

The Modern Korean Nation, Tan'gun, and Historical Memory in Late Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Century Korea*

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Introduction

Usage of the modern term 'nation' began in the early twentieth century in Korea. Correspondingly, the historical figure Tan'gun was actively used as a tool for creating a sense of unity and community among Koreans. However, at the beginning of Korean history, Tan'gun was not used in this way. According to varying historical situations, there were different historical memories and meanings attached to Tan'gun. Particularly in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the significance of Tan'gun and the political circumstances situation were very closely connected to the point that it was markedly different from the previous period.

In the late nineteenth century, Korea experienced a severe crisis both internally and externally. Domestically, the feudal order was being dismantled; externally, Korea faced invasions from imperialist powers. The Chinese-centered perspectives Ch'ŏnha (天下) or the theory of Hayi (華夷)) were rapidly being replaced with the concepts of the Western nation-state. The Korean "nation" was discovered and from that time on, the nation has played an important role in overcoming Korean national crises.

* This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2007-361-AL0015).

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At the center of the process of creating the modern Korean nation stood Tan'gun, who holds special significance as a mythical figure and the founding father of Kojosôn, Korea's first kingdom. Throughout history, the "symbolic" Tan'gun has moved with its own life force and played various functions separate from the "real" Tan'gun. Through the process of myth-making, Tan'gun became the progenitor of the Korean people. In general, the Korean people have identified with a history that started from a common ancestor and have been regarded as a group that shares a common history.

In addition, Tan'gun was the symbol of a community connected by one bloodline perpetuating the image of unity and purity in Korean history. It played a major role in the development and settlement of a homogenous nationalism that claimed Koreans as the descendants of Tan'gun comprised a "single" ethnic group. This may be the point that is distinct from Western concepts of ethnic groups which emphasize the market or economy. Therefore, in Korea, there is a strong common historical consciousness that incorporates pride and self-respect in the unique identity as the offspring of Tan'gun. Through this, it can be said that residents living in the Korean Peninsula were unified by the concept of one ethnic group. In other words, 'blood' which connotes a strong sense of family, and the shared historical consciousness involving pride and self-respect in their identification with Tan'gun are strongly integrated in the concept of the ethnic group in Korea.

The spread and settlement of a consciousness as "descendants of Tan'gun" through history books and the media occurred in the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century. For example, the Tan'gi era based on the 2333 BC date, National Foundation Day which celebrates the day when Tan'gun founded Kojosôn, the birth of Taejong-gyo which places Tan'gun as the object of faith, all played an important role in the formation of Korean nationalism.¹ Therefore, investigating the

1 Jōng Yōng-hun, "Kūndae Hankukyeshōi Tan'gun Minjokjuūi"(Tan'gun Nationalism' in Modern Korea), *Hankukminjokundongsayōngu*291 (2000); No Tae-don,

change in the perception and memories of Tan'gun during times of political transition or crisis provides important clues to understanding the formation of the "modern nation" of Korea.

Existing studies about Tan'gun have focused on the late Chosôn period and concentrated on Tan'gun's role as a spiritual anchor for nationalism and the independence movement. This study, on the basis of existing research results, will investigate the construction of historical memory related to Tan'gun throughout the process of "modernization" beginning with the Kabo Reforms in 1894 and when faced with increasing Japanese aggression. This investigation will also reveal the process of transforming residents living on the Korean peninsula into "ethnic Koreans."

Modern Political Reforms of 1894 and the Status of Tan'gun

Historically, Tan'gun has been highlighted as the basis for national consciousness and national integration in the face of foreign invasions. The *Samguk Yusa* (三國遺事) and *Chewang Un'gi* (帝王韻紀) were written during the Koryô Dynasty on the brink of national crisis when the Mongols invaded in the 13th century. Also, since the establishment of the next dynasty, Chosôn, Tan'gun began to be emphasized, and the leaders of this new dynasty claimed to succeed Kojosôn by naming the dynasty Chosôn to inherit its power and establish legitimacy of the new regime. In the crowning year of the first king T'aejo, Yejo, Chönsö, and Chobak advised that ancestral rites should be held in Pyöngyang since Tan'gun was the king who received Heaven's will at Tobang, and Kija was the first king to rule by reformation.² Moreover, in the second year of King Sejo in 1456, Tan'gun was designated as the progenitor of Chosôn, and

Tan'gunkwa Kündae Hankuk Minjokunddong (History of Tan'gun and Kojosôn), Sagyejöl Press, 2000.

2 Taejosillok, Vol 1, August. 11 Taejo.

Kija as the progenitor of Later Chosôn on the ancestral tablets.³ Thus, Tan'gun was remembered through the construction of an ancestral shrine for Tan'gun and the creation of the ancestral tablets in the early Chosôn period in an effort to solidify Chosôn's own identity.

However, the "memory" of Tan'gun during the Chosôn Dynasty varies depending on the discourse and an intellectual's perspective. Ha Ryon, a bureaucrat in the early Chosôn, did not recognize Tan'gun as the common progenitor on an empirical basis, since "there are no credible books or records, and therefore [information about Tan'gun] cannot be compared and reviewed." Nam Hyo'on separated the founding of the country and edifying aspects, saying "it appears to me that Chosôn was founded when Tan'gun pioneered the land, but he was ignorant in the way of teaching the people since Chosôn is positioned on the exterior of the frontier."

Meanwhile, the phrase "long ago, a god-man came down to the earth beneath a birch, and the people crowned him king" is recorded in Kwôn Kŭn's *Ŭngjesiju* (應製詩註). Generally during the Chosôn period, the recognition of Tan'gun can be said to be a continuation of that which appears in *Ŭngjesiju*, agreeing on the point that Tan'gun was "the first heavenly king." It is also notable that in records about Tan'gun, Kija was always mentioned. Kija was considered to be one of the three Chinese holy men who came to Korea during the Zhou Dynasty of China.

