



Symbolic Meanings of Dan-Gun Myth

SOME Social and Cultural Implications of the Myth of the Origin of Korea

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Symbolic Meanings of Dan-Gun Myth: SOME Social and Cultural Implications of the Myth of the Origin of Korea

Won Gue Lee

I

From the earliest time in human history, there have been various ways in which people conceive of their society and the world in which it has been set, on the one hand, and in which they understand themselves as related to their circumstances and worldview, on the other. Among these ways, myth, legend, and folktale are of particular interest not because they are products of the prominent human capacity for imagination and fantasy which transcend the temporal and spatial boundaries but because they have important symbolic meanings which explain some deep-rooted sources of man's behaviors and attitudes as related to their views about themselves and the socio-cultural situation under which they live.

In general, anthropologists have approached mythology and cosmology from the point of view that they are cultural phenomena (Dolgin *et al.*, 1977), or, in Durkheim's words, "collective representations" or "social facts" (Durkheim, 1965). The underlying

implication of this view is that myths and cosmological notions are not merely fairy tales, exotic and quaint expressions of a “primitive mentality” but they are statements, made deliberately and consciously by the people who tell them, which are about society and man’s place in it and in the surrounding universe (Middleton, 1967: x). Such statements are, in general, symbolic ones, so that an important anthropological problem becomes one of understanding the reality that the statements are used to symbolize. Thus Bellah, who emphasizes the method of what he calls “symbolic realism,” explains myth as seeking to transfigure reality so that it provides moral and spiritual meaning to individuals or societies (1970; 1975: 3). Furthermore, according to Geertz, myths (with rituals) as sacred symbols relate an ontology and a cosmology (worldview) to an aesthetics and a morality (ethos): their peculiar power comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level, to give to what is otherwise merely actual, a comprehensive normative import (1973: 126-127).

The purpose of this paper is to examine some symbolic meanings of the *Dangun* myth, the myth of the origin of Korea, in terms of their social and cultural implications which are possibly assumed to be related to some of the traditional (and, in a sense, present) socio-cultural situations of Korea and some of the characteristics of Koreans in their mentality and normative values.

II

The Neolithic period in Korea coincides with that vast and diverse cultural efflorescence which occurred in North Asia in the third and fourth millennia B.C. It has been assumed that a Tungustic branch of the Ural-Altaic family who were primitive hunting and

fishing people migrated from the northwestern regions of Asia to the regions of southern Manchuria and the Korean peninsula, forming one cultural zone in lands during the periods (Ministry of Culture and Information, 1978). Also, current archaeological and linguistic hypotheses indicate that the developments of agriculture and bronze culture in this area date from the end of the second millennium B.C. (Henthorn, 1971).

With the introduction of metal culture and metallurgic culture during the first millennium B.C., the people began to form tribes and later small tribal states by making alliances with one another. But it was not until the establishment of the Three Kingdoms that recorded Korean history came into being: *Koguryo* (高句麗, 37 B.C.-668 A.D.) occupied southern Manchuria and the northern Korean area, *Paekche* (百濟, 18 B.C.-660 A.D.) occupied the southwest area, and *Silla* (新羅, 57 B.C.-936 A.D.) settled in the southeast of the peninsula. During the periods of unification of *Silla*, and the succeeding *Koryo* (高麗) dynasty (918-1392), Buddhism flourished, becoming a dominant force in their spiritual and cultural lives. The *Yi* (李) dynasty (1392-1910) chose Confucianism as the major guideline for official functioning and private life. After Japan's annexation of Korea (1910-1945), Korea established the Republic as a modern nation.

The *Dangun* myth is the myth of the origin of Korea. The story of *Dangun* myth is included in *Samguk-yusa* (三國遺事) written in 1279 by a Buddhist monk, *Il-yon* (一然), who tried to collect various myths and legends handed down from the earliest times in oral tradition. The book begins with a chronological table and is followed by a long section entitled *Records of Marbles*; it is here that the *Dangun* story can be found. This story is followed by a garbled explanation of certain terms from early Korean history and by legends relating to various early kings of *Silla* and the founding

of *Koguryo*. Then comes the story of Buddhism.

