

The perception and function of myth in historical writings of the Koryŏ period

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1. Introduction

Since the Chosŏn dynasty period, mythological stories have been widely dismissed as unreliable sources for historical compilations. The fantastic elements that are embodied in mythical tales were considered to contort historical ‘truth’, a concept which, in the context of Neo-Confucian rationalism, signified impartial information of past events. However, in Chosŏn texts such as the *Tongguk t'onggam* (‘Comprehensive mirror of Korea’, 1485), *Sinjŏng Tongguk yji sŏngnam* (‘Geographical survey of Korea’, 1530), and *Tongsa kangmok* (‘Outline of Korean history’, 1778), historical writings from earlier periods that incorporate legends and myths are criticised yet used as references. The Tan’gun legend appears in the *Tongguk saryak* (1403), *Samguksa chŏryo* (‘Chronological summary of the Three Kingdoms’, 1476) and *Tongguk t'onggam*. Under the account of the first year of the founding of Silla in the first chapter of the *Samguksa chŏryo*, there is an annotation on the birth of King Hyŏk se that is found in the *Samguk yusa* (‘Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms’, c. 1285) by Iryŏn. Likewise, under the account of the fifth year of Silla, there is an annotation on *Samguk yusa*’s reference to the birth of Hyŏk se’s future wife. However, in the *Tongguk t'onggam*, which is the extended version of the *Samguksa chŏryo*, the annotations relating these ‘unusual’ stories are entirely omitted. In the ‘Ch’aegŏs mok’ section in “Pmnye” of chapter one of the *Tongsa kangmok*, the *Samguk yusa* and Kim Pusik’s *Samguk sagi* (‘The History of the Three Kingdoms’, 1145) are both criticised for their inclusion of ‘unreliable’ accounts, which refer to the stories that incorporate peculiar events. In ‘Koesŏl pyŏnjŏng’ of “Pu kwŏn” (Appendix) of the same text, it states that the *Samguk yusa* “lists as many questionable matters in vain, and many of the names of people and places have been taken from Buddhist scriptures.” It goes on to claim that “it is a pitiful thing that people writing history, full of regret when unable to find facts that are worthy of noting, should have incorporated these (fantastic and supernatural) stories in authentic chronicles, whereby reducing a land of benevolence to that of strange clans.” At the same time, however, the *Tongsa kangmok* records stories from the *Samguk yusa* in a section in the appendix that recount ‘strange stories’ (‘Ko-i’). Despite the clear segregation of the ‘strange stories’ category under which these stories are placed, the fact that the text included such a category raises questions related to the function and importance of myth.

In the Koryŏ period, while the institutionalisation of historical compilation developed, and the adherence to Confucian rationalism was expected within these institutions, myth remained as a significant element in historical records. In discussing myth and its function in historical writings, it is first necessary to observe

the traditional perception of history, and how the recording of history developed in early Korea. In considering the traditions of history in the Kory period, an understanding of traditional Chinese thought pertaining to history and development of historical forms is essential as they influenced those of early Korea.

2. Traditions and understanding of history in ancient China

While the concept of 'history' as a term has had different connotations in the past, the perception of history was often supported by religious beliefs and legendary accounts in ancient Chinese civilisation. The earliest Chinese historical texts emerged with the necessity to record the performance of sacrificial rites of rulers of the first dynasties. In doing so, genealogical records of the rulers were compiled and kept by a scribe. The inscriptions of names of the royal lineage can be seen on sheep bones and tortoise shells, which served as oracular instruments. These early historians were most likely scribes transmitting natural occurrences and human events, including court commands and state affairs. Natural occurrences and the movement of the heavens were closely observed, whereby astronomy became an integral subject in the writing of history. Prayers and divination were believed to be closely related to occurrences of natural phenomena that affected human fortunes and misfortunes.

