli,” (PhD diss., Söul Taehakkyo, 2019), 12–17.

<sup>16</sup> Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Council on East Asian Studies, 1992), 265.

<sup>17</sup> Im Hyöngt'aek, “17-segi kyubang sosöl üi söngnip kwa Ch'angsön kamüi rok,” *Tongbang hakchi* 57 (1988): 160–61; Pak Yönghüi, “Changp'yön kamun sosöl,” 320.

<sup>18</sup> Some authors have pointed out that the story deals with the structure of the So family created by Madame Yang. See Pak Iryong, “So Hyönsöng rok üi sösul sigak kwa chakp'um e t'uyöngdoen inyömjök p'yön'gyön” *Han'guk kojön yön'gu* 14 (2006): 15–22.

<sup>19</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Madame Yang gave birth to two daughters, Wöryong and Kyoyöng, and then a son, Hyönsöng.

their time viewed their sexual desires with fear and caution, considering them taboo. The remarrying of widows, especially those who were from the upper-class and who possessed enough property to be independent, was understood to be driven solely by sexual desire and condemned by society.<sup>21</sup> Madame Yang staying with the So family as a chaste widow enables the survival of the vulnerable family. Everyone respects her and even feels in awe of her. On the other hand, Kyoyōng, who is young, childless, rich, attractive, and upper-class, but unchaste, is forced to commit suicide in disgrace. After Kyoyōng dies, Madame Yang refuses to bury her at either the grave site of the So family or of the family of her husband, the Yi family. As an unchaste widow, she had lost the connection between herself and society, and even in death, there is no place for her to rest in peace. The contrast between the two widow characters highlights that in Confucian patriarchal society, widows like Kyoyōng were deemed the most feared and undesirable, often seen as vermin to be eliminated.

### A Close Mother–Son Relationship

*The Record* clearly presents the most important roles of So Hyōnsōng: as a son, a husband, a father, and an official. The character who supports So's significance in the family is Madam Yang, whose goal was set on preserving the So family. When Madame Yang's husband dies, her goal becomes the preservation of the So family. She finds a reason for living in giving birth to her son and raising him with dignity. The story describes her providing a thorough education to her son. When he is a child and even later, she spends most of her time with him and requires him to visit her five times a day. At seven years old, she starts teaching him Confucian classics. Although a child forms a natural attachment to his or her birth mother, *The Record* suggests that this is not sufficient to produce a desirable son. A mother needs to educate her son, ensuring that he understands her expectations of him and internalizes her values.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, Madame Yang employs both strict discipline and emotional appeal in educating her son, the latter not an aspect of education typical of a father-son relationship.<sup>23</sup> She sometimes employs emotional blackmail, highlighting the fact that she alone has raised him: "I raised you with so much difficulty, thus you should not disappoint me." She teaches Hyōnsōng how to behave toward her, and he begins to understand her expectations. At three years of age, he becomes aware of his mother's concern for his health and responds by diligently avoiding any illness or injury. When he is seven, he says, "I

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<sup>21</sup> Madame Yang and Kyoyōng were both upper-class widows with no financial problems. The social status of widows and their financial independence affected their chances of remarrying and how society viewed such marriages. Widows from the lower-class were under relatively less social pressure to remain chaste because their economic problems were implicitly understood as a compelling reason for remarriage. However, widows from the upper-class were expected to scorn remarriage and remain celibate after the death of their husband.

<sup>22</sup> This bears similarities to the concept of the "uterine family," which emphasizes the ties between a mother and her children, which was proposed by Margery Wolf. Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 32–41.

<sup>23</sup> Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*, 79.

understand that your expectations rest solely on me. How could I not recognize the value of my body, even though I may be foolish?” (히이 칭각하니 모친의 바라시미 쇼즈 일인이라 비록 불초 하나 었디 아히몸이 둥흔 줄 모르리잇가).<sup>24</sup> He also shows concern for his mother: “When you feel sad, I worry that you might get hurt. I hope you understand my concerns, and please try not to cry too much” (슬허하샤 성테 상하실가 두려옵니 니 모친은 쇼즈의 심스를 도라보샤 과도히 테읍디 마르쇼셔).<sup>25</sup>

Madame Yang tries to maintain a warm and affectionate relationship with her son during his childhood, but tensions rise when he is older. *The Record* portrays the outside world as a hostile and dangerous place, full of threats to the bond between mother and son. Hyönsöng’s friends, official duties, and wives are all potential sources of conflict within this relationship, and the author implies that a mother has the right to address such threats as she sees fit. Friends potentially threaten the physical and emotional connection between mother and son. For example, Hyönsöng invites his friends and female entertainers to his home, where they enjoy music and poetry. In so doing, he separates himself from his mother through experiences of which she is not involved. Madame Yang responds with anger and summons Hyönsöng to see her, chastising him:

“You are in a lonely situation, without a father and living with a lonely mother. Enjoying a pleasant life is not appropriate for you. How could you gather female entertainers and friends in a widow’s house? If you ever behave like this again, I will never forgive you.” Hyönsöng had deep regrets and apologized for his sin again while bowing his head. He retreated and sent the four female entertainers away.

외로운 어미를 드리고 자취 처량하니 호화하미 가티 아니려든 과부의 문명의 창악과 봉우를 어즈러이 모호리오 다시 방즈하미 이시면 결연히 용셔티 아니리라 공직 겁히 뉘우쳐 돈슈복죄하고 물러와 스창을 보내고<sup>26</sup>

As a widow, Madame Yang feels undeserving of happiness. She believes that if Hyönsöng wishes to maintain their emotional connection, he should remain solemn and refrain from pleasure, as she does. Her appeal proves effective and compels her son to redirect his attention toward her once more: “After this incident, he observed his behaviors. Each day he became more and more calm, silent, decent, and serious” (일로붓터 더욱 슈형하야 온둥단엄하미 날로 더으더라).

Through Madame Yang’s discipline and emotional appeals to her son, any physical or emotional distance between them gradually diminishes. At the beginning of the story, when she cries, Hyönsöng always asks her why and starts crying, too. As their bond grows, they reach a point of emotional unity, and when Madame Yang is silently sobbing in her room later in the story, Hyönsöng suddenly visits her and shares her sadness without comment.

