

Article

Oedipus in Korea: Echoes of Social Clashes in the Legends of Silla*

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Prologue: A Forgotten Book

In 1942, Mario Untersteiner (1899-1981), an Italian scholar specializing in Classic Studies, published a book titled *Le origini della tragedia e del tragico* (*The Origins of Tragedy and "Tragicalness"*). The topic was not a novelty, as other illustrious personalities such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) had already written on the subject, but Untersteiner's approach was revolutionary. In his work of 1872, Nietzsche (1978) mainly used a philosophical/esthetical approach, by seeing tragedy as the result of a dichotomous conflict internal to Greek culture, exemplified by the categories of "sense of measure" or "equilibrium" (μηδὲν ἄγαν), represented by the solar god Apollo, and excess/disorder, the most representative divinity of which was Dionysus.

Freud focused his study on the psychoanalytic side of the question, starting with the rituals inside "primitive" tribes evoking (and exorcising) rivalries internal to clans and families. By analyzing some ceremonies in which the totemic animal is killed once a year, after being venerated as a taboo, Freud identified such rituals as scenic representations of the killing of a father/ancestor by his sons/members of the tribe. Therefore, the Oedipus' complex is anything but the unconscious rivalry between father and son aimed to possess the mother (Freud 1913). The breaking of the taboo and the subsequent sense of guilt by the son constitutes the primitive core of the message of tragedy, where the "hero/father" narrates his story as the main character and the "son" takes part as the chorus.

Such suggestive hypotheses, however, focused mainly on the effects rather than on the causes of the problem.¹ Untersteiner, on the contrary, drew upon the anthropological theoretical works of scholars such as Gilbert Murray (1866-1957), James Frazer (1854-1941), and William Ridgeway (1858-1926) and came to view tragedy as a consequence of a cultural clash originated since early

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1. Concentrating on the effects, rather than on the anthropological causes, is not rare in scholars who have dealt with this issue. See, for example, Jo 2000, 209-13, according to whom the phase preceding the taboo of incest is just that of "indifference."

migrations of Indo-European people to the Mediterranean area (ca. 2000-1200 BCE). In his theory, in particular, Untersteiner emphasized the different cultural patterns existing between Indo-Europeans and Mediterranean people. Among such differences, Untersteiner considered decisive the Mediterranean matriarchy/endogamy opposed to the Indo-European patriarchy/exogamy. The annual rebirth of Nature, after the “death” characterized by winter, is due to the new seeds that had fecundated Earth in the previous year. But since seeds come from fruits produced by Earth itself, it is as if a mother (Earth) is cyclically fecundated by her own sons (fruits). This concept, diffused in an agricultural society, was unthinkable within breeders and, in account of this, the incest, once accepted in the Mediterranean culture, became taboo after Indo-European invasions, generating Oedipus’ guilt.

In other words, tragedy is the result of intellectual dualisms and social confusion generated from cultural antinomies. The latter, can be summarized as follows:

Mediterranean Culture	Indo-European Culture
Matriarchy and/or Matrilinearism	Patriarchy/Patrilinearism
Goddesses of Earth/Underground	Gods of Sky
Inhumation	Incineration
Resurrection	Rebirth
Endogamy	Exogamy
Circular Time Concept	Diachronic Time Concept
Farming	Breeding

The linear/diachronic idea of Indo-European time, clashes with the circular concept (what Mircea Eliade [1989] calls the “Eternal Return”) of Mediterranean time. The male divinities of the sky, guiding the Indo-European breeders to pastureland, clash with the earth/chthonian female divinities bringing to Mediterranean farmers wheat and fruits. *Mutatis mutandis*, it is the clash echoed in the biblical tale of Cain and Abel. The Indo-European exogamy criminalizes the Mediterranean incestuous endogamy; the Indo-European cremation upsets the Mediterranean burial system founded on inhumation. The Indo-European μετεμψύχως faces Mediterranean cyclical resurrection; the Indo-European patriarchy swamps Mediterranean matriarchy.

In such a tormented and complicated context, the coexistence of different cultural models leads to the formation or adaption of religious figures or symbols; to ethnic, linguistic, and racial compromises, to the contradictions of new taboos and social rules. In the new cultural reality, the incestuous (still licit) love of Oedipus becomes guilty and tragic, whereas old Mediterranean goddesses such as Phaedra, Arianna, or Helena become fatal and sinner women. At the same time, masculine figures such as Paris, the old πάρεδρος of the goddess, are now ridiculed and despised. Little by little, two “classes” of divinities and cults were formed: the “Olympic divinities” (of Arian origin) and the “mystery divinities” of Mediterranean origin. The former were prayed to for the salvation of community (and generally their temples were located inside the city walls), but the latter were worshipped for the salvation of the individual, often in *extra-moenia* sanctuaries. The two classes, however, were not free of reciprocal “contaminations.”

This contrast, which is inexplicable, mysterious and contradictory within a society still lacking in historical awareness, became fertile *humus* for the birth of Greek tragedy, which actually was the scenic representation of a myth within a “feast,” the sacred time *par excellence*. The very inscrutability of the mythological contradictions became, through the enlightenment of the scenic vision, the true form of the existence capable of generating the *catharsis* of the viewers.²

Even after being reprinted two times (1956 and 1984) in Italy, Untersteiner’s book remained untranslated, and then accessible only to a narrow circle of specialists, despite being worthy of better fortune. Untersteiner’s theory, however, can be easily extended to any situation of cultural “contamination” derived from a direct or indirect, physical or simply ideological, intervention of a culture upon another. Hence the purpose of this paper: can we recognize and identify, in ancient sources, some precise episodes that could refer to significant changes, within a transitional phase, in society rules and cultural patterns of

2. Aristotle (*Poetica*, 1449b, 24-28) gives already a brilliant definition of “tragedy”: “Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions” (“Ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι’ ἀπαγγελίας, δι’ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαινούσα τὴν τῶν τοιοῦτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν).

ancient Korea (and Silla in particular) on the basis of the model proposed by Greek tragedy?

The Whole, the Part

Even refraining from Bachofen's ([1861] 2016) "pan-matriarchy" theories, there is no doubt that matriarchy and incest were typical (at least at the mythological level) in many ancient societies, those of the Far East included. With reference to Japan, *Kojiki* 古事記 reports the primordial existence of "seven generations of the time of gods" (Kamiyo nanayo 神世七代),³ the first two of which—the first three, according to *Nihon shōki* 日本書紀—are *hitorigami* (single, genderless/hermaphroditic gods 独神), whereas the remaining are divine couples formed by brother/sister pairs. The seventh and last couple, formed by Izanami and Izanagi (sister and brother), are the direct ancestors of Japan.

Chinese mythology, besides being very complicated, was codified in a relatively late epoch, when China had already received several influences from other cultures.⁴ The god Pangu (or Pan Gu 盤古), for example, is attested only from the 3rd century CE (Bodde 1961, 384) and its figure is believed to have relations with Indo-European or also Babylonian mythology. In this regard, we must not forget that Indo-Europeans people such as Śakâ (Sai 塞 in Chinese) and Tocharians (Yuezhi 月氏 in Chinese) lived in regions (i.e., today Xinjiang 新疆 and Gansu 甘肅) very near the core of Chinese civilization even in full historical times.