The scholar-officials who saw the importance of the relationship between Chosôn and China believed that Korea was civilized and educated by Kija. They perceived Tan'gun as "the founder of the east, the first king to receive Heaven's will," and Kija as "the first monarch to set edification." These interpretations, although there are some deviations, remained consistent until the late Chosôn. The scholar-officials of the Chosôn Dynasty recognized Sojunghwa (Little Sinocentrism) as well as Tan'gun and Kija. This shows the formation of the Korean ethnic identity through Tan'gun, but on the other hand, it also emphasizes Sojunghwa, placing

3 Sejosillok, Vol 4. July 2 Sejo.

Kija at the center of Korean cultural identity.⁴

In the Seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Korean ancient history with an emphasis on Tan'gun became firmly established. After the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592 and the Manchu War of 1636, criticism arose regarding the Qing Dynasty, and a group of scholars began to deny the Sinocentric view of the world, affirming the historic and cultural superiority of Chosôn. This was deeply related to the rise of Silhak (Practical Learning) scholars who wanted to establish the origin of Korea's own history as a country that distinctly differed from China. Silhak scholars attempted to recognize Korea as an autonomous nation that stood on equal ground with China, and in the process, their writings highlighted Tan'gun and weakened Kija. During this time, the first written record of Korean history using Tan'gun Pon'gi was *East History* by Yi Chonghwi in the form of a biography. About the beginning of Tan'gun Bon'gi, Yi wrote, "The grandfather of Tan'gun is a god-man named Hwanin." About Tan'gun, he wrote, "In our country, there was no king; the people were foolish, and they lived in groups together with animals. But Tan'gun taught them to wear their hair in pigtails and created order, establishing and differentiating between a king and his servants, men and women, food and shelter." His writing emphasizes that Tan'gun civilized the Korean people and is the king of enlightenment.⁵ This shows that in the early Chosôn, a new awareness emerged, which promoted Tan'gun from the founder of a nation to a leader who brought civilization and enlightenment to Korea.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Yi Wônik, while adhering to legitimism as a principle in writing *A Brief East History*, viewed that Chosôn's legitimacy began from Tan'gun, was passed on to Kija, and continued through

4 Baek Dong-hyôn, *Deahan Jekuki Minjokdamlongwa Kukakusang* (The National Discourse and National Initiative in the Era of Taehan Empire), Research Institute of Korean Studies at the Korea University, 2010: 78.

5 Yi Chong-Hwi, "Tan'gun Bongi", *DongSa*, Kim Yŏng-Shim and J ŏng Jae-hun, Somyŏng Press (2004): 23.

nine years of the reign of King Munmu of Silla and 19 years of the reign of Koryô's T'aejo. Therefore, he considered Samhan and the Three Kingdoms, as illegitimate, and organized Korean history as follows:

Tan'gun (legitimate) → Kija (legitimate) → Wiman (Chamguk) →
 Samhan (illegitimate) → Three Kingdoms (illegitimate) → 9 years af-
 ter King Munmu of Silla (legitimate) → 9 years after Koryô T'aejo
 (legitimate) → Chosôn (legitimate).

The basis of legitimacy was dependent on the relationship with the former period, starting from Tan'gun.

The change in people's recognition of Tan'gun in the transition period from the nineteenth century Silhak to the age of enlightenment, can be glimpsed in An Chonghwa's *Tongsa Chöryo* published in the year 1904. This book contained descriptions of 800 historical figures spanning Korean history to the late Koryô. An tried to "establish an historical basis for a desirable human character needed for modernization," and succeeded in developing a system of ancient history centered on Tan'gun. He is acclaimed to have acted as an important bridge for the establishment of a national history in Korea.⁶

At the end of the nineteenth century, Chosôn strived to become a modern state as it encountered Western powers. Such efforts were carried out not only within the government and amongst intellectuals but also among the general people. The Korean government wanted to create a national identity that would play an important role in the formation of a modern nation-state through the Kabo Reforms in 1894. At this time, independence was emphasized in the formation of the identity of the Korean modern state, stating "Chosôn is an independent country with a long history and tradition since Tan'gun and Kija." Emphasizing loyalty and patriotism, the Kabo Reforms in 1894 attempted to integrate the Korean "peo-

6 Choe Kiyöng. "An Chonghwa" *HanKuui Yeoksawa Yeoksaga*, Changjakgwa Bi-pyungsa (1994): 58.

ple,” who had strongly believed they were Shinmin(臣民). The Korean people’s consciousness as an independent nation peaked with the establishment of the “Korean Empire” in 1897 and the desire to grow into a prosperous country, and internationally declaring Korea’s status as an imperial absolute monarchy.

One such example of such consciousness appears in the history book compiled after the Kabo Reforms. The Korean history textbook compiled at this time was based on the Silhak scholar’s historical narrative of the Seventeenth and eighteenth century. In June 1894, the Ŭijŏngbu created Pyŏnsaguk with one councilor and four junior officials to compile a “national history.” History textbooks such as *Chosŏn History*, *Chosŏn Chronicles* and *A Brief History of Chosŏn* were compiled at the time. Hunsu Article 10, which was sent to each province by Naemu amun (內務衙門) in 1895 to promote “a unique basis for the establishment of our country and paths to achieve innovation,” states, “first teach the people national history and Korean characters,” strongly emphasizing the education of national history.⁷ The emphasis on national history was intended to be independent from the traditional Chinese history-centered education, and was also an expression of an independent cultural self-consciousness from education based on Chinese characters.⁸

These books generally narrate Korean history from Kojosŏn, founded by Tan’gun in 2333 BCE, to 1893 CE in a chronological order using a mix of Korean and Chinese characters. Also, in almost all of the history textbooks and in some Korean language textbooks *Elementary Sohak*, “Tan’gun Records,” or “Tan’gun Chosŏn Records” appear as subtitles, and Tan’gun is introduced as the founder of Korea who lived during the time of King Yao of China.⁹

In the introduction of *Chosŏn History*, one of the modern history textbooks says, “in the east, there was no king until there was a god-man who

7 *Kojong sillok* vol.33, March 10th, Gojong

8 Jo Dong-gŏl, *History of Modern Historiography*, Nanam Press (1998) :97.

9 Jo Dong-gŏl, *Ibid*: 174.

came down beneath a birch in the T'aebaek mountains. He decided to be king and so named himself Tan'gun; the country was Chosôn. He first set up the capital in Pyöngyang and later in Paegak, and taught the people to wear their hair in pigtails."¹⁰ Such introduction recognized the divine presence of Tan'gun and described him as an enlightened being who brought culture to the Korean people. At that time, wearing pigtails was recognized as a symbol of civilization, and Tan'gun was a person who instilled cultural order in the barbaric people.¹¹

In this way, as Tan'gun was reappraised as the symbol of civilization, independence, and the nation, Tan'gun was not simply a myth. Before the modern times, Tan'gun was a mythical figure who represented the ancient state of Kojosôn.