<sup>24</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 15.

<sup>25</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 16.

<sup>26</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 46.

Such touching scenes demonstrate the blurring of the boundaries between them. Hyönsöng rarely feels happiness on his own account. His happiness comes only vicariously through his mother, despite his many personal achievements. He can be happy only when his mother is happy or when he anticipates her happiness. He is full of joy when she decides to go and watch a royal procession: “Madame Yang had always been in sadness and worry, day and night, and did not enjoy anything. However, noting that she paid attention to a luxurious thing, he could not suppress his extreme happiness” (원녀 부인이 일야수우하며 척연하여 즐기디 아니터니 금일 호화한 뜻 두시물보고 흔 경스 어든 듯 불승환희하야”).<sup>27</sup>

*The Record* values a son’s filial duty over any of his other duties, even his official duties which limit the time he can spend with his mother. Once, when Hyönsöng is late visiting her when he has to attend an official social event, Madame Yang reprimands him severely:

“You [Hyönsöng] have only one parent, your mother. Yet, I believe that you do have a human mind. How could you stay in a guest room after coming back home and be late visiting me? How dare you drink wine and show such an attitude to me! Leave at once, and do not come back.” Hyönsöng felt great fear and felt sorry for her. He bowed his head to ask her for punishment and remained before her.

네 비록 아비업시 즈모 시하즈나 이 곳 인심이어늘... 엇디 나갓다가 외당의 드리와 머물고 어미 보기를 게얼리 하며 술을 취토록 먹어 브정흔 거동을 감히 내 안전의 뵈노쇼 썰니 나가고 드리오디 말나 심이 대경황공하여 머리를 수겨 죄를 청할 쓰름이오 물러나디 아니커늘<sup>28</sup>

Madame Yang is unyielding and unforgiving when her son’s official duties interfere with her perceived maternal rights. When his sister defends him, noting that it was the king who forced him to drink and he dared not refuse, Yang coldly replies that a man’s social and official recognition means nothing if he fails in filiality: “Yang said again, ‘If he [Hyönsöng] performed his official duties seriously, how could the king [the elder son of Emperor Taizong of Song China] ask him to drink wine recklessly in the first place? It occurred because he was mediocre’” 거관이 숙덕홀딘대 칠왕이 엇디 간대로 보채시리오마는 이제 용넬하미라).<sup>29</sup> The implication is that a son’s neglect of his mother is evidence of poor performance in all his undertakings, including official obligations. Hyönsöng immediately regrets his wrongdoing, and people present at the scene tacitly agree with his mother. *The Record* affirms the idea that a man who practices filial piety will never fail in his public duties, while a man who achieves official success by sacrificing or neglecting his filial duties—even partially—is not worthy.

A man’s official responsibilities may require him to leave his home at times, but during this absence, his responsibilities as a son still take precedence. When Hyönsöng has to take an official trip, the majority of his time away from home is spent worrying about and longing for his mother:

<sup>27</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 2, 29.

<sup>28</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 2, 62–63.

<sup>29</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 2, 62–63.

When he saw morning clouds and evening rain, he thought of the time he visited Ch'wisŏng chŏn [Madame Yang's residence] and lamented.... He lost his appetite [thinking of his mother]. He felt both sad and happy when he saw the sun and the moon as they reminded him of his mother. He woke up early to visit his mother and sat all day respectfully with his clothes tidy, as if he was serving his mother. In addition, he stayed late at night and wrote poems of longing for his mother. He did this every day until he had paid his respects to his mother at home. He never missed this.

도운모우를 디흐면 문득 취성던 문안하던 재를 싱각고 탄식하물 마디 아냐...도석 식음의 마시 업스며 일월을 본즉 모친의 용모를 디흐디시 반기고 슬허하야 속절업시 새박 니러 신성하던 재를 마초고 의관을 정히 하야 동일토록 안자시미 모친씨 피심기 공경하며 이경스디 안자 영모시를 지어 읊허 혼명하던 거슬 마초와 혼 재도 페티 아니<sup>30</sup>

This is only two-thirds of the effusive, lengthy description of Hyŏnsŏng missing his mother. Before leaving, he even tells his wife that his only concern is his mother's loneliness and that she should visit Madame Yang as often as possible.<sup>31</sup> His everyday routine of missing his mother takes up a significant part of the description of his official trip. He performs his official duties well and earns respect but feels little pleasure in his work. He yearns only to return home and serve his lonely mother. This son who longs for his mother while away from home embodies the son that his mother wishes for.

In clan fiction, the wedding of a son marks a significant event in the story because it introduces a new family member and may change the existing hierarchy among the members of the family. *The Record* depicts the tension caused by Hyŏnsŏng's marriages, and the marriages even imply a son's wives can be a serious threat to the bond between a mother and her son. Madame Yang's caution toward and discomfort with her daughters-in-law are salient on the description of the wedding days. To maintain her position, she ensures that the mother-son bond remains so close that it cannot be challenged by her daughters-in-law. She needs to exceed her daughter-in-laws both in morality and appearance. The wedding party scenes focus on Madame Yang rather than the new brides, describing her beauty, which overwhelms the guests and even the brides.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Hyŏnsŏng's new brides are often deemed underwhelming or relatively less impressive than Madame Yang: "Madame Yang was greatly disappointed and did not seem happy [to have Lady Hwa, Hyŏnsŏng's first wife, as her daughter-in-law]. Both the elderly and young members of the household disliked the new bride" (부인이 ㄹ장 서운하야 쾌흔 빗치 업고 가뉘 노쇠다 낮비 너기더니).<sup>33</sup>

The fiction depicts the subtle rivalry between Madame Yang and her daughters-in-law in various party scenes. It explicitly highlights that Lady Sŏk, Hyŏnsŏng's second wife, is portrayed less striking than Madame Yang's peerless allure, which persists despite her being

<sup>30</sup> *So Hyŏnsŏng rok*, vol. 3, 90–91.

<sup>31</sup> *So Hyŏnsŏng rok*, vol. 1, 60.

