

Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms, Seoul: Jimoondang, 2006.

The first compilation of beliefs of ancient and medieval Korea, *Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms (Samgukyusa)* contains the seeds of what we refer to these days as Korean culture. Dealing with mythology, legends, anecdotes, Buddhist and Shamanistic beliefs, history, geography, archeology, architecture, and the arts, this book does not only stand for an account of ancient and medieval Korea on Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla Kingdoms, but it also explains through understanding its origins, its transition to modernity.

The author of this book is Ilyeon (1206-1289),¹ a Buddhist monk who compiled materials related to the foundation of various Korean kingdoms, the lives of famous monarchs and Buddhist monks. In order to compile this book, he read both Chinese documents and old Korean documents, and offered his own comments and (re)interpretations, included in parentheses.² In his description, Ilyeon dated the historical events by the reigns of Chinese emperors, and by the sexagenarian years of the lunar calendar that are converted into the twelve units to

* MA Candidate, Department of International Relations and European Studies, Central European University, IRES Department, Nador u. 9, 1051 Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: kristina.silvan@gmail.com.

¹ Ilyeon was born into an ordinary family in Gyeongju, North Gyeongsang Province, in 1206. Before he entered the Buddhist priesthood at the age of nine, his secular name was Kim Gyeonmyeong. Even though he is known as Ilyeon, his Buddhist name was Bogak. At the age of twenty-two he passed the national examination for monks of the Zen sect with the greatest distinction. He devoted himself to study and teaching while dwelling in various temples at different times, and died at the age of eighty-three at Ingak Temple in Uiheung County in North Gyeongsang Province in 1289. King Chungyeol of Goryeo deeply appreciated Ilyeon's knowledge of Buddhist scriptures and Confucian classics and invested him with the title of 'National Buddhist Priest of Eminent Virtue'.

² All the annotative references are printed in a smaller font size than that of the main text.

measure time: rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, serpent, horse, ram, ape, fowl, dog, and swine¹.

Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms (Samgukyusa) was written on hand-carved wooden blocks in Chinese language, from 1281 to 1283, and represents a supplementary to *The History of the Three Korean Kingdoms (Samguksagi)*, compiled half a century earlier by Kim Busik.² The book is divided into five chapters. Chapters one and two discuss the lives of old Korean monarchs and the foundation of old Korean kingdoms, under the titles 'Marvels I' and 'Marvels II'. Chapter three presents the introduction of Buddhism into Korean culture, and it is subdivided into 'The Promotion of Buddhism' and 'Pagodas and Images of Buddha'. Chapter four depicts the lives of the most prominent Korean Buddhist monks, under the title 'Anecdotes of Eminent Monks', while chapter five deals with traditional Korean literature in four subchapters, 'Incantations', 'Tales of Telepathy', 'Hermits' Lives', and 'Filial Piety', respectively.

While the government official Kim Busik borrows the Chinese convention of Confucian historiography which underestimates the importance of mythology and folklore, the Buddhist monk Ilyeon intends to correct Confucian prejudices. Thus, he presents the lives of Korean monarchs from the religious perspective of ancient beliefs such as animism, totemism, or sun worship³. Emphasizing these ancient beliefs, as well as the divine origins of the founders of the three Korean kingdoms, the author underlines the special roots of the Korean nation, distinguishing it from that of Chinese culture. When discussing the influence of Buddhism on Korean culture since the three Korean kingdoms period,⁴ Ilyeon shows how animism has blended with Confucian ideas, Taoist concepts, and Buddhist thoughts in the course of Korean history. The values they cherished, their beliefs and customs speak not only of those old times' tradition, but they also represent a precious evidence for the archetypal frame of values and mindset of Korean people that can be always found within the expression of current Korean culture.

The earliest edition of this book was the copy printed in 1512 by Lee Gyebok, a high government official. The original text has been translated into modern Korean many times by Choi Ho in 1991, Lee Minsu in 1994, or Rhee Sangho in 1999. There are two English versions of Ilyeon's book: Ha Taehung and

¹ Kim Dal-Yong's English version of the book adds the corresponding dates of Christian era in between parentheses.

