Sena Tepebağlı

**MYTH, MEMORY AND REINVENTION IN KOREA: THE CASE OF TAN’GUN**

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A simple definition of a myth is ‘a story handed down through history, often through tradition, that explains or gives value to the unknown’. [[1]](#footnote-1) They are linked to religious, beliefs and rituals. In Korea, they have very important foundation myth which is Myth of Tan’gun. This myth is about a bear-woman, the king, Hwanung, and their son Tan’gun. Like all the myths, there are both people who believe in this story and think that it is fabrication.

The oldest document which is about this myth came from thirteenth century thanks to the Buddhist monk Iryon. According to the Myth of Tan’gun, once upon a time Hwanin who known as a lord of the celestial gave a big place which included three mountains to his grandson, Hwanung. He had all the responsibilities around here and managed in his own way. And he called this place the City of God. One day, a bear and a tiger who wanted to be human came to him and ask if it was possible. Hwanung gave them mugwort and twenty garlic and said that if they eat these only and live without sunshine for one hundred days they will be human. After twenty one days tiger gave up and bear became a woman. But then a some problems occurred. How the bear-women had a child ? After multifold pray, the king Hwanung slept with bear-women and they had a child whose name is Tan’gun.

After Iryon’s version of this myth, Yi Sung-hyu wrote about it with just some little differences. In the fifteenth century, this myth had a big place in Korea’s historical and cultural consciousness. In fact, in Yi dynasty Tan’gun was seen as an ancestor and they asked to dedicate a shrine to the Tan’gun.

In addition to Myth of Tan’gun, there is another one which is known as The Myth of Kija. If we compare these myths, Kija has bigger place in the Korean history and culture. Some people think that Tan’gun did not affect the Korean identity so much. Also when we look at the interaction with other cultures, Koreans had a connection with early China thanks to the The Kija Myth.

When we back to the Tan’gun there are some elements about this myth. The she-bear and tigress which took a place in the story seen as a tribal totems. Furthermore, some Korean historians considered that Tan’gun is a real tribal founder. Other ones thought that Tan’gun is the personification of transformation of tribe into modern Korean people.

1. Received from: http://www.dl.ket.org/latin/mythology/whatisa.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)