

**The Tale of “Shim Ch’ōng”
by Christine Lee**

“What the...,” Shim Ch’ong mumbled to herself. What was she doing lying on the floor of a dilapidated thatched house?

“What’s all this old-fashioned stuff? Is this a folk village or something? Oh, right. I’m supposed to be dead. Is this what Korean hell looks like? Wait, hell is transnational, isn’t it?”
Was this how people ended up when they were killed in a car crash?

She went outside and there she found a man sitting on a wooden bench in the yard.

“Excuse me...”

“Oh, my daughter. You’re up later than usual. Aren’t you feeling well?”

“May I ask who you are?”

“My lovely daughter, what are you saying? You must be very tired if you can’t recognize your own father. Wake up!”

“No, I mean... I don’t have a father like you. *My* father gambled away all his money and abandoned me.”

Shim Hak-gyu put on a grave expression. “Oh Lord!” he wailed. “Why do you continue to bring suffering to our family? First you took my wife to heaven and then you took my eyesight. And now you want Ch’ōng to suffer from amnesia? Poor me, my poor daughter, my little Ch’ōng!”

Shim Ch’ōng was quick on the uptake. Outside the gate she looked around, wondering if she’d been cast into a filming site for a historical drama. But she saw no one holding a camera or any other filming equipment. The surroundings were a bit different from those of Minsokch’on, the Folk Village, where she’d gone on a field trip in grade 9. Nothing here looked

modern, and everyone wore clothing that she only ever saw in historical dramas and films and in her history textbooks. Fear stole into her heart. At the same time, she had to face up to the reality of her situation.

All right. Let's pretend I'm Shim Ch'ōng, the girl in the folk tale.

And back inside the gate she went. “Oh, Father. I'm so sorry. It was a joke. I was just so bored. How could I not remember my own father? Haha... ha... ha...”

For a good month Shim Ch'ōng had to spend awkward days like this with her “father.”

“*Era*, why didn't someone tell me life is such a bitch!” She kept her grumbling to herself so Shim Hak-gyu wouldn't hear. “I need to get out of this shit hole and fast! I have to make it on my own. How come both my father and Shim Hak-gyu can't support their own family? Criminy!”

“Hey Ch'ōng! Is dinner ready?”

“Almost! Just leave everything to me, Father, and have yourself a nice rest!”

“Sure.”

“*Era*, what a shit hole...”

One day she went to the marketplace and heard some sailors saying they were looking for a young maiden they could sacrifice to ensure a safe voyage. Back home she went to find Shim Hak-gyu lamenting:

“What a miserable fate! I just learned I can get my eyesight back if I offer 300 sacks of rice to the Buddha. But where am I going to get 300 sacks of rice! I might be blind for the rest of my days! Woe is me!”

“Father?”

“Oh, you’re back from the market? You should rest up, my daughter. And... forget what I said just now.”

It was weird. Shim Hak-gyu, as if in compensation for the loss of his eyesight, had better hearing than sighted people. He almost always welcomed Shim Ch’öng as soon as she was back from the marketplace or from visiting the neighbors. Chances were slim that he wouldn’t hear her coming into the yard.

Wait, it’s...as if he said that out loud on purpose. She felt goose bumps. But she didn’t dwell on the thought. *Well, anyways, I’m going to jump into the Indangsu and meet the Dragon King. My first long- distance journey here. I better pack my bags.*

For the next several days she was busy meeting with the sailors, who had agreed to give her 300 sacks of rice. One morning she finally broke the news to Shim Hak-gyu:

“Father, I have something important to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“If I’m not mistaken, you will recover your eyesight if you offer 300 sacks of rice to the Buddha. Right? Well guess what --I met some sailors who will give me that same amount of rice if I sacrifice myself when they cross the sea.”

“What? Then how am I supposed to get by?”

“Pardon?”

“Who’s going to cook for me? And do the laundry? And clean the house?”

“But on the other hand you’ll get your eyesight back.”

“But still...”

You can imagine Shim Ch'ōng's disgust. Cunning Shim Hak-gyu was acting just like her real father.

