

Extraordinary, Power, Chaos, and Spirits: Taxonomy of Mysteries in *Samguk sagi* 三國史記

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This article seeks to redefine the Kim Pusik's 金富軾 (1075-1151) *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (Histories of the Three Kingdoms) as a more imaginative and literary text by foregrounding its “supernatural” elements (collectively referred to as “wonder tales”), rather than emphasizing the ‘Confucian’ orientation that has conventionally been prescribed to it. It reviews the extend of incorporation of “wonder tales” into the historiographical content of *Samguk sagi* and outlines the connections between their literary essence and structural functions. The references to extraordinary are typified and distributed by six groups whose attributes are both contextual and functional: the subject matter itself (what is told, in which circumstances the matter is referred to) and assumed level of its compliance with the norms of Confucian historiographical accountability (trustworthiness). These references are analyzed contextually with illustrative references to the Chinese ‘normative histories’ principles. Then the political and structural functions of mystical motifs in the Histories of the Three Kingdoms are deducted and explained. Finally tentative conclusions are offered on the principles of choice of “wonder stories” for the historical narration in the *Samguk sagi* and their functions as ‘special historiographical elements’ are discussed.

Keywords: historiography, *Samguk sagi*, normative history, myths, legends, “wonder tales”, folklore

Introduction: From Rational Historiography into the World of Mysteries

By the 21st century previously almost undisputed in academia Confucian character of *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (or the Histories of the Three Kingdoms) became challenged. As early as in 1998 Richard McBride noted that Kim Yusin's 金庾信 (the paragon of Confucian virtue) biography in *Samguk sagi* “does not read like a conventional Confucian biography” and then went so far as to state that “in many cases the *Samguk sagi* is strikingly similar to Yryŏn's 一然 *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms)”.¹

This transition is vivid in transformation of Edward Shultz's assessments. While in 2004 he would explicitly juxtapose “rational, politically oriented” narrative of *Samguk sagi* to “intriguing anecdotes and mysterious tales” of *Samguk yusa* and attribute

¹ Richard McBride, “Hidden Agendas in the Life Writings of Kim Yusin.” *Acta Koreana* 1 (1998): 139.

scholarly preference to the latter exactly to these anecdotes and tales,² in 2012 he would praise Kim Pusik's "eye for the dramatic" and a "sense of the human significance", that was so unlike of "other histories [that] offer just 'dust and bones' and lack human drama."³ Such a change of mind speaks a change of perception of the *Histories* from that of a 'purely' historical to a cultural and literary source.

Earlier students of *Samguk sagi* tended to focus on historiographic 'rationalization' of mythological motives that should not be regarded as accurate and reliable historic evidences.⁴ Functional analysis of these motives was mostly positivistic: entries on supernatural event were either treated as mere figures of speech with honorific function⁵ or markers intended to separate obviously 'supernatural (irrational)' or 'magic' content from the historical one: "All sections containing stories about dragons, given their obvious fantastic nature, may perhaps help to separate the reliable historical facts presented in the following books from the legends and fantastic stories that probably make up the greater part of the first three books of the *Histories of the Three Kingdoms*."⁶

Later this view was refined. Viktoria Pak (Pirozhenko), for example, a granddaughter of Mikhail N. Pak, adopted a more literature-centered approach and presumed that the tales of the dragons in *Samguk sagi* were the "elements of colorful persuasiveness"⁷ of the historical narrative itself, but without much elaboration of the

² Edward Shultz, "An Introduction to the *Samguk Sagi*," *Korean Studies* 28(2004): 4.

³ Edward Shultz and Hugh H. W. Kang, Introduction in *The Silla Annals of the Samguk sagi*, (Seongnam: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2012), pp. 8-9.

⁴ Late prof. Mikhail N. Park, who initiated Russian translation of *Samguk sagi* in 1950s (completed in 2002 in three volumes), while he himself was a vocal advocate of multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of historical text and a master of critical historiography, could not venture beyond positivist dichotomy between the *rational* (reliable) and the *irrational* (unreliable, "mythical"). In *Samguk sagi*, he wrote, "...even vivid legends and myths are presented as a list of *arbitrarily dated facts* (emphasis mine — A.S.) of the history of a state, as if they were the deeds of real people." (Mikhail N. Pak, "Kim Busik kak istorik" [Kim Pusik as historian], Introduction in: Kim Busik, *Samguk sagi. Letopisi Koguryo. Letopisi Pekche. Hronologicheskie tablitsy* [Samguk sagi. Koguryō Annals. Paekche Annals. Chronological Tables], trans. Mikhail N. Pak. Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 1995, p. 27).

⁵ For instance, commenting on the entry from 5th year of Paekche king Koi 古爾 that states: "In forth month of summer a lightning stroke the pillar of kings' palace gate and a yellow dragon flew from this gate 夏四月，震王宮門柱，黃龍自其門飛出。" (Kim Pusik 金富軾, *Samguk sagi*, j. 24: 648. Page numbers of the original manuscript given according to the Russian 3-volumes edition) Mikhail N. Pak would note that "entries of this kind are obviously intended to exalt the king by displaying his divine connection with supernatural (celestial) powers" (Kim Busik, *Samguk sagi. Letopisi Koguryo. Letopisi Pekche. Hronologicheskie tablitsy* [Samguk sagi. Koguryō Annals. Paekche Annals. Chronological Tables], trans. Mikhail N. Pak. Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 1995, p. 353, note 6).

⁶ Kim Busik, *Samguk sagi. Letopisi Silla* [Samguk sagi. Silla Annals], trans. Mikhail N. Pak. Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 1959, 2001, p. 310, note 28. This is the commentary to the entry from 22nd year of king (*maripkan*) Soji 照(炤)知麻立干: 龍見金城井。京都黃霧四塞 "A dragon appeared in Kūmsōng well. The Capital was shrouded in yellow fog from four sides (all over)" (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 3:115). "Three first books" are the three first *kwōns* 卷 of *Silla Annals*.

⁷ Viktoria V. Pak (Pirozhenko), "Obraz drakona cherez prizmu ranney istorii i istoriografii Korei [The Image of the Dragon through the Prism of Early Korean History and Historiography]." *Proceedings of Korean studies in Russia* 7 (2015): 45.

specifics of these elements. To this day there are plenty works that take on the elements of mystical, mythical, legendary, folklore and other “wonder tales” in *Samguk sagi* with emphasis rather on the literary qualities of the text, but not their structural (narrative) characteristics and significance. Alternatively, there are cultural anthropology works, of which the most prominent arguably is the seminal compendium by James H. Grayson,⁸ where many of notable motifs of Korean mythology are typified (albeit almost without reference to the *Samguk sagi* content).

However, to my knowledge, up to now these “wonder tales” have never been regarded comprehensively as a historiographical element, as a “narrative within a narrative”. True, Remco Breuker attempts a cautious generalization, when he notes that Kim Pusik distinctively differentiated “strange stories that circulate among the people” from “the origin myths of the peninsula” and was “sensitive to Koryŏ’s origin myths and appreciated their importance”.⁹ While “the literal truth of these myths is perhaps best not believed, they are to be accepted as myths of descent: they fulfil a specific function in the history of a state.”¹⁰

But why “the literal truth” of foundational myths and other “fantastic stories” should be doubted in Confucian historiography in the first place? What makes a story trustworthy? Remco Breuker offers a fairly rational argument when he suggests that Kim Pusik “established the ancestry of Koryŏ on the basis of those facts that he thought he could prove, refusing to admit those stories that he considered mythical, confabulated, or implausible.”¹¹ At the same time Breuker maintains that Kim Pusik was not “a staunch denouncer of myth and tales.”¹² It implies that supernatural content of certain narratives was not the sole and, perhaps, decisive criteria for including or excluding them from Confucian ‘dynastic (or normative) history’.¹³

Building on that premise I will try to review the extend of incorporation of “wonder tales” into the historiographical content of *Samguk sagi* and outline the connections between their literary essence and structural functions. I do not intend to prescribe a specific merit (nor a weakness) to Kim Pusik’s approach to historiography on that, but rather specify the relations between the political and ‘mystical’ in the *Histories*. Surely, *Samguk sagi* is a history of “the good or evil of kings and queens, the loyalty or treachery of their servants, peace or turmoil in the state, the order or chaos among the people (君后之善惡，臣子之忠邪，邦業之安危，人民之理亂).”¹⁴ It is a history

⁸ James H. Grayson, *Myths and Legends from Korea: An Annotated Compendium of Ancient and Modern Materials*. London/New York: Routledge, 2012.

⁹ Remco Breuker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea, 918-1170. History, Ideology, and Identity in the Koryŏ Dynasty* (Leiden: Brill’s Korean Studies Library, 2010), p. 324. He implies that foundational myths of the Three Kingdoms constitute Koryŏ’s ancestry and thus were altogether regarded as origin myth of Koryŏ which was historiographically legitimized by the story of descent.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Remco Breuker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea*, p. 94.

¹² Ibid., p. 325.

¹³ *Samguk sagi* can be regarded as a *zhengshi* 正史 (normative histories) type of historical record, of course.

¹⁴ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, 進三國史記表.

of principles of governing (治道) and of administrating (政道), hence, first and foremost it is a story of *political*. *Samguk usa*, on its part, is a story of Buddhism, a story of a teaching and a story of a faith. Hence, it is a story of a *transcendence*, “supernatural” and “mystical” by definition. There is no practical meaning to investigate which one is more “magical” in approach and narrative, although ‘Confucian’ character of *Samguk sagi* is, indeed, often established though the comparison with ‘Non-Confucian’ *Samguk yusa*.¹⁵

Neither I dare to claim *Samguk sagi* exceptional for the Confucian historical canon — such a statement would require at least a throughout comparison of the *Er shi si shi* 二十四史 (Twenty-Four Histories) that were written before 1147 AD up to the *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (New History of Tang) — together with Japanese historical records as well. I aim to demonstrate that the use of “wonder tales” in *Samguk sagi* can be approached with more nuanced assessment than Cartesian dichotomy of ‘real and therefore trustworthy and unreal and therefore doubtful’. I also hope I will be able to offer ideas concerning the historiographical significance of these stories in *Samguk sagi*.

Can History Work (with) Magic?

The idea that official Confucian historiography is methodologically ‘objectivist’¹⁶ and, therefore, shuns supernatural, ‘magical’ or ‘irrational’ motifs was once well-established in academia. Basically, it was grounded in famous words from Confucius himself (or, rather, his disciples):

The teacher would not speak of extraordinary, power, chaos and spirits
子不語怪，力，亂，神¹⁷

The fact that later Yryŏn would challenge this principle and advocate ‘historiography of miraculous and amazing’ in his foreword to *Samguk yusa*¹⁸ can support — albeit indirectly — that this statement together with another widely cited Confucius’ dictum “to transmit, not make” 述而不作 were established norms of

¹⁵ I am grateful to the reviewer who generously supplied me with this argument.

¹⁶ See Sato: “East Asian historiography... shared, at the phenomenological level, a commitment to an *objectivist* (emphasis mine — A.S.) method of historical writing” (Masayuki Sato, “The Archetype of History in the Confucian Ecumene.” *History and Theory* 46.2 (May 2007): 219). On the other hand, Remco Breuker would seem to dismiss such an argument as irrelevant: “Objective historiography, in the sense in which the term has been misused ever since Leopold von Ranke’s successors took the reins of the historiographical discipline, would have meant little to a Confucian historiographer.” (Remco Breuker, “Writing History in Koryŏ: Some Early Koryŏ Works Reconsidered.” *Korean Histories* 2.1 (2010): 62).

¹⁷ *Lunyu* 論語 7:21.

¹⁸ Iryŏn 一然, *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 [Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms], trans. Yu. Boltach (St.-Petersburg: Giperion, 2018), pp. 197-198.

Confucian historiographical canon. Kim Pusik, with his acclaimed fluency with Chinese classics could not have possibly been unaware of that.

Yet another argument in favor of the ‘objectivist’ character of Confucian historiography was believed to have been provided also by Confucius himself, in his canonical *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals). The text of this chronicles is extremely matter-of-fact; it is indeed a stream of historical events, laconic and down-on-Earth. However, even this list of rulers’ births and deaths, wars, battles and sieges, diplomatic efforts, assassinations, harvests and famines, Solar eclipses and so on does accommodate five entries on supernatural — on ghosts, magical beasts, etc.

Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 seminal *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), which heads the corpus of the *Twenty-Four Histories*, contains accounts of spirits, Daoist sorcerers and their magic, and miraculous beasts. Strictly speaking, the *Records* are not ‘Confucian,’ neither Sima Qian is ‘Confucianist’ himself, although he was, of course, a scholar-literati. But even the unquestionably ‘Confucian’ *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (History of the Later Han) by no means shuns “wonder stories.” For example, during the reign of Emperor An 恭宗孝安皇帝, the appearance of two phoenixes, three *qilins*, and four dragons was recorded¹⁹—arguably, a record number for a single reign. Other historical records may (or may not) follow suit (see below discussion of biographies of Liu Bang, the founder of the Han Empire, in *Han shu* 漢書 [History of Han], and Li Yuan, the founder of the Tang Empire, in the *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 [Old History of Tang]).

