

Articles



Volume 24 Number 2

December 2021

The Review of Korean Studies

www.kci.go.kr

Article

Asiatic Motifs and Korean Identity Inherent in Korean Myths: Wolf, Serpent, and Bird

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www.kci.go.kr

The Review of Korean Studies Volume 24 Number 2 (December 2021): 147-172

doi: 10.25024/review.2021.24.2.147

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Introduction

Kim Byung-mo (1988, 54-55) classified the motifs of Korean foundation myths into “descent from the Heaven” and “oviparous birth,” saying the former was a northern Asiatic motif and the latter was a southern motif. Prior to Kim, a Japanese historian Mishina Akihide (1972, 213-24) argued that Korea had two types of myths, dividing the northern Koreans who regarded an animal as their ancestor, with those Koreans in the south who described their originator as a hero from an egg. Kim Hwa-kyong (2018, 7-8) disputed Mishina’s claim which was aiming to disturb the united national identity of the Koreans with intent to justify Japanese colonial rule by promoting regional conflicts. Nevertheless, Mishina’s argument along with Kim Byung-mo’s theory has been influencing the general views on the ancient mythologies of Asia because there have been few studies that refute the claims. This paper hence provides an alternative perspective on the established premises that Korean mythological motifs were given by foreign influence and that each oviparous birth myth of the Ancient Korean kingdoms was the cultural product of the southern Asiatic characteristic.

This paper partially accepts Moon Il-hwan’s (2007, 1) research indicating the correlation between the bird-worship tradition and Korean oviparity myth and Park Myung-sook’s (2010, 70-71) study that the oviparous birth motif is not a cultural product of the Han Chinese but Dongyi. Kim Hwa-kyong’s (2018, 17) rebuttal to Mishina’s southern origin theory of Korean oviparous birth myths is a great inspiration to this study. Although it is somewhat far from my discussion as she focuses on China’s arbitrary interpretation of history, Kim Myung-ok’s (2020, 799) suggestion is in the same vein as Park’s that the oviparous birth is the Dongyi’s motif. However, while those previous studies did not provide the validity of how the egg motif from the Dongyi culture influenced ancient Korean kingdoms, this paper first shed light on that birds and oviparous birth were shamanistic motifs widely inherited on the Korean peninsula.

Korean Myths and Asiatic Motifs

Most nation-states have birth myths of its founders, describing them as mysterious or legendary features to differentiate them from common people.

According to Brown David (2000, 23), “primary myths of nationalism are connected with beliefs in the community’s permanence as an eternal nation whose continuity across many generations and the community’s common ancestry.” In Korea, such myths present a combination of two motifs. The first motif is that their progenitor descends from the sky referring to Heaven. Gojoseon known as the first Korean kingdom represents the epitome of the motif.

The sky god whose name was Hwanin had a second son called Hwanung. The god sent his son to the earth...Then, a tiger and a bear...wanted to become human. Hwanung replied that if they lived in a cave for 100 days while eating mugwort and garlic only...in the course of the promised 100 days the tiger gave up...the bear successfully restrained herself and became a pretty woman called Ungnyeo, means “bear woman”...Hwanwoong married Ungnyeo and she gave birth to Dangun.¹

This story emphasizes that the founding father was a descendant of the heavenly god, linking him to bear-totem. I see it as a symbol of the greatest power of heavenly god that brings the tiger and bear to their knees, the strongest animals in the region. I agree with the theory that the bear, which was chosen to become the maternal ancestor, meant deity or god in Korean phonetics, such as *gom*, *geom*, *goma*, and *gaema* (Youn 1988, 173) because it embodies an absolute god stronger than any other lower deities that existed on the ground at the time.

Another motif of the Korean mythology that ancient kingdoms used to narrate was the oviparous birth by taking the theme of sacred eggs. A birth story of Park Hyukgeose, a founder of Silla shows how the motif developed.

The heads of six villages in Jinhan gathered on the hill of Alcheon, discussing, “We do not have a king to rule over our people...They went up high and looked down to the south. Then a strange vitality struck the ground like a thunderbolt by the well of Najeong under Yangsan and there a white horse was kneeling down and making a bow. Later they found a purple egg. The horse neighed long when she saw the people and climbed

1. In this paper, the author summed up Korean myths from the original texts in both *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi* that are accessible in the database of the National Institute of Korean History (<http://db.history.go.kr>). Each original Chinese text or its Korean version was translated by the author.

to the sky. They opened the egg and a neat and beautiful boy came out of the egg.

The core theme of the myth is an egg that subsumed a miraculous hero who would establish the sacred kingdom. This motif was similarly applied to the myth of Kim Suro, king of another southern kingdom, which consisted of nine tribes and developed into a confederacy of six states under the name of Gaya.

One day when the Gans [Khan] of the nine tribes of Garak [Gaya] were gathering, they heard a voice from a mountaintop named Gujibong, calling them together with saying he had come to become king of a nation on command from the heavenly god, and ordering to be ready to hail their king...a golden box wrapped in a purple cloth came down from the sky on a golden thread, containing six golden eggs...They disclosed six boys. The first of them was Kim Suro who became king of Geumgwan Gaya and the other five were made kings of the five Gaya.

