

# MYTH, MEMORY AND REINVENTION IN KOREA: THE CASE OF TAN'GUN

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Myths of origin are important in shaping a sense of ethnic and national history. An especially interesting type is the foundation myth. Korea's most significant foundation myth is the Myth of Tan'gun, the progenitor of the Korean people. Son of a bear and a celestial deity, by tradition he established the first Korean state in 2333 B.C.E. This myth, first fully recorded in the thirteenth century, was used by Korean nationalist writers in the early twentieth century to establish the uniqueness of the Korean people and the autonomy of Korean culture. After 1945 both North and South Koreans have made use of Tan'gun to help shape national identity, but interpretations of the myth have varied. Some have sought to find a historical basis for Tan'gun and have sought to have the story accepted as literally true; others have simply dismissed the myth as a medieval fabrication. These various interpretations and the controversies they have aroused reflect the larger issues of defining Korean national identity, an issue compounded by the need for each state, North and South Korea, to be viewed as the true embodiment of the Korean nation and its tradition.

Tan'gun was the mythical founder of Chosen, the earliest known Korean state which was conquered by the Chinese emperor Han Wudi in 108 B.C.E. Little is known for certain about this shadowy early state. It appears to have existed as early as 300 B.C.E. and to have been centered in northwestern Korea, but at the present there is no clear archaeological evidence that could firmly establish the place and dates of this kingdom.<sup>1</sup> This myth was first recorded in 1279 by the Buddhist monk Iryön in his *Samguk Yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms). The myth goes as follows:

The *Old Record* notes that in olden times Hwanin's stepson, Hwanung, wished to descend from heaven and live in the world of man. Guessing his son's desire, Hwanin surveyed the three highest mountains and found Mount T'aebaek the most suitable place for his son to settle to help mankind. Therefore he gave Hwanung three heavenly seals and allowed him to rule over the people. Hwanung descended with three thousand followers to a spot under a sandalwood tree atop Mount T'aebaek, and he called this place the City of God. He was the Heavenly King Hwanung. Leading the Earl of Wind, the Master of Rain, and the Master of Clouds, he took charge of some three hundred and sixty areas of responsibility, including agriculture, allotted life spans, illness, punishments, and good and evil, and he brought culture to his people. At that time a bear and a tiger who were living in the same cave prayed to Hwanung to transform them into human beings. The king gave them a bundle of sacred mugwort and twenty cloves of garlic and said, "If you eat these and shun the sunlight for one hundred days, you will assume human forms." Both animals ate the herbs and avoided the sun. After twenty-one days the bear became a woman, but the tiger, unable to observe the taboo, remained a tiger. Unable to find a husband, the bear-woman prayed under the

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the views on Chosön are summarized in Gina L. Barnes, "Early Korean States: A Review of Historical Interpretation," in *Bibliographical Review of Far Eastern Archaeology 1990: Hoabinhian, Jomon, Yayoi, Early Korean States*, ed. Gina L. Barnes, (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1990), 122.

sandalwood tree for a child. Hwanung metamorphosed himself, lay with her, and begot a son called Tangun Wanggom [Tan'gun Wanggŏm].

In the fiftieth year of the reign of Emperor Yao, Tangun made P'yŏngyang the capital of his country, called Chosŏn, or Bright Morning, and then moved to Asadal on Mount Paegak, where he ruled for 1,500 years. When King Wu of Chou enfeoffed Ch'i Tzu to Chosŏn, Tangun moved to Changdanggyŏng, then back to Asadal, where he became a mountain god at the age of 1,908.<sup>2</sup>

Set in the fiftieth year of the legendary Chinese emperor Yao, the founding of Chosŏn would thus have taken place on 3 October 2333 B.C.E., a date that has become a national holiday in South Korea. Koreans today often refer to the "five thousand years of Korean history" a phrase which is based on this legendary date. Although no doubt elements of the legend are very ancient, there is no indisputable reference to any part of this legend before 1279. The second earliest version, which differs in only minor details, is in the epic poem *Chewang Un'gi*, written a few years later by Yi Sŏng-hyu.<sup>3</sup> Significantly the legend of Tan'gun makes its appearance during the period of Mongol domination of Korea in the late thirteenth century when alien rule may have increased national consciousness and resulted in both an interest in indigenous traditions and a need for a unifying myth.

