Making Myth, History, and an Ancient Religion in Korea

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Making Myth, History, and an Ancient Religion in Korea

A dissertation presented

by

Nuri Kim

to

The Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations

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Making Myth, History, and an Ancient Religion in Korea

Abstract

This dissertation traces the history of the myth of Tan’gun, Korea’s founding father, from its first known appearance in the thirteenth century to the modern era. It examines how the myth developed along numerous trajectories, how these intersected in the early twentieth century, and how this confluence resulted in new religious movements and historiographical practices that significantly reimagined Korea’s spiritual and historical past. The study shows that far from being a domestic affair, the process was transnational in nature as the myth was appropriated and reinvented by Japanese (since the late sixteenth century) and Westerners (since the late nineteenth century) before Koreans turned Tan’gun into the premier symbol of the Korean nation. The religion that emerged out of this (called Taejonggyo, “Religion of the Great Ancestral Divinity”) presented itself as an ancient indigenous tradition and sought to endow the Korean nation with a grand history as well as a noble spiritual heritage. As such, the religion played an important role in shaping the contours of Korean self-understandings and historiographical practices. In particular, this dissertation demonstrates that the religion’s historical writings gave birth to the genre of “fringe history” or “pseudo-history” whose impact far exceeded the bounds of the religion, even challenging mainstream academic scholarship. In doing so, the study illustrates the persisting importance of mythology and religious symbolisms in the Korean nationalist imaginary as well as the frictions and contests they cause.
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Figure 1. Map of Korea
Introduction

This study examines the history of the myth of Tan’gun, Korea’s founding father, as well as its role in constructing national and religious pasts. Although the myth’s oldest known record dates from the thirteenth century, the myth has been used to claim as much as five thousand years of history as it narrates the founding of Korea’s first state in the third millennium BCE. Since its emergence, the myth has gone through a dramatic trajectory that transcended dynastic transitions and national borders, reaching its zenith in modern times. Although foundation myths are generally believed to reveal how people of a bygone era structured the world and positioned themselves within it, the Tan’gun myth allows us to gauge how contemporary Koreans continue to do so—how they narrate their history, conceptualize their spiritual heritage, and delineate their national identity. In this respect, the myth is not a relic of the past, but a constant presence in the Korean imaginary and a continuous source of much inspiration, debate, and controversy.

The goal of this study is to appreciate the full scope of this by tracing how the Tan’gun myth evolved over time—how it was received, interpreted, and recreated—from its first known appearance to modern times. In doing so, the study seeks to explain how the myth came to assume such a premiere position in the Korean imaginary, but also how its trajectory was impacted by competing visions, transnational interactions, and geo-political change. After all, the myth was not the sole possession of Koreans as the Japanese appropriated it early on, adding new dimensions to the lore surrounding Korea’s mythical progenitor. Even among Koreans, Tan’gun has been a figure of much contest, revealing the many fault lines between different ideologies, religions, and historical perspectives, thus illuminating the fractured and fragile underside of Korean nationalism.
In pursuing this history, I highlight one particular moment that was pivotal in the rise of Tan’gun, which is the emergence of a religion that was centered on the myth. This occurred in the early twentieth century in the form of the Taejonggyo, “Religion of the Great Ancestral Divinity,” which consecrated Tan’gun into the God as well as ethnic progenitor of the Korean nation. The religion appropriated the myth of Tan’gun to establish itself as an ancient, indigenous religion that originated from Korea’s divine forefather himself and was hence deeply embedded in the roots of the Korean nation. Since it endowed Koreans with divine ancestry and a religious past, the Taejonggyo was ultimately an attempt to imbue the nation with sacred foundations. In many respects, this was successful as the religion contributed greatly to transforming the discourses surrounding Tan’gun and ancient Korean history.

As the religion was attempting to inscribe itself into Korea’s past, it was also rewriting Korean history at large. The narratives that emerged were epic in scope as they delineated the grand beginnings of the nation and a glorious ancestral territory that attested to the greatness of Korea’s indigenous spirituality. The impact of such historiographical undertakings exceeded the boundaries of the religion and profoundly shaped how Koreans envisioned their own heritage. Indeed, many of the concepts and symbolisms the religion developed would become parts of the trappings of Korean nationalism. Hence, in following the emergence of the Taejonggyo, this dissertation puts particular emphasis on how the religion reimagined Korean history, how their texts were circulated, and how they impacted the broader Korean consciousness. In this regard, this study is located at the intersection between myth, religion, as well as history.

With this in mind, I focus much on texts and ideas, their origins as well as genealogies. I particularly analyze how texts were written, rearranged and manipulated, especially through the

1 Such endeavors can be identified in many examples through world history. See Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
Taejonggyo’s efforts to establish itself as a historical religion. Thus, this study emphasizes the strategies and processes through which the religion appropriated historical sources, rewrote Korean history and reinvented the myth of Tan’gun. At the same time, since the focus is on the religion’s textual, symbolical and intellectual creations, there will be less emphasis on the religion’s other activities such as militant resistance against the Japanese, or its organizational changes and internal politics.

In pursuing this history, this study will proceed chronologically in order to gain insight into the incremental processes through which the myth, the religion, and various historiographical practices evolved and proliferated. After all, this is a “making of” story of many things—myth, religion, and history—and it is through a chronological account that one can best locate their origins and trace their trajectories. Furthermore, a chronological approach also enables us to appreciate how these processes were characterized by fits and starts, internal tensions, and corrections. This is because worldviews, ideologies, and religious belief systems are never static, complete, nor entirely coherent, especially in the early stages of development, necessitating a close attention to changes over time. Finally, an examination of chronology allows us to distinguish between history and myth, especially when it comes to the emergence of the Taejonggyo, as the religion’s narrative of its own genealogy was not always aligned with actual historical events.

Myth

Myths are continuously evolving entities that are regenerated and reincarnated over time as new generations engage with them, reinterpret them, and utilize them in novel ways. Especially in modern times, myths have been reappropriated to summon national communities:
Myths of an ancestral homeland, grandiose ancient beginnings, and ethnic descent have all served to consolidate national groups and shape their identities. If myths have been elemental in the construction of nations, they have also contributed much to the persistence and lasting appeal thereof. This is because they are extraordinarily capable of offering powerful symbolisms that imbue people with collective aspirations and a sense of national uniqueness. The same goes for the Tan’gun myth, as it was remodeled and reimagined to perform precisely such functions.

While I will discuss the trajectory of the myth of Tan’gun in more detail in later pages, a brief overview of its history is warranted. The oldest extant record of the myth can be found in the *Samguk Yusa* (*Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*) which is said to have been written by the Buddhist monk Iryŏn and completed around 1281. This was a time when the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) had been invaded by the Mongols and incorporated into the Yuan Empire (1271–1368). The myth itself depicted Tan’gun as the offspring of divine lineage born underneath a *tan* tree (also called *paktal* tree, a type of birch tree), hence the name Tan’gun, “lord of the *tan/paktal* tree.” According to the myth, Tan’gun later founded the first Korean state of Chosŏn, also referred to as Old Chosŏn (or Kojosŏn) in order to distinguish it from the eponymous Korean dynasty established in 1392. The myth also put Tan’gun’s birth and foundation of Korea around the time of the legendary Chinese Emperor Yao, hence sometime in the third millennium BCE, endowing Korean history with much antiquity. The narrative was complex as it incorporated elements from various sources: Tan’gun’s paternal grandfather, the God Hwanin was the Korean version of the deity Indra and hence part of the Buddhist pantheon, while Tan’gun’s mother was depicted as a bear-turned-woman which was a motif possibly derived from folk beliefs. Tan’gun is also depicted as having enjoyed a lifespan of almost two millennia before becoming a

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3 The *tan/paktal* tree is a type of birch tree indigenous to Eastern Asia. Its academic designation is *Betula schmidii*. 
mountain spirit, a motif which suggested Daoist influence. Of course, the myth also intersected with history, as Tan’gun is depicted as having named his state “Chosón” which had appeared in ancient Chinese documents while he is attributed with establishing his capital in the historic city of P’yŏngyang which had served as capital of the Kingdom of Koguryŏ (ca. 37 BCE – 668).

Finally, the myth also connected to the lore surrounding Kija (Jizi in Chinese), whom Koreans had considered the great civilizer from China, as Tan’gun was depicted as eventually being replaced by him.

The myth, however, was not a static entity as a number of different interpretations and versions began emerging soon after. In fact, just a few years later around 1287, the Chewang Un’gi (Poems of Emperors and Kings) offered a slightly altered version of the Tan’gun myth that modified his parental figures as well as the dates associated with the story. And indeed, in the following years and centuries as scholars tried to make sense of Tan’gun in their own ways, a multitude of different takes on the myth emerged. Some of these tried to rationalize the myth by removing its supernatural elements as much as possible and depicting Tan’gun as a historical figure. Others went into the opposite direction by aggrandizing the mythical aspects of Tan’gun’s story and highlighting his supernatural capabilities. Indeed, the general lore surrounding Tan’gun only grew over time as a number of new elements were added. The government also began paying respect to Tan’gun at a shrine erected for him in P’yŏngyang as well as other locales that were associated with him.

Despite this, however, Tan’gun was by no means the only or most important figure to Koreans prior to the modern era. He shared the spotlight with other notables such as King Tongmyŏng (also known as Chumong),⁴ the founder of the Kingdom of Koguryŏ, and, most

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⁴ For more on King Tongmyŏng/Chumong, see James H. Grayson, “Tan’gun and Chumong: The Politics of Korean Foundation Myths,” *Folklore* 126 (3) (2015), 253-265.
importantly, Kija who was attributed with laying the cultural foundations of Korea. This connection to civilization was also what made Kija by and large the most revered figure in premodern Korea, especially during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910), even though Tan’gun was often acknowledged as the founder of the first Korean state. Both Kija and Chumong were also better documented than Tan’gun as they had been discussed in a larger number of texts that predated Tan’gun’s emergence in the Samguk Yusa. Indeed, some premodern Korean scholars even regarded Tan’gun with suspicion and disbelief due to the nature of the myth and the relative lack of historical documentation. Even in cases where Tan’gun was referred to as the founder of the first Korean state, these were often accompanied by a reluctant tentativeness to embrace him. In this respect, the myth of Tan’gun was far from hegemonic in premodern Korea.

At the same time, the myth was also not confined to the Korean peninsula. During the Hideyoshi Invasions (1592–1598), the Japanese captured Korean history books, allowing them to develop an awareness of Tan’gun. Over time, Korean histories began to be published in Japan which introduced Tan’gun to an even wider audience. As Japanese scholars contemplated the significance of Korea’s mythical founder, they started discussing Tan’gun in relation to Japan’s own mythology as well as ancient history. Tan’gun even began to be viewed as a deity from the Shinto pantheon due to some perceived similarities between Korean and Japanese mythology. Hence, Tan’gun was not the sole possession of Koreans as Japanese appropriated and assimilated him into their own traditions, allowing the myth to continue to evolve and take on a life of its own. With increased Japanese advances into Korea beginning in the late nineteenth century, such understandings would be imported back into Korea, triggering a variety of responses. Similarly, from the late nineteenth century onward, the myth would also arouse the interests of Protestant missionaries who identified in the story traces of an original Korean spirituality that was
analogous to Christianity. This, again, added new dimensions to the discourse surrounding Korean myth, religion, as well as history.

In this respect, the Taejonggyo was part of a transnational, centuries-long tradition of reinterpreting and reimagining the myth of Tan’gun, allowing the religion to draw upon a vast corpus of texts and ideas. Thus, even though the religion may be aptly depicted as a modern invention, it did not merely grow out of thin air.

Religion and the Nation

At the same time, the Taejonggyo was also part of an emerging worldview which saw religion and the nation as fundamentally tied together. This view came about through the global expansion of imperialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century which produced novel ways of identifying and conceptualizing national identities. Initially, this was led by Western scholars who employed religion as a cultural marker through which to gauge and rank the nations of the world. Christianity and by extension Western nations were put at the top of the hierarchy whereas non-Western religions and their corresponding cultures were assigned to the lower rungs. Non-westerners, however, did not remain silent as they contested such hierarchies through their own intellectual, cultural, and religious endeavors. Yet instead of rejecting the very link between religion and the nation or racial and religious hierarchies in general, they also discovered religion as an irreducible realm that was deeply linked to the essence of a nation. The strategy was to argue that they, too, possessed an advanced religion, one that was comparable or even superior to Christianity and thus attested to the civilized nature of their own nation. Hence, numerous religious movements emerged across the globe to rediscover indigenous spiritual

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traditions and redefine national identities. Of course, it was not just any spiritual tradition that could be utilized for this purpose—the religion needed to be proven to be linked to a people’s history and be able to demonstrate the noble and advanced character of the nation.

Thus, people across the globe undertook projects to identify, revive, and reinvent their religious heritage as part of larger nation-building projects. For instance, in India, reformers sought to reorganize Hinduism into a rational, monotheistic religion that constituted the core of India’s spirituality and was superior to the colonizer’s own religion.\(^6\) In China, in the waning years of the Qing dynasty, Confucius was summoned as a religious object of worship to revitalize the ailing dynasty.\(^7\) In the wake of the Meiji restoration, the Japanese imperial state, stimulated by Western examples, also engaged in “spiritual engineering” by experimenting with Shinto, first as an official state religion and then as a national morality.\(^8\) In the African and African-American case, intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois put efforts into excavating an African spiritual tradition that far from being primitive, contained a moral philosophy centered on an indigenous God that was superior to the God of Westerners.\(^9\) Native Americans as well argued that they had a religion, one that contrary to prevailing perceptions was in many ways analogous to Christianity and thus deserved to be treated with the same respect.\(^10\) There are, of

course, many more examples such as these that involved excavating, reinterpreting, and reinventing ancient spiritual traditions as part of projects to construct national communities.

While these endeavors were efforts to claim an advanced level of civilization, they were ultimately also attempts to establish a special connection to the Divine. Doing so would endow the nation with sacred foundations and amplify a sense of national uniqueness which transcended the dynamics of the secular world. This was the basis on which nations could claim parity with or even superiority over the dominant powers of the world, if not in material terms, then at least in spiritual terms.

In Korea, it was the Taejonggyo that performed this role. Founded in 1909, the religion was designed as a historical religion with deep roots that reached all the way back to the origins of the Korean nation. The religion emerged when Japanese encroachments had reached a breaking point and the demise of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) had become a near certainty. Faced with this, the religion was, as it proclaimed, an effort to invigorate the Korean nation and an assertion that yes, Korea had its own religion that was both noble and ancient at the same time. And although the Taejonggyo was unable to avert annexation or achieve Korean independence, it was nonetheless influential in shaping how Koreans envisioned their own historical and spiritual legacy.

Rise of New Religions in Korea

The Taejonggyo, however, did not emerge in a vacuum as it was embedded in a larger context of religious effervescence in Korea. This was a response to the social instability and institutional inadequacies of the late Chosŏn period, but also by the impacts from abroad, such as the introduction of new diseases (cholera) and foreign religion (Christianity). While Catholicism
had trickled into the country since the late eighteenth century, the Protestant Church had made significant inroads into the peninsula since the late nineteenth century, culminating in a number of epochal moments such as the Great Revival of P’yŏngyang in 1907. However, it was not just Christianity that saw tremendous success as Korean religions were also sprouting with increasing vigor. The Tonghak, “Eastern Learning,” is usually portrayed as the first organized Korean religion to emerge. Founded in 1860, the religion was a response to the impact of Western Learning, that is, Christianity, the increasing schisms and economic impoverishment within Chosŏn society, as well as recurring outbreaks of epidemics such as cholera which had a devastating effect on the Korean population.\(^{11}\) While the Tonghak was certainly the first organized religion that possessed a strong group consciousness as well as its own scriptures and rituals, even before its emergence, the late Chosŏn dynasty had seen a fair share of secret organizations and millenarian movements that employed religious symbolisms.\(^{12}\) These often came to the fore in revolts such as the Hong Kyŏngnae Rebellion of 1812 in which millenarian prophesies functioned as channels through which popular discontent could be expressed.\(^{13}\) While these movements did not turn into organized religions, millenarian ideas of world renewal also became important elements in the Tonghak’s teachings, a testament to the atmosphere of late Chosŏn society.

The Tonghak gave rise to a number of splinter groups which tended toward the mystical and eventually developed their own scriptures and traditions. The Tonghak also initiated the

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\(^{11}\) Beginning in 1821, Korea experienced roughly ten cholera outbreaks over the following century, leaving hundreds of thousands dead. See Sin Tongwŏn, “Chosŏn mal ŭi kollera yuhaeng” [Cholera outbreaks toward the end of the Chosŏn dynasty], *Han’guk Kwahaksa Hakhoeji* 11(1) (1989), 53-86.

\(^{12}\) See Han Sung-hun, “Mirŭk ŭi sidae, chinin ŭi kwihwan – Chosŏn hugi chonggyo undong e taehan pallan ŭi hyŏnsanghak” [The age of Maitreya, the return of Chinin – a phenomenology of rebellions of religious movements in late Chosŏn], *Chonggyo Yŏn’gu* 75(2) (2015.6), 193-225.

Tonghak Rebellion of 1894 which grew out of discontent with religious persecution and government corruption. As Chinese and Japanese forces began to intervene to suppress the rebels, the uprising also turned into an anti-foreign movement that sought to drive out outside influences. Ultimately, the rebellion led to the Sino-Japanese War as well as the Kabo reforms which attempted to put Korea on a path to modernization. In this respect, the rebellion was a momentous event that illustrated the contradictions within late Chosŏn society as well as the growing importance of religion.

New religious movements continued to emerge after the suppression of the rebellion, such as the Chŏngsan tradition, a Tonghak-offshoot established by Kang Ilsun (1871-1909) in 1901, which would turn its leader into humanity’s savior and the object of worship. In the new century, the Tonghak also began embracing the reformist movement and in 1906 renamed itself Ch’ŏndogyo (“Religion of the Heavenly Way”) after excommunicating pro-Japanese elements such as members of the Ilchinhoe. At the same time, there were also efforts to reform Confucianism and turn it into a state religion as a means of uniting and strengthening the nation. This was led by the scholar and independence activist Pak Ŭnsik (1859-1925), resulting in the establishment of the Confucian religion Taedonggyo (“Religion of Great Unity”) in 1909 at almost the same time as the Taejonggyo was appearing. Interestingly, Pak Ŭnsik would later turn toward the Taejonggyo, suggesting that he came to realize that Tan’gun was more fitting to the

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goals of Korean nationalism than Confucius.\textsuperscript{16} During the colonial period, these religious experiments continued with much vigor as dozens of other new religious groups emerged, allowing their total membership at one point to even exceed that of Christianity and Buddhism.\textsuperscript{17}

What sets the Taejonggyo apart from these religions is that it was consciously presenting itself as an ancient indigenous religion that was deeply intertwined with the history of the nation. Many of the other religions that emerged during this time were characterized by a strong escapist bent and resorted to mysticism and millenarianism rather than active social participation. Even the Tonghak/Ch’ŏndogyo, after growing out of its initial millenarian phase sought parity with the religions of the world by pursuing universalism rather than Korean particularism. Hence, despite its nationalist credentials and participation in the self-strengthening movement, the Ch’ŏndogyo’s teachings were not necessarily nationalist in nature. This was also reflected in the fact that the religion continuously oscillated between rejection of and cooperation with the Japanese. The Taejonggyo, however, endeavored to become Korea’s national religion, and hence put in great efforts to also act as such. Certainly, the religion sought to “save” the Korean people just as many other religions did, but it did so not through the sole reliance on a higher power, but through exalting the Korean nation, creating national symbolisms, narrating a grand ancient history, participating in educational efforts and engaging in anti-Japanese endeavors including armed resistance. This also illustrates the main reason the religion deserves to be studied: after all, since it was an elemental part in the rise of Korean nationalism, it also left indelible marks on the Korean imaginary.

\textsuperscript{16} See Kim Sunsŏk, “Pak Ŭnsik ŭi Taedonggyo sŏllip undong” [Pak Ŭnsik’s endeavors to establish the Taedonggyo], \textit{Kukhak Yŏn’gu} 4 (2004): 171-199.

\textsuperscript{17} For a comprehensive overview and breakdown of the membership per new religious movement, see Murayama Chijun, \textit{Chōsen no Ruiji Shūkyō} [The pseudo-religions of Korea] (Seoul: Chōsen Sōtokufu, 1935). Since this is a colonial government-supported study whose investigations were often delegated to the local police, the findings need to be approached with discretion.
A Brief History of the Taejonggyo

The Taejonggyo was founded in 1909 by Na Ch’ŏl (1864-1916), born Na Tuyŏng, a Confucian scholar who had accomplished the feat of passing the prestigious civil service examination in 1891. Initially, the religion was formed under the name Tan’gun’gyo, which literally meant “Religion of Tan’gun.” In 1910, however, the name was changed to Taejonggyo, “Religion of the Great Ancestral Divinity,” while a subgroup of the religion branched off and maintained the original title. With annexation of Korea by Japan, the religion quickly spread to Manchuria which was serving as refuge for many Koreans. By 1914 the main headquarters of the religion had moved there completely, leaving the domestic operations in the hands of the southern branch of the religion. In 1916, however, Na Ch’ŏl suddenly committed suicide with the purpose of sacrificing himself for the religion and the Korean nation, thus becoming a martyr from the perspective of the religion. This rather extreme act was a response to the tightening grip on the religion by authorities both in Manchuria and Korea. In particular, the colonial government had refused Na’s request to recognize the Taejonggyo as one of the state-sanctioned religions which in the 1915 proselytization ordinances were defined as Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity. This put significant constraints on the Taejonggyo’s activities, leading to Na’s fateful decision as he felt responsible for the hardship the religion was going through. At the same time, his last will also indicated that he was sacrificing himself not only for the religion, but for the sins of the entire human race, emulating more famous religious examples.18

Na was succeeded by Kim Kyohŏn (1868-1923), an illustrious former scholar-official and the Taejonggyo’s most prolific ideologue. Overall, the religion participated in various

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18 For more on Na Ch’ŏl’s suicide, see Hŏ T’aegun, “Hongam Na Ch’ŏl ŭi choch’on kwa yusŏ yŏn’gu” [Study of Hongam Na Ch’ŏl’s death and will], Yŏksa wa Kyŏnggye 96 (September 2015), 340.
nationalist activities: it had a significant presence in the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai (established in 1919), and was also involved in educational activities such as producing textbooks and setting up schools for Korean expatriates in China. The religion was also engaged in the formation of armed resistance groups that would fight the Japanese in Manchuria. Due to such activities, independent-minded Koreans were attracted to the religion which resulted in a significant following in the area. Within Korea, however, the tight grip of the Japanese as well as internal conflicts made the growth of the religion a tougher task. Ultimately, with the establishment of Manchukuo in 1932 and the increasing wartime mobilization within the peninsula, the religion lost much ground both within and without the peninsula, only to re-emerge after liberation in 1945. However, even post-liberation South Korean society was not kind to the religion as it struggled to gain a sizeable following. This was in part because there was not much need for a nationalist religion anymore since the state had taken over many of the Taejonggyo’s nationalist functions. Overall, then, the religion’s significance lies less in its number of adherents as it was unable to sustain a substantial membership. Rather, the Taejonggyo is of scholarly interest because its impact far exceeded the size of its own organization in shaping the Korean nationalist imaginary at large.

The goal of the Taejonggyo was to consecrate Tan’gun as the ancestor and God of the Korean nation while claiming to be a historical religion that could be traced all the way back to Korea’s origins. In doing so, the religion also endowed Korea with a glorious, expansive past, deeply intertwining the history of the religion with that of the nation. Hence, the religion was actively engaged in the production of histories that could support its agendas. The most prominent examples to do so are the “Tan’gun’gyo P’omyŏngsŏ” (“Declaration of the Religion of Tan’gun”) (1910), the Tanjo Sago (Investigating the Affairs of the Ancestral Tan’gun) (around
1911), the Sindan Silgi (Actual Accounts of the Divine Tan’gun) (1914), the Paedaljok Yŏksa (History of the Paedal People) (1922), as well as the Sindan Minsa (History of the Divine Tan’gun’s People) (1923). The religion also produced newly “discovered” documents such as the Samil Sin’go (The Teachings of the Divine Tri-Unity) (1912) which claimed to be the words of Tan’gun and was used to set up the religion’s ethical and cosmological teachings.

The religion’s historical productions were indeed significant as they impacted Korean historiography not only in terms of its subject matter, but also its methodologies. In fact, this study shows that the religion’s historical texts spawned an entire subgenre of writings that has come to be known as chaeya history. This term can be translated in a variety of ways: “fringe history,” “alternative history,” “non-mainstream history,” or even “pseudo-history,” depending on one’s own perspective. The term chaeya itself means “to be out in the field” as opposed to being situated within mainstream institutions. Chaeya history then usually denotes historiographical practices that are not aligned with established scholarly standards especially in aggrandizing ancient Korean history, often performed by individuals not affiliated with conventional academic institutions. The concept of fringe or chaeya history began to be popularized in Korea in the 1970s, when practitioners of such history launched organized challenges against mainstream academic historians. Still, in this dissertation, I will apply the term fringe or chaeya history even to examples that can be seen as the direct precursors of contemporary fringe history. Granted, some kind of fringe history has existed throughout history—the mythologizing of history and production of alternative narratives by fringe scholars can be identified in many periods and in many places. Further, not all histories written by rustic scholars unaffiliated with academic institutions are aligned with the type of fringe history discussed here. In this respect, the focus of this dissertation is the particular modern incarnation
of fringe history that has been geared toward the glorification of ancient Korea. While during the colonial era, fringe history was not yet a self-conscious field, in the 1970s and 1980s, it would gradually develop a group identity by incorporating strong populism as well as völkisch elements in opposing mainstream academia. Indeed, even practitioners of this type of history endorse the term chaeya history, using it to set themselves apart from what they perceive as a corrupt establishment contaminated by Japanese positivism and colonial historiography. Despite their efforts to present themselves as true history, however, the fringe historians employ practices that are often highly dubious as they seek to aggrandize Korean history at all cost. In this respect, while fringe history itself is a broad and diverse field with boundaries that are not always clear, here I particularly posit the use of fabricated sources as a key characteristic of fringe history. Seen this way, the genre is greatly indebted to the Taejonggyo’s historical compositions.

However, the impact of the Taejonggyo’s historical productions was not just confined to more radical extremes, as the religion also availed itself of other channels such as newspapers and textbooks to promote its teachings. This made it possible for the religion to reach more mainstream nationalist discourses as well. This is particularly evident in the proliferation of the national symbolisms and rituals that were invented by the religion, such as Tan’gun-related holidays as well as a certain type of language. Indeed, these would be incorporated in the nationalist rhetoric of the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai as well as the South Korean government later on.

**Historiography**

This dissertation is situated at the intersection between a number of different, but interlocking areas of scholarship which encompass studies on religious history and the
Nuri Kim Dissertation Introduction

Taejonggyo, examinations of the transmission of the Tan’gun myth, as well as investigations of Korean historiography at large.

In focusing on the Taejonggyo and the Korean endeavor to reconstruct an ancient indigenous religion, my work seeks to make contributions to an understudied topic. Especially in the English language, there are no dedicated studies on the subject, making this dissertation the most detailed and comprehensive English-language account of the Taejonggyo to date. Granted, there has been a recent surge of publications on Korean new religions, although they predominantly focus on the Tonghak/Ch’ŏndogyo tradition. Also, while Anglophone scholars have touched upon the Taejonggyo in various contexts, the discussions have been brief: For instance, Donald Baker offers introductions to the religion and also examines the Taejonggyo’s conception of a God in a discussion of monotheistic ideas in Korea, whereas Andre Schmid touches upon the religion in his narrative of the emergence of ethnic nationalism and nationalist historiography in Korea. Although these have offered valuable insights, I seek to provide a more in-depth look at the religion’s intellectual productions, how these were built up and where they drew inspiration from.

There is more Korean language scholarship on the Taejonggyo, while the religion is also often mentioned in history textbooks. Nonetheless, there is still only one academic monograph-length study dedicated to the topic. This is a doctoral dissertation by Sassa Mitsuaki which traces

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22 Schmid, 192-8.
the making of the religion as well as its activities in an unprecedented scope and detail. My work is greatly indebted to this study and engages with it significantly, although there are also crucial points where I diverge from it. After all, Sassa’s account mirrors the more general views by Korean scholars such as Chŏng Yŏnghun that the religion grew out of a native folk tradition of Tan’gun worship. Such a view, however, puts too much faith in the Taejonggyo’s own account of its emergence as it sought to endow itself with a religious genealogy. In contrast, I consider such a narrative itself another form of myth-making aimed at claiming a history. In examining the religion’s ideas and tracing the influences it imbibed, I argue that the religion was not part of a prior sustained folk tradition of Tan’gun worship and that the Taejonggyo’s rise can very well be explained without postulating such.

Regarding studies of the Tan’gun myth, there is an immense body of literature in the Korean language from a variety of fields including history, archaeology, anthropology, literature, religious studies, and sociology. Since I am focusing on the reception and transmission of the myth, the most important work relevant to my study is Tan’gun edited by Yun Ihŭm. This volume is the most seminal collection of knowledge related to the myth as it includes studies by various scholars on the reception and transmission of the myth while also offering a large collection of primary sources related to Tan’gun from premodern to modern times. In this regard, the work makes tremendous contributions to historicizing the myth and enabling others to follow suit. I am greatly indebted to the volume as I incorporate many of its findings and sources into my study. Still, the collection of primary documents is not exhaustive as especially foreign as

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23 Sassa Mitsuaki, “Hanmal ilche sidae Tan'gun sinang undong ūi chŏn'gae: Taejonggyo, Tan’gun'gyo ūì hwaltong ūl chungsim ūro” [Tan’gun-centered religious movements in the last years of Chosŏn and the colonial period: with a focus on the activities of the Taejonggyo and Tan’gun’gyo] (Seoul National University Dissertation, 2003).
24 See Chŏng Yŏnghun, “Taejonggyo wa Tan’gun minjokjuŭi” [The Taejonggyo and Tan’gun-nationalism], Kojosŏn Tan’gunhak 10 (June, 2004), 281-310.
25 Yun Ihŭm et al. Tan’gun: Kŭ Ihae wa Charyo (Ch’ungbop’an) [Tan’gun: investigation and sources (expanded edition)], (Seoul: Sŏul Taehakkyo Ch’ulp’anbu, 2001).
well as religious sources have not been included, something which this dissertation seeks to address. At the same time, I also aim to interrogate the very perspectives, assumptions, and interests that inform the scholarship underlying the *Tan’gun* as I try to historicize how the study of *Tan’gun* has become such a central focus for Korean academics.

In the English language, the *Tan’gun* myth has also been examined in a number of ways. John Jorgensen, for instance, examines the origins of the myth, linking it to Esoteric Buddhism during the Koryŏ dynasty.²⁶ Other scholars have focused on the reception of the myth, particularly Hyung Il Pai who has examined how mainstream Korean scholars in modern times have used the myth of *Tan’gun* to derive all kinds of conclusions about Korea’s ancient history. In doing so, she uncovers the nationalist biases that have shaped such interpretations of the myth, especially taking issue with scholars for projecting the framework of the nation back onto the distant past and employing rather flimsy, self-serving evidence in order to narrate a grand national history.²⁷ While I endorse much of Pai’s critique, my study endeavors to go further and illuminate the many fault lines that also existed within Korean scholarship which was neither uniform nor uncontested. This is particularly evident in the competitions over *Tan’gun* as well as the rise of fringe history which continues to challenge mainstream academia in the present.

A number of other Anglophone scholars have similarly looked at the role of the *Tan’gun* myth in Korean historiography, such as Andre Schmid, Henry Em, and Stella Xu.²⁸

Approaching from the field of religious studies, scholars such as Seung Duck Oak and Timothy

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²⁶ John Jorgensen, “Who was the Author of the *Tan’gun* Myth?,” in *Perspectives on Korea*, ed. Sang-Oak Kee and Duk-Soo Park (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1998), 222-255.
Lee have offered insight into the Christian encounter with the myth. While I take inspiration from all of these scholars, I seek to set myself apart by offering a closer textual analysis of religiously inspired histories from the early twentieth century by interrogating the sources they drew on and exposing the strategies they employed in endowing Korea with an expansive ancient past. This is a meaningful endeavor because the historiographical practices exemplified by the Taejonggyo would go on to have lasting repercussions.

Considering the wealth of English language studies on Korean historiography, it goes without saying that there is much scholarship on this topic in the Korean language as well. While the quantity is too great to fully pay tribute to here, the works most relevant to my topic have been produced by Han Yŏngu who has written extensively about the history of Korean historiography. In particular, Han appreciates the significance and impact of religiously inspired histories especially in the 1910s, seeing these not just as a minor occurrence, but an important strand within Korean historiography. Taking inspiration from his work, I seek to extend this analysis to the 1920s, which saw a rise in religiously inspired histories, and beyond as I trace the genealogy of fringe history from its roots to the present.

In investigating such historiographical practices that were situated on the fringes of academic norms, I expand the scope of scholarly discussions to include pseudo-academic history writings. Korea, of course, is not unique in this regard as such practices can be identified in many

30 See Han Yŏngu, *Yŏksahak ŭi Yŏksa* [The history of the study of history] (Seoul: Chisik Sanŏpsa, 2002). While Han has produced numerous writings on Korean historiography, this one offers the most comprehensive overview of the history of Korean historiography
places and in many periods. Especially in the modern era, they can particularly be encountered in pre-World War II Japan and Germany in efforts to aggrandize the accomplishments of ancient Japan or trace the descent of a superior Aryan race.  

Even in the American context, or rather, particularly in the American context, pseudo-history is nothing novel. Especially with the current rise of populism and the revision of history by conspiracy theorists and internet demagogues, pseudo-history is indeed a force that cannot be ignored. By understanding how the Korean case of fringe history came into being and grew into a formidable presence, this study hopes to offer some insights that have relevance to the contemporary issues of the world.

My study also has larger implications for the study of modern Korean history. Much of the scholarship on the early twentieth century focuses on various aspects of modernity that began developing in this period. These modern changes, however, are often depicted as abrupt new beginnings (depending on the subject matter, rightfully so), creating the impression of a neat break between modern and premodern Korea. However, there is no such thing as a sudden and clean periodic transition as elements from the previous era linger long after the next era has supposedly been ushered in. Indeed, it is also this old, pre-modern foundation that constantly interacts with the new, as remnants from the past are being reinterpreted and reimagined for present needs. This is the case with the Taejonggyo as it sought to present itself as a historical religion by drawing on traditional sources and thus building upon the deeper foundations of the Korean imaginary—the sets of beliefs, worldviews, and symbols important to Koreans. In this respect, old texts and ideas were not simply discarded with the advent of the modern age, but

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continued to be read and circulated, becoming the basis for new developments. My hope is that this focus on religion and myth will offer insight into such deeper layers of early twentieth-century Korea and also bridge the conceptual divide between premodern and modern Korean history.

At the same time, my study also intends to shed light on the transnational dynamics that impacted Korea at the time. After all, the emergence of the Taejonggyo occurred parallel to the global rise of religious endeavors that sought to invigorate nations across the world. In this respect, the religion was but one inflection of a larger phenomenon. This was particularly facilitated by the opening of Korea in the late nineteenth century as contact with foreign spiritual traditions increased, spurring a number of religious experimentations. Especially the foreign imaginations of Tan’gun which were often furnished with religious elements triggered a range of Korean responses and attempts to reclaim Tan’gun as a marker of an irreducibly Korean spirituality. These dynamics demonstrate how transnational interactions occurred even on the level of mythology, impacting Koreans’ experiments with religion, history, and nationalism.

There is, of course, an overwhelming amount of scholarship on the general nature of myth from a wide range of fields including literature, philology, linguistics, theology, religious studies, anthropology, history, and gender studies. It is not the objective of my study to make any meaningful contributions to the theory or definition of myth, something which should be left to more capable and widely read hands. At the same time, however, my work does engage, or at least aligns itself with more state-of-the-art scholarship on mythology. After all, this dissertation shows that far from being a relic of the past, the myth of Tan’gun continued to grow in scope and significance over time and it is especially in the modern era that the myth—enhanced and rearranged—gained more prominence and influence than ever before. This is in line with the
studies by eminent mythologists such as Anthony D. Smith and Bruce Lincoln: Smith has demonstrated the importance of old myths not only in the reimagining of ethnic nations, but also in their continued survival and popularity.\textsuperscript{34} Lincoln, on the other hand, has shown that the construction of myths can occur in any era, including the modern one, leading to profound consequences. The examples he focuses on are far more tragic than mine—Lincoln traces the Aryan myth and its repercussions—yet his illustration of the power of myth in creating nations, races, and other group identities are relevant to the history of the Taejonggyo as well.\textsuperscript{35}

Chapter Outline

The first two chapters focus on the evolution of the Tan’gun myth prior to the modern era. In Chapter 1, I trace the trajectory of the myth in Korea since its first known appearance in the thirteenth century to the late nineteenth century. The chapter examines the debates surrounding the myth as well as its various incarnations as new elements were gradually added to the lore surrounding Korea’s mythical founder. The chapter also shows that Tan’gun, however, was still only one of several Korean notables and that there was a significant amount of skepticism regarding his historicity. In tracing these debates, the chapter also offers many of the building blocks that the Taejonggyo would later appropriate in rewriting Korean history.

Chapter 2 turns toward Japan and traces how the myth evolved there from its introduction in the late sixteenth century to the early Meiji period. The chapter investigates how the myth of Tan’gun was incorporated into various discussions of Japan’s own ancient past, mythology and possible ties to Korea. The chapter also illuminates how Tan’gun began to be envisioned as part

\textsuperscript{34} Anthony D. Smith, \textit{Myths and Memories of the Nation} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 140.

of the Shinto pantheon, thus becoming employed in the quest to understand and reframe Japan’s own spiritual past.

In Chapter 3, I move into the modern period and examine how new discourses on the myth were developed as foreign influence in Korea increased. On one hand, Japanese historians began employing positivistic methods of historical inquiry, turning a critical eye on Tan’gun, while on the other, Shintoists began championing Korea’s founding father as a symbol of Japanese-Korean unity. Western missionaries also brought their own conceptions into the mix as they projected Christian elements onto the myth. And finally, Koreans began rediscovering Tan’gun as a nationalist symbol while drawing on and responding to these outside influences. In illustrating the contest surrounding Tan’gun, this chapter sets the stage for the Taejonggyo to appear.

Chapter 4 finally turns toward the Taejonggyo, offering an account of how the religion came into being in 1909. It focuses on Na Ch’ŏl, the founder of the religion as well as the influences he received as he went from independence activist to religious leader, interacting with a wide range of people including right-wing Japanese Pan-Asianists. The chapter also examines the early texts and activities of the religion, illuminating the process of how the religion’s ideas emerged as it was responding to existing discourses on Tan’gun. As the chapter will highlight, this process was characterized by trial and error, further suggesting the religion’s continuously evolving views of the Tan’gun myth.

Chapter 5 delves more deeply into the historical texts that the religion published and investigates the strategies it employed in order to intertwine the history of the religion with Korea’s origins. The figure to factor most prominently here is Kim Kyohŏn whose illustrious scholarly background engendered many of the religion’s creations. The chapter puts special
emphasis on how he drew on existing sources while adding new innovations to the study and writing of Korean history. As will be highlighted, many of the elements and practices he devised would have significant repercussions on subsequent endeavors to write Korean history.

In Chapter 6, I investigate the impact of Kim Kyohŏn’s texts up until 1945 as they spawned an entire sub-genre of historical writings. The religion’s ideas were also disseminated in a number of other ways as they were taken up by the Korean Provisional Government in exile and also made frequent appearances in newspapers such as the Tonga Ilbo (East Asia Daily). The chapter also looks at the continuously evolving and expanding discussions of Tan’gun beyond the religion’s bounds, offering insight into the great prominence he achieved as well as the continuing contest surrounding him.

In the conclusion, I will follow Tan’gun’s trajectory from 1945 to the present which will bring into focus the contemporary relevance of this dissertation. Part of the motivation behind this study was to argue for the significance of religion in modern Korean history. By focusing on the religious origins of fringe history and the threat it currently poses to academic scholarship, the persisting relevance of religion should become clear.
Chapter 1
Tan’gun in Traditional Korea and the Emergence of Multiple Images

When the Taejonggyo emerged in 1909, one of its main priorities was to present itself as an ancient religion that reached all the way back to Tan’gun. If anything, however, the religion’s strenuous efforts to inscribe itself into Korean history and portray itself as indigenous to the Korean nation only attested to the religion’s constructed nature. The elevation of Korea’s mythical founder to the status of national God was indeed a response to the geopolitical situation and hence a rather new phenomenon. At the same time, however, this recasting of Tan’gun was also part of a long history of reinterpreting and reimagining the figure of Korea’s mythical founder. Hence, in imagining itself, the Taejonggyo did not have to begin from scratch, but was able to build upon a wide range of discussions on Tan’gun, recombining elements that had emerged long before the founding of the religion. This chapter focuses on these discourses in premodern Korea, tracing the transmission and reception of the myth of Tan’gun from the earliest known record to the late nineteenth century. In doing so, the chapter will lay out many of the building blocks that the religion would later redeploy in writing its own history. Further, since the Taejonggyo was striving to present itself as part of a tradition of Tan’gun worship, a look at how the figure of Tan’gun was actually perceived in premodern times will engender a better assessment of the religion’s own claims.

Early Tan’gun

The oldest extant document to mention Tan’gun is the Samguk Yusa (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), said to have been compiled around 1281 by the Buddhist monk Iryŏn while the state of Koryŏ was under Mongol domination. Referring to older Chinese and presumably
Korean documents that remain unverified to this day, the *Samguk Yusa* narrates the founding of Old Chosŏn, the first Korean state, by tracing it back to divine origins. Since many elements of the myth will factor importantly in the coming chapters, a translation of the entire section is warranted:

The *Weishu* says: “Two thousand years ago, Tan’gun Wanggŏm chose Asadal as his capital and founded the state of Chosŏn. This was at the time of Emperor Yao.”

The *Kogi* says: “In olden times Hwanin's son, Hwanung, wished to descend from heaven and live in the world of human beings. Knowing his son's desire, Hwanin (Commentary: also called Chesŏk) looked down at the Samwi and T’aebaek and found it worthwhile to widely benefit the people. Therefore he gave Hwanung three heavenly seals and dispatched him to rule over the people. Hwanung descended with three thousand followers underneath a divine tan tree atop Mount T’aebaek (commentary: Mount T’aebaek is present-day Mount Myohyang), and he called this place Sinsi. He was the Heavenly King Hwanung. Leading the Earl of Wind, the Master of Rain, and the Master of Clouds, he commanded some three hundred and sixty human affairs, including agriculture, life, illness, punishment, and good and evil, and brought culture to the people.

At that time, a bear and a tiger were living in the same cave and prayed to the divine Hwanung to transform them into human beings. Hwanung gave them a bundle of sacred mugwort and twenty cloves of garlic and said, "If you eat these and avoid sunlight for one hundred days, you will assume human form," upon which both animals ate the spices. After twenty-one days the bear became a woman, but the tiger, unable to endure, was not allowed to become human. The bear-woman, unable to find a husband, prayed daily underneath the tan tree for a child. Hwanung incarnated himself, lay with her, and begot a son called Tan’gun Wanggŏm.

In the kyŏngin year, the fiftieth year of the reign of Emperor Yao (Commentary: since the year of Emperor Yao’s ascension is a mujin year, his fiftieth year is a chŏngsa year, not a kyŏngin year, hence this does not seem to be true), Tan’gun established his capital at P’yŏngyang Fortress (Commentary: present-day Sŏgyŏng) and called his country Chosŏn. He then moved his capital to Asadal on Mount Paegak, also named Mount Kunghol (Commentary: sometimes indicated as Mount Panghol), or Kŭmmidal, where he ruled for fifteen hundred years.

When, in the kimyo year, King Wu of Zhou enfeoffed Kija to Chosŏn, Tan’gun moved to Changdanggŭng, but later returned and hid in Asadal to become a mountain spirit. His age was 1908.”

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One thing that immediately stands out is the presentation of the myth as it is not narrated by the author of the *Samguk Yusa* himself, but framed as a story that is quoted from other texts. Hence, Iryŏn, the author of the *Samguk Yusa* is presented not as the originator of the myth, but rather a recipient thereof who inserts his own commentary from time to time. Some of the commentary is merely informational, clarifying terms and locations such as the identities of Hwanin and Mount T’aebaek (T’aebaeksan), while in regard to the timing of Tan’gun’s founding of Old Chosŏn, Iryŏn even takes issue with the dating of the transmitted story. The texts that are quoted, however, create some problems: for one, they contradict each other as one sees Asadal as Tan’gun’s first capital, whereas the other describes P’yŏngyang as the site of the founding of Old Chosŏn. What is more, the sources themselves are dubious: The Chinese *Weishu* (*Book of Wei*) actually does not include any mention of the Tan’gun myth, while the *Kogi* (*Ancient Records*) and the *Tan’gun’gi* (*Records of Tan’gun*) are texts that scholars have been unable to identify.³ Still, the account gives the impression that the myth was recorded in a number of other sources and hence not simply Iryŏn’s own invention.

By portraying Tan’gun’s founding of Old Chosŏn as contemporaneous to the legendary Chinese Emperor Yao who was said to have lived in the third millennium BCE, the myth was endowing Korean history with much antiquity. In fact, modern thinkers would pinpoint the year of the founding of Korea’s first state to 2333 BCE, albeit through a rather complex and

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³ Korean scholars have postulated that some original source of the Tan’gun myth likely existed, although there is no concrete evidence. For an example, see Sŏ Yongdae, “Tan’gun kwanggye munhŏn charyo yŏn’gu” [Study of documents related to Tan’gun], in Yun Ihŭm et al., 50.
problematic process (see chapter 3). Further, as Iryŏn notes in a commentary, the deity Hwanin was another name for Chesŏk which was in fact the Korean appellation for the Buddhist deity Śakra or Indra, the ruler of the highest of heavens. Thus, Tan’gun was depicted as a descendant of a grand deity, embedding the myth within a larger Buddhist cosmology. Other important elements of the myth were the locations that were associated with Tan’gun, especially Mount T’aebaeak which Iryŏn identified as Mount Myohyang (Myohyangsan) located in present-day North P’yŏngan Province, as well as the tan tree, also called paktal tree, which was endowed with much symbolism.

A major significance of the myth is that it established a Korean origin story that could be traced back to divine roots rather than Chinese precedents. Prior to that, Chinese texts had depicted Kija—generally understood as a feudal lord from China—as the earliest known ruler of Chosŏn (ca. eleventh century BCE), while by the beginning of the twelfth century, the Koryŏ court had also begun turning Kija into an object of much veneration, allowing Koreans to lay claim to an ancient history and an age-old civilization. According to lore, Kija was a member of the royal clan of the Shang dynasty, but with its demise, he refused to serve King Wu, the first ruler of the Zhou dynasty, thus fleeing eastward. Kija had been mentioned in several early

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4 Hwanin 桓因 is an abbreviated and Sinicized version of Śakra Devas Indra, which in Korean is Sŏkka Chehwan Indara 釋迦 提桓 因陀羅. In a Chinese translation of the Lotus Sutra from the early fifth century, the monk Kumārajīva omits a few characters from this rather lengthy moniker to create the abbreviated and somewhat unnatural version Sŏk Chehwan In 釋提桓 因. The author of the Samguk Yusa goes even further by dropping the first two characters of this version, hence ending up with Hwanin 桓 因. See Kumārajīva, trans., Miao Fa Lian Hua Jing [Lotus Sutra]. Available through https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/.

5 One prominent example is the writings of the Song dynasty official Xu Jing (1091-1153) who wrote an account of his travels to Koryŏ in 1124, depicting Kija as the point of origin of a Korean dynastic lineage that had been passed down from Kija through Koguryŏ to the contemporary dynasty. See Xu Jing, A Chinese Traveler in Medieval Korea: Xu Jing’s Illustrated Account of the Xuanhe Embassy to Koryŏ, trans. Sem Vermeersch (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016), 63.

Chinese texts such as the *Analects* of Confucius and various histories, thus his Chinese origin and moral virtue had been well documented. Later Chinese texts published between the first and fifth century CE, expanded on such accounts, viewing Kija as moving eastward, being enfeoffed with the land of Choson and bringing much culture to its people. He even began to be seen as the ancestor of King Chun who was known as a ruler of Old Chosón between the third and second century BCE. This effectively turned Kija into the originator of Korea’s oldest dynastic lineage.

By positioning Tan’gun and not Kija at the starting point of Korean history, the narrator of the myth was tracing an older, independent genealogy reaching back to the divine. Tan’gun’s descent from Hwanung who had brought culture to the human realm also endowed Koreans with a direct link to civilization without Chinese mediation. Further, by placing the story in the mythical age of the Chinese sage-kings, the text endowed Koreans with an ancient history comparable to that of their bigger neighbor. Due to these factors, Korean scholars often view the compilation of the Tan’gun myth in the *Samguk Yusa* as an effort to elevate the Korean consciousness in response to the Mongol invasion. Yet, the implications regarding the relationship between “Korean” Tan’gun and “Chinese” Kija were also more complicated, since the text made it look like Tan’gun was driven out by Kija who had been enfeoffed with the land of Chosón by the Chinese king, still suggesting Chinese dominance. Further, the Mongol presence in Korea may have positively inspired the myth in the first place, as some of its motifs, such as animal ancestry, the eminence of the bear, and animal-human transformation possibly derived from Mongolian/Siberian mythology and beliefs.

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7 See *Analects*, Chapter 18.
8 O Hyŏnsu, 168-9.
9 One example is Yun Ihŭm, “Tan’gun sinhwa wa hanminjok ŭi yŏksa” [The myth of Tan’gun and the history of the Korean nation], *Tan’gun kâ Ihae wa Charyo (Chûngbop’ân)*, Yun Ihŭm et al. (Seoul: Sŏul Taehakkyo Ch’ulp’anbu, 2001), 6-9. For a discussion on this, see Javier Cha, “The Civilizing Project in Medieval Korea: Neo-Classicism, Nativism, and Figurations of Power” (Harvard University Dissertation, 2014), 84.
Indeed, the “religious” elements of the myth were apparent, such as the Buddhist pantheon, the metamorphosis of the bear into a woman, or Tan’gun’s transformation into a mountain spirit and enjoying extraordinary longevity. The relocation of Tan’gun’s capital is also sometimes considered a reflection of geomantic beliefs. Further, the Chinese characters for “tan” in Tan’gun would also become the subject of discussions, as the oldest extant version of the Samguk Yusa uses the character 坛 (tan), meaning altar, while most other historical accounts use the character 檀 (tan), which refers to the tan tree (or paktal tree) to which Hwanung, Tan’gun’s father had descended. Hence, depending on the character, Tan’gun could mean “lord of the altar” (壇君) or “lord of the tan-tree” (檀君). However, the usage of the character for altar may be a result of a transcription error which occurred as the Samguk Yusa was republished in 1512 which is in fact currently the oldest complete version of the text. This is supported by the fact that “檀君” was unanimously used prior to that, and only afterwards did the “壇君” version intermittently appear.11 Further, Tan’gun’s lineage was also open to interpretation, since the Samguk Yusa had made only a passing reference to a son named Puru. This, however, was in a commentary on a passage that was not part of Tan’gun’s biography and conflicted with the text’s main narrative.12 Thus, there were many elements that provided material for further interpretations.

One question that emerges here is the origin of the figure of Tan’gun. Given that currently no earlier mention of Tan’gun exists, one might feel tempted to regard him as a late

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11 Yi Chongmun, “Samguk Yusa sojae Tan’gun sinhwa ūi wŏnjŏn e taehan han kaji ūmum” [A question regarding the original version of the Tan’gun myth in the Samguk Yusa], Hanmun Kyoyuk Yŏn’gu 22 (2004), 364.
12 While the quoted commentary from the Samguk Yusa mentions the idea that Puru was Tan’gun’s son, the main narrative of the Samguk Yusa does not portray Puru as the son of Tan’gun, but of Haemosu, the founder of Northern Puyŏ. If the author of the Samguk Yusa had accepted Puru as Tan’gun’s son, he would have likely included it in Tan’gun’s biography.
thirteenth century invention. While this may indeed be the case, there is circumstantial evidence that the figure of Tan’gun, or some sort of precedent that evolved into Tan’gun, had existed prior to the compilation of the *Samguk Yusa*. As mentioned, in the centuries preceding the text, Kija had been depicted in Chinese sources as the oldest known ruler of Korea and even the Koryŏ court had begun commemorating him by the beginning of the twelfth century. Tan’gun, on the other hand, may have been more of a local figure associated with the P’yŏngyang region. For instance, the *Samguk Sagi* (*History of the Three Kingdoms*), completed in 1145, over a century before the *Samguk Yusa*, mentions that P’yŏngyang was originally the home of a Sŏnin Wanggŏm, that is, the Sage Wanggŏm.13 As noted, the *Samguk Yusa* later identifies Wanggŏm as Tan’gun’s first name, and the term sŏnin sounded Daoist in nature, offering a point of convergence with the Daoist elements of Tan’gun’s story, that is, his longevity and transformation into mountain spirit. In this regard, while the name Tan’gun is not explicitly mentioned in the *Samguk Sagi*, the figure of Sŏnin Wanggŏm may very well have evolved into Tan’gun. The writings on a gravestone of a local elite deceased in 1325 further add support to the theory of Tan’gun’s origin as regional figure: while Tan’gun’s name is again not directly mentioned, the engravings mention a Sŏnin Wanggŏm who is described as a king of P’yŏngyang who had lived for over a thousand years prior to the Three Kingdoms.14 The similarities to Tan’gun are apparent. Since the gravestone was erected after the *Samguk Yusa* had elevated Tan’gun to greater prominence, Sŏ Yŏngdae suggests that this is a remnant of a previous tradition that had considered Tan’gun or rather his predecessor Sŏnin Wanggŏm a local ancestral spirit rather than a figure of nationwide import.15

13 Sŏ Yŏngdae, “Chŏnt’ong sidae ŭi Tan’gun insik” [Perceptions of Tan’gun in traditional times], *Tan’gunhak Yŏn’gu* 1 (1999), 60.
14 “Cho Yŏnsu Myoji” [Inscriptions on grave of Cho Yŏnsu], in Yun Ihŭm et al., 399—400.
15 Sŏ Yŏngdae 1999, 63. John Jorgensen similarly argues that the myth already existed prior to Iryŏn’s compilation
Diverging Accounts

Only a few years after the *Samguk Yusa* was compiled, another account of Tan’gun emerged. In *Chewang Un’gi* (*Poems of Emperors and Kings*), published around 1286, the Confucian scholar Yi Sŭnghyu (1224-1300) presented a version that was allegedly based on another unverified source called *Tan’gun Pon’gi* (*Tan’gun’s Biography*) and hence diverged from the *Samguk Yusa* in a number of key respects. While the overall narrative beginning with the heavenly ruler Hwanin and culminating in Tan’gun’s transformation into a mountain spirit is largely the same, the birth of Tan’gun deviates from the earlier account. The bear and tiger do not appear in this version, hence no transformation of animal to human takes place. Instead, it is Hwanung’s granddaughter that turns from divine being into human form and marries the spirit of the *paktal* tree, ultimately giving birth to Tan’gun. In this respect, it is the matrilineal line of descent that is connected to Hwanin. The Chinese spelling for Tan’gun also differs from that of the *Samguk Yusa* as the character for *paktal* tree (檀) is used instead of the one for altar (壇).

Indeed, it was Yi Sŭnghyu’s spelling that would become dominant in the centuries to come, although it will be met with some resistance in modern times.

Of significance is that Yi Sŭnghyu is much more explicit on Tan’gun’s legacy as he lists the states of Silla, Koguryŏ, Southern and Northern Okchō, Eastern and Northern Puyŏ, as well as the people of the Ye and Maek as Tan’gun’s descendants. With the exception of Silla, all of the *Samguk Yusa*. Jorgensen, however, raises the possibility that the myth was actually concocted by Myoch’ŏng, another Buddhist monk (d. 1136) in the twelfth century, that is, over a century prior to the *Samguk Yusa*. Myoch’ŏng was in fact at the center of an irredentist rebellion that sought to relocate the capital from Kaegyŏng (present-day Kaesŏng) further north to Sŏgyŏng (P’yŏngyang) and attack the Jin dynasty to the north. Myoch’ŏng’s background in Esoteric Buddhism, Geomancy, and Daoism, as well as his emphasis on P’yŏngyang in particular seem to match many aspects of the myth. This view, however, does not take into account the prior instance of “Sŏnin Wanggŏm” in the *Samguk Sagi*. See Jorgensen, “Who was the Author of the Tan’gun Myth?”
these were believed to have been located in the northern part of the Korean peninsula and Manchuria. Whereas in the *Samguk Yusa*, there was much ambiguity about how Tan’gun connected to subsequent dynasties, Yi Sŭnghyu was more overtly establishing a genealogy from Tan’gun through history, thereby creating a supra-dynastic entity that incorporated various kingdoms over time and space into one larger unit. While Yi Sŭnghyu uses the term “Tongguk,” that is “Eastern Country” to refer to this entity as was often the case in pre-modern Korea, his conceptualization was part of a more general trend in the Koryŏ dynasty to think in terms of larger, perhaps even national narratives, rather than individual dynasties.16 This could hence serve as a foundation for a more expansive conception of Korean history.

In regard to Kija, the relationship between Tan’gun and the feudal lord from China seems less antagonistic than in the *Samguk Yusa*, since in Yi’s account, Tan’gun retreats to Asadal to become a mountain spirit before Kija arrives to take over Chosŏn. Overall, Kija is depicted in a highly positive light as a benevolent ruler with remarkable edification skills. This was a stark contrast to the *Samguk Yusa*’s rather indifferent treatment of the Chinese sage. As some scholars argue, this may have been due to the fact that writers with Confucian backgrounds such as Yi Sŭnghyu were more positively inclined toward embracing a linkage to Chinese civilization as opposed to the Buddhist monk Iryŏn.17 However, what Yi’s account in particular revealed was that it was certainly possible to revere both Tan’gun and Kija simultaneously, one as the progenitor of Korea, and the other as civilizer. In this way, a division of labor between the two materialized. This offered a contrast to the *Samguk Yusa*’s account which associated Tan’gun and his lineage with both the roots of statehood and culture. For Yi, Tan’gun and Kija were

16 See Remco E. Breuker, “The Three in One, the One in Three: The Koryŏ Three Han as a Pre-modern Nation,” *Journal of Inner and East Asian Studies* 2(2) (December 2005), 144-167.
complementing each other in a way that created an equilibrium between these two figures, at least for now.

What is further noteworthy is that Yi Sŭnghyu makes reference to a shrine related to the three notables (Hwanin, Hwanung, and Tan’gun) of the myth. This shrine was located on Mount Kuwŏl in Munhwa prefecture, Hwanghae Province, which Yi equates with Asadal, the fabled site where Tan’gun was said to have transformed into a mountain spirit. Yi’s wording further indicates that the shrine may already have been of some age at the time of his writing, suggesting the possibility that Tan’gun may have been enshrined there before he emerged in Korean histories in the 1280s. In fact, scholars suggest that the shrine actually refers to the Samsŏng Shrine (Samsŏngsa, Shrine of the Three Sacred Ones) in which Hwanin, Hwanung, and Tan’gun had been enshrined. While it is not clear when it was originally built, textual evidence such as this and others from the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasty merely suggest it was constructed before the late thirteenth century. Since Mount Kuwŏl is not too far from P’yŏngyang, the existence of such a shrine in this period would further add to the notion of Tan’gun’s strong regional ties.

Within the span of just a few years, two seminal accounts of Tan’gun had emerged. This suggests that the production of the second was most likely stimulated by the first, although the exact relationship between the two is not clear. They might represent two separate transmissions of the myth, or one might be an adaption and slight modification of the other. Whatever the case, both saw Tan’gun as the founding father of the first Korean state and traced his lineage back to divine origins. Both also endowed Korean history with an antiquity that rivaled that of China. In this manner, Tan’gun seemed poised to occupy an elevated position in the Korean imaginary.

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19 Sŏ Yŏngdae 1999, 65.
However, the two accounts also differed in several respects due to allegedly different source material. This means that neither could be regarded as more authoritative than the other and that a critical reading was demanded from the outset. This in turn opened up myriad possibilities for divergent and conflicting understandings of the figure of Tan’gun.

Such was demonstrated not long after the two versions had appeared. In a collection of poems and essays, the scholar Yi Saek (1328-1396) did not simply accept one version over the other, but constructed his own critical understanding.20 Writing toward the end of the Koryŏ dynasty, he was selective about what to believe and took a more critical approach to these accounts. He accepted as fact that Korea, or the “Eastern Country,” had been founded at the time of Emperor Yao, but he also conceded that no records had been passed down from that period, hence it was impossible to say anything more about Tan’gun. In this way, he was evading any discussions of the supernatural elements present in the myth while also placing doubt on the existence of the sources that the Samguk Yusa and Chewang Un’gi claimed to have used. Yi Saek talked about Kija and his cultural accomplishments in more detail, although he also emphasized that while Kija was granted the land of Chosŏn by the Chinese king, he did not submit to the king, refusing to be a vassal to China.21 In this manner, Yi Saek was endowing Kija with a certain degree of independence from his country of origin. One side effect of this was that the division of labor between Tan’gun and Kija also took on new dimensions: if according to the Chewang Un’gi, Tan’gun had been the founder and Kija the civilizer, now an emphasis on the cultural accomplishments of Kija led Yi Saek to depict Tan’gun’s culture as uncouth, simple, and

illiterate. This probably made more sense considering the timing of the import of Chinese culture and was most likely not meant as a slight of Tan’gun. After all, Tan’gun was still depicted as a hero for his bravery. Still, Yi Saek was now ignoring the *Samguk Yusa’s* narrative of the divine origins of Korean culture as in Yi’s vision, the beginning of civilization in Korea was clearly mediated through Kija.

All in all, the *Samguk Yusa* and *Chewang Un’gi* were monumental documents in the way they conceptualized Korean history and identified Tan’gun as the founder of the first Korean state. However, even before the end of the Koryŏ dynasty, divergent voices such as that of Yi Saek had emerged. Employing a more common-sense approach, scholars such as Yi received the myth with discretion, setting the tone for much of the succeeding Chosŏn dynasty.

Tan’gun in the Chosŏn Period

Roughly a century after the two foundational versions of the Tan’gun myth had appeared, the Koryŏ dynasty came to a close and the Chosŏn dynasty was established (1392). This naturally became a time of vigorous debates on the ideological foundations of the new dynasty and inevitably led to discussions surrounding Korea’s founding father.

Since deeply devout Neo-Confucian scholars were a driving force behind the establishment of the Chosŏn dynasty, the figure of Tan’gun was interpreted in a way that accorded to the state’s ideological basis. Sŏ Yŏngdae notes that Chosŏn ideologues found themselves in a dilemma since on one hand, there was a need to emphasize Tan’gun’s historicity, while on the other, he came with too many unbelievable elements. Out of this quandary, the

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23 Yi Saek, “Sŏgyŏng.”
24 Sŏ Yŏngdae 1999, 64.
scholar Kwŏn Kŭn (1352-1409) offered a different take on the Tan’gun myth in an effort to
make the entire narrative more plausible. In a collection of poems which he in fact presented to
the Ming emperor during a tributary mission, he produced a streamlined version of the Tan’gun
story, boiling it down to its essentials while removing many of its mystical aspects. Thus, the
poem states that at the time of Emperor Yao, a divine person (sinin) descended underneath a tan-
tree and was crowned king by the people, hence the name Tan’gun, lord of the paktal tree. Kwŏn
further states that while Tan’gun ruled the Eastern Country, that is Korea, it was not clear how
many generations succeeded him, although it was over a thousand years. Kija is depicted as
arriving after the close of Tan’gun’s lineage and taking over the name “Chosŏn.”

What is significant here is that Tan’gun is depicted as having descended directly to earth,
whereas in the original myth it was his father that did so with Tan’gun being born from a bear-
woman. Hence, in Kwŏn’s account, Hwanung and Tan’gun were collapsed into one. There is
also no mention of transformation from animal to human, or human to mountain spirit. Further,
Tan’gun is seen as having been selected king by the people which somewhat lessened any
implications of divine ordination. Moreover, while the myth had stated that Tan’gun had lived an
implausibly long life, Kwŏn offers a more rationalized account that it was actually Tan’gun’s
lineage that was continued for over a thousand years. The poem also contains no conflict
between Tan’gun and Kija, with the latter being portrayed as picking up Tan’gun’s legacy.

Granted, the poem Kwŏn submitted were all constrained by a specific format (in this case, eight
lines of five characters each), hence Kwŏn needed to prune the story to make it fit. Also, since
the audience was the Ming emperor, one would assume that special care was taken to ensure that

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25 Kwŏn Kŭn, “Ŭngjesi sigo: kaebyŏk Tongiwang” [Poem composed on demand by emperor: the original king of
the Eastern Barbarians], in Yangch’ŏnjjip [Collected works of Yangch’ŏn Kwŏn Kŭn] Vol. 1. Quoted in Yun Ihŭm et
al., 435.
the story was diplomatically palatable. Tan’gun’s selection by the people rather than divinity or
the lack of conflict between Tan’gun and Kija illustrate this. Hence, the simplification and
rationalization of the narrative were conditioned by external factors as much as they were by any
possible ideological commitments.

Overall, this type of more rationalized approach to the figure of Tan’gun became a staple
within Chosŏn era discourse and was also reflected in histories published by the government.
The Samguksa Chŏryo (Abbreviated History of the Three Kingdoms) (1476) is a case in point as
is the Tongguk T’onggam (Comprehensive Mirror of the Eastern Country) (1485) which was a
grand project nearly three decades in the making. Both texts which were composed in close
association with each other embraced Kwŏn Kŭn’s account that while initially, there was no
ruler in the East, a divine person descended underneath a paktal tree and was crowned king by
the people. Although the two texts go on to faithfully reproduce the narrative of Tan’gun’s long
life and transformation into mountain spirit, they also express a certain degree of skepticism: one
argues that Tan’gun’s founding of Korea happened such a long time ago, that it was difficult to
know about it with certainty, while the other took issue with Tan’gun’s unreasonable longevity.
In fact, the text refers to Kwŏn Kŭn and supports his idea that the thousand year life-span most
likely referred not to Tan’gun himself, but his entire lineage.26 Both texts also give Kija more
extensive treatments, magnifying his importance as cultural missionary. This indicates that the
division of labor between Tan’gun and Kija had become more entrenched in the official view of
Korean history. One major legacy of the Tongguk T’onggam was that it took issue with the
original dating of Tan’gun’s story and identified the year of the founding of Old Chosŏn as the

26 See “Oegi” [Outer chapters], in Samguksa Chŏryo [Abbreviated history of the Three Kingdoms] Vol. 1. Quoted in
Yun Ihŭm et al., 440. Also see “Oegi: Tan’gun Chosŏn” [Outer chapters: Tan’gun Chosŏn], in Tongguk T’onggam
[Comprehensive mirror of the eastern country]. Quoted in Yun Ihŭm et al., 441.
twenty-fifth year of Emperor Yao’s reign, not the fiftieth. In modern times, this would be matched with the year 2333 BCE and used as basis for the Tan’gun calendar.\textsuperscript{27} All in all, while Tan’gun had now become part of official history, much effort was put into making sense of him more historically.

This, however, does not mean that the lore surrounding Tan’gun was static. On the contrary, new elements continued to be added to it. In the \textit{Sejong Sillok (Veritable Records of King Sejong)} (1454), Tan’gun began to be associated with a number of locales, such as the Ch’amsŏngdan heaven-worship altar located on Mount Mani on the island of Kanghwa, as the altar began to be seen as his construction. A nearby fortress, Samnangšŏng, was also depicted as having been built by his three sons which was in fact a novel element since previously, there was only mention of one son, Puru. According to the \textit{Sejong Sillok}, it was also Puru that Tan’gun sent to a gathering convened by the legendary Chinese ruler Yu the Great who was famous for controlling the waters. The notion of Yu holding a meeting with his feudal lords had been recorded in ancient Chinese documents, and by inserting Tan’gun’s son into the picture, a further connection to history was made.\textsuperscript{28} In this way, Tan’gun was accruing more and more details which served to strengthen his historicity and turn him into a more tangible figure.

The Shrine Issue

Efforts to emphasize Tan’gun’s historicity also opened up avenues for discussing him in different ways. Since the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty, there had been calls to officially enshrine Tan’gun and offer memorial services to him.\textsuperscript{29} After all, if Tan’gun had been the

\textsuperscript{27} According to the Tan’gun calendar, year one would correspond to 2333 BCE. See Andre Schmid, \textit{Korea between Empires 1895-1919} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 181.

\textsuperscript{28} Sŏ Yongdae 1999, 66-7.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 63.
historical founder of the Eastern Country, then it was only appropriate to enshrine him and pay respect to him on a national level. This bore fruit in 1412, when Tan’gun was enshrined within the Sunginjŏn, a shrine which was dedicated to Kija in P’yŏngyang during the Koryŏ dynasty. However, to some, this was not enough: in 1425, the government official Chŏng Ch’ŏk (1390-1475) petitioned for a separate shrine in order to rectify the inferior treatment of Tan’gun for the reasons that he had preceded Kija by over a thousand years and established Old Chosŏn by himself, whereas Kija had been merely given the land by the Chinese king. The request was granted and a separate shrine was set up just south of the area in 1429 with regular ritual offerings conducted every spring and autumn. In this case, however, Tan’gun was still not the sole focus of attention since King Tongmyŏng, the founder of Koguryŏ, was enshrined there as well, indicating an unclear hierarchy between the two figures. Nonetheless, offerings at the shrine continued throughout the remaining Chosŏn dynasty, with the shrine being renamed Sungnyŏngjŏn in 1725. While overall, Kija seems to have played the more important role in the construction of the ideological fabric of the Chosŏn dynasty, the push to raise Tan’gun’s status shows that perceptions varied on the individual level.

