

# Supernatural Births of Protagonists in Classic Korean Literature

## - With Emphasis on Heroic War Stories -

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### Introduction

Classic Korean novels in general are considered to have begun with *Geumosinhwa* (New Stories of Mount Golden Turtle) by Kim Si-seup. Thereafter, with the appearance of so-called biographical novels everywhere in the history of novels, the history of Korean novels gradually started to establish the foundation on which various types of works were later created. There is a problem in that there is no way of knowing exactly by whom and when these classic Korean novels, other than biographical novels, were written. Under such conditions, it is difficult to precisely pinpoint the development and the characteristics of classic Korean novels. Researchers did manage to find results that properly grasp the outline of the trend of classic Korean novels despite such adverse conditions.<sup>1</sup>

However, differences can clearly be seen in areas related to “romance novel” in the development of classic Korean novels. Early works of the so-called biographical novels and novels based on dreams generally deal with events that occurred during a certain period of the hero’s life. These works deal with events that occurred in close connection with the protagonists’ lives after they were fully grown. Such are *Geumosinhwa* (New Stories of Mount Golden Turtle) and *The Story of Won’s Dream*. The births of the protagonists are not the issue here. After some time passed, classic novels began to deal with various events in the protagonists’ lives, from birth to death. Birth and the various stages of life of mankind began to appear in classic Korean novels. This is sometimes extended to the family as well.

Man is born, lives for certain length of time, and then dies. Everyone also undergoes hardships during his/her lifetime. Man sometimes overcomes those hardships or is thwarted by them. The lifestyle may be very different based on the outcome. Everyone undergoes such a process in life.

The vast majority of classic Korean novels, which appear in history of literature during the latter half of the Joseon dynasty, generally deal with this type of people's lives. Classic Korean novels reproduce various stages of human lives. For this reason, classic Korean novels contain reminiscent tales of trials and tribulations, resultant resolutions, events thereafter, and finally death in that order by depicting tales of birth, various stages of life, conflicts, and applicable resolutions. It is true that there are voices criticizing this view as being stereotypically organized, but there is a necessity for paying attention to and observing the meaning contained in each novel.

However, the general commonality among the protagonists of classic Korean novels is that they always overcome the trials and tribulations they face and live happily ever after. Classic Korean novels are inclined toward "happy endings." The protagonists' final moments in our folklore and elsewhere for the most part contain contents similar to "s/he had many children and lived happily ever after in this world, or s/he ascended to heaven after their happy lives," which is not unrelated to the style of endings such as "and so s/he lived happily ever after." It has already been ascertained that the "happy endings" in these kinds of classic novels are closely related to the consciousness of the Korean people.<sup>2</sup>

The protagonists in classic Korean novels can lead such a life due to their supernatural births. The awareness that they were able to gain riches and lead a happy life in the secular world is established because they were born under extraordinary circumstances.

Such a phenomenon appears most obviously in heroic war stories among classic Korean novels. Supernatural births of the protagonists were emphasized in heroic war stories that contain the structural characteristics of the so-called "biographies of heroes."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, supernatural births were utilized exten-

1. For example, previously heroic war stories were judged to have emerged prior to the appearance of epic novels, but the accumulation of new materials and research is in the process of confirming the development due to the exact opposite condition. This will not be mentioned in further detail here because the goal of this article is not a discussion on the development and the characteristics of classic Korean novels.
2. Seo Dae-suk. 1978. "Happy Endings in Classic Novels and the Consciousness of the Korean People," *Gwanak Linguistics Research*, Vol. 3. Seo In-suk. 1984. *The Structures of Ending in Classic Novels and Their Worldview*. M.A. Dissertation, Seoul National University.

sively in other classic Korean novels thereafter. As a result, supernatural births became a very distinctive characteristic of classic Korean novels.

This article attempts to find the mode and significance attached to the supernatural births of protagonists in classic Korean narrative literature, with emphasis on heroic war stories. Circumstances under which protagonists were born during the period prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when novels came into existence is reviewed first in order to do this. This is due to the fact that heroic war stories provide the source of the births of the protagonists.

Heroic war stories were the most popular group of literary works, especially during the latter part of the Joseon dynasty. Thus, it is inferred that the supernatural births utilized in these works gained much sympathy from the readers of those days. The suggestiveness of dreams foretelling births to Koreans of today as well, the majority of whom are born with, is thought to be not insignificant. For this reason, an attempt is made to examine the messages that the supernatural births of protagonists send to those who live in the present.

### **Supernatural Births of Protagonists Prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

When the trend of narrative literature is comprehensively examined, myths and legends existed prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when novels began to exist. Supernatural births of the protagonists appear in myths on founding a nation, the legend of Yaraeja, and legends about prominent personages among myths and legends. Myths on founding a nation and the legend of Yaraeja are stories about founding a new nation or dynasty, or personages who newly ascend to the throne or make an effort to do so. On the other hand, legends about prominent personages deal with persons who accomplished great deeds or had unique abilities. These are wrapped up as myths or legends, but the protagonists were prominent personages who actually existed.