Hence, it seems that ‘extraordinary, power, chaos and spirits’ were not regarded as contrary to Confucian historiographical canon *per se* and Kim Pusik was not restrained in his choice of source material by historiographical method itself. This leads to another question — what should be considered supernatural in *Samguk sagi* to this end? After all, lightning bolt hitting a person is a natural phenomenon, while the narrative of the *purposeful* manifestation of a divine power in the form of a lightning hitting a person or a building implies a supernatural (that is, being beyond the command of a mere human) force at work. However, was that manifestation considered supernatural (on the basis of non-human realm of origin) in times of Kim Pusik? Contemplations on this matter require certain prudence. No other than Kim Pusik himself referred to lightning strikes as markers of divine warning and did it with explicitly political (i.e., practical) purpose, when king Injong 仁宗, swayed by Myoch’ŏng’s 妙淸 words planned to move to Sŏgyŏng:

This summer lightnings stroke over thirty building in Taehwagung palace in Sŏgyŏng. If these were auspicious sites, Heaven would not have acted this way. To seek refuge here—would not it be futile?

¹⁹ *Hu Han shu* 後漢書 [History of the Later Han] <https://ctext.org/hou-han-shu/xiao-an-di-ji/zh>

今夏雷震西京大華宮三十餘所。若是吉地，天必不如此，避災於此，不亦左乎？²⁰

Yet, practical (political) interpretation of any given extraordinary event cannot rule out its supernatural context.²¹ This context provides a basis for interpretative analysis that begins with distribution of the references to extraordinary by groups. The attributes for these groups are both contextual and functional: the subject matter itself (what is told, in which circumstances the matter is referred to) and assumed level of its compliance with the norms of Confucian historiographical accountability (trustworthiness). I present this overview in the next section of the article divided into six sub-sections: Wonders ‘worthy to discuss by noble men’; Founding legends: too extraordinary to be trustworthy?; Magic creatures and entities (beasts, spirits and ghosts); Magic objects and items; Practical magic: “wizardry” in *Samguk sagi*; and, finally, Miracles, divine interventions and other supernatural events. Then I proceed to the analysis of their structural and political functions.

“Hierarchy” of Wonders

References to events, entities and practices of mystical or spiritual nature appear in *Samguk sagi* in very diverse forms and contexts. One of the most ‘Confucian’ and thus historiographically ‘legitimate’ are the descriptions of rites and music (祭祀樂) in the corresponding *kwŏn* 32 of the “Monographs/Treatises” 雜誌 part of the *Histories*. State rituals are a long-standing spiritual foundation of Confucian political model and music is a part of ritual at least from Zhou period. In this case stories of spirits and mystical practices (or, rather, an anthropological compendium of deities and worships) become an integral element of historiography. Compilation of this collection is prescribed by the very structure of the historical record.

Same holds true for the cases when mystical or fantastic matters are explicitly referred to as figures of speech. In this case these references function as literary devices, metaphors and allegories and thus cannot possibly defy historiographic canon. Thus, these two types of references can be united in one group (below called “Wonders ‘worthy to discuss by noble men’”).

Other groups are positioned in order of downgrading (and arbitrarily set) “degree of supernatural” in these references. Starting from the foundational myths and legends, this order proceeds with stories of spirits and magical beasts, stories of magical objects and items, stories of magic practices that are followed by stories of miracles and other

²⁰ *Koryŏ sa* 高麗史 [History of Koryŏ], 98. https://db.history.go.kr/goryeo/itemLevelKrList.do?itemId=kr&levelType=&types=o&parentId=kr_098_0010_0010

²¹ After all, even modern politicians – be it in Korea, Russia, United States or elsewhere – readily turn to various mystical symbols and practices, as if in mockery of sophisticated theories about the rationality of politics.

extraordinary events. Prophetic dreams²² were not included in the list of miracles (they are mentioned only in the context of broader narratives), nor were natural disasters that can be explained by natural causes, nor were astronomical phenomena.

Wonders ‘worthy to discuss by noble men’

Silla’s hierarchy of guardian spirits and deities and sacrificial practices was vast, complex and diverse. It included spirits of soil and grain (社稷) and ancestors-founders’ spirits, the spirits of realm’s prominent mountains and streams, Sun and Moon and other celestial bodies, locally worshipped deities (some of them were ‘appropriated’ from the Chinese or Buddhist pantheon), fortress guardian spirits and so on²³. Kim Pusik also mentioned very special rites such as 壓丘祭 (“suppressing the mound [spirits]”) and 辟氣祭 (“quelling [the evil] energy”), performed “either as extraordinary provisions or in case of draughts and floods (上件或因別制，或因水旱而行之者也).”²⁴ Those two ceremonies were intended to suppress or combat harmful spiritual emanations. Overall, description of Silla’s rites and music is quite ‘positivistic’, matter-of-factly (as is, in fact, becoming to the “Monographs/Treatises” in general) — save for the single entry on the mysterious origins of a flute that can quell ten thousand waves (萬波息), which will be reflected upon later in the article. Records for the Koguryŏ and Paekche for that matter are far more sparse and are based mostly on Chinese sources, that mention generally “worship of gods and spirits (鬼神)”, sacrifices to the Heaven and Earth (inappropriate for feudal lords 諸侯 or vassal states), and a “multitude of ‘obscene altars’ (多淫祠).”²⁵ References to *Kogi* (古記), earlier Korean historical records, cited in “Monographs” mostly recount kings’ sacrificial pilgrimages.

Yet, even these scarce ‘positivistic’ descriptions provide for some cultural and political reflections that will be elaborated later in this article, while other parts of the *Histories* offer much broader gallery of mystical and extraordinary. These matters are referred to in historical documents²⁶ and speeches by historical characters. One of,

²² Prophetic dreams in East Asian culture seem never to have been regarded as something “magical” or supernatural, unworthy of a noble man. On the contrary, they were viewed rather as a means of communicating with the spiritual world: see, for example, one of Confucius’s famous sayings: “Extreme is my decay. For a long time, I have not dreamed, as I was wont to do, that I saw the duke of Zhou 甚矣吾衰也！久矣吾不復夢見周公” *Lunyu* 論語 7: 5, trans. by James Legge. <https://ctext.org/analects/shu-er>

²³ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 32: 1084-1089.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 1089-1090.

²⁶ For example, in a letter of admonition addressed to King Munmu 文武 of Silla, who in 671 sent troops “to invade Paekche,” whose lands were at that time occupied by the Tang China, the Tang general Xue Rengui 薛仁貴 reproaches the Korean ruler for acting contrary to the will of his predecessor—his father—who had impeccably fulfilled his vassal duties toward the Tang Empire. Eloquent passage ends up with a warning: 忽高門之基 延鬼瞰之責, which implies that since King Munmu is indeed betraying

perhaps, the most colorful of such speeches is Kim Yusin's admonition to the Queen²⁷ in the decisive moment the stalemate between the rebellious army of Pidam 毗曇 and Yōmjong 廉宗 and the Queen's army, when a shooting star came falling from the sky down to the loyalist headquarters at Wōlsōng 月城. While the rebels saw that as the ominous sign for their enemy and rejoiced, Kim Yusin referred to Chinese classics to restore the morals of the loyalists:

Good fortune and bad fortune are uncertain; only humans cause these [conditions]. That was why Zhou²⁸ was ruined in spite of the red bird's²⁹ appearance and Lu declined despite the capture of the kirin. [Emperor] Gaozong rose to prosperity when the cock pheasant was crowing and the Duke of Zheng thrived even though the dragons fought each other. Therefore, [we] know virtue triumphs over evil. And thus, celestial anomalies do not deserve any concern. Your Majesty must not worry.³⁰

the memory of his noble lineage (by straying away from his father's precepts) it may bring upon him and his family the condemnation of the "peering spirits (鬼瞰)" (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 9: 222-223). The latter is a likely reference to the Chinese idiom about "ghosts peering into [tall] houses" (鬼瞰其室), which implies that spirits harm (or punish) the arrogant and haughty. Edward Shultz and Hugh Kang saw another reference to the supernatural entity in this passage, namely, to the "god of surveillance" (耳目之神), or the "God of the kitchen (灶神, Zaoshen)", and explained this reference as a hint on Silla's attempt to spy on Tang troops (Edward Shultz and Hugh H. W. Kang, *The Silla Annals of the Samguk sagi*, (Seongnam: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2012), pp. 216-217; note 24), but it looks more like a misinterpretation, and the whole passage — 聽縱橫之說, 煩耳目之神 — should be understood as a description of futile waste of "spirit of eye and ear" (i.e. pointless attention) to the talk of treacherous intrigues (縱橫). 縱橫 — literally "vertical and horizontal" — is a reference to the "School of Diplomacy (縱橫家)" described in the 1st-century BCE work 戰國策 (*Zhan Guo Ce*, Strategies of the Warring States). However, the text of *Zhan Guo Ce* was so at odds with Confucian moral and political virtues that in the post-Han era it was classified as a "dangerous" book; thus, the expression 縱橫 apparently gradually transformed into an allegory of political wiliness and immorality. Korean translation of this passage from 국사편찬위원회 offers similar interpretation (see: https://db.history.go.kr/common/compareViewer.do?levelId=sg_007_0020_0090&type=ancient).

²⁷ *Samguk sagi* does not specify whether it was Queen Sōndōk 善德 or Queen Chindōk 眞德, who succeeded the former. Yet, given the stated time spans (Queen Sōndōk passed away on the eights day — either of the month, or the eights day of the mutiny (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 5:162) — while the battle between the rebels and the loyalists had "lasted for ten days without resolution 攻守十日不解" before the omnious star fell down), it should have been Queen Chindōk. Remarkably, in this paragraph the rebels refer to the queen with the derogatory term "mistress 女主", while the historiographer titles her a Great Queen (大王) — a honorific hardly used ever again in the entire text of the *Histories* for a female ruler.

²⁸ Zhou 紂(辛) here is reference to the posthumous derogatory name of last king of Shang(-Yin) 商, Di Xin 帝辛, and should not be mistaken with the Kingdom of Zhou (周朝). Therefore, this line is better translated as "[King] Zhou met his demise despite the red bird..."

²⁹ While 赤雀 (red bird, or red sparrow) is sometimes equated with phoenix (鳳凰), it is originally the Vermillion Bird [of the South], one of the Four Auspicious Beasts, guardians of four cardinal directions.

³⁰ Translation borrowed from: Na Sanghoon, You Jinsook, and Shin Jeongsoo. "Chapter 41, 42, and 43 of the *Samguk sagi*: An Annotated Translation of Biography of Kim Yusin." *The Review of Korean Studies* 21.1 (2018): 217-218.

Extraordinary, Power, Chaos, and Spirits: Taxonomy of Mysteries¹¹¹
in *Samguk sagi* 三國史記

吉凶無常 惟人所召 故紂以赤雀亡 魯以獲麟衰 高宗以 雉雊興 鄭公以龍鬪昌
故知德勝於妖 則星辰變異 不足畏也 請王勿憂³¹

Here red bird 赤雀 might be a reference to the ancient writings that later surfaced as the *Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年 (Bamboo Annals)³² that states that “red bird(s) gathered at Zhou’s ancestral shrine (有赤雀集于周社).”³³ Kirin (*qilin*), apparently, is the reference to the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals) — in particular, the last entry believed to be composed by Confucius himself. It tells the story of kingdom of Lu people capturing the *qilin*: 西狩獲麟. Later commentators added that Confucius had explained that this had been a favorable sign. Cock pheasant cry was a commonplace bad sign mentioned widely in various sources, and dragon fight is a reference to yet another historical classics, the *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳.³⁴

Another colorful reference to the supernatural was produced by Silla general Ch’andök 讚德 in the face of overwhelming odds and inevitable death while defending the Kajam 槲岑 fortress against Paekche troops. He wished “to die and become a huge demon to devour all the Paekche people and regain the fortress (願死爲大厲, 喫盡百濟人 以復此城).”³⁵

While these references may, indeed, be regarded as mere “literary embroideries,”³⁶ they do evidence that mystical and supernatural realms mattered for people of the

³¹ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 41: 1318.

³² The original text of these chronicles written on bamboo slips (hence the name) was re-discovered in 3rd century AD after almost 600 years of oblivion.

³³ *Zhushu Jinian* 竹書紀年 [Bamboo Annals]. Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/zhushu-jinian/di-xin/ens>. English translation of the first part of the passage might be confusing, though, since the red bird(s) here appeared at Zhou (周) altar which would mean a beneficial sign for the Zhou kingdom and thus, an ominous sign for the Shang (and for Di Xin personally). There is a slight similarity between ‘Zhou’ 周 and ‘Shang’ 商 characters, so there might be a room for speculation that either the compiler of the *Bamboo Annals*, or Kim Yusin (or, rather, the historian/biographer who composed his speech to the queen) mistook one for another. Vladimir Tikhonov’s Russian translation takes this circumstance into account by offering a much more detailed interpretation of the original phrase: “Therefore, [the Yin] King of Zhou [Xin] perished when [his rival—the Zhou King Wen] was visited by an auspicious red bird (the phoenix), and Lu grew weak when [its ruler, Prince Ai, ordered the sacred unicorn—the *qilin*—to be shot in order to capture it” (Kim Busik. *Samguk sagi. Raznye opisaniya. Biografii*. [Samguk sagi. Monographs. Biographies]. Text edition, translation, introductory article, commentary, and appendices under the general editing by M.N. Pak and L.R. Kontsevich. Moscow: Vost. Lit., 2002, pp. 124–125). In this interpretation, all the omens in Kim Yusin’s admonition appear unfavorable, and the contradiction under discussion is resolved; however, this also eliminates the parallelism clearly embedded in the text between the fatal consequences of presumably favorable omens and the favorable consequences of outwardly unfavorable ones. Furthermore, the original text of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* does not state that Prince Ai ordered the *qilin* to be shot.