These developments had direct repercussions for another, presumably much older shrine whose contours were becoming clearer and clearer. This was the Samsŏng Shrine at Mt. Kuwŏl which was likely the unnamed shrine Yi Sŭnghyu briefly alluded to in his version of the Tan’gun myth. The shrine whose origins nobody was sure about had operated outside the purview of the

30 Han Yŏngu 1982, 36.
31 Sejong Sillok [Veritable records of King Sejong] Vol. 154 (Chiriji/P’yŏngando/P’yŏngyangbu). NIKH online version: http://sillok.history.go.kr/. All subsequent references to the Sillok from same source.
32 Pak Kwangyong, “Tan’gun sinang ŭi oje wa onŭl: Tan’gunsa esŏ Taejonggyo ro” [The past and present of Tan’gun worship: from the Tan’gun Shrine to the Taejonggyo], Han’guksa Simin Kangiwa 27 (2000.8), 70, footnote 21.
33 See Han Yŏngu’s discussion on Chŏng Tojŏn, one of the foundational ideologues of the new dynasty. Han Yŏngu 1982, 33-4.
state and was hence more of a local affair, reflecting the regional character of the figure of Tan’gun. As the name of the shrine suggests, the three sacred ones were enshrined there—Tan’gun, his father Hwanung as well as his grandfather Hwanin. However, it seems that around the time of the official enshrinement of Tan’gun in P’yŏngyang, services at this site were abolished. This decision was criticized by some government officials as well as local residents who believed Tan’gun should not have been removed from his original place. In 1428, Yu Kwan (1346-1433), a former high ranking official whose clan seat was in Munhwa prefecture, the area of the Samsŏng Shrine, presented a letter to the king noting that the relocation of Tan’gun to the area of the Kija shrine was inappropriate since Tan’gun had preceded Kija by over a thousand years. He also supported the notion of Tan’gun’s divine descent from Hwanin and Hwanung, arguing against people who rather embraced the “absurd” idea that Tan’gun had suddenly appeared underneath a paktal tree without no known ancestry. A few years later, Yu Kwan’s nephew Yu Sanul (1375-1440) echoed his uncle’s views in petitioning the king to reconsider the site of Tan’gun’s enshrinement. Referring to a song which insinuated that the site of the Samsŏng Shrine was in fact the fabled Asadal of the Tan’gun myth, Yu asked the king not to abandon the original shrine. This was successful as King Sejong (r. 1418–1450) ultimately granted his request. This incident illustrates the different understandings of Tan’gun as well as his local significance which could lead to a tug-of-war between the local elite and the central government when the latter moved in to appropriate the mythical founder.

Nonetheless, in 1452, a few years and two royal successions later, similar issues arose again, suggesting that not much had been done to rectify the situation. This time, it was again

34 In, 1472, the magistrate of the Hwanghae Province stated that it had been 60 years since offerings at this shrine had been abolished. Sŏngjong Sillok [Veritable records of King Sŏngjong] Vol. 15, 1472.2.6.
locals from the region of the Samsŏng Shrine who expressed their deep dissatisfaction with the removal of Tan’gun’s tablet from the shrine. They blamed epidemics that left entire villages dead on the government’s decision to uproot Tan’gun from his original abode, suggesting that he had been embedded in the fabric of local folk beliefs. Despite government orders to make plenty of offerings to appease angry spirits, the epidemic could not be contained. This changed the minds even of officials who had initially been skeptical of the adverse effects of Tan’gun’s removal. After analyzing the *Samguk Yusa*, one official argued that although Tan’gun had first established Chosŏn in P’yŏngyang, he had moved his capital several times and ultimately ended up in Asadal, which he saw as the site of the shrine, to become a mountain spirit and hence likely felt comfortable there. Thus, the official implored King Tanjong (r. 1452-1455) to return Tan’gun’s spirit tablet to its original place in order to eliminate the epidemic once and for all.  

However, it seems that not much was accomplished because twenty years later in 1472, the epidemic was still ongoing and the shrine had not been restored to its original function. The governor of the Hwanghae Province undertook an investigation into the matter and also found that locals associated the epidemic with the abolishment of offerings to Tan’gun and thus had been avoiding the shrine out of fear of some spiritual force. The governor dismissed the connection between the disease and the shrine, calling the rumors absurd, yet he still recommended to the king that in order to appease the local populace, the court send down ceremonial incense and a written invocation every spring and autumn for government-supported offerings. The king granted the governor’s request and the court began supporting offerings to Tan’gun both at the government-built shrine in P’yŏngyang as well the original one at Mount Kuwŏl.  

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37 *Tanjong Sillok* [Veritable records of King Tanjong] Vol. 1, 1452.6.28.  
38 *Sŏngjong Sillok* Vol. 15, 1472. 2.6.
over Tan’gun. At the same time, while the Sillok suggests that the commemorations of Tan’gun at multiple sites continued for much of the rest of the Chosŏn period, it must also be noted that offerings to Tan’gun were often conducted alongside offerings to Kija and King Tongmyŏng.

Tan’gun as Priest

Around the same time, another type of discourse surrounding Tan’gun came to the surface. This one was related to an altar located on Mount Mani in Kanghwa Island and would have significant implications later on. Named Ch’amsŏngdan, but also known under a variety of other names, the altar was known to the government as it had sent officials there to conduct ritual offerings. In a written invocation for a ceremony conducted at the site, Kwŏn Kŭn, the official who had composed the Tan’gun-related poem for the Ming emperor, stated that this altar was in fact built by Tan’gun for ritual offerings to heavenly spirits. The writing further adds that this practice had been passed down from the sacred forefather all the way to the present. The depiction of Tan’gun in this new role as founder of a ritual tradition was significant and went on to be echoed in geographical surveys produced by the government. These sources quoted local rumors according to which the altar had in fact been built by Tan’gun while the nearby fortress Samnagsŏng had been erected by his three sons under his commission. Hence, now Tan’gun was not just a founder of a state-entity, but also possessed significant ritual functions, much like the kings of the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasty. What is more, the theory implied that Tan’gun was also the originator of an indigenous type of heaven-worship that was independent of Chinese

39 Sŏ Yongdae, “Ch’amsŏngdan ŭi yŏksa wa ŭŭi” [The history and significance of the Ch’amsŏngdan], Kojosŏn Tan’gunhak 19 (2008.11), 124-5.
41 Sejong Sillok (Chiriji/Kyŏnggi Kanghwa/Tohobu). Also, Koryŏsa [The history of Koryŏ] Vol. 56 (Chiriji 1/Kanghwahyŏn). NIKH online version: http://db.history.go.kr/KOREA/
ritual precedents. Tan’gun’s functions and achievements were increasing in number while concrete material traces and locales began to be associated with him, adding to his historicity.

Figure 2. The Ch’amsŏngdan Heaven Worship Altar on Mount Mani in Kanghwa Island (public domain)

In reality, however, the oldest known reference to the Ch’amsŏngdan dates from the late Koryŏ period. Examples can be found in the writings by the afore-mentioned literatus Yi Saek (1328-1396). However, while he wrote poems mentioning Tan’gun and also produced an account of his journey to the altar, he did not connect the two, stating that he did not know who had built it. Another Koryŏ scholar, Yi Kang (1333-1368), merely noted that the altar had been built in ancient times and did not offer any guesses as to who might have constructed it.42 In the Koryŏsa (History of the Koryŏ Dynasty), which was compiled in the early Chosŏn period, an entry

42 On Yi Saek’s travel account to Mount Mani, see Yi Saek, “Manisan Kihaeng” [Travelogue to Mount Mani], in Mogŭnjip Sigo Vol. 4. Quoted in Yun Ihŭm et al., 400. On Yi Kang’s thoughts on the Ch’amsŏngdan, see Sŏ Yongdae 2008, 127.
mentioning the altar is made for an even earlier date, the year 1264 when the state of Koryŏ had been invaded by the Mongols and the capital had been temporarily relocated to Kanghwa Island (1232-1270). The record also notes that the Koryŏ king personally conducted a ceremonial offering at the altar—something which only happened when the site and occasion were deemed important enough. Considering that even today, it takes several hours to climb the mountain in order to reach the altar, the altar’s ceremonial significance to the government seems to have been considerable.\(^{43}\) In light of these facts, one may theorize that the altar was in fact built by the government sometime after the capital had been moved to the island in order to continue the court’s ritual functions.\(^{44}\)

Further, the nature of the ceremonies conducted at the altar is also more ambiguous. While the Koryŏ court may indeed have used the site for some form of heaven worship at least temporarily, by and large, the ceremonies conducted at the site were Daoist in nature which is suggested by the type of terminology that was used in association with it. For instance, referring to the ritual that the Koryŏ king conducted there, the *Koryŏsa* uses the character醮 (ch’o) which refers to a Daoist type of offering. Further, the invocation Kwŏn Kŭn wrote for a ritual at the altar was titled 靑詞 (ch’ŏngsa) which also denotes a Daoist type of invocation. All subsequent invocations that can still be identified used the same term.\(^{45}\) In fact, according to early Chosŏn era documents, by 1474, the altar had come under the administration of a government office which specified in Daoist rituals.\(^{46}\) Further sources also reveal that a total of 95 deities were worshipped at the altar—four main deities such as the Jade Emperor along with 91 lower deities.

\(^{43}\) *Koryŏsa: Sega* [History of the Koryŏ Dynasty: line of succession] Vol. 26, 1264.6.7. NIKH online version.

\(^{44}\) Conducting ritual ceremonies was a common part of the court’s functions, especially related to the agricultural cycle and supplication for rain. See Pak Mira, “Samguk, Koryŏ sidae ŭi chech’ŏn ŭirye wa munje” [Heaven worship rituals in the Three Kingdoms and Koryŏ period and related issues], *Sŏndo Munhwa* 8 (2010.5), 19-20.

\(^{45}\) Kim Ch’ŏlung 2008, 286.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 280.
including Laozi, the God of Death Yama, and a number of stars and astrological constellations. In this respect, the rituals conducted at the Ch’amsŏngdan were not exactly directed toward heaven as an absolute entity like in China, but rather aimed at specific deities believed to be located in the heavens. This suggested that the worship at the altar may have been on a somewhat lower level than the type of heaven worship ceremonies which was generally considered the prerogative of the Son of Heaven and thus, the highest form of ritual offerings. While the Korean court conducted such heaven worship rituals throughout the Koryŏ dynasty as well as intermittently in the early Chosŏn period, the type of ritual at the Ch’amsŏngdan thus seems to have been a separate affair and thus of more limited significance. This is buttressed by the fact that rituals at the Ch’amsŏngdan continued even after heaven worship was officially abolished in early Chosŏn out of reverence to the Ming emperor, who as the Son of Heaven was considered the only one qualified to conduct the ritual. Further, while there were movements to abolish offerings at the Ch’amsŏngdan, this was not because they violated the Chosŏn dynasty’s duties as a vassal state, but because of their Daoist, and hence potentially heretical elements. While some modern scholars would view the altar as evidence of some indigenous, quasi-monotheistic heaven worship, this was most likely not the case.

In addition, while notions of Tan’gun as the founder of some sort of worship of heaven, or rather, celestial spirits emerged, the majority of scholar-officials did not endorse such views. This was reflected in the virulent debates over whether heaven worship should be continued or

47 While the total number of deities worshipped at the altar is known, not all of their identities are. See Kim Sŏnghwan, “Ch’amsŏngdan ch’ŏnje ŭirye ŭi pogwŏn e taehan siron – saryŏng sŏnggụl rŭl chungsim ŭro” [Preliminary theory on the recovery of the Ch’amsŏngdan’s heaven worship ritual], Tongasia Kodaehak 23 (2010): 3-52, 9.

48 For more on this, see Pak Mira 2010; Ch’oe Chongsŏk, “Chosŏn ch’ogi chech’ölye wa kŭ nollan e taehan chaegŏm’t’o” [Reconsideration of the controversy surrounding heaven worship in early Chosŏn], Chosŏn Sidae Sahakbo 67 (2013.2), 43-84; Yi Uk, “Chosŏn mit han’guk kŭndae ŭi chech’ŏn munhwad” [The culture of heaven worship in Chosŏn and modern Korea], Sŏndo Munhwa 8 (2010.5), 55-88.

not. As mentioned, heaven worship was conducted in the Koryŏ period more or less continuously with the king reigning over the ritual. This may suggest a heightened sense of Koryŏ as an independent realm separate from China with the king functioning as Korea’s own Son of Heaven.\(^{50}\) At the same time, however, some scholars suggest that even then, the rituals were mostly supplications for rain and a good harvest, and hence on a somewhat lower level than the grander Chinese counterpart which included these functions but was also a tribute to a more abstract notion of Heaven.\(^{51}\) In the Chosŏn period, the heaven-worship ritual was initially continued, although it soon was abolished in 1412 due to a strong commitment to the Sino-centric world order and responsibilities as a vassal state.\(^{52}\) Some literati such as Pyŏn Kyeryang (1369-1430) were vocally opposed to the discontinuation of the ritual, arguing that Tan’gun himself had originated from heaven three thousand years ago, hence Korea was not a fiefdom granted by the Chinese emperor, implying that Korea was entitled to its own worship of heaven. Further, Pyŏn added that heaven-worship had been performed in Korea for over a thousand years, although he did not know exactly when it had begun.\(^{53}\) In this respect, while he mentioned Tan’gun and the worship of heaven in the same context, he did not directly connect these two.

For the time being, however, Pyŏn was successful and the ritual was reinstated in 1416. Debates on the worship of heaven raged on while the ritual underwent a series of abolishments and revivals until it faded away in the latter half of the fifteenth century.\(^{54}\) At the same time, similar, but lower-level substitutes were concocted to pray for rain and a good harvest, continuing for the

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\(^{51}\) Pak Mira 2010, 20.

\(^{52}\) While it certainly happened that a Ming envoy would take issue with the Chŏson dynasty’s worship of heaven, it seems that it was internal forces that led to the abolishing of the ritual. Ch’oe Chongsŏk sees this as an autonomous act to pertain to proper rituals. See Ch’oe Chongsŏk 2013, 53 and 72.

\(^{53}\) Yi Uk 2010, 60.

\(^{54}\) See Ch’oe Chongsŏk 2013.
remainder of the Chosŏn period. However, it does not seem that during these debates, anybody argued for the continuation of heaven worship on the basis that it was in fact an indigenous tradition established by Tan’gun himself.

Nonetheless, as the Chosŏn period went on, more and more texts began quoting the idea of Tan’gun as the builder of the Ch’amsŏngdan. This was also reflected in the different names it began to be associated with: As the altar actually did not have one single name, but was referred to in a variety of ways—Kim Sŏnghwan identifies thirty-five different appellations—more and more names related to Tan’gun began to appear as well. Some examples can be translated as “Tan’gun Heaven Worship Altar” (“Tan’gun chech’ŏndan”), “Tan’gun Heaven Worship Stone Altar” (“Tan’gun chech’ŏn sŏktan”), or “Tan’gun Heaven Worship Stage” (“Tan’gun chech’ŏndae”). Other names also relate to the Tan’gun myth: “Puru Stage” (“Purudae”) implied that the site was built by Tan’gun’s son Puru, while “Sinsi Altar” (“Sinsidan”) was a reference to the site of Hwanung’s descent. Even though the notion of Tan’gun as builder of the altar may not have been the majority view, it was a perception that became more and more widespread. This became the foundation on which Tan’gun would later be imagined not only as the starting point of Korean statehood, but also the origin of an indigenous spiritual tradition.

Supreme Kija

As before, however, this was only one trend among many. As the solidification of the Neo-Confucian order continued in the sixteenth century, the tendency to emphasize Kija and his Confucian connection intensified. One example is Yun Tusu’s Kijaji (Records of Kija) (1580)

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55 Yi Uk 2010, 64-8.
which was an extensive compilation of Kija-related documents ranging from ancient Chinese
records to contemporary domestic sources. Shortly after, the famous scholar Yi I (1536-1584)
published *Kija Silgi (Actual Accounts of Kija)* which used many of the same sources while
offering a more systematic and detailed account of Kija’s life. Paralleling previous accounts, Yi
describes Kija as having escaped to Korea and set up Chosŏn by himself, emphasizing that he
was not acting as a Chinese vassal. In this sense, Kija’s Chosŏn was again endowed with a
certain degree of independence from China. However, the main point of Yi I’s work was to
portray Kija as a true Confucian sage who had propagated his famous eight laws (P’alchobŏp) to
the populace and the principles of kingly rule even to the Chinese king. This was a way to
highlight that Korea was civilized early on with a culture on par with that of China. In respect to
Tan’gun, however, Yi I was rather evasive, simply stating that while Tan’gun came first in time,
it was impossible to trace his history due to the lack of sources. The emphasis was decidedly on
Kija, his superior virtue as well as his success in turning Korea into a civilized nation, while
Tan’gun was mentioned only perfunctorily.57

Such a preoccupation with Kija can also be attributed to Korea’s interactions with the
Ming. After all, Ming envoys would often pay homage to Kija during their visits to Korea, for
instance, at his shrine in P’yŏngyang, expressing a level of ritual veneration that rivaled that
commonly shown toward Confucius. Granted, this was due to how Kija was depicted in classical
Chinese documents, that is, as a paragon of virtue, and not necessarily due to his
accomplishments as the ruler of Chosŏn. Nonetheless, considering such respect that the Ming
paid to Kija, it only made sense for Koreans to emphasize and internalize their connection to this

57 Han Yŏngu 1982, 50-1. Also, Kim T’achūi, “Kundae ijŏn sigi ‘Tongin’ ŭisik ŭi kujo wa kū pyŏnch’ŏn: Tan’gun
insik kwa Kija insik mit hwairon kwa ŭi kwanggye rŭl chungsim ŭro,” [The ‘Easterner’ consciousness prior to the
modern era and its changes: with a focus on its relationship with perceptions of Tan’gun, Kija, and Sino-centrism],
virtuous sage, thus strengthening the cultural as well as historical affinity between the two countries and elevating their own status in the eyes of the Ming.\textsuperscript{58}

With the decline of the Ming dynasty at the hands of the Manchus and Chosŏn’s own humiliating defeats to the much maligned northern “barbarians” (1627 and 1637), the trend to emphasize Kija did not abate. On the contrary, if anything, it strengthened even more. This was because now Koreans considered themselves to be the true successors of Sinitic civilization whose center had been hijacked by what they saw as culturally less advanced people. Hence, although no longer in existence, the Ming dynasty continued to be revered while Kija was emphasized as part of an effort to maintain a link to civilization and establish a sense of superiority toward the Manchus. The famous scholar Song Siyŏl (1607-1689), for instance, called Korea the “Land of Kija” and emphasized that even prior to Confucius, he had propagated the Hongbôm Kuju (Hongfan Jiuchou in Chinese; the Nine Principles of Universal Norms) established by the legendary Chinese King Yu.\textsuperscript{59} Another scholar, Hong Yŏha (1620-1674) presented a conceptualization of Korean history that emphasized Kija while minimizing the significance of Tan’gun: while he begins his narrative with Tan’gun, he also claims that Tan’gun’s lineage had in fact become extinct, thus arguing that it was Kija’s line of descent that was passed on through history. This was a clear move away from views presented in works such as the Chewang Un’gi which listed various subsequent state formations and tribes as successors of Tan’gun. This emphasis on Kija was also in line with a view that stressed the southern lineage of Korean history: with the incursion of the usurper Wiman from China, Kija’s descendants were said to have fled to the southern part of the peninsula where they established the Mahan

\textsuperscript{58} Sixiang Wang, “Co-constructing Empire in Early Chosŏn Korea: Knowledge Production and the Culture of Diplomacy, 1392-1592” (Columbia University dissertation, 2015), 349.
\textsuperscript{59} Kim T’aehŭi 2009, 134.
Confederacy. This developed into Paekche, one of the Three Kingdoms which would be united into a unified Korean state. Such an emphasis on the southern lineage had already been present in previous works such as O Un’s (1540-1617) *Tongsa Ch’anyo (Essence of the History of the East)* (1606) which however did not go so far as to explicitly discount Tan’gun’s lineage. Indeed, there had been efforts to envision Korean history not in terms of one single dominant line of descent, but in terms of two separate, but more or less equal strands, that is, the northern and the southern, both of which were seen as having come together to form contemporary Chosŏn. One example is Han Paekkyŏm’s (1552-1615) *Tongguk Chiriji (Geography of the Eastern Country)* which hence offered a less unitary and more multi-stranded view of Korean history. While the effect of these accounts was a relative de-emphasis of Tan’gun as well as the northern regions which Tan’gun was associated with, Hong Yŏha went one step further in articulating the extinction of Tan’gun’s lineage. Hence, in Hong’s view, Tan’gun may have played a part in Korean history, but one without direct links to the present.

The high level of interest in Kija also became apparent in a more visual way: in 1600, a painting of Kija was brought in from China and enshrined in a Confucian academy in P’yŏngyang. The painting was a depiction of Kija teaching the Nine Principles to the king of Wu. This may have been the first documented visual representation of Kija in Korea and thus attracted a high level of interest. Even the court dispatched a painter to create a copy. The painting was reproduced several times and became the basis for Kija portraits, giving birth to a number of different visual representations of him. These ended up being enshrined in a number

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60 See Pak Inho, “*Tongsa Ch’anyo e nat’anan O Un ŭi Yŏksa chiri insik*” [O Un’s views of history and geography in the *Tongsa Ch’anyo*], Han’guk ŭi Ch’ŏrhak 40 (2007.2): 29-61.

61 Han Paekkyŏm, “*Chu: huhansŏ, samhanjŏn*” [Notes: Book of Later Han, The Three Han], in *Tongguk Chiriji [Geography of the Eastern Country]*. Quoted in Yun Ihŭm et al., 454.

of places, some of which were built specifically to house the portraits. More derivations continued to appear such as a series of drawings depicting various aspects of Kija’s life: in a later version of the Kijaji dating from the seventeenth century, seven drawings represent scenes such as Kija’s travels in China, his escape to Korea as well his reign as the king of Chosŏn. The enthusiasm for the visual depictions of Kija was considerable and meshes well with the textual undertakings to emphasize his sagehood. In contrast, there was no equivalent activity surrounding Tan’gun. While there were rumors that the Samsŏng Shrine at Mount Kuwŏl may have been in possession of a wooden Tan’gun statue until the beginning of the Chosŏn period, as far as we know, the only visual representations of the founding father that have been documented emerged in the early twentieth century.

Resurgence of Tan’gun

However, there were also scholars that reacted against the trend to downplay Tan’gun. One example is Hŏ Mok (1595-1682) who was a rival of Song Siyŏl’s more dominant faction. His account in Tongsa (Eastern Affairs) was in many respects a throwback to earlier times as he accepted Tan’gun’s birth from divinity as well as his unusually long life-span. While Hŏ did not add much that was new, he was returning to a view that paid attention to both Tan’gun and Kija in their established functions, that is, one as founder and the other as civlizer.

Views that were favorable toward Tan’gun also came from people with more unconventional interests. A case in point is Hong Manjong (1643-1725), a talented literatus with

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63 As mentioned, Kijaji was first published in 1580 but was reproduced several times ever since. Yu Mina estimates that the version of the Kijaji with the Kija sketches was produced in the early 17th century. See Yu Mina, “Chosŏn sidae kija e taehan insik kwa Kija yusang” [Perceptions of Kija and Kija’s portrait during Chosŏn], Kangjiwa Misulsa 44 (2015.6), 230.

a Daoist bent and taste for the eccentric. Since his ideas would later factor in the construction of the Taejonggyo, a more extensive look at his works seems appropriate. As Hong states himself, he was interested in finding the key to everlasting life due to a sickness that had once befallen him.\(^6\) One way of doing so was to examine stories of historical figures that had been rumored to have achieved extraordinary feats, such as living unusually long lives, ascending to heaven, or becoming immortals. In “Haedong Ijŏk” (“Unusual Occurrences of the Eastern Country”) (1666), he offers sketches of thirty-eight figures such as Tan’gun, Pak Hyŏkkŏse, the founder of Silla, King Tongmyŏng, the founder of Koguryŏ as well as other famous scholars, monks, and generals. These were all enveloped in their own legends and rumors of mysterious births and supernatural exploits. Examining the wide range of such extraordinary stories, Hong argued that the sheer number of these documented tales indicated that these stories were indeed plausible. This justified a literal reading of the Tan’gun myth as well. Recounting the narrative of the Samguk Yusa, Hong conceded that previous texts had offered inconsistent information, although they all seemed to agree that Tan’gun was indeed endowed with remarkable longevity that exceeded a thousand years. Further, drawing from Chinese lore, Hong lists examples of legendary Chinese figures that were also said to have lived unusually long lives, arguing that Tan’gun was not an outlier in this regard. However, while these individuals had been regular mortals that had extended their lives through self-cultivation, Hong emphasized that Tan’gun was unique: not only was he a ruler that had achieved this feat, but his birth and death were also wrapped in mystique. This led Hong to express uncertainty about whether Tan’gun was human.

\(^6\) Hong Manjong. “Haedong Ijŏk” [Unusual occurrences of the Eastern Country], in Hong Manjong Chŏnjop 1 (Seoul: T’aehaksa, 1997), 126.
or not, likening him to the Chinese hero Fushi, a figure depicted in myths as somewhere between man and god.\textsuperscript{66}

Hong’s literal understanding of the Tan’gun myth also made it into *Sunoji (Records of Fifteen Days)*, a collection of miscellaneous writings which he composed while bedridden once again. In this work, he argues that since other great figures such as Chinese emperors and dynastic founders all had unusual births, there was nothing strange about Tan’gun’s birth either. At the same time, however, Hong also added some significant detail to the Tan’gun narrative: he mentioned that at the time of Tan’gun, people resided in caves, wore clothes made of leaves and ate fruits from trees, hence living in a state of nature. It was only with Kija that Korea became civilized, indicating that despite Hong’s interest in Tan’gun, he did not endow him with cultural attributes. In fact, Hong’s depiction of Tan’gun’s period as unenlightened (*migae*) was something that was mirrored in many other writings of this period. All in all, to Hong, at least for now, Tan’gun was a unique persona, somewhere between man and God; somehow primitive, but still belonging to the highest nobility due to the supernatural aura that was surrounding him.\textsuperscript{67}

Decades later, however, an older and wiser Hong who had survived his ailments offered a more evolved account of Tan’gun as well as Korean history. In *Tongguk Yŏkdae Ch’ŏngmok (A Comprehensive Digest of Korean History)* (1705), he examines a wide range of Tan’gun-related sources, pointing out the differences between them in order to extricate their most essential elements. Hong’s search for immortality, at least for the time being, had been suspended for the sake of scholarly investigation. For instance, he juxtaposes the accounts of the *Samguk Yusa* and *Chewang Un’gi*, highlighting the differences in how they described Tan’gun’s origin although he

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 130-2.
\textsuperscript{67} Hong Manjong, *Sunoji [Records of fifteen days]*, 1-5. National Library of Korea (NLK hereafter) online version at http://www.nl.go.kr.
refrained from valuing one version over the other. He also notes the fact that the two texts had used different Chinese characters for Tan’gun—one for altar, and the other for the paktal tree. In this case, again, he does not argue against one or the other, although Hong himself opted for the paktal tree character probably because it was the more prevalent version. The key development in this account, however, was that while he reuses his phrase on how people had lived in a state of nature when Tan’gun was king, he also depicts Tan’gun as having lifted his people out of these conditions. Specifically, he argues that Tan’gun had instructed people how to wear their hair properly, how to cover their heads, as well as the correct relations between king and subordinate, man and woman, as well as etiquettes for eating, drinking, and living in housing. Hong adds that Tan’gun also ordered P’aengo, depicted as one of his subordinates, to discipline mountains and rivers in order to elevate the lives of the people. While Hong still found nothing unusual about Tan’gun’s inordinate longevity, he was excavating an element from the Samguk Yusa’s myth that had been long ignored: that the roots of culture could also be found in Tan’gun’s narrative. Not that Kija was out of the picture—in Hong’s account he was still an exemplary person who had taught proper rituals to the people. However, the balance had shifted toward Tan’gun who was no longer a founding father with vague attributes, but one with a wide range of specific cultural achievements.68 Hence, Hong’s own understanding of Tan’gun was evolving, and with it, the fortunes of the mythical founder.

An Chŏngbok

Of course, Hong’s view of Tan’gun did not go unchallenged: writing roughly half a century later, the scholar An Chŏngbok (1721-1791) offers an insightful critique of Hong’s

68 Hong Manjong, Tongguk Yŏkdae Ch’ongmok [A Comprehensive Digest of Korean History], 11-3. NLK online version at http://www.nl.go.kr.
treatise in his *Tongsa Kangmok (Compendium of the History of the East)*. This work was also one of the most comprehensive and incisive examinations of the discourse on Tan’gun up to this point. What is noteworthy is that An includes both Tan’gun and Kija in his main narrative of Korean history, lamenting the fact that previously they had often been banished to the “outer chapters” (*œp’yôn*). However, the catch was that An actually begins his history with an introduction of Kija and only then goes on to discuss Tan’gun. By placing Tan’gun underneath the larger rubric of Kija, the former is treated more as a supplement to provide background information for the latter whose line of descent is considered to be the main lineage of Korean history. An quickly reveals why Tan’gun assumes a subordinate position: he regards Tan’gun’s narrative of divine descent as absurd and avows to discontinue the detrimental practice of including such fantastic stories in historical writings. In particular, echoing the anti-Buddhist rhetoric popular among sectors of the Confucian literati, he takes issue with the heretical nature of the *Samguk Yusa*, that is, its Buddhist elements including the references to Hwanin and Hwanung which as he correctly notes were inspired by the Lotus Sutra. Mentioning the Samsŏng Shrine at Mt. Kuwŏl, An further argues for banishing these two false spirits from the shrine although he still condoned Tan’gun’s presence there since it was only appropriate to pay respect to an ancestor. In this respect, many of the embellishments of the Tan’gun myth were denied, except for the fact that Tan’gun had existed and founded Old Chosŏn.

In regard to Hong’s more ebullient treatise, An accepts the notion that Tan’gun may have taught people how to wear their hair and cover their heads, although he also suggested that there

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69 Ha Yunsŏp, “Chosŏn hugi Tan’gun e taehan kiŏk ūi pyŏnhwa wa kû soin” [Changes of perceptions of Tan’gun in late Chosŏn and the causes], *Uri Munhwa Yŏng’gu* 38 (2013.2), 263. In particular, the *Tongguk T’onggam* as well as *Samguksa Chŏryo* have assigned Tan’gun to the “outer chapters.”

70 An Chŏngbok, *Tongsa Kangmok* [Compendium of the history of the East] (che 1 sang, kimyonyŏn Chosŏn Kija wŏnnyŏn), also (purok sanggwŏn sang, koi). ITKC online version available at [http://db.itkc.or.kr](http://db.itkc.or.kr).
was no direct proof of this and that these practices had likely originated from China. On other points, however, he outright rejects many of Hong’s ideas. For instance, he dismisses the story of P’aengo being ordered to govern mountains and rivers, pointing out that this figure was in fact taken from Chinese texts and Hong had confused him for a Korean. Regarding Tan’gun’s descendants, An further notes the many contradictions between previous accounts while agreeing with views that considered Tan’gun’s inordinate life-span to actually refer to his entire lineage. Necessarily, he also discards the idea that Tan’gun had become a mountain spirit, theorizing that this idea probably grew out of some sort of ancestor worship. Equally, he dismisses rumors of a tomb where Tan’gun was supposed to have been buried as well as the idea that early mentions of Sŏnin Wanggŏm actually referred to Tan’gun. After all, if the two were actually one and the same, why would Tan’gun’s name not have been mentioned directly? Here An ignores the possibility that the figure of Sŏnin Wanggŏm may have gradually developed into Tan’gun somewhat later. This is because after all was said and done, An did hold on to Tan’gun’s historicity as the founder of the first Korean state, leaving intact Tan’gun’s status as national, rather than regional hero. When it comes to Tan’gun’s relationship with Kija, An agrees with the dominant tenor of the time, arguing that due to his moral excellence, Kija could not possibly have forced Tan’gun out and that he instead revived Chosŏn after Tan’gun’s state had already become defunct. In this way, An whittled down Tan’gun’s story, qualifying, bracketing, or dismissing many of the details other texts had added, thus leaving few things for the historian to say about Korea’s founding father with certainty. A sobering counterpoint to Hong Manjong’s exuberant account, An’s take can be seen as the pinnacle of critical examinations of Tan’gun up to this point.

71 Ibid., (Wanggŏm).
72 Ibid., (Tan’gun p’i Kija i Changdanggyŏng).
Yi Chonghwi

As can be expected by now, the next major work on Tan’gun pushed the pendulum back into the other direction: in Tongsa (History of the East) by Yi Chonghwi (1731-1797), Tan’gun is restored to his former position and more. Taking cue from An Chŏngbok, Yi also includes Tan’gun in the main narrative of his history rather than relegating him to the “outer chapters” or “miscellaneous records” (chapki) as had been the case in works such as the Tongguk T’onggam. According to Yi, this kind of treatment of Tan’gun suggested that there was a certain degree of mistrust toward Tan’gun-related records which, in turn, was likely due to their incompatibility with Confucian ideas. Yi himself, however, was unfazed by this, as he saw Tan’gun’s historicity evidenced by the monuments associated with him, such as the altar on Mount Mani as well as the Samsŏng Shrine at Mount Kuwŏl. What is more, Yi claims to have seen Tan’gun feature prominently in classical Chinese texts, although it is unclear what he may have been referring to as there are currently no known Chinese records of Tan’gun that predate the Samguk Yusa. Yi also sees Tan’gun as the first sage (sŏngin) to emerge in Korea and, in a nod to Hong Manjong, likens him to the fabled Chinese heroes Fushi or Shennong.

Nonetheless, Yi’s account was not an unabashed effort to aggrandize Tan’gun. Yes, Tan’gun was depicted as the point of origin of a lineage that ran through various Korean state formations, but he was still overshadowed by Kija’s cultural impact as Yi depicts Koreans being drawn toward the Chinese nobleman, leaving Tan’gun behind. Yi’s emphasis on Kija

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74 Ibid., 27.
75 Ibid., 77.
76 Ibid., 30.
was made even further apparent in his presentation of a list of Kija’s line of succession which included a total of 41 kings.\textsuperscript{77} While before, only the tail end of Kija’s lineage had been known, that is, the fortieth king of Kija’s dynasty Pu and his son, King Chun, such a detailed genealogy of Kija’s successors was a novel element. While shrouded in mystery, the list seems to have derived from family genealogies of clans that posited Kija as their ancestral founder.\textsuperscript{78} If so, then the composition of Kija’s genealogy was initially part of an effort to claim illustrious ancestry on the local clan-level, and not a state-driven attempt to historicize Kija. Still, the genealogy added much to the history of the sagely ruler as Yi endorsed it and presented it as fact. Further, the list took on a life of its own as it began to be included in other works as well,\textsuperscript{79} illustrating the ever-increasing lore surrounding Kija.

At the same time, however. Yi also makes significant contributions to the mythos surrounding Tan’gun. In a section where he traces spiritual affairs through Korean history, thus offering something of a religious history of Korea, Tan’gun in particular is depicted as the starting point of Korean spiritual practices, particularly through his construction of the Ch’amsŏngdan which was in Yi’s view a site to worship Shangdi, that is, heaven as a supreme deity. In particular, Yi argues that Tan’gun had “established teachings by means of spirits” (isin sŏlgyo), a phrase which seemed to suggest that he had set up a type of spiritual tradition. This phrase would also become important in the modern period when people would use it to argue that Tan’gun had in fact established an indigenous religion.\textsuperscript{80} For the time being, however, Yi’s work was significant in that it offered a history of spirit worship in Korea with Tan’gun as its

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 50.  
\textsuperscript{78} Kim Ch’ŏljun, “Susan Yi Chonghwi ŭi sahak” [The historical views of Susan Yi Chonghwi]. Tongbang Hakchi 15 (1974), 108. Kim lists the Han-clan genealogy as well as Ki-clan genealogy as sources of inspiration.  
\textsuperscript{79} See Chŏng Igi, Kijaji [Records of Kija] (1879), 33-7. NLK online version at http://www.nl.go.kr. This is in fact an expanded version over Yun Tusu’s Kijaji.  
\textsuperscript{80} Yi Chonghwi, Tongsa, 148-9, 158.}
point of origin. There was no mention of Kija in this section, suggesting that while Kija had been important as a civilizer, Tan’gun was of more consequence when it came to spiritual matters.

Tan’gun and Regional Identity

As mentioned, people from regions associated with the Tan’gun myth had a stake in elevating Tan’gun as a figure of nationwide import as this would boost their own standings. For example, Yu Kwan and his nephew Yu Sanul who both had petitioned for government offerings at the Samsŏng Shrine traced their ancestral seat to Munhwa prefecture where the shrine was located. Indeed, Tan’gun was closely tied to the northwestern region of the peninsula, as Mount Myohyang, Tan’gun’s place of origin, P’yŏngyang, Tan’gun’s first capital, and Kangdong Prefecture, the location of Tan’gun’s grave were all located there. The regional elite sought to use these links to its advantage especially in efforts to counter the regional discrimination they were subjected to due to the north’s frontier location and hence perceived backwardness. One example is the scholar Yi Sihang (1672-1736) who stressed the North’s ties to Tan’gun, Kija, and Koguryŏ, amplifying the region’s prominent role in Korean history while boosting its regional identity. Hence, two forces were at play at the same time as the significance of local elements was contingent upon their roles in the national imagination. Certainly, Yi Sihang emphasized Kija more in his official writings, reflecting a larger trend to appeal to the central elite and emphasize the northwest’s deep cultural foundations. In his private texts, however, Yi seemed to have been more enamored by Tan’gun, expressing a long-held desire to trace the steps of Korea’s founding father and thus somehow get in touch with him. In particular, Yi writes

about his moving, almost magical-realist ascent to a Tan’gun Terrace (Tan’gundae) on Mount Myohyang, which along with a Tan’gun Cave (Tan’gun’gul) on the same mountain had become associated with the mythical founder sometime in the latter half of the Choson dynasty. In this regard, Tan’gun did much to stimulate the imagination of locals, becoming an intricate part of their regional identity.

Practical Learning and Tan’gun

The late eighteenth and nineteenth century also saw a rise of scholarship that was more open to Western knowledge and ready to critique established worldviews. This type of scholarship is often retrospectively referred to as Sirhak, or Practical Learning. Many of the scholars considered to be part of this school shared the kind of inquisitive attitude that had also been apparent in An Chŏngbok, a member of this group, who had been highly critical of how Tan’gun had been depicted. One example is Yi Ik (1681-1763) who showed deep interest in Western science and technology that Koreans came in contact with through China. Knowledge of the wider world also enabled him to critique the deeply entrenched Sino-centric worldview and argue that it was not correct to value Chinese culture over everything else as China was only one small part of the entire world. However, this did not result in a jingoistic emphasis on Tan’gun. On the contrary, Yi’s critical reasoning made him highly skeptical of Tan’gun-related records as he continued to refer to Chosŏn as the land of Kija, acknowledging Korea’s indebtedness to

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82 Sun Joo Kim 2013, 149-151.
83 For instance, the eighteenth-century scholar Kim Chongsu (1728-1799) narrates his visit to the Tan’gun Cave on Mount Myohyang. Kim Chongsu, Mongojip [Mongo Kim Chongsu’s collected works] (Mongo Kŭmgong yŏnbo 1, yŏnbo, Yŏngjo 37nyŏn (1761) 5 wŏl). ITKC online version at http://db.itkc.or.kr.
84 Kim T’aehŭi 2009, 137.
Chinese civilization. This entailed that cracks in the Sino-centric worldview did not automatically lead to a significant valorization of Tan’gun and dissociation from Kija.

Another example is the famous scholar and inventor Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836) who was equally open to Western ideas and even went so far as to convert to Catholicism although he eventually backtracked later on. Influenced by Kojŭnghak, or Evidential Learning, he also shared a dedication to rigorous documentary archeology that was popular among sectors of the literati at the time. In an investigation of Korean historical territory, Chŏng examines the origins of the name “Chosŏn” and concludes that this was in fact the former name of P’yŏngyang, which, as he emphasizes, was the site of Kija’s capital. In offering this account, Chŏng was completely bypassing Tan’gun, ignoring the account according to which it was him who had given Korea the name Chosŏn. This was because Chŏng saw the link between Chosŏn and Kija as much better supported by early Chinese records. In fact, he actively severed any ties between Tan’gun and the city of P’yŏngyang as he found no evidence for this in Chinese sources. This allowed him to argue that the association of the name Wanggŏm, which in Chŏng’s view was an alternate moniker for the city, with Tan’gun was a later fabrication. In this way, a commitment to rigorous philological examination led critical-minded scholars such as Chŏng to deconstruct aspects of the Tan’gun myth that had heretofore not been put under much scrutiny. With the rise of scholarship leaning toward the practical, criticisms of Tan’gun had also become stronger.

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87 Ibid., 7-8.
Another channel through which to gauge the evolving perceptions of Tan’gun is the discourse on his tomb. One of the first mentions of a grave belonging to Tan’gun appeared in the late fifteenth-century *Tongguk Yŏji Sŭngnam* (*Geographical Survey of the Eastern Country*), a study of Chosŏn’s territory. The text describes a grave assumed to belong to Tan’gun located in P’yŏngyang county’s Kangdong prefecture with a circumference of about 410 feet (*ch’ŏk*). The text makes clear that this was based on hearsay and withholds any judgment on the grave’s authenticity.  

However, by the first half of the sixteenth century, the link between Tan’gun and the grave became more entrenched. Especially in the writings by Yu Hŭiryŏng (1480-1552), Tan’gun is endowed with a great deal of historical detail, and the grave was part of it. Many of the facts Yu lists were already in circulation at the time: that Tan’gun had married and produced a son, Puru; that he had built the Ch’amsŏngdan and made offerings to heaven; and that he had ordered his three sons to build a nearby fort. What was new, however, was that Yu added as fact the notion that Tan’gun, contrary to the myth, had died and was buried in Kangdong prefecture, and that it was his descendants who fled from Kija and relocated the capital. Thus, the grave functioned as a means of historicizing Tan’gun as a mortal with a regular life-span.

However, the genuineness of Tan’gun’s grave continued to be controversial. Hŏ Mok and Hong Manjong who were positively inclined toward Tan’gun accepted the grave as authentic, while a number of other scholars cited reports of the grave without expressing their personal opinions. However, whereas Hŏ believed Tan’gun to have died after an elongated life-span,

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89 Ibid., 207-9.
Hong’s position was trickier since he had accepted Tan’gun’s transformation into a mountain spirit, hence making the existence of a grave rather contradictory. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the pro-Tan’gun grave group also encountered some internal problems as another grave began to be promoted as belonging to Tan’gun alongside the old one. Overall, however, skepticism toward the grave(s) prevailed, and Kim Sŏnghwan estimates that the majority of intellectuals rejected reports of Tan’gun’s grave as unfounded.\(^91\) As discussed, many scholars had acknowledged Tan’gun as a historical figure despite disbelief in the mythical elements of his story. To these individuals, the existence of Tan’gun’s grave would not have been entirely unreasonable. What they took issue with, however, was the lack of convincing evidence, since the reports of the grave were based on local myth. This was reflected, for instance, in the theories by Kim Chŏngho (ca. 1804-1866) who argued that the grave in question merely belonged to a king from Koguryŏ, and not Tan’gun.\(^92\)

The debates surrounding Tan’gun’s grave also reached the government and by the late seventeenth century, Yi Inyŏp (1656-1710) recommended that the state conduct maintenance on the site. By 1739, Tan’gun’s alleged grave as well as those of other important figures such as Kija were repaired and used for ritual offerings. The government continued to look after the site for a while, although in most cases this occurred alongside maintenance of the graves of other founders and kings. In this respect, while Tan’gun was considered to be part of this group of notables, no special treatment was given to him. Especially Kija’s grave was being administered on a higher state level, suggesting that Tan’gun was again playing a subordinate role.\(^93\) Further, the veneration of Tan’gun’s grave seems to have been inconsistent as by the late eighteenth

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\(^91\) Ibid., 20.
\(^92\) Ibid.
\(^93\) Ibid., 26.
century, the site had fallen into disrepair again: An official lamented to King Chŏngjo (r. 1776–1800) that the grave had been neglected and that locals had been using the site to gather firewood and graze cows. The official found this state of affairs unacceptable, as he considered Tan’gun the first sage to establish culture and propriety in Korea. Although the official acknowledged that there were doubts about the grave’s authenticity particularly if Tan’gun’s transformation into mountain spirit were to be believed, he still argued it should be honored properly since the legendary Yellow Emperor was also commemorated with a tomb that contained his shoe. The implication was that even if the grave did not contain Tan’gun’s actual remains, they still might contain objects that were related to him. In response, the king agreed that it was lamentable that there were neither guards nor a tomb stone at the site, revealing that the grave had been nothing more than a nameless mound with no regular oversight. However, the king also regretted that there was no clear documentation of the authenticity of the grave, and that unfortunately, ritual offerings could not be resumed. While the conflicted king ordered the site to be guarded, a tomb stone was not erected, suggesting that misgivings about the grave’s authenticity remained. In this way, it seems that despite the government’s effort to maintain the grave, its commitment was rather lukewarm. As will be discussed in following chapters, Tan’gun’s grave only escaped limbo in the modern era, especially in the colonial period when a memorial was erected at the site, and then later in 1993 when the North Korean government finally announced a grand excavation of Tan’gun’s tomb.

The Question of Tan’gun in Folk Beliefs

So far, the focus has largely been on the discourse surrounding Tan’gun, thus giving more weight to the views of intellectuals and officials. This begs a difficult question: to what

94 Chŏngjo Sillok [Veritable records of King Chongjo] Vol. 22, 1786.10.9. Also, Kim Sŏnhwan 2008, 27.
extent, then, did the figure of Tan’gun permeate the practices of the regular folk? This is an important question as the Taejonggyo presented itself as a successor of such popular practices of Tan’gun worship. As mentioned earlier, the Samsŏng Shrine, which was built in honor of Hwanin, Hwanung and Tan’gun had been maintained outside the state’s purview, suggesting that Tan’gun had played some sort of role in the folk beliefs and practices of the area. More specifically, Tan’gun, or whatever entity evolved into Tan’gun, may have been revered as a local ancestral spirit, although it is not clear how far back this practice went. Due to the dearth of sources, it is difficult to say much more about the perception of Tan’gun from below.

Nonetheless, scholars have offered a number of arguments to support the notion that Tan’gun played a significant role in folk practices. One example is the notion that Korean potters that had been forcefully taken to Japan during the Hideyoshi invasions (1592–1598) had set up a Tan’gun shrine called Tamayama Jinja in a village in Kagoshima prefecture, Kyūshū. If true, this would suggest that a tradition of Tan’gun worship had been engrained in parts of the lower strata of Korean society prior to the late sixteenth century.95 This story has also become common lore reported in the Korean media today. However, the view is not undisputed since No Sŏnghwan, for instance, argues that the divinity worshipped at the Korean shrine was initially a vague Koryŏ dynasty deity and only later was identified as Tan’gun as the Japanese grew more aware of him. While the Tongguk T’onggam was published in Japan in the seventeenth century, allowing the Japanese to develop an awareness of Tan’gun, scholars argue that it was around the mid-nineteenth century that the divinity of the shrine came to be firmly understood to be Tan’gun. Further, none of the other numerous shrines that are related to kidnapped Korean craftsmen or

95 Sŏ Yongdae 1999, 70.
ancient Korean migrants from the Three Kingdoms seem to have enshrined Tan’gun, making this particular shrine indeed a very unusual case.\(^{96}\)

Another example of Tan’gun’s purported role in folk beliefs is the argument that he had been deeply embedded in the Korean shamanist tradition. Supporters of this line of thinking base their views on a text called *Mudang Naeryŏk* (*History of Shamans*) which they assume was composed in 1885, prior to the rise of the modern discourses of Tan’gun. The text offers a brief origin story of Korean shamanism while also describing over a dozen shamanistic rites (*kut*) alongside pictoral representations. Although practices are depicted to have degenerated from their original forms, Tan’gun is presented not only as the originator of shamanism, but also as the object of worship in several of the rituals.\(^{97}\) Based on this text, scholars argue that Tan’gun had been perceived as a significant pillar of the shamanist tradition possibly even much earlier than the nineteenth century.\(^{98}\) However, contrary to this scholarship, the *Mudang Naeryŏk* actually seems to have been written in the earlier half of the twentieth century, likely the 1920s or 1930s, as it uses concepts that had not existed before. One example is the term “sin’gyo,” that is, “divine religion” which came to be used to refer to an original Korean spirituality in the colonial period, while another is the notion of National Foundation Day (the third day of the tenth month of the lunar calendar) which was developed by the Taejonggyo to commemorate Tan’gun’s establishment of Old Chosŏn. Further, this kind of “ethnographic” observation of shamanistic rituals is also something that became practiced in the colonial period.\(^{99}\) In this respect, it seems

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\(^{96}\) See No Sŏnghwan, “Ilbon ŭi sin i toen Chosŏn ŭi Tan’gun: Oksan Sinse ŭi chesin i Tan’gun iranŭn insik ŭi chaego” [Chosŏn’s Tan’gun who became a Japanese deity: reconsidering the notion that Tan’gun is the deity of the Tamayama Shrine], *Ilbon Sasang* 26 (2014.6): 3-26. On a more comprehensive study of Korea-related shrines in Japan, see Sin Chongwŏn et al., *Ilbon Sinse e Mosyŏjin Han’guk ŭi Sin* [Korean gods who have been enshrined in Japanese shrines] (Seoul: Minsogwŏn, 2014).


\(^{98}\) For an example, see Sassa Mitsuki, 22.

\(^{99}\) See Sŏ Yŏngdae, “Mudang Naeryŏk sojae Tan’gun kwallyŏn kisa ŭi kŏmt’o” [An examination of the Mudang Naeryŏk’s articles related to Tan’gun], *Minjok Munhwa Nonch’ong* 59 (2015.4), 37-93. Initially, Sŏ had accepted
much more likely that the Mudang Naeryŏk was composed after Tan’gun had been elevated to national prominence in the early twentieth century, meaning that the text cannot be used to substantiate Tan’gun’s prominence in a prior folk tradition. While nowadays Tan’gun has indeed become a more visible part in shamanic rituals often by being identified as Sansin, “Mountain God,” who had traditionally assumed a prominent position in folk beliefs, this is more a testament to the malleability and openness of the shamanic pantheon, rather than evidence of an age-old tradition. After all, even figures such as Park Chung Hee (1917-1979) and his second wife Yuk Yōngsu (1925-1974) are revered nowadays as deities in shamanic rituals. Further, the effort to graft Tan’gun onto the shamanic tradition seems to have been a conscious effort beginning in the colonial era to structure and unify the chaotic pantheon and recast shamanism as a national tradition. The Mudang Naeryŏk can be seen as part of this effort.

While it is highly questionable whether kidnapped potters or the Mudang Naeryŏk can provide insight into how Tan’gun was perceived on the folk level, there is evidence that Tan’gun was employed as a rhetorical device in order to justify at least one uprising, which is Yi P’ilche’s (1825-1871) rebellion of 1871. Yi, the leader of the rebellion, associated Tan’gun with dynastic change, arguing that his spirit had been embodied through Emperor Gaozu, the founder of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), and later again through the Hongwu Emperor who had established the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Tan’gun’s spirit had again returned to the world, Yi

the notion that the text originated from 1885, although he reconsidered his view upon closer inspection of the text. For his original view, see Sŏ Yŏngdae, “Tan’gun sungbae ŭi yŏksa” [The history of Tan’gun worship], Chŏngsin Munhwa Yŏn’gu 32 (1987.5), 20.

100 Hogarth, Korean Shamanism, 132.
101 Laurel Kendall, Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 30-31. Kendall also notes that even in 1994, Shamanic organizations sought to consciously propagate among shamans the notion of Tan’gun as the primary God and founder of the shamanic tradition.
continued, suggesting that he himself was its next incarnation and hence the legitimate founder of a new dynasty. In fact, Yi argued that he was the recipient of the Mandate of Heaven and professed that it was his goal to establish a new Middle Kingdom, that is, China. In this way, the figure of Tan’gun was also fused into the millenarian movements and rebellions of the nineteenth century. It must be noted, however, that Tan’gun did not constitute the core of Yi’s thinking, but rather a smaller complement to his ideas that were largely based on the geomantic prophesies popular at the time. Further, considering Yi’s eccentricity, it is not clear how wide the appeal of Tan’gun as millenarian figure actually was. In fact, this may have been more of an outlier as there is little evidence that Tan’gun was employed in the many other uprisings and rebellions of the nineteenth century. In this respect, Tan’gun’s role in folk beliefs remains rather elusive, with much pointing to the possibility that his role in the imaginary of the regular folk was limited.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the various discourses on Tan’gun from his first known appearances in the thirteenth century to the late Chŏson period. Tan’gun was the subject of many different histories, poems, songs, and geographical studies—too many in number to cover in just one chapter. In this respect, it must be noted that this survey is not exhaustive. Mindful of the limited area covered, this chapter has argued that Tan’gun continuously changed over time with new elements being gradually added. After his beginnings in mythology, Tan’gun underwent a process of historicization, although in certain quarters there were efforts to re-emphasize his

104 A good overview is in Yŏn Kapsu, Kojongdae Chŏngch’i Pyŏndong Yŏn’gu [A study of political changes during the time of king Kojong] (Seoul: Ichisa, 2008).
mythical aspects and endow him with an increasing number of spiritual attributes. Indeed, he was many things to many people, leading to contesting ways of appropriating the founding father. Especially in the latter half of the Chosŏn period, Tan’gun appears more frequently, suggesting a rise in his prominence.105

At the same time, it also needs to be noted that there was still a significant amount of skepticism toward many of the details of Tan’gun’s accounts and that he was still subordinate to Kija. Indeed, it was the Chinese sage that stimulated the imaginations of Koreans the most with his ever-expanding lore. In this respect, it would be false to argue that Tan’gun was on his way to becoming the foremost national symbol, much less the God of the Korean nation. Still, elements were already in place that if combined properly could be used for reimagining Tan’gun in new ways: his divine origins, his association with the worship of heaven, and his elevation to the level of civilizing sage-king offered much material to work with. As will be shown, the transformation of Tan’gun, however, also required the impact from outside—more specifically, Japanese and Western views of Tan’gun, as well as contact with foreign religions.

The story that has unfolded so far also offers a stark contrast to the present as Kija whose lore continued to grow and push him to new heights in the Chosŏn period has now virtually vanished from Korean historical narratives. The account of the Chinese sage’s rule over Korea has been subjected to much criticism in the modern period and debunked to be a myth: after all, documentary evidence indicates a gradual process of invention of the lore of Kija, while on the other hand, archaeological evidence to support his presence in Korea is nonexistent.106 In his stead, it is Tan’gun that has come to reign supreme within the Korean imaginary. Thus, as one

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105 See Ha Yunsŏp 2013.
myth was deconstructed, another took its place. The following chapters will illustrate how Tan’gun and Kija’s fortunes diverged so drastically.
Chapter 2
Early Japanese Appropriations of Tan’gun

The Tan’gun myth was not the sole possession of Koreans. In fact, by the late sixteenth century, it was disseminated to Japan where it took on a life of its own, accruing new layers as Japanese thinkers sought to make sense of the myth and reconcile it with Japanese knowledge. By the early twentieth century, Japanese understandings of the myth would filter back into Korea, thus inspiring, challenging, and provoking Korean efforts to reclaim their founding father. This chapter hence looks at the myth’s trajectory in Japan from its first introduction there to the early Meiji period as these discourses would become the basis for modern Japanese understandings of the myth.

Early Encounters

The Japanese encounter with Tan’gun can be traced back to the Hideyoshi invasions of the Korean peninsula between 1592 and 1598. While exchange between Korea and Japan had existed before that, it is unclear whether this allowed the Japanese to develop a familiarity with Tan’gun. During the war, however, there is specific documentation that some Japanese observers had become aware of Korea’s founding father. For instance, the Buddhist monk Shukuru Shungaku, who accompanied the daimyō Kikkawa Hiroie during the invasion, kept a diary in which he mentions Tan’gun. Connecting the contemporary military campaign to the legend of Empress Jingū’s conquest of Korea – a common theme employed to justify the Hideyoshi invasions¹ – Shukuru also rhetorically links Korea’s military defeat to the demise of

Korea’s legendary founders as he asks where Tan’gun’s remains have gone and refers to Korea’s defeat as the fall of the house of Kija. At one point, Shukuru also describes present-day Chosŏn as the “land of Tan’gun” (Dankun koku) which stands in contrast to how Koreans tended to view their own country, that is, as the land of Kija. While the term “land of Tan’gun” (Tan’gun chi guk or Tan’gun’guk) was not unheard of in Korea, it was usually used to refer to the state-formation that Tan’gun had established, and not contemporary Chosŏn. In this regard, Shukuru had rather casually developed the notion of the “land of Tan’gun” as a supra-dynastic entity.2

Another monk, Zetaku, who accompanied Nabeshima Naoshige, daimyō of the Hizen domain, during the military campaign, also kept a diary of his time in Korea in which he offers a brief sketch of the peninsula’s history beginning with Tan’gun. In doing so, he was quoting from the Tongmong Sŏnsŭp (Primer for Children), a Korean textbook for elementary-level students which was most likely captured during the invasion. Written in Classical Chinese, the Tongmong Sŏnsŭp taught Confucian ethics and also briefly discussed the legendary Chinese sage-kings as well as Korean history starting with Tan’gun, hence Zetaku’s own mention of the mythical founding father.3 The historical narrative of the Tongmong Sŏnsŭp itself was a simplified version of that of the Tongguk T’onggam and devoid of many mythical elements such as Tan’gun’s inordinate longevity or his transformation into a mountain spirit.4 In this respect, it seems less likely that Japanese observers would have taken much issue with the figure of Tan’gun. Still, the book failed to become the main carrier to disseminate knowledge of Tan’gun as the book was rewritten for a Japanese audience and republished by the end of the seventeenth century. Titled

3 Ch’oe Kwan and Kim Sidŏk, 125.
4 Pak Semu, Tongmong Sŏnsŭp [Primer for Children] (Kyech’o, 1913), 20-1.
Shinkoku Dōmō Senshū (Primer for Children of the Divine Country), it replaced the section on Korean history and Tan’gun with a history of Japan beginning with the Age of the Gods. The rest of the book including Confucian teachings and the discussions of ancient Chinese history was kept as it was. In this respect, although the Tongmong Sōnsūp initially worked to familiarize Japanese observers with Tan’gun, once the Japanese version was out, it ceased to perform such a function.

Capturing the Tongguk T’onggam

In fact, it was the Tongguk T’onggam (Comprehensive Mirror of the Eastern Country) itself that became the foremost vehicle for disseminating knowledge about Korean history and Tan’gun in Japan. During the Hideyoshi invasions, Japanese forces captured at least two copies of the Tongguk T’onggam among a wide range of other spoils of war. This work, as discussed in the previous chapter, was the official government-published history of Korea completed in the late fifteenth century. It covered Korea’s history from the time of Tan’gun to the end of the Koryŏ dynasty and was the result of a massive government project encompassing fifty-six volumes. This became the basis for developing an awareness of Tan’gun particularly among Japanese intellectuals who engaged with Korean matters after official diplomatic relations between the two countries had been re-established in 1607.

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5 Matsushita Kenrin, Shinkoku Dōmō Senshū [The Divine Country’s Primer for Children] (1683), 31-2.
6 This is further manifested in historical works such as the Ishō Nihonden by Matsushita Kenrin which was a compilation of Japan-related records from China and Korea and included the author’s critique of these sources. While he makes use of 15 different Korean publications including the Samguk Sagi, the Tongguk T’onggam is by far the source he discusses the most. See Matsushita Kenrin, Ishō Nihonden [Treatise of Japan under Foreign Titles] (1693).
7 Kim Sidŏk, “Zaihakken sareta Shinkan Dōgoku Tsūgan no hangi kara kinsei gunki o kangaeru” [Considering Military Records based on the woodblock of the rediscovered Shinkan Dōgoku Tsūgan], Bungaku (2015 March/April), 153-166.
The most prominent example is Hayashi Razan (1583-1657), the influential Neo-Confucian scholar who also served as tutor and advisor to the first four shōgun of the Tokugawa Bakufu. After the resumption of formal relations with Japan, the Chosŏn government dispatched a total of twelve diplomatic missions called t’ongsinsa, usually to congratulate the inauguration of a new shōgun. The missions were sent between 1607 and 1811 with each delegation numbering somewhere between 300 and 500 members. Hayashi Razan was involved in each of the first six missions (1607-1656), receiving and interacting with emissaries from Korea. Due to the language barrier, person-to-person conversations were largely conducted in Classical Chinese writings. Although this may have been cumbersome at the time, it also allowed many of the conversations to be preserved, offering detailed insight into not only the formal, but also more casual interactions that Hayashi and other Japanese scholars had with their Korean counterparts. Aside from these personal encounters, Hayashi also studied Neo-Confucian literature and history books from Korea, such as the captured Tongguk T’onggam which was the source from which he drew much of his information on Tan’gun.8 His attitude toward Korea was complex, as he showed reverence toward Korea’s Confucian tradition while also regarding the country as historically subordinate to Japan, a widely shared view among his compatriots.9

As can be expected, Hayashi Razan had many questions about the Tan’gun myth and did not shy away from expressing his reservations in a questionnaire submitted to Korean delegates of the 1636 t’ongsinsa mission. First, he asked how it was possible for Tan’gun to have lived over a thousand years, and whether this transmission was perhaps due to the lack of detailed

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9 See Kim Sŏnhŭi, “17 segi ch’ogi-chunggi Hayashi Razan ŭi t’ajasang: Chosŏn t’ongsinsa wa ŭi p’iltam ŭl chungsim ŭro” [Hayashi Razan’s view of the Other in the early to mid-seventeenth century: with a focus on correspondences with the Chosŏn t’ongsinsa], Hanil Kwanggyesa Yŏn’gu 16 (2002.4), 61-88.
records in primitive times. He also wanted to know if Tan’gun’s line of descent could be traced
to the present, cautioning that a learned gentleman (*kunshi* in Japanese or *kunja* in Korean)
should not accept bizarre and deceitful stories. Hayashi further expressed curiosity as to why
ancient Chinese sources included no references to Tan’gun even in sections where they discussed
Old Chosŏn and the Three Han (Samhan) – logical places to mention him. In this way, Hayashi
went further in his critique of Tan’gun than many Koreans were willing to go despite their own
reservations about the myth. At the same time, Hayashi also turned his criticism toward Kija,
although to a lesser degree: while he did not reject the historicity of Kija, he remarked that the
story of him crossing into Korea with five thousand followers could not be identified in Chinese
records.  

While ancient Chinese sources had mentioned that Kija had indeed been enfeoffed
with the land of Chosŏn, his entrance into the country with a large entourage could only be found
in later Korean documents. In this way, Hayashi was identifying issues within Korean historical
texts that demanded more rigorous investigations. Unfortunately, it is unclear how the Korean
delegates responded. In fact, they may not have addressed these questions at all since Korean
emissaries frequently cut conversations short if they felt uncomfortable discussing sensitive
matters with outsiders.

Aside from this criticism, however, Hayashi was positively inclined toward Kija as is
evidenced in a poem which he wrote for the Korean emissary Pak An’gi during the 1643
*t’ongsinsa* mission. Focusing on his and his counterpart’s surnames, Hayashi suggested that there
was a symbolic affinity between two, even though establishing this connection required a rather

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10 Hayashi Razan, “Ki Chōsenkoku sankanshi” [Addressing Chosŏn’s samgwansa], *Hayashi Razan Zenshū* 14, ed. Kyōto Shisekikai (Ōsaka: Kōbunsha, 1930), 156.

complex process of association: The surname Hayashi (林), he argued, was adopted from the lineage of Bigan who, according to ancient Chinese sources, was a close associate of Kija. More specifically, both Bigan and Kija had suffered under the last king of the Shang dynasty, and along with another individual, the Viscount of Wei (Weizi), had been lauded by Confucius as constituting the three virtuous men of the dynasty.\(^\text{12}\) While Bigan was killed by the king in a cruel way, Kija fled to Korea, and Hayashi mused that Bigan’s spirit was accompanying Kija and his five thousand men as they crossed into the peninsula. In this regard, Hayashi was temporarily putting aside his doubts about Kija’s sizable entourage entering Korea. Meanwhile, according to lore, Bigan’s wife had gone into hiding in Mount Changlin (Changlinshan, 長林山), where she gave birth to a son who was given the surname Lin (林). This name was based on the location of his birth and at least according to Hayashi, later inspired his own ancestors to adopt the same surname (林, Hayashi in Japanese). The Korean surname Pak 朴, on the other hand, originated from the first king of Silla, Pak Hyŏkkôse, who could be regarded as a successor to Kija, leading Hayashi to ponder that Pak and Hayashi were connected in spirit.\(^\text{13}\) While Hayashi’s use of Kija and his five thousand men in this case was for rhetorical effect, this suggests that Kija was more acceptable as a historic figure and could function as a symbolic point of convergence for Confucian-minded scholars of the two countries.

This way of thinking is further evidenced in the fact that Hayashi was favorably disposed toward the notion that the Japanese imperial lineage had descended from China. There is indication that in ancient times, some Japanese had considered themselves to be descendants of Wu Taibo, a Chinese prince who similarly to Kija, was also lauded by Confucius for his virtue.

\(^{12}\) *Analects* 18:1.

\(^{13}\) Hayashi Razan, “Gaikoku zōtō chū” [Amid exchange with foreigners], *Hayashi Razan Zenshū* 48, 515.
According to lore, Taibo ceded the throne to his younger brother and left China to live among barbarians, edify them and become their ruler, which some Japanese claimed illustrated his relocation to Japan and coincided with many elements of Japanese mythology of the imperial lineage. Hence, proponents of this line of thinking envisioned Emperor Jimmu, the founder of the Japanese imperial house, as a descendant of Wu Taibo’s lineage.\textsuperscript{14} The theory of Chinese origins of the imperial house had been highly controversial, and even Hayashi struggled to express it publicly.\textsuperscript{15} Nonetheless, he was the one who revived it, allowing Confucian-minded scholars such as himself to claim a connection to Chinese civilization and offer a more historical explanation of the origins of Japan’s imperial line rather than simply accepting the myth of its direct descent from the gods. The parallels to the story of Kija who had equally left China to live among barbarians, edify them and become their king, also indicate potential common ground between Korea and Japan. Tan’gun, on the other hand, did not play any such role. His time to serve as point of contact between Korea and Japan was yet to come.

The Publication of the \textit{Tongguk T’onggam} in Japan

The \textit{Tongguk T’onggam} was published in Kyoto in 1667 by Tokugawa Mitsukuni (1628–1701) who was the head of the prominent Mito domain and a grandson of Tokugawa Ieyasu. Mitsukuni had commissioned the compilation of the \textit{Dai Nihon Shi} (\textit{Great History of Japan}) in 1657, laying the foundation for the influential Mito school to emerge and become a major force in early modern Japan. While Mitsukuni initially possessed only an incomplete version of the \textit{Tongguk T’onggam} captured during the Hideyoshi invasions, over time, the missing parts were

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\textsuperscript{15} Brownlee, 26.
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added with the help of another captured copy and by 1667, a finished version was ready to be published as *Shinkan Dōgoku Tsūgan* (*New Print of the Comprehensive History of the Eastern Country*). The foreword to the Japanese print was written by none other than Hayashi Razan’s son Hayashi Gahō (1618-1680) who had followed into his father’s footsteps as Neo-Confucian scholar with deep interest in Korea. Although it makes only the most standard mention of Tan’gun as the starting point of Korean history, the foreword contains a number of noteworthy comments. For one, Hayashi Gahō regurgitates the main tenor of the time according to which Korea is considered to have been a vassal to Japan ever since Empress Jingū’s fabled invasion of the Korean peninsula. This view was already present in his father’s communications even though he was far from a close-minded jingoist. Gahō also took inspiration from his father’s view regarding the origins of the Japanese imperial lineage and argued that while Wu Taibo had founded Japan with his virtue, Kija had similarly established Korea with his humaneness, hence depicting a strong affinity between the two countries as they were both rooted in ancient Chinese civilization. It is interesting that such a comment could be included in the foreword of this publication, considering the political tendencies and fervent imperial loyalism of the publisher Tokugawa Mitsukuni who was highly averse to the idea that the imperial line had descended from China.

However, what is of greatest significance in this foreword is that Hayashi Gahō employed the myth of Susanoo, brother of Japan’s ancestral deity Amaterasu, and applied it to Korea. While there were several versions of the myth of Susanoo’s descent to earth in the *Kojiki*

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17 See Hayashi Gahō, “Shinkan Dōgoku Tsūgan Jo” [Foreword to the New Print of the *Dōgoku Tsūgan*], *Shinkan Dōgoku Tsūgan* (1667), 3-14.
18 Brownlee, 33.
Records of Ancient Matters) (812) and Nihon Shoki (Chronicles of Japan) (820), Hayashi Gahō held on to a version included in the Nihon Shoki according to which Susanoo had first arrived in Korea and operated there before moving on to Japan. More importantly, Gahō argued that Susanoo’s greatness transcended that of the founders of the three Korean kingdoms Koguryŏ, Silla, and Paekche, and even went so far as to speculate that Susanoo was in fact the founding father of the Three Han, or in other words, Korea. Granted, the notion that Koreans may also have descended from the gods and hence shared common ancestry with the Japanese seems to have been around for centuries. The fourteenth century writer Kitabatake Chikafusa (1293-1354), for instance, considered the theory plausible, but also noted that it was rejected long ago. A more muted view that simply argued that Korea was founded by Susanoo without discussing its implications had also been in existence since at least the fourteenth century. In this regard, Hayashi Gahō was reviving a rather minor theory and giving it prominent support. He even lamented that Koreans were not aware of this connection and suggested that this knowledge should be disseminated back to Korea. By positing Susanoo as the founder of Korea, he was endowing Korea with an alternate origin story, although he did not clarify how Tan’gun factored into this. For now, the narrative of Susanoo’s founding of Korea contradicted the myth of Tan’gun unless a way could be found to somehow make the two stories compatible. What is noteworthy is that such a nascent conceptualization of the common origins of Korea and

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20 While different understandings exist, the term “Three Han” is generally used to refer to the proto-states that preceded the Three Kingdoms. The term also came to be more casually used to refer to Korea as a supra-dynastic entity as early as the Koryŏ period. For a more detailed discussion, see Remco E. Breuker, “The Three in One, the One in Three: the Koryŏ Three Han as a Pre-modern Nation,” Journal of Inner and East Asian Studies 2(2) (2005.12), 144-167.
21 Mark Hudson, 25.
22 Kwŏn Tongu, “Shinwa kaishaku kara yomitoru Sankan ninshiki henka to Susanoo” [Changes of perceptions of the Three Han and Susanoo based on interpretations of mythology], Ilbonhak Yŏn’gu 45 (2015.5), 108.
23 Hayashi Gahō, 12-3.
Japan was nurtured by Confucian scholars such as Gahō. While in the modern era, it was imperialists and Japanese nativists that were most passionate about this idea, at this stage, such conceptions were fomented by individuals who were committed to the notion of ancient Chinese civilization as a universal bond.