“Supernatural birth” acts as a guarantee for the outcome to be achieved by the protagonist. The understanding is that the protagonist in the novel, who is born under extraordinary circumstances, is guaranteed a happy life after overcoming hardships in the secular world. Accordingly, there is a high likelihood of supernatural births being mentioned in novels influenced by the previous stage

3. “Biographies of heroes” was arranged and presented by Cho Dong-il (Cho Dong-il, “A Life of a Hero, and the Development of the History of Literature,” *Donga Munhwa*. Volume 10, 1971.

of narrative style. Nevertheless, there are natural contextual differences due to the stylistic and epochal disparity among myths, legends, and novels.

Supernatural births of protagonists are especially emphasized in myths on founding a nation over other myths which have been passed down through the ages. Representative are the myths of Dangun (myths on the founding of Old Joseon), King Dongmyeong, Silla (myths on the founding of Goguryeo), Bak Hyeoggeose (myths on the founding of Silla), Kim Suro (myths on the founding of Gaya), etc.; the protagonists of these myths were all born with heavenly bloodlines. Dangun was born between Hwanung, (son of a Heavenly God) and Woongnyeo (an earth goddess), and King Dongmyeong between Haemosu (a Heavenly God) and Yuhwa (an earth goddess). Moreover, both Bak Hyeoggeose and Kim Suro came down from heaven. The heritage of beings born of the union between two gods or sent down from heaven makes it seem natural for them to found a nation.

However, myths on founding a nation can no longer function as a myth after that nation collapses. The Three Kingdoms collapsed, followed by the establishment of Goryeo. Goryeo was in need of its own myth. "Goryeo National Myth" as stated in the *History of Goryeo* filled that void. This myth outlines six generations of ancestors immediately preceding Wang Gon. Most of the interest here is focus on the continuation of extraordinary lineage. In the six generations of ancestors from Ho Gyong to Wang Gon, the paternal or the maternal line in each generation contains an extraordinary being. Ho Gyong married a guardian spirit of a mountain, Chin Ui married Sukchong of the Tang dynasty, Chak Che Kon married a daughter of the Dragon King, and Yong Kon married Lady Mong. Of course, heroic acts appeared, but those acts were just a mode for attaining marriage. An example would be Chak Che Kon using his archery ability to assist the Dragon King and thereby demonstrating his heroism, but this ultimately led to a marriage to the Dragon King's daughter. Such lineage functions to ensure legitimacy for Wang Gon's historic deeds.

As previously observed, myths on founding Silla existed prior to the nation of Goryeo and emphasized extraordinary lineage. Bak Hyeoggeose, the progenitor, is said to have descended down to earth from heaven in the myths on founding Silla. Goryeo had to dominate the people of Silla. The Silla people probably all knew that their progenitor was the possessor of extraordinary lineage. If that were the case, Goryeo probably needed to let it be known that its lineage was just as extraordinary as that of Silla in order to convince the people of Silla of the legitimacy of Goryeo in founding a new nation. Goryeo probably put

emphasis on lineage in “the national myth of Goryeo” as a result of being conscious of Silla.<sup>4</sup>

Attention should be paid to the fact that the method of bestowing extraordinary lineage is quite different from the founding myth of the immediately preceding nation. Singularly, one of the parents is always established as a human being in “the national myth of Goryeo.” This is unlike previous myths that laid claims to being sons of the Lord of Heaven or to having descended from heaven.

This may be explained by the fact that the Goryeo dynasty no longer believed in myths. As time passed, it was no longer possible to use the same method of endowing lineage as in previous myths when founding a nation. This is due to the fact that people’s cognition changes with time. Things may have been thus in the very old days, but questions about whether things can still be the same could arise.

Therefore, other stories of birth emerged to endow the protagonists with extraordinary lineage, and this is “the legend of Yaraeja.”

Chang is the name of Mu-wang, the 30<sup>th</sup> king. His mother built a house on a steep slope near Namki and lived alone until she bore a baby as a result of her relationship with a worm.<sup>5</sup>

Mu-wang’s mother was a widow who lived on a steep slope near Namki in Seoul. A man wearing reddish clothes would come to her every night. One night, she stuck a needle in his body without his knowledge only to find out that his true identity was a sea dragon. She bore a son who was unique and broad-minded.<sup>6</sup>

Also, old records state that there once was a rich man who lived in North Village of Gwangju. He had a daughter whose demeanor was very proper. One night, she said to her father, “a man wearing red clothes comes to my bed every night and sleeps there.” He told her to “get a needle with a long piece of thread and pin it to his clothes.” In the morning, they followed the thread to a wall on the north side of the house and found the needle pinned to the body of a worm.

4. See Im Chi-kyun’s “Narrative Literature of King Sejong University,” *Culture of King Sejong’s Era*, Taehak Publishers, 2001 for a detailed discussion on this.

5. 武王...第三十武王 名璋 母寡居築室於京師南池邊 池龍交通而生... Mu-wang. *Residual Events of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 2.