<sup>32</sup> *So Hyŏnsŏng rok*, vol. 1, 47–48.

<sup>33</sup> *So Hyŏnsŏng rok*, vol. 1, 47.



over 60 years of age. Through repeated negative comparisons, the narrative shows that Madame Yang consistently emerges victorious in these competitions, which serve as a public justification of Hyönsöng's devotion to his mother and sister.<sup>34</sup>

The story subtly implies that a man achieves the status of a desirable son by prioritizing his mother's wishes above those of his wives. The author emphasizes Hyönsöng's ability to anticipate his mother's thoughts and emotions. While meticulous care for his mother's well-being is a hallmark of filial piety, in *The Record*, the profound mutual understanding between mother and son emerges as the driving force behind every action. For example, he frequently abstains from marital intimacy, recognizing it as a personal pleasure that he cannot share with his mother. In the early stages of his marriage, he rarely shares a bed with Lady Hwa and appears to exhibit a disinterest in her. When his secondary mother (*sömo* 庶母)<sup>35</sup> asks why, he replies:

If I fall into lust, I may get ill. I am afraid that my illness will cause great worry to my mother. Although my affection toward Lady Hwa is strong, I am cautious not to give in to lust and damage my body.

호식하야 병을 어드면 모친과 큰 녀녀를 깃치올가 두리오니 이러므로 정은 동하디 몸이 상할가 두려 조심하노이다<sup>36</sup>

Hyönsöng's cautious attitude towards marital pleasure mirrors his mother's concerns. When his secondary mother relays Hyönsöng's words, Madame Yang relaxes and remarks, "Now, I see there is no need to worry about my son indulging in personal pleasures" (내 그 호식하야 상할가 녀녀는 업도다).<sup>37</sup> The narrative also contrasts Hyönsöng's attachment to his mother with his relationship to his wives. For example, in scenes where Hyönsöng yearns for his mother, the narrator consistently notes his lack of longing for his wives.

[While contemplating how much he missed his mother] his thoughts suddenly turned to his young son, secondary mothers, and sisters. He wrote poems to express his longing for them. However, he did not miss his two wives.... His longing for his mother always overwhelmed his thoughts about his wives.

홀연 유즈의 당성하믈 보고져 뜻이 잇고 쯔흔 두 셔모와 소운 낭미를 닛디 못하야 글을 지어 회포를

<sup>34</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 4, 49, 51.

<sup>35</sup> "Secondary mother" (*sömo* 庶母) is a term that the primary wife's son called his father's concubine. In the case of *The Record*, Hyönsöng uses the term to refer to his father's former concubines, whose surnames are Sök and Yi. Sök and Yi are both concubines because their social status is lower than Madame Yang. Sök is the daughter of a concubine and Yi is a commoner (*yangin* 良人). Madame Yang is a woman from an upper-class family. Hyönsöng's three wives are all from the upper-class and they are all wives of equal status, although Lady Hwa, the first wife, maintains some privileges due to her seniority in the So family.

<sup>36</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 57–58.

<sup>37</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 58.

위로하되 녀네 두 부인씩은 밋디 아나... 미양 스친지정이 부 〃 의 상스를 이끄는디리<sup>38</sup>

This scene exemplifies that Hyönsöng's emotional bond to his mother is stronger than that to his wives. The narrative makes clear that the correct order of a man's affections should be his mother, his sons, his secondary mothers, his siblings, and only then, his wives. The frequent comparisons between his mother and his wives intensify competitive relationship between the two, heightening the seriousness of their rivalry. *The Record* solidifies this stance by introducing a non-fictional historical figure renowned for his unwavering devotion to his mother. The narrative inserts that Lu Xizhe 呂希哲 (1036–1114) was a Confucian gentleman who admired his parents and was not distracted by his wives and children.<sup>39</sup> Here marital intimacy is perceived not as a romantic ideal but rather as a challenge to the discipline of the Confucian patriarchy.<sup>40</sup>

The desire of Madame Yang to control her son does not allow Hyönsöng to miss his deceased father. The story could have portrayed Madame Yang as merely the link between her dead husband and her young son. In this role, she would have reminded him of his father and encouraged him to be a patriarch like him. However, the story mentions the deceased father only to underscore Madame Yang's suffering as a widow. However, there is one scene in the narrative where Hyönsöng accidentally encounters a portrait of his father. Upon seeing the portrait, he weeps over it for days, directing his attention to his father—an expected and commendable response from a filial son. However, on witnessing this, Madame Yang reproaches him harshly, accusing him of neglecting his lonely mother. The portrait serves as a reminder that Madame Yang is merely the temporary head of the household. Upon realizing this, she swiftly quells the perceived threat. She orders Hyönsöng to roll up the picture and keep it in the family shrine. When he weeps and asks her to give him a few more days with the picture, she refuses to allow it. In addition, the narrative contains no significant male figure who could claim the patriarchal role. Madame Yang has no parents-in-law or other senior relatives, and her son has no male teachers. The only senior relative in the story is her natal father, but his role is strictly limited, and he rarely meets or communicates with Hyönsöng.<sup>41</sup>

## A Powerful Birth Mother and a Weak Son

In most fictional works of the Chosön period, once children reached maturity, the narrative

<sup>38</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 3, 97–98.