The myth of Jumong, the founder of Goguryeo is not much different either. Furthermore, Jumong's story is almost the same as the Buyeo's because Goguryeo loaned the myth from Buyeo where Jumong himself came from.

King Kumwa confined Yuhwa [Jumong's mother] into a room. Then, sunlight shined on her. She tried to avoid it, but the sunlight chased her to shine again. Later she conceived and gave birth to an egg...The king threw it away and gave it to the dog and the pig, but they did not eat it. The cows and horses were avoided when they were thrown away on the road again. When it was thrown into the field, it was covered by birds and animals. Even if the king tried to break it, he could not, so he gave it back to his mother. When she wrapped it with a cloth and put it in a warm place, a boy came out.

One of the notable characteristics of these myths is the combination of two motifs. Being different from the myth of Dangun of Gojoseon that put weight on the direct bloodline of the sky god only, the foundation myths of Silla, Gaya, and Goguryeo including Buyeo take the mystic egg on the central theme of the story in addition to the concept of heavenly bloodline adopted from Gojoseon. It gives an insight that the Korean mythologies combined the two motifs sometime later after Gojoseon. Goguryeo and Silla recognized Gojoseon as their

predecessor: "First King Dongmyung ascended the throne in 37 BC and ruled for 18 years. His family name is Go [Ko] and his name is Jumong, also known as Chumong. He is the son of Dangun."² *Samguk sagi* also noted that "long before this, the six polities of Gojoseon immigrants...made Park Hyukgeose King of Silla."³ I have excluded Baekje and Balhae whose founding records were non-mystical because their founders were direct descendants of Goguryeo. The founder of Balhae was Dae Joyoung, a general of Goguryeo. In the case of Baekje, the first king was a son of Jumong. At any rate, they all had the idea of sky worship and the egg motif in common. The combination of two motifs in Korean mythology is distinctive enough to account for the intertwined patterns of two cultural mainstreams. After all, Mishina's claim that two cultures existed separately in ancient Korea is not convincing. Based on this, I now examine whether the main motifs in Asian foundation myths influenced Korea.

The myth in northern Asia plays a role in making people believe in their king as a divine regent chosen by the god of Heaven, which features Tengrism and shamanism related to nomadic life. For example, the Ashina tribe that was a ruling dynasty of Göktürk rose in the mid-6th century when Bumin Khagan rebelled against the Rouran Khaganate, used such origin myth to legitimate their sovereignty with Tengrism connoting the motif of the descent from Heaven. To strengthen the motif, I think, they brought out "the wolf" that plays the role of shaman as a medium that conveys orders or authority from Tengri and gives birth to a divine king. It was a metaphor to decorate the Ashina tribe as a successor of the old legend passed down from the earliest North Asia.

There was a boy who narrowly escaped death with injuries from war. Then, a female wolf appeared and looked after him back to health. The wolf fell in love with the boy and escaped together from enemies...giving birth to ten

2. The original text in *Samguk yusa* is as follows: "第一東明王 甲申立 理十八 姓高 名朱蒙 一作鄒蒙 壇君之子。"

3. The original text in *Samguk sagi* is as follows: "先是，朝鮮遺民...六部人以其生神異，推尊之，至是立爲君焉。" The Chinese record "三國志，魏書，烏丸鮮卑東夷傳" described them as mostly Chinese Qin immigrants, but the Silla people themselves stated that they were from Gojoseon. It is likely that there were Qin refugees at that time, but the Chinese records valued the Chinatown too much. Also, misperception would have grown even more because there was a country, called Jin with the same Korean pronunciation as Qin, in the same region. Chinese source also noted that there were the immigrants from Lerang, it is noteworthy that the population in the Four Commanderies of Han were also mainly Gojoseon natives.

half-wolf, half-human boys. Of these, Ashina becomes their leader. (Findley 2005, 38; Roxburgh 2005, 20)

When the Ashina tribe obtained control of the other Turks in the steppe, the Ashina leaders needed to invent their origin myth to legitimate the new khaganate. So, they took the motif of a wolf as the main icon of Turks, even though the original symbol of the Ashina tribe was a mountain goat, not a wolf (Babayarov 2010, 394). As Jeong (2009, 31) also suggests, “It showed that the Ashina clan unified the steppe world and prolonged their legitimacy by the adaption of myth based on the wolf motif.” The divine wolf as a medium sent by the sky was commonly delineated in the origin myths of almost every Turkic kingdom. In fact, there were similar wolf myths of the Wusun, the Tiele, and the Xiongnu.

