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Tan'gun Myth and the Korean Thought

LEE NAM-YOUNG

Meaning and Origin of Tan'gun Myth

1) *Mythology as an Expression of National Character*

The Tan'gun myth is one that is concerned with the founding progenitor of this nation containing a clear explanation of the historical origin of the Korean people. The Tan'gun myth is understood as a folk myth which, having a long tradition, is deeply embedded in the folk thought of Korea. The Tan'gun myth enables us to speak frequently of "our history which is as long extending back to 5,000 years" or employ the phrase "our brilliant 5,000-year tradition" without hesitation whenever we mention Korean history and culture.¹⁾

The Tan'gun myth is certainly material from which we can grasp the origin of Korea's historical development. Various meanings of this myth, be they historical or cultural, have already been clarified in the course of studies in the field of Koreanology. However, as Ch'oe Nam-sŏn (pen name Yuktang) said, "the Tan'gun myth is truly the seed of Korean culture; and so, there should be no limit to methods of inquiring into it."²⁾ With this conviction, this writer is going to examine the nature of thought contained in the Tan'gun myth and clarify the thought patterns of

Koreans in ancient time.

Generally speaking, human beings created the families on the basis of blood ties, villages of their own clansmen, and established states. Civilization emerged in this process. Men were born sons of nature with extremely poor instincts. They, however, gradually learned the wisdom of adapting themselves to their natural environment and responding to it properly in order to ensure their survival, thereby enriching the contents of their existence while ceaselessly carrying out the work of constructing civilization. As men lived scattered in all parts of the globe, races came to ramify in different continents according to topography, soil, climate, and products the of regions in which they lived, forming their particular spheres of civilization. The peculiarities of each civilization can be understood as a crystallization of the mode of life and personality of the peoples who were creators of civilization.

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We notice obviously differential modes of life and personality patterns even among the residents of the same region according to sex, age, and time; there is no need to mention the degree of differences among spheres of civilization. Even in individuals we also notice marked differences in temperament and personality. Any attempt to extract the characteristics of the mode of life and the patterns of thought of a nation state seems absurd because it is a collectivity of individuals.

However, we should not overlook the fact that the traditional mode of life and pattern of thought of a people strongly regulates each individual. Although the modes of life and thought differ colorfully among individuals there must be major tendency which clearly exposes the main traits of a nation. One good example is that traditional custom is still prevailing in the present time as was before.

Therefore such a major tendency shown by a people in an age should be considered as their trait of the age. The Tan'gun myth should also be regarded as revealing, in this context, the major patterns of the psychology and thought of the ancient Koreans. Furthermore, this writer proposes to consider the Tan'gun myth as a mythological metaphysics which enables us to grasp the main characters of Koreans and the orientation of their ideology.

2) *Myths as Ancient Learning*

A myth is unquestionably a story about a god. In addition, we can safely say that a myth is that which mythologizes human life and environment. In other words, a myth is, after all, a story constructed and understood by primitive men even though it is undoubtedly a story about a god.

On the other hand, we read that "a myth is an objectification of man's social experiences and not that of individual experiences."³⁾ In this respect, the Tan'gun myth can, without exception, be regarded as a product of objectifying the social experiences of the ancient Korean people during their existence. The mythological structure understood by them universally must have been an expression of their sense of beauty as well as a reflection of their spirit which comprised their wisdom and ideals. To put it another way, "a myth or a

legend is not a creation by one individual but a product of a group of people who live collectively as well as a historical product; it is a philosophical being living in the group of collective life."⁴⁾ As this interpretation shows, a race which possesses its own myths exposes implicitly through them its peculiar insight and form of thinking. Mythological fancy can be understood as one of the mental activities of ancient people which objectively projected their ability to think.

In short, the Tan'gun myth constituted learning for the ancient Korean race. In this sense, "a myth is not an isolated area for human thinking, which, basically, does not admit heterogeneous elements."⁵⁾ What differs is due to differences in expressing the same contents.

