

A Comparative Study of Ancient Folktales of Korea and China

Chong-yon Chu

Manchuria, which China now calls the northeastern region, was inhabited by the Mongolian, Tungusic and Korean tribes around the first century B.C. They had come down from the Altai region and had often been called the northern tribes. They were different from the Chinese, who had built their culture in the Yellow River Basin, in origin, customs and history. They have handed down their own cultural tradition and today we see their unique cultural sphere in the Northeast Asia.

As far as can be ascertained by history books it was around the first century A.D. that the first Koreans appeared in the Korean peninsula and part of Manchuria.¹ Koguryo (高句麗), which occupied the northern Korean peninsula and the southeastern Manchuria, was one of the largest and strongest of the Korean states. Because it originated in Manchuria and not in the Korean peninsula as Shilla (新羅), and Paekche (百濟), the other two Korean states, Koguryo shared customs, linguistic, and religious traits with northern tribes. Unlike ancient Choson (朝鮮) and other states which had come and gone before them, sufficient historical records and material covering the entire span of their history — from the rise to the fall exist for Koguryo, Shilla and Paekche. There also exists a considerable number of myths and legends originating from these three Korean states, and many scholars of Korean literary history regard these myths and legends as the beginning of Korean literature.²

Fully realizing that it is too tall an order for me to compare all ancient Korean and Chinese myths and legends and study their relations here, I would like to limit my presentation to comparing a narrative of Koguryo, which shared Manchuria with China, and an ancient Chinese narrative, in order to espy some of the differences between Korean and Chinese literature. To do so would be a small step forward in the comparison of literary

characteristics of Korea and China. It is also interesting to see how the same motif has been accepted and interpreted by different cultures.

Of a number of myths and narratives about the founding of Koguryo recorded in ancient Korean written materials,³ the one on the mysterious birth of the founder, Chu Mong (朱蒙), and his flight from Puyo (扶餘), and establishment of Koguryo and its territorial expansion and meeting with his son, Yuri (類利), is one of the most interesting and moving.

According to the narrative, Chu Mong was born to Haemosu (解慕漱), who was the first son of the Heavenly Emperor, and a daughter of Habaek (河伯), the God of the Sea. Because of this and his apparent potential to grow into a great leader, the Puyo court tried to harm him. Sensing the imminent danger to him, Chu Mong fled his country leaving behind his wife pregnant with his son to establish Koguryo in the south. Yuri, his son, was born a healthy and naughty boy.

Samguk Sagi (三國史記), the oldest history book of Korea, records the meeting of Chu Mong and his son, Yuri,⁴ as follows:

As a boy, Yuri would kill birds with stones. One day a stone thrown by him at a bird hit a water jar being carried on the head by a woman, breaking the jar. The woman rebuked Yuri, saying that the fatherless boy had broken her water jar.

Returning home, Yuri asked who his father was. His mother, afraid anything harmful might happen to her son, at first did not tell him. When her son threatened suicide, the mother told him that Yuri was a grandson of the Heavenly Emperor and the God of the Sea and that his father had fled to south to found his own kingdom of Koguryo. The mother also told the son that his father had told his pregnant wife, if a boy was born, he, her husband, would recognize the boy as his son if the son would bring to him the matching portion of something which he had hid in "a pine tree on a stone in seven valleys of seven peaks" (吾有藏物七嶺七谷石上之松).

Yuri visited valleys and peaks to find what it was his father had hidden. He was not able to discover it, however. Exhausted, he was loitering in his house yard. He suddenly heard a sound beneath one of the house pillars. After taking a close look at the pillar, he saw that the pine pillar was seven-cornered and it was standing on a stone plinth. He knew that he had finally found what he was so eagerly looking for. From a hole between the plinth and the pillar, he retrieved a broken portion of a sword.

When Yuri presented the broken piece to his father, Chu Mong, in Koguryo, his father produced another piece. The two broken pieces perfectly matched to form a complete sword. The father, King Tongmyong, recognizing Yuri as his son, made him the crown prince to succeed him as the ruler of Koguryo. This narrative was briefly recorded by such Chinese books as *Lun-heng* (論衡), *Liang-shu* (梁書), *Wei-shu* (魏書), *Chou-shu* (周書), *Sui-shu* (隋史), and *Pei-shih* (北史), while Korean history books give more detailed accounts.⁵

I have discovered the following narrative containing the sword motif in *Sou-shen chi* (搜神記)⁶ which is a collection of ancient myths and legends of northern Chinese tribes edited by Kan Pao (干寶) during the Chin (晉) period.