Over time, history developed from the remaking of ancient myths to the refining of crude superstitious ideas to conform to reason. Methods and objectives of historical literature were shaped by rational discourse. The institution of history writing was established, with the court's appointment of scholar bureaucrats entrusted with the task of compiling dynastic or 'standard' histories. With Confucian rationalism, the essence of history was the objective truth based on the consistency of existing records, and justified explanation of cause and effect. Praise and blame were considered to be the fundamental elements of official history. In order to achieve objectivity in historical writing, Chinese historians collected and preserved existing documents on which they based their work. The past was to be perceived as a series of concrete events, and history as an accurate and dispassionate registration of them. As Liu Hsieh stated, "in writing a historical record...the record must include sources collected by hundreds of authors; stand the test of time for thousands of years; show the evidences of rise and decline of a state, and demonstrate the reasons for its rise and decline." (Liu 1970:123-124) In these ways, the Chinese historians developed a method of collecting information, largely from earlier authoritative documents, filtering out the insignificant or unreliable details, and compiling selections. With the establishment and development of standard history that strove to narrate impartial and accurate events of the past, there was a growing tendency to exclude unreliable sources, namely myths, legends, astrological data, and untenable records of natural occurrences. There was a growing tendency to include official data pertaining to court politics in their place. Balazs's study and table of the distribution of 'Treatises', or monographs, in dynastic histories confirm this shift in tendency. From his table (Beasley 1961:86), we observe the following: an overall decline in the number of monographs on 'sciences', or cosmology and unusual phenomena, and an overall increase in the number of monographs pertaining to government administration in standard histories over time. This tendency signifies that history developed into, among other things, bureaucratic guides for functionaries, and, as Balazs puts it, "the shift in interest from the irrational towards the rational, from the ritual to the functional, from the speculative to the concrete; in other words, secularisation, rationalisation, and bureaucratisation." (Beasley 1961:87)

The function of standard history was to reflect a given society, namely its political ethics and events, so that the content would not only supply later historians with material, but also provide later officials with an insight on how to govern. With restraints in content and style imposed by the court for the beneficial reputation of the government in power in the compilation of standard histories, officials who wished to write history without external restraint often took on the task of writing private histories. Many private historians wished to include not only objective data, but also legends and stories surrounding historical events. Divine causality was not rejected, but added to emphasise the spirit of the times when people still believed in the intervention of the Mandate of Heaven. The concept of historical 'truth' was not defined, but rather challenged by the integration of myths. While private histories were unaffected by political bias and conventional rules, they have been for centuries considered as 'miscellaneous' works containing spurious information that distort the 'truth'. Hence, while many officials and scholars wrote private histories over time, these have often been dismissed as *pi-chi*, or notebooks, by historiographers.

3. Traditions and epistemology of history in Kory (918 - 1392)

The early Korean concept of history was similar to that of early China. History writing developed from the transmitting of myths to the filtering of chimerical ideas to the establishment of historical methodologies, whereby history writing as an institution eventually emerged and developed. Confucianism, which constituted the historical perspective of the medieval period, emphasised the moral virtue of the rulers and the role of officialdom in service. Confucian virtue and ethics furthered the goal of enlightened rule, sought peace in foreign policy, and affected cultural society. There emerged a systematic recording of history by scholar bureaucrats appointed by the court. The Office of History in medieval Korea was an important central government office that not only collected and stored historical materials, but also compiled the history of the king's reign after his death. Mythologies and biographies were sometimes used to justify the lineage of rulers and aristocrats. Early standard history, such as the *Samguk sagi*, focused on political history, and people were described almost only in relation to the ruler. It was written for the educated and not for the common people. Often, as it was in China, history was written by the bureaucrats for bureaucrats with the aim to educate officials in the art of governing. Dynastic histories came to be established as the standard form of history in the Kory period, and they continued to develop into an increasingly sophisticated form in the Chos n period. While there were a number of official histories produced in times prior to the Chos n period, the number of texts that have survived from this era are very few. It appears that the *sillok*, or 'veritable records' was a popular form, certainly in the mid-to-late Kory period. Many do not survive today, but their titles are mentioned in the *Kory sa* ('History of Kory', 1451) and *Koroy sa ch ryo* ('Chronological summary of Kory'). The only standard history from the Kory period that survives today is the *Samguk sagi*, which was commissioned by the court, and completed in the twenty-third year of Injong (1145). Kim Pusik and his co-editors adapted the style and structure of Chinese standard histories for their compilation. The writing of the *Samguk sagi* involved gathering extant records by both Korean and foreign writers on the Three Kingdoms period, and compiling them into a single comprehensive work. The trend in history at the time was to write events based on pre-existing documents, without greatly altering the passages taken from the primary sources.

With the Ch'oe military rule and the Mongol invasions and occupation during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the production of official history was sporadic. Private histories, on the other hand, flourished during this time as they were not controlled or restrained by governing bodies. Among these, which include epic verses, notable extant texts are "Tongmyong wangpyeon" ('Lay of King Tongmyong', 1193) by Yi Kyubo, *Samguk yusa* by Iryeon, and "Chewang un'gi" ('Rhymed chronicles of emperors and kings', 1287) by Yi Sngyu.