The Wusun appeared in Chinese accounts since the 2nd century BC to the 5th century AD as a vassal of Yuezhi. Chinese source noted:

The king’s name was Kunmo, Nandoumi, the father of Kunmo, was originally the king of a small country near Yuezhi between the Qilian Mountains and Tunhuang.⁴ Once Yuezhi killed Nandoumi and took away their land, his son Kunmo was just born. His teacher escaped from the battle, carrying him. He laid the baby on the grass to get food. When he came back, a wolf was breastfeeding and a crow flew by with meat in beak.⁵

This legend indicates that the Wusun was culturally closed to the wolf. Due to the name of Wusun, in Chinese character “烏孫” that literally means “raven or crow- grandson,” it seems that “their essential motif is a bird” (Beckwith 2009, 415). But contextually, the wolf motif is more clear and significant. A tribe with the similar name “Wuhuan” in Chinese character “烏桓” that means “raven tree or signpost” does not have the culture related to the bird motif. Therefore, I rather believe that the Wusun took advantage of the founding legend of Rome inherited from the same Indo-Aryan nomads across the steppe, and based on it, they transformed the woodpecker that fed Romulus and Remus into a blackbird

that was widely considered sacred, back then in North Asia as a medium to convey the sky god’s will. Thus, the motif that a wolf saves or gives birth to the divine regent of the sky was already widely spread as such throughout the Asian continent, much earlier than Göktürk appeared in history. For example, personifying a wolf as a medium of heaven also appeared in the origin myth of Tiele that was a confederation of nine tribes, emerging after the disintegration of the confederacy of the Xiongnu. They were also called Gaoche or Chile.

A king of Xiongnu had two beautiful daughters hallowed to marry the god by the king. The king built a high platform in the north, sent the daughters, and prayed for the descent of the god...an old wolf appeared to protect them and howled every day, the younger daughter felt the wolf the god... and went to become the wolf’s wife. She gave birth to a son.⁶

The Tiele was regarded as a branch of the Xiongnu by the Han Chinese and in some way they had Turkic culture in common. The Uyghur had the same origin myth as the Tiele did because “the Uyghur was the leading tribe in a confederation of nine Turkic Tiele peoples” (Mackerras 1972, 1). Thus, the wolf motif had been used in the general Turkic culture since a long time ago. However, it is found in the Mongolian foundation myth in the “Secret History of the Mongols” 元朝秘史 whose first chapter begins with the origin of Genghis Khan.

At the beginning there was a blue-grey wolf, born with his destiny ordained by Heaven Above. His wife was a fallow doe. They came crossing the Tenggis. After they had settled at the source of Onan River on Mount Burqan Qaldun, Batačiqan was born to them. (Rachewiltz 2015, 1)

Batachikan, who was a son of the blue-grey wolf called “Börte Chino” and the white doe called “Gua Maral,” became the direct patrilineal ancestor of Genghis Khan. What is intriguing to me in this myth is that the Mongols were not a Turkic race, but even to them, a wolf was the bearer of the heavenly will. It indicates that Mongols, much before Genghis Khan, believed

4. The original text is as follows: “臣居匈奴中，聞烏孫王號昆莫。昆莫父難兜靡本與大月氏俱在祁連，焯煌間，小國也” (Gu Ban, *Hanshu*).

5. The original text is as follows: “匈奴殺其父，而昆莫生棄於野。烏嚙肉蜚其上，狼往乳之” (Qian Sama, *Shiji*).

6. The original text of Shou Wei’s *Book of Wei* is accessible at <http://yw.eywedu.com/24/10/mydoc185.htm>.

that they had the blood of wolves. So then, does it mean that the wolf motif was originated from the Mongols? Before reaching a conclusion, one needs to pay attention to the Scythian culture, which was known as the first nomadic horse culture and had golden age during approximately the 7th-6th centuries BC, earlier than the Xiongnu in the steppe, beginning its civilization from the 11th century BC. Most of all, the Scythians had a strong culture of animal decorations as one of the most distinctive elements of the Scythian culture. Many tribes or rulers made the images of predators and raptors their symbols. Such Scythian culture made an impact on Asia when they came into contact with the Xiongnu, leading to the widely use of animals as motifs for the national mythologies, and these motifs permeated throughout North and East Asia. However, animal symbolization is not a tradition that was practiced in the Scythian culture only. Such collective animism and shamanistic features were more common among the indigenous Siberian and Northeast Asian who still retain the most primitive form of shamanism. The Tungusic Evenki and Mogolic Buryat are the representative ethnic groups that hold the prototype of the form till today. According to my observation, wolves often appear in their shamanistic rituals. When shamans treat the sick or the haunted by ghosts, they first perform a ritual to raise the spirit of the dead who was the beneficiary's ancestor and they ask, by growling like a wolf when connected to the ancestor, to call other deities that will help the descendent. Thus, the animal motif for a national origin myth was widely spread from the Turkic culture along with the Scythian tradition to the Mongolic and Tungusic culture. Chronologically, the Xiongnu seemed to first adopt a wolf as their symbol and changed the symbol into a mythic motif, and later when the Turks expanded their power in Asia, they took advantage of the widespread wolf motif for their origin myth to strengthen Turkic empire's legitimacy, by encompassing the cultures that pervaded throughout the grand steppe region. As a result, the myth of wolves became the most common element of the whole Turko-Mongol culture, which has had an influence on all northern Asian races. That is to say, all of North Asia—from Northwest Asia, including the Scythian in a part of Europe, to Northeast Asia, including the Korean peninsula—shared the same folklores and mythologies to some degree. In the early Turkic and Mongolic language, the god of the sky or heavenly lord is called "Tengri" and it shapes the central concept of Asian shamanism and animism. Generally the word "Tengri" refers to "sky god." Therefore, the