In the story of *Dangun*, Il-yon placed the foundation of Korea by *Dangun* in the fiftieth year of the reign of the legendary Chinese king *Dang-Go*(唐高), corresponding to the western year 2333 B.C. In view of the lateness of the source and the obviously folkloristic character of the story, there seems no reason to try to get history out of any of this, but *Dangun's* accession date is nevertheless used as the basis of an era in Korea to this day. As a matter of fact, the *Dangun* myth cannot be regarded as a historical record by which the founding of Korea can be traced. Rather, it is a *saga* which tried to communicate or convey some message(Byong-Do Lee, 1959). Therefore, it is a meaningless question whether the story is true or not in its historicity. Rather, the question should be focused on the problem of its symbolic meanings in terms of socio-cultural implications not only in the environmental situation and the adaptation to it but also in the mentality and morality among traditional Koreans (and possibly modern Koreans).

III

The story of the *Dangun* myth is as follows:

In the ancient writings, it is said that: There was *Whan-ung*(桓雄), son of *Whan-in*(桓因, *Hananim*), who desired to descend upon the human world beneath. Knowing his son's intention, the Father who felt the need of public welfare for the people upon the three high mountains of *Taibaik* allowed him to descend and govern the people on earth, providing him with the three Heavenly-warrants. *Whan-ung* descended upon the *Taibaik* mountain with three thousand spirits and founded his divine city under the sacred tree. This is the one who was called *Whan-ung*, the heavenly king. Accompanied by the "Wind General," the "Rain Governer," and the "Cloud Manager," he

governed and cultivated people on earth, teaching them *shin-do*(shin-god, do-way or doctrine, 神道). Thus *Whan-ung* taught the people the five principles of *shin-do* concerning agriculture, destiny, diseases, criminal law, and morality and, also, the three hundred and sixty six ethical principles and regulations concerning husband-wife, father-son, king-subordinate relationships, etc.; and regulations concerning food, water, clothing and community life. *Whan-ung* thus made the people live a community life. He divided three thousand communities into districts and he at times rode out, upon an ox, to see how his people lived. For one hundred and twenty-four years he served his people without kingly rank and neither did the people have any consciousness of nationality. One day *Whan-ung* was approached by a bear and a tiger, both of whom eagerly wanted to be changed into humans. He gave them each a stalk of artemisia and twenty pieces of garlic, telling them to eat these, and to hide from the light of the sun in a dark cave for a hundred days. Only the bear was able to follow this program through, the tiger not having the patience to remain hidden for very long. Eventually after only twenty-one days, the bear was changed into a woman and she prayed again to have a baby. Responding to the wish of the bear-woman, *Whan-ung* incarnated into a man for a moment and married her. Between them, a son, *Dangun-wangkum*(檀君王儉) was born..*Dangun* founded his kingdom, *Chosun*(朝鮮, old name of Korea), at Pyungyang(now the capital of North Korea) in the fiftieth year of *Danggo's* reign(ancient Chinese saga king).... and reigned for one thousand and five hundred years(Byung-Do Lee, 1956: 27-28, 180-181).

It is a common agreement that *Whan-in* of the *Dangun* myth is a different name of *Hananim*(Byung-Do Lee, 1956). The concept of *Hananim*, which literally means “the One Great Whole,” has been a unique monotheistic belief from the earliest times among Koreans(Ryu, 1964). Korean people always believed in and worshipped *Hananim* as the Supreme Ruler for whom there was no image or likeness in heaven or earth or under the earth. The monotheism of *Hananim* has contributed to the ethical thinking of

Koreans in the conviction of the final victory of truth and justice and the belief that God gives final judgment by punishing evil doers and by destroying evil powers at last(Park, 1970). In spite of the lack of systematic ethical theory in the ancient period, the monotheistic implications of *Hananim* worship also provided the strong concepts of kindness and love, of filial piety, of purity, of politeness, and of chastity which seem to have prevailed among the Korean people from the time prior to the Chinese influence(Kim, 1958). The *Dangun* myth is authentic evidence of *Hananim* worship among the ancient Koreans. At the same time, the *Dangun* myth gives a clue to the discovery of religious practices among them, when we related the *Dangun* myth with the monotheistic implication of *Hananim* worship.

