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Author(s): James H. Grayson

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Tan'gun and Chumong: The Politics of Korean Foundation Myths

James H. Grayson

Abstract

Foundation myths by definition are politically focused tales, describing the origin of nations, states, ruling dynasties, clans, and other consanguineal groups. The myths of Tan'gun and Chumong are the oldest extant foundation myths of Korea, but only the Myth of Tan'gun has had a continuous influence on the affirmation of Korean politics and nationalism for over a thousand years. This article explores why that has been the case.

Introduction

My interest in the folk narrative of Korea, especially its foundation myths, dates back nearly fifty years. In my research I have noted the curious fact that in the narrative traditions of Korea there are no ancient records of creation myths that describe the origin of the world 'as we know it', but that there are a significant number of myths describing the founding of nations, states, ruling dynasties and families, and clans and other consanguineal groups. This class of myths, which I refer to as foundation myths, is richly represented in the records of Korean history. Pre-eminent amongst these myths, two stand out: the Myth of Tan'gun (檀君), the founder of the state of Ancient Chosŏn (古朝鮮); and the Myth of Chumong (朱蒙), the founder of the kingdom of Koguryŏ (高句麗). These two myths appear continually, or are referred to frequently, in Korean historic documents, and later in materials written by Europeans and North Americans. However, only one of these foundation myths, the Myth of Tan'gun, has had a significant and continued impact on affirming the legitimacy of Korean politics, and it has also been *the* source for authenticating Korean nationalism. I will explore the history of these two myths, and make some suggestions about why the Tan'gun myth has had such pre-eminence.¹

The earliest political entity to which Koreans have traced their origin as a people, and which they also claim as their earliest state, is the kingdom of Ancient Chosŏn. This state, which occupied territory in southern Manchuria and the north-western part of the Korean peninsula, was absorbed into the Chinese Han Empire (206 BC–220 AD) in 109 BC. Its origins are ancient and the state may date back to the fifth century before Christ, or earlier (Pratt and Rutt 1999, 325; Grayson 2001, 41). Following the break-up of the Mongol Empire in the late fourteenth century, the name 'Chosŏn' was selected by the rulers of the newly established Korean dynasty to demonstrate the historicity of their claim to rule an independent state. This Chosŏn dynasty lasted for over five hundred years, until the state was annexed by Japan in 1910 into its expanding empire.

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The same name, Chosŏn (in its Japanese form 'Chōsen'), was used by the Japanese colonial government until Japan's defeat in the Second World War in 1945. 'Chosŏn' was then used by the Soviet and American military governments in their respective zones of occupation until 1948 when separate independent governments were established in the northern and southern parts of the peninsula. The term Chosŏn continues to be used by the North Korean regime in the present day as the name of their state.² The name Chosŏn clearly has significant political implications for any regime wanting to claim historic legitimacy for its rule, to demonstrate continuity with polities from the most ancient period.

Koguryŏ, one of the so-called 'Three Kingdoms' of Korea or Samguk (三國),³ dominated central and southern Manchuria and the northern and central parts of the Korean peninsula from the third to the late seventh centuries, and through a successor state, Parhae (渤海; Chinese 'Bohai'), until the beginning of the tenth century. Before its collapse in the seventh century, the state was frequently referred to in documents by an abbreviation as 'Koryŏ' (高麗), the name which was adopted subsequently by a new kingdom founded in the tenth century. 'Koryŏ' is the source for the name 'Korea' by which the peninsular kingdom became known to Europeans exploring and trading in East Asia from Renaissance times. Clearly Koryŏ also is a name which lends authenticity to regimes wanting to claim historic legitimacy for their rule.⁴ Given this fact, why is it that the foundation myth of Chosŏn, rather than the foundation myth of Koguryŏ, has been the source of legitimacy for modern Korean nationalism and for the contemporary Korean states in the northern and southern parts of the peninsula?

The Myth of Tan'gun

The oldest extant record of the Myth of Tan'gun⁵ is contained in the *Samguk yusa* (三國遺事, Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) compiled and written by the Buddhist monk Iryŏn (一然, 1206–89) around the year 1277. This work, itself the oldest extant major collection of Korean folkloric material, was written during the era of Mongol domination and begins with the Myth of Tan'gun as the statement of the primordial origins of the Korean people (Pratt and Rutt 1999, 400–401; Grayson 2001, 26–27). The *Samguk yusa* provides two versions of this myth which are drawn from two different traditional sources, one of which is simply a summary of the mythic narrative and the second of which is a full narrative of the myth. The latter narrative is translated as follows.⁶

Text of the Myth

In ancient times, Hwanin (桓因) had a *sŏja* (庶子)⁷ called Hwanung (桓雄).⁸ He desired to descend from Heaven and to possess the world of men. His father, realizing his son's intentions, descended to the three great mountains and saw that mankind would benefit from his son's actions. He gave his son the three *ch'ŏn puin* (天符印)⁹ and commanded him to go and rule over mankind.