Of significance was also the fact that now that the *Tongguk T’onggam* was published in Japan, it was able to spread an awareness of Korea’s origin myth to a wider audience. For instance, during the 1682 *t’ongsinsa* mission, Sakai Tadakuni (1651-1683), a young *daimyō* from the Awa-Katsuyama domain, demonstrated some knowledge of Tan’gun although he was not officially engaged in diplomatic duties. Noting the similarities between Korean and Chinese official attire, he asked the Korean delegate Hong Set’ae (1653-1725) since when Koreans had worn this type of garb and used current ritual practices. Hong responded in a rather cavalier fashion that Koreans had done so since the time of Tan’gun while adding that it was in recent times that these customs had become more widespread. Sakai, however, was not satisfied with this answer, pointing out that Tan’gun’s reign corresponded to the time of Emperor Yao, and that even in China, ritual and attire had changed over time. How could only Korea have maintained the same ritual standards since then? At this point, however, Hong was too busy composing poems for his Japanese hosts, a practice common at the time, and avoided responding to the inquisitive lord.24

While this episode suggests an increasing awareness of Tan’gun, Kija also continued to be the subject of conversations much in the vein of Hayashi Razan’s earlier discussion. During the same mission in 1682, one Japanese scholar noted that Koreans considered Kija, known as one of the three virtuous men of the Shang dynasty, to have ruled Korea and wondered if his

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surname still survived. Hong Set’ae answered that it had been thousands of years since Kija’s reign and that while the surname had changed over time, his descendants still existed, although he did not offer any concrete evidence. The Japanese official further remarked that he had heard that Koreans still performed rituals from ancient China, and asked if three year mourning was practiced. Hong’s response was that from king to commoner, the practice was adhered to ubiquitously, again portraying Korea as a land of ancient, unchanging rituals, although not without employing some hyperbole. The Japanese interlocutor also expressed interest in his guest’s headgear, a kat, which as Hong explained was commonly worn during rituals and official duties. Considering the overall conversation, it seems that the Japanese official’s question about Kija was less an expression of incredulity toward Kija’s Korean connection, and more part of an effort to satisfy his curiosity about Korean rituals and cultural standards.25 This also illustrates that Korea’s own avowed connection to Kija and Chinese civilization could become the object of esteem in the eyes of Japanese scholars of Confucian persuasion.

Some trends: Avoiding Tan’gun

At the same time, not every Japanese familiar with Korean history and the Tongguk T’onggam was as amicably disposed toward the country. Another official involved in the reception of the same Korean delegation in 1682 ranted about how Koreans were trying to deceive the Japanese by claiming to not be subordinate to the Qing while still paying tribute and also using Qing era names. In fact, the official argued that civilized countries had their own era names, implying that Korea was not one of them. Referring to the Tongguk T’onggam, he argued

that it basically narrated the history of Korean subjugation to various foreign powers and that Koreans were hence lying to the Japanese by exaggerating their international standing. In contrast, he emphasized that the Japanese had been using their own era names, official attire and ritual practices, and thus had maintained their independence throughout history.  

This also implied that for him, the Korean use of ritual practices similar to those of China was a sign of cultural subservience and lack of independence rather than something to be envied or lauded. At the same time, however, he remained completely silent regarding Tan’gun even though his knowledge of the *Tongguk T’onggam* suggested that he was most likely aware of him. Whatever the reason, this case shows that while an awareness of the *Tongguk T’onggam* grew over time, there was also a tendency to read it not on its own merits, but in a way that accorded with preconceived notions of Korean history. Especially the lack of reference to Tan’gun suggests that Korea’s founding father may not have fit properly into conventional Japanese understandings of Korean history.

Another example that illustrates this kind of reading of Korean history is the prominent Neo-Confucian philosopher and botanist Kaibara Ekiken (1630–1714) who aside from his main research interests also compiled a wide range of information on surrounding countries including Korea. Writing in 1702, he acknowledged that Korean culture and laws were deeply influenced by China – something which could only be a positive thing as Kaibara himself was proud of Japan’s participation in the Chinese cultural sphere. Nonetheless, his overall assessment of Koreans was rather negative as he considered them lacking in character and bravery. He further ascribed to the mainstream view according to which Korea had been a tributary state to Japan since Empress Jingū’s fabled invasion of Silla. While Kaibara indeed made reference to the

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26 Ibid., 22-3.
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*Tongguk T'onggam*, he was thus ignoring its narrative which did not contain any information on this legendary expedition. 27 Kaibara also made no reference to Tan’gun, joining the ranks of others who chose not to mention him. Of course, Kaibara’s writings on Korea were intended to be nothing more than a collection of information and hearsay and not an organized attempt to write Korean history. Nonetheless, his perspective mirrored a larger trend among scholars who were not keen on discussing Tan’gun, whatever the reasons may have been.

This kind of avoidance of Tan’gun was also manifested in a more in-depth engagement with Korean history by another Neo-Confucian scholar, Muro Kyūsō (1658-1734). Interacting with Korean delegates of the 1711 *t'ongsinsa* mission, Muro wrote an extensive poem encompassing 440 lines that narrated the history of Korea from its beginnings to the Hideyoshi invasions and more recent diplomatic missions to Japan. Overall, Muro represented a more moderate view, as he did not mention Empress Jingū’s fabled conquest of Korea or portray Korea as a tributary state to Japan, a view that many other Japanese scholars and officials did not shy away from expressing even to their Korean guests. 28 Despite a more favorable representation of Korea, however, Muro also did not simply accept Korean history as written by Koreans since he skipped over Tan’gun’s founding of Korea, stating that Tan’gun’s affairs were too far in the distant past to be included. Instead, Muro began Korea’s history with a fairly sympathetic narration of Kija whose historicity he considered to be much more well-established. 29 Further, while Muro emphasized the state of Koguryŏ and its founder, King Tongmyŏng, he presented a filtered version of his origin story. According to myth, King Tongmyŏng had divine ancestry on

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his paternal side and was born from an egg. Muro’s version, however, mentioned only the maternal and human side of his family, omitting his father and the egg, and was thus completely devoid of any mythical elements. In this respect, a more general skepticism toward Korean mythology seems to have informed his approach to Korean history as well as his view of Tan’gun. Whereas in King Tongmyŏng’s case, however, there was still a substantial historical side to the story that could be salvaged, it seems that in Tan’gun’s case, Muro saw little that was historically tenable once the myth was taken out.

Granted, Tokugawa-era scholars especially those steeped in Confucian learning such as Hayashi Razan or Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725) were also skeptical of the Japanese myths of the Age of the Gods, suggesting that Tan’gun was not the only one to be met with a critical eye. However, aside from the supernatural elements within the Tan’gun myth, it may also have been the very claim that Korea was founded much earlier than Japan that was potentially perplexing, making it difficult for Japanese scholars to make sense of the story, as was the case with Muro. Thus, ignoring Tan’gun may have been the simplest choice.

Diversification of Views

While this type of avoidance of Tan’gun seems to have been dominant in early modern Japan as only a minority of those who interacted with Koreans mentioned him, there were, of course, others who continued to discuss him. One example is Gion Nankai (1676-1751) who was much less reluctant to embrace Korea’s founding father. In a hyperbolic poem which he composed as a present for his Korean counterpart of the 1711 t’ongsinsa mission, he praised Korea’s cultural achievements and effusively commended Tan’gun and Kija. He exclaimed that

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30 See Brownlee 1997, 15-60.
31 Ibid., 157.
Tan’gun competed with the Creator in terms of antique origins, ascribing to Tan’gun an ancientness that reached back to the beginning of time. Gion also described Tan’gun and his lineage as having ruled Chosŏn with virtue, likening his achievements to those of the great Chinese sage kings. Further, he attributed to Tan’gun a benevolence on par with that of the God of Spring, and wisdom that allowed him to revive his state by relocating his capital as recounted in the myths. Finally, Gion also mused that Tan’gun’s spiritual energy had ascended high into the heavens, hence adding his own spin on the conventional narrative of Tan’gun’s transformation into mountain spirit. In this way, Gion was embracing the main elements of Tan’gun’s myth as presented in the Tongguk T’onggam, while adding much poetic flair, the likes of which only few Koreans had been able to produce. Kija is similarly showered with words of adulation for his virtue and cultural achievements. At the same time, this poem was intended as a present for Gion’s Korean guest, hence it is not clear to what extent he actually ascribed to such views. Nonetheless, this poem illustrates another take on Tan’gun amid a variety of different approaches.

Since the Hideyoshi invasions of the late sixteenth century, the Japanese had developed their own understandings of Tan’gun. Especially the publication of the Tongguk T’onggam in 1667 was a crucial factor in further spreading an awareness of Korea’s founding father. While there was a variety of views, in general, scholars regarded the Tan’gun myth with suspicion, as was the case even with individuals who were otherwise more positively inclined toward Korea. One should also be careful not to overstate the importance of Tan’gun in Japanese discourse, since he

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32 Ki T’aewan trans., Chosŏn Hugi T’ongsinsa P’iltam Ch’anghwajip Pŏnyŏk Ch’ongsŏ 16: Ch’ilga Ch’anghwa Chip [Translated Collection of Late-Chosŏn T’ongsinsa Correspondences 16: Correspondences of the Seven Families] (Seoul: Pogosa, 2014), 159.
occupied only a minor part in the overall discussions on Korea. Nonetheless even his absence in many debates can be of significance as it suggests the possibility that many Japanese may not have known what to make of him. After all, Korean history was generally viewed through a lens that emphasized Korea’s subjugation to Japan, a view which was so deeply entrenched that even Korean emissaries were reluctant to openly challenge it.\(^{33}\) Even more Korea-friendly scholars such as Hayashi Razan and Amenomori Hōshū (1668-1755) took as fact Empress Jingū’s invasion and subjugation of Korea.\(^{34}\) In this respect, it may have been difficult to incorporate Tan’gun into a framework that looked on Korea from a position of superiority, especially since Tan’gun’s establishment of Korea preceded that of Emperor Jinmu’s founding of Japan (660 BCE) by a significant margin. At the same time, the notion that Susanoo had descended to Korea had been around since the production of the *Nihon Shoki* in the early eighth century. Hayashi Gahō took up this view and expanded it, going so far as to argue that Susanoo was, in fact, the founder of Korea. Hence, by the late eighteenth century, a growing awareness of Tan’gun and the nascent idea of a Japanese deity possibly founding Korea were all present.

**Tan’gun as Japanese Deity**

By the end of the eighteenth century, a very different way of conceptualizing Tan’gun came to the surface. This was the notion that Tan’gun was in fact none other than Susanoo who according to the *Nihon Shoki* had descended to Korea. The idea that Susanoo was possibly the founder of Korea had already been in existence while an awareness of Tan’gun was continuing to grow as well. Against this backdrop, the debates on Tan’gun and Susanoo began to intersect,

\(^{33}\) Yi Hyesun 1996, 299.

\(^{34}\) Pae Kwamun, “Mot’oori Norinaga ŭi Chosŏn pŏng’gukkwan chaego – Kosagijŏn ŭi ‘Miyasukokuni’ rŭl chungsim ūro” [Reconsideration of Motoori Norinaga’s perception of Chosŏn as savage country—with a focus on the Kojikiden’s ‘vassal state’], *Journal of Japanese Language and Literature* 81(2) (2012.5), 50.
with attempts being undertaken to render the two myths compatible. Of course, this was facilitated by the fact that Susanoo also had been undergoing a constant process of reinterpretation – a testimony to the complexity and malleability of the Shinto pantheon. This warrants a closer look at the history of Susanoo.

A Chronology of Susanoo

From his earliest appearances in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, Susanoo has been a highly complex deity who defies any easy characterization. Banished from the world of the gods due to his cantankerous behavior and conflict with his sister, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, he descends to earth, where he is depicted as slaying a serpent in order to protect people. This sudden change in disposition and his depiction as both good and evil have led scholars to believe that the figure of Susanoo may in fact have resulted from a fusion of multiple deities and myths. On earth, Susanoo is said to have established his rule through his immediate descendants, although his lineage is ousted by Amaterasu who becomes the originator of Japan’s imperial line. While there are several versions of Susanoo’s descent to earth, according to one narrative included in the *Nihon Shoki*, he actually came down with his son Isotakeru to a place called Soshimori located in the state of Silla on the Korean peninsula. Soon, however, he declared that he did not want to reside in this land and moved on to the Japanese archipelago. His Korean connection, however, does not end there: in one version, the character “韓” (“kan” or “kara” in Japanese, “han” in Korean) which stands for Korea, appears in the name of the sword with which he slays the serpent (“蛇韓鋤之劍,” “Orochi no Karasabi no Tsurugi,” which can be translated as “Serpent-

36 For a more detailed breakdown of the different versions, see Gadeleva.
slaying Sword from Korea”). Further down in Susanoo’s lineage, one can also find the deity Karakami which can be translated as “Korean God,” again suggesting a strong connection to the peninsula. Many modern-day scholars, both Japanese and Korean, have argued that these references indicate that Susanoo was related to the influx of Korean migrants in ancient times as well as the culture and technology they brought with them such those related to iron. Even the Yasaka Shrine, built in Kyoto in 656 under the name Gion Shrine, currently acknowledges the account according to which the deity was brought over to Japan by an emissary from the Kingdom of Koguryō. Since these views, however, are the result of a long process of historical change, it is necessary to trace how perceptions of Susanoo have developed over time.

Indeed, Susanoo has changed continuously since his first known appearances. In the Kojiki, for instance, Susanoo does not descend to Korea, but directly to Japan, and it is only in the Nihon Shoki where mention is made of his descent to Korea. At the same time, even within the Nihon Shoki, his characterization ranges from impetuous youth to brave conqueror, indicating that he underwent a process of metamorphosis within the same text. While his complex character and the varying descriptions of him open up myriad possibilities for envisioning him in different ways, this also makes it difficult to identify how he was actually perceived in ancient times. Indeed, there is no conclusive evidence that in the beginning Susanoo was predominantly regarded as a foreign deity despite the references to Korea. For instance, in the ninth-century Shinsen Shōjiroku (New Selection and Record of Hereditary Titles and Family Names), the

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39 To view the Yasaka Shriners current position, see Yasaka Shrine Official Website: http://www.yasaka-jinja.or.jp/about/
court-commissioned genealogical record of over one thousand prominent families in ancient Japan, two clans trace their origins back to Susanoo, although both families are considered to hail from the Japanese archipelago. The over one hundred and fifty clans of Korean heritage included in the record generally listed Korean royalty as their ancestors, and not Susanoo.\footnote{Shinsen Shōjiroku [New selection and records of hereditary titles and family names], at http://kitagawa.la.coocan.jp/data/shoji.html. See entry number 566 and 1134 for Susanoo-related clans.} While there were indeed families of foreign origin that sought to improve their statuses by professing to be descendants of Japanese gods that had gone abroad (just as a large number of Japanese clans claimed divine ancestry as well),\footnote{John S. Brownlee, “Ideological Control in Ancient Japan,” Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques 14(1) (1987.4): 113-133, 128.} the current evidence does not indicate that they drew connections to Susanoo. Although the figure of Susanoo may have emerged out of the early interactions between Japan and Korea, once he was established within the Shinto pantheon, it does not seem that he was necessarily viewed as a foreign god. Equally, there is also not much indication that he was actually worshipped widely among native Japanese either since many of the currently existing shrines commemorating him have identified Susanoo as their main deity only in later times.\footnote{Regarding this difficulty, see Kwŏn Tongu 2013, 204-5.}

The perception of Susanoo as a deity with strong foreign ties seems to have slowly emerged over time. There is documentation, for instance, that by the early fourteenth century, Susanoo was identified with Mutōshin, a god of disease considered to be of foreign origin. This understanding may have been influenced by the belief that diseases originated from abroad, especially Silla\footnote{Kwŏn Tongu 2015, 101-3.} and also became the foundation upon which Susanoo began to be identified with a number of other foreign deities.\footnote{Ibid., 103.} For instance, Susanoo was considered to be identical to Gozu Tennō, “Ox-headed Heavenly King,” a protective deity derived from the Buddhist
tradition. It was also this deity that was previously enshrined in the afore-mentioned Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto\(^{46}\) and it is not difficult to extrapolate that he gradually came to be identified as Susanoo.\(^ {47}\) The trend to associate Susanoo with things foreign intensified, and in the 1376 text *Jindaikan Kuketsu (Oral Transmissions on the Chapters of the Age of the Gods)* which contains extensive commentary on the *Nihon Shoki*, he is even depicted as having founded the state of Silla.\(^ {48}\) This was derived from the *Nihon Shoki*'s account that Susanoo had descended to Silla, a notion which had thus evolved into the deity’s founding of the peninsular state. The text also further expands on the *Nihon Shoki* in depicting Soshimori, Susanoo’s site of descent, as a dark and desolate place, offering a reason for the deity to leave the peninsula for Japan whereas the original account did not provide any clues as to why he wanted to do so.

The notion of Susanoo as founder of Silla also influenced Yoshida Kanetomo (1435-1511), a prominent Shinto priest who created his own school of thought in an effort to establish a more organized system of rituals and teachings. Instead of arguing that Susanoo came from abroad, he had a more expansive conceptualization of him, arguing that the deity, in fact, had existed since the beginning of time and encompassed all these other foreign deities that were later associated with him. Hence, foreign deities such as the ox-headed Gozu Tennō, as well as the Sanskrit-derived Kompira and Matara were all different appellations referring to the same God, Susanoo. Yoshida also notes that Susanoo, however, was not worshipped in Japan under his own name, but under his Chinese name Gozu Tennō in places such as the Gion Shrine in Kyoto. Considering that Susanoo and Gozu Tennō were indeed of different origin, this suggests that the

\(^{46}\) There is no conclusive evidence about which deity was initially enshrined when the shrine was first established in the seventh century. One theory suggests that the original deity was a Dragon-deity from Koguryŏ which only later changed into Gozu Tennō (牛頭天王). For more on this, see No Sŏnghwan, “Kodae Yasaka Jinja ŭi chesin e kwanhan yŏn’gu” [A Study on the Yasaka Shrine’s deity in ancient times], *Ilbonŏ Munhwa* 18 (2011), 433-455.

\(^{47}\) Kwŏn Tongu 2013, 244.

fusion of these two was still an ongoing process and that an official identification of Susanoo as the shrine’s main deity had not yet occurred. The statement that he was not directly worshipped in Japan also intimates that countrywide, the awareness and popularity of Susanoo had not yet reached levels that can be witnessed in more recent times. In regard to Susanoo’s founding of Silla, Yoshida argues that the Chinese characters for Silla (新羅), which can be translated as “new beginning,” indicates that this was the first kingdom to be established by Susanoo just as it was the first state to submit to Empress Jingū.\footnote{Kwŏn Tongu 2015, 106-7.} By thus alluding to the fabled invasion of Korea in ancient times, Yoshida presents Susanoo not as imported from abroad, but as a heroic deity that expanded into other territories much like Empress Jingū.

A similar view was also expressed by the Confucian scholar Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725) who lays out his perspective on Susanoo in a dialogue on a number of contentious issues in ancient Japanese history. The question he responds to deserves a closer look as it reveals much about the ideas circulating at the time. Basing his view on Chinese documents from the Han and Wei dynasty, the questioner offers the notion that in several respects, ancient Korea was a predecessor to Japan. Drawing his information from the third-century Sanguo Zhi (Records of the Three Kingdoms) as well as the fifth-century Hou Hanshu (Book of the Later Han), he notes that they all discuss places called Sodo in the southern part of the Korean peninsula as sites of spirit-worship and asylum for fugitives. Further suggesting that “Sodo” sounds similar to the Japanese Soshimori, Susanoo’s site of descent, he raises the possibility that Sodo was in fact the place where Susanoo found refuge after he was banished from the land of the gods. By thus specifically identifying his place of descent, the questioner was bolstering the argument that
Susanoo had first come down to Korea, further giving emphasis to the notion of Japan’s cultural indebtedness to Korea.

In response, Arai first agrees that Sodo was in fact Soshimori, separate villages where ancient Koreans had worshipped their gods. He also notes that Japan had institutions similar to Sodo which he argues were established by none other than Susanoo. Where he differs, however, was in his argument that it was with Empress Jingū’s invasion of Korea that Japanese customs and deities had spread into Korea and not the other way around. In this respect, he reverses the logic of the questioner, claiming that if anything, ancient Korea was heavily influenced by Japan, making Japan the predecessor-state.\(^{50}\) Likewise, Susanoo is argued to be a figure that brought Japanese customs to Korea, being the one who established Sodo in the peninsula instead of simply finding refugee in it. In this way, Susanoo is again associated with territorial and cultural expansion from the Japanese center to the Korean periphery. This was a strong rebuke of the notion that Susanoo was a deity of Korean provenance, illustrating the sharply divided attitudes toward the issue.

Colliding Views: The Tō-Motoori Debate

Discussions surrounding Susanoo were often part of larger debates on Japan’s historical origins and cultural heritage. Such was the case with Tō Teikan (1732-1797) who challenged the Japanese intellectual establishment by presenting a highly provocative treatise on Japan’s origins in his text *Shōkōhatsu (Contrary Views)* (1781). To begin with, he dismisses the Age of the Gods – said to have lasted millions of years – as unworthy of discussion and views Susanoo as the starting point of Japanese history. Regarding him as a historical figure, he argues that Susanoo

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 111-2.
was the king of Chinhan, one of the Three Han or Proto-Three Kingdoms which in his view were established in the Korean peninsula by refugees from the Qin dynasty. In this regard, Tō was endowing Susanoo with both Chinese and Korean connections. While he based much of his argument on the Tongguk T’onggam, his identification of Susanoo as the ruler of Chinhan which was seen as having developed into Silla required some of his own projections: employing a “linguistic method” that focused on matching phonetically similar words, Tō argued that in ancient times, the name “Susanoo” was actually derived from “Ch’ach’aung,” the title of the second ruler of Silla. Tō also claimed that in some dialects, Ch’ach’aung was a title that referred to shamans, in effect portraying Susanoo as a Korean shaman king. Using records on Chinhan as a point of reference in determining the timeline of Japanese history, he then goes on to make his most provocative statement: noting that Susanoo’s descendant married Emperor Jimmu whom, in turn, he considers part of Wu Taibo’s lineage, Tō argues that the date of the emperor’s founding of Japan needed to be pushed forward by 600 years, moving it from the seventh century BCE to the first century BCE. This was necessary to make Japan’s timeline correspond to Korean and Chinese documents which Tō thus endowed with much authority. For instance, he referred to Sima Qian’s Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian) (91 BCE) and the Hanshu (Book of Han) (111 CE), stating that both of these ancient Chinese records had made mention of Chosŏn Korea, but not of Japan, suggesting that Japan could not have been a well-established entity at the time when these works were composed.51

While according to Tō’s account, China and Korea both factor importantly in early Japanese history and especially in the formation of the imperial lineage, it is Korean culture that initially plays a dominant role in the shaping of Japanese civilization. As already suggested in his

51 Tō Teikan, Shōkōhatsu [Contrary Views] (1781), 2b-3b.
theory on Susanoo, Tō found that the ancient Japanese language had taken a lot of its vocabulary from Korean prior to the influx of Chinese influences. He even considers many early Japanese surnames to have originated from official Korean titles and the Korean language. The same goes for the formation of Japanese attire which he traces back to Korea as well as ritual practices which he considers to be influenced by Korean shamanic rites. Japanese literature such as songs and poetry listed in ancient documents are equally portrayed as adaptations of earlier Korean forms. Due to Susanoo’s Korean origin, Tō even goes so far as to describe Silla as Japan’s “land of parental roots” (fubo no ne no kuni), turning Japan into an offspring of Korea. Based on this discussion, Tō concludes that for hundreds of years since Susanoo came to Japan, its culture and language were all of Korean kind at least until Chinese influence grew stronger. In this way, Tō was offering his own theory of the common origins of Korea and Japan which, however, was centered on Korea as the older and more foundational country of the two.

This view, as can be expected, was met with angry responses from nativist quarters, especially the prominent kokugaku scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801). In his treatise Kenkyōjin (1785) which can be translated as “Quieting the Insane,” he takes on what he considers the most controversial statements of Tō’s text and critiques them harshly. The title of Motoori’s text itself was a barb aimed at Tō, ascribing insanity to his opponent. Motoori himself was a fervent believer of Japan’s exceptionalism and dearly held on to the notion of the imperial line’s uninterrupted descent from the gods. Averse to Sino-centric thinking, he sought to support the truthfulness of the Age of the Gods through his academic endeavors. Still, despite his beliefs,
he was also very meticulous about sources and avowed to always base his ideas on documentary evidence. These tendencies were all expressed in his response to Tō. To begin with, he argues that the Age of the Gods, which Tō dismissed, were well established by the *Kojiki* and that the divine period’s duration of millions of years was not unusual since time had a different meaning before the creation of the world.\(^{58}\) In regard to Susanoo, he notes that Tō was unable to support his claim that Susanoo was the ruler of Chinhan with concrete evidence. If Susanoo had indeed descended to Korea, Motoori argues that this would have occurred millions of years prior to Kija’s enfeoffment of Chosŏn. In the same vein, Motoori rejects Tō’s view of the foreign origins of Japan’s imperial line as well as the notion that the Japanese language was initially influenced by Korean, criticizing Tō for not taking into account that people had lived in Japan prior to the influx of foreign culture. In fact, Motoori argues that Japanese is the divine language spoken since time immemorial, and while some mixing of vocabulary from foreign languages may very well have occurred, it was rather Japanese culture that influenced places such as Korea thanks to Japan’s military dominance.\(^{59}\)

While Motoori was thus trying to reject Tō’s claims piece by piece, he left the role of Susanoo in ancient Korean-Japanese relations rather vague. His ambivalent attitude toward Susanoo was even more apparent in *Gyojū Gaigen (Honest Exposition of the History of Controlling Barbarians)*, a text where he traces Japan’s foreign relations or, as the title indicates, Japan’s history of “controlling barbarians.” Motoori puts great emphasis on the tributes Japan supposedly received from surrounding countries and thus offers a comprehensive account of Korea’s subjugation to Japan through history, culminating in the Hideyoshi invasions. Despite a


\(^{59}\) Ibid., 286-7.
view that can be described as highly jingoistic, Motoori did not forget to support his arguments through a meticulous examination of sources. For instance, while he argues that Japan had established a colony in Korea in ancient times, he also concedes that this knowledge was only circulated in Japan and that Korean sources such as the Tongguk T’onggam or Samguk Sagi made no mention of this. Nonetheless, he noted correctly that Chinese documents such as the Sui Shu (Book of Sui) (636 CE) had attested to the fact that the state of Silla and Paekche had sent tributes to Wa which he took as confirmation of Japan’s successful invasion of the Korean peninsula.60

In regard to Susanoo, however, Motoori’s commitment to academic research seems to have led him to a much more tentative appraisal. Although he notes that records suggest Susanoo had indeed descended to Silla, Motoori also acknowledges that nobody actually knew for sure whether the deity had a presence in Korea or not. He offers the possibility that people in Imna, or Mimana, the alleged ancient Japanese colony in Korea, had worshipped him, although he does not provide any evidence for that.61 Here, Motoori refrains from drawing further conclusions about Susanoo’s role in Korean-Japanese relations due to a lack of sources. It is not clear what he actually thought of the notion of Susanoo’s descent to Korea, nor is it clear if he regarded the people who possibly worshipped him in Imna as Japanese settlers or native Koreans. In this way, his text leaves the question of Susanoo’s “nationality” open.

The debate on Susanoo and the deity’s implications for the relationship between ancient Korea and Japan thus highlights the complexity and elusive character of the deity. In Tō’s

61 Motoori Norinaga 1926, 142.
cosmopolitan understanding of Japan’s origins, Susanoo could certainly be employed to support the common origins of Korea and Japan, although the center of gravity was on Korea as the “land of parental roots.” Motoori’s much more nationalistic account portrayed Korea more as an opposing country that needed to be subjugated and tamed. An emphasis on Susanoo was potentially dangerous as it could undermine the notion of Japan’s direct and uninterrupted descent from the gods. This seems to have been the reason why Susanoo’s role remained rather ill-defined in Motoori’s writings. Considering that he was probably the most prominent kokugaku scholar, his ambivalence toward Susanoo only shows that people were still struggling with the deity’s complexities and that no single dominant interpretation of the god existed.

Merging Tan’gun and Susanoo

Against this backdrop, the notion that Susanoo and Tan’gun were one and the same finally came to the surface. In a text published in 1799, the late Tokugawa-period scholar Ban Kōkei (1733-1806) mentions a legend circulating in the island of Tsushima according to which Tan’gun was in fact Susanoo. Due to its geographic location between Korea and Japan, Tsushima constituted the forefront of Korean-Japanese interactions and was thus a space of intensified cultural contact between the two countries. In this regard, it would not be surprising that the island’s populace had somehow merged Korean and Japanese origin myths in an attempt to render them compatible. Ban Kōkei continues that according to this legend, Susanoo/Tan’gun had entered Korea via Tsushima which would locate his origins in Japan and also assign the island with new importance. After all, nowhere in the old myths was Tsushima mentioned in connection to Susanoo’s travels, hence this was a product of the localization of the myth. Since this reference was made at the end of the eighteenth century, it seems that the people of
Tsushima had developed their own interpretation of Tan’gun and Susanoo quite apart from the more dominant understandings that were expressed in major intellectual circles. By being equated with Susanoo, Tan’gun was also imbued with the potential to become a deity, an idea which many Koreans at the time would have found rather peculiar. After all, despite supernatural elements in his myth, Tan’gun was generally considered a historical figure and also revered in a way ancestors were, and not as a deity who possessed the power to control natural elements and participated in the creation of the world. As the discussion so far has shown, even for many Japanese at this time, the concept of the identity between these two figures would have been rather unfamiliar.

Nonetheless, a few decades later, the notion of Susanoo and Tan’gun’s identity began to be picked up by Shintoists, in particular, officials in charge of the afore-mentioned Yasaka/Gion Shrine in Kyoto. By 1870, the Meiji government’s policies to separate Shinto from Buddhism had profound effects on the shrine, which was faced with the task of redefining its pantheon. Prior to that, the shrine’s main deity had been the ox-headed Gozu Tennō, originally a protective deity of the original Gion (Jetavana in Sanskrit) Monastery which, according to lore, was located on the fabled Mount Malaya, or “Mount Ox-head,” in southern India. The name of the deity, which in its Chinese spelling meant “Ox-headed Heavenly King,” was hence derived from its original abode, pointing to the deity’s unmistakable Buddhist origins. At the same time, Buddhism and Shinto had fused into a syncretic blend, eventually creating the implicit perception that the ox-headed Gozu Tennō was in fact Susanoo. As examined, this idea had been in circulation for centuries as Susanoo was associated with a number of foreign deities due to his

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own perceived foreign origins. Considering this, it seemed logical for the shrine to firmly establish Susanoo as its main deity and dissociate him from Buddhism in an attempt to conform to the state’s policies to cleanse Shinto of Buddhist elements. Changing the name of the shrine to Yasaka Shrine, thus eliminating the obvious Buddhist reference to Gion, and firmly establishing its main deity as the native Susanoo were part of this. However, the grounds on which Gozu Tennō was identified as Susanoo were initially not strong as the main commonality between the two deities was simply that both had originated from abroad. It was also an idea that had been strongly contested earlier by the fervent Shintoist and kokugaku scholar Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) who considered this view a misperception and criticized the Gion shrine for its lack of Japanese elements. A more compelling way to identify these two was needed, a task which allowed Tan’gun to enter the picture.

In Yasakasha Kyūki Shūroku (Collection of Old Records of the Yasaka Shrine) (1870), a tract completed shortly after the Meiji restoration, the shrine offers an exposition of its redefined pantheon in an effort to firmly establish Susanoo as its main deity. The challenge was to make the case that from the outset, Gozu Tennō was in fact Susanoo, hence a Shinto god and not one of Buddhist provenance. A discovery in the Korean language made this link possible. Citing Korean words in their original Korean characters, the text argues that “Soshimori,” the name of the place of Susanoo’s descent, actually was the Korean word for Gozu, that is, “ox-head,” in that “so” was the Korean for “ox,” “shi” was identified as a particle, while “mori (or mŏri)” was the Korean word for “head.” In this respect, the argument was that Susanoo had descended to a place called Gozu or “Ox-head” in Korea, which was why he was given the title Gozu Tennō.

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64 Ki Shigetsugu ed., Yasakasha Kyūki Shūroku [Collection of old records of the Yasaka Shrine] Volume 1 (1870), 40-2. However, according to Imanishi Ryū, these phonetic similarities are pure coincidence. Imanishi Ryū, Dankun Kō [Examination of Tan’gun] (Seoul: 1929), 81.
This allowed the author to completely bypass the Buddhist connection and support the identity of the two deities.

Indeed, there were several mountains in Korea that went by the name Mount Ox-head, or Mount Udu (Udusan) in Korea. The specific Mount Udu mentioned here, however, was taken from the *Tongguk T’onggam* and referred to a mountain located in the former area of the Lelang Commandery\(^65\) whose territory was believed to have overlapped with many of the sites associated with the Tan’gun myth. This geographic connection seems to have allowed the author to bring Korea’s founding father into the picture, arguing that it was this Mount Ox-head to which Tan’gun had descended. This implied that Tan’gun could also claim the title “Ox-headed Deity,” suggesting that Tan’gun and Susanoo were one and the same entity. While the *Samguk Yusa* had mentioned another mountain, Mount T’aebaek,\(^66\) as the site of Tan’gun’s descent, the *Tongguk T’onggam* which the Japanese author referenced did not mention a specific place name. Because of this, Tan’gun’s site of descent could be imagined to be Mount Udu without contradicting the narrative of the *Tongguk T’onggam*. At the same time, this argument put the location of Susanoo’s descent much further north in the peninsula compared to previous Japanese accounts, illustrating that the author was willing to modify established views to make Susanoo’s myth compatible with Tan’gun’s.

There was also another factor that made the association of Korea’s founding father with Mount Udu more compelling: Tan’gun was said to have descended to a *paktal* tree, while the original Mount Ox-head (Mount Malaya) in India was famous for its Indian sandalwood, a tree

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\(^{65}\) Ki Shigetsugu, 23.

\(^{66}\) The exact identity of Mount T’aebaek has been a subject of controversy. Older documents such as the *Samguk Yusa* generally identify it as Mount Myohyang, while more recent scholars tend to identify it as Mount Paektu. This will be discussed further in chapter 3.
that had strong Buddhist significance and was used as ritual incense due to its fragrance.  

Since the Chinese characters for Tan’gun’s tree (檀木, *tanmok*) and the Indian sandalwood tree (檀香木, *tanhyangmok*) were similar, the Shintoist author argued that Tan’gun’s tree was in fact a stand-in for the Indian sandalwood tree. While Indian sandalwood trees grow in tropical regions, making Korea an unlikely natural habitat, the suggestion was that the author of the Tan’gun myth may have been influenced by the same Buddhist lore, hence using the closest thing they could find in the Korean context, that is, the *paktal* tree in order to enhance the aura surrounding Korea’s founding father. By thus using the two trees interchangeably and thereby figuratively putting sandalwood trees on Tan’gun’s mountain, the officials of the Yasaka Shrine were able to create the perception that the locale of Tan’gun’s descent was in fact the Mount Ox-head of the lore of Gozu Tennō, although located in Korea and not India. Through this process of association, the mountain originally associated with Gozu Tennō was effectively moved from India to Korea, thus uprooted from its original Buddhist context and put into what was considered a less controversial space.

Ultimately, the argument was that Tan’gun, Susanoo and Gozu Tennō were all identical. Granted, Tan’gun may not have been necessary to argue that Susanoo had descended to Mount Udu in Korea, as the equation of Soshimori with the site was enough to do so. However, the existence of a separate transmission in the form of the Tan’gun myth outside of Japan certainly seemed to add weight to the theory. Thus, Tan’gun’s myth had been brought in to reinvent Gozu Tennō as being of non-Buddhist origin. This bolstered Susanoo’s identity with Gozu Tennō, although as a deity with Korean rather than Indian origins. The relocation of Mount Ox-head

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67 Because of this, the term “牛頭” (ox-head) also came to be casually used to refer to this particular tree, “檀香木.” See Hirata Atsutane 1825, 5b.
from India to the Korean peninsula was thus supported by a unique interpretation of the Tan’gun myth, enabling officials of the Yasaka Shrine to sever any Buddhist connections while maintaining the wholesomeness of Gozu Tennō/Susanoo. However, the fact that the Tan’gun-myth itself was a product of much Buddhist influence, something which the officials from the Yasaka Shrine seemed to be clearly aware of, was not further interrogated.

In regard to Susanoo’s transmission to Japan, the Yasaka shrine’s treatise argues that he was brought over from Korea in the year 656 by an emissary from Koguryŏ who named the deity Gozu Tennō and established a number of shrines including the Yasaka/Gion shrine to worship him.68 The narrative of the emissary’s travel to Japan seems to be based on a short entry in the Nihon Shoki, although there is no mention of him bringing any deities with him or setting up shrines. That notion appeared much later and was expressed in a text from 1863 which anticipated the changes that were to come by offering a new transmission story for the deity.69 It is not clear when exactly this narrative of the Korean emissary establishing shrines in Japan first emerged, although the attacks against Buddhism at the time certainly served as context for the idea to proliferate. Ultimately, the idea of the founding of the Yasaka shrine at the hands of an official from Koguryŏ and not a Buddhist representative further served the shrine’s need to reinvent itself in a hostile environment. To this day, this is the origin story that the shrine officially endorses, although Tan’gun is no longer mentioned.70

Conveniently for the modern day reader, the Yasakasha Kyū Ki Shū roku also offers insight into what sources it drew inspiration from: the text specifically refers to Hayashi Gahō’s foreword to the Japanese publication of the Tongguk T’onggam as well as Ban Kōkei’s text

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68 Ki Shigetsugu, 8.
69 No Sŏnhwan 2011, 47 footnote 16.
70 Yasaka Shrine Official Website: http://www.yasaka-jinja.or.jp/about/
As noted, Gahō had offered the idea that Susanoo had founded Korea without going so far as to equate him with Tan’gun, while Kōkei was the first to document the Tsushima-myth that identified Susanoo with Korea’s founding father. Since no other works are mentioned in this context, it seems that these two texts were the main sources that were built upon to develop the Yasaka shrine’s own theory of Susanoo’s identity. In this way, what was initially a fringe view had come to be endorsed by a major shrine due to the demands of the Meiji government’s policies. The reinvention of Tan’gun thus arose out of the domestic challenges that this tumultuous period in Japan brought about and was mobilized in redefining the Shinto pantheon and offering alternate genealogies. The main Korean source that these Japanese thinkers continued to employ was the fifteenth century Tongguk T’onggam and there is little indication that the Japanese were aware of the more recent Korean debates on Tan’gun. In this respect, any new understandings that emerged in Japan were developed independently of what was taking place in Korea. Tan’gun had taken on a life of his own, allowing him to merge into the Shinto tradition and undergo his own indigenization process.

Conclusion

Tracing the different ways Tan’gun and Susanoo were discussed in Japan, this chapter has come upon early versions of the theory of common Japanese-Korean origins. With some modifications, this view would later be employed to justify Japan’s imperialistic ambitions in Korea. The merger of Tan’gun and Susanoo which was promoted by Shintoists was also an outcome that could potentially support expansionist tendencies which had popped up in Japan over and over again, as is suggested, for instance, by the multitude of favorable references to

\[71\text{Ki Shigetsugu, 41-2.}\]
Empress Jingū and her exploits. However, this chapter has shown that the notion of common ancestry of the two nations as well as Tan’gun and Susanoo’s identity were generally not conceived in such expansionist contexts. Some versions of the idea that Japan and Korea shared the same roots grew out of attempts to understand Japan’s own cultural heritage and Korean influences while at the same time taking a more critical stance toward Japanese mythology. Such approaches emphasized the role of Korea as the originator of much of the shared culture, positing Japan at the receiving end of the interactions. Similarly, the concept that Tan’gun and Susanoo were identical developed over time, first in the fringes that served as sites of intensified Korean-Japanese contact, and then later on in the center when the separation of Shinto from Buddhism necessitated a rearrangement of the Shinto pantheon, leading to rediscoveries of Tan’gun. In this regard, Tan’gun was employed for domestic purposes and not to justify expansionist ambitions.

Why this preoccupation with Korea? While reasons may be many, the most obvious one is the considerable presence of Korean elements in ancient Japanese documents. In Japanese myths, Korea had played a significant role as was evident in the tale of Susanoo, just as there were records of large numbers of Koreans relocating to Japan and transmitting culture to the archipelago. Indeed, Korea factored more importantly in Japanese historical documents than Japan did in Korean texts. Compounding this was the increasing availability of the Nihon Shoki and Kojiki, leading more and more Japanese to pay attention to their nation’s origins. Interestingly, these two seminal collections of Japanese mythology began to be printed for popular consumption in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through new printing technology that actually had been brought back from Korea during the Hideyoshi Invasions. In this respect, it was Korean technology that abetted Japanese attempts to delineate and define Japan’s national
identity even prior to the modern period.\textsuperscript{72} Further, considering the geographic proximity of the Korean peninsula, it seems logical that in examinations of Japan’s own origins, attention was paid to the role of Korea. Hence, when drawing from the depths of classical Japanese texts in order to understand the past, a confrontation with Korea was unavoidable.

This chapter has traced Japanese discourses on Tan’gun and Susanoo through an extended period of time, illustrating the diverse, and often times sharply divided views, their sometimes unlikely origins and the deep history that all need to be taken into account in understanding how modern conceptions of Tan’gun developed. This was the state of things at the dawn of Japan’s imperial incursions into Korea that began in the mid-1870s: critical, scholarly examinations of Tan’gun coexisting with poetic adulations of him; attempts to equate Tan’gun with Susanoo undertaken side by side with views more skeptical of the notion of common Korean-Japanese ancestry. Even after official contact with Korea dwindled following the final t’ongsinsa mission in 1811, Tan’gun continued to be developed and reinvented domestically in Japan, merging with the Shinto tradition and transforming into something new. The next chapter will trace how the modern academic pursuit of history by both Japanese and Koreans, the strengthening of an international Shinto network, and Western missionary views all converged to intensify discussions on Tan’gun and add even more new dimensions to this mythical figure.

\textsuperscript{72} Susan Burns, \textit{Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2-8, and 40.
Chapter 3
Tan’gun in the Modern Era and the Confluence of Transnational Currents

This chapter examines the various discussions on Tan’gun immediately prior to the emergence of the Taejonggyo in 1909. Despite claiming ancient origins, the religion was very much a product of the time, and as such, influenced by several contemporary currents. The burgeoning trend among Koreans to rediscover Tan’gun as a nationalist symbol in the early twentieth century was a crucial one. What is less well known, however, is that this was preceded by the rise of Japanese and Western engagements with Tan’gun around the turn of the century as Korea’s contact with the outside world intensified. These discourses would then influence Koreans who would appropriate, challenge and subvert them in various ways. Thus, this chapter examines Japanese, Western, and Korean discussions on Tan’gun leading up to 1909. While Andre Schmid has traced Tan’gun’s rise as symbol of Korean nationalism from a domestic standpoint,¹ this chapter takes a broader view, incorporating the international debates that preceded and influenced the Korean turn toward Tan’gun. As the myth grew in prominence and was reinterpreted in various ways, it took on a life of its own, proliferating into multiple directions and expanding in scope and significance. Thus, far from being enclosed, the myth was a constantly evolving entity whose transformation only accelerated with time. As new elements were added to the myth by Koreans and foreigners alike, many of them would soon be appropriated by the makers of the Taejonggyo.

Modern Japanese Discourses on Tan’gun

As Korean-Japanese contact deepened after the “opening” of Korea in 1876, Japanese efforts to engage with Korean history also increased. Granted, as before, these often grew out of the desire to understand Japan’s own historical roots, leading to discussions about the nature of ancient Japanese-Korean relations. However, the geopolitical reality of growing Japanese influence in Asia also amplified the importance of how to structure Japan’s relationship with its peninsular neighbor. As Japanese delved into ancient history to seek answers, the figure of Tan’gun would emerge over and over again. Japanese views, however, were far from unitary as they were shaped by diverging trends: one was the rise of “positivistic” history which subjected Tan’gun to rigorous philological and historical criticism, while another one was the drive to expand Shinto abroad, mobilizing Tan’gun as a carrier of Japan’s spiritual tradition.

Positivist Approaches

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the study of history in Japan made strides in developing into a modern academic discipline modeled on Western, particularly German examples. This was most evident in the establishment of the History Department at Tokyo Imperial University whose founding members expressed a strong commitment to positivistic research. Taking the lead was the German historian Ludwig Riess (1861-1928) who was soon followed by Shigeno Yasutsugu (1827-1910), Kume Kunitake (1839-1931), and Hoshino Hisashi (1839-1917) who settled at the university in 1888.² Very soon after, the issue of ancient Korean-Japanese relations and the surrounding mythology became an object of discussion as the topic was now passed on from the old guard to these “modern” historians. Instrumental in this was the

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kokugaku scholar and genealogist Suzuki Matoshi (1831-1894) who transmitted the idea of the Korean origins of Susanoo to the new breed of historians.\(^3\)

In a commentary on Japanese mythology written in the late 1880s, Suzuki maintained the notion developed during the late Tokugawa period that Susanoo and Tan’gun were identical. This idea was based on some superficial similarities in the two respective myths: Japanese myths had portrayed Susanoo as having descended to a mountain in Korea which some connected to Tan’gun’s own divine heritage and origin from a mountain. In fact, in narrating Susanoo’s descent, Suzuki borrowed the general narrative of the myth of Tan’gun and simply inserted Susanoo in his place. Hence, it was Susanoo who had descended to Mount T’aebaek underneath a tan-tree (or pactal tree), established a city called Sinsi and instructed people in human affairs. These were all elements of the Tan’gun myth, now appropriated to accommodate Susanoo. Further, Suzuki goes on, it was Susanoo that people elevated to be their ruler, calling him Tan’gun which was thus simply another title given to the deity. Overall, Suzuki was greatly indebted to Tō Teikan whose controversial view of common Korean-Japanese origins had bought the ire of other kokugaku scholars such as Motoori Norinaga over a century earlier (chapter 3). In line with Tō, Suzuki argued that the name Susanoo itself was derived from the Korean language and that in its original meaning, referred to somebody divine and awe-inspiring. This was based on the idea that “Susanoo” corresponded to the Korean “Ch’ach’aung” which according to Korean documents referred to a shaman who was revered and feared by the people.\(^4\) At the same time, however, Suzuki was also misinformed about the location of Mount T’aebaek, the site of Tan’gun’s origin. While he correctly referred to it as Mount Myohyang in the Yŏngbyŏn

\(^3\) Ibid., 97-8.
district, just as Koreans had generally done, the Korean peninsula,
much further south-east than its actual location. This may have been part of an effort to
reconcile the location with the Japanese idea that Susanoo had descended to Silla which was
originally located in the south-eastern part of the Korean peninsula. After all, the actual Mount
Myohyang was in the North P’yŏngan Province, outside Silla territory, whereas Kyŏngsang
Province was firmly within it. In this way, Suzuki was rather liberal in his adoption of the
Tan’gun myth and Korean geography. At the same time, the Tan’gun myth enabled Suzuki to
add detail to Susanoo’s activities in Korea—something which ancient Japanese texts had not elaborated on—before the narrative relocated the deity to the Japanese archipelago. Thus, the
myth of Tan’gun was integrated into Japanese mythology, rendered compatible with it and
mobilized as a form of gap-filler to augment missing parts. What is more, the very existence of
such a seemingly complementary myth across the sea further served as proof that corroborated
the truth of Japanese mythology.

According to the recollections of Kume Kunitake, founding member of the history
department at Tokyo Imperial University, Susanoo’s Korean connection was something that took
the modern historians by surprise. Kume had been working on the Shigaku Zasshi (Journal of
History), Japan’s first academic journal on history established in 1889, when he encountered
Suzuki and learned of the notion that the figure of Susanoo may indeed have derived from
Korea. This was completely new to him and his colleagues, including Hoshino Hisashi, as they
had not been aware of this fact before. This suggests that Susanoo’s Korean connection,
although discussed by kokugaku scholars and Shintoists before, had not been part of the common

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5 See chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion on this.
6 Suzuki Matoshi, Kojiki Seigi [Exegesis of the Kojiki] (Tokyo: Meiseidō Shoten, 1943, org. 1887), 68.
knowledge on Japanese mythology. After all, there had been several versions of Susanoo’s myth and it seems the one that connected him to Korea had remained on the fringes. The encounter with Suzuki, however, prodded these new historians to take a closer look at the ancient ties between Japan and Korea and ultimately inject new life into the controversial theory of common Japanese-Korean origins.

Hoshino Hisashi was the first of the modern historians to discuss the issue of Japan’s ancient ties to Korea in an article entitled “A Question from an Old Man for Our Sincere Patriots Concerning Japanese Race and Language” (1890). As the title suggests, this was an appeal to Japanese nationalists who were highly averse to notions of common Korean-Japanese ancestry. After all, although the theory is commonly considered an essential part of Japanese colonialist historiography on Korea, it was not uncontroversial or uncontested even among Japanese. As Hoshino later recalled, he was anticipating fierce reactions (justifiably, as it turned out), so he hurried to have the article published in one piece rather than in separate installments which was the more common practice. Latching onto the eighteenth-century Tō-Motoori debate in which Motoori Norinaga had harshly criticized Tō Teikan for his thesis on the Korean origins of Japan, Hoshino argued that tracing Japan’s ties to Korea by no means sullied the national essence (kokutai) or the imperial lineage. If anything, the implication was that it added historical substance to it and only magnified the scope of the imperial house whose ancestors had expanded from Korea to Japan. This also did not mean that Hoshino rejected Japanese expansionist ambitions toward Korea. On the contrary, he lauded Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s

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8 Brownlee, 96.
9 Hoshino Hisashi, “Honzō no jinshū gengo ni tsuki kō o nobete yo no magokoro aikokusha ni tadasu” [A question from an old man for our sincere patriots regarding Japanese race and language], Shigaku Zasshi 11 (1890), 17.
10 Ibid., 40.
11 Ibid., 36.
sixteenth-century invasions of Korea as attempts to reunite the two countries and underscored that Japan should always look west toward Korea.\(^\text{12}\) These may have been statements to appease a sensitive readership, but nonetheless, this contributed to Hoshino becoming associated with the imperialist appropriation of the theory of common Japanese-Korean roots. Although the notion of common ancestry may initially have been part of an effort to understand Japan’s own origins, it could hence easily feed into expansionist ambitions.

In regard to Susanoo, Hoshino endorsed the notion that the deity and his son Isotakeru had originated from Korea although he disagreed on the exact location of his supposed descent: Hoshino argued that while previously, the site had been identified as Mount Udu (Mount Ox-head) in the area of the former Lelang Commandery, hence in the northern part of the peninsula which also overlapped with many locations from the Tan’gun myth, this mountain was actually located further south in Ch’unch’ŏn, Kangwŏn Province. Since there was indeed a Mount Ox-head there as the name was not unusual in Korea, Hoshino’s account was true to Korean geography. This put the place of Susanoo’s descent within Silla’s extended territory and thus meshed better with Japanese myths. Further, Hoshino regarded the notion of Susanoo ruling over Silla as well established and evidenced by the fact that the deity had been worshipped in a Silla Shrine, presumably set up by Koreans who had migrated to Japan. He also drew on Tō Teikan’s argument that the name Susanoo derived from the Korean “Ch’ach’aung,” the title of the second Silla king which also referred to a highly revered shamanic figure. The implication was that Susanoo and his descendants represented actual historical figures from Korea such as kings and noblemen who had served simultaneously as political and religious leaders, while the deification and worship of these individuals indicated customs that were shared by both Koreans and

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 42.
Japanese. At the same time, however, Hoshino did not consider it necessary to endorse the notion that Susanoo was Tan’gun, since he already saw the Japanese deity’s connection to Silla as firmly established.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, in rejecting Tan’gun, Hoshino did not simply inherit Suzuki’s views without critique, but developed his own understanding. Hoshino’s attitude toward Tan’gun may also have arisen out of a strong skepticism toward Korean mythology which would become highly pronounced among Japanese historians.

Deconstructing the Myth

Although Hoshino did not embrace the Tan’gun myth, he was still putting a great amount of faith in Japanese mythology, believing that if reconstructed properly, it would yield important historical insights. Not long after, however, the historian Shiratori Kurakichi (1865-1942), who was just beginning his academic career, confronted the Tan’gun myth with a much more direct and comprehensive examination.\textsuperscript{14} In “Dankun Kō” (“An Examination of Tan’gun”), first published in January of 1894,\textsuperscript{15} Shiratori sought to establish when and by whom the myth had been invented, thereby historicizing it and investigating its origins. He remarked that the myth was a far-fetched construct with many Buddhist elements, and hence was most likely written by Buddhist monks. This was supported by the fact that the Buddhist pantheon played a significant role in the myth as Tan’gun was depicted as the grandson of the Korean version of the deity Śakra/Indra (Chesŏk in Korean). Even more important was the Buddhist lore of Mount Malaya in India and the sandalwood tree. This tree, famous for its scent, was said to have grown on the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 19-22.

\textsuperscript{14} Stefan Tanaka, Japan’s Orient: Rendering Pasts into History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 82-4.

legendary mountain shaped like an ox-head and was commonly used as incense in Buddhist rituals. Shiratori argued that Tan’gun’s place of birth which was identified as Mount Myohyang ("Mount Mysterious Fragrance") was given this name because of its fragrant trees, especially the tan-tree from which the name Tan’gun derived. Even though this tree had no actual relation to the sandalwood tree of Buddhist lore as the latter did not grow in Korea, Shiratori maintained that due to its scent, the tan-tree and Mount Myohyang became identified with the sandalwood tree and Mount Malaya in the Korean imagination. Thus, Koreans were patterning the Tan’gun myth according to Buddhist lore which led to Mount Myohyang and the tan-tree obtaining much mythical significance and ultimately becoming associated with the origins of Korea’s first ruler. As Shiratori noted, these Buddhist elements meant that the myth had emerged after the importation of Buddhism into Korea in 372 CE.\(^{16}\)

Further, Shiratori inexplicably accepted the claim by the thirteenth-century Samguk Yusa, in which Tan’gun had first appeared, that the sixth-century Wei Shu (Book of Wei) from China contained references to Tan’gun, even though this was in fact not the case. While Shiratori was failing to fact-check his sources, his argument was that the myth must have emerged before the Wei Shu began to be compiled in 551 CE. As a result, Shiratori located the composition of the Tan’gun myth between the two the dates, 372 CE and 551 CE, arguing that while old, the myth had appeared long after Tan’gun’s supposed life and was hence a later concoction of the Kingdom of Koguryŏ (ca. 37 BCE – 668 CE).\(^{17}\) Still, Shiratori was dating the emergence of the myth much earlier than many contemporary Japanese accounts which, as we shall see, considered it a product of the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392). In this regard, Shiratori was actually adding more history to the myth than was necessary, which was most likely an unintended

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 2-6
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 6.
outcome of his research. At the same time, despite his criticism, he also appreciated the myth’s boldness as it claimed an ancient Korean history comparable to that of China and envisioned one unified “Korean” state under the name “Chosŏn.” This, he argued, most likely reflected Koguryŏ’s strength which had peaked around the fifth century as it was competing with two other rival states in the peninsula. After all, Shiratori noted that if one followed Tan’gun’s line of descent, the mythical progenitor was revealed to be the ancestor of Chumong (King Tongmyŏng), the founder of Koguryŏ, hence only one strand of Korean history and not the entirety of the Three Kingdoms. In this regard, Shiratori maintained that the myth reflected Koguryŏ’s historical circumstances such as its military expansion and the rise of Buddhism and thus, while it may have been a fabrication, it was still pregnant with historical significance. If this was the background against which the myth emerged, however, it also meant that there was no point of convergence with Japanese history or mythology.

Another scholar, Naka Michiyo (1851-1908), echoed Shiratori’s skepticism toward Tan’gun in an article on ancient Korean history published shortly after Shiratori’s initial study on Korea’s founding father. Offering a more comprehensive examination of Korean history, Naka began his narrative not with Tan’gun, but with Kija. In this respect, Naka was following Shiratori in arguing that Tan’gun was a later invention and hence had no place in his timeline of Korean history. While he agreed with Shiratori that the myth must have emerged after Buddhism came into the country, his assessment of the myth was harsher, claiming that it was actually of even more recent provenance. This was based on his discovery that the twelfth-century Samguk Sagı had mentioned a “Sŏnin Wanggŏm” as one of several sages revered in the P’yŏngyang region,
and that this figure likely developed over the course of a century into “Tan’gun Wanggŏm”
which was Tan’gun’s full appellation. This suggested that the figure of Tan’gun most likely
evolved from regional sage into the founder of the first Korean state after the *Samguk Sagi* was
written, that is, after the mid-twelfth century and before the late thirteenth century when Tan’gun
emerged in the *Samguk Yusa*.\(^{20}\)

Naka was also highly critical of the idea that Susanoo derived from Korea, especially the
theory that located the origins of Gozu Tennō, another incarnation of Susanoo, in the peninsula
rather than India. In this respect, he was articulating what Shiratori’s work had already implied.
Indeed, Naka went on to specifically reject the view supported by the Yasaka Shrine and scholars
such as Hoshino Hisashi that the figure of Gozu Tennō hailed from Korea. Instead, he argued
that not only were Susanoo and the ox-headed deity originally separate entities whose fusion
occurred at a later point, but also that the latter could by no means be traced back to Korea.
Although he noted that there were indeed several sites in Korea named Mount Ox-head (Mount
Udu in Korean), a fact that was used to argue for Gozu Tennō’s Korean origins, Naka argued
that Buddhist texts had clearly indicated that the ox-headed deity was of Buddhist provenance.
The phonetic similarities between “Soshimori,” the site of Susanoo’s descent in Silla according
to the *Nihon Shoki*, and “so ūi mŏri,” that is, “ox-head” in Korean, which had been employed to
buttress the deity’s Korean origin were simply coincidence. Naka also took issue with the
Yasaka Shrine’s official view that the worship of Susanoo had been brought to Japan by a
Korean emissary from the Kingdom of Koguryŏ. Examining the original sources that had
mentioned the Korean official, that is, the ninth-century *Shinsen Shōjiroku (New Selection and
Record of Hereditary Titles and Family Names)*, Naka found that while a Korean emissary

\(^{20}\) Naka Michiyo, “Chōsen koshi kō” [Examination of ancient Korean affairs], *Shigaku Zasshi* 5 (April, 1894), 41-2.
coming to Japan was indeed mentioned, there was no record of him bringing over any deities. This implied that this part was a later embellishment, undermining the notion that Susanoo hailed from Korea and was connected to Tan’gun.\footnote{Naka Michiyō, “Susanoo-no-mikoto no amakudari” [Susanoo-no-mikoto’s descent from heaven], \textit{Naka Michiyo Isho} Vol. 3 (Tokyo: Dai Nihon Tosho Kabushiki Kaisha, 1915), 208-221, 213-4.} 

In 1910, shortly after Japan’s formal annexation of Korea, Imanishi Ryū (1875-1932) offered one of the most systematic critiques of the Tan’gun myth. As we shall see, after around 1905, the notion that Tan’gun and Susanoo were identical had become popular among Japanese Shintoists. They believed that this implied that Japan and Korea shared common origins and went so far as to lobby for Tan’gun to be enshrined alongside Amaterasu in a government-supported grand shrine (jingū) in Seoul to symbolize this unity.\footnote{Imanishi Ryū, “Dankun no setsuwa nit suite” [On the tale of Tan’gun], \textit{Rekishi Chiri} Special Edition (November, 1910), 224.} While this was rejected by Japanese authorities, much to Imanishi’s relief, he felt the need to settle the issue regarding Tan’gun’s possible ties to Japan once and for all. In contrast to Shiratori, he was aware that the \textit{Wei Shu} contained no mention of Tan’gun, hence the figure only appeared in Korean documents. At the same time, Imanishi also argued that the myth was not simply a thirteenth-century concoction by the author of the \textit{Samguk Yusa}. Instead, he saw the figure of Tan’gun as having evolved gradually over an extended period of time: Initially, during the time of Koguryō, the name Wanggŏm (or Wanghŏm) was used to refer to P’yŏngyang, the kingdom’s capital. After the demise of Koguryō, however, the meaning of Wanggŏm changed as the old name of the city began to be associated with a local sage, Sŏnin Wanggŏm, who was possibly revered as the city’s founder.\footnote{Ibid., 226-7.} Significantly, Imanishi argued that this type of naming convention that associated a sage with a particular locale was of shamanist and not Buddhist origin. In his view,
it was only later that Buddhists would appropriate this figure and add Buddhist elements to it which resulted in the figure of Tan’gun Wanggŏm to emerge in the latter half of the Koryŏ dynasty. Imanishi maintained that this genealogy indicated that there was no relation between Tan’gun and Susanoo, or between Tan’gun and Japan whatsoever.  

Scholars were thus hard at work to deconstruct the myth of Tan’gun and cast much doubt on his historicity. By showing that he was indeed an invention of relatively recent provenance, they implied that the figure of Tan’gun was different from Susanoo and could not be used to support the theory of ancient ties between Korea and Japan. However, this did not mean that Japanese scholars were opposed to the notion of common ancestry itself, as the theory could be supported through other means. Shiratori, for instance, championed it on linguistic grounds. Further, Japanese scholars also produced concepts that foreshadowed how Koreans would imagine their own religious heritage. The key notion to emerge here is the worship of heaven which especially Shiratori developed as a marker of an entire civilization.

The Worship of Heaven as Civilizational Marker

Shiratori began focusing on the concept of heaven as early as 1896 and by 1910, his framework had become well defined. The word for heaven played an important role in his research as he regarded it as a common denominator underlying the Ural-Altaic family in which he included languages such as Turkish, Mongol, Japanese and Korean. In order to develop his theory, however, Shiratori had to be very liberal with his selection of words and process of associating them: for the Korean word for heaven, he chose “tongmyŏng” (“eastern light”) which

24 Ibid., 229.
25 Shiratori, however, would later change his views on the affinity between Korean and Japanese. See Tanaka, 78-9.
26 Ibid., 91.
was also the name of the founder of the kingdom of Koguryŏ, even though it was far from the conventional Korean term for heaven. Nonetheless, due to its phonetic properties, he considered it a cognate of other Ural-Altaic words, such as the Turkish word for heaven “tangri” (or “tengri”) as well as the Japanese “tenbu” (“heavenly stage”).

The importance of the word for heaven derived from the fact that, at least in Shiratori’s view, the worship of heaven as a supreme spirit was a practice shared by Ural-Altaic peoples and was in terms of religious sophistication at least on par with the Western worship of God, if not superior. This type of religiosity was thus a key marker of the Ural-Altaic family, but it was expressed most strongly in the Japanese nation due to its deep reverence for the gods and the existence of the imperial institution which traced its origins back to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. Shiratori further identified the form of government based on this religiosity as matsurigoto, that is, “religious government” with which the Japanese people had been blessed since the beginning of their history. This line of thinking thus allowed Shiratori to both employ the discourse of universal religious principles while also maintaining Japan’s uniqueness.

The emphasis on heaven-worship as a crucial religious marker also began to be applied to Korea. In an effort to bolster the theory of common Japanese-Korean origins, the historian Kume Kunitake (1839-1931) employed a framework similar to Shiratori’s, particularly the notion of heaven worship as well as the concept of matsurigoto (“religious government”). Earlier, in 1889, Kume had already argued against a limited focus on the Japanese archipelago and for broadening the framework of Japanese history to include parts of Korea and southeastern

28 Tanaka, 91-2.
29 Ibid., 174.
China into which Japan’s ancient state had supposedly expanded.\(^{30}\) Shortly after, in 1891, Kume also claimed that Shinto was an ancient custom of heaven worship which was shared in East Asia including Korea.\(^{31}\) Indeed, drawing from Chinese documents such as the fifth-century *Hou Han Shu* (*Book of the Later Han*) and the sixth-century *Wei Shu*, Kume suggested that Koreans had practiced Shinto-like rituals through much of their history: according to the sources, Koguryŏ performed a heaven worship ritual called Tongmaeng every tenth lunar month, the Ye people which were categorized as Korean also conducted heaven worship rituals in the same month, Mahan located in the southern part of the Korean peninsula staged similar rituals in the fifth and tenth month, while the state of Puyŏ was said to have performed its own version of heaven worship in the twelfth month.\(^{32}\)

By the time of annexation (1910), Kume had come to further bolster his views. In an article that depicted ancient Korea as part of the Divine Country of Japan, Kume recapitulates many of the notions that supported the theory of common Japanese-Korean origins. Susanoo, for instance, is depicted as a historical ruler who originally hailed from Korea. Kume’s main thrust, however, was to argue that Japan’s religious government had extended to Korea in ancient times and that this was evidenced by traces of similar religious customs in Korea.\(^{33}\) Relying again on Chinese records, Kume argued that, for instance, the festivities by the ancient state of Mahan that had beseeched a good harvest were without fail the same rituals that Susanoo oversaw and that the population’s worship of heavenly deities were Shinto customs. On top of that, he saw the ancient state of Silla as a theocracy where the political ruler also performed religious functions,
as was evidenced by the title of the second king, “Ch’ach’aung,” which referred to a person with shamanic capabilities. This, again, was considered unmistakable proof that the religious customs of Japan, the “Divine Country,” could be found in Korea as well. Thus, even without needing to rely on Tan’gun, Kume was using the concept of heaven worship to underpin the notion of common Korean-Japanese ancestry. In doing so, he had incidentally set the foundation for discussing an original Korean spirituality centered on heaven worship. While for now, this served the purpose of assimilating Korea into Japanese history, soon after, Koreans would appropriate a similar framework in an effort to assert their own religious past.

The Shintoist Embrace of Tan’gun

While historians were producing such findings, Shintoists, however, embarked upon their own path. On one hand, they endorsed the notion of an expansive Shinto tradition outlined by academics such as Kume. On the other hand, however, Shintoists also increasingly embraced Tan’gun and his identity with Susanoo, even admitting him into the Shinto pantheon. By 1870, as noted, the famous Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto had endorsed the theory that Tan’gun and Susanoo were identical as part of an effort to dissociate Susanoo from Buddhism and endow him with a more acceptable genealogy. Support for this view only grew over time as Japanese expansion into Korea increased. In fact, the theory became so influential that Shintoists started a movement to enshrine Tan’gun in a government-supported grand shrine (jingū) in Korea. The initial impetus for this came from Shintoists located in the Japanese mainland, specifically the Kansai Shinshoku Rengōkai (Kansai Shintoist Association). This made sense as the Yasaka Shrine,

34 Ibid., 8.
formerly called Gion Shrine, enjoyed much regional prominence due to its religious significance and the Gion festival it hosted.

In 1904, by the time of the Russo-Japanese War, the increase of Japanese emigration to Korea had led to the emergence of voices that advocated Shinto’s role in civilizing the native populace.\footnote{“Chōsen jinmin ni kan ari” [Having compassion for the Korean people], Zengoku Shinshokukai Kaihō 11.60 (July 1904), 22-4.} In particular, Shintoists began to promote the idea of erecting shrines abroad in order to tie Japanese settlers closer to their homeland while also educating the peoples of the Asian continent. This was partially inspired by the missionary activities of Buddhist and Christian groups there. Efforts to crank up Shinto expansion became more concrete in the following year (1905), as the Kansai Shintoist Association resolved to propose to the Residency-General of Korea, which was established by the Japanese as a result of the Protectorate Treaty of 1905 that turned Korea into a dependency of Japan in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War, to construct a shrine for edifying Koreans and turning them into Japanese imperial subjects.\footnote{Suga Kōji, Nihon Tōchika no Kaigai Jinja: Chōsen Jingū Taiwan Jinja to Saijin [Overseas shrines under Japanese Rule: the Grand Chosŏn Shrine and Taiwan Shrine and their deities] (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 2004), 53-54.} At the center of this was Fukumoto Nichinan (1857-1921), chief editor of the Kyūshū Nippo (Kyūshū Daily).

While he did not yet specify Susanoo as the deity for the Korean shrine, he used the story of Susanoo’s arrival in Korea and rule over the peninsula as justification for civilizing Koreans in the present. Interestingly, although Fukumoto regarded Susanoo as the founding father of Korea, he saw this evidenced in the Korean records of Hogong, a minister of the Silla court who according to the twelfth-century Samguk Sagi had hailed from Japan and crossed the sea to Korea.\footnote{Fukumoto Nichinan, “Kannagara no daidō” [The great way of the gods], Zengoku Shinshokukai Kaihō, 14.80 (March 1906), 14.} It is not entirely clear why Fukumoto chose this rather minor figure as the equivalent of Susanoo, thus completely circumventing the Tan’gun myth. It may be that this story allowed him
to underline that Susanoo had first originated from Japan and then moved to Korea rather than the other way around which was actually closer to the original myth. Whatever the case, Fukumoto was embarking on a path of trying to confirm his imagination of Japanese history through Korean records.

