

ON THE ROAD

Ch'odang Village in

Kim Joo-young

Novelist



There are several roads from Seoul to Kangnŭng on the eastern coast of Kangwon-do province. The easiest route takes five hours along the Yŏngdong Expressway, which crosses Taegwallyŏng Pass. Some travelers leave the expressway at Sangjinbu and take Highway 6 through Odaesan National Park to Yŏn-gok on the coast where

they head south along Highway 7 to Kangnŭng. This route is scenic because you pass through Odaesan and Kyŏngp'odae, the beautiful lake district north of Kangnŭng. Either way, you end up in Kangnŭng and Kyŏngp'o Provincial Park, one of the most popular beach areas during Korea's scorching summer months.

There is more to Kangnŭng than the

beach, however. Six kilometers northeast of Kangnŭng, just south of the beach at Kyŏngp'odae, is the village of Ch'odang. The name Ch'odang originated in China. It means "grass house" and is a self-deprecating expression for one's home village, much like the English expression "my humble abode." The famous Tang China poet Du Fu (712-770) lived in a village called Caotang, the

Kangnŭng



Chinese equivalent. During Korea's Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910), Ch'odang was the home of Hŏ Yŏp, the father of the renowned writers Hŏ Kyun (1569-1618) and Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn (1563-1589). Some say the village got its name when the elder Hŏ moved there, whereas others believe that there was another Ch'odang inhabited by the Ch'oe clan of Kangnŭng.

The bean curd, tofu, produced in Ch'odang is famous throughout Korea. In fact, several tofu restaurants in Seoul are called Ch'odang Tubu (Tofu) House because the name Ch'odang has become synonymous with bean curd, which is *tubu* in Korean. In Ch'odang, villagers pump seawater up from the ocean every morning to steam the bean curd. Mushy tofu poured into a rectan-

gular mold and not yet set is called *sun tubu*, uncurdled bean curd. There is nothing like a plate of sun tubu topped with a spicy mix of soy sauce, sesame oil, green onions and sesame seed, and washed down with a cup of *makkŏlli* rice wine. Once you try it, you have to have more. That is why tofu is the main attraction on most Ch'odang restaurant menus.

Few people know that this center for tofu cuisine was once the home of the famous Chosŏn poet Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn and her younger brother Hŏ Kyun. Their house, nestled in a grove of pine and blossoming cherry trees, is now occupied by three dogs and an elderly couple who are responsible for taking care of the house and surrounding grounds. No one is sure when the house was built, but records show that the writers' father, Hŏ Yŏp, lived there in the mid-16th century and that Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn was born there.

The elder Hŏ's first wife, a woman of the Han clan, bore him a son named Sŏng and two daughters before she died. His second wife, a woman from the Kangnŭng Kim clan, bore two sons, Pong and Kyun, and a daughter named Cho-hŭi, who later went by the pen name Nansŏlhŏn.

The girl was born to a family of literary genius and studied with her brothers. During the Chosŏn Dynasty, few women were given an opportunity to study Chinese writing or literature, even



PARK SUNG-JU

A stone monument honoring Hŏ Kyun (above) and another inscribed with Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn's poetry (below) at the entrance to Ch'odang Village

if they were born to a literary family. *Namjon yŏbi* (men respected and women demeaned) was the gender standard during the Chosŏn Dynasty. Women were expected to remain at home, dedicated to domestic affairs, and were not allowed to demonstrate their abilities outside the home. It was in this rigid society that an eight-year-old Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn wrote *Kwanghanjŏn baekongnu sangnyangmun*, a poem depicting the world of Taoist ascetics.

Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn was married at the age of 15 to a man named Kim Sŏng-nip, but they did not have a happy life together. Kim was a shallow man who preferred loose women and drink to family life, and his mother was a jealous and abusive woman. Nansŏlhŏn gave birth to a boy and a girl but both died, and then she had a miscarriage. Meanwhile, her brother was sent into exile and was later executed. Nansŏlhŏn was understandably discouraged and retreated to a haven of books and poetry until her death.

Her literary world resonates with a



PARK SUNG-JU

certain restlessness. Water and images of water are linked to the human condition throughout her works—water and life, water and hardship, water and purity. For Hō Nansōlhōn, moving water symbolized feminine qualities. The movement of water conjures up the rocking sensation of a horse cart, a boat or a wagon. Water also symbolizes purification, an escape from the restlessness and insecurity of the outside world into a vast, quiet body of water. The movement that Hō Nansōlhōn depicts reflects the insecurities of women's lives, isolated and alienated under the rigid standards of feudal society.