Taking with him three thousand spirits, Hwanung descended upon the summit of T'aebaek-san (太白山, Great White Mountain) beneath the tree by the Sacred Altar. That area was called the Sacred City. He was known as Hwanung *ch'ŏnwang* (桓雄天王, Heavenly King Hwanung).¹⁰ Together with the Earl of Wind, the Master of Rain, and the

Master of Cloud, he supervised agriculture, the preservation of life, the curing of disease, punishments, the difference between right and wrong, in all some three hundred and sixty kinds of work for mankind.

At that time, there was a bear and a tiger which lived together in a cave. They constantly petitioned Hwanung. They wanted to be transformed into men. Then the god gave them a piece of Sacred Mugwort and twenty pieces of garlic¹¹ saying, 'If you eat this and do not see daylight for one hundred days, you will receive a human form.' The bear and the tiger took the plants and ate. They fasted for three times seven days.¹² The bear received a woman's body. The tiger was not able to fast and did not receive a human body.

As there was no one with whom the Bear Woman¹³ could marry, she went daily to the base of the tree by the altar to pray for a child. Hwanung changed his form and married her. She became pregnant and had a son. He was called Tan'gun *wang'gōm* (檀君王儉, King Tan'gun).¹⁴ In the fiftieth year of the Emperor Yao¹⁵ . . . he established a city at P'yōngyang and called the nation Chosŏn. He later moved his city to Asadal on Paegak-san . . . He governed [the nation] for 1,500 years. King Hu of Zhou¹⁶ . . . enfeoffed Kija with [the state of] Chosŏn. Tan'gun then transferred to Changdang-gyōng. Later, he returned to Asadal, hid himself, and became the Mountain God. [At this time], he was 1,908 years of age. (Grayson 2001, 31; translation of *Samguk yusa* 1.1)

The Structure and Meaning of the Myth

Using dramatic structural analysis,¹⁷ one can discern six scenes in the narrative as recorded by Iryōn. In the first scene we see the desire of a son who is not in the line of succession speaking with his father, the Ruler of Heaven, indicating that he wants to descend to earth to rule humanity. The father selects a place for his son to go, supplies his son with a retinue, and bestows on him three sacred symbols of royal authority. The second scene depicts the descent of the son and his retinue on the top of a sacred mountain and his creation of an ideal community. In the third scene, two animals—a bear and a tiger—seeing the wonders of the rule of this culture-bearer, petition him to transform them into humans. He gives them a test, but the tiger fails while the bear succeeds. In the fourth scene, the Bear Woman wishes to have a child, a wish granted by the Son of the Ruler of Heaven. The offspring of this union is Tan'gun, Prince of the Sandalwood Tree. In the fifth and final scene of the original myth, Tan'gun proceeds to create a kingdom. The sixth scene is a redacted narrative added onto the earlier narrative showing how the rulership of the state was transferred from the family claiming Tan'gun as their ancestor to the family claiming Kija as their ancestor. It also offers an explanation for the origin of the cult of the Mountain God.¹⁸

This myth is very complex and unusually rich in symbols and motifs, with resonances to other mythic traditions. In the myth, we see an explanation for the origin of human culture, for the origin of the ruling clan of the state, for the origin of the nation (a people with a clear identity), and for the state itself. This is not a creation myth, because the world and human beings already exist. This is a grand foundation myth explaining the origin of civilization and the current political order. In the final scene of the original un-redacted narrative, Tan'gun exercises his authority by establishing a state, naming it, and fixing a place for his rule. 'Chinese' authority over Chosŏn is denied because the text implies that Tan'gun's name was bestowed upon him by (presumably) his divine

father, and because the Emperor Yao is only referred to as a chronological point to fix the beginning of Tan'gun's reign. This latter point is important because it establishes the independence of the 'Korean' state from 'China', and because it further implies that the 'Korean' state is nearly as ancient as 'China'. The final scene also affirms the divine nature of the royal house—that its right to rule is not dependent upon martial authority or human politics.

In the redacted form of the myth, which has been passed on to us by Iryŏn, we also find an explanation for the transfer of dynastic authority. If the legitimacy of the original ruling house of Chosŏn was due to its claim to divine descent, when a transfer of ruling house took place there had to be a satisfying explanation of why this happened in order to give similar legitimacy to the new ruling family. The authentication of this transfer of the right to rule is sought in the act of Kija's enfeoffment by the ruler of 'China'. Because the state of Chosŏn existed as an independent entity until 109 BC, this redacted narrative must have been in existence at least by the middle of the second century BC, and the original narrative at least two hundred years before that (Grayson 2001, 40–42).

Looked at this way, the foundation myth of Chosŏn from the beginning has been a highly political narrative offering a comprehensive explanation for the origin of 'contemporary' society and the state. It was a narrative that was strong enough to survive its original use to explain the origins of the House of Tan'gun to serve as the explanation for the rise of the House of Kija.