Mo-yeh (莫邪) of Wu (吳) made a pair of swords (male and female swords) for the king of Ch'u (楚). Mo-yeh knew that the king would kill him because it took so long (three years) to make them. Before going to see the king to present the sword, he told his pregnant wife: "The angry king will surely kill me because it took three years to make them. If you should give birth to a son, tell him when he grows up: Step out of the house gate and look at South Mountain and you would see a sword behind a pine tree growing on a rock in the mountain."

Mo-yeh left his wife to bring a female sword to the king. After having the sword examined and learning that it was a female sword of a pair of male and female swords, the king put him to death.

One day, Chih (赤), the son of Mo-yeh, asked his mother where his father was. The mother told him that his father had been executed by the king of Ch'u because it took him three years to make him a sword. She also told him what her husband had said to her regarding where their son would be able to find a sword.

Ch'ih stepped out of the house gate and looked at South Mountain. However, he saw no mountain but a flat stone plinth supporting a pine pillar. He struck near the plinth with an ax and retrieved the male sword.

Ch'ih accidentally made the acquaintance of a righteous man and with his help managed to kill the king of Ch'u. Ch'ih and the righteous man died, too, and the three were buried in The Three King Tomb (三王墓) in Hsüan-ch'un Prefecture (宣春縣) north of Ju-nan (汝南). The Chinese narrative ended tragically.

Both narratives involved fathers and swords. However, there was a difference. In the Yuri narrative, the broken piece of sword led the son

to his father and the throne. In the Mo-yeh narrative, the father was killed and so was the son after revenging his father. One narrative was about meeting, while the other was about separation through death.

According to the ancient Chinese who's who,⁷ Mo-yeh was a man of Wu. Judging from the events surrounding the making of the swords, it is presumed that the period of the narrative was 6 century B.C., when Wu was dominated by Ch'u. Although there is no way to determine which narrative predated which, it is interesting that the two northern narratives on the same motif had such different endings.

Generally speaking, there are two types of stories. One is the comedy type. In the stories of this type, heroes are happily integrated or accepted by the community and society they belong to. In stories of the opposite or tragedy type, however, heroes are isolated from their community or society. The expressions, "comic" and "tragic," here indicate not only the form of the narratives but also the general aspects of their plots.

It is obvious that the Chinese narrative of Mo-yeh is tragic. The scene of the Korean counterpart of the meeting between the father and son and of reunion of husband and wife is a truly happy ending of an heroic epic; it is described as "King Tongmyong was happy that Prince Yuri had fled Puyo with his mother to come to him in April of the 19th year of his reign." This ending satisfies the definition of plot and basic structure of the comedy by Northrop Frye that the hero's love relations and social relations merge into one at the end and the family as a unit becomes integrated with the whole society.⁸ The heroic life of Chu Mong began as an abandoned son and ended in the happy family reunion. It had all the elements of a comedy. The majority of Korean epics after the Yuri narrative have had comic structure down to the 20th century.

I must confess my ignorance about how the tragic motif has been carried on in history of Chinese literature. While it might be difficult to characterize the vast world of Chinese literature simply as comic or tragic, it would be an interesting work, in order to throw a light on the traditional context of literary history, to trace how the tragic motif has been transformed in the course of history down to the present and through what processes.

Notes

1. 李基白，韓國史新論（一潮閣），p. 37.
2. 趙潤濟，韓國文學史（東國文化社），pp. 15-18.
3. 金富弼，三國史記卷第十三 高句麗本紀第一 始祖東明聖王

4. 金富軾，三國史記卷第十三 高句麗本紀第一 琉璃王
5. 曾喜雄外，口碑文學概說（一潮閣），p. 37.
6. 干寶撰，楊家駱編，搜神記（台北：鼎文書局），pp. 77-88.
7. 辭海，台灣中華書局，上冊 干部，p. 1034.
8. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton Univ. Press), p. 218.