4. The characteristics and function of myth in Korean history

4.1 Characteristics of Korean myth (*srhwa*)

Korean mythology is essentially myths surrounding the birth and rise of founder-kings of ancient times. These myths were sometimes integrated into the 'Biography' sections of history texts in medieval times to provide some means of justification for the lineage of rulers and aristocrats. 'Myth' is generally referred to as *srhwa* in Korean. The closest definition of the term '*srhwa*' is 'stories', and refers specifically to tales that are passed down from generation to generation. While there are no rigid rules within this genre, there are a few characteristic factors that define it. For example, *srhwa* must involve stories of either mythical or legendary elements, or of fictitious nature. In other words, conspicuous historical facts or current events cannot be considered as *srhwa*. Moreover, *srhwa* is transmitted orally in the first instance, which distinguishes it from *sosol*, or novels. A 'story' must consist of characters (humans and other forms of existence), a background, and a linear plot of events often with a series of dramatic cause and effect. *Srhwa* generally includes unusual elements, which distinguishes it from 'true' stories. *Srhwa* always reflects the collective thought and belief system of a given culture in which it is created and transmitted.

Srhwa is divided into three broad categories: *sinhwa* (mythical epic), *chonsil* (legend), and *mindam* (folktale). The orator of *sinhwa* assumes that the story is 'true' and sacred. The world of *sinhwa* presumes the existence of a realm outside of the ordinary and rational world, and does not question the level of veracity and degree of sacredness of these stories. *Sinhwa* takes place in far ancient settings and holy places, and involves events that are not comparable to those that take place within the boundaries of ordinary human existence. Evidence of these mythical occurrences includes territorial space, kingdoms, and clans – the event of a myth is substantiated by the real existence of kingdoms and family clans that appear in the story. The hero of mythical epics is often a god or demi-god with supernatural powers. The hero in *chonsils*, however, is human, but his achievements are particularly exceptional. While the orator of *chonsil* does not assume the legend to be sacred, he believes the story to be true. *Chonsil* includes specific places, monuments, or objects that can be found in real life, which warrant its 'factual legitimacy'. The time and place in a legend are fixed and precise. *Mindam*, however, does not need a specific locale. The characters in tales of *mindam* are common people, and their actions and behaviour are ordinary. The orator of *mindam* is aware that the story is entirely fictitious.

4.2 Function of myth in history: the *Samguk yusa* as an example

As works of standard history in medieval Korea were commissioned and controlled by the court, the content and style of 'official' historical writings adhered to an established set of rules influenced by early Chinese traditions. If we consider the traditional perception of history as outlined previously, the fantastic elements that comprise myth are not reliable material for history that aims to record faithful

accounts of events. Historical 'truth' lies in precise details of people, places, and incidents within the realm of human existence. While myth has its own boundaries and definitions of 'truth' within its world, they are not the same as those of the realm of human history. Mythical stories were included in medieval Korean history books since the earliest surviving records of Korea were often in the form of *sinhwa* or *srhwa*. However, annotations were inserted next to these myths, questioning and doubting supernatural accounts, and sometimes attempting to decipher their meaning to make 'sense' of these fragments of tales. One such example is taken from the "Paekche pon-ki" of the *Samguk sagi*: "It is written in the *Silla kosa* ('Ancient records of Silla') - 'As a golden chest (*kmgwan*) descended from Heaven, he was given the name of Kim (*kim* - the same character for *km*).' This event (the golden chest descending from heaven) is questionable, and cannot be considered as true. However, as this story is old and has been transmitted for ages, in putting together history I cannot cut out and eliminate these words."

However, if we observe private historical writings (including poems), we can see how myth can express an important part of history – the spirit of the times, which impartial 'facts' cannot illustrate successfully. Due to the limited space and time, one text will be discussed to elaborate further on this matter.

