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The Concept of God in the Idea of *Hongik ingan*

Choi Moon-Hyoung

The idea of the archetypical utopia as it relates to nature, individuals, and society is shown through the myth of Dangun, the founding myth of the Korean nation. It is a story of gods, and is the first record of nature and of civilization, the relationship between man and woman, and the appearance of a desirable community. *Hongik ingan* thought in Dangun Joseon shows the view of god that includes the descending of the god of heaven, the construction of the city of god that is in accord with the ultimate criteria, and the immortal god of the mountain. It is not humanism simply to benefit human beings, but rather the thought of unification between god and humans. *Hongik ingan* thought cannot be explained by theocentrism or humanism alone. The myth that a god descended into the human world and both bear and tiger wished to be human can be understood as ancient Koreans being focused on human beings as a central figure and on the pursuit of *Hongik ingan* and the harmonization among god, humans, and nature. But the anthropocentrism aimed to realize the human world with the governing ideology given from god was for the mutual benefit for both god and humans.

Keywords: *Hongik ingan*, myth, Hwanin, Hwanung, *sinsi*, supreme god, she-bear, Dangun, harmonization, theocentrism, humanism

I. Introduction

The idea of *Hongik ingan* (弘益人間: devotion to the welfare of mankind) is the main theme of the Dangun myth (檀君神話), the founding myth of Korea. Myths in general are a special kind of story of both gods and humans. Ancient Koreans were naturally sensitive to the kaleidoscopic phenomena of their natural surroundings, which directly affected even their survival. The mighty force of

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nature appeared to be something divine to ancient people, who began to explain nature and the world with the names of deities. People in the prehistoric age handed down their beliefs about the environment as they understood them. They transmitted their knowledge to their descendents through oral traditions or through such means as pictographs, cuneiforms, and murals.

Since the twentieth century, mythologists have begun to pay attention to the existence of mankind's common archetypes which had been dormant in the myths previously regarded as fiction. Psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961) called it collective unconsciousness in contrast to personal unconsciousness, a term originally coined by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). The myth as the substance of a collective unconsciousness has not only various modes according to nationalities and regions but also a common significance transcending races and places.

Korean people in ancient times left meaningful records on the natural environment, human beings, and society. Kim Bu-Sik (金富植, 1075-1151), who authored *Samguk sagi* (三國史記: Historical Record of the Three Kingdoms), categorized them as hyperphysical deities. Master Zen Buddhist Iryeon (一然, 1206-1289), then a contemporary of Kim Pu-sik, however, left valuable records of the Three Kingdoms in his book *Samguk yusa* (三國遺事: Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms). Yi Seung-Hyu (李承休, 1224-1300), the author of *Jewang ungi* (帝王韻紀: Rhymed Record of Emperors and Kings), recorded a myth about the foundation of Gojoseon (古朝鮮). Now, thanks to these and other writers of those periods, we are able to obtain information about the founding of the Korean Peninsula. This information has led us to get a glimpse of the world that our ancestors envisioned.

We can understand the idea of utopia in ancient times—related to nature, individuals, and society—through the myth of Dangun (檀君). The myth contains the story of gods, and thus remains the first record of nature and civilization. It also depicts the relationship between man and woman and the future of an ideal community. Korean forefathers expressed it as *Hongik ingan* (弘益人間). Now we should ask ourselves why the story of gods involved human beings (*ingan*). It may represent the wish of man to speak about the story of human beings in the form of a myth. Then what could be the significance of a five-thousand-year-old myth to us now? We might be able to infer from it the archetype and collective unconsciousness of the Korean people.

By analyzing the concept of god, this paper aims to discover the relationship between the divine and the human, and the meaning of the divine world and the

human world, thereby rediscovering the significance of *Hongik ingan*.

II. The Concepts of God and Myth in Primitive Religions

Primitive humans must have feared almost all physical phenomena they experienced, because what they observed was largely beyond their cognitive power of understanding. Ancient people could not help but stand in awe at the supernatural power of the spirits that played an important role in various phenomena, which naturally led the people to worship and obey them. This worship is seen to have been postulated, not based, on moral standards; instead, it was simply for their survival.