In the fifteenth century, a time of great cultural achievement and of military strength and political consolidation, the myth of Tan'gun played an important, albeit not central, role in Korea's historical consciousness. The *Sejong Sillok Chiriji* (Geographical Appendix to the Sejong Chronicle), the *Ŭngje Siju* of Kwŏn Nam, and the *Tongguk Yŏjiŭngnam* (Augmented Survey of the Geography of Korea) all published in the second half of the fifteenth century repeat the legends, and in 1485 the *Tongguk t'onggam* (Comprehensive Mirror of the Eastern Kingdom) gives Tan'gun as the starting point of its chronological history of Korea to the establishment of the Yi dynasty 1392. At this time a national shrine honoring Tan'gun as the progenitor of the Korean race was constructed at P'yŏngyang.<sup>4</sup> Yi dynasty kings offered sacrifice to Tan'gun at its shrine but as only as one of a number of shrines dedicated to the founders of various Korean dynasties.

Nonetheless, the Tan'gun myth never was very central to premodern Korean identity. In fact, the myth of Kija loomed larger in literature, and history. This legend is also associated with the founding of Chosŏn. According to the Chinese accounts, Kija (Chinese: Qizi) was a Shang China notable, and scholar who in 1122 B.C.E. either fled to Chosŏn or was enfeoffed as the Duke of Chosŏn by the king of the newly founded Zhou dynasty. Some Chinese sources state that he established a line of kings that ruled Chosŏn for forty generations to 195

<sup>2</sup> Peter H. Lee, compiler and editor, *Anthology of Korean Literature: From Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981), 4.

<sup>3</sup> The myth and its various versions are analyzed in James H. Grayson, "The Myth of Tan'gun: A Dramatic Structural analysis of a Korean Foundation Myth," *Korea Journal* 37.1 (Spring 1997): 35-52.

<sup>4</sup> Yi Ki-baek, *A New History of Korea*, translated by Edward Wagner and Edward Shultz, (Seoul: Ilchogak Publishers, 1984), 194.

B.C.<sup>5</sup> The Kija founding myth provided the Koreans with a link with early China giving their kingdom and culture and ancient and respectable pedigree as well as rationalizing the adoption of Chinese culture. The 1122 B.C.E. date of Kija was often presented in Korean histories as the beginning of Korean history for it was the Chinese Kija who brought literacy, agriculture, laws and government to the ancestors of the Koreans and began a three (or four) thousand year cultural tradition. The antiquity this gave their sinified society was a source of great pride. William Elliot Griffis, one of the first Western writers on Korea in the nineteenth century, pointed out that Koreans took considerable pride in citing Kija in order to assert their cultural antiquity. "It is certain that the natives plume themselves upon their antiquity, and that [in this respect] Korean arrogance and contempt for the Western civilization is kindred to that of the Hindoos and Chinese," he wrote. "From the lofty height of 3,000 years of tradition, which is to them unchallenged history, they look with pitying contempt upon the upstart nations of yesterday."<sup>6</sup>

Events at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth led to the rise of the nationalist historians (*minjok sahakka*) such as Sin Ch'ae-ho, Pak Ŭn-sik and Ch'oe Nam-sŏn. With the decline of China and with the growth of nationalism, the Kija legend that began Korean history with the introduction of Chinese culture could no longer serve the needs of national pride. The intrusion of the outside world and foreign intervention into Korea by outside powers led to a nativist reaction and the search for a uniquely Korean past. For some the Tan'gun myth served this need well. Interest in Tan'gun grew during the first decade in the twentieth century, and in 1906 some Koreans founded a Taejonggyo religion that centered around veneration of Tan'gun. Although its adherents remained small, it attracted the interests of some scholars including Pak Ŭn-sik and Ch'oe Nam-sŏn. Ch'oe, in particular, saw Tan'gun as the founder of the Korean *volk*. Historians such as Ch'oe were influenced by the Japanese and their myths of origins, and with European ideas of nationalism as centering around a *volk*, whose essence lie in a unique set of traditions and beliefs. Using insights from folkloric studies, Ch'oe viewed Tan'gun as a real historical figure, a teacher and spiritual leader who founded a great *pulhan* cultural sphere which centered around sun worship and whose influence extended from the Black Sea to Okinawa.<sup>7</sup> Although Ch'oe ideas never received a wide following and Tan'gun worship was restricted to small fringe groups they had considerable influence on Korean scholars at the time of liberation from Japan in 1945. Most Korean historians accepted the idea that the Tan'gun myth had some basis in fact. The story of the she-bear and the tigress were thought to