³⁴ See more details on the dragon fight in: Na Sanghoon et al., op. cit., 218, note 100.

³⁵ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 47: 1427.

³⁶ Derk Bodde, *Statesman, Patriot and General in Ancient China: Three Shiji Biographies in the Ch’in Dynasty* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1940, repr., New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1967), p. 41.

Three kingdoms and for Kim Pusik and the significance of these realms might have spread beyond figures of speech into the realm of politics and historiography.

Even more so, when historical record relays cases of mysterious forces at work — spirits interact with humans, dragons fly, miracles happen and enchanted items perform (or fail to perform) their magic. Sometimes these stories may appear as single entry (like story of a punishment of disgraceful son Yōdong 如冬 or a story of dancing spirits), sometimes they constitute much more complex and sophisticated narratives (like the founding legends or Kim Yusin's apprenticeship with a mystical elderly traveler Nansŭng 難勝). Often, they would appear as a chain of supernatural (strange) events of various nature that precedes or follows a major political one:

In the third month of spring people [from] Wae attacked and captured Changbong.
In the fourth month of summer a violent windstorm uprooted the trees. A dragon
appeared in Kūmsōng well. The Capital was shrouded in yellow fog from four sides
(all over)

春三月，倭人攻陷長峰鎮。夏四月，暴風拔木。龍見金城井。京都黃霧四塞

37

The story then proceeds with colorful description of king (*maripkan*) Soji's 照(炤)知麻立干 romantic affair with strikingly beautiful sixteen-years commoner girl Pyōkhwa 碧花 that led king to behave inappropriately, and culminates with the reprimand from an old lady (apparently, also commoner) who cites classic Chinese parlable, and, ultimately, with Soji's demise.³⁸

Founding legends: too extraordinary to be trustworthy?

Silla and Koguryō founding stories are, perhaps, the most magic-imbued narratives, and, thus the most historiographically controversial, 'non-Confucian'. They were arguably the most discussed and the most criticized parts of the *Histories*.³⁹

³⁷ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 3: 114-115.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Koryō poet and scholar Yi Gyubo 李奎報 (1168–1241) lambasted Kim Pusik for massively abridging the story of Koguryō founder king Tongmyōng (Ko Chumong) 東明聖王 (高朱蒙), thus showing disrespect to original Korean historical sources and culture (see Yi Gangnae 李康來. *Samguk sagi chōngōron* 三國史記 典據論 [Study of the sources of *Samguk sagi*]. 서울, 1996, p. 269). He maintained that much more detailed history of King Tongmyōng was presented in an earlier historical chronicle *Haedong samguksa* 海東三國史 that later became known as *Ku samguksa* 舊三國史 (Remco Breuker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea, 918-1170. History, Ideology, and Identity in the Koryō Dynasty* (Leiden: Brill's Korean Studies Library, 2010), p. 91). Later, Chosŏn neo-Confucians would accuse Kim Pusik of the opposite — of neglecting the Confucian historiographical canon, of excessive attention to "wild and absurd" stories (see Ch'oe Yōng-ho. "An Outline History of Korean Historiography." *Korean Studies* 4 (1980): 1-27.) at the expense of the presentation of "good (virtuous) policies and wise advice." (see Remco Breuker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea, 918-1170. History, Ideology, and Identity in the Koryō Dynasty* (Leiden: Brill's Korean Studies Library, 2010), p. 325)

Extraordinary, Power, Chaos, and Spirits: Taxonomy of Mysteries¹¹³
in *Samguk sagi* 三國史記

Progenitors of Silla ruling families and of Koguryō, unlike, remarkably, the founder of the kingdom of Paekche Onjo 溫祚,⁴⁰ clearly were of supernatural origin:

Both Silla's lineages of Pak and Sōk were born from eggs. The Kim lineage [founder] descended from Heaven in a golden casket, [or,] some say he rode a golden chariot
新羅朴氏、昔氏皆自卵生。金氏從天入金櫃而降，或云乘金車⁴¹

Chumong was not from a human (alternatively — human-born), yet he became human
朱蒙非人所生，其為人也勇⁴²

Their stories are indeed prolific with intermingled ancient mythology and folk-tale motifs. They are well-researched and commented on, therefore I'll mention them very briefly here. Some of these motifs are recurring in all the founder stories (birth from the egg or a casket⁴³), and some resurface even later, in other narratives (the crying horse, for example).⁴⁴ While story of Pak Hyōkkōse 朴赫居世 himself is relatively terse, it is closely connected with the story of his sister-spouse,⁴⁵ Aryōng 閼英, who was born from the right side of a rib cage of a dragon who appeared from a well.⁴⁶

The story of king Tongmyōng is much longer and rich with supernatural details retained from the original legend. It accommodates a 'prologue' of sorts — a story of Kūmwa 金蛙, born as a golden frogling-like boy from under a stone on which king Hae Buru's 解夫婁 of Puyō 扶餘 horse shred her tears, adopted by Hae Buru to succeed him on the throne. It features a mysterious stranger Haemosu 解慕漱, who "called himself the son of a Celestial Emperor 其舊都有人，不知所從來，自稱天

⁴⁰ Onjo is the son of Tongmyōng and his story appears to be devoid of any overtly mythological motifs whatsoever.

⁴¹ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 12: 398.

⁴² Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 13: 405.

⁴³ Anthropologically these two motifs are very close. They are repeated in stories of Pak Hyōkkōse, king Tongmyōng, king T'harhae 脫解 of Silla (which also includes the motif of abandoned infant in a boat set to sail in order to save the offspring considered ill-ominous), Kim Alji 金閼智, the ancestor of king Mich'u 味鄒 of Silla, and Kim Suro 金首露 of Kaya 金官伽倻.

⁴⁴ See the entry in *Silla Annals* of 45th year of *isagūm* Naemul 奈勿尼師今: "In the winter, in the tenth month, the King's horse from the Royal stables knelt down on her knees, cried in sorrow and shed tears" (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 3: 98)

⁴⁵ This double identity originates from somewhat ambiguous line on Lady Saso 娑蘇夫人 (or Sacred Mother Sōndo — Sōndo[san] Sōngmo 仙桃山聖母) from *Samguk yusa*: 生聖子為東國始君。蓋赫居閼英二聖之所自也。It can be interpreted as Lady Saso giving birth to both Pak Hyōkkōse and Aryōng referred collectively as 'two sages/saints' 二聖 — the same way they are referred to in *Samguk sagi*. I'll return to the Lady Saso's story later.

⁴⁶ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 1: 31-32. Aryōng story in *Samguk sagi* is also abridged in comparison with her story from *Samguk yusa*. Connections of the story of a dragon, birth and water well (associated to the ancient myth of the fountain of life) is a reference to the very ancient mythological motifs.

帝子,”⁴⁷ seduced Yuhwa 柳花, a daughter of river’s god Habaek 河伯.⁴⁸ Later, Yuhwa, detained in the dark room by Kūmwā will be pursued by the sun ray which will mysteriously impregnate her. Eventually she gave birth to an egg, from which a boy — future king Tongmyōng is born.⁴⁹

Further adventures of Tongmyōng accommodate such well-known wonders and folk-tale motifs as a bridge from turtles and fishes that helped him during his flight from envious Kūmwā’s sons or momentous meeting with three sages 三賢 in weird clothes⁵⁰ and so on. All in all, his story appears a lot more ‘fantastic’ than any of the three stories of Silla’s progenitors (and, perhaps, even all of them taken together). Yet, it is the Silla’s foundational myths that are the most doubtful for Kim Pusik. He explicitly states it twice: in concluding historiographer’s comments 史論 in both *Silla Annals* and *Paekche Annals* he says that these stories are so “strange [that they] are impossible to trust” 怪不可信.⁵¹ Character 怪 used in this expression is exactly the first in the list of “extraordinary, power, chaos and spirits” that Confucius himself preferred not to talk about.

This statement seems, indeed, a very strong expression of doubt. In fact, it is used just one more time in the entire text of the *Histories*, and with the same purpose — to express reservations in the legend of the origins of the flute that can quell ten thousand waves: “While [they] say so, [it seems too] strange to trust (雖有此說, 怪不可信).”⁵² This very same expression was, as Remco Breuker puts it, “then taken as a *pars pro toto* for Kim Pusik’s [dismissive] attitude towards myths and legends”⁵³ at large.

However, the presentation of the founding myths, as well as the birth circumstances of many other historical figures recorded in the *Samguk sagi*, cast doubt on the validity of such a generalization. First of all, Kim Pusik clearly and unambiguously expresses doubt about the authenticity of the origins of only the founders of the Silla ruling families,⁵⁴ while he presents, albeit in an abridged form, the much more “strange” and supernaturally rich circumstances of Tongmyōng’s birth without comment.

⁴⁷ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 13: 404.

⁴⁸ Habaek is the sinographic homonym of Chinese river deity Hebo. Korean scholars following, perhaps, early insights of Yi Pyōngdo — see, for example, Yi Pyōngdo 이병도. *Kungnyōk Samguk sagi* 『國譯三國史記』 [National Translation of *Samguk sagi*], 을유문화사, 1977, maintain that Habaek, as a god of the Amnok river must be a deity of Korean origin; see Kim Myungok. “Koguryō kōnguk sinhwa Habaek-ui ch’ulja-e taehan insik chaegōmt’o 고구려 건국신화 하백의 출자에 대한 인식 재검토 [Reexamination on the Awareness on the Origin of Habaek in Birth Myth of Koguryeo]. *Culture and Convergence* 38, no.3 (2016): 301-326.

⁴⁹ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 13: 404-405.

⁵⁰ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 13: 406-407.

⁵¹ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 12: 398; 28:774.

⁵² Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 32: 1099-1100.

⁵³ Remco Breuker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea, 918-1170. History, Ideology, and Identity in the Koryō Dynasty* (Leiden: Brill’s Korean Studies Library, 2010), p. 323.

⁵⁴ However, unlike the story of the “flute that calms ten thousand waves,” the construction of the sentence may indicate that Kim Pusik is nevertheless attempting to legitimize these myths

In general, the Chinese historiographic tradition of dynastic histories allowed (and even assumed) that the birth and development of outstanding personalities should be accompanied by a wide variety of mystical and supernatural circumstances. This primarily concerns, of course, the founders of ruling dynasties. However, such a “standard” was not mandatory. Comparison of the biographies of Liu Bang, the founder of the Han Empire, as described in the *Han shu*, and Li Yuan, the founder of the Tang Empire, as described in the *Tang shu*, reveals this difference explicitly.⁵⁵ Liu Bang’s biography includes prophetic dreams of his parents; celestial signs (thunder and lightning); encounters with spirits and dragons; mystical conception; extraordinary personal traits and qualities of Liu Bang, manifested from birth, and exhibited even beyond his conscious intentions (when he got drunk and fell asleep, wine merchants’ sales increased); predictions of mysterious elders; Liu Bang’s own victory over the wereworm, etc.⁵⁶ In Li Yuan’s biography, however, we see almost nothing of this kind, it is very mundane.⁵⁷ This may be due to the gradual “rationalization” of Chinese historiography, but the same difference is observed in the biographies of Tongmyōng and Onjo: both the main and alternative versions of the founding of Koguryō and Paekche differ in that, in the case of Koguryō, mythological motifs are explicitly present in the *Samguk sagi*, while in the case of Paekche, they are absent altogether.

This may suggest that, in the 12th century, Korean Confucian historiography fully allowed for the coexistence of mythological narratives and “rational-historical” ones. Moreover, extraordinary circumstances of birth, unusual physical appearance and traits, as well as special, outstanding abilities are not entitled to the state founders exclusively. Such attributes are also possessed by “ordinary” rulers (often, certain distinctive traits are a prerequisite for claiming the throne)⁵⁸ and other significant historical figures.

historiographically. In the first case, the assertion of the dubiousness of the story is contrasted with the assertion that such a story exists (雖有此說，怪不可信). In the second, it is the opposite: first, Kim Busik asserts the dubiousness of the stories, and then, as a counterthesis, notes that they “... they are passed down from generation to generation as true stories”: (此尤詭怪不可信。然世俗相傳，為之實事 (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 12: 398). Here, he follows the approach of Sima Qian, who collected local traditions and legends and wove them into the historical fabric of the *Records of the Grand Historian*. Further evidence of Kim Pusik’s historiographical trust in traditions is the story about the posthumous transformation of King Munmu 文武 into a dragon 俗傳，王化為龍 (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 7: 251).

⁵⁵ Kim Busik certainly studied both of these works profoundly—he refers to them as the most important Chinese sources on Korean history in a letter when presenting the *Samguk sagi* to the king (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, 進三國史記表).

⁵⁶ *Han shu* 漢書, <https://ctext.org/han-shu>.