One of the outstanding social and ethical ideas in the *Dangun* myth is the principle of “man for the public interest.” As the story tells, one of the main reasons why *Whan-in* sent down his son, *Whan-ung*, was for the interest of the people on earth. In other words, the founding idea of ancient Korea was based on the public interest or welfare of the people and not of the king or privileged class (Kim, 1963). The idea of “man for the public interest” was well reflected in the social system of ancient kingdoms. It was the basis of the primitive democratic system in Korea. In spite of many similar examples in other cultures, it is unique in the sense that almost every kingdom without exception had democratic systems such as *Whabaik*(和白) in Silla, *Chegapyeongyi*(諸家平議) in Buyeo, *Kunkonghoeyi*(君公會議) in Koguryo, and so on (Byung-Do Lee, 1959; Kim, 1963). Important decisions were made in democratic meetings composed of representatives of people. In Silla’s *Whabaik* system, for example, the agreement had to be unanimous without any single disagreement (Byung-Do Lee, 1959). The selection and dethronement of the king was decided in this meeting. There was

also a system by which an individual could appeal directly to the king himself (Cho, 1959). These facts are too strong and too peculiar to ancient Koreans to be attributed entirely to the Chinese influence.

Another important element in the *Dangun* myth is the emphasis on agriculture. All Three Heavenly-warrants are related to agriculture. This is an evidence that Korea was already in the period of agricultural culture. In Korea, the geographical condition accelerated agricultural culture without having a long period of nomadic culture (Kim, 1963). Also, the *Dangun* myth is patriarchal as a whole (Byung-Do Lee, 1959). Thus what the *Dangun* myth reveals to us is that Korea was in the period of agricultural culture and of a patriarchal family system. The patriarchal family system of agricultural culture tends to develop an extended family system in order to have more hands for cooperative farming. An extended family system tends to emphasize the authority of the head of family in order to enforce harmony and peace among the members. And the emphasis of the authority of the head of family leads to the strong concept of filial piety while the parents are alive and of ancestor-worship after they die. If we argue from this perspective, the strong emphasis on filial piety and on ancestor-worship was natural to the ancient people in Korea. In many cases the ethical demand of filial piety was so radical that no other value could compete against it. Thus the socio-cultural foundation of ancestor-worship, coupled with the spirit-worship of shamanism, confirmed the strong observance of ancestor-worship from the early time (Park, 1970).

There is also the mention of morality and criminal law in the *Dangun* myth. In spite of its brief statement, we can infer that the moral law and legal systems were well developed by this time. It is quite possible that the high standard of ethical life and the strict

legal system in the ancient kingdoms can be understood in relation to the *Dangun* myth (Park, 1970: 54). Historically the strict legal system is evidenced in most of ancient kingdoms. The historical record shows that Korea had the Eight-Commandments from the early time of history. Some of the recorded articles are: a) one who has killed another should be killed in return, b) one who has harmed others physically should pay grains for compensation, and c) one who has robbed should either become a slave to the one being robbed or pay five hundred pennies (Byung-Do Lee, 1959: 144-148). There is an additional explanation that the strict legal system with the high standard of morality enabled people to live with doors open and that ladies were so chaste that there was no adultery (Byung-Do Lee, 1959: 146-147).

IV

The marriage of God (*Whan-ung*) with a bear-woman implies an important symbolic meaning of cosmology and ontology (worldview) in Geertz's term among the ancient Korean people in terms of a cosmic unity of two entirely different orders, i.e., the heavenly order and the earthly order. The two orders, the divine order and the natural order, are viewed not as wholly separate or in severe conflict but as a balancing unity and harmonious confrontation. Then the basic cosmology of early Koreans that the Way of Heaven is the very Way of Earth (Choi, 1976) shows the unity of two different orders; and, from the harmony of the two orders, man was given birth. Although this story does not tell us the beginning of man in the world, it does say that man stands between the supernatural (the heavenly order) and the natural (the earthly order) sustaining two basic relationships, those of man to god and to

nature, without any conflict.