Ehyu! That guy wasted his life drinking and gambling, and this bogus shithead of a father is no different.

The day came for her to board the ship. There was a guilty tinge to the sailors' faces.

You guys don't look too happy knowing you have to throw a girl overboard as a sacrifice.

“Hey, it's time to...”

“I know. Thanks for taking me here.”

And just like that she jumped into the sea.

“Umm....”

“Are you okay?”

“This is...the water palace? And you are the dragon king.”

“Right. How did you know?”

Because you're too handsome to be a messenger from the next world. Oh shoot. Did my makeup get washed off?

“Because obviously you're the only one wearing nice silk clothes, and all those people behind you are lowering their heads and putting their hands together politely.”

“Hahaha. Aren't you a clever one. Hey, can you tell me some stories about the world of human beings up there?”

“Sure. Anything you want to hear. I'll give you all the detail you want!”

Ha! I can fill my belly—I'm absolutely starving--and while I'm at it I can check out this handsome dude's face.

Unfortunately for him, the dragon king did not have the ability to read people's minds.

“No, don't tell me—did that really happen?” said the dragon king while listening to one of Shim Ch'ōng's stories about life on dry land. “It's amazing. I want to see that for myself.”

“Why not. And you can count on me to be your tour guide.”

“Thank you.”

Shim Ch'ōng spent several days talking with the dragon king about life outside the sea and eating high on the hog.

“Hey,” said Shim Ch'ōng one day. “I know a story about a dragon king and a rabbit.”

“Okay, let's hear it.”

“Well, once upon a time there was a dragon king who had a disease that could only be cured if he ate the liver of a rabbit. So a loyal retainer, a tortoise, went up on land and—“

“Brought the rabbit down to the water palace. But the disgraceful rabbit played a trick on the dragon king and got away.”

“How did you know?”

“That dragon king was my grandfather.”

“What?”

“So after the rabbit escaped, my grandfather brought Hua Tuo down and got cured. Ever since then we've despised any creature who is close to me but who runs off.”

Well hell, I've entertained this guy long enough. Tomorrow I need to find myself a lotus blossom and get back to dry land.

“I can understand. I would be really sad if someone I knew just left me without a word. But as you know, I have to go back up to land. I can’t live here forever.”

“I know. I’m so sorry I can’t spend more time with you. I’ll get you a big lotus blossom that will help you leave our watery realm.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“My pleasure. But make sure you come and see me again. You are always welcome to visit me and have great conversations.”

The inside of the lotus was warmer and more comfortable than Shim Ch’ōng expected. After fixing her makeup and getting her clothing just right she took a nap with an untroubled mind.

What the heck, I kind of figured this charade would be damn tiring—I need to grab a few winks. Anyhow, if only this next king is as handsome as the Dragon King dude...

“Are you... a fairy? Or a person from heaven?”

Leave me alone, will you—I just want to sleep. Oh god, I’m here already. I knew I should have made sure to fix my makeup before the lotus blossom opened up—damn it all for falling asleep.

“My name is Shim Ch’ōng.”

“Welcome, Ch’ōng. The moment I saw you I was smitten. Will you be my wife?”

And present you with seven sons? No beating around the bush for this guy! And no one told me this king was supposed to be crazy. He’s handsome enough all right, but come on, dude, give a girl some breathing room.

What was Shim Ch'ōng to do, follow the original plot line to the end, or just do whatever she wanted?

Wait, why do I have to follow the original plot? I'm not the Shim Ch'ōng in the original story. I don't even know what's going to happen after the sentence "They lived together happily ever after." So that settles it—I'm taking my destiny in my own two hands!

"Sorry, I'm already spoken for." *Which of course is not true.*

"No problem, for I am king of the country. Who do you think will stand against me?"

Maybe it's not a problem for you, but I've got places to go, things to see.

She gazed at him with pitiful eyes. "My true love awaits me. I must leave."

"All right. Then leave you shall. But at least do this for me first."

"What?"