The original Chinese cosmogonic and anthropogenic myths perhaps implied a primordial dualism (light-darkness, fire-water, or sun-moon) mirroring the totemic nature of the oldest Chinese society. Wodeng 握登, mother of Emperor Shun 舜, belonged to the clan of the snake (symbol of darkness/moon principle), whereas the father was a member of the clan of the bird (symbol of light/sun principle). As a matter of fact, in China we have the crow as the solar symbol, whereas the goddess Nüwa 女媧 is portrayed as

3. These gods could have been preceded by Kotoamatsukami (distinguishing celestial gods 別天津神) who also were genderless/hermaphroditic.

4. See, for example, Yang and An 2005, 32.

a woman with a snake-like body.⁵ In any case, in Chinese mythology we find another case of a brother/sister marriage (Fuxi 伏羲-Nüwa) and the god Pangu 盤古 separating the Yang 陽 and the Yin 陰 from the hermaphroditic/genderless cosmic egg/chaos by means of an axe.

In both cases represented by China and Japan we have, therefore, an originally genderless/hermaphroditic entity later divided into two parts, yin/yang, or woman/man. The creation of land/humankind then is the result of an unavoidable incest, as the creator is a couple formed by a sister and a brother. The creative act is a sexual act, symbolically performed by means of a “turning” ritual aimed to reproduce the primitive, androgen unity. This is, in other words, equivalent to the concept of recreating the original “whole,” represented in various cultures with rotating symbols such as the swastika 卍, triskele 卐, spiral 卐, and taiji 太極 卐. It is not a mere chance that, when the swastika is used as a Chinese character (*wan*) it is a synonym of “ten thousand” 萬, or “all” in indicating the completeness of the Buddha. Such symbols are diffused in almost all prehistoric and proto-historic Eurasia. *Taiji* itself is attested in Europe long before its apparition in China⁶; the well-known paintings of Fuxi and Nüwa from Xinjiang/Central Asia portray brother and sister with their serpentine bodies weaved together, to form a spiral-like pattern, which

5. The snake is, at once, a symbol of life, knowledge, and destruction. In Sumerian mythology, the snake makes Gilgamesh fail in his search for immortality. In Jewish/Christian mythology, the snake gives Adam and Eve (that is to say, the all mankind) knowledge in exchange for their immortality. This is the meaning of the story: by acquiring knowledge, man will predominate on all other living beings on the Earth but, since knowledge presumes the capacity of distinguishing good from evil, man loses the right to stay in the paradise “automatically.” To reclaim paradise, man must use the gift of knowledge for doing good. In Japanese mythology, the ambiguity of the snake is transferred to the Kusanagi 草薙 sword, symbol of the imperial authority of Japan. See Naumann 1992, 162.

6. The yin-yang symbol as it is universally known today derives from that used by the philosopher Lai Zhide 來知德 (1525-1604), after the “circular diagram” described by Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-1073) in his *Taijitu shuo* 太極圖說 and the “swirling diagram” used by Zhao Huiqian 趙撝謙 (1351-1395) in his *Liushu benyi* 六書本義. In more ancient epochs, the concept of yin-yang was usually represented by means of the eight trigrams (*bagua* 八卦). However, a symbol having an almost identical aspect is a Roman military banner in the *Notitia Dignitatum* (Seeck ed. 1876), a kind of military catalogue dated around 420 CE. In particular, the symbol appears on the shields of the corps called *Armigeri Defensores Seniores* and *Mauri Osismiaci*. Moreover, the banner of the corps called *Thebai* is almost identical to Zhou Dunyi’s taiji. While nothing is known about a possible relationship between the Roman banners and the taiji, the Roman symbols could have derived from a Celtic decorative/ritual motif attested already in the 1st century CE. On the development of the taiji symbol see, among others, Louis 2003.

is now put on display at Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum 新疆維吾爾自治區博物院.

In Far Eastern literature we have some examples of the turning ritual as a recreation of the primordial, hermaphroditic unity through sexual intercourse. Very interesting is the following passage from *Hotsuma tsutae* (*Hotsuma Legends* 秀真伝), to be attentively considered despite the controversial nature of this work⁷:

The pure, light part became the positive (male) element, spiraling to the left to form the heavens and the sun. The heavy, murky part spiraled to the right to form the negative (female) element, from which was formed the earth, which in turn gave birth to the moon. (Book 2)

清く軽く巡れるものは陽(マ・男)となって、左巻に廻り天となり太陽が生まれました。重く濁れるものは、右巻に巡り陰(メ・女)となり、このクニタマ(地球)となり、後に月を生みました。

More explicit is the ritual preceding the union of Izanami 伊邪那美 (but also written with other characters) and Izanagi 伊邪那岐 (also written with other characters) in *Kojiki* 古事記:

Izanagi-no Mikoto said: “Well, let us turn around this venerable, celestial pillar and perform our union after we meet.” After they made an oath, (Izanagi) said: “Now, you turn to the right. I will turn to the left.” (Book 1, 4)
爾伊邪那岐命，詔：“然者，吾與汝行迴逢是天之御柱而，爲美斗能麻具波比。”…如此云期，乃詔：“汝者自右迴逢，我者自左迴逢。”

A ritual turning aimed to form couples is attested in Silla 新羅, in a precious fragment of *Sui-jeon* 殊異傳 reporting a tale known by the title of Howon (*The Wish of a Tigress* 虎願):

7. Even if referred to ancient Japan, the book seems to be a forgery of Late Edo period (1600-1860) or even 20th century, within a cultural context where historical past can be literally invented. It is, more or less, a situation similar to that of Korean *Hwarang segi* 花郎世紀. Nevertheless, whatever is the truth, the passage quoted mirrors a Japanese way of thinking, apropos of sexual symbolism, that could have existed also in ancient times.

According to the customs of Silla, from the eighth day to the fifteenth day of the second month, men and women competed by turning around the pagoda of Heungryun temple, and this was called “meeting for luck.” (*Sui-jeon* apud *Daedong unbugunok*, Book 15)⁸

新羅俗 每當 仲春 初八室十五日 都人士女 競遶輿輪寺塔 爲福會。

By taking advantage of this occasion, the female character and the male character of the tale exchange love, before the tragic end. As for the rest, the pillar/pagoda may be intended as a phallic symbol, and the possibility that the competition at Heungryun temple is a Buddhist remake of an older animist ritual is very high.⁹

As for the part extracted from the androgen “whole,” very famous cases are reported in the west: Erebus and Night were born from Chaos according to Hesiod, but the very myth of Adam and Eve offers many topics of discussion, given the correct translation of the term *tzela'* צֶלַע, which generally indicates “rib-bone,” but perhaps more inclusively may refer to “side” or “part.” If so, Adam represents the hermaphroditic/genderless primordial nature from which the feminine element is dragged. Indeed, Eve herself could not have been a figure of Hebrew tradition, but possibly a character derived from Heba/Hebat, the mother of mankind of the Hurrite pantheon.