² Kim Busik (1075–1151) was a high government official of the Goryeo Kingdom (918–1392), who attempted to write the officially sanctioned chronicles of ancient Korean monarchs.

³ In Ilyeon's book, the lives of the old Korean monarchs are not unintentionally entitled 'Marvels'. This suggests the implication of the peoples' faith in mountain gods and powerful spirits, or the interpretation of natural elements and dreams, as well as their direct influence on the Korean monarchs' achievements or defeats.

⁴ Mahayana Buddhism first penetrated Korean Peninsula through China in the late fourth century, and its flexible and tolerant doctrines led the religion to adapt itself easily to ancient Korean animistic beliefs.

Grafton K. Mintz, under the title *Samguk Yusa: Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea* published in 1972, and *Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms*, in 2006, by Kim Dalyong.

Ha Taehung and Grafton K. Mintz's translation focused more on readers' accessibility; hence, the authors explain in their preface, they provided only a minimum number of footnotes, and supplied parenthetical explanations where needed. Notwithstanding, if compared to *Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms*, this version's added explanatory notes are less numerous and detailed. Regarding the usage of footnotes,¹ though minimal in number to make the reading easier without interrupting the flow of the compiled legends and stories, the reader may sense a lack of informative details that could enhance his/her understanding of those ancient times in all their relevant aspects.

As suggested by Kim Dalyong himself, in his preface, his English translation 'aimed to enable adequate communication to take place across cultural barriers.' Thus, 'the English speaking cultures' conceptions of social institutions, religious spirituality, and linguistic norms' have been taken into consideration. Also, his translation, as he himself appreciates it, is mainly sense-for-sense, since he focuses on realizing an intercultural communication.² He also provides numerous footnotes to define and explain concepts common to Korean and Chinese societies, as well as supplies historical maps for readers' better visualization of locations in ancient Korea.

For accomplishing this review of the monk Ilyeon's book, I referred to Kim Dalyong's translation which is more recent and provides the reader with exhaustive explanatory notes³.

Foundation Myths and the Heavenly Nature of the First Korean Monarchs

Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms offers an important insight into various aspects of Korean culture that are still present in and relevant to current expressions embedded in Korean culture. The book consists of legends of the establishment of each state, the miraculous origins of monarchs and their supernatural qualities, as well as the strong bond between their political strategies and religious belief. It is emphasized that most of their decisions,

¹ *Samguk Yusa: Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea* provides a minimum amount of footnotes that are explained at the end of each chapter, while *Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms* intersperses all the useful explanatory notes within the text, showing a tendency for detailed specification.

² The only exception is the translation of songs and poems, which is literal in order to better convey its most intrinsic connotations.

³ This English version was made in consultation with the original copy of the 1512 edition in literary Chinese as well as with the modern previous Korean translation.

achievements and failures were greatly determined by divine influences. The divine element was present not only through the sacrificial rites they were regularly performing, frequent consultations with Buddhist monks, fortunetellers and geomancers, but also through monarchs' own innate power to metamorphose themselves or others depending on the circumstances. Thus, the divine element, and in particular, its Buddhist and animist aspects is pervasive in this book on early Korean history.

When telling the foundation myths Ilyeon refers to them as what Kim Dalyong translated as 'marvels'.¹ Among many of the 'marvels' he presents in his book there is the myth of Dangun which represents the foundation myth of Korean nation as a whole. In order not only to discriminate the roots of Korean nation from that of Chinese, but also to emphasize its supernatural origins, Ilyeon retells the story of Dangun. During the time when Hwanung, Hwanin's son of the divine world, was governing the human world, a tiger and a bear asked to become human beings. Hwanung promised them a life as humans if they only fed on mugwort and garlic in a cave. Only the bear was able to fulfill the promise, and she was immediately transformed into a woman. Upon transformation, Hwanung changed into a man and married her. She gave birth to a son whose name was Dangun Wanggeom. When he grew up, Dangun became a leader and set up his capital at Pyeongyang Fortress, and named his kingdom, Joseon.