"Remain in the palace for a month. Everyone is curious about your existence. Even if you're not a real fairy, pretend you're a fairy from heaven."

"Why do I need to do that?"

"It's simple. To strengthen my royal authority--by showing my people I'm friends with a heavenly being."

"But I'm from a big lotus blossom that was drifting at sea."

"No matter. That's why we have rumor-mongers and gossips to distort the facts of a situation. The only 'facts' I need are that you're from heaven and I was chosen to be king as a deputy of heaven."

"That's some con job."

"Hey, give me a break. It's hard to keep the throne. So I have to cook up a fantasy that this country is a good place to live, so my subjects will keep working for me."

“Wow. You’re scary.”

“That’s a king’s job.”

“Okay, then what will you give me if I pretend to be a fairy from heaven?”

“I’ll set you free after a month.”

“Hey, we already agreed on that. Just help me go back to the water palace.”

“Water palace? Ha, don’t tell me you really believe in that crap. It’s just a figment of some guy’s imagination.”

“It’s not a figment, it really exists, you idiot. That’s where I’m from.”

“Hey, did you forget I’m the king? Don’t be so sassy.”

“You’re the one who’s too big for his britches. Who’s the one from heaven anyway, huh?”

What could the king say to that?

And so it was that the king decided to help Shim Ch’ōng return as soon as he accomplished his purpose.

“I’m thinking of holding a festival for the blind.”

“How come?”

“Like I said, I need to show my subjects how merciful and generous I am. Also, you will be my partner at the celebration.”

“Fair enough. But why does it have to be for the blind?”

“I don’t know. Just because.”

Shim Ch’ōng grew suspicious. She didn’t want to follow the original plot of the story, which was why she’d rejected the king’s marriage proposal. What’s more, she’d been careful not

to mention anything even remotely associated with blind people. So why did he want to hold a festival, and why specifically for the blind? *Is it my destiny to have to follow the original script? What's going on?*

“Why a festival for the blind all of a sudden? Is somebody giving you orders?”

“No, it's just... I know what I have to do, it's all part of the story... Oops. Never mind. Just a slip of the tongue.”

“Fess up-- you're not the real king, are you?”

“What! How dare you speak like that to the king?”

“I know you're not from this world. And I know you know it's the world of the Shim Ch'öng story. Am I wrong?”

“You are also...?”

“Yes, I am Shim Ch'öng, the heroine.”

“Then why not follow the script? Isn't it easier to anticipate your future that way? Besides, we're almost to the end.”

“Think about it. What happens after you find Shim Hak-gyu and marry me? Have you thought how 'happily ever after' you will live after finishing the script?”

“I'll manage somehow.”

“That's a load of bull. You should live your life the way you want. You are the master of your life!”

“So, you don't want to see your 'father'?”

“I've been thinking instead that we could change the script. For example, Shim Hak-gyu is totally different from the Shim Hak-gyu in the real Shim Ch'öng story. He's selfish. He's a

lazyass. And he wants to live in comfort by exploiting me. I am sick and tired of that kind of person.”

“I hear you. So if we really have to follow the script, then the world has us by the short hair. But, nothing happened to us after you rejected my marriage proposal. Think about it.”

“You got a point.”

“Along with my pride being wounded...”

“Sorry about that, haha.”

“Are you going to just neglect Shim Hak-gyu, then? Hmm. I feel sorry for the guy. As you know, thanks to madam Ppaengddök, he won’t get his sight back.”

“Who cares.”

“Girl, you are so cold-blooded.”

“It’s called punitive justice.”

Even so, she felt bad about Shim Hak-gyu remaining blind for the rest of his life. Eventually she came to feel that she might be the one who, by not following the script, would ruin his life.

“Hey, come to think of it, maybe it’s not such a bad idea holding a festival for blind people.”

“See? Better to at least let Shim Hak-gyu get his sight back. You were feeling guilty, right?”

“Oh shut up.”

The king and Shim Ch'ōng decided to keep the festival going for a month, in case it took a while for Shim Hak-gyu to find his way to the palace. As promised, she had to pretend to be a heavenly being and to show the subjects she had a good relationship with the king.