The study of religion by anthropologists well versed in philosophy during the Enlightenment period—considered a preparatory period for religious studies—focused on discovering the essence of religion from the origin of religion in the primitive age. They understood the origin of religion as fetishism¹ or spiritism.² They also advanced two theories: the theory of Mana³ that says religion originated from a fear of impersonal power and the theory of incantation according to which the failure of incantation became the origin of religion. These arguments were later refuted in terms of its propriety, but they were established as theories that explain the modes of primitive religion. Meanwhile, Otto Rudolf insisted that human beings instinctively share religious experiences, or the religious sense of own saying that it is the origin and essence of religion (Otto 1923:59). This interest in primitive religions began from real life. That is

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1. Fetishism means the worship of a fetish that may be natural or an artificial thing. The power of the fetish is thought to have derived its efficacy from one of two sources. In some cases, the object has a will of its own; in others, the source of power comes from the belief that a god dwells within the object and has transformed it into an instrument of his desires. But here, it is used for the worship of the portable object improved by artificial skill. (Eliade 1986:314)
 2. Spiritualism, which is the belief that the activities of spirits such as a tree or swamp, has a significant influence over human life, and that they appeased them in various ways to keep off misfortune and to receive divine protection. As a matter of fact, it was the central axis of primitive religions, and it is seen widely in the folk religions in civilized societies as well. (Jones 2005: Vol.13, 8715)
 3. This belief of Mana can be found among the Melanesians of the South Seas; it is the concept of impersonal and supernatural power which indicates the spiritual power that raises the feeling of dread and fear by functioning on human beings, inanimate objects, and even materials. (Jones 2005: Vol. 8, 5631)

to say, a postulate for the mysterious power that forms and moves around the universe was essential.

Primitive religion was closely associated with myths, and the function of a myth sustained and maintained groups of people. A myth is an expression of a fear in a certain period. A myth constitutes the archetypical model for all collective activities of the future. Observing the inscrutability of natural phenomena offers the contents of beliefs and sacrificial rites as the form with which human beings can define themselves. At the same time, human beings separate themselves from it. It does not mean that human existence breaks away from it by chance, but means that they recognize a part of the constant cosmic order as a certain function (Zheng 1990:7-8).

Myth is a reflection of social structure, an inference of reality excluding emotion, and a refined commentary on consciousness.(Jones 2005: Vol. 9, 6360) They are valuable references that have close connections with the way of thinking in ancient times. The cycle of a one-year life pattern formed a foundation for the establishment of religion based on the life pattern of animals. Besides, it accompanied not only the ritual for those things cultivated from the land, wind, mountain, and rivers, but also prayers and worship to the instruments, generals, lords, ancestors, accompanying prayers, and instruments.

The form of a myth is accompanied by the origin of mankind. According to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, “a myth is an old story of the time when human beings were not easily distinguished from animals, and each of their territories was not yet clearly distinguished from each other in the universe.”(Claude 1963: 75) Simultaneously, however, this story of immemorial antiquity explains how all things in the universe were made, how they are now, and in what form they will remain in the future. Therefore, the first characteristic of a myth is the function synthesizing time, which explains the present based on the past and the present based on the future. The function also explains that if an order turns up, it will continue permanently. The second characteristic is the use of multiple intimations. This means that a myth not only tells about a specific phenomenon, but it also explains diverse phenomena of the universe as one explanation by using one synopsis that can summarize all the elements of the myth (Chun 1980:15-16).

For a long time, human beings have expressed their ideas about the universe, humankind, and culture through myths. Myths are the very first stories of human beings, in the most primitive language, gestures, and consciousness of humankind. According to Mircea Eliade, myths explain the sacred history. A

myth is related to a primitive time: that is, the affair occurred in the time of mythical 'creation.' In other words, a myth explains how things came to exist through the activity of the supernatural existence (Eliade 1985:5).

Around the sixth century BC, myths began to appear in ancient Greece, beginning with the Sophists, and have since been studied by scholars. Greek-Roman mythology contributed greatly to the development of human culture. The scholars of the nineteenth century viewed a myth as a fable, fiction, or creation, but by the end of the nineteenth century, scholars came to recognize the value and significance of myths to explain primitive societies and people. The idea of mythology from the anthropological view is very positive, particularly from the epistemological approach of what does the myth mean. It transferred to the phenomenological interest of what role does the myth play in human society (Jeong 1980:109).

Myths, as we have discussed, are very primitive stories in the most simplified symbol of human affairs. It is the reason why mythologists understand myth as a concept of archetype, or primitive type. The significance of myth lies in the characteristic of archetype. Archetype is originally a philosophical concept, generally meaning the original type or the primitive type before evolution. This theory of archetype was accepted as the literary interpretation by Carl Jung. Jung followed Sigmund Freud who had introduced the theory of psychoanalysis in the mythical analysis and divided unconsciousness into two types.

According to Jung, archetype is not a useless hangover of the ancient past. Rather, it is a living substance, the prosperity of the idea of spirit or the significant imagination. The concept of the archetype is either an expression of the extension of thought or a kind of philosophical reflection. Actually, archetype belongs to the sphere of the instinct and appears to have received a psychological form.