⁵⁷ *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=456206>

⁵⁸ For example, *isagūm* Yuri 儒理尼師今 had more teeth than other people, which enabled him to ascend to the throne (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, vol. 1: 40); the illegitimate son of Silla’s King Hongang (憲康)—Yo (嶢)—“had two protruding bones on his back (背上兩骨隆起),” which enabled Queen

The mother of *isagūm* Yurye (儒禮尼師今), “while walking at night, tasted the light of the stars, and as a result became pregnant; and on the evening she gave birth, the house was filled with an extraordinary fragrance (嘗夜行, 星光入口, 因有娠, 載誕之夕, 異香滿室).”⁵⁹ Kim Yusin’s father “saw in a dream how two stars, Mars and Saturn, descended upon him (夢熒惑鎮二星降於己),” and his mother “saw in a dream a boy in golden armor descending to her room on a cloud. After some time, she conceived and gave birth to Yushin after twenty months [of pregnancy] (夢見童子衣金甲, 乘雲入堂中, 尋而有娠, 二十月而生庾信).”⁶⁰ Mother of the outstanding Silla diplomat and Confucian scholar Kangsu 薑苴 “[once] saw a horned man in a dream, and then became pregnant and gave birth to a child who had protruding bones (bumps) on the back of his head (夢見人有角, 而妊身及生, 頭後有高骨).”⁶¹ Sōl Ch’ong 薛聰 “understood Daoist wisdom from the birth”⁶² and so on.

Returning to the question of the relationship between narratives of miracles and the myths surrounding the founders of the Korean state, it is worth considering the story of Lady Saso, the daughter of an unnamed Chinese emperor, who “...sailed across the sea to Chinhan and gave birth to a son who became the first ruler of Haedong, [then] the princess became an earth immortal⁶³ and lived for a long time⁶⁴ on Sōndo Mountain. This is the story of her birth. 乃泛海抵辰韓生子, 為海東始主, 帝女為地仙, 長在仙桃山.”⁶⁵

This episode, also described in the *Samguk yusa*, remains the subject of different interpretations,⁶⁶ but what is more important here is its structural and historiographical

Jinsōng (眞聖) to recognize him as Hongang’s son, since “the bone structure of my brothers and sisters differs from that of other people (孤之兄弟姊妹, 骨法異於人)” (Ibid., vol. 11: 375)—in this, one can see an allusion to *chingol* (眞骨, “true bone”). Finally, Kungye 弓裔—one of the most important figures in the *Samguk sagi*, an archetypal usurper, tyrant, and villain—is born with teeth already in his mouth, and his birth is accompanied by ominous omens (Ibid., j. 50: 1418)

⁵⁹ Ibid., j. 2:84.

⁶⁰ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 41: 1308.

⁶¹ Ibid., j. 46: 1410.

⁶² Ibid., 1421.

⁶³ A literal translation of the word 地仙 as “earth spirit (*duh zemli*)” as in Russian translation of *Samguk sagi* (as well Remco Breucker’s version of “earthly transcendental”) are both somewhat imperfect. While the dictionary meaning of 地仙 is “hermit, saint,” in this case, 地 most likely refers not to earth, but to land, that is, country or a state (the word “*zemlya*” used in the Russian translation also means “land, country”). It makes Lady Saso’s spirit the patron spirit of Korea.

⁶⁴ This is usual translation of 長在 expression. However, 長 also means “forever”, which would make the entire phrase a bit different — “...and lives on Sōndo Mountain forever”.

⁶⁵ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 12: 398-399.

⁶⁶ In particular, the identity of “the first ruler of Haedong” designated by Chinese official Wang Fu (王黼) in his conversation with Kim Pusik remains unclear. Edward Shultz and Hugh Kang, citing the *Samguk yusa*, tentatively identify him as Pak Hyōkkōse (Edward Shultz and Hugh H. W. Kang, *The Silla Annals of the Samguk Sagi*, p. 405), while Remco Breucker unequivocally identifies him as Tongmyōng and the “holy mother—the Eastern Goddess 東神聖母”—as his mother, the daughter of

role. For example, Mikhail N. Pak, commenting specifically on this episode, concluded that “here, Kim Bu-sik undoubtedly distinguishes the legendary from the historical and does not seek to date the legend to any specific time.” Based on his analysis of this episode, Remko Breker arrives at a different distinction—the previously mentioned difference between “strange stories that circulate among the people” and “the origin myths of the peninsula”—offering a very interesting interpretation of why this story appears in the concluding commentary to the *Annals of Silla*.⁶⁷ Na Hee-La subtly notes that Kim Busik “distances himself” (or even “removes himself”) from unequivocally identifying Lady Saso (or 仙桃聖母) as the founding Mother of Silla⁶⁸ — the historiographer does indeed qualify his statement by noting that he “did not know at what time her son served as king (然而不知其子王於何時).”⁶⁹ Indeed, this caveat allows him (and the reader) to avoid identifying the “wise founder of the state whom she bore” (娠賢肇邦) with either Pak Hyökköse or Tongmyöng, since the dates of their accession are established and specified in the chronicle.

In this account of the story, the mystical element—that is, the myth of the founder and the transformation of a Chinese princess into the guardian spirit of the Korean land—serves merely as a backdrop against which the main narrative unfolds. Kim Pusik’s formal “distancing” from any discussion of the story’s veracity can be interpreted as a ritual act of self-abasement on the part of the historian—an admission of his own inability to verify the “strange story” he heard from a Chinese official. Alternatively, as Na Hee-La does, it can be explained by deeper, cultural-political motives: the desire to unite the Koguryō myth about the founder with the Silla myth without pitting one against the other; to make them a shared, albeit legendary (that is, questionable from a historiographical standpoint) prehistory of Koryō.⁷⁰

the river deity Yuhwa (Remco Breker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea, 918–1170: History, Ideology, and Identity in the Koryō Dynasty* (Leiden: Brill’s Korean Studies Library, 2010), pp. 109, 324–325). Na Hee-La shares this view (Na Hee-La, “Transmission and Settlement of the Story of the Mother Goddess of Seondo Mountain (仙桃聖母).” *The Journal of Korean History*, no. 194 (2021): 1–32; Na Hee-La, “The Mother Goddess of Mt. Seosul and Ancient Korean Goddess Ideas.” *Journal of Local History and Culture* 24, no. 2 (2021): 151–182), examining the context of the convergence of Koguryō and Silla myths about founders and mountain guardian spirits during the Koryō period.

⁶⁷ Remco Breker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea, 918–1170. History, Ideology, and Identity in the Koryō Dynasty* (Leiden: Brill’s Korean Studies Library, 2010), pp. 323–324.

⁶⁸ Na Hee-La, “Transmission and Settlement of the Story of Mother Goddess of Seondo Mountain 仙桃聖母.” *The Journal of Korean History* no. 194 (2021): 19–20.

⁶⁹ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 12: 399.

⁷⁰ Na Hee-La, “Transmission and Settlement of the Story of Mother Goddess of Seondo Mountain 仙桃聖母.” *The Journal of Korean History* no. 194 (2021): 19–20. Remko Breker also views the task Kim Pusik set for himself in a similar light—that is, as the creation of a meta-narrative of pan-Korean history. If their interpretation is correct, then this case can be considered a very interesting example of “roundabout reappropriation”—the incorporation of the Koguryō myth into pan-Korean history through its mediation by Chinese political mythology—and a very vivid illustration of how the politicization of legends and history works.

With this approach, the historical narrative converges with a political myth aimed at establishing the *significance* of certain events or phenomena through the extensive use of figurative means.⁷¹ This leads to a heightened focus on symbols—and, above all, on those associated with the establishment of statehood.

It can be surmised that Kim Pusik's skepticism regarding the circumstances surrounding the origins of the Silla founders was perhaps not historiographical but symbolic. It was caused not so much by the unreliability of the sources⁷² as by the “intrusion” of the Silla narrative—which directly links the founders of the Silla clans to a divine/supernatural origin—into the realm of mytho-politics. The symbolic equating of the founders of Silla (whose historiographical reality was, after all, legitimate in Kim Pusik's view) with the original founders of Chinese civilization may have seemed excessive to Kim Pusik—and therefore, to some extent, unacceptable and questionable.

However, this claim remains merely a hypothesis—and a rather tenuous one at that. For example, Kim Pusik sees nothing criminal in mentioning that “the Sillas call themselves descendants of Shaohao Jintian-shi” (羅人自謂少昊金天氏之後),⁷³ and Tongmyŏng even calls himself the son of the Celestial Emperor (天帝子),⁷⁴ which is also neither commented on nor directly condemned.

Magic creatures and entities (beasts, spirits and ghosts)

The world of the Three Kingdoms is quite rich in magical creatures. The “Bestiary” of the *Samguk sagi* includes dragons (mentioned more than two dozen times⁷⁵), phoenixes, werefoxes, other “exotic/strange (神)” birds and beasts,⁷⁶ as well as animals of a very strange appearance.

For example, in the first year of the reign of the Silla king Sosŏng 昭聖, “...a strange animal resembling an ox appeared, with a long and tall body, a tail about three *ch'ŏk* long, no fur, and a long nose (有異獸若牛，身長且高，尾長三尺許，無毛長鼻).”⁷⁷ Based on the description, this animal bears a striking resemblance to an elephant or a baby elephant, but how could a baby elephant have ended up in Silla in 779? And if it really was a baby elephant, could the Silla people have failed to recognize it, given that they must have been familiar with the appearance of elephants

⁷¹ Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 12-13.

⁷² See note 51 above regarding the historiographical legitimization of myths about founders.

⁷³ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 41: 1306.

⁷⁴ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 13: 406.

⁷⁵ It is true, however, that aside from the legend of Aryŏng's birth, dragons do not perform any explicitly significant “phisical” actions with obvious, tangible consequences: as a rule, the chronicle simply records their appearance, sometimes in connection with other remarkable events (such as the appearance of a dragon in the Kŭmsŏng well, described above).

⁷⁶ For example, in the second year of the reign of the Koguryŏ king Yuri 瑠璃明王, “in the tenth month of winter, strange birds gathered in the courtyard of the grand palace (冬十月，神雀集王庭).” Kim Pusik, *Samguk Sagi*, vol. 13: 412.

⁷⁷ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 10: 322.

from Buddhist depictions (in particular, in the tomb of King Suro 首露, which survived at least until the 10th century)?

A bit later in 14th year of king Hōndōk 憲德:

...in Ch'ōngju, a strange bird appeared in the pond south of the county government building. It had a body five *ch'ōk* long, was black in color, had a head the size of a five-year-old child, a beak of one *ch'ōk* and five *ch'ōn* long, eyes like a human's, and a throat resembling a vessel with a capacity of five *sūngs*, but it died three days later.

菁州太守廳事南，池中有異鳥，身長五尺，色黑，頭如五歲許兒，喙長一尺五寸，目如人喙，如受五升許器，三日而死。⁷⁸

In this case, unlike the previous one, the text contains a clear indication of the structural-narrative function of the story about the “strange bird”: “This foreshadowed Hōnch'ang's downfall (憲昌敗亡兆也).”⁷⁹

Besides, the *Histories* mention animals or birds with unusual coloring or with two bodies or heads, most often in the context of prophecies about future conquests or the annexation of territories.⁸⁰ Furthermore, animals that appear ordinary at first glance sometimes behave strangely and inexplicably, but these cases are grouped under Miracles, divine interventions and other supernatural events while the category of magical animals might also include the weeping horses already mentioned in the myths about the founders, as well as the magical horse 神馬 Kōru 駉驪, which was captured while hunting by king Taemusin 大武神, but then lost during an unsuccessful campaign against the Puyō 夫餘; however, the horse returned on its own later, bringing with it “hundreds of Puyō horses.”⁸¹

The *Samguk sagi* also mentions people with animal-like features. For example, the Koguryō king Yuri, while hunting, “encountered a strange man with wings growing under his armpits (得異人，兩腋有羽).” Inviting him to court, the king granted him the surname U (“Wing” 羽氏) and married him to his daughter.⁸²

Finally, a chronicle may not explicitly call an animal magical, but its extraordinary nature may be implied. An example of such an animal is the fox encountered by the Koguryō king Ch'adae 次大 while hunting (I will address the consequences of this encounter in the section on the structural function of “stories of the extraordinary”):

In the autumn, in the seventh month, while the king was hunting in the valley of P'yōngyuwōn, a white fox followed him and howled. The king shot at it but missed.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 336.

⁷⁹ Ibid. Hōnch'ang was a rebellious ruler of the Ungch'ōn 熊川 province. His rebellion is mentioned in an entry from the same year, but prior to that, there is a reference to a “strange bird.”

⁸⁰ Today, such cases can easily be explained by natural physiological causes (conjoined twins, for example), but in Kim Busik's time, such phenomena were clearly considered unusual and significant events.

⁸¹ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 14: 426-429.

⁸² Ibid., j. 13: 417.

When he asked a fortune teller about this, he replied, “Foxes are considered mysterious and inauspicious animals, especially white ones; this is even stranger.”

秋七月，王田于平儒原，白狐隨而鳴。王射之不中。問於師巫，曰：「狐者，妖獸非吉祥，況白其色，尤可怪也。」⁸³

The stories about spirits in the *Samguk sagi* are no less varied and dramatic. Spirits can be good or evil, of “heavenly” (仙靈) or “underworld/revenant” (祟) origin, spirits of the deceased (鬼), and spirits of “mountains and seas” (山海精靈). However, other epithets are also used to denote the supernatural nature of spirits: 異, 陰, etc.