In her poems, Hō created an imaginary world in which the intense bitterness of Chosŏn-era women was portrayed in a beautiful dream. The opportunities for social interaction by women were extremely limited during the Chosŏn Dynasty, and Hō's life was particularly painful because of her husband's profligacy, her mother-in-law's abuse, the deaths of her children and the hardships that her brothers endured



A stone monument bearing an inscription of Hō Kyun's poetry (above) is found in Kyosan, a village on the coast near Kyōngp'o Lake (below).

in the political arena. Hō used her pain and sense of futility to portray an ascetic world where she found some consolation. In this dream world she found an escape, a nebulous otherness.

Hō Nansōlhōn was plagued by three *han*, or bitter unhappiness. First, why was she born in Chosŏn of all the lands to be born in? Second, why was she born a woman? And third, why did she have to marry Kim Sōng-nip of all the men in the world? These were the reasons she longed for another world.

Four Moons at Kyōngp'o Lake

Kyōngp'o Lake, to the north of Ch'odang, was a natural backdrop for Hō Nansōlhōn's poetry. Today her childhood home is surrounded by pine and flowering cherry trees, but in her time, the lake's waters reached to the house. Kyōngp'o means bright as a mirror, and one can easily imagine a young Hō Nansōlhōn stepping out from her front gate to gaze into the mirror-like water. People once said that four moons shone at Kyōngp'o Lake. The first was





PH: SUNG WOO CHOI

Kyöngp'o Lake (top) and Kyöngp'odaek, a lookout by the lake (above)

the moon in the sky, the second the moon in the East Sea, the third on the surface of Kyöngp'o Lake and the fourth reflected in the wine cup of a gentleman enjoying an evening by the lake. If yet another moon reflected in the eyes of the person sitting across the table were included, other people said, there would be five moons at Kyöngp'o Lake. At the center of the lake is Bird Rock, where hundreds of migratory birds gather. With the lake's many moons and rich wildlife, it is no wonder that Hô Nansôlhôn's poetry reflects an affinity for nature.

Above the lake is a lookout,



Kyöngp'odae, from which the whole lake and surrounding area are visible. The lookout was first constructed in 1326 at Inwölsa where four ascetics who served as officials in the Kangwon region entertained themselves, but it was moved to its present location during the Chosön Dynasty.

The evening mist rising over Ch'odang as seen from Kyöngp'odae is one of the area's most beautiful sights. In fact, Kyöngp'odae is famous for eight vistas, including the sun rising over the ocean, the golden rays of the setting sun illuminating the ocean, the moonrise, the sight of the fishing boats at night,

Kangdongmun Gate in the midst of an old pine grove, and the evening mist over Ch'odang Village.

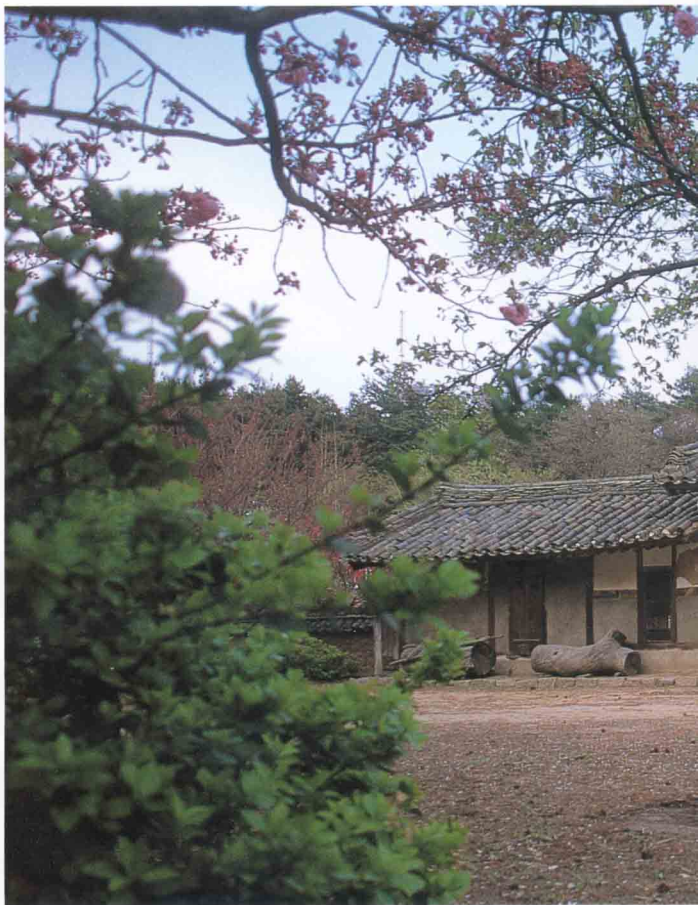
About ten minutes north of Kyöngp'o Lake is a small hill on the coast which marks the spot where Odaesan meets the sea. This is where Hō Nansölhön's younger brother, Hō Kyun, was born. He is best known as the author of *Hong Kil-dong chön* (*The Tale of Hong Kil-dong*) which is thought to be the first novel composed in *han-gül* script. There is probably not a Korean alive who is not familiar with this tale.