Consequently, the essence of the archetype is the constituent of the collective unconsciousness⁴ as well as the model of the primitive image in terms of its contents. Accordingly, Jung explains the structural factor that constitutes myth

4. Unconsciousness is divided into two types in analytical psychology: personal unconsciousness and collective unconsciousness. Collective unconsciousness is composed of the archetypes, that is, the primitive contents that transcend the differences among cultures and races, and the common factors of humankind such as time and space. Personal unconsciousness appears to be a complex concept. Collective unconsciousness only exists as an archetype (Sin 1992:17).

as a revelation of the archetype, motif, and primitive image (Kim 1988:34). In short, the myth means all the primitive affairs that become the origin of all the inevitable situations of human beings—mortality, gender, formation of society, labor, and rules—as well as the origin of the world, animals and plants, and human beings (Eliade 1985:21).

The formation of Korean myths shares the same context as that of the myths of every other nation in the world. The myth of the founding of the Korean nation is the archetype of the culture that reflects the peculiar modes of life among Koreans. That is to say, the individual culture of Korea mirrors the world-view and the perspectives on life. The myth of Dangun is one aspect of the mode of thinking and existence of our ancestors (Choi 2002a:7).

III. The Concept of God in the Myth of Dangun

1. Analysis of the Concept of God in the Myth of Dangun

In the myth of Dangun, we see several deities who constitute the thought of *Hongik ingan*. The first deity is Hwanin; the second is Hwanung; the third deity is, or rather, are the three deities who were led by Hwanung and the other deities whose numbers are close to three thousand; the fourth deity is the she-bear who became a human being. Finally, the fifth deity is Dangun, born of the she-bear and Hwanung. Dangun is the main character of the myth and later became a mountain god.⁵

These gods and their tale are the focal point of *Hongik ingan* thought. The myth of Dangun also shares with us its concept of god and its recognition of god with humankind of ancient times. Therefore, I would like to analyze the essence, the function, and the role of the deities in the myth and want to make clear how the development of the Korean concept of god has been connected with the development of primitive religions.

5. One can understand it as three parts (the Hwanung myth, the she-bear myth, and the Dangun myth) if analyzing the complex composition of the myth based upon their appearance in the myth, or one can understand it as two parts (the Hwanung myth and Dangun myth).

1) Hwanin: Separate God

Hwanin is the god of heaven. Iryeon, the author of *Samguk yusa*, named him Sakra-Devanam Indra, and Yi Seung-hyu, in his book *Jewang ungi*, called him Sangje (Lord-on-High). Sakra-Devanam Indra, according to Iryeon, is the Buddhist term for supreme god. Sakra-Devanam Indra transferred to the god of the Brahmans, to the guardian deity of the East, or the defender of the truth (religion) in Buddhism. Sangje might be the same as the personal god of the Oracle bone character (Jia Gu Wen) in ancient China. This deity was the royal ancestral guardian of the Yin dynasty. However, its closed character and morality might have resulted in the downfall of the Yin dynasty. The following dynasty, Ju, worshipped *cheon* (Heaven) or *cheonmyeong* (Mandate of Heaven) which had a more universal morality than Sangje.

Hwanin was the god of heaven, or the supreme god, and the worship of the god of heaven was common in ancient times. His son, Hwanung, was his incarnation and was of the same essence, but of a different persona. With the advent of Hwanung, Hwanin becomes the root of *Hongik ingan* thought and retires from the myth. Eliade indicates ancient people had faith in the god of heaven and that has a factor of a personal god and a creator, and it contained a religious meaning in heaven itself.⁶ This concept of the heavenly god is found in ancient Chinese myths as well.⁷

Many uncivilized ethnic groups, especially those based on hunting and gathering, acknowledged the existence of a supreme god, but the god did not play an important role in their religious life. Moreover, the god is almost unknown, and the myth is generally simple. This supreme god was believed to have created the world and human beings, but s/he abandoned his own creatures right away, and went back to heaven. Sometimes, the supreme god doesn't

6. Heaven (Sky) represents infinity and transcendence, since the highest is an attribute of a god. Heaven, as it is used here, symbolizes transcendence, power, and constancy. We realize that the high means an existence that is almighty and is full of sacredness as we trace the etymology of the name of gods. The word *oki* of the Iroquois means the one in the high, and the supreme god of the Maori, *iho*, which means highly rising, in the high (Eliade 1987:125-26).