However, the modern changes regarding the identity of Tan'gun are closely related to the efforts to emphasize that Korea was not a subordinate state of China but an independent nation for thousands of years since Tan'gun's appearance and to declare Korea as a modern sovereign nation and not a Chinese suzerainty. Also, after the Kabo Reforms, the formal name was changed to Dynasty, beginning in the first year of King T'aejo Yi Sönggye in 1392. In the discussion of the history of the four thousand years since Tan'gun and Kija, the historical authority of the five hundred years of Chosôn was mentioned as well. This kind of historical awareness reflected the Korean independence from Qing China at the time. The emphasis on the independence from China brought about changes in the previous structure which focused on both Tan'gun and Kija; the discourse regarding Kija as the symbol of civilization and enlightenment gradually weakened, with all the emphasis placed on Tan'gun.

Independent consciousness in the modern sovereign state of Korea was inspired by the Independence Club founded in 1896. During the time, the

10 "Tan'gun'gi" *Chosôn yöksa*. Hakbu (學府), 1894.

11 Cho Hyönsöl. "Kündae gyemonggi Tan'gun sinhwaüi talsinhwahwawa chaesinh wahwa." *Minjok munhaksa yöngu*32 (2006).

formation of Tan'gun and Kija's human nature was still in a transition. The Independence Club declared "Tan'gun the first pioneer of Korea" and "Kija the enlightener of a sacred culture," and stressed the combination of the two, creating the "Tan'gun Era."¹² In the "amendment of the rule regarding the establishment of a branch of the Independence Club" promulgated by the people's joint association on November 13, Chŏng Kyo stated, "Our independent eastern state for four thousand years, Tan'gun came down from the sky and established a country in the same period as King Yao of China," appealing for the historical independence of Korea based on the Tan'gun Era.¹³

Chŏng Kyo also asserted, "Long ago, Tan'gun pioneered the wilderness and Kija taught the people the teachings of holy men. Samhan was established, and afterward Koryŏ was unified. Having received the mandate of heaven, our King T'aejo Yi Sŏnggye founded Chosŏn, which has lasted until now under the rule of a sovereign monarch. For thousands of years, the nation was composed of our people, and the rule has always been carried out in this way."¹⁴ Furthermore, he argued that "Since the time of Tan'gun and Kija until now, Koreans have inherited divinity for several thousands of years. From ritual, music, and culture to regulations and laws, there is nothing in our country that is not independent."¹⁵ This illustrates that the emperor's authority was still absolute at this time and shows that the emperor and the Chosŏn Dynasty were the objects of praise. Yet, it also traces the origin of the Korean Empire and the emperor to Tan'gun. This was an attempt to emphasize historical continuity and show that Korea was on an equal footing with China. Moreover, it stressed the independence of Korea from the "power" of China and the "cultural" sovereignty of Korean rituals, music, culture, and laws, which were thought to be inferior to their Chinese counterparts.

12 "Editorial", *The Independent*, 23th, Oct. 1899

13 Jŏng-gyo, *Taehangyenyŏnsa*, Tamgudang Press (1974) : 379.

14 *Daejosŏn Independent Association Newsletter*; vol 1, November, 1896: 1

15 *Daejosŏn Independent Association Newsletter*; vol 7, February, 1896: 12

The Korean Empire needed to integrate all Koreans as a modern people regardless of their status, lineage, and regional differences in order to create a modern state. However, the Korean Empire attempted to achieve this through loyalty and patriotism of the subjects who were all on an equal status, united under the Emperor with absolute state power.¹⁶ In other words, the understanding of Tan'gun and Kija before 1904 contained a strong sense to absolutize the authority of the Korean empire and the emperor.

Tan'gun as the Founder of the Nation in the Early Twentieth Century

In 1905, Korea signed the Ŭlsa Treaty under duress by Japan, which deprived Korea of diplomatic rights and degraded it to a Japanese protectorate. Afterward, Koreans began to resist and struggle against Japan in various ways. The upsurge of anti-Japanese awareness brought changes in the way Tan'gun was remembered. Such memory was related to the sense of community and patriotism based on national consciousness instead of emperor-centered loyalty and patriotism of the past.

At the time, organizations for self-strengthening movements and the Korean media appealed to the "national spirit" of the people, often using words such as the "Korean spirit" and "Chosôn soul." The Korean Self-strengthening Society, a representative group organized in April, 1906 for the self-strengthening movement, emphasized "self-strengthening" through education and increased productivity and accentuated the cultivation of the national spirit and the national soul by "the will to indoctrinate 20 million brothers with the national spirit and the Korean spirit of 4000 years since Tan'gun and Kija."¹⁷ This advocacy of the Korean national

16 "Editorial", *The Independent*, 10th, Oct. 1897.