6. Choi Sang-su. *Collection of Korean Folklore*, Tongmungwan, 1958, p. 120.

The daughter became pregnant and bore a son, who at the age of 15 called himself Gyeonhwon.<sup>7</sup>

A rich man had a daughter who was of marriageable age. A young man came to the daughter's room every night and slept there; a needle was stuck into the body of the young man, and he turned out to be an otter. The daughter bore a son who became the founder of the Ch'ing dynasty.<sup>8</sup>

Hogyong (General Seonggol) came back and offered a sacrificial rite to the mountain goddess before burying nine people as penance in Pyeongna. The goddess said to Hogyong, "I am a widow, and I preside over this mountain. Now that I've met you, I'd like to rule this mountain as a theocracy with you as man and wife. Please become the great king of this mountain." And they disappeared together. The soldiers conferred the title of Great King to Hogyong, built a shrine for him, offered a sacrificial rite, and changed the name of the mountain to Nine Dragons for the nine soldiers who died together. Hogyong could not forget his wife of old and visited her each night as if in a dream. The son born of this union is Gangchung.<sup>9</sup>

The common denominators in these stories are as follows;

1. A man comes to a woman's room every night
2. A needle is poked into the man's body and the next day he is found to be an extraordinary being
3. The woman bears a son who later becomes a remarkable man.

The issue here is in interpreting the extraordinary being who was the father. However, people in those days seemed to think that an extraordinary being was a "a being who possesses divinity." This can be inferred through the last two examples of General Seonggol and Gangchung.

The basic plot of General Seonggol visiting his wife of old each night after

7. 後百齊甄萱...又古記云 昔一富人居光州北村 有一女子 姿容端正 謂父曰 每有一紫衣男 到寢交婚 父謂曰 汝以長絲 貫針刺其衣 從之 至明尋絲於北墻下 針刺於蚯蚓之腰 後因娠生一男 年十五 自稱甄萱... Gyeonhwon of Later Baekje. *Residual Events of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 2.

8. Choi Sang-su, *ibid.*, p. 467.

9. ...虎景還告平那郡 來葬九人 先祀山神 其神見曰 予以寡婦 主此山 幸遇聖骨將軍欲與爲夫婦 共理神政 請封爲此山大王 言訖 與虎景九隱不見 郡人因封虎景爲大王 立祠祭之 以九人同亡 改山名曰 九龍 虎景不忘舊妻 夜常如夢來合 生子曰 康忠. "The World" in *History of Goryeo*.

he disappeared with the mountain goddess and fathering a son by her is not much different from the legend of Yaraeja. The only difference is that the paternity is clear in this case. But General Seonggol, who made his visits at night, was no longer human. Seonggol, who was once human, became a divine being. The extraordinary being in the legend of Yaraeja was transformed into a deified father. This ultimately shows that people in those days regarded the extraordinary being in the legend of Yaraeja as a divine entity. This ultimately leads to the feeling of rightness in that a child with such extraordinary paternity can only be remarkable. It is only natural for the people born in these stories to all become kings or founders of nations.

Attention should be paid to the fact that the paternal side is established as an extraordinary being but the maternal side is definitely as ordinary people. People of this time period were probably aware that a life is born necessarily through the agency of the parents. The power of persuasion was perhaps not as strong in creating another myth of a hero born through the union between two gods as was the case in the mythological age, because the mythological age was far in the past. This is the reason for the difficulty in finding examples of tales of births of protagonists whose parents are both gods after antiquity where myths on founding a nation abound.

“The legend of Yaraeja” emerged from this situation as a tale of birth that guaranteed the hero an extraordinary lineage. One of the two parents (all on the paternal side) was established as an extraordinary being, but shows changes in time by making the protagonist come out of a human body

Aside from this aspect, however, dreams foretelling births of historically great personages sometimes appear in tales of births. On the whole, “the legend of Yaraeja” was utilized for the births of kings or founders of nations, but other distinguished personages are guaranteed supernatural births through dreams foretelling births. Dreams foretelling births are dreams the parents have prior to conceiving the child. Dreams foretelling births suggested that the birth of those personages were transcendental and fantastic. In other words, dreams foretelling births explain that those personages were not born in an ordinary manner. That is, the protagonists were born because someone had those dreams. As a result, dreams foretelling the births of eminent personages provided a foundation for their activities in the real world. These dreams foretelling births became more diverse in form as the times no longer supported a divine being.

Various aspects of dreams foretelling the births of great men of antiquity can be found in *Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*, *Residual Events of the*

*Three Kingdoms, Reliable Records on Augmented Survey of the Geography of Korea, and Annals of the Dynasty of Joseon, etc.*<sup>10</sup> Secondary persons, things, and blessings are the different types of dreams foretelling births. The first type refers to dreams about other people, the second type refers to inanimate objects such as flowers or stars, and the last type refers to someone else granting a child in a dream.