7. In ancient Chinese texts, the god of heaven had two names. Those are *cheon* (Heaven, God of Heaven) and *Sangje* (The Lord-on-High, ruler of heaven). Heaven is the ruler of the cosmic order, and the high lord dwells in the highest level of heaven, the ninth heaven. An emperor is the son of Heaven, and is the deputy for Heaven on Earth. The combination of Heaven, Creator, and Ruler as the universal guarantor for the continuity of life on earth and for the cosmic order becomes complete by passivity that is a characteristic of the god of heaven (Eliade 1987:126-27).

complete the work of creation, and hands it over to another god who is a son or a deputy. Here the supreme god seems to lose its religious reality. This god became distant and eventually became a hidden god. When the supreme god is forgotten and hidden from the rituals, the memory of the god changes and its story becomes a myth and a paradise for primitive cultures. This myth becomes a focal point for acts or initiation rites of shamans as religious symbols—a symbol of the axis mundi, incantatory soaring and ascension—and as a symbol of great emptiness or the light, until finally it becomes a myth of creation (Eliade 1987:113-18)

Hwanin delegated all the sovereign power for the human world to his son Hwanung, and he left behind the human world; thus he can be called a separated god. Even as Hwanin left behind the human world and delegated his role to his son Hwanung, *Hongik ingan* is about the evaluation of Hwanin and an ideology of the god of heaven. Therefore, it is no more than four characters (*hong, ik, in, gan*) of Hwanin, the god of heaven, that is the main axis of the Dangun myth, and is thus, highly significant.

2) Hwanung: The Supreme God

Hwanung played a central role of linking other gods and fathering Dangun, the main character of the myth. Hwanung plays a substantial role of hero in the myth. The description of Hwanung is divided into three parts. The first scene is that Hwanung, the son of Hwanin, yearns for the human world. The second is that, with his father's support, Hwanung descends into the world with three criteria and with several other deities, and builds the city of god (*sinsi*). In the third scene, he teaches she-bear and tigress the way to become human, and only she-bear overcomes the ordeal. Hwanung then marries the woman who was once she-bear, who in turn gives birth to Dangun.?

Here I will analyze the divinity and the role of Hwanung in each of the three scenes. Hwanung is a god of the heavens as well as the son of Hwanin. The god of the heavens descends into the human world with a group of deities to carry out his wishes, and builds the city of god, an ideal state. This state of god was built by the father god as he decided that it was good enough to represent his ideals, which is developed into the idea of *Hongik ingan*. The human world was ordered by the functional gods—Earl of Wind, Master of Rain, and Master of Clouds—and *Cheonbuin* (天符印) which are the three absolute criteria. It implies the coexistence of the divine world and the human world, and the fact

that the human world establishes its order from the absoluteness of the divine world, which is a condition of *Hongik ingan*.

The divine world takes an active role in the human world. Hwanung gave the commands to she-bear and tigress on how to become human. Hwanung made she-bear's wish a reality, as she remained true and faithfully followed his commands. Furthermore, Hwanung even made the she-bear his consort, and they together begat a child named Dangun.

Hwanung is the personification of the concept of god in primitive religion. He controls the life and death of humans just as he rules over all the other deities. We can infer that ancient people believed that all things have spirits and the people performed religious rites (Gernet 1985:37-38).

3) Earl of Wind, Master of Rain, and Master of Clouds: Polygods, Functional Gods

The Earl of Wind, Master of Rain, and Master of Clouds descended to earth with Hwanung, and are considered polygods and functional gods. Each of the three gods took charge of some 360 different responsibilities, including agriculture, life spans, illness, punishment, morality, and brought culture to his people. As we see in their names, the living culture of the ancient people was based on agriculture.

These functional gods have the features of hylozoism (animism) of primitive religion. Generally, the ancient people were subordinate to nature; they understood the cause of the natural phenomena as a function of mystical power. That is to say, they thought all natural things have their own spirits which are subject to the emotions, thoughts, and wills of the spirits, and that the spirits control all natural events and phenomena. The ancient people worshipped and performed religious rites for these spirits. These religious activities can be found in the depictions of the Neolithic Age.

There are many features regarding the concept of god (Seo 1994:98-100). First, the spirits in primitive religion each had its own duties. For instance, they are many, they are functional, and they are systematic and are aptly named the god of the sun, the god of the moon, the god of the stars, the god of the wind, the god of the sea, and so forth. Second, the spirits of primitive religion are personified. They not only manage nature, but they also possess many human characteristics; this is especially true of the gods of Greek mythology, which are called personal gods. Third, though the spirits may possess human

characteristics, they are above humans, since they wield superhuman powers. Fourth, polytheistic religion has a feature of chaos that comes from the power of various and mystical cosmos. In this chaos, human beings have various connections with many spirits. That is to say, such polytheistic faith is difficult to sublimate into a religion, and is difficult to give a measure of value that gives ethical order to the human world.