In the mythological thought contained in the Tan'gun myth we find a view of the world possessed by the ancient Korean people. In its view of the world we also find the peculiar view of value of the ancient Koreans and their poetic intuition of life.

There is one thing which makes clear before going further. Mythological thought is not completely identical with rational thought. It does not regard the ability for mythological imagination of the ancients who were naive and irrational as a stereotype of excellent knowledge.

When the contents of their myths are abstracted from the aspect of form, however, we find in them something which is related to rational thought no matter how naive their thought may have been. In this respect, it should be clarified that the Tan'gun myth is a product of the thought constructed by the ancient Korean race, as well as being material with which we can inquire into that thought.

If the meaning and contents implied in the Tan'gun myth can be explained from the philosophical angle, we shall be able to discover the essence of the national characteristics of our people.

Before this task is brought to perfection, however, we must first tackle the problems of what the ancient Korean people really was and what attitude it took toward society, nature, and the universe.

Let us see below what the ancient Korean people expressed through their myth.

The Concept of World and Universe Unfolded by Tan'gun Myth

1) View of the World without Asking Its Origin

Generally speaking, the gods who appear in myths might have their own stages of action. But the world of god in Tan'gun myth does not have his own divine kingdom or world. We also find that even the actual world on earth is utilized as a stage of action for gods in it.

The Christian doctrine, while regarding man as an actor whose stage embraces the whole universe, teaches that God created the boundless universe for him. Despite the fact that God gave the universe to man as a gift, he does not remain in it with him as his stage but transcends it. On the contrary, the world or sphere of the Tan'gun myth contains both the creator of the universe and those who were given it as a gift; in other words, the world of the Tan'gun myth means the whole in which all coexist.

The Christian Bible makes it clear that God created all things in the universe;⁶⁾ and Greek mythology says that there was chaos in the beginning (arch.) but order set in gradually to give birth to all things. On the contrary, the Tan'gun myth makes no mention at all of the origin of the universe or of man.⁷⁾

G. Siegmund, a modern Austrian anthropologist of religion, points out that to ask about the origin of man is one of man's naive questions and that most myths try to give an answer in one form or another to the question of the origin of man.⁸⁾ However, the Tan'gun myth gives no explanation at all of the origin of man, a subject most myths deal with.

It is said in the Tan'gun myth that Hwanung, the god of heaven, was covetous of the human world and that the bear and the tiger desired to transform into human beings. This means that human beings had been living on earth together with other living things even before god came into being in heaven. Human beings had already existed even though they had no history, namely, no state. In other words, the Tan'gun myth is not a myth of creation like the Christian and Greek myths in which an explanation is given of the origin of man and of the universe. This is one

structural characteristic of the Tan'gun myth.

The Tan'gun myth, as we have seen, makes no mention of the origin of man and life. It seems that even before god came into being in heaven, human beings and other living creatures such as bears and tigers had already existed on earth, comprehending heaven and earth as space filled with streams of life. It seems that there is no reason why we should always ask about the origin of man and of all other living things. The mythological fictitiousness that even before the appearance of the heavenly god, human beings, bears, and tigers had already existed on earth is truly mysterious and absurd. If, however, the universe is filled with flux of life, there seems no need for questioning about the origin of earthly things.

Life itself is infinite in terms of scope. It is a mystery where life has come from and where it is destined to go. This is a labyrinth closed eternally to human knowledge.

Human beings are finite as bears and tigers are. We only imagine that finite beings are given infinite life by the infinite being and this enables the former to connect their life with the world of infinite life.

Before further developing this point it may be necessary to recall the Tan'gun myth as it appears in the beginning of *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) even though we are sufficiently familiar with it.

OLD KOREA (Ko Chosŏn 古朝鮮)

It is said in *Wei Shu* (History of Wei) that about 2,000 years ago Tan'gun Wanggŏm settled his capital in the land of Asadal and established his country, which he called Chosŏn(Korea). He was a contemporary of King Yao.