notion of the sky as the absolute object of worship in the Korean myth is also meaningfully related to the belief in Tengri. Therefore, it is not surprising that all Korean foundation myths contain the belief in the sky god. Hwanung came from the sky to establish Gojoseon. When King Kim Suro of Gaya was born, the golden box came from the sky first. A strange light from the sky struck the ground and implied the numinousness of Silla King Hyukgeose. The light from the sky was thrown on Jumong's mother to indicate that Jumong was a son of the sun. Including the sun, all of the light from the sky also signified Tengri and his involvement in selecting the king of a nation. The founders of kingdoms thus were all regents of heavenly gods and kings of the earth. As recognized earlier, Tengri is the god worshipped by people in the northern nomadic culture. As a result, the horse was also the main figure of their myths, and this is the reason a white horse suddenly appeared in the Silla myth, making a bow to King Hyukgeose. In short, Korean mythologies about founders of kingdoms were cultural products influenced by the northern nomadic culture. Ancient Korea seems to have more actively interacted with non-Chinese nomadic people and was deeply influenced by sharing and developing of the Turko-Mongol culture together. This is the reason, I believe that the Korean language bears some more resemblances to Mongolian, Turkic, and Tungusic than to Chinese (Robbeets 2005, 422-23), even though it does not fully belong to any of them. If the region of the mythology is extended a little farther to the west, it is linked to Rome. According to tradition, the founder of Rome—Romulus and his twin brother, Remus—established Rome in 753 BC on the place where a she-wolf suckled them. If we cobble it for better understanding of the cultural link, the descendants of the wolves controlled the Eurasian continent for thousands of years.

The fully fledged question is hence, from where did the theme of the egg, instead of the wolf, come to the Korean peninsula? I conclude that the Korean mythology was deeply influenced by the Turko-Mongol shamanistic culture, owing to the similar personality of a god in heaven whom they worshipped and the same plot constructed in their mythologies. For instance, in the national foundation myth of Gojoseon, the same as the Turko-Mongol origin myth, even a single egg did not play a role in mythicizing the founding father Dangun. However, since Goguryeo and Silla in 57 BC, the egg suddenly became an important figure in Korean myths. Main question is whether or not the Korean myths was shaped by the southern culture through the maritime route, along

with northern continental influence, as Korea is a peninsula facing the Asian continent to the north and surrounded by water along three seas. To verify it, we need to investigate if the oviparous birth motifs for origin or foundation myths do exclusively belong to the southern maritime culture.

Funan, the first Southeast state that began to appear in Chinese records from 300 BC, was an ancient kingdom of the Khmer that dominated for centuries in Southeast Asia as the most active and long-lasting kingdom. Therefore, the Cambodian myth will be examined first. According to the legend, an Indian Brahman and the daughter of Naga, the god of the seven-headed snake, began the nation.

Preah Thaong, a brahmin from the east, reaches the Mekong delta by water. Standing at the prow of his ship, he sees the island of Khok Thlok; at its shore is a beautiful woman serpent princess named Nagi Somā. She sees the intruder, assembles her army....Preah Thaong conquers her, they fall in love, and their marriage ceremony is held in her father's subterranean nāga kingdom. After they are wed, Somā's father (the nāga king) "drinks the waters" that cover this land, and creates a land he calls Kambuja. The descendants of this kingdom's residents are the modern-day Khmers who live in the kingdom of Cambodia. (Stark 2006, 307)

Although, in this legend, any oviparous birth is not directly addressed, what we figure out is that Queen Soma was the incarnation of a serpent that was an oviparous animal.

One of a neighboring country, Vietnam also has its national origin myth that receives attention.

Lac Long Quân known as Dragon Lord met Âu Cơ, an Immortal from the Mountainous Realm and produced a pouch of one hundred eggs whence one hundred sons emerged...the father taking fifty sons to the Southern Sea and the mother fifty to the land...the eldest and bravest took the title of Hùng Vương (King Hùng or Valorous King), founder of the Hồng Bàng dynasty. (Nguyen 2013, 318)

Subsequently, the foundation myth of Thailand is examined. According to Kim Young-aih (2001), the myth of Si Inthrahit, the founder of the Phra Ruang dynasty that ruled Sukhothai Kingdom in Thailand has similar

mythological elements to those of Jumong, the founder of Goguryeo. According to her, there are six different records of the myth that can be categorized into four versions (ibid. 171). One of them contains the motif associated with oviparous birth.

When King Phra Chantaracha went hunting in the mountains, he encountered and had intercourse with a beautiful woman...she was Nang Nak, a daughter of a dragon...She bore an egg...An old man and his wife saw the egg and took it to their home. Some days later, a boy came out of the egg. When the boy became 15 years old, people recognized his mysterious abilities. So the king...realized that the boy was his son and named him the prince. Finally, he led the independence war against Angkor and became a King. (ibid. 175)

This legend was dramatized to celebrate their release from the domination of Cambodia and to monumentalize Si Inthrahit's victory. Anyway, the birth of Si Inthrahit features a more distinctive oviparous motif that he is a son of a king and son of Nang Nak that is a serpent, also regarded as a dragon.

Like the Mishina's argument, these Southeast Asian countries have the origin myth of the progenitor related to the oviparous birth. The following question then arises: could it be acceptable that Southeast Asian countries largely influenced the ancient Korean culture and myths?