- Secondary Persons (Seeing Another Person)

His mother saw a man with horns in her dream and conceived.<sup>11</sup>

Manmyeong conceived after dreaming of a little boy who wore golden armor and came into the house riding a cloud on the night of the 38<sup>th</sup> binary term of the sexagenary cycle...<sup>12</sup>

In his dream, a hermit came into the room; his wife also had the same dream. He deemed this very strange and sent a servant to the hermit the next day to ask about his well-being... The day he dreamt of the hermit was the day the hermit died. The man said, “perhaps the hermit will be born into our family.” His wife conceived on the night of the dream.<sup>13</sup>

First Sunu’s mother (of the Park family) lit a light in the yard and prayed to heaven for a child; a small child unexpectedly came down a brass post in her dream...<sup>14</sup>

10. “Classified List of Folktales” by Prof. Chang Duk-sun in data mentioned above was of great assistance in examining dreams foretelling births (reference Chang Duk-sun. *Korean Prose Tale Research*, Seoul National University Publishers, 1981, appendix).
11. 其母夢見人有角而娠... Gangsu. *Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 46. Can also be found in “Personages from Cheongju,” *Reliable Records on Augmented Survey of the Geography of Korea*, Vol. 14 (hereinafter referred to as “*Reliable Records*”).
12. 萬明亦以辛丑之夜 夢見童子衣金甲乘雲入堂中尋而有娠. Kim, Yu-sin. *Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 41. Can also be found in “Personages from Kim Hae,” *Reliable Records*, Vol. 32.
13. 夢見居士入于堂中 室家同夢 驚怪尤甚 翌日使人問居士安否...(中略)...其死與夢同日矣 公日殆居士誕於吾家爾 妻氏自夢之日有娠. Jukjirang of King Hyoso’s reign. *Residual Events of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 2.
14. 初純佑母朴氏 點燈庭中 祈嗣于天 忽夢有小兒 從燈柱而下 奉而懷之... Yi Sunu. In “Series of Biographies,” *History of Goryeo*, Vol. 12.

The mother conceived after she had a dream about a little boy dressed in bluish clothes and surrounded by several people came down from heaven on a five-colored cloud to be cuddled in her bosom.<sup>15</sup>

- Things

The mother conceived after she first dreamt of swallowing a blue bead.<sup>16</sup>

Early on, a sea dragon came into her stomach in a dream, and she told her parents about it after she woke up...<sup>17</sup>

Banggyeong's mother often dreamt of eating clouds and the sunset when she conceived. Thus, she said to others, "this child will surely be from among the supernatural beings, because the spirit and energy of the clouds are in my mouth and nose."<sup>18</sup>

In her dream, the mother (of the Lee family) embraced an orchid and then dropped it when she became pregnant.<sup>19</sup>

The mother dreamt of a star suddenly falling into her bosom and became pregnant...<sup>20</sup>

On the night of the seventeenth of the sexagenary cycle, Seo Hyeon dreamt that two stars, Hyeonghok and Jin, fell to her.<sup>21</sup>

At first the mother dreamt of a shooting star falling to her bosom, and she

15. 母夢五色雲間 有象環擁一青衣童 自天墮懷中遂有娠... Kim Kyong-son. In "Series of Biographies," *History of Goryeo*, Vol. 16.
16. 初母夢吞青色珠而有娠... 明卽神印. *Residual Events of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 5.
17. 嘗夢浦龍來入腹中 警覺而語父母. 羅州牧 佛宇 惠宗. *Reliable Records*, Vol. 35.
18. 初方慶母有娠 屢夢餐雲霧 嘗語人曰雲氣常在吾口鼻 兒必神仙中來... Kim Pang-kyong. In "Series of Biographies," *History of Goryeo*, Vol. 17.
19. 母李氏有娠 夢拘蘭盆忽墮... Chong Mong-ju. In "Series of Biographies," *History of Goryeo*, Vol. 30.
20. 母忽夢星墮入懷 因而有娠... The Fixed Laws of Jajang. *Residual Events of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 4.
21. 舒玄庚申之夜 夢熒惑鎮二星 降於巳. Kim, Yu-sin. *Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 41.
22. 初母夢流星入懷 因有娠... 元曉不羈. *Residual Events of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 4.

conceived thereafter.<sup>22</sup>

The father had a dream about a big star falling down to the house and So was finally born.<sup>23</sup>

The mother (of the Goh family) dreamt that a morning star came into her bosom, and then she bore Taehyeon.<sup>24</sup>

The mother conceived after she had a dream about a sun coming into her bosom.<sup>25</sup>

In the beginning, the mother became pregnant after she dreamt that the sky turned very red and the sun with the red energy came into her bosom.<sup>26</sup>

The queen's mother dreamt of a moon coming into her bosom during her pregnancy.<sup>27</sup>

- Blessings (Bless)

On the 15th of that month, god came to him in a dream and said, “do not worry, for I will grant your second wife a golden boy.” The king woke up and told his vassals...”what should I do, for I do not have a second queen?”<sup>28</sup>

Ikcho and Queen Chongsuk prayed to heaven for a successor; one night a Buddhist priest wearing a priest's robe appeared in a dream and announced that

23. 父夢大星墮其家 遂生瑞... 趙仁規 中 趙瑞. In “Series of Biographies,” *History of Goryeo*, Vol. 18.
24. 母高氏夢明星入懷中 生台鉉... Kim Taehyeon. In “Series of Biographies,” *History of Goryeo*, Vol. 23. Can also be found in 光山縣 人物, *Reliable Records*, Vol. 35.
25. 母夢日入懷 因有娠... Cho In-gyu. In “Series of Biographies,” *History of Goryeo*, Vol. 18.
26. 初母夢天爛赤 日輪帶赤暈入懷中 因有娠... Kim I. In “Series of Biographies,” *History of Goryeo*, Vol. 21. Can also be found in Andong Personages, *Reliable Records*, Vol. 24.
27. 懷妊之時 府夫人夢月入懷... Annals of the Dynasty of Joseon, September of the 14<sup>th</sup> year of Sukchong's reign.
28. 是月十五夜 夢天謂日吾今汝少后 生男勿憂 王覺語君臣曰...(中略)...而無少后奈 何. Seventh year of Sansang-wang, *Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 41.
29. 我翼祖與貞淑王后 詣此祈嗣 夜夢有一衲衣僧來 告曰必生貴子 其名善來 未幾 度祖生 遂以善來名之. Yang-yang Buddhist Shrine. *Reliable Records*, Vol. 44.