After the Koguryō king Yuri, in a fit of rage, executed the servants of T’anni 託利 and Sabi 斯卑 who had been sent after an escaped sacrificial pig, who had cut its tendons in order to catch it, he fell seriously ill. A soothsayer (巫曰) informed the monarch that “T’anni and Sabi had cursed [him] (託利、斯卑為祟)”,⁸⁴ thereafter Yuri commanded that the executed men’s spirits be appeased, and he felt better (王使謝之, 即愈).⁸⁵

Spirits often forebode disaster, both by mere appearance and through prophecy. In the 19th year of the reign of the last Paekche king, Ŭija 義慈, for example, “in the ninth month, an ash tree inside the palace enclosure groaned like a person, and at night, ghosts cried on the road south of the palace (九月, 宮中槐樹鳴, 如人哭聲。夜, 鬼哭於宮南路).”⁸⁶ The following year, the ghosts switched to direct threats: “An apparition broke in the palace and yelled: ‘Paekche is perishing, Paekche is perishing!’” — and then disappeared underground 有一鬼入宮中, 大呼: “百濟亡, 百濟亡!” 即入地.”⁸⁷ When Ŭija ordered to dig up the ground where the ghost disappeared, a turtle was found with the following inscription on its back: “Paekche is like the full moon, Silla is like a new moon (百濟同月輪, 新羅如月新).”⁸⁸

However, the spirits can simply accompany the sovereign’s motorcade (as happened in the 5th year of the reign of Silla king Hōngang 憲康)⁸⁹ or “descend [from Heaven] for walks/games 仙靈降遊”, as in the 12th year of the reign of king Silsōng 實聖,⁹⁰ but often they try to help.

For example, Kim Hujik 金后稷, a loyal minister of the great king Chinp’yōng 眞平大王, concerned about the monarch’s excessive passion for hunting, continued to admonish him from beyond the grave—and ultimately succeeded: the king felt

⁸³ Ibid., j. 15: 454-455.

⁸⁴ The expression 為祟 can also be translated as “turned into evil spirits (the character 祟 consists of the elements 出 “to come out” and 示 “spirit”, i.e. it is “an evil spirit coming out of the grave”).”

⁸⁵ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 13: 415.

⁸⁶ Ibid., j. 28: 730.

⁸⁷ Ibid., j. 28: 731-732.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., j. 11: 368.

⁹⁰ Ibid., j. 3: 99-100.

abashed and gave up hunting.⁹¹ King T'aejŏng Muryŏl's 太宗武烈 deep concerns over the delay in military aid from Tang China were soothed by "a man who suddenly appeared before the king, resembling the late ministers Changch'un and P'arang (忽有人於王前，若先臣長春、罷郎),"⁹² who reported that the Tang troops would arrive the following year.

But ghosts and spirits are capable of more than just offering advice and comfort—they are even willing to fight. Thus, in the 14th year of king Yurye's 儒禮 reign, when Silla warriors were unable to gain the upper hand over their enemy, "suddenly, outlandish/strange troops appeared in innumerable numbers (忽有異兵來，其數不可勝紀)" to come to their aid. After the battle, they mysteriously vanished, leaving behind tens of thousands of bamboo leaves on the grave of the former van Mich'u 味鄒, so that "the people of the country believed that the former king had aided in the war with [his] army of spirits (國人謂：先王以陰兵助戰也)."⁹³ The same (or a similar) "army of spirits" (陰兵) guards Kim Yusin's house, and its departure from the house signals his imminent death.⁹⁴

The widespread belief in spirits—and, consequently, the fairly extensive array of methods for communicating with them (various rituals)—is evidenced not only by the examples already mentioned in the "Monographs" section but also by a remarkable occurrence of Kim Yusin's spirit's discontent in his biography:

In the summer, during the fourth month, a whirlwind suddenly kicked up and went from Yusin's tomb to the tomb of the Great Founder King [Mich'u]. The day grew dark and the sky was so obscured by dust and fog that one could not distinguish men from their surroundings. The guards heard something like the sound of bitter, grief-filled crying coming from within the tombs. Great King Hyegong, learning of this, became fearful and sent high officials to offer sacrifices and apologies. Then, he donated thirty *kyŏl* of rice-land to Ch'wisŏn Monastery [for them] to pray for Yusin's repose.⁹⁵

夏四月，旋風坌起，自庾信墓，至始祖大王之陵，塵霧暗冥，不辨人物，守陵人聞其中若有哭泣悲嘆之聲。惠恭大王，聞之恐懼，遣大臣金敬信，致祭謝過，仍於鷲仙寺，納田三十結，以資冥福⁹⁶

⁹¹ Ibid., j. 45: 1386.

⁹² Ibid., j. 5: 175.

⁹³ Ibid., j. 2: 86-87.

⁹⁴ Ibid., j. 43: 1346.

⁹⁵ Translation borrowed from: Na Sanghoon et al., op. cit., pp. 257-258.

⁹⁶ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 43: 1354. In the context of *political* narrative of *Samguk sagi* that was far more than just a restless spirit's discontent — that was a dire omen of a looming major crisis since the king "in his mature years, became mired in debauchery and indulged in unrestrained revelry, the affairs of state administration were disrupted, natural disasters occurred repeatedly, the people became rebellious, and the altars (foundations) of the state were threatened" (Ibid., 9: 308) since this incident happened just one year before major mutiny that let king Hyegong to his ultimate downfall and death.

Magic objects and items

The stories about magical objects in the *Samguk sagi* are notable for the fact that they generally revolve around the discovery and/or loss of such objects, allowing us to trace folkloric and fairy-tale motifs within these narratives. Often, the circumstances surrounding the discovery or loss of these “magical” objects are far more significant than the properties of the objects themselves, which the chronicle may not describe in detail.

While we can only derive magical properties of the flute that calms ten thousand waves from its name, the story of its origin is very much like a fairy tale:

In the midst of the East Sea, a small mountain suddenly appeared, shaped like a turtle’s head. A single bamboo stalk grew at its peak; during the day, it split into two, and at night, it [once again] merged into one.

東海中忽有一小山，形如龜頭，其上有一竿竹，晝分爲二，夜合爲一⁹⁷

Kim Yusin’s sword acquires magical powers after the young hero performs a mystical feat: after a pilgrimage deep into the mountains, he prays alone to the Celestial Ruler (天官), asking Him “to bestow His radiance and send His spirit down upon the sacred sword (垂光，降靈於寶劍).” The stars answered Kim Yusin’s fervent plea, and his “sword seemed to tremble.”⁹⁸

Even richer in detail is the story of king Taemusin’s attainment and loss of the magical tripod cauldron (鼎),⁹⁹ the golden seal, and military equipment (金璽兵物等) is even more intriguing. This story, like other tales of magical objects, is embedded within a broader narrative—the story of king Taemusin’s ill-fated campaign against Puyō—and is connected to other manifestations of the magical and mysterious (comprising the aforementioned magical horse Kōru together with two-bodied raven that changed its color, the unusual people who joined the king on this military expedition, including the owner of the cauldron, and other wonders). The properties of the tripod cauldron are described in the text (it heated itself without fire, so that food could be prepared for the entire army 使之炊，不待火自熱，因得作食，飽一

⁹⁷ Ibid., j. 32: 1099-1100.

⁹⁸ Ibid., j. 41: 1310. This episode could also be included in the next section, since the sword is endowed with miraculous properties after a direct appeal to the Celestial Powers—that is, after a plea for a miracle.

⁹⁹ It is curious that Kim Pusik uses the image of a tripod cauldron to create a descriptive image of the Three Kingdoms in the preface to the *Samguk sagi*: “...the families of Silla, Koguryō, and Paekche simultaneously founded states, like a tripod cauldron...新羅氏、高句麗氏、百濟氏，開基鼎峙” (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, 進三國史記表), and in the preamble to the chronological tables 年表: “Since the Three Kingdoms, like a tripod cauldron... 至於三國鼎峙...,” (Ibid., j. 29: 747). For a historical and political interpretation of such symbolism, see Remco Breuker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea*, pp. 92-93. Of course, the tripod cauldron of King Taemusin is not directly connected to the image of the cauldron as a collective symbol of the Three Kingdoms—rather, it speaks to the power of the image itself, the sacredness of which likely dates back to ancient times, when such cauldrons were used as sacrificial and ritual vessels.

軍”)¹⁰⁰, whereas the other objects are not mentioned again. The cauldron was lost during the retreat of the Koguryō troops (at which time the magical horse Kōru also disappeared) following a fierce battle with the Puyō forces, in which the Puyō soldiers, despite losing their ruler, did not lose heart but managed to surround the Koguryō forces.

The story ends with a typical Confucian moral: the king repents of his lack of virtue and the rashness of his campaign against Puyō (孤以不德，輕伐扶餘), which proved unsuccessful and resulted in many losses (而又多失我軍資，此孤之過也). As a result, “all the people of the country [of Koguryō], touched by the king’s virtues and justice, expressed their willingness to give their lives to serve the state (是以國人感王德義，皆許殺身於國事矣).”¹⁰¹ An additional — and symbolic — reward for the king is the return of the magical horse Kōru, who brings with him a herd of Puyō horses.

Confucian didacticism is even more strongly expressed in the story of one of the “Three Treasures of Silla”—the sacred sash (聖帶) of king Chinp’yōng. This episode, modeled on the mythological and folkloric motif of the rediscovery of a lost treasure, is also notable for having earned a special historiographer’s commentary from Kim Pusik, who contemplated¹⁰² on the interest of Koryō founder Wang Kōn 王建 in ancient relics associated with Buddhism. Wang Kōn inquired about the fate of this sash from the Silla ambassador Kim Yul 金律,¹⁰³ but neither he nor the closest dignitaries of king Kyōngmyōng 景明 of Silla, knew anything about the sash. Ultimately, only with the help of an ancient monk and appropriate prayers was the sash discovered.¹⁰⁴

Kim Pusik considered Wang Kōn’s interest vain in general and potentially harmful: “These so-called ‘Three Treasures’ of Silla are merely the product of human extravagance; why should a nation require such things (況此新羅所謂三寶，亦出於人爲之侈而已，爲國家，何須此耶)?”¹⁰⁵

A small detail adds a special piquancy to Kim Pusik’s attitude: the sacred sash of king Chinp’yōng “decorated with gold and jasper” turned out to be “extremely long and unsuitable for ordinary people to wear (其粧以金玉，甚長，非常人所可束也),”

¹⁰⁰ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 14: 427.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 428-429.

¹⁰² Russian translation interprets that contemplation as outward criticism: “The fact that T’aejo, having heard the stories of the [Sil]la people, asked about them (the treasures), cannot be considered worthy of imitation” (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi. Letopisi Silla* [Samguk sagi. Silla Annals], p. 168). But such a translation of the phrase 太祖聞羅人之說而問之耳，非以爲可尙者也 may not be entirely correct. In the interpretation of Schultz and Kang, Kim Pusik rather tries to describe this interest as simple, innocent curiosity, devoid of political subtext: “[Our] T’aejo heard of this conversation among the people of Silla and only asked about it, but did not consider it to be of value” (Edward Shultz and Hugh H. W. Kang, *The Silla Annals of the Samguk sagi*, p. 393).

¹⁰³ A year before (in 920), Silla and Koryō established diplomatic relations and exchanged embassies.

¹⁰⁴ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 12: 385.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 386.

that is, highly impractical. Of course, the sovereign is no “ordinary person (常人)” by definition, but Kim Pusik, emphasizing the impractical luxury of the attribute of state power, upholds impeccable Confucian state morality, citing classical works.:

“Mencius said, ‘Princes and lords have three treasures: land, people, and governance.’ The “Book of Chu” states, ‘The State of Chu has nothing to treasure except virtue.’

孟子曰： ” 諸侯之寶三： 土地、 人民、 政事。 《楚書》 曰： ’ 楚國無以爲寶， 惟善以爲寶。 ’ ” ¹⁰⁶

However, perhaps the most thrilling and dramatic story involving magical objects is the tale of Prince Hodong 好童, the son of king Taemusin, and the daughter of king of Annan 樂浪, Ch’oe Ri 崔理, and the magical drum and horn that would sound on their own when enemies approached (樂浪有鼓角， 若有敵兵， 則自鳴， 故令破之).¹⁰⁷ This story also unfolds according to the conventions of a fairy tale: it features an unexpected meeting between a prince and a king (Hodong and Ch’oe Ri), Hodong’s courtship of the princess, and treachery and betrayal (Hodong persuades his betrothed to damage the drum and horn). The loss (or damage) of the magical object is inevitably followed by the loss of the kingdom (Koguryō attacks and conquers its now defenseless neighbor) and, finally, death: upon learning of his daughter’s betrayal, Ch’oe Ri killed her.¹⁰⁸ Hodong’s life also ends disastrously: he commits suicide, unable to withstand the slander of King Taemusin’s first wife and unwilling to reveal to his father the schemes of his spouse:

He (Hodong) replied, “If I were to clear myself, I would be exposing my mother’s¹⁰⁹ wickedness and causing the King anxiety. Could that be called filial piety?” He then fell on his sword and died.