<sup>5</sup> The *Shiji*, a Chinese history written at the beginning of the first century by Sima Qian, is the key historical sources for this legend although Kija (Chinese: Qizi) is referred to in earlier works. According to this sources Kija introduced rice to Korea before it had only millet. Although no descendants for Kija are given, a later source the *Sanguozhi* completed in 297 states that his descendants ruled for forty generations until overthrown by the Chinese usurper Weiman (Korean: Wiman) around 180 B.C. see Kenneth H.J. Gardiner, *The Early History of Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1969), 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> William Griffis, *Corea: The Hermit Kingdom* 8th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Chizuko T. Allen, "Northeast Asia Centered Around Korea: Ch'oe Nam-son's View of History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 49.4 (November 1990):787-806; see also Pai Hyung Il, *Constructing "Korean" Origins: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography, and Racial Myth in Korean State-Formation Theories*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

represent tribal totems; and Tan'gun was considered by most historians as either the personification of the process by which the tribe directly ancestral to the modern Korean people was established or the actual tribal founder. Archaeologists after 1945 busily sought evidence for this early period of Korean history.

### The Official Cult of Tan'gun

With the end of the thirty-five years of Japanese rule in 1945, and the emergence of two rival Korean states, constructing a national history became an urgent matter. In its last years, Japanese authorities had attempted to obliterate all traces of Korean identity, banning Korean language, and history from the schools and attempting to forcibly assimilate Koreans into the Japanese Empire. As a reaction, a self-conscious effort was made to create a Korean history, a Korean educational system, and a Korean cultural identity. The task was made more urgent by the division of the peninsula and the existing of two regimes laying claim to the national heritage. The conservative nationalists, who dominated South Korea during the American occupation, 1945-1948, and who occupied key positions in government and society after the creation of the Republic of Korea in 1948, found the Tan'gun myth useful for these purposes. As a result they established a semi-official cult of Tan'gun. In 1946, the National Committee for Educational Planning made the phrase "*hongik in'gan*" (broad benefit for humanity) which the *Samguk Yusa* attributes to Tan'gun, as the motto for Korean education, and it was incorporated into the Fundamental Education Law of 1949. Tan'gun was not only the progenitor of the Korean people and the founder of the first Korean state but a great teacher whose thought was a guide for the nation's development.<sup>8</sup> In 1948, the government of Syngman Rhee (Yi Sŭng-man) created an official *Tan'gi* calendar dating years from the time of the founding of first Korean state by Tan'gun in 2333 B.C.E. At the same time, the third of October, the traditional date for the founding of Chosŏn in that year, became a national holiday, *kaech'ŏn-chŏl*, usually translated as National Foundation Day but more literally the "Opening of Heaven Festival."

This cult of Tan'gun was not universally accepted. Some educators and politicians objected to the idea of basing the goals and objectives of Korean education on the teaching of Tan'gun, arguing that it was nothing more than adopting the Imperial Japanese idea of mythical/mystical nationalism as the basis of education. Education, critics stated, should be based on democratic and progressive ideas not on "unscientific" myths.<sup>9</sup> The obvious modeling of the new holiday after Japan's National Foundation Day which commemorates the mythical establishment of the Japanese nation by Jimmu Tenno in 660 B.C.E. was also subject to criticism; and others found the entire cult of Tan'gun in conflict with the aims of establishing a modern, democratic state.

Aside from the Tan'gun cult, policies on national history during the Rhee regime, 1948-1960, were inconsistent and unsystematic. No well developed ideology emerged during this period, rather a sometimes incongruous mixture of ideas was taught in the schools and

<sup>8</sup> *Kukki sokkirok* (Proceedings of the National Assembly), 9 November 1949, 744-757.