“surely you will bear a scion of nobility who should be named Sonrae,” and Tojo was born not much after. He was named Sonrae.<sup>29</sup>

In dreams foretelling births as described above, attention should be paid to the fact that divine nature is not found in both parents. These parents were all nothing more than ordinary people like us. These kings may have had dreams foretelling births, but they had nothing more than their position at this time and do not appear as beings with special abilities that set them apart from ordinary people.

If people lived in the tradition cognizant of distinguished personages having extraordinary lineages, then they must expect these personages who had achieved great deeds in history to have had something special that corresponded to their achievements. In other words, it would be easy to think that these personages were born differently in some way. However, the days of deified parents are gone. Therefore, deifying the parents could no longer hold persuasion. How could personages who were born of ordinary parents like us achieve such great things and accomplishments? The solution to this problem seems to be dreams foretelling births.<sup>30</sup> The types of dreams foretelling births presented above are diverse, but ultimately the effort to state that the births of those personages are not ordinary is the same. Dreams foretelling births bestowed supernaturalness.

To summarize the discussions above, it can be seen that the characteristics of the parents in supernatural births prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century changed in general from deified-deified to deified-human to human-human as time passed. Literary contrivance was not necessary in the first two instances because of the cognition that the protagonists deservedly inherited extraordinary lineage from their parents. But another contrivance was necessary in the last instance where the parents were ordinary people, which emerged in the form of dreams foretelling births.

However, dreams foretelling births and extraordinary lineage became a very important element in regulating the characteristics of heroic war stories.

30. There is an argument claiming that dreams foretelling births originated from Chinese influence. (Kim Sok-ha. “An Investigation on Supernatural Births of the Protagonists in Classic Novels,” *Collection of Dankook University Dissertations*, Vol. 3, p. 14). However, in the same manner as that of a universal phenomenon of having dreams could not have originated with Chinese influence, it would be more appropriate to view dreams foretelling births as having originated from the tradition of supernatural lineage as an autogenous phenomenon of Korea.

## Aspects and Meaning of Supernatural Births of Protagonists in Heroic Wars Stories

During the latter half of the Joseon dynasty, great quantities of romance novels were produced of protagonists with exalted lineage and parents of middle-aged couples from great families suffered hardships in the secular world but ultimately overcame all sufferings and triumphed via their actions in war. These seemed to have been very popular among the people of those times. Not only is the number of existing novels great, but the popularity of these novels can be confirmed by the great number of variations of each novel made.

Researchers today refer to novels about military troops as heroic war stories or stories about military life. But the term “heroic war stories” is based on the structure of the so-called “biographies of heroes.”<sup>31</sup> In contrast, stories about military life were created with the theme of “war” in mind.

The structure of “biographies of heroes,” which was used by Cho Dong-il as the basis for prescribing heroic war stories, did not especially concern “war” itself. The function of “whether hardships were overcome or not” was more important. The problems to be overcome did not have to be due to war. As a result, *The Story of Sukhyang*, *The Story of Chunhyang*, etc. could be included in the category of heroic war stories.<sup>32</sup> Serious questions can be raised about the characteristics of the “hero” in such cases. A hero, according to Seo Dae-suk, is someone who puts priority on the values of the group and realizes it.<sup>33</sup> In that case, it is stretching the truth a little to call those who pursue individual happiness, such as Sukhyang and Chunhyang, as heroes.

On the one hand, there are limitations to war stories, which were named thusly due to the inclusion of “war” in the plot. First, there does not seem to be any room for considering the scope of the structural aspects in the term “war stories.” If only “war narratives” were the basis for naming things, there is the dan-

31. “Biographies of heroes” was organized by Cho Dong-il, and its contents are as follows. The protagonists: 1) were of noble lineage; 2) were conceived or born in extraordinary ways; 3) had superior abilities different from the villains; 4) were foundlings and came close to death; 5) were saved and taken in by foster parents; 6) grew to adulthood only to face danger again; 7) became victors by overcoming hardships through combat (Cho Dong-il, “A Life of a Hero, and the Development of History of Literature,” *Donga Munhwa*. Volume 10, 1971).
32. Two novels are considered to be included in the category of heroic war stories in the dissertation mentioned above.
33. Seo Dae-suk, “Development and Metamorphosis of Novels about Heroes,” *Issues on the History of Novels from Antiquity*, Jipmundang, 1993, p. 331.

ger of extensions of these novels becoming very broad. For example, wars were related to family issues, and thus, appeared as a very important theme in epic novels. In these instances, it is questionable as to whether these novels can be distinguished as war stories. Seo Dae-suk uses the term “war stories” in an effort to overcome these questions, but he attempts to divide them into categories based on the consequential structure of each novel.<sup>34</sup> As a result, it can be said that the academic world today silently agrees with the fact that the category of “war stories” also includes works with themes of war among heroic war stories.