It is said in *Kogi* (Ancient Records 古記) that among many junior sons of Hwanin, there was one called Hwanung, who set his sights at the world and coveted the human world. Knowing his son's ambition, the father examined the mountains in China and Korea and found out that it would be possible to do something beneficial to human beings on a wide scale. He gave his son three heavenly seals and sent him down to earth to govern the people. Leading his three thousand attendants, Hwan ung descended to a place below a juniper tree on the summit of Mount T'aebaek, which he called a divine city. He was King Hwanung.

Commanding wind, rain, and clouds, he took

charge of 360 human affairs such as grain, life, disease, punishment, good and evil while governing the world and enlightening the people.

A bear and a tiger lived in a cave at that time, always praying before Hwanung the god that they be transformed into human beings.

Hwanung gave each of them a handful of mugwort and twenty beads of garlic, telling them that if they did not see the sunlight for one hundred days after eating them, they would become human beings. Both the bear and the tiger ate them. After thirty-seven days of abstinence, the bear became a woman; but the tiger could not be reborn into a human being because he did not abstain.

Though reborn into a woman, the bear had no spouse to marry, and she always prayed below the juniper tree. Hwanung disguised himself briefly, married her, and begot a son. He named the son Tan'gun Wanggöm.

Fifty years after King Yao acceded to the throne, Wanggöm moved the capital to the castle of P'yöngyang in the year of Kyöngin and called his country Chosön. He removed his capital to Asadal on Mount Paegak, which was also called Mount Kunghol or Kümmyodal. He ruled for 1,500 years.

Upon the appointment of Kija to Korea in the year of Kimyo when King Wu of Chou was enthroned, Tan'gun moved to Changdanggyöng and later returned to Asadal, where he lived in retirement until he became a mountain god. His age was 1,908 years.

2) Organic World

As the above account shows, Hwanin was the heavenly god who resided in the heavenly world with his son Hwanung. We see clearly, however, that the heavenly world existed in simultaneity with the earthly world where human beings, bears, tigers, and other living things flocked together. It is not clear which of the two came into being first; what is clear is that they are connected with eternity.

Only the heavenly god is described as one who possessed omnipotence, capable of descending upon the earth, disguising himself into a human being, benefiting mankind, and enlightening people. Because he was a divine being, Hwanung the heavenly king could disguise himself as a human being at will. However, it is said that he did not directly supervise the transformation of the bear and the tiger into human beings as they so wished. It

seems that even though he was a heavenly god, Hwanung recognized the individuality of each living thing on earth. Therefore he agreed to realize their wish only on the condition that they would abstain and endure in the darkness of their cave.

Here it is clear that the heavenly god did not exercise his supervision as an omniscient and omnipotent ability. This attitude came to light again when the she-bear implored him after she was transformed into a woman that she have a child. The heavenly god did not display a divine power to make the she-bear pregnant while retaining her virginity. Instead, the heavenly god briefly took the form of a human being and begot Tan'gun through the process of marrying her. This can be interpreted as meaning that Hwanung, even though he could display the power of a heavenly god, recognized the individuality of earthly things, even negative things, as the soil of becoming. While he did not hesitate to appear as a positive being after transforming himself into a human being, he made the she-bear pregnant only through the process of marriage. This indicates that the ability of the heavenly god was limited somewhat.

This state of affairs should not be overlooked but be given careful consideration. It should be made clear that the heavenly existence and the earthly existence respond to each other while performing their own original function.

Nevertheless, we should remember that the relationship between the two is not a completely equal one. This unequal relationship is noticeable when the bear earnestly besought Hwanung that she be transformed into a human being and when the bear woman, after her wish was fulfilled, again implored the heavenly king that she become pregnant. Namely, the earthly being could fulfill her wish of giving birth to a son only with the help extended by the king from heaven. This episode indicates that even though the heavenly king was not omnipotent, his dignity was apparently superior to that of earthly creatures such as human beings and bears. In other words, this means that the relationship between the heavenly world and the earthly world is that the former is stout and solid while the latter is docile and soft.

