

## A Semiotic Approach to Narratives about the Mid-Silla Period in Samguk yusa

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# A Semiotic Approach to Narratives about the Mid-Silla Period in *Samguk yusa*

Jo Yoong-hee

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*Samguk yusa*, one of the most important literary sources, was written by a Buddhist monk Iryeon in the Goryeo period of Korea. “Wangnyeok” in *Samguk yusa* divides Silla history of ancient Korea into three, i.e. the Early Ancient, the Middle Ancient, and the Late Ancient without mentioning much of the characteristics of each period. This essay analyzes the narratives of the mid-Silla period and examines how the author of *Samguk yusa* represents the cultural elements during King Beopheung’s and King Jinheung’s eras during mid-Silla. King Beopheung’s era is shown as the period governed by symbolic mechanism in terms of the Buddhist symbolic meaning of the narrative of Yeomchok’s self-sacrifice. The narratives telling the different characteristics of Weonhwa and Hwarang demonstrate the cultural pattern of King Jinheung’s era. In *Samguk yusa*, Hwarang’s characteristics, rather than Weonhwa’s, are recognized as the better in governing the country efficiently. Furthermore, Hwarang, rather than Weonhwa, turns out to be the better element for the hierarchical society in which a practical mechanism is dominant. It can be said that the author, Iryeon, writes on the cultural transition of the mid-Silla period, which can be analyzed by a symbolic axis and a practical axis. In the narratives in the background of the mid-Silla period, the role of the kings as well as Buddhist elements play a major role and the masculine values and personality, such as what Hwarang represented, are considered to be significant. In short, Iryeon describes the culture of the mid-Silla period considering the movement of the symbolic and practical elements, and moreover reflects the Confucian order of the world.

*Keywords:* *Samguk yusa, Iryeon, narrative, symbolic mechanism, practical mechanism, mid-Silla period, King Beopheung, King Jinheung, Yeomchok, Weonhwa, Hwarang, Samguk sagi, Kim Busik*

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## Introduction

Written in the late 13th century by the Seon (Ch. Chan; Jp. Zen) priest Iryeon (1206-1289) of the Goryeo Dynasty, *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) is an important repository of narratives that provide readers with various phenomena of Korean literature, culture, and history during the Three Kingdoms period. Among the three kingdoms, i.e. Silla, Goguryeo, and Baekje, *Samguk yusa* particularly focuses on Silla, which unifies the other two. Since stories of Silla kings and Silla Buddhism construct major contents of *Samguk yusa*, *Samguk yusa* can be understood as the product of post-Silla people making effort to inherit the Silla spirit after Goryeo succeeded Silla.<sup>1</sup>

In the very beginning part of the book, “Wangnyeok” (Chronology of Kings), the author divides Silla history into three periods according to historic events: Sanggo (Early Ancient), Junggo (Middle Ancient), and Hago (Late Ancient). Interestingly, there is no description why the Early and the Middle Ancients periods are divided as such while the author differentiates the Middle Ancient period from the Late Ancient period according to sovereigns: the Middle ancient period was governed by the Seonggol class, and the Late Ancient period by the Jingol class. At best, with insufficient information in the first part of the “Wangnyeok”, it can be speculated that to some extent cultural changes occurred because we can see that Iryon tried to describe the Middle Ancient period with his observation that new royal titles were adopted from the Chinese language: Wang instead of Maripgan (meaning king), and Siho (meaning posthumous royal title).

Through an interpretation of the *Samguk yusa* text, this paper will examine cultural characteristics of the Middle Ancient Silla period that Iryeon categorized. A specific cultural map of historical transitions can be constructed through an investigation of meanings given to the events that occurred during the period of King Beopheung and King Jinheung, the first two kings of the Middle Ancient Silla period. With an analysis of stories in *Samguk yusa*, we can also eventually reveal the way in which the author implied the significance of this

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1. Han suggests that the reason why *Samguk yusa* particularly focuses on Silla is the change of Goryeo’s political situation. According to Han, in the transition from the military regime to the period of Yuan Dynasty annexation, the political leaders intended to withdraw the old view regarding Goryeo as the legitimate successor of Goguryeo and to propose the new view regarding Goryeo as the successor of Silla (Han 1994:54).

period.

Socio-cultural mechanisms of each stage during a historical period can provide a new model of the world, which can be motivated by cultural transition. Entering a new cultural stage, elements which generally contradict the principles of the previous stage form an alternative context of a culture. Narratives in *Samguk yusa* can also act as resource to identify the hierarchical order of cultural codes and the dominant code in a cultural stage thereafter. A semiotic approach can be applied for a reading of power transitions among cultural codes. Lotman gives inspiration for the interpretation of the *Samguk yusa* text, providing a theory of cultural semiotics that one of two main elements in a culture becomes dominant after tension develops between the two. The dominant code in turn rules the culture while occupying a key role during a period.<sup>2</sup>

This essay examines the cultural movement of a particular period not by historical evidence but by interpretation of literature texts. It is often the case that narratives are interpreted by looking at the culture around them. However, the analysis of a narrative is also a common way of understanding the meaning of a culture as well as the narrative itself, which is the method employed for this essay. In a narrative, the behaviors of people and the relationships between them create events and changes of situation. In this process, what the narrative aims at is revealed through the ultimate meaning and hidden value. In narratives can be found how conflicts and disorders between people lead them to new situations and how they are resolved. In short, a particular period of a history unveils itself through investigation of values in narratives. The author's aim can be also discovered through narratives. That is because the author sometimes cuts into cutcu narratives and shows his/her interpretation on historical events. Therefore, this essay analyzes the author Iryeon's perspective of culture during mid-Silla period.