To be clear, the call to establish a grand shrine in Korea as a means of governing the peninsular population was not uncontested among Japanese. One commentator criticized the Kansai Shintoist Association’s proposal, arguing that Korea under Japanese protection still maintained its own sovereignty and that the imposition of Shinto practices might lead to negative reactions from the native populace. The critique further noted that this kind of enforcement also went against the notion of freedom of religion and thus did not befit the practices of a civilized nation which Japan aspired to be. Nonetheless, such critical voices were overruled as the plans for the Korean Shrine began to gain national support. This became most evident when the Kansai Shintoist Association’s plans were also adopted by the Zenkoku Shinshoku Rengōkai (Nationwide Shintoist Association) which in April of 1906 resolved to support the plans to petition the Japanese administration in Korea to set up a shrine in Seoul.

By the following year (1907), the activities to push for an official shrine in Korea had intensified, as land for it had reportedly been donated by a Japanese settler and contact was made with Japanese officials in Korea. The Residency-General’s official stance was, however, that it could not erect a shrine in Korea through government funds since this would make Korea look like a subject state instead of a protectorate. Still, civilian initiative for the shrine would be welcomed. It is around this time that Fukumoto began to champion the idea of enshrining

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38 “Kankei ni Jingū o okosu no kengi ni tsuite” [Regarding the proposal to establish a Grand Shrine in Korea], Jinja Kyōkai Zasshi 5.4 (April, 1906), 47-8.
39 Suga, 56.
Tan’gun/Susanoo as the founding father(s) of Korea which was meant to be a tribute to Korea’s heritage. While previously, Fukumoto had associated Susanoo with the Silla minister Hogong who had hailed from Japan, now he endorsed the Susanoo-Tan’gun linkage as well, arguing that “there was no difference in calling [Susanoo] Hogong or Tan’gun.” The main point was that whatever Korean figure he was equated with, Susanoo was the founding father of Korea.\textsuperscript{40}

Hence, although Hogong and Tan’gun were completely different figures, to Nichinan it did not matter so long as he could maintain his argument, even if it meant contorting Korean history.

However specious and self-serving Nichinan’s argument may have been, the notion of enshrining Tan’gun gained currency as it began to be discussed by a special committee concerning overseas shrines within the Nationwide Shintoist Association. As a result, the decision was made to promote the dual enshrinement of both Japan’s ancestral deity Amaterasu as well as Tan’gun as part of an effort to unite the people of the two countries.\textsuperscript{41} In this way, it had become official policy of the largest Shintoist Association to promote Tan’gun as Korea’s ancestral deity and set him up as the counterpart of the Japanese Sun Goddess. Tan’gun’s assimilation into the Shinto pantheon was thus gaining steam.

As it turned out, however, these efforts were for naught – at least for now – as Itō Hirobumi, who had become the Resident-General of Korea, flat-out rejected the proposal to enshrine Tan’gun. In June of 1907, shortly after the Nationwide Shintoist Association had resolved to officially push for the enshrinement of Korea’s ancestral deity, Kamono Mizuho (1840-1909), chief priest of the Yasukuni Shrine and a high-ranking member of the Association, toured Korea and Manchuria for observation purposes. He met with Itō in Seoul and discussed the shrine issue with him, proposing the enshrinement of Tan’gun/Susanoo alongside Amaterasu.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 59-60.
Itō was said to have endorsed the construction of the shrine itself, but regarding its deities, he was more negative: whereas he agreed on Amaterasu, he rejected Tan’gun. Although the reasons for this are not given, Itō may have been skeptical about Susanoo’s purported identity with Tan’gun. More fundamentally, Itō may also have shared the historians’ doubts about Tan’gun’s historicity in general, considering him not sufficiently grounded in reality. In fact, this was the official view the colonial government maintained when the enshrinement issue flared up again in the 1920s and it was only with wartime mobilization starting in the late 1930s that the highest levels of government also began warming up to Tan’gun as a symbol of Japanese-Korean unity. For now, Itō’s lukewarm attitude was a significant set-back for the Association’s efforts to enshrine Tan’gun/Susanoo.

Despite the failure of the Association to get Itō to officially endorse Tan’gun, the movement illustrates that the push to turn Korea’s first ruler into a god was initiated by Japanese Shintoists even before Koreans did so in 1909. Although Japanese historians such as Shiratori and Naka had rejected the figure of Tan’gun, Shintoists did not hesitate to endorse him as Korea’s ancestral deity and incorporate him into the Shinto pantheon. Especially Japan’s accelerating expansion into Korea after the Russo-Japanese War was an opportunity for Shintoists to offer grand visions for their religion. In this respect, their views overlapped with those of scholars such as Kume Kunitake who had also argued for the existence of Shinto practices in Korea. Contrary to such scholarship, however, Shintoists had turned toward Tan’gun in order to expand Shinto’s reach into Korea, aggrandizing the tradition’s scope and significance.

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42 Ibid., 60.
43 Kim Ch’olsu, “Chosŏn Sin’gung sŏllip āl tullŏssan nonjaeng ŭi kömt’o” [An examination of the debates surrounding the construction of the Grand Chosŏn Shrine], Sunch’ŏnhyang Inmun Kwahak Nonch’ong 27 (2010), 181.
44 Chang Sin, “Ilche malgi tonggŭn tongjoron ŭi taedu wa naesŏn ʻilch’erŏn ŭi kyunyŏl’” [The rise of the theory of common roots and ancestry in the late colonial period and fissures within the theory of Japan and Korea as One Body], Inmun Kwahak 54 (October 2014), 88.
In this way, Tan’gun allowed Shintoists to confirm and enhance their perceptions of their own tradition, and along the way turn Korea into an offspring of Japan. Thus, before Tan’gun became a rallying point for Korean nationalism, he was a symbol of common Japanese-Korean origins, a notion that was not universally accepted among Japanese, but still had passionate and vocal proponents.

Korean Awareness of Japanese Views

How much were Koreans aware of Japanese discourses and efforts to incorporate Tan’gun into the Shinto pantheon? Although the Korean side of the story will be discussed in more detail later, it should be mentioned here that Koreans were indeed cognizant of Japanese views. Granted, Koreans would react to the scholarly discussions on Tan’gun somewhat later, especially in the 1920s and 1930s since those discourses were for now mostly confined to Japanese academics. Since Shintoists, however, were actively reaching out to promote their ideas, it was not surprising that Koreans would get wind of them sooner than later. For instance, in a 1906 speech published in the newspaper Hwangsŏng Sinmun (Capital Gazette), a Japanese advisor to the Korean self-strengthening organization Taehan Chaganghoe (Korea Self-Strengthening Society) introduces the theory of Susanoo’s descent to Mount Udu (Ox-head) in Kangwŏn Province, as well as other notions such as Susanoo bringing tree seeds to the Korean peninsula and planting them there. The intention behind mentioning these stories was to propagate the idea that the people of Korea and Japan were deeply connected. Even Empress Jingū’s controversial expedition to Korea is affirmed.45 The main message, however, was that Korea had been the stronger and culturally superior country that through these interactions had

45 Such views were introduced to Korea extensively and initially, Koreans would reproduce them without much critique. See Schmid, 151-2.
introduced a great deal of culture to Japan such as literature, art, and spiritual practices. Even the languages had been alike, facilitating this type of exchange between the two countries. Thus, Korea’s current problems were not due to some inherently weak national character, but a result of the vicissitudes of time, hence making it possible to return to former strengths. This was an example that Susanoo’s Korean connection was not only made known to Koreans, but also modified to invert the relationship between Korea and Japan, sometimes even at the hands of a Japanese.

Although the speech did not specifically mention Tan’gun, by 1908, Koreans had become familiar with Japanese appropriations of Korea’s mythical progenitor as well. This was most evident in the writings of the famous nationalist historian Sin Ch’aeho (1880-1936). In “Toksa Sillon” (“A New Reading of History”), a highly nationalist outline of Korean history, Sin rejects Japanese narratives of ancient Korea, especially Empress Jingü’s conquest of Silla since this was not accounted for in Korean sources. After all, in Sin’s mind, it did not make sense that an inferior and in many ways dependent country such as Japan could defeat a superior one. Thus, Sin rants against Koreans who had put too much trust into the Nihon Shoki’s rendition of events, including the theory that associated Tan’gun with Susanoo. The specific view Sin targeted was the notion that Tan’gun was Susanoo’s younger brother, a variation of the theory that saw these two as identical. As Sin notes, such a preposterous view would effectively turn Korea into an

47 There were various ways of viewing the relationship between Tan’gun and Susanoo. Many saw them as identical, while others saw them as related, for instance by positing Tan’gun as Susanoo’s son. See No Sŏng hwan 2011, 50-51.
appendage of Japan, and also turn four thousand years of Korean history into an accessory of the Nihon Shoki, leading him to flat-out reject any attempts to connect Tan’gun with Susanoo.\textsuperscript{48}

Na Ch’ōl (1863-1916), the founder of the Taejonggyo, also demonstrated knowledge of the notion of Tan’gun and Susanoo’s identity, although it is not entirely clear when he became aware of it. In a song which he wrote shortly before his self-inflicted death in 1916, he proclaimed that the belief in Tan’gun had in ancient times spread both west to China and east to Japan, and that especially in Japan it was expressed in the worship of Susanoo.\textsuperscript{49} This suggests that Na had no qualms about endorsing the Tan’gun-Susanoo connection, although his interpretation was a subversion of the Japanese view in that he considered Tan’gun the original deity and Susanoo merely his Japanese incarnation. In this view, hence, it was Japan that had received teachings from Korea and not the other way around. In effect, Na was demonstrating that Koreans were equally capable of claiming an expansive religious past while appropriating elements from Japanese mythology. Further, considering that Na had extensive interactions in Japan before he established the Taejonggyo (chapter 4), it is very possible that he learned of Japanese discourses on Tan’gun prior to his religious awakening in 1909. If so, Japanese appropriations of Tan’gun were part of the reasons for setting up the religion, making his religious endeavors an effort to reclaim Korea’s founding father from foreign hands.

There is also evidence that Koreans came in contact with Japanese views on Tan’gun through everyday encounters. Yi Sangnyong (1858-1932), a scholar and independence activist who showed great interest in history and religion, reminisced in his diary that in early 1910, he had discussed Tan’gun with a Japanese police officer stationed in Korea. Whereas Yi depicted


\textsuperscript{49} Hŏ T’aegŭn 2015, 340.
Tan’gun as Korea’s founding father, the officer corrected him, arguing that Tan’gun was in fact the first ruler of Japan in the Age of the Gods. The view that the officer was expressing seemed to have been his own personal understanding of Korean and Japanese mythology that mixed elements from various sources. Nonetheless, believing that the officer could not possibly be wrong, Yi took this as evidence that Japan had been a vassal state to Korea. Citing the notion of Susanoo’s descent to Korea and subsequent relocation to Japan, he further speculated that this might suggest that Koreans had migrated to Japan from the ancient state of Chinhan located in the southern part of the peninsula.\(^\text{50}\) Again, the Japanese logic was turned on its head as Korea was envisioned as the mother country, something which the police officer probably did not have in mind. In this manner, layers upon layers were added to the lore of Tan’gun as interpretations of the myth were circulated back and forth between Koreans and Japanese who would often draw opposite conclusions despite starting from similar premises. The evidence also suggests that the Korean turn toward Tan’gun was at least in part stimulated by an awareness of Japanese appropriations of him.

**Western Missionaries**

Another important part in this story is the Western imaginary that filtered into Korea through Protestant missionaries. As Sung-Deuck Oak has shown, missionaries had been entering the country since the late nineteenth century, bringing with them their own sets of beliefs and preconceptions which added important new dimensions to the lore surrounding Tan’gun.\(^\text{51}\) One concept the missionaries brought with them was the notion of “primitive monotheism” which

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had already been developed in the Chinese context since the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{52} This primitive or “original” monotheism referred to an ancient worship of a Supreme Being that indigenous people had been endowed with as their earliest beliefs although the tradition was not as fleshed out or well maintained as Christianity. For missionaries, the existence of such a belief could justify and facilitate their proselytizing activities as Christianity could be introduced as something natural and conducive to indigenous traditions. Thus, in the Korean context as well, missionaries were predisposed to find hints of an indigenous monotheistic belief that could be rendered compatible with their own. In their investigations of Korean history, mythology, and beliefs, they discovered Tan’gun.

The missionaries began their engagements with Tan’gun through initial surveys of Korean history. In 1895, missionaries such as James Scarth Gale (1863-1937), George Heber Jones (1867-1919) and Homer Bezaleel Hulbert (1863-1949) presented their findings on ancient Korea in \textit{The Korean Repository}. In their studies, they had looked at Korean histories written during the Chosŏn dynasty.\textsuperscript{53} Granted, what the missionaries were offering were merely preliminary outlines of the story of Tan’gun without yet offering more in-depth evaluations of Korea’s founding father.\textsuperscript{54} Still, some of the missionaries’ projections were already visible, for instance, in Gale’s translation of the fifteenth-century \textit{Tongguk T’onggam}. Instead of truthfully following the narrative of Tan’gun’s metamorphosis into a mountain spirit, he portrayed him as having ascended to heaven, a trope which Westerners were more familiar with. Gale also listed a number of Tan’gun-related remains that could still be found in Korea such as the grave that had

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{52} Sung-Deuk Oak, \textit{The Making of Korean Christianity: Protestant Encounters with Korean Religion, 1876-1915} (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2013), 44-5.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Oak, “Shamanistic Tan’gun,” 44-5.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Homer B. Hulbert, “The Origin of the Korean People,” \textit{Korean Repository} (June 1895), 220.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
been attributed to him and the ceremonial offerings which had been presented to Tan’gun.\textsuperscript{55} Thus, Gale was offering an overview not only of the Tan’gun myth, but of the more general lore surrounding Tan’gun as well.

Soon, discussions surrounding Tan’gun intensified, particularly in the debate between Gale and Hulbert that took place in 1900 during the meetings of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. The overarching topic was the extent of Chinese influence on Korean culture: Gale argued that Korea was greatly indebted to its bigger neighbor in almost all respects, making it more or less a small replica of China, which Hulbert rejected by emphasizing the indigenous elements of Korean culture.\textsuperscript{56} For Gale, the cultural exploits of Kija who had hailed from China were an indication of the predominance of Chinese influence, while for Hulbert, Tan’gun in particular represented Koreans’ consciousness of their indigenous cultural heritage. As examples of what Koreans considered Tan’gun’s legacies, Hulbert included the top-knot as well as ethical doctrines governing state and home. This was an allusion to the writings by Hong Manjong (1643-1725) who had argued that Tan’gun had taught Koreans how to wear their hair and establish proper social relations (chapter 1). While Hulbert emphasized that he did not place any confidence in the historical value of the legend of Tan’gun, the important thing was that nonetheless, Koreans did so universally. Further, he argued that if Tan’gun was of legendary character, then so must Kija have been as well, equally banishing Kija’s, and by extension, ancient China’s cultural contributions to Korea outside the realm of history. What is more, Hulbert claimed that the purported remains related to Tan’gun were testimonies to Koreans’ faith in him as their progenitor, listing as examples the mountain altar on Mount Mani, the nearby

\textsuperscript{55} James S. Gale, “Korean History: Translations from the Tong-gook T’ong-gam,” \textit{Korean Repository} (September 1895), 321.

\textsuperscript{56} See \textit{The Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society} 1 (1900), 1-49.
fortress supposedly built by his sons, the shrine dedicated to him at Mt. Kuwŏl, as well as the grave attributed to him in P’yŏngyang. Although Hulbert did not consider Tan’gun a historical figure, he thus endowed him with a considerable amount of significance, turning him into a symbol of an indigenous Korean culture as well as Koreans’ consciousness thereof. In doing so, however, Hulbert was most likely overstating the significance of Tan’gun as the very existence of this debate suggested. Moreover, by and large, it was still Kija that was revered as the founder of Korean civilization. Nonetheless, Hulbert was showing that it was possible to turn Tan’gun into the embodiment of something purely Korean, perhaps foreshadowing the developments that would soon unfold.

In response, Gale countered that evidence of Tan’gun in Chinese records was non-existent and that even in major Korean histories such as the fifteenth-century Tongguk T’onggam, documentation of the founding father was relatively scant. The more recent Kija, on the other hand, had been discussed extensively in both Chinese and Korean sources, leading Gale to argue that “he existed in a very different way from Tan-gun [sic].” Gale’s argument was not unreasonable as the major Korean histories had indeed allotted more space and significance to Kija while prominent scholars such as Chŏng Yagyong had been quite reserved about the veracity of the records on Tan’gun. Hulbert’s view, however appreciative of Korean culture, was thus open to contestation based on documentary evidence.

George Heber Jones (1867-1919), who was tasked with commenting on this debate, sought to mediate between the two opposing views, and in doing so, revealed another understanding of Tan’gun. First, he stated that when Kija arrived, Korea was under the rule of

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58 “Discussion,” The Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 1 (1900), 44.
“Tangun [sic] chiefs,” taking Tan’gun as a title given to tribal leaders, thereby endowing the name with a dose of historical reality. Jones further argued that the myth of Tan’gun represented Korean shamanist beliefs that predated the Kija-days because the heavenly deity Hwanin, Tan’gun’s grandfather, was part of the shamanist pantheon. In doing so, Jones was oblivious of the fact that the deity was actually based on the Buddhist god Indra and that shamanism with its fluid and open nature continuously incorporated new deities. Thus, Jones was offering an ahistorical view that overlooked Tan’gun’s indebtedness to Buddhism. Nonetheless, Jones’s view was significant as it associated Tan’gun with an indigenous, age-old spiritual tradition that preceded any foreign influences. While he viewed shamanism as this spiritual tradition, he had opened the door for discussing and imagining an indigenous Korean religion in new ways.

A Christian Tan’gun

As Western missionaries’ engagement with Korean culture deepened, their understandings of Tan’gun also took on new dimensions. Gale had already associated Tan’gun with an indigenous spiritual tradition, although he defined it as shamanism. Soon, however, missionaries began to discern in Tan’gun a number of religious motifs that they found strikingly similar to their own. In particular, they identified in the myth elements of what they considered an ancient indigenous monotheism. Granted, missionaries had already been discussing the possible existence of a native concept of a monotheistic deity as they were looking for a Korean translation to refer to the Christian God. Many believed to have found it in the term hananim (“the Heavenly One/the Great One”) which they thought had been used in Korea universally to

59 Ibid., 48-9.
refer to a Supreme Being.\textsuperscript{60} However, the term itself was not uncontested as it was not clear whether Koreans had used it to refer to a monotheistic God or rather a chief deity in a polytheistic system.\textsuperscript{61} Thus, by offering a Christian reading of the Tan’gun myth, the balance could be shifted to one side, further cementing the notion of an indigenous Korean monotheism.

Homer Hulbert initiated this kind of discourse. While he had already viewed Tan’gun as a symbol of Korea’s indigenous culture, in 1901, the year after the debate on Tan’gun and Kija, he offered a more embellished retelling of the Tan’gun myth. His interpretation of the myth was evolving as was evident in his recounting of Tan’gun’s birth from a bear-turned-woman:

The first wish of [the bear-woman’s] heart was maternity, and she cried, “Give me a son.” Whan-ung [sic], the Spirit King, passing on the wind, beheld her sitting there beside the stream. He circled round her, breathed upon her, and her cry was answered. She cradled her babe in moss beneath that same pak-tal [sic] tree and it was there that in after years the wild people of the country found him sitting and made him their king.\textsuperscript{62}

In the original Tan’gun myth, Hwanung was the son of Hwanin, the heavenly deity, and had descended to earth where he married the bear-woman, thus producing Tan’gun. There was no mention that Hwanung was a formless entity, but Hulbert depicted him akin to the Holy Ghost, while the woman’s impregnation strongly resembled Mother Mary’s Immaculate Conception. To make the similarities even clearer, Hulbert went on to state that Hwanung sought an “earthly kingdom”\textsuperscript{63} and was “incarnated through the medium of a virgin,” something which none of the Korean sources had argued before. But he did not stop there, as his notion of incarnation was part of something larger: in expounding the relationship between Hwanin, Hwanung, and

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\begin{itemize}
\item Oak, *Making*, 62.
\item Homer B. Hulbert, “The History of Korea,” *Korea Review* 1 (January 1901), 34-5.
\end{itemize}
Tan’gun, Hulbert recast these three into the “Korean Trinity”\textsuperscript{64} which he went on to explain as consisting of the Creator, his son, and his earthly incarnation,\textsuperscript{65} thereby imposing on them a dynamic similar to that of the Christian Trinity. While Hulbert also made clear that this story was of mythical character and should not be taken as definite history, he was thus increasingly transposing Christian meanings onto the myth.

Although Hulbert’s reservations about the historicity of Tan’gun remained consistent, he greatly valued the symbolic significance of Tan’gun for Korean culture. For one, he imbued the figure with great antiquity, arguing that compared to him, “Kija seems almost modern.” He reached this conclusion especially through the existence of the Ch’amsŏngdan, the heaven worship altar on Mount Mani. Surely, Hulbert depicted Tan’gun as a “fabled king” and admits that it is impossible to verify the legend that he erected the altar to worship his own divine father. Nonetheless, Hulbert argued that the altar’s “immense age [was] beyond question,” and that it was of “almost equal antiquity” as the relics of ancient Egypt. Since Tan’gun was associated with the altar, in Hulbert’s logic, the figure of Tan’gun and the custom of heaven-worship must have been just as old. Thus, the message was that Tan’gun, the worship of heaven, and the altar were all connected in the Korean imaginary, and that through the figure of Tan’gun, Koreans had preserved knowledge of a Christ-like figure and certain Christian motifs since the earliest times.

Hulbert was not the only one who pursued this line of thought. In \textit{The Religions of Eastern Asia} (1910), Horace Grant Underwood (1859-1916) built upon Hulbert’s views while adding more theoretical trappings. Arguing against an evolutionary view of religion, Underwood put forth what can be termed a degeneration theory which saw forms of pure monotheism as the earliest human faiths which, however, had declined over time into superstition and polytheism.

\textsuperscript{64} Homer B. Hulbert, “The History of Korea,” \textit{Korea Review} 1 (January 1901), 34-5.
\textsuperscript{65} Homer \textit{Passing}, 289.
Hence, even peoples of countries such as Korea and China were originally monotheists which was “a remnant of the still more ancient times when God Himself made personal direct revelations to the fathers of the race.”\(^6^6\) In Underwood’s view, notions of the Trinity also existed in other religions such as Daoism or Buddhism, although in a less defined form.\(^6^7\) Echoing Hulbert, he argued that in the Korean case, this primitive monotheism was evidenced by the heaven worship altars located on mountains, especially the Ch’amsŏngdan on Mount Mani. To Underwood, this was a site of pure monotheistic heaven worship devoid of false idols as it was adorned with “neither image or [sic] spirit tablet” and was a place where “generations worshipped the God of Heaven.”\(^6^8\) In regard to the myth of Tan’gun, Underwood argued that although it “may be classed as pure legend,” it revealed what its narrator believed to be the earliest known faith of the Korean people. In particular, this included a belief in the Creator’s earthly incarnation which Underwood considered “a necessary precedent to world salvation,” and hence a crucial element of the Christian Truth.\(^6^9\) The fact that incarnation was a key motif underlying Korean beliefs was of great import, allowing Underwood to argue that there was a “strong probability of a primitive pure monotheism”\(^7^0\) which was revealed to Koreans long ago.

Hulbert and Underwood were hence focused on identifying and excavating an ancient monotheistic faith that in their views had long ago paved the way for Christianity to take over Korea. They found evidence of this in the Tan’gun myth, associating it with an ancient indigenous monotheism and endowing it with Christian motifs such as the notion of the Trinity, Incarnation, and Immaculate Conception. To be sure, the missionaries did not consider Tan’gun

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\(^{6^7}\) Ibid., 255.  
\(^{6^8}\) Ibid., 261.  
\(^{6^9}\) Ibid., 258.  
\(^{7^0}\) Ibid., 106, 109.
What was more important to them was the existence of this myth and certain motifs within it that in their eyes represented a pure, primitive monotheistic faith that Koreans had taken up in the earliest of times. The legend of Tan’gun erecting an altar on a mountaintop to worship his heavenly father was not taken at face value, but still its mere existence was considered indication that Koreans associated the first of their kind with the worship of heaven. However, while the Ch’amsŏngdan was turned into a symbol of an indigenous monotheistic faith, these missionaries seemed unaware of the fact that the altar was actually of Daoist character and likely erected during the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century when the court had moved into the vicinity (chapter 1). By estimating the altar’s age closer to four thousand years, the missionaries were eagerly overestimating its antiquity, thus creating their own versions of the Tan’gun myth heavily informed by their imaginations. Nonetheless, in doing so, they were effectively responding to questions such as “Does Korea have an indigenous religion?” thereby initiating a discourse with far-reaching repercussions.

At the same time, however, it was not just the missionaries’ understandings of Korean beliefs that the Tan’gun myth aided: in fact, it also served to enhance their understandings of their own faith. After all, the myth of Tan’gun demonstrated the universal character of the Christian Truth far beyond a limited region. The myth also suggested that the Christian Truth was not limited by time either since if the figure of Tan’gun was indeed more than four thousand years old, then this also meant that the Christian motifs within the myth actually predated the formation of Christianity itself. Hence, to these missionaries, the Christian Tan’gun was a historical figure.\footnote{Although Hulbert states that “standing upon this altar-crowned summit…one tries to imagine himself back in the days of Abraham, when Tan’gun stood by and directed the building of this heaven-touching altar,” this was more of a rhetorical device to attest to the ancient nature of the altar and not an admission of Tan’gun’s historicity. Hulbert, \textit{Passing}, 288-9.}
demonstration of how their God operated in the world, and thus, emboldened their embrace of primitive monotheism as mankind’s oldest faith.

Korean Awareness of Missionary Discourse

Considering that the missionaries were writing these texts not for a Korean, but an English-reading audience, the question remains how much these discussions actually filtered into the native populace. As is well recorded, the missionaries certainly used indigenization strategies to render Christianity more compatible with native beliefs and attract Koreans to the church.\(^\text{72}\) The adoption of the term *hananim* was the prime example as it was regarded a purely indigenous term referring to a monotheistic deity. Thus, the Christian God was not a foreign God, but wrapped in this Korean name, could be presented as a familiar one. In regard to Tan’gun, the missionary Charles Allen Clark (1878-1961) suggested that the figure of Korea’s founding father indeed played a role in converting Koreans. In *Religions of Old Korea* published in 1932, he argued that many Korean converts “first had their interest in the Korean Gospel aroused through their knowledge of Tangoon [sic] and his God, and that He is one and the same as the God of their Bible.”\(^\text{73}\) This suggests that missionaries had employed Tan’gun in teaching Koreans the Gospel, although it is not clear how accurately this description fits to the beginning of the twentieth century as Clark was writing some three decades after the Christian discourse on Tan’gun had first emerged.

However, there is more concrete evidence from 1911 that Koreans had become familiar with the missionaries’ rhetoric regarding an age-old monotheistic faith. The famous nationalist

\(^{72}\text{For a good overview, see Oak, } Making.}\)

\(^{73}\text{Charles Allen Clark, } Religions of Old Korea\text{ (New York: Revell, 1932), 143. Cited in Oak, “Shamanistic Tan’gun,” 53-4.}\)
writer and Taejonggyo-affiliate Pak Ûnsik (1859-1925), for instance, noted that some Westerners viewed the heaven worship altar on Mount Mani as the “oldest structure in East Asia.” Here, Pak was most likely referring to the views by missionaries such as Hulbert and Underwood. Hulbert in particular had considered the site an authentic remnant of Korea’s ancient faith, predating any kinds of Chinese structures. Pak Ûnsik agreed with this part of their views as he was also arguing for an ancient indigenous faith, although not in order to support the propagation of Christianity, but to identify Korea’s own irreducible religious tradition. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, the missionary views were also mirrored in the ideas of the Taejonggyo: the religion’s texts contained numerous references to Christian motifs such as the Korean Trinity or an omnipotent, omniscient God. What is more, the religion also sought to establish itself as the successor of an ancient indigenous faith which the missionaries had emphasized so much. In this respect, the missionaries’ views were not just appropriated, but also subverted. After all, the affinity with Christianity was seen as indication not that the myth of Tan’gun was some incomplete reflection of the Gospel, but that Christianity and other religions for that matter were echoes of the oldest, most original truth, that is, the religion of Tan’gun.

The Rise of Tan’gun in Korea

In the first few years of the twentieth century, foreigners paid more attention to Tan’gun than did Koreans as his rise to premier symbol of Korean nationalism happened after 1905. Prior to that, Tan’gun was certainly no figure of insignificance, but had still largely lagged behind Kija in terms of symbolic and historical import even though Tan’gun had supposedly preceded Kija

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75 Hulbert, Passing, 289.
by over a millennium. Granted, the myth of Tan’gun had not been static as some Korean scholars had continued to expand upon it, while others had played it down. Often, it seemed that while he was paid lip service to as the founder of the first Korean state, reservations about the accuracy of his historical records prevailed. Still, the regional significance of Tan’gun had flared up from time to time as he was strongly associated with the P’yŏngyang area. This, however, was still a far cry from the position that Tan’gun would ultimately take on.

The increase in foreign intrusions at the end of the nineteenth century and the subsequent need to rally the nation did not immediately lead to the Korean rediscovery of Tan’gun. While the Kabo Reforms (Kabo Kaehyŏk) of 1894-1895, which sought to put Korea on the path of modernization in response to the Tonghak rebellion, prompted the production of new history textbooks, these did not deviate much from previous accounts that depicted Tan’gun as the founder of the first Korean state, but still privileged Kija as the great sagely civilizer. In fact, in 1891, Kija’s purported grave (along with that of King Tongmyŏng, the founder of Koguryŏ) was elevated to the status of royal tomb, while Tan’gun’s grave languished in disrepair. After 1897, when the Korean king finally decided to take the reins in modernizing the country by assuming absolute power and turning Chosŏn into the Great Han Empire (Taehan Cheguk), there were still no radical shifts in the perception of Tan’gun. Indeed, the newly self-promoted emperor was explicit in his reverence for Kija’s accomplishments and Confucian teachings as the very foundation of Korea.

The ascent of Tan’gun started around 1905 as this was the year history textbooks began to change their depictions of Korea’s founding father. Especially Taedong Yŏksa (History of the

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76 Schmid, 177-8.
Great East), first published in 1905, set new trends in motion. The textbook, aimed at post-elementary level students, was produced by Chŏng Kyo (1856-1925), a scholar-official and educator, and endorsed by the Ministry of Education (Hakpu) of the Korean government. In terms of its contents, the work synthesized many of the elements that had been added to the Tan’gun myth over the last few centuries and arranged them into a chronology with concrete dates even though there was little basis for them. Thus, Tan’gun’s erection of the mountain altar on Mount Mani, his relocation of the capital, as well as his dispatch of his son to China for a gathering convened by Yu the Great were all endowed with a date and thus presented as historical fact. The textbook also maintained that Tan’gun’s lineage was continued: even though Tan’gun’s descendants had abdicated the throne to Kija, they went on to found the state of Puyŏ (second century BCE-494 CE) from which subsequent Korean dynasties branched out. This was a significant change compared to previous textbooks which presented Tan’gun as cut off from subsequent dynasties. The most striking new element that the textbook added, however, was a detailed delineation of Tan’gun’s territory: to the south it was said to have covered roughly two thirds of the peninsula, to the east it bordered on the Pacific Ocean, to the west, the Liaoning Province, and to the north, it reached all the way to the Amur river, thus covering the entirety of Manchuria. While Koreans had often viewed parts of Manchuria as the territory of past Korean dynasties such as Koguryŏ or Parhae (698-926), this was on a much grander level. However, there was no documentary evidence that could support such a grand notion, which was even more perplexing as it stood in stark contrast to the dry, matter-of-fact language in which the

80 Sŏ Yongdae, “Hanmal ŭi Tan’gun undong kwa Taejonggyo” [Tan’gun movements and the Taejonggyo at the end of the Chosŏn period], Hanguksa Yŏn’gu 114 (September 2001), 228-232.
81 Chŏng Kyo et al., Taedong Yŏksa, 36.
information was given. After all, if this was a new discovery, one would expect it to have been announced with much more fanfare. Nonetheless, the unexcited textbook tone only added to the semblance of pure, unembellished fact. While Kija still occupied more pages, the textbook’s impact was profound as once this notion of Tan’gun’s grand territory was put out there, it was impossible to be reined in again.  

1905 was also the year Korean newspapers began employing the Tan’gun calendar (alongside others) as a means of dating. The calendar took 2333 BCE as its base year because it was considered the year of Tan’gun’s founding of Old Chosŏn. This was rooted in the view—presented in works such as the Tongguk T’onggam—that Tan’gun had established his state in the twenty-fifth year of Emperor Yao’s reign. Originally, the Samguk Yusa had dated Korea’s founding to the fiftieth year of the Chinese emperor, but due to some discrepancies in the text’s use of the traditional calendar’s sexagenary cycle, the Tongguk T’onggam had settled on the twenty-fifth year which people now calculated as 2333 BCE. According to this calendar, the Gregorian year 1905 would hence be the year 4238. Granted, the Tan’gun calendar was just one out of many that newspapers used. For instance, the Hwangsŏng Sinmun listed the date of every issue on its first page side by side in a number of ways: these included the year based on the Gregorian calendar, the Qing era name, the Korean era name, the Japanese era name, and also Kija’s founding of his dynasty. Still, not only was the Tan’gun calendar put in the same context as these other ones, but it arguably received even more prominence since as the purportedly oldest calendar with the highest year count, it was listed first. The public use of the calendar also

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82 Ibid., 33-41.
84 Ibid., 404.
underlined Tan’gun’s founding of Korea in 2333 BCE as actual history, stressing a continuous national lineage that reached back over four millennia.

The emergence of the Tan’gun calendar and the textbook-innovations can thus be seen as the beginning of the rise of Tan’gun. The geo-political shifts played a major role in this. After all, 1905 was the year Korea was turned into a Japanese protectorate, greatly diminishing king Kojong’s powers and prestige. Korean nationalist discourse had already been developing, although it was often state-driven and focused on the royal lineage. Further, the court’s emphasis on Confucianism and Kija remained strong. However, with Korea’s descent into Japanese protectorate, the loss of the court’s authority meant that it could no longer function as a symbolic center around which the Korean nation could rally. Instead, the civilian realm emerged as the driving force behind a nationalist rhetoric that appealed to a wider national identity independent of the royal lineage.\(^{85}\) Further, the changing relations with a declining China had created the need to distance Korea from a Sino-centric worldview, calling for fundamental changes in how Koreans situated themselves in the world.

The introduction of foreign ideas is another important part of Tan’gun’s ascent, especially Social Darwinism which had become widely accepted among Korean reformers by the beginning of the twentieth century. Part of its strengths lay in its ability to explain to Koreans the imperialist world order and the national crisis Koreans were facing.\(^{86}\) A key component of Social Darwinism was that it divided up the world into separate racial or ethnic groups that could be arranged into a hierarchy based on their respective cultural levels. There was a strong


\(^{86}\) More on Social Darwinism in Korea, see Vladimir Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea: the Beginnings (1880s-1910s): ”Survival” as an Ideology of Korean Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
deterministic strand as the different groups were each seen as being endowed with their own ineradicable attributes. Thus, the question of how to define the Korean nation became more and more pressing which ultimately led to the figure of Tan’gun.

Foreign forms of nationalism were also important parts of the context in which the turn toward Tan’gun occurred. As Andre Schmid notes, the rise of Tan’gun as nationalist symbol was akin to the Chinese rediscovery of the Yellow Emperor as a rallying point for the ethnic Chinese nation and the Japanese reverence for the Sun Goddess Amaterasu in fostering a sense of nationhood.\footnote{Schmid, 183.} In fact, the sculpting of the Yellow Emperor into the symbol of ethnic Han nationalism can be traced to around 1903,\footnote{Ch’ŏn Sŏngrim, “Naesyŏnŏl aident’i rŭl ch’ajasŏ: 20 segi chungguk ŭi hwangje wa chunghwa minjok mandŭlg” [In search of national identity: the Chinese emperor in the twentieth century and the making of the Chinese nation], Taegu Sahak 81 (2005), 206-7.} only two years before the emergence of the Tan’gun calendar, when the young revolutionary Liu Shipei (1884–1919) argued for using a calendar based on the Yellow emperor’s purported birth in 2711 BCE.\footnote{Alvin P. Cohen, “Brief Note: The Origin of the Yellow Emperor Era Chronology,” Asia Major 25(2) (January 2012), 1-13} The emperor, according to Liu, was the “original ancestor of the four hundred million people of the Han race” and due to the principle of racial preservation, even superseded Confucius in import. Reckoning time in this way made it possible to trace the entire history of the ethnic Han nation as independent of individual dynasties or rulers. It also allowed Liu to position the descendants of the Yellow Emperor as the main agent of history, criticizing harshly the “extreme autocracy” of rulers that had treated the empire as their personal possessions. In this respect, the emphasis on an egalitarian nation at the expense of nobility was in line with Liu’s revolutionary, anarchist and anti-Manchu tendencies. At the same time, however, Liu was also explicit about where he got his inspiration from, acknowledging his debt to Japanese nationalist rhetoric surrounding Japan’s
first emperor Jimmu, and the Japanese way of dating based on his imperial ascension in 660 BCE. Since the Yellow Emperor was very much analogous to his Japanese counterpart, Liu’s argument was that he also deserved a similar treatment.\(^90\)

It is certainly possible that Koreans’ use of the Tan’gun calendar was inspired by Liu, although more research is required. However, what is evident is that Japanese nationalist discourse was circulated more widely within Korea due to Japan’s increasing influence. In the homeland, Japan’s imperial ideology was often expressed as a type of civil religion which emphasized reverence for Amaterasu as the ancestor of Japan’s unbroken imperial lineage.\(^91\) In turn, thinkers such as Hozumi Yatsuka (1860-1912) envisioned the nation-state as a family with the emperor at its head, in effect, making Amaterasu the ancestral founder not only of the imperial house, but the entire Japanese nation.\(^92\) This allowed Hozumi to define the Japanese nation as one bloodline held together by a common ancestor worship.\(^93\) However, the spirit of the ancestral founder was also embodied in subsequent emperors, effectively rendering veneration for the ancestral deity and veneration for any other emperor one and the same.\(^94\) Hence, Amaterasu was not the only figure of the imperial lineage that Japanese nationalism focused on.

Certainly, the Meiji state did much to control the symbolism of Amaterasu and appropriate her in order to elevate the imperial house in the wake of the Meiji restoration. Alternative images of Amaterasu that had been “contaminated” through the long process of the fusion of Shinto and Buddhism began to be censored while the imperial court also took direct

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\(^91\) Sassa Mitsuaki, 47.
\(^92\) Ibid., 53.
\(^94\) Ibid., 12.
charge of the Ise Shrine which was dedicated to the deity. However, Amaterasu did not monopolize Japanese nationalist rhetoric. In fact, her descendant Emperor Jimmu who was believed to have become the first emperor of Japan in 660 BCE arguably came to play a more prominent role in the trappings of Japanese state-nationalism. According to Chiba Kei, Emperor Jimmu was considered to be more suited than the Sun Goddess for Japan’s efforts to achieve a “rich country and strong army” and project a more masculine image to its people. Aside from their respective genders, this was because Emperor Jimmu was a more tangible historical figure that was seen as having founded a political entity, whereas Amaterasu was a deity more removed from the secular world. Thus, even though she theoretically served as the foundation for Japan’s imperial lineage, it was Emperor Jimmu that the Meiji state honored first with a national holiday that commemorated his imperial ascension on February 11 (decreed in 1873). New shrines were also built in veneration of him, while official documents began to be dated based on his founding of Japan, including ones that were sent to the Chosŏn court.

Indeed, more so than Amaterasu, it was also Emperor Jimmu that became known in Korea, at least initially. As early as 1883, a newspaper article offered a summary of Jimmu’s exploits based on the Nihon Shoki, portraying him as a “sacred ruler” and explaining to Korean readers the Japanese way of measuring time based on his imperial ascension. With increased Japanese presence in Korea after the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904, newspapers

96 Ibid., 9.
98 Ibid., 88.
99 This includes the Kanghwa Treaty of 1876 or the 2536th year of Emperor Jimmu’s ascension. Kojong Sillok 1876/2/27 (2/3 according to lunar calendar).
100 “Ilbon saryak” [Condensed history of Japan], Hansŏng Sunbo, December 9, 1883, 20-22.
also began to mention Japan’s foundation day,\textsuperscript{101} as well as the commemorations of Emperor Jimmu’s passing away in April.\textsuperscript{102} In contrast, one is hard pressed to find similar discussions on Amaterasu in the Korean media around this time. However, while Koreans became increasingly aware of Emperor Jimmu’s significance, they also started to react against this trend, and in doing so, began to contrast him with Tan’gun. One commentator lamented that due to Koreans’ use of Japanese textbooks, children only knew of the wisdom of Emperor Jimmu, but not of that of Tan’gun.\textsuperscript{103} Another article deplored the fact that the splendid descendants of Tan’gun were celebrating Emperor Jimmu from afar, a humiliating practice that Japanese influence had brought about.\textsuperscript{104} The fact that Koreans were mentioning Tan’gun and Emperor Jimmu in the same context suggests that Koreans started to see Tan’gun as analogous to his Japanese counterpart, that is, as an ethnic forefather as well as the founder of an original political entity.

Sin Ch’aeho and the Aggrandizement of Tan’gun

Indeed, the discourse surrounding Tan’gun soon took on new dimensions as Koreans began to base their nationalism on the mythical founder. The most prominent example in the elevation of Tan’gun is Sin Ch’aeho who in 1908 offered a substantial reinterpretation of Korean history in his aforementioned article “Toksa Sillon” (“A New Reading of History”). Granted, the text was a polemical work intended to rouse up the reader by proffering a number of populist arguments, but it was not a detailed study with notes or reference to sources. The work also reflected Sin’s Social Darwinian worldview which he combined with an emphasis on a martial

\textsuperscript{101} “Ilbyŏng yŏnhoe” [Japanese service members’ banquet], 
\textit{Hwangŏng Sinmun}, February 12, 1904, 2.

\textsuperscript{102} “Sinmu ch’ŏnhwang cheil,” [Emperor Jimmu’s commemoration day] \textit{Hwangŏng Sinmun}, April 3, 1908, 2.

\textsuperscript{103} “Non irô kyogwasŏ,” [Discussing Japanese-language textbooks], \textit{Taehan Maeil Sinbo}, April 15, 1906, 3.

\textsuperscript{104} “Ilbon úi sambae ch’ungno” [Japan’s three great loyal servants], \textit{Taehan Maeil Sinbo}, April 2, 1908, 1.
spirit that would aid Korea in the quest for survival. In Sin’s understanding, the ethnic Korean nation, not individual rulers, was the main agent of Korean history. As such, the Korean nation had been engaged in constant conflict with surrounding nations, making martialism a prime virtue. As mentioned, Sin also expressed a strong aversion to Japanese efforts to connect Tan’gun to Susanoo since he regarded these as tantamount to subjecting Korean history to Japanese history. Hence, Sin’s writing suggests that not only were Korean intellectuals well aware of Japanese attempts to appropriate Tan’gun and Korean history, but that they also began to react against such discursive intrusions. At the same time, however, Sin was also scolding Koreans who regarded the history of Tan’gun as too distant and difficult to fathom like the Book of Genesis. To Sin, Tan’gun was qualitatively different from such far-fetched religious concoctions which was reflected in his effort to eliminate any religious or supernatural elements from Tan’gun and turn him into a purely historical entity. Tan’gun was real, Sin emphasized, and his language suggests that a significant section of Koreans had to be convinced of this truth.

If Tan’gun had been commonly depicted as the founder of the first Korean state, Sin’s essay added another dimension by turning him into the progenitor of the ethnic Korean nation. As Shin sought to shift away from dynastic lineages and establish the nation, or minjok, as the main agent of history – similar to what Liu Shipei had done with China – he defined the Korean people as a single bloodline descending from Tan’gun. Here, Sin was turning Tan’gun into a figure akin to Amaterasu or Emperor Jimmu although removing any suggestions that he may have been part of a divine lineage as Sin completely omits Tan’gun’s origin story. Considering

108 See Schmid, 180-92. Schmid has discussed the rise of ethnic nationalism in Korea extensively.
Sin’s knowledge of Japanese discourses, it seems likely that Japanese imperial ideology served as source of inspiration even while he was strongly rebuking Japanese conceptions of Korean history. However, Sin also added a number of other innovations to Korean nationalist discourse. After all, as Andre Schmid notes, in 1908, there was still confusion over how to name the Korean nation, reflecting the fact that Korean nationalism was still in the making. Sin took up this task: now that he had adumbrated the contours of the Korean nation, he christened it “Puyŏ” after the ancient kingdom in Manchuria that had presumably succeeded Old Chosŏn. While he does not explicitly state the reasons for this choice of name, it was understood that Puyŏ had given rise to “Korean” kingdoms such as Koguryŏ and Paekche, thus engendering an uninterrupted Korean lineage. Further, the vast territory that the state had supposedly controlled in Manchuria also played into Sin’s goal of delineating a grand ancient nation.

Claiming a Sacred Mountain

Indeed, Sin’s reimagining of Tan’gun and the Korean nation was coupled with his vision of a martial spirit and a glorious past. This brought about far-reaching changes in the understanding of Tan’gun in at least two important respects: first, drawing inspiration from the afore-mentioned textbook Taedong Yŏksa, the territories associated with Tan’gun and the Korean nation were greatly expanded into Manchuria, while second, the significance of Kija was minimized. The historical context here is important: after all, the period saw a decline of Qing Chinese influence, enabling the process of what Schmid termed “decentering China” which empowered Koreans to take a stronger stance toward their neighbor. The migration of largely impoverished Koreans to the Kando region in Southern Manchuria which had begun in the latter

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110 See Schmid, 55-100.
half of the nineteenth century was also an important factor as it created territorial controversies, raising questions about sovereignty over that space.\footnote{See Schmid, 224-36.}

According to Sin’s Darwinian view of history, only a powerful, assertive nation with a strong martial spirit could prevail in this world of constant strife. That the Korean nation still existed was evidence of its prowess and success in the contest for survival even though it may have fallen on hard times. Thus, in Sin’s mind, there was no doubt that Tan’gun as the founder of the Korean nation had been a great conqueror: Sin portrayed him as having been in possession of a meticulous “war machine” in the form of superior weaponry (a bow made of the \textit{tan}-tree)\footnote{The Chinese \textit{San Guo Zhi} [Records of the Three Kingdoms] from the third century makes mention of a \textit{tan}-bow which was produced by the Ye people who lived in the Lelang area, that is, the northern parts of the Korean peninsula. Sin Ch’aeho most likely took inspiration from this. See \textit{San Guo Zhi} (Wei Shu 30, Hui Chuan). \url{http://ctext.org/text.pl?node=603356&if=gb}} that had enabled him to seize and control vast spaces reaching west to Liaoning and north to the Amur river, thus including the entirety of Manchuria. As mentioned, this understanding of Tan’gun’s territory had appeared a few years earlier in the \textit{Taedong Yŏksa} although it is not clear how this conception was reached as traditionally, that region had been associated with the Jurchen/Manchus. Sin connected this vast territory with Tan’gun’s expansive drive, effectively appropriating the Manchu homeland for Korean history. As Sin mused, Tan’gun was not somebody who would be content with dominating the south, crossing his arms and resting on his laurels. He was the creator of a nation-state, and thus must have been engaged in incessant expansion like the founders of great religions and philosophies.\footnote{Sin, “Toksa Sillon,” 315.} In this way, Sin turned Tan’gun into a warrior-conqueror whose martial spirit ran through the genealogy of the Korean nation. There was no new evidence that Sin cited to support his views – his interpretation of Tan’gun and ancient Korea was solely based on his own desire for greatness.
At the same time, this depiction of Tan’gun as the embodiment of Korea’s martial spirit also compelled Sin to offer reinterpretations of the specific locales that had been associated with the myth. Because Tan’gun was now a great conqueror who had been active in the vast expanses of the continent, Sin moved Tan’gun’s origin from Mount Myohyang further north to Mount Paektu which he still called by its alternative name Mount Changbaek (Changbaeksan). The original myth in the *Samguk Yusa* had identified Tan’gun’s place of origin as Mount T’aebaek (Great White Mountain), and added in a commentary that this actually referred to Mount Myohyang (Mountain of Peculiar Fragrance). Virtually all texts on Tan’gun including the numerous textbooks that had appeared in the recent years had thus identified Tan’gun’s place of origin with Mount Myohyang. Sin, however, was asserting that people including the initial recorder of the Tan’gun myth had been mistaken in identifying Mount T’aebaek as Mount Myohyang. In Sin’s imagination, the Mount T’aebaek of the myth must have been none other than Mount Paektu, the highest peak of the Korean peninsula from where the Korean people originated and spread into the surrounding areas. After all, the mountain’s location at the natural border between the peninsula and Manchuria made it the ideal spot to expand into both. Granted, some earlier texts had mentioned that an alternative name for Mount Paektu was indeed Mount T’aebaek (among many other appellations). The context, however, was not related to Tan’gun while Mount T’aebaek was a fairly common name used to refer to serveral places in Korea. In this respect, Sin was offering a radical reinterpretation as he was going against hundreds of years

114 The only exception may be An Chŏngbok’s *Tongsa Kangmok* in which he offers two conflicting accounts: on one hand he notes that Tan’gun descended to Mount Myohyang, while he later states that the site of his descent was Mount Changbaek. This may be because he also depicted Mount Myohyang as a branch of Mount Changbaek which in An’s account hence refers to a larger mountain range rather than an individual mountain. An Chŏngbok, *Tongsa Kangmok* (Purok, ha-kwŏn, T’aebaeksan’go).

115 Pak Ch’ansŭng, “Paektusan ŭi minjok yŏngsan ŭroŭi p’yosanghwa” [Envisioning Mount Paektu as a holy national mountain], *Tong’asia Munhwa Yŏn’gu* 55 (November 2013), 20-21
of established understandings. Nonetheless, Sin’s version would eventually win out, overruling the original record of the myth and irrevocably changing the location of Tan’gun’s origin.\textsuperscript{116}

The relocation of Tan’gun’s origins further north thus meshed better with Sin’s vision of an expansive Korean territory. This expansion was also an intrusion into historically Jurchen/Manchu territory, and Sin’s appropriation of Mount Paektu illustrates this well. After all, the mountain (Mount Changbai in Chinese) had great significance for the Qing dynasty as it was considered the place of origin of the imperial family. Thus strongly linked with Manchu lore on their ancestral homeland, the mountain had become a sacred place and the object of much veneration.\textsuperscript{117} Granted, the mountain also had significance for Koreans. While it had lain outside Unified Silla and Koryŏ territory, the Chosŏn dynasty had expanded all the way north to the mountain. In the early eighteenth century, part of the mountain was formally recognized as Chosŏn territory by agreement with the Qing. Thereafter, the symbolism of Mount Paektu increased, as geomantic theories often depicted it as the head mountain of the peninsula’s mountain ranges.\textsuperscript{118} Also, there were efforts to turn the mountain into the birthplace of the Chosŏn dynasty’s royal lineage, likely inspired by Manchu precedents. However, the notion was met with significant resistance from government officials and ultimately failed to gain much traction, suggesting that the mountain was arguably of more import to the Qing than to Koreans.\textsuperscript{119} Now that Sin was claiming the mountain as Tan’gun’s birth site, he was attempting to commandeer Manchu space again – this time with success.

\textsuperscript{116} One example of how prevalent the view has become is Schmid, 218.
\textsuperscript{117} See Mark C. Elliott, “The Limits of Tartary: Manchuria in Imperial and National Geographies,” \textit{The Journal of Asian Studies} 59.3 (August 2000), 603-646.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 207-9.
The promotion of Mount Paektu and Manchuria, however, also brought with it a demotion of other places that had traditionally been associated with Tan’gun. While even the original myth had mentioned P’yŏngyang as Tan’gun’s capital, Sin argued that this could not have been true, since the city was located too far south to be of any significance. Instead, he claimed that the city was simply an outpost that Tan’gun had conquered. In the same vein, he argued that Tan’gun’s purported grave in the P’yŏngyang region was not set up there because the city was an important place, but because Tan’gun most likely had perished there during one of his many expeditions. In this point, Sin was even likening Tan’gun to Alexander the Great who had died far away from home during his expedition to Persia.\(^{120}\) It is ironic that Sin de-emphasized the importance of P’yŏngyang so much, given Tan’gun’s local significance and possible origins in that region. Still, Sin pushed ahead with his spacial rearrangements, even overturning the original myth and significantly reshaping the lore of Korea’s founding father.

The other significant consequence of Sin Ch’aeho’s aggrandizement of Tan’gun was the demotion of Kija. As mentioned, Koreans had held Kija in great esteem as he was believed to have brought civilization to Korea and set the foundation for subsequent Korean dynasties. In contrast, even though Tan’gun had preceded Kija in time, his lineage was often considered to be cut off from subsequent dynasties. Sin lamented this state of affairs and set about making some radical changes.\(^{121}\) Given the prowess of the Korean nation, Sin argued that it did not make sense that Koreans had submitted to a foreigner such as Kija and even made him their king. Sin’s view also reflected the rising importance of ethnicity since before that, people by and large had not taken much issue with Kija’s Chinese origins as his connection to what was considered the center of civilization was much more important. Now, Kija was considered a foreigner,

\(^{120}\) Sin, “Toksa Sillon,” 315.  
\(^{121}\) Ibid., 316.
somebody who did not really belong to the Korean nation. His arrival in Korea with five thousand followers also could not possibly have been enough to replace Tan’gun’s dynasty. Instead, Sin argued that Tan’gun’s state had already been succeeded by Puyŏ, and that the Puyŏ king invested Kija with rank and land. Granted, Kija was cultured and had much to teach, but he was also ultimately a vassal to the Puyŏ king and tasked with administering only one outer region of the kingdom. The notion that Kija’s lineage had ruled Chosŏn for over a thousand years which appeared in the major histories was also a misperception, as in Sin’s view, the area of his administration was limited to the P’yŏngyang region. In this way, Kija was relegated from a sagely king to a foreigner with limited authority and significance. His lineage which had factored prominently before was also removed from Korea’s genealogy. This was a significant reversal as Sin was contradicting centuries of reverence for Kija. Even so, Sin was successful in triggering a downward spiral that would ultimately banish Kija into near oblivion while bringing about a dramatic rise of Tan’gun.122

In this way, Sin elevated Tan’gun above all else, setting him up as the single most important figure in Korean history while irrevocably diminishing Kija’s significance. This was a monumental subversion as by and large, Tan’gun had been regarded as only one notable among many and given less importance than Kija. The circumstances of the time certainly stimulated this change, as Korea’s gradual loss of sovereignty due to Japanese incursions between 1905 and 1910 shook the very foundations of the old world views. The ensuing intellectual crisis, the influence of Social Darwinism and foreign nationalist ideologies, as well as the pressing need to invigorate the Korean nation all led Sin to rediscover Tan’gun and reinterpret Korean mythology. That Sin turned to Tan’gun instead of Kija was not such an unusual move considering the

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prevailing emphasis on ethnicity and an uninterrupted bloodline originating from a founding father. The decline of China also enabled Sin to expand Korean history into Manchuria and downplay the role of Kija. Still, Sin stopped short of turning Tan’gun into a Korean version of Amaterasu as he removed any supernatural elements and presented him as a purely historical ruler. Nonetheless, the aggrandizement of Tan’gun laid the foundation for his transformation into much more than that. After all, in the absence of documentary evidence, upholding Sin’s version of Tan’gun and a grand Korean nation required most of all one thing: faith.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced Japanese, Western, and Korean discourses on Tan’gun immediately prior to the Taejonggyo’s emergence in 1909. The turn of the century was indeed an eventful time that saw a dramatic diversification of discussions on Korea’s founding father. As Japanese scholars adopted Western practices of historical investigation, they began to historicize the Tan’gun myth and investigate its origins. While often critical of the myth, these scholars nonetheless developed frameworks such as the notion of heaven worship that would later become important in Koreans’ understandings of their own religious heritage. At the same time, Japanese Shintoists adopted Tan’gun as a deity in an effort to extend Shinto’s reach abroad and argue for common Japanese-Korean origins. Western missionaries similarly added their religious preconceptions into the mix and identified in the Tan’gun myth traces of an indigenous monotheism that suggested the existence of Christian-like beliefs even prior to Korea’s encounter with Christianity. Finally, Koreans themselves also rediscovered Tan’gun as a rallying point for the ethnic Korean nation, the embodiment of a martial spirit, as well as a marker of a glorious past. Overall, while Tan’gun was being analyzed and deconstructed in one corner,
elsewhere he was being reinterpreted, reimagined and expanded upon into a Shinto deity, a Christ-like figure, and the ethnic progenitor of a nation.

These different interpretations were also responding to and competing with each other. It is significant that Japanese and Western discourses on Tan’gun preceded the Korean rediscovery of him. This suggests that foreign engagements with Tan’gun may have played a significant role in Koreans’ turn toward their founding father. Indeed, especially Sin Ch’aeho forcefully reacted against Japanese appropriations of Tan’gun, turning him into an exclusive symbol of the ethnic Korean nation. Korean endeavors to elevate Tan’gun as nationalist symbol were thus also attempts to reclaim Tan’gun from foreign hands. Others, such as Na Ch’ŏl, the founder of the Taejonggyo, would simultaneously endorse and subvert Japanese views by arguing that while Tan’gun was indeed also a Shinto deity, this was because the worship of Tan’gun had spread from Korea to Japan and not the other way around. As will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, the Taejonggyo also mirrored the missionaries’ discourse on Tan’gun and an ancient indigenous monotheism as the religion sought to present itself as the successor of this very tradition. The religion’s ideas would even ricochet back to Westerners and influence their ongoing attempts to understand Korean beliefs. Thus, as Korea was hurling toward annexation in the final moments of the Chosŏn dynasty, the myth surrounding Tan’gun only grew in dimensions, setting the stage for the religion to appear.
Chapter 4

Constructing an Ancient, Indigenous Religion

This chapter finally turns toward the Taejonggyo, closely following the events leading up to its emergence as well as the religion’s early activities. In doing so, it covers the period from 1905, when the religion’s founder Na Ch’ŏl first gained prominence, to 1912, when the religion’s first scripture appeared. By offering a narrative of the establishment of the religion and its early ideas, this chapter seeks to counter established views that have portrayed the religion as part of an older tradition of folk beliefs surrounding Tan’gun. Instead, this chapter argues that such accounts have put too much trust into the religion’s own narrative and that the gradual construction of the religion as laid out here indicates that no anterior religious tradition needs to be postulated to explain the rise of the Taejonggyo.

Established Views

Although the Taejonggyo, originally named Tan’gun’gyo (“Religion of Tan’gun”), was officially announced in 1909, the religion went to great lengths to claim that it was in fact a revival, or rather, a “re-enlightenment” (chunggwang) of an ancient tradition that originated from Tan’gun himself. Present-day scholars have also argued that the Taejonggyo was part of an older tradition of Tan’gun worship that had been maintained especially in folk practices, although they do not go so far as to trace these back to Tan’gun. Sassa Mitsuaki, for instance, notes the instances of Tan’gun commemorations during the Chosŏn dynasty as well as the growing folklore surrounding him, arguing that these constituted a spiritual tradition that ultimately culminated in the emergence of the Taejonggyo. However, while the religion certainly made references to such precedents, it is doubtful whether these individual instances can be seen as
constituting a cohesive and continuous spiritual tradition. Further, Sassa maintains that especially
toward the end of the Chosŏn dynasty, Tan’gun was worshipped by esoteric groups in the
countryside which provided the seeds for the religion. He especially mentions a group founded
by a mystic, Kim Yŏmbaek, who was said to have entered Mount Myohyang in 1890 for some
soul-searching and subsequently founded a group that consecrated Tan’gun into an absolute God,
thus becoming the forerunner of the modern consecration of Tan’gun. While Sassa takes this as
evidence that such a popular belief was becoming more and more widespread, fueling Na
Ch’ŏl’s religious endeavors, Kim Yŏmbaek’s ontological status is highly suspicious as his story
emerged in the 1920s from the Tan’gun’gyo, the rival group that had split from the Taejonggyo
and maintained the religion’s original name. Considering this, the story was most likely an
attempt to establish the Tan’gun’gyo as the legitimate heir of the tradition of Tan’gun worship by
offering a new religious genealogy. Sassa further notes that by 1885, shamanic practitioners had
also incorporated Tan’gun into their pantheon as head deity, as was depicted in the Mudang
Naeryŏk (History of Shamans), which outlined the origins of Korean shamanic rituals.¹ The
dating of the text, however, is problematic as its language, ideas, and material construction make
it more likely that it emerged sometime in the 1920s or 1930s, after Tan’gun had already become
the central focus of Korean nationalist discourse.² In this respect, there is no legitimate evidence
that Tan’gun worship was maintained on the popular level in the late nineteenth century.

Another scholar, Chŏng Yŏnghun mirrors Sassa’s views in arguing that it is possible to
identify an indigenous folk tradition that ultimately filtered into the Taejonggyo. According to
Chŏng, this tradition has historically set itself apart from foreign teachings such as Buddhism
and Confucianism while tracing its own origins back to Tan’gun, thus making the Taejonggyo

¹ Sassa Mitsuaki, 16-23.
² See Sŏ Yongdae 2015.
part of a much older spiritual lineage. However, the texts that Chŏng lists as examples of this tradition are—in spite of how they are presented—in fact twentieth-century productions, such as the Kyuwŏn Sahwa (Historical Tales from Kyuwŏn),³ or have been modified and expanded in the modern period, such as Ogye Ilchijip (Ogye’s Diaries)⁴ and Ch’ŏnghakchip (Chŏnghak’s Collected Works)⁵ as they include elements that were developed by the Taejonggyo.⁶ This strongly suggests that these works were preceded and influenced by the Taejonggyo rather than the other way around.

Both Chŏng and Sassa also put credence into the Taejonggyo’s official narrative that it is a continuation of a secret society formed by another ontologically suspect hermit, Paek Pong, who was said to have been practicing his worship of Tan’gun on Mount Paektu at the turn of the century. This was in fact the original origin story of the religion even before the Tan’gun’gyo offered the story of Kim Yŏm’baek. In the same vein, the link to Paek Pong would suggest that the Taejonggyo was an expansion of a secluded tradition that was restructured and re-promulgated for the masses in the form of the religion.⁷ Sassa’s argument is that from the beginning, the Taejonggyo’s ideas were too systematic and detailed to have emerged out of the mind of one individual, thus necessitating a preceding tradition to draw on.⁸ This chapter, however, shows that while Na Ch’ŏl certainly was influenced by other discourses and was hence not beginning from scratch, he took much inspiration from contemporary Korean, Japanese and

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³ See Chapter 6.
⁴ See Cho Insŏng, “Tan’gun e kwanhan yŏrŏ sŏnggyŏk āi kirok” [Various types of records on Tan’gun], Han’guksa Simin Kangjwa 27 (2000), 48. Especially Tan’gun’s life-span of 93 years is an idea developed by the Taejonggyo.
⁵ See Kim Sŏnghwan, “Sŏn’ga charyo ‘Ch’ŏnghak chip’ ēi charyojŏk kŏmt’o” [A philological examination of the Daoist record Ch’ŏnghak chip], Sŏndo Munhwa 6 (February, 2009), 109-10. Many of the elements here, such a more expansive notion of the nation or the name of Tan’gun’s four sons, drew from texts that were inspired by the Taejonggyo.
⁶ See Chŏng Yŏng hun, “Taejonggyo wa Tan’gun minjokchuŭi” [The Taejonggyo and Tan’gun nationalism], Kojosŏn Tan’gunhak 10 (June, 2004), 281-310, 290-1.
⁷ Ibid., 293.
⁸ Sassa, 65.
Western sources, while also employing his knowledge of classical Korean texts. Further, as this
narrative will show, the religion’s ideas were far from complete at the time of its announcement,
as they would evolve through an incremental process of additions and corrections. Hence, the
emergence of the Taejonggyo can very well be explained without taking recourse to an anterior
spiritual tradition.

Na Ch’ŏl

In order to understand how the religion was constructed, it is necessary to turn toward Na
Ch’ŏl, the founder of the Taejonggyo, and examine his personal trajectory as well as the events
leading up to the religion’s establishment. Na Ch’ŏl, originally born Na Tuyŏng in 1863, but also
known as Na Inyŏng, grew up in what is present-day Posŏng in the South Chŏlla Province.
Although he was born into an impoverished yangban family, he grew up to become a Confucian
scholar and passed the civil service exam in 1891. From then until 1893, he went through a
number of official posts at the Royal Secretariat (Sŭngjŏngwŏn), Ministry of Military Affairs
(Pyŏngjo), and Office of Diplomatic Correspondences (Sŭngmunwŏn). In the fall of 1893,
however, Na suddenly put down all of his duties and retired to the countryside where he
remained for over a decade despite offers for him to return to the government bureaucracy.9 It is
not clear what motivated Na to do so, but he basically lived off the grid for the next years until
he was catapulted into the spotlight of history in 1905 with Korea’s descent into a Japanese
protectorate. In July of that year, a few months before the signing of the protectorate treaty, the
*Taehan Maeil Sinbo* (*Korea Daily*) printed a letter of protest by a group of former and present
officials that included Na as well as others such as Yi Ki (1848-1909) and O Kiho (1863-1916).

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9 Pak Hwan, *Na Ch’ŏl, Kim Kyohŏn, Yun Sebok: Minjok ŭl Palgyŏnhago Nara rŭl Ch’atcha* [Na Ch’ŏl, Kim
Kyohŏn, Yun Sebok: Discover the Nation and Recover the Country] (Seoul: Tonga Ilbosa, 1992), 9-17.
This letter was addressed to the Korean government, warning it about Japanese duplicitous intentions despite talks of preserving Korea’s independence.10 While the group of Korean loyalists was exhorting the government to come up with counter-measures against Japanese intrusions, they felt that this was not enough as Na and O Kiho decided to travel to Japan themselves and take matters into their own hands. According to Japanese police documents, they had been invited by none other than Son Pyŏnghŭi (1861-1922), the leader of the Tonghak/Ch’ŏndogyo (Religion of the Heavenly Way), who was staying in Tokyo under the pseudonym Yi Sanghŏn, enabling the group to secretly meet with a number of other Korean exiles.11

While the nature of their interactions remains unclear, it is significant that Na and his entourage were interacting with other people engaged in religious experimentation. Moreover, some sources suggest that Na and his group of Korean loyalists sought to go one step further and directly engage the Japanese government. According to Hwang Hyŏn’s Maech’ŏn Yarok (Maech’ŏn’s Unofficial History), a “private” history, as well as Pak Únsik’s Han’guk T’ongsa (Painful History of Korea), which regurgitates many of the former’s accounts, Na Ch’ŏl and his group submitted a letter to the Japanese emperor in the form of a petition, asking him to refrain from turning Korea into a protectorate. The tone of the text was conciliatory as it was written in the style of a petition with the usual tropes of prostrating oneself in front of the emperor. At the same time, Pan-Asian rhetoric and Social Darwinian tropes were also employed as the letter talked about Korea and Japan as brother nations and the well-being of the “Yellow Race” while expressing concern about the intrusion of the “White Race” into Asia. This petition, however,

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10 “Pyŏlbo” [Miscellaneous news], Hwangsŏng Sinmun, May 7, 1905, 2.
11 “(205) Yŏ Shisatsu Kanjin tokŏ ni kansuru ken (July 26, 1905)” [Case related to overseas trip by Korean person of interest], in Han’guk Kŭndaesa Charyo Chipsŏng 3: Yŏsich’al Han’gugin Kŏdong 3, ed. Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wiwŏnhoe (Kwach’ŏn, Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wiwŏnhoe, 2002). NIKH online version at http://db.history.go.kr.
failed to receive any attention, and with the news that Itō Hirobumi would assume the post as Resident-General of Korea, Na and his group of Korean patriots rose to action again by penning another statement. The letter which they addressed to Itō this time was much more caustic, accusing the Japanese of duplicitous behavior and predicting a heavenly punishment for Itō himself for his actions toward Korea. However, even this more aggressive tone did not bring about a response from the Japanese, prompting Na and his group to return to Korea for the time being.\(^\text{12}\)

It is not clear how truthfully these events have been recorded due to the *Maech’ŏn Yarok*’s tendency to include anecdotes and hearsay. However, considering the pattern of behavior of the group, it does not seem far-fetched that they would have composed such letters, although it remains unclear how and if they were ever delivered to their intended recipients. Whatever the case, the protectorate treaty went through in November of 1905, and in the following year, Na and his group traveled to Japan again in order to meet with Japanese notables and continue their diplomatic efforts.\(^\text{13}\) Interestingly, it seems that the people he interacted with were mostly Japanese right-wingers: police reports indicate that one was Uchida Ryōhei (1879-1937) who had advocated for the annexation of Korea, although it is not clear when this interaction took place as Uchida was spending much time in Korea. Another one was Okamoto Ryūnosuke (1852-1912), a former officer of the imperial army who had been involved in the murder of Queen Min in 1895. Thanks to a vigilant police, the details of Na’s encounter with Okamoto have been preserved: according to a police report, one of the reasons Na requested a


\(^{13}\) Pak Sŏngsu, *Na Ch’ŏl: Tongnip Undong ŭi Abŏji* [Na Ch’ŏl: Father of the Independence Movement] (Koyang: Buk K’aemp’ŭ, 2003), 94.
meeting with Okamoto was the latter’s acquaintance with Kim Yunsik (1835-1922), a prominent Korean scholar-official, whom Okamoto had met about a decade ago during his adventures in the peninsula. Kim Yunsik had also been a teacher-figure to Na and would later get briefly involved in the Taegonggyo as well. Na’s objective in meeting Okamoto was to persuade him to advocate for Korea’s independence and push against the current cabinet’s policies toward Korea as he had been known to be critical of them before. The meeting, however, was a failure, as Okamoto merely repeated the usual Japanese rhetoric that turning Korea into a protectorate was indeed to protect it from Chinese and Russian incursions, and that independence should be achieved at some point in the future once a certain level of strength had been attained.\footnote{“(275) Kanjin no kōdō ni tsuite” [On the activities of Korean nationals], in Kuksa P’yŏnych’ an Wiwŏnhoe, Han’guk Kŭndaesa Charyo Chipsŏng 3. NIH online version at \url{http://db.history.go.kr}.}

The idealistic efforts to reach out to Japanese notables and conduct “private” diplomacy were bound to fail in bringing about any meaningful changes to Japanese foreign policy, and the frustration within the group of Korean loyalists kept growing. Returning to Korea, Na and O decided to take more drastic measures, this time directed toward Koreans. They hired members of righteous armies and tasked them with assassinating the five Korean ministers, or rather, the “five bandits” that had been responsible for signing the Protectorate Treaty. According to Na’s own testimony in court, he believed that these five individuals had willfully signed the treaty without authorization from the Korean emperor and were thus responsible for the enslavement of “twenty million Koreans.”\footnote{Kojong sillok 48, 1907.7.6.} In addition to such punitive motivations, newspaper reports suggested that by removing these treacherous ministers, Na and his group also sought to replace the administration and nullify the Treaty.\footnote{“Na O ŭi kongch’o chŏnmal” [The full story of Na and O’s testimony] Hwangsŏng Sinmun, April 27, 1907, 2.} However, although Na’s hired assassins tried several times to achieve their objectives between late 1906 and early 1907, they failed to murder even
one of their targets. These blunders led to the exposure of Na’s plans and the arrest of those responsible. Put on trial, Na was sentenced to ten years of domestic exile, while his associates also received similar sentences that ranged from five to ten years. Nonetheless, by the end of the year, Na and his accomplices were ultimately pardoned by Emperor Kojong who was about to cede the throne to his son due to conflicts with the Japanese, allowing Na to regain freedom of movement and resume his struggle for Korean independence.