<sup>9</sup> Hahn Ki-on, "Study on the Democratization of Education in Korea Based on the History of Educational Thought," *Korea Observer* 1.3 (April-July 1969), 11-31; Yu Chin-o, "Sin kyoyuk sasang kwa kukka ūi hyŏndaehwa" (New Educational Ideas and the Modernization of the Nation), *Sae kyoyuk* (New Education) 100 (February 1963):26-27; *Kukka sokkirok*, 9 November 1949, 744-757.

promoted by the state that combined Confucian-traditionalist with anti-Confucian "progressive" values, extreme mystical and racially based nationalism with an ideologically vague internationalism, and authoritarian-anti-Communism with liberal democratic concepts.<sup>10</sup> All textbooks employed by the centralized educational system were either issued by the Ministry of Education or approved by its Textbook Compilation Bureau. Guidelines, however, were not always clear, and although a detailed national curriculum was developed, it was not implemented until 1957. As a result interpretations of Korean history varied somewhat. All national histories began with Tan'gun, but some treated him as a legend or myth and others as a fully historical person. Nor was there any consistency in the way in which the Kija legend was treated. All agreed that the modern Korean state was a direct lineal descendent of the ancient Chosŏn state that fell to the Chinese in 108 B.C.E. but how it was connected with the later Three Kingdoms period of (57 B.C.E. to 676 C.E.), to the unified Silla state (676-935), to the Koryŏ state (935-1392), and to the later Chosŏn state (1392-1910) was not clear. History texts also lacked a consistent treatment of the geographical boundaries of the ancestral Korean state of Old Chosŏn founded by Tan'gun, although most agreed that its political core was in the P'yŏngyang area.

The military government headed by General Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏng-hŭi) that came to power in 1961, abolished the *Tan'gi* calendar and proposed changes in the teaching of national history. In 1963, the Ministry of Education set up a committee to "unify" the various theories and interpretations of national history. The committee set up guidelines that stated that all stories of how some Chinese had emigrated to Korea and introduced civilization or organized state "will be ignored in the textbooks."<sup>11</sup> There was to be no mention of Kija. Significantly, Tan'gun was to be treated as legend and the evolution of early Korean history and society was stated in terms of archaeological evidence. This reflected the attitude of the new leadership and of many professional historians who wanted to make Korean history "scientific" while at the same time stress in the ancient and autonomous development of the Korean race and culture.

Tan'gun remained an ambivalent figure, part quaint myth and part symbol of the Korean nation. Although he did no longer played a major role in the national history texts or in the official rhetoric of national identity, from time to time his spirit was still conjured up in support of various national causes or to define "Koreanness" in whatever way the regime found suitable. President Park, for example, at one address told his audience in 1963 that "we should abide by the spirit of Tan'gun and do our best for the unification of the divided country, for freeing our brethren from the Communists and for the eternal prosperity of Korea."<sup>12</sup> Schoolchildren were taught that the spirit of Tan'gun signified service to others and the third of October was maintained as a state holiday.

But both within and outside the government a small lobby of Korean nationalist historians, scholars, and writers, and members of the religious cults such as the Taejonggyo and the Hanŏl-gyo (Sect of the Korean Spirit) agitated for the promotion of a national cult of

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<sup>10</sup> For an example of this see the guidebook for educators written by the first education minister An Ho-sang *Ilminjuŭi ponbat'ang* (The Fundamentals of Ilminism), (Seoul: Ilminjuŭi Yŏn'guso, 1950).

<sup>11</sup> *Korea Times*, 9 August 1963.

<sup>12</sup> *Korea Times*, 4 October 1963.

Tan'gun and a revision of Korean history giving due recognition to the nation's glorious and unique historical heritage. Such people were often represented in the Cultural Properties Bureau of the Ministry of Education, and in the historical compilation bureaus. In deference to such groups the government announced in 1966, that it would erect a statue to Tan'gun on top of Namsan, a mountain overlooking central Seoul in order to "infuse the national spirit into the mind of the people." This would be financed from funds raised in a three-year campaign. The plan drew fire from several sectors of society. Christian leaders complained that "if forced by the government" it would be "identical to making the people worship an idol."<sup>13</sup> The press complained that the money would be better spent on academic research or other purposes; and some scholars repeated earlier complaints that "discredited practices of the past [Imperial Japan] were being revived."<sup>14</sup> The project was dropped, but a private group did raise the funds to build a modest shrine to Tan'gun in Seoul's Sajik Park.<sup>15</sup>