“Oh heavenly figure, may you enjoy your sojourn here, and please call down the rains to make the land fertile so we can have a rich harvest for years to come!”

“Haha, I'll give it my best shot.”

“Hey, doesn't it get old smiling to people all the time? I bet you'll get a big-time case of mouth cramps.”

“What do you expect? A heavenly figure has to have a kind look to her, like a holy angel or something.”

“A holy angel? You need to take a break, you're not making any sense.”

“...Yeah, what I should have said is that I have a lot of experience in the service industry, so naturally I've been trained to smile nonstop.”

The job was tiring but she really enjoyed being delivered from stressful thoughts. She only had to think about her duties as the heavenly being who was in the service of the king, and not about the next part of the script. The people attending the banquets were nice, different from her customers when she was working part time. And these weren't just plain old banquets, they were court banquets, so she could partake of the royal cuisine to her heart's desire.

Wow, this is tasty stuff! I want to take some of these ladies of the royal kitchen back home with me.

Among the delicacies, there was one in particular she liked.

“Holy rooster! said the king one day. “Are you the one who put in the order for fried chicken?”

“Yeah, I wanted it so bad. How come you didn’t order it yourself?”

“No reason to. I can’t just hand the Royal Kitchen a recipe for a dish that people in this time period don’t know about.”

“Poor guy. Like I said, people in heaven really dig fried chicken.”

“I should have been Shim Ch’ōng, not a king.”

“Eat your heart out.”

While they feasted on chicken they talked about their experiences working at a fried-chicken franchise.

“Hmm,” came a voice from one of the banquet-goers. “This smell is so familiar--wait! Isn’t that the chicken dish my daughter made for my birthday? Then she’s alive! My daughter Ch’ōng! Where are you?”

Again and again Shim Hak-gyu called for Shim Ch’ōng. The others in attendance began to wonder.

“Shim Ch’ōng,” said the king. “Your father is calling you.”

“Hold on. I just realized something--the most important thing.”

“Which is?”

“We’ve already deceived your subjects with this heavenly-being charade. I can’t imagine what’s going to happen if it leaks out that Shim Hak-gyu, a blind man for crying out loud, is my father.”

“Oh God, you only now figured that out?”

“No thanks to you!”

“So, any bright ideas?”

“We’re both in danger. There could be revolts nation-wide, you could get dethroned.”

“And you might get put to death because you’re a commoner who lied to the *yangban* with all their whoop-dee-do authority.”

“This hierarchy sucks. Oh hell, I don’t know. But they wouldn’t kill the heroine of the story.”

“I wouldn’t bet my life on that.”

“Que sera sera. I’ll just meet Shim Hak-gyu as we planned.”

“Ch’öng! Shim Ch’öng! Where are you, my daughter?”

“Father, I am here!”

“Is... is it really you, my daughter Ch’öng?”

“Yes, it’s me!”

“*Aigo*, your shit-for-brains father has made life so difficult for you!”

“Oh but it’s my absence that’s made life so difficult for *you*, Father. Please forgive your hare-brained daughter. Boo-hoo!”

“Uh-uh, it’s shit-for-brains Pop who needs forgiving.”

“*Aigo*, my father!”

“*Aigo*, my daughter.”

There we go—I definitely deserve an Oscar for this!

As they were staging their tearful reunion an elderly retainer approached. “Sorry to interrupt you guys, but are you really her father? How can a blind man be the father of a woman from heaven?”

Oh shit—what now?

But just when she'd reached her wits' end trying to come up with an answer, miracle of miracles, Shim Hak-gyu got his sight back right then and there. Imagine everyone's surprise at witnessing a blind man opening his eyes wide and throwing aside his walking stick.

"How dare you raise doubts about me? I was testing you humans, testing your sincerity toward my daughter and me!"

What the hell is the old fool saying now? "Father, what are you trying to--?"

"Hold on. I know you're mad at them too, but let me scold them first."

Shim Hak-gyu was no slouch at reading a situation, and he'd seen through Shim Ch'öng's act. But now it was time to throw the terror of heaven into the retainer and the others at the banquet.