<sup>39</sup> *Naebun* written by Sohye 昭惠王后 (1437–1504) depicts Lu Xizhe 呂希哲 (1036–1114) as an ideal Confucian gentleman. Lu did not laugh a single day during his 60 years of marriage, even in his bedroom. Sohye Wanghu, *Naebun*, ed. Yi Kyönggha (Söul: Han'gilsa, 2011), 171.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>41</sup> When Madame Yang's husband fell ill, he reached out to his father-in-law, Madame Yang's biological father, and asked him to take care of his children before dying.

tended to focus on their experiences and challenges.<sup>42</sup> However, in *The Record*, an imposing birth-mother figure emerges, seeking power even at the expense of diminishing her son's patriarchal authority. Unlike male heads of households, whose aging, frailty, and eventual retirement were accepted as natural in stories of the time, Madame Yang defies these conventions, exhibiting no visible signs of aging, appearing almost ageless. She refuses to step back and accept her place as an elderly woman and does not allow her son to gain his autonomy. In such circumstances, a seamless transfer of power from mother to son is impossible. Throughout her lifetime, she seeks to maintain the same degree of authority:<sup>43</sup> "Madame Yang had a great-great-grandson, but she did not withdraw from house affairs."<sup>44</sup> In addition, she retains the right to possess and use the personal property of the So family. The entire finances of the So household, including the property brought by Hyönsöng's wives from their families, are under her control:

Two wives [of Hyönsöng] dared not have their personal property, gold, silver, silk, or dishes. Although they brought money from their own families, they put it in the family storehouse. When they had to use it, they had to report to Madame Yang in advance and could never use it as their own. The house rules were strict like this. Thus, all people admired the family and said that people who want to learn courtesy should visit Hyönsöng's house. In addition, all parents respected the house's fairness and they pleaded with Hyönsöng to teach their children. Many children under the age of ten brought books and gathered in the house to learn.

두 부인이 이시나 감히 스 \* 직물 금은과 능내며 그르시 업서 비록 친가의의셔 오는 거시라도 고동의 두엇다가 쓸 재는 반드시 부인씩 고흔 후 내여 쓰고 죽전죽항하미 업스니 그 가법의 숨엄하미 이긋튼 디라 시절 사름들이 아니 탄복하리 업서 그 네법을 비홀딘대 당 \* 이 소현성 부등으로 가라 하며 죽 식 둔 재 다 그 청고하를 공경하야 그르치를 청하니 십세 이하 쇼으들이 칙을 끼고 문의 메여시니<sup>45</sup>

Madame Yang's power extends to the private lives of her family members. She wields authority in Hyönsöng's conjugal relations, sometimes more powerfully than Hyönsöng himself. When he is upset with Lady Hwa's jealousy towards his second wife, he punishes her by refusing to visit her residence. Madame Yang later forgives Lady Hwa because of her service to her. This forgiveness means that regardless of Hyönsöng's personal feelings toward his wife, he must

<sup>42</sup> In similar stories of the time, when a son grows old enough to marry, his mother is largely absent from the text, likely because her presence would only diminish his agency and authority. Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 309.

<sup>43</sup> In *Pyölbön*, there is a scene in which Hyönsöng argues against Madame Yang's reliance on Buddhist rituals. This defiance angers Madame Yang intensely, and she says, "Your life and death are up to me." *So-si samdaerok*, vol. 10, 96–99.

<sup>44</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 4, 124.

<sup>45</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 4, 41.

make peace with her.<sup>46</sup>

Madame Yang ensures that she is abreast of every aspect of the lives of her family members, especially her son's private life. Hyönsöng shares all his news with her, telling her repeatedly that he does not hide anything from her. However, after his marriage, his sexual desires and performance become personal information that he shares only with his wives. This poses something of a dilemma to his mother as she cannot inquire about these matters while occupying the honorable role of a father and teacher to her son. As such, she leaves it to Hyönsöng's two secondary mothers to pry into his private life on her behalf. The secondary mothers sneak into his bedroom and eavesdrop on him and Lady Hwa. They find out that Lady Hwa is pregnant and report this back to his mother. They also find out when Hyönsöng has his first sexual relations with Lady Sök, his second wife, and again report it to Madame Yang, who is pleased to hear this news. Perhaps surprisingly, neither Hyönsöng nor his wives express discomfort about being overheard. Instead, they are grateful for, and in awe of, his mother's keen insight and deep consideration. Hyönsöng's sexual activities affect the continuation of the family,<sup>47</sup> and Madame Yang uses this as a pretext for keeping her son under surveillance.

Confucianism focused on the production of self as an external process achieved through the proper performance of social roles.<sup>48</sup> However, Hyönsöng's identity is mainly shaped by his filial piety rather than other social roles. *The Record* demands a vast amount of devotion and obedience from children, such that even a son as committed to his mother as Hyönsöng cannot fully provide it. His mother's expectations of him are too great, and his efforts to appease her leave him with little time and energy for anyone or anything else. Though he passed the civil service examination at an early age and rose through its ranks, he has undergone no significant development since his childhood, particularly in his relationship with his mother. Although he has several wives, he has gained no deeper understanding from his marriages. On the contrary, his image of his mother as a perfect human being enables him to clearly see their flaws, even in seemingly perfect women like Lady Sök. His mother's monopolization of power has prevented him from maturing into a conventional patriarch.

Hyönsöng's weakness is evident in his strong sense of guilt and shame. He feels guilty for being the son of a widow: "My sin is serious; thus, I have not known my father's face and love. Also, my sin makes my second sister suffer" (내 죄악이 심둥하야 엄친의 면목과 은익을 모르고 두 낫 누의로 하나히 더러릇 굿기니)<sup>49</sup>; "I have failed to fulfill the relationship between father and son, the most important of the three cardinal relations [samgang 三綱]. I am a serious sinner. How can I do things like others?" (부족유친과 삼강의 둥흔 거슬 헛터 못하니 심흔 죄인이라 엇디 범스

<sup>46</sup> Madame Yang is generally gentle and generous to her daughters-in-law, but this is possible only because her son follows her wishes in his treatment of them. Once her son serves as her agent, she rarely needs to personally discipline her daughters-in-law, except in cases where they attempt to monopolize her son's attention. In such instances, she punishes them harshly to assert her authority.

<sup>47</sup> Chöng Yöngsin, "Yösöng kajang üi yökhwal kwa kinüng: *Yun Ha Chöng sammun ch'wirok üi chungsim üro*," *Tongbanghak* 13 (2007), 145–82; Chizhova, *Kinship Novels of Early Modern Korea*, 130.

<sup>48</sup> Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 26.