17 "Taehan Self-reliant Association's Prospectus", *Taehan Self-reliant Association Newsletter*1, July 1906: 25-26.

spirit spread rapidly among Korean thinkers. Ch'oe Namsön also attempted to raise national consciousness by arguing for the existence of the Chosön spirit in *T'aegükhakbo* in August 1906, stating "The Korean people of the East have had our unique Chosön soul since the world began, the Eastern land spirit that was passed down for the past 4000 years."¹⁸

This kind of emphasis on the Chosön soul and the Korean spirit changed the traditional understanding of Tan'gun and Kija. Through active self-strengthening movements since 1905, the purity of the Korean national spirit was emphasized, and the existence of Tan'gun and Kija came to be recognized as a symbol of national spirit itself, irrelevant to the authority of the emperor. In other words, the self-strengthening movement repeatedly stressed the extensiveness of Korean history, explaining Korean history as a nation that started from the time of Tan'gun, and emphasizing that Korea was a nation continued on by the lineage of the Han people.¹⁹

As the concepts of the royal family, emperor, and the people began to be gradually distinguished, contention began surrounding the concept of a modern nation-state in which the principal agents of the nation were the people and not the royal family or the emperor. Claiming that "All nations have their own national spirits," such assertions mentioned Tan'gun and Kija as symbols of the Korean national spirit. Such changes showed the Korean people's desire to strengthen the nation in a situation where the emperor's authority had been significantly eroded due to successive Japanese invasive policies.

Meanwhile, in 1907, Japan forced the abdication of King Kojong on the grounds of The Hague Secret Emissary Affair and disbanded the Korean military, impairing the sovereignty of Korea to a mere nominal status. Koreans continued to carry out anti-Japanese struggles across the country, which reached its peak in 1908. In the heightened anti-Japanese atmos-

18 Choe Nam-Seon, "Contributions" *Taegukhakbo*1(1906): 17.

19 IlSesaeng(一歲生), "Shin Shidae üi Sajo"(the Trend of New Generation), *Taegukhakbo*14 (1907).

phere, voices appealing for national unity began to rise all around the nation. One was the so-called "Theory of One Family of Tan'gun," which claimed that "all Koreans are descendants of Tan'gun, related by blood." It is closely associated with the understanding that all Korean people are part of an extended family and descendants of Tan'gun, and the leading intellectuals who produced, expanded, and dispersed this theory were Sin Ch'aeho, Pak Ŭnsik, and Ch'oe Namsŏn.

The first to advocate the theory of Tan'gun descendants based on modern nationalism was the *Korea Daily News*, where Sin Ch'aeho was the chief editor. On January 1, 1908, the *Korea Daily News* published celebratory remarks under the title, "New Year's Blessing." "Oh, today is January 1 of the 4240th year since Tan'gun founded our nation, and January 1 of the 5Seventeenth year since Korea was first founded. Korea is a magnificent nation that succeeded 4000 years of history. We are like a big brother to Japan."²⁰ On January 7 of the same year, the paper also published a submission that called out to "20 million compatriots and descendants of Tan'gun related by blood, with an independent history for 4200 years." And on July 28, an editorial appealed to the readers stating, "Korean compatriots, do we not have a sacred history of 4,000 years? Are we not the descendants of the great civilizer Tan'gun? Are we not the descendants of the Samhan nations who reformed Japan?"²¹ As such, the phrase "descendants of Tan'gun" began to be used more frequently since 1908, illumining the fact that the history of Korea was superior to that of Japan.

Using the "family" metaphor, Sin Ch'aeho strengthened the meaning of *minjok*, or an ethnic group, as a family by uniting all Korean people as the descendants of a single ancestor Tan'gun. Afterward, the word *minjok* quickly spread in combination with "Tan'gun," and gained the "power" to bond people. "Since our progenitor Tan'gun was born in the Taebaek Mountains, founded our nation, and enlightened our future generations,

20 "Editorial", *Taehanmaeilsinbo*, 1st, Jan. 1908.

21 "Editorial", *Taehanmaeilsinbo*, 28th, Jul. 1908.

the whole land of Korea is his industry; four thousand years history is his genealogy; former kings are the first born sons of his house; mountains and rivers surrounding the boundaries of the land is the fence that borders his house. Here, 20 million descendants have been born, grown up, lived together, eaten food, worn clothes, and shared our joy and sorrow. Our nation is no more different than a family.”²² Such statements made residents who lived on the Korean peninsula a family with a common ancestor Tan’gun, creating a huge community and instilling a sense of community as family members to all the people.

From August to December, 1908, Sin systematized the nationalist view of Korean modern history in a series of historical articles titled “A New Reading of History,” which narrated detailed accounts of ancient Korean history from Tan’gun to the destruction of Parhae in detail. Sin described historical methodology in the introduction of the book. Although the development of his empirical logic was somewhat limited, he attempted to view Korean history comprehensively and in its entirety.

Sin Ch’aeho’s *A New Reading of History* was divided into an introductory section which discussed general theories and the body which dealt with the particulars. In the parts about historical methodology, he supported “the rise of a new history,” compiling history by collecting everything from Chosôn history and altering historical narratives into small bits of historical stories, and analyzing various fields, including politics and customs, through broad and keen perspectives. Sin believed that the nation was an organism made up of a national spirit. Therefore, the history of a nation described the rise and decline of a nation, and a nation’s weakness and strength is reflected in the relationship between the main and minor ethnic groups within the nation as well as the rise and fall of a nation from a social evolutionary perspective. In writing history, Sin emphasized the need to find the leading group of people of a nation and to analyze their politics, business, military services, conventions, and rela-

22 “Editorial”, *Taehanmaeilsinbo*, 31th, Jul. 1908.

tionships with other countries and other races.²³

Through *A New Reading of History*, Sin Ch'aeho asserted the theory of the legitimacy of Puyŏjok (夫餘族) with Korean history continuing from "Tan'gun to Puyŏ to Koguryŏ to Parhae." He claimed that "Puyŏjok (夫餘族) is a divine race, the descendants of Tan'gun, and the true heroes of the Eastern country that continued in existence for 4000 years" and clearly defined Puyŏjok as the principle ethnic group in Korea since they belonged to the lineage of Tan'gun. Furthermore, regarding the rise and fall of Puyŏ, he thoroughly ruled out the previous perspectives of history, which focused on respect for China. Especially in regards to Kija who was revered until the late Chosŏn, Sin wrote "the King of Puyŏ invested Kija with titles of nobility and allowed him to live in Pyŏngyang, and made him a servant of Puyŏ," arguing that Kija was nothing more than a servant of Puyŏ.²⁴ He also described that Tan'gun established his kingdom at the center of the peninsula with its base in the Paekdu Mountain, founding a great empire that governed countless tribe nations in Manchuria, Liaodong, and Kojosŏn, and the Tan'gun Dynasty was passed down to the Puyŏ Dynasty, which was later succeeded by Koguryŏ.