This project focuses on two parts of *Samguk yusa*. One part is the story of Yeomchok (also known as Yichadon) who sacrificed himself for the sake of the religious achievement of Buddhism. The other part is related to the stories of Weonhwa and Hwarang. The story of Yeomchok shows how death functions in the culture of King Beopheung's reign. The narratives of Weonhwa and Hwarang demonstrate differences between the two stories of female elites in the

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2. Lotman gives an integrated vision on diverse cultures based on semiotics in his book *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Lotman 1990).

Weonhwa and male elites in the Hwarang during King Jinheung's reign, which shows the contrasting narratives of disorder and order and moreover the author's interpretation of them. These narratives play the role of a map illustrating which direction the culture of mid-Silla period is heading for.<sup>3</sup>

“Symbolic” and “practical” axes are used in this essay for analyzing the cultural transition to the mid-Silla period captured by the author Iryeon. Through a symbolic mechanism, the meaning of an individual behavior as “part” is equivalent to the meaning of “the whole.” In this mechanism, the symbolic function of a part is dominant in a culture through such action as religious self-sacrifice. In contrast, within the practical mechanism, “a part” or “an individual” is hierarchically subordinated to the function of “the whole.” In this case, part becomes desirable when it functions as an element of the whole.<sup>4</sup> This essay demonstrates how the symbolic mechanism functions to produce the symbol of the construction of the utopian world of Buddhism by examining the narrative of Yeomchok's sacrifice for King Beopheung. This also shows how the practical mechanism operates to subordinate an individual's role to the actual and rational role of politics during King Jinheung's reign.<sup>5</sup>

## Yeomchok's Martyrdom<sup>6</sup> and Symbolic Mechanism

Before looking at the socio-cultural epoch of the King Beopheung period, which Iryeon regards as the beginning of Middle Ancient Silla, it is necessary to understand the background of transmission of Buddhism to Silla. The major events of the era of King Beopheung, with Iryeon's description focusing on King

3. Song calls narrative language as the meta-language of culture in terms of narrative language used to interpret culture (Song 1999:61).

4. Lotman (1970) proposes symbolic and practical axes in order to analyze Russian culture. According to Lotman, a semantic pattern is discovered in a culture in which a behavior as a part is equivalent to the whole and a syntactic pattern is shown in a culture in which a behavior as a part is subordinated to the whole. A symbolic axis is found in a semantic pattern and a practical axis is found in a syntactic pattern. For more, see Yi Inyeong (1993:13-43).

5. A narrative in a text may occasionally contain characteristics of both symbolic and practical mechanisms, but in different ratio. This paper evaluates the narratives on the reigns of King Beopheung and King Jinheung according to a relative viewpoint, and so identifies each reign with one of the two mechanisms.

6. For the narrative of King Beopheung and Yeomchok, see “Heungbeop” in *Samguk yusa*, gweon 3.

Beopheung and Yeomchok, happen in the process of the development of Buddhism in Silla.

In the “Heungbeop” (Rise of Buddhism) part, Iryeon describes in detail the pioneering period of Silla Buddhism led by the Monk Ado.<sup>7</sup> According to the description in *Samguk yusa*, it was during the reign of King Nulji when Chinese Monk Ado transferred Buddhism to Silla because King Nulji governed Silla during a similar period to King Sosurim’s era of Goguryeo when Ado traveled through Goguryeo to Silla. Silla’s Buddhism could not but be silent for about one hundred years under unfavorable circumstances until it met its chance for development with the coronation of King Beopheung. Although, as mentioned, a couple of elements involving royal society imply socio-cultural change, a narrative of King Beopheung and Yeomchok can be considered as very important material for defining the cultural characteristics of the period.

After his coronation, King Beopheung expresses his wish to develop Buddhism in Silla. His interest in Buddhism is found in the section “Wonjong heungbeop yeomchok myeolsin” (King Beopheung’s raising of Buddhism and Yeomchok’s Martyrdom) in the “Heungbeop” part.<sup>8</sup> With a firm faith of Buddhism, he makes an attempt to build a temple but fails because of protests from his officials.

A while ago when King Beopheung was working in Jageukjeon building, he looked to the East and said,

“In the past, Emperor Ming of Han China received a response from Buddha before Buddhism flowed into the East. I have wished to build the place for people to receive their blessings and to get rid of their sins since my coronation.”

At that moment, courtiers only pursued their great duty of governing countries without understanding of the King’s profound idea and hence did not follow his holy project of temple construction.

The King made a sigh and said,

7. Iryeon introduces two different arguments about the transmission of Buddhism to Silla, one of which is found in “Silla bon-gi” of *Samguk sagi* and the other of which is in the epitaph of the Monk Ado. Iryeon expresses his disagreement with both arguments.

8. This is Iryeon’s summary of the writing of the Monk Ilnyeom in the Namgansa temple. The Monk Ilnyeom writes this when he establishes an organization for praying for Yeomchok in front of his grave.