After the division of primitive genderless/androgyny in many cases a woman emerges as the main character. Nüwa creates mankind and has her divine colleague/*alter ego* in the Xiwangmu 西王母, the Queen Mother of the West, whose peaches of immortality are reminiscent of the pomes of the Hesperides. Amaterasu 天照 becomes the leading sun-goddess of Japan. In the west, the *Magna Mater*, the symbol of fertility, is especially worshipped since the Paleolithic age, as demonstrated by the statuettes with very remarkable feminine attributes found here and there in Europe. In the period from the end of the first millennium BCE to the beginning of the first millennium CE, the

8. The episode is also reported in *Samguk yusa*, Book 5 and *Haedong japrok*, Book 4.

9. As a matter of fact, Buddhism's trend and purpose was often that of assimilating the older religions. A typical example referred to Japan is that of the work known as *Shintōshū* (*Collection of Shintō Tales* 神道集). As for the episode here examined, we also have to remember that to turn around a sacred entity (fire or tree) is precisely a Hindu ritual, called Parikrama or Pradakshina, later also adopted in Buddhism. The original ritual was connected with marriage, and then with fecundity.

syncretism among Mediterranean religion, “revealed” monotheistic religions and Hellenistic philosophy renewed the concept of the feminine element as the Supreme Knowledge,¹⁰ the intellectual side of God’s divine will, the “mother” whose son/fruit will be the instrument for mankind’s salvation. She is the Rūāh רוּחַ of the Jews, the Σοφία of Gnosticism, the Holy Spirit of the Christians.

Recovering primordial completeness is necessary to approach the divine sphere, which has no sexual difference. The phenomenon is very evident in shamans’ and seers’ sexual ambiguity. Even if the feminine nature is able to explain gods’ will, males need to acquire a feminine element to achieve the necessary completeness to deal with the supernatural world. In the west, the famous diviner Tyresia lived both as man and as woman; Herodotus reports the sexual ambiguity of Scythian shamans (Herodotus IV, 67).¹¹ In the East, male shamans often act and dress as women. The “third sex” (androgyny), according to Plato, was so strong that Zeus decided to cut its representatives in two halves:

I propose now to slice every one of them in two, so that while making them weaker we shall find them more useful by reason of their multiplication; and they shall walk erect upon two legs. (Plato 2001, 190d)
 νῦν μὲν γὰρ αὐτοῦς, ἔφη, διατεμῶ δίχα ἕκαστον, καὶ ἅμα μὲν ἀσθενέστεροι ἔσονται, ἅμα δὲ χρησιμώτεροι ἡμῖν διὰ τὸ πλείους τὸν ἀριθμὸν γεγονέναι: καὶ βαδιοῦνται ὀρθοὶ ἐπὶ δυοῖν σκελοῖ.

The successive patriarchy tried to minimize the androgen nature of the primordial entities, by attributing to them a masculine nature. At the same time, primitive feminine concepts are turned into masculine characters. This happened from Europe to Japan. Adam became just a man; the Rūāh/Σοφία, originally representing the “mother” of the trinity, together with “father” and “son,” became the Holy Spirit in Christianity. In the east, Nūwa

10. It is exactly the “Supreme Knowledge” (Holy Spirit) that allows Jesus’ apostles to speak all the languages of the world when making proselytism.

11. Quotation is as follows: “This manner of divination they have from their fathers: but the Enarees or ‘men-women’ say that Aphrodite gave them the gift of divination, and they divine accordingly with the bark of the linden-tree. Having divided the linden-bark into three strips, the man twists them together in his fingers and untwists them again, and as he does this he utters the oracle” (αὐτὴ μὲν σφί ἡ μαντικὴ πατρῴη ἐστὶ. οἱ δὲ Ἐνάρες οἱ ἀνδρόγυνοι τὴν Ἀφροδίτῃ σφίσι λέγουσι μαντικὴν δοῦναι: φιλύρης δ’ ὧν φλοιῷ μαντεύονται. ἐπεὰν τὴν φιλύρην τρίχα σχίσῃ, διαπλέκων ἐν τοῖσι δακτύλοισι τοῖσι ἑωυτοῦ καὶ διαλύων χρᾶ).

is replaced by Suiren 燧人 or the Huangdi 黄帝; otherwise, she becomes Fufei 伏妃 and commits suicide. Izanami is burned by her own son Kagutsuchi 軻遇突智/Homasubi 火産靈 and forced to retire in the Netherworld. Amaterasu becomes a man in texts such as *Hotsuma tsutae*. The passage also occurs in the institutional field: as a matter of fact, in Silla the Wonhwa 源花 (or also 原花) are replaced by the Hwarang 花郎.

Such changes did not occur in a single day: they originated from a complicated series of social, political, ideological, and economic situations. Korea was not an exception, and I think that the episodes I will report may be considered some steps of such a process.

Stat Corea Pristina Nomine

As far as we can know through written sources, Korea (with the possible exception of Jeju 濟州 island, where some myths about a creator/goddess called Seolmundae Halmang 설문대 할망 exist¹²) does not have true cosmogenic/anthropogenic myths. Instead, Korean mythology mainly concerns the founding of the nation. With regard to the Dangun 檀君 myth, the victory of the bear over the tiger (both are totemic animals) may allude to old tribal clashes impossible to recognize today. What is paradoxical, however, is that in Korean folktales the tiger (that is to say, the defeated animal) plays a role that is much more important than that played by the bear.¹³

Generally, little attention is paid to the fact that Dangun's myth is the myth of "Korea," not of "Koreans." In other words, it is very difficult to imagine that all people living in the Korean peninsula identified themselves as descendants of Dangun during the Three Kingdoms period or even during the "Unified" Silla

12. She can be seen as an archetype of the "Great Mother." She is a giantess and, in some versions, mother of five hundred sons. This particular aspect makes her similar to Hārīti, the she-demon converted by Buddha, who found a place among the divinities of Japan, where she is known by the name of Kariteimo 訶梨帝母 or Kishimojin 鬼子母神, a divine mother protecting children. In other stories from Jeju, Sky and Earth are separated by Dosumunjang 都首文章, a subject of the Emperor of Heaven. See Jin 1992, 22-27.

13. An important exception is represented by the episode reported by the *Chronicles of Garak* (*Garakgukki* 駕洛國記 in *Samguk yusa*, Book 2), where the Queen wife of King Suro 首露 dreams of a bear before giving birth to Crown Prince Godeung 居登.

period. More probably, that of Dangun was a local myth, later extended to all of what came to be considered the “Korean nation.” The available Korean sources regarding the mythical past of the nation are chronologically late and because of this they appear confusing and contradictory. What is worse is that they do not take into account the cultural fragmentation of the Korean peninsula in early times.

Archeological finds related to the period ranging the late first millennium BCE to early first millennium seem to suggest the existence of different cultural patterns diffused throughout the Korean peninsula.¹⁴ In particular, it is possible to draw a rough division between a “southern culture,” in some way connected with Kyūshū 九州 island in Japan, and a “northern culture,” more linked to Manchuria and Siberia’s models. Given the nature of Korean territory, we can imagine a society mainly based upon agriculture in the South, and some prevalence of breeding in the North.

We do not know if and how such differences also involved ethnicity, language, beliefs, and customs. In this regard, we are informed that Goguryeo 高句麗 and Baekje 百濟 actually were offspring of Buyeo 夫餘 in Manchuria, and that the language of Goguryeo was very similar to that of Baekje, but different from that of Silla. As for Silla, it shares with Gaya 伽倻 a similar myth of founding of the nation within a common, parallel development from Jinhan 辰韓 and Byeonhan 弁韓.