The figure of Na Ch’ŏl that has emerged so far was one that deeply cared about the fate of Korea and did not shy away from resorting to sometimes drastic, if ill-fated measures. Idealistic and passionate, Na seemed to be in possession of an unbridled drive to achieve his goal of maintaining Korean independence however hapless his endeavors may have been. His statements further indicate that he ascribed to the notion of the Korean nation as a collective of twenty million people. He also employed Social Darwinian and Pan-Asian rhetoric while interacting with a wide spectrum of people which included Korean loyalists, religious activists as well as Japanese expansionists. So far, Na was focused more on Korea’s political fate and thus sought to achieve some political impact through concrete actions, be they diplomatic or criminal in nature. From what we can tell, there is no indication that he was interested yet in establishing a new religion, and neither is there evidence that he put any emphasis on Tan’gun up to this point.

As a scholar who had passed the prestigious civil service exam, he was no doubt aware of the classical treatments of Tan’gun. Still, in none of the sources is there any indication that Na sought to center Korean nationalism around the figure of Tan’gun.

That somebody like Na would all of a sudden announce a new religion centered on Korea’s mythical founder must have come as a surprise to his contemporaries. But he did, and

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17 “Chappo: choein ch’ŏp’an” [Miscellaneous news: first hearing of offender], Taehan Maeil Sinbo, July 5, 1907, 2. 18 Pak Sŏngsu, 102.
seemingly aware of this, Na made sure to set up a buffer that could explain this. After Na’s sentence was commuted, he traveled to Japan again in November of 1908 and stayed there until late January of the following year. According to the Taejonggyo’s lore, it is there that Na made contact with a group affiliated with a mysterious ascetic named Paek Pong who had supposedly been practicing his Tan’gun-centered faith on Mount Paektu with a small group of followers. Paek Pong’s name, meaning “white summit,” was itself a reference to the mountain. While Na was staying at a hotel in Tokyo, an elderly man reportedly emerged from an adjacent hotel room and pushed upon Na a number of religious texts that eventually served as the foundation for the Taejonggyo. The elderly gentleman was not Paek Pong himself, but a member of his mysterious band of brothers that had decided to spread their faith to the masses now that Korea was in crisis. While at first, Na paid little attention to the documents, the man would reappear later and tell Na that since Korea’s political fate had already been sealed, it was now time to return to Korea and focus on propagating Tan’gun’s teachings. According to the religion’s own narrative, hence, Na was merely chosen as a vessel through which the religion was to be spread, and not the originator thereof. This meant that the Taejonggyo was not a religion that Na created himself, but one with deep roots that transcended Na’s own knowledge and experience. The figure of Paek Pong also served as buffer that would lessen the burden of proof on Na, as he could always just point toward the brotherhood if questions were asked.

It goes without saying that this narrative as well as the existence of Paek Pong’s mysterious group is highly suspect as not even Na himself claimed to have actually met Paek Pong in person. The story was that he had met one of his disciples in Tokyo in a highly unusual

20 Taejonggyo Chŏnggyŏngsa P’yŏnsu Wiwŏnhoe, Taejonggyo Chunggwang Yûksimnyŏnsa [Sixty years of history since Taejonggyo’s re-enlightenment] (Seoul: Taejonggyo Ch’ongbonsa, 1971), 77-8.
encounter, but never the man himself. Certainly, one might argue that since Na had not shown any religious inclinations before, it was unlikely that he could suddenly announce a fairly well-formed religion. As noted, this line of thinking, expressed by Sassa Mitsuaki and Chŏng Yŏnhun, postulates that there must have been a prior tradition that the religion inherited. However, the story of Na’s encounter with Paek Pong’s disciple is too unrealistic while nobody during the subsequent decades of the Taejonggyo’s activities has ever demonstrated the existence of the brotherhood. Further, as will be shown in this chapter, even by its official announcement in 1909, the Taejonggyo was in fact far from complete as its ideas and texts were still in the process of being formed. Indeed, in doing so, Na was able to draw extensively from the discourses that had been circulating both in Korea as well as Japan.

While the story of Na’s encounter with the mysterious man in Tokyo is certainly more myth than fact, it is still worth looking at Na’s activities in Japan since he formed the religion shortly after his return to Korea in 1909. What is more, the story still suggests that it was in Japan that Na received the inspiration for the religion. Fortunately for us, the Japanese police kept close tabs on Na as they regarded him a person of interest and recorded his whereabouts meticulously. Along with a stay in a hospital to fix some diabetes-related issues, Na again visited various people – Korean exiles and students, but more importantly, Japanese notables with whom he spent much time conversing through a translator. The content of their conversations as well as Na’s motivations for returning to Japan and meeting these people remained somewhat of a puzzle, although police reports claimed rather vaguely that his objective was to come up with some sort of venture to help the Korean nation.21 Nonetheless, it may be worthwhile to take a

21 “(164) Kanjin no kōdō” [Activities of Korean nationals], in Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wiwŏnhoe, 2002.
closer look at the individuals he associated with as this might offer some clues as to what kind of influence Na imbibed during his stay in Japan.

Na’s Encounters in Japan

According to police records, Na’s main Japanese acquaintances were Tōyama Mitsuru (1855-1944), Matsumura Yūnoshin (1852-1921), and the afore-mentioned Okamoto Ryūnosuke and Uchida Ryōhei.22 These had all been involved in Japanese expansionist activities in the Asian continent one way or another and had expressed a great deal of interest in individuals from such “frontier” regions. Many of them had in the past also been involved in or supported rather radical activism such as assassinations of political opponents. The person Na spent the most time with was Matsumura Yūnoshin which included a stay at his home. Matsumura, a former samurai, had been incarcerated for politically-motivated murder from 1871 to 1878 and had accompanied Japanese troops to Taiwan during the first Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895). After annexation of the island, he became a bureaucrat in the colonial government there and was held responsible for the Yunlin massacre of 1896 which left thousands of Taiwanese dead.23

Tōyama Mitsuru and Uchida Ryōhei both can be described as “continental adventurers” (tairiku rōnin), that is, Japanese nationals who roamed around the continent often outside the purview of the Japanese government, advocating for the increase of Japanese interests abroad. Also called “brokers of empire,”24 they were strong supporters of Japanese expansion, often times even ahead of a more reluctant political establishment, and aided military efforts through

22 Ibid.
espionage and a sizable network of informants in the Asian mainland. In particular, Tōyama had been a member of the Gen'yōsha, or Black Ocean Society, an ultranationalist, paramilitary group founded in 1871 that agitated for Japanese military conquest of the Asian mainland. Its three core tenets were the reverence of the imperial household, love for the country, and the protection of the people’s rights, which they used to justify their meddling in foreign affairs. Tōyama had also supported the Korean reformist Kim Okkyun (1851-1894) who after the failed Kapsin Coup of 1884 had gone into exile in Japan, as well as other Korean efforts to reform the government and distance the country from China.²⁵ Tōyama later became a member of the Kokuryūkai, (Black Dragon Society or Amur River Society), which was established in 1901 by Uchida Ryōhei as a successor of the Black Ocean Society. One of their continuing activities was to support reformers or dissenters from other Asian nations who had been exiled to Japan and aid their activities in bringing about change in their respective homelands, of course, in accordance with Japanese interests.²⁶ These Japanese nationalists were activists and adventurers with an idealistic bent. They talked about supporting the welfare of other Asian countries and fending off Western imperialism. However, individuals such as Tōyama or Uchida were not necessarily in the business of writing ideological works or coming up with sophisticated treatises to outline their philosophies. Nonetheless, their nationalist way of thinking was obvious as is evidenced in their aggrandizement of Japan and commitment to the imperial household. Further, Uchida Ryōhei, for example, as a martial artist and Judoka, promoted not only the sport in his writings, but also the notion of a martial spirit (Bushido) that made the Japanese nation unique.²⁷ Although the

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²⁷ Uchida Ryōhei, Jūdō [Judo] (Tokyo: Kokuryūkai Shutpanbu, 1903), p. 18
details of the conversations between Na and these individuals largely remain unclear, it does not seem far-fetched that Na Ch’ŏl would have picked up some of the rhetoric that his interlocutors tended to employ.

The relationships between Na and his Japanese hosts seem to have been cordial as they were connected through mutual acquaintances. Especially Matsumura Yūnoshin seemed to have been close to Na as he visited him in the hospital and even allowed him to stay at his place. It may come as a surprise that Na, who had denounced the protectorate treaty of 1905 and strongly opposed Japanese incursions into Korea, would socialize with right-wing Japanese activists. Nonetheless, there are several possible reasons why he did so: first of all, he may have taken these Pan-Asianists at their word as they at least ostensibly promoted peace in East Asia. Na’s stance was that this peace indeed needed to be achieved, although not through the present means, that is, unilateral Japanese domination. Further, these activists were often critical of their own government’s actions when their visions of how to increase Japanese interests abroad differed from official policies. What is more, there was much common ground between Na and his Japanese counterparts – although they may have been on opposing sides of the Korea-Japan divide, Na was also a staunch patriot and loyalist of his own country and did not shy away from resorting to more drastic measures such as attempts to assassinate treacherous elements if necessary. These Japanese right-wingers had a track record of supporting dissidents and reformers from abroad and an even more violent past. Thus, in terms of their basic dispositions, there may have been much sympathy between Na and his Japanese hosts. This also illustrates that alliances and allegiances in this period were often highly complex and not as clear-cut as they are often made out to be.
At the same time, Na may also have picked up more concrete ideas regarding religion through his interactions in Japan. Okamoto Ryūnosuke, who had lectured Na on Korea’s need to raise itself to a higher level should it desire independence, in fact strongly promoted Buddhism as an element of the Japanese national essence (kokutai) and a protector of the nation. Having become a Buddhist leader after his military career, Okamoto emphasized Buddhism’s role through history as a guardian of the imperial lineage and the Bakufu. In Okamoto’s view, this qualified the religion to serve as a unifier of the people and a state religion should the need for such arise. At the least, he argued that the state should implement a system of officially sanctioned religions and recognize Buddhism as such due to its conduciveness to the Japanese nation. This also reflected Okamoto’s concerns about the influx of Christianity which he believed was detrimental to the nation and needed to be checked. All in all, his thinking posited religion as a crucial marker of national identity and an indicator of the fate of a nation. These were ideas which would be found later in the Taejonggyo as well.

Clearly, Okamoto Ryūnosuke was seeking to defend Buddhism as the policies in the wake of the Meiji Restoration had done much to threaten the religion’s once eminent status. He was particularly trying to fend off attacks from those that supported some form of Shinto as Japan’s national essence. This was represented by movements, such as “Japanism” (Nihon shugi) which aimed to invigorate the Japanese nation through a more concerted effort to “revive” Japan’s age-old Shinto tradition. At the core of this movement was the veneration of Japan’s mythical founder, Amaterasu, as well as the entire imperial lineage which was claimed to have originated from her. This veneration was presented as a type of civil religion intended to unify

29 Ibid., 77-88.
and elevate the Japanese people, thus superseding sectarian religions such as Buddhism or Christianity. This was also intricately linked to the family-state theory (discussed in chapter 3) which envisioned the Japanese nation as one family with the emperor as its head. While such a trend threatened the position of Buddhism, Okamoto Ryūnosuke was trying to carve out a space for his religion by appropriating a language that was similar to that of the proponents of Japanism. It is difficult to conceive that Na was not influenced by such discourses – Okamoto’s attempts to tie Buddhism to Japan’s national fate or the more general movement to revere Japan’s imperial ancestry and revive an ancient religious tradition.

Early Steps and Competing Forces

After months in Japan, Na returned to Korea on January 26, 1909. According to the Taejonggyo’s official history, he announced the religion on Taeborum, the first full moon of the lunar New Year and an important Korean holiday. In 1909, this day fell on February 5, suggesting that within a mere ten days, Na had organized a new religion as there was little indication that he had done so during his stay in Japan which, again, included an extended stay in a hospital. The Taejonggyo’s dating of events is hence a bit suspect, which is compounded by the fact that there are currently no known records of the religion’s announcement that date from the day in question. Rather than pinpointing the beginning of the religion to a specific date or event, one can identify a gradual emergence. For instance, there is evidence that by March 20 of that year (1909), Na had turned his attention toward the spiritual: according to the diary of Kim Yunsik, Na’s teacher-figure who had also connected him to his Japanese contacts, Kim visited Na’s home and saw that he had written on a wall the words he had supposedly received from a

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30 Sassa, 47, 53.
31 “(194) Kanjin kikoku no ken” [Case on return of Korean national], in Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wiwŏnhoe 2002.
divine man (*sinin*) in his dream, a sight which Kim found peculiar. It is not clear what exactly those words were, who this divine man was (Tan’gun, perhaps), and to what degree Na’s plans for the religion had progressed at this point. Still, Na’s peculiar new interest foreshadowed more.

Over the summer months, Na’s religious activities became more and more visible. This was also a time when Na continued interacting with intellectuals of various backgrounds as he was rooming with Ch’oe Sŏkha (1866-1929), who had spent ten years in Japan to study law, as well as Kim Yŏngyun, who was a Tonghak/Ch’ŏndogyo affiliate engaged in his religion’s publishing endeavors. By the end of July, the efforts by Na and his clique, which included his previous partner in crime O Kiho, to propagate their Tan’gun-centered faith began to be mentioned in newspaper articles, suggesting that at least by summer of 1909, the contours of the religion had taken shape. Even the authorities began investigating the religion, suggesting that it had gained enough traction so as to raise official interest. At the same time, songs and poems about Tan’gun began appearing in newspapers as well, and although the authors of these works were not identified, the language suggested that they originated from Na’s circle. One short poem exhorted that in order to recover lost territory and revive the livelihood of the people, Tan’gun’s descendants had to unite around their ancestor. Another poem appealed to Koreans as brothers and sisters and exhorted them to never forget the grace they had received from Tan’gun through his strenuous efforts to set up a nation and protect the people. This way of addressing Koreans as brothers and sisters was something which would appear in the

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32 Kim Yunsik, *Sok Ŭmch’ŏngsa* [Sequel to Turbulent History] 13 (Seoul: Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wiwŏnhoe, 1960), 285.
33 Ibid., 302. For Kim Yŏngyun’s participation in Ch’ŏndogyo publications, see *Ch’ŏndogyohoe wŏlbo* [Ch’ŏndogyo Monthly] (Seoul: Ch’ŏndogyo Chugang Ch’ŏngbu, 1910).
37 “Tan’gun’ga” [Song of Tan’gun], *Taehan Maeil Sinbo*, August 6, 1909, 1. Also in Sassa, 67-8.
Taejonggyo’s other texts as well. Further, this kind of adulation of Tan’gun was a step beyond Sin Ch’aeho’s discussions which had certainly envisioned Korea’s first founder as an epic hero, but did not go so far as to call for such a concentrated veneration of him.

However, Na and his group were not the only Koreans who sought to consecrate Tan’gun. As noted in the previous chapter, Japanese Shintoists had come to view Tan’gun as part of the Shinto pantheon and petitioned Itō Hirobumi to enshrine Korea’s founding father alongside Amaterasu in a grand shrine to be built in Seoul. This was meant to demonstrate the common origins of the two countries as Tan’gun was often equated with Amaterasu’s brother, Susanoo. While Itō rejected such efforts, by summer of 1909, a group of Koreans had adopted the cause to commemorate both Korea’s and Japan’s ancestral founders by building a shrine that was envisioned as the Korean equivalent of the Grand Ise Shrine in Japan. Called Sin’gung Ponggyŏnghoe/Jingū Hōkeikai (Shrine Worship Association), the group included pro-Japanese government officials and even members of the royal clan, with the staff alone counting around ninety members. The association was in fact a revival of an earlier Japanese organization of the same name formed in 1906 by an individual named Takahashi Hisashi, although originally, the group was focused on Amaterasu alone. As the organization was reborn as a Korean organization to worship both Tan’gun and Amaterasu, Takahashi continued to act as an advisor, although the rest of the membership which by August of 1909 amounted to a total of 216 individuals had become exclusively Korean. The association’s major activities transpired in the summer of 1909, thus coinciding with the period of the Taejonggyo’s full-fledged appearance.

38 Sassa, 44-5.
Although it is not clear which one came first, this suggests that the two movements to consecrate Tan’gun were in direct competition with each other.

The grand shrine, which the association planned to erect in Anam district of Seoul, was in fact supposed to be dedicated to Tan’gun, Amaterasu, as well as King T’aeso (Yi Sŏnggye), the founder of the Chosŏn dynasty. However, it was especially the affinity between Tan’gun and Amaterasu that was underlined as a means of demonstrating the closeness between the two countries. This was also illustrated by the fact that Tan’gun was presented as ch’ŏnhwang, or tennō (‘Heavenly Emperor’), a title which was usually associated with Japanese emperors.41

Thus, Tan’gun’s transformation into an ancestral deity akin to Amaterasu was complete. In enshrining these two, much symbolism was to be employed, as the tablet representing Tan’gun was to be made of the paktal tree, while Amaterasu’s tablet was supposed to be manufactured by the Ise Shrine directly.42 Indeed, there seems to have been a direct connection to groups in Japan as the association received at least one visit from a Japanese grand shrine official while plans to send a Korean delegation to the Ise Shrine were made as well.43 Further, while the official inscriptions to be added to the shrine did not explicitly mention that Tan’gun and Amaterasu were siblings, Japanese government records44 and even Korean newspapers were all in agreement that this supposed familial connection was underlying the entire project.45

However, due to internal conflicts, financial problems, and a reluctant colonial government, the shrine was never completed. Further, Koreans expressed fierce criticism toward the movement as well, with one commentator taking issue with the notion of Tan’gun and

41 Ibid., 11.
42 Ibid., 29-30.
44 “(521) Jingū Hōkeikai no kinkyō” [Recent status of the Shrine Worship Association].
45 “Sin’gung Ponggyŏnghoe” [The Shrine Worship Association], Taehan Maeil Sinbo, July 6, 1909, 1. In Sassa, 46.
Susanoo’s identity, accusing the organization of falsifying Korean history, denigrating Korea’s founding father, and selling out the country by subordinating Tan’gun to a foreign god. A group of Confucian scholars also expressed their anger regarding the association’s appropriation of Tan’gun in a letter addressed to the Resident-General Sone Arasuke (1849-1910). Viewing the familial ties between Tan’gun and Amaterasu as a preposterous Japanese ploy to mock Koreans, the Confucian scholars dismissed the Shrine Worship Association as ludicrous and detrimental to Japanese presence in Korea. Thus, in reacting against the efforts to consecrate Tan’gun as a counterpart to Amaterasu, these Koreans solidified their sense of ownership over Tan’gun as an irreducibly Korean entity. This competition, hence, served to cement Tan’gun’s position within the Korean nationalist imaginary, and it is easily conceivable that it also invigorated Na Ch’ŏl’s own endeavors.

The “Declaration of the Tan’gun’gyo”

It is this competition over Tan’gun that puts into relief Na’s efforts to establish Korea’s founding father as the sole object of worship for the Korean people. Whereas the Sin’gung Ponggyŏnghoe promoted multiple deities, with Tan’gun as the counterpart of Amaterasu, Na’s focus was much more singular, offering a strong contrast to the pro-Japanese organization. And indeed, it is around this time that the Tan’gun’gyo began producing its strongest arguments in support of itself.

The most important document that Na’s religion published at this time was the “Tan’gun’gyo P’omyŏngsŏ,” that is, the “Declaration of the Tan’gun’gyo” (“Declaration”

46 “Kalsŏng Maegukcha” [Reprimanding traitors to the nation], Taehan Maeil Sinbo, July 30, 1909, 1. In Sassa, 46.
47 Kim Sanggŭn et al., “Sanggŏn Sone Ch’onggam ege ponaen ŭigyŏnsŏ,” [A letter of opinion submitted to the Resident-General Sone], T’onggambu Munsŏ 8 (Kwach’ŏn: Kuksa P’yŏnch’an wiwonhoe, 1999).
The document was initially published in the Cheguk Sinmun (Imperial Post), although currently, no extant copy can be found. The Hawai’i-based Sinhan’gukpo (New Korea News) then published the text in several installments from September 7 to October 19 of 1909. This newspaper tended to publish articles from Korea about a month after they had initially come out, suggesting that the declaration was published in mid-to late summer. Of the extant versions of the declaration whose dates we can trace with certainty, the Sinhan’gukpo’s print is the oldest one.

“Kyŏngch’uk yŏnhoe” [Congratulatory celebrations], Taehan Maeil Sinbo, November 20, 1909, 1.
offering a narrative of the ups and downs of the Korean nation that was closely intertwined with the fortunes of the religion. According to this narrative, the beginning of Korean history was grand as Tan’gun who had descended from divinity commanded a vast territory and spread his teachings into all directions.\(^{50}\) This sounded similar to Sin Ch’aeho’s treatment which had magnified the role of Tan’gun and elevated him to the premier position in Korean history. But one finds even more echoes of Sin’s views as the document associated Tan’gun with Mount Paektu instead of the more prevalent Mount Myohyang.\(^{51}\) The arrival of Kija, the next important point in Korean history, is also treated in a way similar to Sin’s. According to the “Declaration,” Tan’gun’s lineage continued to blossom while the religion’s reputation became widely known even in China, reaching the ears of Kija. Enamored by these teachings, Kija then traveled a long way from the state of Shang to Korea to pay his respects. The Korean ruler, feeling compassion for Kija’s arduous efforts, allowed the guest to settle in P’yŏngyang which Kija and his lineage repaid with great loyalty.\(^{52}\) Thus, in this narrative, the hierarchy between Tan’gun and Kija was again firmly decided in favor of the former, much like in Sin’s account.

However, by the time of Ki Chun, Kija’s fortieth descendant, faith in Tan’gun had deteriorated and people had turned toward superstitious fortune telling referred to as “Hongbŏm Poksul” (“Hongbŏm Hocus-Pocus”) which was in fact a derogatory allusion to “Hongbŏm Kuju/Hongfan Jiuchou,” the “Nine Principles of Universal Norms.” These were in fact considered ancient Chinese teachings which Kija had purportedly brought over to Korea.\(^{53}\) During the Chosŏn dynasty, these teachings had been greatly revered and viewed as markers of the high level of Korean civilization, although now the “Declaration” associated them with

\(^{50}\) “Tan’gun’gyo p’omyŏngsŏ,” [The Declaration of the Tan’gun’gyo] (1) Sinhan’gukpo, September 7, 1909, 3.
\(^{51}\) Ibid.
\(^{52}\) Ibid.
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
backward superstition. According to the religion’s narrative, the propagation of such beliefs led to the ultimate demise of the dynasty and loss of Old Chosŏn’s original territory.

A strand of the Tan’gun-faith, however, survived and was passed on to the Kingdom of Puyŏ and then to the Kingdom of Koguryŏ where the faith was greatly practiced again, allowing the kingdom to thrive. Especially Koguryŏ’s founder Chumong or King Tongmyŏng was praised for his faith: as a child he supposedly took a branch from a paktal or tan tree, professed that it was the holy tree to which Tan’gun had descended and made a bow with which he hit every target. This was a variation of the well-known legend of Chumong, although the original version did not specify the type of tree that was used or make any references to Tan’gun whatsoever. Thus, the “Declaration” projected Tan’gun onto existing tales, rewriting Korean legends and history. This was in fact a recurring pattern: according to the “Declaration,” Kwanggaet’o the Great (ca. 374-413), the Koguryŏ king who had commanded the vastest territory, was also depicted as a faithful believer of Tan’gun which allowed his expansionist endeavors to be successful. The same applied to the kingdoms of Silla and Paekche which were similarly able to thrive thanks to their veneration of Tan’gun.54

However, according to the document, a major challenge was on the horizon: all of a sudden, Buddhism entered the country which led to the demise of the religion as well the downfall of the kingdoms of Koguryŏ and Paekche. Angered by the loss of faith, Tae Chŏyŏng took the religion’s scriptures and fled to Manchuria where he set up the Kingdom of Parhae (698-926) which thrived for three hundred years. The faith survived a bit longer in Unified Silla (668-935) as well, but even there, the rise of Buddhism as well as Confucianism led to the decline of the religion as well as the fall of the dynasty. The pattern continued throughout the

remainder of Korean history: Wang Kŏn, the founder of the Koryŏ dynasty, apparently adopted the name Koryŏ to express his reverence for the Tan’gun-fearing kingdom of Koguryŏ and erected an altar on Mount Myohyang as well as a tomb commemorating Tan’gun in P’yŏngyang. Still, his descendants were blinded by Buddhist teachings which invited the Mongol invasion as well as great hardship for the people.55 The Chosŏn dynasty was then established by Yi Sŏnggye (1335-1408) who was also depicted as faithful to Tan’gun—the “Declaration” claimed that he was born on the southern side of Mount T’aebaek and had in his dreams even received a golden ruler from Tan’gun himself, auguring Yi’s ascent to the throne. The lore of Yi Sŏnggye receiving the golden ruler had emerged in the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty and was incorporated into court musical performances.56 However, the notion that it was Tan’gun himself that gave the ruler to Yi was a recent addition. In fact, this idea was also promoted by the pro-Japanese Shrine Worship Association,57 although it is not clear who developed it first. However, the fact that both sides championed it suggests that while competing, the two groups also took inspiration from each other. The “Declaration” also claimed that Yi’s suppression of Buddhism was due to his reverence for Tan’gun, although the rise of Confucianism again led to the decline of Korea’s ancient teachings and ultimately the demise of a once promising dynasty.58 In this way, the religion was setting itself up against Buddhism in spite of the Tan’gun-myth’s original debt to it, and to a lesser extent even distanced itself from Confucianism although Na Ch’ŏl and other prominent members had strong Confucian backgrounds.

55 Ibid.
56 Chŏng Muryong, “Chŏng Tojŏn akchang ŭi hyŏngsangsjŏk hamŭi wa sigajŏk wisang” [The figurative meaning of Chŏng Tojŏn’s akchang and its position within the history of siga], Inmunhak Nonch’ong 15(2) (2010.6), 1-42.
57 Sin’gung Ponggyŏnghoe, Sin’gung Kŏnch’ukji (1910), 1.
58 “Tan’gun’gyo P’omyŏngsŏ,” (2).
Despite the dominance of foreign religions, the document argued that traces of Korea’s once thriving religion could still be found in various instances. For example, it referred to a sixteenth century poem by Nam Hyo-on (1454-1492) that had praised Tan’gun for giving birth to the Korean people and propagating standards of human ethics, which according to the “Declaration” was an indication that the poet was an adherent of the religion. The document also highlighted the fact that King Sejo (r.1455-1468) had given offerings to heaven at the altar on Mount Mani, further seeing this as documentation of the worship of Tan’gun. Here, the text was again building on historically documented facts, while interpreting them rather liberally. Ultimately, however, the religion and Korea’s fortunes had definitely declined, which the text attributed to Koreans looking toward foreign teachings instead of their own native traditions. As the document stated, Tan’gun would punish his people not by eradicating them in one instance, perhaps alluding to the ancient Hebrew God, but due to his love and goodness, he would only withhold his teachings from the world in times of unfaithfulness. This, then, was the state of affairs Koreans currently found themselves in.

In this way, the “Declaration” exerted much effort to establish the religion as a historical one that originated alongside the Korean nation and was intricately tied to its fortunes. The worship of Tan’gun was inscribed into historical events, legends, poems, and individual actions, turning Tan’gun into a ubiquitous presence. Indeed, the breadth of knowledge that was expressed in this text was impressive and suggested that the document was likely written by somebody with classical training such as Na himself. However, one can also see hints of Western influence: as the fortunes of the Korean people were deeply connected to their faithfulness to Tan’gun, the relationship between Koreans and their God was depicted as often fraught with disobedience just

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
like the relationship between the ancient Jews and their God. While the document does not actually refer to Koreans as the chosen people, the implications, however, were clear: Koreans were meant to adhere to the religion of Tan’gun, and only by returning to their original faith could the nation be revived.

Fortunately, according to the text, Paek Pong had taken it upon himself to save the world by praying to heaven on Mount Paektu for ten years. As a result, he was granted a stone chest filled with the religion’s scriptures and documents pertaining to the history of Tan’gun. Here, again, it was not Na who was the focus of the religion: the mysterious figure of Paek Pong was its prime apostle, and Na merely a disciple and mouthpiece. This buffer also served to reduce the burden on Na as he could always deflect responsibility. The documents that Paek Pong had supposedly received were also not yet ready for publication as the “Declaration” stated that these would be made public in due course.61 This strategy allowed the religion more time to further develop its teachings. For now, the prime objective was to make Koreans aware of their spiritual heritage that was embodied in the religion.

Alongside proclaiming the third day of the tenth month as National Foundation Day, the “Declaration” also made another contribution to nationalist discourse by giving the Korean nation a new name. After all, this was a time when Koreans were still searching to define their own people. In fact, even as late as the summer of 1908, there was confusion over the name of the Korean nation as there was no established consensus yet.62 As if responding to this, Sin Ch’aeho, shortly after, presented “Puyŏ” as the name of the Korean nation (chapter 3). This, however, did not become widely accepted, and the “Declaration” instead opted for the name “Paedal,” supposedly a purely Korean word which according to the text meant “the light of the

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62 Andre Schmid, 171.
ancestors” and through a process of translation had ended up becoming “Chosŏn.” “Paedal” was also supposedly the word from which paktal, the name of Tan’gun’s tree, derived.\(^63\) Indeed, in contrast to Sin Ch’ae-ho’s “Puyŏ,” “Paedal” would become widely accepted as an alternative name for the Korean nation.

The “Declaration” also attempted to write Tan’gun into present folk customs in order to argue that unbeknownst to most people, the worship of Tan’gun was deeply ingrained in Korean culture. For instance, the white collars Koreans attached to their traditional garment was claimed to be a reference to the white peaks of Mount T’aebaek and thus a sign of reverence for Tan’gun. The various house spirits that families worshipped were also argued to be none other than Tan’gun himself, and the ritual ceremonies conducted for these spirits in the tenth month were originally meant to commemorate Tan’gun’s founding of Korea. The custom of farmers to offer the first spoon of a meal to the spirits were also attributed to Tan’gun’s teachings. Even the eighteen households of potters that were kidnapped to Japan during the Hideyoshi invasions supposedly continued to give offerings to Tan’gun in accordance with Korea’s ancient customs.\(^64\) These were all meant to be indications of the religion’s scope and immense cultural significance.

Overall, the notion of Tan’gun that emerged in the “Declaration” was that of a historical figure as well as a deity that continued to interact with the world. Tan’gun was referred to as Tae Hwangjo (“Great August Ancestor”) who had founded the first Korean state and spread his teachings to his people. This made Tan’gun into a tangible, historical entity with concrete achievements. At the same time, he was also portrayed as an omnipotent deity that continued to watch the world, bestowing blessings and punishments depending on the actions of his people.

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\(^{63}\) See previous chapter.

\(^{64}\) “Tan’gun’gyo p’omyŏngsŏ,” (5) Sinhan’gukpo, October 5, 1909, 3.
Here, Tan’gun was depicted as an emotional and personal deity who loved his people and felt deeply for their actions.\(^6^5\) In this respect, Tan’gun consisted of both a physical incarnation and metaphysical presence, mirroring attributes of the Christian God. The bond between the Korean nation and their God also resembled that between the ancient Jews and Jehovah which also implied that that the Korean people had to continue to commemorate their God and realize their debt to him.\(^6^6\)

According to the appendix, there were at least seven texts that the religion planned to make public in the future. These were the documents that had presumably been contained in the stone chest given to Paek Pong and then given to Na Ch’ŏl in Tokyo. Based on the titles of the texts, these included the religion’s main scripture, a treatise on ethics, a theoretical investigation of the human and the divine, the doctrines of the religion, a history of Tan’gun’s dynasty, historical records of the religion, and contemporary records of Paek Pong. While no works with the exact same titles were ever published, although some texts later appeared that covered some of these topics, it seems that the religion was planning to create a comprehensive theoretical, practical and historical framework that would endow the religion with the necessary trappings as a respectable and systematic religion. For now, the main task was to spread the word as widely as possible to “save the Korean nation from its current misery and lead it to a better world.” Thus, the thirteen undersigned each were tasked with taking charge of one Korean province, while there were additional individuals assigned to outside regions such as the Liaodong peninsula, Manchuria, China, and Japan in order to seek ancient texts, observe local situations and work for the religion. The appendix even included a number of songs praising Tan’gun and his achievements. These were supposedly of ancient origin as well, with one argued to have been

sung by King Tongmyŏng, the founder of Koguryŏ, as well as King Kwanggaet’o whenever he rode into battle to boost the morale of his troops.  

Overall, however, the document was an outline of what was to come and hence, not a defined statement of the exact tenets of the religion. These were still in the making. For now, the main point was to remind people of the fact that the Taejonggyo was indeed Korea’s original religion and deeply intertwined with its origins. In this regard, the text can be described as an attempt to reconstruct the collective memory of the Korean nation. In order to achieve this, the “Declaration” contained certain strategies that the religion would continue to employ in the years to come: a broad knowledge of history and literature were coupled with some very liberal interpretations that allowed the religion to write itself back into history and excavate a long “forgotten” spiritual tradition. In doing so, the text demonstrated the scholarly background of the founders of the religion as well as inspirations taken from foreign and domestic sources. Overall, the “Declaration” was also an attempt to inculcate into Koreans a sense of pride by asserting that yes, we have a religion, one that is both ancient, noble, and comparable to the great religions of the world. If Korea’s political fate had been all but sealed, at least within the spiritual realm, Koreans could hence claim a special bond with the divine and assert parity with foreign nations.

Practicing the Religion

With the basic outline of the religion established, Na and his associates continued to recruit new members. They set up an ancestral tablet representing Tan’gun at Na’s home in Seoul where they performed ceremonial offerings to the mythical ancestor. The initiation rite for new members was also conducted there, as new recruits burned incense, recited a pledge and

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67 Ibid.
received a membership certificate with Paek Pong’s seal on it. In this way, basic procedures and rules for the religion were put in place. Alongside establishing the third day of the tenth month as National Foundation Day, the most important annual holiday, the religion’s bylaws declared that services be held on the first and fifteenth day of every month. This was soon changed to weekly Sunday services, following the example of the Christian Church. The rules also detailed the type of food used for offerings while stipulating the use of pak’tal-wood for incense. The members of the religion were all expected to consider each other brothers and sisters and pay respect to Tan’gun at important life events. Believers of the religion were also encouraged to learn to read Korean script unless their financial situations did not allow so. The rules further emphasized that members stay away from superstitious customs such as shamanist divination and other heterodox beliefs. At the same time, they were encouraged to revere the spirits of prominent Korean figures and even were told not to disrespect foreign teachings or spiritual leaders. Some stipulations pertained to membership eligibility: those that moved abroad voluntarily were not to be treated as fellow Koreans, and while technically, the religion was open to foreigners, they had to be part of the religion for more than fifteen years in order to be able to perform official duties. While these rules and regulations exemplified Na’s efforts to turn his group into an organized religion, he may have been inspired by the Ch’ŏndogyo which not too long ago had produced a constitution of a similar kind.

Overall, the main focus of Na’s religion was to give offerings to Tan’gun much in the way ancestors had been commemorated in traditional Korea on the family and state level. In this

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68 “Tan’gun’gyo chŏnp’o” [Spreading the Tan’gun’gyo], Taehan Maeil Sinbo, October 19, 1909, 2.
69 Sassa, 68.
71 Ch’ŏndogyo Chungang Ch’ongbu, Ch’ŏndogyo Taehŏn [Ch’ŏndogyo Constitution] (Seoul: Pomungwan, 1906).
respect, the rituals did not seem to be a radical departure from the Confucian practices Koreans had been familiar with. Now, however, it was Tan’gun that was revered as the most august forefather that could unite the entire nation into a family, fostering a sense that all Koreans shared the same ancestry. Hence, in a time when the status system of the Chosŏn dynasty was no longer tenable, horizontal relations between all members of society came to be stressed. This was something that other groups such as the Tonghak/Ch’ŏndogyo or the Independence Club (1896-1898) had championed before, suggesting that the religion of Tan’gun was very much part of this trend. The religion’s services were also much more frequent than traditional Korean offerings, indicating that the Taejonggyo was congregational in nature and focused on fostering organizational cohesion and a strong sense of group membership. In this respect, again, the religion was part of a larger trend as the emphasis on frequent, regular religious services was something that Korean religions were taking from Western examples.  

This effort to present itself as an organized, structured religion akin to the great religions of the world also necessitated a distancing from folk beliefs and practices, another current underlying the religion’s ideas.

Meanwhile, in January of the following year (1910), both Na and O Kiho simultaneously announced that they had changed their first names. Na had taken the name “Ch’ŏl” (喆), and O opted for “Hyŏk” (赫). Both characters meant “bright” or “to shine,” alluding to both Na and O’s efforts to illuminate Korea’s ancient religion and enlighten the Korean people. By March, the membership of the religion had reportedly grown to 3500 nationwide, with 1500 being centered in the capital region. In particular, March 15 according to the lunar calendar was commemorated as the day of Tan’gun’s ascension to heaven, marking another important holiday.

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73 “Chappo” [Miscellaneous news], *Hwangsŏng Sinmun*, January 23, 1910, 3.

74 “Tan’gun’gyo hwang” [Tan’gun’gyo boom], *Hwangsŏng Sinmun*, March 13, 1910, 2.
for the religion. This also suggests that the religion now officially interpreted Tan’gun’s final transformation as his heavenly ascent which may again have been a result of Christian influence as this resembled missionary interpretations of the myth. Whatever the case, the day was commemorated with much fanfare, with droves of believers gathering at Na’s house.75

Theorizing the Religion

The religion also began adding more theoretical trappings to its teachings as was demonstrated in a sermon from May 1910 which was transcribed and published in the Hwangsŏng Sinmun. The transcript does not indicate who gave the sermon, although it was probably one of the leaders such as Na or O. The speaker also offered a more general outline of the nature of religion itself – that it had been used to structure human life since the beginning of history and that the goal of religion was to promote good and discourage evil in order to protect the common good endowed to man by Heaven. Thus, the speaker argued that religion was more fundamental and inherent to mankind than other man-made institutions such as law or politics, suggesting that every nation, every people had possessed a religion since the beginning of history. In the Korean case, the logical conclusion was that this religion was none other than the religion of Tan’gun. While the main message was the same as before, the sermon marked a development of the religion’s rhetoric as it began employing more universal language on the nature of religion in order to make the case for itself.

The sermon also offered a variation of the Tan’gun myth that shed light on Tan’gun’s double role as both a historical figure as well as a metaphysical deity. According to this rendition, Tan’gun was in fact the physical embodiment of the “Heavenly Spirit” which had

75 “Haengje Sŏlgyo” [Conducting rites and giving sermons], Hwangsŏng Sinmun, April 27, 1910, 2.
decided to convey its blessings to the human realm. Hence, Tan’gun was incarnated in human form in order to spread the divine teachings and save mankind. This narrative resembled the missionaries’ reading of the myth that viewed Tan’gun as a Christ-like figure that came to earth to rescue humanity. Especially the fact that Tan’gun and the Heavenly Spirit were depicted as different forms of the same essence paralleled the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Ghost. This was compounded by the fact that the sermon referred to Tan’gun’s teachings as “pogūm,” that is, the “good news” which has usually been used to refer to the Christian Gospel. Indeed, the speaker also noted that while in the Korean tradition, this Heavenly Spirit was expressed as Tan’gun, in Confucianism, the same entity was called Shangdi (Sangje in Korean), in Buddhism Śakra (Chesŏk in Korean), and in the Christian tradition, Holy Father (Sŏngbu in Korean). As the sermon emphasized, Tan’gun was thus the Korean version of a universal religious essence which proved that Koreans, too, just like other nations had worshipped the Heavenly Spirit early on. In this respect, Tan’gun was more than just the ancestor of the Korean nation; he was an expression of the universal divinity. This also elevated the religion of Tan’gun to the same level as the great religions of the world. Indeed, the fact that Tan’gun’s descent was dated to 2333 BCE even suggested that Koreans had been privileged in receiving the divine revelations earlier than others.

The sermon also revealed the religion’s changing attitudes toward Kija. Whereas the “Declaration” was still somewhat gentle toward Kija, commending his loyalty to the Korean ruling house, the sermon was much harsher: here, Kija is accused of leading Koreans to forget their heavenly ancestor by spreading his eight laws (P’alchobŏp) and thereby completely immersing Korea in Chinese teachings. While these laws had commonly been understood as the first known laws in Korean history and if anything had positive connotations as they
demonstrated the high level of Korean civilization, here they are denigrated as foreign in origin and character. In this respect, the sermon depicted Kija as actively detrimental to Korea’s culture and religious heritage. This was again a reflection of the growing importance of ethnicity within Korean discourse, something which was particularly apparent in Sin Ch’aeho’s writings (chapter 3).

The sermon also demonstrated a broader vision that positioned the religion within a contemporary global context. The speaker warned of the imperialistic endeavors and the intense competition for survival of the fittest as these would lead to the demise not only of individual nations, but of mankind at large. Fortunately, however, religious movements were emerging all over the world to pacify humanity and spread the Heavenly Way. The sermon made clear that the Korean inflection of this global trend was the Taejonggyo, again putting the religion on the same plane as other religions of the world and thus adding further legitimacy to the Taejonggyo. This was again an evolution over the religion’s earlier text which had focused more narrowly on the Korean context alone. Now the religion was presented as a response to the global threats that nations around the world were facing.

However, perhaps the most significant element of the sermon was that it offered a more expansive notion of the nation. As noted, Na Ch’ŏl had previously referred to the Korean people as a nation of twenty million. This was indeed a more general trope that could be easily encountered in Korean writings at the time. The sermon, however, referred to the nation as consisting of whopping seventy million people who all descended from Tan’gun. This was a substantial increase, greatly enlarging the scope of the nation. However, the sermon did not actually specify where all these additional members came from. As would later become clear, this in fact included the people of Manchuria and northern China, allowing the religion to lay
claim to a larger territory as well as a more expansive history that was not confined to the peninsula. This, again, illustrated the continuous evolution and expansion of the religion’s ideas.76

Developing the Religion’s Tenets

The sermon also outlined the Five Tenets which were the religion’s practical precepts. These included the worship of the ancestral deity, spiritual cultivation, love for one’s compatriots, safeguarding the land, and developing industry. Although the tenets were argued to derive from Tan’gun directly, many of the precepts in fact sounded like slogans from the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement, suggesting more modern provenance. Still, the emergence of these tenets was an important development as previously, much effort had been exerted to establish what the religion was, that is, an ancient religion that was part and parcel of the Korean nation, but not much had been said about its practical and ethical teachings. Hence, with the Five Tenets, the religion was incorporating new elements that allowed it to present itself as a more comprehensive religion.

The Five Tenets were described in detail in the *Tan’gun’gyo Odae Chongji P’omyŏngsŏ*, that is, the “Announcement of the Five Tenets of the Tan’gun’gyo,” (*Announcement* hereafter), which not only explained the tenets, but also detailed their history, tracing them back to Tan’gun himself. This marked the first time that the religion actually discussed the teachings that Tan’gun himself had purportedly articulated. The document was attributed to the authorship of Paek Pong, again shifting the burden of proof and documentation away from Na and his group. The text also listed the various incarnations of the tenets which had slightly changed over time. For

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76 “Tan’gun’gyosŏl p’ilgi” [Transcript of Tan’gun’gyo sermon], *Hwangsŏng Sinmun*, May 25, 1910, 1.
instance, in the earliest written version of the tenets, the fifth tenet was listed as “to exert effort for food and clothing.” In the version that had supposedly been used in the Kingdom of Koguryŏ, this became “to promote industry” which also made it into the most recent version. The use of the term industry (sanŏp), of course, was an anachronism since it was highly improbable that the word had been used during the time of Koguryŏ. This betrayed the manufactured nature of these teachings, exemplifying again how the religion was trying to rewrite Korean history. Nonetheless, by offering a history of the Five Tenets since the time of Tan’gun, the religion was able to concretize its own history from a different angle.

The Announcement also included elements that suggested that the religion was appropriating Japanese discourses. For instance, the document noted that during Tan’gun’s era, there was no writing system, hence Tan’gun’s initial teachings had been orally passed down and then reinterpreted by philosophers. The first person to transcribe Tan’gun’s teachings was said to have been a scholar named Susaro (dated to ca. 1616 BCE), another mysterious figure completely absent from historical documents. While possibly just a coincidence, the name Susaro may have been derived from Susanoo based on the phonetic similarities between the two. If this was indeed the case, the brains behind the Taejonggyo were incorporating elements from Japanese mythology into their own narrative, similar to how Japanese had done with Korean mythology. In this case, however, Susaro was far from Tan’gun’s equal, but turned into a distant disciple and follower of Korea’s founding father, illustrating that the religion was not only appropriating, but possibly also subjugating Japanese discourses.

**Footnotes:**


78 Ibid., 4a.
In addition to that, Tan’gun’s life span was also shortened significantly to a mere ninety years, which most likely was part of an effort to emphasize Tan’gun’s historicity. This was an element that was subject to change again as the religion would soon settle on a different account, further attesting to the religion’s continued process of corrections and modifications. The document also pushed the expansiveness of the Korean nation both in terms of geography as well as membership. For one, it took inspiration from Sin Ch’aeho who had depicted Tan’gun as having ruled over a vast territory that reached all the way north to the Amur River (chapter 3). In the announcement of the Five Tenets, Sin’s depiction is taken literally as it is presented in the form of a map that visualizes the immense habitat of the original Paedal people that far exceeded the Korean peninsula (figure 3).\(^79\) The document also includes a genealogy of Tan’gun’s people, that is, the Paedal nation, which included not only present-day Koreans, but also Jurchen and other tribes in China and Manchuria, both extant and not. This explained why the religion’s documents had begun talking of a nation of seventy instead of twenty million people.\(^80\) At the same time, while the religion had begun envisioning a more expansive nation that encompassed much of East Asia, the Japanese were conspicuously absent from this.

\(^79\) Ibid., 1b.
\(^80\) Ibid., 1a.
There were also other instances where the document was conversing with Sin Ch’aeho who was putting forth his own theories of an ancient Korean spirituality. His debates often overlapped with those of the Taejonggyo, but also diverged from them in crucial ways. For instance, Sin posited “Sŏn’gyo” (“transcendental teachings”) as Korea’s indigenous faith that had existed since the time of Tan’gun. Just as the Taejonggyo had done, Sin argued that this

81 Ibid., 1b.
tradition was of advanced nature and contained ethical teachings as well as notions of an abstract God which could be identified in the Tan’gun myth. According to Sin, the myth also contained other universal religious elements such as a concept of the Trinity consisting of Hwanin, Hwanung, and Tan’gun. This view was mirroring the interpretations by Christian missionaries (chapter 3) and would be adopted by the religion as well. Sin also narrates the decline of Korea’s indigenous religion as being brought about by the import of Buddhism which, again, resembled the Taejonggyo’s account. Still, while details of the exact nature of Sŏn’gyo were scant, the language Sin employed suggested that he saw it as somewhat closer to Daoist folk practices, albeit without overt superstitious elements. Further, Sin did not connect this tradition to the Taejonggyo, as he saw Sŏn’gyo as a marker of an advanced ancient civilization, but not as something that needed to be revived in the present.82 Indeed, there is no indication that Sin Ch’aeho endorsed the Taejonggyo, although he would, as we shall see in later chapters, express a critical attitude toward its scriptures.

In this regard, Sin was offering an in many ways similar, but competing account to the religion’s own narrative, suggesting that the relationship between Sin and the religion was marked by mutual influence, but also divergence. The ideologues behind the religion were aware of Sin’s endeavors as the Announcement noted that some had identified Korea’s ancient religion as Sŏn’gyo, a reference to Sin, although adding that “Sin’gyo” (“divine teachings”) was the more proper appellation. It was also this Sin’gyo which was considered the forerunner of the Taejonggyo. Indeed, the term Sin’gyo would gain prominence as it came to be adopted more widely in the discourse on an indigenous Korean religion. One early example is the nationalist historian and later Taejonggyo-affiliate Pak Ŭnsik who would also employ the concept of

Sin’gyo to narrate a religious history of Korea. Even scholars not affiliated with the religion, such as Yi Nŭnghwa (1869-1943) would come to frequently utilize the term to refer to an antique Korean spirituality.

The Announcement also revealed the continued inconsistencies in the religion’s views on Kija: while the religion’s depictions of him had fluctuated over time, in this text, the nobleman from China was presented in a more positive light again. Although Kija was admittedly of foreign origin, he was portrayed as marrying a Korean woman and getting immersed in the religion’s tenets, which made it possible to assimilate him into the Korean nation. In fact, in a radical turn from previous texts, the Announcement claimed that the religion thrived during Kija’s dynasty, leading to Confucius’ famous proclamation that he wanted to live among the Eastern Yi (Tongi), which the text interpreted as the Chinese philosopher being enamored by Korea’s religious teachings and wanting to live among Koreans. This also reveals why the document offered a more positive interpretation of Kija’s dynasty: after all, viewing this era as one where the religion thrived allowed the religion to take advantage of Confucius’ comment and interpret it in a manner favorable to itself. Overall, however, this back-and-forth regarding Kija again illustrates that instead of being seamless and consistent, the religion’s emergence was characterized by various, sometimes even conflicting attempts to establish itself. Each text that the religion published offered a new opportunity to make the case for the religion from a different angle, chances which the writers took with alacrity even if it meant creating inconsistencies and overturning previous statements.

83 Pak Ŭnsik, “Taedong kodaesaron” [On the ancient history of the Great East], Han’guk Hakpo 18 (2) (1922, originally published in 1911), 240-249.
84 Tan’gun’gyo Odae Chongji P’omyŏngsŏ, 5a.
85 Ibid., 6a.
The Emergence of a Scripture

By May of 1910, one commentator listed the Taejonggyo (still called Tan’gun’gyo at this time) alongside the Ch’ŏndogyo as a candidate for a Korean state religion. This was an impressive feat for the religion since the commentator was otherwise critical of the uncontrolled sprouting of new religious movements all over the country. Thus, the commentator viewed the Tan’gun’gyo as different from the many new religions that were “leading Koreans astray through all kinds of ruses.” This suggests that the religion had been successful in commanding respect and projecting a certain degree of appeal that other new religions were unable to. Further, in the same month, it was reported that the religion planned to produce 5000 copies of a textbook, although it is not clear what the exact nature of the book was or if this endeavor ever came to fruition. Nonetheless, the religion seemed very active and by July of 1910 was said to be adding new recruits by the day, reaching a membership of 6000.

The formal annexation of Korea in August of 1910 did not put a dent on the religion’s activities. On the contrary, the religion continued to evolve and expand its reach. In September, shortly after annexation, the religion announced that by orders of Paek Pong, it had changed its name from Tan’gun’gyo to Taejonggyo, which can be translated as “Religion of the Great Ancestral Divinity.” The character “-jong偓” was a rare one that in old Chinese dictionaries such as the Guangyun (1008 CE) had been identified as referring to “ancient divine man” (sanggo sinin). The religion thus appropriated this rare Chinese character, implying that it had referred to Tan’gun all along. This was again an attempt to write Tan’gun back into historical

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86 “Han’guk chonggyogye ūi changnae (sok)” [The future of Korean religion (continued)], Taehan Maeil Sinbo, May 18, 1910, 1.
87 “Kyogwasŏ Palgan” [Publication of textbook], Taehan Maeil Sinbo, May 20, 1910, 2.
88 “Tan’gun’gyodo” [Members of the Tan’gun’gyo], Hwangsŏng Sinmun, July 12, 1910, 2. These numbers, however, have to be taken with caution as they are often self-reported by the religion.
documents, this time, even into texts of Chinese provenance. One reasoning that was given for the religion’s name change was that since the religion of Gautama Siddhartha was called Pulgyo and the teachings of Kongzi were called Yugyo, the teachings of Tan’gun should equally not be confined to the specifics of a person’s name. Hence, just as other major religions, the religion of Tan’gun should have a more general name that could transcend particular historical contexts.90 This name change also correlated to a split within the religion, as a group branched out due to internal conflicts, retaining the religion’s original name. The new name also reflected the trend within the religion to employ a more general title to refer to Tan’gun, such as Taehwangjo (Great Imperial Ancestor) or Ch’ŏnsin (Heavenly Deity).91 This emphasized that Tan’gun was not just a historical figure that had lived in the past, but a universal deity that could transcend specific historical contexts. This, again could serve as basis to claim parity with the great religions of the world.

However, this does not mean that the notion of Tan’gun as a historical figure came to be neglected. In the same month, it was also reported that a portrait of Tan’gun had been enshrined in the Taejonggyo’s office in Seoul. This portrait supposedly originated from the P’yŏngyang region, although it is not clear what its exact nature was. Nonetheless, the visualization of Tan’gun was significant in that it showed that while the religion was elevating Tan’gun to a more abstract and universal entity, on the other hand, it was still trying to represent him as a concrete historical figure.92 This made sense as the two notions of Tan’gun as an individual and as a deity were contingent upon each other: after all, the historicity of the figure of Tan’gun served as

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90 “Tan’gyo myŏngŭi” [Title of the Religion of Tan’gun], Hwangsoong Sinmun, September 4, 1910, 2.
91 “Kwanggo” [Announcement], Hwangsoong Sinmun, September 8, 1910, 3.
92 “Chinsang Pongan” [Enshrining of portrait], Maeil Sinbo, September 25, 1910, 2.
testimony to the more universal Heavenly Spirit, while the Heavenly Spirit served as source for Tan’gun’s authority and historical significance.

In the following months, the religion continued various kinds of activities: in October, Na and O submitted a request to the colonial government for a building that had belonged to the Chosŏn government’s Office of Finance. This was apparently an attempt to accommodate the religion’s growing membership. It is not clear what happened to the request, although it seems highly unlikely that the colonial government would have simply transferred an entire building to the religion. The religion also commemorated National Foundation Day for the second year in a row. It was claimed that four hundred brothers and sisters had gathered for the event, with the religion’s flag being hoisted, incantations read, songs sung and traditional music played. However, due to the many activities to spread the religion’s teachings and conduct its ceremonies, a newspaper article soon reported that Na was in acute financial distress. Apparently, he had spent his own money as the religion lacked a proper source of income due to its impoverished membership. At the same time, this also allowed Na to be depicted in a positive light as someone who would gladly sacrifice his belongings for the greater good.

The following year, 1911, seemed to have been a quiet one as not much on the Taejonggyo was reported. However, the religion kept busy underneath the surface as in early 1912, the first of its scriptures was finally ready to be revealed. Entitled Samil Sin’go (Teachings of the Divine Tri-Unity), the text consisted of 366 Chinese characters of Tan’gun’s teachings as well as two forewords, annotations, a history of the text’s transmission, as well as reading instructions. The title itself demonstrated that the religion had officially endorsed the

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93 “Kyogwan ch’ŏnggu” [Request for teaching facility], Maeil Sinbo, October 7, 1910, 2.
94 “Kaeč’ŏnil kyŏnghasik” [Ceremony for National Foundation Day], Maeil Sinbo, November 6, 1910, 3.
95 “Sagyo chibun” [Leader of religion performs his duty], Maeil Sinbo, November 25, 1910, 2.
96 “Samil sin’go” [The Teachings of the Divine Tri-Unity], Maeil Sinbo, February 7, 1912, 3.
notion of the Trinity which Western missionaries as well as Sin Ch’aeho had already discussed within the context of the Tan’gun myth. Further, while previously, the Five Tenets were the closest to Tan’gun’s teachings that had been made public, the new text purported to represent the actual utterances of Tan’gun written down and passed on by his disciples. The teachings were pithy and cryptic, addressing the infinity of heaven, the ubiquity of the One God, God’s residence in heaven, the creation of the world, and the nature of man. 97 However, rather than the teachings themselves, it was another innovation that was more significant: instead of using the conventional character 神 (“sin”) to refer to God, the text employed the character 祐 (“sin”) which according to the Qing dynasty Kangxi Dictionary was in fact the antique version of the former character. 98 From the perspective of the Taejonggyo, this character looked similar to the 檀 (“tan”) from Tan’gun, with the implication being that the two characters were actually of the same origin. This meant not only that the character for God and Tan’gun were etymologically related, but that Tan’gun was in fact the entity from which the concept of God derived, not just in Korea, but in the larger East Asian civilization. Thus, the excavation and appropriation of an obscure Chinese character had enabled the religion to again inscribe itself into history.

The history of the Samil Sin’go as narrated by the text also demonstrated the religion’s sweeping imagination. According to the text, Tan’gun pronounced his teachings to his disciples who then carved the words into a book made of rare blue stone. During Kija’s time, the words were then engraved into a book made of pucktal wood by a legal scholar who hailed from the Shang dynasty. This time, the text was said to have been written in Chinese characters, suggesting that initially, Tan’gun’s teachings had been written down in some form of ancient

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97 See Samil Sin’go [The teachings of the divine Tri-Unity] (Seoul: Taejonggyo Ponsa, 1912).
Korean script that no longer existed. This is a reversal from earlier statements according to which there existed no script during Tan’gun’s time and thus, one had to wait centuries until subsequent thinkers could write down the divine teachings which had been transmitted orally. While the two versions of the text were kept separately, the Korean version in the state of Puyŏ and the other one in Wiman’s state, both, however, were ultimately lost in wars. The current text was claimed to be a copy of a Classical Chinese translation that dated from Koguryŏ and was taken to Manchuria when Tae Choyŏng fled there to establish the Kingdom of Parhae. One of the text’s two prefaces is also attributed to Tae Choyŏng himself, while the other one to his younger brother Tae Yabal. At the same time, the annotations to the 366 characters of Tan’gun’s teachings were supposedly written by Im Asang who was depicted as a scholar of the Parhae court. By the time of King Mun, the third regent of Parhae, however, the fear of losing the scripture became so great that it was decided that the document be put in a stone chest and hidden on Mount Paektu.99 This was presumably the state of the text until over a millennium later Paek Pong would come upon the chest during his soul-searching on the mountain, offering an alibi for why the document had been so long forgotten.

This narrative, again, was a product of the religion’s continuously expanding historical imagination. If in the beginning, the religion had been content with projecting Tan’gun onto existing historical documents, now, it had begun to actively manufacture historical texts that were claimed to be of ancient origin. In this regard, the Samil Sin’go marks an important point in the evolution of the religion as this was the first of such doctored historical texts, with many more to come. Thus, the lore surrounding Tan’gun kept accruing new dimensions, with even the

99 Samil Sin’go, 16.
ancient utterances of Tan’gun coming to the surface, rendering Korea’s ancient past more
tangible and concrete than ever before.

Conclusion

In tracing the emergence and early steps of the Taejonggyo, this chapter has
demonstrated how the religion took form in increments, rather than appearing into the world a
finished product. Elements were gradually added over time, as the religion’s theoretical
underpinnings, practical tenets, as well as scriptures emerged in intervals. In doing so, the
religion was also imbibing influences from various contemporary discourses, be they Korean,
Japanese, or Western in origin. The commemorations of Tan’gun in particular were expansions
of Confucian ancestor worship while the religion’s tenets resembled the slogans championed by
the reformist movement. The notion of Tan’gun as both a historical figure as well as a
metaphysical deity borrowed elements from Christianity, while the veneration of him as the point
of origin of the Korean nation resembled Japanese state ideology. This indicates that contrary to
what scholars such as Sassa Mitsuaki or Chŏng Yŏnghun have argued, the process of the
religion’s emergence can be explained without positing a prior folk tradition of Tan’gun worship.
Indeed, there is little evidence of such practices. Still, all of these influences were grafted onto a
deep knowledge of classical Korean and even Chinese texts which would factor even more
importantly in the years to come.

The chapter has also illustrated some of the religion’s fluctuating views as it was still in
the process of finding its footing. This was particularly evident in the religion’s position toward
Kija or the existence of an ancient Korean script. Still, the overarching goal of the Taejonggyo’s
textual productions was set as it sought to inscribe itself into history as an ancient religion that
was embedded in the origins of the Korean nation. In order to make this case, certain discursive patterns emerged that would have lasting impact: history and imagination were merged as actual historical figures and events were retrofitted with added significance in an attempt to write the religion back into history. But the religion also reached beyond simply reinterpreting history as it began to actually manufacture historical documents claimed to be of ancient origin. In doing so, the religion set an important precedent for a certain type of historiographical practice that was inspired by religious beliefs and fell outside the bounds of academic standards. This was highly significant as the religion’s most influential texts—histories of the Korean nation—would continue to incorporate and develop such practices, serving as a model for many to come.
Chapter 5
From Myth to History: The Techniques of Writing History

While the Taejonggyo’s views on Korean history filtered through a multitude of announcements, sermons, and newspaper articles, the religion eventually sought to consolidate its historical teachings in a more organized way. In 1914, the religion finally published the *Sindan Silgi*, the “Actual Accounts of the Divine Tan’gun” which was promoted as the religion’s official history. The book was focused on tracing the history of Tan’gun, his nation, as well as the religion he founded, thereby offering proof of the Taejonggyo’s deep historical roots. Previous texts had already discussed various aspects of these topics, although often, they had merely put forth a number of assertions without offering documentary evidence. The *Sindan Silgi*, however, was written in the form of a history much in the vein of classical histories, thus including numerous references to sources to support the text’s claims. In this regard, the composition of the work was an effort to turn the religion’s ideas into history proper, marking an important point in the development of the religion’s ideas. At the same time, the work’s significance also reached far beyond the confines of the religion as it was one of the first attempts to write a nationalist history of the Korean people, even preceding the major works by Sin Ch’aeho. While Sin had called for a nationalist history in his 1908 essay “Toksa Sillon,” his text, however, was more of an outline of things to come and not a comprehensive history. Sin himself did not actually take up the task of writing such a history until the late 1910s, while his major works, the “Chosôn Sanggo Munhwasa” (“Cultural History of Ancient Korea”) and the “Chosŏnsa” (“History of Korea,” also known as *Chosŏn Sangosa, History of Ancient Korea*) were not published until the 1930s. The *Sindan Silgi* can hence be regarded as one of the first responses to Sin’s call, thus constituting the starting point of nationalist historiography.
To those familiar with the earlier texts of the religion, many of the ideas in the *Sindan Silgi* were not necessarily new. A majority of the text’s elements had already been expressed in various forms, although often not in the same detail. Further, by 1911, Taejonggyo thinkers had compiled a collection of sources in the form of the *Tanjo Sago (Investigating the Affairs of the Divine Tan’gun)* which would become the basis for the text. What the *Sindan Silgi* did was to put the religion’s accumulated ideas and sources together in a more coherent, systematic manner while developing some of them further and adding some new ones. The most novel innovation of the text was not necessarily the contents of its ideas, but the methods it employed in utilizing sources to back up the religion’s ideas and create the semblance of history. In light of this, this chapter will focus not only on the ideas the text offered, but on the strategies and manoeuvres that were mobilized to construct the religion’s historical narrative. As part of this, much emphasis will be put on examining the sources the text was citing and analyzing the ways they were deployed to fit into the Taejonggyo’s narrative. After all, the project of writing Tan’gun back into history and creating a religious as well as national genealogy required historical documents to be not only edited and reinterpreted, but in some cases even reinvented. Further, this chapter will also investigate how the Taejonggyo’s histories evolved after the publication of the *Sindan Silgi*, and how these religiously-inspired texts were read, received, and imitated.

The Brain of the Religion: Kim Kyohŏn

Since the breadth of the sources that the *Sindan Silgi* cited was impressive, only somebody with the proper scholarly background would have been capable of writing such a work. Further, considering the fact that a good number of the sources used in the text, such as the *Sillok (Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty)* or the *Chŏngbo Munhŏn Pigo (Expanded*
Encyclopedia of Documents), had been confined to the Chosŏn court and were not accessible to the public, this person would have needed experience in the proper official posts to bring all these sources together. Indeed, the person to do so was none other than Kim Kyohŏn (1868-1923), a scholar-official who became affiliated with the Taejonggyo in 1910 and quickly rose through its ranks to become its second leader in 1916. Kim Kyohŏn’s background is significant in several respects. For one, it aligns with the strong Confucian credentials of those who had constituted the backbone of the Taejonggyo, illustrating the general milieu from which the religion’s membership hailed. Further, Kim’s background attests to the considerable breadth and depth of the expertise and knowledge that, as we shall see, went into the writing of the religion’s histories.

Kim Kyohŏn was born into a branch of the Kyŏngju Kim clan, an illustrious family lineage that had for generations produced a number of high-ranking scholar-officials.1 His mother’s side was equally prominent as it was part of the P’ung’yang Cho clan which had wielded enormous political power in the late Chosŏn period due to its proximity to the court.2 Growing up in Seoul, Kim did not disappoint either side of the family thanks to his own achievements as he passed the civil service exam in 1885 at the tender age of seventeen, which was a most impressive feat considering that the average age of successful examinees tended to be in the mid- to late thirties.3 Thanks to starting his career as civil servant early, he passed through a wide array of posts before 1910, gaining experience in matters related to diplomacy, the military, law, and especially the compilation of court documents. In particular, in 1903, Kim

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2 Pak Hwan, 85.
3 Yi Wŏnmyŏng, Chosŏn Sidae Munkwa Kŭpcheja Yŏn’gu [Study of civil service examination passers of the Chosŏn period] (Seoul: Kukhak Charyowŏn, 2004), 243.
became engaged in the production of the *Chūngbo Munhŏn Pigo* (*Expanded Encyclopedia of Documents*) which was a continuation of a government project that had begun a century earlier to create a comprehensive database of texts pertaining to Korean culture and institutions through history. In 1909, shortly before annexation, Kim also assumed the post of vice director of the Kyujjanggak, that is, the Royal Library of the Chosŏn court which housed the dynasty’s most expansive collection of texts. These posts allowed Kim plenty of opportunities to develop a familiarity with a wide range of historical documents, many of them inaccessible to the public, becoming an invaluable asset in composing the Taejonggyo’s historical works.⁴

In early 1910, with the demise of the Chosŏn dynasty looming, Kim had an encounter with Na Ch’ŏl which became the occasion for his induction into the Taejonggyo. This was also the year Kim became affiliated with the Chosŏn Kwangmunhoe (Korean Society for Illuminating Letters) which was founded by the soon-to-be famous intellectual Ch’oe Namsŏn (1890-1957) and dedicated to recovering, collecting, and publishing classical Korean texts.⁵ This allowed Kim to engage with like-minded scholars who were committed to excavating and preserving Korea’s historical legacy in the wake of annexation. Thus, he joined the ranks of other prominent nationalists such as Chang Chiyŏn (1864-1921), as well as future members of the Taejonggyo such as Park Únsik and Yu Kŭn (1861-1921).⁶ While other members of the Chosŏn Kwangmunhoe had mostly been engaged in education and publishing efforts outside the state bureaucracy, Kim had the most government experience and intricate knowledge of documents that were not available to the public. Thus, even before compiling the Taejonggyo’s official

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⁴ Pak Hwan, 89-93.
⁶ Pak Hwan, 96. Also, O Yŏngsŏp, “Chosŏn Kwangmunhoe yŏn’gu” [Study of the Chosŏn Kwangmunhoe], *Han’guk Sahaksa Hakpo* 3 (2001.3), 101.
history, Kim Kyohŏn had already been a sought-after man both in government and non-government projects to compile Korea’s historical legacy.

Overall, Kim’s background so far illustrates that he was more or less a traditional scholar who during the tumultuous period from the late nineteenth century onward, continued to hold on to his official posts and perform his duties as a loyal civil servant. While others were caught up in the latest currents of the times, such as the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement or more radical efforts to oppose Japanese intrusions, Kim did not swerve away from his career path. Thus, in contrast to others who had begun to look to Japan or the West for new knowledge, Kim’s expertise was classical and more old-fashioned in nature. Nonetheless, if the task required drawing from the depths of Korea’s own historical legacy, there was no one more suitable than Kim.

Even though Kim Kyohŏn was not a founding member of the Taejonggyo, his erudition and expertise enabled him to quickly become a leading figure within the organization. Indeed, as the publication of the Sindan Silgi in 1914 illustrated, Kim had become the main ideologue of the religion, giving its ideas form, structure, and authority. Na Ch’ŏl, the founder of the religion, had also passed the civil service exam, but his academic background was not as illustrious as Kim’s since he had not served in the kinds of official posts that allowed access to Chosŏn’s most valuable documents. Thus, even if many of the religion’s ideas may have originated from Na, it was Kim who augmented and refined them, endowing them with historical substance. After Na Ch’ŏl’s suicide/martyrdom in 1916, Kim’s contributions and credentials enabled him to be selected as the second leader of the Taejonggyo, a position which he maintained until his death in 1923.\(^7\) The most important product of Kim’s labor was the Sindan Silgi which was the official

\(^7\) Cho Hangnae, 401.
history promoted by the Taejonggyo, and as such, initiated a number of important trends within and without the religion.