Heaven and earth are described as parts of an harmonious whole and as being connected with each other in organic relationship. The earthly world is not isolated from the heavenly world where the god resides as a transcendental entity. The interpretation seems proper that "the god who appears in the Tan'gun myth is not far-off from the earthly world."

Tan'gun, the hero of this myth, is described as a crystal in whom divine life and human life are blended into one. If Tan'gun had anything different from ordinary human beings who had already been living on earth, it was that Tan'gun was not a mere natural person embodying earthly life but one of ability who inherited both the superiority of a leader filled with heavenly dignity and the self-denial and perseverance that was displayed by the bear woman.

According to the Christian Bible, God made man the master of the universe and established order in it for him. God's kingdom unmistakably exists outside the universe as a supernatural entity.⁹⁾ In the Tan'gun myth, however, man, as an intermediary between the heavenly god and earthly beings, is striving to realize the ideal of benefiting mankind while having no urgent sense of indebtedness to god. Man holds his sphere of living as a harmonious being in the universe and realizes the meaning of his existence in his all-inclusive sphere of living.

3) Totalistic View of the World

It was pointed out earlier that the heavenly world is not distinguished or isolated from the earthly world or vice versa in the Tan'gun myth. Commanding the rain, wind, and clouds, bringing with him grain and life, and supervising disease, punishment, good and evil, the heavenly god descended to earth to participate in human life and promote the well-being of human beings. The universe in the Tan'gun myth is a harmonious organic entity which unifies the sphere where the heavenly god resides and the sphere where human beings and animals coexist. The universe is not dualistic in this myth.

The mythological metaphysics we find in the Tan'gun legend are based, first of all, on

a monistic view of the world. However, this monism should not be understood as identical with the monistic view of the world of Western metaphysics which rejects the disorder of the phenomenal world. The world grasped in the Tan'gun myth is rather an all-inclusive world embracing both the heavenly world and the phenomenal world, namely, a totalistic world. The whole sphere of the universe in which the material world is not separated from the spiritual world provides the background for the Tan'gun myth.

Some may argue that the concept of the world or universe in the Tan'gun myth is nothing different from that of Nature in Western philosophy. However, the universe or nature in the Tan'gun myth, as its original meaning suggests, is not limited by something which transcends nature or by supernature. Nature in the Tan'gun myth can communicate with infinity. Through this myth we can grasp the unique view of the world or universe held by the ancient Koreans.

Natural and Social Factors in the World of Myths

1) Natural Environments and Their Influences

Both as individuals and as members of a race, men are placed under some restricted circumstances in terms of time and space. Their thought, generally speaking, is apt to be restricted by the natural features and social environment of the area where they live. Natural and social elements impose a certain fixed pattern or form a certain trend in the life of individuals or a race. These elements also characterize their mode of thinking by emphasizing some particular aspects while neglecting some other aspects. Especially in the initial stage of civilization, the influence of natural and social conditions on the life and thought of the ancients must have been tremendous.

The ancient Korean people were no exception to this trend. In this respect, the Tan'gun myth can be interpreted as expressing the characteristics of the view of nature and social life of the ancient Korean people. In other words, the myth primarily delineates the ancient human society of Korea as its inhabitants adapted themselves or reacted to nature. Now

let us examine how the Tan'gun myth, which also clarifies the historical origin of the Korean race, contains natural and social elements to such an extent that it can show the characteristic thought and mode of life of the ancient Korean people.

Concerning natural features, it is to be pointed out that the ancient Korean race settled in a relatively spacious land in the north-eastern corner of Asia.¹⁰⁾ Their land has relatively well developed rivers and its soil is generally fertile. Its climate is temperate; the four seasons are distinct. Consequently crops are various and plentiful. These natural features must have cultivated in its residents the wisdom of adapting themselves to nature. The adequate sunshine and rain according to the seasons were heavenly blessings. Various crops ripened in the fields. It was a natural consequence that Koreans settled in a life centering around agriculture.

The disposition of the Korean people who lived in these circumstances was described in early Chinese historical records.