In the myth of Dangun, these gods not only had specific functions, but they ruled under a unified system and under the control of the supreme god, Hwanung. Together they put considerable restraints on human society. For example, though Wind, Cloud, and Rain have absolute influence over agricultural life, they were still under the rule of Hwanung's unified system. It is thought that nature restrained human beings and dying after being struck by lightning was considered a punishment of heaven. This is an example that gods actively placed restraints on the human world. It is similar to the idea of Motzu (墨子) in ancient China, who believed that the will of heaven is a superstructure, and that various functional gods keep watch over human beings. Above all, such a restraint implies that the realization of *Hongik ingan* is not enough with only the autonomy of human beings.

4) She-bear: Earth Mother

She-bear appears in the middle of the myth with a tigress, both of whom prayed to Hwanung to make them human. Hwanung gave them commands to follow, and transformed she-bear into a woman since she followed his commands. Hwanung showed himself as a man to the she-bear, and they begat Dangun. What is the meaning of a bear in the myth?

She-bear and tigress were living together in a cave. Their relationship could be similar to the relationship of a husband and wife (Kim 1988:114), or perhaps of a brother and sister (Na 1993:158-159). Some suggest their relationship as the union between different ethnic groups—those who worship the bear and those who worship the tigress as their totems.⁸

Some believe the bear or tigress was a messenger of the mountain god, or was even worshipped as the mountain god. Although it was the bear that was

8. Totemism originated in animal worship (zoolatry), which is a part of nature worship. Primitive humans not only depended on animals, but also worshipped them as a divinity and considered them holy. This belief came into being as totemism(Lee 1997:240-41).

transformed into a human, it is the tiger that has appeared more often in Korean legends and stories. How should we understand she-bear's predominance in the myth of Dangun? The *gun* (君) in Dangun is often pronounced *gom* (bear). Ancient Asian cultures worshipped the bear as a god, as they had a bear totem. Considering that the bear was worshipped as a god and appeared as a goddess in ancient Siberia, and that the Korean culture was based on those ancient Asian cultures, it is quite possible that the bear came to be considered a god in Korean myths.⁹

Furthermore, the fact that she-bear had lived in a cave ensures the characteristic of the bear as the Earth Mother. The characteristic of the bear as the Earth Mother also appears in its biological feature; a bear is similar to humans as it stands erect and becomes active in spring after hibernation (Kim 1976:25; Yu 1975:32).

This feature of a bear brings an idea of revival to human beings. The idea of revival is not originated in bears or other hibernating animals, but came out of observing the periodic death and revival in the world of vegetables. Hence, the motif of revival can be seen in the agricultural culture, which is best shown in the Earth Mother appearing as faith in grain (Yu 1975:32).

Transforming from a bear into a woman is a plot that expressed religious initiation and gives qualitative transformation to a new existence. Frequently, the religious initiation of nomads uses a symbol that experiences death in the destruction of the body. In agricultural culture, however, it symbolizes the death as being broken off with light or life by going back to the mother's womb or staying in a cave.

9. Therefore, the characteristic of the she-bear in the myth of Dangun is in collusion with bear ritual and thought, whose features are as follows: (1) Bear is an animal god and a mountain god. (2) Bear is a personal god and an ancestral god. Bear tended to be considered human. (3) In the bear ritual, bear has a female feature. (4) Bear itself is a mountain god, or the highest god in the animals, or the messenger of the highest. (5) Bear as the highest god of the animals sends bears or animals for humans, or comes down to the human world as a bear. (6) The soul of the bear is transferred to the world of the animal. Bear never dies. (7) If one's ancestor dies, s/he becomes a bear in the animal world and lives permanently. That is to say, the bear becomes an animal god and the highest god of the animal, consolidates its position as a mountain god, and this mountain god has a human figure in the holy world since it is an ancestral god (Lee 1997:240-41; Kim 1976:25).

5) Dangun

Dangun, the founder of Korea, was born from the union of Hwanung, the god of the heaven, and the she-bear, the goddess of the earth. In the fiftieth year of the reign of Emperor Yao, Dangun made the walled city of Pyeongyang, the capital of Joseon, where he ruled for fifteen hundred years. When King Wu of Chou sent Chi Tzu to rule Joseon, Dangun moved to Jangdanggyeong, but later returned and hid in Asadal as a mountain god at the age of 1,908.