Precursor

Fortunately for the historian, it is possible to trace the process of how the *Sindan Silgi* came into being as it was in fact, a sequel to another, much lesser-known work. Prior to the *Sindan Silgi*’s publication, Taejonggyo thinkers had compiled another text entitled *Tanjo Sago*, 

(*Investigating the Affairs of the Ancestral Tan’gun*) which can be regarded as a stepping stone toward the creation of the *Sindan Silgi*. The *Tanjo Sago* was completed around 1911, although it seems that it was disseminated through handwritten copies and only published after liberation. The work was a source collection rather than a historical narrative, explaining why it remained more of an unofficial text. Further, while there has been some debate on who the author was, several individuals may have collaborated on the work with Kim Kyohŏn most likely taking the lead. Others involved may have included Pak Ŭnsik as well as Yu Kŭn, both of whom had also been affiliated with the Korean Society for Illuminating Letters. The *Tanjo Sago* itself was a collection of sources related to Tan’gun, categorized thematically around individual facts that had been known about him. The collection encompassed over five dozen historical documents ranging from private poems to court documents and histories from both Korea and China. Many of the texts such as the *Chŭngbo Munhŏn Pigo* (*Encyclopedia of Documents*) or *Sillok* (*Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty*) were not easily accessible to the public, making it very likely

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9 Ibid., 149-50.
that Kim contributed a large portion of these citations. The *Tanjo Sago* also avowed to be based on the principle of *kojǔng*, that is, philological investigation through documentary evidence. In this regard, the work purported to cite sources as meticulously and objectively as possible, claiming that all sources were employed truthfully with no single character added.\textsuperscript{11} As had been common practice, the work also distinguished clearly between facts derived from other documents and the author’s own commentary which were appended to some of the chapters. Thanks to the work’s clear delineation of sources, it is possible for the reader to examine what grounds the arguments were based on, how these arguments were derived and how valid the whole process was.

The *Tanjo Sago* was divided into the inner chapters and outer chapters, with the inner chapters documenting facts about Tan’gun’s life, and the outer chapters documenting the veneration of Tan’gun through history. Each chapter was dedicated to one particular fact, such as Tan’gun’s origins, his founding of Old Chosŏn, or a particular instance of veneration of him. The majority of these facts had already emerged over the centuries in a variety of texts, some earlier, some later, and had been gradually added to the myth. For instance, the notion that Tan’gun had sent his son/disciple to China for a gathering convened by Yu the Great was not in the original myth, but had emerged sometime in the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, the notion that Tan’gun had taught people how to wear their hair and cover their heads was also something that had appeared later in the writings by Hong Manjong in the early eighteenth century (chapter 1). The *Tanjo Sago* listed all such known facts about Tan’gun, while also citing the documents from which these had originated. In this regard, the text was more of a collection of historical references to Tan’gun rather than a historical narrative. In some cases, the author also added his

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\textsuperscript{11} Kim Kyohŏn et al., *Tanjo Sago* (Koyang: Hanppuri, 2006), 14.
\textsuperscript{12} Sŏ Yongtae 1999, 66-7.
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own evaluation of the sources, suggesting that he had engaged in some degree of source criticism. One example is the text’s treatment of Tan’gun’s life span in which case a number of varying quotations were listed only to be rebutted. After all, several sources had estimated Tan’gun’s life span to exceed a millennium, but the author of the *Tanjo Sago* rejected these, arguing that a closer investigation of the sources suggested that Tan’gun had lived a more reasonable 217 years while his reign lasted 93 years.\(^{13}\) Another case of such source criticism was the text’s treatment of the Korean Trinity. The text noted inconsistencies across previous accounts on Tan’gun as some had portrayed Hwanung, Tan’gun’s father, as having descended to earth, while others had depicted Tan’gun as the one who had descended underneath a *tan/paktal* tree. The author of the *Tanjo Sago* rendered these conflicting versions compatible by arguing that father and son were in fact the same entity, a notion which would later serve as basis to establish the concept of the Korean Trinity that would consist of Hwanin, the Heavenly Deity, Hwanung, his son, and Tan’gun, his grandson.\(^{14}\) The text also expressed doubts about the veracity of the reports on Tan’gun’s putative grave located in the Kangdong area in P’yŏngyang since these were merely rumors that lacked solid documentary foundations. A site such as this would also contradict the religion’s view that Tan’gun had ascended back to heaven, explaining the text’s skepticism toward the grave.\(^{15}\)

Despite such attempts at source criticism, however, the *Tanjo Sago* fell far short of its own promises. In fact, the text’s straightforward presentation of sources laid bare the weakness of some of the evidence it employed. For instance, regarding the location of Tan’gun’s origin, the work echoed Sin Ch’aeho in identifying it as Mount Paektu, although even the sources the

\(^{13}\) *Tanjo Sago*, 57-61.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 87.
Tanjo Sago cited all associated Tan’gun with Mount Myohyang. The only source that made it possible to identify Tan’gun’s place of origin as Mount Paektu was a geographical account that listed Mount T’aebaek as an alternate name for Mount Paektu. The context, however, was unrelated to Tan’gun, while Mount T’aebaek was not an uncommon name in Korea. From the sources alone, it was not clear why all accounts that had mentioned Mount Myohyang as Tan’gun’s site of descent should be wrong. This also revealed that there was no other newly discovered evidence that the religion had access to in its reinterpretation of Tan’gun’s place of origin, indicating that the association of Tan’gun with Mount Paektu was indeed a recent phenomenon and based more on inference than documentation.

Another problem with the Tanjo Sago was that some of the citations were redundant: in the chapter on Tan’gun’s founding of Old Chosŏn and establishment of his capital in P’yŏngyang, the work cited the Samguk Yusa as well as a number of other texts that had mentioned the same. The problem, however, was that these texts were all building on the Samguk Yusa to make the case, rather than doing so independently through different sources. Thus, even though the Tanjo Sago enlisted eight different sources to support Tan’gun’s founding of Old Chosŏn, these could all be collapsed into one.16 The abundance of documentation was hence more appearance than reality.

There was also the occasional odd citation. While most of the sources were historical documents from Korea or China, one of the quotations was actually from a more recent Japanese publication called Manshū Chishi (Geography of Manchuria). This work was produced by the Japanese military in 1894 and was a sort of intelligence dossier on Manchuria. In a chapter that depicted the religious customs of the region, there was mention of a belief in an omniscient and

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16 Ibid., 38-9.
omnipotent deity that resided in the highest of heavens from where it governed lesser deities. This was cited in the *Tanjo Sago* almost verbatim to intimate that Tan’gun was in fact this supreme deity, or “chusin” (main deity), suggesting that faith in him had extended to Manchuria. The existence of such a distinctive citation in the book may have been due to the fact that the *Tanjo Sago* was a collaborative effort with several individuals contributing quotations from different sources. While there is little evidence that Kim Kyohŏn himself had direct access to contemporary Japanese discourses, Yu Kŭn or Pak ŭnsik who had been engaged in more “progressive” affairs such as the newspaper publishing industry may have contributed this particular source. Na Ch’ŏl himself, although it is not clear whether he worked on this text, had also been exposed to modern, especially Japanese intellectual trends through his travels and interactions in Japan. Whatever the case, this demonstrates that the compilers of the *Tanjo Sago* were able to take recourse to recent Japanese publications and access more general Japanese discourses on religion.

At the same time, there were also some highly suspicious citations, as some scholars and texts were attributed with quotes that did not exist. For instance, the scholar Yi Ik (1681-1762) is attributed with stating that Korea’s original religion created by Tan’gun was initially called “Chonggyo” (“Religion of the Ancestral Divinity”), but had wrongly become known as “Sŏng’yo” (“Transcendental Teachings”). This was anachronistic as the character “chong” or “-jong” (倧, “ancient divine person”) had only recently begun to be employed by the Taejonggyo, just as the term Sŏn’gyo was starting to become more popular among contemporary intellectuals such as Sin Ch’aeho to refer to an indigenous Korean spiritual tradition. No such quote can be

18 *Tanjo Sago*, 29.
19 Sin Ch’aeho, “Tongguk kodae Sŏn’gyogo.”
found in Yi Ik’s works, suggesting that the *Tanjo Sago* was resorting to questionable practices in projecting its religion onto the past. The same goes for the text’s citation of some Chinese texts which were employed to further attest to Tan’gun’s historicity. One example is the *Jilin Leishi* (*General Matters of Korea*), a Song dynasty text that listed a glossary of 353 Korean words and their eleventh- or twelfth-century pronunciations transcribed in Chinese script. The *Tanjo Sago* attributes this text with offering an entry on the *tan*-tree and its Korean pronunciation “*paktal,*” which would suggest that the term was indeed of importance to Koreans in the past. However, the actual *Jilin Leishi* did not contain any such entry, as the word *paktal* had only recently become significant through the Taejonggyo’s endeavors, suggesting that here again, some manufacturing was involved.21

While in these cases, actual texts or individuals were attributed with suspicious quotes, sometimes the ontological status of the source texts themselves was elusive. One example is the *Kogŭmg i* (*Records from Past to Present*) which the *Tanjo Sago* attributed with mentioning the notion of the Korean Trinity that consisted of Hwanin as Heaven, Hwanung as Spirit, and Tan’gun as Spirit-turned-man.22 This resembled how Western missionaries had projected Christian motifs onto the Tan’gun myth in conceptualizing the Korean Trinity as consisting of Hwanin as God, Hwanung as Spirit, and Tan’gun as his earthly incarnation. If the *Tanjo Sago* was correct, this would mean that the religion’s notion of a Korean Trinity preceded the influx of Christianity and thus, was not derivative. However, scholars have struggled to trace down the *Kogŭmg i* as there are simply no records that a text of this title and contents had ever existed.23 Considering this, the *Kogŭmg i* and its mention of a Korean Trinity were likely part of an attempt

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20 *Tanjo Sago*, 34.
21 Chŏng Ukchae, 135.
22 *Tanjo Sago*, 18.
23 Chŏng Ukchae, 137.
to appropriate religious concepts from other traditions while at the same time claiming indigenous origins for them.

There were also efforts to build on the authority of some Chinese sources which, however, also turned out to be of nebulous origin: The Tanjo Sago cites a work called Xu Wanwei Yubian as offering a genealogy of heaven worship practiced through Korean history. The name of the work suggested that it was a sequel or a second volume to an actual Chinese work called Wanwei Yubian (Remaining Collection of Mount Wanwei), a collection of texts selected by the Ming dynasty scholar Wang Shizhen (1526-1590). However, there are no records of such a sequel, while the original text also contained no such reference as it was not even related to Korea. The quote itself also seemed anachronistic in its listing of the names of Korean heaven worship practices from ancient Puyŏ all the way to the Koryŏ dynasty: according to the quote, in Puyŏ, the practice was called Taech’ŏn’gyo, in Silla, Sungch’ŏn’gyo, in Koguryŏ, Kyŏngch’ŏn’gyo (these three can all be translated as “Heaven-worshipping Religion”), and in Koryŏ, Wanggŏmgyo (“Religion of Wanggŏm”). In doing so, the quote established a genealogy of Korean heaven worship that had continued through much of Korean history. However, there are no records of such names, and indeed, the naming convention here suggests that these were inventions of more recent origin. After all, each name consisted of three characters with “-gyo (“teachings”) at the end to indicate its nature as religion, a convention which had become popular in Korea in the early twentieth century. Further, while heaven-worship practices had indeed been documented for each of these periods, the notion that they were center-pieces of a cohesive

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24 For instance, see Kankoku Chūsatsu Kenpeitai Shireibu ed., Kankoku Shakai Ryakusetsu [Summary overview of Korean society] (Seoul: Kankoku Chūsatsu Kenpeitai Shireibu, 1910), 26-34. This text lists six Korean new religious movements which all employ this naming convention. In contrast, the names of older traditions, such as Buddhism (Pulgyo), Taoism (Togyo), and Confucianism (Yugyo) consisted of two characters, again with “-gyo” at the end. These terms, however, have a much longer history.
religious tradition and somehow part of a lineage originating from Tan’gun was novel. In earlier times, these rituals were most likely related to agricultural practices, while especially in Koryŏ, the practice was influenced by Chinese precedents. Although most likely a fabrication, the Tanjo Sago’s genealogy revealed that the Taejonggyo put strong emphasis on narrating a tradition of heaven worship which the religion claimed to have inherited. This mirrored the scholarship of contemporary Japanese academics who had identified heaven worship practices through Korean history. While some of these had viewed the practice as a common denominator underlying a larger Ural-Altaic civilization, others more specifically had equated the ritual with Shinto practices that had spread across the sea (see chapter 3). The religion’s emphasis on an indigenous lineage of heaven worship also showed similarities to the Western missionaries’ preoccupation with identifying an indigenous monotheistic tradition through Korean heaven worship practices. In this regard, the Taejonggyo’s own intellectual productions were very much mirroring foreign discourses.

Despite the Tanjo Sago’s avowed commitment to philological rigor, the picture drawn so far indicates that it was layered with a number of highly suspicious elements. While a wide range of texts had been quoted truthfully, even these were often interpreted in a problematic fashion to fit into the religion’s framework. In regard to the suspicious citations, one may give the compilers of the book the benefit of the doubt, since the occasional erroneous reference may have slipped in as they were sifting through a wide array of sources. What is more likely, however, is that the misuse of sources and quotations was deliberate, as they were too frequent and systematic to simply be mistakes. After all, whenever the Tanjo Sago offered new elements on Tan’gun that had not been mentioned before, the supporting evidence was highly suspicious.

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25 For a good overview on heaven worship practices throughout Korean history, see Pak Mira 2010, 7-30.
This was especially so in cases where one might suspect foreign influences such as the notion of the Trinity or the emphasis on a genealogy of heaven worship. It was especially in these cases that the text employed dubious sources, most likely in order to establish the religion’s ideas as indigenous and to mask any debt to foreign sources. Thus, historical documents were manufactured to endow the religion’s ideas with historical depth and reality.

However, despite its often-times shaky foundations, the *Tanjo Sago* is valuable in that it laid bare the strategies and resources the religion was using in order to support its version of Korean history. An intricate knowledge of classical Korean as well as Chinese documents was employed to much benefit, as were the skills to create sources and seamlessly write quotations back into existing documents. With the resources and databases available today, it is easier to see through the religion’s strategies. For a reader of the early twentieth century, however, it would have been very difficult to vet the sources as many historical texts were not readily accessible to the public. In fact, some of the questionable sources that had appeared in the *Tanjo Sago* would also be re-cited by other historians without critique, taking on a life of their own. The extensive knowledge and authority of a traditional Confucian scholar such as Kim Kyohŏn were thus used to the religion’s advantage, rooting the religion’s historical teachings in the impenetrable depths of classical documents.

Overall, however, the *Tanjo Sago* was more of a tentative work, an interim report on Tan’gun-related sources. It did not go very far in explicating the implications of many of the sources and also did not combine them into coherent narratives. The work was likely the most comprehensive collection of Tan’gun-related sources up to this point, but as such, it was more of

\[26\] The availability of a plethora of resources including new media and online databases, of course, has not prevented the more recent surge of “alternative facts” and all kinds of fabulous concoctions. The contemporary wealth of information and sources through new media, hence, can be a double-edged sword.
a preparation for things to come. Indeed, the work was never officially promoted by the religion, nor was it disseminated widely as it would soon be replaced by another text, the Sindan Silgi.

The Sindan Silgi

In 1914, the religion’s official history, the Sindan Silgi was published, and in many ways, it was a sequel to the Tanjo Sago as it took over many of its sources as well as its objective of tracing an extensive religious tradition through Korean history. The Sindan Silgi also augmented and superseded its predecessor, as it offered more of everything in terms of topics it discussed and sources it employed. While the Tanjo Sago had focused on two major themes, that is, Tan’gun’s activities and the veneration of him through Korean history, the Sindan Silgi added to that a number of topics such as a genealogy of dynasties that succeeded Tan’gun’s Old Chosŏn, a genealogy of the Paedal people and its various branches, as well as more extensive discussions on Tan’gun in folk beliefs and ancient Korean territory. Thus, the Sindan Silgi was an exhaustive compilation of the historical ideas the religion had developed so far, backing them up with sources and thus endowing them with the appearance of historicity. In contrast to the Tanjo Sago which was composed entirely in Classical Chinese, the Sindan Silgi also used mixed Sino-Korean script, allowing the text to be brought to a larger audience.

The Sindan Silgi was more exhaustive than its predecessor as it also contained parts written in narrative style. These portions were crafted meticulously as they seamlessly merged the religion’s own ideas with past accounts of the Tan’gun myth. In contrast to other sections of the work, the narrative parts, however, did not offer any notes or citations, making it more difficult for the reader to examine the origins of their claims. At the same time, this also allowed the narratives to be presented as given truths, and as such, sounded similar to other classical
accounts of the Tan’gun myth. The opening of the work illustrates how traditional accounts were interwoven with the religion’s ideas in creating a new version of the Tan’gun myth:

“Hwanin, Hwanung, Hwan’gŏm (Commentary: some call them Tanin, Tanung, and Tan’gŏm), these are the Trinity. On the third day of the tenth month of the sangwŏn kapcha year, Hwan’gŏm turned from God to man, took with him three heavenly seals, and descended to Mount T’aebaek (Commentary: present-day Mount Paektu) underneath a tan-tree. He then established the divine teachings, Sin’gyo, and edified the people…On the third day of the tenth month of the mujin year, the 125th year of the Opening of Heaven, the people of the country elevated the divine person to king. This is Tan’gun (Commentary: so called because he descended underneath a tan-tree) and the state was named Tan (Commentary: also called Paedal)…In the 147th year of the Opening of Heaven, he moved his capital from Mount T’aebaek to P’yŏngyang and renamed his state Chosŏn…in the 217th year…he entered Mount Asadal and ascended to heaven. He had reigned as king for 93 years and although it is not known how many generations of his descendants succeeded him, their rule lasted 1210 years.”

The most prominent addition in this narrative was the notion of the Trinity or Tri-Unity which consisted of Tan’gun, his father and grandfather. The name “Hwan’gŏm” itself which Kim used as alternative title for Tan’gun, was a way of creating consistency among the three generations, as in the original myth, Tan’gun’s name stood out from his father’s and grandfather’s as only the latter two shared the character “hwan.” The “-gŏm” from Hwan’gŏm was derived from Wanggŏm, which was part of Tan’gun’s full name, Tan’gun Wanggŏm. Further, in the Chosŏn-era, there were conflicting accounts on who had descended to Mount T’aebaek as some stated that it was Hwanung, while others stated that it was his son Tan’gun. The concept of the Trinity, however, enabled Kim to resolve this issue as the two were merged into one. What is more, in a later part of the text, Kim went on to equate this Korean Trinity with Shangdi, the Supreme Deity of the Chinese tradition, as well as Śakra, the heavenly deity of the Buddhist tradition. In the latter case, Kim also connects Tan’gun to the concept of the three gods

27 Kim Kyohŏn, Sindan Silgi [Actual accounts of the divine Tan’gun] (Seoul: Taejonggyo Ponsa, 1914), 3-5.
of Buddhism, although he was most likely referring to the three Buddhas. Thus, the argument was that the deities of the Confucian and Buddhist traditions were other expressions of the Korean Trinity and vice versa, allowing Kim to again endow the Korean Trinity with a universal character.28

Although Kim made no explicit reference to the Christian tradition in this text, Kim’s notion of the Tri-Unity mirrored Christian elements, especially since he depicted Tan’gun as a God being incarnated in human form. Thus, the original version of Tan’gun being born from a bear-turned-woman was discarded as no mention of Tan’gun’s mother and her travails to become human was made. This may have been in line with Kim’s rejection of shamanic folk beliefs which he had expressed in this text as well.29 Kim’s depiction of Tan’gun’s ultimate ascent to heaven was also a variation of the original version which had described Tan’gun entering Mount Asadal and becoming a mountain spirit. As the notion of the mountain spirit itself was a common trope in folk beliefs, this was another departure from the original myth that the Sindan Silgi undertook. In fact, Kim’s account of Tan’gun’s final transformation was closer to that of Western missionaries such as James Scarth Gale who had also depicted Tan’gun as having ascended to heaven (chapter 3).

A number of other new elements had also been inserted into the Tan’gun myth. The focus on the third day of the tenth month which the religion had already proclaimed as National Foundation Day, or the “Day of the Opening of Heaven” (Kaech’ŏnjŏl), is a case in point. This was derived from the fact that some ancient Chinese texts had documented Korean heaven worship rituals conducted in the tenth lunar month, although no records had pinpointed the exact date to the third day of the month. The identification of Mount T’aebaek as Mount Paektu was

28 Ibid., 32-3.
29 Ibid. 33.
also a recent invention promoted by Sin Ch’aeho (chapter 3) which the religion had taken over. The name Paedal, or Tan, to refer to Korea’s foundational state was of Taejonggyo origin, as were the numerous dates and years associated with the myth that Kim Kyohŏn had derived through his own philological investigations. These elements were all mixed with older elements of the Tan’gun myth, such as the three seals which was a nod to the original myth in the *Samguk Yusa*, Tan’gun’s elevation to king by the people which was derived from the *Tongguk T’onggam*, and his relocation of the capital which was a compromise between these two classical accounts. Noteworthy for later discussions is the fact that Kim also showed some restraint in adding new elements as he admitted that he did not know the details of Tan’gun’s line of succession which was believed to have ruled Old Chosŏn for over a millennium. As we shall see in the following chapter, other texts which would soon emerge did not possess the same restraint.

Hence, the *Sindan Silgi*’s baseline onto which these new elements were grafted consisted of components from various existing accounts of the Tan’gun myth. The *Samguk Yusa*, of course, which had offered the original myth, was part of this, as were Chosŏn-era accounts such as Hŏ Mok’s *Tongsa* (*Eastern Affairs*), Hong Manjong’s *Tongguk Yŏkdae Ch’ongmok* (*A Comprehensive Digest of Korean History*), and Yi Chonghwi’s *Tongsa* (*History of the East*). Especially Yi’s assertion that Tan’gun had “established teachings through spirits” could be turned into the notion that Tan’gun had “established Sin’gyo,” the Divine Religion, by slightly rearranging the characters.30 Yi had also claimed that he had seen Tan’gun being mentioned in ancient Chinese documents, although he did not specify their identities as it is not clear if they ever existed.31 Still, Kim Kyohŏn made reference to Yi’s claim as it could bolster the religion’s

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30 Ibid., 3. The original is 以神設敎, “establishing teachings through spirits,” while the modified version is 設神敎, “establishing Sin’gyo.”
31 Ibid., 30-2.
project of offering evidence of Tan’gun’s historical reality. Yi had also likened Tan’gun to the
mythical Chinese rulers and cultural heroes Fuxi and Shennong—members of the Three
Sovereigns and Five Emperors—an analogy which Kim Kyohŏn picked up as well. In this way,
Kim was building on a multitude of existing sources, extracting elements that seemed conducive
to his own project of projecting the religion back into history and merging them into his own
account. In doing so, he would not shy away from endorsing sometimes questionable scholarship
as long as it could further his purpose.

The range of sources Kim employed to emphasize Tan’gun’s significance was wide, as
he gleaned any types of documents that could somehow be interwoven into his project. For
instance, he employed poems that mentioned Tan’gun such as the one Kwŏn Kŭn had presented
to the Ming emperor (chapter 1) or travelogues that narrated visits to Tan’gun-related remains
and sites. Even poems by Ming envoys who wrote about the stories of Tan’gun they had heard
during their travels in Korea were cited as well.\(^\text{32}\) Kim also wrote Tan’gun into sources that were
originally unrelated to him, such as the Sillok’s account of a conception dream that augured the
birth of King Injo (1595-1649) whose name was in fact the rare “chong” (倧) character
employed by the religion, turning Tan’gun into an omnipresent entity that accompanied Korean
rulers.\(^\text{33}\) The documents Kim drew on even included the Talsŏng Pae clan’s family genealogy,
which had listed the clan’s own foundation myth claiming that its original ancestor had come
down from heaven and was raised by Tan’gun himself.\(^\text{34}\) According to the document, it was also
Tan’gun who endowed the clan’s ancestor with the family name and rank as chief official of the
Namhae region. It is not entirely clear when this origin myth was developed, but there is

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 78-9.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 54. The original version of the dream can be found in Injo Sillok [Veritable Records of King Injo] 50, 033a-033b. http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/wpa_200002

\(^{34}\) Sindan Silgi, 4, 41-2.
evidence that by 1912, descendants of the Pae clan had become members of the Taejonggyo and begun flaunting their ties to Tan’gun. Kim Kyohŏn became aware of this family legend and incorporated it into his history of Tan’gun. Granted, this constituted only one small detail in Tan’gun’s story, but it was the small details that made Tan’gun more tangible and life-like than ever before. This particular detail was also rooted in existing documents, and although the document itself was most likely manufactured, it did not originate from Kim himself, and thus, he was not responsible for its authenticity. This again indicates that Kim was eager to embrace almost anything he could find as he was scouring a myriad of texts for Tan’gun-related references.

However, this does not mean that Kim employed all the sources that were available to him as he did not make use of some of the most obvious choices. One was the “Announcement of the Five Tenets” which included Tan’gun’s practical and ethical precepts and their various incarnations through history. The document does not seem to have been circulated widely as it was more for internal use, thus there may have been less of an incentive to cite it. Another one, however, was the Samil Sin’go, the Taejonggyo’s main scripture, which purportedly contained the actual utterances of Tan’gun/God himself and had been made public by the religion in 1912 (chapter 4). This text was championed widely, and although the author is unclear, Kim Kyohŏn was listed as the publisher of this work. The absence of any reference to this text in Kim’s histories is glaring since the Taejonggyo promoted the Samil Sin’go as an authentic text of ancient origin. The document also contained one of the religion’s earliest official references to the Korean Trinity, making it an obvious choice for Kim to use. Still, Kim did not refer to this

35 Cho Ch’angyong, “Pukkando sich’algı” [Account of inspection of the northern Kando region], in Paengnong Silgi (Ch’ŏnan: Tongnip Kinyŏmgwan, 1993), 254. Available online at Independence Hall of Korea website http://search.i815.or.kr.
36 Samil Sin’go (Seoul: Taejonggyo Ponsa, 1912), 18.
document in the *Sindan Silgi* at all even though he could have used it to bolster his arguments. While one can only offer conjectures as to the reasons, perhaps Kim wanted to base the religion’s history on outside sources to endow his views with the appearance of more objectivity, rather than building upon his own religion’s texts. Further, as Japanese observers such as Imanishi Ryū surmised, Kim may actually have been the author of the *Samil Sin’go*, which would have made a citation of the text even more delicate.\footnote{Imanishi Ryū, *Dankun Kō* [An Examination of Tan’gun] (Seoul: 1929), 86.}

Overall, however, the *Sindan Silgi* was stepping into the *Tanjo Sago*’s footsteps, taking over many of its questionable citations. This included quotes from ontologically shady sources such as the *Kogŭmgi*\footnote{*Sindan Silgi*, 32.} or the *Xu Wanwei Yubian*.\footnote{Ibid., 39.} At the same time, however, some of the quotations that had appeared in the *Tanjo Sago* were now assigned to different sources. In the earlier text, the terms Chonggyo and Sŏn’gyo, both referring to Korea’s indigenous religion established by Tan’gun, were attributed to the Chosŏn-era scholar Yi Ik. In actuality, however, no such reference could be found in his works, and in the *Sindan Silgi*, Kim Kyohŏn went on to change the source of this quote to another text called *Tongsa Ryugo* (*Investigating Eastern Affairs*) whose existence was also highly suspect. It is not entirely clear why Kim replaced one dubious source with another, but he went on to attribute the *Tongsa Ryugo* with a number of pieces of evidence that attested to Tan’gun, such as folk tales on the mythical founder and his descendants, thus using the text as a kind of stand-in for a variety of miscellaneous quotations.\footnote{Ibid., 30-2.}

Whatever motivated Kim to make this change, this demonstrates that his manufacturing of sources was an ongoing process, and that he did not shy away from correcting his own inventions if necessary. In this respect, the *Sindan Silgi* was a reimagining of the *Tanjo Sago*,
taking over a significant number of its elements, but when needed, did not hesitate to override it even if it meant creating inconsistencies.

The Sindan Silgi also deeply intertwined the history of the religion with that of the nation, an important theme in the religion’s teachings. However, the concept of the nation proffered here was not restricted to the Korean nation, but was expanded to the greater “Paedal” nation, that is, the descendants of Tan’gun of which the Korean people constituted only one branch. This was a notion that the religion had been promoting for a while, but here, it was presented with historical documentation. The other branches of this greater nation were located in Manchuria and northern China as Kim included dynasties that had traditionally been excluded from Korean histories such as the Liao dynasty (907-1125) and the Jin dynasty (1115-1234) as part of the lineage. The Liao dynasty had been established by the Khitans and had occupied much of Mongolia, Manchuria, northern China as well as parts of northern Korea, while the Jin dynasty, which had replaced the former, was founded by the Jurchen and had also occupied Manchuria and northern China. By including these two into the greater national lineage, in effect, Kim was assimilating the Khitans and the Jurchen into the “Paedal” nation of Tan’gun’s descendants.41 Kim backed this up by referring to the fact that the Liao and Jin dynasty both had performed religious practices which he claimed originated from Tan’gun:42 the Liao Shi (History of Liao) had adumbrated a worship of a heavenly spirit,43 while the Jinshi (History of Jin) had mentioned the Jin dynasty’s veneration of Mount Paektu which was intertwined with the worship of dynastic ancestors.44 While both of these sources were real, it was Kim that connected both of these examples to

41 Ibid., 29-30.
42 Sindan Silgi, 66-7.
http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=845139&searchu=%E5%A4%A9%E7%A5%9E
https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E9%87%91%E5%8F%B2/%E5%8D%B735
Tan’gun. The logic was that since Tan’gun was the first to establish the worship of heaven through the altar on Mount Mani, any subsequent practices with similar features must have derived from it. Also, while the Jurchen’s reverence for Mount Paektu was in potential conflict with the growing Korean emphasis of the mountain, Kim reconciled these two by turning the Jurchen veneration of the mountain into another manifestation of the worship of Tan’gun. Thus, a creative re-reading of historical sources allowed Kim to incorporate the northern tribes alongside contemporary Koreans into the Paedal nation and its spiritual legacy.

At the same time, the Sindan Silgi was also problematic in that it created tensions with the religion’s other textual creations. As discussed in the previous chapter, Na Ch’ŏl had claimed to have received a number of documents that the mysterious Paek Pong had purportedly found in a chest on Mount Paektu. At that time, Na had only presented the titles of these texts which suggested that they included the religion’s various scriptures as well as histories. The religion announced that these would be made public in due course, that is, once the Korean nation was ready to receive them. However, no texts with matching titles were ever published, although some that were analogous were, such as the Samil Sin’go which was presented as one of the scriptures from the chest. The chest also allegedly contained historical texts that, based on their titles, could potentially be matched with Kim Kyohŏn’s Sindan Silgi, as one title suggested that it pertained to the history of Tan’gun’s dynasty and another one to the history of Tan’gun’s religion. Nonetheless, Kim never claimed that the Sindan Silgi originated from a chest as he was clearly presented as its author. Further, he did not cite or mention these texts in any of his works, suggesting that the project of “revealing” the texts from the chest had been sidelined as this would have required the manufacturing of a host of new documents. Thus, the religion had

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45 Sindan Silgi, 70.
quietly gone back on its initial promise and decided on a different course of action, illustrating again that the process of building up the Taejonggyo involved false starts, broken promises, and internal inconsistencies.

Rekindling Territorial Controversies

Some of the Sindan Silgi’s contributions consisted of simply excavating and presenting historical sources without adding any commentary as this was enough to rekindle old controversies. This was especially so when it came to understanding and reimagining Korea’s historical territory. The prime example is the Sindan Silgi’s lengthy citation of Pak Chiwŏn’s (1737-1805) Yŏrha Ilgi (Rehe Diaries), that is, Pak’s accounts of his travels to China in the late eighteenth century. In this text, Pak was offering a revisionist account of Korean territory. For one, he offered the theory that there had been in fact several cities named P’yŏngyang, not just the contemporary one which was located on the Taedong River. The others had been located in what was now Chinese territory, one slightly north of the Korean peninsula and another one located further west in the Liaodong peninsula. While Pak made no mention of Tan’gun, and took Kija as the starting point of Korean history, this allowed him to argue that the P’yŏngyang which Kija had used as his capital was indeed located further north than the current one. In fact, Pak claimed that any city which Old Chosŏn’s capital moved to subsequently was named P’yŏngyang as well, leaving a trail of cities of the same name.\(^\text{46}\) This notion of multiple P’yŏngyangs was based on Pak’s own interpretation of Chinese historical documents and estimates of Korea’s ancient territory, but he did not offer any hard evidence to support it. Nonetheless, this allowed Pak to bolster the notion of a larger Korean territory that had its center

\(^{46}\) Pak Chiwŏn, “Togangnok” [Account of crossing the river], in Yŏrha Ilgi Vol.1 (late 18\textsuperscript{th} century), paragraph 37-40. http://www.davincimap.co.kr/
beyond the peninsula’s boundaries. In the same vein, Pak also argued that the river P’aesu, which ancient Chinese documents such as the *Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian)* had portrayed as the border between China and the land of Chosŏn,\(^{47}\) was also located outside the peninsula. Although there was no unanimous view, prominent scholars such as An Chŏngbok had identified the river as the Taedong River, thus associating it with the city of P’yŏngyang and firmly locating it within the peninsula.\(^{48}\) Pak’s conceptions, however, moved both the river and P’yŏngyang outside the peninsula, thereby expanding Korea’s ancient territory.\(^{49}\) Thus, long before the modern discussions of ancient Korean territory, Pak had already offered a rather expansive vision of the Korean homeland.

The potential repercussions of this spacial reimagining were significant as this enabled Pak to argue that the four Han Commanderies (108 BCE – 314 CE), that is, administrative districts that had been established by the Han dynasty after bringing Old Chosŏn to its demise, had been located outside the Korean peninsula. This stood in contrast to conventional views according to which the commanderies had reached into the peninsula, especially the Lelang Commandery which had usually been associated with the P’yŏngyang region even among Chosŏn-era scholars. Pak, however, argued that the P’yŏngyang referred to in historical documents was in fact another P’yŏngyang located in the Liaodong peninsula, thus well outside contemporary Korean territory. This allowed Pak to maintain the integrity of the peninsula as untouched and unconquered by Chinese forces. His view, however, remained a minority view as generally, scholars of the time such as Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836) had no problem accepting

\(^{47}\) Sima Qian, “Chaoxian Liezhuan” [Biographies of Chosŏn], in *Shiji* (91 BCE). 
\(^{48}\) An Chŏngpok, “P’aesugo” [Examination of P’aesu], *Tongsa Kangmok* Appendix lower volume (ca. 1778).
\(^{49}\) *Sindan Silgi*, 89-97.
the fact that the Lelang Commandery was located within the peninsula’s borders.\(^{50}\) Indeed, although scholars of the Chosŏn period had varying views on the exact location and scope of the individual commanderies, they generally accepted the fact that the Lelang Commandery had been set up in the area of contemporary P’yŏngyang. Thus, Pak’s views seemed to have limited impact during his lifetime.

In excavating Pak’s treatise, Kim Kyohŏn was in effect giving new life to a controversial minority view that could be employed to support the Taejonggyo’s own notion of a grand ancestral homeland.\(^{51}\) This was despite the fact that Pak had actually been referring to Kija’s realm, not Tan’gun’s, which, however, was a difference that could be easily brushed aside. Now, Pak’s text was used to attest to Tan’gun’s extensive reach. Ultimately, Kim Kyohŏn’s appropriation of Pak’s views seemed successful, since about a decade later, the issue of the location of the Han Commanderies began to be fiercely debated thanks to the excavation of Lelang Commandery artefacts in the P’yŏngyang region. The most prominent example was Sin Ch’aeho who, while admitting that there may have been some Chinese influence in the region, expressed an almost allergic reaction to the idea that the area of contemporary P’yŏngyang had been under foreign rule in ancient times. Dismissing the evidence offered by Japanese archeologists, he echoed Pak Chiwŏn and Kim Kyohŏn’s notion of multiple P’yŏngyangs, arguing that the P’yŏngyang occupied by the Lelang Commandery was located outside the peninsula.\(^{52}\) This type of thinking also revealed contradictions: after all, although the emphasis on an expansive Korean territory highlighted the importance of Manchuria, somehow, the

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\(^{50}\) Song Hojŏng, “Sirhakchadŭl ŭi yŏksa chirigwan kwa kojosŏn hansagun yŏn’gu” [Study of the Sirhak scholars’ view of history, geography, in regard to Old Chosŏn-Han Commanderies], Han’guk Kodaesa Yŏn’gu 62 (2011.6), 47.

\(^{51}\) Sindan Silgi, 97-8.

integrity of the Korean peninsula was still of utmost importance. At the same time, there were also Korean historians such as Yi Pyŏngdo (1896-1989) on the other side of the aisle who inherited the mainstream Chosŏn-era view that the Commanderies had reached deep into peninsular territory.\textsuperscript{53} This view, however, also coincided with the findings of Japanese scholars, a fact which over time, has made the conventional view of the location of the Han Commanderies susceptible to attacks as being colored by Japanese “colonial historiography.” In this respect, Kim’s revival of the revisionist notion of multiple P’yŏngyangs and the location of the Han Commanderies had lasting repercussions that inform historical debates to this day.

Influence on other Korean Historians

Kim Kyohŏn’s writings were thus influential in laying the foundations for future historical debates. In addition to setting agendas, his texts also became direct models for historical works by scholars who, as far as we can tell, were not members of the Taejonggyo. One example is Ō Yunjŏk (1868-1935) and his \textit{Tongsa Yŏnp’yo (Yearly Chart of the History of the East)}, an extensive year-by-year chart of Korean history beginning with Tan’gun’s founding of Korea and reaching all the way to 1910. This work was published in 1915, a year after the \textit{Sindan Silgi}, and listed Kim Kyohŏn as proofreader. Reaching over 400 pages, this work took inspiration from Kim’s \textit{Tanjo Sago} and \textit{Sindan Silgi} when it came to Korea’s ancient history, sometimes even replicating the mistakes found in Kim’s texts, such as erroneous characters and misspelled names.\textsuperscript{54} In general, Ō Yunjŏk was not necessarily a gullible historian who accepted everything without critique. For instance, while he included in his chronology the extensive list

\textsuperscript{53} Song Hochŏng, 50-51.
\textsuperscript{54} Chŏng Uckhāe, “Tongsa Yŏnp’yo ŭi kanhaeng kwa kŭ ŭimi” [The publication of the \textit{Tongsa Yŏnp’yo} and its significance], \textit{Changsŏgak} 9 (2003.9), 124.
of Kija’s line of succession which had appeared only relatively recently and was likely a fabrication, he also admitted that the information was unreliable and should be met with suspicion.\(^{55}\) However, Ő Yunjŏk did not approach Kim’s accounts of Tan’gun with the same critical eye, as he accepted many of the elements from Kim’s texts without further ado. One prominent example was Kim’s estimates of the length of Tan’gun’s reign (93 years) and lifespan (217 years) which could also be found in Ő’s work.\(^ {56}\) What is more, he even took over many of the questionable citations that Kim had employed, such as the Jilin Leishi’s alleged entry on the term “Paedal,” or the Kogŭmgi’s purported mention of the Korean Trinity.\(^ {57}\) Ő was also referencing Yi Ik’s putative use of the terms Chonggyo and Sŏn’gyo. This quote had appeared in the Tanjo Sago, but in the Sindan Silgi it was attributed to a different unidentifiable text, the Tongsa Ryugo, suggesting that Ő Yunjŏk was taking cue from the earlier text in this matter. Overall, Ő’s great indebtedness to Kim Kyohŏn suggests that Kim’s account of Tan’gun – despite its many issues – was able to pass the tests of other historians and gain acceptance even outside the religion’s quarters.

Ő Yunjŏk may not be the most famous Korean historian of the colonial era as he is usually not as widely discussed as more prominent ones such as Sin Ch’aeho or Yi Pyŏngdo. Nonetheless, Ő was a scholar of some import as he became one of the initial members of the notorious Chōsenshi Henshūkai, that is, the Korean History Compilation Committee, set up by the colonial government in 1922. This was a grand project to compile the entirety of Korean history which took over sixteen years and culminated in the publication of the thirty-six volume

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\(^{56}\) Ibid., Yŏkdæ Illamp’yo 1.  
\(^{57}\) Ibid., Kojosŏn 1.
Chōsenshi (History of Korea). This project dwarfed non-governmental projects to write Korean history, far exceeding them in terms of scope, budget and human resources. The committee consisted of both Korean and Japanese scholars, and Ŭ was part of it from the beginning. Since the work completely ignored Old Chosŏn and began Korea’s history with the Kingdom of Silla, it is commonly considered an effort by the Japanese to undermine and devalue Korean history. This has led to anybody associated with the project such as Ŭ Yunjŏk to be considered a collaborator. Nonetheless, this does not mean that Ŭ subscribed to the perspectives underlying the Chōsenshi, as in his expanded version of the Tongsa Yŏnp’yo published in 1934, he continued to hold on to his vision of ancient Korean history as well as Kim Kyohŏn’s sources even though by that time he had been exposed to Japanese perspectives. This was remarkable since he decided not to include other dubious sources that were circulating at the time, especially a chart of Tan’gun’s line of succession that included the names of forty-six successive rulers of Tan’gun’s dynasty. As will be discussed in detail in the subsequent chapter, this chart had become a mainstay in a significant number of Korean histories, although it did not pass Ŭ Yunjŏk’s criticism. Thus, Kim Kyohŏn’s ideas could not only influence people outside the religion, but also linger with them for a long time.

58 Seed Pak Ch’anhŭng, “‘Chosŏnsa’ (Chosŏnsa P’yŏnsuhoe p’yŏn) ŭi p’yŏnch’an ch’eje wa sŏnggyok – che 1 p’yŏn che 1 kwŏn (Chosŏn saryo) ŭl chungsim ŭro” [The structure and characteristics of the compilation of the ‘History of Korea’ (published by the Korean History Compilation Committee) – with a focus on volume 1 book 1 (Korean documents)], Sahak Yŏn’gu 99 (2010.9), 147-183.
59 In this regard, Ŭ Yunjŏk was a complex historian who worked with the Japanese, but privately maintained his commitment to a different kind of history, much like other scholars such as Ch’oe Namson or Yi Nunghwa who found themselves in the same predicament. See Chŏsen Sŏtokufu Chŏsen Shi Henshūkai, Chŏsen Shi Henshūkai Jigyŏ Gaityō [Korean History Compilation Committee project outline] (Seoul: Chŏsen Sŏtokufu Chŏsen Shi Henshūkai, 1938), 19-25.
60 See Ŭ Yunjŏk, Chüngbo Tongsa Yŏnp’yo [Augmented edition of the Tongsa Yŏn’pyo] (Seoul: Chŏsen Shigakukai, 1934), Tongsa Yŏnp’yo 1.
Response by Foreigners

At the same time, Kim’s works were also read by foreigners who responded to it in their own ways. Especially the Canadian missionary James Scarth Gale is a case in point, as his encounters with Kim’s writings impacted his own views on Korea’s indigenous spiritual tradition. As was the case with many missionaries in Korea, Gale had also endorsed the notion of an age-old monotheistic tradition in Korea. However, while missionaries such as Homer Hulbert or Horace Grant Underwood had argued for the existence of an indigenous monotheism based on the Christian-like motifs in the Tan’gun myth, Gale was initially more reserved about this view, arguing that Korea’s monotheistic elements actually had come from China. By 1917, however, Gale had become more intrigued by Tan’gun as he depicted him as “the most mysterious and the most interesting of all religious influences of Korea” in an article which he dedicated solely to Tan’gun.  

This was based on his reading of numerous Korean and Chinese sources related to Tan’gun and the veneration of him which he translated into English and published in the same article. As it turned out, however, all these sources were taken directly from the Sindan Silgi even though Gale did not openly state so, suggesting that he had come to see the work as a veritable collection of Tan’gun-related sources. This is evidenced by Gale’s quotations of some of the more unique sources that had appeared in Kim Kyohŏn’s work, such as the Kogŭmgi, Tongsa Ryugo as well as the Manshū Chishi. Even the fanciful stories of Tan’gun appearing in dreams of notables were taken over by Gale.  

While Gale did not immediately venture to extrapolate what these sources implied regarding an indigenous religion, a few years later, his ideas had evolved further. For instance, in regard to the Ch’amsŏngdan, the altar on Mount Mani supposedly erected by Tan’gun himself,

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61 Sung-Deuk Oak 2001, 51.
Gale noted that he did not know “what inspiration moved an indifferent people to carry huge blocks of stone…fifteen hundred feet up the face of the cliff,” but he was sure that “some strange, impelling experience must have been behind the work.” These were the words of somebody who was warming up to the idea that some religious belief was motivating Koreans at the time of Tan’gun to erect such monuments. Gale also mused that “the echo of [Tan’gun’s] mission on earth is like that of a Messiah who came to enlighten and save,” interpreting the Tan’gun myth through a Christian lens.⁶³ Although Gale was still not as decided as other missionaries, his interest in Korea’s founding father as a religious marker had peaked. This also coincided with the fact that he no longer argued that Korea’s monotheistic elements had derived from China, suggesting that Gale’s encounter with the Sindan Silgi had significantly changed him from being skeptical of the notion of an original Korean monotheism to finally assuming a more open disposition toward it.

In contrast to such more positive readings of Kim Kyohŏn’s writings, Japanese scholars responded in a much more critical way. The most prominent examples are Takahashi Tōru and Imanishi Ryū who were both experts in Korean Studies. In a 1920 newspaper article published in Korean, Takahashi Tōru took note of the rise of the religious veneration of Tan’gun as Korea’s national forefather and set about investigating if this practice was actually based on a valid reading of the legend of Tan’gun. His conclusion was that Tan’gun was originally not a figure of nationwide significance, as only people in the northern part of Korea had considered him their founding tribal chief, whereas those in the south had traced their history back to Pak Hyŏkkŏse, the founder of Silla.⁶⁴ Thus, Takahashi’s argument was that the religious consecration of

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⁶³ James Scarth Gale, *James Scarth Gale and his History of the Korean People* (Seoul, Royal Asiatic Society Korea Branch, 1972), 94. [originally published in 1927]

Tan’gun as a national symbol was unfounded as he was only of import to part of the Korean nation. In reaching this conclusion, Takahashi took issue with Kim Kyohŏn’s text in which Tan’gun was portrayed as the forefather of the entire Korean nation, both the northern and southern lineage. Takashi focused on one particular source Kim had cited that suggested that Tan’gun was an important presence even in the southwardly-located Silla. This source was in fact a line attributed to the Koryŏ-dynasty scholar Yi Kyubo (1168-1241) which referred to a portrait of Tan’gun painted by the Silla dynasty artist Solgŏ. Takahashi, however, was unable to find any of such references in Yi Kyubo’s works. This further served to support Takahashi’s argument, as it suggested that the source itself may have been a recent invention by Taejonggyo thinkers.65 While Takahashi was focusing on only one particular example and may not have been aware of the entire extent of questionable citations in Kim’s texts, he was catching wind of the dubious strategies Kim had employed in rewriting Korean history.66

Imanishi Ryū, who had already offered a comprehensive examination of the Tan’gun myth in 1910, also took issue with the Taejonggyo’s texts. By 1929, Imanishi had had the chance to look at the religion’s major publications including its main scripture, the Samil Sin’go, as well as its official history, the Sindan Silgi. In regard to the Samil Sin’go, Imanishi claimed that it was in fact authored by none other than Kim Kyohŏn himself despite its alleged divine origins. This was based on Imanishi’s realization that the words of Tan’gun were very much in line with Neo-Confucian teachings, suggesting that the text was in fact written by somebody with a scholarly background, such as Kim Kyohŏn himself. With respect to the Sindan Silgi, Imanishi took note

65 Sindan Silgi, 43.
66 Takahashi Tōru, “Tan’gun chŏnsŏl e taehaya” [On the legend of Tan’gun] (2), Maeil Sinbo, March 7, 1920, 1. While Takahashi refers to the religion’s text as “Tan’gun Sago” [Investigation of the History of Tan’gun] there is no work of the exact same title, while the passage he refers to appears in the Sindan Silgi, making it very likely that this was the text he was discussing.
of the fact that the work envisioned more or less the entirety of the far eastern people as Tan’gun’s descendants – with the exception of Japan. In Imanishi’s view, this effort to champion a grand expansive nation while at the same time excluding the Japanese was a reflection of the geopolitical situation of the time and hence, a testimony to the contemporary origins of the text’s rereading of Korean history.\footnote{Imanishi Ryū 1929, 88.}

Turning Religion into Textbooks

Although the Sindan Silgi was presented as the religion’s official history, Kim Kyohŏn did not stop there. Just as the Sindan Silgi was an evolution over the Tanjo Sago, Kim continued incessantly to enhance his history and find new ways to make Tan’gun even more relevant and tangible, this time in the service of the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai. In 1917, shortly after Kim had become the leader of the Taejonggyo, he moved to Manchuria along with the majority of the religion’s operations to escape Japanese control and participate in Korean independence efforts more freely. He was one of the signers of the Taehan Declaration of Independence which, announced on February 1, 1919, was the first of several declarations proclaimed in the lead-up to the March First Independence Movement of the same year.\footnote{Pak Hwan, 129-30.} The Provisional Government in exile was established as a result of this watershed moment with a significant number of Taejonggyo affiliates participating in its formation.\footnote{Sassa Mitsuaki, 98-9.} One objective of the government was to develop the trappings of a nation-state by enacting national holidays, performing state rituals, and also writing its own history. Hence, in 1922, the government announced the publication of the Paedalchok Yŏksa (History of the Paedal People) which was

\footnote{\footnote{Imanishi Ryū 1929, 88.} \footnote{Pak Hwan, 129-30.} \footnote{Sassa Mitsuaki, 98-9.}}
lauded as a most suitable textbook. While the author was listed as Kim Hŏn, this was in fact a pseudonym Kim Kyohŏn had taken on.  

Written in textbook format, the *Paedralchok Yŏksa* traced the entire history of the Paedral nation from its mythical beginnings all the way to Korea’s annexation. The book was systematically divided into chapters which corresponded to a historical period, while each chapter was again subdivided into smaller lessons that focused on individual events or facts. The political events of each period were discussed first, after which the culture, especially religion, of each period was surveyed. Following the *Sindan Silgi*, the scope of this textbook was also wider than that of conventional Korean histories, as it represented the more expansive notion of the nation that encompassed the people of Manchuria and northern China. Hence, the history of the Liao and Jin dynasties were included as was the case in the *Sindan Silgi*. In the new book, however, Kim even incorporated the history of the Qing dynasty as part of the history of the Paedral nation. In contrast to the *Sindan Silgi* which consisted of narrative as well as source documents, the *Paedralchok Yŏksa*—in usual textbook fashion—was pure narrative and offered no discussions of sources. The latter work was also much more detailed as it sought to present an exhaustive history of the nation covering each period until recent times whereas the *Sindan Silgi* was more focused on ancient history. The main thrust, however, was the same as the objective was to position Tan’gun as the ancestor of the grand Paedral nation as well as the point of origin of an indigenous religious tradition.

While the work took over many elements from the *Sindan Silgi*, Kim also added some new ways to support the notion of a grand ancient religion. For instance, he appropriated Buddhist elements such as the Ogye (“Five Precepts”) which were teachings delivered by the

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70 “Sin’gan sogae” [Introducing new publications], *Tongnip Sinmun*, March 31, 1922, 4.
Silla-dynasty monk Wŏn’gwang as well as the P’algwanhoe ("Festival of the Eight Vows") which was a Buddhist ceremony that had also begun in the Three Kingdoms period. These teachings and ceremonies, Kim argued, actually all originated from Tan’gun and were hence indications of his sophisticated religious teachings. There was, of course, no evidence to support this, indicating that Kim was again engaging in some ahistorical maneuverings to magnify the scope of Tan’gun’s legacy. Furthermore, Kim also added the notion that Koreans had had their own ancient script in the time of Tan’gun which was a testimony to the high cultural level of this period. The notion of an ancient, indigenous script was something the religion had gone back and forth on: in the Tanjo Sago, Kim had argued that Tan’gun’s history was passed down orally until it was written down in Chinese due to the lack of a Korean script, whereas the Samil Sin’go had claimed that Tan’gun’s teachings were indeed passed down through an ancient Korean script which was, however, lost over time. In the Paedalchok Yŏksa, Kim again settled on the latter, turning the existence of an ancient Korean script into canon. This again attested to the ceaseless efforts Kim was engaged in to fine-tune, polish, and enlarge his history. What is more, this time his history was turned into a textbook and validated by the Provisional Government, thus enabling his ideas to proliferate far beyond the bounds of the religion.

Nonetheless, for Kim, this was still not enough. If the Paedalchok Yŏksa was an evolution over the Sindan Silgi as well as a change of genre, Kim Kyŏhŏn, again, did not rest on his achievements and continued to hone his history. This culminated in the Sindan Minsa (History of the Divine Tan’gun’s People) which was published in 1923, the year of Kim’s death,

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71 Tanjo Sago, 36.
72 Samil Sin’go (Seoul: Taejonggyo Ponsa, 1912), 16.
73 Kim Hŏn (Kim Kyohŏn), Paedalchok Yŏksa [History of the Paedal people] (1922), 10.
and only one year after the *Paedralchok Yŏksa*.\textsuperscript{74} The work continued in the textbook format and as such took over the main structure of the previous text. Still, there were a few innovations: now, Kim more clearly defined the history of the Paedal nation as a duality that consisted of the northern and southern dynasties and applied this framework consistently through history. The *Sindan Minsa* also offered more information on the culture of the nation: while the *Paedralchok Yŏksa* had focused mainly on political events and religion, this book added chapters on institutions, art, as well as folk customs for each period. This was a reflection of Kim’s efforts to offer more insight into the history of the people, instead of just political events, making the *Sindan Minsa* the most exhaustive and systematic history of the nation that Kim or anybody else for that matter had written up to this point.

Overall, Kim Kyohŏn’s turn toward textbooks allowed him a lot more freedom to present his own version of Korean history since he was not bound by sources anymore. Even if a good number of the sources he had employed in his earlier works were contrived, he still had to go through great lengths to produce them and derive his narrative from them. However, thanks to the textbook format, Kim no longer had to explicitly state where his information came from, allowing him to present a seamless narrative and a number of bold new statements. For instance, he was now free to claim that the Manchus were descendants of the Kyerim Kim clan without having to offer any evidence.\textsuperscript{75} This represents an important trend in Kim Kyohŏn’s writings which is a decrease of open acknowledgement and examination of sources in favor of narrative. Kim’s earliest work, the *Tanjo Sago* was entirely a collection of sources punctuated with some of his own comments, while the *Sindan Silgi* offered a collection of sources alongside source-less

\textsuperscript{74} Kim Kyohŏn, *Sindan Minsa* [History of the divine Tan’gun’s people], trans. Ko Tongyŏng (Seoul: Hanppuri, 2006). [originally published in 1923]

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 232.
narratives. Written as textbooks, however, the *Paedalchok Yŏksa* and the *Sindan Minsa* consisted only of narrative and aside from some quotes used in the main body of the texts, did not make explicit reference to sources. In this way, an initial focus on philological examination, however flawed it may have been, had given way to the mere presentation of a grand historical narrative. Thus, as Korea’s history became more expansive and detailed, the reliance on historical argumentation based on sources was replaced by narrative and rhetoric.

Another issue that Kim’s textbooks ran into was in how to structure the relationship between the peoples of Korea and Manchuria considering they were now descendants of the same Paedal nation. The idea of a greater nation was one that the religion had promoted since its beginning, but now Kim actually had to write a history of these two branches and how they had interacted with each other. This was especially tricky when it came to describing the relationship between the Chosŏn and Qing dynasty, as it was characterized by invasions, humiliations, and contempt. As Andre Schmid notes, Kim’s solution was to simply gloss over the details and downplay many of the conflicts, for instance, by portraying the Chosŏn king’s humiliating surrender to the Qing as an “oath between brothers.”76 This was a radical revision of how Koreans had viewed the Qing, namely as barbarian usurpers that had overthrown the Ming which the Chosŏn court had been loyal to. In this regard, there was something forced about the inclusion of the Manchus into the nation’s history, which was also apparent in the fact that in Kim’s account, the history of Chosŏn occupied much more space than the history of the Qing. Certainly, this was understandable since Kim himself was Korean, but then the question remained how to structure the relationship between Koreans and the Manchus in the present. Were they supposed to unify under the banner of the Paedal nation? Should efforts be made to

76 Andre Schmid, 196-7.
reach out and make the Manchus understand their national heritage? Which one was the main branch of the nation, if there was such? There was much ambivalence here, and it does not seem that Kim or the religion ever offered any satisfactory answers to these.

Overall, however, the evolution of Kim Kyohŏn’s works from source collection to textbook was also significant in that it allowed his textual creations to gain broader appeal and become an important element in the Korean nationalist movement abroad. The Paedalchok Yŏksa was promoted by the Provisional Government in Shanghai and used in schools for Korean expatriates in China. The Sindan Minsa was also disseminated in the Kando region where it was adopted as textbook in Korean middle schools. Thus, outside the Korean peninsula, Kim’s ideas were able to prosper even beyond the confines of the religion, injecting Korean expatriates with a grand vision of Korea’s heritage and a sense of national pride. The nationalist drive behind these texts was not lost on the Japanese either, as especially the Sindan Minsa was disallowed by the colonial police and also became subject of confiscations in raids by Japanese forces in Manchuria.

Filtering into the Peninsula

Despite Japanese censorship, Kim’s exile writings also influenced domestic attempts to write Korean history. One example was Kwŏn Tŏkkyu (1890-1950), a linguist and historian, who offered a secularized reading of Kim Kyohŏn’s text in his 1924 publication Chosŏn Yugi

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78 “Kando kak chunghak ŭi yŏksa kyogwasŏ Sindan Minsa rŭl sayong,” [Middle schools in the Kando region using the Sindan Minsa as history textbook] Tonga Ilbo, November 24, 1923, 3.
80 “Sindan Minsa rŭl tasu ipsu” [Several Copies of the Sindan Minsa confiscated], Tonga Ilbo, November 26, 1923, 3.
(Extended Records of Korea). Especially in the chapter on ancient Korean history, the structure of the text and periodization were largely taken from Kim’s textbooks. Kwŏn also took over the notion of a grand nation that traced its lineage from Tan’gun and encompassed the peoples of Manchuria. He even reproduced other details from Kim’s texts, such as the notion of an ancient Korean script that had existed in the age of Tan’gun. At the same time, however, Kwŏn had his own convictions. Instead of opening his narrative with the descent of divinity, he began with an ancient people that had believed their ancestors to have descended from heaven. Thus, what was presented as fact in Kim Kyohŏn’s account was turned into the belief in this fact, mitigating the supernatural elements of Kim’s history. This, however, was not a devaluation of this belief in divine heritage as the faith was turned into a marker of a strong national consciousness and sense of uniqueness since the earliest of times. Further diverging from Kim’s account, Kwŏn also refrained from using the term “Paedal” and instead used several other names to refer to the proto-nation, such as the “Hwan” people, the heavenly people, or the Tungusic people. Nonetheless, Kwŏn paralleled Kim’s grandiose vision in claiming that this proto-nation had founded one of the “six great ancient civilizations,” although it is not entirely clear which he was referring to. What is more, Kwŏn’s more rationalized approach even allowed him to expand Korean history in time: after all, the very fact that Tan’gun was selected king by the people – a notion proffered by the fifteenth-century Tongguk T’onggam – suggested that the nation had already existed prior to Tan’gun’s crowning. Thus, in Kwŏn’s account, it was five to six thousand years ago that the “Hwan” people had emerged onto the stage of history, further pushing back the beginning of Korean history in time. Hence, even for scholars that did not ascribe to the Taejonggyo’s religious beliefs, Kim Kyohŏn’s histories could serve as a source of much inspiration.

81 Kwŏn Tŏkkyu, Chosŏn Yugi [Extended records of Korea] (Seoul: Sangmun’gwan, 1924), 1-5.
Conclusion

The works by Kim Kyohŏn are significant not only in that they crystalized some of the religion’s core teachings, but also in that they demonstrated how the Taejonggyo sought to turn religion and mythology into history. After all, Kim’s writings revealed the strategies, sources, and ploys that were employed to give authority to the notion of the Taejonggyo as a historical religion. Kim was indeed the right person for this undertaking as his scholarship and experience enabled him to derive the religion’s ideas—with some artifice—from the amalgamation of Korean scholarship without having to explicitly borrow foreign ideas. This was an achievement as the initial turn toward Tan’gun that had occurred around 1905 was certainly influenced by contemporary foreign thought (chapter 3). Kim, on the other hand, was able to build up the religion’s foundations from the accumulated wealth of classical knowledge. Granted, foreign influences were still there: for one, the emphasis on the genealogy of heaven worship contained elements that were strikingly similar to the conceptions by Japanese scholars or Western missionaries. The Taejonggyo’s focus on notions such as the Trinity and Incarnation also resembled how Western missionaries had been interpreting the Tan’gun myth. Nonetheless, Kim Kyohŏn was able to derive the lineage of heaven worship and the notion of the Trinity from his personal investigations of Korean documents, even though this required some of his own creative contributions. This enabled him to present the religion not as some sort of hybrid that had imbibed foreign influences, but as an indigenous entity that had grown out of the depths of Korea’s past.

In doing so, Kim Kyohŏn’s works also contributed to the blurring of boundaries between myth and history. After all, through Kim’s endeavors, the Tan’gun myth had become more history than it ever had been before, as a wealth of sources as well as Kim’s own authority were
employed to document and validate Tan’gun’s reality. Especially Kim’s adoption of the textbook format boosted this process, as Kim’s ideas were given added reach to penetrate the historical awareness of Koreans. Hence, Kim Kyohŏn’s history had evolved from a history upheld by a certain religion to a national history that was ascribed to by a much wider range of people.

Kim’s works were also successful in exerting influence on other practices of writing history within and without the field of academic history. On one hand, the issues Kim’s texts raised such as the location of the Han Commanderies set the agenda for heated scholarly discussions to come. On the other hand, Kim’s works also became models for a different type of history which developed outside the bounds of the scholarly establishment. This is because many of the suspicious sources that Kim had employed would be cited in other texts as well, thus gaining a reality of their own. But it is also because Kim had set a precedent for creatively enhancing and fabricating historical sources, something which others would replicate as well, although with much less restraint. Thus, Kim’s writings would fuel the development of a more populist type of history, alternately named “pseudo-” or “fringe history,” the focus of the next chapter.
Kim Kyohŏn died in 1923 while performing his duties as the head of the Taejonggyo in Manchuria. It was a sudden death and certainly an enormous set-back for the religion. However, the death of the religion’s most significant ideologue did not mean the end of the production of religiously inspired histories. On the contrary, the discourse on Tan’gun only kept expanding and diversifying as others were eager to follow into Kim’s footsteps. Discussions on Korea’s mythical progenitor also proliferated far outside the religion, seeping into a wide range of different areas. This chapter examines how such discussions on Tan’gun continued to evolve beyond Kim Kyohŏn on the scholarly as well as popular level. It pays particular attention to how the practices of religiously inspired histories gave birth to a new genre of historiography and how new discourses on Tan’gun developed in the wake of the Taejonggyo’s intellectual interventions.

Diversification of Discourses

Kim Kyohŏn was not the only channel through which the religion’s ideas were disseminated. Others soon succeeded him, adding their own twists and innovations to Korean history. One example is Chŏng Yun (1898-1931) who in 1923 undertook a linguistic approach in investigating Korean history and customs through the religion’s lens. The strategy he employed was to examine old words – names of dynasties, kings, and places related to both Korea and Manchuria – and their etymology, thus revealing their deep underlying meanings. For instance, in analyzing the term “Suksin” (Sushen in Chinese) which referred to an ancient ethnic group in Manchuria, Chŏng argued that the original pronunciation of the name was in fact “Chusin” which he claimed referred to the tribe’s founding father who was none other than Tan’gun. After
all, the term was phonetically identical to the “Chusin” which Kim Kyohŏn had appropriated earlier to refer to a supreme deity that was worshipped in Manchuria and was in fact another expression of Korea’s progenitor.¹ This theory was very much in line with the Taejonggyo’s efforts to champion the notion of a grand nation that incorporated both Manchuria and Korea, as Kim Kyohŏn had emphasized in his texts that the Suksin were indeed part of the greater Paedal people. Another example of Chŏng’s linguistic reasoning was his analysis of the Mount Mani/Mari where Tan’gun had supposedly conducted the worship of heaven. Chŏng suggested that “Mari” actually derived from “mŏri,” the Korean word for “head,” and thus in modern parlance, Mount Mari would be translated as “head mountain,” reflecting the mountain’s utmost importance in the Korean practice of heaven worship.² Again, the name of the mountain itself was thus turned into a testament to Tan’gun’s religious practices, illustrating how Chŏng was projecting Taejonggyo elements back into the language and customs of both Korea and Manchuria. Although the connections he drew based on perceived phonetic similarities seemed often excessive, his practice was not much different from other linguistic methods that were being employed by Japanese scholars such as Shiratori Kurakichi or Korean scholars such as Sin Ch’ae-ho and Ch’oe Namsŏn.

The Taejonggyo’s ideas were also disseminated through visual media such as cartographical illustrations. This was the case with Yi Wŏnt’ae who in 1923 visualized the changing territories of the Paedal nation through a total of 44 maps. This was an impressive feat as not only were maps drawn for each branch of the Paedal nation and historical period, but each individual map was also accompanied by a wide range of Korean and Chinese sources that were

¹ Chŏng Sin, Saji T’ongsokko [Investigation of historical records and customs] (Shanghai: Samil Insŏgwan, 1923), 24-5.
² Ibid., 68.
referenced to visualize the various territories in as much detail as possible. At the same time, Yi Wŏnt’ae’s territorial imaginations were very much influenced by Kim Kyohŏn: not only did the latter serve as proof-reader of the text, but many of the sources and ideas Kim had employed in the *Sindan Silgi* were adopted by Yi as well. Yi’s work, however, also went beyond Kim’s exploits in offering representations of the Paedal people’s territory of more recent periods as well, indicating that Yi had done much research of his own. Nonetheless, the flaws were the same as the sources that Yi listed revealed the sometimes shaky foundations his maps were built on, especially in regard to ancient history: When it came to the original territory of the Paedal nation, the map illustrated a grand realm that in accordance with Taejonggyo thought reached all the way north to the Amur River. However, once one sifted through the numerous historical sources that were presented alongside the map, it became clear that Yi had employed the same suspicious sources Kim had used and that there was actually not enough data to delineate such a territory.³ Nonetheless, the mere listing of an overwhelming amount of sources alongside these highly detailed maps made Tan’gun’s grand territory more tangible and real than ever before.

Both Chŏng Yun’s linguistic analyses and Yi Wŏnt’ae’s visual representations illustrated that the religion’s ideas were morphing into new forms. Both works were also not geared specifically at a religious audience as they were published as part of the Provisional Government’s publication efforts in Shanghai. These works were meant for a much wider audience, that is, the entire Korean nation, and possibly even beyond.

The Kyuwŏn Sahwa and the Proliferation of Fringe History

The diversification of discourses also suggested that the act of imagining and writing Korean history could neither be monopolized nor contained. Indeed, after Kim Kyohŏn’s final work in 1923, Korean histories continued to be produced with much vigor. While Kim Kyohŏn’s works functioned as a source of inspiration, these new histories also exceeded the breadth and level of detail of Kim’s own works. One major new element that these newer works began to incorporate in the 1920s was a list of 47 rulers of Tan’gun’s dynasty encompassing a total of 1195 years. While previously, only Tan’gun and his son Puru had been known, this list traced Tan’gun’s entire line of succession including the name of each ruler, the length of their reigns, as well as their major deeds. This was a level of detail that could not be found in Kim Kyohŏn’s works, much less any histories that had been produced up to this point. It also added much detail to the history of Tan’gun and was hence soon adopted in a number of history books.

The emergence of the chart of Tan’gun’s line of succession marked a big step beyond Kim Kyohŏn’s creations. At the same time, this phenomenon of a royal genealogy suddenly appearing was not necessarily new. After all, a genealogy of Kija’s lineage that encompassed 41 generations had also appeared sometime in the eighteenth century and was used by a number of clans to trace their own origins back to the sagely ruler from China. Prior to that, only the fact that Kija’s lineage had ruled Old Chosŏn for 41 generations had been known, but not the details such as the names of Kija’s descendants or the lengths of their reigns. This newly “discovered” chart thus filled a gap in the existing knowledge and was hence eagerly reproduced.4 Now that Tan’gun was endowed with similar historical detail, he was—at the very least—drawing even with Kija.

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4 Pak Kwangyong 1980, 279.
The first known work to employ Tan’gun’s lineage of 47 rulers was the *Kyuwŏn Sahwa* (*Historical Tales from Kyuwŏn*) which claimed to have been written in 1675, but was in all likelihood a modern invention.⁵ As stated in its preface, the goal of the text was to recover ancient Korean history and present it in unprecedented detail.⁶ While it is not clear when this work had first appeared, other texts began making reference to it perhaps as early as 1923 when Kim Chonghan (1844-1932) briefly mentioned that Tan’gun’s lineage encompassed 47 rulers, although he did not go into detail or explicitly name the *Kyuwŏn Sahwa*.⁷ In the 1925 publication *Tanjŏn Yoŭi* (*The Essentials of Tan’gun-Scriptures*) by Kim Yonggi, however, the *Kyuwŏn Sahwa* is mentioned explicitly with the details of Tan’gun’s lineage replicated at length.⁸ Further, while it certainly added many of its own innovations, the *Kyuwŏn Sahwa* drew extensively from Kim Kyohŏn’s *Tanjo Sago* (1911) and *Sindan Silgi* (1914), suggesting that it was likely manufactured between 1914 and 1923.