The Myth of Chumong

The foundation myth of the kingdom of Koguryŏ is the Myth of Chumong.¹⁹ Structurally this myth is quite different from the Myth of Tan'gun, but it is characteristic of the majority of foundation myths in China and Korea. The structural pattern of the Chumong myth type is the typical pattern for foundation myths from north-east Asia. The Myth of Chumong is frequently mentioned in Western sources from at least the early eighteenth century, and is mentioned in European materials when the Myth of Tan'gun is not.²⁰

Text of the Myth

At that time, when Kŭmwa (金蛙, Golden Frog)²¹ had been traversing through the southern side of the T'aebaek Mountains, he came across a girl at the Ubal River and spoke with her. She said that she was the daughter of the Earl of the River and that her name was Yuhwa. The girl told Kŭmwa that one day when she had been playing with her young siblings, a man came to her and said that he was the Son of the Ruler of Heaven. She said that he had taken her to a house on the Yalu River just beneath Bear Spirit Mountain and committed adultery with her, and had not returned.

'My parents scolded me for having relations with a man without a go-between, and banished me to this place.' Thinking this very strange, Kŭmwa secluded the girl in a room, but the sun's rays shone. The light caressed her body; she became pregnant and gave birth to an egg which was said to be five litres in size. The king threw the egg away, giving it to the dogs and pigs, but they would not eat it. He put it out on the road, but the cows and horses avoided it. The king threw it out on the field but the birds and the beasts would not tread on it. The king tried to smash the egg, but was unable to do so and gave the egg back

to its mother. The mother wrapped up the egg in a cloth and placed it in a warm spot. A child broke open the shell and came out. His physique and outward appearance seemed unusual and full of wisdom. When the child was seven years old, he was precocious and unlike ordinary children. By himself, he could make his own bows and arrows. If he shot a hundred times, he hit the target a hundred times. He was called Chumong, which in the language of that people means good shot.

Kūmwa had seven sons, but none were the equal of Chumong. The eldest, Taeso, said to the king that Chumong was not a human child and that if he were not done away with now there would be trouble later. The king would not listen to this advice and commanded Chumong to raise the horses. Chumong knew a fine horse and gave them little to eat making them thin. He gave the duller horses more to eat and made them fat. The king rode the fat horses while he gave the lean horses to Chumong. Chumong's mother learned that several of the king's sons and officials wished to kill him. She said to him, 'People wish to kill you. Since you are resourceful, there isn't anywhere you couldn't go and live. Go, and flee quickly.' Chumong took O'i and two other friends and fled to the River Ōm. He announced to the waters, 'I am the grandson of the Ruler of Heaven, the descendant of the Earl of the River. Today I must flee; my pursuers are nigh; what shall I do?' Then the river fishes and terrapin formed a bridge over which he crossed. They then dispersed and the pursuers were unable to cross.

Chumong came to Cholon-ju and established his capital there . . . The name of the nation was Koguryō and Chumong took 'Ko' (高) as his surname. At this time, when he became king, he was twelve years old. (Grayson 2001, 82–85; translation of *Samguk yusa* 1.14)

Structure and Meaning of the Myth

The structure of the Chumong type of foundation myth is noticeably different from the Tan'gun mythic type. Briefly, the first scene begins with the story of the discovery of a young maiden who has been taken in adultery by a divine being. Discovered by the local ruler hiding by a river, she is taken to the ruler's 'palace'. The second scene describes how the maiden gives birth to an enormous egg, the attempts to destroy it, and how a young boy heroically cracks open the egg and emerges from it. The scene depicts how the young hero is extraordinarily capable, with skills that arouse the jealousy of his 'half-brothers'. In the third scene, Chumong learns that he is to be murdered by his stepbrothers. Gathering around him three trusted companions, Chumong flees with his adversaries in hot pursuit. Importantly, this scene shows the hero Chumong using his divine associations to thwart his pursuers and to escape. The final scene depicts him settling into new territory, creating a new state, a new nation, and a new ruling house.

The narrative of the Chumong myth type vividly depicts the flight of the hero to create a new state. This type of narrative is different from circum-Mediterranean hero myths which use the 'flight of the hero' motif, because in East Asian versions of hero myths the heroes never return. They establish new nations and states, as described in this myth; they do not return to their home territory.²² The Chumong myth uses the oviparous birth motif to describe the birth of the hero, a common feature in many foundation myths in Korea and other parts of East Asia.²³ It does not use the motif of the descent of a divine being who brings culture and government to humanity, as in the Myth of Tan'gun. In some ways, it is more detailed than the Myth of Tan'gun, describing the

manner of the conception of the hero, his trials before and after his birth, and his flight from his enemies. Like the Myth of Tan'gun, the narrative is very brief but clear about the origin of the state and the ruling house. The narrative of the Myth of Chumong shades over into quasi-history, whereas the Myth of Tan'gun is always clearly in the realm of the divine. The Myth of Chumong not only depicts the creation of a new state, it also shows the hero actively giving a name to the state, and devising a name for the royal house which links the name of the family with the name of the new state. However, unlike the Myth of Tan'gun, the Myth of Chumong does not describe the gift of culture. Chumong is not a culture-bearer as is Tan'gun. He is only the founder of a great state, a nation, and a ruling family.