Dangun, like many other founders of a nation, is a proxy of the god of heaven and becomes an object of worship as a descendant of the god. Some interpret that he is the chief of theocracy and at the same time a shaman. Taking the view that Dangun was a historical holy man, it recognizes that he was the chief of theocracy in the Gojoseon period (P. Y. Lee 2001:128).

There is no doubt that Dangun is a god for he is the son of the gods of heaven and earth. What is especially noteworthy is the part that Dangun became a mountain god. There is evidence that the figure of the supreme god Koreans have worshipped was a mountain god, for mountains are holy places for Koreans. There is a belief that the dead live in the mountains, and a mountain god is an object of worship. Thus the god of mountain remains a friendly existence for Koreans (E. B. Lee 2001:325).

Dangun is a founding god and a mountain god. Founders of a nation are considered to be above kings and his ancestors. The founders possess the same power as if the god of heaven or the supreme god had descended to earth. Following the development of primitive religions, we can see that in a patrilineal society, people start to explain their origin from an animal or a hero, and that they view human history from a human point of view. The process changes from totemism to ancestor worship. Through the development of agriculture and stock-farming, humans slowly began to overcome nature, and they no longer needed to sanctify animals and consider them as ancestors. Moreover, with the establishment of private property and paternal authority, as well as of the paternal line, ancestor worship became possible. Thus, the existence of Dangun can be understood in this context.

In conclusion, when we analyze the persona, merits, and abilities of various gods in the myth of Dangun, the concept of god in the myth generally has its axis with the development of the concept of god in primitive religion. That is to say, the concept of god in primitive religion developed from animism to the Earth Mother as the supreme god, or the god of heaven, and totemism turned to

ancestor worship. The gods in the myth of Dangun follow the same process. The Korean myth, however, pursues *Hongik ingan* based on the harmonization and cooperation of the gods without any conflict or struggle in the process of development.

2. Characteristic of the Korean Concept of God

The god of the Dangun myth is in many ways similar to Sangje of the Yin dynasty. Sangje is a personal god that controls life, death, and the fortunes of humans, and is considered the royal ancestral god of the Yin people. The power, merits, and ability of this god is well represented in the record of the Oracle bone inscriptions, and shows that the Yin people looked to Sangje regarding national affairs such as war, farming, and the appointment of governors. But after the Chou dynasty, this notion of a personal god disappeared, and was replaced in the Sung dynasty by *Cheonmyeong* (天命: Mandate of Heaven), which is an impersonal concept. It was later developed into the concept of *Taegeuk* (太極: the Great Ultimate) and of *li* (理: principle) which means the cosmic order and the law by neo-Confucianism (Choi 2002b:49-57)

Koreans, however, sustained the concept of a personal god, the heavenly god. Koreans have highly valued human concepts. Thus, as they attach importance to their lives, they do not have a myth of genesis. It produced the idea of ancestral worship; Koreans have long thought that the ancestral gods protect and give blessing to their descendents. Furthermore, Koreans also worshipped very distant ancestors as well as parents, and thought the heavenly god as the origin of the first ancestor. Thus, the god of heaven has a higher position than their ancestral god (Ryu 1988:165).

Even in neo-Confucianism in Korea, the notion of Sangje as a transcendental personal god was widespread. Reverence for a personal god is the central axis in *seonghak* (聖學: study for being a sage) of Toegye (退溪), and Dasan (茶山) understood god, human, and society as being composed by the personal god, Sangje, as a central figure (Kim 2000:248-56). As we have seen, the Korean concept of god is different from the Chinese concept of god, and thus has not lost the factor of personal god from the ancient faith.

In addition, the Korean concept of god has an unfolding process. In comparison with the West's monotheism, which developed from the poly-gods to the highest (supreme) god and finally to monotheism, the myth of Dangun developed from poly-gods to the god of heaven and finally to ancestral gods. It

is also different from the development of god in China, which developed from poly-gods to the supreme god and then to the immanent god. Thus, the characteristic of the Korean concept of god is a personal god, or a mountain god, while it also has the characteristic of the ancestral god.

IV. Idea of *Hongik ingan* on the Concept of God

1. Relation of God-Human-Society

The meaning of *Hongik ingan* is that god opened the world of human beings and made it a reality. That is to say, being enough to *Hongik ingan* is a possibility, not a completion. It is not that he simply longed for the human world, but was the good will of a god to realize the divinity in the human world that Hwanung wished to help the people. It means that the god saw the possibility in humans to realize his good will. The god accompanies the three criteria (*cheonbuin*) and other functional gods as concrete realities. *Cheonbuin* is the three absolute criteria and the absolute principle that means divinity; the functional gods take charge of the education and governance of humans. Therefore, *Hongik ingan* means the will of god that Koreans believe in, rather than the will of Koreans.