答曰： ” 我若釋之， 是顯母之惡， 貽王之憂， 可謂孝乎？ ” 乃伏劍而死。¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. Furthermore, as a Buddhist, Kim Pusik might have considered such a “materialization” of the three true treasures of Buddhism—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (佛陀， 達摩， 僧伽)—too vulgar. Wang Kōn inquired about the “three treasures of Silla (新羅有三 (or 王) 寶)”: the statue of Buddha in Hwangyongsa temple (皇龍寺), the nine-story pagoda, and the Sacred Sash (所謂丈六尊像、 九層塔并聖帶). The parallel seems quite obvious, although in his commentary, Kim Pusik draws on the Confucian “state triad” of symbols: Hall of Light, State’s Seal and Nine Tripods (明堂， 國璽， 列九鼎) and cites famous Tang intellectual Han Yu 韓愈, a devoted Confucianist and a resolute and vocal antagonist to Buddhism and Daosism: ‘To harmonize the will of Heaven and humanity and lay the foundation for Great Peace is certainly not something these three artifacts can achieve (歸天人之心， 興太平之基， 決非三器之所能也).’

¹⁰⁷ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 14: 434.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. In an alternative version of this story, as recounted by Kim Pusik, the king of Koguryō married his son to the daughter of the king of Annan, whom he then sent back to her homeland to damage their battle armor.

¹⁰⁹ He politely referred to king’s first wife as mother, although he was not her son.

¹¹⁰ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 14: 435

This story also prompted harsh reprimand from Kim Pusik, who condemned both father's (the king) and son's behavior as contrary to benevolence and genuine filial piety:

Now, that the king, believing slanderous words, has killed his beloved son, who was innocent, his lack of benevolence is beyond description. Yet Hodong cannot be said to be without fault... When a son is reprimanded by his father, he should act as Shun¹¹¹ did toward his blind father: accepting a light beating but fleeing from a severe one, always striving not to lead his father into unrighteousness. Hodong failed to understand this principle and met his death in an inappropriate manner; while observing minor propriety, he was blind to the greater righteousness.
今王信讒言，殺無辜之愛子，其不仁不足道矣，而好童不得無罪。子之見責於其父也，宜若舜之於瞽叟，小杖則受，大杖則走，期不陷父於不義。好童不知出於此，而死非其所，可謂執於小謹而昧於大義¹¹²

Practical magic: “wizardry” in *Samguk sagi*

Historical figures of the *Samguk sagi* perform feats and possess abilities that today would undoubtedly be called magical. However, the answer to the question of whether these were considered supernatural during the Three Kingdoms period and in Kim Pusik's time is far from clear-cut. What appears to be magic today might well have been considered science back then (and the reverse is also true, of course).

For instance, the future king T'harhae (who, like the other founders of Silla's ruling families, was born from an egg) “devoted himself entirely to his studies during his youth and mastered the secrets (principles) of the land (於是專精學問，兼知地理).” Having determined that the home of the Silla nobleman Hogong 瓠公¹¹³ was located on an auspicious site (吉地), he used a cunning plan (設詭計) to take possession of it and settled there.¹¹⁴ Though, on the next year after T'harhae ascended the throne, he compensated Hogong for his losses by appointing him Grand Minister (大輔).

It would be very tempting to deem T'harhae the first Korean geomancer — despite the “official birth” of Korean *p'hunsu* 風水地理說 is generally traced to the 9th century CE, — since the city of Wolsŏng was later founded on the auspicious site he had discovered. However, what is more important to us is that practices which today we would call mysticism or superstition appear in the *Samguk sagi* almost from the very first lines. Of course, “geomantic elements” could very well have been added to the account of this episode later, once it became part of history—that is, once it was

¹¹¹ Shun 舜 is the last of the legendary Five Emperors of China.

¹¹² Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 14: 436.

¹¹³ Hogong, like T'harhae himself, was a foreigner in Silla. He came from the country of Wae 倭, a thousand *li* to the northeast of which lay the country of Tap'ana 多婆那, the birthplace of T'harhae. This squatting of two foreigners would likely have been a trivial matter, not worthy of historical record, had one of them not been a high-ranking statesman and the other the future king.

¹¹⁴ Kim Pusik 金富軾, *Samguk sagi*, j. 1:45.

recorded.¹¹⁵ This is all the more true given that determining auspicious and inauspicious locations (with a wide variety of methods, including divination) was part of the skill set and even the duties of a Confucian scholar, as can be seen in the example of Kim Pusik himself, mentioned above.

For example, in the well-known story of Taese 大世 and Kuch'il's 仇柴 journey to the West (i.e., China), Taese, who “from childhood dreamed of transcending the ordinary (少有方外志)” shared his desire to master such mysteries:

I intend to set out on a raft across the sea to reach Wu and Yue¹¹⁶, where I will seek out my master and study the Way on Sacred mountains. If this mortal body could be transformed and the ways of the immortals could be learned, then I would ride the winds beyond the vast expanse—this would be the most wondrous and magnificent journey under heaven.

...吾將乘桴泛海，以至吳越，侵尋追師，訪道於名山。若凡骨可換，神仙可學，則飄然乘風於沆寥之表，此天下之奇遊壯觀也...

Contemplating this story, Lee Kidong assumed that “the tale of Taese suggests that Daoist thought and associated magic of religious Daoism were prevalent in Silla society”.¹¹⁷ While he might have slightly overrated predominance of Daoist magic in general, this episode does indeed speak Daoist mysteries. Sacred mountains (名山) is a reference to the Four Sacred Mountains of Daoism (四大道教名山), two of which — Longhu (Dragon and Tiger Mountain 龍虎山) and Qiyun (Neat Clouds Mountain 齊雲山) are located in South-East China. “Body transformation (or, literally, transformation of the bones)” here is a reference to the mystic practices of Daoism,¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Even a formal comparison of the dates of T'harhae and Hogong's lives reinforces the view that these stories are a later reinterpretation of legends and myths, one that is not particularly reliable from a historiographical standpoint. T'harhae ascended the throne at the age of 62 in 57 CE. Earlier, in the 24th year (i.e., at the age of 33), he had ceded the throne to Yuri because Yuri had more teeth. Even earlier, in the 10th year (i.e., at the age of 19), T'harhae was appointed *taebo* (Grand Minister), and two years before that, king Namhae had given his daughter in marriage to him because he “had heard of his wisdom.” Hogong, meanwhile, was sent as an envoy to Mahan in 20 B.C. (i.e., by this time—according to the logic of Confucian historical narrative—he must already have held high position), and thus 78 years passed from the time of that diplomatic mission until Hogong's appointment as *taebo* in the second year of T'harhae's reign. And seven years later, Hogong would discover a small golden box in the middle of the Sirim Forest (始林), inside which was an infant—Kim Alji (金闕智). How old must Hogong have been at that time?

¹¹⁶ Of course, Wu [and] Yue are neither ancient kingdoms of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, nor the Wuyue of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907-979). In all likelihood, it is a geographical reference to South-East China.

¹¹⁷ Lee Kidong. “The Indigenous Religions of Silla: Their Diversity and Durability”. *Korean Studies*. Vol. 28 (2004): 62.

¹¹⁸ These practices of transcendence stem from the concept of *huangu fa* (換骨法, “method of transforming the bones”) that implied either a rebirth through another person's fetus or transformation of one's ordinary or mortal bones (凡骨) into the bones of a transcendent (仙骨), traditionally through

while Taese's dream to "ride the winds beyond the vast expanse" evokes an allusion to two episodes from Zhuangzi 莊子 — either to the praise of Liezi 列子, who was "a great master of riding the six winds and spent ten and another five days in wandering (夫列子御風而行, 泠然善也, 旬有五日而後反)"¹¹⁹, or to the description of "divine (or spiritual)¹²⁰ people (神人) from Mount Gushe" who "ride in cloud chariots, harnessed by dragons, and in their wanderings are carried beyond the four seas (乘雲氣, 御飛龍, 而遊乎四海之外)".¹²¹

Apparently, Kim Yusin also practiced Daoist esoteric arts and various forms of divination, having been taught by mysterious old man called Nansūng,¹²² who rejected Yushin's pleads to teach him "magic arts (授之方術)" several times testing Kim Yusin's determination and integrity before acceding to the youth's persistence.¹²³ Kim Am, the great-grandson of Kim Yusin, was also well-versed in these same mystical arts (方術) as well as the teachings of the Yin-Yang School (陰陽家);¹²⁴ furthermore, he developed his own method of divination based on the *Qimen Dunjia* (奇門遁甲) system.¹²⁵

It is telling that the "supernatural" abilities of Taese, Kim Yusin, and Kim Am are the manifest or expected results of their training. One of the most striking forms of the institutionalization of such training was the *hwarang* institution in Silla. The *Samguk sagi* explicitly states the syncretic nature of their worldview, which combined Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions (三教)¹²⁶ based on indigenous beliefs and practices. Quoting an inscription by Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn (崔致遠) on the Nanrang stele (鸞郎碑), Kim Pusik reports: "Our country has a mysterious teaching (Way) called *p'unnyu* (國有玄妙之道, 曰風流)." It appears that the "mysterious teaching" (玄妙之道) may have been closely associated with the "Neo-Daoist" school of Xuanxue (玄

the ingestion of the Golden Elixir (金丹). By Song times this expression came to be used as a poetic metaphor referring to the ability to create something new from the original without altering the original. I would like to express my deep gratitude to a reviewer who kindly advised me on that matter.

¹¹⁹ Zhuangzi 莊子 《逍遙遊》: 3

¹²⁰ Lo Yuet Keung. "Wandering and Imaginal Realms in Analects and Zhuangzi". *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. 50 (2002): 91.

¹²¹ Zhuangzi 莊子 《逍遙遊》: 5. Alternative translation is: "Ride the clouds and fly the dragon, and travel beyond the four seas." (Lo Yuet Keung, "Wandering and Imaginal Realms in Analects and Zhuangzi", 91). These "divine (or spiritual) people" who "do not eat grain, inhale the wind and drink dew" are somewhat similar to the *hwarangs* in appearance: "Their skin is white and pure like glaciated snow, and their bodies are as gentle as young girls" (*Zhuangzi* 莊子 《逍遙遊》: 5)

¹²² The fact that Nansūng is a bodhisattva (Na Sanghoon et al., op. cit., p. 207, note 43) is yet another evidence of the syncretic character of mystical worldview in Silla.

¹²³ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 41: 1309-1310. Another possible reference to mastery of the mystical arts is a certain "secret plan (陰謀)" that Kim Yusin sent to his subordinates. Ibid., j. 43: 1342.

¹²⁴ One of the schools of natural philosophy in ancient China that focused on cosmological and occult-numerological issues.

¹²⁵ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 43: 1353.

¹²⁶ Ibid., j. 4: 136.

學).¹²⁷ Furthermore, the aesthetic culture of *fengliu* (風流), which developed in China during the Six Dynasties period (3rd–6th centuries CE)—a term homonymous with *p'unnyu*—is, at its core, very close to the aesthetics of the *hwarang*. *Fengliu* implied grace, spontaneity, naturalness, and refinement—and had a distinctly playful (遊) element, while “playful journeys” (遊)¹²⁸ were a crucial part of *hwarang*’s training; they would gather in groups to “... exchange ideas on morality and righteousness, entertain themselves with song and music, or take recreational walks through the mountains and along the rivers (或相磨以道義 或相悅以歌樂 遊娛山水).”¹²⁹

The *Samguk sagi* frequently contains descriptions of miraculous events that are answers to prayers—direct appeals to Celestial powers. Through prayer and the burning of incense, the Buddhist monk Mōkhoja 墨胡子 heals the daughter of the king;¹³⁰ king Taemusin, who has been surrounded with his army, prays to Heaven (乃乞靈於天), and “a thick fog descended, so dense that one could not distinguish people even at a *chi-ch'ōk* (a hand’s reach) distance away, and lasted for seven days (忽大霧咫尺不辨人物七日).”¹³¹

In an episode somewhat reminiscent of the tale of Kim Hujik’s restless spirit, the coffin containing the body of the deceased Ondal 溫達內 could not be lifted until his wife had bid him farewell: “The princess approached and stroked the coffin, saying, ‘Life and death are decided. Alas, the time has come to part (公主來撫棺曰：「死生決矣，於乎，歸矣。」)”.¹³² The princess’s words and actions in this episode can be interpreted as a ritual-magical formula or prayer.

¹²⁷ *Xuanxue* (“The Doctrine of the Mysterious”) is a complex synthesis of Daoism and Confucianism, which was also methodologically influenced by the “School of Names” (Mingjia 名家) and Buddhist metaphysics. The school’s name derives from the first paragraph of the *Dao De Jing*: 玄之又玄 眾妙之門 (“In the Mysterious—there is yet another Mysterious—the gateway to myriad mysteries”).

¹²⁸ This concept may also be a reference to teachings of Zhuangzi, who had it as a primary philosophical category.

¹²⁹ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 4: 135.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 124. This event is recorded in an entry dated to the 15th year of King Pōp’ūn’s reign (法興, 528 AD), but it states that Mōkhoja arrived in Silla from Koguryō during the reign of King Nulji (訥祗) (417–485), and the incense he used in his healing was sent as a gift from the king of the Liang (梁朝), which existed from 502 to 557. Therefore, it is impossible to definitively identify the ruler whose daughter Mōkhoja healed based solely on the information in *Samguk sagi*. Iryōn analyzes these and other contradictions regarding the dates of Buddhism’s advent to Silla in detail in the chapter “Ado [Lays] the Foundations [of Buddhism in Silla] 阿道基羅” (Iryōn, *Samguk yusa*, trans. Yu. Boltach, pp. 447–459). Kim Pusik, on the other hand, limits himself to noting the discrepancies in the dates given by various sources, linking the account of the deeds of Mōkhoja and Ado to the date of the “official” beginning of the spread of Buddhism in Silla.