Sin Ch'aeho's *A New Reading of History* broke away from features of medieval history, including such theories as "Confucianism and history are one (經史一體)," "Chinese vassal state (中華主義)," "Revere China and destroy barbarians (春秋義理)," and dynastic legitimacy, as well as the description of events in chronological order. Moreover, shying away from the historical view of emphasizing moral perspectives as was done in the traditional era, Sin described the past events based on evolution theory of society and the state, revealing his view of history and nation, where the power of historical development lies not in the king and the nobility, and "our country is not the property of one family clan but of all Korean people." Considering Korean history as an independent field of

23 Jo Dong-gŏl, *Ibid.*: 174.

24 Sin Ch'aeho, "A New Theory of Reading History", *Taehanmaeilsinbo*, 27th, Aug. 2007.

study and as a national history not bound by China, Sin Ch'aeho attempted to establish a modern historical method by investigating facts from the perspective of the *minjok*, not limiting it to the royal family and nobles, and an empirical and wholistic causality analysis of history. In line with this idea, Sin discovered the "*minjok*" in writing *A New Reading of History*, placing the *minjok* at the center of history.

Sin Ch'aeho also attempted to rediscover "historical places" of Korea. He claimed the existence of the Tan'gun Era by citing Pyŏngyang Castle and Samnang Castle which were constructed in the Tan'gun Era, and weapons such as the bow of Tan'gun and the bow of Sukshin, which were recorded in Chinese history books.²⁵ In such ways, Sin Ch'aeho overcame the mythological existence of Tan'gun and emphasized Tan'gun as a great and sacred historical figure who founded the East.

In the early twentieth century, Sin Ch'aeho began to use Tan'gi, or the calendar system that starts from the date Tan'gun founded Korea, which reflected a contemporary notion of clarifying Korean national identity. At the same time it also expressed the Korean people's will to reject the feudal monarchy system and aim for a modern democratic republic. Basically, the use of Tan'gi was interlocked with the change in which the *minjok* replaced the royal family or the king as the principle agent of history.²⁶ Sin argued the logic that "our country today is not the property of a dynasty but of the people. Therefore in recording history, years should not be counted from the date of the founding of a dynasty, but from the date of the founding of Korea by a national or religious leader who dominates our people's thoughts."²⁷ This emphasized the origin of the Korean *minjok* in

25 Cho Hyŏn-Sŏl, "Demythologization and Remythologization of the Dangun Mythology in the Modern Enlightenment Period", *Minjokmunhaksayeongu* 32 (2006): 25.

26 Go Byŏng-chŏl, "Understanding on Discourse of Dangun in Modern", *Jonggyo yŏngu* 21(2000): 245.

27 Jŏng Yŏng-Hun, "Tan'gun-nationalism' in Korean History and Its Political Meaning", *KPSA Journal* 28-2(1995): 43.

the people, and it was intended to encourage and instill national pride in the Korean people by suggesting that the sufferings of our nation are short compared to its powerful and lengthy history and will be overcome “soon.” Through this process, Tan'gun was at the center of the Korean “*minjok*” and the beginning of Korean history.

Pak Ŭnsik, the chief editor of the Imperial Capital Gazette (Hwangsŏng sinmun), also began to emphasize the notion that all Koreans were descendants of Tan'gun. Pak frequently published editorials stressing the ideology in statements such as “Koreans are the holy descendants of Tan'gun and Kija, and indeed a superior race in world history.”²⁸ The notion of Tan'gun's descendants became a cliché in the new nationalist consciousness. In other words, a new slogan calling for a unified nation was advocated by using fixed numbers such as 2 million, 3000, and 4000 and connecting them with the Korean people, land, and history. In turn, such connection placed Tan'gun at the core of the national integration ideology. Through the cliché “20 million Koreans, 3000-li land, 4000 years of history,” which integrated compatriotism, land, and history into one image, the emergence of the notion of Tan'gun's descendants further strengthened the theory of a state of a blood-related race and allowed Koreans to remember Tan'gun.

The existence of Tan'gun allowed Koreans to form a “community” of people who shared a common destiny for the past 5000 years and to secure the highest value they must safeguard through struggle and even death. To modern Koreans, Tan'gun was a bond that tied individuals together and a medium that bound individuals into a national community.

Another unique aspect in remembering Tan'gun at this time was the fact that the presence of Kija, who had been remembered as a symbol of cultural community, was reduced or disappeared. Intellectuals discarded the previous way of remembering both Tan'gun and Kija, only remembering Tan'gun and investing the entire Korean ethnic and cultural identity in

28 “Editorial”, Hwangsŏng sinmun, 4th, Mar. 1908.

Tan'gun. This was proof that the Korean independence and the dissolution of Sinocentrism were being achieved.

Tan'gun as an Object of Religious Belief

As the Japanese oppression of Koreans worsened, Koreans discussed various ways to bind Koreans into a historical community. In the process, words such as Tan'gun, race, blood relations, territorial boundary, and language were adopted and used in connection with *minjok* and history, placing Tan'gun once more at the center of the Korean *minjok*. *Minjok* was a concept that represented a single-racial purity and the concept of a group of people who had a great potential to realize the grand history of the past in the future. The greatness of the past signified the Korean people's desire for the greatness of their nation in the future. In other words, the present crisis Korea faced as it was on the brink of becoming a Japanese colony and the desire to escape from such a situation created nationalism based on the combination of the words "*minjok*" and "Tan'gun."

Furthermore, the understanding of Tan'gun proceeded to a different level while emphasizing the historical and cultural community, moving beyond the simple recognition of Tan'gun as a founder of Korea. Around the time of the Tonghak Peasant Revolution in 1894, there was a religious group led by Kim Yŏmbaek that worshiped Tan'gun in P'yŏngan Province. Then in 1904, Paek Pong and others announced the "Tan'gun Propagation Statement" at Paekdu Mountain. Though the nature of the groups that worshipped Tan'gun was unclear, the religious movement of Tan'gun worship was spreading at the time in combination with nationalist sentiment.