The meaning of *Hongik ingan* is first based on divinity (possibility) and second, aims to improve the quality of human life (condition), and third, realizes the divinity in human beings (completion). The myth shows this development through the three gods, Hwanin, Hwanung, and Dangun. Finally, the gathering of the individuals who realized the divinity in themselves is *Hongik ingan* as a social ideal.

In *Hongik ingan* thought, there is a belief that the order in the human world originated from the absolute valuation of heaven. The gods of the Dangun myth are personal gods, similar to Sangje of the Yin dynasty and Yahweh of the Old Testament. These gods are different from the gods of Confucianism, which insist upon the immanent god (*li*; principle, *hsing*; nature) and grounded in *Cheonmyeong* thought in the Chou dynasty. Heaven of “What Heaven confers is called nature” is a heaven of good nature, but the heaven of *Hongik ingan* and *jaeseihwa* (world is educated in accordance with the reason of heaven) is the supreme god that implies holiness.

2. Pursuit of the Individuality of the Whole Man and the Consonance of the Whole

In *Hongik ingan*, gods, nature (animal), and human beings appear in succession. It has as its premise that the human world was born based on the active and positive will of god and nature (animal).

First, let us look at the pursuit of the individuality of the Whole Man. Hwanin sends his son Hwanung to earth. In so doing, Hwanung transforms the divine into the human. The affair in which a bear becomes a she-bear (woman) means the sublimation from materials to human, and animals to humanity. The two essences, from god to human, and from animal to human, are Dangun, who symbolizes humanity of the Whole Man. Here we see the ideal human that ancient Koreans envisioned. It is not an image of a gentleman as in Daoist thought, and it is not the ideal of self-cultivation and the holding back of human desire as in Confucianism, and it is not an image of the saint as in the transcendental one of Laotzu or Zhunggi. The individuality of the Whole Man that Koreans considered human is the harmonization of divinity and materiality. He is not a man who conflicts with and suffers from two desires, but an individuality of the Whole Man which *Hongik ingan* thought pursues—a human that is harmonized between the pursuit of the ideal and the satisfaction of reality, and between the desire of the soul and the desire of the body.

The ideal concept of god and man in Korean thought is the unification of god and human as its ideal form, from a normal man to a gentleman, from a gentleman to a wise man, from a wise man to a saint, and eventually to the man of god. This man of god is a representation of Dangun, the founder of Korea.

Second, it is an expansion from individuality to wholeness. The myth of Dangun contains two worlds: the divine world and the human world, or the world of heaven and the world of earth. The world of heaven descended to the world of earth under *sindansu* (divine tree) with its order, and built a city of god, and the nation of the earth was founded under the name of Joseon, and Dangun was its founder.

Above all, Hwanung harmonized the divinity and materiality of the earth. He satisfied the ideal of the soul with the three criteria, and the three functional gods took the parts of the life of body. On the basis that Hwanung made his son, Dangun founded Joseon. That is to say, on the basis of the harmonization between divinity and materiality in the ideal individual, it shows that the balance of the whole life was possible at the same time.

It is different from Western thought, as the god of Judaism was transformed to a remote god from Yahweh who worked in human history, and the two worlds were divided dualistically. It also shows that the spot of our life understood human beings and the social reality positively. Thus, the vision of a world in which god and humans, and individuals and society enjoy harmony and consonance is the essence of *Hongik ingan* thought.

V. Conclusion

Hongik ingan thought in Dangun Joseon shows the view of god that includes the descending of the god of heaven, the construction of the city of god that is in accord with the ultimate criteria, and the immortal god of the mountain. It is not humanism simply to benefit human beings, but rather the thought of unification between god and human that pursues the divine world in human society since it sees there is a divinity in each human being. In *Hongik ingan* thought, the view of god and the view of humans in Korean thought are indivisible, and cannot be explained by either theocentrism or humanism alone.

As we see the plot of the myth that a god descended into the human world, and both the bear and the tiger wished to be human, it can be understood that ancient Koreans focused on human beings as a central figure, and on the pursuit of paradise and the harmonization among god, human, and nature. But the anthropocentrism in *Hongik ingan* was aimed to realize that the ideal human society with the governing ideology given from god, even if it was anthropocentric, was for the mutual benefit of both god and humans.

This characteristic is closely connected with the fact that Gojoseon society was based on agriculture. Agricultural culture is influenced by changes in nature, and the consensus (mutual response) with god that is represented as heaven, a transcendental absolute being, took priority. Realization of *Hongik ingan* comes from the order of the divine world. That is the thought of god by ancient Koreans is reverence and respect as opposed to strictly human relationships.