In the Thai myth, Si Inthrahit is described as the first king who established the identity of Thailand and began the Phra Ruang dynast. Si Inthrahit began his reign from 1238. It is impossible that this myth had an impact on the ancient Korean foundation myths. Likewise, Vietnam seemed to complete its origin myth against the backdrop of fostered national consciousness after the war with the Mongols in the 13th century and it was introduced for the first time in the book of *Linh Nam Chich Quai* in the late fourteen century. It is unlikely that it was the prototype of the ancient Korean mythologies. Most of all, a pouch of 100 eggs or a multi-headed serpent seems too exotic and unfamiliar a theme in Korea to be included as a Korean cultural figure. Therefore, I am skeptical that the oviparous birth motifs in Korea were imported from any country in Southeast Asia. Otherwise, the answer needs to be sought within Korea, considering that it is an immanent element of Korean culture.

New Narrative of Oviparous Birth Motifs in Korea

Although Mishina's argument seems to be similar to Kim Byung-mo's, it is fundamentally very different. Contrary to Mishina's claim that there were two different cultures and different ethnic groups in Korea, which cannot be regarded as one nation, Kim weighs on the mixture of both northern and southern cultures in the Korean peninsula. I agree to Kim's claim that two main cultures intermingled in the Korean peninsula. However, I do not think that Korean oviparous myths were influenced by Southeast Asia. I suggest that the Korean oviparous motif is an indigenous cultural element that distinguishes Korea from others. There are five reasons why the Korean oviparous motifs are cultural characteristics of Korea.

Firstly, the attribute of eggs in Korean myths is different from the southern myths. The Korean motif is not a serpent's egg such as that of snakes of most Southeast Asian countries but birds. The eggs in the myths of Southeast Asia indicate that their divine authorities of kings are associated with maritime forces. Therefore, their mystical serpent-ancestors live under the sea. Meanwhile, mythic eggs for Korean divine rulers come from Heaven or the highest mountain trees closed to the sky. Lee Imsu (2014, 382) suggested three characteristics of Korea's ancient culture: "the 'worship of the sky' looking up to the flying birds, 'worship of the eggs' which are birds' prototype, and 'the shamanism' which is a belief in the spirits of heaven, earth, and all things."

For second, despite the long and strong cultural similarity to the Turko-Mongol culture as much as sharing most of shamanistic culture, no Korean kingdom accepted wolves as their ancestor, while the belief in a sky god had been kept and rituals were practiced in almost the same way. Throughout the Eurasian steppe region, they are commonly known to have worshipped animals as a shaman. In the steppe and the north grassland, these animals were strong and rapid wolves which are gregarious animals. This was useful for spreading the community value and implementing the ideals, such as unity, cooperation, and obedience of leadership, by exemplifying them in wolves. Meanwhile, ancient Koreans considered a bird to be a stronger messenger sent by the god of the sky on account of its flying feature. Especially in a farming society, the delegation of the sky, which governs the weather, was absolute. Therefore, the bird, which was just one of objects of worship in the steppe and North Asia, finally became the highest symbol and even the ancestor of ancient Koreans.

Third, the bird motif of a progenitor was not universal, even in North and East Asia. Compared with other myths, the oviparous birth of a king in Korea is a highly distinctive characteristic itself that was not common in those regions. A bird's egg appears in the Mongol and Tibetan mythologies. However, it is an iconology of Kalavinka, a fantastical creature of Buddhism in later times, not of the old folk figures. Tuoba Xianbei's ancestry myth contains the typical motif of a heavenly descendent similar to Korea. However, it did not include the theme of eggs, and it introduced a short variant story focusing on a fairy-type woman sent from the sky.⁷ The Khitan's myth has a similar motif of a heavenly woman.⁸ Although they shared the motifs of a heavenly descendant, their motifs were still different from the Korean bird motif. Only the Manchu people who were once part of Gojoseon and Goguryeo have a myth associated with the bird motif. According to *Researches on Manchu Origins* 滿洲源流考, legend has it that:

Once upon a time, three immortal girls...descended from heaven and bathed in Bulhūri Lake. While they were bathing, a spirit magpie placed a red fruit on the clothes of youngest girl, Fukulen; and after eating it, she became pregnant and gave birth to a boy who was Bukūri Yongşon. (Sun 2017, 8)

Unlike the Xianbei and the Khitan, the Manchu foundation myth clearly features a bird—in the story, a magpie—acting as the agent of the sky god. It seems to me that the bird motif was a regional core theme on the Korean peninsula and its environs. In other words, "the reason for the similarities of the Manchu myth to Korea's is that the two peoples belonged to the same cultural circle" (Ryu 2001, 374). It has attracted attention that the familiar plot of mythology, such as that of ancient Korea, was also discovered in two ancestral myths in mainland China. Xie, the first ancestor of the kings of the Shang dynasty, is said to have given birth to him after swallowing an egg that was dropped by a blackbird while bathing in the river with two other women (Yang, An, and Turner 2005, 148). The exact same myth exists, delineating Nuxiu who

7. The original text of Shou Wei's *Book of Wei* is accessible at <http://chinesenotes.com/weishu/weishu001.html>.

8. The original text of Toqto'a's *History of Liao* is as follows: "相傳有神人乘白馬自馬盂山浮土河而東有天女駕青牛車由平地松林泛潢河而下至木葉山二水合流相遇為配偶生八子其後族屬漸盛分為八部。" This is also accessible at <https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E9%81%BC%E5%8F%B2/%E5%8D%B737>.

swallowed a blackbird's egg and gave birth to Daye, who became an ancestor of the Qin dynasty.⁹ In contrast to Korea, bird motifs are unusual in ordinary founding myth of the Han Chinese. Therefore, I believe that, back then, the aforementioned two states in China were related to the cultures of the Korean peninsula and its surroundings.