“Alas, because I succeeded to the crown with a lack of virtue, the harmony of Yin and Yang in heaven has been destroyed and people in the world have not enjoyed a happy life. So I have tried to carry out my royal duties by tellintelling the teachings of Buddha. Who will follow me?”

In this message, “the place for people to receive their blessings and to get rid of their sins” refers to a Buddhist temple. However, King Beopheung found it hard to achieve his wish because his task was so new during that period that his subjects were not convinced of such an idea. According to Iryeon’s summary, the King could not understand his officials’ protest against the establishment of a Buddhist temple representing the rising of Buddhism since his officials aimed at “governing countries” as their primary goal. While King Beopheung’s intention to promote Buddhism was strong, practical politics was the first consideration to the courtiers who were against the King. The courtiers’ opposition overwhelmed the King’s power. Thus, the King experiences a setback with a sigh.

The conflict in the beginning of King Beopheung’s reign can be summarized based on the confrontation between King Beopheung and the courtiers.

King Beopheung’s Aims	Courtiers’s Aims
Temple Construction	Country Governing
Holy Project	Great Duty
Religious Symbolism	Political Practicality

The Kingdom’s policy had basically been directed to the courtiers’ side, which focused on practical governing of the country. The King himself tried to change the direction of the policy in a spiritual way. Developing a religious project for people concerning “Buddhist teaching” was his top priority. Temple construction was his symbolic way of religious achievement as opposed to political practicality. The “holy project” as a King’s object is rather non-practical, sacred, and symbolic than practical, secular, and direct. Over the conflict between the King and the courtiers, the King had to step back in the first round because of the courtiers’ practical enterprise. The symbolic code failed to obtain effect in competition with the practical code and lost an opportunity to weaken the latter’s vested rights.

However, a new phase began for the symbolic code among others to take an initiative in the culture, which was made with an appearance of a new character, Yeomchok. He was the ideal person who could succeed with the King’s symbol-

ic project.

There was a person who has grown in the court. His family name was Bak and his nickname was Yeomchok. Although it is not very clear who his father was, his grandfather Jong held the rank of Ajin and was the son of Galmunwang Seupbo. He had a loyal heart like bamboo and the pine tree and morals like a clear mirror. As a great-grandson of a family who lived in a virtuous way, he wanted to be a close aide to the King, and as a loyal courtier of the holy kingdom he wanted to be an assistant in the peaceful days. At that time he was twenty-two years old, and became Sa-in. He could understand the King's situation by reading his face.

The author Iryeon clearly describes Yeomchok's family background, up-bringing environment, goal of life, status, and age. Yeomchok is introduced as a young man of virtue from a good family, raised in the court, understanding the King's mind in spite of his young age and low status of Sa-yin. Iryeon presents Yeomchok as a good and promising official. Through this information, readers expect that a new moment of power transition is approaching with the help of a character who fully understands the King's aspiration and will practice it composedly.

Yeomchok, described as a wise and righteous person, does his best to accomplish his duty by sacrificing himself for the kingdom. In terms of Yeomchok's self-sacrifice, Yeomchok himself proposes a different idea to the King's.

(The Sa-yin or Yeomchok) says,

"I heard a saying that people in the past asked a woodcutter what to do. May I ask you something even if you punish me for that?"

The King says,

"It is not what you can do."

The Sa-yin says,

"It is the loyalty of an official to sacrifice himself for the country and it is the righteousness of a subject to sacrifice himself for the king. If you behead me for not delivering the king's words right, all the people will obey and cannot but follow your words."

The king says,

"... I really mean to do good to people. How on earth can I kill an innocent man? For your part, it can be the method of realizing virtue.

However, it is better not to be punished.”

The Sa-yin says.

“Although everything is difficult to throw away, the most difficult things are one’s body and life. If I die this evening, the great philosophy of Buddhism will be accomplished in the morning. Then, Buddha’s sunshine will again be at the center of the sky and the great King will keep the peace.”

This dialogue contains a narrative model called “manipulation”. Manipulation in the narrative is done by the sender delivering a message of recognition to the receiver. In the above dialogue, both the King and the Sa-yin are the sender as well as the receiver.<sup>9</sup> Yeomchok’s wish confronts the King’s dissuasion on the issue of Yeomchok’s self-sacrifice. Yeomchok wants to become a scapegoat for the purpose of the King’s will coming true. He offers to give up his life with an understanding of the importance of his sacrifice. However, the King dissuades Yeomchok.

The King did not willingly consent to Yeomchok’s suggestion because he was afraid of killing an innocent person for the purpose of promoting Buddhism. Unlike the first stage when King Beopheung wanted to lead a symbolic project such as temple construction, he now does not look squarely at the symbolic meaning of Yeomchok’s idea. At that moment, the King hesitates and just sees the physical meaning instead of the symbolic meaning of Yeomchok’s death. With faith that self-sacrifice is equivalent to the realization of Buddhist truth, Yeomchok emphasizes the symbolic meaning of his death.

The King eventually changes his mind and accepts Yeomchok’s wish by saying, “This is the behavior of a great man.” The King evaluates Yeomchok’s sacrifice as Buddhist practice, which means the King reconfirms the symbolic meaning of his project. Yeomchok is then ready to participate in his sacrificial rite.