A different understanding of Tan'gun beyond Tan'gun as a mythical and historic figure emerged after the conclusion of the Ŭlsa Treaty in 1905. One of the most representative ways was the move to start a "religion" of Tan'gun worship. There were also times when Tan'gun was believed to be a divine existence and an object of worship even before the

modern times. Tan'gun had been understood as a regional guardian or a hero in the Pyŏngan Province or recognized as the founder of shamanism or Sŏndo (仙道) culture.²⁹ The reason Tan'gun was recognized as a “guardian” was because of the records about the Tan'gun myth, in which Tan'gun was thought to be a god or a descendant of a god or rumored to have stepped down from ruling and became the guardian god of Adal Mountain. These circumstances allowed the deification of Tan'gun to be readily accepted by Koreans.

The surge of recognizing Tan'gun as Korea's founder brought about the emergence of a religious group that worshipped Tan'gun, transcending the national origin. Facing a national crisis, Tan'gun became the national guardian, the pillar of Tan'gun Worship (later known as Taejonggyo), and finally a god. Na Ch'ŏl (Na Inyŏng) founded Taejonggyo. Na was a government official born in Posŏng, Chŏllanam-do, who passed the civil service examination at the age of 29. Not only Na but also scholars, soldiers, and government officials of the Korean Empire supported Tan'gun as the national founder and attempted to rebuild the country with Tan'gun at the center of the Korean national spirit. They studied traditional subjects in depth and also showed interest in the study of Korean national studies, while focusing on Tan'gun throughout their studies.³⁰

Na Ch'ŏl in particular was a figure known for expanding the movement to save Korea between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. He studied under Kim Yunsik, a member of the moderate enlightenment party, and in the early 1900s, he carried out activities for national salvation along with O Kiho, Yi Ki and others. Na also participated in diplomatic activities based on the theory of Oriental peace. As part of

29 Jŏng Yŏng-Hun, “‘Tan'gun Minjokjuŭi' ūi Jŏnsa “(Tan'gun Nationalism in Pre-Modern Period of Korea), *Kojosŏn Tan'gun Hak*8(2008): 169.

30 Li Min Wŏn, “Kŭndae Haksŏlsa sogŭi Tan'gun Minjokjuŭi”(Theoretical Study on “Tan'gun Nationalism” of Korea in Early 20th Century-Relating to Korean Empire's Compiling Project for History and Institutions), *Hanguk Sasanggwa Munhak* (Korean Thought and Culture)72(2014): 246.

his efforts, he went to Japan three times between 1905 and 1908 to negotiate the independence of Korea from Japan. When Korea was degraded to a protectorate of Japan due to the Ŭlsa Treaty in 1905 despite his efforts, he organized Chasinhoe (自新會) and planned the assassination of the five enemies who signed the Ŭlsa Treaty, but failed.

In exile after 1907, Na Ch'ŏl realized that the movement for national salvation could not be realized by a small number of people and decided to create Taejonggyo. For Na, Taejonggyo was the only way to save Korea at the time. Along with O Kiho, I Ki, Kim Yunsik, and others Na began the movement for Tan'gun Worship at Hansŏng on February 5, 1909 by holding a ceremony with the ancestral tablet of the Great Ancestor Tan'gun. At first, the movement was simply called Tan'gun Worship instead of Taejonggyo. Tan'gun Worship became known to the public when it received the media coverage in July 1909.

Na Ch'ŏl, O Kiho, and others decided to start the national religion movement due to the recognition that nongovernmental diplomacy and killing a few traitors were not enough to defend Korea from Japanese invasion. Therefore, they conceived of a different strategy away from psychological resistance against Japan and the restoration of sovereignty and decided to start a new national religion with the national founder Tan'gun at the center. They came to believe that they must put up a nationwide fight against Japan. Therefore they founded the unique Korean religion with Tan'gun as the Great Ancestor (大皇祖), and this was *chunggwang* (重光) of Tan'gun Worship in 1909. The word *chunggwang* was used in the sense of restarting something that was already present, taking historical continuity into consideration.

At the time, the origin of the Korean national religion began from Tan'gun Chosŏn, and was passed down to Taech'ŏn'gyo (代天教) in Puyŏ, Sŭngch'ŏn'gyo (崇天教) in Silla, Kyŏngch'ŏn'gyo (敬天教) in Koguryŏ, Chinjonggyo (眞宗教) in Parhae, and Wanggŏmgyo (王儉教) in Koryŏ. However, Na Ch'ŏl and others who believed that the national religion was discontinued during the reign of King Wŏnjong of Koryŏ due to the Mongolian invasion used the word *chunggwang* to revive the unique Ko-

rean national religion as part of their attempt to resist Japanese invasion. Thus, Tan'gun worship took on a strong characteristic of independence.

Among the devotees of Tan'gun Worship were Sin Kyusik, Pak Ŭnsik, I Hoeyŏng, I Siyŏng, Cho Soang, Pak Ch'anik, Kim Ku, Cho Wan'gu, An Chaehong, Min P'ilho, Chŏng Inbo, Chu Sigyŏng, Kim Dubong, and Choe Hyŏnbae. The theory of Taejonggyo was defined through the writings of *Sindanminsa*, *Sindansilgi*, *Tan'gigosa*, and *Tan'gunsago*, and was related to the process of dispelling Sinocentrism of the past. Along the same lines, the existence of Tan'gun was emphasized in the study of Korean history, and a nationalistic view of history was established as well.