Viewed in this way, currently utilized heroic war stories and ordinary war stories share some elements in common but include individual novels that are pertinent only their own domain as well. According to the arguments of these researchers, *The Story of Yu Chung-nyeol* can be a heroic war story as well as an ordinary war story, but *The Story of Chunhyang* may be a heroic war story but it cannot be an ordinary war story. This article cannot deal with all of these works. Therefore, this article deals with novels that are included in the structure of “biographies of heroes”, and simultaneously, where war appears as a method of overcoming hardships, i.e., works that are heroic war stories and ordinary war stories, at the same time. These will be referred to as heroic war stories.<sup>35</sup>

Among Korea’s novels, heroic war stories are one type that focus on extraordinary lineage. It has already been ascertained by Cho Dong-il’s research that the structure of “biographies of heroes” is based on “the myth of King Dongmyeong,” which is the myth on founding the nation of Goguryeo. This raises a question.

Heroic war stories were a type of novel created during the Joseon dynasty, but Goguryeo had already disappeared into history by that time. As we all know, the myths of fallen nations cannot be passed down with vitality from generation to generation. In reality, Goguryeo collapsed before Unified Silla came into existence. Then how was it possible for the structure of the myth on founding Goguryeo to survive in the literature of the Joseon dynasty.

The reason can be found in Goryeo. Goryeo claimed that it succeeded Goguryeo. Because of this, the myth on founding Goguryeo could be passed on with vitality from Goguryeo to Goryeo to Joseon. The situation of the latter half

34. Seo Dae-suk, *Structure and Background of War Stories*, Ewha Women’s University Publications, 1985.

35. Hereafter, if it is included in the scope of definition in this article, the novel will be commonly called a heroic war story.

of the Goryeo dynasty, which inherited the myth on founding Goguryeo, can be found in Yi Kyu-bo's preface in *Saga of King Dongmyeong*.

King Dongmyeong's extraordinary deeds were much discussed in the world, to the degree that even foolish men and women of low birth could talk about them.<sup>36</sup>

We can know the myth on founding Goguryeo had vitality until the latter half of Goryeo if we take into consideration that all, even foolish men and women of low birth, knew of the extraordinary achievements of King Dongmyeong. I would think such are the clues that can explain the reason for heroic war stories created during the Joseon dynasty being based on the structure of "the myth of King Dongmyeong."

The protagonists' process of birth as shown in heroic war stories is as follows:

- 1) middle-aged couple from a great family
- 2) no successors
- 3) prayer for a child
- 4) a dream foretelling the birth
- 5) supernatural birth
- 6) heroic temperament

This process is as described below when a general narrative is applied.

An aged couple from a traditional renowned family lamented about their lack of a child to carry on the family name; they prayed for a child, and a child was conceived after having a dream foretelling its birth. A heavenly maid came down to earth to assist the birth (or the birth room was filled with scent) when the child was ready to be born on the 10<sup>th</sup> month (depending on the novel, it can be as long as the 20<sup>th</sup> month). The child was extraordinary from its birth.

The most important thing here is the dream foretelling the child's birth. A dream foretelling the birth is the transition point from being without a child to

36. 世多說東明王神異之事 雖愚夫騷婦亦頗能說其事. Yi Kyu-bo. "Saga of King Dongmyeong," *Collected Works of Minister Yi of Korea*, Vol. 3.

being with a child. In heroic war stories, dreams foretelling births were utilized in the births of heroic protagonists in order to endow those personages who could only be born in human-human relationships with supernaturalness. The novels applied dreams foretelling births from the period prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is necessary to pay attention to the content of those dreams foretelling births.

Eagerly awaiting for an answer to her prayers, she saw five-colored clouds appearing one day, and a hermit who held an official position came down riding a blue dragon. He said, "I am the hermit who conquered blue dragons. Ik-song was evil, and he was sent back to his hometown when the Lord of Heaven was informed of his misdeeds. But Ik-song harbored a grudge and picked a fight with me at a party at the multi-storied jade building. Consequently, he was expelled to the world of mortals. He did not know where to go, but the spirit of Mount Namak commanded him to go to your house. Please take pity on him." The hermit said to the dragon, "I'll look for you again later," and sent it away into the five-colored cloud. Then he ran into the lady's bosom. The lady was startled and woke up to find out that it was a dream.<sup>37</sup>

A child wearing blue clothes came in, bowed deeply, and said, "I am the son of the king of the South Sea. I escorted my father to the heavenly palace and committed a sin by competing with Taebaek... I was expelled from there and did not know where to go, but luckily, the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva of Choonglim Temple by the South Sea instructed me to come here. So here I am."<sup>38</sup>

From the sky came down a little child wearing blue clothes and surrounded by clouds and mist, paid obeisance, and said, "I am the son of the king of the East Sea. I sinned against the Lord of the Heaven and thus was sent down to earth. I had nowhere to go, but the Golden Buddha sent me here."<sup>39</sup>

Many more heroic war stories aside from those mentioned above, such as *The Story of Chang Ik-song*, *The Story of Hong Gye-wol*, *The Story of General*

37. Kim Dong-uk. 1973. "The Story of Yu Ch'ung-nyol," *Collection of Gyongin Ancient Novels in Woodblock*, Vol. 2. Humanities Research Institute. Hereinafter referred to as "Collection of Woodblock Books."