The eastern people is called *I* (夷). *I* means the root. The people has in high esteem benevolence and is happily engaged in creation. This is as if all things are growing up with their roots embedded firmly in the soil. They are docile by nature¹¹⁾

This record shows how much an agricultural society influenced the disposition of its inhabitants and how closely the ancient Korean people adhered to their agricultural life.

In their everyday conversations, the Koreans are fond of praising their land with such phrases as "a land as beautiful as embroidered brocade," "five crops and one hundred flowers in full bloom," and "good-hearted folks under the blue sky." These expressions are odes to their splendid and beautiful natural environment and the fertility of their soil. An agriculture-centered mode of life inevitably makes its people sensitive to the climate and the nature of the soil. They naturally seek more favorable natural conditions for their living. In a gradual process they are gripped by a fixed idea connecting agriculture with nature. To put it in detail, farming requires a fertile plain and adequate rainfall and sunshine. Farming would be impossible if rainfall and sunshine are not adequate even though

the soil is fertile or if the soil is not fertile even though rainfall and sunshine are adequate. To discern these natural conditions must have been a matter of life or death for the ancients rather than an extremely ordinary common-sense knowledge whether the discernment was a product of intuitive understanding or of reflective discrimination.

This kind of understanding and discrimination gradually expanded, and deepened becoming elements forming an agriculture-centered view of nature or the world. In other words, the ancient Koreans grasped heaven and earth not as separate entities but as having an inseparable and organic relationship. They could not think of earth without earth.

We often find the definition of the Tan'gun myth as an agricultural myth which has an agriculture-centered society as its background.¹²⁾ There may be many reasons for this definition. The marriage between Hwanung and the she-bear should be construed as indicating unity between heaven and earth which constitutes the basic element for the mode of agricultural production. Ultimately this is a monistic or totalistic view which regards the interaction between heaven and earth as an inseparable phenomenon of life.

2) *Agricultural Settings and Objectification of Thought*

The agriculture-centered mode of life helps the people confirm another indispensable element for survival as long as it enables them to exist. This means that men, as farmers who are actually successfully engaged in agriculture, find meaning in their existence. No matter how friendly nature might be to men, nature alone cannot feed them to the full. Fertile land and favorable climate promise a satisfactory life for men as long as they take part in the work of nature by sowing the seeds, tending the plants, harvesting the crops, and storing them.

In short, heaven, earth, and toil by men are the three indispensable and inseparable basic elements for human existence. This is the "Thought of Three Elements"¹³⁾ in Oriental philosophy. The *Book of Changes* develops the theory of changes by commanding the three elements—heaven, earth, and man.

The Mean notes (in Chapter 22) that “the creation of heaven and earth should be praised. Men are encouraged to take part in the work of heaven and earth.” Chu Hsi of the Sung dynasty attached an annotation to the ancient saying, interpreting to mean that “to take part in the work of heaven and earth results in man’s standing abreast with heaven and earth. These are the three elements.” This means that in his relations to heaven and earth, man stands not in a subordinate position in a vertical line of superiority and inferiority but in an equal position in a horizontal line of co-ordination like “three brothers” or “three friends.” The expression of such a feeling of unison and alignment between heaven and earth should be construed as one aspect of the agriculture-centered mode of thinking.

Men eagerly want to benefit by fertile soil and favorable climate. The Korean race yearned after nature; furthermore, the Koreans were blessed with a rich abode.

The ancient Korean people believed that their life was directly connected with nature which dominated their existence. It can be inferred that this belief led them to a mysterious awe of nature. On the other hand, they may have thought that earth which produced everything inherited the heavenly will. If this inference is tenable, the passage in the Tan’gun myth where Hwanung, the heavenly king, commanded the wind, rain, and clouds and supervised grain, human life, disease, punishment, and good and evil can be construed as implying that the Korean people had more reverence for heaven than for earth.