를 타인과 꺾터 흐리오).<sup>50</sup> The moral code in the world of *The Record* suggests that the son of a widow should think of himself as a sinner. Hyönsöng understands this code well, lamenting that he “caused” his father’s death and the suffering of his mother and sister. Although his guilt is groundless, he regards himself as owing a debt to his family and feels responsible for every problem within it. This guilt is apparent even during what should be happy life events, such as his marriages. On the day of his second wedding, he appears miserable, weeps loudly, and says that he does not deserve pleasure because of his sins:

I could not have my father’s lessons, broad like the sky, or his deep love. I do not know my father’s face. I am a sinner in human relationships, and I am ill-fated.... How could I ever gain happiness?

하늘 경계와 은늘를 밧줍디 못햐야 엄친의 면목을 모르니 인륜의 죄인시오 박명햐미 심햐디라...엣디 즐거오미 이시리오<sup>51</sup>

His guilt is so intense that it overwhelms his happiness and is ever-present. Madame Yang’s solemnity and sadness are the trigger for this guilt: “My filial devotion is insufficient, and this always makes my mother unhappy. I always regret my wrongdoings and sins.”<sup>52</sup> His sense of the debt he feels he owes his mother is strong and life-defining.

The story uses material from Confucian classics such as *Xiaojing* 孝經 (The Classic of Filial Piety) and *Xiaoxue* 小學 (Elementary Learning)<sup>53</sup> to present Hyönsöng’s guilt as reasonable, indicating that children who lose their parents should not behave like others. However, while the classics recommend a modest attitude among children mourning a parent during funeral processions and memorial services, the references to the classics in *The Record* have a more specific purpose. *The Record* assigns a sense of guilt to a surviving son (*yubokcha* 遺腹子) to justify his devotion to his widowed mother. Hyönsöng’s feelings of guilt usually lead to a strengthening of his resolution to devote himself to his mother: “The only thing I wish for in my life is to find enjoyable events for my mother.”<sup>54</sup> His guilt leads him to prioritize his mother over official duties, personal business, and marital matters. As such, he chooses to be an official but does not want official fame, marries but has no interest in women, and maintains marital relations with his wife but does not favor her.

Hyönsöng also has a strong sense of shame. Shame occurs when a person fails to fulfill the expectations of his ideal self.<sup>55</sup> He regards himself as incompetent, someone who fails to follow his mother’s teachings correctly:

<sup>50</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 4, 81.

<sup>51</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 88–89.

<sup>52</sup> *The Record*, vol. 1, 88. “내 효성이 극진티 못햐여 즈당의 혼연햐실 적이 업스니 듀야 허믈을 닷그며 죄를 헤아리고.”

<sup>53</sup> To Minje, trans., *Hyogyöng* (Söul: Chisik ül Mandünün Chisik, 2008); Yun Hoch’ang, trans., *Sobak* (Söul: Hongik Ch’ulp’ansa, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 89. “일싱 먹음의 먹음어 버라는 배 즈당의 깃거햐시믈 요구햐야.”

<sup>55</sup> Herant A. Katchadourian, *Guilt: The Bite of Conscience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 18.

Though my father is not present, my mother's discipline does not fall short of the teachings of Mencius's mother. Yet, I could not distinguish myself in the world and failed to follow her lesson. I am truly a foolish and unfilial being. I am ashamed because I do not have any outstanding deeds in this bright world.

우리 등이 가친이 아니 겨시고 즈모의 교훈이 밍모의 느리디 아니시되 즈식이 현효티 못하여 마르  
치시믈 받줍디 못하고 도로혀 불초흐미 심흔디라 몰근 세상의 낱할 형실이 업스니 붓그럽거니와<sup>56</sup>

His shame results in a poor self-evaluation and motivates him to follow his mother beyond his childhood. Men in other works of clan fiction also undergo humble self-recognition, but this does not lessen their heroic qualities.<sup>57</sup> On the contrary, such humble comments usually serve to reinforce their other positive qualities, suggesting that they are or will be Confucian gentlemen capable of performing official public tasks with modesty.

Filiality is understood as the basis of loyalty (*ch'ung* 忠)<sup>58</sup> and offer ethical guidance on appropriate behavior in various extra-familial social situations and relationships.<sup>59</sup> If Hyönsöng's filial devotion positively influenced his governance of family members and extended to his public duties, it could be seen as filial piety fulfilling its inherent function and encompassing a broader world beyond the family. However, his shame and guilt narrow his range of activities and limit his devotion to select family members rather than people outside his family. His burden causes him to avoid public affairs and engaging with others outside his family: "My filiality is insufficient to please my mother... thus I am not interested in anything or anyone else."<sup>60</sup> As a result, he refrains from offering political advice to the king. He also excludes his wives and children. He does not take care of his wives when they are ill, and he does not apologize to Lady Sök for kicking her out of his home. He instead apologizes to his mother for his misjudgment and failure to follow her advice. Compared to his perfect mother, everyone else has shortcomings, and he cannot respect them because no one surpasses her. He even points out his father-in-law's wrongdoings and leaves his seat before their conversation is over, something he would never dare to do to his mother.

These failings undermine his patriarchal authority. Although the story depicts his attitude as aligning with Confucian norms for gentlemen rather than signs of emotional immaturity or

<sup>56</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 19.

<sup>57</sup> For example, in *Wannööl hoemaeng yön*, when the son speaks with his mother, he often describes himself as insufficient and unworthy. However, these comments are portrayed as features of his refined personality and strong will to fulfill his official duties. Kim Kyöngmi, T'ak Wönjöng, Kim Yumi, and Ku Sönjöng, trans., *Hyöndaeyök Wannööl hoemaeng yön 2: Chöng-ssi kamun üi wigi* (Söul: Hyumönisütü, 2022), 33-37.

<sup>58</sup> *Elementary Learning* indicates that a filial son will be a loyal subject because he will serve his king as he served his parents. Yun Hoch'ang, trans., *Sobak* (Söul: Hongik Ch'ulp'ansa, 2005), 89. *The Classic of Filial Piety* also indicates that "Filial piety begins in service to your parents and continues in service to your lord" and "People who are truly able to serve their parents well will not be arrogant in the high station." See To Minje, trans., *Hyogyöng* (Söul: Chisik ül Mandünün Chisik, 2008), 32, 60.

<sup>59</sup> Hektor K. T. Yan, "Is Filial Piety a Virtue? A Reading of the *Xiao Jing* (*Classic of Filial Piety*) from the Perspective of Ideology Critique," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 12 (2017): 1191.