38. Kim Ki-dong. 1976. "The Story of Kwak Hae-ryong," *Collection of Ancient Novels in Print-Type*. Asia Publishers. Hereinafter referred to as "Collection in Print-Type."

39. "The Story of Oryong," "Collection in Print-Type," Vol. 4.

*Wang, The Story of Chang Kuk-jin*, etc., show similar aspects of dreams foretelling births.

These dreams foretelling births all have a common narrative: “I am so-and-so, was invaded by so-and-so, and came to your house by the command of so-and-so.” However, the parents were all passive. They just received what was given to them and had no choice in the matter. This is the reason that the parents were all middle-aged couples. It was difficult for middle-aged couples to conceive babies on their own in the Joseon dynasty. Middle-aged couples simply lent their bodies for the births of the protagonists. They could not show any reaction to the personages sent by the object of their devout prayers. Middle-aged couples were utilized in the stories to make clear that the heroism of the protagonists in the novels was not endowed with the parents’ divinity as in earlier myths or legends but were endowed with something else. The supernaturalness of the protagonists was endowed through dreams foretelling births.

In the above examples of narratives on dreams foretelling births, the protagonists were all heavenly beings or related to heavenly beings prior to coming down to the world of mortals. Protagonists with heavenly bloodlines can be seen in the myths on founding nations. If that is the case, is there a connection between the protagonists’ heavenly bloodlines in heroic war stories and myths on founding nations? A clue to the answer to this question can be found in the fact that the basic structure of heroic war stories is based on “biographies of heroes” as can be seen in “the myth of King Dongmyeong.” As commonly known, it can be said that King Dongmyeong preserved the heavenly bloodline naturally, because he is the son of Haemosu, son of the Lord of Heaven. Such an aspect of “the myth of King Dongmyeong” is inferred to have influenced heroic war stories.

Parents of the protagonists could not be established as god-like beings in the period prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when heroic war stories came into existence. Dreams foretelling births were already universally accepted in births of great personages. Thus, heroic war stories probably had to apply dreams foretelling births of the protagonist to appear “specious” to the general audience. However, as observed in previous pages, the method of births of historically great personages to be accompanied by dreams foretelling births was not enough to clearly state that the protagonists are from supernatural bloodlines. In order to supplement this, the origins of the protagonists were directly expressed in dreams foretelling births through the personification of a constellation, a son of the dragon king, or heavenly maid in order for the heavenly image to be brought into relief

in heroic war stories. Dreams foretelling births, which were universally acknowledged in those days, were utilized to remove any accusations of “unbelievable events,” and the original form of a hero was not broken at the same time. Heavenly images of dreams foretelling births in heroic war stories were none other than a fictitious substitute for the mythically divine.<sup>40</sup>

A very important controversy emerges here. Up until now it has been generally agreed that protagonists imbued with “influential and distinguished family” connections in heroic war stories are related to exalted lineages emerging from mythical heroes.<sup>41</sup> However, when dreams foretelling births that clearly identify the protagonists as heavenly beings are taken into consideration, there is room for reconsidering such an interpretation.<sup>42</sup>

There is no collective relation between the distinguished families in the stories and births of the protagonists. The protagonists were born through dreams foretelling their births based on devout prayers and not because the protagonists’ families were distinguished. As previously explained, the parents of the world of mortals just passively accepted the protagonists. Nowhere could it be found that the distinguished families were the source of births.

Moreover, it is necessary for us to first consider the fact that “extraordinary lineage” endowed heroism to the protagonists. If distinguished families were the transformation of “noble lineage,” the protagonists in heroic war stories must

40. Of course, there are instances where just the dreams foretelling births appear (*The Tale of Hong Giltong* and *The Story of Yi Gi-bong*), or do not appear at all (*The Story of Cho Ung*, *The Story of Yu Mun-song*, and *The Story of Kwon Ik-choong*) in heroic war stories. However, there are instances where the authors merely produced works with such themes in the beginning and did not think deeply of their abilities if the theme of the stories mostly originated from folklore or a collective group. Simply utilizing dreams foretelling births applies to this case. In contrast, in works without dreams foretelling births, the fact that protagonists have noble bloodlines of heavenly origin was brought to light in the process of describing their deeds and so coincides with the argument of this article that protagonists in heroic war stories have heavenly bloodlines. For more detailed discussions, see “Research on Heroic War Stories-Focusing on Birth and Strife,” M.A. Dissertation, Seoul National University, 1985, pp. 52-56 by Im Chi-kyun.

41. In *Theories of Korean Novels* (Knowledge Industry Company, 1977) by Cho Dong-il, “parents were of distinguished royal blood” in heroic war stories was substituted with “the hero is of distinguished bloodline.” And in *Structure and Background of War Stories*, Ewha Women’s University Publications, 1985, Seo Dae-suk claims that the protagonists born of distinguished families were influenced by noble lineage from myth.