The symbolism of constructing a Buddhist temple remained dislodged in the periphery by the practical code based on political reality until Yeomchok understood King Beopheung’s great ambition and decided to locate his death in the

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9. Greimas uses “manipulation” in the theory of semiology. Command, prayer, prohibition, and dissuasion are his classification of manipulation. Song applies Greimas’s manipulation to his works (Song 1992:165-192; 1999:67-76).

context of a symbolic rite such as temple construction. With Yeomchok's self-sacrifice, the situation was reversed in the King's favor. In turn, the state governing that is strongly related to the reality of life goes to the periphery. Now, at the center of the Kingdom's culture stands the symbolic meaning of Yeomchok's death, although Yeomchok's personal life defined as physical and material substance is located at the outskirts of the culture.

The narrative of King Beopheung and Yeomchok can be explained as the whole and a part relation. In this case, the whole means the retainment of Buddhist influence, which has eventually been pursued by the King and Yeomchok. A part is Yeomchok's holy sacrifice that functions as a motif to achieve the King's great ambition for the construction of a Buddhist world in his kingdom. The part is not any smaller than the whole and not a fragment subject to the whole. The part leads to a symbolic way for the whole, which means that the part functions as a symbol containing the same value as the whole. Yeomchok's acceptance of the sacrifice is the practice of the Buddhist way through the process that occurs as transcendence from a part to the whole. This process is not focussed on the accumulation of a quantity but the profoundness of a part.

In this culture system, "glory" is more precious than "honor." "Honor" contains a meaning of respect involving materialistic compensation while "glory" includes a meaning of respect involving almost no expression. During King Beopheung's era, the most valuable sign of "glory" was Yeomchok's death, which replaced the definition of "the rise of Buddhism." In short, King Beopheung's period is characterized as semantic culture focused on signifying or symbolizing the process between the whole and part of the world surrounding human beings.<sup>10</sup>

## Narratives of Weonhwa and Hwarang<sup>11</sup> and Practical Mechanism

King Jinheung, the twenty-fourth ruler of Silla, succeeded King Beopheung's crown. "Mireuk seonhwa (The Fairy Flower of Maitreya), Misirang, and Jinjasa" section in "Tapsang" (Pagodas and Buddhist Images) of *Samguk yusa*

10. For more about "honour" and "glory", see Lotman (1970).

11. For the narratives of Weonhwa and Hwarang, see the "Tapsang" part in *Samguk yusa*, gweon 4.

begins with narrative of the King Jinheung period through which the cultural types of that period can be compared to King Beopheung's period. According to the narrative, King Jinheung, earlier in his period of leadership as king, tried to establish a stable environment for the promotion of Buddhism.

In pursuance of the will of his uncle, King Beopheung, King Jinheung devotedly served Buddha, built temples in many areas, and led people to be monks or nuns.<sup>12</sup>

Yeomchok's self-sacrifice is the symbol of glory standing not for his own self but for the King's success in firmly establishing Buddhism. Thus, the narrative describing the situation before and after Yeomchok's death also illustrates the cultural mechanism of King Beopheung's era carefully in order to unveil the symbolic meaning of Yeomchok's sacrifice. The quotation above implies that King Jinheung positively connects the real lives of people to the utopian world of Buddhism, which King Beopheung constructed with the help of Yeomchok's will to be sacrificed. This narrative shows King Jinheung's effort to connect Yeomchok's sacrifice to people's everyday lives by establishing temples and guiding people to become monks. Maintaining the symbolic power of Buddhism established in King Beopheung's era, King Jinheung applies practicality to the symbolic power.

As analyzed above, King Beopheung's efforts to secure symbolic meaning to Buddhism through the construction of temples was confronted by courtiers who considered the administration of the country to be their prime focus. He overcame the conflict with the aid of Yeomchok's self-sacrifice resulting in a guarantee for the survival of the King's Buddhist utopia. In the end, the narrative related to King Beopheung and Yeomchok in the "Heungbeop" part ends with the symbolic achievement of a Buddhist vision. Then, readers might expect that King Jinheung's period does not require sacrifice to be made for religious purpose with symbolic meaning, which was already achieved during the former King's era.

The narrative continues showing King Jinheung's pursuance of the construction of an ideal ruling mechanism through his setting of desirable relations

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12. Some expressions of the English translation in this quotation come from *Sources of Korean Tradition* (Lee et al. 1997:49).

between people.

In addition, endowed with elegance, King Jinheung respected Taoist immortals. He selected beautiful girls from common families and made them Weonhwa (Best flowers). He ordered members of Weonhwa to gather and select people, and teach them filial piety, fraternalism, loyalty, and faithfulness, which were considered as the essence of ruling the country.

According to this narrative, King Jinheung makes a change in his priority. Buddhism does not seem to be the first priority of King Jinheung. King Jinheung stresses ruling the country by law, which is what King Beopheung's officials considered to be most important along with being the cause conflict between the officials and King Beopheung since he tried to establish Buddhist temples. It is presumed, according to the description in *Samguk yusa*, that King Jinheung believed that the development of Buddhism in Silla entered a stable phase. Therefore, with the stable background of Buddhism he sets up a new goal of governing the Kingdom in a way that adheres rather closely to a practical way of life.