An interesting thing in the story is the fact that both the son of the Heavenly King and animals envied man in the earth. The son of God wished to come down to man's world while animals wished to become humans, and both of them asked God. Here human life is viewed as worthwhile and desirable because even god and animals are anxious to be involved in the human world. Human life is described as priceless and respectful, and the human world as the center of the universe combines the heavenly order and the natural order. Here lies the basis of the positive humanism of the Korean mind (O-Ryong Lee, 1977). Thus a famous early Chinese historian, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (司馬遷, 2c B.C.E.), explained the character of Korean people as follows:

The people are kind and gentle and they love to live (仁而好生);
They know the Way of Heaven and obey their destiny (易以道御).

But why a bear but not a tiger? It has been assumed that the two animals represent two different symbols. The tiger has been viewed by Koreans from the early times as symbols of dynamism, outward strength, power of courage, conquest with physical power, etc. while the bear as those of the static, inward strength, power of patience, conquest with mental power (O-Ryong Lee, 1977: 24). Koreans always highly evaluate characteristics of the latter type. O-Ryong Lee calls the former, the 'hero' type, and the latter, the 'saint' type and he interprets the success of the bear as the triumph of the saintly mind over the heroic power (1977: 25). As a matter of fact, Koreans from the earliest times have regarded patience, forgiveness, self-restraint and the like as prime values over bravery, revenge, physical power and so on. Thus Koreans never invaded other countries throughout history (Byung-Do Lee, 1959). The military officers and soldiers were always treated as lower strata

(and this is one of the reasons why Korea was invaded by other countries so often!). Then it is no wonder that Korea has so many stories about saints but few about heroes. Strangely, however, the tiger has been more familiar in Korean legends and folktales than the bear. And there has been no taboo about the bear and, in this sense, the bear was not the object of totemism in Korea. (This is probably because the bear adored the human, but not the reverse in the story.)

Possibly due to the higher valuation in terms of patience and inward mental power (saintly characteristics), tests used for the bear and the tiger for their becoming humans were not focused on their capacities in the use of armed forces but on those in endurance with self-restraint and self-discipline. The tests consisted of two different tasks which need endless patience and self-control: one was to eat only twenty pieces of garlic and a stalk of artemisia; the other was to hide from the light of the sun in a dark cave for a hundred days. The garlic was edible but as a spice while the artemisia was not a food but was used as an ingredient of some medicines when it was dried and ground. In short, things provided as food were very bitter and hot to eat and, needless to say, those were not enough in quantity for one hundred days. It was also a difficult task to hide the light of the sun for such a long time because the darkness means fear, death, and despair for the primitive people. By implication, tasks given to the bear and the tiger were extremely difficult to perform.

However, to become a human the bear and the tiger should have overcome the difficulties. It seems to be the process of what Turner calls the 'liminality' as one of the 'structural' aspects of passage (1969) that characterizes *rituals of status elevation*, in which the ritual subject or novice is being conveyed irreversibly from a lower to a higher position in an institutionalized system of such positions

(p. 167). Many stories of saints and early kings in Korea, thus, involved some kinds of adversity and distress to have to be overcome in order that they could become kings and to be called as saints. Among them, the following story will be a good example.

This is the story of *Cho-yong* (處容) which was based on the song of *Cho-yong*. There had been many songs in Silla called *Hyang-ga* (鄉歌) and later some fourteen of them were collected and written in *Samguk-yusa*. The song of *Cho-yong* (879 A.D.) was one of them but the most widely known one. The story and the song of *Cho-yong* are as follows:

Cho-yong, one of the seven sons of the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea, had been given a beautiful woman to wed by the Silla king, Horgan, who wished to keep his services as advisor. Seeing that Cho-yong's wife was extremely beautiful, an evil spirit (Demon of Pestilence) transformed himself into a man and attacked her in her room while Cho-yong was away. But when Cho-yong returned and witnessed the scene, with calmness he sang this song while dancing:

Under the bright moon of the capital,
'Til far in the night I sported.
Returning, I see in the bed,
There are four legs!
Two were mine,
Whose are the other two?
Those originally mine have been taken;
What shall I do?