A founder’s birth from an egg is a common theme of the ancient Korean states. Egg mythology and symbolism are much diffused along the world, even if their recondite meaning is often concealed behind general ideas such as “fertility,” “rebirth,” etc. However, the egg myth present on the Orphic tradition (later exported to the Greek thought) offers a more complex key of interpretation, according to which we can recognize in Korean myths of the origin of the nation a similar nature with the myths of China and Japan. The Orphic myth shows a primal, hermaphrodite divinity, emerging from a cosmic egg, which starts the procreation and the generation of life. In Greek it is called Φάνης or also Πρωτοτόνος (first-born); in the iconography, it is entwisted with

14. To mention a representative difference, the use of jar-burials (*onggwanmyo* 甕棺墓) is present only in the southern part of Korean peninsula and in Kyūshū. See, among others, Riotto 1995, 45.

a snake, winged and wearing a hat. As a matter of fact, Φάνης is an Ouroboric-hermaphroditic god of light, representative of that *coincidentia oppositorum*, already theorized by Heraclitus, which becomes an authentic mythical pattern also traceable in Indian and Far Eastern philosophies/religions (yin-yang).

Therefore, in Korea the origin of the nation is the origin of the world itself, and the eggs of Jumong 朱蒙 or Suro are cosmic eggs. From the eggs of the Korean tradition, however, only kings or chiefs come out, but we do not know whether the absence of “important” female characters is due to successive modifications of the myth. The reason is concealed in the very etymology. The pure Korean term “al” (egg 알), in fact, is surely connected with the Mongol word “üre” (seed) and then with the generative strength of the sun. In the ancient language, “al” also indicates the sun, as today proven by expressions such as “saheul” (three days) and “naheul” (four days), which are old transpositions of 三日 and 四日, where the character of “sun” is transliterated “eul,” the equivalent of “al.” In this regard, the word “achim” (morning 아침) derives from a primitive “at” 안 or “al” (sun) and the nominalization of the verb “chida” 치다, the latter of which carries a meaning of “to raise” or “to illuminate.” The substantial identity between sun and egg might have led to the birth from eggs as an effect of the solar fecundation. Surely, the name Hyeokgeose 赫居世 (also called Bulgunae 弗矩內)¹⁵ means “governing the world by light”: a title generally reserved for a god. As a matter of fact, Hyeokgeose is a god of light. Nevertheless, Hyeokgeose’s queen was born from the side of a hen-dragon, in memory of which Silla was also called “Gyerim” 鷄林. Intriguingly, the episode of the birth of Hyeokgeose’s queen recalls that of Eve and has the same translation issue, as the character *hyeop* 脇 is often intended as “rib” or “galbi” 갈비 rather than “flank” or “side.” Despite the apparent supremacy of Hyeokgeose, however, I think it is remarkable that the name of the kingdom was created after the queen (who also had a hen beak),¹⁶ while the hen itself seems to have been venerated in Silla (or in Korea), if we are to believe *Samguk yusa*:

Indians indicate Haedong (Korea/Silla) by the name of Guguta Yeseolla.

15. The correspondence is between 赫 and 晝, meaning “light,” between 居 and 古 (that) and between 世 and 世, meaning “nuri” 누리 and then “world.”

16. In *Samguk sagi*, written by the Confucian Kim Busik, the name “Gyerim” is said to be derived from the cry of a rooster pre-announcing the birth of Kim Alji 金闕智. See *Samguk sagi*, Book 1.

Guguta means “chicken,” and “Yeseolla” means “noble.” This happens because, as they say among themselves, the people of Korea respect and honor very much the chicken/god(dess). They also use chicken feathers as ornaments. (*Samguk yusa*, Book 4)

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。彼土相傳云：其國敬雞神而取尊。故戴翎羽而表飾也。

“Yeseolla” is surely “Silla,” and then Hyeokgeose’s queen is a goddess herself. She was born with a hen beak, which falls when she is bathed by the men who find her. In this regard, I wonder whether the bath that causes the loss of the queen’s beak (and then the primitive, divine identity of the queen herself) is a trace/symbol of the fall of matriarchy/matrilinearity.¹⁷

A goddess connected with the moon is surely Se-o 細鳥, who, together with her husband Yeongo 迎鳥 (or Yeono 延鳥), is the main character of a tale already present in *Sui-jeon*.¹⁸ In the tale, Se-o reveals herself as the main character after weaving a silk piece capable of making the sun and moon shine again in Silla. Indeed, the moon is strictly related with matriarchy as it symbolizes women’s menstrual cycle but also the eternal cycle of nature. It also symbolizes human life’s “becoming” with its luck and misfortune (*heungmang seongsoe* 興亡盛衰). In this regard, the moon also plays an important role in the

17. In western mythology, the hen-dragon is called “cockatrice” and it has been attested since the 12th century, but it is probably the transformation of a Greco-roman legendary animal called “basilisk” (βασιλίσκος in Greek; *Regulus* in Latin), according to 1397 John Trevisa’s translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ *De proprietatibus rerum* (VII, 68 and *passim*). What is interesting is that both the Greek and Latin terms literally mean “little king.” If we think that Hyeokgeose’s queen actually is a “little king” (since her husband is the “great king”), I wonder whether the hen-dragon was associated with the idea of “queen” also in ancient Korea.

18. The sun and moon as royal symbols are also perceivable in this tale. Husband and wife, originally living in Silla, became king and queen in Japan, after prodigiously reaching their new land. After they leave their homeland, the sun and moon disappear from Silla. The king of Silla sends an envoy to Japan to recall the royal couple, but Se-o (the queen) simply provides the Silla envoy with a piece of silk woven by her. When the Silla ambassador returns to Silla, the silk is offered to the heaven, and then the sun and moon shine again. Remarkable elements of the tale are the leading role of Se-o, whose silk actually saves the kingdom of Silla, and the fact that she and her husband practiced fishing before entering Japan. The association between fishery and royalty, in fact, is a well attested pattern, from Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean area (Dumuzi and Saint Peter) to Britain (saga of King Arthur). See *Sui-jeon* 1996; *Sui-jeon* apud *Pirweon japggi*, Book 2; *Samguk yusa*, Book 1. On the worship of the moon in Silla, see Yi 2001, 12.

divination method known as *jomsaengi bogi* [좀생이 보기].

Fecundation by means of sunbeams, however, can be placed within the mythological pattern where the inactive Ouranic God acts through the active “Fecundator/Active God,” that is common in Korean mythology. In other words, it is the myth of the supreme God that, once “retired” (or even chased, as in the case of Ouranos) from human affairs, acts under the name/aspect of another divine entity. It is the case, for example, of Hwanin 桓因/Hwanung 桓雄, Ra/Osiris, El/Ba'al, etc.

We can collect other information from ancient sources. Information itself, indeed, is often contradictory. For example, we can read that in Buyeo (and consequently in Goguryeo) levirate was practiced, as among the Xiongnu 匈奴: ...when a man dies, his younger brother marries the widow; and this custom is identical to that of the Xiongnu 兄死妻嫂與匈奴同俗 (*Sanguo zhi*, Book 30; *Samguk yusa*, Book 1).¹⁹ Levirate is typical to patriarchal/exogamic societies, where woman is considered a “good” destined to remain in the same clan. Nevertheless, we are also told that Pyeongwon’s 平原 daughter (general Ondal’s 溫達 wife) left the royal palace, bringing with her precious objects and slaves, and this means that women could also have private properties and decide their own destiny.