Yeomchok's death, as mentioned, is equivalent to the construction of a utopian world of Buddhism on the upper level. This is because the symbolic significance of the private sphere, such as Yeomchok's death, is counted. Thus, the meaning of Yeomchok's death is not subordinate but equivalent to the level of the utopian world of Buddhism. The author stresses the symbolic meaning of Yeomchok's physical death to demonstrate that the symbolic mechanism functions in King Beopheung's era.

However, a person or a socio-cultural phenomenon during King Jinheung's reign is considered as a part which is subject to the whole. The part functions as a member or a component within a cultural context. From the above narrative, it can be said that King Jinheung next intended to stabilize the political environment. He selected members of Weonhwa and ordered them to select people, and to teach the people the fundamental principles of ruling the country such as "filial piety, fraternalism, loyalty, and faithfulness." These elites, including Weonhwa members, were organized as the supporters of the ruling order of the country.

Another concern of King Jinheung can be seen in the narrative. Female-oriented thoughts were incorporated into the King's politics at this stage. People of

Silla generally believed that a feminine character, Seondo seongmo (Holy mother of Mount Fairy Peach), gave birth to Park Hyeokgeose, the founder of Silla.<sup>13</sup> The above narrative also highlights the importance of the female character, accepting the traditional value derived from mythical belief. At this stage, the author, Iryeon, describes women as the core element of politics.

However, the following narrative introduces the event that changes the situation, that is, the conflict between two Weonhwa. Specifically, Gyojeong's jealousy to Nammo causes the conflict.

Ladies Nammo and Gyojeong were selected as Weonhwa and they gathered three hundred to four hundred people. Gyojeong was jealous of Nammo. She arranged a banquet for Nammo and made her drunk. Gyojeong secretly moved Nammo's body to the northern stream, hit her with a stone, and buried her to die. The followers of Nammo did not know where she was. They cried sadly and went away. Somebody discovered the conspiracy, composed a song, and taught children to sing it in the street. The followers of Nammo heard the song. Nammo's body was found in the northern stream and Gyojeong was killed. The King then ordered the system of Weonhwa to be abolished.

The Weonhwa group, the leader of which was supported by hundreds of followers under the king's trust, was the core element for the security of the ruling order of the kingdom. They were in the position to teach "filial piety, fraternalism, loyalty and faithfulness." Nevertheless, a Weonhwa became jealous and committed murder. Because of this Weonhwa conflict, King Jinheung was frustrated with his project for a political system, which focused on female leaders. The ladies lacked an exact understanding of the political arena in those days. Weonhwa was simply supposed to function as "a part" for "the whole" of the order for the country. They should have learned that they lived in a cultural society where the syntactic system was dominant. In this syntactic culture, a person is a part of the whole and only has significance when it functions as a component of the whole. Thus, this narrative concludes that King Jinheung could not continue his policy of adopting females as political models and so it stopped at

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13. The narrative on Seondo seongmo appears in the "Gamtong" (Answers to Devotions) part of *Samguk yusa*.

the experimental stage.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the Weonhwa system was discontinued because female leaders neglected their duty in a cultural context.

Under a syntactic culture system, public affairs rather than private affairs occupy a dominant position in a society. In such a culture, an individual's duty is imposed depending on his/her position in the system. An individual duty exists not only for the individual post but also for the base of the King's administration. Harmonious relations between individuals in an absolute monarchy give strong support in strengthening the king's position.

After the failure of the Weonhwa system, King Jinheung tried a new experiment with the Hwarang and Gukseon system. This new system had the same purpose as the Weonhwa system had. He wanted an effective administration for his country.

After many years, the King thought that for the prosperity of the country the principles of nature had to be taken into prior consideration and ordered again the selection of virtuous men from noble families, called Hwarang. Seolwonrang served as the first Gukseon (Nation's representative Hwarang). This was the beginning of the institution of the Hwarang and Gukseon.

Although King Jinheung's intention to establish a syntactic culture system through the new system of Hwarang was no different from the purpose of selecting Weonhwa, the ways in which they were selected were totally different.

<b>Weonhwa</b>	<b>Hwarang</b>
Beautiful women	Virtuous men
Ordinary background	Noble background
For governing the country	For the prosperity of the country

Hwarang were selected among men from families with noble backgrounds,

14. Historians criticize *Samguk yusa* for its description that the system of Weonhwa began in King Jinheung's era. They argue that the system of Weonhwa began much earlier. This problem is caused when Iryeon makes a parallel between the Hwarang and Weonhwa in the process of explaining the establishment of the Hwarang in King Jinheung's era. Because the establishment and the abolishment of the system of Weonhwa were written in the same part as the Hwarang, the system of Weonhwa is misunderstood to be the system existing in King Jinheung's era. For more, see Yi and Kim (1961: 599).

whereas Weonhwa were not subject to special conditions. The members of Weonhwa were just ladies from families with common backgrounds. According to the above two narratives on Weonhwa and Hwarang, unlike the Hwarangs, the ladies were only required to be beautiful, without any conditions of virtue. With these two narratives, the writer of *Samguk yusa* intervenes in comparing Hwarang and Weonhwa. The writer in the text shows that the Weonhwa system failed because the eligibility was just beauty, resulting in losing the harmony and balance of the Kingdom. Accordingly, the qualification criteria for Weonhwa were understood as negative elements in choosing Hwarangs. Therefore, the direction of the King's interest changes from "beautiful-ladies-from ordinary families" to "virtuous-men-from families with noble backgrounds."