The fourth reason the bird's egg motifs as cultural characteristics of Korea is that the "Feathered Headgears," also known as *jougwan* in Korean, proves that the worship of birds was a very Koreanized cultural behavior of those days. As discussed already, ancient Korea was deeply influenced by shamanism whose cultural tradition is still carried out today. Shamanism is the central element to today's Korean folklore and holds an important position in farming and fishing villages. Such shamanistic rituals are not much different from those of the ancient aborigines living in northern Asia. Korean shamans existed from the Gojoseon period or before and had the highest status in each Korean kingdom; the leadership of a shaman was even equivalent to that of a king, or the shaman him/herself would be a king. North Asian shamanism was mainly accompanied by animism. The wolf became to be the most important icon for the Mongols, the Tungus, the Turks, and the steppe region, but it was the bird on the Korean peninsula. In the end, these bird-worship ideas developed into the form of feather decorations, which were originally part of a shaman's unique attire in North Asia. The practice of putting bird feathers on the headgear to the North Asian was confined to the shamans only during their ritual practices. Besides, many of them used to wear fur from other animals on their heads instead of bird feathers. However, wearing such a feathered headgear was uniquely common among people in Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla regardless of occupation. Especially, when they needed to reveal their identity such as at diplomatic events, they generally wore the feathered headgear.¹⁰ This means that all three kingdoms of Korea have recognized individuals as having the same status as a shaman. They seem to have a kind of belief similar to the so-called "Priestertum aller Gläubigen" (priesthood of all believers). For them,

the feathered headgear was an emblem of shamanistic identity as a descendant of birds. Although professional shamans existed, the aristocrats of the three kingdoms on the Korean peninsula widely shared such a sense of shaman. Therefore, "the Chinese literatures used 'Feathered Headgear' as a recognition tag to distinguish the people of the Korean peninsula from others" (Cho 2013, 140). Under this background of shamanistic consciousness, the myth of an oviparous birth strengthened the legitimacy of a king who was born from an egg. Likewise, Korean festival involving drinking, dancing, and singing on those days was a national ritual to experience the communal feeling of flying and meeting god. Thus, the Korean oviparous myths had not been loaned from any foreign cultures.

Last but not least, *sotdae*, which are tall poles with sculpted birds on the top of them, can be an evidence of bird worship tradition in ancient Korea. These poles are erected at the entrance of towns to protect people from evil spirit and bad luck, and they foster prosperity and long life. *Sodo*, which dates back to Gojoseon, was a prototype of *sotdae*. Another record also demonstrates the bird-worshipping customs in the Proto-Three Kingdoms Period. The Chinese records reads, "when a person dies, the wings of a large bird are buried, and the meaning is to make the dead fly to heaven."¹¹ Ancient Koreans believed that life and spirit carry various bird shapes, and birds were thought of as a bridge between the two realms: life and death, heaven and earth, and the god and the people. The steppe people used the she-wolf motif as the key icon, which likely originated from the Scythian culture. In Mongolia, however, wolves are turned into paternal bloodlines and married to a she-reindeer. It is likely that Mongols later borrowed the wolf motif. Here, it is noteworthy that Korean did not employ wolves or reindeers in their mythologies, indicating the mythical uniqueness for their identity.

Despite the long-lasting hypothesis, considering the Yakut's falcon legendary and many stories about a sacred crow in the steppe and North Asia as the origin of Korean bird worship, I suggest that ancient Korea reveals more contrasts than commonalities with them. In Korea, a magpie or swallow was a more auspicious symbol than a crow, a rooster more than a falcon, and later the wild goose or duck as well.

9. The original text of Qian Sima's *Shiji* is as follows: "秦之先, 帝顓頊之苗裔孫曰女修。女修織, 玄鳥隕卵, 女修吞之, 生子大業。" This is also accessible at <https://ctext.org/shiji/qin-ben-ji/zh>.

10. Kim Moon-Ja claims that *jougwan* originated from Scythia. But I do not find a decisive resemblance of "scythe-shaped tail" with *jougwan*. It seems, at most, to be an example of cultural intercourse with Scythia. For further details see Kim 2005, 56.