The *Samguk yusa* was written at the end of the thirteenth century by the S n (Zen) Buddhist master Iry n (1206 -1289) and his disciples. A number of sources conjecture that the compilation of the text began in the seventh year of King Ch'ungny l (1281) and was completed around 1285. While factual accuracy is indispensable within the conventional definition and understanding of history, the historical vision embedded in Iry n's *Samguk yusa* is not preoccupied with the historicity of events. In this work, the past does not merely consist of physical incidents, but involves diverse entities of human existence, including a spirit often unique to its given time influenced by a common societal belief system. This 'spirit' is essentially the shared perception and attitude of a collective group that affect its members' interpretation of historical causation. From the references made to ancient Korean and Chinese texts in some sections, we know that Iry n consulted recorded documents that were extant in his time. Where there is no reference to specific texts, we are left to assume that these stories were the result of the author's transcription of oral accounts. By creating a unique literary structure, and making use of both his research-based knowledge and creative imagination, the author was able to go one step further from simply regurgitating impartial information to reconstructing a history that explores both the physical events and the abstract spirit of a community. The vision of history in the *Samguk yusa* is one that considers not merely 'what happened', but more importantly how human existence, including the issue of causality, may have been perceived and accepted by people at a given time in a given society.

Divine intervention in the form of creatures, spirits, and unnatural acts weaves itself in and out of the entire framework of the *Samguk yusa*. The narration of unusual occurrences alongside impartial information, and myth alongside fact demonstrates the people's superstitious outlook on human reality in the Three Kingdoms and Kory periods. The coexistence and interconnectedness of these multiple worlds are the basis of Iry n's historical vision: history does not merely consist of people (notably important figures) and physical events surrounding them, but takes into account the people's attitudes towards human reality supported by existing belief systems and cultural influences. By integrating history, religion, and folklore into a single narrative work, the *Samguk yusa* demonstrates a perception of history that is supported by religious beliefs and legendary accounts, and the conviction of the interrelatedness

between the natural, supernatural, and unnatural worlds. Here, the 'natural world' signifies human existence or reality, and all physical events within this existence that are in accord with nature. The 'supernatural world' signifies the world of religion (primitive and otherwise) where spirits and/or higher beings exist. The 'unnatural world' signifies man-made inventions and practices such as language, literature, and folk customs, as well as rules and customs governing and affecting individuals within a society.

Iry n depicts the natural world with a historical narrative that recounts straightforward information on past events, the supernatural world with fantastic stories that involve divine intervention, and the unnatural world with songs that reveal aspects of literature, language (*idu* that is used to record the fourteen *hyangga* pieces), and folklore of a given period. Through a literary structure that fuses together historical narrative, fantastic stories, and songs, the natural, supernatural, and unnatural worlds are symbolically united. In other words, human existence is not separate from the supernatural; the supernatural world, which we perceive as 'unreal' today, is very much a 'real' part of human life in the *Samguk yusa*. This concept is further supported by the prevalence of divine intervention throughout the text, which incites and confirms the people's belief and faith in higher beings (be it heaven, ancestral spirits, or Buddha), and their interaction with human life. This insinuates that the causality of human events was commonly perceived in direct relation to the workings of a higher force in the Three Kingdoms period. In the process of connecting these multiple worlds through the creative management of literary style, Iry n reconstructs history that underlines the close relation between human existence, religion, and culture, and the perception of historical causation influenced by a superstitious outlook on human reality.

Myth in the *Samguk yusa* functions as an eloquent mediator and illustrator of the concrete and abstract worlds. Through the use of myth, not only events but also human perceptions, mentalities, and lively images of the world as it existed then become unfolded before the eyes of the reader.

5. Conclusion

The discrediting of omens, unusual phenomena, and unsubstantiated lore, and the promotion of a methodical approach to history based on the spirit of critical investigation and discernment of facts confirmed the growing tendency towards rationalism and bureaucratisation in the writing of history in early China and Korea. Despite the developing scientific approach to the writing, study, and critique of history, myths have - while being perceived as less important factors in determining the authenticity of past events as the decline in the number of their appearances in standard histories suggest - never been entirely omitted from Korean historical texts. This is because of the irrefutable fact that the earliest source for history was myth and legends, and because keys to strengthen arguments and discussions on origins and lineage could be found in myths in spite of their figurative illusions. More importantly, however, myth can raise significant questions about historical 'truth' which impartial narration cannot, so long as the figurative codes of myth can be deciphered or interpreted.

As in the words of Yi Kyubo in his preface to the epic poem, "Tongmy ng wang p'y n" ('A lay of King Tongmy ng'):

When I first heard them I laughingly remarked that the sage of Confucius did not speak of prodigies, feats of strength, disorders, or spirits.... I still could

not believe what I thought were false and illusory legends; but after mulling them over several times, I came round to thinking that they were not illusory, but holy; not false, but spiritual; and that if our national history was to be written properly, they could not be ignored. (Rutt 1973:48)

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