Many of Ilyeon's compiled legends point not only at the relationship between human beings and gods, but they also emphasize the connection between human beings and sacred animals. Due to their divine nature, animals such horses – protectors of eggs, out of which boys of divine nature and supernatural powers would hatch out –, (sea) dragons, frogs, turtles, or sacred hens are often depicted as powerful beings with which people are connected in various ways. One of the clearest examples of how human beings can fear, but also tame these animals is found in the legend of Duke Sunjeong. One day, Duke Sunjeong in the reign of King Seongdeok, was having lunch on the sea shore with his wife, Lady Suro. Suddenly, a sea dragon appeared and snatched the lady away into the sea. An old man appeared and said: 'Ancient people said that the words of several people can melt even iron. How can the dragon deep in the sea not be afraid now of the tongues of many human beings?' (2006: 96). The old man suggested the king to compose and sing a song in order to get his wife back from the depth of the sea. The duke did so and he reunited with Lady Suro. The song the duke composed together with other people is as follows: 'Turtle! Turtle! Set Lady Suro free. /What

¹ The initial term corresponded to the Chinese characters (gi-yi, 紀異), which can be literally translated as 'exceptional records/accounts.'

a cardinal sin it is to steal the wife of another person! /If you disobey us and do not set her at liberty, /We will catch you, broil you, and eat you.'

The extraordinary origins of many characters are explained through the egg myth, or as the offspring of mothers impregnated by spirits descended from heaven, sunbeams, or dragons. For example, not only Jumong's mother was impregnated by a sunbeam, but also Jumong himself originated from an egg. Geumwa, the son of the King Hae Buru, locked Yuhwa in a room. There, the sunbeam penetrated into the room and impregnated her; soon after Yuhwa¹ laid a big egg of 2.38 gallons in volume. Even though the egg was cast away to animals, they would not dare to touch it. Finally being returned to its mother, a boy hatched out of the carefully taken care egg. Named Jumong, due to his prodigious qualities of a 'skilled archer', he became King Dongmyeong (58 BCE-19 BCE) of Goguryeo.

Apart from attempting to imply the divine element present in the flow of ancient Korean history, Ilyeon's book also provides various explanatory legends for Korean toponyms, as well as explanations for the most common Korean family names. For example, the most common Korean surname, Kim originates from the time of the reign of the King Talhae, when a baby boy named Alji ('a little boy') was found in a golden coffer, in the forest of Sirim. Since he came from a golden coffer he was surnamed Kim, which means 'gold.' Park, another common family name in Korea, is related to the story of one boy who was born out of an egg whose shape looked like a calabash. The people in that village called the calabash by the phonetic name of 'park', and thus his family was named Park.

The book also shows the origins of the New Year day, or other traditional festivals, as well as the beginning of the 'Zen Sect and Doctrine of Buddhism,'² or uncommon weather reports, such as the early snows in August 15 of the year of the rat (808).

Among the cultural aspects that can be still found in modern Korea, Ilyeon's book mentions the custom of interpreting dreams of either monarchs or pregnant women,³ and 'buying' auspicious dreams. While saying, 'I will buy the dream,' is still in use among Korean people, the book mentions an episode during the time of King Taejong (604-661) when a silk skirt was actually traded for an auspicious dream.

¹ Yuhwa was the daughter of Habaek, who was the spirit of the waters of the Yellow River in China.

² The beginning of the 'Zen Sect and Doctrine of Buddhism' in Korea dated from the time of the fifty-fifth monarch, King Gyeongae, when a Buddhist Sermon for 100 Seats was held. The king burnt incense and held a Buddhist service in person, while he served food to three hundred monks who were studying and practicing Seon (Zen) meditation.