¹³¹ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 14: 428. In much the same way, king Nulji of Silla escaped a similar situation (*Ibid.*, j. 3: 104).

¹³² *Ibid.*, j. 45: 1408. The primary meaning of the character 歸 is “to return, to set out on the return journey,” but it also has a meaning (especially in compound words) associated with death or passing away: 歸人 — a deceased person, the departed.

Among these “magical” miracles, one “man-made miracle” stands out in particular—a shrewd ruse that Kim Yusin orchestrated during the aforementioned rebellion led by Pidam and Yŏmjong. After encouraging the queen, who had fallen into despondency due to an ominous omen, with wise words, he created a “counter-omen”:

made a puppet, set fire to it, tied it to a kite, and cast it upwards. It looked like [a star] soaring up into the sky. The following day he had men spread a rumor on the road saying, “The star that fell went back to the sky last night,” which perplexed the enemy soldiers.¹³³

乃造偶人 抱火 載於風鳶而□之 若上天然 翌日 使人傳言於路曰 “昨夜 落星還上” 使賊軍疑焉¹³⁴

It is worth noting the remarkable pragmatism of the chronicle and of Kim Yu-sin himself: regardless of whether an extraordinary event is of divine or human origin, what matters is using it to one’s advantage—and, if necessary, staging it.

Miracles, divine interventions and other supernatural events

Hope for a miracle, divine protection, or the intervention of supernatural forces is a fairly common theme in the *Samguk Sagi* when it comes to crises or significant events. For example, King Pŏphŭn’s close advisor, Ich’adon 異次頓, defied the other dignitaries who opposed the spread of Buddhism and willingly sacrificed himself to uphold Buddhist teachings. As he ascended the scaffold, he humbly declared: “I am going to my execution for the sake of the Dharma. If the Buddha is truly divine, something extraordinary will surely happen upon my death (我爲法就刑, 佛若有神, 吾死必有異事).”¹³⁵ After Ich’adon was beheaded, blood as white as milk¹³⁶ gushed from his wounds—and this miracle undermined the skepticism toward Buddhism.

Kim Yusin also turns to the “unknown (陰) forces” of Buddhism for help. When the Silla troops, besieged in the fortress of Pukhansansŏng 北漢山城, find themselves in a hopeless situation, he exclaims: “Though our human strength is exhausted, we can still draw upon mystic aid.” (人力既竭, 陰助可資).¹³⁷ Then he retreats to Buddhist monastery 佛寺, build an altar and prays there. «Soon, Heaven brought down

¹³³ Translation borrowed from: Na Sanghoon et al., op. cit., p. 218.

¹³⁴ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 41: 1318.

¹³⁵ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 4: 125.

¹³⁶ Shultz and Kang note that this incident “is frequently linked with shamanism,” but point out that in Buddhist context milk can symbolize truth (Edward Shultz and Hugh H. W. Kang, *The Silla Annals of the Samguk sagi*, p. 121; note 31).

¹³⁷ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 42: 1331. Na Sanghoon et al. offer ‘divine intervention’ for 陰助 (Na Sanghoon et al., op. cit., p. 232), which is also a viable translation.

punishment [on the foes], and everyone attributed it to the power of his sincere devotion (會有天變，皆謂至誠所感也).”¹³⁸

Na Sanghoon et al offer alternative translation: “Just then the heavens shook and all the people said that his complete sincerity moved Heaven.”¹³⁹ Yet, it sounds a bit too “confucianized”. While 天變 literary does mean “Heaven shake”, it also means “Heaven’s punishment”. Besides, as Vladimir Tkhonov aptly points out in his comment to this incident in Russian translation of *Samguk sagi*, that the *Samguk yusa* provides a much more detailed description of the events, one that is absolutely “non-Confucian” (and not even “Buddhist”). According to the *Samguk yusa*, Kim Yusin builds an altar not in a Buddhist temple but on a mountain; he does not pray but practices magic—神術—and quite specific punishment is unleashed upon his enemies: “a beam of light the size of a large vessel,” lightning shatters the catapults, and weapons break. Tikhonov concludes that “the ‘magic’ ‘used’ by Yusin has pre-Buddhist origins and is connected to the local cult of Heaven, celestial light, and mountains.”¹⁴⁰ Of course, the more modest account of this episode in the *Samguk sagi* confirms Kim Pusik’s skeptical attitude toward the depiction of spectacular external manifestations of “magic,” but it does not confirm his “miracle-aversion.”

However, even a clearly “Confucianized” context may also contain references to mystical forces. Such references may be indirect—king Munmu describes the significance of the now elderly Kim Yusin to the Silla state as follows: “...he will quietly serve as a great fortress for us (則隱然若長城).”¹⁴¹ This obvious allegory suggests that Kim Yusin had already attained the status of a sacred figure during his lifetime. But the reference can also be direct. For example, a report from the second year of King Munmu’s reign states, among other things:

When *sach’an* Yōdong beat his mother, thunder roared from the sky and struck him dead with a bolt of lightning, leaving three characters on his body: 湏瑩堂 <the meaning of the character 瑩 is unknown>.

沙淪如冬打母，天雷雨震死，身上題須瑩堂三字 <瑩字未詳>¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 42: 1331.

¹³⁹ Na Sanghoon et al., op. cit., p. 232.

¹⁴⁰ Kim Busik. *Samguk sagi. Raznye opisaniya. Biografi*. [Samguk sagi. Monographs. Biographies], p. 285, note 27. It is possible that king Taemusin’s appeal to Heaven (天) in the episode depicting his miraculous rescue reflects a local interpretation of divine intervention rather than a Confucian one.

¹⁴¹ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 43: 1343. The character 隱 (hidden, dark, secret, inscrutable) is a homophone of 陰.

¹⁴² Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 6: 194. Story of Yōdong’s punishment is very similar to the story of the retribution to Emperor Wuyi 武乙 of Shang(Yin) who enraged the Heavens: “The Emperor Wuyi was unprincipled and made images, which he called ‘Heavenly gods.’ With these he played chess, ordering someone to make the moves for them; and when the ‘celestial gods’ did not win he abused them, and making a leather bag, filled it with blood, threw it up and shot at it. This he called shooting at Heaven. While Wuyi was hunting between the Yellow and Wei rivers, there was a clap of thunder, and Wuyi was struck dead by lightning.” (Sima Qian, *Shiji* [Records of the Grand Historian], Annals of Yin 殷本紀, 23. Translation by AI and *Chinese Text Project* users. <https://ctext.org/shiji/yin-ben-ji>

The moral of this episode speaks for itself: Yōdong, who failed in his filial duty, met with just retribution. However, lightning need not be merely divine punishment or a menacing omen (when it strikes the palace buildings). Lightning may well create a convenient opening for the heroes. For example, Kim Yusin's future mother, Manmyōng (萬明), was locked up in a separate residence under guard by her strict father after he learned that she had "consorted with (Kim Yusin's future father) Sōhyōn (與[舒]玄野合)."

Suddenly, a clap of thunder shook the gate of the house; the guards were startled and thrown into confusion, and Manmyōng slipped out through a hole in the wall, then fled with Sōhyōn to Manno Commandery
忽雷震屋門，守者驚亂，萬明從竇而出，遂與舒玄赴萬弩郡¹⁴³

Similarly, Kōin 巨仁, accused of distributing slanderous letters defaming Empress Chinsōng 眞聖,¹⁴⁴ imprisoned and sentenced to death, was pardoned and set free after he scratched a poem on the prison wall complaining to Heaven about the injustice, to which Heaven immediately replied: "... that very evening, clouds suddenly gathered, and amid thunder and lightning, rain and hail broke out (其夕，忽雲霧震雷雨雹)."¹⁴⁵

Aside from the divine interventions *Samguk sagi* offers a wide variety of extraordinary event that are not so obviously "divine" in nature. Among such examples is the "animation" of various objects that begin to move on their own. For instance, in the 23rd year of the reign of the Silla king Naehae, "military equipment began to emerge of its own accord from the armories (武庫兵物自出),"¹⁴⁶ and a report that "in Soryangni, stones moved on their own (少梁里石自行)"¹⁴⁷ serves as a sort of preamble to the account of Kōin's miraculous liberation (reports of self-moving stones appear several times in the *Samguk sagi*). There are also frequent accounts of spontaneous actions performed by trees (see the example above of the weeping ash tree). Such phenomena are often mentioned in connection with dragons: "In the summer, in the fourth month, a dragon was seen in the pond east of the palace. South of Kūmsōng, a fallen willow rose up on its own (龍見宮東池。金城南臥柳自起)."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 41: 1307.

¹⁴⁴ These accusations were by no means unfounded: queen Chinsōng was notorious for her favoritism and inappropriate behavior: "... the queen secretly took in two or three young, handsome men, engaged in lewd conduct with them, and subsequently appointed them to key positions, entrusting them with the state affairs. Consequently, flatterers and favorites ran rampant, bribery became commonplace, rewards and punishments were unjust, and order was broken (潛引少年美丈夫兩三人，淫亂，仍授其人以要職，委以國政。由是，佞倖肆志，貨賂公行，賞罰不公，紀綱壞弛)." Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 11: 372.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 373.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 2: 73.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., j. 11: 372.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 2: 80.

The *Samguk sagi* records instances of resurrections: “A man in Namsin county died but came back to life a month later (南新縣人死 歷月復活)”¹⁴⁹; it relates stories of how “an old woman in the capital turned into a man, and five tigers entered the city (王都老嫗化為男 五虎入城),”¹⁵⁰ and another one “turned into a fox and ran away (王都老嫗化狐而去).”¹⁵¹

The incidents involving animals are quite varied and strange. If the march of more than 8,000 mice from Ch’iak county to Pyöngyang (雉岳縣鼠八千許，向平壤) in the fifth year of the reign of Silla King Hyegong 惠恭,¹⁵² the thing that seems the most strange is the number of rodents (as well as the fact that someone somehow bothered to count them), while other examples are more intriguing. For example, in Paekche, “on the Moch’ön River, black frogs and red frogs fought; the black frogs were defeated and died (矛川上有黑蛙與赤蛙群鬪，黑蛙不勝，死).”¹⁵³ And in Silla, in the 10th year of King Aejang’s (哀莊) reign, “At the Pyöksa Temple, a toad ate a snake (碧寺蝦蟆食蛇).”¹⁵⁴

Sometimes such events occur in succession, especially on the eve of major upheavals. For example, in the 19th year of the reign of Paekche King Ŭija, the aforementioned report of weeping ghosts was preceded by the following: «Second month of spring: a multitude of foxes entered the palace; one white fox sat on the prime minister’s desk (春二月，衆狐入宮中，一白狐坐上佐平書案)»; «Fourth month of summer, in the crown prince’s palace, a hen mated with a yellow sparrow (夏四月，太子宮，雌雞與黃雀交)»; «Fifth month: in the river Sabi to the southwest of the capital, a large fish washed ashore and died, three *chang* long (五月，王都西南泗泚河，大魚出死，長三丈)»; “a woman’s corpse floated up at Saengch’o bay, eighteen *ch’ök* in length (秋八月，有女屍浮生草津，長十八尺).”¹⁵⁵

The following year, Paekche fell.

Structural and Political Function of Mystical Motifs

It is striking that references to and accounts of the supernatural serve as markers of important, politically significant events. In the *Annals*, these are concentrated in entries dating to either the early or late years of a reign, which is, in principle, characteristic of Confucian chronicles. However, they may also appear during the middle of a reign, on the eve of or following important battles or other events (for

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 23: 626.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 26: 697.

¹⁵² Ibid., 9: 306. However, Kim Pusik notes that “according to other sources, there were several dozens of them (一云數十).”

¹⁵³ Ibid., 13: 421. This event was interpreted as an omen of the fall of Northern Puyö (北扶餘).

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 10: 328.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 28: 730.

example, the stories of Mōkhoja and Ich'adon's self-sacrifice are linked to the year Buddhism was adopted in Silla and follow immediately after the account of that event) and/or political crises.

One piece of evidence for the early establishment of this tradition in Korean historiography is Kim Pusik's observation that, according to the *Gogi* 古記 (Ancient Records), the story of the spirits accompanying King Hongang's procession took place in the first year of his reign.¹⁵⁶

The historical accuracy of the “magical” and strange incidents within this narrative is completely irrelevant; as “historiographical events,” they are legitimized by the text itself through their connection to facts that are taken as axiomatic within the text (the years of rulers' accession and death, battles, political appointments or reforms, etc.).¹⁵⁷ As Richard McBride aptly put it, “Kim Pusik and his team allowed for significant literary license and did not necessarily let facts obstruct the telling of a good story with good morals.”¹⁵⁸ And while the literary merits of the *Samguk sagi* may fall slightly short of its historiographical merits, the difference is negligible.

The ideological and political function of stories about “Extraordinary, Power, Chaos, and Spirits” is similar to that of reports on natural disasters (droughts and floods, earthquakes, locust plagues, etc.) and astronomical phenomena (solar and lunar eclipses, the appearance of comets, etc.). All of these (especially the unfavorable ones, and even more so the supernatural ones) could be interpreted as omens or as evidence of a crisis in governance—that is, the ruler's gradual loss of the Mandate of Heaven. The reverse is also true—favorable events, miracles, and omens could be interpreted as evidence of the sovereign's virtue and, consequently, of his political power.