Ancient Koreans believed in “spirits” (then they practiced Animism) and extensively practiced “washing bones” (*chobun* 草墳)²⁰ burials: a system used in peripheral areas of Korea until very recent times and, in certain cases, even now (Yi 1969, 73; Bak 1977). This is a very important element, since this system is deeply concerned with the idea of “Earth Mother Goddess” (Jimosin 地母神), a figure similar to the *Magna Mater* of the Mediterranean area. The use of this burial system drastically dropped after the introduction of Buddhism in Korea, a philosophy of Indo-European origin that privileged the use of incineration (An 2007, 361). We begin to glimpse a situation not very different from that of ancient Mediterranean beliefs under the Indo-European influence.

In general, that of proto-historic Korea appears as an animistic, agricultural society founded upon the system of tribal confederation, with limited use of

19. In Goguryeo, the case of king Gogukcheon 故國川 is well-known.

20. Also marked, according to the various regions, *chobin* 草殮, *oebin* 外殮, *sogoljang* 掃骨葬, *chojang* 草葬, etc.

private property²¹ and the absence of an authentic sacerdotal class. We have to keep in mind these aspects, since such a society is a more favorable field for matriarchy and/or matrilinearity, whose memory, I think, can be traced in some historical and literary episodes of the successive epochs.

Take My Daughter and Be the King: The Clash between Endogamy and Exogamy

In order to hypothesize in Korea a socio-cultural process similar to that occurred in the Mediterranean area, we have to start from some aspects emerging from historical and literary sources. One of such aspect concerns endogamy, an unthinkable cultural pattern in Korea under Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, whose repulsion for incest went as far as strongly discouraging even marriage between people having the same surname. Nevertheless, the possible existence of the Oedipus' complex in the Korean society of ancient times (but also in modern times) was already recognized by Korean scholars themselves more than fifty years ago (Seo and Yi 1973, 137). In particular, the relationship between the mythical figures of Hwanin and Hwanung has been identified as the prototype of the father/son conflict, according to the Freudian approach (Yang and Yi 1998, 1123).²²

In ancient Korea, two episodes are particularly significant in indicating the practice of endogamy. The first one is the marriage of Kim Yusin 金庾信 with his own niece Jiso 智炤, the daughter of his younger sister Munheui 文姬, which can be considered as an authentic case of incest.²³ The second case regards the

21. In this regard, the collective agricultural work system later known as *dure* 두레 or *pumasi* 품앗이 was likely largely practiced. See Yun 1996, 286. On the importance of private property in the passage from matriarchy to patriarchy see Abendroth 2013.

22. However, the tale regarding Hwanin/Hwanung can be included in a world-wide mythical structure where a “static/inactive” god and a “dynamic/active” god are found. A famous example is that of El and Ba'al, in Phoenician religion, but even the case of God-Jesus Christ can be considered. For further detail on “static/dynamic gods,” see Eliade 1976, 51. With reference to Korea, Jang Mansik (2007, 107) sees the affair between King Mu and Princess Seonhwa, narrated in the 2nd book of *Samguk yusa*, as a literary attempt to exorcise the ancient Oedipus complex.

23. I will not consider here the possibility that Kim Yusin could have been a descendant of Shaohao 少昊 as stated in *Samguk sagi*, Book 41:…羅人自謂少昊金天氏之後….Even if so, in fact, the

princess daughter of King Pyeongwon of Goguryeo, the future wife of Ondal. The princess abandons the royal palace since the King intended to marry her to a nobleman of the Go 高 family (*Samguk sagi*, Book 45). If we think that “Go” was the surname of the royal house of Goguryeo, we can imagine that the marriage arranged for the princess would have been an endogamous one. We do not know if such a custom also existed among commoners or it was only practiced within royal clans in order to strengthen their power. In this regard, we should remember that even the royal house of ancient Persians (an Indo-European people) practiced a strict endogamy, as proven, for example, by the cases of Queens Hutaosā (Ἰταόσσα in Greek, Wife of Cambyses and Darius I) and Parizade (Παριζάδης in Greek, Wife of Darius II). In any case, the refusal of the princess of Goguryeo to follow her father’s order could possibly be read as a moment of transition towards the practice of exogamic marriage.

What can be hypothesized as a moment of transition surely is the controversial episode of King Tarhae 脫解 as it is found in *Sui-jeon* and *Samguk yusa*.²⁴ The story of the son-in-law who becomes king is attested in various cultures and, perhaps, it presupposes the idea of the “sacrifice” of daughters.²⁵ In China, Emperor Shun rises to the throne after marrying Emperor Yao’s 堯 daughters. In Greek mythology, this kind of power transmission is frequently attested. Menelaus becomes king of Sparta after marrying Helena, Tyndarus’ daughter. Bellerophon ascends to the throne of Lycia after marrying the daughter of the local king; Melampus marries the daughter of king Praetus and becomes the monarch of Argo. The diffusion of such a custom reveals an incipient transformation of social rules, now oriented towards the masculinization of power, and still, in a royal context, we come across parents who refuse to live apart from their daughter. Daughters are still “precious goods” parents wish to live with.

cultural horizon of Kim remains a pure “Korean” one. As for Munheui, she is considered by Pyo Jeongok (2011) one of the four cases of female androgyny traceable in *Samguk yusa*. The other three characters are Queen Seondeok 善德, Dohwanyeo 桃花女, and King Suro’s 首露 wife, Queen Heo Hwangok 許皇玉.

24. For more information, see *Sui-jeon* apud *Samguksa jeonyo*, Book 2; *Samguk yusa*, Book 1.

25. The original Indo-European marriage is hypothesized to have been an act of force or violence by men as consequence of purchasing or even kidnapping women, within a strongly exogamic society. This could have generated the idea of “sacrificed daughters” as in the cases of Iphigenia and Sim Cheong 沈淸 (see *infra*). On the problem, see Dumézil 1979.

Korea is not an exception. The episode of Tarhae, as it is reported in *Sui-jeon* and *Samguk yusa*, is very interesting. Tarhae is a foreigner, also born from an egg, who comes from the sea (precisely from the land of Yongseong 龍城) and wins the sympathy of the king of Silla in a very unfair way, that is to say, by deceiving Hogong. This episode hides a very complex background, simply unconceivable in medieval and modern Korea. First of all, a foreigner becomes the king, and this means that in pre-Buddhist Korea even foreigners were given the possibility to ascend to the throne. Moreover, Tarhae seems to be a blacksmith, a kind of artisan highly reputed in almost any culture. Blacksmiths are the people who create agricultural tools, but also weapons; and weapons belong to gods. This is the reason why blacksmiths themselves become gods: in Greek mythology Hephaestus crafts the lightning for Zeus; in Indian mythology Tvastri crafts the *vajra* for Indra. But, above all, Tarhae's marriage implies the practice of exogamy and the reluctance to give the throne to a woman, and this seems a contradiction, as in a later epoch we will have ruling queens in Silla.

It is possible that the craftsmanship of Tarhae was considered a valid title for the throne, but the *Chronicle of Garak* (*Garakgukki* 駕洛國記) preserved in *Samguk yusa* reports the episode in a different way (*Garakgukki* apud *Samguk yusa*, Book 2). According to *Garakgukki*, Tarhae first comes to Garak (or Gaya) and, once there, he claims the throne of the kingdom. King Suro refuses, and then the two rivals engage in a fierce competition of magic arts in order to decide the ruler. Tarhae loses, and then he leaves Garak and takes refuge in Gyerim (Silla).