<sup>60</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 88-89.

weakness, his unconditional submissiveness to his mother, passionless marriages, shame, and guilt significantly diminish his leadership. Such weakness serves only to emphasize Madame Yang's strength. In this way, the story becomes that of a mother, not a son. The literary significance of *The Record* is in its portrayal of a mother maximizing her power at the expense of her son, all under the shadow of a patriarchal society.

### A Hierarchical Mother–Son Relationship

*The Record* is unique in its depiction of Madame Yang in that she builds a hierarchical relationship with her son by demonstrating that she is more capable than him. Several episodes from the story demonstrate that she is more qualified to be the head of the household. Her adherence to Confucian principles and resolute determination are underscored when she chooses to execute her second daughter, Kyoyŏng in defense of family honor. Kyoyŏng, widowed at a young age, engages in a sexual relationship with another man following her husband's death. Upon discovering her daughter's indiscretion, Madame Yang severely reproaches her as a "disgraceful daughter who has disgraced her deceased father and living mother and also sullied the reputation of the So family" (죽은 아버지와 사랐는 어찌게 욕이 미쳐며 조선의 불행을 깃치니).<sup>61</sup> She orders her to commit suicide by drinking poison. Madame Yang was a vulnerable woman with a young son, and her position as the head of the household was given rather than earned. However, her actions here underscore her determination, a quality comparable to that of her husband.<sup>62</sup> The narrative also emphasizes the nobility of her decision, stemming from her readiness to prioritize the So household. It is a decision that ultimately shields the So family from further disgrace.

In contrast to Madame Yang, Hyŏnsŏng exhibits a more lenient approach in handling his sister's indiscretion. Aware of her grave sin, he grapples with indecision and attempts to conceal the transgression. On the other hand, his mother's resolution gives her a distinct moral superiority that distinguish her from the other characters. If she had tried to conceal the situation as Hyŏnsŏng and his secondary mothers did, she would have faced criticism for neglecting proper household management in favor of her maternal affection. Such actions would have undermined her authority, reinforcing the notion that women are unfit to lead households, thus shifting the responsibility to her son. Madame Yang's formidable persona serves to shield against potential attacks, both from the characters within the story and its readers.

<sup>61</sup> *So Hyŏnsŏng rok*, vol. 1, 39.

<sup>62</sup> A father punishing his unchaste daughter, even if this was an unconfirmed rumor, was widely regarded as an appropriate means of protecting the family's honor. In *Changhwa Hongnyŏn chŏn*, the father believes that his daughter lost her virginity before marriage and sentences her to death. *Ku Inhwan*, ed. *Changhwa Hongnyŏn chŏn* (Sŏul: Sinwŏn Munhwasa, 2003). In addition, a *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* entry from 1521 contains an account of a father who killed his daughter for engaging in sexually immoral behavior. *Chungjong sillok*, *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* Database, 41:30b16–31a2 [Chungjong 16/1/24], ed. Kungmin Pyŏnch'an Wiwŏnhoe, [http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kka\\_11601024\\_004](http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kka_11601024_004).

Another episode where Madame Yang demonstrates her authority is when Hyönsöng's second wife, Lady Sök, is falsely accused of adultery. While Hyönsöng opts to expel her from their home, Madame Yang, convinced of Sök's innocence, advises him to refrain from taking action and instead allows her to handle the situation.

“I may be an insignificant woman, but I am not devoid of insight. If this matter poses a serious threat to our family, how can I afford to be indecisive? ... Therefore, you need not concern yourself with my actions. Simply observe how I handle the situation.” Her words struck Hyönsöng like a sobering realization. He bowed and remarked, “My mother has broadened my narrow view and ignorance.”

네 어미 비록 쇼 \* 녀지나 식견이 고루티 아냐 일죽 헤아리미 겁흐니 방해로오면 대스를 엇디 모호히 흐리오... 아히는 구뜰여 알너 말고 내의 처티를 보라 상셰 텅파의 취흔 거시 썬듯하야 공슈사례 왓 히으의 무식흔 소견으로 하야곰 흥금이 열닌디라<sup>63</sup>

Witnessing some suspicious events, Hyönsöng disregards his mother's advice and expels Lady Sök from their home. However, when her innocence is later vindicated, Madame Yang expresses regret for her son's hasty decision. These events prompt those around them to compare the mother and son, seeking to determine who is the more suitable head of the household. They lead readers to this agreement that Hyönsöng should obey his mother, as he cannot surpass her: “The mind of a woman [Madame Yang] is open like this. [We thought Hyönsöng was great, but now] we see that he is not that great” (녀즈의 어위츄미 이 곳뜰니 소상은 도로혀 괴뜰디 아니토다).<sup>64</sup>

There are also several scenes in which Madame Yang publicly rebukes Hyönsöng. When he joined the gathering with female entertainers, she scolds him severely.

Madame Yang got angry and said, “Since I lost my husband early, I have relied on you only hoping for your proper marriage. How dare you gather unworthy individuals and act recklessly on your own!” ... Hyönsöng was terrified to see her anger.

부인이 텅파의 노왓 내 일죽 선군을 여희고 너를 의디하야 아름답다이 성인흔를 브라거늘 네 엇디 감히 요괴로운 거슬 외당의 모도와 방즈헝기를 전쥬흐노... 상이 모친의 노를 보고 크게 두려흐나<sup>65</sup>

Hyönsöng immediately apologizes, bringing satisfaction to Madame Yang, as she observes her son's compliance and subservience. The narrative of *The Record* praises this son who willingly submits to his mother's authority.

The character, Hyönsöng, assumes more of an auxiliary role than an equal partner to his mother. When she compels Kyoyöng commit suicide, Hyönsöng experiences sadness but

<sup>63</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 3, 5.

<sup>64</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 4, 96.