The Two Myths in the Historical Record

A Korean foundation myth, the Myth of Chumong, appears for the first time in a European-language source in 1735 with the publication of the four-volume work by Jean-Baptiste du Halde (1674–1743), *Description géographique, historique, politique, et physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise* (A geographical, historical, political, and physical description of the empire of China and of Chinese Tartary). Based upon letters written by Jesuit missionaries in China to their order's headquarters in France, this work became the major source of information for the French *philosophes* for their depiction of Chinese society, government, and culture. But it was more than that, because du Halde's work also provided detailed information about the nations and states surrounding China, which he called 'Tartarie Chinoise'. Du Halde's work has a whole chapter devoted to the peninsular kingdom, providing a significant amount of information about Korean folklore and religions. The chapter begins with a Korean foundation myth—the Myth of Chumong. There is no mention of Tan'gun. The *Description* was soon translated into English and published in 1736. In either its original French or in the translated English version, the *Description* was until the end of the nineteenth century the principal source of information about Korean religion and folklore in European-language works on world folklore (Grayson 2002, 3–5). The Myth of Chumong's position as the representative foundation myth of the Korean people and state would seem to have been unassailable. Why did this change?

We have seen that the Myth of Chumong provided a quasi-historical account of the origin of Koguryō—the major political entity in Manchuria and the northern part of the Korean peninsula from the third to the tenth centuries. It specifically showed how the state linked in with other historical states, especially 'China'. The abbreviated form of 'Koguryō' as 'Koryō' became the name of another dynasty which ruled the Korean peninsula from the tenth to the very end of the thirteenth century. Thus, states which traced their origin back to Chumong, or in some manner attempted to link their state into his lineage, had dominated the peninsula for over a thousand consecutive years. Moreover, the Europeanized form of the name Koryō (Korea, Corea, Corée, etc.) was used exclusively in the languages of the many nations of Europe for the peninsular kingdom. Given this background, why has the Myth of Tan'gun become pre-eminent?

To answer this question, we have to understand both the purpose of the Myth of Tan'gun as recorded in the *Samguk yusa*, and the character of the *Samguk yusa* itself. First of all, I refer to the Myth of Tan'gun as a 'crisis myth', a myth that can be utilized by a state or its

ruling élite in a time of crisis in order to sustain or create a condition of political stability. The final scene of the myth as redacted and recorded in the *Samguk yusa* describes a period of crisis: the end of the House of Tan'gun and the emergence of the House of Kija. How can one explain the demise of a dynasty claiming divine descent and the transfer of power to a clearly human royal house? The answer is to show that the authority to rule has been given to the new house by the paramount ruler of East Asia, the King of Zhou. This is an early example of the idea of 'enfeoffment' (or symbolic recognition) of the rulers of states which surrounded China. There is a precedent in Chinese history for this type of crisis of dynastic succession. The Shang dynasty of China (traditional dates 1600–1046 BC) was ruled by a family claiming divine descent. When the Shang was succeeded by the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC), it was claimed that the 'Mandate of Heaven' (天命, *tianming*) had passed from the Shang to the Zhou. The Mandate was withdrawn because the last Shang ruler did not rule with righteousness (Creel 1953, 10–20). This argument is not made in the *Samguk yusa* version of the Myth of Tan'gun, where there is only an appeal to the authority of the King of Zhou who has the Mandate. In this way, the House of Kija could transfer authority to rule the state from the House of Tan'gun to itself, while at the same time maintaining the historic continuity of the state. This was the first crisis that was resolved by reference to the Myth of Tan'gun.