Their literary (compositional) function is twofold. First, it consists in creating drama by building suspense: by foreshadowing events, they contribute to a buildup of tension, preparing the reader for the fact that something significant is about to happen. This transforms the historian, in the words of the Schlegel brothers, into a “turned-back prophet” who foresees the “future past” from the present. Moreover, this very foresight, reinforced by confidence in historiographer's moral righteousness—for “the prophet is morally certain of his knowledge, and this moral certainty is derived from the fact that he belongs to a community whose rules and laws he embodies”¹⁵⁹ — provides the second aspect of the compositional function. It grants the historiographer the right to

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., j. 11: 368.

¹⁵⁷ The extent to which these facts are historically substantiated is a subject of a separate discussion. For example, in the entry on the reign of Emperor Huidi 惠帝 in the *Han Shu* 漢書, the account of his death is preceded by a mention of two eclipses occurring in succession. The first of these actually occurred, but the second did not, which makes it a “specific element of historiography.” (Bashkeev V.V., Ul'yanov M.YU., Celujko M.S. “Podhody k issledovaniyu istoricheskikh processov v opisani drevnej i srednevekovoj istorii Kitaya i stran Yugo-Vostochnoj Azii [Approaches to the Study of Historical Processes in the Description of Ancient and Medieval History of China and Southeast Asian Countries].” *Otgososok proshedshego v budushchem*. 2012. p. 60).

¹⁵⁸ Richard D. McBride II, “The Structure and Sources of the Biography of Kim Yusin,” 502.

¹⁵⁹ Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 168.

make moral judgments about past events, with accounts of the supernatural serving as one of the allegorical or direct tools for doing so.¹⁶⁰

At times, the *Samguk sagi* presents a complex, multifaceted narrative structure for such events. For example, the image of a weeping horse can be used both to foreshadow the birth of a ruler (as in the stories of Tongmyōng and Pak Hyōkkōse) and to foreshadow his death, as was the case with King Naemul,¹⁶¹ or even the fall of a state, as was the case with King Ŭija of Paekche (even considering that the story of the red horse, which neighed as it circled the image of the Buddha at Ohamsa Temple and then died (驛馬入北岳烏含寺, 鳴匝佛宇, 數日死), appears five years prior to the fall of Paekche).¹⁶² However, the weeping horse in King Naemul's stable may have foreshadowed not only his death but also the return of Silsōng 實聖, who had been held hostage in Koguryō and went on to ascend the throne a year later.¹⁶³

The encounter between king Ch'adae and the white fox sets off a chain of events that features the fortune teller's prediction, which develops into a warning and admonition, and the brutal murder of this fortune teller by the king, who scorned his subject's moralizing.

Yet, the fortune-teller who tried to convince Ch'adae that "even evil (an inauspicious omen) can be turned into good" ultimately proves to be right: omens do not necessarily predetermine the outcome. Thus, King Taemusin's campaign against Puyō was foreshadowed and accompanied by a series of auspicious omens and miraculous discoveries, but the campaign ended in failure, and only the ruler's sincere repentance restored his virtue and won back the loyalty of his people.

In the story of unfortunate prince Hodong its folk-tale basis performs two structural functions. First, it dramatizes the political story of territorial advance; second it creates 'suspense' for a dramatic and tragic denouement. The narrative culminates in historiographer comment that provides moral assessment for both Hodong's and his father, the king's behavior, which becomes the part of the general assessment of king Taemusin's reign. The reader encounters an extremely complex figure with distinct strengths and weaknesses and a dramatic life story. Here, Kim Busiku brilliantly

¹⁶⁰ Even when presenting rituals and sacrifices in a "positivist" manner in his "Monographs", Kim Pusik does not miss an opportunity to make a moral and political assessment: the practices observed in Silla, where "sacrifices were not offered to Heaven and Earth"—rituals befitting only the Son of Heaven, that is, the emperor—were performed with due observance of ritual, whereas in Koguryō and Paekche, sacrifices to Heaven (inappropriate for feudal lords 諸侯 or vassal states) were offered (Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 32: 1085, 1081–1091).

¹⁶¹ See footnote 41 above.

¹⁶² Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 28: 728–729.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 3: 97. Given the tense relationship between Naemul—who had sent Silsōng as a hostage to—Silsōng and Naemul's sons (whom Silsōng, in retaliation, sent as hostages to Koguryō and Wae to certain death, for which he was killed by Nemul's son Nulji, who was married to Silsōng's daughter—Ibid., 99–101), one might have expected a greater number of omens and extraordinary events in the account of these events.

succeeds in presenting not merely a textbook illustration of “the virtues and vices of a ruler,”¹⁶⁴ but also a portrait of a real person.

“Wonder tales” also allows Kim Pusik to touch upon deeply philosophical themes concerning not merely political administration (政道), but the fundamental principles of governing (治道). Kim Yusin demonstrates a master class in political philosophy in the episode depicting the suppression of the Pidam and Yŏmjong rebellion. His speech to the troops is not limited to appeals to the lessons of the past—it offers a very subtle and sophisticated interpretation of how the Mandate of Heaven, or Heaven’s destiny (天命) is connected to human destiny (人命) through the manifestation of Heaven’s will, that is, the thesis of predestination. Continuing the line of thought with which he began his consolatory speech to the queen— “Good fortune and bad fortune are uncertain; only humans cause these [conditions] (吉凶無常 惟人所召)” —he defends the moral righteousness of the loyalists’ cause:

Now, Pidam and others are plotting against the sovereign... such men are called ‘rebellious ministers and villainous sons’ whom men and gods alike would hate and Heaven and Earth will not tolerate. I have serious doubts and cannot believe that Heaven could be indifferent to these [events] or even [send] a star as an ominous [omen] to the sovereign’s fortress. The Great Heaven merely follows human desires, repaying good with good and evil with evil. So let us not bring shame upon the spirits!

今毗曇等以臣而謀君...此所謂亂臣賊子 人神所 同疾 天地所不容 今天若無意於此 而反 見星怪於王城 此臣之 所疑惑 而不喻者也 惟天之威 從人之欲 善善惡惡 無作神羞¹⁶⁵

Kim Yusin’s arguments echo those of the treatise *Kongzi Jiayu* 孔子家語 (The School Sayings of Confucius)¹⁶⁶:

Duke Ai [Lu] asked Confucius, “Is the survival or demise, and the fortune or misfortune, of a state truly determined by Heaven’s will, and not solely by human actions?” Confucius replied, “Survival, demise, fortune, and misfortune all depend solely on oneself (i.e. on human’s actions — *author*); but natural disasters and supernatural phenomena do not.”

哀公問于孔子曰：“夫國家之存亡禍福，信有天命，非唯人也？”孔子對曰：“存亡禍福，皆己而已；天災地妖，不能加也。”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, 進三國史記表.

¹⁶⁵ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 41: 1318.

¹⁶⁶ It is traditionally dated to the 3rd century CE, although A. Yu. Blazhkina tends to suggest the existence of an older prototype (Blazhkina, A. Yu. “Predstavleniya o Kun-tzu i Lao-tzu: po materialam traktata ‘Kun-tzu jia yui’” [Representations of Confucius and Laozi: Based on Materials from the Collection ‘Kongzi Jiayu’]). *Chelovek i kul'tura Vostoka: issledovanbiya i perevody* [Man and Culture of the Orient. Studies and Translations]. Ed. by V.B. Vinogradskaya. Moscow: IKSAN RAS, 2023. p. 49.)

¹⁶⁷ 孔子家語, 五儀解: 13. <https://ctext.org/kongzi-jiayu/wu-yi-jie/zhs>

A similar idea—that one bears personal responsibility for one’s actions and that there is no such thing as inevitable predestination—is expressed by the Koguryō *ubo* (Minister) Kobokchan (高福章), who reassures king T’aejo (太祖), who was unsettled by the interpretation of a strange dream he had the night before: “If one acts wickedly, good omens turn into bad ones; if one acts virtuously, disasters turn into blessings (作不善，則吉變為凶；作善，則災反為福).”¹⁶⁸

Although in this case there were indeed serious grounds for concern: as the chronicle indicates, king’s brother Susōng (the future king Ch’adae) initially, at the instigation of his courtiers, and later of his own volition, began to covet his brother’s throne. T’aejo had a disturbing dream about a leopard biting off a tiger’s tail just the day before Susōng revealed his ambitions to a small circle of confidants (and killed the man who dared to admonish him).

The following year, Susōng conspiracy was uncovered, but king T’aejo abdicated the throne in his favor. King Ch’adae’s reign is described in the *Samguk sagi* as a series of ominous omens, natural disasters, and the monarch’s misdeeds (including the murder of King T’aejo’s eldest son and the suicide of his youngest). This prompts another moralistic political commentary from Kim Pusik, which emphasizes the fundamental importance of patrilineality in the transfer of power (i.e., the necessity of passing it strictly from father to son). The aforementioned episode with the fox turns out to be an intermediate climax of Ch’adae’s reign; it ended with the murder of the fortune-teller who had attempted to appeal to the despot’s conscience using the same argument that Kobokchan had employed.

The turning point came when the Koguryō nobleman Myōngnim Dappu 明臨荅夫 “killed the king, who was hated by the people.”¹⁶⁹ It seems that Ch’adae’s tyranny was so brutal that Myōngnim Dappu, despite committing regicide, was put in the biographical section of the *Samguk sagi* under the informal category of “loyal and righteous (merit subjects and their descendants) (*ch’ungŭi* 忠義)”¹⁷⁰ — in contrast to another Koguryō official, Ch’ang Jori (倉助利), who overthrew king Pongsan (烽上) (a ruler no less despotic and immoral than Ch’adae) and was classified as a “rebel subject” (*yŏksin* 逆臣).

The narratives of the reigns of Taemusin and Ch’adae are very similar, but Ch’adae’s can be considered a model narrative of moral assessment. He is unambiguously a tyrant and a ‘perfect villain’. Yet their stories are united by an approach that can be called the “residual misfortune” (餘殃). Its essence lies in the fact that a ruler (not necessarily a tyrant) not only gradually loses virtue (德) but also amasses “misfortune” (殃), the critical “amount” of which leads to his downfall.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 15: 449.

¹⁶⁹ Kim Pusik, *Samguk sagi*, j. 15: 448-456.

¹⁷⁰ Per Sin Hyōngsik’s typology: Sin Hyōngsik, *Samguk sagi yon’gu* 三國史記 研究 [Study of *Samguk sagi*] (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1995), p. 338.

¹⁷¹ I am deeply grateful to my colleague Victor V. Bashkeev, who drew my attention to this structural principle adopted in traditional Confucian dynastic historiography.

Conclusion

This overview above, albeit incomplete (there are about 180 entries in *Samguk sagi*, that can be defined as “wonder stories”), allows some tentative deductions. While Kim Pusik himself definitely was not a ‘staunch denouncer of myth and tales’, it is impossible to judge decisively on his choice to include or discard them from the historical narrative on the basis of their believability alone. After all, even denying plausibility to a given story he would include it, and a pattern of this ‘plausibility check’ does not repeat itself.

Rather, he seemed to rely on the significance of a story (or its elements) for his general concept of historiography, which, being ‘Confucian’ in form and composition left a room for mysteries, miracles and magic as long as they adhered to the political task of the document and supported its general purpose.

With this approach a story became history and a history became story since literary imagery supplemented chronology and they mutually reinforced the point the historiographer wanted to make. “Wonder stories” constituted an array of historiographical instruments that provided both dramatic appeal and a foundation (and relevant cases of political behavior) for moral judgment. The mix of Korean and Chinese mythological and folktale *oicotypes* (as a folklorist would put it¹⁷²) and Confucian moral and political values provides *Samguk sagi* with both adherence with the historiographical canon of ‘normative stories’ and distinctive cultural particularity. The latter, read against other cultural traditions, can offer interesting parallels for comparative research.¹⁷³ While the former, read against Chinese historical classics can refine our understanding of Korean Confucian thought of 12th Century.¹⁷⁴

Apparently, for such an analysis interpretive approach alone would be insufficient. It is not particularly reliable from an academic standpoint, since interpretation is, by definition, ambiguous: it fully allows for alternative and even opposing interpretations. This will likely require a combination of formal folklore studies—which identify and typologize motifs (basic elements in a tale or narrative that persist in tradition) — and critical textual analysis assisted by mathematical methods (which will help determine the frequency, recurrence, variation, and combination of various motifs).

¹⁷² Alan Dundes. “Folkloristics in the Twenty-First Century (AFS Invited Presidential Plenary Address, 2004).” *The Journal of American Folklore* 118.470 (2005): 400.

¹⁷³ For example, a self-beating drum and a self-playing horn motifs in the story of prince Hodong conjure parallel with Russian *Tale of the Golden Cockerel*, put in verse by famous poet Alexander Pushkin in 1834. Some folklorists believe that the plot of this tale was based on Coptic legends of enchanted golden figurines of ram and cock that would warn Egyptian ruler of an enemy army approach to the borders (See Boiko, K.A. “Ob arabskom istochnike motiva o zolotom petushke v skazke Pushkina” [On the Arab source of the motive of the golden cockerel in Pushkin’s fairy tale]. (1979): 115-119).

¹⁷⁴ For example, in Chinese dynastic chronicles, the model of “residual misfortune” can explain the lawful ruin of entire dynasty. As we have seen, in *Samguk sagi* this model is suitable for describing individual reigns—but it remains to be seen, to which extent it holds true for the *Samguk sagi* as a whole.

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