In any case, Tarhae appears as an unscrupulous adventurer seeking personal profit at any cost. Surely, he is not a model of a virtuous king, and his negative disposition is reflected by the unnatural way (exogamy) he takes to power. Endogamy, in fact, presupposes the knowledge of one's counterpart, reducing the risk of accepting a bad individual in the family/clan. On the contrary, exogamy is a more hazardous system, and it is not a mere chance that Tarhae becomes king by means of fraud and trickery. The story of Tarhae, therefore, actually is a eulogy of endogamy within a context where exogamy and patriarchy were gaining ground.

This paragraph cannot be concluded without some considerations on Silla's bone-rank system (*golpum* 骨品) and *galmunwang* 葛文王, a system that seems strictly related with the "sacred bones" (*seonggol* 聖骨), as it apparently disappears after Queen Jindeok's 眞德 reign. Even if many hypotheses have been

formulated apropos of *galmunwang* (the precise meaning of the term seems unknown to Iryeon himself),²⁶ I think that little or no doubt exists about the fact that he was a close relative of the royal couple with an active role in the dynastic succession, within a marriage system that must necessarily have been an endogamous one. More problematic is the end of *seonggol*: was it simply due to the shortage of men of that blood-lineage²⁷ or to a new view of incest as sin, after the introduction of Buddhism²⁸ (and the progressive penetration of Confucianism)? It is difficult to answer such a question, but a response maybe can come from the story of Suro, the first king of Garak/Gaya, whose queen is said to have come from India. The episode illustrates a clear case of exogamy with a queen who comes from India, homeland of Hinduism and Buddhism with a prevalence of Indo-European, exogamic culture. We do not know when the tale of King Suro and Queen Heo 許 was created, but I wonder whether the new Buddhist landscape played a role in making the plot, in order to discourage strict endogamy. If so, we cannot rule out that the disappearance of *seonggol* may have had something to do with a new vision of the world, with new cultural patterns and social rules.

Women of Love, Women of Death

I mentioned already that one of the consequences of the introduction of Buddhism to Korea (but I may generalize by saying “to the Far East”) was the burial system of incineration, typical to Indo-European cultures. In some particular Indo-European contexts, as the ancient Indo-Iranic culture, incineration was not practiced for religious reasons, since fire was considered so sacred that it could not be polluted by contact with corpses. It was the case

26. Its original text is as follows: “Silla people use ‘galmunwang’ as posthumous title, but the reason is unknown” 羅人凡追封者稱葛文王, 未詳 (*Samguk yusa*, Book 1). On the figure of *galmunwang* see, among others, Yun 2013; An 1996; Ha 1994. For a relation between *galmunwang* and the old society of Saro 斯盧, see Seon 2011, 12.

27. This is the commonly accepted hypothesis. On the bone-rank with reference to the succession to the throne of Silla see, among others, Kim 2014, 85.

28. According to Bak (2011, 137), the very concept of “sacred” as it emerges from the term “seonggol” is a consequence of Buddhism and the “divinization” of the king. However, such importance given to *seonggol* should have presupposed a strict endogamy, putting at risk the continuation of the royal lineage. The question remains a controversial one.

of Mazdaist religion, whose believers preferred to expose corpses in a particular structure called *dakhma* (better known in the west as “tower of silence”) in order to have them eaten and dissolved by beasts and time. However, the deep change of Korean society during the course of the first millennium CE surely was cause for conflicts whose echoes are traceable in old tales and texts. The adoption of Buddhism was above all a political choice by the ruling class aimed to enlarge and legitimate its power by creating a strictly tripartite society on the basis of the Indo-European model.²⁹ The consequence was the creation/officialization of a precise Buddhist clergy (equivalent of what in Vedic India were *brāhmaṇa*), of a royal house representing the military class (*ksatriya*) and laborers. Indeed, that of *ksatriya* was the caste Siddharta Gautama himself belonged to,³⁰ and the Silla king identifies himself as the *Čakravartin* or “universal ruler.” As a matter of fact, Buddhism in Silla was at first an élite religion, and Silla rulers declared themselves *ksatriya* by using Indian names: King Jinpyeong 眞平 (r. 579-632) became Śuddhodana, Queen Seondeok 善德 (r. 632-647) became Śrīmālādevī and Queen Jindeok (r. 647-654) became Guṇāmālādevī. It was, more or less, a phenomenon similar to the feudalism of the western Middle Ages, when society was actually divided into *oratores* (“prayers,” and then the church), *bellatores* (“warriors,” and then the feudal lords), and *laboratores* (“workers,” and then the “food producers,” according to Dumézil’s tripartite classification) (Dumézil, 2015). A “state,” “official” religion was created, in opposition to the primitive cults now reserved to individuals: *mutatis mutandis*, in Korea we had the same phenomenon of the “Olympic cults” and “mystery cults” which occurred in the Mediterranean area.

Queens and princesses of the Three Kingdoms still preserved magic/supernatural skills within a context where rulers and shamans were still confused. Indeed, the presumed thaumaturgy of kings, symbols of the legitimacy of their rule, is traceable also in Europe until quite recent times. The princess daughter of King Pyeongwon is able to unblock the coffin of her husband Ondal, fallen in a battle against Silla, only by means of gestures and words:

29. The Avestan Iran seems to have had no particular divisions, as the term *kara* means “people” and “army.” Nevertheless, in the successive periods the caste of Rathaēstar (equivalent to *ksatriya*) rose. See Alberti 2008, 635.

30. The strict relationship, on the basis of the Indian model, between Buddhism and the royal lineage in Silla in the 6th and 7th centuries is also noticed by Yi 2012, 372.

At the moment of celebrating (Ondal's) funeral, the bier could not be moved. Then the princess came and, while caressing the bier, said: "Life and death, everything is done: let us go back now." So, the bier was moved and the funeral was celebrated. The king, in hearing this, was extremely sad. (*Samguk sagi*, Book 45)

欲葬柩不肯動 公主來撫棺曰 死生決矣 於乎歸矣. 遂舉而窆. 大王聞之悲慟.

The princess of Goguryeo, therefore, is able to manage the life and death of her husband, who appears to be her authentic *πάρεδρος*.

Queen Seondeok is a foresighted and wise interpreter of cryptic messages: in this sense, she can also be considered a "shamaness." Not only does she understand the message by the Tang 唐 emperor, but she also succeeds in forecasting a military menace for Silla. Still, she is a believer in Buddhism, and an episode already reported in *Sui-jeon*, shows her in the midst of a dramatic social change. The episode is that of Jigwi 志鬼 (also written 地鬼), perhaps the most "tragic" (in the Greek sense of the term) character in the whole of Korean folklore, the authentic Korean "Oedipus." Jigwi, a humble worker at a post station, is secretly in love with his queen, who is unaware of this. He suffers for his impossible love until his body becomes haggard and worn. On the verge of desperation, he writes a letter to Seondeok who surprisingly replies, promising to meet him at Yeongmyo 靈廟 Temple. Jigwi goes to the temple, but the queen is late and he falls asleep. When the queen arrives and finds him asleep, she avoids waking him and leaves a precious bracelet on his chest. When Jigwi wakes up, he realizes that he has missed the chance to meet the queen and, at that point, as he falls into a terrible dismay, a fire is born from his chest that literally devours him. Jigwi becomes thus a god of fire and the queen orders some sages to write a fire spell to be put in all houses of Silla. This is the text of the spell:

The fire that sprang from Jigwi's heart,
Burned his body and made him a god.
May he lose his way into the deep sea,
And neither appear, nor come near us!
(*Sui-jeon* apud *Taepyeong tongjae*, Book 73)

志鬼心中火
燒身變火神
流移滄海外
不見不相親.