There was another crisis. From the middle of the thirteenth century, the kingdom of Koryŏ (918–1392), which claimed to be a successor state to Koguryŏ, was occupied by the Mongols for a century.²⁴ It was precisely in this period when the *Samguk yusa* was compiled. It is one of the two oldest extant Korean historical documents. The other work is the *Samguk sagi* (三國史記, History of the Three Kingdoms), written a century earlier by Kim Pusik (金富軾, 1075–1151) who was one of the most powerful civil servants of his age. The *Samguk sagi* is a thoroughly Confucian and rational state history, patterned after many examples from China. Kim does not refer to Tan'gun, but traces the origin of the 'Korean' state to Chumong. Partly, this is because the Myth of Chumong is quasi-historical in content rather than mythical (examples like Chumong were used in Chinese histories), and partly because it created a direct link with Koguryŏ which Koryŏ claimed as part of its political lineage (Pratt and Rutt 1999, 400; Grayson 2002, 96). A century later, in the thirteenth century, Koryŏ was invaded by the Mongols and made to submit to their suzerainty. Iryŏn, when he was compiling the *Samguk yusa*, collected traditions, tales, and myths that had not been recorded in Kim Pusik's work (Pratt and Rutt 1999, 400; Grayson 2001, 26–27). Pre-eminent amongst these tales is the Myth of Tan'gun. The *Samguk yusa* opens with the story of Tan'gun, who takes precedence over Chumong who is also mentioned in the text of the *Samguk yusa* along with many other state and clan founders. Again, we can see that in the mid thirteenth century there was a crisis of state authority, and that the Myth of Tan'gun was used in the *Samguk yusa* to demonstrate that the legitimacy of the Korean state and its rulers did not derive from Mongol enfeoffment, but from the divine descent of the original ruling house. The myth, as recorded by Iryŏn, also clearly makes the point that the Korean state is nearly as old as the Chinese state, a claim which the Mongols could not make.

In 1351 a new king came to the throne of Koryŏ, King Kongmin (恭愍, r.1351–74), who was determined to throw off traces of Mongol dominance and restore the state's authority. Among his state counsellors was Paek Munbo (白文寶, 1303–74), who in 1361

made a sophisticated use of the Tan'gun myth to provide an intellectual and philosophical basis for the revival of the weakened Koryŏ state. He claimed that the year 1361 was precisely 3,600 years since Tan'gun ascended the throne. The East Asian calendar is a lunar, sexagenary calendar made up of five cycles of twelve years. Thus, 3,600 years is sixty cycles of sixty years, the completion of a grand cycle of cycles. Paek implied that the king and nation could make a completely fresh start. In a sense, the future was all before them (Grayson 2001, 54–55). Paek's claim is interesting for two reasons. First of all, reference to Tan'gun ignored the implicit claims of the Koryŏ state to descend from Koguryŏ and thus from Chumong. Second, it is also interesting to note that a great Confucian scholar-bureaucrat would refer to this myth, whereas his predecessor of two centuries earlier, Kim Pusik, ignored it completely. Again, the myth was used in a time of crisis: the transition from a period of subjugation to a period of independent action.

King Kongmin's attempt at the restoration of the state failed, and less than twenty years after his death Koryŏ was swept away in 1392 by a radical group of Confucian scholars who wished to expunge any lingering Mongol and Buddhist influences in the nation, and to create a society which was thoroughly Confucian in its mores and practices. The name for this new state—a state breaking with the past (Koryŏ)—was Chosŏn (Pratt and Rutt 1999, 62–63; Grayson 2002, 96 and 107–12). This choice of name is interesting for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that the name uses the implicit reference to Tan'gun to claim ultimate legitimacy for the new ruling house to govern. The name makes a break with the 'Koguryŏ' past, but in so doing it bolsters the authority of the ruling family by linking them with a myth, a procedure which had been rejected by the rationalist Confucian bureaucrat, Kim Pusik. Aside from the general issue of dynastic change, the radical Confucian reformers had to deal with the fact that they had achieved power in a very un-Confucian manner. They had overthrown the 'ruler' (the king) to whom in Confucian thought they as servants owed absolute loyalty, or *ch'ung* (忠).²⁵ By using the name 'Chosŏn', the revolutionaries were reaching back into the most primordial period of 'Korean' history to claim legitimacy for the new dynasty, thus also resolving a crisis of a conflict of loyalties.

Within two generations of the founding of the Chosŏn state, there was yet another crisis—regicide. King Sejong (世宗, r.1418–50), the great scholar-monarch of this dynasty, died, to be succeeded in rapid succession by his eldest son, and then by his young grandson. A regency was established for the young king under his uncle, Sejong's second son. The regent then set aside his nephew, exiled him, and subsequently had him murdered. This created a dynastic crisis which in one way or another rumbled on for two centuries—an issue of questioning the legitimacy of all subsequent kings who were in some way descended from a ruler who had committed regicide (Pratt and Rutt 1999, 463). The uncle, now King Sejo (世祖, r.1455–68), had a counsellor of state, Yang Sŏngji (梁誠之, 1415–82), who wrote a treatise which advised the king about the way of kingship, and which also provided him with a philosophical means to justify his right to rule. In this treatise, the *Non kundo sibi-sa* (論君道十二事, Discussing the Twelve Works of the Prince), Yang argues that the origin of the state and royal authority does not come from or depend upon the association of the state with China. The origin of the state and therefore the legitimacy of Sejo to rule come from Tan'gun, not the Chinese emperor who might enfeoff the rulers of Chosŏn (Grayson 2001, 55). Tan'gun is the ultimate,