Korean historians remained divided on the significance of the Tan'gun legend. Convinced it had a historical basis, some archaeologists such as Kim Chŏng-bae and Kim Chong-hak dedicated years of effort to provide evidence for an ancient Korean state. Other historians, however, felt that the history of Korea was in need of reform. Seoul National University professor Pyŏn T'ae-sŏp at a conference in 1971, argued that the entire idea of national history (*kuksa*) was in need of reconsideration. "The term 'national history' indicates that its content is influenced by stubborn ultra-nationalism, mysticism, beautification and government control." National history should, he felt, simply be called "history." Pyŏn called upon the government to cease standardization and control of history texts and stop teaching a history that was characterized by "blind over-estimation," of national achievements, uniqueness or antiquity. Professor Chŏn Hae-jong of Sogang University suggested that narrowly focusing on Korea's autonomous development must be revised and due treatment for the impact of China on Korea introduced in national history texts in order "to understand the civilization within which the nation has developed its traditions." Professor No Myŏng-sik of Kyunghee (Kyŏnghŭi) University criticized the fragmentary knowledge of Western history that resulted in a narrow nationalist focus on Korean history.<sup>16</sup>

For many others Tan'gun represented an authentic indigenous tradition that differed from the imported traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and more recently Christianity. They argued that the essence of Tan'gun's teaching was *kyŏngch'ŏn aien* (worshiping Heaven, loving humanity), and *hongik in'gan* (broad benefit for humanity) represented what was termed *kŏn'guk inyŏm* (the ideology of the national foundation). This was a special Korean brand of humanism that valued human relations, and was concerned with the collective welfare of the people rather than individual self-assertiveness of Western culture, or the cold rationalism of the Chinese Confucianist system. This was combined with a strong sense of racial/ethnic unity- reminiscent of prewar Japanese mystical racial -nationalism. The Korean people were sometimes referred to by these writers as the *Paedal Minjok*, a reference

<sup>13</sup> *Taehan ilbo*, 25 February 1966.

<sup>14</sup> *Korea Times*, 26 February 1966.

<sup>15</sup> *Korea Newsreview*, 1 March 1986, 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Korea Times*, 18 July 1971.

to the *paedal* tree that under which Tan'gun was born.<sup>17</sup> Nor were these ideas peripheral, rather they were supported by scholars at the official government research center to study Korean nationalism, the Korean Academy (*Chōngsin Munhwa Yōn'guwōn*) established in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup>

### The Tan'gun Revival and Its Controversy

Spurred on by the demands of nationalist elements in the Korean historical profession, and by a host of popular writers and of various patriotic organizations, a renewed attempt to reinstall Tan'gun as the fountainhead of Korean history began in the mid 1980s. In 1985, the Seoul City government which was not an autonomous local unit of government but part of the powerful Home Ministry, announced the construction of a large scale memorial complex to Tan'gun that would replace the modest shrine built with private funds in 1968. Christians again rose up in alarm and pressured the city to back down the following year but a private organization the *Hyōnjong-hoe* (Revere Ancestor Society) agreed to raise the money for a four building complex to be constructed in Sajik Park in downtown Seoul.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, ultra-nationalists pushed for a revision of the textbooks. One scholar, Hwang Sang-gi of the Han'guk Historical Society, went so far as to file suit against the Ministry of Education for erroneous coverage of early Korean history in textbooks, including the denying of the historical authenticity of Tan'gun.<sup>20</sup> This strident nationalist sentiment made itself felt during the preliminary process of revising the national primary and secondary curriculum that was to be carried out in 1990. On 6 June 1987, the Education Deliberation Committee on Textbooks of National History delivered a draft of guidelines for the revision of textbooks to the Ministry of Education.<sup>21</sup> According to the guidelines Tan'gun, "the national founder will be treated as reliable historical fact." "Old Chosōn [the state founded by Tan'gun] will be dealt with as Korea's first national state featuring a highly developed bronze culture."<sup>22</sup> The Committee stated emphatically that Tan'gun was an historic person even though "orthodox persons treat him as a myth." Kija on the other hand, who does not appear in "orthodox Chinese historical books" is to be dismissed as myth. The kingdom founded by Tan'gun, Old Chosōn "will be expanded to include part of the Liaoning in Manchuria."<sup>23</sup> Thus Manchuria or at least parts of it would be included as part of the cultural hearth of

<sup>17</sup> Elaine Kim and Chungmoo Choe editors, *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*. 46-47.

<sup>18</sup> See Chōngsin Munhwa Yōn'guwōn, *Han'guk kukkaüi gibon sōnggyōk kwa kwaje* (The Basic Nature of the State and Its Problems), (Songnam, Korea: *Chōngsin Munhwa Yōn'guwōn*, 1988); Chōngsin Munhwa Yōn'guwōn, *Chōngt'ongjōk gach'ikwan kwa sae kach'ikkwan üi chongnip* (The Establishment of Traditional Values and New Values), (Songnam, Korea: Chōngsin Munhwa Yōn'guwōn, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> *Korea Newsreview*, 1 March 1986, 22.