Sin Ch'aeho, who was also a follower of Tan'gun worship, emphasized Tan'gun's existence and asserted that the Korean *minjok* were the descendants of Tan'gun, and that the Tan'gun Era existed in history in *A New Reading of History*. He believed that Tan'gun marked the beginning of Korean national history, and that the uniqueness and excellence of our *minjok* was manifest in the Tan'gun Era. Furthermore, Sin wrote that Chosŏn was the most superior period of time in about a thousand years after Tan'gun and that the ancient culture of the Tan'gun Era even influenced China.³¹

The influence of Tan'gun worship and a Tan'gun consciousness also appeared in Pak Ŭnsik's writings. Pak regarded Tan'gun's Sin'gyo(神敎) as the national religion. In *Han'guk Tongsa*, which was published in Shanghai in 1915, Pak asserted that the first religion in Korean history was Sin'gyo, further claiming that Taejonggyo, which succeeded Sin'gyo, was the Korean national religion. In this book, Pak underscored Tan'gun as the national founder and used "national spirit" as the central concept in Korean history. He wrote, "A country can collapse, but history does not collapse. The country is the body, and history, the spirit. Therefore if the spirit lives and remains intact, the body can be resurrected someday."³²

31 Sin Ch'aeho, "A New Theory of Reading History", *Taehanmaeilsinbo*, 27th, August, 1908.

32 Pak Ŭn-sik, "Introduction", *Hankukdognipundongjihyŏsa* 韓國獨立運動之血史,

To Pak, history was the national spirit, and the beginning of that national spirit was the soul of Korea that continued down from Tan'gun. Therefore, Pak Ŭnsik worshipped Tan'gun as the center and the core of the Korean *minjok*, and this logic was related to the notion of Tan'gun in Taejonggyo.

At the time of the founding, two important memorial days for Tan'gun were established in Tan'gun Worship: the National Foundation Day and Ŏch'ŏnjŏl (御天節). The National Foundation Day, October 3 on the lunar calendar, was the day Tan'gun came down from the sky and founded Kojosŏn. The first commemoration of the National Foundation Day was held on October 3, 1919 according to the lunar calendar, and it was called Kaegukjŏl (開國節) at the time. A commemorative ceremony was held in Na Ch'ŏl's house, and Kim Yunsik, the chairman of the Privy Council (中樞院) of the Korean Empire, provided food and refreshments. The number of participants amounted to about 200 people.

Taejonggyo became official in July 1909, and its religious influence expanded relatively fast. When the expansion of the religious influence of Tan'gun worship attracted the attention and surveillance of the Japanese Residency-General police, Na Ch'ŏl renamed Tan'gun Worship to Taejonggyo in 1910, and the general headquarters of Taejonggyo was relocated to Manchuria, due to limited anti-Japanese activities in Korea. In terms of religious aspects, Na promoted religious organizations for Tan'gun worship in various parts of the country, and carried out evangelism and education at the same time. Based on such activities, anti-Japanese Independence Movement Groups were organized to promote the independence movement and independence war.

Through Taejonggyo, Tan'gun became a god of a trinity—Hanim, Hanung, and Han'gŏm. Such worship of Tan'gun and the trinity was based on Ŏjesamilsin'goch'an, thought to be written by Tae Choyŏng, or King Go of Parhae, and Samilsin'gosŏ, written by Tae Yabal. The term Tan'gun Hanbaegŏm, meaning the Great Ancestor (大皇祖), was used. It was explained

that since Tan'gun, who was Hanbaegŏm, inherited the blood of the father in heaven, and Koreans were the descendants of Tan'gun, Koreans are the people of the heaven who was related to god by blood.³³ This expressed the intention of the people of Taejonggyo to establish a national identity with Tan'gun at its peak.

In this way, Taejonggyo was established with a focus on the Korean *minjok* at a time when the Japanese invasion was gathering momentum and when a nation was forming with the Western concept of the nation at the center.³⁴ In the face of a national crisis, various attempts were made to promote patriotism and promote national and ethnic capabilities.

Taejonggyo was the culmination of the notion of Tan'gun by establishing him as the founder of the nation as well as the object of religion and faith.

Tan'gun, the object of worship in Taejonggyo, became a special figure not only for the Korean race but came to be recognized as a universal figure who was related to all human beings. In this process, Tan'gun took on a special relationship with the Korean *minjok*, as it was recorded that the Korean race had formed a huge force and enjoyed a highly advanced culture, centered in Manchuria from the ancient times as legitimate descendants of Tan'gun.³⁵

National Foundation Day, which commemorated the foundation of Korea by Tan'gun, became a national holiday after the general headquarters was relocated to Manchuria under the repression of Japanese imperialism. After the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai was established, China made National Foundation Day a national holiday,

33 Go Byŏng-chŏl, "Gŭndae Tan'gun Damlon ũi Yihae"(Understanding on Discourse of Tan'gun)" *Jonggyoyŏngu*21(2000): 241-242.

34 Sŏ Yŏngdae, "Gŭndae Tan'gun Insik gwa Minjokjuŭi" (Hangugŭi Ideas on Dangun and Nationalism in Modern Korea), *Dongbuka yŏksa nonchong* 20(2008) : 83.

35 Kang Don-gu, *Hankuk Gŭndae Jonggyo wa Minjokjuŭi* (The Modern Religion and Nationalism in Korea), Jipmundang Press, 1992: 144.

and Koreans exiled overseas staged annual celebratory events calling the day Kaegukjöl (開國節), Kiwönjöl (紀元節), and Kaech'önjöl (開天節) on October 3 by the lunar calendar. The National Foundation Day event was a mechanism that secured national identity, formally reviving Tan'gun as a historical figure. The foundation day song was sung at the event: "If there is water in the world, there is a spring; if we were a tree, then we have roots; the father of this nation is Tan'gun...we pledge to receive and bring glory." The song was used as a mechanism to instill national consciousness and to allow the Korean *minjok* to recognize a homogenous national identity.

As another mechanism to inspire national consciousness, Paekdu Mountain was highlighted as part of the concept of a holy land of the nation. Since Tan'gun was born on and Korean national culture had started on Paekdu Mountain, it was emphasized as the birthplace of the Korean nation. Therefore in remembering Tan'gun, Paekdu Mountain also received the spotlight and became established as a holy place.

In such ways, Taejonggyo planned events related to Tan'gun, which was accepted by the Koreans, and a sacred national place was designated as well. These efforts were made to instill in Koreans that we are a divine race and the people of heaven, and furthermore a people who can fully overcome crises. It clearly shows that Taejonggyo was part of the independence movement.