"Oh no," pleaded the retainer, "you've got it all wrong."

"Too late for that. You have dared disdain this heavenly being, and for this, the land of Chosön shall suffer the lengthiest of droughts! So be it."

Aigo, forgive us this once, good sir, I beg of you."

After Shim Hak-gyu had scolded everyone to his satisfaction he had the meal of his life, the court servants at his beck and call until the banquet ended. He was provided with fancy lodgings at the court and tasty food to eat. Retainers asked after him every day and begged for mercy.

"Father, what's been happening all this time? How have you been doing?"

"I managed to get by. Don't worry..." And suddenly he was coughing up blood. "Ch'öng, my daughter. I have something to tell you."

"Hush up, now. I'm afraid you'll lose too much blood."

"I must tell you this. I am... your father."

“Of course you’re my father.”

“I mean, I’m your real father, the guy who abandoned you when he ran off from a gambling debt.”

“What? And how come you never told me?”

“I was beaten up and stabbed by that gang I borrowed money from—they tracked me down. And when I came to my senses I heard people talking in whispers, ‘Poor Ch’öng, poor Shim Hak-gyu.’ At first I said to myself, ‘What the...?’ But finally I made the connection—I was in the Shim Ch’öng story.”

“But... but you didn’t notice I was your actual daughter Ch’öng at first!”

“Oh but I did. I knew it was you because a neighbor found you lying in the yard of that thatched house the day after I found myself there. Of course I knew the story and so I figured I’d wait for the day I got my eyesight back.”

“You should have told me. Then we could have made a plan and avoided all this mess.”

“I was so selfish and immature as a person and a father. My only thought was for you to follow the story and then my life would turn around when you married the king. But I realized I was wrong, I regretted all the foul-ups and mistakes I made after you left me. I’m terribly sorry.”

“All right, that’s enough for now. You need some rest.”

“But I didn’t waste those 300 sacks of rice.”

“Can it, I said. I want you to rest.”

“Sorry.”

“By the way, it was really weird to see you vomiting blood. There’s nothing in the story about Shim Hak-gyu having a health problem like that.”

“I think it’s because you’re leading Shim Ch’öng’s life as you want.”

“Are you pinning the blame for your illness on me?”

“No, I just wanted to say that people’s lives don’t turn out exactly the way we might expect them to.”

“I really hope you’ll make your own life, your own destiny.”

“I will. Thanks to you, my daughter Ch’öng.”

That night Shim Ch’öng went to the king and told him about her father becoming Shim Hak-gyu and about his illness. She wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“Why do you want to leave? We have a lot of specialists. I will help you.”

“What will people think of a father who’s supposed to be from heaven throwing up blood?”

“Good point. Then what’s your plan? Do you know anyone who can help you?”

“Yes,” she said with a grin.

With the king’s assistance, Shim Ch’öng and her father arrived at the Indangsu. With no hesitation they plunged right in. They woke up in a fancy room, and the first thing Shim Ch’öng asked the dragon king was to help her father.

“No problem. Our medical knowledge is extensive—we were even taught some techniques when my grandfather brought Hua Tuo here.”

“Thanks, Dragon King!”

After a course of treatment Shim Hak-gyu was restored to full health. He became a good drinking buddy of the dragon king and taught him the gambling game with the deck of flower

cards that had led to his death in his previous life. He wanted to stay in the water palace, and the dragon king allowed him to spend the rest of his life there.

Shim Ch'ōng, by now a heavenly figure beyond all doubt, went back to land and visited the king to say hello. And guess what--before she knew it she'd developed feelings for him, but now, out of the blue, another marriage proposal!

“Not exactly what I expected...”

“What didn't you expect?”

“Well, I kind of feel like you've been stringing me along all this time.”

“What— you think I'm not serious?”

“Um... I mean, it's just so sudden.”

“But once upon a time we had something special going, didn't we?”

“Maybe we still do.”

They both laughed. And then the following spring they tied the knot and lived happily ever after.