<sup>20</sup> *Korea Newsreview*, 11 October 1980.

<sup>21</sup> Aidan Foster-Carter, "Listen class, to the latest version of history," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, (24 December 1987):57-58.

<sup>22</sup> *Korea Herald*, 9 June 1987.

<sup>23</sup> *Korea Herald*, 10 June 1987.

Korea. To emphasize this latter point the state of the southwestern Korean state of Paekche (14 B.C.E.-660 C.E.) would include a portion of Liaoning.

In the same nationalist vein, the new history guidelines were to down play the role of China or outside powers in Korean affairs to the extreme. Even the generally accepted and crucially important Chinese colony of Lelang (Korean: Nangnang, 108 B.C.E.-313 C.E.) in northern Korea was to be reduced to a footnote that it "supposedly existed."<sup>24</sup> The role of Tang China in the seventh century unification of Korea was to be excluded. And the guidelines stated that Korea's "historic resistance against foreign invasion will be described in greater detail including resistance during Mongol and Japanese invasions."<sup>25</sup> The implications of this were clear. Korea's autonomous development was again being proclaimed along with emphasis on Tan'gun as the national founder. The tribal-nationalist streak in Korean history was to again prevail. Kija with his connotations of Korea as a cultural offshoot of Chinese civilization is to be dismissed from the national history. Furthermore, the Yalu is not to be the historical border of Korea, but the nation's cultural hearth was to extended deep into Manchuria and perhaps beyond.<sup>26</sup>

Textbooks authors and Ministry of Education officials who approved of texts were, however, reluctant to adopt these extreme nationalist guidelines. So despite the emphatic statements by the revisionists about the historicity of Tan'gun, South Korean textbooks published after the guidelines went into effect in 1990 showed an ambivalence in their attitude toward Tan'gun. Sometimes both mythical and "scientific" views in conformity with prevailing non-Korean scholarly opinion were presented in the same text leaving it up to the teacher to decide which interpretation to emphasize. The Korean language rich in convoluted, ambiguous sentences aided textbook writers in the task of adhering to the guidelines without rejecting alternative theories of history. Government issued teacher guidebooks reflected this lack of enthusiasm for the new historical treatment. The standard middle school teachers' guidebook simply discussed the "Tan'gun myth" and related it to the archaeological remains of early state formation in Korea.<sup>27</sup> The standard high school teachers' guidebook ambivalently stated that Tan'gun and his state have been associated with archaeological remains found in northern Korea, and then gave the traditional date of the founding of Tan'gun's state as 2333 B.C.E. without asserting this as an historical fact.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, despite the skepticism over his historicity that prevailed, a modest revival of interest in Tan'gun occurred in among the South Korean public. This was apparent in the press. In October 1993, the *Korea Herald* editorialized that "There is no denying that the account of Tan'gun is interspersed with concepts that contradict modern-day scientific reasoning, but then great histories of the world are laced with mythical accounts." It went on

<sup>24</sup> *Korea Herald*, 10 June 1967.

<sup>25</sup> *Korea Herald*, 10 June 1987.

<sup>26</sup> This claim that Manchuria was part of Korea in ancient times became a source of dispute between China and South Korea in the 2000s. See Andrei Lankov "The Legacy of Long-Gone States: China, Korea and the Koguryo Andrei Lankov *Japan Focus* (October 2006).

<sup>27</sup> *Chunghakyo kuksa kyosa yongji tosŏ* (Middle School National History Instructor's Guide), (Seoul: Kuksa P'yŏnch'an Wiwŏnhŭi, 1995), 18-19.

<sup>28</sup> *Kyodŭng hakyo kyosa yongji tosŏ* (High School National History Instructor's Guide), (Seoul: Kuksa P'yŏnch'an Wiwŏnhŭi, 1995), 16.



to argue for the relevance of Tan'gun's teaching for Korea as it entered a new era of civilian, democratically elected government:

Aside from the controversy over the mythical nature of Tan'gun, we must not be remiss in attaching significance due to his teaching of love for the nation, affection for fellow men and faithfulness to oneself. Today's national passion to cultivate democracy and promote reform and common prosperity seems especially meaningful as the efforts are in full consonance with Tan'gun's proud ideals in founding the nation.<sup>29</sup>