The governing ideology of ancient Korea can be understood in the same fashion of *Hongik ingan*. In the foundation ideology of Dangun, *Cheonbuin* has been called *geumcheok* (golden ruler) in the Silla Kingdom, *geumtap* (golden tower) or a pair of scales in Goryeo, and *monggeumcheok* in Joseon, but the meaning is the same. The monument of King Gwanggaeto the Great stated that

when the founder of Goguryeo died, he told his son “to govern this world with the Dao,” and the monument of King Jinheung of the Silla Kingdom said that “by saying soft wind and public morals, govern the nation with the philosophy of Tao.”

Then what does the Tao mean? It can be understood as the heavenly absolute criterion which does not come from the desires of humans. This is the restoration of humanity that originated in the myth of Dangun. The happy life of human beings cannot be formed by the relativity between humans since human beings cannot accept love and because they possess never-ending desires. The archetype of Korean thought is based on the accurate recognition of the unlimitedness of human desires. The three criteria with which Hwanung came down to earth shows that the order and the standard of heaven are indispensable for the realization of *Hongik ingan*. The ideology and standard of governing is the purity and absoluteness of *geumcheok* and *geumtap*, and is symbolized as the fairness of a pair of scales. This is the meaning of the Dao of governing with the Dao

Thus, the ideology of *Hongik ingan* was intended to be the absolute and ultimate world as a level of the divine world through the sanctification of human beings, as opposed to simply a human world devoid of any sort of divinity. Since ancient times, Koreans have given gratitude to the spirits and gods, and have strived to create the city of god where they would be blessed. Moreover, the thought of *Hongik ingan* was not just for a specific people, nation, or class, but it shows the universal harmony of the spirit of peace, the ideal that Koreans have pursued, and the will of god that Koreans believe in. The thought of *Hongik ingan* is the ultimate ideology that mankind has pursued and is full of suggestions to the modern people who are at a crisis of being placed under the adverse influence of the humanistic relativism.

Appendix I

There are different English translations of *Samguk yusa*, including *Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms* and *Samguk Yusa: Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*. The myth of Dangun has been taken from the latter translation.

In the old book it is written, “In ancient times *Hwan-in* (Heavenly King,

Chesok or *Sakrodevendra*) had a young son whose name is *Hwan-ung*. The boy wished to descend from heaven and live in the human world. The father, after examining three great mountains, chose *Taebaek-san* (the *Myohyang* Mountains in North Korea) as a suitable place for his heavenly son to bring happiness to human beings. He gave *Hwan-ung* three heavenly treasures, and commanded him to rule over his people.”

“With three thousand of his loyal subjects *Hwan-ung* descended from heaven and appeared under a sandalwood tree on *Taebaek* Mountain. He named the place Sin-si (city of god) and assumed the title of *Hwan-ung Ch'onwang* (another title meaning heavenly king). He led his ministers of wind, rain and clouds in teaching the people more than 360 useful arts, including agriculture and medicine, inculcated moral principles and imposed a code of law.”

“In those days there lived a she-bear and a tigress in the same cave. They prayed to Sin-ung (another name of *Hwan-ung*) to be blessed with incarnation as human beings. The king took pity on them and gave them each a bunch of mugwort and twenty pieces of garlic, saying, ‘If you eat this holy food and do not see the sunlight for one hundred days, you will become human beings’”

“The she-bear and the tigress took the food and ate it, and retired into the cave. In twenty-one days the bear, who had faithfully observed the king’s instructions, became a woman. But the tigress, who had disobeyed, remained in her original form.”

“But the bear-woman could find no husband, so she prayed under the sandalwood tree to be blessed with a child. *Hwan-ung* heard her prayers and married her. She conceived and bore a son who was called *Tangun Wanggeom*, the King of Sandalwood.”

“In the fiftieth year of the reign of *Tang Kao* (legendary Chinese emperor *Yao*, traditional date some time before 2000 B.C.) in the year of *Kyong-in* (if it was *Kyong-in*, it must be the 23rd year) *Tangun* came to *P'ongyang* (now *Sogyong*), set up his royal residence there and bestowed the name *Chosun* upon his Kingdom.”

“Later *Tangun* moved his capital to *Asadal* on *T'aebaek-san* and ruled 1500 years, until king *Wu* of *Chou* (ancient Chinese dynasty) placed *Kija* on the throne (traditional date 1122 B.C.). When *Kija* arrived, *Tangun* moved to *Changtang-kyong* and then returned to *Asadal*, where he became a mountain god at the age of 1,908” (Ha 2006: 18-19).

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