Therefore, a stone monument was built in Myeongju, which, thereafter, cured people's vices and made them practice virtue. They respected superiors and were generous to inferiors. The five constant ways (benevolence, righteousness, ritual decorum, wisdom, and trustworthiness), the six arts (etiquette, music, archery, chariot driving, calligraphy, and mathematics), the three scholastic occupations (royal tutor, instructor, and teacher), and the six righteous positions of courtiers (holy minister, good minister, loyal minister, wise minister, virtuous minister, and honest minister) were broadly diffused in those days.

Unlike the Weonhwa system characterized by jealousy and malice, Hwarangs had virtues of respect and generosity according to a strict standard of personnel selection under the Hwarang system. As a result, courtiers worked broadly with various good virtues, assisting the King by offering righteous advice. During the King Jinheung period, eventually a part or a member willingly admitted their role as an element of the whole society. This meant that the whole was recognized as an organic body in a syntactic structure of culture. Therefore, it can be said that narratives about the King Jinheung period focus on the process of achieving the practicality of political stability, whereas, in the narratives of King Beopheung period, individual behavior is developed into symbolic dimension. In the narrative about King Jinheung's reign, an individual eventually becomes an element functioning as a part for the whole.

## Iryeon's Writing and His Authorial Interpretation on Culture

King Beopheung and King Jinheung are the kings in the beginning of the mid-Silla period. Well-known narratives related to the two kings are the places where Iryeon's interpretation of the culture in the mid-Silla period is shown. As mentioned in the previous section, symbolic mechanism and practical mechanism are the two axes used in reading narratives whose settings are the eras of those two kings.

More specifically, in the narratives of King Beopheung's era, the King, stressing the symbol of the construction of the utopian world of Buddhism, confronts his officials who believe that the practical aspect of governing the country should come before the symbolic power of Buddhism. In the beginning of the confrontation, the King cannot overcome the officials' protests. However, Yeomchok's self-sacrifice establishes the symbolic culture, which the King Beopheung wants to construct as the dominant pattern during his reign. The analysis on the narratives about the Hwarang and Weonhwa reveals the dominant cultural pattern of King Jinheung's era. The analysis demonstrates that King Jinheung also fully understood the symbolic mechanism of the construction of the utopian world of Buddhism, which King Beopheung pursued. King Jinheung successfully reinterpreted, within the context of reality, the symbolic mechanism that King Beopheung pursued. As a result, many people became Buddhist monks. Moreover, King Jinheung put more emphasis on politics. In this sense, Confucian values such as filial piety and loyalty were stressed. A person functioned for the social order of the whole structure. This is the practical mechanism.

Iryeon illustrates movement of cultural characteristics between the symbol of the construction of the utopian world of Buddhism and the practical aspect of politics in reality in the narratives on the mid-Silla period. In terms of the process of history, it is difficult to exclude either of the two subjects. However, one of the two can be dominant in the cultural phenomena of a specific period. It can be said that Iryeon interprets the socio-cultural transition between King Beopheung's and King Jinheung's eras as the movement of power from symbolic mechanism to practical mechanism although he does not explicitly express so.

*Samguk yusa* contains various kinds of narratives. The analysis of those narratives also demonstrates the author's view of culture and writing strategy. If the narratives about the mid-Silla period appearing in *Samguk yusa* are compared

with the description of the same period in Kim Busik's *Samguk sagi*, a history of the Three Kingdoms, the characteristics of the narratives in *Samguk yusa* will be clearly displayed.

*Samguk yusa* basically shares the same content on King Beopheung and Yeomchok as does *Samguk sagi*.<sup>15</sup> According to *Samguk sagi*, King Beopheung wants Buddhism to prosper whereas his courtiers do not have faith in the King's plan and they are critical and against Buddhism. Hearing Yeomchok's wish to be sacrificed for the courtiers' consensus of Buddhism, King Beopheung denies his request with a response, "I cannot kill an innocent person with my basic intention of raising Buddhism." Eventually, the King accepts Yeomchok's idea that Yeomchok would kill himself only if Buddhism could be practiced by his sacrifice. *Samguk sagi* shows a process from the introduction of Buddhism in the Silla period to its expansion as a national religion, which is close to the overall content of the same story in *Samguk yusa*.

However, *Samguk yusa*, compared to *Samguk sagi*, describes the King's vocation of developing Buddhism with more emphasis. The narrative of *Samguk yusa* emphasizes the King's willingness to promote Buddhism with subjective interpretation such as a "profound idea" and a "holy project." This is the author jumping into the middle of the narrative and trying to explain that Buddhism could not but prosper in King Beopheung's era. The narratives in *Samguk yusa* seem to be written for the purpose of legitimizing the King's behavior.

In the period of King Jinheung, *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi* again share a common theme on the prosperity of Buddhism.<sup>16</sup> However, they have different narratives in describing the background of the rise of Buddhism. *Samguk sagi* gives information that King Beopheung's queen ruled as a regent because King Jinheung ascended the throne at the early age of seven. Readers can presume that Silla's Buddhism could maintain its power with the fact that the Queen of King Beopheung was very influential during the Silla period in terms of the growth of Buddhism. Therefore, it is naturally accepted by readers that Heungryunsa temple was built in the capital city Gyeongju in the fifth year of King Jinheung's reign and people were encouraged to leave home to serve Buddhism as monks. Sequentially, in the tenth year of King Jinheung's reign, a

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15. For the description of the King Beopheung's reign in *Samguk sagi*, see "Silla bongi" (*Samguk sagi*, gweon 4).