The popularity of Tan'gun was seen in the expanding scope and variety of the annual celebration of National Foundation Day. In 1993, a Korean Gallup poll revealed that 75 percent of those surveyed believed that Tan'gun should be revered as the nation's founding father"<sup>30</sup>

### North Korea Enters the Tan'gun Controversy

Nor was the revival of interest in Tan'gun confined to South Korea. Tan'gun emerged as a symbol of Koreaness in North Korea as well. In its efforts to construct a national history North Korea had the added burden of fitting national history into the Marxist framework. To emphasize the nation's antiquity and the P'yŏngyang regime's own legitimacy, North Korean textbooks created a materialist framework of nationalists histories as falling into successive stages of development; they then pushed back the dates of these stages with each revision. By 1977, the *Chosŏn T'ongsa* (Comprehensive History of Korea) connected the beginning of national history with the introduction of bronze culture in the second millennium B.C.E. which developed independently of bronze age culture in China. Old Chosŏn was stated to have existed in the eighth century.<sup>31</sup> Tan'gun, however, regarded by Marxist historians as a feudal myth, was ignored.

It therefore came as a surprise when North Korea, announced on the eve of National Foundation Day 1993 that its archaeologists had excavated remains believed to be those of Tan'gun from a mausoleum near P'yŏngyang. According to a North Korean radio broadcast, eighty-six bones had been dug out of the ancient royal tomb together with a gilded bronze crown and some ornaments and that they believed these to belong to Tan'gun and his wife. The bones were further stated to be 5,011 years old; Tan'gun was estimated to have been about 170 cm tall. South Korean archaeologists voiced suspicions about the authenticity of the claim agreeing among themselves that some facts might have been fabricated. The existence of bronze ornaments found in the tomb shed doubt on the dates since no bronze work more than three thousand years old had been found on the peninsula. The dates were too early for even Tan'gun believers in the South to accept, preceding even the mythical dates by seven centuries.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, these claims by North Korea were also linked to the claim that early human remains suggested that Tan'gun and the Korean nation had descended from a distinct line of humans. "Scientific evidence therefore supports the claim that there is a distinctive Korean race and that " the foundation of the first state of the Korean nation by

<sup>29</sup> *Korea Herald*, in *Korea Newsreview*, 9 October 1993, 34.

<sup>30</sup> *Korea Herald*, in *Korea Newsreview*, 9 October 1993, 34.

<sup>31</sup> Ch'oe Yong-ho, "Reinterpreting Traditional History in North Korea," *Journal of Asian Studies* 40:3 (May 1981):503-23.

<sup>32</sup> *Korea Newsreview*, 16 October 1993, 30-31.

Tangun was a historic event, which laid the groundwork for the formation of the Korean nation.”<sup>33</sup> By 1998, the P’yŏngyang regime became more emphatic in this claim. “Tan’gun is now a historical figure who founded the first Korean state about 3000 B.C.E. which centered around Pyŏngyan.” The basin of the river Taedong, they declared was “the cradle of mankind” since the remains of Pithecanthropus were found about one million years ago.<sup>34</sup>

North Korea has long claimed that the son and successor to long term leader Kim Il Sung (Kim Il-sŏng), Kim Chong-il (Kim Chŏng-il), was born in Paektusan about on the China -North Korea border, long held as a sacred spot and often linked to Tan’gun as his birth place. Thus, in a very indirect way the regime and the ruling dynasty was linked with the ancient progenitor of the Korean people. Now this connection was made more explicit. P’yŏngyang in establishing this link most probably sought to bolster its legitimacy over the peninsula by showing that Tan’gun was born near P’yŏngyang and built a state there. The regime implied it was a successor to the founder of the Korean nation and upholder national spirit. By the late 1990s Tan’gun’s name was frequently asserted by the nominally communist regime as a symbol of the Korean nation. The third of October, long celebrated in South Korea as National Foundation Day, became “the nation’s day” with memorial services to “King Tangun.” Official statements from P’yŏngyang often termed Korea as the “Tan’gun nation.” For example, when North Korea launched the medium-range Taepo-dong 1 ballistic missile on 31 August 1998, North Korea announced the launch as “a great pride of the Tan’gun nation.”<sup>35</sup> Kim Jong Il (Kim Chong-il) in public statements urged the Korean people to follow the “spirit of Tan’gun.” Kim Jong Il, who succeeded his father in 1994, was called “a great sage of Tan’gun’s nation born of heaven and sun of a reunified country.”<sup>36</sup>