Indeed, the *Kyuwŏn Sahwa* took elements from Kim’s works and adapted them in new ways, thus adding dimensions to Korean history that had not existed before. The most prominent example is the inclusion of a lengthy creation story that covered thousands of years and ultimately connected to the history of the Korean nation. In a way, this was Korea’s own version of the “Age of the Gods.” In contrast, while Kim Kyohŏn’s narrative had also begun with divinity, it did not contain a creation story, but delved directly into the narrative of divine descent and the history of the Paedal people. In adding this new dimension, however, the *Kyuwŏn Sahwa* nonetheless employed familiar elements, as it introduced the creator as “Chusin,” that is,

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⁵ See Kim Sŏnghwan, “Tan’gun chŏnsŭng ŭl t’onghae pon Kyuwŏn Sahwa ŭ charyojŏk sŏnggyŏk” [The characteristics of the Kyuwŏn Sahwa based on its Tan’gun transmission], *Taedong Munhwa Yŏn’gu* 86 (2014), 299-332.
⁶ *Kyuwŏn Sahwa* [Historic tales from Kyuwŏn]. 3-8. Page numbers are based on online NLK version at http://www.nl.go.kr.
“supreme deity” that “resided in the highest of heavens” and “reigned over numerous smaller deities.” This description had already appeared in Kim Kyohŏn’s works and as he had acknowledged himself, was in fact taken from a late nineteenth century Japanese military publication that discussed the religious customs of Manchuria. This was the most obvious giveaway that the Kyuwŏn Sahwa – despite its purported origin in the seventeenth century – took much inspiration from Kim Kyohŏn’s works and was thus a more recent fabrication. The evidence, of course, was not confined to this one instance, as there were numerous cases where the Kyuwŏn Sahwa borrowed from Kim’s works, such as in how it wrote Tan’gun back into Korean folk customs and turned the Buddhist deity Indra and the Chinese Shangdi into different incarnations of the Korean Trinity.

Still, in offering a detailed list of Tan’gun’s lineage encompassing 47 kings and 1195 years, the Kyuwŏn Sahwa went beyond anything Kim Kyohŏn had ever attempted. Kim had been straightforward about the fact that he was only aware of Tan’gun and his son, Puru, and that the remaining part of the lineage was unknown to him. The Kyuwŏn Sahwa, however, demonstrated much bolder aspirations and much less restraint in its historical imagination as each of the 47 kings was endowed with name, year of ascent, length of reign as well as a number of important deeds. Many of the descriptions were hagiographic in nature, praising the wisdom and achievements of the kings, while the reverence for Tan’gun is a recurring virtue that these rulers possessed. China also factors importantly, as Tan’gun’s kingdom is often depicted as being in competition with Chinese dynasties, suggesting a sense of parity between the two countries. In offering such information, the Kyuwŏn Sahwa was shedding light on over a millennium of

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9 Kyuwŏn Sahwa, 9.
11 Kyuwŏn Sahwa, 61-2.
12 Ibid., 77-96.
Tan’gun’s history that had previously been shrouded in mystery. After all, up to this point, this period had been a puzzle, as initially, Tan’gun was depicted as having enjoyed an unusually long life-span, while later on, historians “rationalized” the myth by speculating that this lengthy period referred to Tan’gun’s entire line of descendants. Still, the details were missing, revealing a gaping hole in the timeline of Korean history, that is, until the emergence of the Kyuwŏn Sahwa conveniently dispelled the thick fog surrounding Tan’gun’s missing millennium.

Despite the Kyuwŏn Sahwa’s attempt at historical narrative, however, the nature of the text raises a few questions. After all, the text was never formally published during the colonial period even though other texts had begun citing it. This indicates that the text was passed on from person to person through private channels, adding to the esoteric character of the work. Further, there is also no indication that the Taejonggyo officially endorsed the Kyuwŏn Sahwa even though the religion’s influences on the text were obvious. The work was thus outside established cannon. The text’s lengthy discussions of the gods and the story of creation also showed that it was written as the work of a mystic rather than an analytic scholar. The murky nature of the text is also reflected in the fact that the work is attributed to the mysterious Puk Aeja, a nickname of sorts, but has not been historically documented as there is no evidence that such a person had existed in the seventeenth century. The only other known appearance of the name can in fact be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century when it was used as a penname of an unidentified contributor of the newspaper Hwangsŏng Sinmun.13 Moreover, the title of the text, “sahwa,” that is “historical tales” suggests that perhaps this work was conceived as historical fiction and that Puk Aeja was intended to be a fictitious character employed as

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narrator. In this respect, the Kyuwŏn Sahwa may have been written as an embellished reimagining of Korean history, meaning that perhaps not all of its elements were meant to be taken literally.

Nonetheless, the level of detail that the Kyuwŏn Sahwa went into to depict Tan’gun’s lineage of 47 rulers was impressive, and it is because of this that many subsequent histories embraced it. The Tanjŏn Yoŭi, the earliest known work to replicate Tan’gun’s entire lineage was written by Kim Yonggi who was a high-ranking member of the Taejonggyo and mostly active in the religion’s remaining operations in the Korean peninsula. This was also reflected in the fact that in contrast to Kim Kyohŏn’s later works, the Tanjŏn Yoŭi was published in Seoul. This work can be described as an updated version of Kim Kyohŏn’s histories as it took over the basic narrative, structure, and sources of the Sindan Silgi while enhancing it by incorporating Tan’gun’s lineage from the Kyuwŏn Sahwa. At the same time, all the esoteric depictions of the gods and the creation story from the Kyuwŏn Sahwa were not taken over, suggesting that Kim Yonggi did not accept the Kyuwŏn Sahwa wholeheartedly, but only picked the elements he considered compatible with the Taejonggyo’s standard view of history. Nonetheless, this suggests that the religion’s understanding of Tan’gun and his dynasty continued to evolve even after Kim Kyohŏn’s death. The same development can also be identified in the Tan’gun’gyo, the group which had split from the Taejonggyo in 1910, as Tan’gun’s line of succession was also incorporated in its texts.

Indeed, the Kyuwŏn Sahwa influenced not just religious endeavors to write Korean history, but a wide range of works outside of religion. Granted, even these texts often

14 Kim Yonggi, 5a.
15 Chŏng Chinhong, Tan’gun’gyo Puhŭng Kyŏngnyak [Strategy to revive the Tan’gun’gyo] (Sihŭng: Kyesindang, 1937), 31-47.
incorporated elements from Kim Kyohŏn’s now almost canonical accounts, although they played down their religious aspects. One example is Kim Kwang’s *Taedongsagang* (*Outline of the History of the Great East*) published in 1928. As the title suggests, this was a throwback to olden times as the term “Great East” or “Eastern Country” had been commonly employed in the Chosŏn dynasty to refer to Korea. In a similar old-fashioned vein, the work also faithfully narrated the history of Kija whose importance had continuously declined in the modern era. At the same time, the *Taedongsagang* did employ many of the Taejonggyo’s features when it came to Tan’gun’s history, illustrating how deeply entrenched Kim Kyohŏn’s creations had become. As the work further incorporated Tan’gun’s line of succession, it also illustrated the influence of the *Kyuwŏn Sahwa*.

Such a trend was also visible in the 1939 *Segabo* (*Historical Family Lineages*) by Sŏ Kyesu. The main focus of this text was to trace Korean family lineages through history based on their respective surnames. Tan’gun’s lineage of 47 generations was categorized as the “Hwan” surname group, a name which was taken from Hwanin and Hwanung, while Kija’s lineage was put into the “Cha” surname group. There was nothing religious or mystical about this text, yet it did include the *Kyuwŏn Sahwa*’s list of Tan’gun’s successors without much ado.

The *Kyuwŏn Sahwa*’s influence also seeped into works such as Yi Ch’anghwan’s *Chosŏn Yŏksa* (*History of Korea*) (1934) which added a few of its own innovations to Korean history. While the work drew very much from Kim Kyohŏn’s writings, especially the *Sindan Minsa* and its discussions about the culture, arts, and customs of Tan’gun’s period, it employed the term “Hwan” instead of “Paedal” to refer to the greater Korean proto-nation. The name “Hwan” was

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derived from the Tan’gun myth, but Yi also considered it synonymous to “white” or “radiant” in the Korean language. Thus, the Korean proto-nation was defined as the “white” or “radiant” nation, which the author associated with the importance of high, snow-covered mountains on which these people had performed religious rites. As will be discussed, this was most likely an idea inspired by Ch’oe Namsŏn’s theories of a greater Eurasian civilization that shared the common worship of heaven and white mountains. Similar to Sin Ch’aeho, the text also emphasized Social Darwinian struggles, such as the clashes with the northern Xiongnu and Ainu people which, according to the text, the Hwan people successfully repelled, subjugated, and even enslaved.\textsuperscript{18} With the inclusion of Tan’gun’s line of succession,\textsuperscript{19} Yi Ch’anghwan’s work was thus a great synthesis of the Kyuwŏn Sahwa, Kim Kyohŏn’s texts, as well as the ideas by Sin Ch’aeho and Ch’oe Namsŏn.

However, this does not mean that all historical texts with Taejonggyo influence embraced the Kyuwŏn Sahwa. For instance, the Chosŏn Kanggam (Basic History of Korea) published in 1933 was part of the Taejonggyo tradition, building on Kim Kyohŏn’s historical accounts while making references to the religion’s scriptures. The work was also very much designed as a traditional history as it was solely written in Classical Chinese, setting itself apart from many of the other histories that had used mixed Sino-Korean script. While it was certainly a text inspired by religious beliefs, it refused to employ the Kyuwŏn Sahwa, as no mention of Tan’gun’s extensive line of succession is made. In fact, the text replicated older accounts in stating that the details of Tan’gun’s line of descent were unknown.\textsuperscript{20} Sin T’aeyun’s Chŏngsa (Orthodox History), published in 1935, was a similar case as it was part of the Taejonggyo’s tradition of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Yi Ch’anghwan, Chosŏn Yŏksa [Korean history] (Seoul: Puksŏngsa, 1934), 2.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 155-9.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Kim Myŏnp’il, Chosŏn Kanggam [Basic history of Korea] (Hamhung: Chosŏn Kanggam Ch’ulp’ansa, 1933), 3.
\end{itemize}
writing history, citing the religion’s scriptures and incorporating them into its historical narrative. While the work does mention that Tan’gun’s dynasty had continued for 47 generations, the specifics were not elaborated on, perhaps revealing a degree of skepticism. After all, this stood in stark contrast to the work’s treatment of Kija’s lineage, as it recounted the entirety of the 41 successive generations in detail.\footnote{Sin T’aeyun, \textit{Chŏngsa} [Orthodox history] (Koksŏng: Tan’gun Myojesil, 1935), 14-5.} Hence, even though Taejonggyo-inspired histories continued to be produced, not all of them sought to expand Korean history at all cost.

As the discussion so far has shown, the act of writing Korean history was a popular exercise that was repeated over and over again by a range of individuals. There was especially a great fixation on ancient history, illustrating the preoccupation with understanding Korean origins. While the trend was toward aggrandizing Korea’s ancient past, a degree of diversity was also preserved as each sought to offer their own takes on Korean history. Still, these texts can be seen as together constituting their own genre or historiographical practice, as they were influenced by Kim Kyohŏn’s accounts and made use of many of his questionable sources. Even if not all of these authors were members of the Taejonggyo, the religion’s influence was apparent. Their works were also markedly different from other endeavors to write Korean history that aspired to employ more modern methodologies. After all, the authors of these religiously inspired histories were a different kind compared to the scholars who, as we shall see, were often trained in Japan or at least engaged with contemporary Japanese scholarship and thus expressed a more critical attitude toward the sources that had emerged from religious quarters. Indeed, the historians inspired by the Taejonggyo mostly claimed only traditional training as their backgrounds which was reflected in the fact that their histories were written in the form of more classical chronologies and not historical argumentation. Ultimately, as their works circulated
outside mainstream academic quarters and employed rather questionable scholarly practices and sources, they can thus be considered fringe history or even pseudo-history. Granted, there were varying levels of extremes, as some of these authors may simply have been mistaken in citing questionable sources, while others, such as the author of the *Kyuwŏn Sahwa*, represented a much more intentional attempt to forge history. In this regard, the label “fringe history” needs to be applied with nuance.

Sin Ch’aeho Again

While these religiously inspired histories were being reproduced and disseminated in various ways, scholars exposed to more modern historical methodologies were also producing new approaches to Tan’gun. Especially Sin Ch’aeho continued to be at the forefront of this. What set him apart from the Taejonggyo-types of histories was the fact that he did not ascribe to their questionable sources. Instead, he applied his own version of linguistic inquiry which was not unlike those employed by scholars such as Shiratori Kurakichi, basing many of his investigations on perceived phonetic similarities between words. Still, Sin’s conclusions were often just as grand as those of religiously inspired histories. While he had already portrayed Tan’gun as a great conqueror in his 1908 “Toksa Sillon” (“A New Reading of History”), his depictions of ancient Korea became only more expansive and detailed over time. In fact, in terms of his bombastic and populist language—Henry Em calls it the “(tragic) epic form”\(^{22}\)—he far exceeded that of the more classical, matter-of-fact tone of Taejonggyo-types of histories written in the style of traditional annals and chronicles. This difference became apparent in Sin’s major works on ancient Korea, including the “Chosŏn Sanggo Munhwasa” (late 1910s, “Cultural

\(^{22}\) Henry Em, *Great Enterprise*, 81-2.
History of Ancient Korea”), the “Chosŏnsa Yŏn’guch’o” (1924, “Basic Study of Korean History”) and the “Chosŏnsa” (1931, “History of Korea,” also known as Chosŏn Sanggosa, Ancient History of Korea).

In 1910, Sin had already added religious elements to Tan’gun, arguing that Korea once had its own grand religion called “Sŏn’gyo” (“Transcendental Teachings”) which had existed since the time of Tan’gun and thus preceded any Chinese influences. Sin emphasized the advanced nature of the religion – that it contained ethical teachings, notions of an abstract God, as well as concepts similar to that of the Christian Trinity which he saw expressed in the Tan’gun myth. This allowed Sin to set the religion apart from what he considered the superstitions of Chinese Daoism or the barbarian animal-worshipping cults of Manchurian tribes. Although the religion declined with the import of Buddhism, Sin argued that traces could still be found, for instance, in the myth of Tan’gun. Later on, Sin referred to this tradition as “Sudugyo,” “Religion of the Sacred Altar” which was based on the notion that Tan’gun was a ruler-priest who represented heaven. In fact, Sin claimed that the religion was so advanced that it was even imported by the Chinese and the Xiongnu.23 This narrative, of course, was similar to the one which the Taejonggyo had contrived, although there were also key differences. For one, Sin did not identify Korea’s indigenous religion with the Taejonggyo as his project was not to revive some age-old tradition since he was in fact critical of the relevance of religion for modern times. Further, his exclusionary attitude toward northern tribes such as the Suksin and Yemaek also stood in contrast to the Taejonggyo’s notion of a more expansive nation.24 Still, Sin agreed on

24 Sin Ch’aeho “Tongguk kodae Sŏn’gyogo.”
the fact that Korea had been in possession of a grand noble religion that indicated the high level of sophistication of ancient Korean civilization.

Indeed, the relationship between Sin’s views and those of the Taejonggyo was characterized by tension as well as overlap. For instance, Sin was more reluctant to embrace National Foundation Day, although he did agree with the Taejonggyo’s notion that worship of Tan’gun had continued through much of Korean history.25 Sin also did not embrace the term “Paedal,” since he could not find any reference to it in historical documents.26 Moreover, Sin’s conception of the Korean nation was different: not only did he prefer to call it “Puyŏ,” but he also envisioned it as a powerful nation that had ruled over Manchurian tribes rather than seeing them as part of the same lineage. Sin also seemed to be more conflicted about the existence of an ancient Korean writing system, a notion which the Taejonggyo had come to champion. Initially, Sin had echoed the Taejonggyo in arguing that the history of Tan’gun was passed down through some ancient Korean script, although all original documents had been lost.27 Later on, however, he rescinded this view as he found no evidence of such a system, conceeding that the first writing system Koreans had known was indeed Classical Chinese, albeit with Korean variations (called “Idu”).28 However, what set Sin apart the most from fringe histories was that he was highly skeptical of the religious scriptures that claimed to contain the words of Tan’gun such as the Ch’ŏnbugyŏng (“The Quintessential Scripture of Heaven”), the scripture of the Tan’gun’gyo, or the Samil Sin’go. Indeed, Sin preached caution against using fake documents, which was also

27 “Chosŏn sanggo munhwasa,” 70.
28 “Chosŏnsa,” 68.
reflected in the fact that he did not make any references to Kim Kyohŏn’s sources or the Kyuwnon Sahwa. From what we can tell, Sin’s sources were historically sound.

Hence, the problem with Sin was not the historical sources that he employed, but his interpretations thereof as he used convoluted processes of association and a highly questionable linguistic method based on superficial phonetic similarities to extrapolate all kinds of conclusions. This allowed him to continue to aggrandize Tan’gun’s history and add new elements to it. One concept that factored prominently in Sin’s writings since the late 1910s was the system of three capitals and five districts which he extrapolated through a highly byzantine and abstruse process of linguistic inference. However shady its origins, Sin depicted this system as an example of the ingenuity of Tan’gun’s governance. In fact, he argued that this system of rule was so effective that Chinese dynasties copied it with alacrity. Sin even went so far as to conjecture that Tan’gun’s system of governance was the most advanced in the antique world, and that ancient Koreans could have ruled the globe if they had chosen a more martial approach in spreading their culture. This, of course, was Sin’s own grandiose fantasy, but it was based on his linguistic inference, rather than any doctored sources. In terms of religion, Sin mirrored the Taejonggyo’s views in arguing that Korea’s ancient religion had spread to China and the north, again demonstrating the prowess and influence of the Korean nation. Hence, even though Sin did not align himself with Taejonggyo-inspired histories, he was similarly engaged in a spiral of continuously expanding and refining ancient Korean history based on his imaginative interpretation of sources. In doing so, he was producing new types of discourses on Tan’gun that intersected with and sometimes exceeded the religion’s take on history. His works also influenced other Korean scholars such as Chŏng Inbo (1893-1950) who also firmly held on to the

29 Ibid., 37.
30 “Chosŏn sanggo munhwasa,” 89.
belief in Tan’gun as the glorious historical founder of Korea and the point of origin of a noble spiritual tradition.\(^{31}\)

Overall, Sin may be placed somewhere between religiously inspired fringe history and academic history. Beyond his traditional Confucian schooling, Sin had not received any formal historical training, although he was very open to foreign methods and ideas and employed them liberally in his works. His writings also incorporated historical argumentation by deriving conclusions from data rather than merely narrating chronology. Despite the semblance of modern historical scholarship, however, his populism, abuse of the linguistic methods, as well as grandiose assertions ultimately pushed him closer to pseudo-history. This also suggests that the boundaries between fringe history and academic history were not always clear and that there were many different gradations between the two. Still, many fringe historians nowadays trace their genealogy back to Sin Ch’aeho who is seen as the leading example of proud nationalist scholarship that resisted the Japanese onslaught on Korean history.

The Popularization of Tan’gun

Historical texts were not the only channels through which ideas about Tan’gun were popularized. In the wake of the March First Independence Movement of 1919, the Japanese implemented what is called “cultural rule” (bunka seiji) which offered Koreans more space to engage in various non-political activities. This led to the revitalization of the Korean publishing industry, opening up opportunities for the Taejonggyo to spread its ideas. The Tonga Ilbo, one of the first Korean-language newspapers to be allowed by the colonial government in 1920, played a particularly prominent role as Taejonggyo members were deeply involved in the paper’s

operations. One example is Yu Kŭn (1861-1921) who was one of the founding members of the newspaper and served as an advising editor. On the religious front, he is attributed with working together with Kim Kyohŏn in compiling historical sources for the Tanjo Sago, while in terms of his journalistic experience, he had been one of the main contributors of the Hwangsŏng Sinmun (Capital Gazette) which was founded in 1898 and shut down by the colonial government in 1910. Kwŏn Tŏkkyu (1890-1950), likewise a Taejonggyo member, also contributed actively to the Tonga Ilbo through his writings. Hence, from the beginning, the newspaper frequently reported on the religion’s activities including commemorations of the religion’s holidays, such as Tan’gun’s founding of Korea as well as his ascent to heaven. The newspaper also frequently referred to Tan’gun as sacred forefather while propagating the notion of the Paedal nation. The exaltation of Mount Paektu as the place of origin of the Korean nation was also a prominent theme as the newspaper frequently included various kinds of reports on the mountain, such as travelogues.32

Perhaps the most telling example of the newspaper’s promotion of Tan’gun was its call for portraits of Korea’s founding father shortly after the newspaper’s inception in 1920. The announcements were repeated over the course of several weeks and asked readers to either find and copy existing portraits, or submit their own creations. In effect, this was a call for Koreans to imagine and research their mythical progenitor. After some delay, the results were scheduled to be announced on Korea’s Foundation Day, that is, October 3,33 but unfortunately, misfortune struck as the newspaper was temporarily shut down by the colonial government from September 26, 1920, to February 20 of the following year. After publication of the newspaper was resumed, however, there was no more word on the contest. This may be because at least according to later

33 “Tan’gun yŏngjŏng e ch’uihaya” [On Tan’gun’s portrait], Tonga Ilbo, June 6, 1920, 3.
reports, it seems that no submissions had been made. In 1922, however, on the occasion of Korea’s Foundation Day, the *Tonga Ilbo* did print a portrait of Tan’gun, although this one had originated from the Taejonggyo. In this respect, it was again the religion that could be counted on to imagine and popularize Tan’gun when others failed to do so.

![Figure 4. The Taejonggyo’s Portrait of Tan’gun in the *Tonba Ilbo* (1922.11.21)](image)

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34 “Tan’gunmŭng ŭl such’uk” [Renovating Tan’gun’s grave], *Tonga Ilbo*, April 1, 1950, 3.
35 “Kŭmil Kaech’ŏnjŏl” [Today is National Foundation Day], *Tonga Ilbo*, November 21, 1922, 3.
The *Tonga Ilbo* was also involved in another highly visible effort to promote Tan’gun which was the movement to renovate Tan’gun’s purported grave in P’yŏngyang’s Kangdong county. As mentioned in chapter 1, the grave was first mentioned in the early Chosŏn period and while the Chosŏn government had intermittently paid attention to the site, there was a substantial amount of skepticism regarding its authenticity. Since the original myth had depicted Tan’gun as having become a mountain spirit, there were also questions whether there could be such a grave at all. This led some to argue that the grave contained merely items that had belonged to Tan’gun rather than his bodily remains. Overall, however, the grave largely languished in disrepair. It took until 1909, when Tan’gun began to be elevated as a nationalist symbol, that the court finally developed plans to repair and rebuild the grave which, however, was not realized as the Japanese soon annexed Korea.\(^{36}\) The grave remained in disarray for a while, but by 1923, the local elite were beginning to put in efforts to maintain the grave and furnish it with a royal mound and other auxiliary facilities. While this encountered financial difficulties, from 1932 onward, the *Tonga Ilbo* turned the movement into a nationwide effort by advertising the project and collecting donations. This was more successful than the earlier call for Tan’gun-portraits, as numerous contributions were made. By 1936, a tomb stone was finally erected at the grave which firmly established the site as Tan’gun’s resting place.\(^{37}\) Significantly, this movement was not dictated by any religious groups, but initiated by the local elite as a way to emphasize their regional ties before this was turned into a nationwide effort. Indeed, the movement transcended religious affiliations as even Christians made donations to the cause, suggesting that the veneration of Tan’gun was not restricted by sectarian divisions. There was no pronounced Taejonggyo

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\(^{36}\) Kim Sŏnghwan, “Ilche kangjŏmgi Tan’gunnung kijŏkpi ū kŏllip kwa Tan’gun chŏnsŭng” [The erection of the tomb stone on Tan’gun’s grave and Tan’gun transmission during the colonial era], *Sahak Yŏn’gu* 86 (June 2007), 179-80.

\(^{37}\) Ibid. 183.
participation—this can also be explained by the fact that Kim Kyohŏn had expressed doubts about the grave as it did not fit into his account of Tan’gun’s ascent to heaven. This also indicates a growing rift between different types of veneration of Tan’gun—one religious, the other civic. Even a small number of Japanese made monetary contributions to the project, further attesting to the fact that veneration of Tan’gun was not limited by national affiliation, either.  

The movement to renovate Tan’gun’s grave was also a sign of the growing focus on locales associated with Korea’s founding father. There was, of course, Mount Paektu which in the early twentieth century had become identified as Tan’gun’s place of origin, and even Mount Myohyang, which had previously occupied that status, maintained some of its importance as it was home to a “Tan’gun Cave.” Mount Mani with its heaven-worship altar (Ch’amsŏngdan) was another example, as was the Samsŏng Shrine at Mount Kuwŏl which however was razed sometime during the colonial period. These sites even became destinations for pilgrimages which were widely reported on. The Tonga Ilbo as well as Chosŏn Ilbo sent widely advertised expeditions to Mount T’aebaek which then were followed up by a number of articles and lectures emphasizing the mountain’s beauty and significance. One prominent example is the travelogue by the novelist Hyŏn Chin’gŏn (1900-1943) who in 1932, used the pages of the Tonga Ilbo to serialize his account of his pilgrimage to the “sacred” sites of Tan’gun. While he did not visit Mount Paektu, most likely due to its distance, he narrates his pilgrimage to Tan’gun-related locales, gradually building up to a grand finale where he ascends to the altar on Mount Mani.  

There is no evidence that Hyŏn was a member of the Taejonggyo or its splinter group, the

38 Kim Sŏnghwan, Ilche Kangjŏnmi Tan’gunmŭng Such’uk Undong [The movement to renovate Tan’gun’s grave in colonial Korea] (Seoul: Kyŏngin Munhwasa, 2009), 386-7, 399-400, 416-7.  
39 Sassa, 148.  
40 Pak Ch’ansŏng 2013, 24-5.  
41 Hyŏn Chin’gŏn, “Tan’gun sŏngjŏk sullye” [Pilgrimage to sacred Tan’gun-sites], Tonga Ilbo, July 9, 1932 – November 9 (serialized).
Tan’gun’gyo, yet the reverence for Tan’gun that he expressed in his writings certainly bordered on the religious. This also suggests again that deep reverence for Tan’gun did not have to be associated with a particular religion, as it was an expression of patriotism that any Korean was capable of.

As already mentioned, the Provisional Government in Shanghai was also a breeding ground for Tan’gun-related thought. This was because a number of Taejonggyo affiliates factored prominently in its operations, such as Sin Kyusik (1979-1922) who assumed a number of important posts including that of prime minister and minister of foreign affairs. His disciple and later chief of the Independence Army Yi Pŏmsŏk (1900-1972) also claimed to be a follower of the religion. As a result, not only did the government use the Tan’gun calendar, but it also adopted National Foundation Day, invented by the religion, and commemorated it with regular ceremonies. Even the day of Tan’gun’s ascension, another important day in the religion’s calendar, was celebrated. Hence, despite the religious origins of these holidays, these ceremonies had become celebrations of national symbols that transcended religious affiliations. This made it possible even for Christians such as Syngman Rhee (1875-1965), the first president of the Provisional Government, as well as An Ch’angho (1878-1938), the famous nationalist educator, to participate in these events.

Indeed, the Provisional Government was the main center from which the consecration of Tan’gun was popularized more widely. Alongside using the Tan’gun calendar in its documents, the government also employed its newspaper, the Tongnip Sinmun (not to be confounded with the eponymous newspaper published between 1896-1899 by the Independence Club) as a particularly prolific channel through which notions of the Paedal nation and Tan’gun as sacred

42 Sassa, 96.
43 Ibid., 102.
forefather were spread, along with more explicit references to the Taejonggyo and its commemorations of Tan’gun. The Tongnip Sinmun company also published other works, such as Kim Kyohŏn’s textbook Sindan Minsa, as well as the journal Paedal Kongnon (Paedral Review). The name of the journal itself revealed the significance that the term Paedal had come to assume, although its general tone was more combative and political than religious texts, as its first priority was the struggle for Korean Independence.\textsuperscript{44} This also led to more politicized discussions about Tan’gun that reflected the ideological rivalries of the time. For instance, Chŏng Yun, also a Taejonggyo affiliate, employed Korea’s ancient history and descent from Tan’gun to emphasize the particularism of the Korean nation and disavow the universalism Korean communists had ascribed to. In fact, he accuses communists of “turning their backs on the unique teachings of Korea’s founding father,”\textsuperscript{45} and thus abandoning their national identity. In this regard, the Tan’gun-nationalism influenced by the Taejonggyo could also take on more aggressive forms as it was deployed in the political conflicts of the time.

Reception of the Religion

While the Taejonggyo’s impact on Korean nationalist discourse was apparent, the religion’s quantitative success in expanding its organization is more difficult to trace with accuracy. This is partially because in 1914, the religion was split into two branches as the religion’s headquarters were relocated to Manchuria, slightly north of Mount Paektu. Granted, the religion had been active there even before that, but now its main operations had moved outside the peninsula in an effort to escape Japanese control and gain more freedom of action.

\textsuperscript{44} Kuokchigwang, “Paedal Kongnon ch’ulseho” [On the first issue of the Paedal Kongnon], Paedal Kongnon 1 (September, 1923). NIKH online version at \url{http://db.history.go.kr}.
\textsuperscript{45} Iru (Chŏng Sin), “Hwanjok ınt hwanjok kkiri saraya” [The Hwan people have to live among Hwan people], Paedal Kongnon 4 (April, 1924). NIKH online version at \url{http://db.history.go.kr}.
While some elements remained in the peninsula, this meant that the religion’s domestic and international arms operated in vastly different situations. It is claimed that by 1923, the religion’s membership reached close to three hundred thousand members, with the vast majority presumably located in Manchuria.\(^{46}\) This, however, is likely based on the religion’s own accounts and thus much higher than the actual number. After all, according to Manchukuo statistics, the Korean population in the region had grown to around half a million by 1922 even since Koreans had begun moving there in the second half of the nineteenth century.\(^{47}\) In fact, one Japanese report from 1918 estimated the number of Taejonggyo members in the Kando region to be just slightly over eight hundred, although this seems too conservative.\(^{48}\) This is especially so when considering the fact that the Taejonggyo was an important element even in the eyes of the Japanese as they noted the religion’s anti-Japanese stance and participation in armed resistance which alone was estimated to involve a thousand and two hundred combatants.\(^ {49}\) In addition, the religion was actively involved in educational efforts, including the publication of textbooks and histories for Korean schools including the Sinhŭng Mugwan Hakkyo ("New Military School") which was established in 1911 in order to train independence fighters.\(^{50}\) Prominent members of the religion such as Yun Sebok (1881-1960) were also heavily engaged in establishing schools

\(^{46}\) Sassa, 80.
\(^{48}\) Ch’oe Pongnyong, “Ilcheha chaeman hanin ŭi chonggyo undong” [Religious activities by Koreans in Manchuria during Japanese colonial rule] *Chonggyo Yŏn’gu* 31 (June 2003), 259.
\(^{49}\) Minseibu Sōmuni Chōsaka, 84.
\(^{50}\) Sassa, 106. The Sinhŭng Mugwan Hakkyo was initially established as Sinhŭng Kangsŭpso (New School) in 1911 in the western Kando region. It changed its name in 1919 and was closed down due to Japanese pressure in 1920. See Han Sijun, “Sinhŭng Mugwan Hakkyo wa Han’guk tongnip undong” [The Sinhŭng Military School and Korean independence movement], *Han’guk Tongnip Undongsa Yŏn’gu* 40 (2011.12), 5-31.
with curricula influenced by the religion. In fact, one Korean newspaper reported a total of 56 schools that were set up in Manchuria by members of the religion.

More anecdotal evidence also suggests that the religion played a significant role in the lives of Koreans in Manchuria. For instance, in his diary, the journalist Cho Ch’angyong (1875-1948) narrates his travels to Manchuria in 1912 and depicts not only his own conversion to the Taejonggyo, but also that of a large number of Christians as well as entire Korean villages. Kim Chŏnggyu (1881-1953), an independence activist likewise active in Manchuria, similarly offers an account of his initiation into the religion there. Chŏng Wŏnt’aek (1890-1971), another independence activist and member of the Taejonggyo, narrates how he used the religion’s network to flee to Manchuria and travel to Shanghai. Japanese/Manchukuo records also listed the Taejonggyo as the largest religious sponsor of militant activism, particularly through the Taehan Kunjŏngsŏ (“Korean Military Department”), an organization of independence fighters that battled Japanese forces in Manchuria between 1919 and 1922. However, it is difficult to find reliable statistics that allow us to gauge the extent of the Taejonggyo’s membership in the region with more accuracy. This is even further complicated by the fact that religious affiliations were fluid – Kim Ch’ŏnggyu, for instance, seems to have been involved in the religion for only a brief time as he later became more deeply engaged in the movement to consecrate Confucius. This type of temporary membership may have been because of some tensions between different views of Tan’gun, that is, one that saw him as a national deity, and another that simply revered

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51 Ibid., 82.
52 “Pukkando kakeh’ŏ e taejonggyo kyŏngyŏng hakkyo” [Taejonggyo-managed schools in many locales in the northern Kando region], Tonga Ilbo, September 27, 1923, 3.
53 Cho Ch’angyong, “Pukkando sich’algi,” 255.
54 Kim Chŏnggyu, Ilgi Yasa [Diary and unofficial history] Vol. 8, (Entry from 1912), 9. Available online at Independence Hall of Korea website https://search.i815.or.kr.
55 Chŏng Wŏnt’aek, Chisan Oeyu Ilchi [Diary of Chisan’s foreign travels] (Seoul: T’amgudang, 1983).
56 Minseibu Sōmusi Chōsaka, 84-5.
57 Kim Chŏnggyu, Vol. 10.
him as an ancestral founder. What is more, the Japanese occupation of Manchuria beginning in 1931 put significant restrictions on the religion’s activities there, pushing many of its elements underground until Japan’s defeat in 1945.\textsuperscript{58}

Within the peninsula, the remaining forces of the Taejonggyo were also engaged in various activities such as publishing histories and establishing Tan’gun shrines. However, this was marred by internal conflicts especially between more traditionally inclined members whose views were still deeply rooted in Confucianism and a younger, more progressive group which rejected Confucianism as something alien to the Korean nation.\textsuperscript{59} This was a tension that had been lurking within the religion for a while, as its founding members had strong Confucian credentials, but still felt compelled to portray Confucianism—at least on the surface—as having led to the decline of Tan’gun’s teachings. This conflict severely hindered any efforts to expand the religion’s operations in Korea. Granted, members of the religion had been involved in the Tonga Ilbo, but their writings may have been more effective in propagating the more general veneration of Tan’gun rather than the religion itself. After all, it was possible to embrace Tan’gun as a national symbol without embracing the religion. Further, even within the peninsula, religious affiliations could be tentative as was the case with the scholar Yi Pyŏnggi (1891-1968) who was associated with the religion only intermittently while remaining ensconced in Buddhism.\textsuperscript{60} In fact, by the mid-1930s, the presence of the Taejonggyo’s organization within the peninsula had deteriorated so much that in his study of Korean pseudo-religions (\textit{ruiji shūkyō}), the Japanese ethnologist Murayama Chijun listed it as virtually defunct.\textsuperscript{61} Certainly, the religion

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{58} Sassa, 83-5.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 122.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Yi Pyŏnggi, \textit{Karam Ilgi} [Karam Yi Pyŏnggi’s diary] (I) (Seoul: Sin’gu Munhwasa, 1976).
\item \textsuperscript{61} Murayama Chijun, \textit{Chōsen no Ruiji Shūkyō} [The pseudo-religions of Korea] (Seoul/Keijō: Chōsen Sōtokufu, 1935), 446.
\end{itemize}
still showed some signs of life in 1936 as the magazine *Samch’ölli (Three Thousand Li)* included articles that introduced the Taejonggyo as Korea’s indigenous religion. 62 This, however, only further illustrated that there was still much need to promote the religion as such, failing to turn the religion’s fortunes around, especially with the impending wartime mobilization.

The Tan’gun’gyo which had split from the Taejonggyo in 1910 went through a similar trajectory of rise and decline. While it took over the main ideas and texts from the Taejonggyo, the Tan’gun’gyo also developed its own scriptures to emphasize the religion’s status as the rightful heir to Tan’gun’s spiritual tradition. Thus, in 1916, the religion published the *Tanjŏn (Scripture of Tan’gun)* and *Tan’gyŏng (Sacred Book of Tan’gun)* which contained Tan’gun’s teachings, and soon after, it also claimed that it had “discovered” the words of Tan’gun—the 81-character *Ch’ŏnbugyŏng (The Quintessential Scripture of Heaven)*—carved into the walls of a cave on Mount Myohyang. 63 The teachings, however, were not radically new as they were strongly influenced by the Taejonggyo as well as Confucianism. 64 Overall, however, the focus seemed to be more on religious ideas such as the relationship between God and man, and not as much on Korean history. This was likely due to the fact that the religion was solely operating within the Korean peninsula and was thus less inclined to engage in outright nationalist activism that could incite the ire of the Japanese. The Tan’gun’gyo also began ascribing to its own origin story: if the Taejonggyo had traced its roots to the mysterious Paek Pong who had allegedly set the foundations for the religion during his retreat to Mount Paektu in 1904, the Tan’gun’gyo traced its origins to an equally mysterious individual, Kim Yŏmbaek, who was argued to have

62 Yun Yŏngsil, “Tan’gun kwa Sindo: 1930 nyŏndae chungban Ch’oe Namsŏn ŭi Tan’gun sinang puhŭngnon kwa simjŏn kaebal” [Tan’gun and Shinto: Ch’oe Namsŏn’s Tan’gun-faith revival argument and the Inner Cultivation Campaign in the mid-1930s], *Han’guk Hyŏndae Munhak Yŏn’gu* 36 (2012), 379.
63 Sassa, 189.
64 Ibid., 185-6.
entered Mount Myohyang even earlier around 1890 to begin his spiritual journey to worship Tan’gun. The fact that this fictitious account emerged first in 1924 suggests that the Tan’gun’gyo was more and more rewriting its own history in order to claim legitimacy over the Taejonggyo.

As the Tan’gun’gyo was limited to the Korean peninsula, it also assumed a more conciliatory attitude toward the colonizer, for instance, by participating in commemorations of imperial holidays and hoisting the Japanese flag on such occasions. Indeed, a good number of “pro-Japanese” Koreans who were employed within the colonial bureaucracy were members of the Tan’gun’gyo, suggesting that the consecration of Korea’s founding father did not necessarily imply an antagonistic attitude toward the Japanese, or vice versa, that cooperation with the Japanese did not hinder people from professing some form of patriotism toward the Korean nation. Further, the religion also cooperated with Uchida Ryōhei’s Dōkōkai/Tonggwanhoe (Society of Simultaneous Illumination)—a group that consisted of Japanese “continental adventurers” as well as Korean collaborators—in petitioning for an administratively autonomous Korea as part of the Japanese empire in 1922. The Tan’gun’gyo was also closely affiliated with the Chosŏn Yugyohoe (Korean Confucian Society), a pro-Japanese organization that ascribed to the notion of a greater East-Asian community based on a common Confucian culture. In fact, the membership of the two organizations overlapped significantly which was possible thanks to the Confucian tendencies within the Tan’gun’gyo which only became more pronounced due to this relationship. In turn, this also strengthened the Confucians’ veneration of Tan’gun as a national ancestor and the object of filial piety, illustrating the closeness between the consecration of

66 Sassa, 170-3.
Tan’gun on one side and Confucian teachings on the other. At the same time, since these
Confucians also endorsed Tan’gun’s role as great edifier who contributed to the cultural
foundations of East Asian civilization, Korea’s founding father was effectively given a
supporting role in the organization’s Pan-Asian visions. Because of these diverse affiliations,
however, the Tan’gun’gyo was also hampered by internal conflicts that were detrimental to
sustained growth. With the increasing pressure that came from the wartime period beginning in
the 1930s, the Tan’gun’gyo—despite its accommodating stance toward the colonial
government—was eventually ordered to disband in 1936.

Resurgence of Tan’gun as Symbol of Korean-Japanese Unity

The example of the Chosŏn Yugyohoe was a reminder that it was possible for Koreans to
both revere Tan’gun and support Pan-Asian visions at the same time. This echoed earlier
endeavors to turn Tan’gun into a symbol of Japanese-Korean unity. As discussed, prior to
annexation, Shintoists had sought to enshrine Tan’gun and Amaterasu together to symbolize the
common Korean-Japanese origins in a government-funded shrine which, however, was rejected
by Itō Hirobumi. Even Koreans had created an organization that petitioned for the enshrinement
of Tan’gun alongside Amaterasu to pay tribute to the ancestral founders of the two countries.
While these efforts were short-lived, coming to a close by the time of annexation, they surfaced
again with the construction of the Grand Chōsen Shrine (Chōsen Jingū) by the colonial
government. Completed in 1925, the shrine was located on Mount Nam (Namsan) in Seoul and
occupied the highest rank in the hierarchy of Shinto shrines in Korea. While ultimately, it was
dedicated to the Meiji Emperor as well as the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, there was a lot of debate

67 Ibid., 216.
68 Yun Yŏngsil, 379.
on which deities to enshrine, with candidates often having some sort of connection to Korea, such as Susanoo, Empress Jingū, or even Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Shortly before the official dedication of the shrine, the debate flared up again as Shintoists such as Ogasawara Shōzō (1892-1970) engaged in a last-ditch effort to have the deities changed. He argued that the shrine needed to incorporate some local elements and hence be a tribute to Korea. As such, Tan’gun should be enshrined alongside Emperor Meiji as a symbol of the unity between Korea and Japan. This resonated with a number of other Shintoists and amateur scholars who scrambled to delay the opening ceremony of the shrine.

Nonetheless, these efforts were again rejected by the colonial government. The reasons for this were many: for one, while Shintoists and civilians considered Tan’gun a real entity, mainstream Japanese historians were highly critical of his historicity. Even as a legendary figure, it was claimed that Tan’gun only related to Koreans in the northern part of the country and that southerners even felt a degree of animosity toward him, although it is not clear where this idea came from. Further, officials argued that Koreans did not possess notions of gods analogous to what the Japanese had, and that Koreans thus had to be inducted into Shinto practices slowly. This was in a way a rebuttal of earlier Japanese views that had projected Shinto elements onto Korean folk practices.

Still, the argument that there needed to be some sort of tribute to a Korean deity ultimately gained ground, resulting in the enshrinement of a rather vague “grand national spirit deity” (“Kunitama no Ōkami”) in the Keijō (Seoul) Shrine in 1929. This shrine was located next to the Chōsen Shrine and was dedicated to Amaterasu, but it was also a much older and smaller

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70 Kim Ch’ŏlsu 2010, 178-9.
71 Ibid., 181-2.
shrine that was initially established by Japanese civilians in 1892.\textsuperscript{72} This “national spirit” deity was supposed to be a tribute to Koreans and was hence a concession to those that argued for incorporating local elements in the shrine. The colonial government, however, never officially affirmed nor denied whether the deity was Tan’gun. Nonetheless, the perception that this was indeed Korea’s founding father seems to have become widespread. This was particularly reflected in reports that the shrine had become a site for some sort of Tan’gun commemorations, and that after liberation, a Korean group sought to continue its services to Tan’gun at the site.\textsuperscript{73}

As this discussion has shown, there was much contest surrounding Tan’gun which created ambiguities in his status in regard to Korean-Japanese relations. While some strongly endorsed him as a symbol of Korean-Japanese unity, the colonial government in particular was resisting this view. This was also reflected in the fact that the government in general was much more reluctant to endorse the notion of common Korean-Japanese origins as this could create problems in ruling the Korean populace.\textsuperscript{74} It is only with wartime mobilization of the late 1930s that the government warmed up to the notion of common ancestry and occasionally employed Tan’gun as a symbol thereof.\textsuperscript{75}

At the same time, a drive to align Tan’gun with the Shinto tradition could also come from Koreans. As noted, the Sin’gung Ponggyŏnghoe (Shrine Worship Association) that emerged in 1909 is a case in point. Even Na Ch’ŏl himself attempted to register the Taejonggyo as a Shinto sect in 1915, although this was more out of necessity as the colonial state officially recognized only Christianity, Buddhism, and Shinto as proper religions, and turning the Taejonggyo into a


\textsuperscript{73} Suga Kōji, “Nissen dōsoron to jinja” [The theory of common Japanese-Korean ancestry and shrines], \textit{Tongasia Munhwa Yŏn’gu} 53 (May 2013): 65-89, 78.

\textsuperscript{74} Chang Sin 2014, 92.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 103.
branch of Christianity or Buddhism was out of the question. All other religions were categorized as *ruiji shūkyō*, or “pseudo-religions,” and became the object of more stringent police surveillance. Na’s petition was ultimately rejected which was part of the reason why he decided to commit suicide and sacrifice himself for the religion (1916). The most prominent effort by a Korean to recast Tan’gun as part of the Shinto tradition, however, came from the prolific writer Ch’oe Namsŏn. His views were more than just regurgitations of those of Japanese Shintoists and thus deserve a more in-depth look.

Ch’oe Namsŏn and Ethnographic Approaches

Even though Ch’oe Namsŏn eventually envisioned Tan’gun as a marker of Korean-Japanese affinity, his earlier discussions on Korea’s founding father were coupled with an emphatic rejection of Japanese discourses. While Ch’oe began his investigations of the Tan’gun myth in his 1918 “Kyego Ch’ajon” (“Investigating the Old and Recording What Is Preserved”), he began criticizing Japanese scholarship that deconstructed the myth in his “Purham Bunkaron” (“Purham Cultural Sphere”), published in Japanese in 1927. In this work, he positioned Korea as a center of a Greater Eurasian Cultural sphere that was characterized by shared religious practices such as the worship of heaven and divine mountains. Ch’oe saw this fact reflected in the Tan’gun myth which he took as a figurative representation of this ancient civilization, while the name Tan’gun itself was seen as the title of the ruler-priest of a theocracy, the earliest system of human governance. This was based on Ch’oe’s linguistic analysis according to which “Tan’gun” was a cognate of “tengri,” the Mongolian word for sky or heaven, and thus referred to

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76 Sassa, 77-8.
77 Ch’oe Namsŏn, “Kyego ch’ajon” [Investigating the old and recording what is preserved], *Ch’ŏngch’un* 14 (1918)
a person in charge of the worship of heaven. This emphasis on “tengri” was similar to that of Shiratori Kurakichi who was also fixated on the concept of heaven and its various incarnations (chapter 3). Ch’oe also noted that in some parts in Korea, the word “tangul” referred to shaman, which was most likely related to Tan’gun and attested to his religious functions. Ch’oe denounced Japanese dismissals of Tan’gun as academically negligent as they did not further inquire into such meanings of the name. Although Ch’oe admitted that there was much unknown about Tan’gun’s historicity, the significance of this figure was first and foremost religious and thus harbored important implications for understanding not only ancient Korean, but ancient East Asian civilization at large.79

Ch’oe added bile to his criticism of Japanese scholars in 1926 when he attacked Oda Shōgo (1871-1953)80 who had noted the lack of Chinese documentations of Tan’gun and reduced the myth of Korea’s founding father to a mere tale about a local mountain spirit.81 Enraged, Ch’oe went on to produce a number of writings on Tan’gun in the next few years, taking on Japanese scholarship that had critiqued the Tan’gun myth as a fairly recent fabrication. Along with the article by Oda, this included the studies by scholars such as Naka Michiyo, Shiratori Kurakichi, Imanishi Ryū, as well as a number of others.82 Ch’oe criticized these as being too focused on documentary evidence and not incorporating ethnographic observations of folk practices that could be connected to the Tan’gun myth (such as the widespread worship of mountains). He also argued that the reduction of the Tan’gun myth into something local and insignificant was a result of the bias of Japanese scholars who considered Koreans incapable of

80 Ch’oe Namsŏn, “Tan’gun puin ŭi mang” [The follies of denying Tan’gun], Tonga Ilbo, February 11-12, 1926, 1.
81 Oda Shōgo, “Iwayuru Dankun densetsu ni tsuite” [On the so-called legend of Tan’gun], Bunkyō no Chōsen (February, 1926), 32-40.
82 Ch’oe Namsŏn, “Tan’gunnon” [On Tan’gun], Tonga Ilbo, March 3-July 25, 1926 (serialized).
having their own national founding myths. In this regard, the existence of such a myth itself became a cultural marker of an advanced nation. Moreover, Ch’oe accused Japanese scholars of being too dependent on Chinese sources while devaluing Korean sources which again he attributed to their prejudice. In arguing so, Ch’oe was offering the most comprehensive critique a Korean had leveled against Japanese scholarship on Tan’gun up to this point.

At the same time, Ch’oe also added a number of his own innovations to the study of Tan’gun. For one, he began to use the character 坛 instead of 檀 to refer to the “tan” in Tan’gun. The former, referring to “altar,” was used in the oldest extant version of the Samguk Yusa, although this may have been a result of a transcription error that became solidified in later editions of the text. The latter character, which referred to the tan/paktal tree, was the version that had been used most widely and was the more logical choice as it reflected Tan’gun’s connection to the paktal tree. This version, however, also engendered Japanese criticisms that the myth was a later invention by Buddhist monks due to the tree’s significance in Buddhist rituals. Hence, in referring to Tan’gun as “lord of the altar” instead of “lord of the tan tree,” Ch’oe was attempting to uncouple Tan’gun from Buddhism and evade such accusations. This choice of character was also a reflection of Ch’oe’s endeavors to emphasize the religious implications of Tan’gun that related to a much older and larger ancient civilization centered on the worship of heaven.

Indeed, Ch’oe Namsŏn suggested a number of transformative new ways to discuss Tan’gun, drawing especially from modern Western discourses on religion, folklore, mythology, and ancient history. One approach was to accept the Tan’gun myth for what it was, that is, a

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83 Yun Sŭngjun, “Yuktang Ch’oe Namsŏn ŭi Tan’gunnon Yŏn’gu” [Yuktang Ch’oe Namsŏn’s views on Tan’gun], Immunhak Yŏn’gu 37 (2009), 307.
84 Yi Yŏnghwa, “Ch’oe Namsŏn Tan’gunnon ŭi chŏngae wa pyŏnhwa” [The development and changes of Ch’oe Namsŏn’s views on Tan’gun], Han’guk Sahaksabo 5 (2004), 23.
myth, and compare it to myths from surrounding regions. This allowed Ch’oe to identify a number of common motifs such as the notion of divine intervention to save humanity or the existence of a transitory being between man and God. To Ch’oe, the presence of such motifs in the story of Tan’gun was proof that it was indeed a legitimate myth of ancient origin and not a more recent Buddhist invention as Japanese scholars had claimed.\(^85\) Ch’oe also employed concepts from ethno-religious studies to emphasize the religious implications of the myth. Thus, he noted that the notions of the fetish, prayer, magic, taboo, sanctuary, altar, and sacred tree could all be found in the myth, suggesting that it contained all the hallmarks of a primitive but systematic religion.\(^86\) From Choe’s point of view, this was too genuine a reflection of ancient religions to be a later concoction. But Ch’oe also argued that the myth contained some historical truths, such as the southward movement of the Korean people which he saw expressed in Tan’gun’s relocations of his capitals, or the importance of P’yŏngyang which Ch’oe saw as the geographically ideal site for the emergence of a state.\(^87\)

Most significant, however, was Ch’oe’s application of the concept of Totemism, as he considered the bear and tiger of the myth as representing totems of different tribes. This turned the myth into a narrative of the bear-tribe successfully overcoming the tiger-tribe and becoming the main line of Korean history. On the other hand, the marriage by the bear-woman to Hwanung and the birth of Tan’gun suggested the custom of exogamy, that is, the marital union with somebody outside one’s tribe. As Tan’gun was thus a member of the superior bear-tribe with Hwanung having entered the picture as an outsider, Ch’oe argued that this also reflected the

\(^{85}\) Ch’oe Namsŏn, “Tan’gun kŭp ki yŏn’gu” [Tan’gun and the study thereof], *Pyŏlgŏn’gon* 12-13 (May, 1928), 26.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 27. The fetish would be the mugwort and garlic which the bear and tiger ate to become human. Both were praying to Hwanung who would practice magic to transform those who respected the taboo by not stepping out of the cave. Only the bear succeeded and was transformed into a woman whereupon she would pray daily underneath a *tan*-tree, which serves both as sanctuary, altar, and sacred tree.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 29.
matrilineal nature of primitive society. Choe’s interpretation was significant since previous thinkers had been unable to make sense of the bear and tiger, and thus often left them out of their discussions. The Taejonggyo specifically had completely avoided this topic. Ch’oe, however, put the bear and tiger at the center of his interpretation, deriving meaning out of this previously neglected element of the myth. Ultimately, his reading allowed him to proclaim that the myth was a “proto-history” that revealed crucial facts about the social and religious make-up of ancient Korea.  

Ch’oe Namsŏn’s discussions of Tan’gun were indeed path-breaking, pushing the discourse into numerous new directions. He did not have to rely on the Taejonggyo-inspired histories or recently “discovered” documents to do so, as the theories and frameworks from Western scholarship were enough to cast Tan’gun in a novel light. While this was an effort to reclaim Tan’gun from the confines of Japanese scholarship, Ch’oe was at the same time laying the foundations for bringing Tan’gun back into the realm of Japanese discourses. This was because Ch’oe had depicted the ancient religious customs represented by Tan’gun as ubiquitous in much of Asia including Japan. Hence, not only did he imply that the cultures of Korea and Japan were of the same stock, but he even referred to Korea’s ancient tradition as “Old Shinto” (Kosindo).  

Granted, Ch’oe was trying to argue for the significant role Korea played in this grand ancient cultural sphere, however, he struggled to make the case that Korea was somehow more essential than other regions as he even conceded that the origin of this civilization was most likely in the central regions of the Eurasian continent. Further, the notion that Korean and Japanese religious customs—regardless of Tan’gun’s status—were of the same origin had

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88 Ibid., 32, 34.
89 Ch’oe Namsŏn, “Purham Munhwaron,” 89-90.
90 Ibid., 62.
already been propounded earlier by Japanese scholars, offering significant common ground with Ch’oe’s theories. And indeed, it was this common ground that Ch’oe would soon return to.

With the Manchurian Incident in 1931 and the establishment of Manchukuo in the following year, the atmosphere in Korea also began to change. By 1935, the colonial government initiated an “Inner Cultivation Campaign” (Shinden Kaihatsu Undō) in order to elevate the morale of Koreans and increase their readiness for the present geo-political situation. Religion in particular was employed to achieve this goal. Meanwhile, Ch’oe Namsŏn had also begun to cooperate more actively with the Japanese, and even though he did not always agree with them, he had come to believe that participation in the system was the best way to benefit the Korean people. This also applied to religion: on a trip to Japan, Ch’oe became aware of the fact that the Shinto tradition included deities derived from Korea, and that even Tan’gun was enshrined in the Tamayama Shrine in a village in Kagoshima prefecture which was settled by Korean potters who had been taken to Japan during the Hideyoshi invasions. This led Ch’oe to greatly appreciate the open nature of the Shinto tradition which accommodated foreign, and particularly Korean elements.\footnote{Yun Yöngsil, 362.} Enamored by this, Ch’oe engaged in several projects that were part of the Inner Cultivation Campaign such as the Chosŏn Kyehoe (Korean Association for the Purification of Ceremonies) which in fact sought to align Shinto with Korean tradition and popularize it in the colony. Ch’oe later explained that his true goal in recasting Tan’gun as part of the Shinto tradition was to ultimately build an enormous shrine for him as a tribute to the Korean nation.\footnote{Chizuko T. Allen, “Ch’oe Namsŏn at the Height of Japanese Imperialism,” Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies Vol. 5 No. 1 (2005), 37-8.} Indeed, whereas previously, Ch’oe’s main focus was on portraying Tan’gun as a genuine marker of a noble and ancient religious tradition, now his emphasis was on portraying this tradition as
very much compatible with Shinto. Hence, in a conference on the role of religion in the Inner Cultivation Campaign, Ch’oe went to great lengths to convince his audience, which included Japanese scholars and officials, of the existence of a “splendid” Korean faith and its affinity with Shinto. In regard to the term “Tan’gun,” he particularly argued that the Japanese “takeru” meaning chief was etymologically related, suggesting that Korea and Japan shared a similar religious past. This, in Ch’oe’s view, indicated that reviving Korea’s ancient tradition was compatible with the Shinto faith and a worthwhile endeavor if the goal was to turn Koreans into productive members of the Japanese empire.93 Ch’oe even went back on his definition of Tan’gun as “lord of the altar,” arguing that, after all, it was not really important how to spell Tan’gun’s name.94 This was a conciliatory gesture symbolizing that he was moving closer toward the Japanese again.

Ch’oe’s ideas were supported by Yi Nŭnghwa (1869-1943), the famous Korean ethnologist and religious scholar. Presenting at the same conference, Yi was even more explicit than Ch’oe in arguing that “it was proper for Koreans to first worship at the Chosŏn Shrine, and then worship Tan’gun.”95 He saw no contradiction between the two as he also identified great similarities between Korean and Japanese religious practices, especially those surrounding sacred trees. Compared to Ch’oe’s speculations, however, Yi offered a slightly more sober and down-to-earth approach that put more emphasis on historical records. Hence, Yi traced the documented instances of commemorations of Tan’gun from the late Koryŏ period onward, even mentioning the Taejonggyo as the contemporary incarnation of this tradition.96 Further, whereas

93 Ch’oe Namsŏn, “Chŏsen no koyū sinkō” [The indigenous faith of Korea], Shinden Kaihatsu ni Kansuru Kōenshū (Seoul: Chŏsen Sŏtokufu Chūsūin, 1936), 25.
94 Yi Yŏnghwa, 30.
95 Yi Nŭnghwa, “Chŏsen no koyū sinkō” [The indigenous faith of Korea], Shinden kaihatsu ni kansuru kōenshū (Seoul: Chŏsen Sŏtokufu Chūsūin, 1936), 52.
96 Ibid., 44.
Ch’oe’s goal was to emphasize Korea’s ancient tradition since primitive times, Yi also listed other instances as part of Korea’s religious heritage, such as ceremonial offerings related to agriculture or shamanist practices popular among the regular folk. Of these, however, Yi argued that it was particularly the worship of Tan’gun that befit the goal of cultivating Koreans as members of the empire due to the Tan’gun myth’s similarities with Japanese religious motifs.

Despite such attempts to reach out to the Japanese, Ch’oe and Yi’s arguments were not necessarily met with a favorable reception. The prolific ethnologist Murayama Chijun, who presented at the conference after Ch’oe and Yi, offered a more pessimistic evaluation of Korea’s indigenous spiritual tradition. In his account, there was no room for a primitive, but noble Korean spirituality that was somehow analogous to the Shinto tradition. This meant that there was also nothing that could be revived for the inner cultivation of Koreans. Rather, Murayama considered the worship of ghosts and the focus on rather mundane goals of avoiding misfortune and seeking happiness as the basis of Korean spirituality. In this regard, Murayama noted that Korea’s spiritual tradition was preoccupied with the here and now, hence lacking any sense of the future. It also did not possess more advanced religious concepts, such as that of an absolute God or the soul, suggesting that Korean religion occupied a rather low level in the hierarchy of religions. This was reflected in the practices of Korean shamanism which Murayama believed to be the oldest Korean spiritual tradition. Certainly, shamanism was an important element in everyday life, but it could not be expected to contribute much to the enlightenment of the masses. In this respect, Murayama was negative about the prospects of edifying Koreans by utilizing its own religious past, offering a stark contrast to Ch’oe’s views. By denying any similarities with

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97 Murayama Chijun, “Chōsen no koyū sinkō” [The indigenous faith of Korea], Shinden Kaihatsu ni Kansuru Kōenshū (Seoul: Chōsen Sōtokufu Chūsūin, 1936), 62.
98 Ibid., 65.
the Shinto tradition, Murayama was also setting himself apart from earlier Japanese scholars who had projected precisely such practices onto Korean tradition.

Akiba Takashi (1888-1954), who presented after Murayama, had a more favorable view of Korea’s spirituality, although this does not mean that he accepted the ties between Korean tradition and Shinto. Akiba’s view was that Koreans did indeed possess elements of a noble and useful spirituality, most importantly, the belief in a heavenly deity named “Hananim” (“The Heavenly One”). He also pointed at ancient Chinese records of Korean heaven worship practices as well as notions of heavenly deities in the Korean legends of Pak Hyŏkkŏse, the founder of the Kingdom of Silla, or Chumong, the founder of the Kingdom of Koguryŏ. The Tan’gun myth, however, was in Akiba’s view a much later invention and while it also reflected a reverence for heavenly deities, this likely arose out of the Buddhist rather than an indigenous tradition. Overall, however, due to Korea’s indigenous sense of a Heavenly God and the influx of similar ideas from foreign traditions, Akiba believed that Koreans were in possession of religious elements that were universal and useful for the Inner Cultivation Campaign. However, just like Murayama, at no point did Akiba argue that there was any direct point of contact with the Japanese Shinto tradition, leaving Ch’oe Namsŏn’s approaches unrequited.99

Despite Ch’oe’s failure to gain support from his Japanese colleagues, his ethno-linguistic approach was succeeded by other Korean scholars such as Chang Sūngdu who accepted the notion that “Tan’gun” or “Tangul” was a common word in much of ancient East Asia. According to Chang, this word had originally denoted a theocratic ruler, but had been transformed to refer to heaven, shamans, or other things high and exalted, such as the Japanese “taka.” In regard to the word “Hwanung,” Chang argued that the term derived from “hanul” (“heaven”) or

99 Akiba Takashi, “Chōsen no koyū sinkō” [The indigenous faith of Korea], Shinden Kaihatsu ni Kansuru Kōenshū (Seoul: Chōsen Sōtokufu Chūsūin, 1936), 73-88.
“hanulnim” ("the heavenly one"), associating it with a supreme deity that Koreans had worshipped since time immemorial. Thus, he suggested that the *Samguk Yusa*’s depiction of the myth’s deities as part of the Buddhist tradition was a mistake that the recorder committed due to his own Buddhist worldviews. Ultimately, however, Chang endeavored to use the Tan’gun myth to investigate ancient marriage customs through the union between Hwanung and the bear-woman: he identified that the myth demonstrated monogamous marriage practices that were geared toward procreation and based on mutual consent. In Chang’s view, these resembled modern marriage practices and thus attested to the advanced nature of ancient Korean customs. Such theories were again exemplifying the Korean drive to present the myth in as positive a light as possible.\(^\text{100}\)

Tan’gun and Shamanism

The disconnect between Korean and Japanese assessments of Korea’s indigenous spirituality was apparent even as intellectuals like Ch’oe Namsŏn sought to align Korean religious elements with the Shinto tradition. Part of this was because Ch’oe’s arguments were—despite his best efforts—speculative in nature, failing to find much support among his Japanese counterparts. This was also partially self-inflicted since Koreans themselves had more and more begun to identify Tan’gun with shamanism which the Japanese often saw as an indication of the backwardness of Korean culture. Ch’oe, for instance, had already portrayed Tan’gun as a shaman-ruler, although he also tried to depict Korea’s indigenous religion as a relatively advanced and complex tradition. His discussions, however, were focused mostly on identifying such a tradition in the ancient past and not on making any statements about contemporary

\(^{100}\) Chang Sŏngdu, “Dankun no minzokugakuteki kenkyū” [An ethnological study of Tan’gun], *Chōsen* 283 (December, 1938).
shamanic practices. Further, Ch’oe also sometimes appeared to be conflicted about identifying Tan’gun’s religiosity with shamanism, as in his speech at the Inner Cultivation conference, he chose not to mention this connection at all, most likely out of an awareness of shamanism’s negative reputation. However, Ch’oe was not the only one to have drawn a connection between Tan’gun and shamanism, as this notion had played a recurrent part in Yi Nŭnghwa’s studies on Korean religion. For instance, Yi considered the union between bear and man of the Tan’gun myth a shamanic motif of spiritual communion,101 while the “Sinsi” (“divine city”) established by Hwanung was considered a ritual space where Tan’gun had conducted religious ceremonies related to agriculture and healing.102 Certainly, Yi Nŭnghwa also suggested that this original Korean religiosity—which he named “Sin’gyo” (“Divine Teachings”) as had become customary by this time—had become adulterated over time and lost much of its splendor, expressing a critical attitude toward present-day shamanic practices. In this regard, he was trying to find a balance between two different forces: on one hand, Korean shamanism could not be ignored due to its pervasiveness in folk practices, while on the other, its reputation as backward and detrimental to modern life made it necessary to disavow its contemporary incarnation.

Even though scholars such as Ch’oe Namsŏn and Yi Nŭnghwa seemed somewhat uncomfortable about the connection between shamanism and Tan’gun, the notion nonetheless gained ground as people affiliated with shamanic practices also sought to trace their tradition’s history back to Tan’gun. For instance, in the afore-mentioned Mudang Naeryŏk (A History of Shamans), a text that introduced Shamanic rites (kut) with colorful illustrations and brief synopses of their histories, Tan’gun is portrayed as the originator of shamanic practices as well

101 Yi Nŭnghwa, “Chosŏn sin’gyo wollyugo (2)” [An examination of the roots of Korea’s Sin’gyo tradition], Shirin 7(4) (October, 1922), 100.
102 Yi Nŭnghwa, Chosŏn Chonggyosa [History of Korean religion] (Seoul: Yŏngsin Ak’ademi Han’gukhak Yŏn’guso, 1983), 4-5.
as the highest deity in the shamanic pantheon.\textsuperscript{103} The text was previously believed to be a late nineteenth-century production, however, the contents of the work suggest that it emerged most likely in the 1920s-1930s.\textsuperscript{104} Turning Tan’gun into the most important deity of the shamanic pantheon was a new development as it was usually other deities that were dominant. According to studies by Japanese ethnographers in the 1930s, these included Chōnsin (Heavenly Deity), often identified as Chesŏk from the Buddhist pantheon, Sansin (Mountain God), and General Ch’oe Yŏng (1316-1388) of the Koryŏ dynasty who was perhaps the most popular deity in shamanic rites.\textsuperscript{105} In narrating shamanism’s history in relation to Tan’gun, the Mudang Naeryŏk also employed plenty of recently developed concepts, such as the term Sin’gyo, the notion of October 3 as the day of Tan’gun’s descent, and a number of other tropes from Kim Kyohŏn’s texts that had projected Tan’gun onto Korean folk beliefs.\textsuperscript{106} The overall tone of the text was also similar to Yi Nŭnhwa’s, as the current shamanistic practices were seen in a critical light which was likely a consequence of the push to “purify” and modernize shamanism.\textsuperscript{107} This trend was expressed most clearly in the Sungsinin Chohap (Association of Shamans), a shamanist association which was founded in 1920 with the purpose of improving shamanism’s reputation. This association, as well as a number of smaller organizations, also posited Tan’gun as an object of worship, thus firmly incorporating Korea’s founding father into the shamanic pantheon.\textsuperscript{108} Tan’gun was seeping into folk beliefs and practices, becoming a ubiquitous marker of a Korean spirituality. Hence, just as the Taejonggyo was claiming Tan’gun as its point of origin, shamanist

\textsuperscript{103} See Sŏul Taehakkyo Kyujanggak ed., \textit{Mudang Naeryŏk}.  
\textsuperscript{104} Sŏ Yongdae 2015, 87.  
\textsuperscript{105} The prominence and popularity of these deities has not changed much today, although Sansin, the Mountain God, is nowadays often identified as Tan’gun. For Tan’gun’s identification with Sansin, see Hogarth, \textit{Korean Shamanism}, 132. For colonial-era scholarship on the Korean shamanic pantheon, see Akamatsu Chijō and Akiba Takashi, \textit{Chōsen Fuzoku no Kenkyū} [A study of Korean shamanism] (Tokyo: Ōsaka Okugō Shoten, 1938), 72-76.  
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 66-8.  
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 85.  
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 86-7.
practitioners were doing so as well. There was some irony in this, as the Taejonggyo had tried to set itself apart from shamanic folk practices and present itself as a more noble tradition. Tan’gun, however, was not the religion’s sole possession.

Korean Criticisms of the Myth

While Tan’gun was thus becoming more and more ubiquitous, there were also Korean historians that approached the Tan’gun myth from a more critical perspective, avoiding any temptations to aggrandize Korea’s ancient history. Yi Pyŏngdo (1896-1989), who had studied history at Waseda University and was thus steeped in positivistic research, was one such case. In his introduction to Korean history serialized in the Tonga Ilbo in 1923, he cautioned against linguistic analyses that derived all kinds of historical and religious meanings from the Tan’gun myth. He considered such practices a threat to the study of history since it employed the most tenuous of evidence—phonetic similarities. At the same time, however, he did not simply endorse the dismissal of the myth by Japanese scholars either, since he believed that despite far-fetched elements, the myth seemed to contain some deep-rooted truths even though he did not specify what these were. Yi also assured the reader that he was not one to shorten Korean history—on the contrary, he believed it to be of ancient nature. Nonetheless, he regarded the myth as too vague to use as reliable historical source, thus deferring judgment on its implications regarding ancient Korean history.109 To Yi, Tan’gun was simply outside the historian’s realm of inquiry, neither to be affirmed nor denied, but simply bracketed for the time being.