11. The original text of Shou Chen's *Records of the Three Kingdoms* is as follows: "以大鳥羽送死, 其意欲使死者飛揚。"

Bird Motif in Southeast Asia and China

I have refuted the theory that southern Asia has the same oviparous birth motif as Korea. I have reasoned the egg motifs of foundation myths classified into the birds and the serpents. The next question is if there is any bird's egg motif in myths in Southeast Asia. Although I have already examined some myths of Southeast Asia, there are more mythologies owing to ethnic diversity in the region. Lee Ji-hee (2005, 39-41) listed up 46 mythologies of oviparous birth motifs discovered in 10 countries, classifying into 6 categories by who laid the eggs: deity, sun, animal, plant, inanimate object, or human. Lee's categorization is a good survey. I suggest a simpler approach to this. For this discussion, it is more comprehensive to classify the origin myths as sky worship and sea worship motif, excluding the world creation myths among them. As noted, the sun, birds, high mountains, and trees are symbolic elements identical to the sky in the myths while snakes, dragons, water, and underworld stand as a symbol for the sea. For example, Naga lays eggs, water itself lays eggs, or a woman marries the dragon in the myths. In other word, the egg that appears as a motif of the foundation myth is related to the sky god or the sea god. Although birds do not lay eggs directly in Korea's foundation myth, the *sodo* of Gojoseon, *sotdae* of the Samhan period, Samjoko of Goguryeo, and the chicken worship of Silla let us know that birds in context symbolized the god of the sky. The Korean oviparous birth is related to the sky god, taking the bird theme as a key cultural element. Some tribes also have the sky-relevant motifs in their origin myths in Southeast Asia. The Muong people in Vietnam believe that their ancestor was a bird. Some Indonesian natives think all human beings are descendants of a bird. The Chin tribe and Palaung in Myanmar have the oviparous origin myth related to the sun (Lee 2005, 43-44). Malakas and Maganda, the first man and woman in the myth of the Philippines, came to the earth from a patch of bamboo pecked by a cranky bird (Docdocil 2009). Brunei also has a royal myth of the oviparous birth from the sky (Gallop 2004, 43). So, although there is a difference between bird and serpent motifs, would not the premise that Southeast Asia is the oviparous cultural sphere and that they influenced on the ancient Korean myths be correct? Unfortunately, there are much more undocumented tribes with exceptions. To enumerate just a few well-known countries, the Malacca's founder in Malaysia, Prince Parameswara, was said to be a descendant of Alexander the Great, but it is more likely that he was a Hindu political refugee

from Sumatra (Aquino 2019). Laos has affluent mystic tales and legends that are mostly about deities imported from the Hindu culture mixed with a small part of Taoism. Singapore has a simple story regarding the origin of its name only: "Singa meant a lion in Sanskrit and pura was a land" (Udayasankar 2016). East Timor, which gained independence in 2002 has an exotic myth about a nation that involves a crocodile, which became the island of Timor.¹² A scholar studied the mythic motif of major three tribes in Taiwan (Lee 2011, 19-38). However, no myth relating to an oviparous birth of the founding father is proposed. Even in Myanmar and Indonesia, any tribes do not have oviparous myths. Basically, I do not agree that an ethnic minority who mainly lived deep in the jungle without any active contact with the outside world was the origin of the ancient Korean culture. I suggest that an isolated culture of primitive societies does not need to be stitched with the frame of kinship or origin with ancient Korea if there is no trail of proximity or exchange. Ancient Korea was a very open society and interacted with various cultures like a flying bird.

A Japanese scholar, Hideyuki Sekine, examined in some detail the theories on the origin of bird worship in Korea. The theories can be classified into two categories: the "northern origin theory" and the other is "autochthonous development theory." According to him, Korean scholars disregard the Southeast Asian origin theory that has been drawing more attention in Japan. He claims that it should be given more weight to the Southeast Asian origin theory (Sekine 2012, 505). The rather questionable point for me is that in his abstract, he referred to "the Southeast Asian origin theory" on the surface, but he actually addressed the "Chinese origin theory." He mainly cited Kokubu's view that considers the Hemudu culture's bird totem as the origin of bird worship in Korea and Japan. Kokubu asserted that bird worship originated in the Hemudu culture in China and passed down to Shang via the Liangzhu culture through people's migration. He partially accepted the North Asian influence of shamanism as well. Sekine thus named his views a mixture approach. The other theory that Sekine cited is Hagiwara's theory that the bird worship originated in Yangtze River in China, and later went north and then south again, flowing into the Korean peninsula. Although Sekine classified them as two different views, namely, mixed and monistic, they are essentially the same point of views

12. For this, refer to University of Coimbra's "Legends from Timor" accessible at <http://www.ci.uc.pt/timor/croc2.htm> (accessed May 5, 2020).

claiming the origin from South China. In fact, this is almost in line with a theory of rice inflow into the Korean peninsula. The view is that it began in the southern part of Yangtze River in China and entered the Korean peninsula through the Shandong and Liaodong peninsula. The evidence they are presenting includes the presence of bird-based totem poles and relics depicting people with feathers in their heads. However, this is a highly fragmentary idea, as are the attempts to search for the origin of Korean bird worship in other cultures: Greek-Roman fortune teller through birds; “Turul,” a legendary bird that led Hungarian army; or “Huginn” and “Muninn” on Odin’s shoulder in German mythology.