Some classify the Tan’gun myth into the group of myths which concern the descent of heavenly descendants. However, respect or reverence for heaven harbored by the ancient Koreans was by no means intended to alienate man from earth as if it had no relation to man at all. For the ancients heaven held a position superior to that of earth inasmuch as its creation continued ceaselessly through interactions with earth. “I understand that this view later developed into the theory of Yin (Negative) and Yang (Positive).”¹⁴

3) *General Trends in Northeast Asian Cultural Region*

The view of nature we have examined, the position of human beings in the universe, and reverence for heaven—all these should not be confined to the ancient Koreans, but they should be regarded as a general trend common to all races who lived in the sphere of agricultural culture having a similar environment and elements and, especially, to the Chinese race in the northeastern part of the Asian continent whose territory was contiguous to ours and whose climate and mode of life were similar to ours. What we have discussed may be expressed more succinctly and in a more straightforward manner if we employ concepts contained in the Chinese classics.

We find in Chinese books very similar descriptions. This may have been a natural consequence, for the Chinese people, too, expressed their agriculture-centered view of nature.

Some important concepts contained in the Chinese classics are as follows:

The concepts of “t’ien-ti” (heaven and earth) are equivalents¹⁵ as are the concepts of “ch’ien-k’un” (male and female) and “yin-yang” (negative and positive).¹⁶ The sphere these concepts cover is not a finite one but a totalistic one embracing both nature and supernature.

We also find a trend that in the relations between heaven and earth, the former is placed in a little higher position than the latter. This is a sign of reverence for heaven. It is said in the *Book of Changes*: “Heaven is exalted; earth is low. This is the fixed order of the universe.” Mencius said that “those who follow the heavenly will can survive and those who disobey it will perish.” This is one expression of Mencius’ metaphysics which is based on reverence for heaven. The “heavenly decree” in the *Mean* is also an intensive expression of reverence for heaven.

Such a view of heaven became more manifest in the Confucianism of the Han dynasty. Especially after the adoption of Confucianism as the national ideology, the ruler came to be identified with heaven in an effort to make regal authority absolute. Tung Chung-shuh, a typical

academician of the time, said in *Ch'un-ch'iu-fan-lu*, his greatest work, that "heaven is the king of all gods." Pan Ku said in *Pai-hu-t'ung* that "heaven is, so to speak, a pacifier. Residing in a high place, it rules the world below and pacifies it for human beings."¹⁷⁾ We find a significant similarity between the Chinese classics and the Tan'gun myth.

4) Peculiarities of the Ancient Korean People

The similarity between the Chinese classics and the Tan'gun myth cannot be ascribed solely to the homogeneity between the Chinese and Korean peoples in the modes of thinking due to their similar agricultural culture. It cannot be asserted that similarity in the circumstances and mode of living always brings about similarity in the mode of thinking. It may be that the ground was ripe for the ancient Chinese race to give birth to myths whose form and structure are the same as the Tan'gun myth. We have to examine the originality of myths.

Myths are products which appeared at the dawn of civilization. All written theories about them were, on the other hand, products of historic times. It is a mistake to think that myths were produced under the influence of classics. It may be possible to clarify the structure and characteristics of myths by employing the concepts and theories developed in the classics. This is a method of retroaction. This means that we admit the existence of myths before theories and that theories were influenced by myths. In other words, we can infer that the thought of Yin and Yang which ruled the minds of our people was already suggested in the legend about Hwanung and the she-bear, a product of primitive Korean society, before its introduction from the *Book of Changes*.¹⁸⁾

This assertion was already made by Ch'oe Nam-sôn (pen name Yuktang) as the basic precondition for a right understanding of Korean history. He made the following suggestions:

1. Tan'gun is the only key to the solution of puzzles in ancient Korean history. Research on him seems to be the most important cornerstone for Oriental studies, for we can only form a view of the ancient aspects of Oriental culture through

him."¹⁹⁾

2. It seems that the Chinese thought on changes, the theory of the Three Elements, and the idea of identifying the ruler with heaven may have been founded on the ancient philosophy of the Korean people in view of the shape, pronunciation, and meaning of the characters. The religious mood of the Chinese seems entirely an imitation of the Korean people."²⁰⁾