There is no doubt that this episode symbolizes a crucial passage in Silla's society. Jigwi's love for his queen is actually the love for a mother, as the queen is the mother of the country. As a matter of fact, Jigwi represents the pre-Buddhist society of the Three Kingdoms, a society where matrilinearity (or even matriarchy) and incest could have been admissible. However, in the new cultural patterns that were gaining ground, Jigwi's love becomes absurd and ethically guilty: it is not a mere coincidence that Jigwi's failure occurs in a Buddhist temple, the home of the new religion and the new world order. Moreover, if we look at other versions of the same tale (as, for example, that reported in Book 20 of *Daedong unbugunok* 大東韻府群玉), we notice that the fire born from Jigwi's heart extends and attacks the pagoda of the temple, so that the episode is recorded as *Simhwa yotap* (the fire of heart that wrapped the pagoda 心火繞塔). In this case, the conflict between the old order and the new order is evident (the old order takes revenge upon the new one by burning a symbol of Buddhism), and Jigwi, as a representative of the tradition, can only become an enemy of the new state and of the new ethics. We can suspect, therefore, that in some cases the clash between Buddhism and the old beliefs may have been not bloodless. This suspicion is reinforced by another anecdote concerning Master Wongwang 圓光. While living in his hermitage in Mount Samgi 三岐, another monk came to live near him. The newcomer had a strong temper and practiced magic arts shouting loudly in his exercises. For this he became hated by the god of the mountain, who invited Wongwang to tell him to move to another place. As the newcomer refuses, the revenge of the god is terrible:

At night, [Master Wongwang] heard a sound like thunder, and the following day he saw that the mountain had collapsed, burying the monk's house. (*Sui-jeon* apud *Samguk yusa*, Book 4)

夜中有聲如雷震。明日視之，山頽填比丘所在蘭若。

Later, the god reveals himself as an old fox, a generally negative character in Korean folklore associated with women. More probably, she is a goddess.³¹ What is important, however, is that the traditional god/goddess gives his favor to Wongwang, an "orthodox" Buddhist monk, and he/she kills the monk still

31. The prevalent feminine element in mountain divinities/demons is noticed by Yi 2000, 119.

“contaminated” with traditional, shamanistic beliefs, symbolized by the magic arts. Another contradiction possibly showing a transitional phase is the moral teaching of the tale where “salvation” is possible only through the practice of orthodox Buddhism and the renunciation of old beliefs. At the same time, the fox is far from being the negative god/spirit representing the extreme degeneration of the feminine sex.³² In any case, if even a god/fox recognizes the superior powers and values of Buddhism, is not this an admonishment to refrain from traditional cults?

But the transition towards a different society had other dramatic moments. Again, the question of sexuality is at the basis of tragic episodes, as in the case of Wonhwa, a special female (or, at least, also open to women) corps traditionally founded by King Jinheung 眞興 (r. 540-576). Two women, Junjeong 俊貞 and Nammo 南毛, were the leaders of the corps, but within a short time they started to quarrel over their supremacy:

Because of their beauty the two women envied each other, and thus Junjeong maneuvered Nammo into her own house. Here, Junjeong made Nammo drink to drunkenness and then she drew her to the river and killed her, throwing her into the water.... (*Samguk sagi*, Book 4)

二女爭媚相妬，俊貞引南毛於私第，強勸酒至醉，曳而投河水以殺之....

Junjeong was sentenced to death and executed. As for the corps of Wonhwa, it was abolished and substituted by Hwarang, a male corps. The event is very significant and it appears to be another step towards a decisively male-oriented society, in the Silla kingdom that had just accepted Buddhism. Wonhwa failed because of jealousy, what is typically viewed as a “feminine” attribute, which makes women unreliable, fickle, and therefore unsuitable for posts requiring high responsibility. However, the spirit of Wonhwa survived in some way also in Hwarang, whose sexual ambiguity (later juxtaposed to that of shamans) represents one of their characteristic aspects.³³

32. According to Yi Euigang (2015), the new, positive perception of some animals could be connected with Buddhist thought.

33. On the sexual ambiguity of Hwarang see Riotto 2012. In particular, Hwarang seem to have been grouped in homosexual couples, as in the case of the *ιερός λόχος*, the “sacred battalion” of ancient Thebe. Inside the Hwarang couple, there would have been an *ἐραστής* (lover) and an *ἐρώμενος* (the one loved). The episode of the rivalry between Jukji 竹旨 and Ikseon 益宣 for

Sometimes, to ignore the past in the name of the new order may cause an immense disaster. Such is the case of King Gyeongdeok 景德 (r. 742-765), whose story seems a true claim of *nostalgia* for the past. King Gyeongdeok had no sons, and even after he repudiates his queen in favor of Manweol 滿月, daughter of the *gakgan* 角干 Euichung 依忠, he continues to have no prince. For this reason he asks Master Pyohun 表訓 for a meeting with the Lord of Heaven in order to make possible the birth of an apparent. Master Pyohun meets the Lord of Heaven two times, and eventually the response is that the king should welcome a daughter and not a prince, otherwise the kingdom could face serious troubles. Careless about his ὕβρις, the king ignores the warning of the Lord of Heaven and insists on having a prince. As a result, the future King Hyegong 惠恭 (r. 765-780) was born, and very soon the child reveals his particular nature, by playing and acting as a girl. This happened because:

The young king, in fact, was already a woman and for this reason, once he became a man, from the first year of age until he assumed the throne he always grew up enjoying girls' games... (*Samguk yusa*, Book 2)

小帝即女爲男故。自期啐至於登位。常爲婦女之戲...

The king always brought silk bags and mocked Taoist priests. A puppet in the hands of his mother, he was not able to take care of state affairs, so the whole kingdom precipitated into turmoil and eventually he was murdered by Kim Yangsang 金良相, the future King Seondeok 宣德 (r. 780-785). Like the tragic prophecy on the destiny of Oedipus and Thebe, the prophecy on Hyegong and Silla had come true too. Like Oedipus and his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, Gyeongdeok and Hyegong's tragedy ends with a negative catharsis generated by the destruction of the γένος, that is to say, the very offspring and a royal lineage lasting from 654. The "nostalgia for woman" is clear: even if King Gyeongdeok has a 8 *chon* 寸 long phallus, he is unable to generate male posterity and his masculinity is useless as that of the satyrs of western mythology.³⁴ On the

Deugo 得鳥 (*Samguk yusa*, Book 2) is extraordinarily similar to that between Encolpius and Ascytos for Giton in *Satyricon*. On homosexuality in Korea in ancient and modern times see Kim and Hahn 2006.

34. In western mythology, in fact, satyrs are associated with the mule, an animal with an apparent strong masculinity and still unable to procreate. Therefore satyrs represent the depraved side of

contrary, as in the case of the satyrs his masculinity is a symbol of bestiality and a rudeness that make him ignore the will of heaven.