primordial ancestor of the nation and state. This example again illustrates that in a time of crisis it is the Myth of Tan'gun which is called upon to provide legitimacy to the state, and even to rulers who have committed the most heinous of crimes: regicide.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, European-language materials do not refer to Tan'gun. The first two books on Korean history written in English trace the Korean nation back to Kija.²⁶ This usage refers back to 'Ancient Chosŏn', thus confirming the historic origins of the Korean state, but it eschews any mythological associations, continuing a Confucian tradition dating back to Kim Pusik in the twelfth century. The choice made by the authors of these books must reflect the information that they received from Korean informants and Korea-related materials, which in turn must reflect a consensus at that time about the acceptable origins of the state and nation. The first English-language book to deal with the Myth of Tan'gun is *History of Korea* by Homer B. Hulbert (1863–1949), an early Methodist missionary to Korea, published in 1905. It begins with Tan'gun and then traces the origin of the state through Kija (Weems 1962, 1: 1–4). This emphasis on Tan'gun is also reflected in early twentieth-century nationalist histories of Korea, notably those by Ch'oe Namsŏn (崔南善, 1890–1957) and others (Pratt and Rutt 1999, 73).²⁷ Thus, by the beginning of the twentieth century, stress was being laid on the mythological origins of the state and nation, emphasizing that the nation's roots can be traced back into the mists of the primordial past. We have seen that the myth had been used in this way from the earliest times in order to assert that 'Korea' was nearly as ancient as 'China'. Clearly the emphasis on antiquity is here also, but the context is different. The great power in East Asia from the end of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth centuries was not China but Japan. This use of the Myth of Tan'gun was in reference to Japan, not China.

From the 1860s, Japan had begun a rapid rise to become a modern state and to achieve geopolitical dominance in the East Asian region. A sense of modern Japanese nationhood had been created in this period through an emphasis on the centrality of the imperial house, whose origins were traced back to descent from the sun goddess Amaterasu ōmikami (天照大神). Thus, a primordial myth had been used by the modernizers of Japan to create a new political order. By 1905, modernized Japan had defeated the traditional regional power China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, and a major European power in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. Her political pre-eminence in eastern Asia was firmly established. In 1905, Korea was declared a protectorate of the Japanese Empire, and five years later in 1910 it was formally annexed. An independent Korea had disappeared off the map.²⁸ The context of the early twentieth-century histories of Korea was Japanese aggression and the loss of Korean independence. In order to assert the independence of Korea, and to rebut Japanese colonial claims to legitimacy through the use of their primordial myth of Amaterasu ōmikami, Korean historians used the Myth of Tan'gun to establish an even earlier claim to political legitimacy.²⁹ The Myth of Tan'gun yet again emerged at a time of crisis.³⁰

Following Japan's defeat in the Second World War, the Korean peninsula was divided into a Soviet zone of occupation north of the 38th Parallel, and an American zone south of the 38th Parallel. During this period, the governing powers in both zones continued to use the term 'Chosŏn' for Korea. After the establishment of independent countries north and south of the Parallel, usage diverged. North Korea continued to use 'Chosŏn' to describe itself, whereas South Korea used another term, referring neither to Koguryŏ

nor to Chosŏn.³¹ However, the new government of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) did not eschew references to Tan'gun. The fourth law legislated by the new National Assembly in 1948 adopted the Tan'gi (檀紀, Tan'gun Calendar) as the official basis for the calculation of years based on 2,333 BC as the date of Tan'gun's ascension to the throne.³² This was followed in 1949 by the adoption of Kaech'ŏn-jŏl (開天節, Opening of Heaven Festival) as a national holiday set for 3 October. This date refers to the day on which Tan'gun's father descended from the heavenly realm to earth.³³ Although the use of the Tan'gi calendar was abolished in 1961 in favour of the Western calendar, Kaech'ŏn-jŏl remains as a national holiday.

The late 1940s was a critical period in Korean history with the re-establishment of the (South) Korean state, and the need to create a new national identity. Even if the name of the state was not the name of Tan'gun's kingdom, the calendar system originally used by the new South Korean government was linked to the Myth of Tan'gun and one of the first national holiday dates to be adopted was likewise associated with the myth. At a critical time, the myth yet again came to the fore.

The North Korean government, even though it had adopted the name of Tan'gun's kingdom as the name for the state, held back from making any links with the myth itself until 1994. In that year, when North Korea was facing massive economic problems, the government announced that they had excavated a tomb containing the bones of Tan'gun and his family. A book, *Tan'gun: Founder-King of Korea*, was published in the same year describing the excavations of the tomb complex which 'demonstrated' the great antiquity of the Korean people (Anonymous 1994). The use of the name 'Chosŏn' for the North Korean state consequently linked in with this claim. A delegation from the Academy of Social Sciences of North Korea made presentations about the excavations to a session of the Association for Korean Studies in Europe held in Prague in 1995.