Paek Namun (1894-1979) who had studied economic history in Japan took an even more critical approach to the Tan’gun myth. In contrast to Yi Pyŏngdo, Paek was highly influenced by

Marxist understandings of historical materialism and sought to rewrite Korean history from an economic perspective. Thus, in his *Chōsen Shakai Keizaishi (Social and Economic History of Korea)*, published in Japanese in 1933, he ascribed to the universal stages of historical development conditioned by economic relations and applied this framework to Korean history. This turned Korean history into a sequence of economic stages moving from a primitive communal economy to an ancient slave economy, then to Asiatic feudalism, and from there to the sprouts of capitalism. Paek’s goal was to show that Korean history was far from stagnant as Japanese historians tended to argue, but was very much in accordance with universal historical laws of development. Hence, instead of emphasizing Korea’s particularity, his focus was on the universal character of Korean history.\(^\text{110}\)

This also affected Paek’s take on the Tan’gun myth. For one, he criticized Ch’oe Namsŏn and Sin Ch’aeho for using the myth in order to aggrandize Korean history and emphasize Korea’s uniqueness. At the same time, he also criticized Japanese scholars such as Shiratori Kurakichi and Oda Shōgo for dismissing the Tan’gun myth too easily. In Paek’s view, the Tan’gun myth contained a number of truths, especially ones that reflected the transition from the communal stage of a primitive economy to a slave economy. Thus, Paek argued that the existence of a line of succession, titles, and the appearance of a privileged authority in the myth suggested emerging class divisions. The rise of Tan’gun also indicated the establishment of a patriarchy, while the mention of garlic, mugwort as well as grain intimated the development of farmland agriculture. Viewed from such a perspective, Paek proclaimed that Tan’gun was hence “neither an actual individual, nor a mountain spirit from Mount Myohyang, nor a spirit of the *tan*-tree, nor the nation’s forefather, but simply a title of a male chief and primitive aristocrat”

\(^{110}\) Henry Em, *The Great Enterprise*, 130-1.
who was standing at the transition from one historical stage to another. Thus, Paek argued that
the Tan’gun myth was simply one marker within Korean history, and not its starting point, much
less the point of origin of East Asian civilization.111 In this respect, he was strongly opposing the
grand nationalism that had become associated with Tan’gun, illustrating that Korea’s founding
myth created disagreements even among Korean scholars.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the proliferation of discussions on Tan’gun following the
Taejonggyo’s reimagining of Korea’s founding father. Many of the elements that Kim Kyohŏn
had constructed made their way into numerous subsequent histories written by individuals both
within and without the religion. These works all shared a commitment to a grand vision of
ancient Korean history and did not shy away from employing erroneous sources including newly
“discovered” documents such as the Kyuwŏn Sahwa. The religion’s histories thus set the
foundation of a genre that may be termed fringe history or pseudo-history characterized by
unconventional historiographical practices such as the reliance on fabricated documents and a
drive to glorify Korean history. Freed from existing sources and guided by imagination, such
histories had a tendency to add to ancient Korean history an ever-increasing number of details, a
trend which would continue after 1945. Hence, as time went by, Tan’gun evolved more and more
from a mythical entity of unclear origin to a highly concrete and tangible historical figure with an
increasing number of exploits. At the same time, the veneration of Tan’gun was also popularized
through a range of other channels such as the Tonga Ilbo or the Provisional Government in
which members of the Taejonggyo played a significant role. In this respect, even though the

religion did not initiate the rise of Tan’gun by itself—one only needs to remember the contributions by Sin Ch’aeho—it was a major factor in igniting a boom surrounding Korea’s founding father. However, as the veneration of Tan’gun was simultaneously a civic expression of patriotism, it could also be uncoupled from the religion itself. After all, Tan’gun as a national symbol superseded religious affiliations and as such was able to thrive outside the confines of the religion.

This also meant that the Taejonggyo, despite its significant contributions, was unable to monopolize Tan’gun especially since more and more people sought to appropriate and reimagine him in their own ways. In this regard, the more the religion succeeded in promoting Tan’gun, the less it could control his significance. Thus, Ch’oe Namsŏn turned the Tan’gun myth into a lens onto a much larger Eurasian civilization as well as a primitive faith which, however, he did not envision as part of the Taejonggyo’s tradition. This even allowed Ch’oe to cast Tan’gun as a point of convergence with Japanese religion and to justify the propagation of Shinto to Korea. While this was for the most part ill-fated, Choe’s innovations in applying the framework of Totemism to the myth would have far reaching consequences. In the popular realm, shamanist practitioners also laid claim to Tan’gun, turning him into a symbol of their own tradition. And finally, there were even more skeptical approaches to Tan’gun, such as that by Paek Namun, which sought to eschew a grand nationalism and use the Tan’gun myth to emphasize the universal character of Korean history and not its uniqueness. Hence, by the end of the colonial period, there was a rich tapestry of discourses ready to be employed by the two Korean states that would soon emerge.
Conclusion
A Rich, Complicated Legacy

Tan’gun and the South Korean State

With Korea’s liberation in 1945 and the establishment of the Republic of Korea in the southern half of the peninsula three years later, the stage was set for Tan’gun to flourish with renewed vigor. And indeed, many of the Tan’gun-related symbolisms developed during the colonial era were endorsed by the new South Korean government. For one, the Tan’gun calendar was legally adopted as Korea’s official calendar in order to “demonstrate domestically and internationally the uniformity of the nation, the identity of the state, and the antiquity of (Korean) history.”\(^1\) As has been discussed, the calendar had appeared around 1905 and had been employed by a number of Korean newspapers as well as the Taejonggyo. During the colonial period, the Provisional Government in Shanghai also began using the calendar. Since the new South Korean government saw itself as the successor of the Provisional Government, it inherited the use of the Tan’gun calendar as a means of presenting itself as the rightful heir of Korea’s Independence Movement. This was hence also a way of highlighting the South’s legitimacy in opposition to its rival in the North which had adopted the Gregorian calendar—at least until 1997 when it created its own calendar based on Kim Il Sung’s birth.

In the same vein, \textit{Kaech’ŏnjŏl}, or National Foundation Day, which was created by the Taejonggyo and also commemorated by the Provisional Government, was similarly adopted as an official holiday of the new South Korean republic in 1949. Granted, there was confusion among lawmakers whether the day marked Tan’gun’s birth or his ascension to the throne, but it

\(^{1}\) Chŏng Yŏnhun 2014, 407.
was generally accepted that it was historically a day that Koreans had commemorated to honor their founding father since ancient times. Further, Taejonggyo notions such as that Tan’gun had been the object of veneration even in Manchuria and Mongolia were also proffered by Korean legislators.2 Tan’gun’s traces even seeped into the Basic Law of Education enacted in 1949 which enshrined the motto of “Hongik In’gan,” that is, “to widely benefit the people,” as its main philosophy which was in fact a phrase that had appeared in the Samguk Yusa’s version of the Tan’gun myth. Thus, Tan’gun’s association with the South Korean state was strong. This was also due to the prominent participation of Taejonggyo-affiliates in the government such as the Vice President Yi Siyŏng (1869-1953), the Prime Minister Yi Pŏmsŏk (1900-1972), as well as the Minister of Education An Hosang (1902-1999). Especially An would become the religion’s leader in the 1990s.3 An Chaehong (1891-1965), another Taejonggyo-affiliate and historian who would later become a member of the parliament, even went so far as to link Tan’gun to the Republic of Korea’s foundation by emphasizing the democratic elements that could be found in the myth: some accounts such as the fifteenth-century Tongguk T’onggam had depicted Tan’gun as having been chosen king by the people, which An took as proof of the democratic character of the Korean nation which was now revived in the South Korean state.4 This, again, could be read as an effort to employ Tan’gun to claim legitimacy over the North.

However, this does not mean that the religion’s ideas were wholly transferred to the new Korean state. For instance, in deciding whether to use the solar or lunar calendar in commemorating the founding of Korea, the legislature opted for the former, thus creating a break

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2 “Che O-hoe kukhoe imsi hoeŭi sokkirok” [Stenographic record of the fifth parliamentary special meeting] Number 3, 1949.9.21, in Yun Ihŭm et al., 647-652.
3 Im Ch’aeu, “Haebang hu Tan’gun insik üi pyŏnhwa wa munje – Tan’gun yŏngjŏng kwa Tan’gi yŏnoho rŭl chungsim ŭro” [The changes of perceptions of Tan’gun and related issues in post-liberation Korea – with a focus on Tan’gun’s portrait and the Tan’gun calendar], Sŏndo Munhwa 12 (2012.2), 49.
4 An Chaehong, “Kaech’onjŏl kwa minjok chŏnt’ong” [National Foundation Day and national tradition], in Yun Ihŭm et al., 643-5.
with the religion’s tradition. This was even noted by one member of the parliament who lamented the fact that the religion was not consulted at all in the discussions leading up to this decision.\(^5\) In this respect, the government-mandated civic veneration of Tan’gun was already beginning to move away from the religion’s practices, creating a growing gulf between the two. Further, usage of the Tan’gun calendar also did not last as it was abolished in 1961 in the wake of the military coup that eventually put Park Chung Hee in power. In its stead, the Gregorian calendar was enacted with the avowed goal of aligning Korea with the practices of advanced nations and projecting a more open and cooperative image to the world.\(^6\) As one scholar notes, this decision may have been facilitated by the military elite’s view on Korean history as many of the top brass had been trained in the Japanese imperial army and thus had developed a rather conflicted relationship with Korean history. This was apparently the case with Park Chung Hee who despite paying lip service to Tan’gun,\(^7\) often also expressed a more negative attitude toward Korea’s traditional legacy as an obstacle to progress.\(^8\)

If that was the case, however, it seems that not long after, the government did begin to embrace Tan’gun again as in 1966 it announced that it would build an enormous statue of him on Mount Nam (Namsan) in Seoul. The goal was to “unify the spirit of the people and establish Korean agency”\(^9\) which may also have been reflected in the choice of the location as it had previously been the site of the Grand Chosŏn Shrine. Granted, the effort to erect a statue of Tan’gun was undertaken by the administration and was thus independent of the Taejonggyo’s activities. Still, one government official avowed to turn Tan’gun into an object of national

\(^5\) “Che O-hoe kukhoe imsi hoëui sokkirok” Number 3, 1949.9.21, 652.
\(^6\) Chŏng Yonghun (2014.4), 411-2.
\(^8\) Chŏng Yonghun (2014.4), 416.
veneration which would induce people to even “offer their own hair, fingernails as well as toenails in front of the statue.” This, however, was met with fierce opposition that pointed at the mythical and thus fictional nature of Tan’gun, arguing that such a figure was not appropriate for the government’s goals of modernizing the country. Especially Christians and younger people seemed to be strongly rejecting the statue\textsuperscript{10} with one commentator stating that although Tan’gun had indeed been useful as a national symbol during times of foreign oppression, in an age of science and progressivism, actual historical figures such as General Yi Sunsin who had heroically repelled Japanese maritime forces during the Hideyoshi Invasions (1592-1596) would be more appropriate to lift the Korean spirit.\textsuperscript{11} While there was support for the Tan’gun statue as well, especially among Taejonggyo-affiliates such as An Hosang and others who saw no harm in paying symbolic respect to Korean ancestry,\textsuperscript{12} the plan to build the statue was ultimately scrapped. Instead, it was indeed Yi Sunsin who was incarnated as a bronze statue soon after, although at a different site.\textsuperscript{13}

The resistance by Christians in particular may have led the government to further distance itself from any elements that could be perceived religious when it came to the veneration of Tan’gun. This became evident when the government began employing the Hyŏnjŏnghoe (Association for Illuminating Propriety) for Tan’gun-related commemorations, \hfill

\textsuperscript{10} “Panbal e puditch’in Tan’gun tongsang kŏllip kakkye chŏlmûni tūl ū ūigyŏn” [The youth’s opinion on the controversial construction of the Tan’gun statue], \textit{Kyŏnghyang Sinmun} 1966.2.12, 5.

\textsuperscript{11} “Tan’gun tongsangnon irŏk t’uja kyehoek ā ipp’an handa” [Criticizing the plan to invest a hundred million wŏn in the Tan’gun statue], \textit{Tonga Ilbo} 1966.2.15, 5.

\textsuperscript{12} “Tan’gun sŏngsang kŏllip tūsen igyŏn” [Colliding views regarding the constructing of the Tan’gun statue], \textit{Kyŏnghyang Sinmun} 1966.2.5, 5.

\textsuperscript{13} The statue of Yi Sunsin was erected in 1968 in front of Kyŏngbuk Palace, the Chosŏn dynasty’s main palace in Seoul. Park Chung Hee’s military dictatorship (1961-1979) did much to emphasize the martial spirit of Korean heroes such as Yi Sunsin. Regarding Park’s personal reverence for Yi, see Carter Eckert, \textit{Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism, 1866-1945} (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 94-5. For the changing perceptions of Yi Sunsin through history, see Chŏng Tuhŭi, “Yi Sunsin e taehan kiŏk ū yŏksa wa yŏksahwa” [The history and historicization of the memory of Yi Sunsin], \textit{Han’guk Sahaksa Hakpo} 14 (2006.12), 5-43.
completely bypassing the Taejonggyo. The Hyŏnjŏnhoe was a non-profit organization formed in 1968 to disseminate proper patriotic ideals and memorialize Korea’s founding father in an avowedly civic manner that was not affiliated with any religious denominations.\textsuperscript{14} The group was led by Yi Hŭisŭng (1896-1989), a linguist and former president of the Tonga Ilbo.\textsuperscript{15} The organization even built a Tan’gun Temple and subsequently donated it to the city of Seoul which allowed the organization to continue managing the site. This was likely what made the bond between the Hyŏnjŏnhoe and the government possible, as the organization’s commemorations of Tan’gun-related holidays began to be supported by the administration.\textsuperscript{16} The organization also followed the government’s standards of commemorating Tan’gun-related holidays according to the solar calendar, hence setting itself apart from the Taejonggyo. At the same time, however, the Hyŏnjŏnhoe was also clearly influenced by the religion as it also commemorated Tan’gun’s Ascension and ascribed to the notion established by Kim Kyohŏn that Tan’gun had enjoyed a life-span of 217 years.\textsuperscript{17} In this respect, the organization was certainly indebted to ideas of religious origin.

The government’s preference for the Hyŏnjŏnhoe also became apparent in the debates surrounding Tan’gun’s portrait. While establishing the Tan’gun Temple, the Hyŏnjŏnhoe had erected a Tan’gun statue there which was not based on any prior visual representations of Korea’s founding father. This was hence a competitor to the Taejonggyo’s portrait of Tan’gun which had been used since the religion’s early years. At the behest of the religion, its portrait was

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} “Minjok chŏnggi chuch’esŏng ŭi chiju Tan’gun sŏngjiŏn sajik kinyŏmgwan wangong” [Completion of temple of Tan’gun, main pillar of the national spirit and subjectivity, as well as the memorial hall of the soil and grain altar], Tonga Ilbo 1968.9.5, 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} “Kugŏhak t’aedu chŏn Tonga Ilbo sajang ilsŏk Yi Hŭisŭng paksa pyŏlse” [Passing away of Ilsŏk Yi Hŭisŭng, great authority of linguistics and former president of Tonga Ilbo], Tonga Ilbo 1989.11.28, 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Im Ch’aeu 2012, 54.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} “Hyŏnjŏnhoe ŏch’onjŏl haengsa” [Hyŏnjŏnhoe’s commemoration of Tan’gun’s ascension], Tonga Ilbo 1981.3.16, 6.
\end{itemize}
recognized by the government as official standard in 1976. In the following year, however, the Hyŏnjŏnghoe requested to have its own portrait of Tan’gun (which was based on the statue) to be officially endorsed as well. This wish was granted, leading to two competing portraits to receive the same status. The government’s logic behind this was that one was the object of religious worship while the other was the object of civic reverence. To the Taejonggyo, however, this was a defeat as it could no longer claim sole proprietorship over Tan’gun’s visual representation, solidifying the fault line between two seemingly different types of veneration of Korea’s founding father. And indeed, it was also the Hyŏnjŏnghoe’s version which would be disseminated more widely as it appeared in government publications including history textbooks.

Figure 5. Competing portraits of Tan’gun: The Taejonggyo’s version (left) and the Hyŏnjŏnghoe’s version (right) (public domain)

18 Im Ch’aeu, “Taejonggyo Tan’gun yŏngjŏng ŭi kiwŏn kwa chŏnsu munje” [The transmission of the Taejonggyo’s Tan’gun portrait and related issues], Sŏndo Munhwa 11 (2011.8), 30.
Despite the government’s efforts to present the veneration of Tan’gun as non-religious, resistance from Christian groups continued. In 1985, the City of Seoul decided to expand the Tan’gun Temple with taxpayer money. Christian groups rallied against this on the grounds that the worship of Tan’gun constituted idolatry and an infringement on the separation between church and state. This led to conflicts with groups that were supportive of the expansion of the temple. In fact, according to a poll, two thirds of Koreans were in support of the city’s plans, while three fourths accepted that in general Tan’gun should be venerated as Korea’s ancestor. At the same time, slightly more than half believed him to be a historical figure, while roughly one fourth considered him fictional. Even more than half of the Christians polled answered that it was proper to venerate Tan’gun.19 In this respect, the majority had no problem with the veneration of Korea’s founding father. The government as well maintained that the worship of Tan’gun was not a religious act and should not infringe on anybody’s rights, which in a way echoed the Japanese assurances decades earlier that Shinto Shrine worship was by no means religious in nature. Nonetheless, the opposition soldiered on and ultimately prevailed in pushing the government to annul its plans. Hence, the nature of the veneration of Tan’gun continued to be controversial as its religious nature depended on the eye of the beholder.

The Decline of the Taejonggyo

The increasing distance between the government and the Taejonggyo did not bode well for the religion’s fortunes. In fact, the very success of the religion in championing Tan’gun as the premier figure of the Korean nation also undermined the religion’s own existence. After all, as the government appropriated the veneration of Tan’gun and many of the Taejonggyo’s

symbolisms, it disavowed their religious aspects, hence alienating the religion and turning it into a relic of the past. The veneration of Tan’gun did not require the religion anymore.\textsuperscript{20}

Granted, the early years after liberation seemed promising for the Taejonggyo: not only were its rituals and ideas disseminated nationally, but the religion even founded a school, Hongik University, in Seoul in 1947. The name itself was a reference to Tan’gun as “Hongik” was short for “Hongik In’gan” which again meant “to widely benefit the people” and was taken from the Tan’gun myth. Nonetheless, with the rise of military dictatorship in the early 1960s, the university underwent some significant changes, causing the Taejonggyo to lose all influence over the school.\textsuperscript{21} This also foreshadowed the overall decline of the religion’s membership. The numbers collected by the government prior to 1985 are not entirely reliable as they jump back and forth erratically. Nonetheless, they may offer some general sense of the religion’s membership, which according to the government ranged between roughly 14,000 (1963)\textsuperscript{22} and 175,000 (1978),\textsuperscript{23} while there were also extreme outliers of half a million which may have been self-reported by the religion (1960).\textsuperscript{24} Especially in the 1970s, the numbers solidified slightly above 100,000.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{20} Kirsten Bell sees something similar happening with the Ch’ŏndogyo: As both the South and North Korean governments appropriated the religion’s past for political purposes, the Ch’ŏndogyo’s religious legitimacy has been undermined. See Kirsten Bell, “Cheondogyo and the Donghak Revolution: The (un)Making of Religion,” \textit{Korea Journal}, Vol. 44(2) (Summer, 2004), 123-148.
Also, Yi Taehŭi, “Honggikdae Kangt’al sagŏn i sesang e allyŏjigi kkaji - [palgul] Honggikdae ŭi kamch’ŭojin yōksa, Kkŭnnaji annūn nonjaeng <ha>” [Until the usurpation of Hongik University became known to the world - the hidden history of Hongik University, continuing controversies (part 2)], \textit{Pressian} 2012.11.11, http://www.pressian.com/news/article.html?no=39935
\textsuperscript{22} “Kidokkyo 73 manmyŏng i ŭttŭm” [Christianity with 730,000 members is top], \textit{Tonga Ilbo} 1963.1.22, 7.
\textsuperscript{23} “Han’gu kongggyoin 2 ch’on 7 baek 36 manmyŏng mungongbu chipkye,” [27,360,000 people with religion in Korea according to count by Ministry of Culture and Public Affairs], \textit{Maeil Kyŏngje} 1978.1.20, 8.
\textsuperscript{24} “Modŭn sinja 399 manmyŏng!” [All believers total 3,990,000!] \textit{Tongga Ilbo}, 1960.3.13, 4.
\textsuperscript{25} “Mungongbu sŏ palgan chongggyo pŏpin tanch’ae illamp’yo” [Chart of religious organization published by Ministry of Culture and Public Affairs], \textit{Kyŏnghyang Sinmun} 1971.5.21, 5.
However, in 1985, the first time the national census recorded religious membership, the Taejonggyo registered 11,000 followers, which gradually declined to a mere 3,000 by 2015.26 The numbers from the census seem the most reliable as they show a clear trend and were also picked up by the most extensive and systematic survey so far. They also reflect the near invisibility of the religion in contemporary Korean society, especially when compared to the immense membership of Buddhism and Christianity which by 1985 had each exceeded 8 million out of a population of 40 million (of note, the Tan’gun’gyo, the Taejonggyo’s splinter group vanished from existence in the years following liberation). Certainly, the Taejonggyo has tried to inject new life into its organization, for instance, in 1980 when it petitioned the government in a rather far-fetched manner to amend the constitution and turn the religion into the official state religion.27 Smaller new religious movements that worshipped Tan’gun had also emerged in the meantime, although their membership was not significant, further suggesting that the veneration of Tan’gun as a religious symbol did not have mass appeal.28 Granted, more research needs to be done on the complex reasons for the religion’s decline, yet considering the rise of other religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, it seems that Koreans preferred religions with deeper traditions to satisfy their spiritual needs. Further, with the nationalist functions overtaken by the state, little remained for the Taejonggyo to offer.

Tan’gun in North Korea

Meanwhile in the North, Tan’gun’s fortunes also changed with the times. For decades, Tan’gun played little to no role in the North Korean imaginary as the state showed little interest

27 “Munhwa Tanch’ae ŭi isaek kaehŏnan ŭl pomyŏn” [Survey of diverse suggestions for constitutional amendments by cultural groups], Kyŏnghyang Sinmun 1980.3.19, 5.
28 “T’och’ak soet’oe” [Decline of indigenous religions], Kyŏnghyang Sinmun 1971.3.30, 5.
in the mythical founder and scholars payed only intermittent attention to him. This was because of the predominance of Marxist historiography whose proponents such as Paek Namun had joined the North after liberation. In the few instances where the Tan’gun myth was discussed, the emphasis was on identifying the historical reality behind the myth and putting Korea within the Marxist framework of historical development. Hence, as was the case with the seminal *Chosŏn Chŏnsa (The Entire History of Korea)* (1979-1983), the focus was not on aggrandizing Tan’gun as a great historical founder, but on showing that Korea had been an ancient slave economy and hence fit into universal historical patterns. If anything, the ruling class symbolized by the mythical figure of Tan’gun was the object against which the masses struggled heroically to escape enslavement. Further, based on archeological findings, the emergence of an ancient Korean state was estimated to have occurred in the eighth or seventh century BCE which was a much more modest claim compared to narratives that put the beginning of Korean history to 2333 BCE.

This, however, changed radically in 1993 when the North suddenly announced that it had excavated Tan’gun’s grave and discovered his and his wife’s remains. The grave, located in the Kangdong district of the city of P’yŏngyang, had been known since at least the fifteenth century, although its association with Tan’gun was merely based on local folklore. Added to this was the skepticism which North Koreans had expressed toward Tan’gun in general. Now, however, the North claimed to have discovered unquestionable evidence in the tomb that Tan’gun was real: through the use of Electron Spin Resonance dating, the remains were assessed to be 5011 years old, putting Tan’gun to roughly 3000 BCE which was even earlier than conventional accounts.

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29 Kim Chŏngsuk “Pukhan eso ŭi Tan’gun yŏn’gu” [Studies of Tan’gun in North Korea], in Yun Ihŭm et al., 278.
30 Mun Ch’angno, “Pukhan ŭi kodaesa insik kwa yŏn’gu kyŏnghyang” [North Korea’s perception of ancient history and scholarly trends], *Han’gukhak Nonch’ong* 29 (2006): 167-224, 178.
31 Ibid., 195.
Based on this excavation, the North claimed that Koreans had been endowed with a state and civilization early on, thus having been able to develop a “splendid” culture over the course of five thousand years. The location of the grave also allowed the North to emphasize the central role of P’yŏngyang in Korean history, adding legitimacy to the North’s claims as the true successor of Tan’gun’s legacy. Indeed, the government turned the grave into a national monument by reconstructing it into an enormous pyramid that became the site of pilgrimages and mass commemorations. As scholars suggest, this sudden turn by the north may have been a mechanism to cope with its increasing international isolation precipitated by the fall of the Soviet Union. Further, with Kim Il Sung’s failing health, the emphasis on grand dynastic lineages may also have intended to facilitate the succession of power to his son, Kim Jong Il.

![Figure 6. Tan’gun’s alleged grave in Kangdong in the 1930s (Tonga Ilbo 1932.4.26)](image)

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32 Sahoe Kwahakwŏn, “Tan’gunnung palgul pogo” [Report on Excavation of Tan’gun’s grave], in Yun Ihŭm et al., 682.
34 “Tan’gun chwadamhoe” [Tan’gun round-table], in Yun Ihŭm et al., 831.
The news of the discovery of Tan’gun’s skeletal remains was met with great skepticism by southern scholars who were particularly dubious about the method that the North claimed to have employed to derive the age of the remains. Nonetheless, the North was able to count on the
support of some southerners, particularly members of the Taejonggyo. Already sidelined by the South Korean government, the religion endorsed the North’s discovery and even aided it in setting up Tan’gun-related rituals. Leading this effort was An Hosang, the former minister of education who had become the leader of the Taejonggyo (1992-1997). In Beijing, he cooperated with the North’s state-sanctioned Ch’ŏndogyo faction to work out the ceremonies commemorating Tan’gun and even made an illegal trip to North Korea to pay his respect at what had become Tan’gun’s mausoleum. He even performed rituals there with his North Korean counterparts to commemorate Tan’gun’s Ascension.35 Shortly after that, the North also began commemorating National Foundation Day on October 3, just as the South had done. In this way, the North Korean government was increasingly employing religious and mythical symbolisms for its own propagandist purposes, laying claim to Tan’gun and presenting itself as the rightful heir of Korea’s main lineage.

This was also reflected in the drastic changes that occurred in North Korean historiography. All of a sudden, Tan’gun became aggrandized as a heroic figure onto which all kinds of exploits and legendary stories were projected. Ancient history was finally being rewritten in North Korean fashion, although with the help of outside sources: in fact, the North began making use of fake documents such as the Kyuwŏn Sahwa and others that had appeared in the South more recently, such as the Hwandan Kogi (Ancient Records of the Hwan and Tan Dynasties).36 Thus, South Korean fringe history had become official North Korean history. By the late 1990s, the North—based on the findings of Tan’gun—even began advancing the notion

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that ancient Korea had developed its unique “Taedong River civilization” in the P’yŏngyang area which was one of the five great ancient civilizations alongside Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and China. Indeed, emphasis was put on the fact that this civilization was not influenced by any outside forces as it was argued that Koreans were able to maintain their racial purity. Moreover, the civilization was also presented as being older than the other four examples, proving the superiority of Korea’s roots. In this respect, although it took the North longer to embrace Tan’gun, once it did, it did so with much vigor and imagination, surpassing anything that the South Korean government had ever undertaken. As the North was appropriating Tan’gun to create its own mythical aura, it intersected with the efforts by South Koreans such as An Hosang, the Taejonggyo’s most vocal proponent and a man of much controversy.

An Hosang and the Conflict between Fringe History and Academia in the South

Indeed, An Hosang was a figure of many dimensions: He was a philosopher who had received his Ph.D. in Germany in 1929, an admirer of Hitler, and a government official who as South Korea’s first minister of education contributed greatly to the republic’s ideological underpinnings. His efforts to organize student groups modeled after the Hitler Jugend during his tenure as minister of education have also led to perceptions of him as a fascist. Most relevant to this study, An was also a devout member and later leader of the Taejonggyo as well as the most prominent of fringe historians. While his early writings focus much on philosophy, he began publishing historical works in the 1960s, aligning himself with the pre-liberation tradition

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37 Hŏ Chongho, “Chosŏn ŭi “Taedonggang munhwa” nŭn segye 5-dae munmyŏng ŭi hana” [Korea’s “Taedong River Culture” is one of the five cradles of civilization], in Yun Ihŭm et al., 741-754.
38 An Hosang, “Segyejŏk inmul hoegyŏn’gi: Hit’ŭllŏ, Ainsŭt’ain, Oiken chessi ŭi insang” [Account of global figures: impressions of Hitler, Einstein, and Euken], Chogwang 4(11) (1938.11), 86-89. In this text, An Hosang is particularly effusive about Hitler’s oratory skills and the image he projects as a true activist.
39 See Yŏn Chŏngŭn, “An Hosang ŭi Ilminjuŭi wa chongch’i kyoyuk hwaltong” [An Hosang’s One Nation and political and educational activities], Yŏksa Yŏn’gu 12 (2003.6), 7-38.
of religiously inspired histories. At the same time, however, he also went far beyond the scope of previous works as he aggrandized Korean history to an entirely new level. In a book published for an English-reading audience, for instance, he traced the origins of the Korean people to the fourth millennium BCE, that is, even preceding Tan’gun’s purported founding of Korea by over a thousand years. Geographically as well, he expanded Korea’s original territory far outside the peninsula and even Manchuria, claiming that the ancient Korean race had “colonized and held the entire Chinese mainland about six thousand years or more ago.”\textsuperscript{40} He thus positioned the original Korean race as the creator of East Asian culture to which the Chinese were greatly indebted, even suggesting that many great Chinese figures such as Confucius were in fact descendants of Koreans who had mixed into the local populace. This way, An was claiming even Chinese cultural achievements for the Korean nation and pushing fringe history even more toward a völkish type of history characterized by populist ideas, glorification of one’s race, and blatantly contrived facts.

But An Hosang did not stop there as he continued to develop his views as ancient historical documents were suddenly “rediscovered.” One was the \textit{Tan’gi Kosa (Ancient History of Tan’gun)} which was published in 1959, but purported to reach back all the way to the eighth century. The contents of the work were very much in line with the \textit{Kyuwŏn Sahwa} in its narration of Tan’gun’s line of descent, although it sought to juxtapose events in Korean history with astronomical observations. A more important and consequential work was the \textit{Hwandan Kogi}, published in 1979. This book actually consisted of a number of documents, the oldest of which was claimed to date from around the seventh century. The uniqueness of this work was that it completely reimagined the periodization of Korean history which generally was considered to

\textsuperscript{40} An Hosang, \textit{The Ancient History of the Korea-Dong-I Race: the Korea-Dong-I race, Creator of East Asian Culture} (Seoul: Institute of Baedal (Korean) Culture, 1974), 31.
have started in 2333 BCE. The *Hwandan Kogi* pushed Korea’s recorded history further back in time—by five millennia. This was accomplished by adding two more dynasties before Tan’gun’s founding of Korea, with the oldest being Hwan’guk ruled by a Hwanin lineage, a reference to Tan’gun’s grandfather, and the following dynasty called Paedal which was ruled by a Hwanung lineage, a reference to Tan’gun’s father. Thus the three generations of Hwanin, Hwanung, and Tan’gun were seen as representing a dynasty each, with Hwan’guk having lasted 3301 years and Paedal 1565 years, pushing the beginning of Korean history back to 7197 BCE. An Hosang fervently endorsed this narrative, expanding Korean history from an already impressive 6000 years to a whopping 9000 years.41

It was not just An alone who was greatly invigorated by the appearance of fake documents, but an entire group of people around him. In 1975, An started an organized push to propagate fringe history by producing “academic” journals dedicated to his type of pseudo-scholarship. This coincided with the government’s decision to directly produce and mandate history textbooks since 1974, offering an opening for An to push his agenda. Thus, An and his group petitioned the government to include their views in the government’s history textbooks. In 1981, thanks to Korean politicians who were sympathetic to his cause, An even managed to initiate a public hearing at the parliament that put academic historians who were in charge of the textbooks on the defensive. Granted, An’s claims were preposterous as he championed notions such as that Beijing was once the capital of the Kingdom of Paekche and that Korea had ruled over the entirety of Japan. Regarding Tan’gun, it was his contention that Korean history textbooks should clearly indicate his historicity as the actual founder of Korea rather than portraying him as a mythical entity. However, one of the most effective and persisting criticisms

41 An Hosang, “Kukcho Tan’gun (Paedal imgūm) ŭl pattūrō minjok chuch’esōng ŭl hwangnip haja” [Let us establish national subjectivity by elevating the national forefather Tan’gun (the Paedal king)], *Kyōreol* (1997), 75-77.
his camp lodged against academic historians was that the latter group was practically continuing
the much maligned practice of colonial historiography created by the Japanese to devalue Korean
history and portray it as heavily influenced by foreign powers.\(^{42}\) Was there any truth to this
charge?

It is true that many of the mainstream historians prominent in the post-liberation era such
as Yi Pyŏngdo and Yi Kibaek (1924-2004) had been trained in the Japanese positivist school
during colonial times. However, in regard to their depictions of ancient Korean history, such
historians have also been accused of the opposite charge: that their frameworks were actually too
much shaped by a nationalist desire to aggrandize Korea’s past and project too much significance
onto the myth of Tan’gun. This is a criticism made by Hyung Il Pai who takes issue with
mainstream South Korean scholars for erroneously applying the unit of the nation onto the
ancient past and misinterpreting archeological evidence for the sake of national history.\(^{43}\)
Indeed, there is a remarkable uniformity among mainstream South Korean scholars such as Yi
Pyŏngdo, Yi Kibaek, and Kim Chŏnhak in embracing the Tan’gun myth as a repository of some
fundamental truths about ancient Korea. In doing so, they refute earlier Japanese scholars who
saw the myth as a later invention that had nothing to do with actual ancient history. Granted, few
of the mainstream scholars in South Korea accept Tan’gun as an actual historical figure, opening
up opportunities for fringe historians to accuse them of a defeatist colonial view. Nonetheless,
academic historians generally accept that the myth, or at least elements of it, are of ancient origin
and that if read correctly, reveal important facts about bronze-age Korean society, economy and
religion. Especially the methodologies that had earlier been employed by Ch’oe Namsŏn and

\(^{42}\) Ki Kyŏngryang, “Saibi yŏksahak kwa yŏksa p’asijŭm” [Pseudo-history and historiographical fascism], \textit{Yŏksa Pип’yŏng} 114 (2016 Spring), 221-4.
Paek Namun are influential, as scholars particularly narrow in on the meaning of the bear and tiger, often viewing them as totems representing different tribes and spiritual traditions that were competing in an age of emerging class divisions.\textsuperscript{44} Although these figurative readings are sometimes criticized by contemporary religious scholars,\textsuperscript{45} Totemism has become the predominant framework through which the Tan’gun myth is understood among mainstream academics.

In this respect, it has been widely accepted among South Korean scholars that the myth of Tan’gun is of ancient origin. The problem is, however, that the myth’s first known emergence is traced to the thirteenth-century \textit{Samguk Yusa} which is far removed from the period the myth claims to be depicting. One way scholars sought to overcome this gap was through archeological undertakings. In 1948, Kim Chaewŏn, a European-trained art historian, claimed to have identified motifs from the Tan’gun myth in Chinese carvings found in the Wu family shrines in the Shandong peninsula. Since these carvings dated from the first or second century CE, this discovery was lauded as evidence that the myth had been known over a millennium prior to the \textit{Samguk Yusa}, and hence was not, as Japanese scholars had claimed, a relatively late fabrication.\textsuperscript{46} However, Kim’s interpretation of the carvings was not universally accepted as even some Korean scholars noted that his visual identifications were erroneous in that he had neglected the overall context of the carvings and misidentified figures likely due to his own selection bias.\textsuperscript{47} Kim’s interpretation has been highly influential as it was even adopted in English-language publications.\textsuperscript{48} Nonetheless, the flaws in his theory meant that the claim of the

\textsuperscript{44} Yi P’ilyŏng, “Tan’gun Yŏn’gusa” [History of the study of Tan’gun], in Yun Ihŭm et al., 110-121.
\textsuperscript{45} “Tan’gun chwadamhoe,” 838.
\textsuperscript{46} Pai Hyung Il, 71.
\textsuperscript{47} Yi P’ilyŏng, 111. Hyung Il Pai also offers a criticism of Kim Chaewŏn’s interpretation of the carvings. See Pai, 71-4.
\textsuperscript{48} For one example, see Peter H. Lee et al., \textit{Sources of Korean Tradition Volume I: From Early Times through the Sixteenth Century} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 5.
Tan’gun myth’s antique nature needed to be based on a different foundation. Indeed, Korean scholars have come to argue that its contents in and of itself suggest that the myth is of antique origin: for one, the fact that the story of Tan’gun was transmitted in the form of a myth implied ancient origins—after all, why concoct a myth of this kind as late as the thirteenth century? Second, the myth resembled other Northeast Asian founding myths of Siberian or Ainu origin that involved animal-ancestry, suggesting that the Tan’gun myth was indeed a genuine myth of a similar kind and period. In other words, this line of thinking holds that the Tan’gun myth is of ancient nature simply because it feels old, rehabilitating the myth as a “real” one. The possibility that the Tan’gun myth could have drawn from such other northeast Asian examples in the thirteenth century especially with the Mongol presence in Korea seems to be entertained only by scholars active outside Korea.

Unsurprisingly, South Korean history textbooks were very much in line with predominant views as they emphasized that the Tan’gun myth was a founding myth of great antiquity just as other nations around the world had their age-old tales of their own origins. The very existence of a founding myth was thus seen as a universal marker of civilization, making it only natural for Koreans to have their own. The textbooks also argued that the myth reflected a historical reality—although they tended to eschew depicting Tan’gun as an actual individual, Totemism, tribal competition, emerging class divisions, and the existence of an ancient Korean state were all turned into historical facts that were evidenced by the myth. Granted, the textbooks were often vague about when exactly this ancient Korean state had emerged, as even some of the authors of

49 “Tan’gun munje e taehan t’oron” [Discussion of the problem of Tan’gun], in Yun Ihŭm et al., 779.
50 Hyun-Key Kim Hogarth, Korean Shamanism and Cultural Nationalism (Seoul: Jimoondang Pub., 1999), 259.
52 Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wiwŏnhoe, Kuksa (sang) [National History (upper volume)] (Seoul: Taehan Kyokwasŏ Chusik Hoesa, 1990), 17-8.
the textbooks such as Ch’oe Mongnyong privately dated the emergence of Old Chosŏn to 1000-1300 BCE rather than 2333 BCE.\textsuperscript{53} What was particularly emphasized in these textbooks, however, was the notion that the Tan’gun myth had served as a “mental anchor” and rallying point for the Korean nation throughout history and allowed Koreans to express a strong national self-consciousness of divine election and heavenly descent.\textsuperscript{54} This imbued the myth with much historical significance regardless of the truth value of its contents. Such textbook accounts, of course, were rearrangements of history as Kija and Koreans’ veneration of him were virtually erased from the pages of history, allowing the story of Tan’gun to preside as the singular most important symbol of the Korean nation.

Despite the nationalist tones of the textbooks, this was not enough for fringe historians such as An Hosang who wanted an even stronger commitment to the expansiveness of ancient Korea and the historicity of Tan’gun. Continuing their attacks on mainstream historians in the late 1980s, the fringe historians finally saw some success in exerting influence over the textbooks. Ch’oe Mongnyong, the scholar in charge of writing ancient history for the government-mandated textbook since 1990, acknowledges that he accommodated the views by fringe historians, trying to find a compromise between mainstream and non-mainstream perspectives.\textsuperscript{55} This began to be expressed in the 1990 version of the textbook and then became even more amplified in the version from 1996: For one, the textbooks referred to Tan’gun not merely as a mythical figure, but as the title of the ruler of Old Chosŏn, thus adding historical reality to the name. Old Chosŏn’s territory was also associated with the distribution of mandolin-

\textsuperscript{53} “Tan’gun chwadamhoe,” 805.
\textsuperscript{55} “Tan’gun chwadamhoe,” 834-5.
shaped bronze daggers, allowing the territory of ancient Koreans to be extended to include much of Manchuria, Liaoning and the Shandong peninsula. Further, Hwanung is depicted as a symbol of an advanced people that considered itself to be descendants of heaven and expressed its “superiority” over surrounding tribes. The account particularly emphasizes Tan’gun’s link to religion, arguing that he was a ruler of a theocracy that connected ancestral worship to the worship of heaven and imposed his religious system onto subordinate tribes. This strong connection between Tan’gun and heaven worship in particular was something that did not exist in previous textbooks to the same degree and evokes the Taejonggyo’s own ideas. A map illustrating the vast distribution of ancient Koreans as indicated by the madolin-shaped bronze daggers was also something that had been included in the textbooks only with the impact of fringe historians since 1990.56 While the textbook did not accommodate all of the fringe historians’ demands, this level of glorification of the ancient Korean race was certainly something that could be ascribed to their efforts.

56 Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wiwŏnhoe, Kuksa (sang) [National History (upper volume)] (Seoul: Taehan Kyokwasŏ chusik hoesa, 1996), 26-31.
Despite such achievements, the fringe historians’ demands continue. They have been exerting pressure on politicians and government officials with increasing success, resulting in important research funds being channeled away from projects that are regarded as anti-nationalistic even if they actually represent long-held scholarly views. This is particularly the case with the more recent discussions on the locations of the Han Commanderies with mainstream scholars locating particularly the Lelang Commandery in the P’yŏngyang area, while

Figure 8. Ancient Korean territory according to the government's high school textbook of 1996\(^{57}\)

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 30.
fringe historians position it outside the Korean peninsula, allowing them to aggrandize ancient Korean territory and move Han influence away from the Korean peninsula. The personal attacks and bedeviling to delegitimize mainstream scholars as slaves to colonial historiography is also a problem that has turned this debate into something of a witch-hunt. Certainly, academic scholars have not been silent as they have launched counterattacks since the late 1970s. And although in the realm of textbooks, much ground has been ceded to fringe historians, younger scholars less afraid to speak up have recently stepped up to form a bulwark against the excesses of fringe historians. However, with their belligerence and fanatical zeal, fringe historians are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Granted, they are not a uniform group as some are motivated by religion, as was the case with An Hosang, whereas others do not proclaim any religious affiliations and trace their spiritual lineage back to Sin Ch’ae-ho. Further, while they all take issue with academics’ depictions of ancient Korea, their views also often differ from each other in terms of how expansive Korea actually was. Still, the increase of channels to propagate their populist views—the internet, cable TV, and pseudo-academic journals—certainly has enabled them to reach an audience much larger than before. Considering this, there is no end in sight to the onslaught on academic history and the conflict surrounding Korea’s ancient past.

Religious Conflict over Tan’gun

As was evident in the case of An Hosang, the Taegonggyo championed the cause of fringe history since it was part of its DNA, but also because this was a way to make the religion relevant again. However, it was not just the Taegonggyo that took up this cause, as a number of

58 Ki Kyŏngryang, 223.
59 Examples are: Chŏlmŭn Yŏksahakcha Moim, Han’guk Kodaesa wa Saibi Yŏksahak [Ancient korean history and pseudo-history] (Koyang: Yŏksa Pip’yŏngsa, 2017), which is based on articles that appeared in the following: Yŏksa Pip’yŏng Vol. 114 (2016.2), 115 (2016.5), 117 (2016.11), 118 (2017.2).
other religious and semi-religious groups followed suit. One example is the Chŭngsando, another new religious movement with roots in the early twentieth century, which thanks to its larger capital and audience even came to exceed the Taejonggyo in its efforts to propagate fake histories such as the *Hwandan Kogi*. While the religion was not traditionally focused on Tan’gun and ancient Korean history, it took up this cause in the 1980s with the emergence of such fake histories.\(^6^0\) Another example is Dahn World, originally Tanhak Sŏnwŏn, a yoga organization that was formed in 1980 and has since become an international entity with yoga studios across the world. This group was behind the Hanmunhwa Undong Yŏnhap (Korean Cultural Campaign Association) which was part of a movement that avowed to rectify ancient Korean history as a means of “recovering” Korea’s national spirit. At the center of this effort was the famous poet Kim Chiha who attacked positivist history as unfit for discussing Korea’s roots and openly championed a more creative approach to ancient Korean history that could be useful for the future of the Korean nation.\(^6^1\)

The Hanmunhwa Undong Yŏnhap was also at the center of the controversy over the Tan’gun statues which the organization erected between 1998 and 1999: with the financial crisis of 1997 that hit South Korea hard, the group sought to lift Korean morale and rally the nation by setting up Tan’gun statues all over the country. While it did so on its own expense, the statues—which amounted to a total of 369—were placed in public spaces such as schools and parks.\(^6^2\) While the statues came with seemingly harmless inscriptions that supplicated for unification of


\(^6^1\) Kim Chiha, “Sanggosa Undong Pip’an e daehae Kim Chiha ssi panbangmun” [Kim Chiha’s rebuttal of criticisms of the Ancient History Movement], *Tonga Ilbo* 1999.8.18, 12.

\(^6^2\) Out of the 369 statues, 228 were erected in elementary schools, 54 in middle and high schools, 3 in kindergartens, 3 in colleges, 29 in parks, 23 in public spaces, and 29 on private property. See “Tan’gunsang kaltŭng chŏngmyŏn ch’ungdol ro ch’idanna?” [Will the conflict surrounding the Tan’gun statues turn into an all-out confrontation?], in Yun Ihŭm et al., 735.
Korea, the model of the statue was in fact based on the Taejonggyo’s portrait of Tan’gun used for religious purposes and not the one that had been used for civic affairs. Indeed, this was also how Christian groups regarded that statue: as a religious symbol, or rather an idol, that was intruding into public spaces and thus infringing on their own freedom of religion. Dozens of statues were thus beheaded or damaged in other ways by enraged individuals, while Christian organizations began efforts on the national and grassroots level to have the Tan’gun statues removed. This was successful in a number of places, although the Tan’gun supporters did not remain silent, making their discontent public by holding counter-rallies and even funerals for the decapitated statues. While many of the statues have since been removed, a good number remain standing in schoolyards, offering potential for further conflict.

Figure 9. A Tan’gun statue erected in the wake of the IMF crisis (public domain)

63 “Hanmunhwa Undong Yŏnhap tung 50 yō tanch’ae ôle minjok chŏngsin suho jiphoe”[50-something groups including the Hanmunhwa Undong Yŏnhap staged rally yesterday for the protection of the national spirit], Tonga Ilbo 1999.10.11, 30.
64 Timothy Lee, 93-5.
This impassioned rejection of Tan’gun, however, also revealed internal divisions among Christians as not everybody was negatively inclined toward Korea’s founding father. As discussed, in the early twentieth century, Western missionaries had already claimed to have identified Christian motifs in the Tan’gun myth which allowed them to portray Christianity as compatible with Korea’s spiritual tradition. Thus, Tan’gun came to be seen as a Christ-like figure within a Korean Trinity that suggested that Koreans had been endowed with some fundamental religious truths even prior to contact with Christianity. Even during the colonial period, there is evidence that Korean Christians may have internalized some of these ideas as the Ch’amsŏngdan, the heaven worship altar on Mount Mani which had been traditionally linked with Tan’gun, became appropriated for local Christian worshipping practices. This link between Tan’gun and Christianity was also reproduced by a number of Korean theologians after liberation, including Yun Sŏngbŏm and Ham Sŏkhŏn. The argument often was that the deity appearing in the Tan’gun myth was none other than the Christian God himself which made it possible to affirm both Korean tradition and Christianity at the same time, while also reinforcing the idea of Christianity as something natural to the Korean people. There were also even more creative ways of connecting Tan’gun to the Christian tradition, as some came to consider Koreans to have originated from ancient Israelites by imagining Tan’gun as a descendant of biblical figures such as Noah or Jacob. Especially in the latter case, the people of Tan’gun were portrayed as the descendants of Jacob’s son Dan based on the phonetic similarities between

Kim Ŭnsŏp, “Yesu wa Tan’gun, kū Kujo wa yunghap” [Jesus and Tan’gun, their structure and fusion], *Kyohoe Sahak* 11(1) (2012), 149-151.

“Dan” and “Tan’gun,” turning the Korean nation into one of the lost tribes of Israel.\(^6^7\) Granted, this type of embrace of Tan’gun seems to be a relatively minor phenomenon within Korean Christianity which in general is characterized by a more uncompromising attitude. Nonetheless, even within the Korean Church, opinions on Tan’gun vary.

Overall, the post-liberation period saw the myth of Tan’gun become firmly ensconced in the Korean imaginary as the most foundational expression of Korean identity. While it took the North longer to reach this stage, the paths of both North and South Korea ultimately converged in turning Tan’gun into the premier symbol of the Korean nation. At the same time, however, both North and South used Tan’gun to buttress their respective claims as legitimate representative of the Korean nation. Thus the arena of competition between the two Koreas had also begun to encompass Tan’gun. In this respect, although Koreans often envision him as a potential common denominator that can facilitate unification between the two states, so far, Korea’s founding father has only functioned to exacerbate the division between the two. Indeed, the contest surrounding Tan’gun has been raging on within the South as well, between fringe historians and academic historians, between different religions, and sometimes even within the same religion. In this respect, as the myth of Tan’gun inspired an ever-increasing number of people, it also gave rise to new conflicts.

From an academic perspective, the rise of fringe history is a troubling phenomenon that defies any easy solution.\(^6^8\) After all, its proponents are impervious to historical and archeological facts. Some scholars even depict fringe history as “fascist history” due to its intolerance for other

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\(^6^7\) Timothy Lee, 95-97. Also, Pak Kwangyong 2000, 78. For an example of the view that sees the Korean people as the Tribe of Dan, see “Hanminjok ŭn Isŭrel ‘Danjip’a’ minjok ida” [The Korean nation is the tribe of Dan of Israel], http://www.victor.or.kr/kor/sn_news/2013/03/648-1.htm

\(^6^8\) Boudewijn Walraven offers a more benign take on fringe history. While he looks at the Chūngsando, he argues that these types of nationalist histories have emancipatory effects in that they enable these groups to define themselves and confirm their own group identity. See Walraven, “Parliament of Histories,” 174.
views, viscous attacks on academia, and sheer fanatical glorification of Korea’s ancient past. Indeed, as another scholar observed, the efforts to envision a grand expansive nation that originated deep in the Asian continent in fact resembles the more sinister and “trans-historical” efforts by imperial Japan to mobilize a Pan-Asian populace. One could even go so far as to liken the imaginative constructions of Korea’s grand origins to the fantasies by Nazi mystics who had imagined a noble Aryan race originating from the tops of the Himalayas. This, then, reveals the dark side of mythology, reminding us that “myth is never harmless.”

Today, the Taejonggyo is invariably recognized in history textbooks for its nationalist exploits. In this regard, it has indeed succeeded in becoming part of Korean history. As an active religion, however, the Taejonggyo has barely any presence anymore despite its continuous efforts to portray itself as Korea’s national religion (kukkyo). In contrast, fringe history, born out of the religion, is alive and well. It continues to demonstrate a remarkable resilience and an ever-expanding imagination of Korean history, while enjoying a solid readership especially thanks to perceived threats from China and Japan to appropriate and diminish Korean history. This has allowed fringe history to adorn the shelves of bookstores in Korea side by side with academic histories, making it difficult for the layman to distinguish between the two. Indeed, in simulating the semblance of academic scholarship, the line between fringe and academic history is not always clear. This is evident in the fact that sometimes scholars from otherwise respectable

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69 See Ki Kyŏngryang.
70 Pak Kwangyong, “Silchŭng musihan sanggosa sŏgi ilehe chŏngsin tongwŏn kwa hŭpsa” [Rectifying ancient history while ignoring documentary evidence resembling imperial Japan’s spiritual mobilization], Tonga Ilbo 1999.8.25, 13.
institutions also endorse fringe elements, although the degree of how “fringe” one is differs from person to person as there are various levels of extremes. The term “fringe” may also be misleading as it implies a minority view, but considering the large number of publications that fall within the rubric as well as their popularity, a different moniker in the English language might have to be found.

And so, there is no end in sight to the reinvention and mythical rennovation of Korean history. As this dissertation has shown, the myth of Tan’gun has been continuously debated, appropriated, and contested throughout history, not only by Koreans, but also by Japanese and Westerners alike. The myth’s various trajectories would all intersect in the early twentieth century, resulting in the rise of Tan’gun as a nationalist symbol and the emergence of the Taejonggyo. The religion constituted a strong effort to reclaim Tan’gun for the Korean nation and inscribe a noble, indigenous spiritual tradition into Korea’s past. Despite such endeavors, however, the religion was unable to monopolize the image of Tan’gun as competing visions persisted. Yes, Tan’gun had become the most salient symbol of the Korean nation, but even just a little bit of slippage could lead to discordant images. For instance, as was the case with Ch’oe Namsŏn, there was only a thin red line between Tan’gun as a quintessentially Korean symbol and Tan’gun as a signifier of Japanese-Korean unity. This was because the perceived expansiveness of ancient religious customs associated with Tan’gun could be readily used to underpin the affinity between the two nations in service of the Japanese empire. The very fact that the deification of Tan’gun emerged from Shintoist quarters also bolsters the impression that

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73 One example is Yi Chong’uk, former Professor of History at Sogang University and also president of the school between 2009 and 2013. Yi promoted as real another recently surfaced document called Hwarang Segi (The Generations of the Hwarang) which surfaced in 1989, but claimed to date from the eighth century. For more on the issues with the text, see Richard D. McBride II, “Pak Ch’anghwa and the Hwarang Segi manuscripts,” Journal of Korean Studies 13 (1) (2008), 57-88.
these diverse and opposing images of Tan’gun were often intricately connected on a deeper level. Even liberation of Korea in 1945 did not mean the end of the competition over Tan’gun, as schisms between the two Koreas, between different historical views, between different religions, and sometimes even within the same religion continued to give sustenance to a multiplicity of images. This also attests to the precariousness that underlies the seemingly hegemonic figure of Tan’gun as well as Korean nationalism at large.

Perhaps the most significant of the Taejonggyo’s legacies is that it set a precedent for a certain attitude toward Korean history. After all, not only was the Taejonggyo writing religious history, but it was also writing history religiously, turning the production of Korean history into a sacred endeavor. In other words, history had become religion—a hallowed, inviolable object of belief that required constant affirmation and commemoration, not just for members of the religion, but for many Koreans outside of it as well. This explains the numerous efforts to reimagine and rewrite Korean history over and over again as these were not just intellectual endeavors, but religious enterprises to confront, experience, and renew a sacred object. And thus, the evolution of Tan’gun is far from complete, as Korea’s founding father will no doubt continue to inspire the sentiments and imaginations of many to come, for better or worse.
Glossary

Akiba Takashi  秋葉 隆
Amaterasu  天照
Amenomori Hōshū  雨森 芳洲
An Ch’angho  安昌浩
An Chŏngbok  安鼎福
An Hosang  安浩相
Arai Hakuseki  新井 白石
Asadal  阿斯達
Awa-Katsuyama (domain)  安房勝山藩
Ban Kōkei  伴 建蹊
Bigan  比干
bunka seiji  文化政治
Bushido  武士道
Ch’ach’aung  次次雄
Ch’amsŏngdan  塙星壇
Chang Chiyŏn  張志淵
Chang Sŭngdu  張承斗
Changbaeksan (Changbaishan)  長白山
Changlinshan  長林山
chaeya  在野
chapki  雜記
Chesŏk  帝釋
Chewang Un’gi  帝王韻紀
Chinhan  辰韓
Cho Ch’angyong  趙昌容
Ch’oe Namsŏn  崔南善
Ch’oe Sŏkha  崔錫夏
Ch’oe Yŏng  崔鎬
Ch’ŏndogyo 天道教
Ch’ŏl 詩
Ch’ŏnbugyŏng 天符經
Chong 僧
Chŏng Ch’ŏk  鄭陟
Chonggyo 僧敎
Chŏng Kyo  鄭喬
Chŏng Wŏnt’ae  鄭元澤
Chŏng Yagyong  丁若鏞
Chŏng Yun  鄭潤
Ch’ŏnghakchip 靑鶴集
Ch’ŏnhwang 天皇
Chŏngsa 正史
Ch’ŏnsin 天神
Chŏsen Jingū 朝鮮神宮
Chŏsen Shakai Keizaishi 朝鮮社會經濟史
Chŏnsenshi 朝鮮史
Chŏnsenshi Henshūkai 朝鮮史編修會
Chosŏn 朝鮮
Chosŏn Chŏnsa 朝鮮編年
Chosŏn Ilbo 朝鮮日報
Chosŏn Kanggam 朝鮮輿論
Chosŏn Kwangmunhoe 朝鮮光文會
Chosŏn Kyehoe 朝鮮禊會
Chosŏnsa 朝鮮史
Chosŏn Sangosa 朝鮮上古史
“Chosŏn Sanggo Munhwasa” 朝鮮上古文化史
Chosŏnsa Yŏn’guch’o 朝鮮史研究草
Chosŏn Yŏksa 朝鮮歷史
Chosŏn Yugi 朝鮮留記
Chosŏn Yugyohoe 朝鮮儒敎會
Chumong 朱蒙
Chungbo Munhŏn Pigo 增補文獻備考
Chunggwang 重光
Chūngsan 甑山
Chūngsan 甑山道
Chusin 主神
Dai Nihon Shi 大日本史
“Dankun Kō” 檜君考
Dankun koku 檜君國
Dōkōkai 同光會
fuho no ne no kuni 父母の根の国
Fukumoto Nichinan 福本日南
Fuxi 伏羲
Gen'yōsha 玄洋社
Gion (Shrine) 祇園神社
Gion Nankai 祇園南海
Gozu Tennō 牛頭天王
 Guerrun 廣韻  
Gyojū Gaigen 駑戎慨言  
Haedong Ijŏk 海東異蹟  
Hakpu 學部  
Ham Sŏkhŏn 咸錫憲  
Han 韓  
Han Paekkyŏm 韓百謙  
hananim 하나님  
Han’guk T’ongsas 韓國痛史  
Hanmunhwa Undong Yŏnhap 한문화운동연합  
Hanul/Hanulnim 한율/한율님  
Hanshu 漢書  
Hayashi Gahō 林鵞峰  
Hayashi Razan 林羅山  
Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤  
Hŏ Mok 許穆  
Hogong 瓠公  
Hong Kyŏngnae 洪景來  
Hong Manjong 洪萬宗  
Hong Set’ae 洪世泰  
Hong Yŏha 洪汝河  
Hongbŏm Kuju/Hongfan Jiouchu 洪範九疇  
Hongbŏm Poksul 홍범복술, 洪範卜術  
Hongfan Jiouchu 洪範九疇  
Hongik In’gan 弘益人間
Hoshino Hisashi 星野 恒
Hou Hanshu 後漢書
Hozumi Yatsuka 穂積 八束
Hwan 桓
Hwandan Kogi 桓檀古記
Hwang Hyŏn 黃玹
Hwangŏm 桓儉
Hwangsŏng Sinmun 皇城新聞
Hwan’guk 桓國
Hwanin 桓因
Hwanung 桓雄
Hyŏk 赫
Hyŏn Chin’gŏn 玄鎭健
Hyŏnjŏnhoe 顯正會
Ilchinhoe 一進會
Im Asang 任雅相
Imanishi Ryū 今西 龍
Imna (also Mimana) 任那
Injo (King) 仁祖
Iryŏn 一然
Ise (Grand Shrine) 伊勢神宮
isin sŏlgyo 以神設敎
Isotakeru 五十猛神
Itō Hirobumi 伊藤博文
Jilin Leishi 鷄林類事
Jimmu (Emperor) 神武天皇
Jin (dynasty) 金

*Jindaikan Kuketsu* 神代巻口訣

Jingū (Empress) 神功皇后

Jingū 神宮

Jingū Hōkeikai 神宮奉敬會

*Jinshi* 金史

Kabo Kaehyŏk 甲午改革

Kaech’ŏnjŏl 開天節

Kamono Mizuho 賀茂水穂

Kang Ilsun 姜一淳

Kangxi 康熙

Kaibara Ekiken 貝原益軒

Kansai Shinshoku Rengōkai 関西神職連合会

Karakami 韓神

Keijō 京城

*Kenkyōjin* 鉗狂人

Ki Chun 箕準

Kija 箕子

Kija Silgi 箕子實記

Kijaji 箕子志

Kikkawa Hiroie 吉川広家

Kim Chaewŏn 金載元

Kim Chŏnggyu 金鼎奎

Kim Chŏnghak 金廷鶴

Kim Chonghan 金宗漢

Kim Chŏngho 金正浩
Kim Kwang  金洸
Kim Kyohŏn  金敎獻
Kim Okkyun  金玉均
Kim Yŏmbaek  金廉白
Kim Yonggi  金容起
Kim Yŏngyun  金永倫
Kim Yunsik  金允植
Kitabatake Chikafusa  北畠 親房
Kogi  古記
Kogûmi  古今記
Koguryŏ  高句麗
Kojiki  古事記
Kojosŏn  古朝鮮
kokugaku  國學
Kokuryûkai  黑竜会
kokutai  國体
Kompira  金毘羅
Koryŏsa  高麗史
Kosindo  古神道
kojūng  考證
kukkyo  國敎
Kume Kunitake  久米 邦武
Kunitama no Ōkami  國魂大神
kunja or kunshi  君子
Kwanggaet’o  廣開土
Kwŏn Kŭn  權近
Kwŏn Tŏkkyu 權惠奎
Kyego Ch’ajon 稽古築存
Kyŏngch’ŏn’gyo 敬天敎
Kyujanggak 奎章閣
Kyūshū Nippo 九州日報
Kyuwŏn Sahwa 揆園史話
Lelang (Commandery) 樂浪郡
Liao (dynasty) 遼
Liao Shi 遼史
Liu Shipei 劉師培
Maech’ŏn Yarok 梅泉野錄
Mahan 馬韓
Manisan 摩尼山
Manshū Chishi 滿洲地誌
Matara 摩多羅
Matsumura Yūnoshin 松村 雄之進
matsurigoto 政
migae 未開
minjok 民族
Motoori Norinaga 本居 宣長
Mudang Naeryŏk 巫黨來歷
mujin 戊辰
Murayama Chijun 村山智順
Muro Kyūsō 室鳩巢
Mutōshin 武塔神
Myohyangsan 妙香山
Na Ch’ŏl 羅喆
Na Inyŏng 羅寅永
Na Tuyŏng 羅斗永
Nabeshima Naoshige 鍋島直茂
Naka Michiyo 那珂 通世
Nam Hyo-on 南孝溫
Nihon Shoki 日本書紀
Nihon shugi 日本主義
O Kiho 吳基镐
O Un 吳潢
Ō Yunjŏk 魚允迪
Oda Shōgo 小田省吾
oep’yŏn 外篇
Ogasawara Shōzō 小笠原 省三
Ogye 五戒
Ogye Ilchijip 宛溪日誌集
Okamoto Ryūnosuke 岡本 柳之助
Orochi no Karasabi no Tsurugi 蛇韓鋤之劍
Paedal 倍達
Paedalchok Yōksa 倍達族歴史
Paedal Kongnon 倍達公論
Paek Namun 白南雲
Paek Pong 白峰
Paekche 百濟
Pak An’gi 朴安期
Pak Chiwŏn 朴趾源
Pak Hyŏkkŏse 朴赫居世
Pak Ŭnsik 朴殷植
P’alchobŏp 八條法
P’algwanhoe 八關會
Parhae 渤海
pogŭm 福音
Puk Aeja 北崖子
Pulgyo 佛教
*Purham Bunkaron* 不咸文化論
Puru 夫妻
Purudae 夫妻壇
Puyŏ 扶餘
Pyŏn Kyeryang 卞季良
Pyŏngjo 兵曹
ruiji shūkyō 類似宗教
Sakai Tadakuni 酒井 忠国
*Samch’ölli* 三千里
*Samguk Sagi* 三國史記
*Samguk Yusa* 三國遺事
*Samguksa Chōryo* 三國史節要
Samhan 三韓
*Samil Sin’go* 三一神誥 or 三一餡誥
Samnangsŏng 三郞城
Samsŏngsa 三聖祠
Sangje 上帝
Nuri Kim Dissertation Conclusion

sango sinin  上古神人
Sanguo Zhi  三國志
sangwŏn kapcha  上元甲子
sanŏp  産業
Sansin  山神
Segabo  世家譜
Sejo  世祖
Shangdi  上帝
Shennong  神農
Shigaku Zasshi  史學雜誌
Shigeno Yasutsugu  重野安繹
Shiji  史記
Shinden Kaihatsu Undō  心田開發運
Shinkan Dōgoku Tsūgan  新刊東國通鑑
Shinkoku Dōmō Senshū  神國童蒙先習
Shinsen Shōjiroku  新撰姓氏録
Shiratori Kurakichi  白鳥庫吉
Shōkōhatsu  衝口発
Shukuru Shungaku  宿蘆俊岳
Silla  新羅
Sillok  實錄
Sima Qian  司馬遷
Sin  神 or 神
Sin Ch’aeho  申采浩
Sin Kyusik  申圭植
Sin T’aeyun  申泰允
Sindan Minsa 神檀民史
Sindan Silgi 神檀實記
Sin’gung Ponggyōnghoe 神宮奉敬會
Sin’gyo 神敎
Sinhûng Mugwan Hakkyo 新興武官學校
sinin 神人
Sirhak 實學
sinin 神人
Sinsi 神市
Sinsidan 神市壇
Sō Kyesu 徐繼洙
so ŭi mŏri 小衣梅里
Sodo 蘇塗
Solgŏ 率居
Son Pyŏnghŭi 孫秉熙
Sone Arasuke 曾禰 荒助
Sŏngbu 聖父
sŏngin 聖人
Song Siyŏl 宋時烈
Sŏn’gyo 仙敎
Sŏnin Wanggŏm 仙人王儉
Soshimori 蘇尸茂利
Sudugyo 수두교
Sui Shu 隋書
Suksin 肅愼
Sunoji 旬五志
Sungch’ŏn’gyo  崇天敎
Sŭngmunwŏn  承文院
Sŭngjŏngwŏn  承政院
Sungsin Chohap  崇神人組合
Susanoo  素戋呜尊, 須佐之男命 (among others)
Susaro  秀斯老
Suzuki Matoshi  鈴木 眞年
Tae Choyŏng  大祚榮
Tae Yabal  大野勃
T’aebaeksan  太白山
Taeborum  大保銘
Taech’ŏn’gyo  代天敎
Taedong Sagang 大東史綱
Taedong Yŏksa 大東歷史
Taedonggyo  大同敎
Taehan Chaganghoe 大韓自強會
Taehan Cheguk 大韓帝國
Taehan Kunjŏngsŏ 大韓軍政署
Taehan Maeil Sinbo 大韓每日申報
Taehwangjo 大皇祖
T’aego 太祖
Taejonggyo  大倧敎
tairiku rōnin 大陸浪人
Takahashi Hisashi 高橋 久司
Takahashi Tōru 高橋亨
takeru タケル
Tamayama Jinja 玉山神社
*Tan’gi Kosa* 檀奇古史
*tangul* 당굴
Tan’gun 檀君 or 坛君
Tan’gun chi guk or Tan’gun’guk 檀君之國 or 檀君國
* Tan’gun’gi* 檀君記
Tan’gun’gyo 檀君敎
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“Tan’gun’gyo P’omyŏngso” 檀君敎佈明書
Tan’gun chech’ŏndae 檀君祭天臺
Tan’gun chech’ŏndan 檀君祭天壇
Tan’gun chech’ŏn sŏktan 檀君祭天石壇
*Tan’gun Pon’gi* 檀君本紀
*Tan’gyŏng* 檀經
*tanhyangmok* 檀香木
*Tanjo Sago* 檀祖事敎
* Tanjŏn* 檀典
*Tanjŏn Yoŭi* 檀典要義
*tanmok* 檀木
*tenbu* 天舞
Tō Teikan 藤 貞幹
Tokugawa Mitsukuni 徳川 光圀
“Toksa Sillon” 讀史新論
*Tongguk* 東國
*Tongguk Chiriji* 東國地理誌
*Tongguk T’onggam* 東國通鑑
Nuri Kim Dissertation Conclusion

*Tongguk Yŏkdae Ch’ongmok*  東國歷代總目
*Tongguk Yŏji Sŭngnam*  東國輿地勝覽
*Tonghak*  東學
*Tongi*  東夷
*Tongmaeng*  東盟
*Tongmong Sŏnsŭp*  童蒙先習
*Tongmyŏng (King)*  東明
*Tongnip Sinmun*  獨立新聞
*Tongsa*  東史
*Tongsa*  東事
*Tongsa Ch’anyo*  東史纂要
*Tongsa Kangmok*  東史綱目
*Tongsa Ryugo*  東事類考
*Tongsa Yŏnp’yo*  東史年表
*t’ongsinsa*  通信使
*Toyama Mitsuru*  頭山 滿
*Uchida Ryōhei*  內田 良平
*Udusan*  牛頭山
*Wang Kŏn*  王建
*Wang Shizhen*  王世貞
*Wanggŏm*  王儉
*Wanggŏmgyo*  王儉敎
*Wanwei Yubian*  宛委餘編
*Weishu*  魏書
*Weizi*  微子
*Wiman*  衛滿
Wŏngwang 圓光
Wu Taibo 吳太伯
Xiongnu 匈奴
Xu Wanwei Yubian 續宛委餘編
Yasaka (Shrine) 八坂神社
Yasakasha Kyūki Shūroku 八坂社舊記集錄
Yi Ch’anghwan 李昌煥
Yi Chonghwi 李鍾徽
Yi Hŭisŭng 李熙昇
Yi I 李珥
Yi Ik 李瀷
Yi Inyŏp 李寅燁
Yi Kang 李墦
Yi Ki 李沂
Yi Kibaek 李基白
Yi Kyubo 李奎報
Yi Nŭnghwa 李能和
Yi P’ilche 李弼濟
Yi Pōmsŏk 李範奭
Yi Pyŏngdo 李丙憲
Yi Pyŏnggi 李秉岐
Yi Sangnyong 李相龍
Yi Saek 李穡
Yi Sihang 李時恒
Yi Siyŏng 李始榮
Yi Sŏnggye  李成桂
Yi Sŭnghyu  李承休
Yi Sunsín  李舜臣
Yi Wŏnt’ae  李源台

Yŏrha Ilgi  燕行日記

Yoshida Kanetomo  吉田兼倶
Yu Hŭiryŏng  柳希齡
Yu Kŭn  柳瑾
Yugyo  儒敎
Yun Sebok  尹世復
Yun Sŏngbom  尹聖範
Yun Tusu  尹斗壽

Zenkoku Shinshoku Rengōkai  全国神職連合会
Zetaku  是琢
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*Soů*

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*Tongnip Sinmun*

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