³ Similarly to many other cultures, according to Korean folk customs, pregnant women's dreams have been relevant for the sex of the future baby, as well as for getting an indication about his/her future. For example, in Korean culture, if a woman dreams a dream of a bear, it is believed that she will give birth to a son.

The Promotion of Buddhism and the Legends of Eminent Buddhist Monks

Around the 4th century CE, Buddhism arrived, and at first, it claimed lives of several Buddhist monks. The first propagator of Buddhism in the Goguryeo Kingdom was Shundao, who was ordered by Fu Jian¹ of the Qin Empire to take Buddhist statues and scriptures to Goguryeo. Not only the first Buddhist statues and scriptures brought from China by Shundao, but also the construction of Chomun Temple and Ibullan Temple marked the beginning of the promotion of Buddhism in Goguryeo around 370 CE. In Baekje Kingdom, the promotion of Buddhism was marked in 385 by the establishment of a Buddhist temple at the new capital of Hansin County, where ten spiritually enlightened monks lived. The gradual process of promoting Buddhism in Korea had also a lot to do with the indirect help of several prodigious monks who impressed the royalties of those times with their outstanding qualities². In order to show their sincere appreciation, the monarchs erected temples to the encouragement of Buddhism in Korea. Also, assiduous missionary works done by Buddhist monks, such as Monk Tanshi of the Yuanwei Kingdom, introduced people to Buddhist faith.

The book also describes the lives of the most eminent Buddhist monks, among whom Wonhyo (617–686)³ and Uisang (625–702).⁴ It is said that when the Sacred Monk Wonhyo was born under the Sara Tree, ‘five-colored clouds covered the ground’ to announce the birth of one who would be referred to as a ‘person of innate sagacity, who learned everything without a teacher’. He made a great contribution to the enlightenment of the people by making the rounds of many villages in the country and chanting ‘Namuamitabul’ (Save us, merciful Buddha). Master Uisang was thought to be an incarnation of Buddha on the diamond throne, with a jeweled sunshade. He ordered ten temples to propagate Buddhism according to the principles of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

¹ Fu Jian (317–355) was the ruler of the Qin Empire. He is known for having led strong barbarians from the northwestern region of China to the capital city during the period of the Han and Jin Dynasties.

² For example, according to the story ‘Ado Cultivated the Foundation of Buddhism in the Silla Kingdom’ (2006: 173–180), in the third year of the reign of King Michu, when Princess Seongguk was sick and neither medicine nor sorcery helped, it was only the simple presence of the Buddhist priest Ado that cured her.

³ The story about Wonhyo is entitled ‘Wonhyo, an Unbridled Monk’ (2006: 311–315).

⁴ The ‘anecdote’ about Uisang is entitled ‘Uisang’s Mission Wor’ (2006: 315–320).

TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

In chapter five, 'The Tales of Telepathy' shares the same structure; all of them end with a song of praise dedicated to laudable characters who usually are the protagonists of these short stories, where personification is one of the most frequently used figures of speech. Another common aspect they are endowed with is the presence of moral anecdotes which the writer decodes in the last part of each tale. Even though formulated according to the Buddhist percepts, many of the moral lessons can be noted for their quality of atemporality, since all of them have been constantly parodied in various literary forms. They criticize certain aspects of human nature such as a doubtful mind¹, misjudgment due to shallowness², or human cruelty and malevolence.³ The characters of 'The Tales of Telepathy' are Buddhist monks, common people, or officials, while the main motifs are metamorphosis, karma and reincarnation, superstition, and one's struggle to attain nirvana and reach the Pure Land.

The stories on 'filial piety'⁴ suggest that the book concerns with Confucianism as well. They present the unconditional sacrifice of some Korean sons and daughters, due to which they gained kings' appreciation and praise. These characters' exemplary devotion to their parents led them to extreme sacrifices. The clearest example of this sacrifice is found in the story of 'Son Sun (who) Attempted to Bury His Child in the Ground during the Reign of King Heungdeok'. As the title of the story suggests, Son Sun tried to bury his own child because he would always steal all the food served to his grandmother. Digging in the ground where his son was supposed to be buried, Son Sun and his wife found a stone bell. Considering it as a 'wonderful object', they decided to spare their child's life. The sound of the bell was heard by King Heungdeok who, hearing about their story, became so impressed by Son Sun's filial piety that he offered him a new house and annually gave him 256 bushels of rice to praise his exemplary devotion to his old mother.