Both north and south, the myth of the primordial origins of the Korean nation and state has re-emerged at critical historical junctures to reaffirm the antiquity of the people and the state, to provide legitimacy to new dynasties or to rulers who have weakened claims to the throne, to provide legitimacy to new nation-states, and to create a sense of nationhood and nationalism. The version of the Myth of Tan'gun as recorded by Iryŏn was a crisis myth explaining how the House of Kija supplanted the House of Tan'gun. The Myth of Chumong was the myth of the origin of a particular state. The Myth of Tan'gun was also the myth of the origins of a culture and a people. However important the kingdom of Koguryŏ was historically and politically, the Myth of Chumong could not provide a comprehensive explanation for the origin of the national culture and the people. Moreover, the way in which the Myth of Tan'gun was recorded by Iryŏn meant that the text of the myth lent itself to subsequent and repeated uses at times of crisis, even into very recent times. Foundation myths like the Myth of Tan'gun are not simply of historic interest; their meaning and impact continue to resonate down the centuries.

Notes

¹ This lecture draws upon research done for my book *Myths and Legends from Korea: An Annotated Compendium of Ancient and Modern Materials* (Grayson 2001), which is referred to throughout the article. Source citations from ancient Korean materials are given in the traditional East Asian format of title of work, kwŏn (券, volume or section) number, and chang (章, paragraph or unit) number; thus, *Samguk yusa* 1.1.

- ² The Republic of Korea (South Korea) uses a different term for 'Korea', Han'guk (韓國), which refers to three tribal confederations or proto-kingdoms in the southern and central part of Korea during the first four centuries AD.
- ³ The other two kingdoms were Paekche (百濟) and Silla (新羅), but their histories and the uses of their histories and traditions will not be discussed here. The Three Kingdoms Period was from the third to the mid seventh centuries.
- ⁴ For a general survey with reference to the religious situation, see Grayson (2002, 53–59, 79–83 and 93–96). More detailed information may be found in Lee (1984), the standard English source for Korean history.
- ⁵ Translations of the four earliest extant versions of the myth, and a thorough discussion and comparative analysis of them, are found in Grayson (2001, 26–58 and 151–55).
- ⁶ In the text of the myth shown here, I have omitted the comments and supplementary information which Iryōn has provided for the benefit of his readers. I have left untranslated certain technical terms, providing explanations of them in the endnotes.
- ⁷ A sōja may mean either the son of a secondary wife or the second son of the principal wife. It is unclear from the context which is meant, but he would not inherit in a system of primogeniture.
- ⁸ The meaning of these names is unclear, but Iryōn implies that 'Hwanin' means the 'Ruler of Heaven'. This view is supported by Yu (1975, 1227).
- ⁹ This term means 'heavenly seals'. Precisely what they are is not known, but they are symbols of royal authority. This part of the myth is comparable with the section in the foundation myth of the Japanese imperial house when the sun goddess Amaterasu ōmikami gave her grandson three sacred objects before descending to earth to rule. The myth of the origin of the Japanese ruling house is surprisingly similar to the Myth of Tan'gun, and different from other Chinese and Korean foundation myths. This is discussed in Grayson (2001, 130–36).
- ¹⁰ The term ch'ōnwang is similar to the term *ch'ōn'gun* (天君, Prince of Heaven) which was used to describe shamans during the period of the Silla kingdom. Ch'ōnwang is also parallel to the Japanese term for emperor, *tennō* (天皇, ruler of heaven).
- ¹¹ These plants form part of the pharmacopoeia of East Asian medicine. Used in this context, the plants have magical rather than medicinal purposes.
- ¹² This formulaic statement of the length of time implies that the phrase is part of some kind of chant with compulsive force.
- ¹³ 'Ungnyō' (雄女). Terms such as 'Bear Woman' are used in contemporary narratives from eastern Siberia to describe transformed humans or animals. For a discussion see Grayson (2001, 136–51).
- ¹⁴ Tan'gun means 'Prince of the Sandalwood Tree'. The *Shan Hai Jing* (山海經, Classic of Mountains and Seas), a Chinese folkloric record compiled between the third century BC and the first century AD, refers to a sacred tree atop a sacred mountain via which shamans ascend and descend between the earth and the heavenly realms. The imagery in this section of the myth implies that Tan'gun is a shamanic figure (see Grayson 2001, 34–35). The term *wanggōm* also carries the meaning of a religious leader as well as a political leader (see Yu 1975, 641).
- ¹⁵ The Emperor Yao (堯, traditional dates 2356–2255 BC) is the fourth of the Five Emperors (五帝) of Chinese primordial time.
- ¹⁶ Hu is said to have been the first king of the Zhou (周) dynasty (1125?–256 BC). The connection made between this ancient Chinese king and Kija is most certainly not historical. By tying the ancestry of the new ruling dynasty of Ancient Chosŏn into Chinese chronology, the redactors could show that Kija's enfeoffment by Hu not only gave legitimacy to Kija's right to rule, but also demonstrated that the Kija dynasty was as historic and ancient as the Chinese state.
- ¹⁷ This form of analysis treats oral narrative like a play or drama with various scenes which build up to the conclusion of the narrative.