Bird-worship practice was indeed common throughout Eurasian cultures. The Miao tribe in southern China, as Hagiwara noted, had a custom of totem poles with idols of a bird, as do American Indians. However, that custom cannot be considered as the origin of the Korean *sotdae* culture because of the unique feature of the *sotdae* being erected in a cluster and having too different an appearance and function: “Unlike those of other Northeast Asian countries, Korean *sotdae* has been transformed into various forms and functions suitable for agricultural culture, integrating it into the belief system of farming villages” (Kim 2014, 208). Some scholars may pay attention to Miao’s chicken rituals that evoke the iconology of Silla rooster. One must, however, understand that “the elements of procedure, belief, and assumption behind the chicken ritual are not confined to the Miao and other southwest minority ethnic groups in China” (Feng 2012, 1). The Hmong people in Thailand use chickens for shamanistic rituals (Tapp 2000, 94), and an Indonesian minority, Batak tribe, also has a legend about a blue chicken (Lee 2005, 44). Even the national symbol of France is the Gallic Rooster. I agree that “myths themselves may be generally memories of their past, but they also have characteristics that are created to strengthen their legitimacy by borrowing other contents, not their own” (Cho 2003, 454). Even so, it is more unlikely that Goguryeo or Silla borrowed the myth from those countries. Although a few pieces of pottery, paintings, or primitive remains with a bird symbol have been found outside of the Korean peninsula, it is not enough to reverse the Korean autochthonic theory, since Korea’s bird worship was more distinctive, consistent, and widely practiced as a long-lasting indigenous culture than any others. It is more likely that Korea made an inroad into South China and Southeast Asia. An ancient Indian lend support

to my argument.

Indians call Silla “Guguta Yeseola,” meaning “Guguta” means chicken, and “Yeseola” means precious. The country [India] says to each other, “The kingdom [Silla] adores the chicken god, so adorns their hats by putting the feathers on it.”¹³

Conclusion

Korean language and folklore prove the relations with Turkic, Tungusic, and Mongolic cultures, and the exchanges with the marine cultures from South Asia have been continuing to discuss. Ancient Korea was the junction of civilizations outside of China, rather than a recipient of the Chinese culture, and various foreign cultures have been intermingled on the Korean peninsula. Therefore, the theoretical frame that the combination of northern nomadic culture and southern marine culture formed the ancient Korean culture is indisputable. Nevertheless, one should not overlook the unique and endemic Korean culture throughout the Dongyi region extensively. I suggest that bird worship is one of the representative autochthonic elements.

A widely-known premise is that the heavenly descent motif originated from North Asia and the oviparous birth motif from South Asia, which influenced Korean myths. This paper, however, casts light on that the oviparous motif which appeared in Korean mythology was derived from the bird-worship tradition while Southeast Asian oviparous motifs stemmed from serpent worship. In other words, the mythic icon of the southern marine culture is not an egg itself but a serpent such as a sea snake or a water dragon, as the sea god. Since Korea has legends about a sea dragon called *yongwang*, the southern cultural influence on Korea is still probable. Seok Talhae, a royal clan originator of Silla, came from a country called Dragon Castle. Lady Aryoung, a wife of Park Hyukgeose, was born on the side of a dragon flown out of a well. The dragon is symbolic of the sea, and the well is of agriculture. It was another melange. However, the serpent motif is not absolute even in Southeast Asia. It

13. The original text of *Samguk yusa* is as follows: “天竺人呼海東云矩矩吒嚳說羅，矩矩吒言雞也，嚳說羅言貴也。彼玉相傳云，其國敬雞神而取尊，故戴翎羽而表飾也。”

is more likely that sky worship and sea worship interacted in Asia. Rather, the mythic motif is determined by the cultural identity that each nation or state has maintained than divided by the geographic scheme of the North or the South. Therefore, the geographical classification proposed by Mishina and Kim Byung-mo is not always valid; the more important implication is people's perception of identity relating to the mythical motif.

It is accepted that people in the Three Kingdoms period maintained the perception that they were the children of a bear woman.¹⁴ Additionally, they also maintained the identity as a middleman who crossed the heavenly world and earthly world like birds, based on a shamanistic belief. After the unification of the three kingdoms, as the influence of the Chinese culture grew on the Korean peninsula, both the ethnic identity symbolized by bears and religious identity as a shaman symbolized by birds seem to have degraded.

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14. There have been attempts to find the prototype of Gojoseon's bear totem in the Komi in northern Russia, the Buryat in Mongolia, and some tribes in the Kamchatka peninsula or Ainu. However, the historic distribution of tigers indicates that no tiger inhabited in the areas. It is most likely that the Dangun myth is originated from Gojoseon where bears and tigers lived.

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Abstract

This article examines the claim that Korea's ancient culture was formed by a melange of the northern nomadic and southern marine culture. To verify it, the foundation myth, which is an observable element reflecting cultural archetype, has been investigated. As a result, this paper confirms the theory as valid. However, a widely-known premise that the heavenly descent motif originated in northern Asia and the oviparous birth motif in southern Asia needs to be reconsidered. Rather than being divided by the geographic scheme of the North and South, the mythological motifs in Asia were determined by people's perception of cultural identity. For example, the egg-birth story of progenitor in Korean myths is not linked to the Southeast Asian motif but to Korean autochthonic sense of identity.

Keywords: Korean foundation myth, Korean identity, Asian mythology, mythological motif