42. I generated a new interpretation about this a while ago (Im Chi-kyun, “Narrative Literature of King Sejong University,” *Culture of King Sejong’s Era*, Taehak Publishers, 2001). The interpretation in this article is based on the said work.

have been endowed with heroism due to the lineage of distinguished families. But distinguished families in heroic war stories did not endow the protagonists with heroism. Distinguished families in the stories were nothing more than the environment through which heavenly beings entered the world of mortals at the instruction of transcendental directors. Ultimately, there is no connection between distinguished families and the noble lineage of the protagonists.

Then why were distinguished families established as the background for the births of the protagonists? My thoughts on this are that the background of distinguished families is nothing more than a literary device that merely maximized the hardships of the protagonists. After the protagonists were born in heroic war stories, the distinguished families were ruined for whatever reason, thereby putting the protagonists in a difficult position. The readers would feel compassion for the protagonists when the protagonists, who were expected to lead happy lives due to having heavenly bloodlines and being born into distinguished families, were placed in unimaginable hardships because of the downfall of their families. The fact that the protagonists were the only sons who were begot with difficulty after devout prayer may result in increasing the compassion of the readers. Thus, the readers would have felt pity for the protagonists who suffered hardships and would scrutinize the protagonists' achievements throughout their lifetime. Maximization of these hardships ultimately resulted in dramatizing the actions of the protagonists who overcame hardship. This literary device that is achieved with difficulty is the power that made it possible for heroic war stories to be the type of novel that contained the most popular and commercial characteristics among the novels of the late Joseon dynasty. Supernatural bloodline verified by dreams foretelling births justified transcendental assistance when the protagonists suffered hardships later, and endowed the protagonists with heroism. Also, towards the end of the stories it was natural for the protagonists to become victors in wars where nations might be destroyed and changed. The authors of heroic war stories once more emphasized the status of the protagonists, i.e., that the protagonists were heavenly beings, in order to do this.<sup>43</sup> Through war, the images of the protagonists in heroic war stories transitioned from individuals to collective heroes who put importance on the protection and realization of the values of their respective groups first. Achievement in war can

43. This can be verified by representative works such as *The Story of Cho Ung*, *The Story of Yu Mung-song*, and *The Story of Yu Chung-nyol*. This is discussed in detail in the above-mentioned paper by Im Chi-kyun, pp. 53-55.

be regarded as a means for personal advancement. However, in the instances where the protagonists in heroic war stories fought in wars, the fate of the nations depended on the outcome. It is true that the protagonists achieved personal glory in these wars, but the protagonists were definitely heroes who protected the values and ideas of the groups from the viewpoint of the organization of the groups. This is the real image of a hero.<sup>44</sup>

Dreams foretelling births similar to those in heroic war stories can be found in different types of novels. However, the difference lies in the fact that the protagonists as individuals are the issue in those works.

## Conclusion

People in Korea who talk to a pregnant woman today frequently ask, “what kind of dream did you have when you became pregnant?” Moreover, they might listen to the content of the dream with much seriousness and interest. And the gender of the unborn child is sometimes inferred from the content of the dream. In reality, most of the people in Korea know of “dreams foretelling their own births” and endow those dreams with meaning.

Dreams foretelling births are in fact the result of supernatural lineage bestowed on mythical heroes that transform with the times handed down from generation to generation. But dreams foretelling births that were endowed on great personages in the past are extended to common people of Korea today as omens of birth.

The moment that a device for a specific individual or group circulates as a model of precedence or regulations, it becomes the property of all people. Moreover, it becomes something public and conventional. Proliferation of dreams foretelling births can probably be explained thusly.

Of course, we cannot possibly ignore the dissemination of these dreams due to the parents’ affections for and expectations of their children. The hope that their children will leave great achievements behind is also inherent, because their children came into this world accompanied by dreams foretelling births, as did great personages in myths. However, when taken into consideration that Korean people are very interested in others’ dreams foretelling births and dis-

44. It is mutually understood that the protagonist of myths on founding a nation is certainly the hero of that group.

cuss them, we can be convinced that the dissemination of dreams foretelling births is not achieved merely on the individual level. At least two forms of consciousness can be grasped here.

First is egalitarianism of human beings.

Dreams foretelling births appeared as indications of births of great personages. When this is open to all, it ultimately results in the thinking that anyone can become great. Egalitarianism is opening the same possibility to everyone at birth, the starting point for all.

Second is humanism.

Men and women having children through physical union is a scientific thought. Despite the fact that men and women can have physical union at any time, a child is not conceived every time this happens. People who believe in dreams foretelling births believe their children to be chosen. Because they are chosen, dreams foretelling births are seen as notices of birth. The thinking that human beings are not born into this world at random but are chosen is the culmination of humanism.<sup>45</sup>

Dreams foretelling births that contain such consciousness are educationally useful as well. The possibility that children think about themselves one more time when they hear about dreams foretelling births related to their own births from their parents is very high.

Seen from this point of view, the tradition of supernatural lineage is alive even today.

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45. Korean people consider a newly born baby to be one year old. Ten months spent inside the mother's stomach is acknowledged as life even though the baby could not be seen. This is also one way to express humanism.