North Korea’s rediscovery of Tan’gun encouraged his supporters in the South. In the late 1990s, a group of twenty civic, religious and academic figures headed by the noted poet Kim Chi-ha formed the Federation of the Civic Movement of the National Spirit. This group sought to promote what they called “Koreatude” derived from the concept of “Negritude.” This was a racial-cultural spirit that was uniquely Korean and was symbolized by Tan’gun.<sup>37</sup> Some South Koreans sought to seek in Tan’gun their common Koreaness with the North. Archaeologist Kim Jung-bae head of the Tan’gun Academy made a trip to North Korea in November 1999 and announced that his organization would participate with the North Korean Academy of Social Sciences in an academic seminar on Tan’gun on 3 October 2000.<sup>38</sup>

The use of Tan’gun as a national symbol, and all the controversies and contradictions that this has resulted in came to the fore in 1999 when several statues of Tan’gun were smashed, beheaded and splashed with red paint at some schools in a city outside Seoul. The *Hanmunhwa* (Korean Culture) Movement Federation of Korea, a conservative cultural group

<sup>33</sup> “Pyongyang-Capital of the Korean Nation” *Korea Today* (1995 No.2,43-45), 45.

<sup>34</sup> *Korean Central News Agency* broadcast 13 March 1998, BBC Worldwide Monitoring 14 March 1998.

<sup>35</sup> *Agence France-Presse* 11 September 1998.

<sup>36</sup> *Korean Central News Agency* 1 March 2000, BBC Worldwide Monitoring.

<sup>37</sup> *Korea Herald* 2 August 1999.

<sup>38</sup> *World Reporter* 19 November 1999.

that sought to revive the founding values of Korean society and which was critical of the “philosophical chaos” of modern society, began to distribute hundreds of plastic statues of Tan’gun in schools and parks. The association argued that the so-called scientific ideas disproving Tan’gun’s historical basis were created by the Japanese imperialists “in an effort to destroy Korean spirituality.” The association’s project, met with strong opposition from Christian groups and many Korean historians as had similar efforts in the past. Christian groups have asked for the removal of these statues from public areas branding them “idolatry.” Seoul National University historian No Tae-don has criticized the glorification of Tan’gun-which he stated was a myth created during the Mongol invasions to assert a common identity and then resurrected in the early twentieth century in face of Japanese aggression. It was used to create “a common link among the Korean people in times of oppression.” But today, he argued, the myth serves only to distort history and “will do nothing to advance society.” Other South Korean argued that such mystical nationalism is counter productive to Korean national interests in an age of globalization.<sup>39</sup> North Korea jumped in to condemn the “desecration” blaming it on “elements under the patronage of the South Korean authorities,” and as a “dastardly treacherous act shielding the past crime of the Japanese imperialists who describe him as a fabulous [unhistorical] person.”<sup>40</sup> P’yongyang had asserted itself in the decades long controversy in South Korea over the role of Tan’gun in Korean history and national identity. Meanwhile, while North Korea continued to commemorate Tan’gun’s birth during on his October 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday with ceremonies at his tomb outside the capital.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

The Tan’gun controversy, for all the puzzlement or bemusement it may bring to non-Koreans, provides an instructive case study in the process by which national myths are used to construct national histories and national identities. Tan’gun remained a powerful emotional symbol for some Koreans, but mainstream academics would not accept the historicity of Tan’gun and many rejected the mystical, racial nationalism that he represented. Tan’gun thus provides an example of how myths and traditions are remembered, reinterpreted, and/or ignored to serve prevailing intellectual and political currents and the concerns of various groups. The myth of Tan’gun has undergone constant reexamination and reinterpretation as Koreans, in both North and South Korea, seek to extract from their past a meaningful history. While never central to Korean national identity, Tan’gun remains important enough as a symbol of “Koreanness” to continue to arouse controversy and discussion. For all of South Korea’s impressive economic achievement, Korea remains a divided nation, and the South is still trying to reformulate a distinctive national identity amidst a very rapid social and cultural transformation. Under these circumstances it is not likely that a universally agreed upon consensus on the meaning and use of the Tan’gun myth will emerged in the near future.

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<sup>39</sup> *Korea Times* 9 July 1999; *Korea Herald* 9 July 1999.

<sup>40</sup> *Korean Central News Agency*, 1 November 1999, 1 November 1999 BBC World wide Monitoring

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