His calmness and generosity so impressed the demon that he knelt before Cho-yong and told him he would never enter a gate where a likeness of Cho-yong (in the form of a door placard) was displayed (ed. Byung-Do Lee, 1956).

From then on the song has been widely sung, on the one hand, and the picture of *Cho-yong* has been widely attached at front doors

of houses to exorcise the demon. Also, later the song was incorporated in a masked performance and presented in an expanded version at court in *Koryo* and early *Yi* periods (Henthorn, 1971: 74; Peter Lee, 1974: 42, 52-54).

Traditionally, *Cho-yong* was considered to be a shaman; he expelled the demon not by confrontation but by means of song and dance, thus shaming the demon into submission. *Cho-yong's* handling of the situation has been described as fatalistic, magical, and the like (Peter Lee, 1979: 116). However, what was inspired and respected from *Cho-yong* among the people was his generosity and calmness. His greatness lay in his power of self-restraint, self-control and forgiveness and his deed was described as the triumph of the inward struggle with himself. That was why he was regarded as a saintly figure (O-Ryong Lee, 1977: 40). This can be seen as the liminality of status elevation through humility, patience, submissiveness, silence, etc. (Turner, 1969: 103, 189).

To return to the *Dangun* myth, only the bear who could endure difficulties with patience and self-restraint became a human (woman) after twenty one days. It was birth of a human from a bear after experiencing and overcoming physical and mental difficulties. It may be said that the birth was one of the life-crisis rites of which Warner speaks:

Birth is one of the life-crisis rites in terms of critical moments of transition which all societies ritualize and publicly mark with suitable observances to impress the significance of the individual and the group on living members of the community (Warner, 1959: 303)

V

The Korean culture developed over 5,000 years has solid

traditions. Some myths and legends, on the one hand, and some mores and practices, on the other, have been established over a very long period of time. Some traditions that have served to solidify the Korean people as a people are now criticized but others are strongly defended. There is no doubt that those myths, legends, and folktales have been closely related to mores and traditions in Korea. Nowadays westernization of the Korean culture is accompanied by disappearance of some traditional mores and practices and by oblivion of some myths and legends, and the situation tends to create a new life style. But the basic structure of the Korean consciousness is almost wholly intact, indicating the fact that Korean traditional culture is deeply rooted in the Korean mind. In the undercurrents of Korean life even today old myths and their related mores still hold strong sway over society. Here lies the value of the *Dangun* myth which provides some significant symbolic meanings for mentality and morality of Koreans as well as their cosmology and ontology.

The event of the foundation of Korea by *Dangun* is supposed to have happened in 2333 B.C., and until recent times Korean calendars and dates were reckoned from this year. The day of October the third has been being celebrated as a national holiday of the foundation of Korea every year. Now there are few in Korea who believe *Dangun* was a real historical figure. However, there seems to be no one who denies that the *Dangun* myth gives Koreans some crucial symbolic meanings in terms of its social and cultural implications: that Koreans have been a single unique people from the beginning with one language, one tradition, one destiny, etc.; that the deeply rooted mind of Koreans in their higher evaluation of gentleness, patience, self-restraint, and so on can be traced to the beginning of the nation; that normative values such as filial piety and the respect for the ancestor have been the imperative from the

earliest times in Korean history.

Therefore, it is no wonder that Koreans always say without hesitation that *Dangun* is the founder of their country and they are all descendants of *Dangun* and that the spirit of the *Dangun* myth is the spirit of Korean people and the like; not because they believe the myth as a historical fact but because they recognize the essence of symbolic meanings of the myth, consciously or unconsciously, feeling it as real. Similarly, the other example of *Cho-yong* can be interpreted as having symbolic meanings to convey some critical messages. Then it can be concluded that the study of symbolic meanings of myth in terms of their socio-cultural implications is one of the crucial clues for understanding the culture and the society of Korea in general (as of other cultures and societies).

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