3. The thought of Yin and Yang changes and of cooperation between heaven and man was born among Koreans; and the bud of the thought of changes, the highest pinnacle of Oriental philosophy, first grew among Koreans as proved by various evidence.²¹⁾

With the belief that ancient Korea was the origin of Oriental culture, Yuktang called Korea "the horbed of philosophy and religion."²²⁾ Dr. Park Chong-hong inferred that the reverence for heaven and the theory of Yin and Yang had their origin in Korean myths.²³⁾

It is clear that the thought of unity between heaven and man, the theory of Yin and Yang, and the doctrine of heavenly decree which we find in the Chinese classics stemmed from the Tan'gun myth. The prototype of the Chinese concepts and theories enumerated earlier can be found in the Tan'gun myth; and we feel keenly that Chinese thought was a product of abstracting the influences of the Tan'gun myth.

The Tan'gun myth, together with reverence for heaven, has been the spiritual root of the Korean people through all ages, as pointed out by Pak Ūn-sik, who said in part:

"Tan'gun, the founder, taught the people with his heavenly way and worshipped heaven. Puyō, Koguryō, Paekche, and Koryō all followed his teaching.

"When a son is born in this country, the parents do not fail to worship the three gods, whom they call the gods of production. They are Hwanin, Hwanung, and Tan'gun.

"During the Kija period, they built a shrine for Tan'gun. In the Three Kingdoms period, Buddhism thrived, but they held Hwanin Chesōk (Chesōk meaning heavenly king in Sanscrit) in reverence. He is mentioned in the Huayen-sutra. All temples in the country worshipped Hwanin Chesōk. This has not been altered to date. In the Koryō Kingdom 360 hermitages were built on Mt. Myohyang to commemorate Tan'gun's governing 360 human affairs. The priest Ilyōn compiled *Samguk yusa* and discussed creation by the three gods.

"In the Yi dynasty, Yi Hwang, a noted Confucian, said that the religion of Korea originates in Tan'gun. Chông Yak-yong said that the three gods are progenitors of the Korean people, as well as the origin of religion. As the Korean people worship heaven, their religion is called Paech'on'gyo (heaven-worshipping religion). It is also called Taejonggyo. 'Jong' in Taejonggyo means ancient god-men."²⁴⁾

The spirit embodied in the Tan'gun myth has been vividly inherited in all books, old and new. It may not be too much to say that its spirit constitutes "an indomitable foundation of national thought."²⁵⁾

On the contrary, the theories and thought developed in the Chinese classics which are believed to have been influenced by the Tan'gun myth underwent distortion and reversion in the process of succession.

Yin and Yang came to form mysterious connections with the concepts of the Five Elements with which it originally had nothing to do, thereby degrading it into a superstitious theory. The thought of the Three Elements was adopted by Taoism, inclining toward escapism blocking the pioneer spirit affirming reality. The Chinese thought of revering heaven was altered into a theory of exalting the ruler in the Chin and Han period. This trend has exerted influence on the Chinese until the modern age.

Even Chu Hsi who brought Neo-Confucianism to perfection wrote *I-pen-i* in an effort to clarify the basic meaning of the *Book of Changes*; but he, too, could at best only understand it in a speculative and illusive manner. The philosopher who believed that he had grasped the core of truth failed to penetrate into the true meaning of Yin and Yang or the Three Elements—heaven, earth, and man—without trying to recognize it with an intellectualist attitude while giving tacit consent to superstitious elements. The cosmology of Neo-Confucianism was nothing but a set of decorations based on groundless and empty theories in a futile attempt to seek the essence of life in the expansive universe.

We are asked here to direct our attention again to the meaning of the Tan'gun myth. We should interpret the implications of the myth as an indicator of the thought of the ancient Korean race. We should correctly re-

cognize the view of the world held by the ancient Korean people.

The self-awakening of the Korean people originated in the cosmic mind projected from the very world, full of vigor. Through this, Koreans became to understand the meanings of the relationships between the productive universe and productive man.