<sup>65</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 45–46.



remains silent despite other family members pleading with Madame Yang to spare her. After his sister's death, his secondary mother, who represents the voice of the family, expresses her discontent to him regarding Madame Yang's decision. She accuses Madame Yang of being merciless and lacking maternal affection. In response, Hyönsöng contends that his mother's decision was right and necessary for upholding the family's honor. When his secondary mother suggests that Hyönsöng should have intervened, he asserts that he cannot go against his mother's wishes, even if he disagrees with them.<sup>66</sup> He also adds that Madame Yang has high moral standards with which he cannot override. After hearing Hyönsöng's words, his secondary mother offers an apology for her earlier complaints. Hyönsöng's support of his mother silences any further criticism or doubt regarding her authority as head of the household, at least on the surface.

Madame Yang's dominance over Hyönsöng persists throughout his lifetime. By the time of her death, she has reached the age of at least one hundred.<sup>67</sup> However, despite this, Hyönsöng does not assume leadership of the family, as he dies shortly after his mother. *Pyölc'hön* (The sequel) reveals the reasons behind their deaths. Upon the death of his mother, Hyönsöng experiences a physical and emotional breakdown, manifesting in symptoms such as vomiting blood and an inability to eat or walk unaided. Hyönsöng's death, presumably caused by mourning over his mother's death, insinuates that he exists as a supporting figure in the story. His demise completes the picture of him as the ultimate filial son, but it underscores his inability to emerge as the powerful leader of the household. For him, achieving independence from his mother proves impossible, as their identities are inseparably intertwined.

The So household is depicted as Madame Yang's domain, governed by an impeccable matriarch and supported by her dutiful son as her second-in-command. She attains the highest recognition as a woman, earning the title of a "king among women" *녀똥군왕* as underscored by the narrator.<sup>68</sup> Her commanding presence even compels a high-ranking official from the court to kneel, drawing crowds to the household to glean insights into this exemplary family. Her astute governance of the extended family in her children's education earns her recognition as a sage, granting them to take only limited authority within the family.

## Widows and the 17th-Century Korea

The notion of widows remarrying was viewed negatively throughout the Chosön era.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 1, 41.

<sup>67</sup> In *Ponjön*, Madame Yang dies when Hyönsöng is over eighty years old. Considering that she had a great-great-grandson, she could not have been less than one hundred years old when she died. According to *Pyölc'hön*, Madame Yang died at the age of 115. *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 15, 57.

<sup>68</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 4, 58.

<sup>69</sup> Even before the invasions, upper-class widows were discouraged from remarrying through specific legal provisions, called the "Act of Restriction on Descendants of Remarried Women" 再嫁女子孫禁錮法, which was enacted in 1477. This law indirectly restricted the opportunities for the offspring of remarried women to hold official positions, creating an obstacle to remarriage. Upper-class widows who had children who could be

This view became even more prominent during the late Chosŏn period after the Japanese invasions of 1592-98 and the Manchu invasion of 1636-37. After these invasions, the Chosŏn government attempted to strengthen the Confucian patriarchal family in a bid to restore the faltering social order. There arose a heightened concern among the upper class.<sup>70</sup> During this period of social turmoil, the role of widows, whose numbers significantly increased as a result of the invasions, assumed importance in preserving the patriarchal family lineage.<sup>71</sup> Faithful widows who fulfilled their duties for their marital families and suppressed their own desires were seen as capable of filling the void left by men.<sup>72</sup> The Chosŏn state and male literati thus collected cases of chaste widow figures and compiled their stories into biographies of such faithful women. The choice of a faithful widow character in *The Record* was no coincidence given the social atmosphere of the time.<sup>73</sup>

The widow-mother character in *The Record* represents a socially vulnerable at that time. In the 17th century, the Chosŏn state significantly diminished the status of women within their families, reinforcing patriarchal kinship and rigid gender division.<sup>74</sup> Women, especially those widowed, faced a dramatic change in their social standing. Prior to the 17th century, a widow living with a married son held sole control over household affairs and was regarded as the head of the household (*hoju* 戶主). However, starting from the late 17th century, the son assumed the role of household head, relegating the widow to the status of solely being her son's mother. As such, her rights as the head of the household, including economic rights, transferred to her son upon his coming of age. The authority of men over women became more pronounced, overshadowing the authority once wielded by mothers over their children. Women were marginalized from the position of household head and stripped of their ability to represent the family to the outside world.<sup>75</sup> Although widows retained some control over domestic affairs, their officially weakened status within the household left them feeling

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employed in the government and could support themselves economically even if they lived alone were thus less likely to remarry. See Jung Ji-Young, "Questions Concerning Widows' Social Status and Remarriage in late Chosŏn," in *Women and Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea: New Perspectives*, eds. Kim Youngmin and Michael J. Pettid (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 122-123.

<sup>70</sup> Michael J. Pettid, "Confucian Educational Works for Upper Status Women in Chosŏn Korea," in *Women and Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea: New Perspectives*, eds. Kim Youngmin and Michael J. Pettid (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 49-70.

<sup>71</sup> As Maram Epstein has shown, widows often took on the role of their dead husbands. While the social roles assigned to each gender were important, Confucian ideology emphasized that the proper performance of social roles was more important to social order than ensuring the congruity of biological and social identities. Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 29.

<sup>72</sup> Sim Yŏnghŭi, Chŏng Chinsŏng, and Yun Chŏngno, *Mosŏng ūi tamnon kwa hyŏnsil: Ōmŏni ūi sŏng, sam, chŏngch'esŏng* (Sŏul: Nanam Ch'ulp'an, 1999), 390.

<sup>73</sup> For the biographies of faithful women and the importance of widow characters in premodern Korea, see Yi Hyesun and Kim Kyŏngmi, *Han'guk ūi yŏllyŏ chŏn* (Sŏul: Wŏrin, 2002).

<sup>74</sup> Han Hŭisuk, "Chosŏn hugi yangban yŏsŏng ūi saenghwal kwa yŏsŏng ridŏsip," *Yŏsŏng kwa yŏksa* 9 (2008): 5.