This small hill is called Kyosan. *San*

means mountain and *kyo* is a mythical snake that tries but never succeeds in becoming a dragon. Kyosan was also Hō Kyun's pen name. He was born in his maternal grandparent's home at the foot of Kyosan. The house is gone now; all that remains is a stone monument bearing an inscription of Hō Kyun's poetry.

Hō Kyun's life was as unhappy as his sister's. He was a celebrated writer and scholar, but his son, born to his second wife, was not able to enter the Chosön bureaucracy and serve as a respected official because he was illegitimate by Chosön standards. A renowned idealist

Few people know that Ch'odang was once the home of the famous Chosŏn poet Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn and her younger brother Hŏ Kyun, the author of The Tale of Hong Kil-dong.



and liberal, Hŏ fraternized and sympathized with other gentlemen-scholars who experienced similar frustration. He rebelled against a society that discriminated on the basis of one's birth and that allowed politics to be influenced by money. He dreamed of creating a world in which the illegitimate and men of low birth were treated as equals.

In this sense, Hŏ Kyun was like his sister. Through the exploits of Hong Kil-dong, a Robin Hood-like figure, Hŏ's *The Tale of Hong Kil-dong* indirectly attacked the tyrannical rule of

Kwanghaegun (r. 1608–1623) and called for the reform of societal and government practices that discriminated against children born out of wedlock. Hŏ's dream of equality was never realized, however, and he was twice accused of treason. The first time he was sent into exile; the second, in 1618, he was executed along with his followers.

Just as Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn could not live as an ordinary Chosŏn woman, Hŏ Kyun could not follow the path prescribed for him by society. Although they experienced bitter tribulations, Hŏ

Nansŏlhŏn left a body of poetry that demonstrates her ability to escape the strictures of her society through her writing, and Hŏ Kyun stood by his values and perhaps achieved spiritual freedom after his death.

Talented female poets were rare in traditional Korean society. The rules of decorum governing the lives of women of noble birth were strict. Women were not taught literature; they were expected to limit their interests to cooking. Clearly, Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn was a genius and a singular woman, breaking with con-



The home of Hō Yōp, father of writers Hō Kyun and Hō Nansōhōn

vention and writing poetry from the age of eight.

Hō Kyun explained his relationship to his sister in this way: "My late sister was a kind person and a fine writer, but her good qualities were never recognized by her mother-in-law. She lost her two children and died with great pain in her heart. My own heart aches when I think of my elder sister. I read Hwang Tae-sa's *Words of Sorrow (Aesa)* and realized that feelings of sibling love and sympathy have not changed through the ages."

There is one more place that every visitor to Kangnūng must see: Sōn-gyo-jiang, a traditional house on the road from Kyōngp'o Lake to downtown Kangnūng. A large parking lot and many Korean-style restaurants mark the entrance to it. The house facing the lake was once home to a branch of the ruling Yi clan of the Chosōn Dynasty and is unique for its free-flowing use of space, quite different from other houses of that era. It also combines the closed style of architecture from Korea's colder northern region and the open style

found in the warmer southern provinces. In the pond next to the house is a pavilion supported by four stone columns. It looks as if a scholarly gentleman is dangling his feet in the cool water. The walls of the pavilion are made of folding doors. On hot summer days, gentlemen must have sat there, enjoying the cool breeze over the water.

The lake radiates the sad and sometimes violent history of this region. On each tree and stone, the moss of time reminds visitors of Kangnūng's colorful past. ♦