Even after Korea's degradation to a Japanese colony, organizations that aimed to gain independence for Korea, gathered in front of the memorial tablet of Tan'gun and strengthened their solidarity for the awareness of resistance against Japan. "Tan'gun" was the spiritual pillar of the Independence Movement.³⁶ As mentioned before, in a national crisis, Tan'gun was continuously summoned from history and was remembered in the spiritual aspect.

36 Kang Yöng-shim, "Chosön Kukwön Hoebokdanüi Gyölsönggwa Hwaldong" (Organization and Activities of the Chosön Kukkwon Hoebokdan), *Hankuk Donip Undongsa*(The Studies of History Independence Movement)4(1990): 150 ~ 151.

Conclusion

Memory does not mean taking facts from the past at face value. According to the position and the situation in which the object of memory is placed, it is fluid and sometimes subject to artificial production. An example of this is when Tan'gun was taken out of history and historical records between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Korea entered modernity with contact with Western culture after the opening of the ports at the end of the nineteenth century. Koreans took an interest in the formation of a national identity, recognizing that the world was a competing space for nations. The making of the Korean national consciousness was closely related to the process and the way of remembering Tan'gun. Ways to remember Tan'gun differed depending on the times, interlocked with national crisis. The "bundling" of Tan'gun and Kija that continued from the early Chosôn period began to disintegrate as foreign countries plundered Korean sovereignty. Kija was gradually excluded from the historical consciousness of the Korean people while the memory of Tan'gun was emphasized. This reflected the sentiment of the times as people tried to overcome crisis by strengthening national consciousness through Tan'gun.

The homogenization of the *minjok* gained strength as the genealogy and the system of Korean history centered on Tan'gun were gradually constructed. Among them, national identity specified by Koreans of the modern age was 'Paedal *minjok*,' as the descendants of Tan'gun. Hereby, Koreans escaped from the medieval self-awareness centered around China and acquired modern national self-identity with an independent history and a unique culture, different from China and the rest of the world.

The term *minjok* is an ethnic concept of a single lineage, and therefore the Korean *minjok* was represented as a pure race. The Korean *minjok*, descendants of Tan'gun, the eternal and great origin of Koreans, must

also be great, and therefore the term “*minjok*” was used in association with historical eminence.³⁷ As one of the many philosophies of the Korean independence movement, Taejonggyo was created to overcome the national crisis at the time and to emphasize national solidarity.

Therefore, the Korean *minjok* has evolved from a “pre-modern nation” into a “modern nation,” using Tan’gun as a symbolic mechanism and figure. This materialized into the capability of the resistance Koreans put up to fight against Western imperialist countries and the Japanese in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, and this was one of the features of Korean nationalism that created a “modern Korean nation.”

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37 Li Jin-gyöng, *Yöksaüi Kongkan* (The Space of history), Humanist, 2010: 318.

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<Abstract>

The Modern Korean Nation, Tan'gun, and Historical Memory in Late Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Century Korea

Kim Soo-ja

Tan'gun was the symbol of a community connected by blood that accompanied the image of unity and purity in Korean history. It played a major role in the development and settlement of a homogenous nationalism, defining Koreans as descendants of Tan'gun and therefore members of a "single" ethnic group. "Tan'gun" was also at the center of the process of creating a modern nation. Historically in each period, the "symbolic" Tan'gun moved with its own life force and performed various functions apart from the "real" Tan'gun.

The making of a Korean national consciousness was closely related to the process and the way of remembering Tan'gun. Ways to remember Tan'gun differed depending on the times in the face of the national crisis. The "bundling" of Tan'gun and Kija that continued from the early Chosôn period began to be disintegrated as foreign countries plundered the Korean sovereignty. Kija was gradually excluded from the historical consciousness of the Korean people while the memory of Tan'gun was emphasized. This reflected the sentiment of the times as people tried to overcome the crisis by strengthening national consciousness through Tan'gun.

Hereby, Koreans escaped from the medieval self-awareness centered around China and acquired the national self-identity of the modern times with an independent history and a unique culture, different from China and the rest of the world.

Keywords: Tan'gun, Kija, Minjok, Shin Ch'aeho, Taejonggyo, History, Memory

〈국문초록〉

19세기 말 20세기 초 한국의 근대민족과 단군 기억 방식

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한국 역사에서 단군은 국가적 위기 상황에 직면했을 때 역사 기록의 전면에 등장하였다. 고려시대 몽고 침략기 단군신화를 기록함으로써 고조선을 환기시키고 이를 통해 ‘한 민족’의 반만년의 유구한 역사와 역사적 실체로서의 독자성을 강조하였다. 그리고 근대 민족이 만들어지는 과정의 중심에 ‘단군’이 있었다. 역사적으로 각 시기마다 ‘상징화’ 된 단군은 ‘실재했던’ 단군과는 별도로 독자적인 생명력을 갖고 움직여왔고 다양한 기능을 해왔다.

한국의 민족의식의 형성은 ‘단군’을 재기억하는 과정과 밀접하게 연관되어 있다. 이 시기에 단군을 기억하는 방식은 시기별로, 국가의 위기상황과 맞물리면서 약간의 차이를 보인다. 조선시대 초기부터 이어져 오던 단군과 기자의 오래된 ‘하나의 묶음’은 외세의 국권침탈이 강해질수록 해체되기 시작하였다. 기자는 점차 역사의식에서 배제되고 단군에 대한 기억만이 강조되었다. 이것은 단군의 위상이 변화했음을 보여주는 것이며 동시에 단군을 통해 민족의식을 강화하여 위기 상황을 극복해 보고자 하는 시대의 반영이라 할 수 있다.

이로써 한국인들은 중국 중심의 중세적 자기의식으로부터 탈피하여, 중국이나 세계 여타 민족과는 다른, 스스로 자주적 역사와 고유한 문화를 갖고 있다는 근대 민족으로의 자기정체성을 분명히 가지게 되었다.

주제어: 단군, 기자, 민족, 신채호, 대종교, 역사, 기억