¹ 'The woman who appeared as one of nineteen incarnations of Avalokitesvara Bodhisvatta to save human beings was a female servant at Bunhwang Temple' (2006: 360). This moral is part of the tale entitled 'Gwangdeok and Eomjang', 359–360, and hints at people's limited mind set, who never expect exceptional qualities from people of poor condition.

² 'As the two stories demonstrate, human beings in the present world are treated according to their appearances' (2006: 364). This moralistic conclusion appears in the tale 'The Incarnated Buddha Received an Offering', 362–364, and it criticizes human beings' criteria for showing their appreciation and respect toward others.

³ 'If wild animals can be so benevolent, why are some human beings inferior to them?' (2006: 373). This rhetoric moral is part of the tale 'Kim Hyeon Attracted a Tigress', 368–373, and it blames human nature for its insensibility.

⁴ 'Filial piety' is a concept mostly known as representative for the Confucian thought in Korea.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms (Samgukyusa) offers a valuable insight into Korean ancient history. It also provides an evidence for the origins of folk customs and cultural aspects that can be still found in contemporary Korea. The book canvases the history of the Three Kingdoms through emphasizing the harmonious interweaving between politics and religious belief. The necessity for constant harmony between gods and humans (monarchs) is contoured throughout the book, through relevant examples such as: ‘human beings should not disturb heaven’ (2006: 100)¹, or ‘the question of life and death for a nation depends on the mandate from heaven’ (2006: 119)².

The strong connection between earth and heaven is also symbolically available through the image of the rope descending from the sky. An intermediary tool between the two worlds (the sky and the earth), as well as a vehicle allowing the transit in both directions (from sky to earth and from earth to sky), the rope represents a prevalent literary motif in many Korean legends. For example, according to a legend about ‘The Record of the Garak Kingdom’ (2006: 149–167)³, one day a purple rope descended from the heavenly sky to drop six round eggs from which Suro⁴ and the other five leaders of the Gaya States hatched out.

Having highlighted the divine element and the interrelation between political strategy and religious belief, as well as interpreting the records of the Three Kingdoms from the author’s own perspective as a Buddhist monk, the historical reliability of Ilyeon’s compiled work may be doubted. In interpreting and commenting on the already existing historical records, Ilyeon’s own point of view on them can be, considered by some, permeated by the writer’s subjectivity. Nevertheless, what cannot be doubted is that the activities within the political arena of those ancient times were obviously conjoined with the monarchs’ religious belief. Either they accomplished remarkable successes or failed in their duties as leaders, their affairs were closely related to their fear of gods and faith in the interpretation of supernatural elements such as dreams, weather signs, or prophecies of Shamans, monks, and fortunetellers.

¹ From the story ‘King Gyeongdeok, Monk Chungdam, and Great Priest Pyohun’, 97–100.

² From the story about ‘Great King Kim Bu’, 117–125.

³ The Garak Kingdom was established out of several dozen villages around the Nakdong River, and was composed of five Gaya States, such as: Ara, Goryeong, Dae, Seongsan, and So (later on the names of the Five Gaya States were modified into: Geumgwan, Goryeong, Bihwa, Ara, and Seongsan). The State of Geumgwan was founded by King Suro, it was the leading state of all Gaya states, and survived for 491 years after being absorbed into the Silla Kingdom in 532.

⁴ Suro or Sureung (?–199) was the legendary founder and king of the ‘Great Garak Kingdom’.

Along these lines, *Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms* shows that the pairing of religious faith with politics represented the worldview of ancient Koreans. At the same time, it contours the archetype of Korean psych that is still applicable in the present times.

*C T LINA STANCIU**