FOOTNOTES

1. To presume the era of Tan'gun's reign as beginning in 2333 B.C. may confront objection according to criteria. This is a question not directly concerned with the aim of this paper; and so it is omitted here. Refer to "An Inquiry into the Relations Between *Samguk yusa* and the Priest Ilyön" by this writer carried in *Ch'ölhak Non'gu* (Philosophical Treatises), Vol. 2, published by the Society of Philosophy, Seoul National University, 1973, pp. 15-17.
2. Ch'oe Nam-sön, "Original Meaning of the Tan'gun Myth," *A Complete Collection of Ch'oe Nam-sön's Works*, Vol. 2, (Hyönam Publishing Company, 1973) p. 190.
3. Ch'oe Myöng-gwan, "Cassirer's Mythological Theory," *A Collection of Treatises to Commemorate the 70th Birthday of Dr. Kim Kye-suk*, 1975, p. 78.
4. Son Chin-t'ae, *An Introduction to the Spiritual History of Korea*, p. 20.
5. Ch'oe Myöng-gwan, *ibid.*, p. 64.
6. Kim Söng-mok, "Man's Position in the Universe," *A Collection of Treatises to Commemorate the 70th Birthday of Dr. Kim Kye-suk*, pp. 12-13.
7. Cho Chi-hun said in Chapter 4. Types of Korean Myths, *A Preface to the History of Korean Culture*, (T'angudang Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 51-53, that Korean myths included those about the creation of the country and creation of the universe, and that they disappeared in written myths such as the Tan'gun myth.
8. Kim T'ae-gwan trans., *Faith of Primitive* (Pundo Publishing Co., 1972), p. 7.
9. Gospel According to St. John, Chapter 18, Verse 36.
10. The question concerning the ancient living sphere of the Korean race can be solved through not only historical but archaeological, anthropological, and sociological research. Some achievements made in this inquiry in the past are: Ch'oe Nam-sön said that "the sphere where the Korean

- people lived at that time was truly broad, tens of millions of square leagues, extending northward as far as the Heilung River and the Hsinganling Mountain Range and southward as far as the Yellow River and the Korean peninsula, with the Sungari River in the center." (Kyego Ch'ajon, "A Complete Collection of Ch'oe Nam-sŏn's works, Vol. 2, p. 14). According to Professor Kim Ch'ŏl-chun, "the ancient Korean tribes of Han and Yemaek lived along the east coast of northern China, mainly in the Shantung peninsula, before their migration to Manchuria and the Korean peninsula in the Chou period." (*History of Development of Ancient Korean States*, p. 34)
11. "Series of Biographies on the Eastern Race." *Huhanshu*,
 12. Ch'oe Nam-sŏn, "Kyego Ch'ajon," "Tan'gun and His Study," *ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 40, pp. 247-250. Cho Chi-hun, *ibid.*, p. 39.
 13. *Book of Changes*, Shuokuachuan.
 14. This is referred to with prudent and indi-

- rect demonstration by Dr. Park Chong-hong in "Religion of the Korean people," *Intelligence and Groping*, (Pagyŏngsa Publishing Co., 1967), pp. 138-139. The description coincides with the main theme of this paper.
15. *Book of Changes*.
 16. *Book of Changes*.
 17. Pan Ku, *Pai-hu-tung*, Chapter on heaven and earth.
 18. Yi Ŏ-nyŏng, *Myths of the Korean People*, (Sŏmundang, 1972,) p. 128.
 19. Ch'oe Nam-sŏn, "Pulham Munhwaron," *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 43.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
 21. *Ibid.*, "Korea in Her Infancy," p. 184.
 22. *Ibid.*, the same page.
 23. Refer to footnote no. 14.
 24. Pak Ŏn-sik, *Han'guk Tongsa*, Part 3, Chapter 60, "Tan'gun's Godly Religion."
 25. Son Chin-t'ae, *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Twine

Why was I born thus late?

So deep is man's decline
 From days so simple truth could still
 Be knotted into twine
 That, really, it does not matter
 Whether I seek or shun
 That simplest truth, that nothingness
 The wineshops offer one.

By *Sin Hŭm*
 Translated by Graeme Wilson