16. For the description of the King Jinheung's reign in *Samguk sagi*, see "Silla bongi". (*Samguk sagi*, gweon 4)

relic of Buddha was sent to Silla through a Chinese envoy and a Silla monk, Gakdeok, who were sent by the Liang dynasty of China, and were greeted by courtiers ordered by Silla King in front of Heungryunsa temple, which shows that Buddhism was developing on a stable foundation. On the contrary, as examined above, *Samguk yusa* describes that not the Queen of King Beopheung, but King Jingheung himself continued King Beopheung's policy and in result maintained an unbroken faith in Buddhism by building temples in many areas and encouraging people to be Buddhist priests. This description makes readers think that the development of Buddhism during King Jinheung's reign was carried out by King Jinheung's active decision. It can be said that the author of *Samguk yusa* tried to attribute the prosperity of Buddhism to King Jinheung's activity as he emphasized the King's role during King Beopheung's period.

Through writing about the institutions of Weonhwa and Hwarang, *Samguk yusa* also illustrates King Jinheung's excellence in terms of the policy of selecting promising officials. In the narratives of King Jinheung's era, Iryeon, first of all, gives a very simple description about King Jinheung, indicating his personal name, coronation year, and his concern with Buddhism. Then, the author tells the readers the stories about the systems of Weonhwa and Hwarang in the era of King Jinheung. The readers may think that the King seems to have a great interest in the systems of Weonhwa and Hwarang from the very beginning period of his reign. In addition, in the statement that the system of Hwarang was established after "many years have passed" since the system of Weonhwa was abolished, the Weonhwa and Hwarang systems can be seen as the major projects throughout King Jinheung's era. At this point, the author's intention, focusing on King Jinheung's policy of recruiting promising elites, is revealed.

In contrast, in *Samguk sagi*, the stories of Weonhwa and Hwarang are located together at the end [the 37th year] of King Jingheung's reign after various descriptions of events during thirty six years such as Silla's expansion of territory after several battles between the three kingdoms, diplomatic relations with China, and musician Ureuk's activities. Compared to *Samguk sagi*, *Samguk yusa* emphasizes King Jinheung's eminent judgment for the system of personnel selection, mainly focusing on the stories of the Weonhwa and Hwarang, among others, during King Jinheung's reign.

The narratives of both *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi* basically describe that the Hwarang system in the King Jinheung period was introduced as an alternative personnel selection system when the problem within Weonhwa system is revealed. However, some characteristic elements of Weonhwa and Hwarang in

the two texts are different from each other. Unlike *Samguk yusa*, *Samguk sagi* does not mention the beauty of Weonhwa as a basic condition to be selected. As for the Hwarang, *Samguk sagi* shows their family background like *Samguk yusa*, citing material requiring that “men from noble family”<sup>17</sup> were selected. However, a handsome appearance is regarded as a basic condition for the Hwarang in *Samguk sagi*, which was only for Weonhwa in *Samguk yusa*, while in *Samguk yusa*, being “virtuous people” was stressed as one of the basic conditions for joining the Hwarang group. In *Samguk sagi*, the “cultivation of virtue” is described as an element obtained through Hwarang community life after they were selected. Unlike this, in *Samguk yusa*, a man of virtue is a necessary condition to become a member of the Hwarang.

In short, in the narrative about King Beopheung and Yeomchok, the author shows his interpretation on the development of Silla culture. Iryeon legitimizes King Beopheung’s effort of constructing a utopian world of Buddhism by using expressions like “profound idea” and “holy project.” Compared with *Samguk sagi*, in the narratives about King Jinheung in *Samguk yusa*, the Hwarang and Weonhwa are described in the way that creates contrast. This is because Iryeon looks at the Hwarang in a more positive way than the Weonhwa after he explains what kind of personality is needed to become a Weonhwa or a Hwarang.

In general, it is said that Iryeon’s *Samguk yusa* contains Buddhist ideas whereas, in Kim Busik’s *Samguk sagi* the author, as a Confucian official, delivers Confucian ideas.<sup>18</sup> However, *Samguk yusa*’s narratives of the mid-Silla period often puts emphasis on the King’s governing the country and the masculine virtues. In the description of cultural phenomena in the early mid-Silla period, the two axes, the ruler-the subject and men-women, are centered. There is no doubt that *Samguk yusa* has many narratives about Buddhism. Thus, based on Buddhism, Iryeon’s writing reflects Confucian ideas.

## Conclusion

This essay examined the cultural phenomena of the mid-Silla period in the nar-

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17. In *Samguk sagi*, the author cites Hwarang’s background from *Xinluo guoji* (Kr. *Silla gukgi*) by Ling Hucheng of Tang China.

