

**EXCERPTS FROM IRYŎN'S MEMORABILIA OF THE THREE KINGDOMS
(SAMGUK YUSA): THE TANGUN LEGEND**

Introduction

The Tangun legend tells of the birth of Korea's first king and the foundation of the first Korean state, (Old) Chosŏn, in a date often calculated as 2333 BCE. (Note that there is also a later Korean state known as Chosŏn.) Though based upon earlier sources, this oldest surviving account of Tangun was recorded by the Koryŏ-period Buddhist monk Iryŏn (1206-1289) in his *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk yusa*).

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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***Excerpts from Iryŏn's Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms (Samguk yusa):
The Tangun Legend***

... The *Old Record* notes that in olden times Hwanin's son, Hwanung, wished to descend from heaven and live in the world of human beings. Knowing his son's desire, Hwanin surveyed the three highest mountains and found Mount T'aebaek the most suitable place for his son to settle and help human beings. ... Leading the Earl of Wind, the Master of Rain, and the Master of clouds, he [Hwanung] took charge of some three hundred and sixty areas of responsibility, including agriculture, allotted life spans, illness, punishment, and good and evil, and brought culture to his people.

At that time a bear and a tiger living in the same cave prayed to Holy Hwanung to transform them into human beings. The king gave them a bundle of sacred mugworts and twenty cloves of garlic and said, "If you eat these and shun the sunlight for one hundred days, you will assume human form." Both animals ate the spices and avoided the sun. After twenty-one days the bear became a woman, but the tiger, unable to observe the taboo, remained a tiger. Unable to find a husband, the bear-woman prayed under the altar tree for a child. Hwanung metamorphosed himself, lay with her, and begot a son called Tangun Wanggŏm.

Questions:

1. How does the Tangun legend compare with the origin accounts of other societies?

2. What do the "three hundred and sixty areas of responsibility" represent? How did the appearance of Hwanung transform "his people"?
3. Interpretations of the Tangun legend have varied from literal readings to arguments that the bear, the tiger, and the sky represent the totems of different prehistoric tribal clans. If one adopts the second interpretation, what sort of a past social process or transformation might the legend describe?
4. During the later Chosŏn period (1392-1910) until the late 19th century, not Tangun but rather Kija, enfeoffed by the king of the Chinese kingdom of Chou, was most commonly treated as the more important founding figure. What effect does emphasizing Kija rather than Tangun have on one's understanding of how Korea began? Why would Korean nationalists of the 20th century have preferred Tangun?

Longer Selection

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Excerpts from Iryŏn's Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms (Samguk yusa):
The Tangun Legend

The *Wei shu* tells us that two thousand years ago, at the time of Emperor Yao, Tangun Wanggŏm chose Asadal as his capital and founded the state of Chosŏn. The *Old Record* notes that in olden times Hwanin's son, Hwanung, wished to descend from heaven and live in the world of human beings. Knowing his son's desire, Hwanin surveyed the three highest mountains and found Mount T'aebaek the most suitable place for his son to settle and help human beings. Therefore he gave Hwanung three heavenly seals and dispatched him to rule over the people. Hwanung descended with three thousand followers to a spot under a tree by the Holy Altar atop Mount T'aebaek, and he called this place the City of God. He was the heavenly King Hwanung. Leading the Earl of Wind, the Master of Rain, and the Master of clouds, he took charge of some three hundred and sixty areas of responsibility, including agriculture, allotted life spans, illness, punishment, and good and evil, and brought culture to his people.

At that time a bear and a tiger living in the same cave prayed to Holy Hwanung to transform them into human beings. The king gave them a bundle of sacred mugworts and twenty cloves of garlic and said, "If you eat these and shun the sunlight for one hundred days, you will assume human form." Both animals ate the spices and avoided the sun. After twenty-one days the bear became a woman but the tiger, unable to observe the taboo, remained a tiger. Unable to find a husband, the bear-woman prayed under the altar tree for a child. Hwanung metamorphosed himself, lay with her, and begot a son called Tangun Wanggŏm.

In the fiftieth year of the reign of Emperor Yao, Tangun made the walled city of P'yŏngyang the capital and called his country Chosŏn. He then moved his capital to Asadal on Mount Paegak, also names Mount Kunghol, or Kŭmmidal, whence he ruled for fifteen hundred years. When, in the year *kimyo* [1122 B.C.], King Wu of Chou enfeoffed Chi Tzu (Kija) to Chosŏn, Tangun moved to Changdanggyŏng, but later he returned and hid in Asadal as a mountain god at the age of one thousand nine hundred and eight.