- ¹⁸ In Korea, San-sin (山神, Mountain God) is a different figure from the spirits of that name in China or Japan. Whereas in those latter countries 'Mountain God' is the name of the spirit or deity of a particular mountain, in Korea the Mountain God is the god of all mountains collectively, thus resembling a Siberian 'master spirit'. For a full discussion of the concept of master spirits and Manchurian spiritual beliefs, see Shirokogorov (1935).
- ¹⁹ Translations of the different versions of the foundation myth of Koguryō with commentaries and analysis may be found in Grayson (2001, 63–86).
- ²⁰ As with the text of the Myth of Tan'gun, I have omitted the comments and supplementary information which Iryōn has provided for the benefit of his readers. I have left untranslated certain technical terms, providing explanations of them in the endnotes.
- ²¹ Kūmwa was the ruler of Eastern Puyō (東扶餘), a state in central Manchuria which is included in the lineage of Korean states and peoples. For a translation of its foundation myth and a commentary, see Grayson (2001, 61–63).
- ²² The East Asian 'flight of the hero' motif has been thoroughly discussed by Hsu Cho-yun and Katheryn M. Linduff (1988).
- ²³ Other examples of this motif found in Korean myths are in state-level foundation myths of the kingdom of Silla and the Six Kaya States (Grayson 2001, 88–98), and in Silla clan-level foundation myths (Grayson 2001, 103–107).
- ²⁴ Unlike other parts of the Mongol Empire, Koryō was never absorbed directly into the empire, but was only indirectly governed by it. The royal family remained in place, as did the Confucian civil service. However, to indicate the subordination of the Koryō royal house, the reign names included the character *ch'ung* (忠) for loyalty rather than the character *chong* (宗) for ancestor.
- ²⁵ There were a number of Confucian scholar-bureaucrats who rejected the aims of the revolutionaries because it meant disloyalty to their sovereign. Among these was Chōng Mongju (鄭夢周, 1338–92), the greatest scholar and most senior civil servant of his time. He was murdered for his loyalty to the king and the Koryō dynasty (Pratt and Rutt 1999, 244–45).
- ²⁶ See Ross (1879) and Griffis (1882). Ross's book was largely based upon Chinese sources, whereas Griffis used Japanese sources. At that time, Korea was generally closed to travellers from outside East Asia (Pratt and Rutt 1999, 57–58).
- ²⁷ A full discussion of nationalist history may be found in Lee (1984).
- ²⁸ The official name of the Japanese colonial government was the Government-General of Chōsen (朝鮮總督府), continuing the use of the name of the last Korean dynasty (Pratt and Rutt 1999, 148–49). Whether this gave the colonial government any legitimacy in the minds of the Korean public is highly debatable. A full discussion of this period of Japanese history may be found in Chapter 5, 'Modernization in Meiji Japan', of Reischauer and Craig (1979, especially 178–89).
- ²⁹ As noted earlier about the first Western authors of histories of Korea, Hulbert's use of the Tan'gun myth must reflect contemporary attitudes of Koreans and of the sources which he used for his history.
- ³⁰ Recent discussion of these issues, and twentieth-century matters, may be found in Pai (2000), Seth (2013), and Kim (2014).
- ³¹ The full, formal name of North Korea is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (朝鮮民主主義人民共和國, Chosŏn minchu chu'ui inmin konghwa-guk), combining a very Soviet-style state name with an appeal to the most ancient of Korean state traditions. From 1896 until the annexation of Korea by Japan, the Korean state was called 'Tae Han cheguk' (大韓帝國, Empire of Tae Han). Following the annexation, the movement for independence from Japan styled itself the Interim Government of the Republic of Korea (大韓民國臨時政府, Tae Han min'guk imsi chōngbu) using the term 'Tae Han' to refer to three Korean proto-kingdoms in the first centuries AD. To establish a linkage with the independence movement from Japan, the South Korean government used this term in its name instead of 'Chosŏn'.

- ³² A full description of the origin and history of the Tan'gi calendar is found on the Korean Wikipedia: <https://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/단군기원>. See also Pratt and Rutt (1999, 463). The National Assembly of the newly liberated South Korea passed the legislation on 25 September 1948.
- ³³ The celebration of Kaech'ŏn-jŏl as a national holiday was one of the first actions of the Interim Government in 1919. The South Korean National Assembly legislated for the holiday on 1 October 1949. For further information see the Korean Wikipedia: <https://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/개천절>.

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Biographical Note

James H. Grayson is President of The Folklore Society and Emeritus Professor of Modern Korean Studies in the School of East Asian Studies at The University of Sheffield, UK. He has written extensively about the anthropology of religion and folklore in East Asia, especially in Korea.