18. See Bak et al. (2002: 76-84) for more information of research on worldview in *Samguk yusa*.

ratives in *Samguk yusa*, particularly, the narratives about King Beopheung and King Jinheung in the early years of the mid-Silla period. The relationship among elements constructing culture, and its significance, can be seen in the narratives about the self-sacrifice of Yeomchok in King Beopheung's era and the systems of Weonhwa and Hwarang in King Jinheung's era.

Based on symbolic and practical factors, Iryeon illustrates the culture of the early years of the mid-Silla period. The narrative about King Beopheung's era demonstrates that in order to dramatically change a social paradigm, a symbolic action like Yeomchok's self-sacrifice is needed. The narrative describing the firmly established system of the Hwarang in King Jinheung's era stresses the practical aspect of society for the purpose of maintaining the foundation of culture. As mentioned, Iryeon employs a framework of the symbolic and the practical to depict the movement of power in the transition of culture during the mid-Silla period. The reason why the symbolic pattern of culture is dominant in King Beopheung's era is that there is a movement replacing the existing political culture with a new one based on Buddhism. The dominance of the practical in King Jinheung's era demonstrates the process of the male-centered political culture of the Hwarang dominating the female-centered political culture of the Weonhwa.

This essay also examined the characteristics of Iryeon's worldview and his interpretation of culture by the comparison of the narratives on Yeomchok and the systems of the Weonhwa and Hwarang in *Samguk yusa* with the records on the same events in *Samguk sagi*. Iryeon showed his view on the conflict between King Beopheung and his officials. By adding his own comment to the narrative, he legitimizes King Beopheung's will to promote Buddhism. Iryeon's comment leads the readers to the idea that it is natural and right that Yeomchok's self-sacrifice delivers King Beopheung's will to the public. In the narratives about King Jinheung's era, Iryeon also stresses the King's will more than Kim Busik does in *Samguk sagi*. Iryeon uses binary opposition to compare the nature of the Hwarang with that of the Weonhwa. This binary opposition manifests that the nature of the Hwarang is more appropriate than that of the Weonhwa to a society pursuing practical and hierarchical governing. In the narratives about socio-cultural phenomena of the mid-Silla period, king's abilities and masculine competence are highlighted.

While trying to show Iryeon's perspective on mid-Silla culture, this essay focused on the characteristics and meaning of narrative structure in the text of *Samguk yusa*. Therefore, political, sociological, and religious phenomena, which are usually discovered in non-literary texts, were beyond the focus of this paper.

Controversial arguments on the origins and developments of the Weonhwa and the Hwarang were also located at the periphery of this discussion. This essay analyzed cultural codes in narratives by the framework of symbolic mechanism and practical mechanism. Although this framework cannot explain every single phenomenon of culture, it is useful to understand the movement of powers constructing a culture. If other narratives in *Samguk yusa* are investigated by the framework of this essay, it may prove helpful in understanding the dynamism of the core elements constructing ancient Korean culture.

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## Glossary

Ado	아도 (阿道; 我道)
Ajin	아진 (阿珍)
Bak	박 (朴)
Beopheung	법흥 (法興)
Gakdeok	각덕 (覺德)
Galmunwang	갈문왕 (葛文王)
Gamtong	감통 (感通)
Goguryeo	고구려 (高句麗)
Goryeo	고려 (高麗)
Gukseon	국선 (國仙)
Gweon	권 (卷)
Gyeongju	경주 (慶州)
Gyojeong	교정 (姣貞)
Hago	하고 (下古)
Heungbeop	흥법 (興法)
Heungryunsa	흥륜사 (興輪寺)
Hwarang	화랑 (花郎)
Ilyeom	일념 (一念)
Iryeon	일연 (一然)
Jageukjeon	자극전 (紫極殿)
Jingol	진골 (眞骨)
Jinheung	진흥 (眞興)
Jinjasa	진자사 (眞慈師)
Jong	종 (宗)
Junggo	중고 (中古)
Kim Busik	김부식 (金富軾)
Liang (Ch.)	梁
Ling Hucheng (Ch.)	令狐澄
Maripgan	마립간 (麻立干)
Mireuk seonhwa	미륵선화 (彌勒仙花)
Misirang	미시랑 (未尸郎)
Myeolsin	멸신 (滅身)
Myeongju	명주 (溟州)
Nulji	눌지 (訥祗)
<i>Samguk sagi</i>	삼국사기 (三國史記)

<i>Samguk yusa</i>	삼국유사 (三國遺事)
Sanggo	상고 (上古)
Seolwonrng	설원랑 (薛原郎)
Seon (Ch. Chan; Jp. Zen)	선 (禪)
Seondo seongmo	선도성모 (仙桃聖母)
Seonggol	성골 (聖骨)
Seupbo	습보 (習寶)
Siho	시호 (諡號)
Silla	신라 (新羅)
Silla bon-gi	신라본기 (新羅本紀)
Silla gukgi	신라국기 (新羅國記)
Sosurim	소수림 (小獸林)
Tang (Ch.)	唐
Tapsang	탑상 (塔像)
Ureuk	우륵 (于勒)
Wang	왕 (王)
Wangnyeok	왕력 (王曆)
Weonhwa	원화 (原花)
Wonjong	원종 (元宗)
Xinluo guoji (Ch.)	新羅國記
Yeomchok	염축 (厭觸)
Yichadon	이차돈 (異次頓)
Yuan (Ch.)	元

\* Ch.: Chinese. Jp.: Japanese

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