<sup>75</sup> Jung Ji-Young, "Questions Concerning Widows' Social Status and Remarriage in Late Chosŏn," in *Women and Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea: New Perspectives*, eds. Kim Youngmin and Michael J. Pettid (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 111-14.

vulnerable and anxious.<sup>76</sup> In this social environment, a submissive son who was unwilling to challenge his mother's authority as household head could minimize potential power conflicts between them. The portrayal of Hyönsöng in *The Record* suggests that a son alone, regardless of his age or maturity, lacked the capacity to effectively manage a household; instead, it was imperative for his mother to take the lead in governing the household.

The widow character in *The Record* likely appealed to female audiences seeking to see empowered female characters. As a widow in a wealthy upper-class family, Madame Yang exudes authority. Madame Yang is portrayed to exert considerable influence over household affairs, including matters of finance and the private lives of other family members. This would have been impossible for women whose husbands still lived. The depiction of Madame Yang as a prosperous and respected widow, free from the influence of a husband or in-laws, embodies the unattainable aspirations of numerous women in Chosön society—to be influential, independent, and yet widely respected.<sup>77</sup>

*The Record* also demonstrates that the portrayal of women in biographies willingly relinquishing their roles upon their sons' maturity is artificial and most likely inaccurate. Such a simplistic portrayal appears in shorter texts such as biographies. However, it was more challenging to achieve in lengthy works of fiction such as *The Record*, which delves into the nuanced facets of a character over a long period of time. Consequently, *The Record* holds historical significance as it explores the imagined possibilities of women grounded in the realities of the time.

## Final Thoughts

Madame Yang achieved two significant milestones that earned her respect. She ensured the prosperity of her husband's family and wielded more power and influence than generally permitted by strict Confucian gender norms.

The popularity of *The Record* can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, the work reflects a social value prioritized during this era—the preservation of the patriarchal family lineage. As long as this is preserved, Madame Yang can assume an unconventional role in the name of

<sup>76</sup> The government's efforts to strengthen the patriarchal family order by elevating the social position of men had been ongoing since the early 17th century. By the late 17th century, there was a significant increase in the sons of widows being registered as the heads of households. In addition, the principle emerged that mothers with sons should not register as the heads of their households. This was because they were not regarded as independent individuals with the capacity to make decisions according to their own will. Chöng Chiyöng, "Chosön hugi hoju sünggyesüng pangsik üi pyönhwa wa chongböp chilsö üi hwaksan: 17/18 segi *Tansöng bojök* e nat'an an kwabu wa gü adül üi chiwi rül chungsim üro," *Han'guk yösöngbak* 18, no. 2 (2002): 11–12, 20. These social changes from the 17th century on led to a decline in the position of mothers within their households and likely caused anxiety for them.

<sup>77</sup> In contrast to Madame Yang, married women with living husbands in the story are limited in terms of displaying their talents. For example, Lady So, the first daughter of Madame Yang who marries a respected upper-class gentleman, has many obligations related to her husband and her in-laws, and has no opportunity to display her extraordinary talents, which are similar to her mother's.

motherhood.<sup>78</sup> Second, she does not pass on her power as the female head of the household to the next generation of women in her family. In the narrative, no female family member inherits her rights over the family's property or the education of children, except for Madame Yang. For example, although Lady Hwa expresses interest in managing the household and her child's education, she is unable to pursue these interests due to the presence of her mother-in-law, husband, and male teacher for her children. Her attempts to assert her power to govern the So household in Hyönsöng's absence, result in turmoil and failure.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, the sons of Lady Hwa and Lady Sök share a male teacher whose authority surpasses that of the two mothers. When the teacher punishes the sons, Lady Hwa is powerless to stop him, and other family members even criticize her for overstepping her bounds. This reinforces the strict delineation of the daughter-in-law's role as dictated by the patriarchal society of Chosŏn at the time.<sup>80</sup>

*The Record* represents the desires of women through the portrayal of exceptional women. Toward the end of the story, elderly women in the So family, with the exception of Madame Yang, are depicted living leisurely lives, writing poems and playing go (*paduk*). However, the power of unmarried women, mothers without a son, and low-born women such as the concubines is diminished in this household. The two secondary mothers, for example, are simply aides to Madame Yang, and their roles are significantly reduced when she no longer requires their help to solidify her position.<sup>81</sup> Only upper-class married women with sons afforded the luxury of living comfortable, leisurely lives. In this way, *The Record* fails to provide a comprehensive portrayal of the diverse lives of women at this time. However, as a story in which a woman strives for achievement and power within the confines of the patriarchal system, it undoubtedly resonated with many women of the period.

For modern readers, Madame Yang's pursuit of power through harsh discipline and the education of her son challenges any simplistic assumptions about birth mothers in premodern Korean fiction. Moreover, this portrayal of the power dynamics between a birth mother and her son within the imaginative realm of clan fiction suggests that women's aspirations for power can be as potent and enduring as those of men, motivating them to devise diverse strategies to achieve it. Such strong female heads of households did not appear in later clan fiction. After the 17th century, married female characters tended to conform to the stereotypical gender role of Confucianism, and widowed mothers relinquished full power

<sup>78</sup> For example, Yang wants to keep her married daughter as close to her as possible, and her first daughter spends most of her time with her birth family. *The Record* suggests that the birth family can offer a legitimate and comfortable place for married women. This would have been impossible if Hyönsöng's father were alive and had demanded his daughter take care of her in-laws.

<sup>79</sup> *So Hyönsöng rok*, vol. 4, 104–20.

<sup>80</sup> Female heads of households appear in later clan fiction works such as *Yun Ha Chöng sammun ch'wirok* (尹河鄭三門聚錄), but their domestic power is far more limited than that of Madame Yang. See Chöng Yöngsin, "Yosöng kajang üi yökhwal kwa kinüng: *Yunba chöng sam mun ch'wirok* üi chungsim üro," *Tongbanghak* 13 (2007): 146.

<sup>81</sup> Hyönsöng's secondary mothers are portrayed as frivolous and nosy. This characterization highlights the distinction between them and the esteemed Madame Yang, possibly implying an unbridgeable gap between members of the upper- and lower-classes.

to their sons after an initial period of education. *The Record*, which portrays a powerful mother and a submissive son, is a product of the 17th century—a time when the patriarchal system was gaining power but had not yet achieved complete dominance in Chosŏn society.

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