With the passing of time, Korean women of ancient history and old tales lose, little by little, their leading roles, until they turn into negative or passive heroines. Jinseong, the last ruling queen, is a dissolute woman whose loss would be moaned by none. The tiger-woman of *Sui-jeon* sacrifices herself for the man she loves, recalling the Alcestis (Ἀλκηστις) of Greek tragedy,³⁵ Sim Cheong 沈淸, even though her story was codified in a much later epoch, sacrifices herself in favor of her father, echoing the western story of Iphigenia (Ἰφιγένεια). The two sisters evoked by Choe Chiwon 崔致遠, are nothing but melancholic spirits only able to enjoy a night of love with the great poet, before returning to the eternal darkness of the netherworld (*Sui-jeon* apud *Taepyeong tongjae*, Book 68). Still, Choe Hang's 崔伉 concubine has the capacity to resuscitate her lover by means of her crying and desperation.³⁶

Once again, under the veil of ancient tales we glimpse a contradictory, sometimes unexplainable situation. In the Mediterranean area, the inscrutability of mythological contradictions resulted in the creation of tragedy. In Korea it became the core of national folk literature, since what cannot be explained can only be narrated.

mankind (they are sex-addicted and drunkards), since they are completely unproductive and useless within the social order. On the question see Nencini 2009, 126.

35. The episode is known by the title of *Howon* (*The Wish of a Tigress* 虎願). See *Sui-jeon* apud *Daedong unbugunok*, Book 15.

36. The episode is known as *Susap seoknam* 首挿石楠 (*The Sprig of Camphor in the Hair*). See *Sui-jeon* apud *Daedong unbugunok*, Book 8. Eight days after his death, the soul of Choe Hang visits the house of his concubine with whom he could not live together because of the opposition of his parents. After dividing with her a sprig of camphor, Choe's soul brings her home after saying to her he finally obtained permission. Then Choe enters his home and the concubine waits for him in the courtyard. Choe, however, does not come out again and therefore the concubine enters the home and asks Choe's wife where the man has gone, and when Choe's wife says the man died eight days before, the surprised concubine insists on seeing the corpse and she notices the brig of camphor. Then she understands and starts to cry, and her tears revive Choe.

Conclusions: Never More, my Sweet Sister

Despite the scarcity of material from the ancient period, we can guess that the first millennium CE was, in Korea, a period of dramatic social changes. It is always hazardous to compare cultural phenomena of different geographical areas and contexts, but often a common matrix can show different aspects and nuances. To give a single example, almost all cultures have marriage rituals, but rituals can change according to the various cultures. If the Korean peninsula was a primitive matriarchy and/or matrilinearity, then the process towards patriarchy could have been complicated, or even dramatic. Also, the transition towards new cultural patterns would have been neither linear nor uniform. On the contrary, the process' mode and times were different according to the various geographical areas of the Korean peninsula. What is certain is that the "Korea" we know better, that is to say the Korea of the Joseon 朝鮮 period (1392-1910), is a reality which is completely different from the period we dealt with here, even if some traces of older times are still visible: for example, the complaints about the custom, for a bridegroom, to live in his spouse's house after marriage.³⁷ Today in Mediterranean area marriage among cousins is still practiced, but a marriage like that of Kim Yusin would be considered incest. In Korea, the strict exogamy handed down from the Joseon period persists: still, the unconscious desire for incest, nourished by repression, in the Far East seems stronger than in the Mediterranean area.³⁸ Concerning the idea about women's role in Korea, in very recent times it seems that the birth of a female child is no longer considered a "failure," also thanks to the improvement of national welfare. It is difficult to say if some aspects of past will be fully recovered, but various philosophers assure that the world's history is cyclical: Bachofen himself presumed an alternation between matriarchy and patriarchy and Giambattista Vico ([1725] 2012) had already sensed the sinusoidal nature of history. The 20th century was a period of

37. Its original text is as follows: "[If the man enters the woman's house, it] upsets the meaning of husband and wife, if yang follows yin, it is against the principles of heaven and earth..."
...以亂夫婦之義。陽聽挖陰以拂天地之經乎... (*Taeheojeong-jip*, Book 1).

38. It is not a mere chance that a significant part of pornographic literature and films of Japan is dedicated to incestuous relationships. Still nowadays, a favorite theme of Korean *dramas* is the love between a boy and a girl which becomes impossible after they discover they are brother and sister. On the desire for incest in Korean see Yang and Yi 1998.

remarkable changes, where concepts and ideas that had lasted for centuries were deeply reviewed and modified. The 21st century seems to have so far produced a reaction to such changes, with renewed “clashes of civilizations” echoing medieval phenomena as “religion wars,” “crusades,” and so on. I imagine a similar action/reaction process was also in existence in ancient Korea, even if many details of such a process are unknown yet.

At the end of this article, mainly carried out with a structuralism/based approach, it is still difficult to jump to authentically “provocative” conclusions: this would be hazardous and anti-scientific. Therefore, this article is to be considered a starting-point, rather than an “arrival-point.” However, I think we have enough proof to establish some reliable points about the society of the Three Kingdoms Korea and Silla in particular. These points can be listed as follows:

- 1) As in many areas of East Asia, in ancient times Korea (or, at least, a part of Korea) had a society where women played a very important role. In this regard, there is high probability that some matrilinearity (if not matriarchy) was practiced.
- 2) Interfamilial/endogamic marriage (and incest) was almost surely practiced, at least at the level of predominant clans. We do not know exactly whether incest was practiced by lower subjects too: if so, we can imagine the ancient society of Korea as one possibly based on sedentary life and agriculture and a religion connected with earth’s fertility gods/goddesses.
- 3) This situation started to change in the late part of the Three Kingdoms period, perhaps under the effect of the migration of people from Siberia/Central Asia, more linked to nomadism, exogamy, heavenly religions and patriarchy. Little by little, the original cults faded together, perhaps, with endogamy.
- 4) In this changing social/cultural context, the arrival of Buddhism (Indo-European religion) set a decisive blow, by creating a tripartite society with a privileged religious class, strictly linked to the royal house, aimed to better control the popular masses. For the first time an “official religion” or “state religion” was created, and the original beliefs disappeared or adapted themselves to the new faith, becoming a kind of alternative religion practiced by individuals. The Indo-European concept of society influenced human relations including, possibly, marriage too, and this could have led to social clashes. What was licit

before, now was disregarded or even prohibited. The importance of men over women increased, due mainly to the multiplication of warfare, the creation of a system increasingly based on private property, and a masculine predominance in the Buddhist clergy. After the popularization of Buddhism, an enormous quantity of men entered temples in order to avoid military duties, significantly weakening Silla's society.

- 5) In consideration of what is said above, Untersteiner's model regarding the impact of Indo-Europeans upon Mediterranean culture can be applied, in many ways, to ancient Korea too. Echoes of those social clashes surely survive in western classic literature as well as in Korean ancient literature: another Oedipus was in Korea too.

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Abstract

This paper tries to explain some aspects and facts of ancient Korean society as a consequence of the cultural overlaps occurred over the course of the first millennium CE. In particular, foreign elements such as Confucianism and Buddhism thought are hypothesized to have exerted a deep influence upon traditional customs, within a historical process leading to social transformations similar to those occurred in the Mediterranean civilizations after the Indo-European invasions during the second millennium BCE. Relying on a suggestive hypothesis regarding the origin of the Greek tragedy in relation with the social clashes due to cultural conflicts, the author believes to individuate a similar anthropological structure in some events and characters of Korean folklore, as they have been reported by historical and literary sources.

Keywords: Greek tragedy, Silla period, Korean traditional culture, cultural clashes, structural anthropology

